

*Beyond Nation? Ludwig Leichhardt's Transnationalism*

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**Abstract:** Inspired by the conference theme of 'Looking Back to Look Forward' this paper examines the multiple ways in which the Prussian explorer of northern Australia, Ludwig Leichhardt, provides possible new directions for rethinking contemporary concepts such as transnationalism and nationalism. While the paper in its genealogical fashion assumes that the past is not simply available to us to be looked upon but rather is made to appear to us through various, material and ideological productions; it is still inspired by the possibility that re-imagining the past in the present can produce alternative and better futures.

**Keywords:** Ludwig Leichhardt, transnationalism, nationalism

The disappearance of Leichhardt in 1848 and failure to ever find his body (or those of his final party) has produced not a stable historical figure easily folded into continuing national mythologies but an indeterminate subject. A subject produced through the discourses of imperialism and nationalism but also exceeding them. That absent body is a sustaining provocation to confirm both the 'unsettled' state of Australia and the Indigenous presence that Leichhardt overwrote in his so called 'discoveries'. It is also a provocation to go on looking at the ways in which Leichhardt as a non-Britisher in a British colony may offer challenges to the ways we imagine both colonialism and nationalism in relation to Australia. In the first instance it is Leichhardt himself who challenges any straightforward idea of himself as only and ever Prussian or 'German'<sup>1</sup> and that imagining was clearly supported by a culture of transnational scientific communication and support produced by a belief in the transcendence of science itself.

### **Science, Squatters and Transnationalism**

Leichhardt was a poor but talented student. His university education was marked by poverty and a need to rely upon the gifts of friends and a small trickle of support from his family (Cotton, 1938:34). The first letter collected by Arousseau is from Leichhardt to the Crown Prince of Prussia in 1832 when Leichhardt was attending the Friedrich Wilhelms Universität, Berlin. Leichhardt the following appeal: 'Since, Sir, through your

position you are concerned with the protection and advancement of the sciences, could you possibly come to consider taking into your special care a young beginner, who elected for this course of study because of its irresistible appeal?' (Arousseau, 1968:4). Arousseau records this petition being rejected but 'with gentle courtesy' (1968:406). The letter is however indicative of the ways in which patronage was one assumed path for help for poor but motivated students. It also establishes the ground upon which Leichhardt makes his claim— not only as an impassioned student but a person driven by his passion for science. But his most significant patronage was to come from his friend and fellow scientist William Nicholson, who shared his allowance with Leichhardt for many years and who would eventually in 1841 supply the funds necessary to enable Leichhardt to travel to Australia.

Once in Australia Leichhardt was eventually supplied with accommodation by another follower of natural science, Robert Lynd, and was able to put together his first expedition through a mixture of Nicholson's money and materials supplied by friends he had made either among the squatters or among fellow scientists. In exchange for this order of patronage there were usually gifts of exotica, newly discovered plants and animals and often acknowledgements of these patrons in the names given to many new discoveries. In a world that did not produce a clear paper trail of financial exchanges the traces of them can be read off the explored country and through the botanical listings. Forever in Australia we have the Nicholson River and for his Australian supporters the Robinson River, the Lynd Ranges, the Lynd River, the Mackenzie River and so on. This system of support from the wealthy was a key part of the reproduction and expansion of the rising culture of science that was slowly moving from small, elite enclaves in the Royal Societies to more popular and domestic (and so gender inclusive) forms. In Australia that science brotherhood was complemented by the support offered to Leichhardt by the squatter community, who were restless for the land mass to be further mapped and opened up to their interests.

