

Ludwig Leichhardt – the Life and the Legend

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SUMMARY

Ludwig Leichhardt was a German scientist and adventurer, who became famous in Australia as an explorer. Leichhardt became famous when he successfully completed an expedition of exploration across the top of Australia. A feat taking one and a half years! However, he became a legend when he disappeared on his second attempt to cross Australia from east to west. Many searches were made to find him and his companions, but only traces were found.

This paper describes the person Ludwig Leichhardt and discusses the reasons why there was such enthusiasm to search for him. It also explores why Leichhardt entered Australia's psyche as a legend.



Figure 1: Portrait Ludwig Leichhardt

LUDWIG LEICHHARDT THE PERSON

Ludwig Leichhardt was "...a tall, angular, young-old man, with an aquiline nose, peering blue eyes and straggling hair and beard." However, notwithstanding that Leichhardt had poor eyesight, and as one of his mentors, AW Scott, described him as having, " little sense of direction, no self-reliance and no resource", Leichhardt went on to become one of the most famous explorers in Australian history. Leichhardt became the Australian explorer who became an enigma, a puzzle never adequately solved.

Friedrich Wilhelm Ludwig Leichhardt was born in Trebatsch, Prussia, on 23 October 1813. He was the son of Christian Hieronymus Matthias Leichhardt, a modest farmer and peat cutter.

Ludwig showed ability at study. However, he had a delicate physique and very short sighted. He was also of a nervous temperament and quite melancholic. He tended to sway between euphoria and fits of depression.

In his childhood, Ludwig Leichhardt's imagination was priggled by a distinguished German adventurer and author, Prince Hermann Puckler-Muskan.

At 20 years old he went to University of Gottingen. He was a studious youth who was interested in solitary walks. In 1835 (at 22 years of age) he enrolled at University of Berlin. He was an unexceptional student.

However, Leichhardt was a prolific writer, writing many letters to his home, and keeping a comprehensive journal of his thoughts and aspirations. It is these that allowed his story to be revealed in full clarity today.

In 1835 he met John Nicholson, the son of a relatively well-to-do English clergyman. He also met John's brother, William Nicholson, who became his financial protector and informal sponsor.

While enrolled at University of Berlin, he studied medicine and natural science. In 1837, Ludwig visited England under William Nicholson's sponsorship. From 1838 to 1841, Leichhardt lived in London and Paris, and visited hospitals from time-to-time as a student. William Nicholson became a physician in 1845, however "...it is highly improbable that Leichhardt was any more advanced than his colleague...and did not obtain a medical degree, and therefore was not entitled to use, as he always did use in Australia, the term 'Doctor'." Chisholm p61.

Ludwig Leichhardt planned to study natural science at the British Museum and perhaps work in hospitals and afterwards he and William would wander for three or four years through Europe, Africa or Australia. However, during this period, William Nicholson became poor and Leichhardt became a "confirmed sponger".

Leichhardt resolved "to travel abroad". In 1838 Leichhardt was filled with a feeling of "uncertainty" because at 25 years of age, he was yet to serve a year in military training.

However, he was hell-bent on exploring the secrets of nature. In October 1840, Ludwig Leichhardt officially became a “military deserter”.

LEICHHARDT IN AUSTRALIA

Ludwig Leichhardt chose Australia to travel to because:

- William Nicholson’s brother had gone to Port Phillip, Victoria, Australia.
- He had seen samples of Australian flora and fauna, that was quite “strange”.

The country was still unexplored and he could serve as artist on an “expedition” and collect specimens and do general scientific work.

William Nicholson left Leichhardt, to return to his family, as his father had died three years earlier. Nicholson bought Leichhardt the passage to Australia, plus £200. On 1 October 1841 Leichhardt set off for Australia.

Leichhardt arrived on the *Sir Edward Paget* at Port Jackson, New South Wales, Australia, on 14 February 1842. Leichhardt had no benefactor, not any means of support. During this early period in the colony, he met the Surveyor General Sir Thomas Mitchell, however, was unable to extract sponsorship from him. Until he finally found a benefactor in Sydney, Leichhardt made an extensive collection of native flora. He applied for a position with the Sydney Botanic Gardens, but was rejected.

