

Too many Ludwig Leichhardts

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The western Simpson Desert is Leichhardt territory. Not necessarily because Leichhardt ever made it that far, but because, in 1938, a search expedition led by renowned anthropologist Charles Mountford visited the area. Mountford's search for Leichhardt had been prompted by the discovery of artefacts presumed to be human remains at Mount Dare station. As a fact-finding mission, the expedition was a failure and the suspected bones were later found to be calcified tree-roots. And yet, Leichhardt continues to haunt the region, as cultural historian Ingereth MacFarlane learned from Bingey Lowe when she talked with him about his country. Lowe, an Irrwanyere elder, had been head stockman at Mt Dare when Mountford visited, and he commented: "Just like that Cap'n Cook, that Leichhardt, he in Townsville, he everywhere, how many Cap'n Cooks, how many Leichhardts?"¹

This is a haunting statement indeed, as it invites comparisons of Ludwig Leichhardt with eighteenth-century maritime explorer James Cook, whose supposed "discovery" of Australia in 1770 has regularly been celebrated by settler Australia as the nation's founding moment. "Cook legitimises [White] Australian history," writes Chris Healy in his book on diverging Australian memory cultures. "His name provides an answer to the question 'Where do we come from?'"² Healy is keen to point out that Aboriginal people, too, have their Captain Cooks and remember him in complex and varied ways that differ significantly from received historical accounts or nationalist celebrations. In Indigenous oral testimonies, film, paintings and song, Cook pops up in places we know he could not have visited; he does things he could not have done. And there is not just one, but there are many, even too many Captain Cooks, as Paddy Fordham Wainbarrunga put it in 1988: "Too many Captain Cooks [...] have been stealing all the women and killing the people. They have made war."³

For Wainbarrunga and other Indigenous activists in the twentieth century,⁴ "Captain Cook" became a means for commenting on their relations with white people that enabled them to denounce the long history of Indigenous suffering and to articulate the need for the restoration of law and sovereignty. Bingey Lowe, it seems, deliberately alluded to these Cook stories in his offhand remark on Ludwig Leichhardt: His "How many Leichhardts?", purposefully echoes the notion of "Too many Captain Cooks" in a manner that also critically interrogates our contemporary concern for the explorer's fate evinced, not least, by the many Leichhardts that are collected on this website.

One might easily suspect that there have always been too many Leichhardts, in particular when reading Darrell Lewis's recent painstakingly assembled study on every hypothesis regarding Leichhardt's fate that has ever come to light.⁵ These theories broadly fall into two categories and imagine the expedition team either as murdered in a massacre or as stranded in the outback with some survivors eventually living permanently with Aboriginal people. What is most striking about Lewis's assemblage of historical leads and speculations, however, is how, for decades after Leichhardt's disappearance, any purported knowledge about the expedition's fate fundamentally relied on Indigenous reports. Europeans continued to know very little about inland Australia, and the majority of clues as to Leichhardt's whereabouts could therefore only be obtained in cross-cultural exchange. Two historical newspaper reports may illustrate this point: In 1859, a settler told the *Sydney Morning Herald* "that the wild blacks have a yarn about having a white man somewhere out there, away back – the Lord only knows where; and they insinuate that it must be one of Leichhardt's party [...] It is my opinion that it is only a yarn."⁶ While such stories of possible survivors living with Indigenous groups began to spread in the 1860s, accounts of massacres were already in circulation well before Leichhardt was due at Swan River, and continued to dominate the reports for decades after the expedition's disappearance. In fact, so many Aboriginal accounts of white men being massacred were recorded that *The Bulletin* remarked in 1880 that "the same tales exist among the natives in all parts of the continent, and Leichhardt and his men must have been killed over and over again in as many different places, if the different native stories are to be believed."⁷ Too many Ludwig Leichhardts, indeed.

And then there is something else that is remarkable about these newspaper reports. Their different versions of Leichhardt's fate notwithstanding, both reject Indigenous accounts of the explorer's whereabouts as little reliable "tales" or "yarns". Darrell Lewis, in trying to solve the mystery of Leichhardt's final resting place, appears to concur with this conclusion when he asserts in 2013 that the evidence provided by these stories "can immediately be dismissed".⁸ Indeed, it seems highly unlikely that the information proffered by these yarns will contribute to the eventual discovery of Leichhardt's remains. But is that really all there is to them?

If, in the twentieth century, Indigenous storytelling about famous explorer figures such as James Cook was less concerned with historical fact but served to make important statements about Indigenous suffering and the need for postcolonial justice, would it be too far-fetched to claim a similar function for these Leichhardt tales from the nineteenth century? As a matter of fact, Captain Cook stories already circulated at the time of Leichhardt's

disappearance. From the 1820s onwards, Sydney residents had recorded Indigenous accounts of complex gift-giving exchanges with Cook and his crew. Like the Leichhardt yarns collected by Lewis, these stories are hardly verifiable. Instead we might come to see them, as Maria Nugent does, in terms of a powerful commentary on the experience of Aboriginal people in the mid-nineteenth century, and as invitations to a dialogue “on what happens when things from outside a culture [...] are improperly introduced.”⁹ Seen in this light, the figure of Leichhardt might indeed have functioned “just like that Cap’n Cook” in similar exchanges: as an attempt to facilitate a dialogue between Indigenous people and colonists through recourse to the same historical persona, about the possibilities for peaceful outback coexistence or the dangers of illegitimate trespass into Indigenous territories.

Notes

¹ MacFarlane, Ingereth. *Entangled Places: Interactive Histories in the western Simpson Desert*. unpublished PhD thesis. Australian National University 2010, 136. The interviews were conducted in the late 1990s, when Lowe was in his eighties.

² Healy, Chris. *From the Ruins of Colonialism: History as Social Memory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 14.

³ Wainbarrunga, Paddy. “Too many Captain Cooks.”(dir. Penny MacDonald, 1988).

⁴ Among them are Percy Mumballa and Hobbles Danaiyarri. For an overview of some of the most important of these statements, see Healy, 42-72 and Maria Nugent. *Captain Cook Was Here*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 105-136.

⁵ Lewis, Darrell. *Where is Dr Leichhardt? The Greatest Mystery in Australian History*. Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2013.

⁶ “Discovery of a Large River on the Barwin.” *Sydney Morning Herald*. 16 June 1859, 8.

⁷ “The Fate of Leichhardt.” *The Bulletin*. 25 December 1880, 13.

⁸ Lewis, 366.

⁹ Nugent. *Captain Cook Was Here*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 116.

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