ON LEICHHARDT’S PATH
KAKADU 1845:
REFLECTIONS BUSHWALKING A TIME TUNNEL
THE MYSTERY OF LEICHHARDT CONTINUES HAUNTING THE OUTBACK - WAS IT THE DESERT, THE ‘NATIVES’ OR A SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY FAR MORE SINISTER?

DAN BASCHIERA
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REFLECTIONS BUSHWALKING A TIME TUNNEL

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The author acknowledges all the lands and elders of Australia’s First Nation Peoples described herein, as would have Ludwig Leichhardt.

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Leichhardt’s original hand drawn map shows the heading north he took in Kakadu National Park to where he met Jim Jim Creek. Marked with the asterisk is his expedition’s camp of the night of November 16th 1845. The next day he followed the creek downstream to stand atop the cliffs of the now famous Jim Jim Falls where he realised, with an enormous relief, that in the valley below he may have finally discovered one of the three Alligator River catchments. The mouth of any of these rivers, he knew, would give him the coordinates to guide him toward his destination – the Victoria settlement in Port Essington.

After two days trying to descend the cliffs, he spent the evening of the 18th of November 1845 alone above these magnificent falls enjoying the gorgeous colours of the outback twilight that Kakadu can produce. Leichhardt assisted his poor eyesight to look out across the dimming plains with the small sighting scope on his sextant. The funding for Australia’s first scientific expedition was so limited it did not have a proper telescope…

Probably unbeknown to Leichhardt as he scanned the valley before him, a few eyes from an ancient civilisation had been following his every move. The young Aboriginal bachelors living atop the escarpment would have been fascinated by the brass work of his large lattice sextant. What did this ‘first contact’ mean in the Dreamtime? Such a strange object needed demystifying and so was painted on the rock wall of a shelter. This shelter lies directly on Leichhardt’s path of November 1845.

The ‘first contact’ painting in Kakadu is not guns but possibly a scientific instrument, Ludwig Leichhardt’s sextant. The gun paintings came later…

Does this rock art right on Leichhardt’s path confirm his position on the 17-18th November of 1845? Is it Leichhardt’s lattice sextant painted with the impressionism of the dreaming located on the walls of a rock shelter alongside Jim Jim Creek in Kakadu National Park? What did the young men of the dreaming make of young Ludwig holding the sextant and flashing its brass work in the sun? None of the thousands of generations before them had told a dreaming story such as this.

“The real voyage of discovery consists not of seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”
Marcel Proust
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The author has had the great privilege of sitting with elders in Kakadu National Park who have passed away, but who ensured some of the Dreaming story was passed on traditionally orally, by word and with respect. Also a recent opportunity to talk about Leichhardt with a group of Traditional owners who were intrigued how ‘Snow Drop Creek’ got its name. Thanks also to George Chaloupka (deceased), our ‘white elder’, for his photos, our talks and his interest in the potential of the Marx - Leichhardt coincidence. Thanks also go to Douglas Hobbs who undertook a gruelling November field survey back to the blaze site, and to the Kakadu National Park authority for their support and interest and Anne O'Dea in particular for her patience and going the extra mile. A thank you also goes to Gretchen Ennis, Maria Huddleston, Rachel Carey, Catherine Wilkin, Judy Opitz and Geoff Bahnert all of whom laboriously edited my turgid academic writing.

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Finally, this book would not be here if it were not for the CDU Library locating their old photocopies of Leichhardt’s original 1845 hand drawn daily journal. A famous traditional owner seeing in my eyes the telling of dreaming story and to my wife Annie Whybourne for her medical search, further editing, and whose sharp eye spotted the ancient blaze up on Jim Jim Creek. She has inspired all the adventure that has gone into this book so far, and no doubt there will be more to come.
On Leichhardt’s path, Annie looking for clues in a rock shelter alongside Jim Jim Creek. (Photo D. Baschiera)

'Honey moon pool' atop Rainbow Serpent dreaming (Photo D. Baschiera)
On Leichhardt’s path Kakadu 1845: Reflections bushwalking a time tunnel

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Please note:
When referencing ‘Leichhardt's Manuscript’ the author is referencing the original hand written journal as distinct to the published and edited version which is referenced as Ludwig Leichhardt.

“…..hidden away it has pockets of a surreal beauty, where you can find natural rock gardens with crystal clear water sparkling down little water falls into delightful rock pools”. (photo Dan Baschiera)
The map is based on Ludwig Leichhardt’s original hand written field book. The campsites shown in blue are approximate. Permission from Kakadu NP authority is needed to access any campsite.
Who was Ludwig Leichhardt?

“He is possibly the single most controversial figure in the history of Australian Exploration.” (McLaren P.179)

Leichhardt, ostensibly Australia’s first independent scientist and successful European explorer, left behind an enigma in early colonial history – what happened to Friedrich Wilhelm Ludwig Leichhardt? In April 1848, with nine others, he set out on his third Australian expedition into country unknown to the white man and was never seen again...

Born on the 23rd October 1813 in a little Prussian hamlet called Trebatsch in what was East Germany, he lived a hard and poor childhood that was compounded by the later separation of his parents. Leichhardt, at an early age, then threw himself into what studies his father could sponsor. His brilliant mind impressed and so he worked his way into university. After Trebatsch and studying in a boarding school at Zaué, he then studied in the gymnasium at Cottbus, before moving on to the Universities of Berlin (1831, 1834-36) and Göttingen (1833). At Göttingen, a friendship with Englishman John Nicholson, studying medicine, aroused Leichhardt's interest in science, so he turned from his earlier study of philosophy and languages to the natural sciences. Leichhardt pursued knowledge like an addiction, for its own sake and not in preparation for any particular qualification or career. He ceased to follow a prescribed syllabus and no university degree was ever conferred upon him.

The practice of addressing Leichhardt as 'doctor' arose later out of recognition by his contemporaries that he was a man of substantive learning dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge. Leichhardt never used or recognised the title of 'doctor'. He continued a wide range of natural and philosophical studies in Paris, and London where he read widely into the contemporary discourse of the time. His research and field work came with the assistance of friends and the patronage of John Nicholson. The original plan had been for Leichhardt and Nicholson to explore Australia together, however pragmatism saw Nicholson break with his long standing friend to set up a medical practice in Scotland. With scientific adventure in his young blood Ludwig was determined to pursue his dream of exploring for science. He boarded a ship with a small chest containing some clothes, a few
books and rock specimens (all he had in the world) and sailed for the then great unknown *Terra Australis Incognita*, a continent that had recently been named Australia. In his pocket was a parting gift of two hundred pounds Sterling from Nicholson.

When he arrived in Sydney on the 14th February 1842, he had been a scholar and an academic for over a decade. Fascinated with natural science, Leichhardt was obviously a scientific romantic. Mesmerised by the works of the great German scientist explorer Alexander von Humboldt and imbued with ‘the counter enlightenment thinking’ and the romanticism of Jean Jacques Rousseau, he arrived in Australia to explore the great unknown and to observe and study its natural science. No doubt as is obvious in his writing and behaviour, he was fascinated by the ‘natural man’ of Indigenous Aboriginal society and was to note how ‘civil society’ was violating it. He was prophetic in his analysis of ‘Terra Australis’, the new Australia, and broke ground for its emerging science.

Before setting out on his first expedition in 1844, Leichhardt had spent two years learning to become a ‘bushman’. A lonely white man, he often bravely lived with Indigenous communities along the coastline of New South Wales and through Queensland, this at a time of the ongoing multiple ‘massacres’ of Australia’s first peoples. Individual white travellers were often speared in reprisal.

Leichhardt was closely exposed to this terrible underside of colonial Australian history. I believe that he was poised to reveal it and its gruesome and latent political endorsement on his eventual return to London, but as we know, he disappeared in the Australian outback in 1848.

Quite likely a man ahead of his time, Leichhardt was to see the land of Australia, ‘The *Terra Australis*’ as it was, and had been for tens of thousands of years before the ‘contact’. He was one of a few white men to see the ‘Dreaming’ at possibly its epoch, and maybe one of a small handful at that time who appreciated it, studied it, tried to learn from it and understand it as a ‘student of men’ (his words).

In many ways, he left his mark on early Australian history, not only with his profusion of writing, his journal, and the streets and buildings named after him, but also on the trees he camped under
in the outback. There with a little tomahawk he carried for the purpose, he would blaze the signature “LL” mark of his passing. Many of these blazes disappeared through bushfire and flood. However, occasionally, every now and then, one gets discovered...

Preface

Imagine stepping back two centuries and meeting Indigenous Australia while it was still immersed in the pre-contact empowerment of its ancient living culture. It was described by some as an advanced but not technical civilisation at the epoch of an aristocratic and egalitarian socialism. Yet it was described by others as an ignorant stone-age and primitive savagery.

In the context of the time and in its emergent scientific debates, it was often argued by Leichhardt’s fellow scholars that the ‘black man’ of ‘Terra Australis’ ascribed to Rousseau’s definition of the ‘natural man’ and as such essentially good and that it was ‘civil society’ as Rousseau claimed that induced the ‘savage state’. According to Rousseau, “Humanity’s natural state is innocent, happy and independent: man is born free.” (Rousseau P.158)

The English, at the time though, were to wrongly interpret Rousseau’s idea of ‘natural man’. Due to a mistranslation of the French ‘Sauvage’ which means natural and not brutish, the English were to wrongly label Rousseau’s natural man as the ‘noble savage’. Sadly the name stuck.

Leichhardt, an exemplary linguist, spoke six languages and was very competent in French. While living in 19th century Paris, he studied Rousseau and I suspect the study of what Rousseau claimed formed a significant part of Leichhardt’s Australian agenda. However, when he landed in Sydney in 1842 he quickly learned to keep this knowledge and philosophy very close to his chest. Any shared views with Rousseau would not have endeared him to a racist and anti-French colonial aristocracy, the very people he needed to fund his expeditionary research.

So close to his chest he kept his reading of Rousseau that Roderick whose most thorough research of Leichhardt can only note two occasional and somewhat related reflections.
‘Nature was so bounteous and the needs of these primitive people so few, that the prospect of civilization’s overwhelming them depressed Leichhardt’

(Roderick p.217)

He thought that the monument to Rousseau, where the Rhone issued from the lake, was ideally placed to reflect Rousseau’s turbulent spirit.

(Roderick p.136)

Today, and with the turbulent philosophy of Rousseau in mind, we can question freely what Ludwig Leichhardt and his small team of explorers would have seen and experienced as they traversed the Kakadu of November 1845. Thankfully, we still see parts of this ancient and highly civilised society of ‘natural man’ painted on the rock shelter walls, in its languages, its songs, artwork and its complex society. Yet we must ask what would an explorer of Leichhardt’s learning have witnessed and observed before our first Australians experienced all that went with that terrible violence of colonial subjugation?

Here in this little book is a social history of mystery, a story full of reflective questions and speculation about Leichhardt, his approach, the controversy, and his disappearance. It is a story that I believe leaves one pondering Australian colonial history and the times and places experienced by “our most enigmatic explorer” (Dewar 1994).

This work also attempts to respect the values of the Dreaming where within oral tradition we find the past, present and future all rolled into one. So, as you read, you will move back and forth between the 1840s and the present day. While this may be a little confusing to the individualist controlled by commercialism and the schedule of time, on the flip side the reader who understands the Aboriginal perspective of non-numeric collectivism can be more relaxed in the freedom and the timelessness of the Dreaming and indeed the timelessness of the outback.

Written here then are reflections immersed in the outback. From under it’s ‘sit down trees’ it peers through the hazy mirages and vast horizons in an attempt to capture some of the untold story of Leichhardt, to look beyond the questions that still keep echoing back and forth from the 1840s.
Some of these questions relate to the ‘dark shadow’ of early Australian colonial history. To the massacres of thousands of Australia’s first peoples as their lands were taken from them and to then be subjugated into the ‘non existence’ of a *Terra Nullius*.

In Britain, the humanitarians of the time under Queen Victoria and Prince Albert had censured the government of New South Wales for what was happening. Recently, the Australian Prime Minister said sorry to Indigenous Australians for what had happened. In writing here I know I will upset some but encouraged by many who realise that being sorry is to also to acknowledge some of the depth of this historical and murderous Australian tragedy.

This book is dedicated to the spirit of humanitarianism that we see in the science and thoughts of people like Prince Albert and William Wilberforce who fought against slavery. Leichhardt himself, as a unique explorer, ‘a student of men’, privately voiced his concerns on what was happening to this continent’s first peoples as he sought learning and friendship from them.

It is my view that had Leichhardt survived and published a reflection on Rousseau’s claims, possibly Indigenous Australians would have been recognised in our constitution, thus destroying any implied myth of Australia being a ‘*Terra Nullius*’.

The social dysfunction we see in 4\textsuperscript{th} world Australia today, many humanitarians would argue, has at its source the political application of this lack of recognition and its resultant historical and contemporary breach of the political contract. Here is a social history that in part highlights the long term violence of this social dysfunction which has its roots in early colonial Australia. It is an ongoing story that began well before what Leichhardt describes in 1842 as the birthing of a new type of federated country similar to the USA.

Apart from Joseph Caley, Leichhardt was our first independent and all round scientist.

…*Leichhardt was the first major Australian explorer capable of recording accurate scientific data.*

*(McLaren p.193)*
Furthermore, he was to correctly predict the beginnings of modern Australia some 58 years before the 9th of July 1900, when Queen Victoria gave her royal assent to the Federal Constitution of Australia.

He also predicted the continuation of the violence and tragedy that had befallen this country’s first peoples. In remote Australia, it is now a violence of poverty and racist non-inclusion that impacts on only 0.4% of Australia’s voting population. For over a century and a half this ‘inconvenient’ collective minority, unseen by the mainstream, continues to experience a poverty caused by the difficulty capitalism has in harnessing a non commercial remote collective and subsequently an abuse of the political contract. In researching and writing this little book, I find it truly sad that well over a century ago a scientist began describing a 4th world of violent poverty. A social dysfunction ignored for over 200 years and recently hidden in the political spin of Australia as a ‘lucky country’...

Leichhardt’s path – where Jim Jim Creek flows through the sandstone of the Arnhem land escarpment. (photo Annie Whybourne)
SECTION 1 The past

1845 Leichhardt’s path and enigmatic fate

The sophistication of Australia’s ancient Indigenous culture has often given me cause to reflect on what it must have been like for the first European explorers like Sturt, Gregory, McKinlay, Burke and Wills who did walk the pre-contact pathways into what we now know as the song lines of the ‘Dreaming’ (Chatwin 1988).

They, however, were not the first. The seventeenth century shipwrecks of the Dutch East India Company marooned its sailors on the west coast, thus making them the first European contact with the Indigenous peoples of what the Dutch then called a great and fearful Zuitland – Southland. Eventually, in an intriguing history of its own they give it the name land D’Endracht (Harmony) then New Holland. In its time, the Dutch East India Company lost over 100 ships through shipwreck and piracy while plying the Cape Town to Batavia leg of their legendary spice trade.

The low lying reefs and desolate scrub deserts of the West coast of Australia, first described by Dirk Hartog in 1616, spawned sea shanty myths of this fearsome great ‘Southland’ – a land of sharp spinifex and desert. The largest ship lost on this desolate coastline is thought to be linked to the myth of ‘The Flying Dutchman’. Adding to the fear was the terrible bloodthirsty experience of the ship ‘Batavia’ running aground on the reefs of the Abrolhos Islands in 1629. Other ships just ‘disappeared’. The Dutch East Indian ship the ‘Zuytdorp’ was a case in point. Disappearing in 1712, she was found 242 years later in 1954 at the base of cliffs south of Shark Bay along with evidence of her survivors who, in never being able to return to Batavia, were marooned forever in the fearful Zuitland.

What happened to these marooned sailors who were part of history’s early European contact with the Dreaming? Continuing on down through the centuries we see a ‘blonde’ colouring in Indigenous hair and ‘a Dutch temperament’, noted in the early 1900s by ethnologist Daisy Bates throughout the Indigenous communities in the Shark Bay region of Western Australia.

Then, as European history slowly unfolded in this part of the world, there emerged stories of strange plants, animals and coastlines. Explorers like Abel Tasman, William Dampier, James Cook, the
convict settlement and Matthew Flinders came next followed by the settlers. Gradually, the European population grew and forcibly took the land from the ‘black fellows’ of Terra Australis. While the early colonists settled on the coasts more and more ‘white fella’ eyes were cast toward the mysterious hinterland of this continent, pondering its potential riches. To these ponderings came stories and fantasies of an inland sea and a quest to know more of a great unknown. Sea faring explorers, British, French and Dutch had already begun the quest for the ‘great river’ or passage that would lead to this mythical inland sea.

During this early colonisation of the 1830s and 40s, with vast tracts of Terra Australis Incognita and its pre-contact Dreaming still a mystery, historical luck provided this birthing nation with a young German adventurer reading philosophy and natural science. Described in the modern day as a polymath, Frederick Wilhelm Ludwig Leichhardt was to complete in December 1845, the first successful European exploration into the vast unmapped wilderness of what was by then known as Australia. The large southern continent that had by virtue of place been named in the Greek for southern as ‘Australis’ or as the Dutch had called its Western shores New Holland. The great ‘Terra Australis Incognita’ was eventually renamed by Matthew Flinders as Australia on his maps of 1802. However, up until 1824, the great southern continent, as mentioned, had been given names such as the Land D’Endracht, New Holland, and Terra Australis. The name “Australia” had only been in common use just some 20 years before Ludwig Leichhardt set foot on its soil.

In December 1845, Leichhardt and his party of bedraggled fellow explorers surprisingly emerged from the bush south of the tiny and isolated northern settlement of Victoria, well east of the modern day Darwin in what is now the Northern Territory. They were the first to have had an insight into the interior of the continent, having successfully charted and scientifically recorded a pathway on horseback from Moreton Bay in Queensland to the bay of Port Essington in the Northern Territory. Located on the Coburg Peninsula north of what is now known as Kakadu National Park, the little naval hamlet of Victoria in Port Essington was probably the most isolated and remote military outpost in the then British Empire. The ruins and cemetery still stand there today, as a lonely antique of colonial life lost in the bush. Victoria should also stand as an unrecognised memorial to Leichhardt and his small team for
it was here that they successfully finished the first known land crossing from the ‘settled’ east coast through a vast unknown to this isolated community of Royal Marines ‘protecting’ the north of Australia for the queen, flag and empire.

It was Ludwig Leichhardt who proved that the colonised east coast of Australia could be connected to the North and in turn the East Indies beyond.

For years I have reflected on the fact that Leichhardt, on completing his epic first expedition in 1845, had walked through the Dreaming of what we now know as Kakadu National Park.

Kakadu is remote and in some places still pristine. Some surviving Leichhardt campsite blazes, where he had carved his LL initials into a nearby tree, had to be out there somewhere. Leichhardt was known to carve a blaze at every camp. The puzzling question was why had none ever been found in Kakadu? According to his journal he had to have had at least 25 campsites in Kakadu National Park. Trees do burn in bushfires, get eaten by termites, blown over by cyclones or washed away in flood and some just get grown over, but surely there had to be some surviving blazes. After all, he did survey a path through Kakadu and his map had been published with his journal. So why the mystery, why had no blazes been found? It was a question that was to perplex me until I found a possible reason - a reason that led me to write this book and add my controversial hypothesis as to why Leichhardt disappeared.

My wife Annie, and I, know Kakadu National Park well, within the access restrictions maintained by the park authorities and the Traditional Owners of the land. We know that there are isolated areas of Kakadu which have had minimal human contact over the past one and a half centuries. One area is the ancient sandstone escarpment of the Arnhem Land plateau. If there was a Leichhardt blaze surviving it had to be on his path somewhere on this ancient sandstone and crevassed plateau. A number of journal entries in November 1845 record their tracking across the superheated labyrinth of a sharp sandstone rock desert with despair. The harsh environment was nearly, but not quite, his nemesis.

After undertaking a lot of research, trying to find his track on the plateau and his entrance into Kakadu, and getting frustrated because nothing was reading accurately, I began to realise that
there were significant flaws in the ‘official’ and published map of Leichhardt’s route. This is the ‘Arrowsmith map’ that was originally published by the government in 1847. The map was also a puzzle for other researchers such as Glen McLaren (1997 p.564 -569) and Judy Opitz (2000 p.75).

Realising that something was wrong, I turned to Leichhardt’s handwritten notes and hand drawn maps. Thankfully an old copy of these was in the ‘rare books’ section of the Library at Charles Darwin University. They were found while I was doing my preliminary searches. I could not believe my luck. The original hand drawn maps and sketches actually superimposed themselves onto the satellite imagery of Google Earth. This combined 19th and 21st century data then easily merged into a modern topographic map. With my experience of Kakadu, it gave me what I hoped finally was a congruent set of coordinates. Nowadays, like all else it seems, these hand drawn sketches are also on the web.

In mid 2008, Annie and I bushwalked above Jim Jim Falls with the objective of finding a Leichhardt blaze as this would help fix Leichhardt’s path. To this end we succeeded and as a result I can reflect further into the mystery of Leichhardt’s legacy. If it were not for Annie, whose sharp eyes made out the ancient “LL” scar on a tree amongst many, and Leichhardt who carved it in 1845, this story would not have been written. When we found the blaze it felt surreal, as if Leichhardt had reached out to touch us from behind the veils of history.

Sitting on the banks of the Jim Jim Creek that day, enjoying the shade of the trees clustered around the large billabong of what is still an excellent campsite my mind wandered back to the time Leichhardt may have sat in this very spot. The water is as smooth as glossy flat silk reflecting the trees and sky, the air hot and still.

Behind him Leichhardt may have heard Calvert and Roper mutually cursing the rock country they had covered in recent days past while the others chopped fire wood and set up camp. Soon the scent of a campfire would drift into his thoughts. So far this magnificent adventure into the unknown had thrown up many challenges for the team, and now in this terrible but beautiful sandstone rock his thoughts would have wondered on where they were. Exhausted and running out of supplies would they survive?
Three years later Leichhardt’s failure remains one of the main mysteries of Australian exploration history. In 1848, on his third expeditionary attempt, this scientific explorer, together with his well equipped and armed team, simply vanish into the outback. He was going to look further south from where he sat on the banks of the Jim Jim Creek that sunny November day in 1845. Where others thought there might be a great inland sea he was going to look for what he believed might be a ‘collar range’, a plateau of mountains running east to west across the Northern interior. He suspected that the watershed of these mountains in some measure fed the rivers he had crossed on this the first expedition. Therefore crossing further south than he had in 1845 it would be a case of walking along its northern slopes in a westerly direction watering from stream to stream (Bailey p.254). The very ambitious plan was to use the northern rivers to cross the continent from Queensland to the Swan River colony (Perth).

