

Hans Wilhelm Finger

Into the Red Heart

and other tales from Australia, South East Asia, and beyond

with 25 illustrations, mainly in colour

Imprint

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Cover image: The red desert in central Australia
Based on a painting by Edward Frome, 1843

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Into the Red Heart

On the morning of March 25, 1846, the sailing ship *Heroine* slipped unnoticed into Sydney harbour. It was moored on the quayside and released the unheard-of into the dawn silence of the city. While walking down George Street to see his old friend Lieutenant Robert Lynd at the barracks, Ludwig Leichhardt at first encountered the carpet merchant Mr Aldis. Leichhardt was to describe the incident to his family at home in Prussia in the following way:

"When he finally recognized me, which took quite some time, he broke out in such jubilant cries of welcome that I was quite perplexed. And as he accompanied me to Lynd's house, calling to everyone on the street, "This is Leichhardt! We'd given him up for dead, we sang songs lamenting his passing! He's come from Port Essington and he conquered the wilderness!", I thought the whole town would erupt in sheer joy.

Ludwig Leichhardt was a naturalist from the Prussian margraviate of Brandenburg, one of the last to embody Humboldt's broad-ranging educational ideal. On an earlier private expedition, funded by just a few cattle breeders, he had discovered the sought-after land passage from the early colonial settlements in the east near Brisbane to Port Essington near Darwin, on the north-west of the Australian continent. The main motive for this undertaking had been to establish a shorter alternative to the long, dangerous route to India and Europe used to export colonial goods and materials from the southern and central east coast. Leichhardt himself also wanted to be the first person to explore the natural environment of this unknown area. Accompanied by just a handful of companions, he covered a distance of several thousand kilometres through a wilderness that no white man had ever set foot upon, enduring unimaginable hardships along the way. Whereas other early explorers attempting to penetrate the country's interior had returned, discouraged, to the coastal settlements after encountering the vast deserts, Leichhardt's discovery of fertile areas had given the colonists new hope and opened up many exciting prospects for the future. Thus he became a celebrated national hero of his time.

At the turn of the years 1847/48, Leichhardt set off on an even more extensive journey than the previous one. He was joined by his brother-in-law August Classen, who was an experienced seafarer, Arthur Hentig, an estate manager and

cattle drover of German extraction, a farm hand named Kelly, and cattle-herder Donald Stuart. It was said of the latter that he had lived among the Aborigines for years and could endure all the hardships of the wilderness. Kelly and Stuart had been sent to Australia as convicts and hoped that their good conduct during the expedition would lead to an official pardon. There were also two young Aborigines in the team, Wommai and Billy, the first of whom had accompanied Leichhardt on his previous expedition. Leichhardt hoped that this journey would fulfil his long-held dream of being the first white person, indeed the first person ever, to cross the vast continent from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean, from Brisbane to Swan River, today called Perth, and to explore its geography, flora and fauna.

Before his departure from London to Sydney in 1841, he had written prophetically: "My goal is to reach the interior, the core of this dark land mass, and I shall not cease until I achieve it." And before setting out, he underlined his determination to make his latest undertaking a success by declaring to his friend and benefactor Reverend Clarke that he would never set eyes on Sydney again unless he was returning from Swan River.

He took along 7 horses, 20 mules as pack and riding animals, and 50 oxen which were at first laden with equipment and would be slaughtered during the journey. The provisions included 800 lb flour, 120 lb tea, 100 lb salt, 250 lb lead rifle shot, 40 lb of gunpowder and a large tent for the entire team. Leichhardt hoped to complete the journey within two to three years. His reward would be the exploration of the continent's totally uncharted interior, its indigenous peoples, fauna and flora, and its transition from one coast to another – and a multitude of natural history discoveries. On the successful completion of his expedition, Leichhardt would be able to take his pick of any scientific post in the country. Moreover, he would be able to exert a beneficial influence on the development of the colony, its people and science in general, and his journey would go down in history as one of mankind's greatest achievements.

On the morning of April 5, 1848, the settler and cattle breeder McPherson saw the travellers for the last time from one of his outposts on the upper Cogoon River, about 250 miles inland from Brisbane. This was when the expedition team left civilization for the unknown territory beyond – and for those who remained, a long silence was to begin. Since that day, Leichhardt and his companions, his animals and equipment have never been seen again. In early 1852, more than three years after the team's departure, there were investigations into rumours of the their demise, and search expeditions were sent out into the country's interior. All of them have met with failure – right up to the present day.

If we want to know what really took place in the lonely desolation of this vast continent – where the seemingly endless land mass draws its hot breath in the desert, occasionally releasing it upon the aching coasts – we first have to become familiar with the strange red heart beneath its wonderful yet deadly sky. And if we are able – armed with the knowledge we have gained about him – to bring to life the gaunt figure of Ludwig Leichhardt in our imagination, then we can follow his wanderings across the endless plains into the red heart of Australia. And we should eavesdrop on the tales of the Aborigine elders around the evening camp fires, just like the bushman of old who, unperturbed by the spread of civilization along the coasts, trod his lonely path through this barren land following his odd longings and learned about its secrets that have been handed down to us. For this is what we shall learn:

After the expedition team and animals had left the last settlement, which itself lay in the wilderness, a confident Leichhardt - feeling that he was borne on the wings of providence and that fortune was smiling upon him – led them away from Cogoon River towards Maranoa River in the west. They travelled northwards, and then south of the Gulf of Carpentaria towards the west until, far in the north-west, at Limmen Bight River, or at the latest at Roper River, they turned south-westwards. From here the expedition wandered ever further into an region that was increasingly arid and less fertile. The hitherto green vegetation took on a parched, brown shade and became increasingly sparse. The stultifying heat grew in intensity, and the dusty red sand that fills Australia's interior stretched to every horizon.

Over a year had passed since they had left Mr McPherson's cattle station. Their shoes and clothes were practically in tatters, they'd already eaten over half the oxen, the other animals were weak and their numbers diminished due to accidents. The flour had long since been used up, they were surviving almost exclusively on dried beef, with the occasional bit of wild game, and any edible wild grasses, roots and fruits they could find. They began to live in the manner of the Aborigines, exploiting their own resourcefulness and ingenuity to survive the hostile outback.

