

“The Vanishing of Ludwig Leichhardt, Heritage Festival History Talk, Leichhardt Town Hall.”

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There is something peculiar about wandering around an ex-cemetery on a hot day, looking for a memorial to someone who was not even buried here. Between 1868 and 1912 over ten thousand colonists were buried at what is today Pioneers’ Memorial Park in the Sydney suburb of Leichhardt. How many Indigenous bodies might have been interred here before or after 1868, is not recorded. Not that there is much evidence of any of them now, other than a vaguely disconcerting, funereal air. The gravestones were removed prior to 1922, when the allotment opened to the people of Leichhardt for their recreational enjoyment. It became a massive, largely indiscernible grave, marked only by a small plaque behind the entrance arch, advising: “Particulars concerning the interments in the area may be obtained on application to the Leichhardt Town Hall”.

The iconic Prussian scientist and explorer Ludwig Leichhardt (1813-1848?) probably never visited this place, least of all when it was operating as a cemetery. He had most likely been dead twenty years before it opened. In the few years that Leichhardt had spent in the colony of New South Wales, he and a party of European and Indigenous men had gained fame for travelling from Moreton Bay (now Brisbane, Queensland) to Port Essington (Northern Territory) in 1844-1845, but then he had perplexed the world by completely disappearing two years later, on an attempt to overland to the west coast. But Leichhardt is here in spirit at the Memorial Park. Apparently a tree was dedicated to him in 1963 to commemorate his

sesquicentennial, and that is what I am looking for today.¹ It is an obvious spot: A site in the municipality of Leichhardt officially dedicated to remembering pioneers. Yet the choice is filled with irony. The first thing you see after entering is a memorial to the “Men of Leichhardt” who served and died in the Great War – to another set of absent bodies. How might they have felt about coming from Leichhardt, and fighting against Leichhardt’s German countrymen? At a time when German-Australian relations reached their nadir, with Germans and German-Australians interned, and place names (although not Leichhardt in Sydney) erased, but conversely when a surprisingly large number of men of German extraction served as Australian soldiers?² There had, after all, been a very significant number of German-speakers who had migrated to Australia in the nineteenth century. The shadow of the world wars complicated the Australian commemoration of the explorer in 1963 when the tree was planted. The wars were living memory, and Alec Chisholm’s 1941 anti-hagiography of Leichhardt, *Strange New World*, set the tone, including by way of its influence on Patrick White’s epic 1957 fictionalization of the German explorer in *Voss*.

In the end I don’t find any obvious Leichhardt tree, despite looking at everything that is passably fifty years old. Only one tree looks plausibly memorial, but it is too young, and the boulder at its base does not bear an inscription, although it looks as if it should. An unfinished re-planting perhaps? Or just another phantom, like the inconclusive blazed “Leichhardt trees” which have been found all over Australia in the years since he disappeared, and which Darrell Lewis has recently documented **in his attempt to explain where Leichhardt probably met his end.**³ By far the most prominent thing in the park, though, is the oversize Rotunda erected to

¹ Arousseau 1964.

² See e.g. Fischer 1989; Williams 2003.

³ S. Lewis 2013.

mark Australia's Bicentennial of European settlement in 1988. Rusty and neglected, it is a strange throwback to the nineteenth century era of bandstands and monuments, but with cast iron finials substituted by brutal steel girders. Could the 1963 Leichhardt memorial tree have been grubbed out to make way for this construction? A superannuated relic, a bit like the 10,000 graves that had been landscaped over earlier in the century? In visiting Pioneers Memorial Park, I joined the legion of recent searchers and foot-steppers who have failed to find Leichhardt but had a good time doing it. How much more rewarding the task when you don't have to restrict yourself to a small park but have a whole continent! But then to what extent am I somehow repeating in miniature what various other searchers did when they used Leichhardt as an excuse to be out in the Australian interior? Using white absence to "guarantee white male presence," as one critic puts it.⁴ Obsessing over him and inconclusive relics in a way that **deflects or** obscures the colonial processes of settlement and Indigenous displacement in which he was entangled, an entanglement of which he was half aware, as his recently published diaries, written in the early 1840s whilst reconnoitring in the colony of New South Wales, indicate.⁵

In fact, I did find Leichhardt a little further down Norton Street at the Town Hall. Here a much smaller piece of metal marks the Bicentennial: It is a bronze bas relief of Leichhardt given by the East German **Liga für Völkerfreundschaft** (Peoples' Friendship League) to the **citizens** of Leichhardt in 1988, at that time led by a particularly radical Town Hall.⁶ If, as Lindsay Barrett suggests in an essay, Leichhardt has had many lives, then one of them brought him here from the communist state.⁷ Geographically, Leichhardt was an East German inheritance, but

⁴ Martin 2004: 27.

⁵ **Thanks to Lars Eckstein for this suggestion (Eckstein in Eckstein and Hurley unpublished).**

⁶ On the Leichhardt Left see e.g. Greenland 1998; Hogan 2004.

⁷ Barrett 2013

remembering him there was contested, since Nazi writers, bureaucrats and antiquarians had already called him up. However, with some re-badging he could be made to do useful ideological work in the Cold War, and perhaps even inspire budding young socialists to devote themselves to the betterment of man. Sceptics were outpaced when the German Democratic Republic (GDR) sought out trade ties and legitimacy via relations with the non-Communist world, a fact that saw the establishment of an embassy in Canberra in 1973 and then the deployment of Leichhardt as shared East German-Australian heritage. In 1988 – the explorer’s 175th as well as white Australia’s 200th birthday – the GDR duly seized upon him as a “figure of integration” between East Germany and Australia.⁸ The many fruits of that initiative included this relief at the Town Hall, which was supposed to prompt the people of Leichhardt to recognise the explorer’s accomplishments and, in a second step, the GDR’s own achievements in “really-existing socialism.” This deliberate use of history by a State anxious about its international legitimacy was perhaps not so far removed from a Bicentennial Rotunda. Indeed, this one Leichhardtian moment in 1988 reveals two States each uncomfortably negotiating a range of things, including the late Cold War setting, and a desire to accommodate Indigenous protest at the same time as celebrating European settlement. Having finally found Leichhardt, I approach the relief with some trepidation, expecting it to be an example of the socialist realist mode of sculpture, something to rival the heavy-handedness of the Bicentennial Rotunda. However, it is a surprisingly soft image of Leichhardt, by a woman who, I learned from the archives, had struggled to render him both “dynamic” and “human.”⁹ In the event, **the sculptor** Gertrud Salomon succeeded in realizing a Leichhardt who lives on, looking out with

⁸ “**Integrationsfigur**”, Joachim Elm, the then East German ambassador in Australia, quoted in Laurenz 2004. **Unless otherwise noted translations are mine.**

⁹ “**dynamisch**”; “**menschlich**”, Untitled undated typescript, Bundesarchiv Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR (BSAPMO), N 2558/13.

curiosity from his place on the wall of a local council chamber, despite the demise of the Peoples Friendship League and the State that brought him here.

My short excursion into traces in Leichhardt Municipality casts up so many of the themes that this book examines: The ideas of failure and success; of productive absences and strange, unexpected presences; of the powerful, generative work that memory cultures do, and of how they **can** operate in travelling ways.