Leichhardt’s continental treks

“The absence of water and grass…precluded our progressing further…a severe disappointment, as we had just reached the part of the country through which Leichhardt most probably travelled.”
- Augustus Charles Gregory

On an expedition to cross the Australian continent from East to West, the celebrated explorer Ludwig Leichhardt (1813-1848) and his party disappeared.

Despite his relatively short career as an explorer, the Prussian-born botanist had already earned his place as one of Australia’s great pioneer adventurers. His greatest expedition was a remarkable trek of almost 5,000 miles (approx. 8,000 km) that opened up the interior to further exploration and settlement.

Leichhardt was an unlikely explorer, with poor eyesight and a lack of bush skills. Despite this lack of experience, in 1843 he trekked across unfamiliar territory, striking overland from the Hunter River region in NSW to Moreton Bay in Queensland.

Leichhardt became determined to pursue his scientific interests and desire for adventure by travelling into far North Queensland.

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The First Expedition
Leichhardt's first expedition

In 1844 Leichhardt set out on his first ambitious expedition. Bound for the Northern Territory’s Port Essington, he crossed vast areas of previously unexplored terrain on a route skirting the shores of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

After their departure from the Darling Downs in Queensland in October, little was heard of Leichhardt's party's progress, and as the weeks passed they were given up for lost.

When the expedition eventually reached their destination in December 1845 they caused a national sensation. Part of the reason for their new celebrity was that Leichhardt and his party had covered nearly 5,000 miles (ca. 8,000km), discovering a number of major rivers including the Burdekin, Lynd and Mitchell.

Read Leichhardt's journal [4], or fieldbook [5] of the expedition from Moreton Bay to Port Essington.

A dangerous journey
The long journey was not without incident. The party met and traded with many of the Aboriginal peoples through whose lands they travelled. They lost valuable equipment including four horses at the Roper River, and suffered an ambush by one hostile party of Aborigines that left naturalist John Gilbert dead and other members of the party injured.

Despite these privations, Leichhardt carefully recorded the botany, geology and the lie of the land in his drafted fieldbooks. He noted the presence of useful natural resources such as water, timber and minerals, and recognised the support of friends and benefactors by naming geographical features in their honour.

"Mr Gilbert was the only one, who received a deadly wound, a spear entering into the chest between the neck and the clavicle…when he was stooping to get out of his tent."
- Ludwig Leichhardt
Journal of Dr. Ludwig Leichhardt's overland expedition to Port Essington in the years 1844-45, revised by the explorer, and published with his sanction, 1846 [Copy 1] 1846

Ludwig Leichhardt, 1813-1848?

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TO THE PUBLIC.

Numerous applications having been made for copies of the Australian Journal, containing the Narrative of Dr. Leichhardt's Overland Expedition from Moreton Bay to Port Essington, with which we were unable to comply; we have been induced to print off a quarto edition of the same, under the sanction and revision of the Explorer himself; appended to which is a Map—a correct copy from the Doctor's—showing the progress of inland discovery to the present date.

STATHAM AND FORSTER,

Procurers of "Australian Journal."

Sydney, N. S. W.,
April 25, 1846.
Journal of Dr. Ludwig Leichhardt's overland expedition to Port Essington in the years 1844-45, revised by the explorer, and published with his sanction, 1846 [Copy 1] 1846

Ludwig Leichhardt, 1813-1848?

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with a broad sandy bed, easily to be crossed at low tide; and the water was clear. Between the Stratton and the Van Denoon, which I crossed at 17°09‘, I past four creeks, all of which are unoccupied by water below and last water. Between the Stratton and Gilbert’s Lagoon I found three creeks running on this country, and all the water rivers are crossed. Between the Van Denoon and the Coast, within 17°25, I quitted small creeks which had no name, and which I called the "Gilbert," in commemoration of the fate of my unfortunate companions. Between us about 17°6‘, it contained numerous water holes of fresh water; last water, not. Between the Van Denoon and the Gilbert’s seven creeks with water between them and the Coast. Towards the latter, which had water in this bed, but small channels of lagoons parted to the land of the creeks, were fed by a deep seated hill’s water, or more broad. The tea-tree bush and grass, which always follow the vicinity of a growing stream, is never found at all. In latitude 17°40‘ we came on a salt-water river, which I called the "Ipper," this word being frequently used by friendly black fellows, whom we encountered on the same lagoons along the coast of the Gulf of Corsica. The tea-tree bush, and the Coast there is a chain of unflowing lagoons of fresh water.

The whole country from Gilbert’s Lagoon to the Ipper, extending along the coast of the Gulf of Corsica is highly adapted for pastoral purposes. Cattle and horses would thrive exceedingly well sheep would too, unless the climate, the temperance, or the nature of the soil is favourable for them. Large plains limited by narrow hills of open forest land, extensive bays and tea-tree flats openly uncovered, changing with a mere undulating country, the grassy moderately frequent remains of lagoons, and shady forest lead along; the land under this country pleasing to the eye of the traveller, and inviting to the agriculturist. After what I have learnt of the prairies of the United States, I am of opinion that long stretches of country would be adapted for both.

The country is well watered. The first time we entered the country (when Gilbert was killed) it the second time they were very mellow, but not at the approach of the Ipper. We were not even acquainted with the second time, at the Ipper, they were very mellow, and it was evident that the grass and mallee would not support many cattle, which were before us.

I crossed the whole country between the Mitchell and the Sabine River, the "Noon Country," from the first sandy with a yellow sandy material, which we passed very much. It grew in the sandy plains, open forest land, with the river and the plains. I had seen at first the Ipper River. It appeared between the Van Denoon, and we never met it again.

Between the Ipper and the Mitchell, between 17°45‘ and 18°00‘, we passed through the tops of fresh water rivers, one fine running creek, which I called Beames Creek, which was the source of fresh water lagoons. The country near the Ipper is undulating and fertile forest land, for an extent of about twenty miles. How it passes in large plains, some of them three miles wide, over the mountains, and the mangroves. The plains stretch along the banks of the rivers, and are separated by creeks, filled up by thickets of a small tree, which we called the blackwood tree, from the wind of the west. The country is generally bad water, though the number of streams in the plains of the coast, where we had frequent rains, and the grass was good for many years.

Between the Ipper and the Mitchell, where we had our first water, the river was full from the rain, and the grass was good. There was, however, a great deal of water, and the grass was good.

Between the Mitchell and the Sabine, the country is generally bad water, though the number of streams in the plains of the coast, where we had frequent rains, and the grass was good for many years.

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Ludwig Leichhardt, 1813-1848?
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Next chapter
The fateful second expedition
[19]

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Leichhardt’s continental treks
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