

The Death of John Gilbert

B.J. Dalton

On the evening of 28 June 1845 the members of Leichhardt's Overland Expedition relaxed around a large campfire. They had eaten well; ten duck among eight men "gave us a fine dinner".¹ That afternoon they had found the first concrete evidence that at last the coast was near: broken shells of a marine mollusc near the camp. They were more than usually at ease, but the night was dark and cold,² their clothing threadbare after eight months in the bush. By 7pm they had started drifting off to bed; it would then have been dark a full hour. Five of the six white men divided themselves among three scattered tents. John Roper and James Calvert shared one, John Gilbert and John Murphy a second; the third was occupied by William Phillips. Leichhardt stretched upon the ground near the fire, alone or with Harry Brown, one of the two Aboriginal members, nearby; the other, Charley, - possibly both - settled down in the open near one of the tents.³ Very soon - say at a quarter or twenty past seven - Aborigines attacked. Amidst great confusion three or four shots were fired,⁴ and the attackers

¹ Unless, otherwise indicated, all quotations are from Leichhardt's manuscript *Journal of an Overland Expedition...* held in the Mitchell Library, Sydney.

² The moon did not rise till 3am; southerly winds setting in on 26 June made the nights very cold. After the attack, when the explorers sat through the night with the fire extinguished, the wind "made shiver our very bones". Leichhardt, 27 & 28 June 1845.

³ According to Roper, "the Doctor and our two black fellows slept around the fire...". This may well have been usual, but on this occasion, Charley was clearly very near Gilbert's tent as will transpire. There is no direct evidence where Brown was, but the two Aborigines were usually inseparable; Gilbert noted on 30 April that, having quarrelled, they "at night slept separately for the first time in the expedition". Leichhardt's words "I stretched myself as usually upon the ground at a little distance from the fire" imply that there was no-one near him. His account of Charley and Brown during the attack also suggests that they were together when it began. "Charley and Brown called for caps which I was busy to find and as soon as they got them the guns were discharged into the crowd of the natives...".

⁴ Roper declares that Murphy and Brown both fired; Leichhardt implies that Charley did too; Phillips says "Four guns were discharged by us...".

disappeared. Two of the whites, Roper and Calvert, lay badly wounded; a third, Gilbert, was dead.

This paper considers how the attack originated, what its purpose was, and how Gilbert died. The attack occupied two or three minutes in a journey extending through fifteen months, but it is not unimportant: the only instance of bloodshed in an expedition otherwise notably free from clashes with local inhabitants of the territory traversed. It is also true that focussing a spotlight upon the evidence concerning one event has been known to illuminate rather more than that event itself.

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Direct evidence comprises four documents compiled by participants. In chronological order of completion they are:

Gilbert's diary: written in the field, it terminates with an entry for 28 June;

John Roper's letter describing the attack dated from Sydney, 12 May 1846;⁵

Leichhardt's *manuscript* Journal: compiled in Sydney, on the basis of a log kept in the field but no longer extant, it was completed in September 1846;⁶

⁵ Written to John Gould, the ornithologist, Gilbert's patron and employer, it was read to the Zoological Society in London on 22 September 1846 and published in the Society's *Proceedings* for that month.

⁶ The published *Journal of an Overland Expedition...* (London, 1847) was seen through the press by P.P. King, the naval explorer, whose numerous editorial amendments are clearly identifiable on the manuscript. In the entries for 27 and 28 June in particular major changes were introduced. Several passages were interpolated, some matter deleted and - as is common throughout the entire text - words substituted and the order of words and phrases changed. King can be absolved of any intent to falsify a document, yet that is the result both from an historical and a literary point of view. Two other extended narratives by Leichhardt furnish no additional matter for the subject of this paper: a Report apparently written at Port Essington, released to the press after Leichhardt reached Sydney, and published with revisions at the end of April 1846 as a pamphlet entitled *Journal of Dr Ludwig Leichhardt's Overland Expedition...*; and a letter to his brother-in-law written on the ship which carried the expedition to Sydney, and dated 24

William Phillips' manuscript Journal: written no earlier than June 1847⁷ and possibly some years later, it may be based in part upon a record kept in the field, but it is of limited value.

