

## WHERE DID LEICHHARDT WANDER?

### A Theory of his Probable Route and Fate

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It is now over one hundred years since Ludwig Leichhardt and his entire party disappeared from the knowledge of white men. From more than thirty points in inland Australia have come reports during the past ninety years of traces which, in some way, probably have some bearing on the fate of Leichhardt and the route he travelled.

Much has already been said and written on this intriguing subject, and I now only propose to list the various discoveries that undoubtedly have some connection with the mystery, and attempt to put forward a theory connecting these discoveries into a definite route that leads to where the explorers met their fate. Some of the most eminent and learned men in Australia have attempted to unravel the mystery of Leichhardt, both in the field of exploration and by research.

Leichhardt, after a successful expedition from Brisbane to Fort Essington in 1844-45, planned the almost impossible—a journey overland from Brisbane to Perth. He made a first attempt in 1846, but only reached the Peak Downs in Central Queensland and was forced to return to Brisbane; bad organisation was the principal cause. In March, 1848, Leichhardt wrote and lectured in Sydney of his intention to start out in a second attempt to cross the continent.

Sturt had returned from the country north-east of Lake Eyre with the news that the area was an impassable desert. Leichhardt, therefore, seems to have decided on a north-west course from his starting point, Macpherson's station on the Cogoon (Muckadilla of to-day), just west of the present site of Roma. In poetic language, he wrote in the "Sydney Morning Herald" on March 8, 1848:

"We shall sail down the Condamine, go up the Cogoon, and follow Mitchell's tracks to the northern

bend of the Victoria (Barcoo River). I shall then proceed to the northward until I come on decided water of the Gulph (sic.), and after that resume my original course to the westward."

It seems he had no intention whatever of travelling southwest from Macpherson's station. By taking a northwest course he proposed to "skirt the northern end of the desert" (presumably that described by Sturt) and "... strike the headwaters of the Flinders . . . and should the country be sufficiently well watered, I would, of course, proceed to the westward, keeping the same latitude and try to reach the waters of the northwest coast in about Lat. 17 deg. 18'. Should I succeed in this I will turn to the southward and work my way parallel to the northwest and west coast until I reach the Swan River. This journey I hope to accomplish in two years, although I am aware unforeseen difficulties may retard my progress."

For this gigantic undertaking, Leichhardt enlisted the services of four white men and two blacks. They were: Classen, a German who had only been a few months in Australia and who was a sailor by profession; he was then thirty-five years of age and thought to have been a relative of Leichhardt's; Hentig, a German-Russian, who had experience in the bush as a station manager, Donald Stuart, a Scot, and an experienced bushman, Kelly, an Irishman, and a good bushman, and two blacks, Jimmy, and another. Jimmy had been with Leichhardt on his previous expedition and seems to have been a trustworthy fellow. Unfortunately, even the numbers of Leichhardt's party are uncertain. Some historians include "Young Classen," a nephew of Classen, and Thomas Hands, a bushman, supposed to have joined the expedition at one of the frontier stations. Therefore, there could have been seven, and not five, white men. As Leichhardt seems to have at least partly realised the gigantic nature of his undertaking, this larger number seems a possibility. Apparently lack of funds prevented his taking more than four white men with him at the beginning, but what happened from the time the party left Brisbane to the time they arrived at Macpherson's station can only be conjectured. Leichhardt does not mention any addition in numbers, so we must assume there were only five white men.

Leichhardt himself, then thirty-five years of age, was far from being in good health, but despite all he

was fired with an intense desire to "win through to Perth or die in the wilds of Australia, for Australia."

