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CHAPTER XII

THE FIRST OVERLAND EXPLORERS

There were now fifteen squatting districts extending from the Glenelg River (on the South Australian-Victorian border) to the Wide Bay area on the verge of the tropics in Queensland. Sir Thomas Mitchell had pointed out that to expand beyond these areas was only possible if exceptionally fertile land was found, or if railways were introduced. He believed that it was only north, into the interior of Queensland, that it was feasible for the nomadic horsemen of the sheepman’s front-line to advance with profit, after Eyre and Sturt had met defeat, attempting to push far west, and north-west, from New South Wales.

The question of exploration across the continent from south to north in the hope of establishing settlements on the northern seas strategically located for reciprocal trade with Asia had been actively discussed.

On 3 October 1843, on the motion of Dr. Sir Charles Nicholson, the Legislative Council of “New South Wales” carried a resolution that included the following:

“That, whereas, the establishment of an overland route between the settled parts of New South Wales, and Port Essington, will be attended by important additions to our geographical knowledge of the interior of Australia, and is an object the accomplishment of which is likely to be attended with great advantage to the commercial and other interests of this colony, by opening a direct line of communication with the islands of the Eastern Archipelago, with India and other parts of Asia:

Resolved:

That a Committee be appointed for the purpose of enquiring into the practicability of such a design and the means whereby it may be carried into effect, and that they do report to the Council the result of such enquiry with as little delay as possible.

Question put and passed, and Committee consisting of the following members appointed: Mr. Elwin, Dr. Lang, Mr. Suttor, Mr. Wentworth, Mr. Macarthur, and Dr. Nicholson.”

Sir George Gipps hesitated to advance the money for such an expedition. Sir Thomas Mitchell advocated a start for it from Fort Bourke on the Darling; he recommended that, as a starting place, Moreton Bay be rejected, queerly enough, because—

“the Dividing Range would have to be surmounted, occasioning to the cattle and horses, at starting, a degree of fatigue and exhaustion which would probably much impair their strength and usefulness in the subsequent part of the journey.”

Finally, the public which, as usual, was very vocal in its dis-
pleasure at the Governor's reluctance to finance the proposal, was
most retiring when it came to a matter of subscribing the costs of it,
small though they were estimated to be!

Dr. Ludwig Leichhardt

In this dilemma Dr. Ludwig Leichhardt came into the picture and
under capitious public scrutiny.

He was the first of the overland explorers who carried discovery
south to north across the continent.

Dr. Ludwig Leichhardt had been educated as a physician; had
spent more than eight months in the Moreton Bay area in 1843 and
had hoped to attach himself to the overland trip, if it eventuated, as
a naturalist. He now conceived the idea of leading a private expedition
personally. With no following, and attached to no socialite clique, he was regarded with mild scorn as "a singularly bold
intruder on a work equally beyond his province and his powers," as
Coote says (op. cit. p. 53).

Actually, he was a young man of great intelligence—the sort of
man who, on first seeing a barramundi—an unusual fish with only
four known relatives—immediately recognised its rarity and its
relationships, though far from libraries and textbooks; a man whose
"spot diagnoses" of geological structures were correct where sometimes later geologists disputed for years about them before ultimately
conceding his accuracy, and so on. (80)

Of himself, he wrote in a letter to Professor R. Owen (the great
anatomist and naturalist in England):

"Living here as the bird lives, who flies from tree to tree, living
on the kindness of a friend fond of my science, or on the hospitality
of the settler and the squatter, with a little mare I travelled more than
2,500 miles zigzag from Newcastle to Wide Bay, being often groom
and cook, washerwoman, geologist and botanist at the same time; and
I am delighted in this life, but I feel too, deeply, that ampler means
would enable me to do more and to do it better. When you next hear

