What happened to Ludwig Leichhardt?

Before going into the probable route of Leichhardt’s 3rd expedition in 1848 and his disappearance, we need to gain an appreciation of what was known about the inland of the continent at that time, and what were the aims of his expedition. Charles Sturt had penetrated north of Cooper Creek to the edge of the Simpson Desert in 1844/45, and proved that the inland was barren and nearly bereft of water. However, the concept of an “Inland Sea” was still firmly held by some key explorers and hopeful Governors, with the 1827 Maslen “map” of the interior showing a Great Lake east of Tennant Creek. The belief was that the NW-flowing rivers from the Western side of the Great Dividing Range in NSW and Queensland flowed into this lake; and then out to the Indian Ocean via the Fitzroy River. Matthew Flinders’ circumnavigation and mapping of the coast had shown that the only large rivers that could discharge the flows from such a vast catchment were in the Kimberley area, so this thesis made eminent sense.

Thomas Mitchell’s 1830s expeditions into western NSW had confirmed that these rivers ended up in the Darling, and then into Sturt’s River Murray. So perhaps the rivers feeding the Great Lake originated in western Queensland? To check this out, Mitchell went up the Maranoa River in 1845/46 and part way into Central Queensland, looking for these rivers. Mitchell’s finding that the rivers on the Western side of the Queensland Divide mostly flowed SW (into the Darling or Lake Eyre catchments) was confirmed by Kennedy’s 1847 journey down the Barcoo/Thomson to near where Sturt crossed Cooper Creek. So the Inland Sea theory was looking shaky, but the geography of the northern Queensland inland rivers, Lake Eyre and the entire Central Australia/northern Western Australia was still unknown. Leichhardt set out to solve this mystery, as well as conduct a thorough scientific survey of the Inland.

Leichhardt’s first expedition in 1844/45 to Port Essington had kept east of the Great Dividing Range, and then into Sturt’s River Murray. So perhaps the rivers feeding the Great Lake originated in western Queensland? To check this out, Mitchell went up the Maranoa River in 1845/46 and part way into Central Queensland, looking for these rivers. Mitchell’s finding that the rivers on the Western side of the Queensland Divide mostly flowed SW (into the Darling or Lake Eyre catchments) was confirmed by Kennedy’s 1847 journey down the Barcoo/Thomson to near where Sturt crossed Cooper Creek. So the Inland Sea theory was looking shaky, but the geography of the northern Queensland inland rivers, Lake Eyre and the entire Central Australia/northern Western Australia was still unknown. Leichhardt set out to solve this mystery, as well as conduct a thorough scientific survey of the Inland.

Leichhardt’s style of travelling was quite different to that of John MacDouall Stuart, leader of the first team to cross the continent from South to North and return. Stuart’s approach was to carry all food on many horses, and travel quickly. Even so, his crew was plagued by scurvy since the food was comprised of jerky and flour, with no time for gathering bush tucker. Leichhardt’s training as a scientist shifted his focus to an expedition to study the geography/geology/flora/fauna of regions he traversed, taking specimens as he went. His thorough knowledge of botany allowed him to experiment with bush tucker, and his well-armed team including 2 Aboriginals were able to gather small game, plants and shoot kangaroo/emu/birds for the pot. His men often went hungry and travelled slowly, but at least had a more balanced and healthy diet which they had learned from local aborigines.

As a result of his first trip and other information to hand from Mitchell and Kennedy, Leichhardt knew that there had to be another Divide, which separated the rivers flowing to the Inland from those going to the Gulf or the Arafura/Timor seas. And that the inland was a harsh and unforgiving desert region, since he didn’t believe Sturt’s Inland Sea hypothesis. Published correspondence from Leichhardt clearly shows his intention was to cross the Continent from Moreton Bay Colony to the Swan River colony via the following route:

* go well west of the Darling Downs to avoid the thick scrub of Central Queensland that had hindered his first expedition
* head NW along Mitchell’s tracks up to the Divide between the Gulf rivers (e.g Flinders, Leichhardt, Macarthur) and the inland-flowing rivers (now known as the Diamantina/Georgina systems running into Lake Eyre)

* across what we now call the Barkly Tablelands to the south edge of the Kimberley; then

* skirting the northern edge of the deserts to the WA Coast; then down the Coast to Swan River

And so off his party went in late 1846, but ended in fiasco 6 months later after fierce bickering of the team; chronic salmonella poisoning from poor camp hygiene; and chaos trying to manage a large flock of sheep, goats, mules and bullocks. Recruiting another team and scraping finance together, he tried again in 1848 and set off into the unknown, where his team of 7 people, with 14 horses, 20 mules and 50 bullocks disappeared completely. Numerous expeditions went out searching for them, some completely in the wrong places, and all wasting their time and finding nothing. Many claims that the party had been killed by aborigines were investigated – but the bush was full of stories of alleged murders by both blacks and whites, so nothing could ever be pinned down and no remains or gear found. Any inquiry addressed to tribesmen would receive a reply that “that other mob further out bush” were guilty of any murders of white men, with directions and distance uselessly vague. Scattered bits of tack and equipment found in the Outback could have been from any party of whites, who often followed explorer’s tracks looking for new pastures within months of the explorer’s passing. Or stuff could have been carried hundreds of miles away by aboriginal traders, who had vast networks over the country trading items such as ochres and pituri, and any whitefella stuff considered useful such as iron or glass parts. Carnegie’s 1896 crossing of the Gibson and Great Sandy Deserts found nothing. Madigan’s 1939 crossing of the Simpson Desert was looking for evidence of the Leichhardt team, but found nothing.

Endless speculation and numerous “artifacts” have clouded the legend of the 3rd Leichhardt expedition. So far, the only authenticated relic has been a stamped brass label from the stock of a gun, found near the NW edge of the Tanami /Great Sandy Deserts. What do I think? Leichhardt's intended route is marked on the map. I suspect he may have got across the Barkly Tableland to the head of the Victoria River; then followed Sturt Creek down to Lake Gregory. Then, thinking this way looked promising, disappeared into the Great Sandy Desert.

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References and further reading:

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3. Into the Unknown – the tormented life and expeditions of Ludwig Leichhardt, J Bailey (Macmillan, 2011)
4. Mr Stuart’s Track, J Bailey (Macmillan, 2006)