

For more than 160 years the disappearance of Australian explorer Leichhardt has remained unsolved.



Missing Australian explorer Leichhardt and his map (Photo: National Library of Australia; State Library of new South Wales)

CELEBRATED IN HIS DAY as a national hero and lauded as the 'Prince of Explorers', Leichhardt disappeared, aged 35. At the time, he was attempting an east-west crossing of the continent.

In April 1848, in the company of five white men, two Aboriginal guides, seven horses, 20 mules and 50 bullocks, he left the Darling Downs in southern Queensland bound for Western Australia's Swan River settlement. Shortly after, the entire party vanished with barely a trace.

On the incredible 4800 km journey - privately funded, done on the cheap and completed in 1844-45 - which made him famous, Leichhardt travelled from southern Queensland to Port Essington on Arnhem Land's north-west tip. Somehow, in the crushing humidity and oppressive heat of a late November build-up to the Wet, Leichhardt successfully led his expedition several hundred metres down the escarpment north of Jim Jim Falls, in what is now Kakadu National Park. No-one knows how.

In recent years, Aboriginal rock paintings purportedly of Leichhardt in both the Kakadu area and in Arnhem Land have become widely publicised. One shows a man wearing a tie and holding a rifle aloft like a spear, as if the painter, having never seen a rifle, didn't know how it was used. Another shows a man wearing a broad-brimmed hat and astride a urinating horse.

In western Arnhem Land and Kakadu, such historical vignettes are richly recorded in natural gallery after natural gallery. Lightning Man, the Creation Mother and other Dreaming figures occur beside and overlay emus, barramundi, thylacines, snakes, people and handprints. Some are superimposed with pictures of Macassan sailing boats, guns and men on horseback. It's a potpourri of layered ochre-coloured stories and it would not be surprising if Leichhardt and his not-so-merry men were a part of these.

Covered in boils, eating rancid meat, exhausted and one man down after ornithologist John Gilbert was killed by Aboriginal people in the Gulf Country, the young group was apparently barely able to talk to each other after almost 15 months. Leichhardt later described his companions as "tormentors".

"The very sight of them disgusts me," he wrote. "I expressed even two days before arriving at Port Essington my ardent wish, not so much of being at the end of my journey, as being rid of companions who did take so little trouble to please me."

Visiting Fellow at the National Museum of Australia Darrell Lewis - archaeologist, historian and unashamed Leichhardt fan - said there were men who met Leichhardt's fellow expeditioners and decided that, "his men were the problem, not Leichhardt himself".

Testament to Leichhardt's dogged commitment, the group made it to the struggling Port Essington settlement of Victoria. Established in 1838 as an English toehold on the continent's north, Victoria was intended to become a major trading centre but the tropical weather and wildlife made it intolerable for most Europeans and it was abandoned after just 11 years.

However, to Leichhardt when he arrived on 17 December 1845, it was heavenly. "I was deeply affected in finding myself again in civilised society, and could scarcely speak," he wrote. The expeditioners sailed back to be feted in Brisbane and Sydney and Leichhardt was awarded gold medals from the British and French geographical societies. Although he hadn't found the optimum route for an overland track to Port Essington, pastoralists soon followed in his tracks, using his descriptions and maps to locate the best of the country.

"I THINK HE WAS the best-trained natural scientist in Australia in the 19th century," enthuses Emeritus Professor Henry Nix, of the Fenner School of Environment and Society at the Australian National University. For 30 years, he was involved in scientific expeditions through the tropical country Leichhardt traversed.

"We had a minimum of three scientists, but usually five or six. We had a geologist/geomorphologist, a soils person, a botanist, a climatologist, a land-use person, someone commenting on the pastoral attributes. But Leichhardt combined all of that training in one person," Henry says. "His assessment of the pastoral potential was ... always spot on. The actual expedition document ... is still probably one of the best accounts of the country he passed through. It is something quite remarkable."

Before he came to Australia from his German homeland in 1842, Leichhardt applied his nimble mind to a vast realm of study. He was competent in at least six languages and he had studied philosophy, medicine, geology, natural sciences and physiology.

If you finger through the thick pages of his original field book, preserved in the strongroom at Sydney's Mitchell Library and speckled with brown age spots (but in remarkable condition), Leichhardt's scientific expertise is evident. With a keen eye, he described vegetation, geology, animal behaviour and noted Aboriginal words. And his medical knowledge is clear; when Gilbert was killed, Leichhardt's deft treatment of two others in his party injured by waddies and spears probably saved their lives.