Gilbert's diary is the only one that cannot be coloured in any particular by knowledge of the attack; it is especially important for antecedents of the attack. Roper and Leichhardt are independent witnesses, each writing without having seen the other's account. Since each supplies some data omitted by the other, it is of some importance as evidence for the reliability of both that Roper's quite short letter contains at least 17 points of fact corroborated by Leichhardt. Not surprisingly, Leichhardt provides the more "scientific" account: what he observed, what he was told, and what he inferred are distinct; comment and speculation are austere restrained. Roper, like most untrained observers, does not expressly distinguish his own experiences from the accounts of others or from his own surmise; but a careful reader usually can. The manuscripts of all but Roper's letter are in the Mitchell Library, Sydney.⁸

Indirect evidence of great value can be drawn from diverse sources:

- from two branches of anthropology, cultural and material;⁹
- from study of the terrain, proverbially indispensable in military history;
- from medicine.¹⁰

January 1846: *Letters of Ludwig Leichhardt*, ed. M. Aourousseau, Cambridge 1968, Vol.III, pp.839-43.

⁷ The title refers to Leichhardt's "First (successful) Exploration", fixing the earliest possible date for its completion after Leichhardt's return from his second expedition, admitted a failure, in June 1847.

⁸ They constitute ML A2586, ML MSS 683, C 155 and C 165.

⁹ For anthropological information of the greatest value I am indebted to Dr John Taylor of the Department of Behavioural Sciences, James Cook University, the leading authority on the culture of the Mitchell River Aborigines. The opportunity to see, handle and photograph Mitchell River spears I owe to Professor Barrie Reynolds, Material Culture Unit, James Cook University. See also the film *The Man Spear*, Sydney, Australian Museum, 1970, AIAS L102.

¹⁰ Relevant sections of this paper were discussed with Dr Laura Ward, then Medical Officer, James Cook University, to my great benefit.

Even astronomy has a morsel to contribute.¹¹

If reference to military history seems odd, reflect that the subject of the paper is a clash between two armed parties, with fatality resulting on both sides, and a total casualty rate of 37.5% on one.

3

Attempts to account for the attack of 28 June have commonly focussed upon an incident of the previous day. While the two Aboriginal members were out after game on 27 June, shots were heard, explained after their return to camp as necessary to scare off Aborigines intent on spearing the party's cattle.¹² In this paper I have only two points to make about this incident:

1. The party's subsequent behaviour that day and the next demonstrates complete lack of belief in any continuing threat to the animals. All, white and black, settled down to sleep both nights without the slightest precaution against attack. Yet the loss of cattle would have meant a sentence of death for the party, dependent upon them as their food reserve and as pack animals.
2. One point in Charley's report can be relied upon, as we shall see: that there were no women with Aborigines they encountered.¹³

Gilbert's diary leads us to look for an origin rather earlier. Entries every day from 24 June to 28 June make it clear that Leichhardt's party was being shadowed by Aborigines who kept out of sight but signalled their presence by lighting fires as they moved. Thus the explorers travelled those five days ringed by columns of smoke. On the 24th Gilbert noted: "the Natives appear to be moving on ahead of us but a very short distance, for every where as we proceeded we came upon fresh burning grass." On the 25th,

¹¹ The time of moonrise (fn.2 above), supplied by Mr V. Ford, Research Officer, Mt Stromlo Observatory.

¹² Gilbert, Leichhardt and Phillips all give an account of this incident.

¹³ This point is noted only by Leichhardt. "The gins seemed to have decamped beforehand".

"everywhere around us were many columns of smoke rising above from natives burning the bush." On the 26th, "as yesterday Native fires were seen in every direction around us", and again on the 27th, "as yesterday Native fires all around us". The last entry in Gilbert's diary includes the words, ominous in retrospect: "Native fires in every direction *and very near us*, but none of the Natives seen."¹⁴ Leichhardt notes this extraordinary phenomenon on the 27th and 28th. On 27 June, "we saw smoke of native's fires in every direction, but we did not meet with any natives," and on the 28th "we saw smoke rising in every direction..." It is natural to look for some event shortly before 24 June which might have aroused the animosity of Aborigines in the locality. It is readily found on 21 June. Indeed there are three encounters that day which may be categorised respectively as one certain, one possible, and one probable affront to Aboriginal custom.

