

‘M. le Dr Leichardt, savant allemand’: 19th-century French Perspectives on his Scientific Contributions

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Bicentenary commemorations of Leichhardt have centered on two countries: Germany, his homeland, and Australia, the focus of his explorations and site of his mysterious disappearance. Ulrike Kirchberger and Heike Hartmann have drawn attention to Leichhardt’s entanglement within the transnational networks of the British Empire.¹ But what of France? Matthew Flinders’ circumnavigation of 1801-03 and subsequent settlements had secured British control of Australia and dashed French hopes of establishing a rival colonial claim,² yet French scientists retained an interest in the exploration and natural history of the southern continent. This paper offers a first overview of the ways in which Leichhardt, a Prussian in a British colony, was entangled within French networks too.

While studying in London and Paris, Leichhardt established connections which remained important several years later and half a world away. Gaetano Durando, the proprietor of a Paris-based “Comptoir Botanique”, was a key contact. Lengthy extracts from Leichhardt’s letters to Durando, published in the *London Journal of Botany* in 1845 and 1846, list specimens sent to French individuals and institutions: a collection of plants forwarded “to the museum of the *Jardin des Plantes*”; wood samples sold to the phytopalaeontologist Adolphe-Théodore Brongniart.³ “You may wonder”, Leichhardt wrote later to his brother-in-law Carl Schmalzfuss, “why I did not send these collections to one of our German museums”:

The simple reasons are, that I studied natural history principally in English and French museums, and that during my earlier years I enjoyed no such friendly intercourse with any of my countrymen as would have obliged me to consider them first. Durando was a botanist, and my intimate friend ... It was my friendly relations with Durando that led me to send the collection to him rather than to one of the recognised English or German botanists.⁴

Today a web search of the herbarium of the Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle in Paris yields 121 specimens of flowering plants collected by Leichhardt, representing around 60 separate species, two of which (*Bridelia leichhardtii* and *Lobelia leichhardtii*) bear his name.⁵ The collection includes nine type specimens, one lectoparatype and nine syntypes.⁶ Type specimens, which form the basis of the published description of a species and provide an objective standard of reference for the application of the species name thereafter, are crucial to scientific taxonomy.⁷

In 1847 the Société de Géographie de Paris and the Royal Geographical Society of London both honoured Leichhardt’s achievements. Their awards highlight the differences

between French and British perspectives on his contributions. The Royal Geographical Society stressed particularly the commercial potential of Leichhardt's discoveries: his journey had "open[ed] to the settler in Australia new and extensive fields of enterprise" and "connect[ed] the remote settlements of New South Wales with a secure port on the confines of the Indian Archipelago". Certainly he had also collected "objects of natural history" and had "constructed a detailed map of the country through which he travelled", but his discoveries of coal and of "country ... highly adapted for the pursuits of the agriculturist" were mentioned first⁸. The Société de Géographie de Paris, representing a nation with no direct colonial interests in Australia, recounted Leichhardt's geological and botanical observations in detail, but made no mention of coal, secure ports, or country suitable for agricultural pursuits. The selection of 'M. le Dr Leichardt, savant allemand' and the French adventurer Charles E. Xavier Rochet d'Héricourt as co-recipients of the Société's annual prize was justified "on the one hand [by] the importance of their discoveries, on the other [by] their learned observations made in little-known regions and the light shed by these on geography".⁹

Francophone scientists remained interested in Leichhardt's fate following his disappearance. The geographical societies of Paris, Lille, Marseilles and Belgium published reports on the various search expeditions sent out to locate traces of Leichhardt's party, alternately criticizing the New South Wales and South Australian governments for making insufficient efforts to find a traveler who had "rendered the most eminent services in exploring unknown parts of Australia" or for spending exorbitant sums on dubious leads.¹⁰

Concern for Leichhardt's whereabouts did not douse French interest in his scientific contributions. I close with French-Australian botanist and ethnographer Anthelme Thozet, who settled in Rockhampton, northern Queensland, in the 1850s.¹¹ An enthusiastic plant collector, he sent numerous specimens to Victoria's Government Botanist, German-born Ferdinand von Mueller, with whom he shared a keen interest in the practical application of botanical knowledge; he also cultivated Australian plants in his private garden, "Muellerville". Thozet's contributions to the Paris Exposition of 1867 and his publications in leading French scientific journals helped make Australian plants known in France.

The Société d'Acclimatation, which aimed to introduce to France and its colonies useful species from around the world, acknowledged receipt in 1870 of "a collection of seeds, and notes ... explaining their use and value, from our new colleague, M. Anthelme Thozet".¹² In 1872 they published these notes, and in 1873 a longer article appeared, describing plants "used as food by the natives of northern Queensland". Both publications referred frequently to Leichhardt's observations. Thozet described *Parinarium nonda*,¹³ for example, as an

“attractive tree which, according to the unfortunate and celebrated explorer Leichhardt, yields a very good fruit”. *Encephalartos denisonii* became “Leichhardt’s beautiful arborescent cycad”. Further species were identified as “probably the ‘yam’ to which Leichhardt refers in his *Journal Overland Expedition* [sic]”, “Leichhardt’s cluster-bearing fig tree”, and, more simply still, “Leichhardt’s tree”.¹⁴ Perhaps inspired by Leichhardt, Thozet also recorded Aboriginal names for many plants.

