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The Leichhardt papers Reflections on his life and legacy

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Leichhardt's colonial panorama: social observation in his Australian diaries

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The Leichhardt diaries contain rich evidence on natural, geological and anthropological matters, but the young German naturalist was also a keen observer of the colonial social phenomena he encountered during his period in New South Wales. This paper discusses aspects of the social panorama he observed in 1842-44 in the townships and frontier settlements of eastern Australia, from Sydney to Newcastle and as far north as Wide Bay. The intimate entries of his personal notebooks evoke Leichhardt's acute perceptiveness, but also his marginal social position, his moral imagination and a personal outlook that was infused with German Romanticism.

□ *Leichhardt, colonial Australia, social life, exploration.*

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'Today I found a greyish caterpillar,' Ludwig Leichhardt wrote in his new diary, inland of Moreton Bay in November 1843, 'which was eating the young shoots of the Indian corn. It is about 9" long, greyish with two bunches of hairs on the back' (Darragh and Fensham 2013: 264). With its combination of close scientific observation and a daily renewal of enthusiasm for nature in all its wonder and complexity, the sentence is highly characteristic of Leichhardt's diarising style. As the essays in this volume demonstrate, his diaries are a unique and profoundly rich source for Australian natural history and environmental research. But the social observations they contain are also acute and insightful; as his biographer Colin Roderick notes, 'His observations went beyond geology and botany. He seized the opportunity offered by the welcome he received from all ranks of society – from the well-to-do squatter to the struggling shepherd – to interest himself in labour and social conditions' (Roderick, 1988: 196). The naturalist confirmed his range of interests in a letter to his mother: he had spent, he told her, some six months in Sydney 'where I studied the surrounding districts, the townspeople, the management of public affairs, and the general way of life there' (Leichhardt to his mother, 10 November 1842, Arousseau, 1968: 579). Matters of rank and status, questions of love and affection, work and leisure, faith and duty all aroused his curiosity from time to time. He was alert to matters of economic production, class status and relations, religious observance, popular education and morality amid the rest of the intriguing and often disconcerting social panorama he encountered in town and country. His interest was particularly stirred by striking individuals, their circumstances, habits and approach to life: quirky adventurers, self-made opportunists, oddball personalities.

Consequently we find the acumen and intelligence with which Leichhardt approached Australian nature replicated in his attention to social life and conditions in the colony. This paper uses the evidence of Leichhardt's newly-translated diary and the letters he composed during this period to reconstruct his appreciation of the social panorama presented to him by the New South Wales of the mid-1840s, from Sydney to Newcastle to beyond Brisbane on the northern frontier. The evidence of his diaries allows us to grasp the distinctive characteristics and wider prospects of this embryonic colonial society – riven with tensions of class, race and gender, as we will see, with manifold uncertainties of various kinds – as they were refracted through an intelligence that itself was a delicate balance of contradictions. Leichhardt's Australian diaries reinforce our image of the young scientist dedicated to critical observations in the best traditions of empiricism, but they also provide more subtle insights into the foundations of his private being. His was an empirical and scientific intelligence that was nevertheless infused with a lively spirituality and a quintessential Romanticism.

THE SOCIAL LANDSCAPE

'Roaming in the forests of New Holland' (Leichhardt to Carl Schmalzfuss, 16 January 1843, Arousseau, 1968: 617), botanising near Newcastle and Sydney, in the Hunter Valley and further north to Moreton Bay in 1842-44, Leichhardt was a young knight errant of science in a colonial society largely preoccupied with far more mundane and utilitarian matters. A scholar, physician and scientist, but also a youthful German infused with a northern Romanticism, restless and driven and often socially awkward, he was himself a curiosity in the rough and ready Anglophone world of the Australian bush and its nascent settlements. As a general

frame of mind, Leichhardt was unsure of his own place in the world, marginal to colonial society and beset by doubts and insecurities. His comment in a letter that 'I'm living in a state of indecision which deprives me of the serenity of mind that I need for my scientific activities' (Leichhardt to W.J. Little, 12 November 1842, Arousseau 1968: 591) is apposite, as is the comment in another letter a year later, shortly after he turned 30:

The rapidity of time reminds me of the shortness of my life, and it is not so much for me to think of dying, as to think of dying without leaving something behind me that may speak for me when my ashes are driving in the wind. Even in assisting people with my medical knowledge, I feel a great satisfaction, for I am an immediately useful member of society (Leichhardt to Robert Lynd, 24 November 1843, Arousseau 1968: 683-4).