The first occurred when the explorers came across Aborigines diving for waterlily seed vessels in a lagoon. Immediately the whites were spotted, the Aborigines ran off leaving behind a large "harvest" of seeds, which Leichhardt appropriated, leaving "a large piece of Iron" in return.¹⁵ Among Mitchell River Aborigines this would be a very grave offence even today.¹⁶

About the same time one of the party's Aborigines, at another lagoon, "had seen an old man and two gins, and the former had tried to frighten him by setting the grass on fire, but when he saw that Brown still approached, he had retired into the forest."¹⁷ It is tempting to conclude that an undisclosed sequel may have been at least an attempted rape: except that, if it were, it is hard to see why Brown did not keep quiet altogether. A question mark must therefore stand over this incident.

We are on firmer ground with the third.

¹⁴ Emphasis added. These words take on heightened significance when put alongside Leichhardt's observation that the Aboriginal camp which was the scene of the 27 June incident "was scarcely 300 yards from ours."

¹⁵ Leichhardt, Gilbert and Phillips all mentioned an encounter this day; the first two record the taking of lotus seeds.

¹⁶ Waterlilies are regarded as having specific owners, whose express consent must be obtained before any seeds are gathered.

¹⁷ Only Leichhardt mentions this incident, and the next one.

We heard some subdued cooees not very far from our camp which I thought might originate from natives returning late from their excursions whom our fires had attracted. I discharged a gun to make them aware of our presence and we did not hear anything more of them.

Clearly Aborigines were coming to visit the camp after dark announcing their presence and, therefore, their peaceful intentions, in advance. All other visits throughout the journey were made in broad daylight, with great care on the visitors' part to ensure they were seen at a safe distance and their friendly attitude understood. On this unique occasion the purpose must have been very urgent. I consider that envoys were coming to raise the matter of the stolen lotus seeds, and that Leichhardt's blunt response must have been an aggravation of the original offence.

On the 22nd and 23rd, when Gilbert recorded nothing out of the ordinary, the Aborigines were presumably engaged in careful observation of the strangers and discussion of how they should be dealt with: always a puzzle at first contact.¹⁸

Knowing that at least one serious offence had been committed on 21 June and that the stalk ended in the attack of 28 June in which Gilbert died, it would be natural to conclude that the shadowing party was sent on a killing raid: a band of men seeking a favourable opportunity of exacting retribution by killing one or perhaps all of Leichhardt's men with hunting spears. These are formidable weapons, accurate and fatal at distances greater than 100 metres,¹⁹ by no means completely outclassed by the explorers' guns. All but one were smooth-bore muzzleloaders with an effective range no greater than the spear, and a rate of fire decidedly

¹⁸ And perhaps also in making the spears used in the attack, for which see below. Modern observation has shown that each requires 14 man-hours work.

