

Ludwig Leichhardt

How Leichhardt's life in Europe prepared him for his explorations in Australia.

Summarised from:

Roderick, Colin. 1988. *Leichhardt, the dauntless explorer*. Angus & Robertson, North Ryde NSW.

Born on 23rd October 1813 on his parents' farm at Sabrodt, part of the town of Trebatsch in Saxony, Ludwig Leichhardt was the sixth of their nine children. His secondary schooling started when he was eleven at the Friedrich-Wilhelm-Gymnasium at Cottbus. His final report described him as having a very good memory. His Latin was quite good, he did extremely well in Greek, he was very thorough in his German work, though his French wasn't too good. He was good in Hebrew, which he'd studied privately. He didn't do so well in the science subjects. His work in Geography, Political History, Philosophy and Religion was very good.

In November 1831 he began his university studies at the Friedrich-Wilhelm-Universität. After two years at that university he went to the Georg-August-Universität in Göttingen for a year, before returning to the university in Berlin. He studied a wide range of subjects and was for a long time not certain exactly what occupation he should take up. He was fairly sure he wanted to do something practical rather than something only involving the use of the mind. For most of his university years, particularly the later years, he was very poor, and his father had difficulty supporting him. In his second stint in Berlin he became good friends with an English medical student named William Nicholson, who was quite well off. Leichhardt eventually shared accommodation with William, who paid Leichhardt's uni fees and textbook costs. Leichhardt decided that he wanted to concentrate on the world of the natural sciences.

In the year when Leichhardt was born, Prussia introduced compulsory military service of two years duration. Students who successfully completed secondary schooling at a

Gymnasium only had to do one year's military training and were classified as volunteers, not conscripts (successful completion of *Gymnasium*-schooling was also the prerequisite for university study). In 1837 Leichhardt went to England, having accepted William's invitation to study the natural sciences with him there. Getting a travel permit from the Prussian Government was difficult because Leichhardt had not yet done his compulsory year of military service. He tried to fake physical problems that would give him an exemption, but the army doctor declared him fit for service. Leichhardt wrote to the king saying that he was going to enhance Prussia's name in the scientific world, but he was only given a deferment, being allowed to go to England provided he did his service within four years.

Initially based at William's family home outside of Bristol, William and Leichhardt devoted themselves to the study of geology and marine animals through the Bristol Museum and walking tours around the West Country coast. Moving to London, they continued this, with introductions to respected experts in various institutions, and viewed zoological and anatomical collections in various museums. They watched the official parade for the new Queen Victoria on her first visit to London as Queen.

In mid-1838 the pair went to Paris, a sort of Mecca for European students of the plant world. The Prussian ambassador in England rejected Leichhardt's application for a permit to travel to Paris, however, the French consul gave him a French pass describing him as an Englishman. In Paris Leichhardt was amazed at the hero-worship of the dead Napoleon, considering that Napoleon's wars had killed many French and cost them a lot of taxes. He saw monuments to victories but nothing about defeats. Leichhardt found the Paris women not as attractive as the English women. They seemed small. William and Leichhardt spent much time at the Jardin des Plantes, and attended many courses and lectures at the Museum of Natural History, the Sorbonne (university) and the School of Mines. Leichhardt learnt a lot that allowed him to accurately identify and classify so many things during his famous expedition to Port Essington in Australia, eg the Queensland barramundi, and the coal deposits at Blackwater. Lectures by Antoine César Becquerel led Leichhardt into thermodynamics and meteorology. This knowledge played a role later in Australia when he

dismissed the idea of the existence of a big inland sea in the centre of Australia, an idea which explorers like Charles Sturt and Thomas Mitchell believed.

At the end of 1839, when William's younger brother Mark emigrated to Melbourne, Leichardt and William decided that they would eventually go to Australia to explore its Nature after first increasing their skills and knowledge in the natural sciences through a tour of southern Europe (again paid for by William). In mid-1840 Leichardt tried unsuccessfully to get a travel pass to Italy from the Prussian ambassador in Paris, who said that there would be no time for Leichardt to tour Italy and be back in Prussia by 1st October when his extension of time for starting his military training would be over. William and Leichardt contrasted the restrictions that Prussia put on its citizens with the freedom Englishmen had to go wherever they wanted. They went to the British ambassador in Paris, who gave Leichardt a pass as a British citizen.

From September 1840 until June 1841 Leichardt and William travelled through southern France, Italy and Switzerland, spending a considerable amount of time in Clermont-Ferrand, Naples, Rome and Florence. In Naples Leichardt concentrated particularly on the geology of the area, learning about volcanoes. During their stay in Rome Leichardt read the Italian, English, German and French newspapers, and in March 1841 he read in the colonial section of the newspaper that 40 German families had been given work in building and farming in New South Wales.

As this tour continued, Leichardt and William grew further apart, William lost interest in the scientific exploring that Leichardt did in each place. William decided not to go to Australia after their European tour, but he would pay for Leichardt's ticket to Sydney. Back in Paris, Leichardt managed to get an interview with the famous German explorer and scientist Alexander von Humboldt (whose travels in South America were well-known), hoping to get advice on what he should do in Australia. However, Humboldt, who didn't know a lot about Australia, and who spoke in French rather than German through the short interview, wasn't very helpful and Leichardt was disappointed with his manner. He and William returned to London, and for a fair while Leichardt was undecided whether to go to Sydney or to Melbourne. In any case, it seemed to him that Australia was the only option, that he

had no future in Europe: to go back to Prussia would have meant punishment for delaying his military training too long, he could not work in a university as he had not formally finished a degree (and he had no money of his own that would allow him to finish his formal studies), and although he had by then acquired a very good all-round knowledge in different fields of natural science, he had not specialised in any one area, which was becoming a requirement. By the time he left for Sydney on the *Sir Edward Paget* on 1st October 1841, he felt he was well prepared for what he had set as his goal: to reveal the natural world of Australia's interior.

Although he travelled as a cabin passenger (paid for by William), he mixed with all classes of people on the ship and made contacts that would be valuable to him in the colony of NSW. From the steerage section of the ship he met James Calvert, who was part of his team on the Port Essington expedition, and the German Heinrich Böcking, who later was with him on the second expedition.