Assistance was initially given to Leichhardt by individual large landowners, mostly in the form of equipment and hospitality while he developed his bush know-how in the two years before he set off on his first and most successful exploration from Moreton Bay to Port Essington. But many of those big landowners also provided money and equipment for his later expedition when the colonial government refused to. Their interests were in both finding a faster route for produce to get to a port for shipment to India and the discovery of further valuable grazing land that they could take up. Leichhardt was deeply valued by this community because he could supply intelligence about the country that included details about the presence of minerals, quality of soil and existing pasture. The descriptions of the country he passed through that were subsequently published in the newspapers reflect that mixture of natural science and eye to development:

This creek comes from a hilly country, which, more to the north-west, rises into ranges of considerable elevation, giving rise to a great number of water courses, creeks, and gullies, all collecting into Robinson's Creek. The whole country is openly timbered, the ridges at the upper part of it in part covered with silver-leaved ironbark, well adapted for sheep. Fine flats extend along its banks, where I first met it in lat. 25-28. (Sydney Morning Herald Thurs 26<sup>th</sup> March 1846)

This combination of scientific knowledge and the further colonial possibility that he enabled through it was well appreciated by the community. As *The Australian* editorializes:

Considering the rich fields of agricultural speculation his journey opens to the Colonists, the modesty of the traveller is as conspicuous in this outline of his labours, as his indomitable perseverance in accomplishing an enterprise, which, under all circumstances, borders, in its conception and execution, on the sublime. (Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> Dec 1845)

The taking up of land and further expansion of the colony quickly followed the intelligence and markers that Ludwig Leichhardt had left in the landscape and some of those remain still. One example (very pertinent to this Journal!) is the marked Coolabah tree in the main street of Taroom which Leichhardt used to mark a territory he considered of high quality. His writings then drew William Turner who was licensed in 1845 to hold the Taroom pastoral run to the district and the marked Coolabah tree has in turn been added to the Queensland Heritage list.<sup>ii</sup>

On his eventual return from the Port Essington expedition, having travelled almost 5000km and for over a year, public meetings were called to provide him with adequate testimonials which would include amounts of money from individuals and the colony itself. In new world colonialism, sustained patronage had shifted from the monarch to the community and the popularity, and perhaps perceived usefulness of the exploring figure, was important in garnering this support. The newspapers therefore played a vital role in both calling for support and reporting the progress of that support. In the second call for a meeting to establish a testimony for Leichhardt (the first meeting was to establish the committee) the newspaper announcement was followed by a list of all of those individuals who had already paid a subscription to his testimonial. This reads like a *Who's Who* of the colony starting with the Governor, George Gipps, and followed by some of the wealthiest landowners including Benjamin Boyd, Robinson, Macarthur, Denison and so on. In this way a mixture of public proclamation and proof of one's social connections and civilized interests, plus an exciting tale of extraordinary travels led to strong public and popular support for Leichhardt. After this first expedition he was also recognised by France, England and Germany including a pardon for his avoidance of Prussian military service.

In Australia or rather the British Colony that would become Australia –support for Leichhardt was gained through a strong call for deserved funds and a negotiation of Leichhardt's imperial transnationalism. Immediately upon his return the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) editorialized:

Dr. LEICHARDT has done that which must cause his name to be enrolled among the benefactors of Australia, and we are sure that the colonists will not be backwards in showing that they appreciate the value of his services. He ought to be rewarded both privately and publicly.

The SMH then reports Sir Evan McKenzie (who had already been publicly recorded as having given 5.5 pounds—a fifth of the Governors contribution) as saying:

...He trusted that the people of New South Wales would show to England and to Europe and to the world what a community of Britons would do when any individual *stepped forth* from Europe to extend the glory of the British name. True, Dr Leichhardt was a foreigner, but his exploits had been achieved in a British territory, and the British Empire would have the benefit. When the news reached him that Dr. Leichhardt

had returned to Sydney —successful —a friend and Countryman of Leichhardt's was under his roof —and at once he congratulated him on the honour which Dr Leichhardt had conferred on the German name. (Sydney Morning Herald, Monday 30<sup>th</sup> March 1846)

