THE LOST LEICHHARDT.

(By Thos. Welsby.)

(Read at a meeting of the Historical Society of Queensland, on August 28, 1929.)

Amongst the many great tragedies of the Australian Continent wherein explorers and lonely wayfarers have lost their lives, out on the plains, on the ridges, and amidst the mountainous regions with their eternal vigilance of silence, to my mind there is no more melancholy story than that of the lost Leichhardt and his comrades. Those companions were his brother-in-law, Classen, Donald Stuart, Hentig, Kelly, Womai and Billy; the party, including Ludwig Leichhardt, being seven in all.

There seems to be some little confusion regarding the actual number comprising the expedition, that is as far as the narration of various writers is concerned, for although that of seven is in evidence, other accounts assert that the tally consisted of six whites and two blacks.

Whatever the number may have been, Leichhardt and his party vanished from human ken some little time after April, 1848, for his last communication is dated: “Sheep Station at Mount Abundance, April 4th, 1848.”

According to Henry Stuart Russell there remains yet another, but a doubtful, trace of Leichhardt’s movements in July, 1848. It appeared, so he says, in the Maitland “Mercury,” and is as follows:—

“We have been favoured with the sight of a letter from a gentleman in New England, dated June 11th, which states that a Mr. M——, whose station is on the Bundarrah River, had informed him that Dr. Leichhardt had returned three hundred miles to the farthest station to say that he had found a magnificent country with beautiful grass and water; that Leichhardt thought that he might possibly never return; or else not for so long a time that it would be a pity such a country should remain unknown; that his party were all well, and that he had returned to them.”
How true this statement, supposed to have appeared in the Maitland "Mercury" may be, is not for me to say, but one can scarcely imagine Leichhardt travelling 300 miles, entirely on his own, to make such an assertion regarding magnificent country, and then returning to his party over the same mileage, without leaving some diary or written evidence subsequent to his letter of April of the same year.

The leader of that expedition had undertaken a most stupendous task to cross Australia from East to West, say from Moreton Bay to what is now known as Western Australia, following between the latitudes of 25 and 30. Even at that period, writes Ernest Giles, in his book, "Australia Twice Traversed, the eastern interior was not all entirely unknown as Mitchell's Victoria River, or Barcoo, and the Cooper's and Eyre's Creeks of Sturt, had already been discovered. Eyre's Creek lay nearly one thousand miles from our eastern coast in latitude 25 deg. south, and it was considered by some that Leichhardt would direct his course there. But Gregory's search party in 1858 came across a Moreton Bay ash tree marked "L" in latitude 24 deg. 35 min., longitude 36.

This is near Enniskillen Station on the Barcoo River, so that if the Moreton Bay ash tree discovered by Gregory, really bore the significant letter bearing Leichhardt's name, can be expressive of the explorer's last known stoppage on his journey, then he must have been making a northern route, not more than 200 miles distant from his 1845 travelling.

Giles says Leichhardt originally started with a party of eight, including one, if not two, blacks; but that in consequence of some disagreement the whole party returned to the starting point. After having been reorganised, however, it started again with the same number of members. A short time later, two or three again seceded and returned to the settlements, while Leichhardt and the others pushed on toward the west. Giles expresses the belief that the destruction of the party was due to flood. He says they were traced to the valley of the Cooper which, in times of flood, was liable
to inundation, the flood-waters reaching a width of between 40 and 50 miles. Had the party perished by any other means, he says, some remains must have been found by the aborigines in that region; but the complete disappearance could only be explained by assuming that "everybody and everything had been swallowed in a cataclysm and buried deep and sure in the mud and slime of a flood."

This theory is supported by John Davis, author of a work, "Tracks of McKinlay and party across Australia" (London, 1863). Davis was one of McKinlay’s party which, in February, 1862, was traversing the inner side of the Great Stony Desert. Writing of a spot some 300 miles west of Leichhardt’s probable disappearance, he describes the conditions under which the floods at certain times swept with a roar over the creek beds, carrying all before them.

The flood theory also is endorsed by Mr. W. H. L. Ranken, in his book, "The Dominion of Australia."

On the other hand, Ernest Favence, in his book, "Australian Exploration," dismisses the suggestion of flood as "scarcely likely," considering that "on the subsidence of the waters, the blacks would have found something of the belonging of the explorers." He thinks that thirst was the most likely agent of their destruction and that fire completed the work.

