Singing Leichhardt
Monica Haagen-Wulff

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. 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. 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. Then there is Imaru, with whom he shares a blanket. 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.”

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 corrobori, songs which they accompanied on the Eboro, a long tube of bamboo, by means which they variously modulated their voices.”

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


6 Nicolson. ibid. Page number?

7 Leichhardt. “28 November 1845.” ibid,

8 Leichhardt. “6 December 1845.” ibid.


10 Leichhardt. “2 December 1845.” ibid.


Monica van der Haagen-Wulff, Doctorate of Creative Arts (DCA), is an Associate Lecturer at the Chair for Education and Cultural Sociology at the Institute of Comparative Educational Research and Social Sciences at the University of Cologne. Her teaching and research interests include: Cultural Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Gender, Migration, Globalisation, Global Cities, Performance Studies, Theories of Embodiment, Fictocritical Writing, Critical Heritage und Historical Memory Studies. Monica has an intercultural dance and performance background and her main research focus is on how practice and theory can be merged to create new knowledges, and in so doing decentre Eurocentric knowledge constructions.