

Singing Leichhardt

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Leichhardt followed a dream, a dream of reaching into the wilderness. It was an imperial dream common to many men at the time; men who wanted to put to the test their masculinity on the colonial frontier.¹ It was a sexualised dream, of penetrating virgin territory to fill up the blanks on the map with the pink ink of the virgin deflowered². For Leichhardt it was also a dream of following his admired *Vorbild* Alexander von Humboldt, to journey through nature and read it as a web of interconnection.³ And lastly, it was a personal journey to overcome his inner demons, his tendency to melancholia, or depression, as we would now call it: “Since the last year a strange transformation has taken over my spirit. I suffered from overwhelming attacks of melancholia. That is why I need the excitement, that big ventures like this carry with them, to free me of this pain.”⁴

Yet Leichhardt’s diary entries from his first journey buzz with self-congratulatory pride and exuberance, glowing under the gaze of his generous sponsors. Propelled by the endorphins of colonial conquest, he and his companions penetrate the unchartered territory they plan to tame, claim and make known. In Leichhardt’s own words:

Many a man’s heart would have thrilled like our own, had he seen us winding our way round the first rise beyond the station, with a full chorus of “God Save the Queen,” which has inspired many a British soldier, — aye, and many a Prussian too — with courage in the time of danger.⁵

The most devastating event of the expedition is Gilbert’s death as a result of an indigenous attack on the camp. And from this point onwards, there is a discernable change in the way Leichhardt approaches the indigenous people he meets. Perhaps initially out of fear, and later because he sees benefits, he takes up giving gifts, albeit of, to him, worthless objects, like the metal nose rings of the slaughtered oxen. As I read it, the giving of this particular gift is a moment of profound irony. Leichhardt, in his attempt at diplomacy, gives away a nose ring made of iron, the material form of industrialisation and modernity, the nose ring of an ox, the type of animal for whom the colonial frontier is being scoured for potential pastures, the very reason the expedition is taking place. The result would be massive dispossession, genocide, and a still unresolved history.

Further adding to the irony is the fact that Leichhardt uses the process of gift exchange of oxen nose-rings to find out about traditional food sources and tools: in trading the object that foreshadows the ruin of traditional indigenous life, he makes his first meaningful connections with indigenous society. And yet, with his increasing knowledge and connection

to Indigenous Australians, and true to his beloved Humboldtian worldview, he begins to see indigenous society as an integral part of a greater natural system that clearly functions very well.⁶ Leichhardt can no longer safely hold on to the confidence of his European colonial superiority and the mirror reverse of Aboriginal savagery. This is the beginning of a contradiction that is never resolved for Leichhardt, and remains a source of irritation, perhaps part of the motivation for his compulsion to return the Australian bush, where he will ultimately remain.

After Gilbert's death, and well towards the end of the journey, Leichhardt begins referring to the indigenous people he meets as "our black friends", and eventually even calling them by name.⁷ He writes about Apirk, "a young and slender, but an intelligent and most active man", or Nyuall, who impresses him so much that he names a lagoon after him, the only Aboriginal naming of place after Charley's Creek.⁸ Then there is Imaru, with whom he shares a blanket.⁹ He speaks of these men with genuine fondness, tenderness and interest giving insights into character traits and his impression of their physicality: "Whilst we were waiting for our bullock, which had returned to the running brook, a fine native stepped out of the forest with the ease and grace of an Apollo, with a smiling countenance, and with the confidence of a man to whom the white face was perfectly familiar."¹⁰

I would like to finish these brief reflections with my favourite moment of Leichhardt's *Journal*. The entire company, minus only one of its members, Gilbert, arrives at the final stage of their journey. I imagine their sorry state: emaciated, sunburnt, dressed in rags that hardly cover their bodies, buoyed by the tantalising closeness of civilisation evidenced in the increasingly large stock of English words in the vocabularies of their local guides. They are close to their goal but also close to collapse, a process we have followed viscerally by reading the oxen's slaughtered bodies as texts, as metaphors of decay and exhaustion throughout the journey, the oxen's syntax being the taste of their flesh, the brittleness of bones and the consistency or absence of bone marrow. Bedraggled now and close to disintegration, they come across White Bill, their last indigenous guide. He takes pity on the expedition party: "Percieving our state of exhaustion and depression in which we were, they tried to cheer us with their corbori, songs which they accompanied on the Eboro, a long tube of bamboo, by means which they variously modulated their voices."¹¹

In reading this quote I can't help but return to the opening scenes of the *Journal*, with its depiction of the forward march into the unknown accompanied by an impassioned "God Save the Queen". By holding these opening and closing scenes in juxtaposition I am moved by the tenderness of the latter, the compassion and thoughtfulness of the gift of song which I believe

Leichhardt, by the end of his journey, knew how to receive. And yet this reflection is bittersweet, knowing that the knowledge gained during the expedition would ultimately be used for colonial expansion, and the dispossession of land of the very people who were singing Leichhardt back home.

Notes

¹ Tosh, J. "Imperial Masculinity and the Flight from Domesticity in Britain 1880-1914." T. Foley, L. Pilkington, S. Ryder & E. Tilley, eds. *Gender and Colonialism*. Galway: Galway University Press, 1995. 72-86.

² McClintock explains the colonial act of discovery in the sexualised form of penetration and naming as baptismal scenes and male birthing rituals, in order to justify and assert power and ownership over the land. McClintock, A.J. *Imperial Leather*. New York, London: Routledge, 1995, 29.

³ Nicolson, Malcolm. "Alexander von Humboldt, Humboldtian science, and the origins of the study of vegetation." *History of Science* 25:2 (1987): 167.

⁴ "Seit dem letzten Jahr kahn ein seltsamer Wechsel über meinen? Geist. Ich lit an starken Anfällen von Melancholie. Darum brauche ich wohl die Aufregung, die die Große Unternehmung begleitet, um mich dieser zu befreien." Braumann, F. *Die erste Durchquerung Australiens: von Brisbane zum Northern Territory 1844-1846, Ludwig Leichhardt*. Wiesbaden: Edition Erdmann, 2012, page number?

⁵ Leichhardt, Ludwig. "1 October 1844." *Journal of an overland expedition in Australia*. 1846. The University of Adelaide. Accessed 23 October 2013.

<<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/l/leichhardt/ludwig/152j/appendix.html>>

⁶ Nicolson. *ibid.* Page number?

⁷ Leichhardt. "28 November 1845." *ibid.*

⁸ Leichhardt. "6 December 1845." *ibid.*

⁹ Leichhardt. "10 December 1845." *ibid.*

¹⁰ Leichhardt. "2 December 1845." *ibid.*

¹¹ Leichhardt. "14 December 1845." *ibid.*

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