Unfortunately this new venture was short-lived. In December 1930 James Bickley wrote the following letter to the Government Resident at Alice Springs:

I with regret to inform you that Elijah Bickley of Halls Creek is Dead & Buried on 15 inst in Halls Creek. I am his Father & I do not want the Land that he has taken up in the Territory & I am as I am a old man & I am greved at the loss of my Dear Son Elijah.75

Figure 4: The most poignant letter of the Bickley Saga: James Bickley reporting the death of his son Elijah.

75 James Bickley to Government Resident, Alice Springs, 16-12-1930. Northern Territory Archives, F28 Box 17, GL 646.
This appears to be the last letter any of the Bickleys sent to the Lands Department in Darwin, so there can be little doubt that after fourteen years of struggle and setback, their dream of becoming independent landholders, growers of fruits, nuts, grains, cotton, and breeders of cattle, horses and mohair goats, had finally evaporated. At what must have been great expense, James and David paid for a marble headstone and iron railing to be sent from Perth and placed it upon Elijah’s grave in the Halls Creek cemetery (plate 132); neither of the surviving men appears to have a grave at Halls Creek and they may have eventually left the district.

There is, however, one more cruel twist to the Bickley story. While he was still hopeful of achieving his dream of independence, in 1927 James Bickley decided he wanted to marry the woman of his heart’s desire. But this woman was an Aboriginal, and under the laws of the day James had to have the permission of the Chief Protector of Aborigines to marry her. He engaged a law firm to approach the Chief Protector on his behalf and initially the Chief Protector thought the request had come from one of James Bickley’s sons, and was willing to consider it. However, when he discovered it was the elder Bickley, ‘a white man, aged approx 65’, he refused permission, and instead warned him ‘against committing any breach of the “Aborigines Act” in this connection.’76 The Protector asked the police for a report on Bickley and Constable Archibald at Halls Creek replied that,

although not exactly living in an Aboriginal camp, [he] comes very close to it. There is little doubt about him consorting with them. He seems to me to be endeavouring to gain some influence over them, and also the half-castes in the district. All or most of them go to him for advice.77

Archibald also reported that Bickley had ‘been instrumental in having one or two half­castes exempted from the Act some years ago’, and through solicitors in Perth was trying to get exemption for others in the Halls Creek district. He added the surprising information

76 Chief Protector of Aborigines, cited in report by Constable W. Archibald, Halls Creek, to Commissioner of Police, Broome, 30-12-1927. State Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 430, Item 4871.
77 Constable W. Archibald, Halls Creek, to the Chief Protector of Aborigines, 31-12-1927. State Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 430, Item 4871.
that ‘To my knowledge he has no half-caste children of his own, although he claims David and Elijah Bickley as his own sons...The fact that he wants to marry a gin goes to show that he must consort with them.’ This combination of inhumane law and heartless bureaucracy denied James yet one more of his dreams and left him the choice of either giving up the woman or breaking the law. We can only guess at the choice he made.

The various documents that relate to the Bickleys reveal James Bickley as a humane and decent man with not a trace of prejudice in his heart; a man who tried to assist Aborigines to escape from the provisions of the onerous ‘Aborigines Act of 1905’; a man who treated two ‘half-caste’ men as his own sons (if, indeed, they were not his own sons) and tried for years to make a home for them. Unlike many white men of his time and place, he was a man who wanted to do the right thing and marry an Aboriginal woman he was associated with, rather than keep their relationship secret and in the process break the law. For his trouble he was denied permission to marry, treated with great suspicion, and placed under close and ongoing scrutiny by government authorities. In subsequent decades others were to follow the Bickleys’ footsteps into the Tanami, and try to establish themselves on a desert block. None had the Bickleys’ grand vision and few, if any, were to endure the problems they encountered, yet most failed just as surely as the Bickleys did. Unlike the Bickleys, they failed much more quickly, and few ever tried more than once.

It is easy to laugh at the Bickleys – for their idiosyncratic and phonetically Irish spelling, for their repetitious lamentations at their misfortunes, and their wildly unrealistic vision of a veritable Garden of Eden in what most white people would consider a classic ‘howling wilderness’. But at the same time I cannot help feeling a great measure of sympathy for them as true ‘Aussie Battlers’. For years they struggled to achieve their dream, however wild and unlikely it might now seem. They made mistakes and suffered the mistakes of others. They were bullied by a mean and powerful neighbour who caused them great loss.

79 Constable Archibald to Inspector Leen, Broome, 2-5-1928. State Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 430, Item 4871.
of livestock and money, and one of them was nearly murdered out in the wastelands. Yet they persisted for fourteen long years, and it was only the death of one of the sons that sounded the death-knell for their hopes.

The Bickley saga reveals the structure of power relations in the Northern Territory and Kimberley in the second and third decades of the twentieth century. These were weighted strongly against ordinary workingmen and in favour of the big cattle companies. It also gives us a glimpse of another possibility, another Australia that might have been, and reminds us of the good relations experienced by members of Gregory’s expedition on the lower Victoria in 1856.
EPILOGUE

The people, places and events described in this thesis are only part of a cavalcade of wonderful stories that constitute Victoria River district history. Stories of paradise lost and paradise denied, of murder, massacre and manhunt, of wild and modest dreams, grand enterprises, successes and failures.