At an equally basic level, however, he was thrilled to witness the dawning of a grand national enterprise. He told a family member in an early letter from Sydney that he was 'fascinated when I watch what is happening here. 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 federation. In a mild climate, where nature is generous, [in a place] very favourably situated for trade, an energetic people like the English ought to make rapid and remarkable advances' (Leichhardt to Carl Schmalfluss, 23 March 1842, Arousseau 1968: 439). At the same time he was quick to grasp the primary tensions in a society emerging like a chrysalis from crude and brutal beginnings as a penal settlement. Some citizens were free and independent and had always been so, and wore their badge to 'exclusivity'; others were 'emancipists' but forever tainted by

their convictions and servitude. Leichhardt confessed to a kind of existential unease in that early letter from Sydney to his brother-in-law:

No matter how liberal you are, if you're in the company of ex-convicts you'll never banish the thought that you are in fact dealing with people who were once capable of committing serious crimes. True, they have paid the penalty and have returned, white-washed, to society – but has it redeemed them? Do they really merit our confidence? Such considerations, which are by no means groundless, explain why many free emigrants have come to regard themselves as [people of] a distinct and superior class. (Leichhardt to Carl Schmalfluss, 23 March 1842, Arousseau 1968: 438).

This sense of the provisory character of colonial society – the questions and doubts intrinsic to the whole enterprise – is a keynote in Leichhardt's social observations in the years that followed. It underlay, for instance, his interest in the evidence of colonial industry and development that promised to establish this uncertain society on a surer footing. One of the earliest large-scale engineering projects he observed was the breakwater at the base of Nobbys Island in the mouth of Newcastle harbour. In October 1842 he sketched the geology of the rocky outcrop that was being progressively reduced between 1818 and 1846 to protect the harbour from the south-easterlies. This critical observation of environmental engineering as the landscape signature of colonisation became a common theme in the diaries, as he recorded things like market gardens, orchards and vineyards, coal pits, limestone workings, sandstone quarries, wells and cultivated fields, woolsheds, and experiments in livestock husbandry and grazing. 'Eventually I will myself get behind

the secrets of a New Holland settler,' he joked in April 1843 (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 203); but although small in scale these were considered significant enterprises worthy of his careful observation. Each was a kind of progressive modification to the landscape that expressed the essential colonial project of winning a living from the land. Leichhardt's scientific eye was able to relate the fortunes of such efforts to natural factors such as geology, soil quality, groundwater, climate variability, native grass types that were useful for livestock feed, and so on.

He was similarly alert to small details of life in the raw townships and settlements he visited. In the homes of Sydney's elite, for instance, he found it 'certainly most interesting to see, in the hall of a rich villa, [an] Apollo of Belvedere sculpted in Carrera [*sic*] marble side by side with a New Zealander's well-carved wooden battle-axe and his tomahawk and paddle, while in the high airy rooms an inlaid table in Florentine style, a beautiful Erhard pianoforte, tall mirrors, and wide-winged doors of mahogany-like, French polished, eucalypt timber kept each other company' (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 5). It was a juxtaposition of old culture and new world primitivism that was almost poetic. Later that year he celebrated Christmas with a family in Newcastle, in a manner that remained distinctive of Australian culture for generations. The roast goose 'reminded me of home, the plum-pudding of Old England, but for dessert figs, peaches, and apricots were served, which are to be had fresh at Christmas only in this part of the world.' (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 102).

With little more than 300 residents, Brisbane had a much smaller society than did Sydney or even Newcastle when Leichhardt arrived there in the middle of 1843, and it did not take him very long to get the measure of the place. It had only been open to free settlement for about a year; the dilapidated

penal barracks and cottages were occupied by officials, shopkeepers and local worthies. Visiting squatters, immigrants and itinerant workers camped on the outskirts, built humpies on crown land or made do with a rudimentary hotel room; overall the place was characterised, one historian writes, by 'sluggishness and uncertainty ...[and] government disinterest' (Johnston, 1988: 84). His diary entries overlooked the topography of this fairly nondescript little settlement, dwelling instead on the small, masculine and intimate character of Brisbane's social circle at that time. He found the familiar social distinctions between 'exclusives' and 'emancipists', but here the cliques were highly personalised:

Society in Brisbane is...of a particular nature. The so-called gentry: Dr Ballow, the Police Magistrate Captain Wickham and John Kent seem to be exclusive. Then there are the unmarried young men, who stand between these and the wild crowd of jackaroos, as they are accustomed to call the squatters here. To them belong Mr Marryatt [*sic*] and Lieutenant Johnston, whose reserved behaviour, however, already almost placed him among the exclusives. Then there are some respected merchants here (store keepers), who almost all have gone through the whitewash, such as Mr Lord and Mr Le Brittain. The former is a friendly handsome man. Mr Macgregor [*sic*] the clergyman belongs of course to the whole community and I think that he is an upright friendly benevolent man. Mr Mackenzie is the only substantial man of the place and I hope that he comes through the hardship of the [present] time happily. (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 256-257).