Dr. A. Grenfell Price, in Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, South Australian Branch, 1937-1938, wrote:

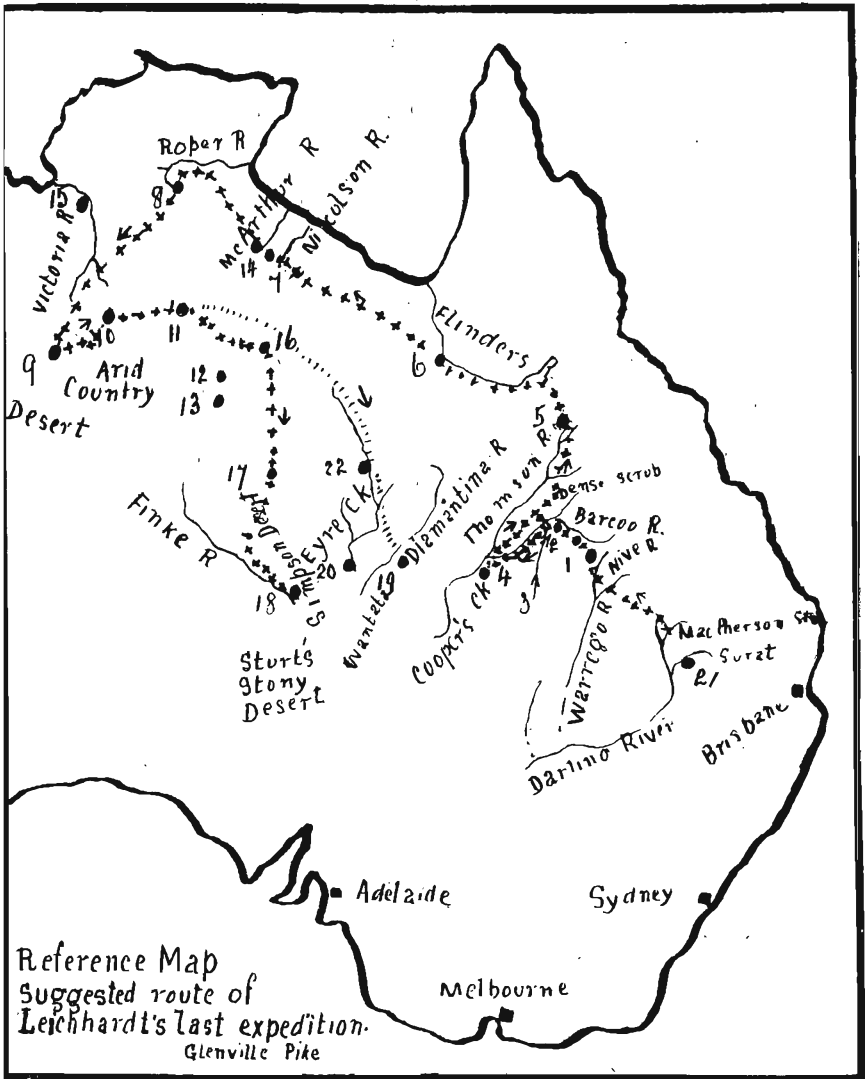
"In planning to traverse Australia from east to west, even by a northerly route, Leichhardt assayed an almost impossible task. Even with camels (which he had unsuccessfully tried to obtain) Leichhardt's journey, particularly in Western Australia, would have been most hazardous. Writing in 1881, Ernest Favenc pointed out how heavy and clumsy were Leichhardt's old-fashioned packsaddles and water canteens and kegs."

Leichhardt's animals consisted of seven horses, twenty mules, and fifty cattle. That only seven horses were taken is not understandable, and seems to suggest there were only seven men including two blackboys. But Leichhardt was more experienced than to imagine a man could ride the same horse across Australia. Twenty mules would have been only sufficient pack animals, with spares, to carry two years' provisions plus clothing and water canteens. Such an expedition, so poorly equipped, was doomed to certain failure. But, as with the numbers of men in the party, we have no guarantee but what Leichhardt did not add to his horses at one of the outlying stations.

That Leichhardt traversed more than half way across the continent and perhaps attempted to return, is borne out by the fact that it was over two years, and possibly three, before any news of disaster reached the frontier stations of Queensland through native channels. These spoke of a massacre of white men "towards the setting sun."

