

Colin Roderick / Ludwig Leichhardt the Dauntless explorer – Two encounters in 1988

Gerhard Stilz

Five minutes before my phone call, I hesitate. Should I actually approach the notoriously offhand and quirky Leichhardt biographer? I've been warned after all. But I am already here now. Following a tedious city tour, a deserted pedestrian zone, an unimaginative museum, and a meagre dinner with a special voucher for a jug of beer, the meeting with Roderick is quickly set up. "You here? Good on you. Yes of course. Pick you up tomorrow morning, 9.30."

My host is right on the dot to pick me up. Well into his seventies, wearing polished brown Sunday shoes and white knee-length socks, khaki shorts, a pale shirt with unbuttoned collar and – a pith helmet. As leisurely as a policeman, he enters the motel's courtyard and discovers me. An expedition to Castle Rock is in the offing – his firm decision. The ascent of the two-hundred-meter-high panoramic rock in the heart of Townsville promises an outstanding view over North Queensland. I want to pack my small binoculars, but Roderick, an ex-serviceman, reaches into his picnic basket and forces on me a pair of heavy gray-green military binoculars. He himself has an even bigger telescope on a leather strap, presumably even more powerful. On our ascent of the rock he tells me about his heroic feats during the war, and about his character. He likes the Germans for their intellectual and military virtues, but concedes that Leichhardt refused Prussian military conscription, absconding instead to Australia to undertake his research.

A panoramic view. Roderick tells me where I should aim my camera, far out to Magnetic Island as well as inland towards James Cook University, beyond which a hundred and forty years ago – can't you still imagine the caravan of oxen, sheep, goats and mules, accompanied by some half a dozen men on horseback - Ludwig Leichhardt departed through bush and outback and eventually disappeared without a trace. I follow my guide and take the right photos at the right places.

After that, Roderick ('Call me Colin') invites me over to his house. His villa, a spacious, breezy Queenslander stilt house with a veranda, situated in a garden full of citrus trees, provides a shady setting and turns the "late morning tea" into a cultivated late-colonial amusement. But before we commence, a test: Could I read some handwriting? Slanted, cursive *Kurrent*-style script, here and there in Latin, with occasional outbursts of the old-fashioned *Suetterlin* script. "No problem, my father's handwriting was worse," I lie. A glow flickers over Colin's face:

“There are not many in this country who can do it, they don’t care for languages, they don’t learn these scripts.” – A great save: “Where did you learn it?” – “The Military. Had to guard a prisoner of war. He taught me. Know your enemy,” he winks at me. “But Leichhardt ...,” I cut in. “Oh, Leichhardt was a great man, an Idealist – a German, don’t forget – but he was one of us. Poor man. Those British colonial buggers should have supported him. Shame we lost him out there.”

“Meet Margaret” – his wife has prepared Yorkshire pudding and a special fruit loaf. Colin shows me an advance copy of his new book, the first competent biography of the German explorer, he emphasizes. Because he is the only Australian author who has thus far written about Leichhardt who speaks German and can read the old German script. 525 pages – “Hard work, but good stuff.” Time flies by in reminiscing about Roderick’s research travels, Ludwig Leichhardt’s expeditions, and all the good souls and hardworking colleagues, whom the biographical subject left behind in Europe, and the biographer met on his travels through Germany. Suddenly, all the confrontations the dauntless explorer Leichhardt had with Australian authorities, politicians, tradesmen, and expedition members, blend in with the strident biographer’s academic skirmishes, fought against adversaries on two continents. Leichhardt: the Humboldt in the uncharted nature of the Australian cosmos – and Roderick: the Leichhardt in the “cultural deserts” of Australia’s past and present.

In the afternoon I have to go back to Brisbane. Roderick takes me to the airport so early that I can get a seat next to a window. For him it’s imperative to introduce me to the highest-ranking officer in the flight crew. Roderick counsels him at length on the side I should be seated so as to see the latest important water reservoir in Australia, which has submerged any scattered traces of the German explorer still existing in the Burdekin River valley. The kind flight steward points out that the Burdekin dam cannot actually be seen from this flight, but Colin insists and he personally assigns me the right seat. He also gives me a big hat-box which is filled with a shredded manuscript version of the biography amongst which are nestled the most exquisite North Queensland fruits. Fruits I still love to this day – avocados, sweet lemons, oranges, bananas and a passionfruit. But on my flight to Brisbane, I am most definitely sitting on the wrong side. In any case – just as the steward had predicted – the reservoir is nowhere to be seen. In reality, the flight passes over the sea giving a view of the Great Barrier Reef with its shaded white crescents of coral reef in turquoise green and cerulean water. Then it continues toward the coast: floodplains with cane fields and pastures. Wildly meandering rivers form deltas that spread into backwaters and drained billabongs, bordered by mangrove thickets. The main

waterways carry murky muddy stormwater and carry the slurry miles out into the sea. There the suspended soil blends with the deep blue of the warm Pacific which takes it in its embrace.

Leichhardt, however, still rests obnoxiously, secretively and persistently on the other side of the Great Dividing Range. Where – nobody knows. His unfathomable bequest is the search for the Unknown.

Meanwhile, from my side of the airplane, I see the practicalities: the airfield at Bowen, the harbour piers at Mackay, built for shipping out sugar, rice and copper ore; even Cape Townshend, swampland compartmentalized by inlets, covered with Australian bush and jungle, and reserved for the military. Gradually clouds appear and my view comes to an end. I can momentarily forget about Colin Roderick’s Burdekin dam. But his Leichhardt – he remains at my side.

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