Over millions of years the configuration of what is now the Victoria River country changed again and again. Several times it was under the sea. Each time, sediments built up and turned into rock, and when the sea withdrew these rocks were worn down into valleys and gorges. Lava flowed, too, and gradually the land took on the form that it has today.

Aborigines appeared on the land something like 40,000 or 50,000 years ago – it makes little difference exactly when. Over thousands of years they achieved a deep understanding of the region, its climate and ecology, and they learnt to control and modify the environment to their advantage through the use of fire. Aboriginal burning almost certainly created and maintained the great Mitchell grass savannas that were to attract the cattlemen and their herds like flying foxes to bloodwood blossoms.

Then the cattle came, and unquiet times descended like a blight on the tribes and the settlers alike. For twenty years people on both sides were killed and maimed, and lived in constant fear. Jasper Gorge rang with rifle fire and curses and taunts, and blood ran there and elsewhere throughout the district.

VRD and Captain Joe spent fortunes trying to establish sheep stations, but only succeeded in creating a legend of failure. The Wardaman people twice drove the whites out of their country, but like the other tribes of the region were forced to make peace in the end. Cattle duffers came and went (and came again later), and many a battler tried to make a go of it in all but impossible circumstances. Across the decades of white settlement, some people were driven half mad, others heart-broken.
When the first settlers and cattle arrived in the Victoria River country they were unarguably in a frontier situation. For the next twenty years this frontier was characterised by violent conflict with the Aborigines, extreme isolation, desperately slow communications, and rough living and working conditions. If medical assistance was available at all, it was primitive and supplies often took months to arrive, brought to the stations from the Depot Landing on the lower Victoria River or direct from Wyndham or Katherine on horse and bullock wagons, or by packhorses or pack-camels. In common with many outback areas, the Victoria River region attracted its share of adventurers and fortune hunters, and became a last refuge for the brutal, the criminal, the half-mad, the alcoholics and other social misfits who were not tolerated 'inside'. In 1905 a member of a droving team passing through the district declared that 'This country is more or less full of lunatics; in fact all the loonies of the various states seem to gather in this part'.

During this time the station workforce consisted of white stockmen, Aboriginal stockmen and domestics brought in from distant areas, and perhaps a Chinese cook-come-gardener. Most if not all of these employees had to be paid, including at least some of the 'foreign' Aborigines, and wages in these remote and dangerous areas were high. Cattle were run on the open range system, and soon became unmanageable. They were mustered on horseback and driven to the nearest, often far-flung yard for drafting, branding and other treatment. Markets for the cattle were extremely limited. It was difficult, dangerous and expensive to run a Victoria River district station.

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1 ‘Inside’ was the term outback bushmen used to describe the long-settled regions of Australia, usually near the coast. The corollary was, of course, ‘outside’, meaning outside the settled districts (Australian National Dictionary, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, pp. 326, 453).
2 Hely-Hutchinson, The North Queensland Herald, 21-5-1906; other references to misfits and criminals in the district can be found in ‘Odd Stock and Other Notes’ The Morning Bulletin, Rockhampton, 20-1-1906 and in ‘An Irresponsible Journalist’, Northern Territory Times, 30-4-1909.
3 A paysheet for employees on VRD dated March 1887 lists ‘Bob Herbert Blkboy’, ‘Charley Mungylah Boy’ and ‘Doctor’ as each having drawn money from a station account. They probably had actually drawn goods from the station store to the value shown (Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd.: Sundry papers re CB Fisher and the Northern Australia Territory Co., 1886-1892, Noel Australian National University, Archives, Canberra. 2/876/22).
4 In the Ord River country in 1905 it was reported that wages for station hands were £2 per week whereas in Queensland it was £1 per week (‘A Big Cattle Trip. From Western Australia to Queensland’, The Morning Bulletin, Rockhampton, 29-8-1905).
The movement of bush Aborigines to the various homesteads caused a major change to
the station workforce. The able-bodied among them became available as unpaid and
almost unlimited labour, and they began to replace Aborigines ‘imported’ from distant
areas, and probably also some of the white staff. At much the same time that the
Aborigines were coming in the bronco method of handling stock was introduced,
increasing efficiency of management and reducing the cost of running the stations.
Also, cattle prices rose sufficiently to make it worthwhile to overland Territory stock to
Queensland. In short, several changes coincided and Victoria River cattle station
economies adjusted and improved accordingly. An economic pattern developed
whereby Aborigines worked on the stations throughout the dry season and were paid
only in clothing and rations. People too old, too young or too sick to work subsisted on
rations provided by the station and whatever bush food they could find. When the wet
season was imminent the workers returned their clothes to the station store, were issued
with a supply of rations, and were free to go on walkabout.

Coming in to the homesteads may have proved less stressful for the Aborigines than
staying out, but living conditions on the stations were hard. By coming in they placed
themselves under the control of white people, whether it was a policeman, the station
manager, a jackeroo, or a passing bagman. White people living in the district were
relatively few in number and isolated, and so often felt that they had to be ‘hard’ on the
blacks, to ‘show them who was boss’. Aborigines could and sometimes did resist
unwanted situations, but most whites carried a firearm for shooting unwanted livestock,
and also for self-defence and to enforce their demands, and if other whites were present
they would always back each other up.

