

Ludwig Leichhardt: the man and his mission

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THESE two books on Ludwig Leichhardt complement each other perfectly. In *Where is Dr Leichhardt?*, Darrell Lewis devotes himself to laying out all the information available about the hunt for the missing explorer that has fascinated Australians for more than 160 years. In *Ludwig Leichhardt: Lost in the Outback*, Hans Finger has translated new material to present an intimate portrait of Leichhardt, the man. Together they provide the tools for forming a view about an engrossing puzzle. Readers with aspirations to play detective can take up the challenge to succeed where so many have failed.

First, some essential background: in April 1848, Prussian explorer Ludwig Leichhardt left Mt Abundance, which was then at the Queensland frontier, accompanied by six or maybe seven other men and a large baggage train of equipment and livestock. He planned to trek across Australia through vast stretches of unknown country to the settlement of Swan River in Western Australia.

It was not his first exploratory journey. To much colonial acclaim, he successfully opened a route from Moreton Bay to Port Essington during 1844-46. However, a second expedition in 1847 that was intended to travel west from Moreton Bay to Swan River had to be abandoned due to rain, illness and the loss of livestock. The effect of that failure on Leichhardt is not fully canvassed in Lewis's book but it is available by turning to *Leichhardt: Lost in the Outback*, of which more below.

Colonial society lionised Leichhardt from his arrival in New South Wales in 1842. The success of his first expedition and the spectacular failure of the second only increased his prominence. Great expectations were laid on the third journey, some of them fuelled by Leichhardt, who understood their role in fundraising. His disappearance on this third trip is one of Australia's greatest historical mysteries, matched only perhaps by the tale of Lasseret's gold.

Through the decades since Leichhardt vanished, just when the explorer might have faded from the public mind, someone has always found an object - or tracks - which they claim proves he passed by, triggering another round of speculation about his fate. In his 1957 novel *Voss*, Patrick White revived the ethereal, enigmatic figure who shifts and shimmers in history like a mirage. Now Lewis has done it again and a new generation will ponder what happened to him. With modern technology to help, perhaps this time someone will find a conclusive answer.

Leichhardt's journey to the west coast was expected to take at least two years. Through 1849 and 1850, nobody worried about the lack of news. By 1851, however, his friends were concerned because his supplies would have run out.

Where is Dr Leichhardt? is the history of the attempts to find him. And there were many.

The first search was made in 1851 by a squatter who was looking for new pastures. No fewer than 14 other attempts, both official and unofficial, followed. Some were made by members of Leichhardt's earlier expeditions, some by his friends, by competing explorers, by men in search of fame for themselves. Some were funded by the NSW government, others by the Royal Society in London. In 1865, the Ladies' Leichhardt Expedition was launched to collect funds, with an organising committee of 16 women, including two from each religious denomination.

From the start, the press played an active role in fanning the flames around Leichhardt's disappearance. Its enthusiasm quickly blurred the difference between factual information and speculation. Ignorance and distortion built on ignorance and distortion, which Lewis carefully disentangles, bringing clarity that helps the reader understand what happened. Such was the fascination with this mystery that in 1880, 30 years after he vanished, *The Bulletin* offered a Pound1000 reward "for the first conclusive and substantial proof of the place where Dr Ludwig Leichhardt, the Great Australian Explorer, met his death".

The history of who, when and what happened in the hunt for Leichhardt is a fascinating and, at times, hilarious tale. For starters, multiple theories abound regarding the route he took. Lewis organises these geographically and assembles the information that supports or casts doubt on each one. The evidence includes stories about encounters and massacres, marked trees, wheel tracks and artefacts, all found or recounted by a bunch of amazing characters.