Now let us enumerate the discoveries of Leichhardt relics, placing them in order on the assumption the expedition traversed a northwest course, as Leichhardt proposed.

About 150 miles to the northwest of Macpherson's station, Hovenden Hely, in 1852, found two trees marked "L" and unmistakable signs of Leichhardt having been in the locality—on the head of the Nive River (1). Here, Leichhardt appears to have crossed over the divide on to the head of the Barcoo, as he had previously intended. Hely heard a story from the blacks



that a party of white men had been murdered to the westward; they carried tomahawks made from the gullet plates of saddles. In 1858 Gregory found an "L" tree on Enniskillen Station on the Barcoo between the present sites of Tambo and Blackall (2), and about eighty miles beyond Hely's discovery. In 1861 Walker found another "L" tree seven miles further down the Barcoo (3). Five aged bullocks and an old horse carrying Leichhardt's brand were supposed to have been found near here. The blacks said they had come from

the northwest. In 1926 it was reported that an "L" tree was found on Retreat Station, also two other "L" trees eight or twelve miles down the Cooper from the Barcoo-Thomson junction (4).

In my opinion, these trees reported in 1926 mark Leichhardt's furthest point down the Cooper and represent an excursion he made in this direction, following an urge he expressed before starting out that he wished to discover if the Victoria (Barcoo) just investigated by Kennedy became the same river as that named by Sturt the Cooper. Leichhardt now returned up the Barcoo to the tree found by Walker, and I agree with this explorer's suggestion, that:

"Leichhardt intended leaving the Victoria (Barcoo) at the tree seen by Gregory, was stopped in his northwest course by the same barrier encountered by me (dense scrub) and turned back to camp at the tree found by me, subsequently clearing the scrub where I rounded it."

Satisfying himself that the Barcoo and Cooper were one stream, Leichhardt "rounded the scrub" and proceeded northward, for in 1862 Walker found very old horse and mule tracks in several places on the tributaries of the Thomson River in that area north of the present Aramac and south of the present site of Prairie (5). Walker thought that Leichhardt would have experienced trouble in the basalt country on the head of the Flinders. That it was his intention to strike the head of the Flinders or "water of the Gulf" Leichhardt made plain before starting. Here it may be mentioned that tracks of animals or vehicles remain quite clear in the hard black soil of the downs country for twenty or more years, especially if made during wet weather.

Leichhardt now followed the Flinders for 250 miles, leaving it when it turned northward towards the Gulf, at Lat. 20 degs. S. At this spot (6) the pastoralist-explorer, Duncan McIntyre, discovered two trees marked "L". These trees cannot be attributed to Landsborough, but must surely have been Leichhardt's work. The chiselling was very old, and not fresh as it would have been had Landsborough been responsible. Seventy-five miles further west McIntyre found two very old saddle horses bearing Leichhardt's brand. This was in the year 1865. Leichhardt may have abandoned these horses here or they could have been left much further west, and were merely returning on their old tracks as their grazing wanderings took them.

Assuming Leichhardt continued northwest according to his plan, we next find traces of his passing from a tree marked "L" situated between the heads of the Nicolson and McArthur Rivers (7), found in 1882, and over 400 miles from the marked trees on the Flinders. This tree would not have been a relic of Leichhardt's 1845 expedition to Port Essington, as on that occasion he passed much closer to the coast.

Two hundred miles further northwest, we have Gregory's discovery in 1856 of a camp site made by white men and in a manner practised by Leichhardt, at the junction of the Elsey and Birdum creeks adjacent to the Darwin-Birdum railway of to-day (8).