(80) It is not generally known that he was one of the earliest persons to climb
Beerwah, the tallest of the Glasshouse Mountains. Dr. F. W. Whitehouse
drew our attention to a German report of Leichhardt in which (F.W.W.'s
translation) occurs the following: "... The Glasshouses, which are about
eight miles east of Durundur and four to five miles south of the Bunya
Bunya range... these extraordinary peaks: some look like sharp teeth,
others like sharp pyramids, others more conical or rounded. Biroa (Beer-
wah) is about 1,200 feet high; Kunawaroon (Coonowrin), Dunbodola (Tun-
habodola), Waianurrum (Beerburrum), Tinharragan (Tibrerwaccum), and
others... From the top of Biroa (Beerwah) one enjoys a very extensive
beautiful and informative view. To the south and east one sees isolated
peaks, some as steep and as fantastic as Biroa itself, particularly Kunau-
waroon, and the other peak lying next to it (Tibrerwaccum); then, the sea
and its islands. To the north is an isolated peak Mandanu (Goochin)—and
then the Bunya Bunya Mountains region extending from east to west... the
western spur is Durundur, under which Archer's station is situated..."
Leichhardt was taken up Biroa (Beerwah) in 1843 by Thomas Archer (then
twenty-one), who had previously climbed it and others of the Glasshouses,
with a blackboy "Jimmy Beerwah" as guide. On that former occasion at
the summit they found the names of Andrew Petrie and John Petrie (who
had preceded them by a year or two) written on a paper in a bottle. J. C.
Burnett and others also climbed it.
1. Andrew Petrie
2. Handel, cattle drover
3. Savory (the only baker)
4. Neusteads, sawyers
5. T. Richardson (the only general store)
6. Convict Barracks (afterwards Court House)
7. W. Kent (druggist shop)
8. Fitzpatrick (the First Chief Constable)
9. The Lock-up
10. The Constables' Place (only two in all)
11. Slates' Post Office (old)
12. Slates' Pineapple Garden
13. Church of England
14. The Hospital
15. Mort, milkman
16. Wright's Hotel
17. The General Cemetery
18. Tread and Windmill
19. Edmonton's Paddock
20. Old R. Jones
21. Dr. Simpson (the first Commissioner)
22. Old Major Prior
23. The Gaol
24. Skyring's Beehives (soft goods shop)
25. Hayes, milkman
26. Brothers Fraser (first houses)
27. The Catholic Church
28. McLean's Blacksmith's Shop
29. Edmonton's (the only butcher)
30. Bow's Hotel
31. Taylor Shappart
32. Montifeur (a financier)
33. W. Pickering (now Bank of N.S.W)
34. Sergeant Jones
35. Soldiers' Barracks
36. Officer De Winton
37. Commission Stores
38. Queen's Wharf (the only one)
39. Captain Wickham's Office
40. Commissioner T. Kent
41. The Commissioner's Garden
42. Captain Coley
43. Government Gardens
44. Father Hanley (the only Priest)
45. Saw Pits (late Gas Works, now Adelaide S.S. Co.)
46. Queen Street
47. The Boat House and Boatman's House
48. The First Tombstone (two graves)
DURUNDUR— the station of the Archer family near the present site of Woodford.

Charles Archer (see Plate XVIII) drew this picture to accompany a letter in which he said: "... having arrived at Durundur yesterday (30 July 1843) and knowing you are all anxious to know what sort of place it is." The man working on the canoe is John Archer; the figure in the foreground leaning on a spade is the "Laird of Durundur" himself.
of me it will be either that I am lost and dead, or that I have succeeded to penetrate through the interior to Port Essington.”

He was fated to be heard of in all three of his categories.

In August 1844, accompanied by Calvert, Roper, John Murphy (aged sixteen), a convict named Phillips, and an aboriginal called “Harry Brown,” he left Sydney for Brisbane where Sir Evan Mac-Kenzie, Pemberton Hodgson, and others received and encouraged him. At Westbrook, Hodgson joined his party with a negro; Gilbert, a naturalist, was added to it and also a second aboriginal called “Charley.” Provisions were the usual white flour (1,200 lb.), sugar (200 lb.), tea (80 lb.), and gelatine (20 lb.), but Leichhardt was wise enough, while actually on the trip, to add to these deadly staples a large number of vitamin-rich native plants that he saw en route.

Text Figure 7.

The track of Dr. J. Ludwig Leichhardt, the first overlander to the shores of the northern sea from the limits of colonisation in the south, 1844-5.