We now know a ‘collar range’ as such does not exist. What Leichhardt did find on the last expedition continues feeding the mystery. I believe it was the then unknown and impassable Great Sandy Desert, a desert of sand, scrub and spinifex that emerges in
the hinterland of one of the hottest parts of Australia and cuts through to the coast. For Leichhardt it would have been a waterless barrier of horrifying proportions. The outback was to swallow the nine (possibly ten) men, their livestock and equipment ‘without a trace’. The author John Bailey writes:

\[
\text{Perhaps the most intriguing mystery of the final Leichhardt expedition is that only one piece of its equipment has ever been found. After all, his pack animals carried bags bulging with items likely to endure for decades...}
\]

(Bailey 2011 p.334)

That piece of equipment is the brass plate described below:

![Image of brass plate](image)

The brass plate that was removed from an old gun butt found wedged in a baobab tree in the Kimberly on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert near the border between WA and the NT. This is now confirmed as the only surviving artefact of the mysterious 1848 expedition. Was this how far Leichhardt got, was it an item traded, did he go further, is there a pile of remains somewhere nearby, was it spears, was it poison, was it a lack of water, was it a combination – who knows? (Courtesy Australian National Museum)

What happened to Leichhardt? To this ‘prince of explorers’ as he was dubbed by journalists at the time. (Roderick 1988 p.245, Bailey p.251) How could a party of well-equipped and experienced bushmen (and Leichhardt was very experienced by this stage) disappear so totally that we have absolutely no clue as to where their bones lie? We only have the vastness and the shimmering horizons of the great Australian outback.

Through the haze, the dust and the sun-drenched mirages, enigmatic questions continue to haunt the pathway and the tracks that Leichhardt blazed through the bush of Terra Australis. From the northern wetlands to the deserts of the centre there are stories told of a party of white men perishing but all of these are without
hard evidence. They are just stories, tantalising theories, some based on circumstantial evidence. The theory of Leichhardt’s possible ‘flour bag’ assassination written herein is also a story like so many others in the outback and told with a good ‘billy’ tea and a pinch of salt over countless campfires.

Other authors like Bailey, Simpson and Roderick also acknowledge the many stories. Bailey postulates a number of possibilities, in one he described the party following a seasonal river into a desert which then disappeared leaving the party to scatter in a fatal thirst. He described Leichhardt awaiting his fate sitting on a sand dune smiling as a sandstorm buries him alive (Bailey 2011p. 347). Roderick favours his theory that Leichhardt was murdered by an Indigenous attack at the Wantata waterhole in south west Queensland (Roderick p.500). The social violence of his time however has me favouring a political removal. There are many stories.

Certainly, all we know is that on the morning of the 5th of April 1848, Ludwig Leichhardt and his party of six white men (a seventh white man may have joined later) and two Indigenous men had ridden out of Alan Macpherson’s station near Mount Abundance on the Cogoon. This, at the time, was the last outpost before the white man’s unknown.

When the bush closed behind them to the sound of pack saddle squeak, whip crack, hoof beat and bell tinkle we would have seen the expedition’s twelve horses, thirteen mules, fifty bullocks and two hundred and seventy goats starting to move into the outback. There was possibly that last vision of Leichhardt, upright in his saddle, all proper in collar and tie, with his gangly long legs and boots dragging the stirrups through the dew of the taller scrub grasses. His horse with steaming nostrils now leaving a shadow in the hoar frost as the sun rose just after dawn. Then they were gone.

In reading about Ludwig Leichhardt, my research seems to have unpacked some very intriguing ‘coincidental’ bits of Australian colonial history. These I have tried to highlight here by putting pen to paper. What emerges now, with the benefit of hindsight, is a little puzzling and what has been written of this early period of settlement history seems, in Leichhardt’s case, to unravel into a conspiracy theory of its own accord. Despite his lack of means, it
would appear that in the plethora of letters, issues, massacres and political intrigues that surrounded him he was trapped in a social geography probably far more sinister than any natural geography he was to encounter in the outback.

Leichhardt left the first tracks in what was to be ‘Australian’ exploratory research and scholarship, a work for which he was awarded recognition in both London and Paris. However in doing so a conspiracy theory appears to swirl its smoke around him and the colonial government of the time. We see it through the expert control of Phillip Parker King, a sitting member of the Legislative Council, as he befriends Leichhardt, then dominates, edits and publishes Leichhardt’s and possibly one of Australia’s earliest scientific documents. This is Leichhardt’s journal of the 1844/45 expedition - the famous ‘Journal of an Overland Expedition from Moreton Bay to Port Essington.

At the time, the editing and publication of his journal was seen as an ideal support by the colonial government for Leichhardt and the colony. Also Phillip Parker King in the context of the time and colonial ethos would have seen his editing as guidance. However, the colonial government of NSW with mysterious reason had not sponsored Leichhardt and so here we also appear to have a recorded political control of science and of knowledge from the hinterland. Is this not a key element in most of history’s conspiracies? Was there a hidden agenda of minimising the Indigenous record in this ‘editing’?

The reading of Leichhardt’s original hand written manuscript of his published journal is very interesting. It is a lengthy work that describes mood and feeling, with certainly more description of his Indigenous contacts than what was published. In his original writing, Leichhardt was making a longitudinal effort throughout the manuscript to emphasise the genteel support and care he received from all the ‘natives’, as he described Australia’s first peoples. While this is somewhat paternal and often using terms common at the time such as ..."their gins (women) were not with them”, apart from the loss of Gilbert (which he does not elaborate on) he recorded a solid description of civilized relationships throughout. His original writing casts his first contact with Indigenous Australians in a positive light. His words impart a strong sense that these are good people who duly cared and shared with us. This sense of caring commune is quite absent in the edited and
published work. In one example, Leichhardt describes a
corroborree being held to lift the spirits of him and his men as they
neared Port Essington. In the final days the team’s mood was
sullen and frustrated. He describes the didgeridoo and the party
given for them but all that is published is a bland description of a
ceremony and the didgeridoo. This ‘blunting’ of originally described
Aboriginal ‘generosity and goodwill’ is constant throughout the
published journal. At times the manuscript is hard to read
underneath all of Parker King’s deletes and edits. In short and in
comparison to what was published I found that the original
manuscript was grossly manipulated. I can certainly understand
Leichhardt’s displeasure about this – personally, I would have
been furious.

While we must bear in mind that the journal was published during
the oft unseen and unwritten agenda of massacres and the forced
taking of Indigenous lands in the early decades of Australian
colonial history between the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s. I ask why
such a dearth of Indigenous reference in Leichhardt’s published
journal when he literally could have written many books on the
subject? This is really my primary question of many, and like the
mystery of Leichhardt’s story itself, none generate any answers,
just more questions.

In an overview of the early Australian history of settlement and
expansion, I believe we may need to reposition the Leichhardt
enigma. Not in the weeds and entanglement of what appears to be
the deliberate controversy that surrounds him. There are
criticisms such as his poor leadership and lack of ‘mateship’ which
appear true. However, claims of inaccurate navigation and poor
bushmanship are blatantly untrue. Keeping the Leichhardt
discussion distracted by negatives and tangled in the weeds it
seems has hidden some of the more political, murderous and
contentious social issues of the time, such as the unofficial support
for ‘ethnic cleansing’. I ponder - had Leichhardt survived and
published freely in London an uncensored and fuller account of
Australia’s ‘noble savage’ – or indeed ‘natural man’ - would
science under the then auspice of Prince Albert have called for
and supported the recognition of Indigenous people in the future
Australian Constitution? Did Leichhardt, in fact, represent a threat
to the concept of a ‘Terra Nullius’?
While working with Leichhardt’s published material on Kakadu when trying to find his LL blazes, I noted both a lack of congruency with the coordinates in the geography and a real paucity in written Indigenous demography. The data before me had to be skewed. This led me to the conclusion that the publications on Leichhardt’s work, his published map which was produced from his notes by Captain Samuel Perry, and his published journal, were not ‘quite right’. This suspicion was finally realised when, based on the clue of a large “silver” waterfall and an accurately scrawled map within his unpublished field book, as Roderick had assumed before me, I identified Jim Jim Falls as his calculated exit point from the Arnhem Land escarpment.

*The creek formed a fine waterfall of very great height like a silver belt between rich green vegetation behind and above which the bare mountain walls become visible.*

(Leichhardt’s Manuscript p. 391)

It was the clue which led Annie and I to a Leichhardt campsite, a place in the remote outback where he had blazed a tree by a Jim Jim creek billabong on the night of the 16th of November 1845. Interestingly, there was a difference of over 30 kilometres between Leichhardt’s original coordinates and the published ‘official route’ that he was supposed to have taken.

Once we had established the identity and dated the blaze, we knew we had discovered the first Leichhardt blaze in Kakadu, after a century of people looking for one. We now knew that contemporary Australia finally had an accurate link to this explorer’s true pathway through the pristine beauty of Kakadu National Park, although I suspect some traditional elders of the Gagadju, in years past, knew of Leichhardt through the handed down narratives.

What did Kakadu look like in 1845? We can only imagine. There must have been huge flocks of birds, a sky filled literally with vast moving clouds of geese and duck, trees everywhere dense with parrots, cockatoos and a cacophony of bird call in the dawn. In the rising sun, colourful Gouldian finches, first described by Gilbert on an island in Van Diemen’s gulf (Spillett p.72), would have sparkled through the grass lands, the turquoise hooded parrots would have caught the eye flitting from their termite castle nests. There would
have been bright redwing parrots flashing in the woodland. The flood plains would have been laced with corellas and swarms of green budgerigars. Leichhardt also described a sonorous sound coming from all the ‘native companions’. These would have been the flocks of the dancing grey cranes we now call the brolga. He and his party would have no doubt have seen flocks of thirty to forty dancing in the dawn.

As the dawn melted into the intense heat of November, the pre-monsoon ‘gunumeleng’ season would dominate the day with its hot silence. Slowly the sun would pass across the top of the paper bark trees raising a scent of honey from their blossom and the shadow of man and horse would lengthen. Then on worn creaking saddles with the sweat and flies no longer trickling into their eyes Leichhardt’s men would look up in the relief of a cool late afternoon.

In the distance a boiling thunderstorm would be painting grey shades on its horizon and cracking them with the intermittent flashes of Namarrgon, the lightning man. Then a minute or two later a deep but gentle rolling thunder would be heard.

On the opposite side of the sky, a reddening sun would start to spread its orange artistry through the outback dust. In the spectacle of a Kakadu evening, with its sky split between thunder and sunset, the weary and worn party of Leichhardt’s first expedition would have made camp in a patch of trees near a large and beautiful billabong crammed with lilies. Taking their water for the evening billy they may have noticed it had a slightly yellow tinge.

Settling into the camp next to these yellow waters, Leichhardt was to describe the land as if it was alive, but sadly today it is nothing like what it must have been.

The Indigenous community in Kakadu National Park today do number in the hundreds. Leichhardt was to describe a density of ‘black fellows’. However the original peoples had dropped substantially by the 1900s, as some say, to smallpox but also to leprosy. Again, I have to wonder about all this. The smallpox was known to have killed thousands of Aboriginal people after European contact, but in the north after hundreds of years of contact with Macassan trepang fishers why did these scourges
suddenly appear, where did they come from and why as late as 1901 was no protection offered? Did the ethnic cleansing of the massacres also include a biological element, a question that does not escape me.

For the Indigenous people that Leichhardt met and was helped by and their immediate descendants, there has been much pain and agony. It is as if Leichhardt had a chance to look beyond the drawing of the ‘white man’s’ curtain of ignorance on an ancient dreaming. Certainly, it is only Leichhardt’s limited descriptions that give us a glimpse of what it must have been like. John McKinlay, the next explorer to follow him into the Alligator rivers basin, did so in 1865, but saw nowhere near the number of people as Leichhardt did, only some smoke in the distance. When contact had been made, he then experienced ‘native aggression’ near the East Alligator river. What had happened in the decades after Leichhardt?

Kakadu has been plundered by hunters, bird trappers and armed bored soldiers during the Second World War. Then, closely followed by land cruiser, pump action shotgun, mining and bus, a bitumen road now cuts across the ancient timelessness of Kakadu National Park.

However Kakadu is resilient and, despite the cane toads “White Man’s Dreaming”, you can get a few hints of what the country was like in its original state up on the escarpment or in areas near the South Alligator river such as the Yellow Waters billabong. This was where Leichhardt was to camp on the 26th of November 1845, out under some paperbark trees on the flood plain, near to where the ‘tinnies’ (aluminium fishing boats) fish and the tourist boats cruise today.

Back in the November of 1845, Leichhardt and his men had trudged through the bush along Jim Jim Creek and then down onto the flood plains to camp under the paper barks just back from the Yellow Waters lagoon. As the sun lowered to the continuous call of thousands of geese lifting off the flood plain the small team pitched camp and saw to the livestock. The evening twilight would have been filled with the haunting of numerous didgeridoos as they droned out from all the campsites around them.
The survivors of the Alligator rivers flood plains now live in private communities and the didgeridoos, while still used in ceremony are also found in the tourist stalls and in backpacker camps droning to the clink of six packs. As much as we like Kakadu it is no longer as Leichhardt and his team saw and heard it.

Sunset on Yellow Waters in 1845 would have been a prehistoric experience. Imagine all the campfires giving rise to the multiple sounds of an ancient stone-age culture drifting across the flood plains. There would have been the clicking of clap sticks in beat to ancient songs and the haunting didgeridoo. All of this would have been in harmony with the thousands of magpie geese calling as they roosted in the trees. Then, as the peach and blue colours of the tropical twilight reflected on the mirrors of all the billabongs and they deepened to a red brown, a sudden whistling sound would mark a cloud of duck settling. In the trees way behind, the faint shrilling of roosting lorikeets mixed with the last crackling rattle of the darter bird perched on an old tree stump with wings raised, its silhouette there amongst the lilies. Night would have fallen rapidly to the call of the cicada. In the moonlight, as they settled into their swags, the whistling sound of low flying geese still migrating along the river would have been broken by the eerie wail of the stone curlew. Then more ominously over in the billabong nearby they would have heard the sound of a thousand kilogram splash and know a crocodilian dinosaur had warned off a rival. Hearing this, Leichhardt's men would have been uncomfortable knowing their ammunition was now down to a handful of slugs.

In a smoky fire lit camp, off in the distance, to the beat of a faint clapping stick and in a language from 40,000 years ago, there was another chanted song. The foot beat of a dance and the body paint told a story well into the dark, possibly a story of the strange white men astride the large dingoes seen that day.

On leaving Sydney, my companions consisted of Mr. James Calvert; Mr. John Roper; John Murphy, a lad of about 16 years old: of William Phillips, a prisoner of the Crown; and of "Harry Brown," an aboriginal of the Newcastle tribe: making with myself six individuals.......... I was after much reluctance prevailed upon to make one change, - to increase my party; and the following persons were added to the expedition:--Mr. Pemberton Hodgson, a resident of the
district; Mr. Gilbert; Caleb, an American Negro; and ‘Charley’, an aboriginal native of the Bathurst tribe.

(Introduction, Leichhardt’s Journal 1846)

While Gilbert joined just prior to departure two, of the above, Hodgson and Caleb, were to return home as Leichhardt rationalised supplies in the first few weeks out of Moreton Bay. Eight were to continue on and into Australian history. By the time they had come to the land we now know as Kakadu, one of them, Gilbert, had been killed in a mysterious spearing, so seven ‘spirit’ men on horseback moved across the flatness of the South Alligator river’s flood plain. Five of them were white, spoke with a very strange song line and carried spears of thunder. In the decades that were to come forty thousand dry seasons of dreaming were about to drastically change...

Paperbark trees still lace the billabongs and the path Leichhardt and his men walked on as they crossed the South Alligator river flood plains in the following days. Trudging through the soft underfoot they headed north alongside the river. In the distance, they saw the fearful rocky escarpment they had recently climbed down. Whilst still visible in the shimmering midday sun, it was, with its memory of Jim Jim Creek, thankfully receding into the blue of distance. All would have been quiet in the heat except for the occasional flock of corellas cackling and musing above them like they still do today in the rich shade offered by those paperbark trees.
The view atop Jim Jim Waterfall looking out to the South Alligator river valley, where Leichhardt camped the night by himself so he could take in the view with his sextant and gain some respite from the difficulties he had with his team leadership.

Realising that he had to be looking at the Alligator rivers catchment and the pathway to Port Essington, he would have known at that moment his was going to be the first successful European hinterland exploration of what was then still known as a Terra Australis - “…when suddenly the extensive view of a magnificent valley opened before us.”  (Photo Douglas Hobbs, site survey 2008)
Before the flood plains

Well before they reached Kakadu and the South Alligator rivers flood plains, Leichhardt’s party were already exhausted. On a latitude some 300 miles south of Port Essington the sandstone ‘and broken rock desert’ of the Arnhem Land escarpment had emerged ahead of them. In their threadbare clothing and with limited supplies, the barrier before them as they approached what we now know as Kakadu National Park would have been as fearful as it was heartbreaking.

Out of the scrubland they were walking through, they would have come to the first sandstone outliers more and more frequently. Slowly the land and the ground beneath them would have changed into a large and fearsome sandstone maze.

...our path was intercepted by precipices and chasms, forming an insurmountable barrier to our cattle.

(Ludwig Leichhardt 5 November 1845)

I had a most disheartening, sickening view over a tremendously rocky country. A high land, composed of horizontal strata of sandstone, seemed to be literally hashed, leaving the remaining blocks in fantastic figures of every shape; and a green vegetation, crowding deceitfully within their fissures and gullies, and covering half of the difficulties which awaited us on our attempt to travel over it.

(Ludwig Leichhardt 11 November 1845)

It was in this harsh rock country that Leichhardt had to slaughter one of the remaining cattle - a favourite and gentle all white cow who had been struggling with bleeding hoof and was now all ‘knocked up’. Camped next to a creek that night, her name was to be forever immortalised. High on the Arnhem land escarpment, in a grassy meadow there is a beautiful flow of water with little tinkling waterfalls that Leichhardt named as ‘Snowdrop Creek’.

The banks of the creek, which I called snow drop’s creek after the bullock I had killed were grassy and open.

(Leichhardt’s Manuscript p.382)
While the plateau is extremely rugged, hidden away in deep chasms there are pockets of relic monsoon forest of a surreal ‘Jurassic’ beauty, where you can find natural rock gardens with crystal clear water sparkling down little waterfalls into delightful rock pools. On the top of the plateau, however, you walk on a lofty high architecture in ancient natural sandstone that can turn with sudden betrayal into a sheer 200 metre deep trench often hidden in a pocket of vegetation.

In the middle of the day, the burning tropical sun with its magnified heat radiating up from the grey sandstone draws so much sweat your wet clothes cling to you. The sweet thick scent of Spinifex dries your nose and all around shimmers in bright super hot sunlight. It is a landscape that clicks and wavers, where rocks take on every shape and size. Yet despite the hot and humid temperature, particularly in November when Leichhardt's party passed through, two of the Indigenous rock art sites that have been found nearby paint the gun as a spear and depict the eccentric Prussian in forty degree heat still wearing his necktie.
We travelled nine miles north-west by north; crossed numerous rocky creeks, and some undulating country; and had a most distressing passage over exceedingly rocky ranges. At the end of the stage, we came to a large Pandanus creek, which we followed until we found some fine pools of water in its bed.

(Ludwig Leichhardt 16th November 1845)

In his original field book, Leichhardt noted the “exceedingly rocky range” on his path just before he intersected a big creek flowing from the east (Jim Jim – Leichhardt’s hand drawing of this intersection is on the book cover). This was the 16th of November 1845, his final day of despair before he saw his potential escape from the sandstone country late the following morning. It was at this creek junction that Annie discovered the old Leichhardt blaze carved into a tree on the northern bank of Jim Jim Creek.

Forced westward by the unrelenting stone but unknown to the expedition, the sandstone escarpment was to be their last real barrier before they escaped along Jim Jim Creek to reach the flood plains of the South Alligator river. Confirming his longitude when he reached the mouth of the South Alligator River, Leichhardt turned the team east. Then with some deviation along the East Alligator River due to crocodiles and the river’s girth, he was finally able to cross it near Ubirr. This shallow crossing enabled him to then take a north eastern track into the Coburg Peninsula and finally onto the Victoria settlement in Port Essington.

The turning point and a year overdue

Early on the morning of 17 November 1845, Leichhardt and his team had set out from this camp little knowing what was going to confront them. In total surprise and amazement they had come to the precipice of a huge valley just before noon.

There were many high falls in the bed, which compelled me to leave the creek, and proceed on the rising ground along its banks, when suddenly the extensive view of a magnificent valley opened before us.

(Ludwig Leichhardt 17 November 1845)
This valley is as wide as it is beautiful. Leichhardt was looking out from on top of the Jim Jim Falls toward a curving outlier, a peninsula of sandstone escarpment, sweeping north westerly into the valley of the South Alligator river from well south of Jim Jim Creek. Today we know the valley of the South Alligator River as a vast mix of wetland and woodland. Its intermittent opposite boundary is indistinct, lying somewhere beyond the West Alligator river system well over his horizon. Leichhardt was not to know this, but he knew by any approximation of his longitude that it was at this point he had to turn north. There were too many indicators coinciding. His navigational plan would have included finding the Alligator rivers catchment, and he knew any one of the Alligator Rivers and in particular the East Alligator mouth would give him a direct bearing for Port Essington, and Victoria! The valley before him had to be the catchment of at least one of these rivers and I believe he suspected, correctly, that it was the South Alligator River.