Now, apart from a story circulated by a man named Hume in the 'seventies, who said he knew what had happened to Leichhardt and that he had met the sole survivor, Classen, on the Victoria River, and because of Hume's doubtful character the story was never believed—we have the momentous discovery of a plate inscribed "Ludwig Leichhardt" in the possession of Mr. H. R. Bristow Smith of Laura, South Australia, who said it had been given him by Charles Harding, a drover, years before. Smith said:

"Mr. Harding informed me that he found the plate attached to the butt of a rifle which had been partly destroyed by fire, in a bottle tree marked with an 'L' near Mt. Inkerman near the Musgrave Ranges, about ninety miles over the West Australian border. Leichhardt's letters contain mention of such a gun."

A musket which had belonged to John Gould and used by Gilbert on the first expedition had been repaired by a gunsmith with the intention of returning same to Gould, but instead Leichhardt retained possession of it for use on his last expedition. It may have become burnt in a campfire accident, and Leichhardt left it behind, it only being an encumbrance to him. There is little reason to doubt the situation of the bottle tree and Mt. Inkerman (9), as some historians have tried to do. Pastoralists in the settled country further north have testified that the blacks occasionally spoke of a mountain of that name, it sounding more like "Inka-main." Harding, the drover, could have easily come upon the tree with its gun in the manner he told Smith. From the 'eighties onwards there was considerable movement in cattle to Western Australia, both from the Northern Territory and Queens-

land. Furthermore, station owners assert there are bottle trees (baobabs) of a different genus to the Queensland variety (*brachychiton spa*) out towards the Musgrave Ranges, and in the early days the blacks spoke of a well, timbered by white men, having once been in the locality. Around it, they said, were once bullock bones and pieces of iron. About 100 miles to the northeast (10) old blacks forty years ago remembered there were bullocks with bells on in that area (Tanami Goldfield) before they saw white men.

We have every reason to assume Leichhardt's party, reaching the Eley, turned southwest to the Victoria River, and finding desert country barred progress beyond Lat. 20 degs. S., turned westward and the well and **the bottle tree marked Leichhardt's furthest west**. Desert country ahead and possibly the low condition of his surviving animals, scanty supplies, and weakened state of his men after what must have been a gruelling journey of 2,500 miles, would prevent further progress towards the west coast. Leichhardt would have missed the head of the west-flowing Fitzroy River—a river such as he had hoped to find that would lead him to the west coast—by at least 150 miles. Leichhardt was a very determined character, and once he proposed a task he would not be easily changed from it. Therefore there is every reason to believe he carried out his plan of a northwest semi-circular course to reach the northwest coast of Australia, barred only now by the waterless desert that faced him. He would therefore be forced to turn back.

We will never know what happened to Leichhardt and his party in this lonely country except for the tale told by Hume, who got it, he said, from Classen who was then living with the blacks. Subsequent events proved there may be some truth in this story. In any case, I assume Leichhardt reached Mt. Inkerman (9) and returned to the head of the Victoria River so as to miss the desert to the southward—whether by his own will or by force exercised by his men, as Hume claimed, now matters little. We can also assume the date was some time in September, 1849, reckoning on the expedition having progressed at the rate of five miles per day and allowing an extra month for exploratory excursions and periodic rests.

The next point of interest to indicate Leichhardt's return route was the discovery by John McDouall

Stuart in 1860 of two very old blazed tree lines leading to a native well, then dry, situated about twenty miles west of the present Newcastle Waters (11) and south of the belt of dense lancewood scrub that Stuart could not penetrate. My theory now is that Leichhardt's party split up in this vicinity, probably caused by dis-sension concerning the best route to take to reach civilization in the shortest possible time.

Leichhardt would propose to try and reach the nearest settlements in South Australia, but his men may have been in favour of trying to reach a Queensland station in the vicinity of where they had set out. Perhaps they thought the girdle of salt lakes believed to exist in the north of South Australia to be impenetrable. Leichhardt may have wanted to go southward, for, having by now acknowledged defeat in his attempt to cross Australia from east to west, he may now have had in mind a north to south crossing, travelling through country where something new and worthwhile may be found. In the dissensions that followed these plans, one of the party—we will say it was Classen—decided to remain in the Never-Never with blacks with whom he had become friendly. Leichhardt's blackboy, Jimmy, also remained, perhaps with Classen.

