

## Leichhardt and Voss

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Patrick White first saw Sidney Nolan's work in the seventh floor gallery of David Jones' Elizabeth Street department store in Sydney in 1949. The exhibition featured Nolan's extraordinary Burke and Wills series, which, together with his famous Ned Kelly pictures of 1946 and 1947, made his reputation as a painter in Australia. According to White's biographer David Marr, 'White came to the Australian desert through Nolan's eyes.'<sup>1</sup> Indeed, while White may have worked as a jackeroo on some of his family's properties in the Monaro during the 1930s, he'd never seen anything like the country within which he would set *Voss*. Nor had he seen paintings like Nolan's outback works before, because they really were a novel development within twentieth century painting. The effect of all the big red-brown canvases on White was profound: they fed into the chemistry of *Voss*, while Nolan became somebody with whom White wanted to connect.

In its conception and development, *Voss* is perhaps the most over-determined novel in Australian letters. Influenced, in White's own account, not just by Ludwig Leichhardt, but also by Edward John Eyre's journals detailing his walk along the Nullabor coast one hundred years earlier; by White's experiences as a British officer at war with Germany in the North African desert; by the unlikely combination of Arthur Rimbaud and of Alec Chisholm's anti-Leichhardt book *Strange New World*, not to mention Liszt and Mahler and Alban Berg and Bela Bartok. And, to this eclectic list we can add the desert paintings of Sidney Nolan.

In a typical example of the bi-polar world in which Australian culture workers lived during the 1950s, when it came time to find a cover for *Voss*, Sidney Nolan, who'd spent the first thirty years of his life in Melbourne, was living in London, while White, who'd spent much of the previous three decades in London, was the owner of a small farm on the outskirts of Sydney. Having decided that he wanted Nolan, who he'd never met, to do the cover for *Voss*, White wrote to him and asked if would take on the job. Nolan said yes, and White sent him a draft of the book. Nolan then sent back a postcard featuring a preliminary sketch, with the following text on the reverse side: 'This is a rough note for *Voss* cover. Thrilled with the book. Look forward to meeting. S.'<sup>2</sup> White loved the image: 'It got the character to perfection — thin and prickly'.<sup>3</sup> But Nolan then reworked his *Voss* for the final version. The palette stayed more or less the same, but *Voss* put on weight. No longer thin and prickly, Nolan's *Voss* had turned into a 'fat and amiable Botanist.'<sup>4</sup> The background meanwhile had also expanded, from an outline of a couple of miserable shanties to a substantial run of two story buildings. White was disappointed, but still he approved the work and told the publisher to go ahead.

Nolan's first cartoon of *Voss* appears to draw heavily on the Nineteenth Century caricature of Leichhardt by John Mann, second-in-command of the failed 1846-47 Swan River expedition. In his notebook, Mann sketched an unflattering image of Leichhardt, to whom he had taken a dislike and whom he suspected of being Jewish, based primarily on the fact the German wasn't interested in

performing Sunday prayers, as well as on other ‘unChristian’ opinions he had apparently expressed.<sup>5</sup> Mann employed the two key signifiers used by Charles Dickens in his anti-Semitic portrait of the character Fagin in *Oliver Twist* — a long, thin hooked nose and a long, pointy beard — in his visual sketch of a rake-thin Leichhardt wearing an over-sized Oriental-looking hat. Mann was obviously pleased with the image, because some forty years later he redrew it with added background detail as the frontispiece for his book *Eight Months with Dr. Leichhardt in the Years 1846-47*.

So, Nolan’s take on John Mann’s Jewish Leichhardt was the version of the image which White felt got the character of *Voss* ‘to perfection’. The published version on the other hand had lost the miserable skinniness that signified authenticity for White, and so severed the direct connection to Mann’s caricature. However, a link with Mann still remains, simply through the cartoon mode of the drawing. And it’s this deliberate insubstantiality of the sketch that allows us to read into it as much or as little as we want.

Is the Nolan/Voss figure simply a parody of the generic European natural scientist in colonial Australia? Actually, Nolan’s Voss, along with his paintings of the late 1940s and early 1950s, literally *represent* a version of Australia’s Whitefella myths, and if we look at them in Claude Levi-Strauss’s terms — composed not of rigidly fixed narratives but of constituent elements, *mythemes*, which can be assembled and rearranged to narrate, enhance or redeploy the story or stories in question — then what we see initially are the different elements at play rather than the unified narratives: an Indigenous man with a spear, a horse in the desert and so on.<sup>6</sup>

This was the conceptual framework within which Nolan was working. It wasn’t that Nolan singled White’s Voss out for haphazard, minimal treatment, rather, this form of minimalism was basic to all of his works treating the elements of Australia’s Whitefella myths, though, perhaps with Voss he pushed this use of minimalism even further than he had previously, perhaps because he was trying to produce an image that was the antithesis of White’s virtuoso narrative; after all, Patrick White was accused of many things in the course of his career, but Minimalism was never one of them.

So, Nolan’s Voss can take its place as one more element of the Leichhardt myth: the generously mean, dictatorial, brilliantly hopeless Prussian at home in the Bush, who loved women but couldn’t stop kissing men and who was always lost even though he always knew where he was going, whether it was through the pages of a journal or across the stage in an opera house.

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<sup>1</sup> Marr, David, *Patrick White: A Life*, Sydney: Random House, 1992, p. 316.

<sup>2</sup> Nolan, Sidney, Book jacket design for Patrick White’s novel *Voss*, 1957 (postcard), State Library of New South Wales, ML 743.

<sup>3</sup> Marr, p. 323.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Mann, John, *Eight Months with Dr. Leichhardt in the years 1846-1847*, Sydney: Turner and Henderson, 1888 (British Library Historical Print Editions), p. 67.

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<sup>6</sup> Levi-Strauss, Claude, 'The Structural Study of Myth' in *Structural Anthropology*, New York: Basic Books, 1963, pp. 206-231.