Having given most careful thought to the matter, however, my own opinion is that Leichhardt and his companions were lost to mankind through the flood waters of the west.

Frederick William Ludwig Leichhardt was born at Trabatsch, Prussia, on October 23, 1813. After studying at the Universities of Berlin and Gottingen, he took up a medical course, which he completed at the Royal College of Surgeons in England. Coming to Australia in May, 1842, he started at the end of the same year on a botanical collecting tour overland from Newcastle to Moreton Bay, and in 1843 and 1844 was collecting in Moreton Bay, Wide Bay, and the Darling Downs. In July, 1844, he went to Sydney, but in the following month returned to Brisbane.
The subject of an overland expedition to Port Essington, on the north coast of Australia, had been occupying much attention, not alone by the public in Sydney, but by the Legislative Council. Hence Leichhardt's desire to undertake the mission and his arrival at Brisbane. In arranging his plans of journeying he had limited his party to six individuals, those leaving Sydney with him being James Calvert, John Roper, John Murray (a lad of 16), William Phillips (a prisoner of the Crown), and Harry Brown (an aboriginal). Later, Pemberton Hodgson, a Mr. Gilbert, Caleb (an American negro), and Charley (another aboriginal) joined the party. They travelled from Brisbane, through Cooper's Plains to Westbrook Station. Their real start, however, was made on September 30, from a station which Leichhardt always spelt Fimba (better known as Jimba, but in reality, Jimbour, some years later the property of the late Sir Joshua Peter Bell).

On October 7 they reached the Condamine River. Ten days later, Charley threatened to shoot Mr. Gilbert. On October 18 the Kent Lagoon was named, and later on Leichhardt named Acacia Creek and Dogwood Creek.

In November the heat became very oppressive and, as the party was considered to be too large, Mr. Hodgson and Caleb were sent back to Jimbour. On November 6 their latitude was 26°3'44", and they were travelling along the valley of a river which, in acknowledgment of the kindness received by Leichhardt at the hands of Mr. R. Dawson, of Black Creek, Hunter River, he named the "Dawson" River.

Following this river for some days, they then made a detour, and, coming in sight of some ranges, the leader gave them the name of the Gilbert Ranges.

On November 27 a bell-shaped mountain was named "Mount Nicholson," in honour of Dr. Charles Nicholson; the distant range being called the Expedition Range.

December 18 saw them in the vicinity of some very fine lagoons, and, on that day, their first bullock was killed for food. After a substantial meal
of fresh meat, the remaining portions were cut into thin slices, and sun dried, the fat being melted down to grease their saddles, bridles, and all leather gear.

Very hot days were now encountered, and very severe thunderstorms, their latitude being 44° south. Their Christmas dinners consisted of suet pudding and stewed cockatoos. January 10 saw the expedition at the junction of Comet Creek, which Leichhardt had named, and a large river was named by the leader as the Mackenzie River, in honour of Sir Evan Mackenzie.

Toward the end of February, Leichhardt had much cause for anxiety in consequence of the discontent and disobedience of the two blacks. On one occasion both of them deserted their leader and absented themselves for a time. On another day, towards the end of the month, Charley again left the camp without permission. When remonstrated with on his return, Charley became violent and struck Leichhardt on the mouth, displacing two of his teeth. Both the aboriginals, Charley and Harry, were banished from the camp, but were afterwards (on expressing contrition) permitted to rejoin the party. Following their northern course, they came across numerous natives, who had never before seen a white man.

On March 28, they encamped about two miles from the foot of a mountain, which was called Mount McConnel, after Fred McConnel. The Suttor River winds round its western base and, at four or five miles beyond it, in a northerly direction, and in latitude 200° 37', joins a river, the bed of which at the junction is fully a mile wide. Leichhardt writes, under date April 2:

"The Suttor was reported by Charley to be joined by so many gullies, and small creeks, "running into it from the high lands which "would render travelling along its banks ex- "tremely difficult that I passed to the east side "of Mount McConnel and reached by that route "the junction of the Suttor with the newly- "discovered river which I called the Burdekin. "The course of the river is to the east by
south, and I thought that it would most prob-
ably enter the sea in the neighbourhood of
Cape Upstart. Flood marks, from fifteen to
eighteen feet above the banks showed that an
immense body of water occasionally sweeps
down its wide channel.