Beyond the townships, Leichhardt experienced an altogether different kind of hospitality in the rough bush huts of the

shepherds and drovers. Travelling north of Newcastle he spent a night in one simple shelter, the first of many, but the occasion was sufficiently novel to inspire an incongruous comparison with the Classical asceticism of Diogenes. 'It was funny to see with what little household gear man is able to manage if he must.... We had two little benches, each seating two persons, who had to hold the balance in such a way that, if one rose without warning the other, the latter would immediately tumble over with the bench, plate, spoon, knife, and fork. For the night a soft bed of grass and ferns was prepared....' (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 48). By the end of that year Leichhardt recorded: 'So far I have moved from house to house and from hut to hut and everywhere I have been received, not only kindly, but even lovingly' (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 111).

COLONIAL ARCHETYPES

For all his awkwardness in formal social situations, Leichhardt was inquisitive and thus keen to learn from informants of various kinds and stations during his travels. 'The observant inhabitants of the bush,' he reflected in April 1843, 'whether they be servants or whether they keep servants, are always pleasant companions. They have many stories, because their marches lead them through wide tracts of country. They have usually lived a life full of changes and have therefore a rich store of observations, adventures and anecdotes.' (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 189). His diaries, far more so than his letters, are rich with short character studies, a sketchy typology of the men and women that made up the fabric of colonial society: rough ex-convicts and swearing bullockies, self-made men of intelligence and good humour, coarse and grasping colonial opportunists of various kinds. One archetype we meet frequently is the colonial knockabout, the well-travelled

adventurer landed on colonial shores, often beset by character flaws or moral weakness. On the road to Singleton in the last days of 1842, for example, Leichhardt met with a Mr Gordon, magnificently bearded with alert and intelligent eyes, splendidly attired in a straw hat, blue jacket, and tightly buttoned trousers and claiming family connections to the Duke of Argyll. After squandering his fortune in gambling 'and other gentlemanly occupations he [had] come out to New Holland to improve his financial situation.' (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 102). Earlier, in Newcastle, he had encountered a similar fellow named Robertson, 'a middle-aged gentleman ... who has rambled much about the globe, seen a great deal, and committed many a foolish prank and finally was reduced to great poverty. I was great attracted by his clever conversation and his sound knowledge.' After a stimulating conversation dealing with acclimatisation and the potential of indentured labour, Leichhardt was dismayed to learn of Robertson's feckless life and poor judgement, and 'distressed to find such good knowledge and so much experience not reflected in the moral character of the man.' (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 43).

This last example reminds us that Leichhardt, like many colonial observers of the period, was often pre-occupied with the moral character of both individuals and the broader society at large. Indeed, one of his earliest conclusions about Australian society dwelt upon the transitory and opportunistic character of the colonial population. He understood that most 'came here to make their fortunes and for nothing else. They are willing to devote years of their lives to the purpose, in the hope of being able to return home to enjoy life quietly until they die.' Few planned to settle permanently, and those families that did constituted the 'only real wealth' of the nascent society (Leichhardt to Carl Schmalzfuss, 23 March 1842, Arousseau, 1968: 438). In time, this

view matured into a fundamental conviction about moral character and its prospects in the turbulent flux of colonial life. Reflecting on the high cost of labour in a January 1843 letter to his brother-in-law, for example, Leichhardt regretted that most immigrants seemed unwilling to take up the well-paid rural work on offer and settle into agriculture and a life of modest domestic economy. By contrast he felt most were

so bent on making fortunes, and on making them quickly, that they think of nothing but getting better positions and better wages. The consequences are that they fight shy of handling a spade as they're not even willing to stay in one place; they squander their spare time in idleness; and they move around restlessly from place to place, from employer to employer, to the detriment both of themselves and of those who employ them (Leichhardt to Carl Schmalfluss, 16 January 1843, Arousseau, 1968: 618-19).

