On Leichhardt's path – we walk the time tunnel

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My interest in Leichhardt began in the late seventies when I first began to work as a social worker alongside the collective orientation of Australian Indigenous culture. Its sophistication often raising a self reflection on what it must of been like for the first Europeans who actually did walk the pre-contact pathways into 'the dreaming'.

Seventeenth century shipwrecked sailors would have been the first. The 'blonde' colouring in their hair and 'a Dutch temperament' noted by Daisy Bates in the early 1900s within the Indigenous communities of the Shark Bay region, Western Australia, is part of that history. In its time the Dutch East India Company lost over 100 ships through ship wreck and piracy on plying the Cape Town to Batavia leg of their spice trade. The low lying reefs and desolate scrub deserts of the west coast of Australia first described by Dirk Hartog in 1616 spawned some fearsome sea shanty myths of this great '*Zuitland'* (Southland). The largest ship lost on this desolate coastline thought to be linked to the myth of 'The Flying Dutchman'. Explorers like Abel Tasman, James Cook and the convict colony of first settlers came next and with them stories of a great unknown.

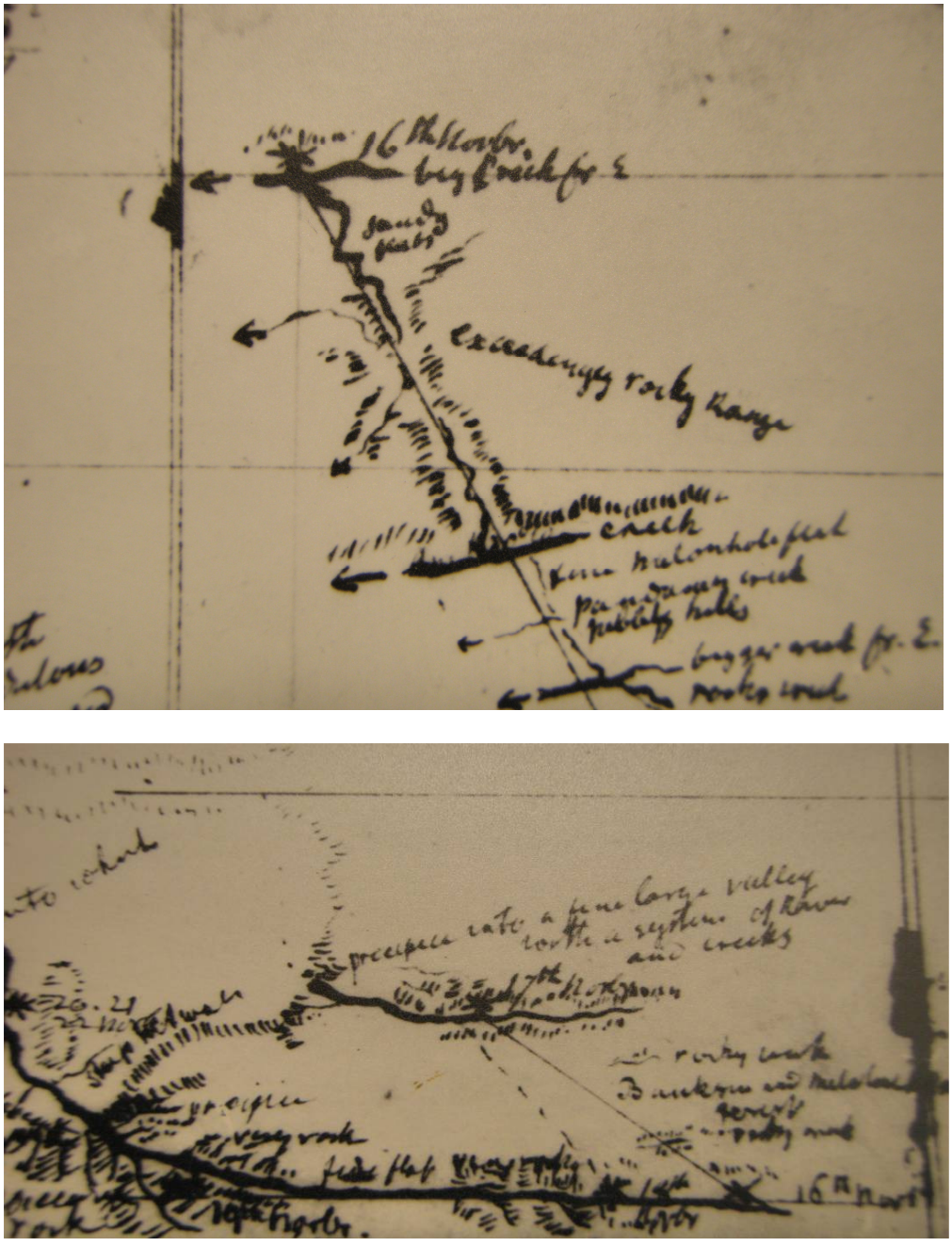
During early colonisation, with vast tracts of Terra Australis and its pre-contact dreaming still a European mystery, a little historical luck provided this birthing nation with a young German adventurer reading science. Our earliest scientific explorer, Wilhelm Ludwig Leichhardt, was to complete in December 1845, the first successful European exploration into this unknown hinterland. When he and his party of bedraggled surviving fellow explorers emerged from the bush south of the then tiny settlement of Victoria they had charted and scientifically recorded a pathway from Moreton Bay in Queensland to Port Essington in what is now the Northern Territory.