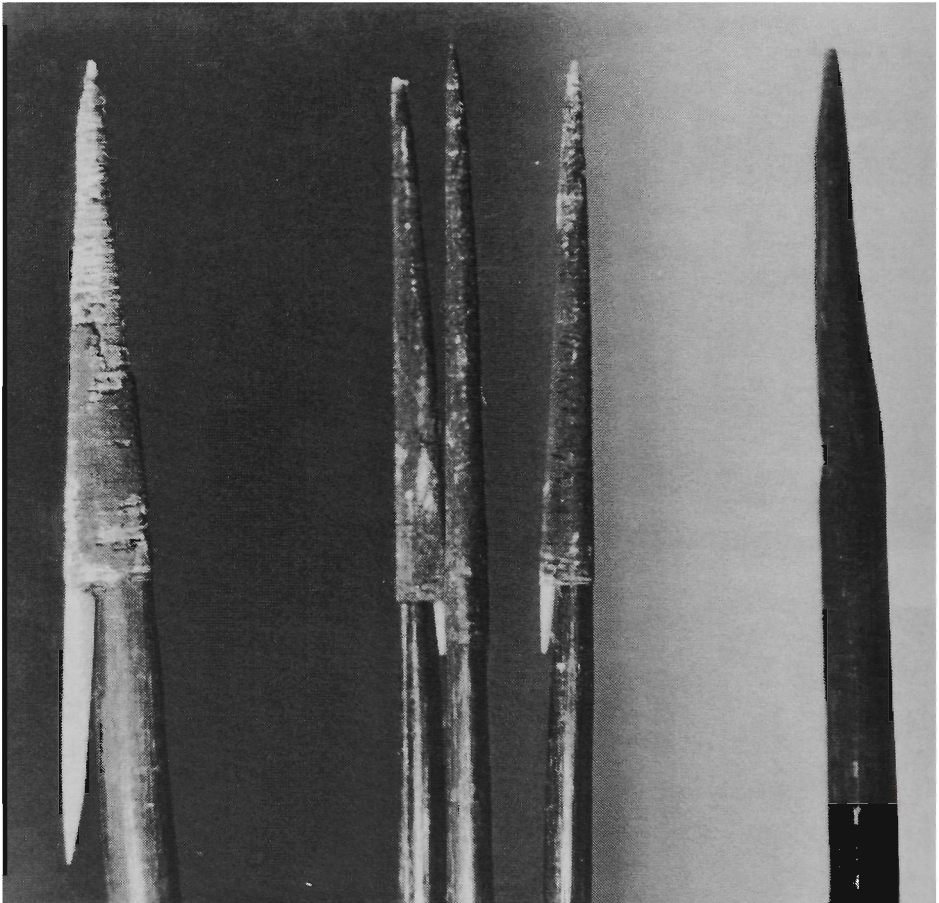
¹⁹ Dr John Taylor has witnessed spear-throwing contests between modern Aborigines at Mitchell River Mission. At 100 metres the best marksmen transfix the target - a banana palm - with every spear.



2. Ample Opportunities for Ambush

(a) Open Grassland near the Fatal Waterhole, 28 June 1983

(b) One of Multiple Channels of the Nassau River



3. Heads of Mitchell River Spears

Two varieties of the barbed man-spear alongside an unbarbed hunting spear.

inferior.²⁰ A killing raid is secret and silent, typically an ambush; spears are thrown from cover with deadly aim by assailants unseen and unheard.

Two doubts present themselves at once. There is no difficulty in accounting for the Aborigines keeping out of sight: that was in accordance with the pattern of a killing raid. The mysterious killing power of firearms, demonstrated on three separate occasions during these days, gave an added incentive.²¹ But why reveal their presence continuously through five days' shadowing by the ring of signal fires?

Again, the countryside being traversed, though very flat, offered abundant opportunities for ambush, whether one, several or eight victims were intended. The explorers rode each day on average nine miles (14.5km) through grassy plains, alternating with belts of open forest where visibility is well under 200 metres. Even on the plains, with grass often over a metre high at that season, an ambush of unsuspecting horsemen would not be impossible for Aborigines intimately familiar with the terrain; in the open forest it would be easy. Then there was "scrub" - dense vine forest along major watercourses - where visibility is often no more than four or five metres. At least one member of the party entered scrub most days: the whole party at least twice. One of these occasions, when the Nassau River's five or six parallel channels were crossed on 28 June, afforded a perfect opportunity for wiping out the lot. Every night as the men sat around the campfire, Aborigines could have crept within pointblank range and speared them all, unseen and unheard.

There is a second purpose for which a raiding party of Mitchell River men might be despatched. The retribution it seeks to exact is not death but the corporal punishment known to whites as "thigh-stabbing", to Aborigines

²⁰ Such guns, firing ball ammunition, might kill a man 200 metres distant, but were wildly inaccurate at less than half that range. Firing shot, they would be harmless to a man 50 metres away. Professional soldiers were drilled to fire three aimed shots a minute from muskets functionally identical. We can be certain that Leichhardt's men could not match that rate, and that spears could easily exceed it.

