BIG CATS AND DEAD SHEEP: AN OVERVIEW OF THE FOLKLORIC PHENOMENA OF BIG CATS IN THE AUSTRALIAN BUSH

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ABSTRACT

Since the late 19th century there has been a persistent strand in Australian folklore, one claiming that the bush is inhabited by mysterious catlike predators. A wide array of origin myths and behavioural claims around the death of stock and claimed sightings is pervasive amongst the inhabitants of rural Australia, these flaring into panics and reaching the attention of the mainstream media every few years. Despite this, there seems to be little in this instance of the usual manifestations of folklore in song, literature and art as compared to say that for Bunyips or Yowies.

This preliminary study looks at the overall pattern of Big Cat folklore in Australia as part of an ongoing project evaluating associated mythology in relation to Anglo-Australian attitudes to the bush. This paper considers the culture and folklore surrounding big cats in the Australian bush and the means by which people formulate the stories.

KEYWORDS

Folkloristics; Beast Lore; Eco-Lore;

REFERENCES


Dickman, Chris R., Overview of the Impact of Feral Cats on Australian Native Fauna (Sydney: Institute of Wildlife Research and School of Biological Sciences, 1996).


Sightings of anomalous big cats in Australia began more than 100 years ago. In the Gippsland region of south-eastern Victoria, the origin of the cats is claimed to be American World War II airmen who brought cougars with them as mascots and released them in the Australian Bush. No conclusion has been reached, and photographic evidence is often difficult to interpret. The mass slaughter of sheep is often given as evidence to support the big cat theory. They are often killed by a clean puncture or slit. Dead animals would have been thrown into the Fleet and accumulated debris, which may have included cats and dogs could have been washed down in heavy weather. So, it is plausible at least that dead cats and dogs may have been seen in rivers during rainstorms. However, such dead animals would have also been seen in dry weather so there’s no especial reason to connect the sight of dead animals in the Fleet with rain. Did domestic pets ever rain down? One supposed origin is that the phrase derives from mythology. In truth, what was in the mind of whoever coined this expression is now lost to us. I have to admit defeat and say that I don’t know the origin of this phrase.