

LEICHHARDT 1001

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What does an examination of Ludwig Leichhardt's relations with his fellow expeditioners reveal as to their leader's preferred ways of researching the outback of Australia? Based on his first eventually successful venture, that is, the expedition from Jimbour station in southern Queensland to Port Essington, Cobourg Peninsula, in today's Northern Territory which lasted from 1 October 1844 to 17 December 1845, it would have been quite impossible for him to travel without recruiting a backup support party. He needed members added to his party even if he saw them as an unnecessary hindrance to his ambitions. Basic foods had to be taken to supplement meat gathered by hunting along the track. Working bullocks were needed to carry these supplies and also to provide meat for the party. Party members were required to supervise the bullocks and the horses needed to transport his expeditioners. Men were also required to conduct night watches, to gather firewood and, after the slaughter of a bullock, to lay out the meat for drying.

The men chosen by Leichhardt were volunteers with no particular talents for the task ahead, a possible exception being the lad, John Murphy, whose artistic skills were used to sketch the features of the country through which the party travelled. Leichhardt first met Murphy when the lad was only twelve years of age, on board the ship *Sir Edward Paget* whilst he and John's family were en route to Australia. Other members were James Snowden Calvert (19 years), also met on the voyage out and later at a Hunter Valley property. John Roper, then in his early twenties, was another recruit from the Hunter Valley, although he was too young to have acquired many useful qualifications. The only convict added to the party was William Phillips, who was most anxious to join as he saw involvement as a sure way of gaining an early conditional pardon.

Two Aboriginal men were recruited; Harry Brown, from the Hunter River, and Charley Fisher, added whilst the party was at Moreton Bay. Charley was described as an experienced tracker who had once been a police constable. Both were said to have spoken good English and were recruited for their presumed experience with the Australian outback, although neither had prior knowledge of the country actually traversed.

At Moreton Bay Leichhardt reluctantly yielded to the pleas of John Gilbert, an experienced naturalist and ornithologist under directions from the eminent bird-man John Gould, to be allowed to join. Gilbert saw this as an excellent opportunity for collecting bird

specimens in the interior, as indeed it was, but he was speared to death in a native attack on the party on 28 June 1845.

The final members of the party – Christopher Pemberton Hodgson and his African-American servant Caleb – were added when in the Darling Downs but both men left after only one month when the difficulties facing the party became increasingly evident.

It is evident, from the surviving records of the party including those of Leichhardt, that there was a blanket loss of respect between the expeditioners and their leader, and Leichhardt's criticism of his first party (with the exception of James Calvert), needs an explanation. The first reason was, without doubt, the strain placed on all members by the overlong and exhausting journey. Leichhardt had estimated that the time in the field would be five to six months, yet the party took nearly a year and a quarter to reach their goal.

The second reason was the nature of the leader himself. There seems little doubt that Ludwig possessed a mind capable of making him outstanding in whatever intellectual pursuit he chose to follow. While still a student in Europe he set himself a goal – to dedicate his life to scientific research – and in this he pressed on with the singlemindedness of a zealot. Before leaving London he declared his target to be Australia: 'The interior, the heart of this dark continent, is my goal, and I will never relinquish the quest for it...'. He was never to waver from this ambitious aim. As he was to say in relation to criticism, 'it is rather hard to blame a man, whose whole soul is wrapped up in his expedition'.

This inflexible drive explains many of Leichhardt's attitudes. He was indifferent to personal discomforts, and indeed hardships, so long as his plans progressed. This concentrated behaviour led others to label him as eccentric. Similarly, he tended to ignore the complaints of his companions as his mind was elsewhere. His overwhelming priority was to achieve his 'Grand Design' of making major discoveries in the Australian hinterland – especially in botany, geology and geography – and to the extent that he felt that his companions were impeding these goals, so were they adversely judged.

In addition to this drive, Ludwig Leichhardt had another characteristic; he undoubtedly preferred to work alone. He never found a companion who shared his visions. There is little doubt that he would have been happy to have pressed onwards over the horizon of the Australian wilderness alone but this was impracticable and so he was doomed to endure the daily frustrations of leadership and, like other leaders of superior intellect and out of step with his followers, he too was destined to have his reputation denigrated by lesser men.

These characteristics were evident in both his first and second expeditions and may well explain in part the ultimate disappearance of his third expedition of 1848. Driven on by

restless ambition, Leichhardt led his men into the waterless country west of Mount Abundance and beyond the point of a safe return. Just where the ultimate disaster struck the expedition will perhaps never be discovered.

Dan Sprod was born in Adelaide in 1924 and after service in the Royal Australian Navy (1942–1946), he studied at the University of Adelaide before joining the National Library of Australia in Canberra. In 1966 he was appointed as University Librarian at the University of Tasmania and worked in that role until he retired in 1975, to devote his time to writing and publishing. His early interest was the history of nineteenth-century Australian land exploration, and his Blubber Head Press published a number of studies in that field based on the journals of the explorers and members of their parties. His own work on Ludwig Leichhardt resulted in two publications: *Proud Intrepid Heart: Leichhardt's first attempt to the Swan River 1846–1847* (1990) and *Leichhardt's Expeditioners: in the Australian Wilderness 1844–1845* (2006).