

‘Being Careful in this Country’: Leichhardt’s social anxieties

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In 1842-44, his first years in Australia, Ludwig Leichhardt was not a celebrity. He was not yet the lost explorer who miraculously returned, nor yet the enigma who vanished forever in 1848. He was simply a young man of science, an observant outsider in a raw colonial society: sensitive, immensely diligent, prone to rapture, obsession and anxiety in successive moods. Without social standing or position, he was a marginal figure beset with doubts and insecurities that he vented in his personal diaries.

In the diaries (edited for the first time and published by the Queensland Museum in 2013) we hear Leichhardt's internal voice: the warm eloquence of a boundlessly curious and intensely alive young man. They capture his acute perception, not just of rocks and trees, ecology and botany, but also his subjective responses to the human landscape around him.

He felt alienated in the grand homes of Sydney's colonial elite, but experienced remarkable hospitality in the rough bush huts of the shepherds and drovers as his travels began. “So far I have moved from house to house and from hut to hut and everywhere I have been received, not only kindly, but even lovingly,” he wrote in the last days of 1842. But he was no garrulous egalitarian, knocking about easily with the rough denizens of the bush. He kept a gentlemanly distance, holding his social experiences up to the light of his inquiring intelligence just as he might scrutinise a beetle or a leaf.

By the time he arrived at David Archer's run Durundur, inland from Moreton Bay, Leichhardt had formed definite anxieties about the character of Australian settler society. The evident tensions between ‘exclusives’ and ‘emancipists’ – between the freeborn settlers and the former convicts – seemed to threaten social harmony. He was disheartened by the selfish pragmatism he encountered constantly, and the absence of women and their civilising “feminine graces” was disconcerting. In a letter home he fretted about the transitory and opportunistic character of the overwhelmingly male population. He understood that the men he had met with - adventurers, reprobates, former convicts and the like – “came here to make their fortunes and for nothing else.” The virtues of domesticity, respectability and civil society were inevitably hard to find.

In this Leichhardt agreed with David Archer, an upright Scot, who asked “what moral benefit the colony gained from the young men bringing capital, who came here, set up stations . . . with the intention of making a lot of money and then returning to England.” Both men regretted the moral implications of a society on these lines:

They employ a large number of unmarried men, live dissolutely and thoughtlessly when they come to town and to the pub, think little of religion or make fun of it and leave no trace of their existence, as soon as they leave this country.

“How different it would be,” Leichhardt added, “if active hard-working families had settled here, like for example the missionaries at Brisbane!”

This may seem simple prudery, a naive longing for respectability that was hopelessly incongruent with colonial realities. But the diaries show us how things were more complex than that, especially when the latent tensions of this raw colonial society flared up.

All these anxieties - the perils of dissipation, the feckless lack of deference, nascent class tensions - were wrapped into a single pregnant encounter on the headwaters of the Gwydir River in May 1843. En route to Brisbane Town, Leichhardt had fallen in with Thomas Lodge Murray-Prior, an exuberant scion of an Anglo-Irish military family. Aged only twenty-two, Murray-Prior was superintending a station on Rocky Creek where the young German lodged while examining the country around.

One day, returning to the station hut just before lunch, Leichhardt chatted with a middle-aged man reading in an armchair. The stranger, named Waterford, occupied Byron Plains nearby. When the cocky Murray-Prior arrived, Waterford “rose to shake hands with him, but Prior rebuffed him so coldly that the man quietly sat down again.”

Shortly afterwards the hut-keeper served the midday meal, and immediately, as Leichhardt recorded it, Murray-Prior stood up and left the little shack, “and as I followed him, he said to me that Waterford was a convict, who seduced a girl, whom a friend expressly placed under his protection.” He declined luncheon in such company. When the ‘emancipist’ came out of the hut, the ‘exclusive’ addressed him abruptly: “Mr Waterford, I regret I cannot be more hospitable towards you, but your midday meal is served in the hut.” When the ex-convict indignantly demanded an explanation, Murray-Prior answered curtly, “I think I am not of equal rank with you.” Leichhardt recorded the response: “With a ‘thank you’ Waterford went back into the hut and as we came back from the garden, he had saddled his horse and ridden away, without touching his meal.”

This snub was far beyond a refused handshake. As news of the incident spread, some vowed “that they would bolt the door on Prior and set a dog on him.” Waterford put it out that “he had never been so insulted [as] by this young fob and that he would have revenge on him. Should he not be able to, his son would do it.” Honour was important, for ex-convicts as much as for “young fobs”.

The incident brought Leichhardt’s underlying anxieties to the surface. He understood the gentlemanly code that Murray-Prior upheld, but regretted his friend had not been more

circumspect in the circumstances of frontier life. “I agree with Prior,” he wrote in his diary, “to make a scoundrel feel his contempt, not for his atoned life, but for his unatoned. Many thought, however, that he could have done this much better and finer, because common sense just dictates being careful in this country and not to know the errors and crimes of its inhabitants.” The language of atonement hints at the workings of Leichhardt’s moral compass, but it is clear he was learning the social intricacies of Australian bush life exactly as he was making sense of the bush itself.

Sources

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