



**Australian Government**

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**Chief Scientist**

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**LUDWIG LEICHHARDT MAP LAUNCH  
AUSTRALIAN DICTIONARY OF BIOGRAPHY  
and AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY**

***LUDWIG LEICHHARDT – AN INSPIRATION FOR THE NEXT  
GENERATION***

**30 SEPTEMBER 2014**

**11am**

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CANBERRA**

It gives me great pleasure to be here today.

I have long been a supporter of the Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB).

When I was vice chancellor of ANU, I attended the events at which The ADB went online in 2006 and also when it celebrated its 50th birthday in 2009.

As I said then, The ADB is one of the jewels in ANU's Crown.

I am delighted to be back, in my new role as Chief Scientist, to talk about Ludwig Leichhardt. All of us here have heard of Leichhardt, the great Australian and great Prussian explorer and naturalist. But I get the impression that most of the public have not. Those who are aware of him tend to know about the unsolved mystery surrounding his death and that of the rest of his expedition in 1848. But fewer people tend to know much about his life in science.

But if Leichhardt's story can inspire young people of Australia to be as adventurous, engaged, critical, risk-taking and devoted to discovery as he was, then it's a story we ought to share, one that ought to be told. I congratulate ADB for getting that story out there in such an accessible and agreeable way.

After his untimely death, Leichhardt quickly acquired a reputation from his contemporaries of being gluttonous, arrogant and egomaniacal. Perhaps it was this perception that informed the titular character in the Patrick White novel "Voss", based on Ludwig Leichhardt.

In the novel, the financier of Voss's expedition, Mr. Bonner, asks "Have you studied the map?" Voss replies with typical hauteur "The map? I will make it first!"

Artistic licence aside, none would deny that Leichhardt had the right combination of confidence, devotion and fearlessness in the face of long and dangerous expeditions.

Australia is a land with enormous ecological dimensions and was a formidable challenge to the explorer. Not that the ambitiousness of the task deterred Leichhardt in the slightest.

He was a scientist with an insatiable curiosity about the world. His expeditions were information and specimen-collecting journeys.

His meticulous field notes reveal the light he cast upon the broader scientific and ecological questions, such as the origins of Australia's megafauna. Richard Owen, a young English Professor, was convinced that the relatives of modern African elephants had roamed the Australian bush and that this was the likely origin of Australian megafauna. Leichhardt examined fossils and held them to be "Australian type, and ... that the large fossil jaw was formed on the same plan as the Kangaroo, of the Opossum, of the Flying squirrel, and of the Koala". By Leichhardt's deduction, the fossils he examined were marsupials and nothing like elephants.

Charles Darwin was keenly interested in the meaning of such classification. Leichhardt's findings were accurate and he unwittingly adjudicated on a key piece in the jigsaw that would become The Theory of Natural Selection – 11 years after his death.

Sadly Leichhardt died at the young age of 35, having achieved so much and with the potential to achieve so much more.

Professor Henry Nix believes that if whatever happened on his last expedition hadn't happened, his observations could have

joined those by the other great naturalists of their time such as Alexander von Humboldt and Charles Darwin.<sup>1</sup>

When Leichhardt was awarded a pair of prestigious prizes in 1847 by the Paris Geographical Society and the Royal Geographical Society, he said: “Naturally I'm very pleased to think that such discerning authorities consider me worthy of such honours, but whatever I have done has never been for honour. I have worked for the sake of science...”<sup>2</sup>

Leichhardt was the noblest kind of scientist. Despite having great talent and commitment, he didn't seem to want to brandish this. He wasn't interested in praise and admiration and he didn't require the vindication of authority for his work. The discoveries themselves were the reward and vindication.

Although we are here to celebrate the life and work of Ludwig Leichhardt, we are specifically here to celebrate the work that the National Centre of Biography and the Australian Dictionary of Biography has done in creating this wonderful new resource of information on his seminal journey.

An article on Ludwig Leichhardt by Renee Erdos was published in Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 2, in 1967 – nearly 50 years ago.

Now, NCB have taken Leichhardt's “Journal of an Overland Expedition in Australia from Moreton Bay to Port Essington”, with all its rich observations about climate, geology, soils and vegetation patterns, and have used it to revise the map of Leichhardt's journey precisely.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nma.gov.au/audio/detail/ludwig-leichhardt-a-loss-to-science-and-australian-culture>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nma.gov.au/collections/highlights/the-leichhardt-nameplate>

This is new information that's presented in an attractive and accessible way with the most accurate rendering of Leichhardt's journey ever produced.

It's replete with journal entries, illustrations and sections of the aforementioned Renee Erdos essay discussing the significance of the exploration, their scientific findings, their interactions with Aborigines, and the political and economic effects of the expedition.

Its accessibility is designed to appeal to school children so that a whole new generation can learn about, and get inspired by, Ludwig Leichhardt.

Now that this pilot scheme has been completed successfully, Leichhardt's map will be the first among many – NCB and ADB's eventual aim is to create similar resources which cover all the great journeys of exploration across Australia.

For now, though, it is with great pleasure that I can announce that this beautiful map of Ludwig Leichhardt's Expedition from Moreton Bay to Port Essington will, as of today, be deposited in the national and state libraries. The map will also now be available for sale through the ANU Press website.