

Looking for Leichhardt in Leichhardt

Andrew W. Hurley

I Pioneers Memorial Park

There is something peculiar about wandering around an ex-cemetery on a hot day, looking for a memorial to someone who was not even buried here. Between 1868 and 1912 over ten thousand people were interred at what is today Pioneers Memorial Park in the Sydney suburb of Leichhardt, not that there is much evidence of them now, other than a vaguely disconcerting, funereal air. The gravestones were removed prior to 1922, when the allotment opened to the people of Leichhardt for their recreational enjoyment. It became a massive, largely indiscernible grave, marked only by a small plaque behind the entrance arch, advising:



Photo: Andrew W. Hurley

Ludwig Leichhardt never visited this place when it was operating as a cemetery. He had probably been dead for twenty years when it first opened. But he is here in spirit. Apparently a tree was dedicated to the missing explorer in 1963 to memorialise his sesquicentennial.¹ It is an obvious spot: a site in the municipality of Leichhardt officially dedicated to the commemoration of pioneers. Yet that choice is also filled with irony. The first thing you see after the main entrance is a memorial to the Men of Leichhardt who served in the Great War.



Photo: Andrew W. Hurley

How did they feel about coming from Leichhardt and fighting against Leichhardt’s countrymen, I wonder? The shadow of that war and the next complicated commemoration of the explorer in 1963 when the tree was planted. The wars were living memory, and Alec Chisholm’s 1941 antihagiography of Leichhardt still set the tone.²

In the end I don’t find any obvious “Leichhardt tree,” despite looking at everything that is passably fifty years old. There are memorials everywhere in this palimpsest of a park; trees planted to commemorate the founding of the Labor Party, and the National Day of Action Against Sexual Violence; plaques about sustainable transport; and an obscure slab of sandstone with the words “Tuber”, “Leaf”, “Stain”.



Photo: Andrew W. Hurley

Only one tree looks plausibly memorial, but it is too young. A re-planting perhaps?



Photo: Andrew W. Hurley

The only clearly German thing I find is some new playground equipment adjacent to a treehouse that is off-limits. “Unstable – keep clear”: A fitting title for a Leichhardt tree, but it too seems too young.³ I guess the German equipment is used by today’s children of Leichhardt like Elio and Doan, whose painted tiles decorate the playground.

By far the most prominent thing in the park, though, is the Rotunda erected to mark Australia’s Bicentennial of European settlement. It does not seem to be getting much use at all today, despite the fact that it is a wifi hotspot. Rusty and neglected, it is a strange throwback to the era of bandstands, but with cast iron finials substituted by brutal steel girders. It does not seem to know what it wants to be, other than big. Could the Leichhardt tree have been grubbed out to make way for this construction?



Photo: <http://sydney-city.blogspot.com.au/2012/10/leichhardt-rotunda.html>

In visiting Pioneers Memorial Park, I joined the legion of recent searchers and foot-steppers who have failed to find Leichhardt but had a good time doing it. How much more rewarding the task

when you don't have to restrict yourself to a small park but have a whole continent!⁴ But then to what extent am I somehow repeating in miniature what various other searchers did when they used Leichhardt as an excuse to be out in the Australian interior? Using white absence to “guarantee white male presence,” as one critic puts it.⁵ Obsessing over him and inconclusive relics in a way that deflects or obscures the colonial processes of settlement and Indigenous displacement in which he was entangled.

II Leichhardt Town Hall

I am more successful further down Norton Street at the Leichhardt Town Hall.



Photo: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Leichhardt_Town_Hall_corner.jpg

Here a much smaller piece of metal marks the Bicentennial: It is a bronze bas relief of Leichhardt given by the East German “Peoples’ Friendship League” to the people of Leichhardt in 1988. If, as Lindsay Barrett suggests, Leichhardt has had many lives, then one of them brought him here from the communist state.⁶ Geographically, Leichhardt was an East German inheritance, but memorialisation of him there was patchy and contested. He was tainted since his name had been invoked in the Nazi “Aryanisation” of Slavic place names in his home region, Lusatia during the late 1930s. However, he could also be made to do useful ideological work in the Cold War era, and perhaps even inspire budding young socialists to devote themselves to the betterment of man. Hadn’t Leichhardt done just such a thing through his dedicated scientific questing in Australia? East German Leichhardt sceptics were ultimately outpaced when the German Democratic Republic sought out trade ties and legitimacy via diplomatic relations with the non-Communist world, a fact that saw the establishment of an embassy in Canberra in 1973 and the deployment of Leichhardt as shared East German-Australian heritage. In 1988 – a convenient double anniversary marking the explorer’s 175th as well as Australia’s 200th birthday – the German Democratic Republic seized upon him as a “figure of integration” between East Germany and Australia, as Joachim Elm the then East German ambassador in Australia put it.⁷ The fruits of that initiative were a Leichhardt symposium with Australian participants held in East Germany, a bronze bust of Leichhardt destined for the new Parliament House, and this relief at the Town Hall. Its installation was combined with an exhibition about how Leichhardt was honoured in East Germany, and was supposed to prompt the people of Leichhardt to recognise explorer’s accomplishments and, through him, the German Democratic Republic and its achievements. This deliberate use of history by a State anxious about its international legitimacy is maybe not so far removed from a Bicentennial Rotunda, then? Having finally found Leichhardt, I approach the relief with some trepidation, expecting it to be an example of the “socialist realist” mode of sculpture I have witnessed in various places in the East; something actually to rival the heavyhandedness of the Bicentennial Rotunda. However, it is a surprisingly soft image of Leichhardt; a relief in a different sense of the word. I learned from Elm’s archived files that its sculptor, Trude Salomon, had struggled to render Leichhardt as both “dynamic” yet “human.”⁸ In this process, she succeeded in realizing a Leichhardt who lives on, looking out with curiosity from his place on the wall of a local council chamber, despite the demise of the Peoples Friendship League and the State that brought him here.

