

Schoolbook Leichhardts: Discovering Ludwig Leichhardt in Historical Narratives for Children

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I first discovered Ludwig Leichhardt in a schoolbook. During my doctoral research, which included dusting off historical narratives in old Australian textbooks, I encountered many an explorer who helped “open up” the continent for settlement. As undisputed heroes of early twentieth-century narratives of Australian history, they appeared in children’s history textbooks in countless stories of discovery and exploration. Among them, Leichhardt enjoyed a prominent role. Despite his German origin, he was featured as an Australian hero. His expeditions, particularly his successful journey to Port Essington, were usually described in detail, along with much speculation about his eventual disappearance. All six textbooks studied for the period 1907–1941 included an account of his discoveries.¹

By the mid-twentieth century, however, Leichhardt had all but disappeared – not only from the face of the earth, but also from the master narrative of Australian history. Contemporary developments needed to be incorporated into the national narrative of Australia – including crystallization points of national sentiment such as Gallipoli and events related to the Southeast Asian theatre of WWII (such as Japanese attacks on Australia and Britain’s beginning retreat from the Asia-Pacific region and reorientation to Europe). In addition, new modes of writing history emphasizing the experience of lower-class Australians, women, and minorities increasingly found their way into textbooks. Narratives related to the official adoption of multiculturalism and the rise of Aboriginal protests, reflecting a change in Australian values, heavily influenced textbook narratives from the late 1970s onwards. Stories of early exploration, though still regarded as important to the formation of Australian identity, were thus assigned considerably less space. White, male explorers and politicians were no longer the unchallenged main characters of the Australian story. Whereas textbooks published between the 1950s and 1980s still frequently featured accounts of inland exploration, they rarely mentioned Leichhardt.² Anti-German sentiments during both World Wars, as well as Alec Chisholm’s influential 1941 biography *Strange New World*, which portrayed Leichhardt in a rather negative light, likely affected this development. Whereas Blaxland, Cunningham, and Mitchell persisted, Leichhardt did not.³

I rediscovered Leichhardt in an unlikely place: reincarnated as a comic book hero. Peter Leyden, author and editor of visual histories for children, retold the story of Leichhardt’s endeavours in the form of comics used as supporting material in history

classrooms in the late 1950s and 1960s.⁴ Leyden vividly portrayed Leichhardt's journey into the "never-never," placing particular emphasis on the hardships his expedition team endured and its contacts with Aboriginal people who, especially in Leyden's second version of the story, seem to haunt the group like ghosts. The death of John Gilbert following an Aboriginal attack is the climax of Leyden's historical account: a dramatic, oversized image of Gilbert, a spear in his chest, appears in both books (in one, Gilbert aptly cries, "They've killed me! They've killed me!").⁵ As in the older textbooks, Leichhardt is generally portrayed as a heroic figure. However – partly owing to the format of the dramatic comic representation, but certainly also to the influence of Chisholm's autobiography – speculations about Leichhardt's personality grow. Leyden describes him as a "strange German,"⁶ "a man of few words who liked his own way,"⁷ and one who "believed that his way was always the best."⁸

Yet again, Leichhardt's trail appears to grow cold for about a decade, reappearing in the early 1970s and 1980s in two supplementary books about Australian explorers written for history teachers.⁹ Now, Leichhardt is described as a Prussian – not a German – and is introduced by his full name, Friedrich Wilhelm Ludwig Leichhardt, perhaps to emphasize his Prussianness.¹⁰ Although Tilbrook generally portrays him more sympathetically than Dugan, Leichhardt is represented as an anti-hero in both accounts, clearly having lost his former status as an acclaimed and largely unquestioned national figure. Both narratives problematize Leichhardt's personality and alleged short-comings. Dugan describes Leichhardt as "a rather strange young man"¹¹ who "couldn't shoot properly, was short-sighted and had little sense of direction."¹² Tilbrook characterizes him as bright, courageous, and hard-working, and a passionate natural scientist but also a "naïve naturalist"¹³ and "a dreamer"¹⁴ who was "ridiculed [...] as a creature of fantastic habits"¹⁵ after his disappearance. Like Dugan, Tilbrook suggests that Leichhardt was called "Doctor Leichhardt" without having completed a university degree and that he relied heavily on friends' goodwill to financially support first his studies and later his travels.¹⁶