²¹ Game was shot on three days, a total of four wallaby and over 50 ducks and pigeons. No clue to the limited effectiveness of these firearms, noted above, would have been apparent to observers seeing them in action for the first time.

as "marking".²² A punishment raid is conducted openly, usually in daylight, with much noise; it is a public occasion with many onlookers. Where kinsfolk or neighbours are involved, there is scrupulous care not to exceed the appropriate number of wounds. That restraint does not operate when whites or strangers are involved, but always there is care to avoid fatal injuries. The target areas are the thighs and buttocks, where large muscles shield the great blood vessels. For this purpose a specific "man-spear" exists. The hunting spear, made to kill, consists of a heavy shaft of hardwood sharpened to a point; there is no separate head and no barb. The man-spear has a shaft of light wood with a socket into which a head of hardwood is glued and bound. There may be one, three or four prongs, each with its barb of kangaroo bone.

With this alternative possibility in mind, let us look at details of the 28 June attack.

4

It was launched immediately the party had settled down for the night. "Not one, I think, could have closed his eyelids" wrote Roper; Leichhardt was "in a state half asleep and half awake".

Roper heard what sounded like sticks thrown on to his tent and went out to investigate. He and his tentmate Calvert were immediately set upon in the open. Roper's letter shows that he later assumed the noise to have been made by the first "volley of spears". This cannot be right; spears thrown with serious intent would rip through any tent like paper. Clearly the attackers tossed sticks on to the tent to bring the occupants into the open, curious but not alarmed and therefore unarmed. Immediately, "a terrific yell, that will ring in my ears for ever, was raised"²³ and the two men were set upon with spears and waddies. They were helpless on the ground within

²² From the conspicuous permanent scars remaining after the wounds have healed.

²³ Roper to Gould, 12 May 1846, as above. There is corroboration from Leichhardt, "...suddenly aroused by an immense noise *and* by the calling for help of Calvert and Roper". Emphasis added.

arms length of the attackers; both suffered multiple wounds. Clearly they would have died if that had been the aim.

Consider the wounds these two suffered. Roper had five or six spear wounds: two or three in the scalp, one through his cheek into an eye socket, one through his left arm and one in his loins; he had taken a heavy blow on the shoulder. Calvert had one spear through the left testicle into his groin, another "at his knee". Waddi blows had broken his nose and injured one elbow and hand. Excruciatingly painful, these were not dangerous wounds. Both men recovered before the expedition reached Port Essington in December.

Consider next the weapons used. Leichhardt writes: "Several of these spears were barbed". In fact every spear specifically mentioned in the documents - by Leichhardt and by Phillips - was barbed. There is nothing to show that any unbarbed spear was used. Barbs, remember, are used by Mitchell River Aborigines solely on the man-spear employed exclusively for punishment.

Note also that, although the attack was broken off when guns were brought into action, the assailants did not bolt in panic. They took with them a badly wounded comrade. They remained in close proximity until he died early the next morning, when their wailing was clearly heard. Only then did they depart, taking the corpse with them.

5

To turn to Gilbert's death: he was hit by a single spear as he came stooping from his tent²⁴ to hand a gun and ammunition to the Aborigine Charley. The spear struck one of the most vulnerable spots in the human body: behind the collarbone where three great blood vessels lie close to the surface, exposed to a stab from above, the sub-clavian and carotid arteries and the jugular vein. A spear at exactly the right angle might possibly

²⁴ Leichhardt uses the phrase "stooping to get out of his tent" both in his Report and in his Journal.

penetrate to the heart, as Leichhardt thought for a time.²⁵ More probably one or more of the great blood vessels were severed, resulting in almost immediate loss of consciousness followed rapidly by death through massive haemorrhaging into the chest cavity. Blood in the mouth, seen by Leichhardt before he found the small death wound, would come from the spear's piercing the lung, windpipe or throat. The spear almost certainly broke off in the wound as Gilbert fell to the ground.²⁶

Charley was within arms length; the spear must have passed within centimetres of him. Murphy, who shared Gilbert's tent, must also have been close: "at his side", according to Roper. The spear, launched at a cluster of two or three men, cannot possibly have been aimed at the tiny vulnerable spot it hit. Gilbert's death, we can be certain, was not intended. It was a case of accidental death.

6

The evidence is overwhelming that the attack on 28 June was a punishing raid launched in retaliation for one or more offences committed a week earlier. Against a party at least equal in number to the attackers²⁷

²⁵ "...Mr Gilbert, a collector of birds, was killed by a spear that pierced his heart...". Leichhardt to this brother-in-law, 24 January 1846, *Letters of Ludwig Leichhardt*, as above.

