

Ludwig Leichhardt

Europe. Ludwig Leichhardt was born in 1813 as the sixth of nine children of the farmer and royal peat inspector Hieronymus (1778–1840) and Sophie Leichhardt (1776–1854) in the village of Sabrodt / Trebatsch in Brandenburg, Prussia. After attending the one-class village school in Trebatsch, he changed to the Gymnasium in Cottbus in September 1829. He lived with the family of his older sister, Henriette Leichhardt, and became very close with his brother-in-law Friedrich August Schmalfuß, with whom he later started a long-term correspondence. He often walked the 40 km distance between Trebatsch and Cottbus. Leichhardt graduated from high school in 1831. Between 1831 and 1836 he studied languages and philosophy at the universities in Berlin and Göttingen, then moved to natural sciences: botany, natural history, zoology, geology, physics and later economics and medicine. During this time he met the brothers John and William Nicholson, who came from a wealthy English family and supported Leichhardt financially in the following years. William Nicholson invited Leichhardt to England in 1837, and together they followed their own course of study (law, literature, history, anthropology, further language studies – French, Hebrew, Latin, Greek, Sanskrit and Persian); but foremost they extended their studies in medicine and natural sciences at the Royal College of Surgeons and the British Museum in London and at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. To put this knowledge into practice, they embarked in 1840/41 on a journey through the south of France, Italy and Switzerland, which lasted almost nine months. At the end of this trip Leichhardt had a rather disappointing meeting with 71-year-old Alexander von Humboldt in Paris. While abroad, Leichhardt had been drafted for Prussian military service, and became effectively an exile from Prussia because he had failed to report. In 1841 Nicholson provided Leichhardt with funds to leave for Australia (but did not join him, contrary to what had been planned). On October 1, 1841, Leichhardt boarded the sailor “Sir Edward Paget” in London and arrived in Sydney on February 14, 1842.

Natural exploration. Although Leichhardt never received any formal university degree, “by virtue of his education and experience, he would have been one of the most highly qualified scientists to have reached Australia to that time” (Darragh). In the following months and years Ludwig Leichhardt explored Australia's east coast from Sydney to the Glasshouse Mountains (Queensland) and observed and described the geology, plants and fauna he encountered and collected. Leichhardt travelled on the fringes of white settlement, before the widespread land clearing and

the expansion of towns, therefore his plant collections represent an important record of the original vegetation in these habitats (Darragh). In the Moreton Bay district, Leichhardt came in close contact with the local Aboriginal people and included their extensive knowledge on plants and animals and other knowledge of the country in his research. In his field books, he started to list plant names in three different Indigenous languages of the area.

Expeditions. Leichhardt undertook three major expeditions in Australia. The overland trip to Port Essington started from Jimbour, the farthest outpost of settlement on the Darling Downs, on October 1, 1844, with nine other men (among them the experienced ornithologist John Gilbert, who had been to Port Essington four years earlier; an Afro-Australian cook named Caleb; a convict; a 15-year-old; and the Indigenous expeditioners Charley Fisher und Harry Brown) and with 15 horses, 16 oxen, 600 kg of flour, 100 kg of sugar, 40 kg of tea, 10 kg of gelatine and some chocolate, as well as weapons and ammunition, tents, sextants, a chronometer, a telescope and a compass. Leichhardt had calculated that they would reach Victoria after crossing a distance of about 3200 km in a period of five to six months. But difficult wilderness terrain, heat and lack of water, dwindling provisions, illnesses and accidents prolonged the journey. John Gilbert was killed in a fight with Aboriginal people. After fourteen and a half months and more than 4800 km, a group of seven arrived at Port Essington on December 17, 1845. Then Leichhardt planned to cross Australia from east to west, but this second expedition had to be aborted after six months due to many weather and illness-related setbacks. The third expedition set out from the Condamine River in 1848. After heading inland Leichhardt and his companions disappeared without a trace. Although in the following years and decades numerous search parties set out to look for him (the latest search was initiated when in 1938 eight skeletons were found at Mt. Dare on the edge of the Simpson Desert), Leichhardt's disappearance was to become an “enduring myth”.