I found only two references to Leichhardt in history textbooks published after 1990. One discusses him as a case study of an early explorer and echoes Tilbrook's characterization of Leichhardt and the interest in his personality, as well as early twentieth-century accounts outlining his geographical conquests.¹⁷ Interestingly, the most recent example of a schoolbook reference to Leichhardt is integrated in a narrative of multiculturalism: In a section entitled "The Chinese and the Germans," the textbook authors devote a mere sentence to Leichhardt's expeditions and fate, stating that "Ludwig Leichhardt became a well-known inland explorer who disappeared in 1848."¹⁸

After my accidental discovery of Leichhardt and his changing representation from early Australian textbook hero to a footnote in Australian school history, I attempted to find out what German textbook authors had made of him – only to see Leichhardt vanish once again. Whereas he appears in early imperial and Wilhelminian geography textbooks celebrated as a determined explorer and influential scientist,¹⁹ early twentieth-century accounts mention him only in passing – similar to contemporary Australian accounts.²⁰ Interestingly, many German textbooks are concerned with Leichhardt's third, unsuccessful journey.²¹ Only one includes a detailed description of his journey to Port Essington,²² and none makes any negative references regarding his character. The two German dictatorships, the National Socialist regime and the German Democratic Republic (GDR), both of which appropriated Leichhardt for political purposes,²³ left very few traces of him in the sample I studied;²⁴ similarly, West German textbooks and those published after 1990 also seem not to consider his achievements important enough to pass down to future generations.²⁵ This explains why I had never encountered Leichhardt before coming to Australia: his disappearing act was only too successful at the level of the German collective memory.

Notes

¹ Two Australian textbook collections were consulted to compile the textbook sample on which this article is based: the Ministerial Library Textbook Collection at the Public Record Office Victoria and the Australian Schools Textbook Collection at Deakin University. Listed in the order of their date of publication, Leichhardt appears in the following history textbooks: Alexander Sutherland and George Sutherland. *The History of Australia and New Zealand from 1606 to 1890*. new impr. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907, 140-141; E. J. M. Watts and D. H. Souter. 1862-1935. *Stories from Australian History*. Sydney: William Brooks & Co, 1908, 128-131; Arthur W[ilberforce] Jose. *History of Australia from the Earliest Times to the Present Day, With Chapters on Australian Literature and the Early History of New Zealand*. 11th ed. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1925, 146; 148-149; 151-152; 157; 159; 181; 190; Gilbert R[ussell] Crowther. *Famous Australians: A History of Australia for Primary Classes*. Melbourne: Arbuckle, Waddell, 1926, 58; G[arnet] V[ere] Portus. *Australia Since 1606: A History for Young Australians*. 4th ed. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1936, 127-128; 141; Charles R[ichard] Long. *Stories of Australian Exploration: Founding of the Australian States and New Zealand; Victoria: Its Foundation and Development*. rev. ed. Melbourne: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1941, 155-162.

² Of the eight textbooks studied for this time period, two make passing references to Leichhardt. The textbook sample includes the following titles (listed in the order of their appearance): Helen G. Palmer and Jessie MacLeod. *The First Hundred Years*. rpt. Melbourne: Longmans, 1956; Clive Turnbull. *A Concise History of Australia*. rpt. New York: Viking Press, 1966; A[lan] G[eorge] Le[wers] Shaw. *A Short History of Australia*. rev. ed. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967; W[es] H. Blackmore, R. E. Cotter, and M. J. Elliott. *Landmarks: A History of Australia to the Present Day*. rpt. Melbourne: Macmillan, 1973; W[illiam] P[atrick] Driscoll, Jack Benlow, and E[lwyn] S[ydney] Elphick. *Birth of a Nation*. Adelaide: Rigby, 1974; Sue Fabian. *The Changing Australians: A Social History*. rpt. Adelaide: Rigby, 1984; Humphrey McQueen. *Social Sketches of Australia, 1888 to 1975*. rpt. Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Books, 1986; Ronald Laidlaw. *The Land They Found: Australian History*

for *Secondary Schools*. rev. ed. Melbourne: McMillan, 1989. Shaw (69) and Driscoll (122) briefly mention Leichhardt.