²⁶ Roper wrote: "...pulling the spear out with his own hands, he immediately dropped upon the ground lifeless". This is mere surmise, based upon the facts that no spear was visible in the wound when Gilbert was examined, and that no-one else had pulled it out.

²⁷ None of the documents attempts an estimate of the attackers' numbers, but none suggests that the explorers thought themselves out-numbered. One passage in Leichhardt's Journal, indeed, rather implies the contrary; in justifying his decision to resume travel on 1 July over the protests of two badly-wounded men, he writes: "it was dangerous to remain longer at the place for fear that the natives might return *in greater numbers* and attack us or our cattle". Emphasis added.

The Aborigines surprised on 21 June, from whom the raiding party was drawn, were described by Leichhardt as "some families of natives", by Gilbert as "two parties of natives" and by Phillips as "two small tribes". It would be reasonable to conclude that they comprised two of the primary food-gathering groups called by some anthropologists "bands". These are no bigger than ten or twelve men, women and children. From two such groups it would be difficult to muster even eight men for a raiding party.

and armed with weapons of awesome power, it called for great resolution and courage: greater by far than a killing raid. Planned with care, the attack was executed with speed and precision. Precautions were taken to limit the risk to life. The victims chosen for punishment were lured into the open and dealt with at close quarters. Spears thrown towards other members of the party - in Leichhardt's words, "some few to [Phillips'] tent and one or two towards the fire" - were, pretty obviously, intended simply to keep them at a distance. Withdrawal when the guns went off I see as part of the plan; certainly it was no panic-stricken flight. These precautions were not wholly successful. One man died on either side, but that was a risk knowingly incurred. By the time their own man had died, the attackers were certainly aware of Gilbert's death. The account was square: the mission accomplished.

7

Considered as an instance of first contact under exceptionally favourable conditions, the episode is illuminating and depressing. To the initial chance encounter of 21 June neither side brought hostile preconceptions. The knowledge of old wrongs suffered on the one side, the guilt and fear of treachery on the other, which poison encounters so often at later stages, were wholly absent. Leichhardt was perfectly innocent of any conscious breach of Aboriginal right or custom. Not conspicuous during this expedition for sympathy with Aborigines or interest in them, he was nevertheless prudent and humane in his dealings. There could hardly be a greater contrast with later explorers in Cape York and the Gulf country: the Jardines in the '70s, Christie Palmerston in the '80s and Logan Jack in the '90s, all ready to let fly with rifles at first sight.

The Aborigines whose lotus seeds were taken did not consider that it might be the unthinking act of hungry men rather than deliberate theft. In this respect they were as much prisoners of their culture as graziers of a later generation whose cattle were speared by Aborigines excluded from traditional food supplies. (But at least the Aboriginal response was measured, unlike the indiscriminate slaughter of the nearest blacks which commonly followed the "outrage" of cattle-spearing.) That a fleeting encounter between parties so free from ill-will and hostile preconceptions

should culminate by a kind of inevitability in killing on both sides, is an indication how slight the chances were that European occupation of Australia could ever have been bloodless.

8

This final section considers what firearms were available to Leichhardt's party on 28 June 1845, and how many shots were fired.

No list of weapons is given in any surviving document, but from all the evidence it is clear that the expedition set out with six long firearms: three single-barrelled and two double-barrelled smooth bores (shotguns in present day terms) and one rifle. Pistols are mentioned twice²⁸ with no indication of number or type, but have no bearing on the events of 28 June.

Although the number of long firearms equalled that of Europeans in the party, it is clear that only four Europeans ever used them. There is no mention of Phillips or of Leichhardt ever shooting; of the latter, indeed, Gilbert wrote: "the Dr himself cannot handle a gun in fact he has no idea of shooting, and being rather near-sighted never feels any interest in trying".²⁹

By early March 1845, two guns were unserviceable. On the 5th, Leichhardt noted that Charley, in a fall with his horse, "broke a double-barrelled gun which was a very serious loss to us, as he had been unfortunate enough to break another single-barrelled one beforehand". This is corroborated by Gilbert two weeks later: "two guns of the original stock have unfortunately been broken so badly they are rendered useless".³⁰ No further damage occurring before 28 June, the party had four serviceable long arms on that date: one double-barrelled and two single-barrelled guns, and one rifle.

