

Social and political aspects in Leichhardt's European travel journal

Rolf Striegler

As a preparatory step for his planned research in Australia, Ludwig Leichhardt embarked on a journey through the south of France, Italy and Switzerland with his friend William Nicholson, in order to get acquainted with the scientific circumstances, and primarily to put into practice the knowledge he had acquired in London and Paris. The journey lasted almost nine months, from September 16, 1840 to June 12 or 13, 1841. I have transcribed the 394-page-long travel journal, and have so far published the parts from southern France and Naples¹.

Although Leichhardt mainly focused on geological and biological observation, which was especially pronounced in Auvergne and Naples, he also always showed an interest in the social conditions of the lower and middle classes in the countries he visited and expressed his thoughts about them.

He visited for example hospitals in Marseille and Naples, on the one hand to improve his medical knowledge, but on the other hand also because he sympathized with the situation of the poorer section of the population. In Naples, he visited the poorhouse (Alberga dei poveri) and the clinic for the incurably ill (Ospedale degli incurabili) and surveyed the quality of treatment and medical care of their 5500 and 2000 patients, respectively, finding both institutions to be excellent.

Especially in Naples, Leichhardt got better acquainted with Italian family life in this case that of his landlady, Signora Antonelli, with whom the two friends stayed for nearly three months. He described how the family celebrated Christmas, and he witnessed fireworks being set off in the streets to celebrate the new year. He disapproved of the noise which firecrackers made, because "every wretched mentally ill person living in the neighborhood was going to suffer terribly at the sound of these shots."

For most of the population in Naples and Rome, daily life took place on the streets. Here they manufactured, transported, and sold goods, panhandled, but also pursued pleasures, such as listening to storytellers, watching Pulcinello entertainers and listening to musicians. Leichhardt wrote time and again about public events such as these, which were marred only by the fact that he, as a foreigner, was looked upon as a man of fortune, and was supposed to donate accordingly.

In Naples, Leichhardt went to a public lottery which took place every Saturday. He felt sorry for the people, particularly those from the lowest class, who were ready to sacrifice their wages and belongings in the hope of winning, and despite losing were willing to repeat it all the following week. He criticized the authorities for allowing these “unequal unjust charges,” whose “moral impact was ruinous,” but which annually generated one million Ducats for the state.

Likewise, Leichhardt mused over what happened when people turned to crime to better their living conditions, and who ended up in prison. In Livorno, he saw enchained convicts performing manual public works. In Naples, he lived next to the prison, and in Rome he happened upon another prison across from the ruins of The Baths of Diocletian, and this started to occupy his thoughts deeply. Undoubtedly, he reasoned, criminal acts had to be punished in order to safeguard adherence to the laws, to compensate the victims and to pre-empt illicit behavior, . But Leichhardt rejected excessive cruelty in punishment. He could not accept the attitude which offered “by means of the confessional a quick and complete absolution even for cruel delinquencies,” and he became increasingly critical of the Catholic Church.

But he pondered how prisoners could be restored to a normal life again. For this reason, he thought “industrious work during the week” was important in prison, as well as lodging prisoners at weekends in “the company of honorable men ... so that they could get acquainted with the happiness and blessing of those who in silent diligence find their peace and contentment.” Felons living together was “one of the greatest faults of prisons.” After they had served their sentence, felons should be rehabilitated “into society as honorably as possible.”

Deportation to a colony seemed to Leichhardt “a splendid blessing under the proviso that the education ... of prisoners was handled with utmost care.” He believed, however, that the system operating in Sydney was wrong. He himself thought it conceivable to leave his scientific ambition aside, and as a citizen of an independent state, to cultivate the untouched wilderness in Australia, and in doing so, attain a new homeland.

Leichhardt came into contact with political questions primarily in Rome, where he and his travel companion Nicholson read English and German newspapers every evening in a café. Besides a couple of scientific discoveries, he mentioned in his journal among other things the assembly of the Prussian territorial estates or diets, and the establishment of a second settlement by the New Zealand Company (In general, he contemplated in his diaries the efficacy of the formation of

colonies). He noted the size of the British army in 1841-42 with its 203,593 soldiers, which generated costs of £ 7.191.281. He also found the forthcoming election in Ireland of interest, where in line with Lord Morpeth's Registration Bill, the elective franchise was linked to free or leased property; and that only one in 77 persons could vote, while this proportion was 1:30 in Scotland and 1:18 in England.

Most of all, however, Leichhardt was interested in the struggles of the Ottoman commander in Egypt, Muhammad Ali, who, in his attempt to ensure Egyptian independence from the Sublime Porte in Constantinople, had begun to modernize Egypt after the European model. On November 22, 1840, Leichhardt mentioned in his journal that the Syrian stronghold St. Jean d' Acre, which was annexed to Egypt in 1832, was lost again in a battle against the English-Turkish fleet. On February 15, 1841, Leichhardt even dedicated more than four pages of his journal to the "affairs of the Orient." He noted that in order to enforce the independence of Egypt, Ibrahim Pasha had on behalf of his stepfather, Muhammad Ali Pasha, conquered Crete, Syria and parts of the Arabian Peninsula. After alternating interventions by the great powers, Russia, England, Prussia and Austria (vividly described by Jantzen),² Muhammad Ali lost all territories again. France, which had assured Pasha of its support, felt primarily disparaged by England, which in turn fueled nationalist ideas back in France. Prime Minister Thiers mobilized and even wanted to fortify Paris, in order to prevent another humiliation like the one in 1814-15 when the Anti-Napoleonic Coalition seized Paris . Leichhardt also kept an eye on the German territories west of the Rhine. He gathered from the press a sense that a European, if not a world war loomed as a possibility.

¹ Rolf Striegler, ed. *Ludwig Leichhardts Tagebuch von seiner Reise durch Süd-Frankreich 1840*. Cottbus: Naturwissenschaftlicher Verein der Niederlausitz, 2008. Print. Booklet with 76 pages , Rolf Striegler, ed. *Ludwig Leichhardts Tagebuch von seiner Reise nach Neapel 1840/41*. Cottbus: Naturwissenschaftlicher Verein der Niederlausitz, 2013. Print. Booklet with 212 pages

² Jantzen, Günther. "Mehemed Ali, der Erneuerer Ägyptens." In: Hermann Ludwig Henrich von. Pückler-Muskau. *Aus Mehemed Alis Reich: Ägypten und der Sudan um 1840*. 3. Auflage. Zürich: Manesse, 1994. 701-46. Print.

* The passages marked with quotation marks are taken from Leichhardt's travel journal.