The landscape through which they were now travelling was mostly flat, broken up by riverbeds that were empty during the dry season. Leichhardt at first attempted to lead the team further closer to the coast in the west, where chains of hills were visible from a distance. But on closer inspection the hills turned out to be heavily weathered rocks, barely passable, characteristically dull rusty brown, their edges eroded by the elements. Over millions of years sand, wind and water had assailed them, carrying off the resulting dust into the desert

plains. And now the hot wind swirled up the red sand, whipping it against the faces of the travellers and sending tufts of rootless spinifex across the parched ground, that got caught on their boots and clothing. There were a few spindly trees scattered sporadically across the endless landscape, their sparse branches granting the men and animals a meagre amount of shade. More dust was stirred up with their every step and those of the animal's hoofs, lodging deep in the cavities of their lungs. Again and again the men had to struggle to keep their oxen, horses and mules together. The convoy attracted marauding swarms of flies, their ceaseless humming like a constant drone before the faces of the sweating men. Eventually they grew too weary to swat them, allowing them to settle on their mouths, noses and eyelids. Even the nights at the water holes brought no respite: that was when the mosquitoes came in their multitudes, tormenting them until they finally found sanctuary in sleep in the early hours.

But this was not to be the last of their afflictions on their long journey through the searing heat of the parched wilderness. They were constantly plagued by thirst, and the monotonous diet robbed them of their strength. The constant lack of provisions was a cause of strife among the expedition members, and they had to be constantly on their guard against hostile Aborigines.

Towards the end of 1849 and after several more months of their journey, the expedition reached a region far south of the tributaries of the present-day Victoria River near the almost completely dried-out Sturt Creek east of the Kimberleys. They had arrived at the northern edge of a seemingly endless, waterless desert - today called the Great Sandy Desert - the deadly heat and aridity of which stopped them in their tracks.

Given the pitiful remains of water in the creek, it would be impossible for them to remain here for long. The initial euphoria had long since vanished, and the bickering among the team members, which was all too familiar to Leichhardt from earlier expeditions, had gradually taken root again. He had to act fast to find a way out of this desert area.

During morning tea, he addressed his men: "In one hour I shall ride out with Classen, Wommaï and Billy to reconnoitre the terrain ahead."

This had already been attempted by Stuart, but he'd returned after two days, exhausted and without having found water or pasture land for the animals. Leichhardt went on:

"I intend to enter the desert and head southwards as far as possible. I'll then ride westwards in an arc and eventually head back to camp. It should take about six to eight days, provided that I find water on the second day at the latest."

This would be the longest reconnaissance trip of the expedition so far.

The water hole at the camp would suffice for the entire team during this time, so the men remaining behind would be well provided for. Leichhardt reminded them to keep a close eye on the animals when they were grazing so that they

wouldn't wander off, to watch out for Aborigines and not to get involved with them. Thereupon, he rode off with his three companions.

They followed the course of the creek that ran close to where they'd set up camp, until they reached its source in a group of low-lying boulders. They rode around the boulders and continued out into the arid plains which were becoming increasingly sandy. The presence of dried-out grass and withered bushes and trees in a few land depressions indicated to Leichhardt that there must have been water here occasionally, but after the long dry period, the last traces of moisture had evaporated. At noon on the second day, they sought shade under a huge, slightly overhanging boulder and started to dig in a dark patch of ground. The resulting hole slowly began to fill with water, which the animals drank greedily and the men used to make tea. Leichhardt resolved to make use of the cool evening temperature to dig even deeper into the ground for water in a spot nearby that seemed promising. During the following night, a moderate amount of water collected in this second hole as well. The next morning, after the travellers and their animals had fortified themselves, Leichhardt sent Classen and Billy back to the camp to inform the others about their find. He intended to travel on with Wommaï, following the arc over the sand hills to the south west, and then heading towards the west. They would be able to avoid the searing heat by seeking out a shady spot in the afternoon and riding further into the desert at night by the light of the full moon. The red glow of Aborigines' camp fires would also be easier to spot in the dark than the barely visible columns of smoke they gave off during the day. Leichhardt was confident in the knowledge that wherever Aborigines had set up camp there was likely to be a supply of water nearby.

The scouts set off, following a handful of circling birds along a dried-out river bed and over the undulating sandy ground. Both men tirelessly scanned the horizon in search of hills, clusters of trees or columns of smoke from the Aborigines' fires. At times they were filled with hope when they believed they'd spotted a large elevation or a dried-out river bed, then plunged into desperation when, on closer examination, no water was to be found and they were thus forced to dejectedly ride onward. The sun sank towards the horizon, dusk followed, and the two exhausted riders strained their weary eyes in the hope of catching sight of the verdant green of a water hole or hearing the screeching of birds quarrelling over a remaining puddle. But this time their efforts were in vain and, with low spirits, the two men sought a place to rest for the night. Their animals were suffering terrible thirst and could not be coaxed into eating the dry, shrivelled grass, so they used the remainder of the water in their saddle bags to provide them with a meagre drink. They then prepared some tea – though it was scarcely enough to quench their enormous thirst – and sated their hunger by chewing on the dried meat from their supplies.

The full moon slowly rose in the sky, illuminating the terrain so brightly that they could confidently venture out, continuing their journey in the hope of sighting the fire of an Aborigine camp. They reached a slight elevation in the landscape from where they could make out two distant fires to the south-west, in their direction of travel. However they were too far off to reach during the night and one of the animals stubbornly refused to take another step, so they stopped to rest until sun up.

The next morning they set out in the direction of the fires and found the now deserted Aborigine camp – and a small water hole fenced off with interwoven branches. Both men and animals drank eagerly from the water hole, but did not touch anything else in the camp. Despite the meagre supply of grass, Leichhardt made his mind up to return with the rest of the men, for he felt the water would suffice for the entire expedition. But now he intended to return to the water hole by the boulders, from where Classen had set out for the base camp. He chose not to pursue the plan to ride in an arc westward because he and Wommai, as well as the animals, were too exhausted to risk riding into the unknown. They had found what they had been looking for: water in the desert. And there were Aborigines living in this barren wilderness too, albeit widely dispersed – and their camp fires had instilled them with fresh courage. Leichhardt was absolutely certain that he would be able to continue his voyage and traverse the fearful terrain ahead, eventually reaching Swan River beyond. At noon the following day they reached the spot where they'd dug for water by the boulders, and found both holes generously full. The day after that, they reached the main camp and the rest of their companions. Leichhardt was totally exhausted and barely able to dismount from his horse. He almost fell from his saddle, and thus did not apprehend the frosty atmosphere that prevailed in the camp. He thirstily gulped down the tea that Classen offered him, murmured something along the lines of, "set out westward tomorrow morning", and immediately fell into a deep sleep.

In the morning he awoke feeling refreshed and since Wommai had recovered after a night's sleep, he instructed him to take one of the rested mules and ride out westward with Classen. On their return the day previously, Wommai thought he'd spotted the peaks of a mountain range. They were instructed to try to reach them and to find out if there was sufficient water and pasture land around the foothills. They were also to establish how far south the mountain range extended. Leichhardt exchanged few further words with Classen, who in turn tried to pull him aside. As Leichhardt noticed that Classen was once again starting to complain about Stuart and Kelly, he broke off the conversation, for his brother-in-law had been bickering with the other two since their journey

began. Classen was unable to deal with their coarse manner, and thus the three had been constantly quarrelling. But there was no time for discussion; the two scouts had to set out early in order to be back in three days at the latest – in case they found no water. Thus, a disaffected Classen departed with Wommai at dawn the next day, beset by a vague but dark sense of foreboding.