Leichhardt’s initial Australian sponsor was Lieutenant Robert Lynd, a bachelor and barrack master for the 63rd Regiment. However, it was his subsequent sponsor, AW Scott, a wealthy “squatter”, who taught Leichhardt some of the bush craft necessary to participate in serious exploration of the new colony. Leichhardt stayed with Scott in the Newcastle area (about 200km north of Sydney) for about 2 months.

Leichhardt then commenced his journey northwards, living on the “unbounded” hospitality of settlers, especially in the Darling Down, studying the flora and fauna along the way.

He made his way to the settlement of Brisbane in early 1843. He stayed in Brisbane for a year staying variously with squatters and other German missionaries. He then explored the Brisbane area for the next year.

After 2 years in Australia, Leichhardt had not yet earned a single penny. But he had his mind fixed on exploration. Squatters needed to know what lands were available beyond the limits of knowledge of the area around Brisbane. Squatters were pastoral pioneers who “squatted” on new land without seeking permission of the government and were generally composed of young men of good education, gentlemanly habits and high principles.

Previously, explorers of Australia like Sturt, Mitchell, Eyre and Grey opened earlier lands. The squatters needed to know what was the nature of land lying broadly between Moreton Bay (near Brisbane, Queensland) and Port Essington (north of Darwin, Northern Territory) which was far to the north of the Gulf of Carpentaria. The question being, was the land suitable for pastoral expansion?

Ludwig Leichhardt thought of joining Sir Thomas Mitchell on an expedition, however, this project fell through because Mitchell had quarrelled with Governor Sir George Gipps. This presented Leichhardt with a grand opportunity. He proposed to find a route from Moreton Bay to Port Essington...if support was forthcoming.

Leichhardt quickly made his way to Sydney. He proposed a “small private expedition”, but only received a luke warm reception in Sydney. Some squatter from southern New South Wales made modest contributions. Then some trades people also assisted and finally, a shipping company granted free passage to Moreton Bay from Sydney. The expedition was a reality.

LEICHHARDT’S FIRST EXPEDITION

Leichhardt was not an assertive man and selected members of his party, who would “patiently submit and resign to my guidance”, rather than on the basis of experience or ability.

The part from Sydney was:

Ludwig Leichhardt	31 y.o.	Scientist	German
James Calvert	19 y.o.	ship board acquaintance	English
John Murphy	15 y.o.	ship board acquaintance	Irish
John Roper	24 y.o.	casual acquaintance	English
William Phillips	44 y.o.	prisoner of the Crown	English
Harry Brown		aboriginal person	Australian

In Brisbane, Leichhardt added:

Charlie Fisher		native policeman	Australian
Caleb		American negro cook	American

And in the Darling Downs Leichhardt added:

Pemberton Hodgson		young squatter	English
John Gilbert		naturalist	English.

The expedition took 17 horses, 16 bullocks, 12 dogs.

Gilbert wrote that the expedition offered “a glorious opportunity of unmasking the hidden novelties of tropical Australia.” But he went on to write that he “..felt a little jealous of a foreigner, being the first to make known the hidden treasures of this vast and interesting country.” These sentiments bode badly for Leichhardt, as Gilbert evolved as the popular leader.

On 16 September 1844, John Gilbert sent a small natural history collection to FR Strange, a naturalist in Sydney, to forward to Gould in London. Gilbert wrote on the accompanying letter, “would you not like to go?” This was Gilbert’s last letter and rests in Sydney’s Mitchell Library, along with other items from one of “the most extraordinary journeys of exploration in the history of Australia.”

John Campbell, a squatter from Darling Downs, suggested that Leichhardt not follow the coastal strip, but go inland, starting from the Darling Downs and go north, hugging the range for water. Campbell also suggested Leichhardt take bullocks, rather than horses, and forget about herding sheep for food. Campbell was a practical man.

Leichhardt's sprung carat was destroyed in three days.

The expedition rallied in Campbell's Station (near present Toowoomba) and broke in the pack bullocks.

The expedition headed off on 18 September 1844. The party was chaotic;

- Horses retreated to their homes
- Bullocks threw their packs
- Supplies were lost.

