

BYLONG VALLEY WAY: A MYTHICAL LANDSCAPE

By Colleen O'Sullivan
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It is a mythical landscape that we drive through late on an autumn day. Shadows spread across the valley. The mountains above us brood, close in on us, awesome and intimidating. I imagine surveillance posts in rocky outcrops: Wiradjuri warriors watching our progress, just as they did William Lawson exploring the Goulburn River valleys; and William Lee clearing and cultivating 'his land' and establishing his cattle and horse studs.

By the time Flora Morrison is teaching her first pupils at the Bylong Upper Provisional School in 1917 and Jessie Hickman, the Lady Bushranger, is driving her cattle through the mountain passes, the Wiradjuri have been decimated.

The mountains, with their millions of years of sandstone and basalt cliffs, remind me that nature is more enduring and constant, and perhaps less dangerous, than we humans.

At Kerrabee an empty coal train waits in the railway loop while a loaded coal train heads for the Newcastle docks. I am reminded of a more recent history when the five tunnels for the Sandy Hollow to Maryvale railway were built, during the depression, to provide employment, and then soon after the war, the 'ghost' railway was abandoned.

Locals remember taking a short-cut through the narrow Cox's Gap railway tunnel hoping not to meet another car before they got through. My husband recounts how as a young public servant he had to investigate whether the Sandy Hollow Railway should be finally built. 'I loved the name Sandy Hollow,' he said. 'It reminded me of Sleepy Hollow, where the demonic Headless Horseman roamed, terrorizing the inhabitants.'

It took us a while to make our first trip on the Bylong Road, urged on by locals who always took that road to the coast. Other locals first considered how much rain there had been or whether they could expect a blowout. I imagined big warning signs at either end: 'Look out! Dirt Road! Pot-holes! Dangerous Bends! Steep Climbs!' On that first trip there was an edge of excitement as we steered around bends and around holes; but we were also overwhelmed by the beauty and peace of this valley.

It is an agricultural landscape: cattle yards, shearing sheds, windmills, dirt roads, forest tracks, fences, railway lines, bridges, letterboxes, stables, haystacks, silos, windbreaks, dams and culverts. Electricity pylons and telegraph poles spread their threads towards the sunburned foothills. Irrigation sprays circle in the sunshine and the sun's rays dance across the grass tips turning them luminous pink.

Some fields are ploughed brown waiting for seed; others will become the dining paddocks of contented cattle. Horses mooch under trees; motionless cows stand or lie like

plastic figures positioned by a small child; though an occasional wandering cow plods across a field. Birds dart and swoop and glide. Bellbirds tinkle up Growee.

People live in the Bylong Valley as well as work, though we don't see too many of them. They live in neat comfortable farmhouses sheltering among willows and peppercorns and poplars; or in prosperous green-roofed homesteads with rose bowers, wide verandahs and lighted tennis courts. They live in the scattered houses of small localities. Some backyards are the refuge of old trucks, cars and machinery; others are picture perfect. They live too in unpainted fibro cottages with shutters askew or in lop-sided bark or crumbling stone huts. I wonder at their lives and the history of their houses. I know in one abandoned hut lived a man who cultivated grevilleas and befriended kangaroos. I wonder if his story will grow bigger or fade into the shadows.

The Bylong Road is now completely sealed and was renamed the tourist-attractive Bylong Valley Way, suitable, indeed just right, for caravans and motor-bikes. The locals dreamed of fleets of tourists wending their way over the mountains and through the valleys to Kandos and Rylstone. And yes it is becoming a tourist highway; and part of the 'Inland Adventure Trail'. A scenic thoroughfare. Among Australia's 'Top Ten Drives' according to Fairfax.

The Bylong Valley Way is a destination in its own right. Though there is only one village in this valley, Bylong, a one-shop stop, it offers great coffee, Byron Bay biscuits, local products and thick sandwiches. Alas the Bylong Mouse Races have become part of the mythical fabric of the valley.

Along the Bylong Valley Way occasional tables, barbeques and rest areas release a sense of longing: to stop with thermos and picnic baskets, turn our backs to the road, and nestle in the Australian bush.

On the weekend just passed, the Battle For Bylong group hosted a Drive Via Bylong weekend. Its aim: to showcase the beauty and history of the area. The group hopes to capture more of its history from those who view the Hall of History. All of this material will be given into the safekeeping of the Rylstone and District Historical Society.

There are a number of groups working to protect this historic and beautiful valley, in danger from the Korean power company KEPCO, who has plans to open two open cut mines and an underground mine. I can only hope the campaigners are successful.