By about 1905 white pastoralists had established a social and economic situation that
remained little changed for more than sixty years. For all this time, almost all the land in
the district was cattle station land, controlled by white men, and all this time the
Aborigines were effectively slaves – unpaid, with few rights, and at the bottom of the
station social hierarchy.\footnote{Their slave-like status was recognised by cattle station whites. During my conversations with long-
time cattleman, Charlie Schultz, he actually referred to particular Aborigines as having been ‘a good old slave’.
} For whites in the region conditions were more congenial, but
still hard. They, at least, were paid, and had the option of leaving any time they desired.

353
While conflict with bush Aborigines diminished markedly once the homestead camps were established, it was not the end of the frontier. There were still occasional outbreaks of violence between Aborigines and whites, but these were localised in nature, and most of the physical conditions of the first two decades of settlement continued for many more. There was change, but change came slowly until the 1960s. In the 1930s and 1940s Traeger two-way pedal-radios were introduced (plate 133). These enabled instant communications, and combined with the presence of aeroplanes based in Katherine and Darwin, they enabled the quick evacuation of serious medical cases. However, these radios, and the two-way battery-powered radios that superseded them, were inefficient and could not always make a connection, especially during the wet season. Two-way radios remained the only means of electronic communication until the mid-1980s when telephones were installed throughout the region, and since then satellite and computer technology has linked the region directly to television and the internet.

Motor vehicles began appearing in the district in the 1920s (plate 134) and their use was firmly established by the 1930s. Trucks replaced the original packhorse mail service and were in turn replaced by an aerial service in about 1939 (plates 59, 135, 136). The motor vehicles also replaced the donkey teams, camel trains and pack horses in many areas, but for decades the main roads were little more than rough tracks (plates 137, 138). For months on end the country was too wet for motor travel, or the roads too badly damaged by water to be passable to motor vehicles until repairs were made. On many stations there were few graded tracks until the 1950s and 1960s, and camels, donkeys, mules or horses were used to pull wagons or to carry packs into some areas until the 1960s, or later (plates 139 to 143). By the time I arrived in 1971 the main highway across the region had been sealed with a one-lane-wide strip of bitumen, but the Victoria River had still not been bridged and most rivers and creeks elsewhere had only culverts, low-level concrete crossings, or no improvements at all.

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7 Stan Jones, who took over management of Gordon Downs in 1952, told me that he used pack camels on the station until he left in 1964.
The open range system of cattle ‘management’ remained in use until intensive fencing programs were implemented in the 1960s and 1970s. On VRD hundreds of kilometres of fencing were erected in the 1960s but the paddocks were so large that in many instances it was still effectively open range mustering, with many beasts able to escape into rough or timbered areas. Wild bulls, brumbies and donkeys remained in plague proportions into the 1960s and beyond. The stations employed full-time shooters, but for years on VRD wild bull numbers remained around 15,000 to 20,000. Substantial inroads into the feral animal problem were only made with the advent of the Brucellosis and Tuberculosis Eradication Program (BTEC) in the late 1970s and 1980s. It required more intensive fencing, shooting from helicopters, and lastly, the ‘Judas Collar’ technique introduced in the 1990s. The problem persists, however, and within the last five years there was estimated to be 42,000 wild horses and 103,000 donkeys in the district as a whole.

The Golden Age of cattle duffing had passed by 1912, but there continued to be other episodes over the years. For example, three men were jailed for stealing 200-odd cattle from the VRD-Delamere boundary area in 1928 and driving them across country to Dorisvale, and in 1953 the trial of a well-known cattleman for stealing cattle from VRD caused a sensation in the Territory and down south. He got off in what a policeman involved told me was ‘a travesty of justice’. Instances of alleged cattle stealing still occur, and though it is much more difficult to get away with now that there

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10 The ‘Judas collar technique’ relies upon the social habits of most feral animals. First, a feral animal is captured alive and fitted it with a collar containing a radio transmitter. It is then released and will team up with other feral animals of its own species. After a time the radio signal is tracked down and all the animals destroyed except for the one wearing the collar. The surviving animal will again find ‘mates’, and the process is repeated until there are no feral animals left (see *Savanna Links*, issue 9, March-April 1999, p. 7).
11 Personal communication, Keith Sarfield, Invasive Species Management Officer, Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife Commission.
12 Personal communication, Darryl Hill, resident of the Victoria River District almost continuously since 1969, as station hand, station manager, Soil Conservation Officer with the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory, and at present Project Officer with the Victoria River District Conservation Association, based in Katherine.
13 ‘Supreme Court’, *Northern Territory Times*, 20-7-1928.
14 As well as being reported in the *Northern Territory News* (27-8-1953, 1-10-1953, 8-10-1953, 10-10-1953), the case received several pages of text and colour photographs in A.M. magazine (November 3rd, 1953, pp. 56-58).
15 Personal communication, John Gordon.
are aeroplanes and helicopters, and modern communications, it is still difficult to obtain a conviction.