There have been several discoveries in support of this theory. Right from the late 'fifties the blacks in the interior spread rumours in a confused manner of there being a white man living among them; this was particularly so among blacks questioned by Gregory on the Barcoo; they said the white man was a long way to the westward. Up to the 'eighties these stories persisted, and even led to Sub-Inspector Gilmour making a search among the Cooper natives in 1871 that led to some highly interesting discoveries.

In 1860 Stuart saw fresh tracks of a barefooted man whose imprint was remarkably like that of a white man, just north of Tennant Creek (12). He was also surprised to see very old and faint tracks of horses, also travelling eastward. The following year, on Stuart's next expedition, he found a ". . . freshly built 'wurley' constructed with greater care than usual. It was thatched with grass down to the ground. Inside the 'wurley' there was a quantity of grass laid regularly for a bed on which someone had been lying . . . there was collected a large quantity of firewood."



This suggests a white man—possibly the maker of the bare-foot tracks—was in the vicinity (13). Blacks neither make beds of grass nor collect firewood. And whose horses, other than those of Leichhardt, would have left the old tracks Stuart had seen, for Stuart was the first known white man to traverse the Northern Territory from south to north.

In a camp of wild natives at the head of the Macarthur River (14) a stockman named Tom Lynott, in the year 1889, reported he saw a very old white man, his long yellow hair and beard distinguishing him from the blacks. He spoke to Lynott in a language that he thought was German. The blacks would not allow Lynott to approach him closely and it appeared they guarded the white man jealously fearing his escape. Apparently he was literally held prisoner. He was very ill or weak at the time and was carried about by two gins. He was never seen again, and died as he had lived for years—unknown. Lynott firmly believed this white man was Classen and we have no reason to doubt him. If it was he, he would have been about seventy-six years of age. The "Port Denison Times" of Bowen, in the issue of September 28, 1867, reported that the vessel "Eagle" chartered by the South Australian Government to carry out the examination of Arnheim Land, under the command of Captain Cadell, had explored the Roper River for forty miles. The captain reported he saw a wild white man among a crowd of natives on the south bank of the river; the white man waved, but the blacks were too numerous and savage-looking to risk a landing. Undoubtedly this was the same white man Lynott later saw on the Macarthur River.

This discovery remarkably bears out Hume's statements of having met Classen about 1870. Dr. A. Grenfell Price writes:

"Hume, who had been imprisoned for robbery under arms, announced in 1871 while in prison, that he had found two trees marked 'L,' some papers, and a white man living with the natives in Northwest Australia, and that he had recovered Leichhardt's and Classen's journals. Classen, he said, had informed him that the party had mutinied on the headwaters of the Victoria River in the northwest of the Northern Territory. Leichhardt had died, and the others, returning homewards, had been murdered by the natives on Eyre Creek. Classen, however, had survived in the Terri-

tory and was detained by the natives. When Hume returned he could produce only the bag which had contained papers, and said that the latter had been stolen. However, he showed a telescope to the Minister for Lands, who deciphered on it the inscription 'L.L.D.H.D. 1845.' Grave doubts were thrown on Hume's veracity and his alleged movements in Central Australia."

I think Hume was unjustly condemned because of his past misdemeanours, and in his desire to unravel the mystery of Leichhardt he was undoubtedly sincere. In 1874, for instance, he and two mates set out into the interior for the third time. In Southwest Queensland, poor Hume and a man named O'Shea died of thirst, the country being enveloped by drought. Hume gave his life to the Leichhardt cause. Surely these are not the actions of an "unprincipled liar and scoundrel" as certain irate people have labelled him over the years.