In a starving fear, Leichhardt and his team had struggled through the deadly maze of sandstone in what we now know as the Arnhem Land escarpment to finally succeed in emerging atop of the falls on the 17th November 1845. Its rugged access has preserved this part of Kakadu and so Leichhardt’s pathway above the Jim Jim Falls still looks today as he saw it then. When Annie and I climbed up the falls looking for his campsite of the 16th November 1845, we were in effect walking through a time tunnel. In ascending the steep cliff face of this magnificent waterfall, we saw what he saw. Little has changed in this eternal part of Kakadu with its relic rainforests and blue butterflies that skip in the air in front of your nose. Leichhardt was the first white man to walk through it.

Standing above the Jim Jim falls, with the water thundering beneath, one can easily step back a century and a half. The view is stunning, but then so was Leichhardt's achievement.

The Jim Jim creek flows as a pristine ribbon of blue into the valley of the South Alligator river. This ‘big creek’ had given Leichhardt a rocky but watered pathway out of some of the most rugged terrain in Australia. By November, as the wet season hovers, the sandstone country is a demoralizing rocky terrain sweltering in tropical heat and humidity. The season is called the ‘build up’ and is debilitating.
Leichhardt must have made his November 17-18 1845 journal entries with an immense sense of relief and perhaps real joy, for below him, according to his estimated longitude, would have to be a critical target of this expedition. A river valley of this size just had to contain one of the three large and supposedly parallel northern flowing Alligator rivers, the mouths of which had been charted by Captain Phillip Parker King during his coastal survey between 1818 to 1822. A brave effort given his ship was a coastal cutter of some 17 metres called the ‘Mermaid’ with a crew of 19. He like other explorers was also looking for a great river or passage to the great mythical sea believed to be in the centre of the continent.

Kakadu National Park is the only national park in the world with a complete river system contained within its boundary. This is the South Alligator River named by Phillip Parker King possibly on either the mistaken assumption that it contained alligators or that he was using the old name for saltwater crocodiles. A story goes that he was greatly embarrassed when Leichhardt corrected him, for in his field notes he describes the estuarine crocodile.

Leichhardt had been seeking any one of these rivers to provide what navigators now call a ‘handrail’ - a bearing toward Victoria in Port Essington, a fledgling naval post of Royal Marines stationed in young Queen Victoria’s remotest colonial outpost. This was the goal of Leichhardt’s first expedition in the years 1844/45 and now they were well over a year late and well behind his original estimated time of arrival. In short they had already been given up as another doomed party.

Before leaving Sydney, Leichhardt was told that his was a foolhardy expedition and that his party would perish. He even noted some of these comments in his journal. Yet, atop Jim Jim Falls on the 17th of November 1845, these fears must have dissolved for despite all odds he had to know he now stood within grasp of victory.

A large river, joined by many tributary creeks coming from east, south-east, south-west and west, meandered through the valley; which was bounded by high, though less precipitous ranges to the westward and south-west from our position; and other ranges rose to the northward.

(Ludwig Leichhardt 17 November 1845)
We again found ourselves at the brink of that beautiful valley, which lay before us like the Promised Land.

(Ludwig Leichhardt 17-18 November 1845)

The cliff face of Jim Jim Falls is truly formidable. Leichhardt and his men spent their time on that memorable afternoon in 1845 trying to find a way down the boulders and ledges of the imposing precipice and waterfall confronting them, finally in failure retiring back upstream a piece in order to try again in the following days.

“…the narrow gully, with perpendicular walls, sunk rapidly into the deep chasm, down which the boldest chamois hunter would not have dared to descend”.

(Ludwig Leichhardt 18 November 1845)
Atop the precipice

Leichhardt detached himself from the others on the evening of the 18th November 1845 and camped by himself out on one of the flat grassy ledges overlooking the cliff face and the rainbows in the waterfall. He was enjoying what we now know as one of the most beautiful views of Kakadu. The occasional enchanting wailing cry of the black cockatoo would have swept up to him through the thunder of the falling water, hauntingly calling from the valley below.

Leichhardt had arrived in Australia with the particular ambition of exploring for science. To do this he knew he had to train as a bushman and with limited funds he needed to gain sponsorship from the government of New South Wales and support from the settlers. For was he not going to be surveying into the hinterland for the government, the economic benefit of the new colony and path finding a way for livestock and goods to be driven from the eastern to the northern coast?

The lack of any government exploratory interest perplexed Leichhardt. They delayed funding to Mitchell’s attempt who was the Government surveyor and had no funds for a private operation such as that proposed by Leichhardt. While it is argued that the ‘lack of funds’ was due to his Germanic origin, I believe it is more possibly a result of Leichhardt’s year long agency living with Indigenous people in the bush, so as to self train and learn the bushcraft he needed to know. I suspect he knew this behaviour had alienated him from the ‘colonial aristocracy’ before he could position himself for expeditionary work. So possibly a real reason why no help came from the colonial government was because here we had an obvious ‘nigger lover’ with the hidden politics of a trouble maker. Why sponsor a man studying the ‘savage’ black fellow and trying to learn from him when the black fellow was vermin, a pest and a nuisance that needed exterminating? With the ten year old Myall Creek massacre fresh in the colonial mind and the ‘outrage’ it caused when London demanded the judicial pursuit of the perpetrators what further trouble would this German cause with London? Would it not best suit the colonial ambition of taking land from these savages if he just ‘disappeared’ like all the other dreamers who had ventured into the outback?
On reading the original manuscript I believe when Leichhardt finally made it through to Port Essington, he did it with the help of the Indigenous clans from the South Alligator onward. Absolutely exhausted his team at that stage would have been staggering forward. Interestingly Leichhardt acknowledges this help by the clans of the Alligator region in his original handwritten manuscript. However as one can expect with the racist ethos of the time there is no published record in the journal of the ‘black man’ helping a ‘white man’ explorer with any civilised concern.

Sadly, Captain McArthur, the serving commandant at Port Essington for most of its ten year existence, blunted Leichhardt’s great achievement in exploratory history. Instead we can read a blinkered colonial arrogance of an insular lonely life guarding the bushland of Northern Australia. No doubt influenced by the negative remarks Leichhardt’s team had for their leader’s concerns about Aboriginal people. McArthur enmeshed in the racism of the time demonstrates an obvious dislike for Leichhardt and his politics.

“Captain McArthur was not at all impressed with Leichhardt, who during his stay must have given cause for McArthur to consider him a thin skinned radical. He reported to England that Leichhardt was not deficient in talents, but in politics he considered him to be of the very lowest stamp. Bitter, virulent, malicious, dishonest, shifting and mean.”

(P. Spillett p.128)

Nearly two years after he threw himself into the wilderness and two months before he meets McArthur, it was a brave and tenacious man who stood atop a large waterfall pouring into the South Alligator river valley in the November of 1845. Lifting the canvas bag he wore for a hat he would have used the small sighting scope in the large lattice sextant he held so as to take in the view for his poor eyesight and possibly gain a fix on the moon if it was visible.

No doubt, a party of young Indigenous bachelors living in the high escarpment and along the sandstone creeks before Jim Jim falls would have been watching these strangers and their animals with astonishment and caution. Nothing from their dreaming stone-age civilisation had prepared them for this. While they might have been aware of Leichhardt's approach, we do not know if they revealed
themselves but by recording painted versions of the event in nearby rock shelters we know they tried to describe what they saw to each other and to their Dreaming.

Directly on Leichhardt’s path is what I believe is a painting of a lattice sextant and in a valley near Jim Jim Creek there are those paintings of a man wearing a necktie and using his rifle as a spear, the artist obviously never having seen a rifle before. In another, there is a unique painting of a man on horseback wearing a very strange head dress. Leichhardt had lost his hat earlier in the expedition and was wearing a canvas bag in its place. In all likelihood, according to the now sadly passed and revered Northern Territory Museum and Art Gallery curator and NT rock art specialist George Chaloupka, these he believed were ‘first contact’ paintings, the paintings of Leichhardt. Unfortunately, I discovered the painting of the sextant just before George passed and was not able to gain his critical analysis and insight as I am sure he would have been intrigued.

Squatting around their fire those nights, with the orange light flickering on their rock shelter in 1845 as it had done for eons, what would the young men have made of these strange white ‘spirits’ and the huge dingoes they rode. They spoke in no tongue that linked to their song lines. They wore a strange headdress, carried different metals and their spears spoke thunder. They painted these visions on the rock face to describe to their colleagues and to appease the spirits of the Dreaming. The paintings recorded Leichhardt’s path but as first contact they helped to demystify, no doubt, something they had never seen before. Little did they know that this Garden of Eden they had lived in for countless generations was soon going to change forever with introduced diseases, the horror of leprosy and ‘inoculation’ by the .303. This of course was Leichhardt’s fear. He suspected what would follow him and what Rousseau claimed ‘civil’ society would visit upon these naturally innocent people in the years to come.

We can only wonder back then above the waterfall if Leichhardt and his party knew that they were being watched, or whether there had been some contact here as there is no mention in his writing.
Among the paintings of spirit beings a painting of a man wearing a necktie while using his rifle as a spear near Jim Jim Creek. (Photo courtesy George Chaloupka, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory)

The bachelors lived atop the escarpment fishing the Saratoga and hunting the agile rock wallabies. Interestingly, on this expedition Leichhardt noted the Saratoga was named ‘Barramunda’ by the clans he encountered in Queensland and so correctly he was the first to describe the Saratoga as the Barramundi.

Leichhardt’s discovery was that of the true Barramundi – the natives called it burramunda but white men then transferred this name to the giant estuarine perch.

(Roderick p.266)

While the young unattached men lived in the high rocky sandstone country all year around, the group families they had left after being initiated lived on the flood plains and then in the dry lower rock shelters during the wet. Each bachelor was waiting to be ‘chosen’ by a young woman of age. While the process was complex she would come in a small group of other mature young women to decide which man was to be the father of her children. The chosen bachelor had to be decreed appropriate according to law. The elder man to whom the young woman had been promised earlier in her life would then give permission for the young man to join her and the group family on the flood plains. She would have her love and the father for her children. The elder would have his pension
with the much needed support for the hunt. The old man would no longer need to run down the wounded wallaby or emu. This was a marriage, a collective support cycle and a convenience for all, even for the older women as the old man waned. (From discussions the author had as a young man in the shade of shelters and sit down trees with Indigenous elders and friends who have now passed).

Watched by all these bachelors, Leichhardt, just ahead of the coming wet season, was lucky. The swollen creeks on the plateau could have trapped his party and stranded them for months with little or no food. They were to escape the ancient sandstone plateau and the flood plains before them just in time.

Atop the precipice, Leichhardt scanned the river valley that had to guide him north to the coast where its mouth would be just south west of Port Essington. Initially he may have been unsure if the valley he was looking into was that of the East Alligator river or the South Alligator river but later he suspected he was viewing the South Alligator. Finding any one of these catchments would have been exactly as he had planned in Sydney some two years before.

When finally joined by the rest of his men the next day, all that Leichhardt had to celebrate this small navigational victory was a modest dinner of some of Snowdrop’s boiled hide.

*I appeased my craving hunger, which had been well tried for twenty hours, on the small fruit of a species of Acmena which grew near the rocks that bounded the sandy flats, until my companions brought my share of stewed green hide.*

*(Ludwig Leichhardt 19 November 1845)*

Leichhardt, his men, and their stock were footsore and again had started to get short on rations as Snowdrop’s dried beef jerky had been consumed and all that was left now was her hide. Working their way through the sheer sandstone crevasses and numerous dry rocky creeks would have consumed a lot of energy. They would have been preserving their remaining bullocks, fearful they would be locked into this sandstone desert and starvation for weeks ahead. Food and game had been scarce, as was ammunition. They were already out of bird shot and were firing stones. Tenaciously, they were trying to survive off the land as
they went, and where they could. They often hunted to supplement rations as Leichhardt satisfactorily describes earlier in his log:

_We caught a bandicoot with two young ones, which gave us an excellent luncheon._

*(Ludwig Leichhardt 10 March 1845)*

Until he stood above the falls and saw the valley before them he must have been a very worried man, wondering when this labyrinth of sandstone, this “trap”, this desert of rock that he and his party had been struggling to navigate through, was ever going to end. There was nothing to hunt, nothing to survive on and no contact with the ‘natives’. The thought that he might be confronted by an impassable gorge that was going to take hundreds of miles to circumnavigate would have been one of his many fears. At least when they got to the valley below they could afford to slaughter another bullock. He knew where they were and finally had a way forward.

The party’s group mental state however was terribly low, particularly as they were all suffering from exhaustion, irritating skin infections caused by malnutrition, the relentless attack of insects and tropical fungi in the groin. The men were experiencing the acute stress of a group now locked together for over a year in the psychological gaol of their survival. The sentence they were serving for this unique type of ‘group stress’ was well past the original and planned six month release date. (Leichhardt 14 Dec 1845)

The difficult relationship between Leichhardt and his men is well recorded in both his first and then again on his second expedition. When approaching Port Essington the following month, he was to comment bitterly and famously on how glad he was going to be in getting rid of his men (Bailey p.241). What is obvious from these difficulties was that Leichhardt fixated on his science, was probably no real leader. With limited funds, he had no real choice of volunteers and his team lacked the discipline and allegiance generated even by a meagre wage. Leichhardt was criticised by authors such as Alec Chisholm and others for a lack of leadership, but to be fair one also has to acknowledge that other explorers who were well sponsored by the government could hire and fire as they saw fit. Leichhardt in leading his teams into the outback
shared no such luxury. Was it an indirect government strategy to withhold funds in order to deliberately set him up to fail? As such, this strategy may also have had a part to play in his eventual fate. Again, who knows? The question just hangs there.

One must also bear in mind that in the desire for fame and discovery, tensions in relationships did occur in other explorations during the Victorian era. In 1857, in their quest for the source of the Nile, Richard Burton and John Hanning Speke had one of the most famous ‘falling outs’ in 19th century exploratory history. At the time, nothing was known of Africa’s hinterland and both suffered great deprivation. John McKinlay and Robert Henry Edmunds, the next white men to follow Leichhardt onto the South Alligator floodplains in 1866, often argued with each other.

What we do know is that at the time of Leichhardt’s adventures in early Australia, a decade before Burton and Speke, and two decades before McKinlay and Edmunds, nothing was known of the hinterland of the great island continent. Back in 1845, speculations abounded, one of the more famous as mentioned was the existence of an inland sea. Leichhardt openly disputed the ‘inland sea’ theory believing a vast desert existed in the centre of the continent that was straddled towards its north with a mountain range, but in short, no one knew and Leichhardt wanted to find out.

Neither did they know how to explore in this country with explorers often launching government sponsored large expensive military styled expeditions that failed.

Independently John Eyre and his Aboriginal friend ‘Wylie’ however had been successful in a transition along the bight from Adelaide to Albany using a small team in 1840 and Leichhardt had noted this. He subsequently planned his expedition around the small team on horseback formula.

Now, after a year of being ‘locked together’ by the vastness of the outback his expedition, while struggling with relationships, never the less were to prove that a small team on horseback was a successful formula.

Leichhardt had developed the small exploratory team concept after spending a lot of time in the outback of NSW learning to live in the Australian bush. As mentioned, this raised colonial eyebrows as
most of this time was also spent living with the Indigenous clans who taught him what he needed to know. This was a very brave decision given the ongoing massacres of Indigenous people and their reprisals on solitary travellers of the time, but he knew it was knowledge he had to have. Critically, he had to learn the skill of following the flocks of finches, particularly the Zebra finch, as these little birds have to drink on the hour. It was a strategy also adopted by other explorers who followed Leichhardt into the dry interior. Contrary to some of the hearsay criticism of the time, he was by 1844 a sound and self-trained bushman and did not 'stumble' through to Victoria as some have jealously portrayed, with 'beginner's luck'. Unlike other government funded explorers, he had studied and well prepared himself for the rigours he knew lay ahead. The only 'stumbling' done would have been due to his poor eyesight. Leichhardt, from what he has written about this handicap, was probably 15 to 20% blind. With such poor eyesight to have undertaken these journeys, these adventures for science, he was indeed a very brave man.

Leichhardt knew that to succeed in crossing the long rugged arid distances of the outback he would need his Indigenous knowledge, and a healthy and well stocked small team on horseback with a fast ability to track the birds to water or to always return to water if none was found ahead. Critically and in sensitivity to their needs the small team and stock preserved and did not destroy the small Indigenous waterholes. This was an issue which often generated conflict and attacks on the larger exploratory parties as the large number of bullocks rendered water holes into mud and Leichhardt I suspect knew this.

_We soon met with a fine reedy water hole, with swarms of little finches fluttering about it..._

_(Ludwig Leichhardt 5th December 1844)_

The Indigenous knowledge he gained was his pathway to self reliance in the bush which differed to the larger well funded paramilitary government teams of his contemporaries, such as Mitchell, and Burke and Wills, who in the main abandoned their carts, large teams and supplies once the going got difficult. Some argue that in the case of Burke and Wills, had they respected Leichhardt’s approach in regard to Indigenous self reliance, knowledge and the support offered by Aboriginal people, their fate may well have been different.
However, other future explorers who followed Leichhardt into the outback, like Stuart, were soon to adopt his light team strategy. In 1844, as he set out for Port Essington, Leichhardt actually abandoned those goods too heavy to carry and returned two of his men to Jimbour, fearing that the expedition did not have enough rations. By any account, he was a calculating and not a reckless explorer. Nevertheless, it can also be argued that by the time he and his team reached the South Alligator flood plains, over eighteen months later, they were on their very last legs and had it not been for the help and friendships offered by the Aboriginal clans they may have never made it to Victoria.

All of this aside, and atop the precipice, Leichhardt’s immediate challenge was to get the expedition’s three bullocks and the horses, all unshod, down the 300m cliff face that stood before him. Any reader who has climbed the steep, rocky, boulder-hopping path from the base of Jim Jim Falls to the top of the escarpment would recognise that the achievement of “climbing” his horses and livestock down this precipitous face with belly in hunger is yet another unsung feat of this 19th century explorer from Germany. To save weight, he had cast his spare horseshoes into a billabong back in June whilst in the soft country of the Lynd River, a river he had named after a close friend in Sydney. Little did he know the part of his path that now lay behind him had covered some of the most difficult rock country in the southern continent.

Cleverly, using the north and western direction of creek beds, Leichhardt had succeeded in breaking through the sandstone barrier in just under 2 weeks and then taking 2 days in scaling his horses and remaining cattle down the escarpment face on 19th and 20th November 1845. He then continued following the Jim Jim Creek to the north-west until it met the South Alligator River which then turned him directly north.
Large fish betrayed their presence in the deep water by splashing during the night: and Charley asserted that he had seen the tracks of a crocodile. Swarms of whistling ducks occupied the large ponds in the creek: but our shot was all used, and the small iron-pebbles which were used as a substitute, were not heavy enough to kill even a duck. Some balls, however, were still left, but these we kept for occasions of urgent necessity.

(Ludwig Leichhardt 21 November 1845)

Back in Sydney, the young colony had already given Leichhardt and his men up for lost. On the ship returning Leichhardt and his party from Victoria to Sydney the following year, he had received news from the captain of a passing schooner.
The people in Sydney had given us up a long time ago
and that they had even made verses on our graves.
(Leichhardt in Roderick p.386)

However, here in mid to late November 1845, thousands of miles
from the people of Sydney and their prayers, he had just
descended from an ancient plateau, a precipice over which the first
rains of the coming wet season were pouring into the valley of the
South Alligator river. His fellow explorers had now suffered over a
year of deprivation and, in the preceding weeks, a fear born out of
frustration while navigating the rocky maze of the plateau stretched
out behind them. This frustration is evident in the comment
Leichhardt wrote on the 20th November 1845 in a happy reflection
following his successful descent into the valley:

The melodious whistle of a bird was frequently heard in
the most rocky and wretched spots of the tableland. It
raised its voice, a slow full whistle, by five or six
successive half-notes; which was very pleasing, and
frequently the only relief while passing through this most
perplexing country.

In looking out across that valley today I ask what had Leichhardt
and his team really experienced as they came in contact with the
Aboriginal clans of the Alligator Rivers? In November 1845 it was
the onset of the wet season, the celebration time.

A Dreaming place

The cliff face that had held them back is today officially defined as
part of the Arnhem Land escarpment in Kakadu National Park. In
the many languages of its people, one can wonder if Leichhardt
ever learnt that the cliff face, the plateau they had walked on, is a
Gagadju Dreaming of the Rainbow Serpent. Leichhardt and his
team had traversed a Dreaming site that the elders I have spoken
to understood to be the famed site of the oldest recounted story in
human history.

In the evening sun today, visitors to Kakadu National Park should
climb up to the Mirra lookout and then look eastward toward this
cliff face. There they can see the land form of the Rainbow
Serpent in all her amazing colours.
“…we observed a great number of grasshoppers, of a bright brick colour dotted with blue: the posterior part of the corselet, and the wings were blue; it was two inches long, and its antennae three quarters of an inch.”

(Ludwig Leichhardt 17 November 1845)

In the Dreaming, these grasshoppers are the children of the Lightning Man ‘Namarrgon’, coming out to greet their father. This is when he comes across the top of the escarpment to impregnate their mother, the Rainbow Serpent, with the life of his lightning and the wet season that brings it. Traditionally, when these grasshoppers appear, the bachelors in the rock country would send messages to the families on the flood plain, warning them to move to the rock shelters. It was time for the fertility ceremonies. Also here we have the oldest myth in the world telling us that lightning (electricity) gives life.

Into the Alligator Rivers catchment

Following the Jim Jim Creek into the Alligator rivers catchment, Leichhardt was still a little unsure which of the Alligator rivers he was following. So on the 24th of November, four days later, he took the time and was able to observe the star Castor and the moon through his sextant and thus calculated that his longitude placed him more westerly, confirming the South Alligator river but all the same Port Essington, he noted in his journal, had to be only 140 miles north east from where they stood.

We were according to my calculations and to my course at the South Alligator River, about 60 miles from its mouth and about 140 miles from Pt. Essington

(Leichhardt’s Manuscript, p394)

I believe Leichhardt’s decision to continue striking north along the South Alligator river would have been to test both the river system he was on and using the Arrowsmith map of Parker King’s coastal navigation a confirmation of his longitude, which in Leichhardt’s case was a very difficult formula to calculate without a chronometer. This additional distance increased his route from Jim Jim falls to Port Essington from 140 to 200 plus miles.

