

Exploring Beef Jerky

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In 1938, after yet another group had unsuccessfully trawled the Australian outback searching for the remains of Ludwig Leichhardt, who had been missing since 1848, public interest in his story re-emerged in the Australian mass media. Newspapers reported that Leichhardt's aborted second expedition of 1846 was "doomed to failure from the outset, for these trans-continental journeys were not successful until pack horses took the place of waggons, and tin meat, meat on the hoof."¹ Leichhardt's quintessential mistake was presumed to have been the form of his food, especially that of his meat.

Leichhardt's diaries and letters vividly portray his own meat consumption, and that of people he encountered. In describing the form of the meat consumed, Leichhardt also describes the relative affluence as well as the social and religious formation of the various cultural groups he met. Writing in 1838 from England, where his health had deteriorated due to diet and the coal-infused air, Leichhardt assured his father that he would be surprised at the fare offered in decent restaurants, which consisted merely of a piece of meat and hard-boiled cabbage, or similar.² Good beef-steaks, he noted, were as hard to come by as they were in Prussia; perhaps this was a nineteenth-century equivalent to *The Economist's* Big Mac Index.³ Leichhardt was also an astute observer of how meat was prepared. In England it was plain and simple, with the quality of the meat evident, unlike in France, where everything was covered in a sauce, leaving the diner suspicious of the meat's quality.⁴

In Australia, meat was plentiful and "exceptionally cheap," particularly in contrast to fruit and vegetables.⁵ This bounty led Leichhardt to claim that Australian landowners and labourers had far better sustenance than their Prussian counterparts, despite the scarcity and quality of vegetables (including potatoes).⁶ Unlike his English peers, who reluctantly left their homeland because they did not believe it possible to survive on foodstuffs other than "Roast beef and Plumbpudding" [sic], Leichhardt confided to a friend that he felt so content in the bush that a meal of tea, damper and salted meat could quite make him forget the luxuries of an English mid-day meal.⁷ At the same time though, the mere thought of fresh potatoes with butter or new-season herrings was enough to bring a wave of home-sickness over the traveller.⁸

White Australians predominantly nourished themselves with freshly slaughtered meat, since vegetables were not able to withstand the scorching sun.⁹ According to Leichhardt, those station owners who ate vegetables had a lower standard of health than those who

essentially lived on meat. For example, the Gossner Lutheran Aboriginal Missionaries near Brisbane mostly ate a vegetarian diet and consequently looked wan and unhealthy.¹⁰ Such examples inspired him to consume meat almost exclusively during his (failed) 1846 journey to Swan River.¹¹ Indeed meat became such an integral part of Leichhardt's diet that abstinence during Lent seemed ridiculous.¹² And yet meat may have been the reason for his failure. If we believe the mid-twentieth century newspapers, it was not the consumption of meat *per se* which brought down Leichhardt's party, but rather the way that the meat was prepared, namely by air-curing.

Contrary to common white practice, Leichhardt nourished himself as much as possible on local game including kangaroos, emus, bustards, and pigeons.¹³ (Emu meat served him well on the first expedition to Swan River, in a context where commentators would describe emu meat "as food for blackfellows, and not for whites," to be "resorted to in an emergency diet."¹⁴) However, Australian game often eluded Leichhardt despite his two Indigenous expeditioners and his greyhound. And so his culinary landscape was often restricted to dried meat from European beasts.¹⁵ (Muscular tissue; entrails were a luxury!¹⁶) With such an end in mind, Leichhardt's aborted 1846 expedition set out with 40 oxen, 180 sheep and 270 goats; his 1848 expedition took even more livestock.¹⁷ The emphasis was on dried meat: the fresh meat of fattened lambs was believed to have fewer health benefits than dried beef, and Leichhardt even thought that it caused the party to succumb to diseases such as malaria and diarrhoea. And so we have Leichhardt's fixation with drying meat, a process which often took three-to-four days. Since the technique of "jerking" beef was not known in his homeland, he described it in detail in a letter to his brother-in-law after one of his exploratory tours. He also published long passages about the method in his 1844-1845 *Journal of an Overland Expedition*¹⁸ as well as in contemporaneous German-language newspaper articles.¹⁹ The Australian landscape even bears out the importance of Leichhardt's jerking in his naming of "Dried-Beef Creek" during his expedition to Port Essington.²⁰