It is now 121 years since the first settlers and cattle came to the Victoria. Their coming has not been kind to the land or to the Aborigines. A century of uncontrolled grazing by hard-hoofed animals has caused large-scale erosion and considerable damage to the ecosystems of the region. Some species of animals and plants are regionally extinct and others are becoming rare. Although recently some attempts have been made to alleviate the worst damage by fencing off riverbanks and shooting out the remaining feral donkeys, the problem is ongoing and may actually be increasing as land use in some areas is intensifying. Introduced weeds have swept across the land. Prickly Parkinsonia and Rubber Bush now inhabit the hills and plains, while Castor Oil bush and Noogoora Burr choke the riverbanks. Devils Claw, Mesquite and other weeds have appeared in recent years and are threatening to become major problems.\(^\text{16}\)

The Aborigines also suffered, first from shootings and poisonings, later from inadequate nutrition, housing and medical attention, and sometimes from brutal treatment at the hands of whites. They were unpaid and effectively under the control of station whites until the mid-1960s. Before this time they were denied access to the cash economy, and when the wet season came their only means of travel was to walk, so the tradition of wet season walkabout continued until the late 1960s. Among the last Aborigines to go on walkabout were Old Tim Yilngayarri and his wife, Mary Rudungnali. In 1970 they set out with their dogs to walk from Daguragu to VRD. Along the way Old Tim became weak in the legs, so he and Mary and their dogs camped at a bore until the following dry season when they were found by a bore maintenance crew.\(^\text{17}\)

Living and working conditions for Aborigines on most stations were extremely poor for decades after they came in from the bush. Infant mortality was extremely high, and

\(^{16}\) The scientific identification of these plants and more detailed information about them and other Victoria River weed problems, can be found in my book, *Slower than the Eye Can See* (Tropical Savannas CRC, Darwin, 2002).

\(^{17}\) Personal communication, Tim Yilngayarri.
housing and sanitation ranged from sub-standard to non-existent. On Wave Hill the living conditions of the Aborigines, and social relations between them and the whites, had been so poor for so long that in 1966 the local people, the Gurindji, went on strike. Over the next six years other Victoria River Aborigines joined the strike, and an initial demand for equal wages soon shifted to demands for the return of traditional lands (plate 144).

The strikes were a major turning point in the history of the district, spelling the end of the mustering and branding system established in the founding years of settlement. Denied access to plentiful unpaid or low-paid Aboriginal labour, the stations quickly turned to mechanisation, replacing horseback mustering with helicopter mustering, and the labour-intensive bronco method of cattle branding with mechanical crushes (plates 145, 146). The stations also ceased to provide rations to the station camps and in some instances closed them down and forced the Aborigines to shift to the nearest town.

The strikes focussed attention on the plight of Aborigines nation-wide, and legislation since the mid-1960s has led to equal pay, citizenship, education, health and legal services, and the passing of the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NT)* 1976. These legislative changes led to Victoria River Aborigines regaining control of several cattle stations and other areas of land, and the breaking of a ninety-year stranglehold on the land by white

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22 For example, see ‘Aborigines pondering their next move at Gordon Downs’, *Canberra Times*, 31-1-1981.

23 Aboriginal Freehold Title now exists on the Amanbidji (Kildurk), Mistake Creek, Fitzroy and Innesvale station leases, and a large section of Wave Hill station. Other successful claims have been made over various areas of former Crown Land, including the Timber Creek Town Common, the Top Springs Travelling Stock Reserve, and long sections of stock routes.
pastoralists. The first land title was handed over in 1973\(^{24}\) and the Gurindji regained title to some of their land in 1975 (plate 147),\(^{25}\) but it probably took at least another decade for the old whitefella mind-set to begin to change. Once Aboriginal people became substantial landholders, they had to be taken seriously by their white neighbours and government agencies, and are now being incorporated into regional programs such as weed, disease and feral animal control.

Aboriginal land rights was not only change to land tenure in the region. First, in the 1980s portions of a number of cattle stations were bought or resumed by the Northern Territory Government to create the Keep River and Gregory National Parks. Second, in the late 1980s to mid 1990s the Federal Government purchased two areas of land for military purposes. One area was part of Delamere station, to be used as a bombing range,\(^{26}\) and the other was Bradshaw station, bought in 1995 for use as an army field training area.\(^{27}\)

Like other groups throughout the region, the Wardaman are now but a shadow of their former power. After they came in to Delamere, Willeroo and Manbuloo they became well-regarded station workers, but decades of sub-standard living and working conditions took their toll. However, the old warrior spirit remained strong. In 1944 on Delamere station a dispute arose between head stockman Jack Connors and the Wardaman men. Several Aborigines confronted Connors with spears and boomerangs, and attempted redress of a perceived wrong, but the affair ended in tragedy when Connors shot dead a Wardaman man named Tiger.\(^{28}\) In common with Aboriginal communities throughout Australia, in recent years the collective fortune of the Wardaman has undergone a change for the better, but many problems remain.

\(^{24}\) This was Kildurk station, since renamed Amanbidji, purchased for the Aboriginal traditional owners by the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission, a Commonwealth Government-funded authority. It has since been converted to Aboriginal Freehold Title through a successful land claim under the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NT)* 1976 (B. Higgins, *Historical Submission : Amanbidji Land Claim*, Northern Land Council, Darwin, August 1976; M. Durack, *Sons in the Saddle*, Corgi Books, Sydney, 1985, p. 511).

\(^{25}\) I was privileged to have been present in 1975 to witness the hand-over of part of Wave Hill station to the Gurindji when the Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, poured a handful of sand into Vincent Linjiari's hand.

\(^{26}\) Part of Delamere pastoral lease No, 567 was purchased in 1989 (personal communication, Vern O'Brien).

\(^{27}\) '$5m defence force cattle station sale', *N.T. News*, 25-12-1995.