Accordingly, Leichhardt shared David Archer's view that this restless opportunism – whether exhibited by the ordinary immigrant or the young man of means on a colonial adventure – had generally regrettable consequences for public morality. The two men had ample opportunity to compare opinions during the several months Leichhardt spent on Archer's sheep property Durundur in the upper Stanley Valley in 1843-44, a period that is carefully documented in his diary entries. His host, a tall and reserved Scot, 'steady and dependable with a strong sense of responsibility to his fellows, both black and white' (McDonald, 1999: 70), was one of the adventurous Archer brothers and shared much of Leichhardt's moral anxiety about the character of settler society. It comes as no surprise, then, to read that 'Mr Archer ... asked what moral benefit the colony gained from the young men bringing capital,

who came here, set up stations, and carry on sheep breeding or cattle breeding, with the intention of making a lot of money and then returning to England. They employ a large number of unmarried men, live dissolutely and thoughtlessly when they come to town and to the pub, think little of religion or make fun of it and leave no trace of their existence, as soon as they leave this country. How different it would be, if active hard-working families had settled here, like for example the missionaries at Brisbane!' (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 215).

According to this thinking, of course, the essential debilitating absence was of those qualities and influences conventionally labelled as feminine. Colonial women were consequently a species of particular interest to Leichhardt, given this larger social context and his own keen appreciation of feminine graces. His attention echoed a wider preoccupation historians have described as a 'cult of true womanhood', that reified the vital contribution made by white women to the civilising process on the frontier. The theme was particularly strong in the American west (Welter, 1966; Jameson, 1984) but it appertained across the British settler colonies too. As Hall observes, '[I]f men's imperial work was to 'discover', to explore, to conquer, and dispossess others, women's was to reproduce the race, to bear children, maintain their men, and make families and households. In that sense, the work of Empire was gendered work.' (Hall, 2004: 47). Like many observers of the colonial frontier and settler societies, Leichhardt regarded the absence of 'civilising' women (and like others he did not imagine Aboriginal women in this role) as a great and significant flaw in the Australian social fabric:

An almost exclusively male population strung out over 600 miles is a very interesting manifestation but it does not express a very satisfactory state of

affairs. Nowhere else could you find better reason why God carved Eve out of Adam's rib. The workmen, shepherds and stockmen are mostly people who were transported here in account of their crimes and misdemeanours and have served their time here. Few of them are married. They have no wives to support, no children to provide for, no relations to consider. They live for themselves, and, as they're capable neither of thinking seriously about the future nor better about the present, all they care for is immediate enjoyment – whenever they can get it. (Leichhardt to Carl Schmalfuss, 14 May 1844, Arousseau, 1968: 758).

When it comes to the individual women we find recorded in the diaries, many of these are again stereotypical (the pretty but vacuous daughter, the bossy society dame and so on) but others presented a more curious moral demeanour. In a sense they were measured up by Leichhardt according to their effectiveness in that civilising role. A Mrs Carter, the wife of a struggling cottager in a settlement on the edge of Lake Macquarie, seemed very well-educated: 'I pitied the poor creature,' Leichhardt wrote, 'who had certainly been brought up to a better life of greater comfort. Though she had probably very strictly observed order and propriety while in England, these refined sentiments of a rich society slackened in the bush; she became lazy and careless, and went without stockings.' Her example prompted wider reflections on status and womanly demeanour in the colonies: 'This is the usual fate of young ladies of her class. Low-class women, who have gradually worked their way up and gained wealth, showed me the opposite tendency: they think highly of white linen, clean clothes, and neatness.' (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 62).

SOCIAL ENCOUNTERS

Like the pious and respectable aspiring squatter Niel Black, bewildered by raucous bush behaviour as discussed in Penny Russell's recent book *Savage or Civilized? Manners in colonial Australia*, the young German 'found himself thrust into a strange, disordered world where the manners he thought integral to character were set at nought.' (Russell, 2010: 83). Even when they were confounded, however, matters of honour, respectability and social acceptance were still the currency of the moment when these social encounters turned awkward, at least as far as educated young gentlemen like Leichhardt were concerned. Accordingly, diary entries such as those of May 1843 record several charged social encounters – loaded with social conventions, expectations and misunderstandings – with a level of immediacy and frankness that was rarely achieved in a letter.