The navigational training he had acquired aboard ship in coming to Australia had been a great help. For now as he walked toward Port
Essington he had to complete painstaking and complex lunar longitude calculations, done with only his sextant as the chronometer had broken in the early weeks. The mathematics of calculating longitude with no chronometer and using only a sextant is a formidable task and tropical celestial observation often difficult. His favourite stars were Castor and Regulus.

In short, while retracing his path through Kakadu National Park, I found a confirmation of McLaren’s 1997 finding. Leichhardt’s navigation was not only relatively accurate (by comparison to his peers) but also a remarkable achievement given his limited means (McLaren p.199). Twenty years later, for example, Stuart in 1862 had so poorly calculated his longitude that when he arrived at the Arafura sea he thought he was at the mouth of the Adelaide River. In fact, it was the mouth of the Mary River (McLaren p.198). I strongly suspect this miscalculation was to ultimately play a part in the South Australian Government’s failure of both the settlement at Escape Cliffs and the expensively sponsored McKinlay expedition.

Leichhardt, on setting out on the Pt. Essington expedition, was going to do a survey ‘for the colony’, so we need to ask why had the colony not sponsored him ‘at the very least’ a spare set of navigational instruments? A spare chronometer to replace the one
that broke would have been of great assistance. Funding was so negligible for Australia’s first scientific expedition it could not afford a telescope. (Bailey p.128) Given the fact that Governor Gipps did not spell Leichhardt’s name right in a passing report to the colonial secretary arrogantly positioned the politics and indifference to science Leichhardt was up against. Leichhardt with help from the newspapers and sponsorship kitted out his expedition for 137 pounds sterling while Mitchell’s expedition at the same time received 2000 pounds and the famous Burke and Wills fiasco 15,000 pounds.

*Overall it was a lack of funding which drastically inhibited the scientific achievements of the 1844-5 expedition. (McLaren p.190)*

Instead, what has followed Leichhardt’s achievements into the following centuries is a litany of criticism and obfuscating innuendo. We see a highlighting of his human faults, his difficulty as a scientist with leadership and what appears to be a relentless smearing of his character. Do I detect further evidence of politics at play here?

At the base of Jim Jim Falls, just before walking through the wide open grasslands of the South Alligator river catchment, Leichhardt killed one of the last of his remaining bullocks, a sign of confidence that the expedition was nearing its goal. With the last of the ammunition, they also managed to shoot a wild buffalo after they had left Kakadu but still well south of Port Essington. This bad luck for the wild buffalo meant that one of the bullocks in the party ‘Redmond’ survived the entire journey, and as with Leichhardt’s horses was to be an unsung hero of early Australian exploration, demonstrating that cattle could be driven from Moreton Bay to Port Essington.

Leichhardt was not to reach Victoria until the 17th December 1845, nearly a full month from the South Alligator flood plains and as mentioned, 200 miles later. It was to be a month of walking across a remarkable landscape of ‘swamplands’ where Leichhardt was to comment the land had “an extraordinary appearance of animation”.

The party moved along Jim Jim Creek and at the billabongs that we now know as Yellow Waters they turned northwards along the South Alligator river until the river water started to become
brackish. Subsequently, well short of where the South Alligator river road bridge stands today and I believe on what must have been a ‘native’s’ warning, Leichhardt managed to bypass the Mamukala swamps leaving them to the east, luckily maintaining a northerly bearing on dry crumbling swamp soil alongside the river and onto the coast. This was fortuitous ‘native guidance’ which had kindly placed him on a native pathway because he and the party could easily have submerged into the massive Mamukala swamplands that were immediately to their east. They were lucky also in that the main wet season was possibly a little late in 1845 as water still had to be sought out throughout their trek across Kakadu National Park.

Leichhardt finally reached the coastal flats at the mouth of the South Alligator river on the 1st December where, with a longitudinal sighting, he confirmed his position cross referencing his longitude with the Arrowsmith map they carried. I suspect this is probably one of the most useful references gained from this map which showed the interior they had just walked through as a void. The expedition then turned east to eventually cross the East Alligator river and then on to emerge from the bush wearing their rags and surprising the small naval station of Royal Marines at Victoria.

They arrived in time for Christmas celebrations no doubt bringing some uplifting cheer to the lonely settlement. Exhausted, thin and sallow they would have been a sight to see especially as Leichhardt still wore a modified canvas bag for his hat. The surprise they generated as they slowly walked through the vegetable plots south of and then into this small hamlet would have been immense. The party had been given up for dead and lost. They were nearly a year behind schedule. Leichhardt had difficulty in stemming back the tears as he successfully concluded his epic adventure and the first European expedition into the unknown hinterland of Australia. While his team did not like him and him them, he had, being the professional he was, brought them through.

Earlier, while trudging through the ‘swamplands’ of the South Alligator river in what is now a world class tourist destination, Leichhardt’s description of the avian biomass that existed on his pathway is awe inspiring:

*Here the noise of clouds of water-fowl...*
The water had received a disagreeable sour aluminous taste from the soil, and from the dung of innumerable geese, ducks, native companions, white cranes, and various other water-fowl.

Thousands of ducks and geese occupied these pools, and the latter fed as they waded through the grass.

Since the 23rd of November, not a night had passed without long files and phalanxes of geese taking their flight up and down the river, and they often passed so low, that the heavy flapping of their wings was distinctly heard. Whistling ducks, in close flocks, flew generally much higher, and with great rapidity. No part of the country we had passed was so well provided with game as this; and of which we could have easily obtained an abundance, had not our shot been all expended. The cackling of geese, the quacking of ducks, the sonorous note of the native companion, and the noises of black and white cockatoos, and a great variety of other birds, gave to the country, both night and day, an extraordinary appearance of animation.

(Ludwig Leichhardt while heading north on the South Alligator flood plains Nov/Dec 1845)

One should note that the word for cockatoo in German is ‘Kakadu’, and a major language group on the Alligator rivers catchment is ‘Gagadju’. I often ponder the coincidence.

Sadly today, you are lucky if you see one and rarely a large flock of geese on the South Alligator flood plain, let alone regularly standing in the shadow of them as Leichhardt’s expedition must have done. While at a certain time of the year there can be a large concentration of geese at the Mamukala swamplands near where Leichhardt camped on the 27th of November 1845, these numbers today are probably small in number compared to what he would have seen.

The Magpie Goose originally occupied a vast territory stretching down the east coast of the Australian continent and into the Murray Darling rivers systems in NSW and SA. The last real breeding
kernel for this magnificent bird is now on the wetlands of the Northern Territory and Queensland. Will we ever see again the dense flocks that Leichhardt observed? The ‘intelligence’ of contemporary Australia sadly makes me doubt this.

In one of the very rare ethnological paragraphs that survived the editing of his survey notes, Leichhardt describes not only being amazed by the birdlife of the ‘swamp lands’ but also the curious friendliness and care given him by his hosts, the Gagadju speaking peoples:

“We encamped at this pool, (just south of Mamukala) and the natives flocked round us from every direction. Boys of every age, lads, young men and old men too, came, every one armed with his bundle of goose spears, and his throwing stick. They observed, with curious eye, everything we did, and made long explanations to each other of the various objects presented to their gaze. Our eating, drinking, dress, skin, combing, boiling, our blankets, straps, horses, everything, in short, was new to them, and was earnestly discussed, particularly by one of the old men, who amused us with his drollery and good humour in trying to persuade each of us to give him something. They continually used the words "Perikot, Nokot, Mankiterre, Lumbo Lumbo, Nana Nana Nana", all of which we did not understand till after our arrival at Port Essington, where we learned that they meant "Very good, no good, Malays very far". Their intonation was extremely melodious, some other words, the meaning of which we could not make out, were "Kelengeli, Kongurr, Verritimba, Vanganbarr, Nangemong, Maralikilla;" the accent being always on the first syllable of the word, and all the vowels short".

(Ludwig Leichhardt 27 November 1845)

A Vibrant Humanity

From the 24th November 1845 onward, Leichhardt continued following the South Alligator River northward. Through hot tropical sunlight the party travelled on horseback often dismounting and trudging through the soft underfoot of the paper bark trees and the open swamplands. Crocodiles sunning themselves would have splashed into the billabongs and creeks, the egrets and the stately
black necked storks would have been moving white speckles, some darting here and there as they hunted, all this in the verdant hues surrounding them. Large golden green goannas would have stood upright and tasted the very strange air of their passing before scattering at high speed into the long grass. The land around them would have been seething with life and Leichhardt’s own words “an extraordinary appearance of animation” probably falls far short of doing justice to the living environment and biomass they were then historically walking in. The day after he moved from his campsite next to the billabongs we now call Yellow Waters, he notes:

I saw here a noble fig-tree, under the shade of which seemed to have been the camping place of the natives for the last century. It was growing at the place where we first came to the broad outlet of the swamp. About two miles to the eastward, this swamp extended beyond the reach of sight, and seemed to form the whole country, of the remarkable and picturesque character of which it will be difficult to convey a correct idea to the reader.

(Ludwig Leichhardt 27 November 1845)

What had Leichhardt and his team really experienced as they came in contact with the clans of the Alligator rivers? In November 1845, it was the onset of the wet season, the celebration time. For the peoples of the flood plain we now know their “Lightning Man” was coming.

In his handwritten notes, Leichhardt recorded ‘numerous black fellows’ and the smoke from their fires. The dry season was ending but they would have still been hunting and gathering before moving to the rock shelters scattered in the escarpment in many places. Some of these we call Nourlangie Rock, Koongarra and Gubarra Creek. It was a hard, idyllic, colourful and plentiful lifestyle that presented itself to Leichhardt and his men. We now know it had a high density of Indigenous people and its ‘civil’ society would have been evidenced everywhere in Kakadu, thus thoroughly discrediting the doctrine of Terra Nullius. Yet why was this ‘civil society’, as such, not described in Leichhardt’s published journal?

The natives visited us very early in the morning with their wives and children, whom they introduced to us. There
could not have been less than 200 of them. They were all well made, active, generally well looking with an intelligent countenance.....

(Leichhardt’s Manuscript p.412 unpublished)

Why such a paucity of description on what he would have seen as some incredibly colourful and amazing experiences? Was he fearful of describing this? I am afraid my reflections do ponder on the fact that back then ‘bush whacking’, the riding down and shooting of Aboriginal men women and children, was a ‘sport’. In 1835, just ten years earlier, Governor Bourke had also implemented a doctrine linked to a ‘Terra Nullius’ context which proclaimed that Indigenous Australians could not sell or assign land. Indigenous people did not ‘legally’ exist as the legal subjugation of Australia’s first nation had well and truly been established.

*The whole country of the swamps is densely inhabited by black fellows who seem particularly to live on their wommala and small bird spear, with which they are able to hit geese and ducks flying in very great distances.*

(Ludwig Leichhardt, handwritten field notes 27th November 1845 at a location somewhere just south of the Mamukala swamps in Kakadu National Park)

Leichhardt’s handwritten field notes contain many peaceful and harmonious references such as “a fine lagoon to which friendly black fellows led us”.

The comments in his journal referring to the bird spear differ to his field notes and are somewhat of a military analysis. I wonder why these comments are so. They were also written (edited?) out of context as the observations actually occurred some five days earlier:

*It seemed that they speared the geese only when flying; and would crouch down whenever they saw a flight of them approaching: the geese, however, knew their enemies so well, that they immediately turned upon seeing a native rise to put his spear into the throwing stick. Some of my companions asserted that they had*
seen them hit their object at the almost incredible
distance of 200 yards: but, making all due allowance for
the guess, I could not help thinking how formidable they
would have been had they been enemies instead of
friends.

(Ludwig Leichardt 2\textsuperscript{nd} December 1845)

What Leichhardt actually wrote in his unpublished manuscript was
this:

...but could not help thinking what formidable enemies
they would have been, if they had been inclined to injure
us...

(Leichhardt’s Manuscript p.410)

Leichhardt’s published journal contains mainly botanical and
geological descriptions and while these were of interest, little is
written on the vibrant humanity that was all around him – why is
this when he could have written a complete book? It is a reflection
I cannot get out of my mind and this of course leads to other
questions, some of them double barrelled. Was he cautious about
writing too much ethnology and if so, what was the government
back in Sydney trying to hide? In context, we need to also ask how
much of the published journal actually contained Leichhardt’s own
words?

Sadly, by the beginning of the 1900s, according to a story handed
down by old hands, the flood plains of the South Alligator river
were virtually empty of people. The only remaining description of
this density of Aboriginal life are the words of Leichhardt and some
of McKinlay who followed him 20 years later and saw less. What
happened out on the flood plains back then is yet another mystery.
Where did the large ‘black fellow’ population of the Alligator rivers,
that Leichhardt was to hesitantly describe, go? What happened to
this vibrant community? It is a mystery in itself greater than the
disappearance of Leichhardt. There are stories of smallpox and a
report in 1901 on the horror of a massive leprosy epidemic. This
was some sixty years after Leichhardt had walked across the flood
plains in the clouds of geese and duck alongside the South
Alligator River.

Heading north and leaving the Magela floodplains to his east,
Leichhardt moved toward the coast. On the coastal mud flats of
the South Alligator River, he turned east and used the coastline to direct him to the mouth of the East Alligator River where he arrived on the 3rd December.

Seeing the necessity of heading the river, which I considered to be the East Alligator; the longitude of which was, where we first came to it, 132 degrees 40 minutes according to reckoning; I returned to the forest land, and travelled along its belt of Pandanus, to obtain a better ground for our cattle, and to avoid the scorching heat of the forenoon sun. Observing some singularly formed mountains rising abruptly out of the plains and many pillars of smoke behind them, I tried to get to them, but was again prevented by the broad salt water. We now steered for a distant smoke to the south-east by east, and had travelled fully seventeen miles on, or along extensive plains, when we perceived seven natives returning on a beaten foot-path, from the salt water to the forest. We cooed--they ran! But when we had passed, and Charley stopped behind alone, they came up to him, and, having received some presents, they showed us some miserable wells between two tea-tree groves; after which they hastened home. Our cattle were tired and thirsty, but we could give them nothing to drink, except about six quarts of brackish water; which fell to the share of our bullock. The feed, however, was rich and young, and during the night a heavy dew was deposited, many flocks of geese came flying low over the plains, which made us hope that water was not very distant.

(Ludwig Leichhardt 3rd December 1845)

In Kakadu National Park, only the paintings remain of our young man of science who in walking through the Dreamtime endeavoured to befriend the peoples he met and they in turn, would guide or light the fires whose smoke often led Leichhardt and his party to water each evening. Is this not evidence of a very civil society?

Out on the flood plains, as he and his party walked through Kakadu, he recorded contact after contact with Indigenous people yet there is limited description and analysis of what was going on around him. Surely he must have seen and heard the women
noisily departing at dawn with dogs and children in tow to gather food. All we have are surface descriptions such as:

_The natives were very numerous, and employing themselves either in fishing or burning the grass on the plains, or digging for roots._

_(Ludwig Leichhardt on the South Alligator flood plains Nov/Dec 1845)_

Yet the women waded into billabongs to feel with their feet for the rough skin of the delicious file snake and the hard shell of the turtles then with gusto would throw the catch ashore. They used the crushed leaves of the freshwater mangrove tree to stun the fish in small pools of water. The children would stick a small strand of spider’s web to the tail of the honey bee and set it free which in the early morning light would then lead them to the hollow tree trunk. Here the women would thread a piece of spear grass into the hole to taste for honey and if so the hive would be removed with a stone axe. The men in turn would hunt the geese while hidden but standing in the branches of the trees on the flood plain thus able to strike at low flying geese with long poles as they flew past. They would also use the highly accurate goose spear to take geese on the wing as described or the straight flying boomerang to break their necks as they fed on the swamps. All around Leichhardt and his men, this hunting and gathering would have been going on, yet little is mentioned in the journal. Surely Leichhardt would have been fascinated by all this industry, this work and discipline.

After finding the mouth of the East Alligator River and further confirming his longitude, Leichhardt knew he was right on track for Port Essington. In mapping his path he then followed the East Alligator River south and back inland and remarkably camped at a site next to the set of lagoons that today can be viewed from the iconic Ubirr lookout in Kakadu National Park.

*I made the latitude of these lagoons, by an observation of Castor, 12 degrees 23 minutes 19 seconds.*

_Dec. 6.--The natives visited us again this morning, and it was evident that they had not been with their gins. They invited us to come to their camp; but I wished to find a crossing place, and, after having tried in vain to pass at the foot of the rocky hills, we found a passage between_
the lagoons, and entered into a most beautiful valley, bounded on the west, east, and south by abrupt hills, ranges, and rocks rising abruptly out of an almost treeless plain clothed with the most luxuriant verdure, and diversified by large Nymphaea lagoons, and a belt of trees along the creek which meandered through it. The natives now became our guides, and pointed out to us a sound crossing place of the creek, which proved to be the head of the salt-water branch of the East Alligator River.

(Ludwig Leichhardt 6th December 1845)

Finally, on the 6th of December 1845, the first white man to enter the area now known as Kakadu National Park, left it as he crossed the East Alligator river.

While negotiating the mudflats on the other side of the East Alligator system, Leichhardt’s field book and notes correct Parker King’s earlier observation of ‘alligators’ to that of crocodiles. This was done while he spent 3 days zigzagging on the mud flats obviously trying to avoid the crocodiles with a critical lack of ammunition. It is here he recorded one of Australia’s more famous explorer understatements. He was to cite ‘large’ crocodiles in his field book. We now know back then Leichhardt and his team would have seen the saltwater crocodile in its full natural size as a true dinosaur, a massive seven metres (23 ft) in length and weighing well over a thousand kilograms. The horses, let alone the men, would have been terrified.

I find it quite perplexing that Leichhardt makes no mention of Ubirr other than a passing comment of being ‘invited to the native’s camp but refusing in order to move on’. This was Leichhardt’s last Kakadu campsite before he crossed the East Alligator River.

On visiting Ubirr in Kakadu National Park today, we realise that it is a unique village of rock shelters, complete with paintings and a ceremonial cave hall. If it is true, as Leichhardt wrote in the published journal, that he did not want to go to ‘their camp’ and bypassed it, then it would have to be one of the closest if not the closest ‘near miss’ in Australian anthropological history. For here was the Bunitj stone village in its full splendour of art, ceremony and daily living. We know now that it was an active demonstration of ancient Indigenous egalitarian civilisation.
If, in fact, Leichhardt did go to the ‘camp’, what did he and his men experience from ‘the friendly natives’ there? After all, they were to spend a full two days ‘resting’ in the location, so I find it highly unlikely that they did not enter the rock village. Why did he not write anything describing it? What was he fearful of? Here I believe he may have been trying to protect Ubirr from the ‘bushwhacking sport’ of the 1840s. Leichhardt would have been fully aware that whilst a lot of this bushwhacking killing behaviour had gone underground since the Myall Creek Massacre court case some ten years earlier, it was still a popular sport and openly written about in letters home to England as in the following case.

*The blacks are very quiet here now, poor wretches. No wild beast of the forest was ever hunted down with such unsparing perseverance as they are. Men, women and children are shot whenever they can be met with...*

*Henry Meyrick, in a letter to relatives in England 1846, in Morgan P.*

It is entirely within the realms of possibility that Leichhardt and his men were given succour and food by the Bunitj people who inhabited the rock shelters of the Ubirr village next to the East Alligator river. They were encamped nearby for two days and ‘resting’ is all that is written. Leichhardt though would have known that this unique Indigenous village was within easy ‘horse range’ of the Victoria Naval settlement at Port Essington this being the case he may have deliberately made no mention of it.

**Victoria**

Leichhardt was to end his first expedition in a beautiful and still pristine part of Australia. This was at the Victoria settlement which even today is in one of the remotest parts of the world and only accessible by sea. The ruins now lie at the southern end of an elongated bay on a Peninsula in Northern Australia. The peninsula itself named after Queen Victoria’s husband, Albert of Saxe Coburg. I wonder if on reading of Leichhardt’s success in reaching Victoria did the young queen think about what life was like for her royal marines and their families stationed there.

While living in a beautiful bay it was a military posting of boredom and banishment, a despairing life of isolation, loneliness and hardship on a peaceful edge of the empire. Destroyed and rebuilt
from cyclone and termite it was a place where her soldiers and their families suffered the fevers and endured the death of Malaria. With the typical arrogance of the times the decision to establish this outpost had failed to consult the Macassan sailors who sailed along this Northern coast. For centuries they had known of the fevers that lurked in the swamps at the southern end of the bay.

An antique outpost of colonial empire, these are the remains of the 'married quarters' where the wives and mothers lived in an isolated banishment, behind them a wilderness stretching for thousands of kilometres (photo Annie Whybourne).

In the hot humid build-up to the wet seasons from 1838 to 1849, the naval settlement of Victoria would have to have been “the hell hole of the Empire.”

Founded on a colonial whim in order to inform the world that Britain ‘owned’ Australia, Victoria at Port Essington only succeeded in “showing the flag” for ten years. Apart from the occasional visiting ship, this small community of soldiers had been virtually marooned on a northern tip of Australia. It was an ill thought out attempt to protect Australia for “the Crown” and an arrogant display of colonialism that subjugated the local and visiting Indigenous communities to a ridiculous and confusing paternalism of British law. Victoria would have served as an ideal social laboratory for the Rousseau perspective on 'natural man'. So I have to wonder if this was part of the reason why the commandant, Captain John McArthur, had little respect for Leichhardt given that his Rousseau based views must have surfaced in this setting. Certainly Leichhardt’s avoidance of military service in order to serve science would also have rankled.
Then in 1849 when all perceived threats to ‘The Empire’ had passed, and the trade and steamship routes were not forthcoming as hoped, the settlement was abandoned by the Admiralty.

It often took two days for a sailing ship to sail from the Arafura Sea through the Port Essington bay to Victoria, making it hard for passing ships to visit and resupply. The Macassans, whilst fishing and collecting the trepang, had avoided the sickness in the southern end of the bay for centuries and what little there was to trade was highly taxed by the Dutch colonial governments of their own homelands. While attempts were made to progress the settlement, sadly poor planning ensured Victoria was from the beginning never fated to succeed as part of Britain’s empire.
The Royal Marines, stood guard at the flagpole in their stiff red uniforms, and sweltered in the heat. Their cannons while protecting, thousands of miles of unchartered outback bushland behind them, had for ten years pointed out in peace across an idyllic bay. I have to wonder as they stood in the shadow of their flag whether the marines ever questioned the expense of this colonial whim. The importance of Victoria at Port Essington was to cost some 43 souls in shipwreck, hurricane and malaria (Spillett p.185). Three ships were lost through reef and storm trying to service and protect, as Spillett so aptly calls it, a “forsaken settlement”.

