

Looking for Leichhardt

Susan K Martin

*Franklin and Leichhardt! brothers of the brave!
Yet one is found, is honoured in his tomb
While cold oblivion shrouds his gallant peer
In awful mystery, undefined and dim.
Where are the traces of his desert path?*

(Embling 1864)

I am in the State Library of Victoria, in the dim recesses of the newspaper reading room peering at projected microfilm. It has been so long since I extracted one of these that I had to ask a librarian to assist me with the odd filing system. This is not the end of my search, however. No microfilm copiers are available, and I do not have time to wait. There are plenty of old readers free, and I think it will be easy enough to locate the poem I am after, magnify it, and either transcribe or photograph it. Unlike my past visits to the newspaper room I have a reasonable camera in my phone. The subjects of the poem, Franklin and Leichhardt, might be lost for others, but I will pin them down easily.

I may have forgotten the Gothic filing system, but I still remember how to thread the ancient microfilm, wind on, and look away to limit the seasickness induced by the flow of words and images. I find the poem quite quickly. The film is in negative. Without a new reader I cannot reverse that, and there is a limit to how much I can expand the reading space. There is also, inevitably, a limit to how clear a picture it is possible to make of an angled, projected negative image of an old, poorly printed, poorly copied, newspaper poem in a dark room. My idea of a quick snapshot fades. I can see Leichhardt and Franklin, but it is as if they are obscured by the sand and ice that imagination gifts them. If this poem is a monument to presence, and endurance, then part of what it monumentalises is the partialness of memory, the fragmentation of record, memorialisation, retrieval.

I am here, at this moment, because in July 2013 I am contacted by German researchers looking for this obscure Leichhardt reference from a paper I presented in 2007. In 2013 I experience unprecedented Google Scholar popularity, thanks to Leichhardt. Very little of my work is encyclopaedic, but for a number of pieces I had attempted to find most of the literary work about Leichhardt written in Australia (the literary monuments to Leichhardt, perhaps), and on the bicentennial of his birth, this work became my most popular—it put me on the tour map. The German researchers were searching for a poem I had referenced which aligned lost Leichhardt with the lost polar explorer, former Tasmanian governor, John Franklin. In the

years since I had written on Leichhardt such painstaking archival research had been revolutionised, and instead of searching my filing cabinets and boxes of paper for that leaf uniting Leichhardt and Franklin I searched *Trove*, that wonderful online world. But of course, the efficient Germans were not ignorant of *Trove*, and neither poem, nor pair of explorers appeared.

Locating my old paper files on Leichhardt was hard enough. I found I had no digital copy of this obscure poem, no sign of it in the computer file labeled by the place I had presented the initial paper—geographically, not topically. All my files were scattered and partial. Considering my likely movements I figured the newspaper must be in my University library, and I could drop over and download a copy in a few minutes. But the run in the library did not start that far back. If I was going to retrace the poem it would have to be to the SLV where I must have read it originally. Why had I taken no copy? Why had I not at least left a note to myself—bad poem, don't bother?

Now, instead, in the dark of the SLV many years later, and with even worse eyesight, I take a series of dim and blurry photographs, and email them to Germany. Between us, the distant Danielle and I, cannot decipher all the words. Gaps and queries remain.

Much of my relationship with Leichhardt has been around the concept of absence. Unlike others, rather than desiring or attempting to fill in that absence – mine has been a fascination with the meaning and uses of the gap, the aporia, the space where Leichhardt should be. In relation to Leichhardt, at least, I never felt Greenblatt's desire 'to speak with the dead'

When I was a child, my family would go on extensive car trips around Australia. My parents were particularly interested in history and geology, so we stopped at a lot of rocks and historical sites. Historical monuments were a particular favourite, perhaps because they combined both of these elements (history and rocks—the markers are almost always hunks of rock, or stone obelisks). Most of these monuments, in my memory, were to Major Mitchell, or Hume and Hovell. I do not recall monuments to Ludwig Leichhardt or his expeditions, but naturally he has his share, including some ironic monuments which reiterate his lostness, such as the Burdekin Falls Lookout in Queensland, overlooking the dam which covers all traces of Leichhardt's campsites in the area (Ludwig Leichhardt—Burdekin Falls)¹.

In a discussion of staged monuments, Leichhardt, and the way in which monuments produce and circulate in the national imaginary Joanne Tompkins comments, “monuments can render speech impossible”². Reading Balodis's *Ghost's Trilogy* Tompkins suggests that

the monuments within the plays are counter monuments; monuments to absence. For me our international, partial, reconstruction of Embling's poem – which mourns the absence of monuments to Leichhardt – is yet another ironic, but fitting reconstruction of it.

Notes

¹ Embling, William Henry. "Leichhardt and Franklin." *The Australasian Post* 13 May 1865, 2. Ludwig Leichhardt – Burdekin Falls. Accessed 16 Oct 2013. <<http://monumentaaustralia.org.au/themes/people/discovery/display/93618-ludwig-leichhardt-burdekin-falls>>

² Tompkins, Joanne. in *Unstable Ground: Performance and the Politics of Place*. Gay McAuley, ed. Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2006, 82.

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