³ Along with Hume and Hovell, Blaxland, Cunningham, and Mitchell are the inland explorers most often referenced in the textbooks studied: Blaxland appears in Turnbull (34), Fabian (81), and Shaw (60); Cunningham in Palmer (41), Blackmore/Cotter/Elliott (42; 49; 51), Driscoll/Benlow/Elphick (120), Fabian (81), and Laidlaw (117-152-4); Mitchell in Palmer (41), Shaw (68), Blackmore/Cotter/Elliott (43), and in Driscoll/Benlow/Elphick (122), Fabian (81), and Laidlaw (117); Hume and Hovell in Palmer (41), Shaw (65), Blackmore/Cotter/Elliott (43), Fabian (81), and Laidlaw (117; 138-139).

⁴ Leyden, Peter. *With Leichhardt to the Never Never*. Australian Visual Education, Sydney, ca. 1958. and *Ludwig Leichhardt: A Visual Australian History*. Publishing House, Crows Nest, N.S.W, n.d.; ca. 1955.

⁵ Leyden. *With Leichhardt to the Never Never*, 16; Leyden. *Ludwig Leichhardt: A Visual Australian History*, 4-5.

⁶ Leyden. *With Leichhardt to the Never Never*, 7.

⁷ Leyden. *With Leichhardt to the Never Never*, 2.

⁸ Ibid. Some of the earlier textbooks also allude to Leichhardt's personality: Watts and Souter remark that "Leichhardt was not a very good leader" (128); Jose states he was not "too ready to take advice and [not] too tactful in dealing with his fellows" (151); and Portus describes him as not being a bushman (127). Positive remarks are also included: Sutherland and Sutherland characterize Leichhardt as "intrepid" and "ardent" (140), Crowther as "quiet" and "unassuming" (58), and Long describes him as an "earnest student of nature" (156). Despite these brief references to Leichhardt's personality, the textbook sample suggests that the preoccupation with Leichhardt's character traits has increased over time.

⁹ Tilbrook, John Richard. *Builders of a Nation. Book 3: Lang to Gordon, 1840-1870*. Manly, NSW: Viking Press, 1973, 12-18; Michael Dugan. *Explorers by Land*. Melbourne, Macmillan, 1981, 16-20.

¹⁰ Tilbrook, 12; Dugan, 16.

¹¹ Dugan, 16.

¹² Dugan, 18.

¹³ Tilbrook, 15.

¹⁴ Tilbrook, 12.

¹⁵ Tilbrook, 18.

¹⁶ Dugan, 17-18; Tilbrook, 13-14.

¹⁷ Engwerda, Robert, and Geraldine Carrodus. *Southern Voices: Australian History to 1918*. rev. ed. Port Melbourne: Heinemann, 2000, 90-91. The textbook includes a question directed at the student readership, asking, "What do sources a and b [excerpts from Leichhardt's letters] tell us about Leichhardt's personality?" (91).

¹⁸ Conroy, Jeffrey, K[im] L[esley] Drummond, and Domonique Splatt. *Time Quest: Discovering Australia's Past*. Milton, Qld: Jacaranda Press, 1999, 179.