En route to Brisbane town, Leichhardt fell in with an exuberant and self-assured 22-year-old, Thomas Lodge Murray-Prior, the scion of an Anglo-Irish military family later to be a pastoralist in central Queensland, colonial politician and father of novelist Rosa Campbell Praed. When Leichhardt met him, Murray-Prior was superintendent at Pringle's station on Rocky Creek, a headwater of the Gwydir River. Returning to the station hut just before lunch one day, Leichhardt chatted with a middle-aged man he encountered there reading in an armchair. Although he didn't know it at the time, the stranger was a former convict named Waterford, who now occupied Byron Plains, a run on the headwaters of the nearby Macintyre River. When Murray-Prior arrived, Waterford 'rose to shake hands with him, but Prior rebuffed him so coldly that the man quietly sat down again.' Shortly afterwards the hutkeeper served the midday meal, signalling another social confrontation between Murray-Prior

and the stranger. Leichhardt recorded the incident and the underlying causes as follows:

[As lunch was served] Prior went out of the hut and as I followed him, he said to me that Waterford was a convict, who seduced a girl, whom a friend expressly placed under his protection. The man came out of the hut. Prior said to him, 'Mr Waterford I regret I cannot be more hospitable towards you, but your midday meal is served in the hut'. 'Explain yourself', said Waterford. Prior replied 'I think I am not of equal rank with you'. With a 'Thank you' Waterford went back into the hut and as we came back from the garden, he had saddled his horse and ridden away, without touching his meal.

This was a snub that greatly aggravated the implications of a refused handshake, as Murray-Prior stood on his social privileges in refusing to explain his conduct to a man he had marked as a social subordinate. Of course Waterford was deeply incensed, as were others when news of the incident spread, fuelled by the bush egalitarianism we now associate with Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend*. 'This treatment of Waterford was now very generally discussed,' Leichhardt recorded, 'and ran like wildfire through the bush. When I passed Heatherington's [*sic*] station 100 miles further on with Mr Dangar, someone said to my companion that they would bolt the door on Prior and set a dog on him.' Waterford himself had let it be known 'that he had never been so insulted as by this young fob and that he would have revenge on him. Should he not be able to, his son would do it.' Honour was important, even among ex-convicts, and slander, snobbery and vows of revenge made for irresistible bush gossip. Leichhardt himself understood Murray-Prior's position but regretted that the latter had not been more circumspect.

'This had very unpleasant consequences for me,' he wrote,

although I agree with Prior, to make a scoundrel feel his contempt, not for his atoned life, but for his unatoned. Many thought, however, that he could have done this much better and finer, because common-sense just dictates being careful in this country and not to know the errors and crimes of its inhabitants. Every stockman, every hutkeeper took Waterford's part and they forgot Waterford's crime, as they only think of his insult as a convict, which indeed they are themselves. (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 225)

A week or so later, the memory of the Waterford incident still fresh in his memory, Leichhardt avoided the latter's holding at Byron Plains and pushed on to the station 'Bukulla' on the Macintyre River. There he introduced himself to the superintendent as a social acquaintance of the owner, the pioneer vigneron George Wyndham. But instead of being invited in to dinner with the superintendent and his guests, Leichhardt was shown to the kitchen to eat his meal alone. As he realised that he had been snubbed, much as Waterford had been and by a man very much his social subordinate, Leichhardt felt annoyed and insulted, acknowledging 'my vanity was deeply hurt and I could only gradually master my feelings.' Buttonholing Mr Samuda, the superintendent, later that night Leichhardt came straight to the point: 'I said that I used the name of Mr Windham [*sic*] to introduce myself to him as a gentleman of Mr W's personal acquaintance and did not think he had treated me in an honourable manner.' His host was embarrassed, making excuses to explain his mistake, 'and said to me that Mrs Samuda would be pleased to make my acquaintance.' Leichhardt was mollified, but the reflections he later recorded testify

to the public and private significance of acceptance in the appropriate social sphere, conventions that might be just as strictly upheld in the bush cottages of the frontier as it they were in the drawing rooms of Sydney. 'In a word,' he wrote, 'the man treated me in a very friendly way and his wife did the same, nevertheless I could only gradually put aside my irritability. I repeat what I said previously: It is not my contact with a lower class of society, which embarrasses or offends me, but I feel the disregard by that society, to which my education entitled me, as strongly as any other person.' (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 228)

FAITH AND THE COLONIAL PROJECT

Leichhardt had been the devout child of Lutheran parents, and throughout his time in Australia continued every night to recite the prayer he had composed himself as a boy (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 33). His letters present a kind of conformist and formulaic piety, but through the diary we gain sharp insights into a more intense personal spirituality as moments of spiritual insight or contemplation were spun into words. On one evening in May 1842, struggling with a gastric complaint and stomach pains, he walked out into the streets of Sydney to find some relief in exercise. His discomfort climaxed in a moment of epiphany, right alongside one of the town's early landmarks and before a classically magnificent vista:

Just as I was standing by the statue of Richard Bourke, gripped by the most exhausting inward pains, the sun set behind a gleaming crest of clouds and purple vapours veiled the distant islands, deep blue the near islands and green shores of the harbour. It was as if Death were shaking me and the Gates of Heaven opening. I fell into a sort of trance and, in spite of my suffering, I enjoyed intensely the beauty of Nature,

because of the extremely sensitive state of my nerves. Never would my soul have left my body more content to soar above this landscape: never did the link between body and spirit appear to me so weak, never the attraction from beyond so strong. (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 13)

This kind of rapturous spiritual infusion, moments when the work of God in nature overwhelms him, is documented in the diary on several very informative occasions. Camping alone on a cool and starry night, making a bed in a burnt-out tree trunk high in the eucalypt ranges around Pieri's Peak, Leichhardt had one of these moments: 'As I arose in the morning and the fresh wind blew over me,' he recorded, 'I felt so happy, so rich and so satisfied that I often stretched my clasped hands to the sky and trembling with joy cried out: O God I thank you!' (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 149). A year later his immersion in natural history convinced him, more than ever before, not only that the wonder of nature was evidence of a beneficial Creator, but that the Protestant doctrines of sinfulness and redemption through atonement were intrinsically ludicrous. The supernaturalism of religious revelation itself seemed essentially unreasonable. 'What is more absurd,' he wrote, 'what is more insane than the irretrievable sinfulness of man; what is more contrary to all reason, more nonsensical than that a curse lies over the whole of nature?' As he and other scientists studied the everyday miracles of nature, 'every day we find more to admire, we appreciate its uniqueness, even though only fragments have become clearer to us, we honour them as the announcement of an omnipotent, omniscient being, whose presence reveals itself in nature more visibly than in a direct but questionable revelation, with which all natural laws are in conflict.' (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 384). 'More

visibly' is the key to this passage: God was knowable through the study of nature as foremost among His works, rather than through the supernaturalism of any dogmatic faith that offended human reason. This evokes precisely the key themes in 'natural theology' that Leichhardt and many of his post-Enlightenment scientific contemporaries drew upon until the decisive paradigm shift associated with the arrival of Darwinism in the 1860s (Dixon, 2005).

By the time of his return to Newcastle in May 1844, Leichhardt's Australian roaming and extended contemplation of nature and the cosmic flux encapsulated by the starry Antipodean night sky overhead had cemented the basic terms of his personal metaphysics:

The solitary thinking in the bush almost brought me to Hegel's views of the immortality of the soul, if I understand them correctly, that it is not an individual and conscious immortality, but that the soul becomes free as a new combination like the simple matter, which composes the body. I think that the soul is somewhat material, somewhat similar to light, to warmth, to electricity, and I have long believed that. It seems to me that nature in its action always must describe a circle, the matter must go and come, like the waters rising to the sky and falling again as dew, snow and rain. An accumulation of immortal souls in paradise seems to me to be positively unnatural. (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 456).

These were very personal reflections, of course. What of Leichhardt's sense of the public contribution of religion to the social project of Australian colonialism? His journeys presented him with one shining example of religious faith in action, namely the Lutheran mission at Nundah a half-day's ride north of the Brisbane township. Later

mythologised as the first 'free settlement' in what later became Queensland (Sparks, 1938), this had commenced at Zion Hill in 1838 as a party of twenty missionaries, wives and children under pastors Karl Schmidt and Christopher Eipper in an attempt to proselytise the Aboriginal communities of Moreton Bay. They received government grants and donations of livestock and occasionally foodstuffs (Johnston, 1988: 59), but otherwise worked in laborious self-sufficiency to cultivate crops, run a Lutheran school and preach the benefits of Christianity and Christian fellowship. To begin with Leichhardt revelled to be among his fellow-countrymen, admiring them for their excellent sausages and spiritual labours alike. After one Sunday service early in his stay he wrote that 'The beautiful full German words of God fell into my soul like refreshing morning dew. It was a beautiful day. I have never felt so relaxed in New Holland, so happy. It is so good to be among good people.' (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 243). He appreciated the missionaries' honest hospitality to the end, and respected their honest dedication to their work, but on later reflection and after several long conversations with his hosts he found them not entirely without blemish. 'One could justly say that the good Schmidt was a prayer personified,' he wrote, but as far as his preaching was concerned,