It would be of little use to speculate further on Classen's thoughts about what took place during Leichhardt's absence, for in the course of the following events, the drama of this expedition was to take a fatal turn.

It happened at lunchtime. Leichhardt had once again taken charge of handing out the food portions, because this issue was the major cause of conflict among the men if one or the other felt cheated out of his due amount. For lack of other pleasures, the daily meals determined the daily rhythm and well-being of the expedition members, and thus played a crucial role in the success of the entire undertaking.

There had been five pieces of beef in the cooking pot, four of normal size, and one smaller. The plates were now lined up with the five portions. Leichhardt sternly enquired of Billy, who was responsible for the cooking, why he'd not cut the pieces of meat to equal size. But before Billy could respond, he was interrupted by Stuart, whose task it was to allocate the food.

"It's alright like that, mister", he said to Leichhardt, although at the outset of their journey he'd addressed him as 'Doctor' or 'Sir'. "The little piece is for Blacky. He only sits around all day anyway."

Leichhardt stopped short. It was another display of insolence by Stuart, who this time pushed his luck further than ever before. Such presumptuous behaviour was not acceptable – not only because Leichhardt, as the expedition leader, was responsible for maintaining harmony among the team members, but because he alone had the authority to limit food servings, if at all. But he was tired of dealing with Stuart's insolence and more than absolutely necessary. The latter had become increasingly rebellious in recent weeks, and Kelly and Billy weren't much better.

"Billy", he said with emphasis, in order to demonstrate his displeasure at the nickname 'Blacky', "may perhaps be rather slack at times, but in general he makes himself very useful and has helped us out of several tight spots. If he has transgressed in any way, it is to be reported to me as usual, and I shall decide if, and in what manner, he is to be disciplined. Since I am not aware of Billy's misconduct, and you have unnecessarily and without my consent, administered a punishment to an expedition member on your own authority, I shall designate the small portion to you. After we have eaten and you have given a report on Billy's idling during my absence, I shall decide whether, and in what manner, he shall be punished."

And that is how it happened. The men ate in silence, a violent rage glowing

Stuart's eyes. He drank his after-meal tea with Kelly, separately from the rest of the men. Leichhardt observed the two men whispering fervently to one another.

He questioned Hentig in order to discover what had occurred during his absence.

"Sir", began Hentig, "I don't know what came over those two", nodding towards the two whispering men as he spoke. "When you're away from the camp, Billy does indeed take certain liberties and it is difficult to get him to work. He once absconded for the whole day and didn't return until after dark. We almost shot at him, because we thought he was an Aborigine trying to steal provisions from the camp. But I'm more concerned about Kelly and Stuart. They're very cantankerous when working and recently they've been no less slovenly than Billy. They always seem to be plotting something."

"We've lingered at this place too long", remarked Leichhardt. "The men are growing uneasy. The animals have eaten up what little grass there was in the area and the water hole is starting to turn muddy. I came across Aborigine camp fires some distance beyond the sand dunes, most certainly near water holes, indeed we checked one of them. They are sparsely located and quite meagre, but we can manage with less water now that we have less animals. Therefore I've decided that we'll set off as soon as Classen returns, and then either head towards the westward range of hills and march southwards along their periphery or head directly towards the direction of the camp fires. The two water holes that Womma and I dug along the way should provide us with enough water for a brief stopover. We'll slaughter the weakest ox this afternoon so that we'll have enough food for the difficult journey ahead."

Leichhardt then summoned Stuart and Kelly, briefly informing them of his findings, and explaining his plan to continue the journey upon Classen's return and then head out across the desert. According to the scant but reliable reports of incursions by other travellers from the direction of Swan River, the desert did not extend all the way to their destination. With a little luck they could complete their crossing of this treacherous landscape within two or three months.

While Leichhardt spoke, he did not fail to notice the dark frowns on the faces of Stuart and Kelly. He hastily added that they would be slaughtering an ox today in order to be well prepared for their journey. Although this meant more work for the men – the meat had to be cut into joints and dried – the slaughter days were the high points of the journey because there was plenty of meat and everyone could eat his fill. The offal was especially prized as a delicacy. But then Stuart and Kelly stood up, as if to distance themselves from Leichhardt, and the former spoke:

"Mister, Kelly and I are of the opinion that it's not a good idea. We've been in the wilderness for almost two years now, we've lost most of our horses and mules, and the remaining oxen will keep us supplied for 6 months at the most –

and that's assuming we find enough water holes. We're surviving on a diet of mainly beef, wild game is becoming more infrequent as we travel deeper into the arid terrain, we've used up most of our tea supplies, our clothes and shoes are in tatters, and we are utterly exhausted. We'll be lucky to find any grazing for the animals in the desert, and few wild animals to shoot due to the scarcity of water holes. We have no idea of the true extent of the desert, and the heat of the interior will be even less bearable than here in the borderlands. We'll most certainly suffer a dreadful fate out there, and we'll never arrive at Swan River."

He paused only briefly, not giving the nonplussed Leichhardt a chance to speak, and went on: "Kelly and I have reached the decision that we should call off the expedition and return to the garrison in Port Essington. It's the nearest settlement inhabited by whites, and we could just about make it there alive."

Leichhardt was aghast. Now it was his turn to rise to his feet, boiling with rage, and Hentig did likewise. Only Billy, sitting somewhat apart from the others but within hearing distance, remained seated, seemingly unmoved. All the men were standing, an unfamiliar occurrence during a discussion in the searing heat of the early afternoon. The escalating confrontation served only to inflame the tempers of the men even more.

"Never, Stuart, never will I call off this expedition. It will not be over until we reach Swan River. I warned you explicitly, *and you*", he said, turning briefly to face Kelly, "before our journey commenced, and I vividly described all the difficulties that we have in fact endured thus far. I also said that it is my firm intention to see this journey through to its successful conclusion despite all the privations we may suffer. And I do not intend to let an unexplored desert and half-hearted companions stand in my way. Since we have covered two-thirds of the voyage already, we shall manage the final third as well. Once we have made it across the desert, we'll start finding more water holes, rivers to the coast are likely, and there'll be more plentiful wild game."

"And even if paradise were to lie beyond the desert", countered Stuart with a hint of mockery, "Kelly and I still wouldn't go on. You have constantly led us to believe that our lot will soon improve, that we will find plenty of water, pastures and wild game beyond the horizon, and that we'd soon reach Swan River. If you want to bite the dust out here in the desert, Mister, you can do it without us. Kelly and I are going to turn back, because that's the only way out of this hell."