Reception. Until today, flora and fauna have been named after Leichhardt, and, in Australia, cities and districts, stations and farms, mountains and rivers, highways and roads, hotels and clubs, coins and stamps. Films, novels, pieces of music and an opera have been based on the historical figure. But the perception of Leichhardt has constantly shifted in the course of historical contexts and interests, especially in the context of German-British relations. Novels like Alec Chisholm's *Strange New World* (1941) and Patrick

White's *Voss* (1957) accentuated flaws in his assumed personality; he was often portrayed as a German explorer lacking “bushmanship” and the skills necessary to be an expedition leader. In Germany, too, Leichhardt's reception has been informed by different eras. In the context of Nazification after 1933, in his home region, place names with a Slavonic Wend and Sorb background like Sabrodt and Trebatsch were renamed, and in 1937 a new municipality was formed that was named “Leichhardt”. GDR historiography attempted to honour Leichhardt as an explorer and scientist within an anti-imperialist framework. Since 1988 a museum has been run by volunteers of the Ludwig-Leichhardt-Gesellschaft in Trebatsch (curiously similar to the small museums run by historical societies in remote country towns in Australia, especially in Queensland). Around the year of Leichhardt's 200th birthday in 2013, German and Australian historians and scientists began to show a renewed interest in research on Leichhardt, with publications, exhibition projects and online portals, focusing on “Erinnerungskultur” in different historic constellations, postcolonial perspectives and insights into Leichhardt's contributions to natural sciences in various disciplines.

The **perspectives on Leichhardt** are manifold, and what makes his life and work interesting, it seems, are precisely the many angles from which they can be read and reread. For example, in the field notes of his explorations, especially in lectures and the versions prepared for publication, Leichhardt described the “character of the country”, with watering holes, pasture land and deposits of hard coal – observations aimed among others at future colonists. On the other hand, his travelogues helped to support land claim cases (Urapunga land case in 2001, in the region around Roper Bar, originally named Leichhardt's Bar) by giving evidence of “how thickly the country was inhabited” (*Journal of an Overland Expedition to Port Essington*), in contrast to assertions of *terra nullius*.

That Leichhardt's contributions in the field of natural sciences have generally remained underappreciated is probably grounded in the fact that he published little of his research in his lifetime. On the field trip to Port Essington, Leichhardt not only drew up maps with geographical features (that he named after friends and sponsors, or after events that took place during the journey) and – most importantly – located water points (with the substantial help of Charley Fisher und Harry Brown); he also systematically conducted botanical and geological research. But towards the end of the trip, the bullocks were overloaded, and the

collection of wood and rocks had to be thrown away; then, when three horses drowned, Leichhardt had to burn his whole botanical collection of more than 4000 specimens (though he spared John Gilbert's animal specimens, which today are kept under Gilbert's name). Returning to Sydney, his expedition was celebrated as a success; Leichhardt was awarded gold medals by the Paris Geographical Society and the Royal Geographical Society in London for his “significant achievements in developing the country”. Leichhardt gave lectures and wrote his first scientific treatise (*Contributions to the Geology of Australia*), but although he wished to turn his research “into exact science” (Leichhardt 1846, after Fensham) by scientifically describing specimens and publishing his findings, he never really got round to it. Rather than sending specimens to Britain, where the dominant scientific discourse on Australian flora and fauna was taking place at the time, Leichhardt gave many of the specimens he collected on his excursions between 1842 and 1844 to the Australian Museum – at least 2600 Leichhardt plant specimens are lodged in Australian herbaria – or sent them to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris and to Berlin (where most of them were destroyed by bombing in WWII).

In the course of reassessing Leichhardt's work in recent years, scientists have noted the sheer range of fields to which Leichhardt has made significant (or potentially significant) contributions: meteorological observations with what turned out to be very accurate deductions on atmospheric circulation around the continent; unique records of certain plants that can also be used as resources for traditional Aboriginal plant use; clues on Australia's environmental history; observations and conclusions regarding Aboriginal burning of landscapes and fire management; conclusions about fossils he found that match the findings of modern taxonomy; contributions to linguistics and ethnobotany in general (Leichhardt's collections of Indigenous words and meanings are probably “the most extensive to survive of the languages of south-east Queensland”, Jefferies). Through “the intensity of his inquiry”, “the creative brilliance of his deduction”, “his capacity to synthesise” and his dedication to and love of the country, Rod Fensham sees in Leichhardt “a great scientist who belonged to Australia”. Anthony Jefferies emphasises particularly that Leichhardt's observations were rarely affected by prejudice and prejudicial assumptions: “Leichhardt's scientific drive, bringing with it thoroughness, quest for accuracy, and, importantly, scepticism of prevailing prejudices, places him head and shoulders above his contemporaries” (Jefferies).