It was praise and thanks and pleas and nothing could be said against the many good words. At the same time...I could not swim with that stream of words, but not wanting to appear to criticise that stream of feelings, I returned to my old form of not saying much and remained with it. We had many religious discussions with one another. I found much in the upright man, which I had to call in secular words bigoted narrowness. He railed against

singing, against dancing and pleasures, of every kind, a reaction not found in Jesus' life. He seemed not to want to accept anything noble in human nature. Everything was filth and sin and what was noble was so only to the extent that God became the subject. So he would not even allow corroborations by the Blacks, which in general are really only amusements and very innocent pleasures. (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 246).

Certainly this stiff dogmatism had failed to convert Aboriginal communities or impress them with the necessary virtues of 'civilised' conduct. The mission's determination to never supply consumables without either payment or work was resented, at least according to one particularly expressive piece of testimony Leichhardt recorded from one Aboriginal man, who

complained that the settlers gave so much food and tobacco, while the missionary brothers gave only small items. Then he stood up, took a piece of paper, which lay on the ground near him, and continued: The settlers give so, holding out the whole piece, the brothers give so, and now tore small strips by strips and handed it to us. Nothing could be more demonstrative. (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 242).

The troubling example of the mission's efforts, and especially their doubtful efficacy, prompted Leichhardt to look beyond the simple virtues and moral earnestness of the Zion Hill missionaries to question the utility of dogmatic religion in the inter-cultural encounters of the colonial setting.

On other occasions he took a more picaresque interest in the often strange and heterodox opinions of the characters encountered on his journeys. On his way to the stations of the Darling Downs in March

1844, Leichhardt encountered a tall, white-bearded and vociferous old recluse by the name of Clarke. The same fellow arrived at Frederick Bracker's Rosenthal homestead the next day *en route* to Sydney, where he regaled the company with his views on established religion. 'He is not well educated, passionate and apodictic in his assertions', Leichhardt later noted. Among many outrageous opinions, the old man regarded the bible as 'an abominable book that has brought only trouble over the world', declaring that 'God is an irrational assumption, the soul is nothing but the puff with which the servant girls stirs up the fire. Jesus is an imposter, the Holy Virgin a whore.' Leichhardt was appalled yet fascinated by these opinions, and unnerved by the way they were aired in defiance of conventional propriety:

It was natural that such a man drew especially on the coarsest and most obscure parts of the bible for his defence. It was a nonsense, a delusion and spurious wisdom to believe that the exalted creator of the world would sleep with a common woman The conversation was in fact too expressive because Madame Bracker was present and I succeeded only with difficulty to get him off this seemingly favourite subject. (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 422-23).

THE FUTURE OF ABORIGINAL LIFEWAYS

As discussed by Jefferies (2013), Leichhardt's keen anthropological and linguistic observations of Aboriginal society and culture illustrate his scrupulous and scientific approach to the subject. But what did he make of the longer-term prospects for indigenous peoples in the unfolding colonial process? He confessed that he had often '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 begging to the white man's door or to craving for strong drink at public houses in the new towns.' (Leichhardt to Carl Schmalzfuss, 14 May 1844, Arousseau, 1968: 757). His diaries and letters allow us to track the emergence of this pessimistic viewpoint. It seems he quickly formed the opinion (as he put it in a letter to his patron William Nicholson in England, written several weeks after he had first arrived in Newcastle and there first encountered Aboriginal men and women living in traditional manner) that 'nothing but compulsion to work, and strong discipline, could save and civilise these savages. Without compulsion nothing will induce them to undertake steady work.' (Leichhardt to William Nicholson, c.26 October 1842, Arousseau, 1968: 546).

While jarring to modern ears, Leichhardt's opinions on this question can usefully be examined a little closer, because they were simultaneously conventional and distinctive. Nearly a year later, he recorded the essence of his position while travelling out from Durundur in early October 1843 (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 324-325). Recognising better than most the acute vulnerability of Aboriginal civilisation amid frontier violence, competition for land and resources, sexual exploitation, alcoholism and contagious disease, Leichhardt was alert to the danger of the social collapse of the tribal system. His intellectual response to that prospect reflected the essential framework of the 'new science' of comparative civilisations that began in Europe with the pioneering historical sociologist Giambattista Vico and matured in the work of German philosophers like Johann Herder. In this evolutionary macro-historical scheme, all civilisations were progressing, but at different rates and in response to different contingent factors,