Regarding Leichhardt's blackboy, Jimmy, having remained in the Never-Never, we must refer to the statement of A. M. McDonald, who in June, 1878, was asked by natives on the Victoria River in Lat. 15 degs. 40' to visit their camp (15) and see "Whitefellow Jimmy." McDonald was unable to reach the place, but it was believed that the aborigines may have been referring to Leichhardt's blackboy.

The supposed existence of Jimmy on the Victoria River, Lynott's discovery of the white man, and the discovery of the Leichhardt plate, should make us not regard Hume's story with entire scepticism, for more than likely it was basically correct, and with reservations should be accepted as much as other Leichhardt discoveries where definite proof is lacking.

To return to my theory of the route Leichhardt followed in his effort to reach a settlement in South Australia.

About 150 miles to the east of Stuart's blazed tree line just west of Newcastle Waters (11), a tree marked "L" was found (16) in 1889 by W. G. Pledge. Nearly 300 miles to the southward near the present Arltunga, Lindsay found an "L" tree (17). This, to my mind, seems to indicate Leichhardt pushed southward from the tree found by Pledge, via that found by Lindsay, and striking the Finke River near the present Engoordina Station followed it down in its southeast course to the edge of the Simpson Desert.

There, just inside the South Australian border (18) some interesting relics and human remains were found by Mr. E. Lowe in 1938, **suggesting that here is the death-place of Ludwig Leichhardt.** The spot was visited by Dr. A. Grenfell Price and party.

“The remains were located on the easterly slopes of a long and high sandridge which formed the western edge of the Simpson Desert, and on the eastern edge of the flood-plain of the Finke.”

Only fragments of human teeth and bones were found, harness leather of “very great age,” fragments of badly-rusted steel, and badly corroded packsaddle rings. The teeth were those of a young aboriginal, it is believed. The most important find of all were two coins of pre-Leichhardt age, one a half-sovereign. Although there were also signs of aboriginal occupation of the area it can be safely assumed the site was the death-place of at least one white man and a black-boy. What other white man but Leichhardt would have penetrated into this inhospitable region at a time to be carrying a coin dated in the 1820's?

Leichhardt would be the only member of his party liable to be carrying money with him, especially sovereigns. An assumption can be made that death was due to thirst or starvation, and not at the hands of the blacks, for they had no knowledge of a massacre thereabouts. Lindsay, who had questioned natives, reported that they had said the whites had died a long way to the east, pointing to a locality in the approximate area where Mr. Lowe made his discovery (18). Baron von Mueller believed the death-place would be found in this locality, and several other prominent people also expressed this belief about sixty years ago.

As before mentioned, Central Australian blacks frequently spoke of a massacre of white men at a waterhole a long way to the eastward of Alice Springs, while those on the Barcoo in Queensland declared the massacre occurred at a waterhole to the westward. These stories were proved correct in 1871 when Sub-Inspector Gilmour of the Queensland Native Police, investigating rumours of there being a white man living with the blacks, made two expeditions out to the Eyre Creek country. On his first expedition he travelled 737 miles on horseback enduring terrific heat, and later, floods. On his second expedition Gilmour rode 1,025 miles, penetrating far westward of the furthest point of settlement in those days.

A captured aboriginal led him to a waterhole called Wantata (19), where he said of his own accord, a long time ago when he was a child, the blacks had killed four white men who had come from the north-west and the blacks burnt everything belonging to them. Gilmour found the remains of three separate human skeletons at the foot of a sandhill, together with fragments of clothing. From this and the fact that the remains had never been buried, Gilmour believed that they were white men—members of Leichhardt's party. He said he had always found that everything the blacks had told him was correct. He wrote in his journal:

"I have no doubt that these must be the remains of some of Leichhardt's party . . . . The whole of the blacks have some superstition about Wantata; they believe the ghosts of white men are abroad there at night time, and they had not been near the spot for years. The whole of the blacks' stories about white men centre around Wantata. In one of the blacks' camps about twenty-five miles from Wantata we found a piece of very old black waterproof, and also a small piece of moleskin."