Leichhardt repeated his "Never", almost screaming it out this time. He then continued in a firm tone of voice, explaining that they would set out in two or three days. "That way", he said, pointing south-west towards the direction of Swan River – though before them lay only desert. Hentig, cool-headed as ever, murmured something about the two men being well advised to reconsidering their, because they might see things differently in the morning, and anyway, the

team had to wait for Classen and Womma's return to see what news they brought. Stuart and Kelly sulkily withdrew, and shortly thereafter tempers had cooled enough for them to commence with the slaughter of the scrawniest ox. What could be better in their miserable situation than the prospect of a feast for supper?

The resoluteness with which Stuart had presented his demands to the expedition leader marked a new shift in their relations. The expedition had been planned exclusively by Leichhardt and his friends, and he had taken along his companions as labourers and cattle drivers. But whereas earlier explorers of Australia's interior had generally been commissioned by the government, and were thus under the command of a strict military leadership, Leichhardt, a naturalist driven by his own willpower and the opportunities of his time, was solely pursuing his own scientific curiosity. As the leader of the expedition he was used to being obeyed, but though he could stipulate obedience as a condition of joining of the expedition, once the journey was underway he had no means of enforcing it. He was now wholly dependent on his companions' being driven sufficiently by the prospect of fame and financial rewards in order to see through the undertaking to its end. But whereas Leichhardt was pursuing a lifelong dream, these coarse, uncultivated men, initially dazzled by Leichhardt's new-found fame, had sought a golden opportunity which had turned out to be a burden for some of them in the course of daily life on the expedition.

The next day they were busily involved in laying out the strips of meat to dry in the scorching sun and making preparations for their journey. Each of the men was lost in his own thoughts, which were completely different from one another. They were expecting Classen to return late the next day, though a delay of one or two days was possible because he had a long way to travel and the famished mules could only be driven along at a dawdling pace due to a lack of water and grass.

Dawn broke the following day, the sun rose slowly over the horizon, as Leichhardt, who had been on watch duties until after midnight when he was relieved by Hentig, was awoken by someone cursing in muttered tones. Stuart stood at the edge of the camp and was loading a particularly stubborn mule. Or was the outburst instead due to his exceptional haste? Leichhardt sprang to his feet.

"Why are you loading up that mule? What's the meaning of this?"

"Curse it, mister, it means we're turning back."

"No, you'll stay here! Unload that beast this instant! Where are the others?" Leichhardt, now wide awake, stormed over to Stuart. "No one shall leave the camp without my consent. We'll wait for Classen to return, then we'll be moving on."

Stuart calmly tied the rope of the loaded mule to the saddle of his horse, and straightened up to confront Leichhardt, who was now standing directly in front of him.

"Mister, you've given enough orders. The only thing that matters now is that we get out of here alive. You can go into in that damned desert! You can rot there for all I care. Rot there!" He let out a mocking laugh and bent over to untie the hobble knot on the front leg of his mount.

Beside himself with rage, Leichhardt rushed over to the mule to untie the luggage straps, but his attempt was in vain. Stuart immediately stood up straight and violently shook Leichhardt, who was still clinging to the straps. The latter was a slightly-built man of science, and though tall and blessed with an unbending will, he was frail and no match physically for the tall, heavy-set Stuart. The latter sent Leichhardt to the ground with one or two blows, mounted his horse, and repeated his verbal attack: "You can rot in this God-forsaken place!" He then rode off at a light trot in full knowledge that the short-sighted Leichhardt would not be able to hit him with the shotgun - and in any case he still lay on the ground as if struck by a thunderbolt.

It was some time before Leichhardt came round. No one else was in the camp apart from him. Where was Hentig? Had he ridden off to round up the animals that had strayed off? Billy would most likely have left with the two mutineers, of which Kelly was the second, there was little doubt about that. A strange silence hung over the camp. Only the enfeebled mule that carried Leichhardt's collections stood tied in the shade of a scrawny tree, and in the distance was one of the oxen, likewise a very haggard beast. As Leichhardt now examined the camp more closely, he realized that most of the equipment, the ammunition box, and the best part of the dried meat were gone. But he still harboured hopes that Hentig would return. Perhaps he had ridden out in a different direction independently of the three others to bring back the stray animals. It was unthinkable that he could have abandoned Leichhardt in the wilderness. Yet as the sun slowly rose higher, blazing down on him in the late morning sky, and Hentig had still not returned, and as he examined the fresh tracks of the whole group, there was no longer any doubt in his mind: he was alone. Suddenly he was struck by the terrifying realization that Hentig had absconded with the mutineers, along with most of the animals, provisions and equipment.

"Hentig! Hentig!" Overcome with desperation, Leichhardt knelt down, wrung his hands, and pleaded with God not to abandon him – not after the torments he'd endured on the long expedition, a mere year or so before reaching his goal. But for the first time since his youth he felt no solace in prayer, which had otherwise always given him comfort in times of danger, poverty and during countless difficulties when travelling.

"God! My Father! Do not forsake me", he cried.

It was only gradually that he returned to his senses and was again filled the familiar confidence that the blessed Father had not abandoned him and that He would guide him as always, and that Leichhardt would willingly follow. But what had happened the previous night? It was unthinkable – could he really have been so wrong about Hentig?

Leichhardt hadn't misjudged Hentig. The day before, Stuart and Kelly had easily been able to coax the timid Billy into joining them. They needed him as a tracker, for hunting wild game, and as a cattle herder, because they'd decided to take the majority of the animals to ensure their survival. The doctor wouldn't need them anymore: he'd was going to die in the desert anyway, of that they were certain. Without his friend Womma by his side, Billy was defenceless against crafty persuasions of the two mutineers. The two men painted a vivid picture of the terrible fate that would await were they to travel further into the desert, where the bloodthirsty natives lurked, ready to impale the poor black man from the coast with their spears. And, they told him, when they were utterly exhausted by the march through the desert sands, even their guns would be of no use because they'd outnumbered by their attackers. In any case, his friend Womma would be sure to find their trail and follow them as soon as possible. Thus Billy switched to the side of the mutineers – he wanted nothing more than to return to his tribe near the coast as soon as possible.