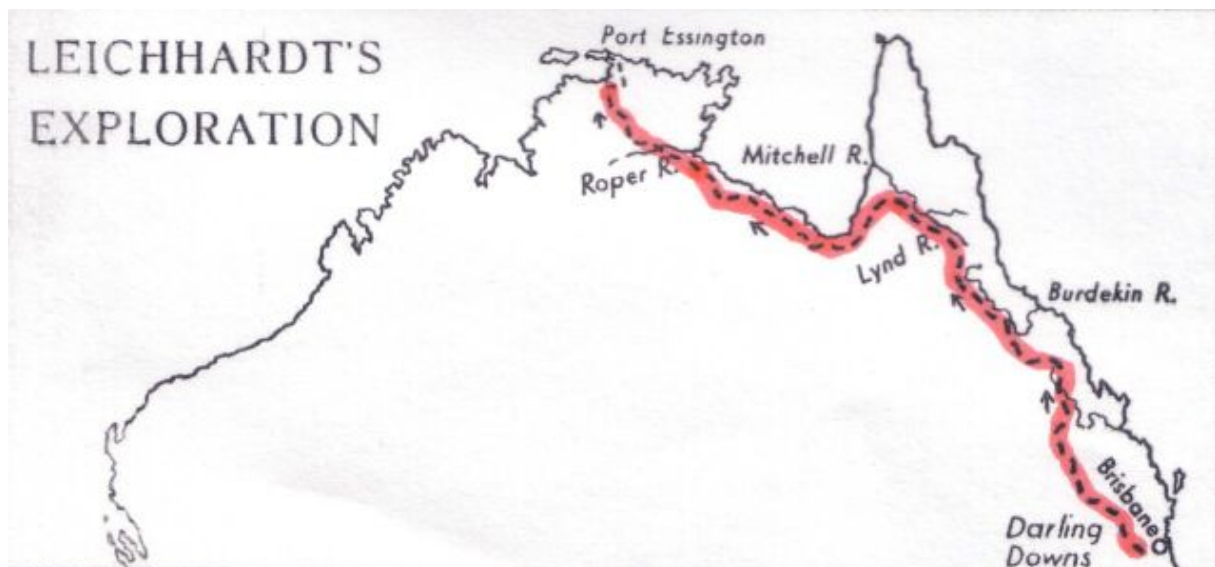
Jimbour (the semi-official starting point of Leichhardt's journey), was the last contact with settlement. On 1 October 1844, they headed off as pedestrians with bullocks and pack horses loaded.

They presented a motley crew of black and white, men of 5 different countries, knowing almost nothing of bush life. All of whom had either a range, mountain, river, creek, plain, lake or lagoon names after them.

Leichhardt declared that the expedition headed forth "buoyant with hope into the wilderness of Australia."

After the chaotic beginning when much of the provisions were lost within days, the party survived on "dried meat and flying foxes and seeds and roots."

John Gilbert was killed in an aboriginal attack on 28 June 1845. John Roper lost an eye in the same attack, but continued his journey for another 5 months!



On 17 December 1845, after a journey of almost 5000km, the expedition dragged itself into Port Essington. Following a period of recuperation, they were shipped back to Sydney on the sailing boat *Heroine*. They arrive back in Sydney 28 March 1846.

At his point Leichhardt busied himself with writing his account of the journey, that was subsequently published as *“Journal of an Overland Expedition in Australia from Morton Bay to Port Essington, a Distance of Upwards of 3000 Miles, During the Years 1844 – 1845”* by Dr Ludwig Leichhardt. “Die Gotter brauchen manchen guten Mann Zu ihrem Dienst auf dieser weiten Erde” GOETHE, Iph. Auf Tauris. Published by T&W Boone, 20 New Bond Street, London, 1847.

This transcript is available electronically over the web through the Project Gutenberg EBook at <http://www.gutenberg.org> with “almost no restrictions whatsoever”.

The book tells the story of the journey in great detail. However, he put a slant on the story, that subsequent historians felt “outrageous”. Leichhardt’s obstinate and domineering nature, and his disregard for the feelings of his companions, combined with a general incompetence, led to much suffering on his part, as well as the other members of the expedition.