Today flights of hundreds of varied and red collared lorikeets, our flying flowers, visit the trees above the lonely graves left behind. Graves of those who would have been alive when in 1845 Leichhardt had emerged from the mystery of a vast unknown.

As Annie and I walked through the ruins of Victoria we felt haunted and humbled by the experience. You feel the toil in the ruins and imagine the lives of men and women who had sailed directly from their British ports to here. Walking on the road leading to the old ruined jetty we knew we were again on Leichhardt’s path.

Overlooking the wide expanse and beauty of Port Essington bay the forlorn foundation ruins of Victoria’s hospital where malaria claimed so many lives (photo Dan Baschiera).
An outback mystery

So what happened to this articulate German, who had seen, experienced and appreciated our Australian First Peoples culture at a zenith of its expression?

The expedition was only ever attacked once by Indigenous people and this was months before they reached the Alligator rivers catchment. The attack happened on the 28th June 1845, when an opportunity to befriend appears not to have occurred. In the conflict two of the party, Calvert and Roper, were injured, and one, Gilbert, was killed all during a planned spearing attack in the night.

What happened to cause the attack is unclear. There are a number of accounts. One is a suggestion that the day before, a pre-contact Indigenous hunting party was allegedly sighted stalking the bullocks by Leichhardt’s Aboriginal trackers. Before any contact had been established, it is possible this hunting party may have been seriously offended by being driven off with an ‘above the head’ gunshot. Gilbert also stated he had allegedly shot at a bird nearby, but did he? While some members of Leichhardt’s party doubted the tracker’s story, Leichhardt, I suspect, doubted both stories. Interestingly, Gilbert just before his death that night, writes that the trackers stumbled onto a nearby camp of two women and a lame old man. Rape was traditionally punished by death. So was Gilbert in fact the offender? Given he was the one fatally ‘targeted’, - ambushed emerging from the tent.

They had watched our movements during the afternoon and marked the position of the different tents and did now throw a shower of spears at the tents of Calvert, Roper and Gilbert, some few to that of Phillips and one or two to our fire.

(Leichhardt’s Manuscript p.249)

Leichhardt had constantly been suspicious of Gilbert. Gilbert had forced himself on the expedition, competed with Leichhardt for scientific specimens and had begun undermining Leichhardt’s leadership. As fate would have it, Leichhardt was to have his doubts about Gilbert’s character confirmed when the expedition finally reached Port Essington.
Leichhardt recorded that on reaching Port Essington, and announcing that Gilbert had been speared to death on the journey, an unnamed marine broke down in despair, for he had volunteered to go to Port Essington with the explicit intention of killing Gilbert when the latter had arrived there, for having seduced the marine’s sister.

(Allen P.27)

We will never know what really happened the night of Gilbert’s fatal spearing and wounding of others. Leichhardt wrote about the incident clinically, keeping his analysis to himself.

Certainly, any ‘contact’ miscue as such carries portent for a cultural conflict – it would have easily happened back in the 1840s when crossing an unknown terrain of independent lands without the permission of its powerful clans, languages, laws, rights and sensitivities.

The day before the attack, the party had also come across a series of stone rings, some with a fire in the centre. Were these sacred Bora rings as Roderick questions, and were they disturbed? Did a hoof from Gilbert’s horse scatter some of the rocks or indeed had Gilbert, ever inquisitive, dismounted and prodded around one of the rings while being watched by silent eyes full of anger hidden in the bush – who knows?

Roderick, in ‘The Dauntless Explorer’, describes a letter from Roper who, on his return from the expedition, stated that none of them had any suspicion of the evil designs of their assailants that day. Roderick concludes “that the attack was due to the disturbance of a sacred site, probably a three ring Bora ground”. He also goes on to say “Captain King, as can be seen by all who read the printed version, rewrote Leichhardt’s clinical account of the onslaught, adding phrases and sentences that converted it into a ‘Rorke’s Drift episode’”.(Roderick 1988 p.332)

Possibly Phillip Parker King described this cultural miscue as a ‘payback’ in a warlike context given the conflicts he had with the northern clans while exploring with the Mermaid. From my study and experience, collective Indigenous Australia, until confronted by white man’s capital values, had never fought a war and they never took the lands of another people. Yes, there were fights, but these were often and still are ‘justice issues’, punishments for spiritual
sacrilege or payback. In context, I actually believe the term ‘Aboriginal warrior’ is a ‘savagery’ misnomer, ‘tactical law keeper’ or ‘natural man’, I believe, being more accurate descriptions. I also believe that whilst living with the Indigenous clans under the noses of the colonial aristocracy before the expedition, Leichhardt would have recognised this anti-warlike behaviour for what it was and is – the good in Rousseau’s ‘natural man’. Since its birth in the Greco-Roman era, our ‘civil’ democracy has only had a few days of total peace. In this context, it makes an interesting comparison with the people of the Dreaming. Surely the absence of war and the prevention of environmental degradation is a true mark of civilization?

I also find it interesting that Leichhardt’s account of this attack is very basic, limited and clinical. Is it a reflection of his doubts? Did he eventually plan to write it up in full on his return to Europe? Was there a lot more to this very strange incident?

There are many who believe that Leichhardt and his final third expedition succumbed to a cultural conflict in 1848, and while this does remain a possibility, my view is that Leichhardt hardened by past experience would now have had a good ability at reading potential for and therefore avoiding conflict. There would have been few Caucasians who could have surpassed Leichhardt’s experienced respect for Indigenous people and their knowledge at the time. He was fascinated by all the languages, the complex reciprocal relationships and the impressive bush skills.

_During the next week Leichhardt spent many hours with the Aborigines, questioning them on their religious beliefs, writing down their dialectical variants of the Kamilaroi language, taking down the words of a corroboree, and making abstracts of their legends. Undoubtedly there would have been enlightening chapters on Aborigines if he had lived to write the books for which these field diaries were to have provided the notes. And it must be borne in mind that Leichhardt was no linguistic novice but was well trained in philology and had heard lectures of the leading anthropologist of his time._

(Roderick p. 203)
Reiterating again on Leichhardt’s abilities, I have often wondered if he was the subject of a politically driven smear campaign. Was the colonial governance, in not recognising Indigenous people, ‘uncomfortable’ with the possibility that this German scientist would conclude that the young colony did have an ancient Stone Age civilization in the Rousseau definition, or similar? What had he written in his journal or raised in discussion that had been edited out or contemptuously denied by higher authorities? Certainly in my reading of his handwritten un published journal his description of the many Indigenous contacts are objective and cast in a positive light, however there is little analysis in either the Rousseau or Darwinian context. Why is this, was it because he actually planned, as Roderick infers, to write an enlightened book on Indigenous Australia?

_They remained with us the whole afternoon, the whole tribe and many visitors (at least 69 persons) squatting down with crossed legs in the narrow shade of the trunks of trees in a long file and shifting with the sun. Their wives were out to look for food but many of their children were with them, which they duly introduced to us._

_(An original description of many in Leichhardt’s manuscript p.411, but absent in the published journal)_

The dearth of ethnology, an early form of anthropology, in Leichhardt’s published journal and notes makes me wonder if he was also fearful of writing about Aboriginal people for their sake. He was conscious that his exploratory work would cause further attacks and visit ‘massacres on the natives’. Was he fearful about writing much of this ethnology while he still remained in the colonies, in the birthing blood of the newly named Australia? What a terrible dilemma he faced, he wanted to explore but knew this would bring the horror of massacre on the people he described.

_“Unless they (Aborigines) cultivated the habit of regular work they were doomed”_ this was Leichhardt’s view on the emergent capitalism and how it would treat Aboriginal collectivism. In 1840-5 there was still public argument for slavery in Australia despite it being abolished across most of the ‘empire’ in August 1834. Leichhardt was caught up in these discussions on slavery, but more as an attempt to try and save lives – he hated slavery. Roderick found this reflection in Leichhardt’s diary.
Although slavery appears the only means of preserving these tribes and civilising them as new generations arise, yet I would rather see them die as freemen than live as slaves. This is my conclusion on 15th February 1844 and so it will remain.

(Roderick p.217)

In Europe, Rousseau’s concept of ‘the natural man’ and its English distortion of the ‘noble savage’ had raged through the academic debates in London and Paris. Leichhardt had to be knowledgeable about the significant discussions in the academic and scientific circles of his time. Are we to ever know if he considered writing a paper or book entitled ‘Le Homme Naturale de Terra Australis’? Evolutionary theory was a key topic of interest in these circles and Leichhardt would have seen the linkages. Did he plan to write aboard ship on return to Europe and away from the censure of the early NSW Government? The last day he spent in Sydney before departing on his final and fateful 1848 expedition he wrote to his friend Rev. W.B. Clarke:-

I go tonight, and shall not again return to Sydney, if I can help it; but I shall let you know how I am getting on.

(Roderick 1988 p.462).

The social shock of the French Revolution less than a century before and its accompanying ‘enlightenment’ had given flight to early social science as it had given rise to Napoleon and in turn he had terrified the royal families of Europe. So it was in the Royal Geographic Society and other scientific societies, whose debates were centred in London and Paris, that we saw the social science discussions of the times carrying interest and importance and often involving those in high political circles.

The evolutionary debate driving the fervour was the question - what were Charles Darwin’s conclusions going to be? As a result, was there in 1840s Sydney a continuing concern in powerful hidden circles about the ‘natural man’? What did Rousseau’s ‘noble sauvage’ debate mean for Australia? Should the Aborigine be kept hidden as an ignorant “savage”? What was London thinking? Was it possible that the scholars of the Royal Geographic Society would react with concern and empathy if this concept of ‘Natural Man’ in early and rudimentary social science
had been applied to the Indigenous peoples of a colony founded on the other side of the world? What implications would these powerful debates have for a colony growing wealthy on the land belonging to the ‘noble savage’? This is both my question and sad reflection of the nature of Australian society in the 1840s. In the Antipodes in a space of less than thirty years the ‘noble savage’ had become regarded as ‘vermin’. (Elder 2011 p.5)

Given the context of the times, we also need to bear in mind that the British government saw Australian Aborigines as subjects of the crown and their need to be treated with respect. In 1837, a British Select Committee had examined the treatment of Indigenous people in all British colonies and the Australian colonies were particularly criticised. The committee had affirmed the 'plain and sacred right' of Indigenous peoples to land and recommended that 'Protectors of Aborigines' be appointed, yet the Aboriginal massacres in Australia continued. One of the more famous was the Myall Creek massacre of June 10 1838, just some ten years before Leichhardt's disappearance.

After the Myall Creek massacre, murderous attacks on Aboriginal people continued for many decades well into the 20th century. White people now went 'underground', using poisoned flour which was harder to prove in court. They also took greater care to conceal or destroy the corpses. Many massacres never became known outside the district where they occurred. (creativespirits.info)

Historically, it appears that there was a significant difference of opinion and philosophy between the ‘seat of empire’ in London and the colony of New South Wales. London, aware of massacres from its intelligence sources, was clearly ‘uncomfortable’ with the genocide. Colonial NSW was at odds with queen and empire.

It appears, given his correspondence on board ship en route from London to the colony of New South Wales, that Leichhardt as a ‘man of science’ was to arrive in Sydney unaware of these politics. He must have immediately become very wary and cautious of the local situation.

In London, the very concept of the ‘natural man’, the myth of the ‘noble savage’, was mixed in with the critical ascendency of science and its Royal Societies. The ‘noble savage’ was seen
living according to the dictates of ‘natural law and reason’, that there was something ‘natural’ about human beings that could be isolated or abstracted from the ‘social’.

Had the first free settlers arrived with some enlightenment and not as convicts from the brutish bowels of British cities and prisons? Had they arrived without the arrogance of ignorance along with the greed of emergent capitalism? Would this have prevented the undeclared war and the liquidation of hundreds of thousands? Sadly, I now reflect with an irreversible Utopian thought that had the settlers arrived with more of a Christian ethic, and with more of a social maturity, that the highly advanced languages, the balance and high social egalitarianism of Aboriginal society would have been studied, written about and respected. (Elder 2003 p.284) Would we and do we need to learn from this? Would our Indigenous people and eventual citizens have been respected in the inaugural Australian Constitution?

If Leichhardt had returned to Europe in 1849 as he had planned and entered the debate with a detailed ethnography of the Indigenous people of Australia, the legal and political myth of ‘terra nullius’ may well have caused a severe embarrassment to British Law, ‘The Empire’, and the Queen. Was Prince Albert, the scientific royal, aware of the concept of ‘terra nullius’ and it being murderously applied in his wife’s empire? Was this any different to the slavery and child labour he was admonishing elsewhere?

I note that prior to starting the first 1845 expedition, Leichhardt wrote the following to Gaetendo Durando, a friend and a curator of a museum in Paris:

_The blacks themselves are very interesting beings about whom I have been recording a lot of information as I have been living amongst them nearly all the time...It seems to have been ordained that these races are to disappear before the Caucasians, although the human passions and the possibilities of human virtue are common to all men..._ (Ludwig Leichhardt 6th January 1844 in M. Aurosseau 1968p.707)

Leichhardt was substantially well read and a scientist in the active meaning of the word. For example, on the evidence of the dry
winds from the hinterland, he contradicted his peers by correctly stating there was no possibility of an inland sea.

…it brought him to the notice of German geographers and it established him as the first of the Australian explorers to take (to) the field with a sound hypothesis concerning the character of the interior of the continent. He was convinced it was dry.  

(Aurousseau in McLaren p.191)

Yet contemporary explorers such as Sturt, Stuart, Hume and Mitchell, blinded by the potential fame of finding that ‘inland sea’ in the Antipodes, arrogantly ignored Leichhardt and set out only to find soaks and the Murray Darling system (Elder 2003 p.64). Sturt, who like Leichhardt, had a positive and non-confrontational approach to Aboriginal people, believed so strongly that there was an ‘inland sea’ he duly set off with a ‘boat’ in 1844.

In the same year as that folly, Leichhardt completed his Contributions to the Geology of New England which was never published satisfactorily. Recently ‘The Geology of New England’ has been identified by modern contemporaries as a work well ahead of its time. Then, while waiting for the ship at Port Essington in December 1845, he had begun to critically track malaria cases, identifying the increase in cases with visiting ships. He was possibly the first to start perceiving that malaria could be insect borne. The supply ship that was to return him to Sydney arrived before he concluded this research. He also successfully treated the eye infections which played havoc in all the early expeditions except his. Stuart, we know, had terrible eye infections as he crossed the continent in the 1860s twenty years after Leichhardt! If it were not for Leichhardt’s professional treatment, it is doubtful Calvert and Roper would have survived their spear wounds and were it not for his experimentation with various plants and observing the ‘native’ cooking and soaking methods for otherwise inedible fruit the team would have succumbed to scurvy. The list of his accomplishments in science continues. In 1843, he wrote the first botanical description of the macadamia nut which he discovered near Mount Bauple in Queensland (Bailey 2011 p.111). A natural philosopher, he was as McLaren correctly describes, a ‘poly math’ (McLaren p.223), and whilst he was given the title of ‘doctor’, he never sought it or used it (Dewar 1994 p.48).
In spite of the paltry support from the NSW government, in 1847 Leichhardt was awarded the Royal Geographical Society’s Patron’s Medal and the Grand Prix of the Societe de Geographie (which he never saw). Glen McLaren states “Clearly, Leichhardt was a scientist and field researcher of the highest order” (McLaren 1997 p.195). He was famous both in the Colony and, by 1847, in Europe. Anything he would have written after the publication of ‘The Journal of an Overland Expedition in Australia’ was obviously going to be received with great interest in London.

Leichhardt and the politics of a Terra Nullius

Leichhardt, we know, wrote broadly and across all the known science of his time. However, his ethnology as published in the journal is at the very least minimal and rarely accompanied with any analysis. In fact, and as mentioned previously ethnological (anthropological) analysis is notable by its absence across his work. Given the substantive field notes he took on his contact with indigenous people why is this, what happened here? The lack of this ethnological work begs further questions. Why is there no link, or a hint toward Rousseau’s ‘Noble Sauvage’ or on the evolutionary discourse, those critical subjects storming through the scientific societies of Europe? Was Leichhardt shy of writing an Indigenous ethnography and if so, why was that, was he planning a book on his return to Europe, and what would the book reveal?

The demonising of Aboriginal people from ‘noble savage’ to ‘rural pest’ and ‘vermin’ as mentioned only took thirty years from the arrival of the first fleet (Elder 2011 p. 5). By the time Leichhardt arrived, the massacring of Aboriginal people was well entrenched and accepted in the social psyche of Sydney. In 1816, Governor Lachlan Macquarie had launched what was to become, in modern terms, the ‘ethnic cleansing’ of New South Wales. This was the horrifying and bloody colonial secret that the academic Leichhardt discovered when he landed at Port Jackson in February 1842, some 26 years later. In a social ethos of violent racism, he had to curb broadcasting his interests as a ‘student of men’ if he was to gain any government funding for his proposed expeditions. What’s more he knew he could not escape this terrible social ethos which has been well described by Bruce Elder:

No one knows how many massacres occurred. Aboriginal people, realising the intention of the whites, retreated to
the hills. At Appin the soldiers came upon a large group. The troops did not care for the rule of law. They opened fire indiscriminately, killing at least fourteen men, women and children. Five Aboriginal people were captured. A number fled from the advance of the soldiers and preferred to jump off nearby cliffs rather than face the bullets and brutality. Macquarie seemed nonplussed by the massacre. The deaths of women and children were dismissed as an ‘unavoidable result’.

The massacre was followed by a proclamation which declared that no Aboriginal person could carry ‘offensive weapons’ within ‘a mile’ of white settlement. Aboriginal people could not gather in groups of six or more near white settlement, peaceful Aboriginal persons should be issued with passports, and all Aboriginal brawling in Sydney was prohibited. It was a nineteenth century version of apartheid. The lines had been drawn. The violence of the frontier legitimised.

So it was that the Aboriginal people of the Sydney basin, people who had lived peacefully in the area for forty thousand years, were all but wiped out...

...The musket and the gun killed all those who tried to resist.

(Elder 2003 p.16)

The editing of Leichhardt’s journal by Captain Phillip Parker King, I would argue minimizes the indigenous contacts into either triviality or sinister potentials thus politically controlling the journal. There have been others who have criticised Parker King’s editing, and the further unknown editing supposedly from the publisher, claiming that the editing robbed Leichhardt’s narrative of its colour and created a literary asepsis. I agree fully with this point of view, a comparison between what Leichhardt originally wrote and what was published certainly does a disservice to Leichhardt’s thinking and the multiple and positive experiences he had with Aboriginal people. I believe the time has come for the Mitchell Library to publish these original notes, complete with the edits, on the web. While Roderick stated:
The manuscript certainly stood in need of editing, and Leichhardt was fortunate in finding Phillip Parker King agreeable to undertaking the work.

(Roderick p.245)

Here I disagree with Roderick, yes at times Leichhardt’s English was a little cumbersome and descriptions like his culinary disposition for fruit bats a bit over the top, but any good English editor would have done the job as all writers need editors. We must remember Phillip Parker King was a wealthy owner of some 1600 acres of land where he ran cattle – land taken from the local Indigenous community. He was born into the colonial aristocracy and in February 1839, he had been appointed to the New South Wales Legislative Council by the Governor in the name of the crown. Then six years later, given his skills as a surveyor, Parker King offered to take the responsibility for the publication of Leichhardt’s journal. A member of the British Royal Society, and like Leichhardt, he would have been very much aware of the debates in London and the concerns these raised in a colony profiting from and managing lands taken by force and massacre. In my view Leichhardt was not ‘fortunate’ in finding Phillip Parker King ‘agreeable to do the work’. In my view it was very much the reverse, the government had to control the journal so as to deny or hide evidence of civilised Indigenous contact. Leichhardt’s ‘disappearance’ also meant that future books would not be published...

I have found Leichhardt’s Germanic English quite eloquent. Judging by the Manuscript, his handwritten notes in his field book and in the comments laced through his letters, Leichhardt was a natural philosopher. Had he survived, he would have published a substantial work of botany. Likewise, I believe he would have published a substantial ethnological work, with a unique analysis as Roderick implies “undoubtedly there would have been enlightening chapters on Aborigines if he had lived...” Other than the earlier French scientific expeditions, Leichhardt experienced the earliest in-depth European scientific contact with The Dreaming. His knowledge of Indigenous culture for the times was formidable. The editing by Parker King upset Leichhardt, but interestingly, possibly in the name of science and the funding he needed for future expeditions, he remained silently compliant.
Leichhardt accepted the emendations although not without qualms, and a fair copy of the emended manuscript went to the publisher in London, where controversial parts of it were further toned down.  
(Roderick, p.247)

Certainly Leichhardt would have been seeking support for a further expedition that was going to take him across the continent to the Swan River settlement (Perth). He then planned to leave Australia from there without returning to New South Wales. No doubt he would have had the opportunity to write an uncensored account freely while aboard ship to Europe. The fact that Leichhardt was upset at the original censuring of his science is without question. We see this in a private letter to his brother-in-law where Leichhardt stated his frustration about the editing of his journal with a short acerbic comment:

I would be glad to have some annoying misprints corrected  
(Ludwig Leichhardt 22 February 1848, M. Aurousseau 1968 p.995)

It seems that Leichhardt was caught in a schism. On the one hand, he had a keen interest and concern for the ‘native’ “as a student of human character”, a comment he was to write aboard ship in coming to New South Wales (M. Aurousseau p.436). Also in a letter to his mother he was to state on the 27th May 1843:

These black children from the bush are never the less highly interesting creatures in many ways. They are not the least lacking in perception.  
(M. Aurousseau 1968 p.671)

On the other hand, he knew one could not criticise the colonial governance view of ‘vermin’ and ‘savagery’ or be noted as being philanthropic or sympathetic to the ‘natives’, as this was seen as a weakness. Any concern about ‘the natives’ was regarded with high suspicion, and not the done thing in a colony, who in order to appease London, was now furious about the recent hanging of some but not all of the white men guilty of the 1838 Myall Creek Massacre (a result enforced by London). Racism was the projected norm, especially so if you sought government funding as Leichhardt did. In context therefore, we see this schism in an
early letter to an influential patron and friend Dr. William Nicholson where he is trying to argue slavery as a means to avoid genocide and to curry favour from the NSW government:

*If it be in the interests of mankind to preserve so subordinate a people, the philanthropists who oppose slavery are in the wrong; for nothing but compulsion to work, and strong discipline, could save and civilise these savages.*


In another example, he writes with the kind of paternalism that the racist colonialism of the time would endorse, and sadly it is a ‘distractive and slurring paragraph’ taken from his journal and supposedly written just before camping at Ubirr in Kakadu. Was he trying to distract attention away from Ubirr, or alternatively are these really Leichhardt’s words given that they are contrary to what he normally wrote privately? I suspect here we have more colonial editing. Towards the end of his manuscript for example in describing the large numbers of people around him near Ubirr he states:

*I had however not the slightest fear and apprehension, my frequent discourse with the natives of Australia to distinguish easily between deceit and the open expression of kind and friendly feelings....*

*(Leichhardt’s Manuscript p.412)*

The published paragraph below one can see was embellished by a number of additional negative adjectives and statements courtesy of the editor.

