

# POSSUM CLOAK

By Sue Jackson

## **Broadcast in 08 on Bush Telegraph *ABC Radio National***

My brother-in-law, Brien Nelson, and my sister, Jude Perry, live due north of Bendigo, in Jaara Jaara country. As a Jaara elder, it is Brien's responsibility to welcome visitors to his peoples' country. Undoubtedly the most famous guest of all time was the Dalai Lama, who in June last year came to bless the site of the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion at Myers Flat on the outskirts of Bendigo. It's amazing to think that the cleansing ceremony Brien conducted that day originates even further back than the ancient rituals of Tibetan Buddhism.

On that occasion, Brien was resplendent in a possum skin cloak made especially for the opening ceremony of the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne in 2006. It was lucky he had it on as it was a freezing day and his legs were bare. It's little wonder that the cloaks were native to the colder south-eastern corner of the continent.

Recently Brien showed me the cloak up close. Although it is new, it was made entirely in the traditional way by the women of his family. The pelts were sewn together with kangaroo sinew, and the only concession to current-day practices was that the skins were from New Zealand where possums are designated pests and not protected as they are in Australia.

Brien explained that cloaks were treasured for their warmth and durability and were handed down as heirlooms. Like so many Aboriginal possessions, they

were multi-purpose, sometimes being used as blankets or mattresses or to wrap babies.

When he flung it over the kitchen table to display it to me, the light reflected back the glossy sheen of the fur, which proved irresistible to the touch. But it's the underside that I found absolutely intriguing. A leather burning tool had been used to draw a map of Brien's country, showing the Loddon river, the women's camp, and initiation, hunting and basket weaving sites. Under the fur, up close to the wearer's body, a rich narrative perpetually unfolds.

In my small inner city garden possums are my nemesis. They use the chicken wire covering the garden pots as trampolines. Our telephone wires are their highway and their exit ramp is our roof, where they rev their engines and do wheelies all night long. And no matter where I hide them I've yet to have a cauliflower or cabbage reach maturity.

Yet when a mating pair took up residence in the roof recently, I took great pains to evict them without harming them, because usually I'm a merciful sort of person. But as Brien explained to me how it takes roughly fifty skins to make an adult-sized cloak, I suspect my eyes gleamed.