Hentig was a more difficult nut to crack, yet the rebels could not do without him either. The route back to the east coast was long, because they couldn't return northwards to Port Essington without the doctor: and they would not find safe haven there since it was a military garrison. They would be asked probing, uncomfortable questions, and the time span between their desertion of Leichhardt and their estimated arrival would be too short to allow all the compromising evidence to be swept away. The officials might send out a search party and perhaps find Leichhardt or Classen still alive – after all, one could not guarantee that the doctor and Classen would perish in the desert. Or maybe they'd get help from their friends, those filthy blacks. If Leichhardt had Hentig and Womma with him, his chances of survival would be considerably higher. And even if the enfeebled Leichhardt didn't make it, Hentig surely might – and if he could manage to make it back to the settlement, it would cause them a lot of trouble. Moreover, they needed another pair of hands, and no one was able to deal with the animals – upon which their survival depended – as well as Hentig. But although he had lost faith in the success of the expedition, they could never convince him to go with them voluntarily. He would rather perish with the doctor, who was just as mad as himself. But once they were far enough away from the scene of events and dependent on each other for survival, Hentig would provide the help they needed. To attempt to flee, alone in the expanse of the land's arid interior, would mean certain death for him. Before they reached

their destination on the east coast, they would have to decide what steps to take: there were, after all, plenty of unexplained disappearances and victims of wild animals in the outback. Such an incident would not arouse any suspicions, certainly not the death of the long-weakened Leichhardt. It was merely a question of choosing the right words.

Thus, during the night watch, they sneaked up on Hentig, and the brutish Kelly knocked him out cold. They then gagged and bound him and whisked him away from the camp until they were beyond hearing distance. Before daybreak they had assembled everything they needed to take outside the camp, and they'd rounded up and loaded the remaining horses, mules and the strongest oxen, including the bound and gagged Hentig. By the time Leichhardt awoke to find the camp deserted, Stuart had taken the rest. Before long the mutineers were out of reach for him, because they knew that he would never leave the camp alone without anyone remaining on guard against the thieving Aborigines. Individuals or groups of them occasionally turned up, sometimes quite close, other times keeping their distance, and Leichhardt wouldn't get far on his ailing mule.

Without Leichhardt's knowledge, the rebels had been scouting their planned route over the previous few days in order to make a quick getaway when they set off. The way they'd arrived, via the north arc south of the gulf, would be too far, so they sought a more direct route to the populated coastal region. Hentig soon came to, but the others kept his hands bound. After several days in which the men, driven by their conscience, made fast progress, they steered a straight course to the distant white settlements. Eventually they untied Hentig, secure in the knowledge that he would not dare to return alone. For the following few days they denied him access to a gun and kept a close eye on him. Later, their only concern would be survival – and Hentig wanted to survive too, no matter what the circumstances, because his companions deserved to hang from the gallows. He would be very wary of them, and try to preserve his horse's strength for the final, decisive stretch.

Classen and Wommaï returned to camp two days later. Up to then, Leichhardt, who was out of his senses, had been aimlessly wandering around the camp. Aware of the hopelessness of his situation, and that that all his efforts and the expedition had reached an end, he was unable to make any clear decisions.

It was evening. The returning men found their familiar camp deserted except for Leichhardt, who was reclining on a bed of grass in the shade of a large rock. He raised his torso slightly in greeting and, with a faint voice, told the others of recent events. To make matters worse, the previous day he'd had an attack of heart palpitations that was much more severe than any time before. Since then he'd been laying down, almost unable to move, suffering terrible pains over his entire chest. The two returnees were cast into a mood of hopelessness at the

news. Classen, himself exhausted from the scouting mission and in no fit state to follow the trail of the absconders, sat down beside his brother-in-law and fell into a deep depression. There was nothing to report from his scouting mission that was of any relevance now. Wommaï poured water over the used tea leaves in the pot. It was the last of their tea supply: the mutineers had taken the rest. From this point on they would have no more of the invigorating beverage, just water to drink. There were still a few pieces of cooked meat in the soup pot, which the two starving returnees ate readily. Leichhardt declined any of the meat and merely sipped at the broth. Since darkness had now fallen and since the returning two men were weakened by the journey back and the bad news, it was decided that they would discuss the state of affairs the following day. But what was there to discuss? It was obvious to all three men that their fate was sealed. The younger Wommaï tied up one of the mules and remained seated by the camp fire for a long time, stoking the embers and singing songs of lamentation. Exhausted, the other two men lay down to sleep without bothering to organize a night watch. Leichhardt lay clinging to his diary until his grip gradually loosened and he fell into a troubled sleep.

The next morning, it required considerable effort and the support of his two companions for Leichhardt to make it to the edge of the camp in order to relieve himself and clean himself up. Directly afterwards, he again sank down onto the bed of grass. The same man who just a few days previously had been filled with heroic determination to cross one of the world's most fearsome deserts with such frugal means, was defeated. The collapse of his expedition, the hopelessness of his situation, the destruction of his hope of being able to finish his scientific work and earn his due recognition had reduced him to an enfeebled, doomed wretch. Not long before, a detached observer would have seen in astonishment how a dauntless will could transform a starved body into a sinewy leader. Bereft of the hope of reaching his goal, he suffered a renewed attack of heavy palpitations, adding yet more strain to his weakened body.

Once the three men had fortified themselves a little with a little morning broth, Leichhardt, without any preliminary remarks, turned to address Classen, who was sitting beside him and resting his head in his hands.

"It distresses me to see you sitting there like this. You didn't choose to come to this dreadful place, and you trusted me to guide you and the others safely to Swan River. But I hold great hope that you and Wommaï will manage to make it to Port Essington. The Aborigines here are not hostile towards us, so you have nothing to fear from them and they might even help you. I, however," he went on, "have found my place here. It is God's will."

"No, no", countered Classen fiercely, "I shall not allow you to perish here. This is not your place. Wommaï and I will take care of you, and in a few days or weeks we will head for the garrison at Port Essington together."

Leichhardt shook his head: "My time has come. I have achieved almost everything that I set out to do. I have penetrated Australia's interior and have made many discoveries along the way. But I cannot take them to the coast. The Lord has reserved that honour for someone else; he chose not to give all the glory to one person, but rather to distribute it among many. He has fulfilled my final wish to find a resting place in my beloved wilderness, which I have so long explored and which was the object of all my longings and strivings through the years – since my youth, in fact, even though it was a vague longing back then. That fills me with happiness. And anyway, what would it mean if I were to return from Swan River to Sydney? My body would be so weakened that I would never fully recover. Perhaps I would only have a few years left to live, and be unable to finish any new scientific research. I'd have to deal with the rumours spread by dissatisfied travel companions and an army of envious people who begrudge a foreigner any form of success in this young country. And the fame? I am already quite famous enough. And now I have the knowledge I sought too."

Leichhardt briefly fell silent, his breathing laboured.

"But not quite," he exclaimed, weakly holding up his diary in his hand. "As you know, I have written down all the details of the expedition in this book, my research, and some of the conclusions I have drawn from it – and I have documented the shameful behaviour of those two rogues. I forgive Hentig, because I'm certain that he was forced to join Stuart and Kelly, and also Billy, who they treated so badly and most likely inveigled."

