A TINY BRASS PLATE

A little over a century ago, an Aboriginal stockman came across a half-burned shotgun hanging from a boab tree near the border between Western Australia and the Northern Territory. On it was a tiny brass plate that read ‘LUDWIG LEICHHARDT 1848’. The strip of metal presents a tantalising clue to the disappearance of a most extraordinary man.

Together with seven companions, their horses, and a number of mules and bullocks, the Prussian explorer and naturalist Ludwig Leichhardt vanished. He had been travelling from south-east Queensland to the Swan River in Western Australia. The number – 1848 – marks the year of that ill-fated expedition.

A GOLD MEDAL

Ludwig Leichhardt was by no means some amateur tourist. He studied six languages, plus philosophy, medicine, geology and the natural sciences. Ludwig attended school in Berlin and Göttingen, continuing his education in London and Paris. But, it was the Australian wilderness that interested him, and in 1841, Ludwig set sail for the great southern land.

The naturalist took to studying the geology and agriculture of the Hunter Valley, before travelling on to Moreton Bay to collect new plants and animals. But, it was a 4,600 kilometre trek through the Queensland outback to Port Essington in the Northern Territory that tempted Ludwig’s reputation as an explorer. Exploring meant enduring sickness and hardship, far from rescue, reading the landscape for direction. The trek took more than three years; so long, he was given up for dead.

On his return to Sydney, Ludwig’s extraordinary accomplishment was celebrated. He and his men were awarded with gold medals from the Royal British and French geographical societies. When the opportunity came up for a cross-continent journey between Brisbane and Perth, few could doubt that Ludwig Leichhardt would be up to the challenge.

A LASTING LEGACY

It’s tempting to take the discovery of Ludwig’s charred shotgun as a sign that he made it as far as Western Australia. A signature ‘L’ was said to be scratched into the boab tree, leading some to speculate the explorer made it even further. In spite of a hefty reward of 1000 pounds, nothing more of the explorer’s possessions or remains were ever brought forward.

While the man himself vanished without a trace, Ludwig Leichhardt left quite a legacy. He is commemorated in the names of flora, fauna, highways, rivers and suburbs. And, his detailed notes and collected specimens formed some of the most accurate early accounts of Australia’s geology and ecology.

One of Ludwig’s discoveries continues to link his German homeland with the Australian wilderness to which he gave his life: a plant with a property that won’t shock you, but will make your eyes wide.

A WHITE-FLOWERED SHRUB

Like Ludwig, Sir Ferdinand von Müller had a German background and an interest in Australian flora. As the director of Melbourne’s Royal Botanic Gardens in the 1850s, Ferdinand discovered and studied hundreds of plants native to Australia.

One particular specimen that caught his eye was a white-flowered shrub he named Duboisia leichhardtii, after the explorer who found it. Ferdinand’s interest was mostly in classifying the plant. Yet, future scientists would find the plant interesting for its medicinal properties.

D. leichhardtii has high levels of the chemicals atropine and scopolamine, both of which are found in the deadly nightshade plant. Though dangerous, both chemicals are also used in medicine. Eye drops containing small amounts of atropine are used by ophthalmologists (eye specialists); while scopolamine is used as a sedative and to treat motion sickness.

Exports of this leafy shrub increased as demand for the drugs soared. In the mid 20th century, CSIRO investigated ways to encourage the plant to grow more efficiently and produce more of the chemicals.

Today, D. leichhardtii is still grown and shipped abroad. In fact, the pharmaceutical company, Boehringer Ingelheim still grows a plantation of the shrubs on Australia’s east coast, sending the dried leaves overseas for processing.

Where does the company send them? Somewhere Ludwig Leichhardt would feel right at home: Germany.