After leaving Jimbour in the Darling Downs, on the first stage of his journey, Leichhardt reached the Condamine River in six days, and, bearing north-west, reached the Dawson on 5 November 1844, after an accident that cost the party 143 lb. of flour, and made it necessary to reduce its numbers. Hodgson and the negro reluctantly returned to Brisbane, and the daily ration was cut for the remainder.

From the Dawson north, they crossed a series of streams and sighted Expedition Range on 17th, the Boyd on 28 November and Zamia Creek on 7 December. There, the blacks who had been silently trailing their party became bold enough to wound a horse.
with a spear. On 10th, the party crossed the range over what is now Albinia Downs, and reached the Comet Peak on 28 December 1844.

(Here, to their astonishment they found a hut consisting of a ridge pole and two forked sticks in the white man's pattern, obviously cut by a sharp tomahawk—the work, perhaps, of some nameless absconder from Moreton Bay, like Duramboi (J. Davies) or Wandi (Bracewell) who had been found with the blacks two years before, near Wide Bay.)

On 20 January 1845 they came to a junction with a river he named the MacKenzie (discovering in its bed, by the way, the creeper called the Leichhardt or MacKenzie bean, the seeds of which they roasted and used as a substitute for coffee).

Through rich lands, flats, sandstone ridges, creeks, dense scrubs and open pastures the party forced its way north. On 26 January 1845 they reached Newman's Creek—a tributary of the MacKenzie and, here, Leichhardt planted his last peach stone (he, too, was a would-be friend to later comers!)

The same day, magnificent downs with "a succession of almost isolated, gigantic, conical and dome-topped mountains" won from him the name Peak Downs. The season was one of drought and the party was gravely troubled by scarcity of water.

(Gilbert, the botanist, was astonished to find on 27th a broad arrow—the government convict mark—cut into a tree apparently by a stone tomahawk.)

From a new beginning on 6 February 1845 through a series of ranges and ravines, and dense brigalow scrub, where the bullocks upset their loads and progress was one long exasperation, they toiled north-west day after day, until with a change of direction to N.N.E. they reached Hughes' Creek in lat. 22° 23'. On the 13th Leichhardt discovered and named a broad but dried-up watercourse, the Isaac, and made camp by it to forage and explore ahead, and also to take stock—the 6 lb. daily ration for the party was down to 1½ lb.!

The two blacks, obviously jumpy, had already deserted once and returned and now, from time to time, had sullen or insubordinate moods. Parties of natives, silent but not openly unfriendly, moved on the flanks or appeared for a moment and melted into the shadows.

Next came Coxen's Peak and Range—and on 7 March the headwaters of the Suttor River—then its junction with the Belvando, and so onward, until Leichhardt reached the point at which he found the great Burdekin—"mother of flood waters"—the end of his second stage and, as he noted, the northern limit of distribution of the black swan! ("With water," he thought, it would be "beautiful country");—he noted that it was full of "flocks of emus."

Up the Burdekin through hilly country he reached Robey's Range and saw, in the distance, Porter's Range: on 22 April he reached the junction of the Clark, and on 25th the Perry. Crossing the Valley of Lagoons, and the head of the Burdekin, he reached the watershed between it and the Lynd, and pressing on, came to the inland edge of the plains that are limited, northerly, only by the shores of the Gulf of Carpentaria. By comparison with what he had passed through in this season of drought, he found it well-watered.

Along the Lynd, past Kirchner's Range, over very rugged country (he especially mentioned the difficulty of communication from the coast inland and vice versa), with every minor torment—like the green ants that made leaf-nests in trees and bit viciously—they reached, discovered, and named the Mitchell River. (They had turned west at lat. 15° 51' 26" S.) The blacks began to close in, to make feints, and bold approaches, and on 26 June, in a sudden night attack, they killed Gilbert and wounded Calvert and Roper severely. Seven days after this disaster, on 5 July 1845, the haggard explorers came in sight of the sea. They had opened a way by land across the vast reaches of Queensland from the eastern settlements to the northern coasts.

In easier stages now, they took a month to reach Stokes' Albert River; they examined the Plains of Promise to check the extent and, perhaps, the possibility of the performance of those promises, and on 8 September they crossed what is now the western boundary of Queensland—the end of Leichhardt's fifth stage.