However, Leichhardt was received in Sydney as a hero. He also took the shine off Sir Thomas Mitchell’s “Australia Felix” expedition, that was to explore the same area as Leichhardt. At the same time Charles Sturt had just returned from a dispiriting journey in the arid interior of Australia, in broken health and nothing to report but a tale of anguish in a hard, hot and dry country.

LEICHHARDT’S SECOND EXPEDITION

Leichhardt proposed another expedition to find a practical route from Morton Bay to Perth (a traverse across the entire breadth of Australia from east to west).

Flushed with adulation, and the apparent glow of success of his first expedition, and not heeding its lessons, Leichhardt set off on another, ill-prepared and ill-conceived journey. The one saving factor, and yet presented Leichhardt with great difficulties, was the selection of a more experienced and competent team.

The part from Morton Bay was:

Ludwig Leichhardt	31 y.o.	Scientist	German
Three inexperienced men			English
One prisoner		prisoner	
Two aboriginal persons		aboriginal persons	Australian
John Mann		Surveyor	Australian
Daniel Bunce	34 y.o.	Botanist	Australian
Hovenden Hely		Squatter	Australian
Turnbull		Farm Overseer	
James Perry		Saddler	
Henry Boecking		Cook	German
Harry Brown		aboriginal person	

The Government commissioned Captain J Beckford Simpson to proceed from Sydney to Port Essington and commence enquiries after Leichhardt. On 2 June 1851, Simpson arrived in the then abandoned Port Essington. He found some natives who recalled having seen Leichhardt in 1845-46, however, not since then. Simpson abandoned the search there.

Hovenden Hely

Authorities decided to pursue a land search, having failed to find anything in Port Essington. In early 1852, Hovenden Hely, a former member of the Second Expedition, was engaged to search for Leichhardt. A party of seven white men and three aboriginal people was formed. Though Hely, had in his own diary, described Leichhardt as, “the most selfish man he had every known”.

Hely travelled north, then west from Leichhardt’s starting point. He found marked trees and camp sites, and met natives who had seen Leichhardt. These aboriginal men told stories of white people being killed in the night, as reprisal for ill-treating some native women. Hely developed the theory that Leichhardt was killed in a massacre.

Augustus C Gregory (1)

Late in 1855, a competent explorer and surveyor, Augustus C Gregory led another search expedition to search for Leichhardt. Gregory formed a party of seventeen men. After ploughing a significant distance into the inland, Gregory split off with six others to the east coast.

He only found dubious vestiges of camp sites in this expedition.

Augustus C Gregory (2)

In 1858, Gregory decided to search for Leichhardt following his tracks. Gregory set off with eight companions and forty horses. He traverse west to the centre of Queensland, then headed south along Cooper Creek, to Mount Torrens and on to Adelaide. This expedition only found a marked “L” near the site of the town of Blackall.

Gregory contended that Leichhardt headed off, north west from this point and perished in the desert.

Bourke & Wills

In 1860, Bourke and Wills attempted to cross Australia from south to north. This expedition was not directly associated with the search for Leichhardt, but stimulated interest in Leichhardt’s destiny. Bourke & Wills’ expedition was a disaster of epic proportions. Few survived this shambolic expedition. However, relief parties of 1961 found evidence of Leichhardt’s journey.

John McDougall Stuart

In 1862, John McDougall Stuart, crossed the continent of Australia from south to north. On his way, Stuart name a mountain after Leichhardt. Though he did not find definite evidence of the lost explorer and his party, he did find horse tracks near Tennant Creek.

Though it was only circumstantial, Stuart also reported having met a native who “gave a masonic sign”, and he also met a child that showed white ancestry.

William Landsborough

In 1861 William Landsborough explored south from the Albert River and Stoke’s “Plains of Promise”. Though the main reason for his journey was to explore the region, he did actively search for signs of Leichhardt.

John McKinlay

John McKinlay in the same year travelled north east from Adelaide, ostensibly to search for Burke and Wills, however, also searched for remnants of Leichhardt’s third expedition.

Frederick Walker

Frederick Walker searched the region west of Rockhampton. As with Landsborough, Walker’s prime motivation was to explore more of this area. However, he more so, actively looked for signs of Leichhardt.

