

**Heart of the Nation** Photography Darren Clark**Mount Taylor  
2606**

**W**hen Ngambri elder Shane Mortimer looks out over Canberra, he doesn't see a city. He is attuned instead to the "spirit woman" lying in the landscape. He sees her face and abdomen, and her breasts – Mount Ainslie and Black Mountain. He sees her womb, the hill where Parliament House now stands. He takes it all in through the eyes of his people, who've lived here for more than 80,000 years. No wonder he's so dismissive of Canberra's centenary. "That means absolutely nothing to me," the 57-year-old says. "It's a nonsense, a contrivance."

Mortimer had no inkling of his own aboriginality until early middle age. The son of a successful engineer, he'd enjoyed a "life of privilege" growing up in Sydney's north; weekends were spent at the Ku-ring-gai Motor Yacht Club, or game fishing, or ice-skating. At the age of 34, when he was living in Manly and working as a theatre publicist, he was looking one day at a family photo album with his wife when she mentioned that his Aunt Vi looked Aboriginal. No, he said, my mum's side are of Pacific

Islander stock. But it piqued his curiosity, and led him to the Office of Aboriginal Affairs, where he discovered an amazing thing: a maternal line going back to his great-great-great-grandmother Ju Nin Mingo, who was born to a Ngambri woman and pastoralist James Ainslie in 1827. His grandmother had been among the Stolen Generations. It turned out his mum and aunties knew all this; the "Islander" story was a convenient family fiction, a way to bury their complex feelings of pain and shame.

Mortimer has lived in Canberra for 20 years now. He's divorced and has no kids ("I chose not to reproduce"), and he performs Welcome To Country ceremonies at civic events. He made headlines recently for his \$6 million lawsuit against a white professor who blogged that Mortimer looked "about as Aboriginal as I do". Mostly, though, he's known for that fabulous cloak. *Thirty six* possums died for it. He had it made after seeing a painting of a 19th-century ancestor wearing one. Things have changed since those days though. "Possums are a protected species now," he laments. "I had to order it from New Zealand." **ROSS BILTON**