One vestiges is a situation where frontier conditions were dominant until quite recently, technologies, cattle management and communications may have reached modern standards, but the mentality of the frontier remains. One aspect of this is seen in the social relations between Aborigines and whites. While for many people these social relations have changed significantly since the tense days of the Aboriginal strikes, old attitudes, prejudices, fears and ignorance still exist. The memories and experience of older residents extend back to the time before the Aboriginal strikes, when social relations between the Aborigines and the whites were still those of master and servant. Some have passed these attitudes on to their children, and sometimes to newcomers to the district.

A sad demonstration of the old-time mind-set of both whites and blacks occurred in September 1988 when Debbie Rose and I were working on the Bilinara Land Claim on VRD. One of my responsibilities was to produce a map of Dreaming and historic sites for the land claim. I knew that the station owner was hostile towards land claims and Aborigines, and had declared that Land Council employees were not to be allowed on the station. The Land Council lawyers assured me that as a consultant I was not an employee, and so was exempt from this prohibition, but it was clear that if I asked for access to the station it would be denied. However, I knew that the station was so large that I could probably do the work without being noticed, so I commenced the work without advising the station manager. Almost all the mapping was done with Anzac Mungindi, a Bilinara elder about sixty years old who had lived all his life at Pigeon Hole, a VRD outstation (plate 150). After spending a week on the station mapping most of the area under claim, we returned to Pigeon Hole one afternoon and learnt that the VRD whites had finally discovered I was on the station. When Anzac realised we had been ‘sprung’ and a confrontation with the station whites could be expected, he visibly panicked and could not get me off the station quickly enough. This was surely a legacy of the ‘old days’ of complete domination by white people. I left, and that same day gates on every access track to Pigeon Hole were padlocked.
The following September Debbie Rose and I, a group of Aborigines, their lawyers, and other Northern Land Council employees set out to drive to Pigeon Hole. The lawyers advised the station manager of our intention, whereupon he contacted the station owner, and received instructions to lock the gates on all the access roads to Pigeon Hole. Several times we had to backtrack and try different access routes, but all were locked (plate 151). Eventually, Debbie and the two lawyers climbed over a locked gate and attempted to walk the last ten kilometres to Pigeon Hole. On the way a station helicopter hovered overhead, engulfing them in dust and gravel, and the station manager arrived to try and prevent them continuing (plate 152). This did not stop them, but before they reached Pigeon Hole they were served with a court order denying them access. 29

Although most of the good cattle land is now intensively fenced and effectively controlled, large areas of rough country remain. A characteristic of frontier conditions is that both the population and the law are spread very thin. This is still the case in the Victoria River country and there have been some notable events in recent times that have taken advantage of this situation. For example, in 1986 there was a court case in which some people were seen and photographed within their neighbours' lease, throwing and branding cleanskin cattle. Their defence was that as there was no boundary fence between the two leases, cleanskin cattle could wander back and forth at will, and it was therefore a moot point which side they were on when caught and branded. The judge agreed and the case was dismissed. 30

A more recent example concerns crocodile poaching. In 1994 I bushwalked through the remote Fitzmaurice River valley and saw very few saltwater crocodiles, yet the Conservation Commission rangers at Timber Creek later told me that the previous year, crocodile numbers had been so high that 'you could have walked from back to back on them' in the waterholes. The rangers were of the opinion that someone had gone into the valley during the previous wet season and cleaned out the crocodiles for their skins.

30 Personal observation.
Map 19: Modern-day land tenure in the Victoria River district and surrounding areas. The dark areas are National Parks (Keep River at the left, Gregory in the centre and right). White areas are Aboriginal Freehold Title and the rest pastoral leases. Bradshaw station and Delamere station east of the highway are now military training areas while Spirit Hills is now a ‘Conservation Zone’ (an extension of the Keep River Park).

Another aspect of the frontier relates to the great size of the stations. Again, the memories of older residents extend back to a time when the stations were huge and unfenced, and there was a corresponding social space in which individual personalities could reach their full potential. Although resumptions in the 1930s, 1950s and 1960s reduced the original size of some stations, many are still vast. For example, Victoria River Downs is now a ‘mere’ 11,885 square kilometres, Bradshaw is 8710, Cattle
Creek, formerly part of Wave Hill, is 7085, and many others are well over 4000 square
kilometres. I believe that these wide expanses still provide a social space within which
human personalities are often more expansive, and more room for laws and social
conventions to be 'bent'.

In sum, the Victoria River country has seen many changes since the coming of the white
settlers. Initially the Aborigines were massacred, displaced, brutalised and enslaved. Some pastoralists succeeded, but others had their dreams dashed. The hard-hoofed
cattle, horses and donkeys ran wild and bred out of control, reaching phenomenal
numbers, and causing severe soil erosion and damage to the flora and fauna. Men of
limited means struggled to create a life of independence for themselves, only to be
thwarted in the end. Eventually the Aborigines were legally accorded the same rights as
other citizens and regained access to some of their traditional lands. The cattle and feral
animals were brought under control, and the country made more 'civilised'.

Yet in spite of the damage to the land and ecology, in spite of the spearings and
massacres and brutalities, and the failed dreams of station owners and battlers alike, the
aura of the land remains. The great ranges are still majestic, Jasper Gorge remains as
beautiful and forbidding as ever, and the great Mitchell grass downs are still a 'vision
splendid' in the late afternoon sun. The mid-dry is still a delight, the lightning storms of
the build-up are as spectacular and frightening as ever, and the monsoons still bring
tremendous floods as of old.