Duncan McIntyre

In 1865, Duncan McIntyre found a tree marked with an “L” in the Flinders River, near the Gulf of Carpentaria. This tree would have been marked during Leichhardt’s first expedition (if it was Leichhardt’s tree at all!). However, McIntyre also reported that he had found traces of Leichhardt, and was subsequently appointed to lead another search party.

Society women of Melbourne raised £4000 to fund the search by McIntyre. This expedition was an abject failure, with McIntyre’s death and not even reaching the search area.

Dr G Neumayer

In 1868, Dr G Neumayer, a Hamburg scientist, who had spent some years in Australia developed a theory that Leichhardt in fact did not reach the north west, but rather search the area for Leichhardt’s remains. However, he did publish a paper in 1881 whereby he declared definitively, that the remains of the lost party were to be found in Mulligan River country, western Queensland.

John Forrest

In 1869, reports were received horse remains and men killed by indigenous Australians could be seen and were attributed to Leichhardt’s party. John Forrest was chosen to lead an expedition by the Western Australian Government. Nothing was found, and it was decided that the bones probably belonged to a horse left behind by Robert Austin at Poison Rock during his expedition of 1854.

J M Gilmour (1)

Following reports that a survivor of the Leichhardt party (known as the “wild white man”) was living with natives west of the Barcoo River, in 1870 (22 years after Leichhardt’s disappearance!) the Queensland government engaged J M Gilmour to check this out. Gilmour was a sub-inspector of the Native Mounted Police at Bulloo Barracks, and an

exceptional bushman. On 16 January 1871, Gilmour set off with a party of a white constable, five native troopers and twenty four saddle and pack horses.

They met a native at Cooper Creek, who reported that a party of white men were killed at Wantata waterhole, some distance westward. Gilmour found the place and found unburied skeletons, which signifies the likelihood of them being white men. He also found other scraps that confirmed the finding.

J M Gilmour (2)

Following persistent reports (or rumours) of a living survivor of the Leichhardt party, Gilmour was sent off again on 11 September 1871 to check. Following tough wet conditions this time, Gilmour traversed to the Diamantina River, where he found more relics, an iron tomahawk, scraps of material and leather.

However, following an arduous trip of almost 300km, Gilmour and his party was unable to confirm the existence of the “wild white man”.

Other Findings

Over the next few years, and with the endorsement of the New South Wales Department of Lands, various so-called “findings” were made that were attributed to members of the Leichhardt party. Nothing was every verified “beyond doubt” and it even developed that there were spurious claims to finds of artefacts, which claimed to include diaries and journals.

All were discredited.

SUMMARY

Ludwig Leichhardt became the Australian enigma. His disappearance was thoroughly investigated, and little was found. He was lauded, and even had places named after him.

The mystery as to whether he died of thirst in the desert, was massacred by aboriginal people, was killed by mutineering companions, who in turn perished, or the whole party died one by one in the Australian wilderness.

The remarkableness of Leichhardt’s impact on Australian exploratory history is in the impact it had on the community at the time of his disappearance and the extent to which efforts were made to find him.

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Figure 2: Portrait of Ludwig Leichhardt by Albert Tucker

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

George Baitch, B.Surv.(UNSW), B.Bus.(P.Admin)(CSU), M.Public Affairs. (Syd Uni) MIS Aust., MMSIA, MPRSSA Registered Surveyor (NSW), Registered Mine Surveyor (NSW). George is currently Senior Surveyor, Surveying Infrastructure and Geodesy, Information Sourcing, Department of Lands in Bathurst. His work is in management of the geodetic surveys of the State and integrating these with the needs of the users of digital land information. He has also occupied other managerial and policy advisory positions within the administrative functions of his Department.

Prior to joining the Department of Lands in Bathurst, George worked for several years in the Riverina as a Staff Surveyor, undertaking cadastral surveys for Crown Lands. In his formative years, he undertook mine subsidence surveys with the Department of Mines in

Newcastle. George's driving professional interest is in continuing professional development (CPD). He has been a member of the Institution of NSW Division's CPD Sub-Committee since 1996.

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