Classen nodded.

"My records are the most important thing now. The other notebooks are in the saddlebag. When my body finally gives up on me, please pray for me and bury me in the spot that I am lying now, so that I can enjoy a modest view across the plains. The rock will provide me with shade and the myrtle tree will gently nod at me."

Once again Leichhardt paused, a little longer this time.

"Take the travel diary and log book and bring them to Port Essington. Captain McArthur will take care of travel arrangements to Sydney for you and Womma. When you arrive, give the books to Reverend Clarke. The captain will also make sure that the two renegades are punished if they should ever reach the coast."

Classen tried to give Leichhardt encouragement with words of comfort, saying that he just needed to recuperate, and he spoke again of travelling together to Port Essington. But he gradually had to accept the futility of his efforts – and the dawning awareness of his own fate, in the midst of a desert wilderness thousands of kilometres from civilization, overwhelmed him. Tears rolled down his cheeks, and he promised to carry out all the tasks with which Leichhardt had

entrusted him. The men sat together for some time without exchanging any further words, each lost in his own thoughts.

Classen and Wommaï surveyed the remaining items and material left behind by the deserters. So little was left, they could easily transport it on the ox and Leichhardt's mule. They intended to leave behind anything that was not absolutely necessary. Leichhardt also instructed them to leave behind the large collection of plants, types of wood, flower seeds, animal skins and suchlike – it would prove impossible to transport them now. They might even be forced to slaughter the ox before leaving, taking all the dried meat they could carry, in order to make quicker progress.

A group of Aborigines entered the camp. They were familiar to the travellers, and when they saw the state of Leichhardt, whom they knew as the expedition leader, they began to lament. But they kept their distance, above all due to the horns of the imposing ox, a beast that filled them with fearful awe. As a precautionary measure, Wommaï had tied it up close to the camp. As the afternoon drew on, Leichhardt, sitting in the long shadow cast by the boulder, recovered his strength a little and his heart palpitations eased off. His body was wasted: only his spirit flickered with the faint signs of life remaining within him. He had the bag containing his notes brought to him, gave Classen some instructions, and with a trembling hand wrote a few lines to Captain McArthur, the commander at Port Essington, instructing him to read the last pages of his travel diary concerning the collapse of the expedition. He exonerated Hentig of all guilt. He then wrote a few words to his mother – tears filled his eyes at the thought of the old woman who would never again be able to take her son in her arms – and to Schmalfuß, his brother-in-law. Finally he wrote in his diary: "... I have given this country all my energy, and devoted myself solely to science, which I served with all my heart. God is my witness." His hand fell limply aside, his weak breath barely causing his chest to rise and fall. Classen leaned over the exhausted man in order to better hear his whispering voice.

"Take the papers. Set off tomorrow." Beneath half-closed lids, Leichhardt's eyes drifted across the distant plains, his face bore a serene expression, all the things it would have still been possible to do had been done.

Classen put the papers in order and placed them carefully in the leather bag. Then he seated himself beside Leichhardt again, embraced him, and stroked his hair. Dusk closed in, Wommaï took care of the animals and brought the two men their evening meal. Leichhardt refused his serving, and merely drank a little water. The young black man sat down at the fire, sighed, and once again began quietly singing the old laments of his tribe. He too was alone and far from his familiar homeland. And as the dark of night spread all around and the glistening stars shone brightly in the sky, a warm wind gently caressed Classen's bare arms. He glanced to Leichhardt, who seemed to soak up the silence of the

night. The crescent moon rose hesitantly, forming a pale sliver amongst the night stars. Tiredness overcame Classen, and he cast a final look at Leichhardt, who seemed to sleep. He lay down nearby, the tensions of the day drifted away, and evaporated in a long, unsettled sleep. Leichhardt passed away that same night.

The next morning, Classen was awoken by Womma's loud cries of lamentation. He quickly grasped their meaning. Tears welled up in his eyes, and he felt more helpless and alone than ever before; alone in this wilderness which was still so alien to him, thousands of kilometres from the nearest white settlement, without a leader, having just lost the one relative who had been the only person he knew well in this vast continent. His tears turned into uninhibited sobs, and Womma's lamentations grew louder.

But then other noises could be heard: a few Aborigines were standing in the camp, and they too were mourning in whispered tones. They had obviously understood the situation quite quickly. The surprising sight of the Aborigines, although they were no longer unfamiliar, quickly brought Classen to his senses. He knew that there was no time for mourning and that he had to set off as soon as possible.

They buried Leichhardt later that day at the designated spot, without a cross or any other marking; instead, with great effort, they simply rolled a heavy stone over the grave with the help of the ox, in order to ensure that the deceased enjoyed a peaceful rest. Then Classen gave Womma instructions on preparing for their departure the next morning. The preparations occupied them for the rest of the day. The Aborigines became more numerous and started to become bothersome. The two men brought the ox into the camp. The poor beast was thus prevented from grazing, but its horns protected them from any unwanted attention. Classen resolved to slaughter the ox later, far from the Aborigines. By evening they had finished their work. They tied up one of the mules inside the camp, and left the other two and the ox to graze freely so that they could fortify themselves. At dawn Womma would round up the animals again, then they'd load them and set out northwards from where they had come. They'd eventually start heading for Port Essington, as described to them by Leichhardt.

They weren't to know that at about the same time, a sailing ship had anchored at Port Essington and taken aboard the entire garrison, and was heading back to Sydney. The departing troops had destroyed all the buildings and crops so that the site could not be used as a refuge by bush robbers and other undesirables. It was as if a higher power had ordained that the remaining expedition members and their precious documents would not be allowed to leave; as if the papers were only burial artefacts for the man who now lay at rest in the red earth that had become his home; as if they too must find their home there – and before that point the selfish laws of human striving were suspended.

They awoke as dawn was breaking, but the mule in the camp had broken its ties – the need to graze was simply too strong, and Wommaï, excited in anticipation of their departure, had been slipshod in tying up the beast. The last remaining members of Leichhardt's expedition – they were aghast. Classen threw himself down, pummelling the ground and screaming. Then they seized their guns and rushed out of the camp. Perhaps one of the animals was still close by. But the grass near the camp had all been eaten, and the animals would be too far off to reach on foot. Classen was the first to collect his thoughts, and Wommaï returned, defeated, hours later. Both men were exhausted and filled with despair. The Aborigines turned up again and realized the dire situation of the two men. The obvious weakness of the two travellers drastically reduced the Aborigine's willingness to help. Now they had the upper hand, because, in view of their being outnumbered and their inability to flee, the men's guns would be of little use.