Of the Plains of Promise he said:

"Should a harbour be found at the head of the Gulf of Carpentaria, which might allow ships to approach and moor in safety, it would not only open this fine country to colonisation, but would allow the produce of the high land of the York Peninsula to be brought down to the Gulf of Carpentaria as well as to the east coast. Cattle and horses could be easily driven from coast to coast, and they would even fatten, as water and feed are everywhere abundant."

All round the Gulf to the Roper River and finally north from its headwaters to Port Essington went the intrepid explorer and his party, and, ultimately, arrived to astonish the community there (and, later, the people of Sydney), who had long given them up as dead.

Leichhardt's party had arrived in Port Essington on 17 December 1845, having lost all their dogs—having left only one bullock, "Redmond," who was saved from their starvation ration by the timely flushing and shooting of a wild buffalo! They had completed a journey of 3,000 miles—the greatest feat of endurance accomplished by any overland explorer, and had performed it with the most meagre equipment of any of the major parties of the period.

The "adventurer" of 1844 was the wildly-heralded hero of 1846. Leichhardt led a second expedition from Jimbour on 2 December
1846 to Peak Downs intending, then, to explore widely the west. He was accompanied by John Mann, Hovenden Hely, Bunce (botanist), Turnbull, and a saddler, a tanner, and two aboriginals. The affair was a failure. All the party except Leichhardt and the aboriginals fell sick at the Comet River with “fever,” they were detained by floods, they had trouble with their animals.

(They had taken 14 horses, 16 mules, 170 goats, 90 sheep and 40 head of cattle—they turned the goats loose on the north bank of the Mackenzie; they lost most of their bullocks and many of their horses and mules near Peak Downs.)

Leaving much of their stores for which they had no means of transport, they struggled back to the Condamine, a defeated and disillusioned group, reaching that area on 31 July 1846. Eighteen months later, Leichhardt set out on his final fatal trip. (81)

**Mitchell on the March**

Sir Thomas Mitchell, himself, was ready in 1845 and with Edmund Kennedy as assistant, and a well-equipped party of 29, much baggage, 30 bullocks, 250 sheep and all the necessary horses, he set out from Sydney near the end of the year. Before he reached the Moreton Bay district he had several hundred miles to cross, so that it was April 1846 before his party reached the Culgoa running about 20° W.S.W. of what is now Goondiwindi. Travelling up the Narram and the Balonne or lower Condamine (northern affluents of the Darling River which were charted but, as yet, unsettled), he made one of his camps in lat. 28° S., near the site of St. George. (Actually he established a depot at a place on the river named St. George’s Bridge.) Here, he heard that Leichhardt had reached Pt. Essington on 17 December 1845 and was safely in Sydney, and thereupon decided to abandon his original plan—which had been to reach Pt. Essington—and to follow the Balonne northwards. Two days or so afterwards, they reached the junction of the Balonne and a river the natives called “Maranoa,” and they recorded and kept the name. Above this the land became an area of grassy plains with some sandy and some thickly timbered patches. Near lat. 27° S., Mitchell discovered the Cogoon and traced it through poorer country and mulga scrub to its headwaters in what he called Fitzroy Downs (after the Governor). They had reached fertile and hilly country at that point—well above sea-level—and he was so pleased

(81) Leichhardt left Sydney on 4 December 1847; arrived at Rosenthal in the Darling Downs on 1 February 1848; Brisbane 13 February 1848; and left three days later on the fatal journey westerly. With Leichhardt were: Clasen (a relative), Entick, Donald Stuart (from the Leslie’s Station at Canning Downs), Kelly, and two aboriginals. They had with them fifty fat bullocks, twenty mules and six horses—no goats. The last letter he wrote to the “Sydney Morning Herald” was dated 4 April 1848; thereafter there was silence. Dr. F. W. Whitehouse believes the party was ambushed and massacred by blacks near Muckadilla. Leichhardt, like many others, as his journals show, made the mistake of camping near waterholes. Thickly leaved branches, just above eye level, were the favourite ambush points of the aboriginals, hunting for men or game.

(82) So named by an old gin who misunderstood the question and thought it related to the country or the blacks across the river; it means “no good.”
direct from Heaven for perseverance, and as a compensation for the many sacrifices I had made, in order to solve the question of the rivers of tropical Australia."

