

A Not-So-Ordinary Sunday Drive – by Jill McCracken

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There is no bridge over the Okuku River and the sign at the edge warns that crossing shouldn't be attempted, especially in vehicles low to the ground. We are in a Toyota Corolla hatchback, a small car with small wheels, not very high from the ground at all. But we have come many kilometres over a long, dusty road to get to this point and the river doesn't look too deep. Turning back now seems a churlish thing to do, backtracking doesn't feel like an adventure at all. And a Sunday drive, in my experience, has never been about taking the easy roads. When we had set out on our Sunday drives in my childhood days, we never knew where we would end up. But we did know that the Austin Twelve, with my father at the wheel, would never follow the sedate and comfortable highways around Canterbury but would insist, instead, on searching out the roads less travelled, the winding, shingle and often nerve-wracking roads that take you far from the crowds and into places of wild and quiet beauty. My grandmother might shriek with fright, my sister might be sick, and the car might get stuck at times, but the roads wound on and my father went with them. We had some amazing Sunday drives.

The Sunday drive that brings us to the banks of the Okuku River is a nostalgic journey, taking me back along the Lees Valley Road in North Canterbury, one of the roads over which my father and the Austin Twelve had taken me and the rest of my family almost 50 years ago. The river had been high and rushing that day and we had turned back. Today, though, is a different story and, had he been here, I wonder what my father would have done.

The Lees Valley Road begins its journey 26 kilometres from Oxford, a small, inland Canterbury town about a 40-minute drive from Christchurch. The drive from Christchurch to Oxford is a fairly straightforward affair, much of it along the Tram Road which heads unswervingly towards the foothills. On a hot, summer, tar-melting day the stands of blue-gums wilt, the yellow grass is dotted with haystacks standing like soldiers on the burnt earth, the lines of poplar trees and macrocarpa hedges march alongside, and the mountains up ahead, pinned starkly against the blue sky, stretch north and south as far as the eye can see. It is a vivid, typically Canterbury landscape.

If we hadn't been feeling particularly adventurous, our Sunday drive might have ended at Oxford. Sunday is market day there and has been for the past three years. Among other things, stall holders sell fresh "spray-free, local" vegetables, venison burgers, Cornish pasties, free-range eggs, honey, relishes and pickles, yellow calla lilies, egg and bacon breakfasts. They are here every Sunday, all year long, though, says one, maybe not when there is snow on the ground. We wander the market and taste the relishes but this is not our destination today and we continue on.

The Lees Valley Road turns off where the llamas graze, exotic creatures standing out among the everyday cows, sheep and horses more common around here. The shingle road winds through the foothills, through leafy trees and shade and onto tussock-covered slopes. Beech trees with their blackened trunks line the road in

places and as we climb higher we can look out over the Canterbury plains sprawling towards the sea. There isn't a lot of traffic on the road, the crowds have been left behind and when we hit the Ashley River again the swimming holes provide a cool respite for just a few. The road crosses the bridge and continues upwards. We follow it.

While already amazing, the landscape now becomes dramatic. Down below, the Ashley River snakes its way through the gorge, the beech forest climbs beside us, and wild blackberries tempt hungry stomachs. The mountain-sides opposite are steep, their tops, devoid of vegetation, creating a ragged, desiccated relief against the sky. The road seems to meander a bit aimlessly, like Sunday roads often do, but it has a purpose that is made surprisingly and strikingly clear. It is as if we have come through a grand entranceway, a door that has opened onto something astounding.

The Lees Valley basin stretches before us, vast, distinct and brilliant. Nestled between the Puketeraki Range and the Oxford-Okuku hills, the basin is a canvas of tawny summer colour, all the shades of brown and yellow. It feels like big, back-blocks country, remote and seemingly empty of human life. But there are homesteads every now and then and we pass Lees Valley School which houses what must be one of the tiniest classroom blocks in the country, and the Top Ashley Picnic Area where nobody is stopping today but which has a picnic table and, at a distance, a small, green privy standing to attention on the otherwise bare patch of grass.

The valley, I later discover, is named after George William Henry 'Jockey' Lee who, according to legend, was shown the route into this place by a Maori companion. I also discover that there is no similar valley landscape in the region. It is a wide valley, the surrounding hills and mountains standing back as if to provide room for the sky that stretches away forever. The native beech forest that was once extensive over these mountains is patchy here now, replaced, through clearance, with short tussock grasslands, low matagouri, patches of manuka and low-lying bracken. The lower hills and higher mountains take on a layered look, stretching back, back and beyond, where eventually those far off peaks recede, dark blue against a paler blue sky. Some might describe this landscape as barren. But while barren

suggests a lack of, a failure to produce, this country simply abounds with raw, unbroken beauty. I know that if we never get to the Okuku River, let alone cross it, that if we turn back now, just being here, seeing this place, is worth the journey.

But we don't stop because the road still beckons and it is Sunday after all. Pausing to open and close farm gates, crossing small fords, rattling over cattle stops, we follow the road that crosses the valley. A plume of dust follows the car, tracking our progress in the still, hot air. We have no idea any more where the road is taking us. In fact, one of us asks the thought in all our heads, does this road actually go anywhere?

The road does go somewhere. It brings us to the banks of the Okuku River. And the warning sign. The river is cool, the water a relief in the heat. There is no mobile phone coverage here. There's been no-one on the road except us for ages. If we try

to cross the river, and fail, there is no obvious help at hand. But this is not a soft option Sunday drive. It is about discovering something new, making a memory worth holding on to, travelling roads we've not been along before. Summer has kept the water levels low. While far from suggesting others should attempt it, we make the crossing easily, yahooping with delight on the other side.

The road, changing to look more like a well-used track than a proper road, continues to wend its way across rolling hills and on through the Okuku Pass. Leaving the river flats, it heads upwards, veering towards the east. Lees Valley disappears from sight. Now, for a time, the countryside resembles those places you see in old movies where bandit-types hang out on the border between Mexico and the United States of America. The hills are scrubby and wild, dotted with scraggly, twisted matagouri bushes where spider nests hang like little white lanterns and purple thistles line the road. It looks almost like the beginnings of a desert. At any time, we imagine, some man on a horse will appear on the skyline, a rifle clutched at his side. But no-one appears and our road is quickly returning to civilisation where the vistas are nowhere near as inspiring as those we've just had the privilege of travelling through. It is hard to believe that all that country lies just beyond those hills.

Since taking the turn-off on to Lees Valley Road back near Oxford, we have travelled about 90 kilometres. Shingle gives way to asphalt, the car speeds up and, as we pass through the green orchards of Loburn and the small-town feel of Rangiora, heading back towards Christchurch now just half an hour away, our mood of adventure gives way to that contented feeling you get at the end of a day well spent. My father, I think, would have been proud. This has been a real Sunday drive!