

Mount Royal: Leichhardt's Liebe - A Leichhardt love affair

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Chance and circumstance have combined to bring this article to press. It recounts the story of Ludwig Leichhardt's journey to Mt Royal in the summer of 1843, and highlights its scientific legacy, context to his later explorations, and contemporary relevance.

About a year after his arrival in New South Wales, Leichhardt travelled by foot and horseback from the Hunter River settlements to Mount Royal and nearby Pieries Peak (then known as Piri), in the Hunter Valley ranges running south from Barrington Tops. He went specifically to explore the geology and botany of an area on the fringe of European settlement, in a landscape of endless forest-clad ridges. Cattle runs and villages were distant, and had been established little more than 20 years.

In his descriptions, observations, sketches, diagrams and specimens made during the journey, Leichhardt conveys a fascination with all aspects of nature, including plants, native animals, geology, ecology, weather and even social history. He exhibits acute observation skills, scientific accuracy, determination, and a very broad understanding of natural history. Together the surviving evidence from the journey provides a snapshot of the character evident in his later inland expeditions.

About his camp at Piri on 27 January Leichhardt wrote:

Die Nächte waren kühl, der Himmel herrlich gesternt. Wie ich am Morgen mich erhob und der frische Wind mich umwehte, fühlte ich mich so froh, so reich, so zufrieden, dass ich oft meine Hände gefaltet zum Himmel streckte und freudebebend ausrief: O Gott ich danke dir! – Ebenso wenig konnte ich mich meiner Gefühle bemeistern als ich auf dem Mt Royal eine so herrliche Aussicht genoss.

[The nights were cool, the sky magnificently starry. As I arose in the morning and the fresh wind blew over me, I felt so happy, so rich and so satisfied that I often stretched my clasped hands to the sky and trembling with joy cried out: Oh God I thank you! I could master my feelings just as little when I enjoyed such a magnificent view on Mt Royal.]¹

Living near Mt Royal for several decades, I have walked and explored the area extensively, and campaigned for its present protection as world heritage listed national park.



Photo: View north from Pieries Peak to Mt Royal (right), Mt Royal National Park

Five years of inquiry started when by chance I discovered that Leichhardt's published letters included descriptions of Mt Royal. I was intrigued to know if these could shed light on the area's environmental history — had the forests and landscapes changed since European settlement? Being a German speaker whose grandparents once lived in the Sydney suburb of Leichhardt only added interest.

A visit to the State Library of NSW uncovered Leichhardt's unpublished diaries and notebooks. The Mt Royal journey comprises around 30 pages, in both German and English, and written in very tight paper-saving script that proved challenging to read. Fortunately I found Tom Darragh in Melbourne was patiently transcribing and translating the diaries, and he generously provided me a copy of relevant sections.

Compiling the daily chronology, linking it to descriptions of places and species, and identifying the actual route taken became a complex task. Because the journal and letters are not sequential, many pieces of the jigsaw needed to be fitted together. All descriptions were linked to specific locations where possible, and checked in the field.

A chance question led to finding over 20 Leichhardt plant specimens from Mt Royal in the National Herbarium of NSW in Sydney; further inquiry found more specimens in Melbourne. Specimens were linked to diary events, as were newspaper weather reports, and these provided extra clues.

Combining information from all sources² I have been able to retrace Leichhardt's journey, which can be outlined as follows: he rides on horseback from Glendon on the Hunter River to St Clair Station on Carrow Brook; from here he is guided along mountain logging paths, with a horse and dog, observing geology and plants; he camps alone in a hollow Eucalyptus tree high in the mountains, near dense rainforests; his horse leaves him stranded and he walks unsuccessfully for half a day searching for it, he camps alone for some days, then runs out of food, and walks back to St Clair for more rations; finding his horse, he returns to his hollow tree and continues to climb the mountains and collect plants, but encounters wet weather and has the misfortune of setting fire to his camp, burning his valuable paper and shirt, and losing his pencil.

Detailed scientific notes, letters, drawings and specimens all provide a picture of his methods and resourcefulness in a forested mountain wilderness. Misadventures and mundane observations blend to tell an engaging story, one that gives insights to a character that to this day looms large in the history and mythology of Australian colonial exploration.

His letter of 15 February 1843, describing his hermit's life, notes: "so I hope to become seasoned for the interior".

The continuing scientific legacy is documentation of over 100 plants linked to current taxonomy, 56 plant specimens still existing in Australian herbaria, geological sketches, and locality-specific landscape descriptions. Together they provide a vivid snapshot of the Mt Royal landscape at a time little removed from European contact. The picture revealed is of great ecological and historical interest, for it presents a scene virtually unchanged from that of today.

Having drawn all the available information together, I suggest that Leichhardt's scientific contribution has been significantly underrated, partly because the material has not been easily accessible in one location, and also because his records were substantially written in German and French.



Photo: Mt Royal, a landscape described by Leichhardt in 1843 and unchanged 170 years later

Mount Royal is a very special place where today's visitor can follow Leichhardt's footsteps over 170 years later, experiencing an almost unchanged landscape, and observing what he documented. It is one of few localities in Australia where detailed and reliable scientific documentation enables landscape change to be assessed over such a long period.

Retracing the journey underscores why Leichhardt fell in love with Mt Royal, particularly its rainforests. He was overwhelmed by its beauty, notwithstanding the hardships and misfortunes.

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Notes

¹ Darragh, T. and R. Fensham. "The Leichhardt diaries. Early travels in Australia during 1842-1844." *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum - Culture* 7.1 (2013): i-x, 1-540, 149.

² Fallding, M. and D. Benson. “Adventures, hardship and a scientific legacy: Ludwig Leichhardt’s 1843 journey to Mt Royal in the Hunter Valley, NSW.” *Cunninghamia. A journal of plant ecology for eastern Australia* 13.1 (2013): 305-330.

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