

## Crossing Myall Creek

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### I.

Sometime in May 1843, Ludwig Leichhardt crossed Myall Creek in the northern reaches of New South Wales. He crossed Myall Creek on his extensive travels between Sydney and Moreton Bay, about one-and-a-half years before he departed on his triumphant first expedition to Port Essington. He was on his way north, where he would soon spend eight intense months researching the natural history of the Moreton Bay District among the local Indigenous population. Before, he had spent much time around Newcastle and the Hunter, where he was hosted by two brothers of the Scott family. He had been introduced to the Scotts during his first months in Sydney, among them Robert Scott, a settler aristocrat with political ambitions and a vast estate in the Hunter Valley. But for now, picture Leichhardt trailing his horse through Myall Creek on a late autumn day, before a backdrop he repeatedly praised as one of the most beautiful in the colony.

I argue that there are various layers of symbolic significance in this image, and that in crossing Myall Creek, there are several crossings involved. Myall Creek is a key crossroads in the silenced history of Australian frontier violence, and it thus invites reflection on the roads taken or not taken by Leichhardt in the face of pervasive massacres of Aboriginal people in the areas that he travelled. Yet for Leichhardt, and for us as his readers, Myall Creek is also an epistemic crossroads in the sense that it marks a challenge to Leichhardt's specific ways of knowing the land. The image of Leichhardt crossing Myall Creek asks us to question the purported innocence of the natural history approach which Leichhardt followed in Humboldt's footsteps, and to foreground its intricate entanglement in the imperial project.

Here is how Leichhardt himself describes crossing Myall Creek on May 31, 1843:<sup>1</sup>

From Norris's to Dangar's station on Myal Creek firstly silver-leaved ironbark ridge, then rich black earth plains with basaltic base covered with box. It has the character of Cassilis. It is a beautiful run, very vigorous grass growth.

From Myal Creek (Dangar's station, Hunger Station) open undulating country with myal and box, oat grass, wool oats, black basaltic soil, pieces of basalt visible everywhere. The track led to a range of hills. In Myal Creek basalt, blue clay slate, thermantide, pieces of quartz. Opposite the hut basalt outcrops, commonly vesicular.

Leichhardt's prose is typically unspectacular; but it is a characteristic example of Leichhardt's way of encountering and reading the land. It is revealing of his *taxonomic gaze*, a gaze which immediately ties keen observation to the progressively expanding categories of the

geographical, botanical and geological sciences. It is a gaze, moreover, which is split between an almost religious desire to know the world and creation, and a more profane desire to provide knowledge for an expanding imperial economy.

In the specific instance of crossing Myall Creek, this ambivalence is further troubled by symbolic resonances which Leichhardt, it seems, was entirely unaware of. At least there is no mention in his diary and letters that a little less than five years earlier, at least 28 Aboriginal men, women and children were massacred on the very site he observes by a marauding group of twelve stockmen. Surely, the massacre itself was no singular or extraordinary event in Australian history; in fact, it was the third in a row committed by the same group, and it was one of innumerable others of various scale in the region, the most notorious being the Waterloo Creek massacre earlier in the same year. Myall Creek gained its extraordinary significance because the atrocities were reported, investigated, and brought to court. And while in the first instance, all eleven of the captured stockmen were freed of all charges, seven of them were found guilty of murder in a second trial and hanged. The second Myall Creek trial in December 1838 was the first and only trial in Australian colonial history in which white men were convicted for murder after a massacre; and as such it changed relations between settlers and Aboriginal people – not by reducing the number of killings, but by promoting more clandestine methods of murder, and a politics of silence.

Clearly, Leichhardt's crossing of Myall Creek is informed by this silence. We may, perhaps, glimpse some of its deeper ambivalences if we return, briefly, to an earlier scene in Sydney and meet, with Leichhardt, Robert Scott. On August 5, 1842 Leichhardt records:

I saw the three brothers: [Walker Scott], Robert Scott and Captain Scott. While Walker fascinated and amused me by his kind good humour, I felt that in Robert I faced a thinking man, whose life is always directed towards the practical side, which, however, he seeks to grasp and command with his mind. He is called no other than 'mad Bob'. Why? – is not clear to me yet. [...] Am I deceiving myself, if I believe that I could be of greater avail in the practical field?

What is probably "not clear [...] yet" to Leichhardt, here, is Robert Scott's role in the Myall Creek trials. What is not shared with Leichhardt is that it was no other than Robert Scott who organized the stockmen's defense. For this purpose, Scott formed a secret association with the distinct aim to maintain the legality of killing Aboriginal people to which apparently most landowners north of Sydney subscribed. Scott raised 300 pounds, hired the best lawyers in Sydney, visited the accused in prison, and personally devised their defense strategy. After the triumphant success of the first defense, however, the tables turned for Scott; following the second trial, he was stripped of his office as Magistrate and he largely withdrew from the

public. The Myall Creek massacre thus rather uncannily throws into relief Leichhardt's attraction to "mad Bob" and his intellectually controlled "practical side." And it raises more fundamental questions about the ways in which the sciences that Leichhardt devoted his life to can be disentangled at all from those more "practical fields" of imperial conquest.