It doesn't seem quite right to say that McKenzie's call was a transnational appeal when it is the Britishness of his audience he is calling upon. But it is a very particular kind of Britishness. It is a sense of being Britons IN New South Wales where NSW will show England and Europe and the world what being a Briton *really* means. What it seems to mean here is a call to actively support a man who is 'German' but gives great honour to the British Empire. In this mixture of colonial pride and imperial measure I sense the beginnings of the strange settler colonial nationhood that Australia will eventually, anxiously, arrive at. It is simultaneously expansive, looking forwards perhaps to a more 'multicultural' colony and careful; revealing a sense of the pervasive anxiety as to how much of the land of the colony could be 'claimed' when it was so little known and the Indigenous owners so overtly present. This meeting ends with a call for legislative and regal support as well as individual subscribers and so support for Leichhardt shifts from individual wealthy supporters to the colonial community, to developing state assistance and British Royal support. The scientist explorer is an international member of the scientific caste, a contributor to a colonial landowning class and a receiver of regal honours in the name of empire. Leichhardt perhaps recognises something of this coming hybrid position when he notes in his journal as he sets out on his expedition:

October 1<sup>st</sup>

Many a man's heart would have thrilled like our own, had he seen us winding our way round the first rise beyond the station, with a full chorus of "God save the Queen" which has inspired many a British soldier,—aye, and many a Prussian too—with courage in the time of danger' (Journal, 1847:5)

The tune of the British Anthem, God Save the Queen being the same as that used for the Prussian Anthem 'Heil di im Siegerkranz'.

Leichhardt however would remain committed to a larger enterprise than even bilateral nationhood or empire — his final letter to his brother-in law in 1848 reports the following:

I was pleased to hear that the Geographical Society in London has honoured me with one of its medals, and that the Geographical Society of Paris has conferred a similar honour on me. Naturally, I am pleased that such learned men find me worthy of such honour, but I have never worked for anything but for science and for science alone...

He continues:

...Should my dried plants be unsuitable for the determination of new species, they will at least be interesting and useful for the plant geography of New Holland. I have been very unfortunate with my seeds because local institutions are not suited to the culture of tropical plants. You may ask why I did not send these collections to our home museums. The answer is that I have carried out my studies of nature chiefly in English and French Museums: that during my youth, I never stood in friendly connection with my countrymen, who naturally should

have had preference. Durando<sup>iii</sup> was a botanist and my intimate friend. He had a hard battle for existence: I wished to give him the opportunity to distinguish himself if my collection was of any value at all. (Aurousseau, 1968: 993-4)

But lest we think Leichhardt's international sense of himself as scientist and a friend precluded a sense of home belonging, towards the end of this same letter he writes with an amended quote from Schiller:

...I intend to go back to Europe for two years and to pay you all a long visit.  
You shall trust and you shall venture;  
Pledges to the Gods are banned;  
Nought but wonder's wings can bear you  
To the far-off Wonderland (I ought to say Motherland)  
(Aurousseau, 1968:995)

So when we think of colonialism eventually producing 'nation' we need also to think about the inter-imperial, the transcultural scientificism and the proto-nationalisms at work long before 1901. Leichhardt in his time in Australia was able to appeal to all of these as proven in the concrete support that flowed to him from the colony en masse, via individuals and in the various awards given to him from the scientific worlds. But the relative transnationalism of that period shifted over time and shifted seemingly with the emergence of a more strident Australian sense of national character and endeavor and so the depiction of Leichhardt suffered correspondingly.

### **Emerging Australia and Being a Real Bushman**

Others have traced the fall of Leichhardt's popularity and most account for it through the influence of Alec of Chisholm's 'Strange New World' in 1941 — a virulently anti-German tract where Leichhardt's abilities and achievements are belittled to raise the contribution of Gilbert, an Englishman who travelled with Leichhardt and who had worked as a collector for Gould, another naturalist most famous for his '*The Birds of Australia*'. Most blame the mood of this book on the surrounding anti-German sentiment in Australia brought on by the Second World War, including the resultant confinement in detention centres or house arrest that many German and German associated Australians suffered.