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river Spree at Trebatsch

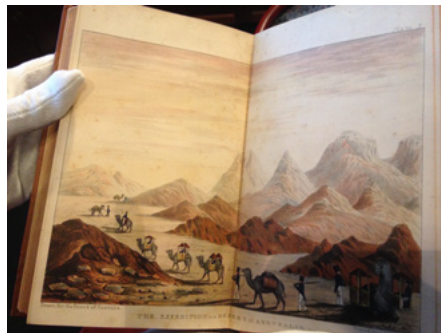
Ludwig Leichhardt 1813 - 1848(?)

photos from my first trip to Trebatsch 2004

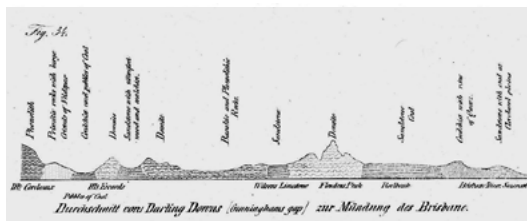


However, Leichhardt himself came to distinguish between two Alexander von Humboldts. He revered the traveller in America, but he ironised the eminence back in Europe, who was "so splendidly embellishing the winnings of his youth" and who became rather ponderous. (Nicholls)

Leichhardt: "I hear that Alexander von Humboldt has just rolled the Kosmos from his shoulders and that the public is aching under its weight."



The expedition in a desert in Australia, in: **The Friend of Australia** or A Plan for Exploring the Interior, and for Carrying on a Survey of the Whole Continent of Australia. By a Retired Officer of the Hon. East India Company's Service. London 1830 (held at Bolton Library, Toowoomba, Darling Downs)



Leichhardt. Beiträge zur Geologie von Australien, Halle: H.W. Schmidt 1855 cross section of mountains of the Darling Downs



word lists for plants in three Indigenous languages



The second Governor of New South Wales, Captain John Hunter, sent a sketch and a Platypus pelt to London in 1798. The parcel was dismissed as a hoax, scientists believing somebody had sewn a duck's beak onto the body of a beaver. This is how strange and incomprehensible Australia was to the Europeans. (Whyte)

field logs from earlier trip in Brisbane region, 1943, State Library of New South Wales

Leichhardt loved this ancient landscape. He loved it with wonder and awe, with empathy and with a deep longing to wholly integrate into this remote, strange and beautiful terrain. He got his wish, merging with the dreaming in a way no other whitefella has quite matched, though many have tried. His keen inquiring mind and remorseless determination has been the spark for countless others who have followed, tracking his trails like dots of ochre and umber across the brigalow and desert, through canyons and rainforest, across grassy plains and along parched riverbeds sighing for moisture under giant gums. ... Feel the night sweep down. Watch the stars whirling overhead, layer upon layer of constellations and galaxies. This is as close as you can get on this planet to feeling the immensity of space. The British didn't get it. They could follow the Condamine River from its source on the western slopes of Mount Superbus and see only sheep, cattle and crops filling pastures. Nothing about the natural landscape made any sense to them at all. Charles Darwin himself, only four years older than Ludwig Leichhardt and normally so astute and perceptive, was confused. He couldn't grasp the concepts of landscapes shaped by fire. (Whyte)

<https://adb.anu.edu.au/entity/8843>
National Centre of Biography, Australian National University. Interactive Map of Leichhardt Expedition from Moreton Bay to Port Essington, 1844-1845 campgrounds and diary of Leichhardt and expedition members



Overland expedition to Port Essington by Ludwig Leichhardt (Samuel Perry, State Library of NSW)

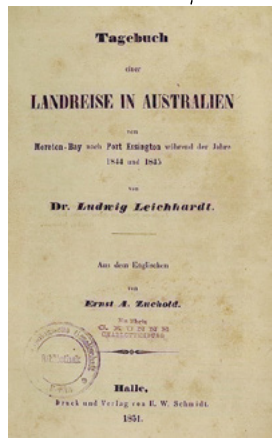
There is a means to preserve them - this means, o hear you pseudo-philanthropists, who want to judge all their circumstances only according to your narrow horizons - this means is slavery. [...] We must take the young generation of the old tribes by force, educate them, compel them to work and so get them used to work.

diary entry Oct. 3, 1843 ... anticipates nothing less than the Stolen Generations (Eckstein)

However, rereading this very diary entry after his return to Sydney, he scribbled the following note on the margins, a note I read as private acknowledgement of Indigenous resistance against assimilation and conquest that is much more than a romantic gesture:

Although slavery seems the only means to preserve these tribes and in the course of generations to civilise them, I would prefer to see them die in freedom than be civilised in slavery. That is my opinion on 15 February 1844 and it will probably remain forever.

German translation



Naming: "Bokkara" versus "Charley's Creek" - on the second expedition the Aboriginal guide Mr. Turner gave place names in local language, which Leichhardt and Bunce noted down in their field logs. Later they fell back to the colonial naming. (Eckstein)

as shown so many times in gender-related historiography: initial acknowledgement and presence written out of history once it becomes official

It becomes blatantly clear that Bunce's 1857 publication very consciously silences the Indigenous names of the watercourses that Mr. Turner charted, and that both he and Leichhardt carefully recorded in their logs. Bunce carefully plays along the colonial doctrine of **terra nullius**, which "discovers", names, charts, and appropriates "empty" land on the banks of the Bokkara as sovereign territory of the British Empire.

place names always struck me even on my first visits to Australia: either they were ridiculous British names after cities or famous men, or they were of indigenous origin without any explanation

Nov. 5-12, field book: Many new trees and plants are observed, but I am almost dead - a despair of breaking even a specimen.