Weeks passed, then months. Classen gradually let go of his ties to civilization and merged into the culture of the Aborigines, a transition that was much easier for Wommaï. They adapted to the duresses of the red earth, because that was their only chance of survival. Their obvious dependence on the indigenous tribe, and the great respect the Aborigines held for the white-faced, blonde-haired Classen, prevented any dangerous disputes. On one occasion, Wommaï seized the opportunity to steal away on the one mule they had managed to find again. He had whispered to Classen about his plan to try and reach the coast in the west, for he suspected that it was much closer than the northern coast. He intended to seek help by signalling to passing ships from the beach, since there were no white settlements there at that time. But he ran into another tribe on the way and was captured. However, due to his youthful age they did not kill the stranger, and they adopted him as one of their on account of his skilfulness.

The blonde-haired Classen seemed to the natives like a being from another world, from their dreamtime in the distant past. Once he had fully comprehended his situation he recognized that the Aborigines were his only chance of survival. His modern-world knowledge soon helped him gain a privileged position within the clan. He took a wife from their number and adopted the customs of his new companions, drifting around the local region with them. Yet he never lost hope of encountering white people and of being liberated from his unfortunate situation. He stored the leather bag containing Leichhardt's diaries and a few of his personal belongings in the saddlebag and hid it in a cave in a craggy area that was sacred to the Aborigines. In the rocks in front of the cave, he carved an L, the sign of the expedition. He was well aware that without outside help he would spend the rest of his life with this congenial tribe, but he hoped that Leichhardt's carefully hidden documents

would endure beyond his death in the dry climate - and perhaps one day come to light.

Rumours of the expedition's failure in the interior had long since reached the east coast, search teams had long since been sent out, but none of them made it to this remote area. And where should one begin searching in that vast, unexplored land, where all traces were swept away by the wind over the years? After John McDouall Stuart managed to make the first south-north crossing of the continent in 1862, a telegraph line was built along the route. As a consequence, whites began colonizing the borderlands of this remote region, though they avoided the perilous desert. Only the occasional bushman dared to venture there, such as Andrew Hume who last travelled to the edge of the desert 1872. Some explorers did actually penetrate the desert, including Peter Warburton in 1873 and Ernest Giles three years later. Thus, tales of a white man who lived in the far west with a group of Aborigines eventually reached the east coast. It was supposed that the man was Classen, the last survivor of the Leichhardt expedition. He was said to be revered by the Aborigines, but they would not let him go – and in any case he could not walk well anymore, and the wild tribesmen thwarted his every attempt at escape. In another area not far away, light-skinned, even blonde children had been sighted, but there was never any precise information, so people tended to treat these tales as bushmen's yarns – just another of the countless strange stories brought forth by the vast continent. Another of the tales relates the subsequent fate of Hentig, Stuart, Kelly and Billy.

We see the mutineers and their prisoner as they make their way directly through the red heartland to the settlements on the coast. Although we don't know their route precisely, it is of no consequence, for the all routes are alike in the interior of Australia. And of all routes, only one is worth pursuing for the white man: the way out, out of the searing red heat to the safety of the coasts and their forests, rivers and above all his fellow whites. It possible that one or other of the four men secretly hoped to stumble across a fertile oasis in the interior, of which they had heard stories before their departure. But they realized that they had been mistaken, and found themselves in an even more hostile wasteland than the one they had fled on the edge of the sand desert. There was no way back, nor any chance of taking a route northwards since it would be too demanding for their diminished strength, so they had no choice but to press forward. They couldn't find sufficient water for their horses and oxen, which perished one after the other, and in this barren wilderness the only game they could find was the occasional small animal or rodent.

In the course of their continuing journey they came across an even more

formidable desert than the one they had just traversed with considerable difficulty. It was the extremely hostile Simpson Desert, at the edge of which Charles Sturt had already failed in 1845. In that searing inferno, even a rain shower would not have quenched their mortal thirst, for as soon as a drop were to hit the ground, it would evaporate. They wore out their leather shoes in this lifeless ocean of sand and stones that stretched right to the horizon. They searched for water mostly in vain, and had to put their animals out of their misery. They tried to travel along the fringes of the Simpson Desert to avoid the death zone, but that only meant prolonging their torment – yet more wavering between hope and desperation. Such a route only resulted in a considerably longer journey ahead of them in the attempt to avoid the stony ground and dunes. They had gained nothing by their mutiny. Hentig had long since ceased to be their prisoner, for now they were fighting for survival together. Even Stuart, who had boasted of being able to survive anywhere, was unable to endure these hardships. Now they were all on an equal footing. Though not quite, because Hentig's upstanding character had put him in a position of leadership. In their perilous situation, the rebels recognized his abilities, his resourcefulness, his sincerity and his courage, and they clung to him like a rock. All they wanted was to survive, but above all else, their thoughts revolved around water, nothing but water.

They crossed several watercourses, but they were dried out. Thus they pushed further and further into the desert, driving themselves ever deeper into their desperate situation in the vast, waterless red heart of the continent. And there, in its scorching expanse, all that awaited them was the prospect of madness and delirium.

There was no need for hostile natives to seal the fate of the wandering group of men, for although the Aborigines might have played a role in their ultimate fate, it would have been an unimportant factor in the mortal battle with the merciless sun and the waterless plains. They dug desperately in the depressions where water would collect in years of heavy rainfall, finding small brackish puddles here and there, but it was not sufficient to fortify the men and animals.

Around 1850 at the latest, the forlorn, miserable band of wretches were approaching their final destiny. The silence and lifelessness of the barren landscape was like a harbinger of their certain death. Day after day the blazing sun rose in the sky, driving away even the last of the birds – yet the tormenting swarms of flies never left them. They could not expect any help from the Aborigines after Kelly, in his greed for water, had shot dead a native at one of the last water holes. The hardy mules held out to the very last, but eventually even they were incapable of carrying their riders. The men's tattered clothing no longer provided their skin with enough protection from the blistering sun. It was hopeless to long for shade. Even lying to rest on the ground offered the

men no respite – indeed it deprived them of the light breeze they felt whilst walking. Eventually night fell, but it brought no relief, for then they dreamed of clear, cool water, only to be awoken at dawn by the agonized braying of their parched mules and a new day of blazing heat. Thus, every new day seemed hotter than the one before, and the men's strength gradually ebbed away. Eventually, the first lost his mind and all the others lost hope – and that was the end.

