

The Truth of Fiction: Leichhardt and Voss

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Patrick White returned to Australia in 1948 aged 35 and soon regretted it. He worried that he had squandered his place among emerging English writers. He complained about “the march of material ugliness” in Australia, “in which the mind is the least of possessions, in which the rich man is the important man” and “muscles prevail.”¹

One hundred years earlier in 1848 Ludwig Leichhardt had disappeared in the Australian interior aged 34. White learnt about him and discovered a kindred spirit. Leichhardt too had complained about the ‘materialism, the devotion to making money which preclude any interest in the needs of the mind’ in Australian society so that “artists and intellectuals have few opportunities. It’s all about brawn.”² Fluent in German from his studies in Europe, White delved into Leichhardt’s original writing. He was inspired by it, as his notebooks acquired by the National Library of Australia in 2006 prove.

Leichhardt’s life story persuaded White of the possibility of cultural renewal in post-war Australia. Leichhardt’s legacy was all around. The latest attempt to solve the mystery of his disappearance was getting underway in 1954 as White began writing *Voss*, the ‘Centralian Resources Expedition’ comprising migrants from Central and Eastern Europe determined to make films, discover precious metals and find Leichhardt’s remains in central Australia.³

In *Voss* White wrote about the seeds of cultural life that Leichhardt had laid in Australia in defiance of anti-intellectualism and he connected this with the transformation of Australian society emerging through mass migration in the 1950s. He reinvented Leichhardt’s biography in an imaginative way to “prove that the Australian novel is not necessarily the dreary dun coloured offspring of journalistic realism.”⁴

White placed Leichhardt’s story in the history of migration to Australia by making his novel about someone who comes to Australia and is destined not to leave the country. This flew in the face of factual writing about Leichhardt which operated on the assumption that Leichhardt planned to return to Prussia after his scientific work was finished, just as the famous Alexander von Humboldt had done after his work in the Americas.

In fact White’s version is accurate. Leichhardt arrived in Australia as an exile. On 1st October 1840 he had failed to report for military service in Prussia and became liable to three years imprisonment there. He was in Italy at the time and managed to obtain English travel documents to keep travelling. A year later he sailed for Australia. Even after October 1847 when King Frederick William IV pardoned him for avoiding military service, Leichhardt did

not plan on returning to Prussia. He wrote disparagingly about Humboldt living out his life in Europe off his earlier journeys of discoveries.

White portrays Voss arriving in Australia with a fully formed mission. "I will cross this continent from one end to the other. I have every intention to know it with my heart."⁵ Here White brought forward the fervid vision that Leichhardt came to pursue in Australia. Again this was in contrast to factual writing, which to this day concentrates on Leichhardt's steady application as a scientist and fails to see that he changed his approach to discovery after his first expedition.

In October 1845 Leichhardt was within weeks of completing that expedition when four of his party's thirteen packhorses drowned in a river in the Top End. As a result the party could not carry the five thousand specimens of plants, woods and rocks that Leichhardt had collected over thirteen months.

This episode was a severe blow to his scientific work. Leichhardt mourned the occasion solemnly. Rather than simply unpacking his specimens and leaving them behind, he took the time to burn all the specimens he could and watched his work vanish into smoke. Gone was any thought of returning to Sydney to spend years classifying and studying his collection.

He now became entirely occupied with a different quest. He determined to cross the Australia from east to west on the longest overland expedition ever attempted anywhere. His letters after 1845 were passionate with this ambition. He forgot about the minutiae of collecting specimens and became convinced that he could solve the riddles of the Australian continent by seeing what lay in its interior. He planned to emerge on the other side of the interior after three years of traveling.

White captured Leichhardt's fervour and accelerated the transition that he underwent from meticulous scientist to obsessive explorer. By the end of the novel, Voss strains to remember "a vaguely scientific mission."⁶

Leichhardt repeatedly wrote about dying in Australia. White picked up this theme in his novel (and unwittingly excited much irrelevant literary criticism about Voss' Freudian death wish). In fact Voss' death in the country is his definitive act in belonging to it. Drawing on a migration framework, White shows that we belong not just where we were born but also where "we live and breathe, and love, and suffer, and die."⁷ The final section of the novel places Voss' story in a local heritage of living and dying and leaving your remains in the country – your bones and your biography. Later generations create culture from these

remains: “He is still there, it is said, in the country and always will be. His legend will be written down, eventually, by those who are troubled by it.”⁸

Patrick White used the Leichhardt story to develop his own artistic mission and to vindicate his own return to Australia. Yet he did not falsify Leichhardt’s story. There is a deep truth to White’s work. With far greater precision than factual biographies, White shows that Leichhardt became obsessed with crossing Australia, the country in which he had chosen to live and die. White also modernised Leichhardt’s story by revealing its relevance to Australia’s history as a country of immigration. White’s version of Leichhardt is fictional but true.

Notes

¹ White, Patrick. *Patrick White Speaks*. Leichhardt: Primavera Press, 1989, 15.

² Arousseau, Marcel. *The Letters of F.W. Ludwig Leichhardt*. Hakluyt Society, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938, 441; 521.

³ Lewis, Darrell. *Where is Dr Leichhardt? The Greatest Mystery in Australian History*. Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2013, 309.

⁴ White. 1989, 15.

⁵ White, Patrick. *Voss*. Mitcham: Penguin, 1963, 33.

⁶ White. 1963, 377.

⁷ White. 1963, 448.

⁸ Ibid,

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