*I had not, however, the slightest fear and apprehension of any treachery on the part of the natives; for my frequent intercourse with the natives of Australia had taught me to distinguish easily between the smooth tongue of deceit, with which they try to ensnare their victim, and the open expression of kind and friendly feelings, or those of confidence and respect. I remember several instances of the most cold-blooded smooth-tongued treachery, and of the most extraordinary gullibility of the natives; but I am*
sure that a careful observer is more than a match for these simple children of nature, and that he can easily read the bad intention in their unsteady, greedy, glistening eyes.

(Ludwig Leichardt 2nd December 1845)

Either we see a schism here or if the words above are not Leichhardt’s then we have further evidence of distortion. After spending time with the clans in NSW in the year before his first expedition, he compassionately, prophetically and privately wrote in German to his brother-in-law back in East Prussia:

….And already the little bands of blacks have almost completely faded away. At the very least their spirit of independence has been broken, and they accept the crumbs that fall from the white man’s table. And that will happen where ever European civilisation makes sudden contact with savages unprepared for it. Everywhere it has been the same. Often when I’ve been with vigorous tribes (of Blacks), I’ve thought sadly of the day that will not be long in coming, when many of these robust bodies will be pierced by the white man’s bullet, when others, stricken by virulent diseases, will drag themselves to an early grave, and when those who survive, sickly and languishing, will finally come to begging at the white man’s door or to craving for strong drink at the public houses in the rising towns.

(Ludwig Leichhardt 14th May 1844, M. Aurousseau 1968 p.757)

It is also likely that Leichhardt shared what may have been his true thoughts with some who may have mischievously reiterated them to the NSW Government. Hence this could be a reason why he was ‘alienated’ and never funded by the government on the first expedition and only gained a limited support on the second and third expeditions. Colonial racism may have wanted to be rid of him and sponsoring his initial Port Essington expedition would have only enhanced his chances for survival. Many others had already ‘disappeared’ in the outback and so too in Leichhardt’s case this would be ‘convenient’. However, I believe this ‘game’ changed substantially and thrust itself into the colonial political sphere with a powerful hammer blow when Leichhardt returned from Port Essington to Sydney as the first successful and now
famous white explorer of hinterland Australia. Leichhardt now held political influence. Interestingly, it was this influence that gained him private sponsorship for his following expeditions but as seems the pattern only a pittance of ‘face saving’ sponsorship from the NSW government who stood in the main to gain the most from his work. I wonder what was going on here?

I believe that as he stepped off the ship from Port Essington in Sydney, the alarm bells would have been ringing loudly in the colonial aristocracy. What had Leichhardt seen and what was he going to tell the world about this colonial backwater? Would he write about an Indigenous world which the government was trying to subjugate into a ‘non-existence’ while profiting from the land?

Controlling Leichhardt’s publication would have been an immediate imperative. A second imperative, I believe, would have been to ensure he never returned to Europe, and particularly after his published journal had won awards and come to the attention of The Royal Society.

With Leichhardt’s new found fame and his interest in further exploration, the ‘political management’ of him was always going to be easy. It would, of course, have been ‘politically correct’ to offer him a little resourcing ‘bait’ to commence another expedition – this time across the top and down to the Swan River settlement, and this is exactly what happened. He was to set out on a second expedition which failed due to a mysterious illness. He returned to Sydney and then a short time later set out on his third and fatal expedition never to be seen again. In comparison to all the other explorers of the time the very limited sponsorship Leichhardt was to gain for his 2nd and 3rd expeditions from the NSW government was most likely a ‘political set up to fail’ and failure in the outback was and still is often fatal. This I believe was a deadly political game played by colonial politics on a man’s romantic motivation to explore for science.

Interestingly, and one could argue naively, before he became politically influential, Leichhardt commented about the established colonial aristocracy. Aboard ship, when first arriving in Sydney, he wrote in a letter:

*The shores of this magnificent harbour were inhabited by savages who had never before seen a white man. They*
are now the site of a big town of 42,000 inhabitants. It is surrounded by the mansions of its wealthy citizens. The richest men in the colony were convicts or are descendents of convicts…the wealthy men and heads of families in Sydney are really convicts on conditional pardon.

(M. Aurousseau, 1968, p.438-439)

The results of the first municipal elections were declared a few months after Leichhardt arrived prompting Sydney to declare it was no longer a town – it had become a city. “so we now have known smugglers and thieves accepted as city councillors” was Leichhardt’s jaundiced comment (Bailey p.81).

How in 1846 Leichhardt was not to see the danger that lurked beneath his popularity I do not know?

In many instances I have found his writing quite prophetic. In the same letter, he continued with a reflection on the future social history of the colony that was fifty years ahead of its time:

A state is coming into being which may, perhaps in less than a century, break loose from England as did the United States of North America and so establish an independent nation or a federation.

(Ludwig Leichhardt 23rd March 1842 in M. Aurousseau, 1968, p.439)

Did Leichhardt send a copy of his notes in ethnology, possibly written in German, back home to his extended family or others in Germany? What happened to the notes on the ‘natives’ he refers to in the correspondence with Durando (May 1844)? His letter writing was prolific and those traced now fill three volumes.

What would such ethnology contain? Those field books on Indigenous life that Roderick comments on possibly offering some insight into the unknown and of an ancient knowledge lost.

When Leichhardt ‘disappeared’ in 1848, in the midst of this ‘noble sauvage’ conjecture, Karl Marx was also publishing the ‘Communist Manifesto’. While this was a coincidence, we know that Leichhardt corresponded with his friend Gaetano Durando, the
curator of the Paris museum, and in fact was to gain an income by sending specimens to him. Gaetano Durando however was known to have an association with Marx and was to meet him in the 1850s. Of interest Leichhardt was also interested in the discussions on ‘collectivism’. We are aware that he had analysed the collective living of a then known European communal ‘society’ known as the phalangsteres, while his early view was:

…so little sanguine am I about the efficacy of peculiar forms of society particularly as long as they remain under the influence of existing ones

(Leichhardt in Roderick 1988 p.465)

No doubt his analysis and thoughts on collectivism continued during his studies of Indigenous groups and in his living experiences in a ‘collective’ on the other side of the world. Leichhardt had spent weeks living with the clans of NSW well before beginning the trek to Port Essington. At that time, for example, how many white men would have squatted on the ground to learn from and about Aboriginal lifestyle?

Not one to be inactive, Leichhardt spent hours squatting on the ground speaking to the Aboriginal stockmen on the station. He filled his field book with notes on their customs, religions and languages.

(Bailey 2011 p.108)

Is there a link between Leichhardt and the collective thinking and philosophising of the time? Was something passed on from Durando to Marx? In an excerpt from a letter Leichhardt sent to his mother there is a strange comment from New South Wales where he began to describe a collective communal life style. This occurred some five years before Marx publishes and it makes me wonder about the details he wrote in his field books.

Every clan has its own circuit within which it moves about continually to find enough food to live on. The whole clan is often united, but they are often scattered by groups of 2, 3, or 4, couples…They have held their own in natural conditions that offered hardly anything in their favour and in doing so have discovered as many things contributing to their support as did we when we learned how…. .”

(Ludwig Leichhardt 27 August 1843, in M.
Then, in the very same letter, he remarkably touched with some insight on what Bruce Chatwin was to describe over a century later in his book ‘The Song Lines’ where clans can easily tune into each other’s languages.

...every song cycle went leap-frogging through language barriers, regardless of tribe or frontier.

(Chatwin 1988 p.31)

Nearly every clan has its own dialect, and even many families use a number of words peculiar to themselves, but strange clans easily come to understand each other.

(Ludwig Leichhardt 27 August 1843, in M. Aurousseau p.672)

It begs the question – did Leichhardt learn how to ‘song line’? It would account for his remarkable and safe transit across first nation lands.

I can only speculate that Leichhardt felt himself under suspicion in 1847 for sympathising with ‘the natives’. I suspect he may have sent notes on the ‘noble sauvage’ back to Europe in secret. If these had been intercepted would they have supplied a further reason to prevent Leichhardt’s return to Europe?

My critical analysis of what has been negatively written about Leichhardt identifies an interesting perspective. Here was a reader of science and an explorer differing cultural background to imperial ‘British’ Victorianism. He was a Prussian German, with an accent, but with excellent English as one of his languages. He was a little strange even though he was extremely well read. It appears he was fixated on science but not good with emotional intelligence and leadership. “A touch eccentric” may be a polite description of his character. He did, after all, always wear a necktie even in the hottest of conditions!

He only had a very small retinue of close friends and there is no doubt he had difficulty with his leadership and its relationships in small isolated team work. It is possible that the evolving Australian ‘mateship’ might have been beyond him. However, I would argue that his mind and his science were sharp and keen edged, and
despite some early mistakes, his navigation was unerringly accurate for what was known at the time. Bear in mind that nothing was known of the terrain he was covering and surveying. Why was he accused of poor navigation? Current evidence, mine included, now points to a contrary view (McLaren, p.199). Leichhardt was only a few kilometres off the mark in most cases (comparative to the better ‘bush navigators’ of the time) and in the latter part of the first expedition he had substantially improved estimates of longitude. Why then was he deemed reckless when in fact the small team expedition format which he pioneered was well calculated and highly effective? Again, these are the enigmatic questions which surround Leichhardt and only raise further questions rather than answers.

Was there a political motive for a lot of the negative comments that still float around Leichhardt? He was very popular because of his success of 1845, yet there were unproven speculations of a ‘madness’, a self-centeredness, an incompetence in navigation, and a questioning of his leadership. Given the number of accounts that his leadership was problematic, this may have also been a reaction of his friendliness to Indigenous people. He described despair in relating to his teams in both expeditions but then with the months of isolation, no doubt the resentment went both ways. In his defence, his men were volunteers and he did not have the funding to engage their loyalty. Was this stress experienced by the team(s) used to politically undermine Leichhardt’s character? He was popular, yet he was a Prussian academic trying to make his mark, and he did befriend the ‘natives’.

I have to wonder, had he been successful with his final 3rd expedition would he have then written a critique of Governor Bourke’s 1835 proclamation on the ship back to Europe. This proclamation implemented the doctrine of Terra Nullius upon which British settlement was based, it reinforced the notion that the land belonged to no one prior to the British Crown taking possession of it. Leichhardt already had substantial evidence to counter the myth of Terra Nullius. Given his planned return to Europe in 1849/50, would an uncensored work such as this have then been given the respect due to the holder of the Royal Geographic Society’s Patron’s medal? I doubt Leichhardt was fully aware of the political clout he carried. If he was, did he naively think that the social geography and its political danger would not follow him into the outback? The mystery he left behind I have repeatedly stated
appears to have had a number of agendas at its core. Perhaps Leichhardt's biggest mistake was not getting on the first ship back to London when he returned from Port Essington.

Leichhardt had learnt that Sir Thomas (Mitchell) was not liked by most of the colonists and flattered himself by comparison that he himself had “perhaps not a single enemy at this side of the globe”

(Roderick p.399)

The prince of explorers

While I agree with McLaren that this title should go to the likes of Gregory, Leichhardt did not need it as he was already famous and science, precluding fame was his main motivation.

Yet while it is the nature of explorers to explore and he had devoted himself to this cause, and was motivated by other famous explorers of the time, what was he really looking for? What was in the outback that he truly wanted to describe? Was he looking for living mega fauna, the first bones of a diprotodont had recently been found? In Europe there had been interesting discoveries hinting at ancient very large lizards and evolutionary theory was of course on the lips of science? What experiences did he have with his first people’s contact on the 1845 expedition? If he did have an unwritten but significant contact with the clans on the Alligator catchment and at Ubirr, was he looking for further evidence of a ‘noble sauvage’ civilisation? These are interesting speculations particularly as mentioned his plan was to publish and return to Europe post 1848.

Had he returned to Europe his work would certainly have come to the attention of the newly appointed Chancellor of Cambridge University. The question then extends to: would the Chancellor have been interested in or severely embarrassed by the work?

This new Chancellor was of course His Royal Highness Prince Albert of Saxe - Coburg and Gotha, the German husband of Queen Victoria. As the royal academic, he was himself active in his people’s welfare and at the forefront in fighting global slavery. In this context, would a publication by Leichhardt, a fellow German, on ‘Terra Australis Nullius’ have shaken the political ‘status quo’ then comfortably enjoyed by a remote colonial Australia where the
upper classes had a wealth delivered by land taken from the original occupants? On reflection, why was India, the jewel in Victoria’s empire, or the other British colonies never declared a ‘Terra Nullius’? The settlers would have been by 1845 only too aware of Captain James Cook’s original misconception. Cook’s original positive references to Indigenous Australians as living a life of collective equality were also to be eventually ‘edited out’ from his log. How would Prince Albert in helping protect his wife’s sovereign care for her empire have reacted to the arrogance of declaring a whole culture, a whole nation of ‘her peoples’, as ‘vermin’ at best and not existing at worst, particularly if a published man of Leichhardt’s standing now had the evidence to prove otherwise?

Remember these were controversial times. Charles Darwin had already formulated his ideas on natural selection in 1838 well before Leichhardt sailed to Australia. Darwin began writing ‘The Origin of Species’ around 1854, and published in 1858. In these times, Marx, in publishing his Communist Manifesto, had already begun to introduce a fear of collective socialism into individualist capitalism. I can only wonder what influence an uncensored Leichhardt publication on ‘a collective natural man’ may have had.

Was the loss of Leichhardt also the loss of a budding cross cultural acceptance and a ‘social maturity’? Would his findings in all those field books have gone some way to countering the evolution of Social Darwinism and its eugenics?

Had Leichhardt been successful in 1849 I further reflect on whether the concept of ‘Terra Nullius’ would have been implied in the Australian Constitution, given its failure to recognise Indigenous occupation. The original Australian Constitution by the way is still in London. We only have a copy in Canberra.

Australia, now over a century later is re-examining and rewriting its colonial classic - the Constitution. For over 100 years there was never a ‘Bill of Rights’ for Indigenous minorities or any Australians. In 2013 it still contains a classic relic of Leichhardt era colonial thinking in short ‘we know what is good for you’. The constitution in so many words states ‘that politicians know best for the good of the community’. To lend some emphasis to this point one can argue that Australia, due to this antiquated relic by 2013, still had not de-colonised. This is evidenced in the 4th world conditions
found in the more remote parts of Australia, and where racial discrimination legislation can be struck out with a political ease that is frightening to say the least. All this as prophesied by Leichhardt a man who probably knew more about the dynamic differences between collectivism and individualism in 1845 than most Australian politicians do in our contemporary era. While this is arguable and thankfully changing, the fourth world Indigenous crisis in Australia has been a problem of ongoing political incompetence since the Federation of Australia in 1901.

In short, it is a social dysfunction caused by the difficulty and challenge that capitalism has in harnessing the collective labour of 0.4% of the voting population. In contemporary Indigenous Australian history we have seen a shortfall in political leadership. It is a paralysing issue that has led comparatively to little Indigenous commitment, less research and no vision in economic modelling. Ironically, tourism 'promotes' this poverty to visitors from all over the world. A poverty well described by Leichhardt in May 1844: “At the very least their spirit of independence has been broken, and they accept the crumbs that fall from the white man’s table.” A poverty that locals and tourists alike are still exposed to in remote Australia today, a century and a half plus since Leichhardt walked his path.

**Reflections on a sinister ‘flour bag’ thesis**

Leichhardt should have never returned to the outback…

> What is very clear is that the ‘death pudding’, as squatters and settlers came to call flour and poison (usually strychnine or arsenic), became common place in Queensland and was still being used as recently as the turn of the century.

(Elde 2003 p.144)

Given the times, it is my view that a more sinister echo should also be added to the grab bag of theories hypothesising about what happened to Leichhardt. In addition to fire, fatal thirst, madness, and attack by Aborigines, should we also allow for the potential of political expedience, which, as always, has included the removal of a potential ‘problem’ before it became one? In Leichhardt’s case, a poisoned flour bag would easily have done the trick. Such a bag, slipped into the 1848 expedition supplies by an unknown hand, is a
possibility. The irony of using poisoned flour bags which were used as a method to remove troublesome natives by the settlers may not have escaped the perpetrator. A disaster like this would easily account for the total loss of an experienced well armed and well equipped party, a party that would have been geographically months away from help. The possibility of such a trap and who would have set it naturally raises the Leichhardt enigma a notch or two. Why, for example, has this, as a possibility, not been raised before?

This is not a ‘conspiracy theory’ I set out to establish. It just seems to have unravelled itself within our known social and historical knowledge of the violence and distortions of the 1840s.

*Kilcoy was the start of a wholesale reign of terror in Queensland which, although poorly documented, indicates that probably thousands of Aboriginal people were killed by poisoning between 1842 and 1900.*

*(Elder 2003 p.144)*

Annie and I, finding a marker on Leichhardt’s path in Kakadu, many kilometres away from where the map published with his journal indicated it would be, eventually triggered my suspicions of things not being ‘quite right’. Our discovery of a Leichhardt blaze in Kakadu, after decades of people looking in the wrong place, now appears to be further evidence of further historical distortion.

I noted in reading his journals, after formulating my flour bag thesis, that chillingly, the vector for the delivery of poison could have been inspired by the following entries in Leichhardt’s journal.

*... as soon as the camp is pitched, and the horses and bullocks unloaded, we have all our allotted duties; to make the fire falls to my share; Brown’s duty is to fetch water for tea; and Mr. Calvert weighs out a pound and a half of flour for a fat cake, which is enjoyed more than any other meal.*

*(Ludwig Leichhardt, 1 May 1845)*

And then a few days later;

*After having celebrated Whit–Sunday with a double allowance of fat cake and sweetened tea, I started with Charley to reconnoitre the country to the westward.*
One criticism of the ‘Bag of Flour’ assassination theory posits that if this was the case, the fatal 1848 expedition would have left ‘a big pile of equipment and bones lying around’ (Professor Henry Nix, in Australian Geographic, story by Ken Eastwood, Aug 3 2010). In my view and given the size of the outback, this pile of remains may yet be discovered, possibly somewhere in the northern rim of the Great Sandy Desert, possibly a few days walk from where the confirmed 1848 Leichhardt artefact of an old weathered and burnt gun butt was found by an Aboriginal stockman around 1900, in the fork of a Baobab tree marked with an L and apparently near Sturt Creek, WA, just inside the WA and NT borders, position unknown.

In this part of the very remote outback, there are sand dunes, dingoes and birds feeding on carrion that could have scattered remains. Back in 1848, both Indigenous trade and spiritual fear may have interfered with any remains. In modern day, the ignorance of a fossicker, prospector or four wheel drive tourist, may have picked up and discarded artefacts ‘as of no value’. In short, who knows? Then who is to say that all members of the party died at once? Maybe a survivor tried to reach Victoria in Port Essington. There is the mystery of the gun butt in the boab on the NT/WA border. Also, I believe there is some Indigenous narrative of white men seen in this part of the outback prior to the Gregory expedition in the 1850s.

Could the poisoned flour have affected the party at a time when water was scarce? Did it compound Leichhardt’s leadership difficulties racked with thirst and poison? Did they go mad and scatter? Or did the convicts ‘on conditional release’ within the party start a murderous campaign? It is all a mystery.

**A very mysterious illness, the puzzle of the second expedition**

Leichhardt’s second expedition failed and he was forced to turn back due to a very mysterious chronic and prostrating illness suffered by himself and his men. Roderick, in his analysis, only suggests a natural cause based on symptoms defined by Leichhardt. Dr John Brien of Townsville suggested the cause of the illness as the bacterium *Salmonella typhimurium*. This would cause Salmonella food poisoning from ingesting rotting mutton and
goat meat. The stores had been soaked by a flooding river and remained in very wet condition (Roderick p.454).

Certainly, the rank, humid, mosquito-ridden miasma the second expedition found itself in and the mysterious illness lends itself to the Salmonella diagnosis. The symptoms of this illness can be abdominal pain, nausea, fever, headache and diarrhoea. Roderick is of the view that the continuous exposure to eating the fetid meat was the compounding circumstance, and yes, as a purely naturally occurring setback I would agree with him here. However, the symptoms do seem broader than 'natural' Salmonella poisoning. If we analyse the issue with the assassination thesis in mind there could have easily have been another agent at work here, such as a poison, affecting many body systems and confusing Leichhardt in its perplexity as was the case. It is interesting that Leichhardt rigidly stuck with his suspicion of ‘bad’ flour as the causative agent of the illness.

_The flour submerged when the mules floundered in the lagoon was lumpy and suspicious looking but leaving of the flour (from daily diet) made no difference._

_Leichhardt in Webster, p134_

_‘There is no doubt in my mind’ Leichhardt recorded in setting down the sad fact of Mann’s collapse, ‘that the bad flour was the cause’ …what really perturbed him was the violent palpitation caused by the slightest movement._

_Webster 1980, p.149_

While Roderick raised the Salmonella analysis he identified a symptom on the 5th of March in the middle of this miasma that differs from the slower onset of a Salmonella infection and lends emphasis to Leichhardt’s suspicion of bad flour.