## II.

I would like to propose that across the diaries of 1843 to 1844, it is possible to trace an increasing awareness on Leichhardt's part of his own conflicted position in the imperial project. Leichhardt, I argue, symbolically crossed Myall Creek anew, the more he engaged with the Indigenous population around Durundur Station in the Moreton Bay region where he stayed between July 1843 and March 1844. He did so by acknowledging, at least in part, other ways of being and knowing the land, without having been able to resolve the tensions between such knowledge and the universalizing narratives of Western science he lived by. Leichhardt came a very long way in this process, a way that is hardly straight forward but wounded and full of sidetracks, fraught with obstacles and irritations, and often remains untraceable altogether. Let me nevertheless try and provisionally signpost it with three passages from the diaries, one dating to just after his departure from Sydney in September 1842, and the others set down after he crossed Myall Creek.

Some three weeks after meeting Robert Scott in Sydney, Leichhardt is shown a collection of Indigenous skulls in Newcastle and records on September 25:

Mr. Bolton, a customs-official, had shown me his skulls of Aborigines. [...] There was a number of interesting indentations on the outer surface of the skulls of the women, which result from blows, which the men rain on the women. That portion of the women's temporal bone, which is behind and above the ear-hole is strongly vaulted (this part corresponds to Gall's Destructiveness). [...] It is amazing what hard blows on the head these savages can stand. Mr. Bolton told me that they confer blows on each other with their waddies freely and in turn.

This passage is vital as it marks how Leichhardt's early encounters with Indigenous Australians are scripted by the same taxonomic gaze that he analyses rock formations, plants and animals with. It does not occur to him, it seems, to question the possible origins of the skulls, or to seek alternative ways of explaining the "interesting indentations" on some of them. The violent politics of the frontier are overwritten by the disinterested politics of the scientific Enlightenment he carried with him from London, Paris, Berlin, or Göttingen, where he would have encountered Franz Josef Gall's phrenological theories, probably in Johann

Friedrich Blumenbach's anthropological lectures. And travelling with Leichhardt to Australia, the racial imaginary of the European Enlightenment effortlessly blends in with the racial rhetoric of settler society, as in the uncanny conclusion of Leichhardt's reading of Indigenous skulls: "Their addiction to drink, however, destroys them, and they disappear like the snow from the mountains in the summer sun."

How far did Leichhardt go from the abysses of such metaphors? Again, the path is difficult to make out. But some four months after he crossed Myall Creek, and some two months after he arrived at Durundur, the diaries increasingly document reflections about Indigenous knowledge that Leichhardt draws from a range of Aboriginal people in the Moreton Bay area, for example on September 18, 1843:

The next morning [...] we were occupied in the scrub of the Bunya Bunya Range. The sharpness with which the Blacks differentiate the various trees of the scrub is extraordinary. More than 50 different trees were distinguished and hand specimens of bark and wood and specimens of leaves or fruit and blossom were collected. Each of the three language families had its own name for each tree. In the process they are so certain that all specimens with few exceptions would be recognised again by the Black kippers on Archer's station, although they had not accompanied us. I recognise how important it is to be accompanied by Blacks, and how desirable it would be even for my science to associate with Blacks during our expedition.

The passage indicates how Leichhardt gradually came to appreciate Indigenous perceptions of the land, and how he attempted to productively align them with his own taxonomic universe, not exclusively by means of appropriation, but in an exchange that becomes increasingly mutual, and gradually extends also to an interest in Indigenous *ways* of knowing, partly documented, here, in his keen interest in Indigenous languages.

Toward the end of the road, however, there is not resolution, but an unbridgeable lacuna between Leichhardt's continuing obligation and, perhaps, attraction to the likes of Robert Scott on the one hand, and to the Aboriginal people he came to live and learn with on the other. While this conflict is nowhere explicitly formulated or negotiated in the diaries, its profound depth transpires in a diary entry dating to October 3, 1843. Still at Durundur, Leichhardt's reflections on Australia's Indigenous people culminate, here, in a plea for an unflinching politics of imperial assimilation which anticipates nothing less than the Stolen Generations:

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.

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.

It is in the unbridgeable gap between these two statements, in the dramatic silence in-between, that I find an emerging understanding in Leichardt's writing that there is no innocence in scientific exploration. An understanding that you can cross Myall Creek, but that it is far too wide to keep a safe footing on both shores.

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<sup>1</sup> Leichhardt's Australian diaries in the German original are available at the Mitchell Library, ref. Leichhardt MLMSS 683 CY 1082. I have used Thomas Darragh translation; cf. Thomas Darragh and Roderick J. Fensham, eds., *The Leichhardt Diaries: Early Travels in Australia during 1842-1844*. Brisbane: Queensland Museum, 2013.

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