For years I had also been reflecting on the fact that Leichhardt on this epic first expedition had walked through what we now know as Kakadu National Park. A part of Australia that is still remote and pristine and some surviving Leichhardt campsite blazes carved into trees used as tent poles had to be out there some where. From the numerous bush walks we have enjoyed in this region my partner Annie and I know that the most isolated part of Kakadu, with absolute minimal human contact over the past one and a half centuries, is the ancient sandstone escarpment of the Arnhem Land plateau. If there was a blaze surviving it had to be in there somewhere, as Leichhardt had tracked across this super heated labyrinth of sharp crumbling rock where deep gorges had crisscrossed his path in an agony of despair. This harsh environment was nearly his nemesis.

Leichhardt's final fate though is still a mystery of the Australian outback. In 1848, this most successful of Australian white explorers and his well equipped third expedition disappeared 'without a trace'. What happened to Leichhardt? How could a party of well equipped, well armed and experienced bush men so disappear in such a totality that we have absolutely no clue as to where their

bones lie? Such is the vastness and mystery of the great Australian outback. This and other enigmatic questions continue to haunt the pathway, the tracks, that Leichhardt literally blazed through the bush of Terra Australis. These enigmatic questions of course raise further questions rather than answers.

Leichhardt also left tracks in colonial scholarship, publishing one of pre-Australia's earliest scientific documents – his journal of the first expedition. Annie and I had worked with this material and directly from a copy of his original hand drawn map as we correlated one of his Kakadu campsites, the night of the 16th of November 1845.



Leichhardts original hand drawn maps leading to and from his 16th November 1845 campsite on Jim Jim Creek upstream from the falls (Courtesy Rare Collection CDU Library Darwin NT).

So it was toward this ancient campsite, after a year of research, that Annie and I were bushwalking toward across the top of the escarpment. We were following the same original map that Leichhardt had charted on emerging from the grip of the sandstone Arnhem Land plateau at the precipice overlooking the valley of the South Alligator River. Starving, Leichhardt and his team had struggled through the deadly maze of sandstone to finally succeed in 'breaking out' on the 17th November 1845. This part of Leichhardt's pathway is in Kakadu still looking today as he would have seen it.

The view atop Jim Jim waterfall looking out to the South Alligator valley "…a pristine ribbon of blue…" (Photo Douglas Hobbs, site survey 2008)

"We again found ourselves at the brink of that beautiful valley, which lay before us like the promised land"
(Ludwig Leichhardt 17-18 November 1845)

These were the victorious words that Leichhardt jotted in his journal as he stood atop the precipice of what we now know as the 300m high Jim Jim

Falls. Annie and I were seeing exactly what he and his party saw in 1845. Nothing has changed in this eternal Kakadu dreamtime, it is a dreamtime that captivates you, and Leichhardt was probably the first white man to walk through it.

The Jim Jim creek still flows as a pristine ribbon of blue into the valley of the South Alligator. It had given Leichhardt a rocky but watered lifeline out of some of the most rugged terrain in Australia. By November, as the wet season breaks, the sandstone country is also a demoralizing rocky terrain sweltering in tropical heat and humidity. It's called the 'build up' and it's debilitating.

Back then:

Leichhardt must have made his 17-18 November 1845 journal entries with an immense sense of relief and perhaps real joy, for below him, according to his estimated longitude, would have to be a critical target of this expedition. A river valley of this size just had to contain one of the three large and supposedly parallel northern flowing 'Alligator' rivers, the mouths of which had been chartered by Captain Phillip Parker King during his Northern coastal surveys circa 1818 -21. Leichhardt had been seeking any one of these rivers to provide him with what navigators now call a 'hand rail' - a bearing toward Port Essington, the fledgling settlement of Royal Marines stationed in the Northern most tip of the then young Queen Victoria's remotest colony. The community, aptly named Victoria, was the goal of Leichhardt's first expedition in the years 1844/45 and he was now nearly a year overdue. The young colony had already begun to give him up as 'lost like many others' in the great outback, comments that were to prove prophetic three years later.

Now, however, they were still atop the ancient plateau, at a precipice over which the first rains of the coming wet season were pouring into the valley of the South Alligator. Here Leichhardt and his men could finally see a way out. Not only that, but before them was precisely what Leichhardt must have been looking for and no doubt all the team were thankful for this deliverance. His fellow explorers had now suffered a year of deprivation and, in the preceding weeks, a fear born out of frustration while navigating the rocky maze of the plateau stretched out behind them. This frustration is exemplified in the comment which Leichhardt writes in a happy reflection after successfully descending into the valley before him a couple of days later:

"The melodious whistle of a bird was frequently heard in the most rocky and wretched spots of the table land. It raised its voice, a slow full whistle, by five or six successive half-notes; which was very pleasing, and frequently the only relief while passing through this most perplexing country. " (Ludwig Leichhardt 20 November 1845)

The turning point

Early in the morning of 17 November 1845, Leichhardt and his team had set out from their camp now half a day's walk upstream from where he stood, little knowing what was going to confront them. In total surprise and amazement they had come to the precipice of this huge valley before noon.