²⁸ By Gilbert on 7 December 1844, and by Leichhardt on 4 August 1845.

²⁹ On 25 March 1845. He adds, a trifle acidly, "like all persons who do not know the use of a gun he has always been dissatisfied with our efforts".

³⁰ *Ibid.* He says so to account for Roper's having to give up his gun in order to provide Charley with one.

The double-barrelled gun belonged to Gilbert;³¹ it was serviceable on 6 May³² (though it had been damaged as far back as 11 October 1844.³³) No other damage occurred to a gun until a month after the attack, when "Brown's horse stumbled and threw him, and unfortunately broke the stocks of the double barrelled fowling piece, and bent the barrels".³⁴ The three remaining firearms seem to have been intact when the expedition reached Port Essington on 17 December.

In a partial list of the party's initial equipment, Leichhardt includes "about 30 pounds of powder, and 8 bags of shot of different sizes, chiefly of No.4 and No.6". He refers to a third size, presumably very fine, as "dust shot" on 3 July 1845; the "small shot" used by Gilbert against plover on 14 February may have been yet a fourth. There was also ball ammunition, capable of being fired from the smooth bores as well as the rifle.³⁵ Some or all may have been in the form of "ball cartridges", a term used by Gilbert on 18 October 1844 and again on 7 December.³⁶

Ball ammunition was clearly reserved in the main for defence against Aboriginal attack. On all three occasions when Gilbert records being prepared with ball ammunition, it was as a precaution against possible attack.³⁷ As late as 21 November 1845, when all the shot had been expended, Leichhardt was still keeping the remaining ball ammunition "for the most urging necessity". In the entire journey, indeed, there are only two

³¹ "...I had loaded both barrels of my gun with ball cartridge..." 7 December 1844.

³² "...I loaded my gun with Ball..."

³³ Then Gilbert wrote that it was "broken in several places".

³⁴ Leichhardt, 30 July 1845.

³⁵ What Leichhardt once calls "rifle-balls" (25 November 1845) are almost certainly the same as the balls with which Gilbert loaded his doublebarrelled smooth bore on 7 December 1844 and 6 May 1845.

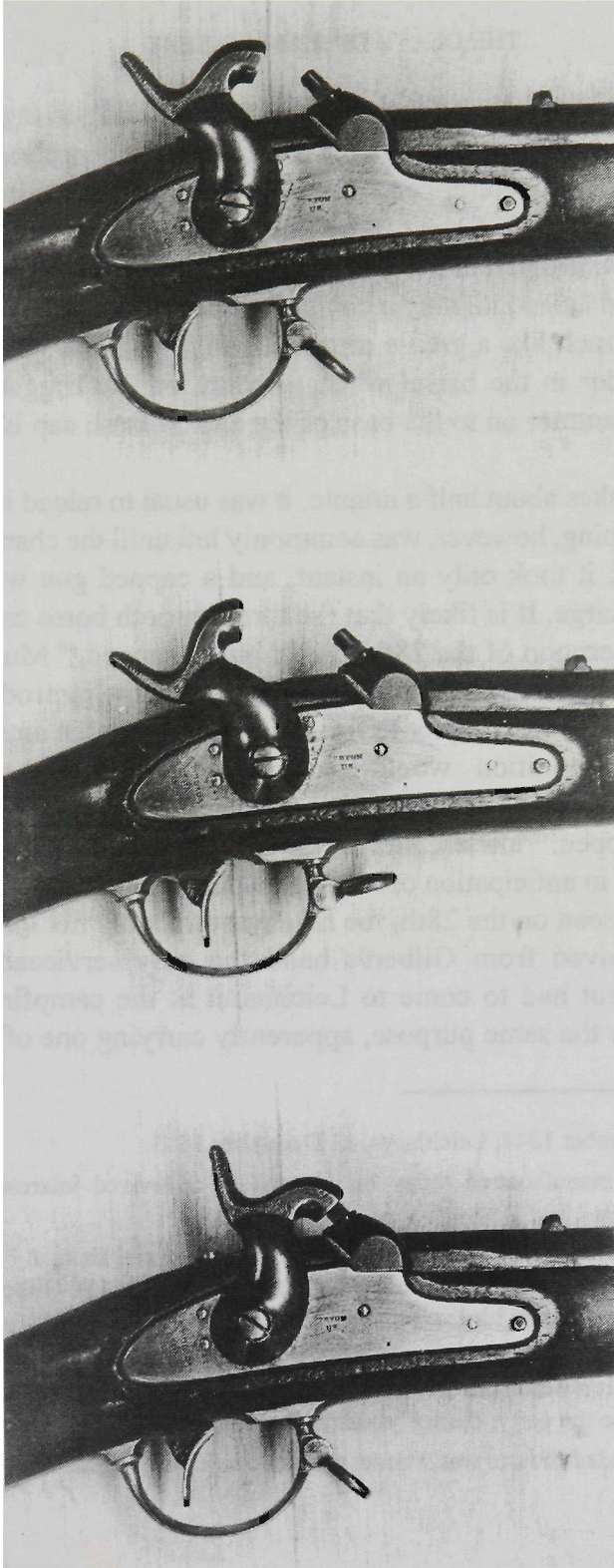
³⁶ A ball cartridge incorporated the lead ball with a measured charge of powder in a sealed cylinder of cartridge paper. Powder, ball, and the paper folded into a wad were inserted into the muzzle in turn and forced home with the ramrod.

