

Ludwig Leichhardt – Better known in Australia than in his Homeland?

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“Friedrich Wilhelm Ludwig Leichhardt – who?” This would be the most likely answer you would get from any student in Germany if you ask them a question about the great German-Australian explorer. Maybe, in the Cottbus region of the German Federal State of Brandenburg you will find somebody who heard about Leichhardt because he or she went to school at the *Leichhardt-Elementary-School* in Tauche or one of the Leichhardt High Schools in either Cottbus or Goyatz. Or, your interlocutor has walked the 11 km *Leichhardt Trail* and visited the small *Leichhardt Museum* in Trebatsch before spending a night at the Leichhardt camping ground at Lake Schwieloch. Perhaps, too, you would have found Leichhardt on the internet, on the tourism website *Leichhardtland.de* which Leichhardt’s region of origin launched in 2012 in German and English language, presenting many cultural, touristic and scientific events related to Leichhardt’s life and the region in general.

You have to dig deep in order to find traces of Leichhardt outside this very limited area of the Oberlausitz/Spreevald. All I could find was a street named in his honor in Dahlem, the Berlin district where Germany’s most important *Museum of Ethnology* is located. The German Post issued a stamp in 1983 with a portrait of Leichhardt, and in October 2013 the German and the Australian Post issued another stamp, commemorating the 200th anniversary.

How different is the situation in Australia! Leichhardt’s expeditions form part of the history curriculum in schools because his discoveries had a considerable impact on the development of the continent. He is considered more Australian than German by many. It is therefore not surprising that municipalities, rivers, mountains, highways and species in fauna and flora carry the name of Leichhardt. While being in Darwin recently, I came across a Leichhardt memorial at the famous *Esplanade* with bronze plates describing his expedition from Brisbane to Port Essington in 1844/1845, including a map of his journey. And, standing at the banks of the East Alligator River in Kakadu National Park, the guide explained to me and other tourists that the name of the river was a mistake, because an explorer from England in the early 19th century believed that the crocodiles he found in the river were a species of alligators he had seen in the USA; however, when the German explorer Leichhardt reached the East Alligator River on his journey to Port Essington, he immediately realized that the reptiles were saltwater crocodiles rather than alligators.

German institutions in Australia keep the memory of Leichhardt, too: The German International School Sydney named one of its buildings after the explorer, and we should not forget that a portrait of Leichhardt is mounted opposite the Consul General's office in Sydney.

In *The Weekend Australian Magazine* of 17 August, 2013, author Nicolas Rothwell characterizes Leichhardt as follows: "He was logical and relentless; solitary and charismatic; gifted and obsessive. In his planning and his preparations he was punctilious, he was a chaser-down of details – yet before all else he was a vision man, drawn inexorably to great projects, wild quests and near-impossible challenges."¹ Now, does this description really reflect Leichhardt's achievements in his study years in Europe? Although studying philosophy, languages and natural sciences at the universities of Berlin, Göttingen, and later on in Paris and London, he never received a degree. Obviously, only his arrival in Australia must have made him the man Rothwell described.

Therefore, the 200th anniversary of Ludwig Leichhardt in 2013 was an excellent opportunity to recall the life and the achievements of this great explorer. In the previous two years, the German missions in Australia and the Australian Embassy in Germany had established a very productive cooperation in order to commemorate the 200th birthday of Leichhardt with a series of events in Germany and Australia. Of course, scientific events formed the center-piece of these activities. The German *Alexander-von-Humboldt-Foundation* awarded two scholarships, named *Leichhardt-Scholarships* to Australian researchers in 2013. In October 2013, the University of Queensland in Brisbane hosted a *Leichhardt Symposium on biodiversity* in cooperation with the *Alexander-von-Humboldt-Foundation*, the Technical University in Munich, the Ludwig-Maximilian-University in Munich, the Ruhr-University Bochum and the Humboldt-University Berlin. A successful project between the University of Technology Sydney and Potsdam University highlighted different aspects of Leichhardt's life and research in March 2013 in Sydney, and again in September 2013 in Cottbus. In May, the Brandenburg Technical University in Cottbus organized an interdisciplinary symposium, commemorating Leichhardt's 200th birthday.

On a less serious note, in Sydney the commemorations kicked-off in the true sense of the word with the Leichhardt-Soccer-Cup in March 2013. When the Consulate General in Sydney was informed about a visit of the Bamberg University's soccer team to Australia, playing matches in Sydney and Brisbane against local university teams, we proposed to dedicate one of the matches to the great German-Australian explorer. The universities of Sydney and Bamberg agreed happily to this proposal. In an exciting and intense match on 14 March, 2013,

Bamberg defeated Sydney 2:0 and took the *Leichhardt-Cup* home to Leichhardt's country of origin.

On 1 September 2013, a new website went online (www.leichhardtland.net.au), designed as a meeting point for all interested in Ludwig Leichhardt, his life and historical achievements, but also a billboard for activities and events related to the bicentenary of the great explorer. The project was initiated by the German Honorary Consul in Brisbane, but very soon a number of interested people and institutions joined and developed a "sister-website" to the one in Germany mentioned earlier. On 16 October, 2013, the municipality of Leichhardt in Sydney's inner west staged an exhibition of four Australian artists who followed the trail of Leichhardt's expedition of 1844/1845 presented their artistic impressions about various locations on this journey to the top end of Australia. The exhibition has toured Australia in the following months.

Returning to my opening question, the answer seems rather simple: Ludwig Leichhardt had a much bigger impact in Australia than in Germany. His journey from Morton Bay to Port Essington opened the continent for many generations to come.

Notes

¹ Rothwell, Nicolas. "L marks the spot". *The Weekend Australian Magazine*. 17 August 2013.

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