"There were many high falls in the bed, which compelled me to leave the creek, and proceed on the rising ground along its banks, when suddenly the extensive view of a magnificent valley opened before us". (Ludwig Leichhardt 17 November 1845)

This valley is as wide as it is beautiful. Leichhardt was looking out from atop the Jim Jim Falls toward a curving outlier, a peninsula of sandstone escarpment, sweeping North West into the valley of the South Alligator from well south of Jim Jim Creek. Today we know the valley of the South Alligator as a vast wetland, its intermittent opposite boundary is indistinct lying somewhere beyond the West Alligator well over his horizon. Leichhardt was not to know this, but he knew by any approximation of his longitude that it was at this point that he had to turn north. There were too many indicators coinciding. His navigational plan would have included the finding the Alligator catchment. He knew any one of the Alligator Rivers and in particular the East Alligator mouth would give him a direct bearing for Port Essington, and Victoria!

Much has been said about Leichhardt's abilities, a lot of it negative and speculative. To the point where I have often wondered if he was the subject of a smear campaign. Would the British colonial governance of *Terra Nullius* have been 'uncomfortable' with a German scientist citing an ancient stone-age civilization? In Europe we had Rousseau's concept of "the noble savage" raging through the halls of academia. Leichhardt had to be knowledgeable of the significant debates in the scientific circles of his time. We will never know if he ever considered writing a paper on 'The Noble Savage of Terra Australis'. We do know however that while waiting for the supply ship at Port Essington in December 1845 he had begun to critically track malaria and was the first to isolate it as being insect borne. The supply ship that was to return him to Sydney arrived before he concluded this research.

Leichhardt, was an all round scientific reader, he wrote his journal broadly across all the known science of his time. Ethnology for example was a form of early anthropology. Sadly however, the 'ethnological reference' in his journal is minimal, basic and rarely accompanied with analysis and notable by its absence. There is no link, or a hint toward the 'noble savage' debate. Why is this? Was it not a critical subject of the royal societies of the time? How much of Leichhardt's ethnography had been cut out of his journal by Captain Phillip Parker King RN, the eldest son of a governor of NSW, a member of the Royal Society himself and whose edits 'dot' the journal? Something of this nature is believed to have infuriated Leichhardt as the journal had been published during his absence while on the second, failed, expedition.

Some faint wisps of his thoughts in ethnology though seem to have survived and can be read between the lines, as in this very human pre-contact entry into his journal;

"Whilst riding along the bank of the river, we saw an old woman before us, walking slowly and thoughtfully through the forest, supporting her slender and apparently exhausted frame with one of those long sticks which the women use for digging roots; a child was running before her. Fearing she would be much alarmed if we came too suddenly upon her,—as neither our voices in conversation, nor the footfall of our horses, attracted her attention,—I cooeed gently; after repeating the call two or three times, she turned her head; in sudden fright she lifted her arms, and began to beat the air, as if to take wing,—then seizing the child, and shrieking most pitifully, she rapidly crossed the creek, and escaped to the opposite ridges. What could she think; but that we were some of those imaginary beings, with legends of which the wise men of her people frighten the children into obedience, and whose strange forms and stranger doings are the favourite topics of conversation amongst the natives at night when seated round their fires?"(Ludwig Leichhardt 20 March 1845)

Another question - did Leichhardt send copy of his notes in ethnology, possibly written in German, back home to his extended family in Germany? We know he was in some correspondence.

If he had done so, what would such ethnology contain? Could it offer some insight into the unknown? It would certainly be an amazing resource for our Australian Indigenous community today. What had Leichhardt and his team really experienced as they came in contact with the clans of the Alligator Rivers? In November 1845 it was the onset of the wet season, the celebration time, for the people of the flood plain their "lightning man was coming".

Leichhardt's journal is very interesting and is now available on the worldwide web, as mentioned it is surprisingly 'light on' for the social anthropology of the time. This absence highlighting another element in the Leichhardt enigma particularly as his journal devotes numerous entries to wide ranging critical scientific analysis including the psychology of both himself and his team.

Was there a political motive for a lot of the negative comment that still floats around Leichhardt? He was very popular in the success of 1845, yet there were unproven speculations of a' madness', self centeredness, and an incompetence in navigation.

My critical analysis of what's written identifies a different perspective. Here was a reader of science, an explorer of differing cultural background to imperial Victorianism. Yes he was a touch eccentric - he did, after all, always wear a tie even in the hottest of conditions. However his mind and his science were sharp and keen edged, and despite some early mistakes and a confusion as to which Alligator river he was on, his navigation was unerringly

accurate for what was known at the time. Bear in mind that nothing was known of the terrain he was covering.

The Dreaming

The cliff face of Jim Jim Falls is truly formidable.