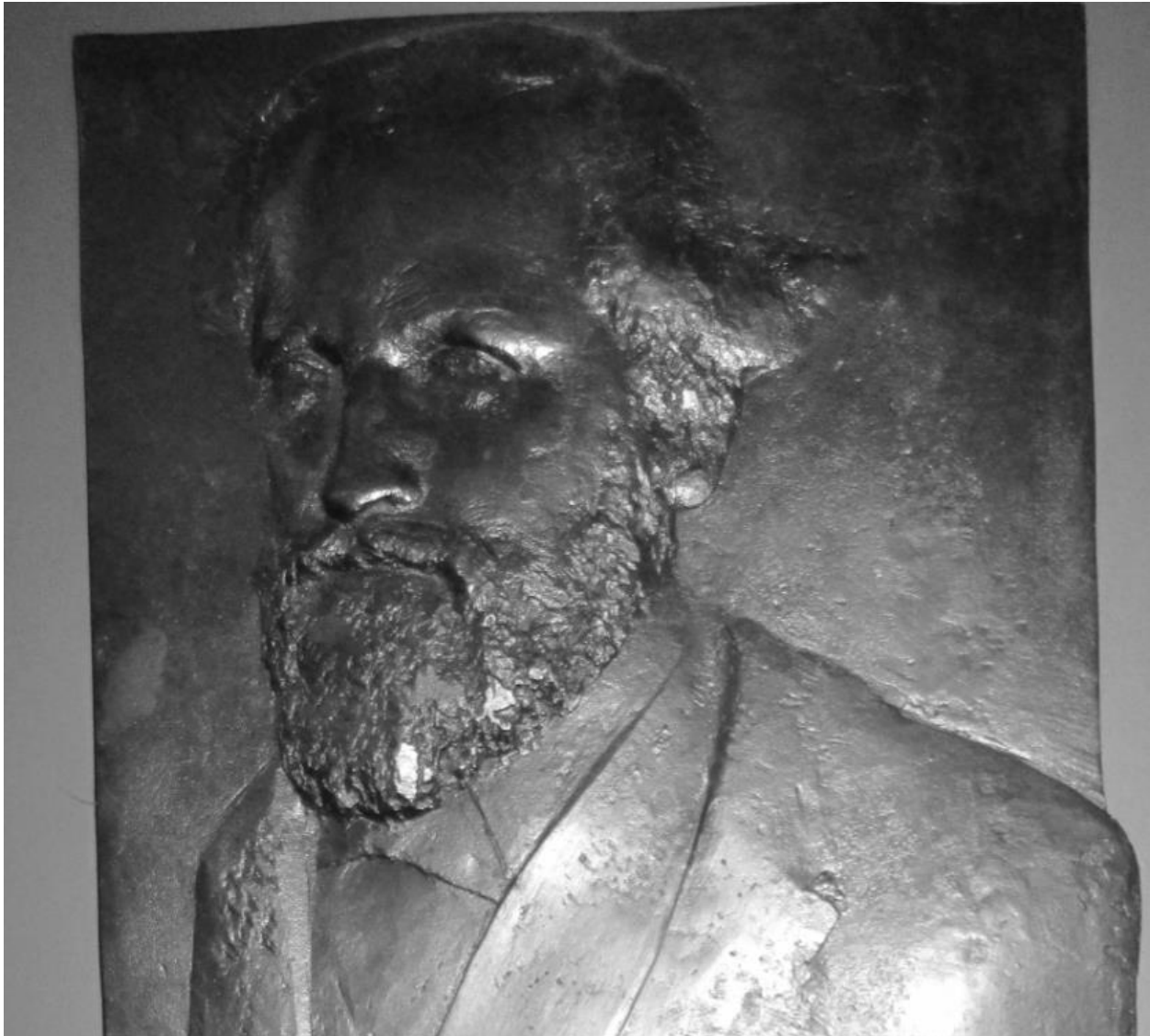


Photo: Andrew W. Hurley

Notes

¹ Arousseau, Marcel. "Sesqui-centenary of the birth of Ludwig Leichhardt." *The Australian Geographer* 9.3 (1964): 176.

² Chisholm, Alec. *Strange New World*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1941.

³ On the slippery nature of so-called Leichhardt trees, see Lewis, Darrell. *Where is Dr Leichhardt?* Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2013.

⁴ On the many searchers and would-be finders, see Lewis *ibid*.

⁵ Martin, Susan. K. "Dead White Male Heroes: Ludwig Leichhardt and Ned Kelly in Australian Fiction." Judith Ryan and Chris Wallace-Crabbe, eds. *Imagining Australia: Literature and Culture in the New New World*, ed. by. Cambridge, Mass and London: Harvard University Press, 2004: 23–52, at 27.

⁶ Barrett, Lindsay. "Die vielen Leben des Ludwig Leichhardt." Heike Hartmann, ed. *Der Australienforscher Ludwig Leichhardt: Spuren eines Verschollenen*. Berlin: be.bra wissenschaft verlag, 2013: 19-37.

⁷ Elm quoted in Laurenz, Konstantin. "Wie Leichhardts Büste nach Canberra kam." *Cottbusser Rundschau*. 3 July 2004.

⁸ Untitled undated typescript, Bundesarchiv Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR, file N 2558/13.

Biographical note:

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