Alas, poor Mitchell! He had not solved the problem.

He called his river (in anticipatory triumph and to celebrate his victory) the "Victoria" after the Queen. It was in fact the Barcoo (Sturt’s "Coopers Creek") as his assistant Kennedy was to determine the following year by tracing its course, after it bent away southerly.

At that point, however, its course lay north and north-west, as it does for many miles, and Mitchell’s mistake was natural enough. After following it for ten days, he was forced to turn back, firmly convinced that "the river to the Gulf" had been found. Mitchell returned to a southern base camp and, while he wrote up his journal, sent Kennedy south-westerly on survey. In ten days, Kennedy reached the Mooni River where, to his surprise, settlers were already "staking out their pastoral claims" and returned to report, finding the Barwon River in flood (he was very glad of the boat Mitchell had insisted they must drag along with them for just such a possibility!).

Settlers followed Mitchell almost immediately and within twelve months had taken up as many of the new areas as could be stocked. Mitchell’s expedition was sound and well planned; he himself was able, intelligent, and insistent on what he considered necessary equipment; to those qualities undoubtedly he and his party owed the record of achievement of a journey of exploration in dangerous untravelled country lasting four months and fifteen days, during which they lost nothing but one horse, which fell over a cliff into a river two days before their journey ended.

As mentioned above Kennedy, the following year, traced the Alice to the Barcoo, and the Barcoo southerly until it lost (but identified) itself along the obvious course and direction of "Cooper’s Creek"—flowing towards the central lakes in the interior of the Continent. The year of Mitchell’s discoveries (1846) was to be one of particular importance, typical of a new epoch of activity that culminated in the separation of Queensland from the parent colony of New South Wales in 1859.

The Crucial Period 1846-1854

In the year 1846 the most northerly settlements in "New South Wales" (other than that of Pt. Essington in what is now the Northern Territory of the Commonwealth) were those mentioned in the last chapter, that had grown up round the penal settlement at "Moreton Bay" and on the Darling Downs, the Logan and Albert, the Upper Brisbane River and the Burnett.

Connection with the seat of government at Sydney was through the Hunter River area, either by the "Tamar" or the "Sovereign" of the Hunter River Steam Navigation Co., from their south side wharf; or, by the long and dangerous overland route to it from the Downs through the New England district; or, very occasionally, by some official vessel from the Queen’s Wharf, which was directly below the Commissariat stores at William Street (near the present Victoria Bridge). (84)

"Newstead" was built by that year, and J. C. Wickham, formerly of the "Beagle," occupied it as Police Magistrate for Moreton Bay—there was no Government Resident until he took the post in 1853. The settlements in the area were under the nominal protection of a detachment of the 99th under Lieutenant Blamire.

The first issue of the Moreton Bay "Courier" had appeared and contained, among other things, an advertisement for the boiling-down works (for sheep) on Kangaroo Point set up by "Tinker" Campbell—a reminder of the great depression of 1841-3.

Stockholders were, as yet, merely "occupiers" under a yearly agreement, and squatters were trying every new area, claiming, selecting, stocking, withdrawing, or establishing their holdings. The land regulations were administered, so far as could be, by Dr. Simpson of Woogaroo (now Goodna) as Crown Lands Commissioner for Moreton Bay; and by Christopher Rolleston of Cambooya as the Commissioner for the Darling Downs.

Leichhardt and Mitchell, returning to Sydney from their explorations on 29 March 1846 and in January 1847, respectively, were able to give most promising reports of what lay "beyond the rivers and the ranges."

On the Brisbane River, regular trade with Ipswich, the head of navigation had begun (17 June 1846) per the "Experiment" owned by James Canning Pearce; and Ipswich was also the starting place for riders, bullock-teams and cattle pushing north through Cress-
brook, and what was to be Gayndah, towards the future Maryborough.

Brisbane had been declared a port of entry that year and had its Custom House, with W. A. Duncan as first Sub-collector, and W. Thornton as Senior Landing Waiter (12 May 1846).

The constant anxiety of the settlers and the squatters was not drought, distance, food shortages, hostile blacks, diseases of men and of cattle, sheep and horses—though all of these were occasionally acute—but the ever-pressing scarcity of labour.