They spent their time on that memorable afternoon in the excitement of trying to find a way down the boulders and ledges of the impossible precipice confronting them, finally in failure retiring back upstream on the same creek of the 16th (Jim Jim) in order to try again the next day.

"…the narrow gully, with perpendicular walls, sunk rapidly into the deep chasm, down which the boldest chamois hunter would not have dared to descend". (Ludwig Leichardt 18 November 1845)

Leichhardt detached himself from the others that evening and remained by himself camping out on one of the flat grassy ledges overlooking the cliff face, and the rainbows in the waterfall. Affording himself what we now know as one of the most beautiful views of Kakadu. The occasional enchanting call of the black cockatoo would have swept up to him through the thunder of the falling water, hauntingly calling from the valley below.

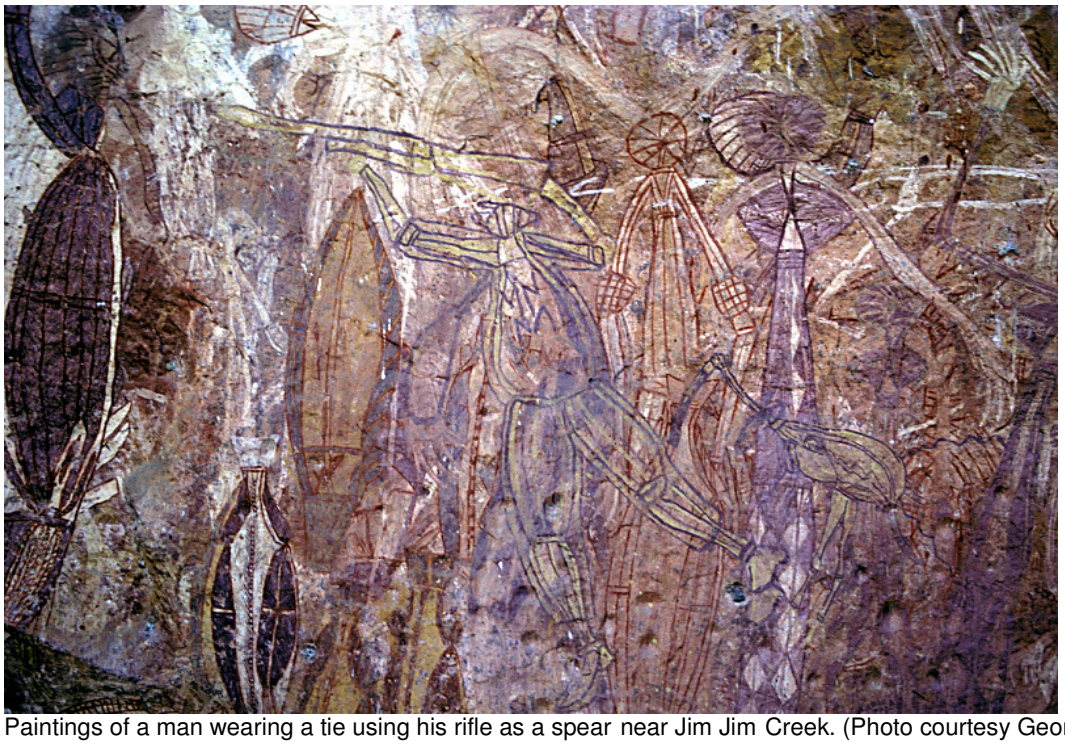
The cliff face that held them back is today officially defined as part of the Arnhem Land escarpment in Kakadu National Park. In the many languages of its original people, one can wonder if Leichhardt ever learnt that the cliff face, the land form they stood on, is the Gagadju Rainbow Serpent dreaming. Leichhardt and his team were standing on what the elders I have spoken to understood to be the famed site of the oldest recounted story in human history.

"…we observed a great number of grasshoppers, of a bright brick colour dotted with blue: the posterior part of the corselet, and the wings were blue; it was two inches long, and its antennae three quarters of an inch." (Ludwig Leichhardt 17 November 1845)

In the dreaming these grasshoppers are the children of the lightning man 'Namarrgon'- coming out to greet their father. He comes to impregnate their mother, the Rainbow Serpent with the life of his lightning and the wet season that brings it. Traditionally, when these grasshoppers appear the bachelors in the rock country would send messages to the families on the flood plain, warning them to move to the high rock shelters. It was time for the fertility ceremonies. Interestingly here we have the oldest myth in the world telling us that lightning (electricity) gives life....

The young men living in the high escarpment and along the sandstone creeks would have been watching these strangers and animals with astonishment and caution, possibly they would have known of Leichhardt's approach. We do not know if they revealed themselves but by recording unedited versions of the event in nearby rock shelters we know they tried to describe what they

saw to each other and to their dreaming. Not far from Jim Jim creek there are paintings of a man wearing a tie and using his rifle as a spear, the artist obviously never having never have seen a rifle used before. Testament to Leichhardt's friendly approach (other explorers were renown to shoot first). In another there is a unique first painting of a man on horseback and wearing a helmet (Leichhardt's straw hat). In all likelihood, according to NT Museum curator and NT rock art specialist George Chaloupka, these are paintings of Leichhardt. Paintings recorded through many hidden eyes into the dreamtime.