The surviving mules, the most hardy, collapsed and died due to exhaustion and dehydration. Then Kelly, the first of the men who refused to continue, was to follow. Hentig and Stuart supported him at first, but they were soon forced to give up because they were themselves almost too weak to walk. They laid their companion under an isolated tree, and promised to return to help him as soon as they came across friendly Aborigines or a water source. The men all knew that these were empty promises, spoken with swollen tongues and barely comprehensible. The three remaining men pressed on, eventually following no particular direction, but simply wandering aimlessly in circles. The next day, Billy the young Aborigine succumbed to the heat. He was from the coast, and not hardy enough to withstand this blazing hell. The next victim was Stuart, who had masterminded the entire mutiny and wanted to survive the rest. Finally even the upstanding Hentig was unable to avoid his inevitable doom. The sun shone down mercilessly upon the men, who were condemned to die in the arid wilderness. They lay scattered, waiting for death in semi-consciousness, near a dried-up water hole they had vainly dug in search of water. As the weeks and months passed, their resemblance to human beings faded; the hot earth below and the scorching sun above baked their emaciated corpses, but they remained otherwise untouched except by small desert scavengers and the omnipresent ants.

But even in this arid region there was rainfall from time to time. And when rain did fall, life suddenly blossomed, grass shot out of the ground, and Aborigines entered the area in their constant search for food and water. They salvaged what was left of the equipment; the saddles, iron items and pieces of clothing, but thereafter they avoided this place of death. Before long, the fresh grass dried out again and large tufts of windblown spinifex got caught up on what was left of the strangers in this vast wilderness. The departing Aborigines left a trail of fire behind them, as they often did in their struggle to find food. The silence was interrupted briefly by the roaring flames and the sun vanished behind a pall of black smoke. And as it re-emerged, it brought the wind, which raised up the white ash, the black charred remains, and the fine red sand, mixing them together. And the last traces of Leichhardt's companions disappeared for ever in the ceaseless life cycle of the desert.

Epilogue

Into the Red Heart: It is uncommon for a biographer to create narrative variations on his biographical works. The story "Into the Red Heart" does not relate the life and deeds of Ludwig Leichhardt, but rather the unknown part of his life – the events that took place in Australia's wild interior where Leichhardt met his end and which could not be biographically documented. The author's Leichhardt biography is concerned solely with biographical facts and the search for the missing men. After setting out on his final journey in early April 1848, Leichhardt disappeared without trace, leaving no concrete clues as to his ultimate fate. All that remains is speculation as to what exactly happened in the vast outback. The author feels a biographer with his detailed knowledge is called for to voice his opinion and thus to address some of the more dubious theories. The events depicted here do not make any claims to be factual and are merely the opinion of the author. The author does not assert that his portrayal of Leichhardt's final journey and his subsequent fate is the official or even the only possible correct version. On the contrary, it merely represents one of many possible variations, albeit one which the author considers plausible. It seemed most fitting to relate these events in the form of a story. The reader is of course invited to respond to this version of events with his own theories.

Using what rationale does the author justify his own version? It is based on the years immediately after Leichhardt's disappearance, when many of his contemporaries were still alive and his fate in the outback was still a highly topical theme. During this time, in the years 1871-74, the first story containing concrete details of Leichhardt's fate was to emerge: It was a report by Andrew Hume, an Australian bushman. The details are unimportant here, and they can be found in various biographies. In short, Hume claimed that he had met the sole survivor of the Leichhardt expedition (Classen) in western Australia, where he was found living with a local tribe of Aborigines. Classen, however, had been unable to leave the tribe without outside help. On a second incursion into the interior, Hume noted down further reports about Classen, but most were lost on the return journey. A third attempt to reach Classen resulted in tragedy, and Hume lost his life in the arid wilderness. The government did not send out an expedition to find Classen because Hume's reports did not seem plausible – they were considered bushman's yarns.

But was this a missed opportunity? According to Darrel Lewis, who in his book *Where is Dr Leichhardt? The greatest mystery in Australian history* (Monash University Publishing, 2013) also wrote about Andrew Hume, there can be no doubt that Hume, due to his experience of the Australian bush and the Aborigines, had stumbled upon a story that evoked fascination among his

contemporaries and still does among readers today. In the late 19th century, a brass nameplate attached to an ancient, half-burned firearm and inscribed *Ludwig Leichhardt* was discovered in a bottle tree. As a result the area around Sturt Creek was once again linked to Leichhardt – which is plausible, since Sturt Creek lay on the explorer's planned route. A thorough scientific evaluation of the brass nameplate was undertaken in 2005/6 at the National Museum, Canberra, and it confirmed that the artefact most likely originated from Leichhardt's time. Although this does not necessarily corroborate Hume's version of events, it does suggest that the concluding drama of the Leichhardt expedition may have unfolded in this area.

It is understandable that the author should have chosen this particular story as the basis of his narrative, for it is the only one which provides the slightest concrete evidence. Moreover, the story is logical: Communication between Classen and Hume would have been very limited since Classen, a former coastal mariner in the North Sea or even a bargeman on the River Elbe, possessed little knowledge of English, and what he had known would have been lost during his years with the Aborigine tribe. He only spoke German, his mother tongue, and the local tribal dialect. Furthermore, the characters of the various expedition members, of which Hume could have known very little, are accurately described in his report: In the course of all his journeys, Leichhardt had experienced problems with some members of his team. Only two of the team members could be considered likely as rebels: Stuart and Kelly. The former claimed to have experience in the bush and to have lived among Aborigines and it was thus plausible that such a man was independent enough to instigate a mutiny so far from civilization. And what of Hentig and Womma? Due to Hentig's character, as statements by his employer and Leichhardt attest, his instigating a rebellion against his leader and countryman was unthinkable. Hume's report also states that Hentig had been forced to go with the mutineers. Womma, the Aborigine, was accompanying Leichhardt for the second time on an expedition and was very loyal to him. If he were guilty of insubordination, he would have to reckon with the his strict employer and Leichhardt's friend, Captain P. P. King, on his return. In this context, the term "mutineer" should be used with caution – even though the Australian public certainly would have considered the behaviour of the renegades so far from civilization comparable to a mutiny, and utterly deplorable – for Leichhardt was not leading a government expedition, but rather a private one: his men had agreed to join him voluntarily, for no fixed wage, but with the eventual prospect of fame and financial rewards. And Hume's great efforts give credence to his version: In order to finally gather more evidence to support his story, in 1874 Hume gained financial support to set out on the long, dangerous journey to Classen for a third time. Two volunteers accompanied him. He and his companions

were to lose their lives on the journey.

The Hume version was indirectly corroborated in the early 1860s by the explorer John McDouall Stuart, who reported on light-skinned mixed-race children in the area in question and who came across further evidence of the presence of a white person in this remote region. In 1867 and again in 1886, two separate groups reported sightings of a blonde-bearded white man. The 1886 report describes an old, grey and crippled man who spoke German and was trying vainly to reach them. A large number of Aborigines were preventing him from doing so. Hume had access to this information and was thus able to form a story from it.

Though Hume's actual report may sound rather fanciful at first, it is more than that: it is a typical story about life in the bush during Australia's early years and as such it is exemplary of the unique quality that the continent and its bold and courageous men have passed down to us.