Unlike most expeditions of the time, none of Leichhardt's crew suffered scurvy, partly

because he supplemented their diet with native greens - such as pigweed and palm hearts - and native fruits, although they could cause digestive difficulties.

Despite success, Leichhardt's reputation as a field scientist and explorer became tarnished after his disappearance. A chief culprit of his character assassination was Australian journalist Alexander Chisholm, who ridiculed Leichhardt's achievements and played up the accounts of those in Leichhardt's party who didn't get along with him.

Chisholm wrote an acerbic book, *Strange New World: the adventures of John Gilbert and Ludwig Leichhardt* in 1941, when wartime anti-German sentiment in Australia was strong. A 1964 school history textbook with an introduction by Chisholm described Leichhardt as "an eccentric, gluttonous, gangling German" who blundered into fame.

Contemporary Leichhardt researchers bemoan this destructive legacy. Darrell describes one of his responsibilities as adding to the rehabilitation of Leichhardt. "He had so much bad press for so long," he says. "He was the best-trained scientist of his time. Chisholm was so prejudiced that that set the tone for almost a century, but now the pendulum's swinging back."

Many of Leichhardt's personal records show care, diligence and patience, particularly his leather-cornered field book. It's been rebound incorrectly at some point, with some pages in the wrong order. Full of fine detail, showing rivers, tributaries and other water sources, the maps are richly annotated with Leichhardt's neat and minute writing. Ink rarely blots adjacent pages, and there is no sign of water damage, mud or ash.

Renowned for being meticulous and having a cool head, he recorded every important geographic detail. The map showing where Gilbert died includes Leichhardt's usual descriptions: "sandstone soft", "melaleuca flats".

He poetically describes that fateful campsite, Teatree Lagoon Camp: "A most beautiful country, plains forest land and chains of lagoons covered with lotus invited to make it extremely favourable for pasturing. Blackfellows very numerous." Then, a second note: "At this camp the blackfellows attacked us at night, killed Mr Gilbert and wounded Roper and Calvert severely." Unemotionally, on the next page, he records simply: "29th Enterrment of Mr Gilbert ... 30th Stop for Roper and Calvert".

Despite his precision, some criticism levelled against Leichhardt targeted his surveying and navigation skills, with claims he was wildly inaccurate and his maps untrustworthy. "A lot of that stuff ... is absolute bullshit," Henry says. "He had no accurate timepiece so all of his longitudes [were] done by sun-sighting. His determinants of latitude were as good as his contemporaries who had everything including [Sir Thomas] Mitchell, who was a surveyor."

WA bushman, historian, author and Leichhardt devotee Glen McLaren agrees. In the 1990s, while researching his book *Beyond Leichhardt: bushcraft and the exploration of Australia*, Glen painstakingly located many of Leichhardt's 1844-45 campsites. Glen followed his route for 1000 km on horseback then visited other campsites by motorbike, helicopter or car. Despite Leichhardt's compass being broken and his sextant damaged, Glen says the explorer's navigation "wasn't bad at all".

"Certainly, the claim that he missed major rivers is completely wrong. Every major feature is there," he says. On average, Leichhardt's latitudinal readings were about one minute 2 km

out, on a par with other expeditioners of the day, including Mitchell. His longitudinal readings weren't as accurate, due perhaps to inexperience and limited and broken equipment, but by expedition's end he was only about 10 km out in longitude.

"Of the 309 campsites, the position of 79 can be established exactly, a further 35 can be established within a probable 400 m range, and 93 within a probable range of 365 m to 732 m," Glen says. "After 150 years, I've settled the argument as to his capacity as a cartographer, navigator and field scientist. I know the country he traversed and think it was an outstanding effort."

IF LEICHHARDT WAS such a great scientist, explorer and navigator, how could he disappear without trace? Other explorers searched for years for signs of their missing peer, following up Aboriginal stories about skeletons and trees blazed with an "L". The expedition equipment included pots, plates, powder flasks, mugs, cutlery, axes, horseshoes and nails, saddles, harnesses and bullock bells. Surely, something would have survived?

Theories developed that the whole party, horses and all, drowned on one of the river crossings. And there were rumours of a massacre by Aboriginal people and one such yarn led to a search of Wantata Waterhole on the Diamantina River, in western Queensland.

Some speculators have drawn a line straight across the country - from Brisbane to the Swan River - and theorised that Leichhardt must have died somewhere near the centre. However, most of Leichhardt's pre-expedition correspondence indicated he was going to try travelling near the headwaters of the northern rivers, well to the north of the desert country.