It was not the lack of meat that mid-twentieth century commentators saw as a major hindrance to Leichhardt's success, rather the fact that he took it in the form of livestock. The time-consuming processes of slaughter and jerking slowed him down. Livestock was also unreliable. Fat beasts might have been tasty when dried, but in leaner times they were tough and unpalatable. Worse still, livestock could get lost, break their legs, eat poisonous plants, or drown in rivers before they could even be turned into jerky.²¹ Leichhardt seems to have delighted in his jerky, be it beef, mutton or kangaroo.²² Yet not everyone was so enamored by it. When he offered it to his Aboriginal expeditioners, "they turned, broke, smelled [it], and

then with a feeling of pity and disgust returned to us [commenting] ‘You no bread, no flour, no rice, no backi – you no good! *Bálanda* plenty bread, plenty flour, plenty rice, plenty backi! *Bálanda* very good!’.”²³ For these Indigenous peoples and for twentieth century commentators, Leichhardt’s culinary provisions were of inferior quality to those of other whites. Livestock was also seen as inferior to tinned meat.²⁴ In 1938, tinned meat was regarded as the epitome of modernity and of the technological progress that had been achieved since Leichhardt went missing with all that livestock. It was blithely assumed that tins would have saved him.

Notes

¹ “Leichhardt Mystery.” *Western Mail*. 11 August 1938, 48. See also: “Bushman May Solve 85-year Mystery Disappearance of Leichhardt Vanished on Trip Across Australia Reported W.A. Clues Perth.” *The Mail*. 17 June 1933, 4.

² “Leichhardt to Herrn Torfinspektor Leichhardt (his father), London, 22 April 1838.” M. Aurousseau, ed. *The Letters of F. W. Leichhardt*. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Hakluty Society, 1968, 155.

³ “The Big Mac Index. Food for thought.” *The Economist* 27 May 2004: n. p. Web. Accessed 6 Aug. 2013. <<http://www.economist.com/node/2708584>>

⁴ “Leichhardt to Christian and Sophie Leichhardt in Trebatsch, Paris, 8 October 1839.” *The Letters*. Vol. 1, 207-208. His descriptions of meat were corroborated by an influential nineteenth-century guidebook of London. See: Baedeker, K. *London and its Environs, including excursions to Brighton, the Isle of Wight, etc. Handbook for Travellers by K. Baedeker*. Leipsic: Karl Baedeker; London: Dulac and Co, 1878, 10.

⁵ “Leichhardt to Carl Schmalzfuss, Cottbus (his brother-in-law), Sydney, 23 March 1842.” *The Letters*. Vol. 2, 432.

⁶ “Leichhardt to his Mother, Sydney, 6 September 1842.” *The Letters*. Vol. 2, 517.

⁷ “Leichhardt to Dr W.J. Little (a friend) in London, Newcastle on the Hunter, 12 November 1842.” *The Letters*. Vol. 2, 588.

⁸ “Leichhardt to Herrn Maler Schmalzfuss, Paris, 30 July 1841.” *The Letters*. Vol. 1, 359.

⁹ “Leichhardt to his Mother, 27 June 1843.” *The Letters*. Vol. 2, 654.

¹⁰ “Leichhardt to Dr William Nicholson (a friend), Archer’s Station, 6 February 1844.” *The Letters*. Vol. 2, 725.

¹¹ “Leichhardt to Daniel Bunce, Port Phillip, Sydney, 17 August 1846.” *The Letters*. Vol. 3, 891.

¹² “Leichhardt to Herrn Torfinspektor Leichhardt, Paris, first Easter holiday 1840.” *The Letters*. Vol. 1, 245.

¹³ “Leichhardt to C. Schmalzfuss, Cottbus, Cambells Station Darling Downs, 3 September 1844.” *The Letters*. Vol. 3, 824.

¹⁴ “EATING EMUS. Meat for Russia. ‘Very Optimistic’ Plan.” *The Brisbane Courier*. 30 August 1933, 21. Reproduced in: *The Courier-Mail*. 30 August 1933, 21; and, *Townsville Daily Bulletin*. 7 September 1933, 2.