Paintings of a man wearing a tie using his rifle as a spear near Jim Jim Creek. (Photo courtesy George Chaloupka Museum and Art Gallery of Northern Territory)

Watched by these hidden eyes, Leichhardt, just ahead of the coming wet season, was lucky - the swollen creeks already rising on the plateau would have caught them and stranded the party for months with little to no food.

Exhausted by the heat and his efforts of finding a way down the precipice, Leichhardt spent the night asleep on his grassy knoll, comfortable in the knowledge that when he awoke on the 18th the first thing he would see was proof of his strategic plan realised.

At this point he may have begun to think that his expedition of 1844-45, after months of despair, was going to succeed. He knew that this river before him had to guide him north to the coast where its mouth would be just south west of Port Essington. This was exactly as he would have planned it in Sydney some two years before. The next day when joined by the rest of his small expeditionary party, all Leichhardt had to celebrate with was a modest dinner of boiled bullock hide.

"I appeased my craving hunger, which had been well tried for twenty hours, on the small fruit of a species of Acmena which grew near the rocks that

bounded the sandy flats, until my companions brought my share of stewed green hide." (Ludwig Leichhardt 18 November 1845)

A Unique 'first ' painting of a man on horseback wearing a helmet (Leichhardt's straw hat) near Leichhardt's path in Kakadu National Park . (Photo George Chaloupka Museum and Art Gallery of Northern Territory).

Atop the precipice

Leichhardt's immediate challenge was to get the expedition's two bullocks and the horses, all unshod, down the 300m precipice that stood before him. Any reader who has climbed the steep rocky, boulder-hopping path from the base

of Jim Jim Falls to the top of the escarpment would, I believe, recognise that the achievement of “climbing” his horses and livestock “with bloodied hooves” down this precipitous face as yet another unsung feat of this 19th century explorer from Germany. (To save weight, he had cast his spare horse shoes into a billabong back in June whilst traversing the soft country of the Lynd River - little did he know what lay ahead.)

Leichhardt and his men had been on short rations for weeks while working their way through sheer sandstone crevasses, and numerous dry rocky creeks. Food and game had been scarce, and so was ammunition. They were surviving off the land as they went, something often done to supplement rations as Leichhardt satisfactorily describes earlier in his log.

“We caught a bandicoot with two young ones, which gave us an excellent luncheon.” (Ludwig Leichhardt 10 March 1845)

Until he saw the valley before them he must have been a very worried man, wondering when this maze of sandstone, this “trap” he and his party had been struggling to navigate through, was ever going to end. There was nothing to hunt and nothing to survive on. The thought that he might be confronted by an impassable gorge that was going to take hundreds of miles to circumnavigate would have been one of his many fears. The party’s mental state would have been at a low, particularly as they were now all starting to suffer from irritating skin infections caused by starvation, at times lack of water, and the relentless attack of insects and tropical fungi.

(Photo Douglas Hobbs, site survey 2008)

"...our path was intercepted by precipices and chasms, forming an insurmountable barrier to our cattle". (Ludwig Leichhardt 5 November 1845)

His party were already exhausted as the sandstone massifs of the Arnhem Land escarpment had emerged on the horizon. Very low on supplies, on a latitude some 300 miles south of Port Essington, the barrier before them would have been as fearful as it was heartbreaking.

"I had a most disheartening, sickening view over a tremendously rocky country. A high land, composed of horizontal strata of sandstone, seemed to be literally hashed, leaving the remaining blocks in fantastic figures of every shape; and a green vegetation, crowding deceitfully within their fissures and gullies, and covering half of the difficulties which awaited us on our attempt to travel over it." (Ludwig Leichardt 11 November 1845)

Cleverly, using the North Westerly direction of creek beds, Leichhardt succeeded in breaking through this barrier in just under 2 weeks and climbed down the escarpment face on 19 November 1845. Following the Alligator catchment, he may initially have been confused as to which of the 'Alligator' rivers he was following and some navigational slippage may have occurred. In all likelihood, his first conclusions placed him on the East Alligator, but this changed when he realised he was on the South Alligator, when in following it he was placed well west of the longitude he sought. On changing direction, his path then cut northeast, where he found the East Alligator, and then onward toward Port Essington arriving in time for Christmas.

Crossing the Magela floodplains would have put him very close to the world famous site known as Ubirr in Kakadu National Park. Would he and his party have been made welcome in the cool shadows of this village of rock shelters? We may never know. Only the paintings remain of our young man of science who in walking through the dreamtime endeavoured to befriend the peoples he met and they in turn, at no behest, would often light the fires whose smoke lead Leichhardt and his party to water each evening.

The only time they had been attacked was months beforehand (June 28th 1845) when the opportunity to befriend had not occurred. In that particular and only case of conflict in the entire trek, two of them were injured and one, Gilbert, was killed. It had started on the day before when a pre-contact Indigenous hunting party were sighted stalking the bullocks. Before any contact had been established this hunting party had been offended on their own land and driven of by the panicked and over vigorous defence of said bullocks. A 'contact' miscue as such is portent for a cultural conflict – it easily happens when crossing an unknown and complex social terrain of independent lands with out the permission of the numerous clans, languages, laws, rights and sensitivities.

