

The Old Dead Tree in the Borroloola Museum, Northern Territory

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In the middle of the main display room of Borroloola's Police Station Museum is the trunk of an old, dead ironwood tree that was reportedly blazed by Ludwig Leichhardt during his first expedition, from Moreton Bay to Port Essington in 1844 and 1845. Originally situated on the edge of the Calvert River, the trunk was moved to the Museum in 1985 after it had died. Rooted in metal now rather than soil, the tree's location alongside the flotsam and jetsam of the town's colonial history calls attention to the politics of both heritage and history in this small locality. As Manning Clark writes, the English "began their ceremonies" in the colony when Captain Cook directed an inscription to be cut on a tree where he first made landfall.¹ This particular act of writing was significant as an assertion not just of sovereignty but, more significantly, of symbolizability: a declaration that this new continent could be incorporated into the world of the colonists through the act of being marked, and thereby being named and known. While Cook's tree no longer exists, other trees marked by later explorers, including Leichhardt, have come to hold great significance within this formerly colonial society as relics of such ceremony.



Leichhardt tree in the Borroloola Museum, photograph by *li-Anthawirriyarra* Sea Ranger Unit, April 2013.

There are not a lot of formal tourist attractions in Borroloola, so like many first-time visitors I went to look over the town's small museum shortly after my arrival in 2007. I had

traveled there to begin anthropological fieldwork as part of research I was conducting for a native title claim. As a direct result of colonization, many Aboriginal people presently live in Borroloola and yet their lives are barely represented in the museum. Aside from some photographs taken by early ethnographers, and several more recent images, most of the museum's displays ignore the lives of Aboriginal people. Instead the museum presents an account of Australia's past that appears consistent with that described by W.E.H. Stanner in his 1968 Boyer lectures for the Australian Broadcasting Commission as a "cult of forgetfulness" practiced on a national scale, extending beyond an ignorance of frontier violence into a general lack of attention to Aboriginal people at all.² When I first encountered the Borroloola Museum's Leichhardt tree, I could not help but interpret it as a paradigmatic illustration of such deliberate practices of dis-remembering.

However, thinking about it some more, I realized that to interpret the Borroloola tree in this way is somewhat limited. Many of the local residents and interstate tourists at Borroloola whom I asked about tree professed ignorance, having failed to even notice it, or having simply afforded it scant significance. One pair of tourists who had rented an aeroplane to retrace the journey of the later explorers Burke and Wills, and ended up in Borroloola (far from Burke and Wills' track) when their plane required repairs, spoke instead of their interest in a display about a non-Aboriginal man who lived with two Aboriginal women in the town in the 1930s and 1940s. For these tourists, photographs of this unusual family provided evidence in support of their understanding of the then-current national policy of Reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Asked about their motivations for following Burke and Wills, and their feelings about the other explorers including Leichhardt, they spoke of what they saw as the explorers' 'fatal flaw': "they failed to engage with the Aborigines [...] that would have kept them alive, they were [...] nothing like modern Australians, but you can sense the start of Australianness in their story." Clearly, for these self-styled modern-day explorers, contemporary Australian nationalism need not involve any straightforward repudiation of Australia's pre-colonial past. Indeed, their comments suggest a more creative engagement with this past.

A close engagement with Leichhardt's life and the legacy he left behind, particularly in his published journals and recently published diaries, arguably encourages such work, presenting a more complex and ambiguous figure than has often been assumed. Actually, my own view oscillates between admiration for Leichhardt the explorer and frustration at the extent to which interest in him exceeds interest in the equally fascinating history of Aboriginal groups in the Gulf. But, as my work on Aboriginal native title claims around the

region has continued since 2007, I've found ways to reconcile some of these opposing feelings. While working on various reports, I've frequently turned to Leichhardt's journal of his 1844/1845 expedition to seek evidence in support of the Ganggalida and Garawa people's claim. With his eye for detail, Leichhardt vividly describes aspects of Aboriginal people's lives in the Gulf at the time of first contact with Europeans, such as their maintenance of pathways for travel and trade, their practices with fire, their construction of wells and weirs, even their understanding of filtration. All of this is now proving invaluable in the claim process. As the original owners regain title to this land – with a partial determination of the claim finalized in 2010, prior to a hearing of evidence for the rest of the claim in 2014 – Leichhardt's work has assumed a key place within the archive attesting to Aboriginal connections to the Gulf country at the time of settlement.

When I first encountered the blazed Leichhardt tree in the Borroloola museum I shook my head in surprise that such an object could still be represented so unproblematically, despite the significant cultural changes that have swept across northern Australia's Gulf country over recent years, fundamentally altering the ways in which the past is remembered. With such marked trees, Leichhardt led the way for the colonists who followed, establishing a path across the region, from tree to tree. But now Leichhardt's work is assuming a different significance. While new roots will never sprout from this old wood, the story of Leichhardt and the ceremony of writing he performed is still significant in contemporary Australia, perhaps now more significant than ever.

Notes

¹ Clark, Manning. *A History of Australia*. vol. I. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1962, 50.

² Stanner, William E.H. *The Dreaming and Other Essays*. Melbourne: Black Inc. Agenda, 2009, 189.

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