

My Greatest Regret

Glen McLaren

As a former farmer, shearer, bulldozing contractor and professional horsebreaker, mine was scarcely a traditional background for an academic career. I came to university studies when, after realising that rural pursuits generally would not provide sufficient intellectual stimulation for the remainder of my life. I enrolled in 1977 at the age of 29.

In 1989 I was introduced to the explorer Ludwig Leichhardt as a topic of study. On reading his field journal, his daily account of his experiences throughout his gruelling 14.5 month expedition across unknown country between Moreton Bay (now Brisbane) and the settlement at Port Essington, north of the present day city of Darwin, as well as a number of critiques I was enthralled and decided to retrace his route by horseback. Realising this would be a costly exercise I decided to link the project to a broader study and gain a Ph D for my effort.

Leichhardt has been severely criticised on three grounds: as a navigator/cartographer, with claims he missed major rivers and other features on his maps; as a field scientist; and as a bushman. My thesis topic was to generate evidence to evaluate the extravagant claims for and against Leichhardt, to place his achievements in the overall development of bushmanship and field science within Australian exploration, and to rank his achievements against his exploration peers, most of whom were surveyors or surveyors general.

Following extensive map research based on topographic maps and magnified copies of his original maps, I knew with considerable certainty where many of his 302 campsites were located. On setting off from Leichhardt's original starting point at the Darling Downs, Queensland, I was originally beset with doubts over my capacity to manage a team of staff, horses and vehicles, but we soon settled into a routine of finding campsites and taking GPS readings. At the close of each day, generally spent riding through bush and very rough country, we set up camp and cooked dinner before sleeping under the stars alongside a roaring fire, as sometimes we encountered heavy frosts.

Sadly, after travelling 800 km I came to realise that using horses was too slow and we changed to cross country motorbikes, whereby we would drive as close as possible with my Landcruiser ute before unloading the bikes from the trailer and setting off across uncleared and frequently extremely rough and often highly dangerous country, sometimes for 15 to 20 km, in order to reach a campsite and take readings. The creeks, for instance, were frequently

30 feet deep, covered in long grass, rocks and fallen trees, and finding a way to cross them was often extremely difficult.

By the time we reached within 400 km of Leichhardt's destination, north of where they crossed the Roper River, we found the intensely broken basaltic fields covering many kilometres which had confronted and almost stopped Leichhardt. Not surprisingly, here I used helicopters and was thrilled to see the accuracy of my research findings at the point where Leichhardt descended from the intensely broken basaltic country to the coastal plain. This point had long been held to be adjacent to the precipitous Jim Jim Falls, but in fact was further to the west. As the helicopter hovered at the point based on my research I said to the pilot, "There should be a relatively clear and rocky section at the base of the escarpment", and showed him Leichhardt's map. Imagine my jubilation when we observed a bare, rocky section in the correct location. At that point I felt that all my work, effort and expense had been vindicated and justified.

On returning to Perth and summarising my findings I was able to make a number of conclusions regarding Leichhardt's achievements and also the claims made for and against them. This was a pivotal point, for up to that time no-one else had ever gathered comparable field data and consequently the previous level of debate had never risen above opinions and conjecture. Firstly, armed with my navigational and cartographic findings I was able to state definitively that, given his paucity of equipment, Leichhardt's mapping as well as latitudes and longitudes were most acceptable. He did not miss any major features. Secondly, based on contemporary accounts, his journals and my field observations, Leichhardt's bushmanship was unquestionably of the highest order, as he led the expedition the entire distance, selecting the route, finding water and securing campsites, often reconnoitring days in advance of the main party and finding his way back through trackless forest at night. And finally, time has shown that Leichhardt's scientific field achievements were of the highest order. He was unquestionably the most broadly educated and complete field scientist in Australian exploration history. Indeed, he was a true polymath and heir to von Humboldt.¹

Armed with these findings the logical next question to ask was why has Leichhardt been so bitterly and inaccurately criticised. The answers were not hard to find. As a Prussian in a British colony, and also one who had trumped Surveyor General Mitchell in his quest to undertake this expedition, Leichhardt provoked a fierce, race-based response, particularly in Alec Chisholm's monograph written during WW II. Secondly was the matter of "armchair history," as no previous historian had examined Leichhardt's achievements through comparable field studies.

As is well known, Leichhardt's party vanished after setting off in 1848 to cross the continent from Moreton Bay to the Swan River settlement. Over the ensuing 168 (change 5 to 8) years tantalising clues have been found and theories abound as to the reasons for their disappearance but, due to the immensity of inland Australia, the question may never be resolved. My deepest regret is that I will never meet him and accordingly I have attempted to redress the inaccurate and intemperate criticisms of this remarkable man, to more accurately reflect his outstanding achievements in Australian exploration history, field science and the development of bushmanship. In my thesis foreword, therefore, I (delete "have") dedicated the work to "... the memory of Ludwig Leichhardt – bushman, explorer and field scientist – a courageous and innovative man."

Notes

¹Unfortunately, of necessity this is a particularly brief outline of Leichhardt's achievements. For comprehensive details refer to Glen McLaren. *Beyond Leichhardt: Bushcraft and the Exploration of Australia*. South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1996, 179-223.

At the age of 68 and twenty five years after carrying out his Leichhardt field research Glen McLaren is still breaking in horses, still riding horses showjumping (German warmbloods, naturally!), still pondering Leichhardt's achievements and still looking back to the most physically and intellectually exciting time of his life. He lives in hope that the riddle of this most admirable and intriguing man's disappearance will be answered in his lifetime.