The most basic tool of an explorer - that of the marked tree - becomes a source of confusion and debate. Over more than a century people found "L" trees everywhere. Lewis picks his way through the competing claims, establishing which are probably Leichhardt's marks and which are doubtful or impossible. It didn't help that there was a second explorer wandering around at the time whose name was Landsborough. Over-eager searchers were prone to claim his "Ls" were Leichhardt's. Furthermore, some trees were sighted but later burned down, died or were washed away. Some "L" trees were identified twice, thus multiplying the number that were said to exist.

The Overland Telegraph was also unhelpful. Tracks made by livestock and drays were potentially a clue to Leichhardt's route, as were the remains of campsites and cooking and other implements, bullock bones, pieces of iron and a tent peg. Once again, the weather was a culprit, obliterating or damaging some of the clues. However, crews from the Overland Telegraph, which was built across the desert from Darwin to Port Augusta in South Australia

during the 1870s, marked trees. They also camped and scattered artefacts, a bit like modern day Everest mountaineers. Furthermore, the construction teams included men whose names began with "L".

One of the most fascinating aspects is the role of Aboriginal people. From the beginning they were key sources of information. Lewis explores the detail of what they had to say, which varied from the belief that a party of white men perished from thirst, to an account that they drowned, to another that they were massacred by other Aboriginal people. Some Aborigines claimed Leichhardt's end came at a fabled destination called Bunderaballa, but nobody ever quite reached it. Lewis writes, "The location of the death gets farther and farther away like a mirage that, when you stretch for it, evaporates ... The bones are always 'two days away' or Bunderaballa itself is 'seven days' travel'." Although some opinions were undoubtedly genuine and intended to be helpful, the suspicion arises on occasion that some Aborigines were "taking the piss" out of the white men.

As Lewis points out, "Yet in spite of all the expeditions, the many relics found, the marked trees, the Aboriginal stories and scores of theories, Leichhardt's final resting place and the manner of his death remains unknown."

Where is Dr Leichhardt? concentrates on the history of the search. Leichhardt himself makes no appearance, although it covers much retrospective speculation, some of it derogatory, about his character. After finishing Lewis's book, you hunger for more.

This is where Leichhardt: Lost in the Outback comes into play. It offers readers a chance to judge the explorer for themselves. Its focus is Leichhardt the man, his thoughts and feelings from boyhood until he disappears.

Hans Finger, who is German, draws on a wide range of sources, including 1900 pages of previously unpublished material, to give a fresh, three-dimensional picture of the boy who was father to the man. Reading Finger's work, the description "single-minded" occurs as the most dominant feature of Leichhardt's character. As he wrote to his family before leaving Germany, "There is something in my nature that pushes me further and further."

From the earliest age he had dreamed of great deeds that would reveal "an interior ... veiled in darkness", which was both internal and external. "This interior, this centre of dark mass is my goal and I will not give up until I reach it."

The Australian continent came to embody his quest and he set his heart on crossing it from east to west. He had failed once. It is clear from Finger's book that nothing would have deterred him again. If he encountered difficulties in following his intended direction, we can assume he would have found an alternative. Anything rather than turn back.

Lewis comprehensively fulfils his aim "to document all the clues, reliable or otherwise, so that the reader can follow the evolving history of the search for Leichhardt and, if they wish, to develop their own answer to the greatest mystery in Australia's history - Which way did Leichhardt go? Where did Leichhardt die? How did he die?" Arm yourself with both books and put your amateur detective skills to the test.

Having assembled all the evidence for readers to assess, it is only in the closing paragraphs that Lewis reveals which route he thinks Leichhardt took. You can match your wits against his. And I am not going to spoil the fun.

Where Is Dr Leichhardt? The Greatest Mystery In Australian History

By Darrell Lewis

Monash University Publishing, 415pp, \$39.95

Ludwig Leichhardt: Lost In The Outback

By Hans Wilhelm Finger

Translated By Kylie Crane, Edited By Judith Simpson

Rosenberg Publishing, 270pp, \$34.95

Babette Smith's books include A Cargo of Women and Australia's Birthstain.