From April 2 to April 22, the party followed
the Burdekin, and in latitude 19° a river as large,
or even larger, so writes the leader, than the
Burdekin, joins the latter from the westward and
the south west. This river was named the "Clarke."
Many creeks and small rivers were found running
into the Burdekin, as the company passed along.

On June 15, good news is brought the leader by
Brown, that the Lynd joined a river from the south
east, with a rapid stream to the westward. This
flow of water was then named the Mitchell, after
Sir Thomas Mitchell, Surveyor-General of New South
Wales. The river came from the eastwards and
took its course to the west-north-west.

On June 28, the first and only fatality of the
party took place. Mr. Gilbert, the zoologist, was
speared by the blacks and died from the wounds.
About seven in the evening, when Leichhardt was
dozing upon the ground, he was called to assist in
repelling an attack. As soon as it was dark the
blacks had sneaked upon the little company, throw­
ing a shower of spears at the tents of Calvert,
Roper and Gilbert; a few at that of Phillips, and
some towards the fire. Two guns were fired, and
the natives decamped, leaving Roper and Calvert
pierced with several spears. Gilbert had been killed
instantly, a spear having entered the chest, between
the clavicle and the neck, the wound being so small
that it was some time before it could be detected.
His body was interred, and the funeral service of
the English Church was read over him, a large fire
afterwards being made over the grave to prevent
the natives detecting it and disinterring the body.

First Sight of the Gulf.

The first sight of the salt water of the Gulf
was hailed on July 5, and Leichhardt was satisfied
that he had now discovered a line of communication
between the eastern coast of Australia, and the Gulf
of Carpentaria. On July 12, they crossed a small river running west by north, with a broad sandy bed, numerous pools of water, and steep banks. It was called the "Gilbert" after their unfortunate companion. July 18 saw the band in latitude 17° 41', they having travelled south west by west; in fact, they were running down the Gulf on their way to find Port Essington, all the time skirting the salt boundaries of sea and land, the natives for days being exceedingly treacherous and troublesome. Since Gilbert's death the camping arrangements had been changed, with the object of guarding against attack.

Towards the end of August their route stood N.N.W., until the Nicholson River was passed. The Calvert River is named early in September, the route being then in almost a northerly direction.

On September 21, the Macarthur River was named. October 13 saw four very remarkable flat-topped cones of sandstone, which appeared like a plateau cut into four detached masses. These Leichhardt called the "Four Archers," after David, Charles, John and Thomas Archer, of Moreton Bay. The following day the "Wickham" River was named in honour of Captain Wickham, R.N., also of Moreton Bay. The Roper River was crossed on October 19, being named after one of the expedition party. The blacks became very numerous but not aggressive, being more inquisitive than rude. Many of them were able to speak a few words of English, and soon became on good terms with the men of the expedition. Leichhardt described them as "the most confiding, intelligent, inquisitive natives" he had ever seen. Late on December 17 they came upon a cart road which wound round the foot of a high hill and, having passed a garden, a row of snug thatched cottages suddenly burst upon them, the house of Commandant Macarthur being next in view. By the Commandant they were received and welcomed. Their long journey was over.

They reached Sydney on March 29, 1846, and were entertained at a public reception. By a public subscription slightly over £1500 was raised, to which the Government added £1000. From this latter sum Leichhardt received £600.

Leichhardt's next expedition to explore the
interior of Australia, on which he started on December 6, 1846, proved a failure.

On August 9, 1847, he started away in a westerly direction for Fitzroy Downs, accompanied by Isaacs, Bunce, Perry and a blackboy, his purpose being to connect his surveys with that of Mitchell. That journey also was a failure. He returned to Brisbane on October 14, 1847, and went on to Sydney.

The Royal Geographical Society of London awarded Leichhardt the Queen’s Gold Medal for his Port Essington trip, and the Royal Geographical Society of Paris gave him its gold medal for that year.

