

Albert Calvert: An impostor to Leichhardt's Legacy

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We use Ludwig Leichhardt as a prism to explore Australian history, but in the person of Albert Frederick Calvert we have an avaricious mirror - an impostor to Leichhardt's legacy.

Calvert was born in London in 1872. His father and grandfather had both become wealthy exploiting gold in Western Australia. As a young man Albert went on several prospecting journeys through the outskirts of European settlement in Australia, and wrote prolifically, including a comprehensive history of the exploration of the continent – in bombastic Victorian style, with many digressions and intrusions by the author.



*Fig 1. Albert Frederick Calvert ('Men of the Day. No. 635.')*¹

In London society, he was celebrated as “Westralia's golden prophet”. He spoke at grand events promoting investment in mining and prospecting companies – taking a commission. He campaigned for the better treatment of Aborigines, in the same breath as relating thrilling tales of encounters with savages.

Calvert wanted to put his own name on the map. Starting in 1896, he organised and personally funded – in the shadow of Leichhardt – an expedition to complete the exploration of Australia. He was then 24.

As he expounded in his books, in 1896 there were only a few blank spaces left on the map, in the interior of Western Australia. His proposed route cut over 1000 miles from Lake Way to the Fitzroy River.

The expedition had several goals: A scientific survey of this unknown interior; finding a stock route between the goldfields in the west and the fertile land in the north - in the gold-boom 1890s, Western Australia's population was doubling every two years. Infrastructure and food supply could barely keep up - and finally, to find any trace of Leichhardt's expedition, vanished somewhere in the Northwest nearly fifty years previously.

Calvert entrusted the details to the South Australian Geographic Society, instructing that no expense be spared outfitting the expedition, and every lesson from previous explorers be applied. Lawrence Wells was appointed to lead the expedition. An experienced and respected bushman, Wells had been part of the troubled Elder expedition in 1891. Other members were Charles Wells - cousin to Lawrence - the naturalist Keartland, Jones, a young geologist – only 19, and Bejah Dervish, an Afghan cameleer.

The expedition began in May 1896 and proceeded smoothly for four months. Wells described the terrain as "500 dreary miles of wilderness, with its burning sands, scanty shade and precarious water". Wells was respectful and generous towards the few Aboriginals encountered, and had some understanding of the languages and customs. With a set course and ample supplies, there was little need for guides, and interactions were brief.

The camels discovered three new species of poisonous plant, Keartland spotted the elusive Princess Alexandra parrot, and Jones sampled likely spots for gold mining.

Then things started to go wrong.

At the final stretch of the journey, Lawrence Wells split the group, to map a broader path. Charles Wells and Jones departed with the two best camels, and ample supplies. The two parties were to meet at the Fitzroy River.

Lawrence Wells and the main party set off northwards. What they found was a savagely inhospitable wasteland. For weeks on end, they stumbled over steep sandhills. They found no shade, no water, and no feed for the camels. Travel was only possible at night. All the explorers suffered terribly, and the camels were dying one by one.

Wells ordered that all belongings not absolutely vital be abandoned, to lighten the load on the exhausted camels. This included nearly all the scientific samples.

On the point of death, they staggered out of the desert and onto the abruptly green and fecund banks of the Fitzroy River. White settlement, and the telegraph, were not far away. Charles Wells and Jones never arrived.

Even if the two had found water and camped, they could not possibly survive for long. Lawrence Wells acted without delay.

In the middle of summer, regardless of his own exhaustion and ill-health, Wells

plunged back into the desert to search for his companions. In tow were a nearby policeman and native trackers, and the faithful cameleer Bejah.

The search party raced around the desert, desperately searching for clues. Under the influence of the policemen, the local aboriginals came to be treated with a utilitarian brutality. Where bribes could not extract information and guidance, the trooper quickly turned to steel shackles, beatings and starvation. A mother had her infant seized and threatened.

In his journal, Wells regrets these cruelties, but never doubts their necessity.

The desert had a dense political geography. Many tribes lived in the area, and somewhere around were a gang that had stolen guns and turned to banditry and murder. Even under violent coercion, guides would not go far outside their tribe's territory.



Fig 2. Body of explorer Charles Frederick Wells²

After five separate search expeditions over six months, a scrap of tweed at an aboriginal camp led the explorers to the remains their fellows propped up under a shadeless tree, mummified by months in the sun.

Calvert had hoped to find traces of Leichhardt's party, not emulate it. Instead, the unexpected cost of the search expeditions left him financially ruined. He was forced to beg the Western and South Australian governments to cover the expense. Disgrace compounded

disaster, and he was pilloried in the press. His public reputation collapsed under the weight of his self-promotion. Wells was charged with negligence, but upon examination of events, commended.

Calvert's career never recovered in Australia or England. Gambling debts and a dislike of Federation soon drove him abroad. He moved to Spain, where he wrote 36 books on history, art and travel, earning him a knighthood but no reliable income. In the 1920s he was accused of swindling an exiled Russian duchess out of her jewels in a failed get-rich-quick scheme.

While Calvert had genuine ambitions of scientific exploration, his ulterior spirit of adventurism and deliberate appropriation of the legacy of earlier explorers shines a different light to Leichhardt, even if the symmetry of disaster casts the same shadow.

Albert Calvert died in very modest circumstances in London 1946.

Notes

¹ Fig 1. Albert Frederick Calvert ('Men of the Day. No. 635.'). <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw258519/Albert-Frederick-Calvert-Men-of-the-Day-No-635> Accessed 03.02.2017.

² Fig 2. Body of explorer Charles Frederick Wells. <http://collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/resource/B+61234> Accessed 03.02.2017.

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