³⁷ On 13 October and 17 December 1844, and again on 6 May 1845.

4. The Lock of an 1843 Muzzleloader

- (a) Half-cock for capping
- (b) Full-cock for firing
- (c) After firing

The nipple is uncapped



occasions when ball ammunition is recorded in use against game: at an early date against an emu, and against a buffalo very near the end.³⁸

Although the only reference to "caps" is in Leichhardt's account of the attack on 28 June 1845, there can be no doubt that all the firearms were muzzleloaders using percussion caps. These are³⁹ small copper cylinders sealed at one end and containing a charge of fulminate of mercury. They fit on to a nipple much like a grease nipple, through which a spark travels to ignite the powder in the barrel when pressure on the trigger releases a spring-loaded hammer on to the base of the cap. A fresh cap is needed for each shot.

As loading takes about half a minute, it was usual to reload immediately after firing. Capping, however, was commonly left until the chance of a shot presented itself; it took only an instant, and a capped gun was liable to accidental discharge. It is likely that the three smooth bores came back to camp on the afternoon of the 28th loaded but uncapped.⁴⁰ Muzzleloaders could be unloaded using a corkscrew attachment to the ramrod, but it was a tedious process; it was simpler to fire the weapon into the air.⁴¹ The need to conserve ammunition would have discouraged this practice in Leichhardt's party. It is very likely that the three guns were left overnight loaded but uncapped:⁴² loaded, moreover, with shot since ball ammunition was loaded only in anticipation of Aboriginal attack, as already seen. As no danger was foreseen on the 28th, the rifle was probably not loaded.

Charley received from Gilbert's hand the only serviceable double-barrelled gun, but had to come to Leichhardt at the campfire for caps. Brown came for the same purpose, apparently carrying one of the single-

³⁸ Gilbert, 7 November 1844; Leichhardt, 11 December 1845.

³⁹ They are still manufactured today on account of a revived interest in shooting muzzleloaders.

⁴⁰ At least two men had fired during the afternoon: Brown several shots in bagging the 10 duck of two species eaten that evening (Leichhardt, 28 June 1845), Gilbert at least two in obtaining two different bird specimens (Roper to Gould, as above).

⁴¹ It may be questioned whether any other method of unloading was often used in practice unless condensation within the barrel had dampened the powder, preventing firing. This happened once to the party, during "constant mizzling rain". Gilbert, 8 March 1845.

⁴² Uncapping a loaded firearm was simple, and quite safe with the hammer at half-cock.

barrelled guns. Murphy had the other single-barrelled gun, and may have had a cap since he was the first to fire. Once given caps, the two Aborigines between them had three shots ready.

It is not difficult, therefore, to reconcile Leichhardt's clear implication that Charley and Brown both fired as well as Murphy, with Phillips' assertion that "four guns" (read "barrels") "were discharged by us".