For a hundred years the stories of the Victoria River country have been lost or only
vaguely known to outsiders, and ultimately most were lost to white station people, as
well. Local Aborigines retain the greatest knowledge of past events, but even among
them the stories are slowly being lost. Historically speaking, for most white people the
land remains a vast and largely silent 'blank', a place of wild imaginings. Now, through
this thesis, the land is at last being repopulated with the characters of the past, and their
stories. Much more remains to be told, but that is a task for the future.

31 Pastoral and General Tenure Map, produced by the Mapping Branch, Northern Territory
Department of Lands and Housing, Darwin, 1990.
Appendix A

INSCRIBED BOABS IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

Boabs inscribed by humans become living documents. Any significant carving or damage to a boab heals over, and unless subsequent damage occurs the impression remains visible for the life of the tree. Exactly how long Australian boabs live is unknown, but they certainly survive for many centuries; an example on the Kimberley coast was carved by crewmen from HMS Mermaid in 1820, and of course, the Gregory boab on the Victoria River was carved by Thomas Baines in 1856. However, boabs are not composed of solid wood. Their internal composition is more like a dense fibre, and when they die they rot very quickly and collapse within a few months (plate 153). Cattle and other animals may then eat the interior wood, the rest disintegrates, and within a year or two there is nothing to show that a boab ever lived at the spot.

If inscriptions are carved deeply enough they stand out well and are easy to read. Sometimes the grooves become partially filled with a black substance, possibly a species of lichen, and these also are quite easy to read. In some instances the grooves are shallow and of the same colour as the surrounding bark. These can be quite difficult to read or virtually invisible. In such cases I burn some grass or twigs to make charcoal, crush this and mix it with water, and then rub a thin smear into the grooves. This creates a mild contrast with the surrounding bark which enables the inscription to be identified, and makes them stand out in photographs. Liquid charcoal causes no damage to the bark and washes off in the first rains.

Sometimes the inscription or inscriptions extend around the trunk of the tree and cannot be recorded in a single photograph. In these cases I use drawing pins to fix a sheet of polythene in place over the carvings, and then outline them with a black felt-tipped pen. Later the outlines can be filled in and the resulting extended image photographed to create a permanent record. I have done this with a number of important boabs, including the specimen carved by the Gregory Expedition of 1855-56, and also the 'Retribution
Camp boab’ which produced a set of images and inscriptions twelve metres long (see page 380).

All of the trees listed here have been fully documented in my National Trust reports. Most of the names I’ve given the trees refer to what is carved on them. If readers wish to know more they should consult these reports (see bibliography).

1814 Boab. Fitzmaurice River, Bradshaw station. Has a name like ‘Casabila’ and date 1814 (see chapter 2). No record is known of this name or of a visit in 1814.


Aboriginal-Carved Boab. Upper Little Fitzmaurice River, Bradshaw station. Has a snake-like design carved on it and a conical standing stone close by.

Aboriginal-Carved Boab. Fitzmaurice River, Bradshaw station. Has a clear but unidentifiable design carved on it.

A Martin’s Boab. Victoria River, Bradshaw station. This was almost certainly was carved by Alf Martin who was in the district from about 1900 and manager of Victoria River Downs station from 1926 to 1946 (see plate 3).

ART Boab. Victoria River, Bradshaw station. These are the initials of Ray Thatcher, a Second World War soldier (a ‘Nackaroo’), based on the river in 1942 to watch for a Japanese invasion.

Arthur’s Boab. Drover’s Rest, Gregory National Park. The name of a drover, with the date 1925.

AW Boab. Bullo River station. The initials AW are associated with a broad arrow, the mark of a government employee, so they possibly are the initials of A.J.A. White, a policeman at Timber Creek in 1910.

‘Bagman’s Retreat’ Boab. Argument Gap, Auvergne station. Bagmen were itinerant station employees who travelled from station to station and living out of their packsaddle bags, hence ‘bagmen’. During each wet season most station employees were laid off and the bagmen used to gather at prearranged spots and set up a wet season camp. No doubt they whooped it up on ‘crinkly’ rum and maybe had a black girlfriend or two. There are dates on the tree from the 1920s. It also bears the name ‘P. Sasck’.

The Sascks were a large family in the Kimberley in the past, and a saying arose that the Kimberley was overrun with ‘Sascks, blacks and bloody Duracks’ (see next page).

‘B’ Boabs. Upper East Baines River, Gregory National Park. Two boabs here have random letters, varying in size and some reversed, all indications that they were carved by Aborigines familiar with the appearance of writing but not with the system.
Blondie's Boab. Victoria River, Bradshaw station. This boab has the word 'Blondie' and a picture of a scared face carved on it by Nackaroos. It is at the same camp as the ART boab and several others listed below. The Nackaroos were young men and had a lot of time on their hands in these camps.

Bloomer's Boab. Bradshaw station. Bloomer was an Aboriginal stockman in the 1940s-1970s.

![Bloomer](image)

Blunder Bay NAOU Boab. Blunder Bay, Spirit Hills Conservation Zone, lower Victoria River. NAOU stands for 'North Australia Observers Unit', otherwise known as the Nackaroos. This is at a different location from the ART boab and Blondie's boab. There is only one marked tree here, but there are signs of occupation such as a sheet of corrugated iron, and a stone 'hide' on a nearby ridge which has a great view down river. A very remote place to this day.