When Commissioner Bigge (1819-1821) was instructed to consider (among other things) the suitability of the settlements as convict establishments, Lord Bathurst(85) added that he must always bear in mind the possibility of the ultimate abandonment of transportation so far as existing settlements were concerned; and asked him to indicate in his recommendation, those which applied at the time, and those which might apply if the convict part of their population was diverted later on to other locations.

When the Select Committee on Transportation recommended that transportation be abandoned, they did not overlook the fact that convicts were a great factor in the economic stability—indeed, in the very life—of the colonies and, in view of the effect abolition might have upon the finances of the settlers, emphatically urged that the government take active steps to promote free emigration.

(It is interesting, as evidence of the indifference usually shown to remote concerns, that all the debates on this subject in the British Houses of Parliament could have failed for lack of a quorum if anyone had been sufficiently interested to demand a count.)

In Australia the abolition of transportation had been a subject of intense anxiety and violent differences and in 1838 Governor Sir Richard Bourke had recommended as an alternative to abolition that a new colony should be formed on the northern coasts. The project was revived in 1845. More urgent, yearly, was that question of intense anxiety and violent differences and in 1838 Governor Sir Richard Bourke had recommended as an alternative to abolition that a new colony should be formed on the northern coasts. The project was revived in 1845. More urgent, yearly, was that question of the future of the colonies.

Settlement in the tropical north, it was thought, might solve the problem; the availability of labour there might even attract the interest of moneyed men; alternatively freed men with a little assistance from the Government, might maintain themselves there.

The pessimism that is the twin of the inertia of routine bureaucracy at once opposed to the proposal the bogies of climate: “fatal to the white man”; practicability: “what productions? what means of transport?; “expense”—who would be liable? “Surely not the slender resources already overstrained, etc., etc.” Finally, and triumphantly, from where would the women for such a community come? To this last, it was answered that many of the men would be married men; that brides might be found among female prisoners, and that any deficiency might be made up by deliberate female immigration.

On 21 November 1845 Lord Stanley proposed that the persons to be sent to the proposed colony should be pardoned convicts from Tasmania (the only place remaining open to transportation—the Home Government’s action in thus making it the unique receptacle for convicts had caused the gravest crisis(86) —and, “exiles,” that is, persons sent out from England with pardons that operated from the time of their landing in Australia. It was considered that both these classes “might reasonably be expected to seize the opportunity of becoming settlers in a new country with all the possibilities of attaining a competence by a few years’ diligent toil.” The Treasury replied, after a delay of fifteen months (2 February 1846, W. E. Gladstone having, by that time, succeeded Lord Stanley as Secretary of State for the Colonies), with a characteristically cautious E. & O.E. approval, “subject to the strictest economy”; and the venture was begun.

Mr. Gladstone, a great man, who had the minor defects of his very great virtues, prefaced action by a despatch to Sir John Eardley Wilmot, in which he complained that though the Tasmanian Governor had, under his charge, many thousand convicts formed into probation parties, or living together at Government depots, he had never examined into the inner world of their mental, moral or spiritual state, and he informed him that he was dismissed! At the same time, says Cumbrae Stewart, he “sent him a private communication in which certain anonymous slanders were put forward as additional reason for his dismissal. This caused the death of the unfortunate Governor.”

Character-assassination was a form of murder-from-ambush which was as common then as now, but far less expertly handled. Gladstone’s burnt sacrifice proved an unlucky beginning to a colonial adventure which many promptly determined to sabotage.

“Having disposed of the Governor of Van Diemen’s Land as effectively as if he had shot him from behind,” continues Cumbrae Stewart, “Mr. Gladstone proceeded to found the new colony.”

(86) Cumbrae Stewart says, “Into Van Diemen’s Land convicts were poured at the rate of 5,000 per year. Work could not be found for them, nor for the people already there. The inauguration of a Probation System, under which the prisoners were scattered all over the island, increased the evil and added to it a grave danger to well disposed settlers. The financial crisis of 1843 made matters still worse. The Colonial Office having made about as bad a mess of the matter as was possible, tried to shift the blame on to the Governor (of Tasmania), Sir John Eardley Wilmot, and succeeded in breaking his heart.”