But I would like to suggest an earlier book, a work of fiction, Ernst Favenc's '*The Secret of the Australian Desert*', had an equally powerful role in the downgrading of Leichhardt's popularity and (in terms of the concerns of this paper) mostly it played specifically upon the idea of Leichhardt as a failed bushman and therefore failed 'real' Australian. *The Secret of the Australian Desert* is a mad romantic, racist romp that was a popular work aimed at a young male readership when written in 1896. It is concerned with a group of white settlers who decide as it is the quiet season to go off exploring. They find along the way the lost journals and one remaining member of the Leichhardt party who subsequently dies, a group of Aboriginal cannibals who are the remnant of a lost civilization and a fabulously rich gold reef. The language in the book is of 'niggers' and a country free for the taking up amid the infinite possibilities of modern development. The hero of the Leichhardt party, according to the journals they find, is a man called Stuart who keeps himself decent through forty years with Aboriginal people who he

teaches the art of the bow and arrow and who he defends against the cannibalistic clans. Stuart finishes his diary thus:

I thank God that though I have lived so long amongst these savages, I have not sunk down to be one of them in their habits, but rather have taught them many things. To the white man that finds this I leave the greeting and blessing I would have given him in life'. (p.66)

Compare this with the account of Leichhardt's or the Doctor's fictional demise in the same journal:

Ever since the Doctor injured his hand through the musket bursting he has been subject to attacks of feverishness and temporary madness, and this has greatly added to the hopelessness of our position. I have often asked him for some definite statement of his intentions, but he seems quite unable to go into details, and I am afraid we are fearfully out in our reckoning'.

....and then finally:

We took it in turns to hold the Doctor on his horse, but he got very bad a few hours after we started, and when the sun grew hot he begged us to lift him off the horse for a little while. We had all the canteens full and Kelly had made a bag of calico and rubbed it outside with goats fat, and it held water tolerably well. So we gave the Doctor plenty to drink, but he got no better, and about noon he died. He talked a great deal to himself in German, but had lost all knowledge of us or where he was, and a good thing too. We could not stop to bury him, for we had to push on, so we left him there on the big plain, where I think no living thing ever comes or ever will come since we were there'.

So here we have Leichhardt reduced to the Doctor (a title surely delivered with all the looming anti-intellectualism that would mark an emerging Australian mythology of valuing practical skills over any book learning), out of his mind, mumbling in his foreign tongue, responsible for the losing of the way of the whole party and with his corpse left exposed in the forever unknown desert. The party who read this account are of course the Australian heirs to the stalwart Stuart. They ride and adapt and know how to treat Aboriginal workers to get the most out of them including beatings and tricks that will stop their superstitions. And finally they name the gold reef they find Stuart Reef — no greater honour then to name the thing that will bring wealth and people (but not learning) to this place.

This book may have been simply a popular but clearly fictional pleasure —as dismissible as any other colonial pot boiler which it clearly bases itself on (for example *King Solomons Mines* et al) but Favenc had greater reach. Favenc was also a journalist, a known explorer and a writer of non-fictional accounts of other explorers including Leichhardt. The quotes below come from a review of his: 'The Explorers of Australia and their Lifework' published in 1908. And here I am interested in the ways in which Leichhardt's by now well worn disappearance produces the silent and potent stage for the production by Favenc of Leichhardt as a very particular kind of failure.

[Leichhardt] appears to have been a man whose character, to judge from his short career, was largely composed of contradictions and

inconsistencies. Eager for personal distinction, with high and noble aims, he yet lacked that ready sympathy and feeling of comradeship that attract men. Leichhardt's followers never desired to accompany him on a second expedition.

And:

As the man of science in a party under a capable leader, Leichhardt would have achieved greater success than many men who have filled that position; as a leader himself he was, of necessity, an absolute failure. ('Explorers of Australia and their Lifework', *Queenslander*, Sept 5, 1908)

The damming of Leichhardt here is complete in terms of the emergent nationalist mythologies developing in the newly federated nation of Australia. Leichhardt was no bushman, Leichhardt was a 'man of science' but not of the people and he blamed others for his failures. In the hard-core homo-social world of the bush that Australia was rapidly building its modern nationhood upon, to be considered a failure at comradeship (read mateship) was as bitter as it could be. Add to this the ready alternative Favenc had already presented in his fiction of bush savvy men who bravely develop the white nation and Leichhardt becomes the near abject of 'Australian man'.