In the wilds of the Top End, near the plunging cliffs of the Arnhem Land escarpment, Dan Baschiera - a lecturer in social work and humanitarian studies at Charles Darwin University, in Darwin - has spent weeks piecing together clues. He's been looking for and found a tantalising "LL" scar on a tree in Arnhem Land's north-west tip indicating, he believes, one of Leichhardt's last camps from his famed first expedition.

Dan supports a highly controversial perspective. "My theory is that he was assassinated by the British Colonial Government," he says seriously. "A bag of poisoned flour - it was the only thing that would have taken the whole team out."

A previous attempt by Leichhardt to cross the continent failed during its first weeks after his party became very sick, says Dan, adding that the explorer initially suspected the tea or flour was responsible. He expands further, saying that Leichhardt's official journal of that failed expedition was edited. "A lot of the ethnological material had been taken out," Dan says. He suggests a motive for assassination.

"You had a German scientist wandering around talking about an ancient civilisation in a country that's meant to be terra nullius [Latin for "belonging to no-one"]. He would have severely embarrassed the Queen and the British government."

Darrell disagrees: "I've never heard about Leichhardt talking about an 'ancient civilisation'. And why then did the NSW government give Leichhardt a big reward (£850) when he returned from Port Essington, and why did the government also give him more livestock and firearms for his final expedition?"

"I think it's drawing a very, very long bow," Henry says. "It wasn't poisoned flour. And if it had been, there would have been a big pile of equipment and bones lying around." Staring down from the wall of Darrell's Canberra office is a picture of Leichhardt above details of a £1000 reward offered by The Bulletin magazine in 1880 for the "first conclusive and substantial proof of the place where Dr Ludwig Leichhardt, the Great Australian Explorer, met his death".

Darrell alerted the National Museum to the existence of one of the best pieces of evidence yet as to Leichhardt's fate: proof the ill-fated explorer's last journey took him at least three-quarters of the way to the Swan River. In about 1900, a 15-cm-long brass plate with Leichhardt's name and the year 1848 stamped on it was found attached to a gun butt in a boab tree blazed with an "L".

Acquired three years ago by the National Museum of Australia, this is the most tangible relic from Leichhardt's final expedition. Experts agree the "L" on the tree indicates at least one of Leichhardt's party placed the gun and plate. But the description of where it was found, passed down orally through several generations, is too vague to fully resolve the mystery.

It was found by an Aboriginal man who passed it on to his boss Charles Harding and Darrell believes Harding's story includes clues - "Sturt Creek", "bottle [boab] tree", "90 miles from the NT border" and "Mt Inkerman" - that point to a spot north of Lake Gregory in north-east WA. However, followers of the Central Australia theory use the same clues to construct a case for The Musgrave Ranges in northern SA as Leichhardt's final resting place.

"My theory is he probably hit Sturt Creek and reached Lake Gregory," Darrell says. From then on, the party would have had trouble finding water and had to choose to "go back all the bloody way, or go back to Port Essington, or go west or go south-west".

Unknown to Leichhardt, the settlement at Port Essington had been deserted by this time, so if he had headed that way, he would not have found anything.

"South of Lake Gregory there are corridors of open country; you could conceivably ride around the edge of the dunes and come all the way down here," Darrell says, pointing to an area about 315 km south of Lake Gregory. "Leichhardt was very conscious about water - and there's evidence that someone went south." When explorer David Carnegie came through this country in 1895, he found an Aboriginal group in the northern Gibson Desert with a heavy tent peg and other items that may have come from Leichhardt's expedition.

Another possible hint came out of this region, in 1889 or early 1890, with some Aboriginal people at Joanna Spring, east of Broome, who remembered an event that happened about 300 km south-east of there. "According to [them], four men on horses - two whites and two Aboriginals - came from the north-east long ago," Darrell says, theorising that perhaps the group split up or some of the men had died. The story claimed that the men and their horses had died, one by one, as they desperately searched for water in rock holes.

Suggesting frustration at not finding more physical evidence, despite several field trips to the area where he believed the gun and blazed tree were found, Darrell bangs down the map on the table and says: "It's become entrenched that the Simpson Desert is the most likely place, but the Simpson Desert is the Piccadilly Circus of Australian deserts - it's got scientists; it's

got tourists; it's got lots of people. This country out here [the northern Gibson and the northern Great Sandy deserts] is the least explored part of the country - it has to be out in the desert. If they'd drowned, some of their stuff would have washed away and then been uncovered later on. And some of them would have survived."

Henry agrees: "I think Darrell's assessment is very close. [Leichhardt's expedition] disappeared somewhere in the Great Sandy Desert or somewhere up there. Someday we might find them - anything's possible."

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