¹⁵ “Leichhardt to C. Schmalzfuss, Cottbus, On board the Heroine, an English ship which sailed between Java and Sydney, 24. January 1845.” *The Letters*. Vol. 3, 831-32; “Dr. Ludwig Leichhardt.” *Süd Australische Zeitung*. 18 July 1866, 5.

¹⁶ Finger, Hans Wilhelm. *Leichhardt. Die ganze Geschichte von F. W. Ludwig Leichhardt, Träumer, Forscher und Entdeckungsreisender in Australien; erzählt von ihm selbst und seinem Chronisten nach seinen hinterlassenen Tagebüchern, Briefen und Reiseaufzeichnungen*. Göttingen: Göttinger Bibliotheksschriften, 1999, 275.

¹⁷ “Leichhardt to Mark Nicholson, Port Fairy, Australia Felix (a friend), Sydney, 7 June 1846.” *The Letters*. Vol. 3, 873.

¹⁸ Leichhardt, Ludwig. *Journal of an overland expedition from Moreton Bay to Port Essington, a distance upwards 3000 miles, during the years 1844—1845*. London: T& W. Boone, 1847, passim. A German translation of this book was published in 1851: Leichhardt, Ludwig. *Tagebuch einer Landreise in Australien. Aus dem Englischen von Ernst A. Zuchold*. Halle: H. W. Schmidt, 1851.

¹⁹ See for example: “Dr. Ludwig Leichhardt.” *Süd Australische Zeitung* 18 July 1866, 5.

²⁰ Leichhardt. *Journal*, 29.

²¹ “Leichhardt to C. Schmalfuss, Cottbus, on board the Heroine, 24 January 1845.” *The Letters*. Vol. 3, 831-832; “Leichhardt to C. Schmalfuss, Cottbus, Prussia, The Woolshed or Mr Dennis’s Station, Darlington Downs Mor. Bay, 6 December 1846.” *The Letters*. Vol. 3, 926; “Leichhardt to Capt. P. P. King, R. N. Russel’s Station, 2 August 1847.” *The Letters*. Vol. 3, 936; “Dr. Ludwig Leichhardt.” *Süd Australische Zeitung* 18 July 1866, 5.

²² Finger. *Leichhardt*, 268.

²³ Leichhardt. *Journal*, 522-522. Bálanda was a Malay word for Dutch people, which had been appropriated as a name for white people by the Indigenous people of the colony of Queensland. Leichhardt. *Journal*, 503.

²⁴ Tin cans epitomise technological progress, commodity objects, and the imperial expansions of nineteenth and early twentieth century British colonial world. They “solved the problem of food preservation and [consequently] released humankind from the final thralls of primitivism.” Although first used in 1810, the initial hand-made tin cans were heavy and were used predominantly for fruits and sweets. Technological advances in the later part of the nineteenth century made tin cans more common and reliable. Tinned meats found service in expeditions of discovery from the early nineteenth -century, such as for the Arctic Expedition of 1824, and for many military campaigns. From the 1850s canneries for meat were opened in the colony of New South Wales, yet the first large meat canneries were established on the Pacific Coast from 1862 to can salmon. One of the oldest meat processing plants and cannery was established in Australia in the late 1880s called the *North Queensland Meat Export Company*, which by 1893 was processing over 100 bullocks a day. By 1917, virtually all of the canned meat produced in Queensland was being purchased by the Imperial Government to be exported to India to supply the troops there. This furthers Simon Naylor’s argument that the tin can was important the “expansion and maintenance of Europe’s empires in the Victorian era” with close relationship between “food-preservation technology”, the imperial state, and modernity. See: Simon Naylor, “Spacing the can: empire, modernity, and the globalisation of food.” *Environment and Planning A* 32 (2000): 1625-1639. See also: “The North Queensland Meat Export Company’s Works, Alligator Creek.” *The North Queensland Register* 5 July 1893, 21; “Meat export Trade. Companies Now in Operation. Canned Meat for India. Modules in Beef.” *The Queenslander* 6 January 1917, 33; “50 year’s old tin of meat.” *Townsville Daily Bulletin* 16 January 1945, 4.

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