much as an organism adapted and matured in response to different environmental parameters. The primary insistence, however, was that each civilisation needed to be understood in its own terms and as a product of its own historical and environmental context; there were no essential or inviolate 'laws' of human nature or divine agency that somehow over-rode or otherwise determined these evolutionary patterns. Consequently, even if Leichhardt took an unapologetically paternalistic stance in relation to the collapse of Aboriginal society (and indeed followed the commonplace assumptions of the day in privileging a European and Protestant work ethic while simultaneously condemning non-European cultural systems as immature and requiring guidance to progress), he echoed these philosophers in maintaining the sovereign character of any society and culture as contingent upon the material facts of its historical context. As he wrote in the decisive entry of 3 October 1843,

We have an education for children and we must have an education for nations, which in respect to civilisation are at the level of childhood. We must take the young generation of the old tribes by force, educate them, compel them to work and so get them used to work. Has it been any different with the European nations? Their nature compelled. Here nature is mild and at present quickly satisfies all the needs each one desires, therefore the more powerful White man must compel the Blacks, because without compulsion, this Black, left to himself, will be irretrievably lost, as soon as he comes into contact with civilisation and its vices. (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 325).

Such at least was the historical imperative as Leichhardt perceived it; but this was not necessarily his own preference. He returned to this page four months later, and made an

emphatic note that was charged with the Romanticism of his generation: 'Although slavery seems the only means to preserve these tribes and in the course of generations to civilise them, I would prefer to see them die in freedom than be civilised in slavery. That is my opinion on 15 February 1844 and it will probably remain forever.' (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 325). What underlay this Romantic gesture was Leichhardt's own deep appreciation of the virtues he had personally observed in Aboriginal society. The assumption that the Aborigine was intrinsically inferior and subordinate to the European invaders was, he noted emphatically, 'exceptionally doubtful', even given the range of moral and social conditions they lived under with the onset of colonisation and the disruptions it had brought to traditional lifeways. 'I have seen him as remnant of powerful tribes,' he wrote, again with a rich infusion of German Romanticism,

with his humpies before the public house, and I have seen him as a member of powerful independent war-like tribes. In my journal there are many remarks, which point at astuteness and determination. The Black with his weapons is no coward. Calmly he meets his enemies – he only fears unknown misfortune – thus the unknown wild Blacks, whom his superstition endows with great power and the White man with horse and gun. Let us return to the times when the free German lived in his cold forest, it seems to me that there is not much difference from the Blacks of this region. (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 325).

Paying the ultimate compliment, then, Leichhardt compared the noble lineage of his own culture and people with the merits of the Aboriginal society he observed on the cusp, in the mid-1840s, of dispossession and dispersal.

CONCLUSION

In September of 1842, after seven months in New South Wales, with no situation or significant employment yet settled and ready to try his luck in Newcastle, Leichhardt could have been forgiven for being disheartened about his own future. In fact he had resigned himself to a condition of uncertainty with his longer term aspirations intact. 'In this colony,' he wrote, 'our plans are perhaps more subject to constant changes than in any other part of the world If, however, it is possible to become established and useful (in fact I consider the two terms almost identical) in a delightful climate and in a little-explored country, I am quite willing to renounce the idea of seeing my dear ones back on home soil again.' (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 29). His initial reflections on Newcastle society were encouraging and he felt he might have a permanent future there, hopes that swiftly dissipated as he realised that 'social conditions [there] were deplorable, that envy, jealousy, and hard-heartedness did not allow one to think of a friendly community life, and that the most persevering industry would not suffice to gain a comfortable independence' (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 55). In fact, for all his keen observations, the social setting of mid-colonial Australia failed to provide this kind of welcoming, satisfying community and a means of independent existence for him. But by the time of his return to Newcastle in May 1844, after eighteen months of travel, he had at least clarified how he might become 'established and useful', and in true Romantic terms it was not by conventional social attachments. He could write with genuine conviction that his community lay with nature:

The bush was an unknown wilderness when I began my journey. At present I know that the industrious, enterprising settler ploughs through it in all directions with his wagons, and that

his sheep and herds of cattle pass through and graze it everywhere. But nevertheless the thought does not please me, at least for the moment, to saddle my mare again and to begin my journeying anew. . . . [But the] striving after new things, and after the unknown will follow more pressingly and will force me out once more into the solitude of the bush to speak there with the trees, the rocks and the birds and to meditate on the workings of nature. (Darragh and Fensham, 2013: 454)

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