Bottle Tree Yard Boab. Jasper Gorge. A landmark boab at the eastern end of Jasper Gorge. It has various initials carved on it, but none are identifiable. It is also a Dreaming tree – it is Walujapi, the black-headed python which formed the gorge.

Bullita Homestead Boab. Gregory National Park. It is right alongside the old Bullita homestead and has names and dates of station people (including children) from the 1930s, 1950s and 1970s.

Bullo River Gorge Boab. Bullo River station. The tree has the name 'Mark' and broad arrow, and date '11-4-17'. There is no record of any patrol by police or other government employees to this area in 1917. However, this gorge was the location of the shooting of at least four Aborigines by police after a white man was speared in 1918.

Broad Arrow AM Boab. Timber Creek area. Again, who 'AM' was remains unknown but the tree is not far from the Timber Creek police station so the broad arrow probably indicates that he was a policeman.

Cali Boab. Retribution Creek, Auvergne station. The tree bears the picture of a boxer and the name 'Cali' in very large letters. I have no idea who or what Cali might have been. A nearby boab has 1890s dates so Cali might have been a boxer in that period.

Cambalin Spring Animal Carvings Boab, Bradshaw station. This has pictures of marsupials and birds carved on it, in the style of local rock paintings (plate 154).
Cambalin Spring ‘House’ Boab. Bradshaw station. Has a strange house-like design carved on it. I suspect it is an Aboriginal version of a building they saw in Darwin, quite probably in the early twentieth century.

Cameron’s Boab. Mosquito Flat, Bradshaw station. Cameron was a policeman on a manhunt after escaped Aboriginal prisoners in 1916 (plate 155).

Canoe Boab. Blunder Bay, Spirit Hills Conservation Zone, lower Victoria River. This is an amazing ‘living canoe’. Someone has chopped down a boab and begun shaping and hollowing it into a dugout canoe. It was never finished and later the chopped parts healed over with bark, it sprouted roots and branches, and is still alive to this day. It is located at a site where in 1942 there was a Nackaroo camp. I have questioned surviving Nackaroos but none of them knew of anyone trying to make a canoe while they were there. However, the men I spoke with were not in the camp for the last few months before it was closed (plate 156).

Captain 1955 Boab. Access road, Bullo River station. Captain was an Aboriginal stockman.

Captain 1957 Boab. Lobby Creek, Bradshaw station. Captain was probably proud that he could write his name.

Chamber’s Grave Boab. Argument Gap, Auvergne station. Chambers was a former surveyor turned cook who died on the track in 1907 and was buried where found, at the foot of a boab. Later a galvanised iron sheet ‘headstone’ was made with the details punched into it. It is still on the tree, in near perfect condition after 90-odd years (plates 157, 158).

Charlie Schultz’s Boab. Bullita homestead, Gregory National Park. Charlie Schultz owned Humbert River station from 1928 to 1971, and Bullita station from 1947 to 1967. Bullita was on the track from the Depot store on the Victoria River, to Humbert River station. Charlie carved his name on this boab in 1929, probably when he was travelling with packhorses to pick up supplies or retuning with them (plate 159).

Chas. N. Schultz
11-7-29
Club Hotel Boab. East Baines River, Gregory National Park. This is one of several different ‘Hotel’ boabs along the East Baines River. This river was a stock route in the early 1900s and according to Charlie Schultz, cooks would set up camp under a boab and in their spare time would carve a hotel name. Perhaps their ‘skin was cracking’ in the heat and they were dreaming of rehydrating with cold beer!

Colin Dawson’s Boab. Bradshaw station. Colin was almost certainly an Aboriginal stockman. There are several boabs at this location marked by Aboriginal stockman and it was probably a stock camp during a muster.

CS Boab. Upper East Baines River, Gregory National Park. ‘CS’ was probably Charlie Schultz, or his father Charles Frederick Schultz who was on the station for a very limited time in 1928.

Daly’s Boab. Near Bullita homestead, Gregory National Park. Daly was an Aboriginal stockman who worked for Charlie Schultz. Daly was born about 1926 and I knew him quite well until his death about 1992. Many Aboriginal stockmen learnt to write their names but were otherwise non-literate.

Dare & Scanlan’s Boab. Blue Mud Yard, Auvergne station. Tom Dare and Jack Scanlan were both stockmen in the district in the 1960s.

Dave Fogarty’s Boab. Drover’s Rest, Gregory National Park. Dave Fogarty was in the district during the 1930s-1950s and then shifted to Central Australia. He was part owner of Buffalo Springs and regarded by those who knew him as one of the greatest horsemen ever.

Drover’s Rest Boab. Gregory National Park. The ‘Drover’s Rest’ was an area of open grassy flats at the junction of Barak Barak creek and the East Baines River. Both streams were stock routes in times past. The junction area had good water and the first open flats after travelling through narrow valleys for days, so the drovers could let the cattle graze and take a rest (plate 160).

DT Boab. Lobby Creek, Bradshaw station. Who DT was remains unknown.

‘Ease Up’ Boab. Drover’s Rest, Gregory National Park. The boab has a message for drovers: ‘Ease Up Mate That’s The Baines’, ie you’ve come through the hard part and the Baines River is just ahead, so now you can take it easy.

