

CONNECTIONS

By Sue Jackson

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I recently stayed with my sister, Jude, and her partner, Brien, on their farm in the middle of Jaara Jaara country in the parched hinterland north of Bendigo. Brien, who works as a park ranger, is a Jaara Elder, so there is not much that he doesn't know about the local landscape and topography. After all, he has 40,000 years experience behind him.

One night we were sitting out on the back step, admiring the stars, when he reached down and plucked what looked to me like an unremarkable piece of rock out of a nearby garden bed. He placed the rock on the palm of his hand and by the light of the moon proceeded to show me what had caught his eye and why that rock was different.

The first thing I noticed was that the shard I'd perceived as dull grey was not grey at all or even uniformly coloured, but variegated. With some of the surface dirt removed, it flickered salmon pink, beige and cream and glistened as if it was wet.

On closer observation, I saw how the rock tapered to two slim, sharp edges and was bisected by a well-defined, dune-like ridge. Brien

explained that while his ancestors were ingenious in utilising found objects, the presence of the ridge identified this object as man-made. It was in fact a multi-purpose scraping or cutting tool, whose construction would have taken considerable time, patience and knowhow.

Some documentaries and films I've seen over the years have been particularly effective in conveying a sense of how the traditional owners of our land probably lived. *Ten Canoes*, which was released last year is a great example. The director, Rolf de Heer, collaborated with the people of Ramingining in the Northern Territory for three years in telling this story about their ancestors.

As I watched them making their canoes, building platforms high up in the gum trees, tracking down the eggs of gumang, the magpie goose, all in the beautiful Arafura Swamp, I became completely caught up in their world. I thought I'd come as close as I ever could to experiencing what it must have been like to live in the Australia of those far off days. That was until Brien handed me that ancient cutting tool.

As I grasped it, weighed it, moved it around for just a moment before it settled naturally and comfortably into my hand, I had an overwhelming sense of connection with its maker. Perhaps thousands

of years ago, one of Brien's ancestors had sat near by, under the same stars, fashioning the tool I held in my hand, awed as I was by its simple beauty.