¹⁹ The following textbook accounts, listed in the order of their appearance, include sections on Leichhardt in chapters on Australian geography, the history of exploration, or Germans abroad that span at least a few sentences: Theodor Schacht. *Theodor Schachts Lehrbuch der Geographie alter und neuer Zeit: Vierter Abschnitt. Die Länder und Staaten der Erde*. Mainz: Kunze, 1874, 1111; Karl Arendts. *Leitfaden für den ersten wissenschaftlichen Unterricht in der Geographie*. Regensburg : Manz, 1880, 258; Willi Ule. *Lehrbuch der Erdkunde für höhere Schulen*. Leipzig: Freytag, 1896, 389; Thomas Louis. *Entdeckungen und geographisch bedeutsame Unternehmungen nach Auffindung der Neuen Welt bis zur Gegenwart*. Leipzig: Spamer, 1900, 127-129.

²⁰ None of the post-1900 textbooks studied includes a reference to Leichhardt of more than two sentences: Hermann Stöckel. *Geschichte der Neuzeit*, München: Franz, 1902, 169 ("Auch das Binnenland Australiens wurde unter großen Gefahren bereist, z. B. von dem verschollenen Leichhardt."); Theodor Huldreich Schunke. *Länderkunde für höhere Lehranstalten*. Leipzig: Hirt, 1903, 397 ("Leichhardt aus der Mark Brandenburg erforscht 1844 die O. und die N.-Küste bis zum W.-Ufer des Carpentaria-Golfes. Er hatte den kühnen Plan, von der Ost-zur Westküste durchzudringen, kam aber 1848 (?) in der Wüste um."); Friedrich Wulle. *Globuslehre, Allgemeine Erdkunde, Länderkunde der außereuropäischen Erdteile und die Weltmeere (mit Ausschluss des*

Atlantischen Ozeans). Halle [Saale]: Schroedel, 1905, 73 (“Die erste Durchquerung Australiens versuchte im Jahr 1848 vergebens der Deutsche Leichhardt. Er ist verschollen geblieben im Inneren des Erdteils.”); Richard Mahler. *Die Erdteile außer Europa*. Leipzig: Wagner & Debes, 1908, 5 (“Der deutsche Forscher Leichhardt versuchte 1847 eine ow. Durchquerung.”); Arnold Steinhauff. *Lehrbuch der Erdkunde für höhere Schulen*. Leipzig: Teubner, 1910, 109 (“Bei dem kühnen Versuch, den Erdteil von O nach W zu durchqueren, fand der verdiente Ludwig Leichhardt ein unaufgeklärtes Ende.”); Ernst Heise. *Physische und politische Erdkunde von Asien, Australien, Afrika, Die deutschen Kolonien*. Hannover-List: Carl Meyer, 1911, 132 (“An diesen [Erforschungen im Inneren Australiens] ist auch ein Deutscher, namens Ludwig Leichhardt, beteiligt gewesen, der einen direkten Weg von Sydney nach dem Golf von Carpentaria einschlug und auch erreichte.”); Max Eckert. *Deutsche Kulturgeographie*. Halle [Saale]: Schroedel, 1912, 28-29 (“Die Erkenntnis des australischen Festlandes und Ozeaniens ist in vielen Stücken der unermüdlichen und heldenhaften Arbeit deutscher Forscher wie [...] L. Leichhardt zu danken.”); Heinrich Harms. *Allgemeine Erdkunde, Die außereuropäischen Erdteile, Europa (ohne Deutschland)*. Leipzig: List & von Bressendorf, 1913, 90 (“Der Deutsche Ludwig Leichhardt blieb gelegentlich eines Versuches, den Erdteil von Osten nach Westen zu durchqueren, seit 1848 verschollen.”); and Wilhelm Fick. *Die außereuropäischen Erdteile und die deutschen Schutzgebiete*. Dresden: Bleyl & Kaemmerer, 1913, 216 (“Hervorragenden Anteil haben Deutsche auch an der wissenschaftlichen Erforschung Australiens, wie der Forschungsreisende Leichhardt, der bei dem Versuch, den Erdteil von O. nach W. zu durchqueren, seinen Tod fand.”)