**Last Tragic Expedition.**

Before starting out on his fourth and final adventure, which was destined to have such a tragic ending, Leichhardt had outlined his intentions as follows:—

“I shall proceed to latitude 23 degrees, "where I found the Mackenzie and Peake Range, "and shall make 80 or 100 miles west of where "we struck the river. I might then find out if "the western branches of the supposed water- "shed go south to join the Darling, or turn "north as the sources of the great rivers of "the Gulf. In the last case, if there were suf- "ficient water, I should go west and try to reach "the North West Coast. If there were no "water to go west or north, I would return "down the Mackenzie and follow my first "journey up to the junction of the Clarke and "the Burdekin. I would follow the Clarke, and "doubtless easily find the head of the Flinders "after crossing a tableland or dividing range. "I would then go on to the Albert and follow "it up to find the latitude of its sources, and "nature of country. Then I would try a west- "erly course to the heads of the Nicholson, Van "Alphen, Abel Tasman, Robinson, and Mac- "arthur, and from the latter river would hope "to reach the waters of the West Coast in "about latitude 17. Should I succeed I shall turn "south parallel to the North West and West "Coast until I reach Swan River.”
These words go to prove that crossing the Continent in some way was his great desire, and that Swan River was to be his ultimate goal. How he progressed we shall see.

Leichhardt left Brisbane on February 16, 1848. The full complement moved from the Downs for MacPherson's station, on the Cogoon River, beyond Mt. Abundance, not far from the present-day site of Roma, and his last letter (to whom written I have not been able to trace) is dated "Sheep Station at Mount Abundance, April 4, 1848." In that he mentions that he left Mr. Birrell's station on the Condamine on March 23, and travelled thence to Mount Abundance in eleven days, covering a distance of 118 miles. That was the last ever heard from Leichhardt, or from anyone else concerning his subsequent doings or his fate. The letter referred to is now in the Mitchell Library, in Sydney.

Several searches were made for Leichhardt and his companions. Hovenden Hely went out with a party to the head of the Warrego in 1852 and returned with a collection of tales from the blacks. In 1864 a Mr. McIntyre, on a journey from the Darling to the Gulf of Carpentaria, followed much the same track as that taken by Burke and Wills. Three hundred miles from the sea and to the westward of Burke's track, McIntyre came upon two old saddle-marked horses. A short distance to the eastward he found the traces of two camps and two trees marked "L." McIntyre concluded that he had come upon new and important traces of the Leichhardt expedition. Upon his return the Government Botanist in Melbourne, Dr. F. Von Mueller, stirred up enthusiasm for a search for his lost countryman. A Ladies' Exploration Committee was formed. Funds were contributed and McIntyre was appointed leader. It was not known for certain whether the trees marked "L," either on the Barcoo or the Flinders, had been marked by Leichhardt. It was known that, if possible, he intended to cross the continent from east to west, and perhaps to discover the nature and extent of Sturt's Desert. McIntyre's expedition, however, proved a failure and ended disastrously.

Another search party, led by A. C. Gregory, and organised by him under instructions from the
N.S.W. Secretary for Lands and Public Works, set out from Mr. Royd's station on the Dawson River on March 24, 1858, and struck out westerly, reaching the Maranoa and following it up to Mount Owen. Gregory afterwards followed the route along which Leichhardt had intended to follow. In latitude 24°35', longitude 36°6', they discovered "a Moreton Bay ash, about two feet in diameter, marked with the letter 'L' on the east side, cut through the bark about four feet from the ground, and near it the stumps of some small trees which had been cut with a sharp axe; also a deep notch cut in the side of a sloping tree, apparently to support the ridge pole of a tent, or some similar purposes—all indicating that a camp had been established here by Leichhardt's party." A very thorough search of the surrounding country, however, failed to disclose any further evidence to help in clearing up the mystery. On May 15, 1858, Gregory's party had reached latitude 23°47', when the absence of water and grass precluded their going further to the north or west, and the only prospect of saving their horses was to return south as quickly as possible. This (Gregory declared) was "a most severe disappointment," as they had just reached the part of the country through which Leichhardt most probably had travelled, if the season had been sufficiently wet to render it practicable.

A. C. Gregory, in expressing his views as to the cause of the disappearance of Leichhardt and his party, rejects the idea that they had been murdered by the blacks, and he adds:—

"I am of the opinion that they left the "Victoria River at the junction of the Alice and, "favoured by thunder-showers, penetrated the "level desert country to the north-west; in which "case, on the cessation of the rain, the party "would not be deprived of a supply of water "for the onward journey, but unable to retreat, "as the shallow deposits of rain-water would "evaporate in a few days, and it is not likely "that they would commence a retrograde move- "ment until the strength of the party had been "severely taxed in the attempt to advance."

And so the mystery remains unsolved!