_Hardly had Leichhardt eaten his meal of tea and fat cake (flour) than ‘the most violent fever heat’ struck him down. Turnbull went down shortly afterward. Perry got so much worse that Leichhardt thought he would die. Brown went down. Bunce was unwell, Hely was next…_

_Roderick 1988, p.424_
What I find disturbing here is that there are parallels with poisoning from any number of dangerous agents that could have been mixed and put in the flour in minor quantities in order to remain undetectable. Agents used in poisoning Aboriginal people at the time were quick lime, arsenic, strychnine and possibly salt peter.

The symptoms for minor quicklime poisoning are burning pain, abdominal pain, vomiting, and rapidly developing low blood pressure (medlineplus/ency/article/002773). The most common effect of chronic arsenic poisoning is sensory predominant peripheral neuropathy with numbness of hands and feet, but it can also cause stomach pain, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, inflammation and necrosis of the gut wall with bloody diarrhoea, cardiac malfunction, thickening and discolouration of the skin (www.atsdr.cdc.gov/csem/arsenic/docs/arsenic.pdf). Mild strychnine poisoning causes symptoms within 15 to 60 minutes – painful muscle spasms possibly leading to fever, agitation, apprehension / fear, ability to be easily startled, restlessness, uncontrollable arching of the neck and back, rigid arms and legs, muscle pain and soreness, difficulty breathing, dark urine – perhaps the ‘prostrating’ as Leichhardt was to describe (www.bt.cdc.gov/agent/strychine/basics/facts.asp). Salt peter (potassium or sodium nitrate) causes dizziness, spasms of abdominal pain, convulsions and rapid heart beat (MSDS P5961 jtbaker.com), possibly the ‘palpitations’ Leichhardt also described. Certainly there are some interesting coincidences here between what the men of Leichhardt’s second expedition were suffering and the now contemporary described symptoms.

With the large distances of the interior and dehydration generated stress, minor quantities of poison would be all that was needed to cause illness and exacerbate the thirst. Could the combined poisons create heat, fever, nausea, abdominal pain, prostration and the guinea coloured water Leichhardt described.

When we consider Leichhardt’s symptoms as defined in Webster (1980 p.33) while Salmonella food poisoning is possible we certainly cannot rule out the potential of other nefarious agents that would also cause similar symptoms.

*The disease always began he found, with that feeling of great heat, fast pulse and heaviness in the head.*

*Headache followed, and pain invaded other parts of the*
body, usually below the heart or across the back of the kidney region. The sensation of heat also tended to be localised, felt most in the ankles, thighs, and arms. Miscellaneous symptoms included dry skin, a furred tongue, weakness in the stomach, giddiness on rising, and urine conventionally described as ‘guinea coloured’. The attacks were preceded by fits of shivering, formed in various times and with various intensities.

(Webster 1980 p. 133)

Did the second expedition, delayed by the flooding and at no risk of thirst, inadvertently open a soaked poisoned flour bag to dry before they got out of range, that is, well beyond the point of no return to white settlement? Could this have been a flour bag ‘positioned low down in the pack’ in the packing system to be consumed when they had gone beyond that point of no return and into desert country but inadvertently unpacked so as to dry out? While Leichhardt’s suspicion and his response by reducing the team’s flour consumption did not have any effect possibly due to the compounding effect of the Salmonella, he may well have unknowingly saved their lives if the flour bag theory is correct.

Then there is the question of what happened to the medical chest, which disappeared. The lack of clarity around the shortfalls of the second expedition’s medical chest or for that matter what constituted the ‘minimal’ medical supplies lends a further perplexity. I have not been able to find Leichhardt’s view. Did he see it as a theft and innocently nothing more nefarious? However, I cannot envisage setting off on an expedition across the continent with what appears to be limited medical supplies – the accusation that Leichhardt deliberately minimised medical supplies on the second expedition makes no sense at all (Webster 198, p.339). What does make sense is the medical supplies being deliberately ‘removed’ and Leichhardt being embarrassed and at a loss to explain this.

Overall, in acknowledgement, the evidence is speculative but enough not to rule this out as a first attempt to assassinate and eventually possibly cause the end result of what finally happened to the third ‘fatal’ expedition. Clearly, the mystery illness of the second expedition needs revisiting, with a deeper analysis beyond the scope and skill of this writer.
A suspicion of bad flour and missing medical supplies must have alerted Leichhardt, but he maintained a naïve appreciation. After all, on the surface, ‘bad flour’ in itself is not associated with an assassination attempt. He was, he believed, the colony’s ‘hero’ and as such may have had his suspicions blinded by all his ‘support’. Certainly in those times, white men were certainly not poisoned with flour – or were they? If poison was one of possibly a number of ‘assassination agents’, flour may not have been the only vector.

I find it perplexing that Leichhardt, ‘as a student of men’, famous, a writer, and amicable to the Aborigine, seemed oblivious to the political danger he was in, given the underlying political acceptance of Aboriginal genocide. Did a group of wealthy ex-convicts in the back streets of Sydney put a price on his ‘disappearance’?

History was to prove Leichhardt’s possible naivety as portentous, because the government, having limited its sponsorship for his expeditions, when he did ‘disappear’, then substantially (read politically) funded an expedition to look for him. However, this occurred some four years later. After all, was it not better if all the criticism about his incompetence be confirmed, and he ‘did just disappear’ into the vast outback? Would the NSW government not present better in spending more money looking for him than in supplying his expedition initially? Interestingly, as one thinks about it, the political conspiracy just appears to expand of its own accord, but then that is the nature of a conspiracy dynamic, is it not?

The ‘Find Leichhardt’ Hypocrisy and destroy the settlement of Victoria at Port Essington

After he disappeared in 1848, the ‘Find Leichhardt’ expedition was eventually dispatched in 1852 under the command of Hovenden Hely. He without distinction had accompanied Leichhardt on the second aborted expedition. Hely went no further than the Warrego River in Queensland - a pitiful effort. As Bruce Simpson describes:

…his efforts at finding the lost explorers can at best be described as half hearted...The government advanced Hely’s ineffectual expedition with two thousand pounds (Sterling). As no money had been forthcoming to help
equip Leichhardt, it appears the government considered the lost explorer was worth more dead than alive.

(Simpson 1997, p.95)

Hovenden Hely, of course, found nothing, despite being given nearly three times the funding that Leichhardt had ever received.

To add further intrigue to the fate of that final 3rd expedition, Leichhardt had set out from Allan Macpherson’s cattle station near Mount Abundance on the Cogoon River in southern Queensland on 5th April 1848. We know, and the government of the time knew, that the first Leichhardt expedition took some 15 months to journey from Jimbour Station, just west of Moreton Bay, Queensland, to Port Essington, NT – 1st October 1844 to 17th December 1845. With Leichhardt already in the field for 15 months on the 3rd expedition, the British Admiralty ordered the closure of the struggling naval station and settlement at Victoria, Port Essington, on the 10th of June 1849. Notwithstanding that the settlement was finally abandoned on the 1st of December that year, all possible sustenance for a party in the field was removed (Allen 2008, p.131). The warship that arrived with orders from the British Admiralty to close the naval settlement was HMS Meander under the command of Captain Keppel. The whole community was taken on board and the order given to destroy any life support infrastructure including the settlement’s decked boat (Spillett, p.168). The NSW government, it appears, did nothing to delay the closure or alert the Admiralty to the fact that an exploratory expedition was possibly in the field nearby and that it may have to depend on Victoria for its survival. Then, when it was closed, no ships were diverted to the remains of the Victoria settlement to check - just in case. It was not until June 1857 that Captain Simpson, commanding the General Palmer, called in to Victoria in “search of the lost Leichhardt”(National Trust, p.13).

Leichhardt thus had had his ‘escape hatch’ from the interior removed. There is the perplexity about why such potential support for a party in the outback was removed. Leichhardt could have been delayed by any number of problems but most likely returning defeated from his foray into the Great Sandy Desert which we now know lay ahead of him. He could well have been close to Port Essington. The Great Sandy Desert, south and south west of what we now know as the Kimberley, was impassable given the expedition equipment in 1848. The desert was an insurmountable
hurdle to Leichhardt, an obstacle that lends emphasis to his last known artefact - the gun butt found in the fork of a baobab tree near the border of the NT and WA. The gun butt was located on the northern fringe of the huge deserts to the south and south west, and right on the route he indicated he would take using the curve of the head waters of the northern rivers. Unknown to anyone at the time, crossing the Great Sandy Desert was an impossible task for Leichhardt’s team.

Had there not been a poisoning or problem that led to a fatal thirst and had he escaped from the Great Sandy Desert, Leichhardt would have had to aim for Victoria in Port Essington. Based on the timings of his first expedition and using basic arithmetic of his travel distance per day, at best speed from where the shotgun butt had been found in my estimate he would have arrived at Victoria no earlier than a month after it had been destroyed and deserted. Trapped in the outback, he then would have faced no other option but to try to return to the east coast or to strike south. Even had Leichhardt's party got through to the Victoria settlement they were still marooned on the Zuitland as were the Dutch sailors of centuries past.

So, through a Government decision, Leichhardt was denied any support that Victoria could have offered, had the expedition needed assistance. Why did the government allow the removal of the only lifeboat? This is an alarming question. While the settlement in Port Essington had been struggling for some time, and the Admiralty had justification for its closure, there appears to have been no indication or notification to Leichhardt of this by anyone in the government before Leichhardt departed in 1848. While the closure most likely took the colonial government by surprise, I doubt this as these types of decisions are made over lengthy periods. Why was there no re-supply point put in place or some warning of potential closure given to Leichhardt? Had he or some of his team survived the Great Sandy Desert and struggled back to Victoria? In the lashing rain storms of late December 1849, imagine the chill of betrayal and horror they would have felt soaking in the deserted ruins of Victoria. Survival would now no longer have been an option.
The disaster

What happened out there in the shimmering and distant vast spaces of outback Australia in 1848?

_No further word from him or from any member of his party ever reached civilisation._

(Roderick p.470)

Leichhardt’s health had taken a hammering particularly in the failed second expedition where I strongly suspect some measure of poisoning had occurred and it possibly caused some longer term damage. This is of course speculation but Roderick found this rather interesting correspondence.

_To Brother in law Schmalfuss he confided his fears on his physical condition “Although I feel well enough to begin this new, long journey, I cannot deny that my constitution has suffered greatly, especially on the last journey, and that I possess less muscular strength than I had four years ago, when I went on my first journey. I suffer especially from palpitation of the heart, which often worries me quite a deal.”_  

(Roderick p.467)

Leichhardt had not planned to stop at Victoria, but he would have been well aware of the settlement as a potential escape route from the interior and this would have offered him and his poor health some reassurance.

In my view, given the expedition’s equipment, the Great Sandy Desert would have been impossible for Leichhardt to cross. Without question, this true desert with its red sand dunes rising in large ergs, and plains of sharp Spinifex stretching across his path for hundreds of kilometres would have seen him fail in his quest to reach the Swan River settlement. Possibly the last bag of ‘poisoned’ flour and the horrific thirst it created decimated Leichhardt's ability to return to previously identified water sources. Did this ‘death pudding’ combine with what we now know as Australia’s second largest and truest desert at its hottest time of year to fatally destroy the 3rd Leichhardt expedition?
If the ‘poisoned flour bag theory’ is correct, Leichhardt would have recognised the recurring symptoms from the failed 2nd expedition and in all probability the party died knowing they had been poisoned.

I agree with Darrell Lewis and Henry Nix (Australian Geographic 2010) that Leichhardt’s remains probably lie somewhere extremely remote buried beneath the moving dunes of the Great Sandy Desert. This, though, is an assumption on our part as anything could have happened. Someone may yet stumble upon an ancient pile of artefacts and bones and hopefully recognise them for what they might be. The outback is vast and it does not give up its secrets easily, but at times it can yield surprises.

Alternatively and as mentioned, Leichhardt, or some of his party, may have escaped from the Great Sandy Desert and struck out for Victoria. However, they would have been using the last of their supplies, again a perfect position for a suspect bag of flour, and with Victoria deserted, no escape route. Not even a small life giving post was left for Leichhardt (as was done with Burke and Wills) with a sign stating ‘dig here for rations and ammunition’ and no passing naval traffic was directed to investigate in the following months and years. Only in 1857 did a shore party enquire about Leichhardt from the Indigenous locals, who by then, nearly nine years later would have had either no knowledge of him or would have been fearful to disclose that a group of white men had come and disappeared or died in their company.

Surely, I argue, the government had a duty of care to ensure at the very least that some means of life giving support was in place in the ruins of Victoria. Then this supply post should have been checked when possible. However, maybe there was no need to afford this expense, as I have already reflected a sinister agenda may have been at play. To have actually ‘marooned’ Leichhardt and his party in the interior was in effect an indirect assassination. Then, in another logical and yet perturbing question, why was the ‘Find Leichhardt’ expedition not launched from the ruins of Victoria? Would this not be the logical choice for a genuine effort, as a supply line and further exploration could have been established? Taking this logic further, if the NSW government were originally serious in providing Leichhardt with a chance of success, why did it not sponsor him to launch from Port Essington and to
continue from where he left off in 1845? Logic that now seems to only add to the conspiracy theory.

As I depend completely on water I can advance only where I can find it.

*(From Leichhardt’s letter to his brother-in-law Carl Schmafuss 6th December 1846, in M. Aurousseau 1968, p.930)*

While Leichhardt did his best to befriend the Indigenous first peoples of this continent, an angry cultural miscue in his final 3rd expedition of 1848 could certainly have triggered a potentially fatal conflict. However, while the expedition was well armed, they were not up against a people well experienced in war, or banditry. It was the period of massacres and there may have been a 100 year old ‘payback’ in the west from something Dampier or the early Dutch sailors had perpetrated. There are narratives of conflict as there are of him dying in the desert but again these are unlikely as he befriended Aborigines and would not move forward unless he had water. He had planned to be no more than 150 miles from the coast at any one time. Although this is not to say that, stung by Mitchell’s accusation of being just a ‘coastal explorer’, he may well have ventured deeper into the interior of the Tanami Desert. All of which, of course, is again circumstantial speculation. Leichhardt’s sepulchre remains a mystery.

The narratives of what may have happened, possibly transmitted through Indigenous oral traditions, quite likely have long since disappeared in the massacres and disease that occurred with the coming of the white man. Also, last century, who would have listened to anything the ‘black fellows’ had to say anyway?

There are no lions or tigers in the Australian bush, only the deep silence of the outback and a racist history of *Terra Nullius*. With the ‘bag of flour’ thesis, all I have done is contextualised another theory with perhaps a stronger case of circumstantial evidence well demonstrated by the social forensic of ethnic cleansing within the colonial politics of the time. Any social historian would agree that what is presented as a political history will always have many hidden truths.

Prior to 1844, Leichhardt spent a lot of time away from Sydney and the white settlements. He lived with the Indigenous clans inland
and along the NSW coast. Given the massacres and exposure to the Indigenous retribution on lonely travellers, this decision in its own right was brave behaviour. His writing does allude to an understanding of the Indigenous way of life. Despite what he wrote or had edited as ‘savagery’, he would have known fights were often a justice payback and not ‘war’. He never witnessed the taking of a clan’s land in the context of war and dispossession. He wrote about Aboriginal collective sharing. Would he have seen this as a church in truthful spirit rather than in brick and mortar – maybe as a ‘noble natural man’ in an emergent civilisation - who knows? Given the racism of the time he certainly would not have written of his observations and perceptions in this context for fear of violent censuring (which is what this theory poses), but it is not to say as a philosopher and a student of man he did not think it.

Undoubtedly there would have been enlightening chapters on Aborigines if he had lived to write the books for which these field diaries were to have provided the notes.

(Roderick p.203)

Looking at the rare evidence of Leichhardt’s ethnology that has survived in print, we can read of a compassion and understanding between the lines. We see this in the following limited but very human contact entries that did reach publication in the journal.

Whilst riding along the bank of the river, we saw an old woman before us, walking slowly and thoughtfully through the forest, supporting her slender and apparently exhausted frame with one of those long sticks which the women use for digging roots; a child was running before her. Fearing she would be much alarmed if we came too suddenly upon her,—as neither our voices in conversation, nor the footfall of our horses, attracted her attention,—I cooed gently; after repeating the call two or three times, she turned her head; in sudden fright she lifted her arms, and began to beat the air, as if to take wing,—then seizing the child, and shrieking most pitifully, she rapidly crossed the creek, and escaped to the opposite ridges. What could she think; but that we were some of those imaginary beings, with legends of which the wise men of her people frighten the children into obedience, and whose strange forms and stranger doings
are the favourite topics of conversation amongst the natives at night when seated round their fires?

(Ludwig Leichhardt 20 March 1845)

What is revealing is also this unique query from a friendly group of pre-contact Indigenous men referring to their curiosity as to why this group of strange white men were travelling without their women:

...managed to keep them in good humour by replying to their inquiries respecting our nature and intentions; among which one of the most singular was, whether the bullocks were not our gins...

(Ludwig Leichhardt 6 May 1845)

One has to ask why this sexual cultural perspective was left in the journal after its edit by Parker-King when many were deleted. In a cultural critical analysis though, it is more than a little interesting. Women were the ‘peace flags’ for travelling groups on ‘walkabout’ and one can only wonder what was transpiring through the collective Indigenous mind. Traditionally, unless it was ‘business’ (payback) or ‘sacred walkabout’, Indigenous men rarely travelled without their women. Leichhardt would have known this and sensed the aggression. However, he knew that Indigenous people were fearful of the horses – and what kind of mystery was this ‘white man’ who climbed on to an animal’s back (horseback) and then sat and rocked with it in such an ‘intimate’ manner? If these were not white spirits returning from the dreaming but ‘peaceful’ men, where were their women? A number of the cattle were female. The concrete collective logic of a very ‘natural’ society fearful of a ‘supernatural conflict’ demanded such a question. The critical issue of gender as a cultural pacifier is evidence of Leichhardt’s depth of knowledge at a time when European society was still in the infancy of social science.

It is my view that Leichhardt understood Indigenous fears and relationships and after losing a member in the 1845 expedition Leichhardt would not have let his guard down. His knowledge of Indigenous ways and collective trade as a white man for the times must have been immense so I seriously doubt he would have been lost through ignorance to an Indigenous spearing. Yet he may well have fallen because of the dangerous ‘colonial values’ arraigned against him. As a man who had ‘gone native’, he was alienated
and as we know never really supported by the colonial ‘governance’ of the time. Thus, he used the resources he could muster and whatever men were afforded to his employ. He was, in short, very vulnerable to ‘removal’.

In 1848, Leichhardt walked into the outback and into a time of ‘ethnic cleansings’ as massacre after massacre still screamed across the land. This horror in Australia’s early colonial history continued on into the early part of the following century.

The peoples of the Alligator Rivers, well described by Leichhardt, had in the main all but disappeared by the 1930s. After Leichhardt, we observe a very strange coincidence. There had been hundreds of years of healthy contact with Macassan trepang fishermen. Then suddenly there was an outbreak of smallpox, this is again extremely puzzling – why suddenly small pox just after Leichhardt passes through? It remains a mystery and a sinister one at that as a company of well-armed Royal Marines were well within range. Also there are stories of small pox infected blankets being distributed to the Indigenous community around Sydney… What actually happened was then lost with one of the largest leprosy epidemics in recent history. The peoples of the Alligator Rivers had the horror of watching their bodies rot as their dreaming came to a close. Was all this disease ‘accidental’ – I wonder?

Dr. F. Goldsmith in his 1901 to the 1st of May 1902 Annual Report as the Northern Territory’s Government Medical Officer, makes for concerning reading and provides a clue as to what happened to most the South Alligator River clans.

If reports are true the question of leprosy among the blacks will have to be taken up without delay. It is said that it has spread from the Alligator River to the neighbouring tribes and if so, this will in time be a menace to the white population in this country. Mr Cahill reports of the Alligator River Tribe that of about 190 members who composed it seven or eight years ago, only about sixty survive, a large proportion of the deaths having been due to leprosy. I admit the question is a most difficult one to treat, but it should be taken in hand before the disease has spread to those tribes that live in proximity to our white centres of population.

(Government Residents Report on the
In the 1920s, the British East and African Cold Storage Company, with the vision of a massive cattle industry, cleared its lands of Indigenous inhabitants west from the Roper River. Riders in teams of fourteen would travel out into the Katherine and Alligator river catchments and also into Arnhem Land. Their job clinically was to ‘inoculate’ whole communities against leprosy and of more importance, cattle theft. They used a potent vaccine called the .303 it was delivered from a distance, easily on horseback and with great accuracy.

In the late 1980s, and with a friend who guided me, I viewed Indigenous rock shelters near Plum Tree Creek in Kakadu National Park. There were dilly bags and artefacts still hanging as if the clan, a long time ago, had left in a great hurry never to return. Amazingly, these artefacts still remained preserved by the remoteness and weather conditions of the outback. The shelters lay directly on the route the riders from the British East and African Cold Storage Company would have taken as they moved through the southern region of Kakadu and then north toward Nourlangie Rock. This famous Kakadu icon was known as Nawalandja Burrunguy by the Indigenous Waramal clan, who in the wet season, lived and shared their most sacred fertility Dreaming site with the other clans of the South Alligator flood plains. The Waramal do not exist anymore. Some say it was a silent and remote genocide from small pox or untreated leprosy but did those who survived get ‘inoculated’ at a distance? At Nourlangie Rock, other than its beautiful paintings, the only thing recorded is a bullet ricochet mark on the rock wall of the main shelter.

“......but it should be taken in hand before the disease has spread to those tribes that live in proximity to our white centres of population.”

(Government Residents Report on the Northern Territory, 1901)

It is possible that with this ‘cleansing’ of the Northern Territory and into Western Australia, the last knowledge of Leichhardt’s journey may have disappeared. While there have been some stories told, most don’t really add to the only hard evidence we have - the gun butt in the baobab tree. Maybe somewhere there is a real story in the memory of an Indigenous elder - an elder whose great grandparents saw a party of white men who did not shoot from
horseback. This would be a rare and interesting story indeed, a story that maybe has not yet been told. The outback often teases with such a possibility and an occasional clue such as the one that led me to the Leichhardt blaze of 16 November 1845 - a mark high up on the escarpment and over 160 years old.