A rare entry in Leichhardt's journal that somehow survived the editor (possibly due to smutty humour) is one of an Indigenous perspective. A rather unique query from a friendly group of pre-contact men refers to their puzzle as to why these strange white men were travelling without their women:

"....managed to keep them in good humour by replying to their inquiries respecting our nature and intentions; among which one of the most singular was, whether the bullocks were not our gins... (Ludwig Leichardt 6 May 1845)

Women were the peace flags for travelling groups and one can only wonder what was going through the collective indigenous mind. On the collective side of the cultural divide you never travelled without your women. What kind of mystery was this creature who climbed on to an animal's back (horse back) and then sat and rocked in such an 'intimate' manner. If they were men then where were their women? A number of the bullocks were after all female and the ancient concrete and collective logic would demand such a question.

Leichhardt was travelling too fast for the song lines of his trackers to keep pace. They were soon to lose what language had to offer.

Overdue

Before leaving Sydney Leichhardt was told that his was a foolhardy expedition and that his party would perish. He even noted some of these comments in his journal. Yet here despite all odds he now stood within the grasp of victory nearly a year overdue at Port Essington.

"A large river, joined by many tributary creeks coming from east, south-east, south-west and west, meandered through the valley; which was bounded by high, though less precipitous ranges to the westward and south-west from our position; and other ranges rose to the northward." (Ludwig Leichardt 17 November 1845)

In his estimation, Port Essington had to be only 250 miles downstream. He still had two bullocks left and just enough horses. Port Essington was within the range of his meagre supplies, but it was a full month later, on 17 December, that he was to reach his final destination. His journal records a month of wonder trudging through what is now a tourist Mecca, the flood plains of the South Alligator River. Leichhardt's description of the avian biomass that existed on his pathway back then is awe inspiring:

"Here the noise of clouds of water-fowl…"

"The water had received a disagreeable sour aluminous taste from the soil, and from the dung of innumerable geese, ducks, native companions, white cranes, and various other water-fowl."

"Thousands of ducks and geese occupied these pools, and the latter fed as they waded through the grass."

"No part of the country we had passed was so well provided with game as this; and of which we could have easily obtained an abundance, had not our shot been all expended. The cackling of geese, the quacking of ducks, the sonorous note of the native companion, and the noises of black and white

cockatoos, and a great variety of other birds, gave to the country, both night and day, an extraordinary appearance of animation". (Leichhardt while heading north on the South Alligator flood plains Nov/Dec 1845)

Sadly today, you are lucky if you see a few and rarely a large gaggle of these geese on the South Alligator flood plain, let alone regularly standing in the shadow of them as Leichhardt's expedition must have done. While there can be large numbers of geese at places such as Mamukala at a certain time of the year, these numbers are nothing like what they must have been.

The Magpie goose originally had a vast domain stretching down the east coast of this continent and into the Murray Darling system. The last real breeding kernel for this magnificent bird is now on the wetlands of the Northern Territory. Another question in my thoughts; can it survive our social schism? Commercialised testosterone demands that we continue to shoot geese, yet environmental tourism demands to see the dense flocks in the way that Leichhardt did.

In another rare paragraph that also survived the editing, Leichhardt describes not only being amazed by the birdlife but also the friendliness and care given him by his hosts, the Gagadju speaking peoples, as he crossed the floodplains.

"We encamped at this pool, and the natives flocked round us from every direction. Boys of every age, lads, young men and old men too, came, every one armed with his bundle of goose spears, and his throwing stick. They observed, with curious eye, everything we did, and made long explanations to each other of the various objects presented to their gaze. Our eating, drinking, dress, skin, combing, boiling, our blankets, straps, horses, everything, in short, was new to them, and was earnestly discussed, particularly by one of the old men, who amused us with his drollery and good humour in trying to persuade each of us to give him something. They continually used the words "Perikot, Nokot, Mankiterre, Lumbo Lumbo, Nana Nana Nana", all of which we did not understand till after our arrival at Port Essington, where we learned that they meant "Very good, no good, Malays very far". Their intonation was extremely melodious, some other words, the meaning of which we could not make out, were "Kelengeli, Kongurr, Verritimba, Vanganbarr, Nangemong, Maralikilla;" the accent being always on the first syllable of the word, and all the vowels short". (Ludwig Leichardt 27 November 1845)

So what happened to this articulate young German scientist?

The social shock of the French revolution less than a century before and its accompanying 'enlightenment' had given flight to an early social science. This was worrisome in the royal societies particularly as debates often involved those in high political circles. There were concerns raised by the 'noble savage' discourse and in another enigmatic question did this subject threaten the colonial politics of 'Terra Nullius'?