²¹ See in particular Carl Baenitz. *Lehrbuch der Geographie*. Leipzig: Velhagen & Klasing, 1885, 287 (“Der deutsche Leichhardt, welcher 1848 von Sydney aus den ganzen Kontinent in westlicher Richtung durchziehen wollte, ist im Inneren zu Grunde gegangen.”); Hermann Wagner. *Allgemeine Erdkunde, Länderkunde der außereuropäischen Erdtheile*. Hannover: Hahn, 1882, 175 (“Den Gedanken zu einer durch Kreuzung des Continents suchte zuerst 1848 der deutsche Leichhardt anzuführen, der jedoch seitdem verschollen ist.”); Siegmund Günther. *Geographie für Bayerische Mittelschulen*. Bamberg: Buchner, 1890, 229-230; (“Erst der Deutsche Ludwig Leichhardt versuchte die Durchkreuzung des Kontinents; allein er erreichte sein Ziel nicht, sondern blieb lange Zeit verschollen.”); and Paul Buchholz. *Charakterbilder aus Australien, Polynesien und den Polarländern*. Leipzig: Heinrichs, 1893, 6-7 (“Den Gedanken einer durch Kreuzung des Kontinents von O. nach W. suchte zuerst der deutsche Leichhardt auszuführen. 1848 brach er auf, um nie wieder zurückzukehren.” [Buchholz’s 1893 comment is almost identical to Wagner’s from 1882.]).

²² Thomas, 126-127.

²³ See Andrew Hurley and Anja Schwarz. “Leichhardts Erbe: Der Australien Forscher im deutsch-australischen Gedächtnis,” *Der Australienforscher Ludwig Leichhardt: Spuren eines Verschollenen*. Heike Hartmann, ed. Berlin: be.bra, 2013, 148-153.

²⁴ I found only two brief references to Leichhardt in textbooks published during the Nazi era: In Heinrich Fischer and Michael Geistbeck. *Erdkunde für Mittelschulen. Vierter Teil: Außereuropa*. München/Berlin: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1943, 96 (“Der deutsche Leichhardt (1841-47) durchforschte den nördlichen Teil des Festlandes. Auf seiner zweiten Reise fand er den Forschertod.”) and, under the category of “Das Deutschtum in Australien”, in Richard Lehmann und Richard Heeschen. *Großdeutschland und die Welt. Klasse 4: Die außereuropäischen Erdteile*. Leipzig/ Berlin: Teubner, 1942, 86-86 (“Auch ein Deutscher, der Brandenburger Ludwig Leichhardt, durchwandert weite Gebiete [Australiens]. Er erforschte den ganzen Nordosten des Erdteils, ging aber in der Wüste zu Grunde.”)

²⁵ In order to trace Leichhardt’s representation in textbooks of different eras in modern German history, I searched GEI Digital (www.gei-digital.de), a full-text database of German teaching materials dating from the 17th century to the end of the National Socialist era, for Ludwig Leichhardt. In addition, I took a random sample of history and geography textbooks that are not listed in the database but physically available at the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research in Braunschweig, Germany. Focusing primarily on books authorized for early secondary education (ca. ages 10-15), in my study on site, I covered about 50 percent of the Nazi-era textbooks and 25 percent of the textbooks from the GDR and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) after WWII as well as from the reunited Germany after 1990. Textbook publishing in the GDR was centralized; all textbooks were published by the *Volk and Wissen* publishing house and used throughout the country (see Lars Knopke. *Schulbücher als Herrschaftssicherungsinstrument der SED*. Wiesbaden: Verlag für

Sozialwissenschaften, 40-41). The education system in the FRG, by contrast, was – and still remains – decentralized, with 16 different states (*Bundesländer*) in charge of textbook authorization. I based my Cold War FRG sample mainly on books authorized for the most populous province of North Rhine Westphalia. For the post-Cold War era, I worked particularly with textbooks authorized for the state of Brandenburg, hoping that it would be the most likely place to find representations of Leichhardt, given that he grew up in the small Brandenburg town of Trebatsch – thus far, without success.

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