Favenc seemingly built his picture of Leichhardt on the writings of, and conversations with Stuart Russell<sup>iv</sup>. In *Genesis of Queensland* Russell wrote:

I run the risk of provoking the Apellean censure: ne sutor supra crepidam, when I tread upon the toes of popular and unqualified approbation by venturing to question Ludwig Leichhardt's fitness for the leadership of men (in the bush sense, with no doubting as to his scientific qualification) in the undertaking to which he bound himself in 1844, and persisted in until he passed out of sight' (1888:359).

Russell should perhaps have heeded his Latin warning and avoided passing judgment beyond his expertise but his description circulated widely and certainly widely enough to be worked upon by Favenc. Leichhardt becomes available through Russell's writings as a German figure of fun, a dotty professor wearing a hat surrounded by creepers and with beetles coming out the brim. As Cotton writes of Russell's description of Leichhardt; "That is a pretty little picture of an entirely mythical German scientist" (1938:163). The infectiousness of this caricature of Leichhardt may also have rested in Russell putting the final judgement of Leichhardt in the mouth of his stockman William Ortan:

Mark my words, sir, Dr. Leichhardt hasn't got it in him, and never will get it. I don't mean to be disrespectful: and I don't mean to say he can't and won't get there: he's a brave gentleman, I don't want to be told that: but how he'll get there in his way, I can't guess, and don't like thinking about: he's no bushman, and I say again sir, if you go you'll be sorry for it. Then again, what does he know about the darkies? (1888: 362)

And so the real bushman speaks some forty years after the event in supposedly perfectly remembered sentences and has his sentiments 'fictionalised' by Favenc. In this way a kind of truth and a kind of fantasy come together, marked as they both are by an emerging national mythology that the bushman knows best.

It is hard not to see the treatment of Leichhardt in the first instance as a movement from a transnational colonial world to a more insular national one. The first able to hold a multi-identified figure driven by a transcendent romantic scientism but the second deciding who was worthy or not on the basis of bushmanship alone. But culture is never so simple. In his dismissal of science and its transnational traditions Favenc simultaneously evokes another Australia which was at this time taking up science as evidence of our modernity and progress. In depicting Leichhardt as a blamer of others he suggests something that Anne Curthoys sees as national trope where Australia is always the victim and never the perpetrator (Curthoys, 2006). And finally in his dragging down of Leichhardt's reputation we see Favenc energetically participating in the 'tall poppy syndrome' where great deeds are made small and manageable by the 'ordinary Australian'. Perhaps in this way Favenc thoroughly installs Leichhardt in the national imaginary albeit negatively.

There is so much more that can be said about the ways in which entanglement of fictional and non-fictional accounts, authorial projections and textual desires have produced our Leichhartian imaginings. In this present moment of an assumed, if sometimes fragile multiculturalism Leichhart's original transnationalism looks fresh and even familiar in a way that the bush centred national descriptions do not. Could it be that we moving backwards to a transculturalism we will only meet in the future?

Looking carefully at the ways in which Leichhardt imagined himself and was seen by others in Australia's colonial period and then how he was depicted by others as Australia reached federation and a distinct nationalism creates an expanded picture of what 'Australian' means now and could mean in the future.

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<sup>i</sup> The German Realm not being established until 1871.

<sup>ii</sup> See <http://queenslandplaces.com.au/node/822> for more detail.

<sup>iii</sup> Durando was (according to Auroseau p.442) 'Gaetano Durando a Sardinian officer who preferred natural science to soldiering so he opened a 'comptoir botanique' near the Jardin des Plantes, Paris.

<sup>iv</sup> See Evening News (Sydney, NSW : 1869 - 1931), Saturday 11 November 1899, page 4 where Favenc is reported as responding to a correction by Mann that the second Leichhardt party were not in enmity with each other, by saying he had drawn his conclusions from several conversations with the late Mr Stuart Russell, author of *The Genesis of Queensland*'

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