The very concept of the natural man, the myth of the 'noble savage', was mixed in with the critical ascendency of science and its royal societies. The 'noble savage' was seen living according to the dictates of 'natural law and reason', that there was something "natural" about human beings that could be isolated or abstracted from the "social". If Leichardt had returned to Europe at this time and entered the heated debate with the ethnography of the indigenous people of Terra Australis it would have negated the legal and political myth of *'Terra Nullius'.* Would this have caused severe embarrassment to British Law, the 'Empire', and the queen?

When Leichhardt 'disappears' in 1848, in the midst of this 'noble savage conjecture', we also have a unique coincidence, Karl Marx recently returned from Germany, publishes the 'Communist Manifesto' in the 'intellectual centre' of the 19th century - London. In the middle of the 19th century industrial revolution how did Marx come across the idea of 'collectivism'? Certainly the social science and its questions at the time would have fuelled his thoughts however did he also, and somehow, read part of Leichhardt's correspondence sent back to Eastern Prussia? This is a long bow to draw, but if indeed, Leichhardt has left an interesting path to follow.

It was a time when 'liberalism' was taking a hold, and Karl Marx was writing his attack on free enterprise and the call for communal ownership of property: *Das Kapital*. Men of wealth were in fear, the recently published 'Communist Manifesto' proclaimed '…the proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win'. Where were these ideas coming from, was there a link to the scientific observations and musings of a German explorer walking through an ancient collective civilisation on the other side of the world. Did this concern lend a political imperative to maintain the myth of 'Terra Nullius'? Did these ideas need to be stopped at their source? Why did Leichhardt, a man of science and adventure, not leave us with a published ethnography? Did some of his notes get to Germany, notes on the collective society of the 'Noble Savage'?

Maybe a more sinister question should also be added to the grab bag of theories as to what happened to Leichhardt. In addition to fire, madness, and attack by natives should we also allow for the potential of political expedience, which as always includes the removal of a potential 'problem'? A poisoned flour bag would easily do the trick. A bag slipped into the 1848 expedition supplies by an unknown hand is a possibility. The irony of this method being used by the settlers to remove troublesome natives may not have escaped the perpetrator. A disaster like this would easily account for the total loss of an experienced and well equipped party, a party that would have been months away from help. The possibility of such a trap and who would have set it extends the Leichhardt enigma.

Chillingly, and in retrospect, I found the following entries he wrote into his log back in 1845.

"... as soon as the camp is pitched, and the horses and bullocks unloaded, we have all our allotted duties; to make the fire falls to my share; Brown's duty is

to fetch water for tea; and Mr.Calvert weighs out a pound and a half of flour for a fat cake, which is enjoyed more than any other meal (Ludwig Leichhardt 1 May 1845).

And then a few days later;

"After having celebrated Whit–Sunday with a double allowance of fat cake and sweetened tea, I started with Charley to reconnoitre the country to the westward". (Ludwig Leichhardt 11 May 1845)

Leichhardt always tried to befriend the indigenous first peoples but an angry cultural miscue could again have triggered a conflict, however where are the stories, the narratives of this? There are no lions or tigers in the Australian bush, only the deep silence and mystery of the outback. There are still parts of Australia where Leichhardt's boot prints may have been the only ones.

Today

Not too far back from where Leichhardt had once stood, Annie and I, in retracing his steps, encounter a fascinating ancient and surreal landscape of sandstone with pockets of green through which laces the Jim Jim Creek, its crystal clear water bubbling and fizzing over small falls and sunken pools.

We were attempting to navigate into history, navigate through a pristine environment unchanged since the explorer's first footfall.

We were aware that Leichhardt often marked his campsites by carving his 'LL' initials as a tree blaze. Our objective was to find one of these blazes for it would indicate a possible campsite. We had his coordinates for the campsite of the 16th November 1845, so we just needed a little luck.

In Leichhardt's day, plotting one's longitude and latitude was not an easy task, longitude being particularly difficult. The fact that Leichhardt was consistently within 4km of his estimated position gave us some hope.

If nothing had been disturbed in the past 162 wet seasons either by bush fire or erosion we might find an 'LL' blaze or some other evidence of Leichhardt's route and actually stand on his path. We wanted to look for old clues. We were looking for an historical artefact at an intersection of two cultures.

If we found anything it would be more evidence that Leichhardt's navigation was indeed accurate.

What we were looking for

On 16 November 1845, just two days before he had enjoyed the magnificent view of what he now suspected was the valley of the East Alligator, Leichhardt and his surviving party of nine men, two bullocks and horses had scrambled down a steep bank into one of the remaining perpetual pools on Jim Jim Creek. They had beforehand wound northwards in this impossibly rugged

country, along the desiccation of a stony creek searching for another creek that had to flow west, a creek which would lead them to the great catchment of the Alligator system. Leichhardt must have known that they were close, through his longitude and latitude approximations.

Where were these great rivers? Were their headwaters locked into this sandstone nightmare, this confusion of creeks and gullies, maybe down some impossibly steep gorges?

On 16 November 1845, the party must have been at the height of despair, and the fear of a lonely death by starvation must have lurked not too far away. There were very few clues on the Arrowsmith's map of the Continent of New Holland they were using. The map was basically a blank outline, based on Philip Parker King's twenty year old coastal surveys.