In a letter to Gaetano Durando on the 12th of July 1844, just before stepping out on his 1st expedition and with all the political intrigue that was to follow, Leichhardt was to prophetically write:

\[
\text{It is quite likely that I shall stay in this colony for good – I may even leave my bones to lie whitening on the plains far inland.}
\]

\[(Ludwig Leichhardt 12th July 1844)\]

He was just 34 years old when his destiny changed to his fate - he disappeared, forever young, into the outback of Australian history….

The McKinlay Epilogue

On the 24th July 1862, John McDouall Stuart, after six attempts, finally crosses the continent from South Australia to Chambers beach near the mouth of the Mary River. Having come up through the centre of Australia from the south, his team had bypassed Kakadu and the South Alligator flood plains. McDouall Stuart walked north far to the west of what is now designated Kakadu National Park. He was to cross the Arnhem Highway somewhere between the Mary River and the Annaburroo Bark Hut Inn. McDouall Stuart, it appears, was to never come near the South Alligator flood plains or the “swamplands of an animated nature” that Leichhardt had described.

It was to be twenty years before the next white man followed Leichhardt into the South Alligator swamp lands. This was John McKinlay, a very experienced explorer highly regarded and sponsored by the South Australian government. A few years earlier, in an arrangement with New South Wales, Adelaide and South Australia had achieved the governance of the Northern Territory. There was a keen desire to profit from this acquisition.

Starting from yet another new settlement in 1866, called Escape Cliffs at the mouth of the Adelaide River, McKinlay was with
misfortune caught in an incredibly heavy wet season. As a result, his expedition was ostensibly a failure. The original plan was to survey the land eastward from the Adelaide River for markets back in Britain, however this large and well equipped expedition floundered in continuous ‘boggings’ and was then forced northwards by the Arnhem land escarpment. Exhausted by the time they reach the East Alligator River, McKinlay ordered the slaughter of his remaining horses and using their hides as an outer skin built a sailing craft of sorts. Luckily, in good weather, it rescued the men who by sailing, rowing and bailing managed to struggle back to Escape Cliffs. The stench in the boat was unbelievable, the seasickness unimaginable, and the craft literally fell apart as it was beached. Had the voyage continued another day possibly some if not all of the men would have perished. The crocodiles along the beaches and in the mangroves were large and numerous.

Throughout his expedition, McKinlay reported only a limited contact with the ‘natives’, clinically describing them in very small groups and only seeing their smoke in the distance. In comparison to Leichhardt, McKinlay’s report does not describe any ‘density of the Blackfellow’. As he crossed the South Alligator floodplains, there were no reports of friendly groups of the size Leichhardt had experienced. What had happened? Where had all the people gone?

McKinlay carried a small arsenal with him. The armoury at Escape Cliffs had a listing of thousands of rounds of ammunition. A few days after setting out McKinlay expressed frustration at forgetting hundreds of ‘caps’ for the ammunition of his small arms but satisfied he had enough for the rifles and carbines. I have to ask - what ‘war’ was expected but not recorded?

While building the boat of horse hide, McKinlay described hostility from the East Alligator tribes. Why is this, I ask, when they went out of their way to help Leichhardt just twenty years before? What had happened in the intervening years? Was a ‘party’ dispatched from Victoria after Leichhardt had returned to Sydney? Again, more questions than answers continue to follow in Leichhardt’s enigmatic path and of course no records exist.

From what I have been told, at the turn of last century, there was a garbled mix of narratives passed down through some Aboriginal
families. They described a group of horsemen from ‘Victoria’, then another group with a wagon coming from the settlement of Victoria in Port Essington after it had closed down and that these men said they were going ‘south’ to Victoria. These are very strange narratives as we know that when the settlement at Victoria closed all residents were evacuated by the Royal Navy in *HMS Meander* and the settlement destroyed. Here we have mixed up and garbled stories whose origin is now lost in history. What happened here?

Again, the mystery of the dreaming and the outback gives us a glimpse of a possibility. Maybe this account relates to Leichhardt or some of his party in late 1849 or maybe early in 1850, making it back to Port Essington after defeat in the Great Sandy Desert only to find Victoria destroyed and deserted. Is this a story of his attempt to escape and make it back to southern Australia with limited supplies and ammunition – if any? The wagon indicates illness or injury. Did they only make it back to the South Alligator flood plains? What remains of the expedition was possibly lost in the ‘swamplands’. This is an interesting speculation given the following excerpt from McKinlay’s official journal of 1866, just after he crossed the South Alligator River.

*Monday April 23 ....At 11.30 came on the tracks of horses, supposed to be left by Stuart at Billiat’s Springs....*

*Tuesday April 24 – camp 25. In Camp. Went out with Thring and found quite recent evidence of the horse or horses being close about: but from the wooded nature of the country, and the hardness of the ridges, could not lay our hands on him or them.....*

*(John McKinlay’s Northern Territory Explorations, 186 p.129)*

Of course, the question that has to be asked here is where did this horse or the mob of horses come from? McKinlay dismissed them as horse(s) left behind by McDouall Stuart at Billiat’s Springs which is nearly 200 km to the south and on the other side of the South Alligator. This is a very strange rationale given that McDouall Stuart also travelled up the Mary River well to the west of the South Alligator River and McKinlay discovered the horse tracks comfortably east of the South Alligator River. A river which he
describes as 300 yards wide where he crossed it the day before finding this evidence of horses.

In my view, no horse with any horse sense is going to ford a 300 yard wide river full of crocodiles unless mounted on and driven to do so, and then with great difficulty, given the size of the crocodiles back then. Yes, I acknowledge the horse track may have its origins with McDouall Stuart’s horse(s) crossing the river in its narrower southern headwaters, but McKinlay’s singular rationale just does not stack up. If these were not Stuart’s horses, where did they come from? All McKinlay saw were the fresh tracks. He did not see the horses themselves. It is doubtful they were strays from Port Essington. Back then, horses were valuable and whilst the horses of Leichhardt’s original expedition were apparently let loose at Victoria, there is no record of horses being released, only pigs, buffalo and banteng cattle. Timor ponies were used in Port Essington, and there were some escapees as evidenced by the Timor pony still seen today on the Coburg peninsula, but never west of the East Alligator River, which back then as now was a heavily infested crocodile barrier to cross.

Surely McKinlay and his colleagues had the skill to discriminate between pony and horse track. They should have also been able to discriminate whether the horses were shod.

Where did these mysterious horses come from? While they could have originally been from McDouall Stuart’s expedition or from Leichhardt’s first expedition, it is also possible they could have been the surviving remnants of Leichhardt’s fatal third expedition in which case the horses would have fared better. We do not know if these horses were very old. Had Leichhardt’s stock had a number of foals? If only McKinlay had sighted them, then maybe something more could have been written into Leichhardt’s fate. How close to Leichhardt’s mystery McKinlay had come we will never know, but his epilogue is written as the next white man to cross Leichhardt’s path in Kakadu.
SECTION 2  The Present

The present day – looking for Leichhardt’s 1845 path in Kakadu

Not too far back from the top of Jim Jim falls in Kakadu National Park, where Leichhardt had once scanned the horizon with his sextant, Annie and I, in retracing his steps, encountered a fascinating ancient and surreal landscape of sandstone, with pockets of green through which laces the Jim Jim Creek, its crystal clear water bubbling and fizzing over small falls and quiet pools.

In 2008, we navigated back into history, through a pristine environment unchanged since the explorer’s first footfall.

In Leichhardt’s day, plotting one’s longitude and latitude was not an easy task, longitude as mentioned being for him particularly difficult. The fact that other researchers report Leichhardt was
consistently within 4km of his estimated position though gave us some hope.

If nothing had been disturbed in the past 160 plus wet seasons, either by bushfire or erosion, we might find an 'LL' blaze or some other evidence of Leichhardt's route and actually stand on his path. We wanted to look for old clues. We were looking for an historical artefact at an intersection of two cultures.

If we found anything it would be further evidence that Leichhardt's navigation was indeed relatively accurate and my suspicions of the political intrigues strengthened.

What we were looking for

To prove the point that his survey work was undermined by the then published map it was critically important to find Leichhardt's path and in doing so we needed to find a blaze as the hard evidence of his passing. We were successful! It required studying the modern topographical map and linking it and 'Google telemetry' to Leichhardt's original map sketches. As such, we gained the congruent clues I was looking for but we also needed to think back to the actual time itself. This research not only was a combination of old and new cartography, but also a need to think how Leichhardt was thinking.

So, in going back in time to the November of 1845, and just two days before he had enjoyed the magnificent view of what he suspected was the valley of the South Alligator River, Leichhardt and his surviving party of nine men, two cattle and horses had scrambled down a steep bank into one of the remaining perpetual pools on Jim Jim Creek. They had beforehand struggled northwards in this impossibly rugged country, along the desiccation of a shallow stony creek, searching for another creek that had to flow west, a creek which would lead them to the great catchment of the Alligator river system. Leichhardt must have known that they were close, through his longitude and latitude approximations.

Where were these great 'Alligator' rivers? Did their headwaters lock into this sandstone nightmare, this confusion of creeks and gullies, maybe down some impossibly steep gorges? Leichhardt and his men must have been at the height of despair. The fear of a
lonely death by starvation in this stone desert would have lurked not too far away. They had no clues to guide them on the blank Arrowsmith map of the continent of Australia they were using. It was a map used for coastal navigation, and based on Phillip Parker King’s surveys circa 1818-22 and it showed nothing of the hinterland.

Finally, on the 16th of November 1845, the party’s hope must have heightened when the livestock bolted forwards to the scent of water in the permanent pools of a large and western flowing ‘big creek’. What must it have been like encamped that night on the dry sandy beach of a large creek billabong flowing in just the direction they sought while the first thunderstorms of the wet season struck them? Little did Leichhardt know what would confront him the next day, and in the days that were to come. While the heat of that November was sucking the energy out of Leichhardt’s party, finding that campsite pool and beach on Jim Jim Creek must have felt like a godsend for these weary, hungry and exhausted explorers. They had at that point been walking across an unknown Australia for nearly 13 months – at least, unknown to white men.

It was to this site, Leichhardt’s last camp of despair, of not knowing where he was in this stone desert that Annie and I were walking toward some 162 years later. We knew it had to be at a southerly creek junction on Jim Jim Creek itself. The original hand drawn map indicated this as had the rumour and myth I had picked up over time and possibly from original Indigenous sources.
Walking along Jim Jim Creek above the falls we knew we were on Leichhardt’s path, if not in time certainly in place, and it did not take much thought to imagine being back in 1845. Even the flies still sound the same!

A Campsite in Kakadu

The weeks of studying Leichhardt’s old map were starting to pay. I had always heard speculation that there had to be Leichhardt blazes in Kakadu National Park, but why had none ever been found? As I mentioned earlier, it wasn’t until after months of comparing the map released with the publication of Leichhardt’s journal to my knowledge of Kakadu topography and then to his original hand sketched notes that I realised why. The published map I discovered was a distortion of Leichhardt’s original hand drawn survey sketches. While this could be due to genuine cartographic error or fancy, could it also be deliberate? Combined with the constant smearing of his character was this a deliberate attempt to discredit his navigation and his survey work? If so, it leans further toward the ‘flour bag’ thesis as to why and how Leichhardt disappeared.

Annie and I found his old survey sketches, now that we were on the right track, translating well into our modern topographic map. Even the sandstone country surrounding us was accurately reflected in Leichhardt’s drawings and journal descriptions, as we walked up the creek.

His drawings and survey were reading so well that after a couple of kilometres Annie commented, and as it turned out, quite accurately - “it has to be the next creek junction”.

We came across the intersection between a dry stony creek and a tree-fringed lagoon in the bed of the Jim Jim Creek. It had all the makings for a camp - a wide shallowing beach on one side and a steep bank on the other.

We started looking for clues and were distracted by some red barked trees that Leichhardt had referred to as ‘red rock box’ trees. After several hours of searching, it was late in the afternoon and disappointed, we moved upstream to camp by the pillars, a beautiful site scattered with Kambolgie sandstone and white sandy beaches.
Fossilized by an ancient sea before there was any life on earth, possibly the oldest of fossils, Kambolgie Sandstone.

The next day, we explored Jim Jim Creek upstream from the pillars, partially to displace our disappointment, and partially to have a bushwalk through some fascinating country and for me to think some more. The disappointment in not finding anything was expected. One hundred and sixty years of fire and flood destroying a blazed tree is a reality in Kakadu. Luckily, in the length of time since 1845, the top of the escarpment has never been touched by what is called ‘development’. It still is the same now as then, wild and uniquely beautiful.
The following morning, after a late start, we walked down the opposite bank with the plan to do some more exploring for the blaze. In the heat, I did not monitor the map too closely as I figured we would come across the site some time after lunch.

When we stopped for lunch it was in some shade on the beach of a billabong in the creek. After a couple of minutes looking around and my checking the map we realised that we were just upstream of the possible site. There was the creek junction, and across the creek were the “red rock box” trees that had distracted us on the way up.

Then we both felt it, very strongly, that we would find something. It was uncanny yet powerful. I immediately walked around on a searching pass, finding nothing, I then returned to where Annie was finishing her lunch.

Sitting down I thought - if I was with Leichhardt’s party that afternoon and in this place, what would have happened, what would we have done?
It then hit me, and I talked Annie through it. With the scent of water in their nostrils the livestock would have separated from the dry stony creek at the elbow 50 odd metres behind the opposite bank and come crashing down that steep bank above the water directly in front of us. After a celebratory soaking they would have moved up the flat beach to our right.

We both got up and started walking along the beach and into a patch of trees. While I was looking at an old fallen tree, Annie called out to me “Dan, come and have a look at this”. I knew in that instant she had found something.

There it was - an ancient LL blaze on a small tree, so old that had we not been looking for it we would have missed it entirely. Looking at the ancient scar everything felt quite surreal. Finally, after 160 years, here was evidence of Leichhardt’s path. It was a message that had telegraphed itself out of history.

On looking around we found what we also thought were old rope burns, and ancient cuts and slashes on the trees nearby but on a follow up survey these proved to be a type of termite furrowing. However – had we found Leichhardt’s camp exactly where he said it would be? An analysis is in the affirmative. According to his hand drawn sketches, it is exactly where he marks it.

The site itself makes for a well sheltered camping area and a place to rest in shady trees with plenty of room for the stock. I suspect in 1845, after the difficult terrain that the team had just been walking through, this camp would have been a welcome respite.

The blaze is located above a washaway that could well have been a comfortable beach in 1845. There is an abundance of shaded sand nearby.

*The expedition sign ‘LL’ was carved into three trees...*  
(Roderick p.252)
The cooling waters of a Jim Jim Creek billabong next to where Leichhardt and his men camped on the night of the 16th November 1845. He was to describe it as a ‘Big Creek fr E’ (from East – therefore flowing West). The following day they were to discover Jim Jim Falls and the Alligator catchment, a key strategic target for the expedition. (Photo Douglas Hobbs, site survey 2008)

Leichhardt’s original hand drawn map leading from his 16th November 1845 campsite on Jim Jim Creek upstream from the Falls. Listed are the campsites of the 17th, 18th, and 19th of November 1845. The sketched map on the book cover is the one leading to the 16th November campsite. Combining both maps with the clue of a large waterfall downstream gave us the accuracy I was seeking. (Courtesy Rare Collection CDU Library Darwin NT).
In comparison to the original hand drawn map the above is the published map showing the Leichhardt campsite area of the 16th November 1845. (Courtesy Rare Collection CDU Library Darwin NT).

The tree with the blaze is small. The botanical assessment has classified it as a *Xanthostemon paradoxus*, a woodland species, but not a riparian one. Its habitat does include fresh water swamps or creeks and in the sandstone country of the plateau. The species grows commonly as an understorey tree in open woodland and generally to a height of 4-10 metres (Brock p.333). The tree with the blaze may possibly have had stunted growth in the creek bed. Arguably, despite its small size the tree is old enough to have been a solid sapling in 1845. As a tree ‘a little out of place’ it may have attracted Leichhardt’s botanical eye.

The blaze is not deep cut, but then we know the explorer was exhausted and probably in no mood to notch a blaze with any elaboration, just some basic cuts on the sapling he used as a horse tether with the small tomahawk he always carried.

Thus, armed with the knowledge of the age and the type of tree where this blaze was cut and its exact positioning on Leichhardt’s sketch map, we know it is authentic. In being the case, we also know this blaze would have been the last blaze Leichhardt cut in despair on his first expedition.

In a follow up survey of the site with archaeologist Douglas Hobbs, his words were “there are too many indicators here to ignore”. Now we have found one blaze site on this path we may find others. Up to this point Leichhardt’s path in Kakadu has always remained a mystery.

Tantalizingly, once we had critically analysed Leichhardt’s true route from the distorted colonial publication, we found an LL blaze in the exact spot where his handwritten notes state he camped on the 16th of November 1845.
Certainly, our discovery is hard evidence that Leichhardt’s published path through Kakadu National Park was incorrect and needs further challenging. The best way to do this is to now move forward and locate other blazes using the one we discovered as a key.

There it was an ancient ‘LL’ blaze – so old that had we not been looking for it we would have missed it entirely - *The expedition sign ‘LL’ was carved into three trees...* (Roderick p.252)

(Photo Douglas Hobbs, site survey 2008)
Leichhardt’s Path in Kakadu

Following this success in finding one of the missing Leichhardt blazes, I have used it as a key to plot his 1845 path through Kakadu National Park.

To this end, I now publish a map of Leichhardt’s route that I have drawn. I have matched his drawings and combined them with his descriptions and I hope kept his bearings within seconds of his latitudes and longitudes. Given the original document is an 1845 survey completed by an exhausted explorer using just a sextant, with no chronometer, the dated campsites are approximate. They rely strongly on Leichhardt’s sketch work and written description of the land. It is a perplexing process as in some places he is quite vague. North of Yellow Waters, he led me up the garden path, so to speak, where his description had him tracking east of the Mamukala swamp but in fact he was west of it. His maps of the ‘swamplands’ are loose and fail to lock into any significant land form as there is none. So now I am reasonably certain that Leichhardt crossed the Arnhem Highway along the vegetation boundary at the eastern edge of the South Alligator flood plains.

Apart from the difficulty in locating his campsites on the flood plains, I would estimate I have achieved some accuracy to within 200-300 metres and up to 100 metres in most cases. This now needs to be tested and will be the subject of ongoing research with the Kakadu National Park authority. With some further luck other blazes could be found. However, a word of warning to prospective blaze hunters - permission has to be sought from Kakadu National Park authorities to enter the prospective lands as the areas Leichhardt traversed are both dangerous (crocodiles, boggy swamp) and on sacred sites, hence subjected to restricted bushwalking permits.

As a visitor to Kakadu National Park, one can nevertheless view three places where Leichhardt did camp in 1845. These are:
1) At the base of Jim Jim Falls next to the car park;
2) In the trees across the plains of Yellow Waters where the cruise boats turn around at the end of the northern leg of the billabong in the dry season;
3) At the northern edge of the billabongs seen from atop the viewpoint at Ubirr.
We also know that Leichhardt’s path crosses the Arnhem Highway on the vegetation boundary east of the South Alligator Bridge somewhere between the flood plain and the pandanus scrub about a kilometre before the Mamukala Billabong turn off. He also crossed the road at the intersection to the Warradjan Cultural Centre as you drive into Cooinda. In fact, the cultural centre at Cooinda, by coincidence, is built right across Leichhardt’s path as he traversed through the higher ground of the bushland to emerge beyond on the Yellow Waters flood plain.

I hope that by releasing this map, one can follow Leichhardt’s path in Kakadu. The objective of this book is to help sponsor the cost of a memorial to the first ‘contact’ in Kakadu which was friendly and truly civilised. An interpretative statue or documentary as such would be an excellent memorial to Wilhelm Ludwig Leichhardt and the people of the flood plains he befriended and recorded.

Until this is achieved, there remains an embarrassingly sad lack of recognition of an amazing man and the people whose lands he walked who had the joy in helping him with the gestures and kindness of an ancient civilisation.

Here we have one of Australia’s premier national parks through which one of Australia’s most famous explorers walked. He was an explorer that did his best to befriend and learn from the First Peoples whose land he traversed and they in turn helped him to succeed. In acknowledging the massacres and horrors of colonial times, in the dark shadow of early Australian colonial history, here we have ‘a first contact’ with ‘natural man’ that was a shining light and truly civilised.
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The Project Gutenberg EBook of Journal of an Overland Expedition in Australia, by Ludwig Leichhardt Title: Journal of an Overland Expedition in Australia Author: Ludwig Leichhardt Release Date: September 25, 2004 [EBook #5005]


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Other wide ranging sources including oral Indigenous bush talk.
About the Author

Dan Baschiera is a veteran Social Worker and an experienced Humanitarian Logistician. Born and raised on the southern slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, Dan arrived in Australia as a ‘bush trained’ young man when his father left Africa due to medical reasons. On graduating from Curtin University he made his way up to Northern Australia where he has remained in between adventures ever since.

He loves the outback, bushwalking, sailing and history. With four languages under his belt he has a keen insight into humanity and its cultures. He has helped develop Australia’s first undergraduate degree in Humanitarianism.

In 2008 teaming with his wife Annie Whybourne they discovered a Leichhardt blaze in Kakadu National Park, after 100 years of people looking. It took Dan two years of untangling the distortions created by a 19th century colonial Australia and as he believes it’s attempt to discredit Ludwig Leichhardt and hide his ethnological findings from the then scientific circles in London. Dan and Annie’s discovery seems to highlight yet another distortion laid into the achievements and history of Australia’s truly enigmatic scientist. While nothing can be proven Dan believes it hardens speculation on his ‘flour bag’ thesis contained herein…

With sponsorship from this book Dan and Annie originally sought to develop a bushwalk through Kakadu National Park using the coordinates Leichhardt used. However the Traditional Owners fear for the sacred areas and the crocodiles across Leichhardt’s path. So Dan and Annie now seek to capture the rich legacy of one of our earliest scientists and the friendships he made as he walked into the Dreaming with a documentary film.

Annie Whybourne and Dan Baschiera at Motor Car Falls – Kakadu National Park