<http://archival.sl.nsw.gov.au/Details/archive/110321465>
Autographs in Mitchell Library, Sydney: Series 11, Field book used by Dr L. Leichhardt on the exploration journey from Moreton Bay to Port Essington, 1844-1845

Journal of an Overland Expedition to Port Essington



... Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer wrote approximately a century after Leichhardt's disappearance: The totalitarian mastery of nature and the Self paradoxically turns into myth. (Mischke)

"What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men. That is the only aim. Ruthlessly, in spite of itself, the Enlightenment has extinguished any trace of its own self-consciousness. The only kind of thinking that is sufficiently hard to shatter myths is ultimately self-destructive."

Oct. 19, 1845 Leichhardt named the Roper River, from here onwards he travelled through Arnhem Land

Nov. 20, 1845 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.

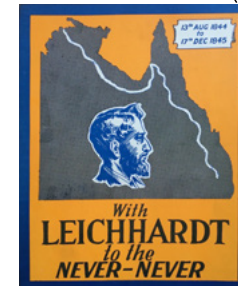
Dec. 16, 1845 They fetched water for us from a great distance, and gave us some Murnatt, which was extremely welcome. Perceiving our state of exhaustion and depression in which we were, they tried to cheer us with their corroboree, songs which they accompanied on the Eboro, a long tube of bamboo, by means of which they variously modulated their voices.

Oct. 1, 1844, after leaving Jimbour, Darling Downs: 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, - ay, and many a Prussian too - with courage in the time of danger.

Chapter Captions - from Kakadu region to Port Essington, Nov. 1 - Dec. 16



Peter Leyden. With Leichhardt to the Never-Never, Pictorial Social Studies (1955)



Nov. 27, 1845 I saw here a noble fig-tree, under the shade of which seemed to have been the camping place of the natives for the last century. It was growing at the place where we first came to the broad outlet of the swamp. About two miles to the eastward, this swamp extended beyond the reach of sight, and seemed to form the whole country, of the remarkable and picturesque character of which it will be difficult to convey a correct idea to the reader.



Burke and Wills, imperial explorers (not scientists), set out (in 1860) to cross the continent in a parade (with camels); they starved in the desert because they were too stubborn and contentious to acknowledge indigenous presence and possible assistance



Aboriginal guides such as Brown were exploring their own country albeit far removed from their traditional territory. ... Was it, as historian Frank Walsh has claimed, that "adventurous young Aborigines penetrated unknown territories with much the same motivation as young Europeans?"

Oct. 16, 1845 We travelled down to the water, about four miles north-east along the creek, which was covered with Cypress pine thickets, and tea-tree scrub. Mr. Calvert and Charley returned on our tracks to endeavour to recover our poor dog. They found him almost dead, -- stretched out in the deep cattle track, which he seemed not to have quitted, even to find a shady place. They brought him to the camp; and I put his whole body, with the exception of his head, under water, and bled him; he lived six hours longer, when he began to bark, as if raving, and to move his legs slightly, as dogs do when dreaming. It seemed that he died of inflammation of the brain. If we become naturally fond of animals which share with us the comforts of life, and become the cheerful companions of our leisure hours, our attachment becomes still greater when they not only share in our sufferings, but aid greatly to alleviate them. The little world of animated beings, with which we moved on, was constantly before our eyes; and each individual the constant object of our attention. We became so familiar with every one of them, that the slightest change in their walk, or in their looks was readily observed; and the state of their health anxiously interpreted. Every bullock, every horse, had its peculiar character, its well defined individuality, which formed the frequent topic of our conversation, in which we all most willingly joined, because every one was equally interested. My readers will, therefore, easily understand my deep distress when I saw myself, on recent occasions, compelled to kill two of our favourite bullocks long before their time; and when our poor dog died, which we all had fondly hoped to bring to the end of our journey. Brown had, either by accident, or influenced by an unconscious feeling of melancholy, fallen into the habit of almost constantly whistling and humming the soldier's death march, which had such a singularly depressing effect on my feelings, that I was frequently constrained to request him to change his tune.

Nov. 10, 1845 Kangaroos and various birds, particularly the white cockatoo, were numerous; and the little bees came like flies on our hands, on my paper, and on our soup plates, and indicated abundance of honey; a small species of Cicada had risen from its slumbers, and was singing most cheerfully.