

Leichhardt in the Landscape

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[W]hen I came back to Australia, after long exposure to war and revolution, in the very month when John Howard secured his position as Prime Minister. Some instinct prompted me to embark almost at once on a set of travels across remote parts of regional Australia, and quickly it became clear to me that this was the aspect of the country that answered to my particular cast of mind and to the leanings of my heart. I have tried often to describe this conversion experience: perhaps it stemmed from some half-remembered childhood exposure to the bush landscape, or some need for knowledge of an uncharted world – but I feel sure that much of its impact on me was due to the companions and precursors whom I found my way to in those years: literary precursors, and men and women whose words and silences helped guide me through the landscape [...]

But the guides that led me across the continent in those days were also written ones: this was the time that I made the acquaintance of the great explorers, and their narratives, which, doubtless, I would have despised when my tastes in literature were more avant-garde. It became clear to me, as I read, that there was a distinctive pace and rhythm to their writing: I began to think of their journals as tales dictated by the landscape, given breath by country – and I often designed my reporting life so as to be able to retrace their uncertain steps across the deserts and the scrublands of the north. First among these guides was Ludwig Leichhardt, whose *Journal of an Overland Expedition in Australia* became a key to my understanding of the bush: and I soon found myself forming my own reflections on Leichhardt's experiences, his scientific mission, his romantic, European-accented way of conceiving the landscape, his sense of the sublime.

[I]n those months and years when I was following in the paths of the explorers, I was also beginning to write about Australia, and I found myself ever more struck by the place of the story, the yarn, the constantly renewed and communicated thread of narrative, making its way between people, as if tales were necessary to the land, and gave it life and meaning: and listening to stories helped deepen my awareness of the past's weight, and the vanished presence of those who had been in the empty reaches of the deserts that I was seeing, or the deep fissures of the Stone Country in West Arnhem Land, or the Pilbara's river gorges and silent, abandoned homesteads.

After some while, I plotted out and began writing a novel of modern Australia: it did not go well, for reasons which were doubtless related to the circumstances of my world: but then, what book ever does go well? In time, it became obvious to me, as I wrote, that I had misgivings about the form of the novel, and its capacity to encompass my overarching sense of Australia. Of course, I was well aware of the thriving literary domain around me; of the many novels and stories being written in different styles: novels that were modish, and intelligent, and as brilliantly distinctive and individuated as the fictions being produced in ever greater numbers in other anglophone societies around the world. But the writers who most attracted me in those days were working in another vein: through the convenient membrane of journalism, I was able to spend a little time with the poet Les Murray, and with the polymorphous Eric Rolls, both authors possessed by a strong connection to place: and as I look back now, I wonder whether I was not heartened or even influenced by my close reading of their works - the animal poetry Les Murray wrote in some of his darker times, for instance, or the portrait of the Pilliga Scrub contained in Rolls' "A Million Wild Acres."

At any event, I was able, after prolonged immersion in these and other narratives, and continual travels in regional and metropolitan Australia, to write a book with a closely organized, but not completely fictive structure, devoted to the stories and the love of stories that I had encountered on my way: and that book, "Wings of the Kite-Hawk," now orients me on my further journey towards the various dark horizons that wait for us in life.

At this point, I feel it might be time for me to retreat a little from my recollection of my own experiences – for what author is an omniscient, or even a reliable authority about himself? – and make a quick pass at a slightly higher level over the topography of Australian writing, and try to outline a broader pattern, in which my own tale might form at most an infinitesimal strand.

There is a familiar, consensual chronicle of Australian letters, which spans much of the past two centuries in an elegant, progressivist sweep – and I also see a subtle counter-story, which holds its own set of lessons about the interplay between history and imagination. Sometimes I picture the moving channel of Australian literature bathed by several separate lights, which catch different aspects of its onward flow: you can read the story through the turbulence of politics, or economics, at the level of society or sensibility: you can feel the pressure of outside literary influences, and the shaping experiences that come to act on individuals. It is a story that takes its rise in the first decades of the nineteenth century, when European writers were lifted up by the wild gale of romanticism – and there is a struggle, even

among the early explorers, Leichhardt, of course, and Mitchell, both of them high intellectuals and enthusiasts of the literary sublime, to read the landscape in romantic terms: a struggle that often falls back on itself in disappointed failure. [...]

This brief account paints the path of Australian writing as an upward glide: and it has been a journey towards sophistication, towards self-awareness, towards the formation of a rich and intermeshed and well-funded, almost self-sustaining cultural establishment. Why, then, my hesitation, my slight sense of sadness as I describe this pattern of ascent? Why? I believe there is another Australian writing tradition: one that is original, distinctive, prompted by where we find ourselves – a tradition that is somewhat less noticed and less admired. It is a writing that tends towards the reduplicative and the understated, the mazy and the open-ended. It is the tradition that was first sensed and explored by Leichhardt, whose disappearance seems somehow very like its defiant foundation act. Its works are hybrid, and unreliable, and conform to no obvious canon - and yet they are instantly recognisable: they have a common stamp. I am thinking of books that come from many distinct fields, and were written in various ways, at various times: let me list a few, almost at random, for randomness seems fitting, and suits my purpose: There's "Tourmaline," by Randolph Stow; and Scott Cane's "Pila Nguru" and T.G.H. Strehlow's "Journey to Horseshoe Bend." There's Billy Linklater's "Gather No Moss," there's the biographic "Man from Arltunga," by Dick Kimber, and there's "Catalina Dreaming," a narrative of war-time flying boat service, written by the Darwin-based historian Andrew McMillan [...].

My aim has been to wind through to the place where I now stand, mid-way through a book about the deserts, and the Pilbara, and the memories they hold; mid-way through a smoky, deceptive dry season, when the air of the north is thick with incandescent splinters of bloodwood and stringybark, mid-way through a life of words, words written in a vain bid to cheat oblivion. Often I have thought a writer in the northern landscape, or the ranges of the inland, should seek to learn from the patterns that lie around us: I have dreamed of writing a book with the structure of a eucalypt leaf, or the phyllode of a desert oak; or with the repeating pattern of a migrating bird's journeys.

Often the chain of my ideas leads me back to that dauntless explorer and precursor, Leichhardt, whose first overland expedition brought him across the stone country escarpment, down into the river plains of Kakadu, on his own long march towards the northern outpost of his day, Port Essington. Leichhardt descended to those plains of promise on December 7th 1845, a time of furnace heat and high humidity, and directed his course towards a distant mountain,

across a blacksoil wetland thick with grasses. “We saw many columns of dust raised by whirlwinds,” he writes, “and again mistook them for the smoke of so many fires of the natives. But we soon observed that they moved in a certain direction, and that new columns rose as those already formed drew off” – and when he and the expedition’s remaining members came nearer, and eventually passed between the columns, it seemed to Leichhardt as if the giant spirits of the plain were holding a stately dance around him, although his scientific eye soon saw the bare soil from a late fire that was giving birth to those willy-willys and setting them on their dance across the landscape. And so he advanced, decoding the country and populating it with spirits as he went. I imagine Leichhardt’s last days, in some inland desert, of dunes, and meandering flood-out coolibahs, and I tell myself he would recognise the two aspects of the Australian bush that mean the most to me: its weight, its heavy press of imagined presences and memories; and its light, its blazing, revealing light, which seems to hold the promise of a world beyond the sun. And I picture him advancing towards death, down trackless paths, as we all must, the weight of the future bearing down on him, the light of words ashimmer in his eyes.

The author of this text is a prominent novelist.