Finally on 16 November 1845, the party's hope must have heightened when the livestock bolted forwards to the scent of water locked in the permanent pools of a large west flowing creek. What must have it been like encamped that night on the dry sandy beach of a large creek billabong flowing in just the direction they sought while the first thunderstorms of the wet season struck them? Little did Leichhardt know what would confront him the next day, and in the days ahead?

It was to the site of this, his last camp of despair, that Annie and I were trekking toward some 162 years later.

As the heat of that November was sucking the energy out of Leichhardt's party, finding that campsite pool and beach on Jim Jim Creek must have felt like a Godsend for these weary, hungry and battered explorers. They had at that point been trekking across Australia for nearly 13 months.

"On leaving Sydney, my companions consisted of Mr. James Calvert; Mr. John Roper; John Murphy, a lad of about 16 years old: of William Phillips, a prisoner of the Crown; and of "Harry Brown," an aboriginal of the Newcastle tribe: making with myself six individuals…… I was after much reluctance prevailed upon to make one change,--to increase my party; and the following persons were added to the expedition:--Mr. Pemberton Hodgson, a resident of the district; Mr. Gilbert; Caleb, an American negro; and "Charley," an aboriginal native of the Bathurst tribe". (Introduction, Leichhardt's Journal 1846)

As Annie and I navigated our way to the campsite of 16 November 1845, we were conscious of intersecting Leichhardt's path just as he'd left it. Walking along Jim Jim Creek we were on Leichhardt's path, if not in time certainly in place, and it did not take much thought to imagine being back in 1845. The flies still sound the same!

The campsite

The weeks of studying Leichhardt's original chart were starting to pay. His old map was translating well into our modern one and to the sandstone country that surrounded us as we bushwalked up the creek.

The old map was still reading well when Annie's comment was "it has to be the next creek junction".

We came across the intersection between a dry stony creek and a tree-fringed lagoon in the bed of the Jim Jim Creek. It had all the makings for a camp - a wide shallowing beach on one side and a steep bank on the other.

We started looking for clues and were distracted by some red barked trees that Leichhardt had referred to as 'red rock box' trees and this to no avail. It was late and, quite disappointed, we moved up stream to camp by the pillars, a beautiful site scattered with rippled Kambolgie sandstone and white sandy beaches.

The next day we had a rest and explored Jim Jim upstream from the pillars, partially to displace our disappointment, partially to have a bushwalk through some fascinating country.

On day 3 after a late start we walked down the opposite bank.

We stopped for lunch and realised that we were just upstream of the possible site. There was the creek junction, and across the creek were the "red rock box" trees.

Then we both felt it, like a sixth sense, that we were where we would find something. It was uncanny yet powerful. I immediately walked around on a searching pass – nothing, then returned to where Annie was finishing her lunch.

Sitting down I thought - if I was with Leichhardt's party that afternoon and in this place, what would we have done?

It then hit me, and I talked Annie through it. The livestock would have separated from the dry stony creek at the elbow 50 odd metres behind the opposite bank and come crashing down that steep bank into the water in front of us. After a celebratory soaking they would have moved up the flat beach to our right.

We both got up and started walking along the beach and into a patch of trees. While I was looking at an old tree, Annie called out to me "Dan, come and have a look at this". I knew in that instant she had found something.

There it was - an ancient LL blaze, so old that had we not been looking for it we would have missed it entirely.

On looking around we found what we also thought were old rope burns, and ancient cuts and slashes on the trees nearby but on a follow up survey with archaeologist Douglas Hobbs these proved to be a type of termite furrowing. However – had we found Leichhardt's camp exactly where he said it would be...?

There it was an ancient 'LL' blaze – so old that had we not been looking for it we would have missed it entirely. (Photo Douglas Hobbs, site survey 2008)

The site itself poses a puzzle. The tree with the blaze looks small. Yet a botanical assessment has it as a Xanthostemon paradoxus – a bit surprising, because this is a typical savannah species, not a riparian one.
This species grows out on the plains, and therefore the specimen with the blaze presents as stunted in its creek bed. Arguably, despite its small size the tree is old enough to have been a solid sapling in 1845. The blaze is not deep cut, but then we know the explorer was exhausted and probably in no mood to notch a blaze with any elaboration, just some basic cuts on the sapling he used as a tent pole with the small tomahawk he always carried.

All we do know is that if these blazes are authentic, they would have been the last he cut in despair.

In mid 2009 Charles Darwin University plans a research survey at the site to test the authenticity of the blazes. The leader of the archaeology research will be Douglas Hobbs, which after an exploratory initial assessment of the site with the author his words were “there are too many indicators here to ignore, we need to take a dendro core of the tree to estimate its age”.

The CDU survey will also consult with traditional owners on the possibility of further paintings and narratives.

Maybe something else will emerge as we walk along the pathway, the track blazed through Kakadu by the first white man to go there.

References

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Ludwig Leichhardt, Journal of an overland expedition in Australia from Moreton bay to Port Essington 1844/45, T&W Boone, London 1847

A copy is also available for free on the web: Google - Gutenberg project Australian Exploration

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