This brief overview suggests Kirchberger’s analysis of transnational networks can usefully be extended to embrace Francophone scientists. The ranks of the Thousand and One should include Leichhardt’s French incarnations.

Notes

¹ Kirchberger, Ulrike. “Ludwig Leichhardt und die transnationalen Gelehrtennetzwerke des britischen Empire.” *Der Australienforscher Ludwig Leichhardt: Spuren eines Verschollenen*. Heike Hartmann, ed. Berlin: be.bra wissenschaft verlag, 2013. 79-93; Hartmann, Heike. “Australien sammeln.” *Der Australienforscher Ludwig Leichhardt: Spuren eines Verschollenen*. Heike Hartmann, ed. Berlin: be.bra wissenschaft verlag, 2013. 95-111.

² Frost, Alan. “Science for Political Purposes: European Explorations of the Pacific Ocean, 1764-1806.” *Nature in its Greatest Extent: Western Science in the Pacific*. Roy MacLeod and Philip F. Rehbock, eds. Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1988. 27-44.

³ Webb, P.B. “Scientific Excursions in New Holland, by Dr. Ludwig Leichhardt, 1842-44; extracted from his letters to M.G. Durand, of Paris.” *London Journal of Botany* 4 (1845): 278-91; Webb, P.B. “Botanical Information. Extracted from a Letter from Dr. Ludwig Leichhardt of New Holland to M. Durando, of Paris.” *London Journal of Botany* 5 (1846): 656-60.

⁴ Arousseau, M., ed. *The Letters of F. W. Ludwig Leichhardt*. Vol. III. Surrey: The Hakluyt Society, 1968. 994.

⁵ The variant spelling of these species names (*leichhardtii* versus *leichhardii*) is correct according to the online database maintained by the International Plant Names Index. Accessed: 18 October 2013. <www.ipni.org>. For a broader overview of specimens collected by Leichhardt in Australian and European herbaria, see Dowe, John Leslie. “Ludwig Leichhardt’s Australian Plant Collections, 1842-1847.” *Austrobaileya* 7.1 (2005): 151-63.

⁶ Anon. “Spécimens d’herbier”. Sourced from the online database maintained by the Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle. Accessed: 18 October 2013. <coldb.mnhn.fr>

⁷ McNeill, J. *International Code of Nomenclature for Algae, Fungi, and Plants (Melbourne Code)*. Sourced from the online database maintained by the International Association for Plant Taxonomy. Accessed: 20 October 2013. <www.iapt-taxon.org>

⁸ [Abbot, Charles, 2nd Baron Colchester]. “Presentation of the Gold Medals.” *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 17 (1847): xxiii-xxvii.

⁹ Roux de Rochelle, Jean Baptiste Gaspard. “Rapport sur le concours au prix annuel, pour la découverte la plus importante en géographie, lu dans l’assemblée générale du 30 avril 1847.” *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie* 3.7 (1847): 213-34. Roux de Rochelle refers to Leichhardt as ‘Leichardt’ throughout. I have omitted [sic] in direct quotes.

¹⁰ Anon. “Le voyageur Leichhardt.” *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie* 4.2 (1851): 70-1; Anon. “Feu l’explorateur Australien Leichardt.” *L’exploration. Revue des conquêtes de la civilisation sur tous les points du globe. Recueil géographique hebdomadaire illustré de cartes, plans et gravures hors texte* 13 (1882): 140; Anon. „L’explorateur Leichhardt.” *Société de Géographie de Lille – Bulletin* 5 (1886): 287; Armand, Paul. “Nouvelles des voyageurs. Océanie. M. Ernest Giles.” *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie de Marseille* 7 (1883): 331; D.L.R. “Le voyageur Leichardt et ses compagnons.” *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie* 4.2 (1851): 364; Suttor, E. “Nouvelles de

l'expédition Leichhardt." *Société Belge de Géographie – Bulletin* 5 (1881): 119-20. And: "Nouvelles de l'expédition Leichhardt." *Société Belge de Géographie – Bulletin* 5 (1881): 271-2. For a comprehensive evaluation of expeditions sent out in search of Leichhardt, see Lewis, Darrell. *Where is Dr Leichhardt? The Greatest Mystery in Australian History*. Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2013.

¹¹ Anon. "Thozet, Anthelme (1826-1878)." Sourced from the online database maintained by the Australian National Botanic Gardens. Accessed: 18 October 2013. <www.anbg.gov.au>; Bird, J.T.S. "Sixty Years in Queensland. Memorable Pioneers. No. 45. Other Canoona Men. (Continued.) A. Thozet." *The Morning Bulletin, Rockhampton*. 3 February 1925, 7; Trimen, Henry, ed. "Botanical News." *Journal of Botany, British and Foreign* 16 (1878): 320.

¹² Anon. "II. Extraits des procès-verbaux des séances générales de la Société. Séance du 4 Février 1870." *Bulletin de la Société Impériale Zoologique d'Acclimatation* 2.7 (1870): 231-55.

¹³ Now *Parinari nonda* or *Nonda plum*.

¹⁴ Thozet, A. "Notes sur l'habitat, l'utilité et la culture de quelques plantes subtropicales de l'Australie." *Bulletin de la Société d'Acclimatation* 2.9 (1872): 364-73. And: "Quelques détails d'Australie." *Bulletin de la Société d'Acclimatation* 2.10 (1873): 81-93.

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