On a second expedition later the same year, Gilmour found the blacks on Eyre Creek further to the west (20) possessed portions of an ancient canvas tent, moleskin, tweed, and duck trousers, a fragment of Scotch twill shirt, several scraps of blue blanket, and an old-fashioned iron tomahawk. They also found a lot of horsehair sufficient to stuff a couple of saddles, goats' hair, and a "dilli" bag with brown and black human hair, obviously European, woven into it. In this area in 1861 McKinlay had found portion of a European greatcoat lined with red flannel which he supposed to have been taken from Leichhardt's party.

The Melbourne "Argus" of 16th January, 1872, published the following:

"As far as anyone can tell no white man can have visited the spot (19) and (20) since 1845 unless it was Leichhardt, and it seems almost certain, therefore, that the relics brought down by Mr. Gilmour are those of Leichhardt or some of his party. Mr. Rudall, to whose examination the bones have been submitted, declares them to be portions of the skeletons of European men, and Baron von Mueller, in whose custody the precious relics now remain, is satisfied that the remains are those of his lost countryman or some of his party."

Hume's story has now gained a ring of truth. You will remember he said Classen told him that Leichhardt's men, "returning homewards, had been murdered by the natives on Eyre Creek."

It is my belief that Wantata Waterhole marks the death-place of at least three of Leichhardt's men who had left their leader in Central Australia in the area where Stuart found the blazed tree line (11), and who were trying to reach civilization only to be massacred by the natives when within a few hundred miles of their goal. The date would be about April, 1850—two years after they had set out. These survivors may have arrived at Wantata Waterhole by taking a course that perhaps led down the Georgina, they having struck its headwaters on the Barkly Tableland. It is doubtful, if Leichhardt was not with them, whether they would mark any trees, but as this is being written a report has come to hand that a Mr. George McIntyre has found an "L" tree on Glenormiston Station on the Georgina River (22), well off any known explorer's route, but as details are vague, the discovery will have to be investigated further.

No mules belonging to Leichhardt were ever found; possibly supplies ran so short at the end of the debacle that they were sacrificed for food. It is likely that mules, horses, and bullocks were killed by the blacks at Wantata and that the bullocks and horse reported found on the Barcoo were survivors. The Barcoo blacks had told both Hely and Gregory that they had killed all Leichhardt's animals at the massacre of white men "to the westward" (referring, no doubt, to Wantata), but that a few had escaped.

The fact that neither Leichhardt, out on the Finke, nor his men at Wantata, met their fate until April or May, 1850, would explain the absence of news of the disaster reaching civilization for so long after Leichhardt set out. It is well known that news of this kind travels very quickly from tribe to tribe. W. Ogilby, P.M., received this first news at Surat (21) in the middle of 1850, and in April, 1852, a detailed account of a massacre west of the Cooper was given.

When the end came, food and clothing would have been at a very low ebb, but let it be remembered that Leichhardt expected to be at least two years away from civilization and had provided accordingly.

The lonely stretches of bush and plain, mountains and deserts, as old as Time itself, will always be the monument to the memory of gallant Ludwig Leichhardt, and the silence of the inland will probably forever cloak his wanderings and proof of his fate in mystery. And yet, after one hundred years and more, it is possible some relics may still be found that will solve this greatest of all riddles of the Australian outback.

NOTE: My principal authorities for all statements made in this paper concerning the situation of Leichhardt relics are Messrs. E. E. Larcombe, F. L. Parker, and Dr. A. Grenfell Price, without whose painstaking research in gathering together in a small compass the locations that have a Leichhardt flavour, and published with Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia (S.A. Branch) during 1937 and 1938, the writing of this paper would not have been possible. I have also referred to copies of the files of the "Moreton Bay Courier" of 1871 and 1872 lodged in the Oxley Library, Brisbane. I would also like to express appreciation to Mr. J. D. Somerville, F.R.G.S.A., of Adelaide, for his helpful advice in compilation.

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