Ernie Rayner’s Boab. Bullo River station. Ernie Rayner was a stockman on various stations in the region during the late 1950s and 1960s, and later was a stock inspector based at Top Springs. In 1962 his boss, Peter Murray, was contracted to muster all the cattle on what later became Bullo River station. To get there the stockmen tried to swim their horses across the Victoria River, but the horses had too much ‘horse sense’ – they knew all about crocodiles. Instead the stockmen had to walk the horses about fifty
kilometres upstream, cross the horses above the tidal reach, and walked them back down the other side. They mustered 600 or 800 head and walked them out along the present Bullo River access road to Auvergne station where trucks picked them up. On the way out Ernie carved his name and date on this boab.

**EV 1911 Boab.** Big Horse Creek, Gregory National Park. Who ‘EV’ was remains unknown.

**42 Bot Boab.** Victoria River, Bradshaw station. ‘42 Bot’ stands for ‘1942 Bottle Glenn’. Bottle Glenn was the name the Nackaroos gave to this camp on the Victoria River, based on the number of boabs in the area.

**Finlay’s Grave Boab.** Victoria River, Bradshaw station. This boab is marked with a large cross, a smaller cross and various initials. The crosses were cut to mark the grave of Finlay who was the ship’s carpenter on Gregory’s Expedition of 1855-56 (plate 161).

**Flyin’ Fox Boab.** Upper East Baines River, Gregory National Park. A signpost boab, alerting the traveller that the creek leading off the East Baines at this point is Flying Fox Creek, and the ‘road’ to take to Humbert River station.

**Fogarty Brother’s Boab.** Bradshaw station. Has the names of Dave and Ted Fogarty who owned this part of Bradshaw station in the 1940s-1950s. The block they owned was called Buffalo Springs.

**Four Boats Boab.** Bradshaw station. The tree has four sail boats on it, and nothing else.

**Four Men in a Boat Boab.** Drover’s Rest, Gregory National Park. Has the outline of a sail boat with four side-view heads inside it, each one wearing a hat. There are no names or dates.

**Frank Lewis’s Boab.** Angalarri Creek, Bradshaw station. Lewis was a stockman in the 1960s.

**Frayne’s Boab.** Drover’s Rest, Gregory National Park. Jack Frayne was a local stockman in the 1890s and small-time land-owner/cattle duffer in the early 1900s. He is said to have been a remarkable character but I know little about him (see Chapter 9). He died on the upper East Baines River in 1912 and Reg Durack said that on the upper East Baines there was a boab with Frayne’s name on it. This could be his grave, but the area is inaccessible and I haven’t tried to relocate it yet.
Fred Marton’s Boab. Drover’s Rest, Gregory National Park. Fred Marton was a very big ‘half caste’ man who got in trouble with the law on many occasions – for theft, cruelty to horses, etc. He could fight, too. He was known as ‘The Whispering Baritone’ or ‘Whispering Fred’, because of his deep soft voice. The inscription shown here is more than 350 centimetres long and was cut with a tomahawk or axe.

F.M. MARTON. BOTTLETREE
58

F.V. Neaves’ Boab. Bottle Glenn, Bradshaw station. Neaves was one of the Nackaroos.

FVN Boab. Bottle Glenn, Bradshaw station. FVN stands for FV Neaves, as above.

Giant Face Profile Boab. Bullo River station. This boab literally has a giant (184 cm) face profile carved on it, but nothing else. It is along side the Bullo River access road but it is so large that it is easy to think that it is a piece of natural damage and thus miss it.

‘Gordon Shot’ Boab. Humbert River station. This boab as the words ‘Gordon J Shot 1910’ and an arrow pointing upstream. Gordon was an Aboriginal ‘outlaw’ who speared ‘Brigalow Bill’ Ward in 1910 and was hunted down and shot by the police (see Chapter 9). Apparently the police camped at this tree after the event and carved the inscription – the only known ‘memorial’ to such an outlaw. The ‘J’ may be the initial of Gordon’s skin name, which was ‘Jangala’ (plates 162, 163).

Gregory’s Depot Boab. Auvergne station. This is a famous boab, located where Gregory Expedition had its base camp in 1855-56 (see Chapter 2). It also bears the initials of early settlers and police (plates 164, 165 and fold-out on page 374).

Guild’s Boab. Drover’s Rest, Gregory National Park. Probably the name of a drover.

Hanson’s Boab. Auvergne station. Chas Hanson was a builder who erected the Timber Creek police station in 1908. The tree is on the edge of the old road from Timber Creek to Auvergne. Hanson carved ‘Hanson builder overland NSW to WA 1908’ on the tree. On the other side of the tree is the statement ‘The Fallop O’Keefe, the Big I Am’. ‘Fallop’ is a slang term from Ireland and Scotland that means either a large lump of
something unpleasant or something tattered and torn. With these meanings in mind, the O'Keefe named on this tree almost certainly was drover O'Keefe, who in 1927 was described as being so large that he found it very difficult to negotiate the Bullwady scrubs of the Murranji Track. When he got through he was said to have been so tattered that he could have won a fancy dress contest (plate 166).

**Haskett’s Boab.** Big Horse Creek, Gregory National Park. Who Haskett was is unknown.

**HLVH 1942 Boab.** Baines River, Auvergne station. HVLH remains unknown.

**Hungry Billabong Boab.** Newry station. Has initials of stockmen and a policeman, and also a police coat of arms – not well done.

**HH Boab.** Lobby Creek, Bradshaw station. HH was probably Harry Huddlestone, a stockman in the 1930s.

**Jack Barry’s Boab.** Upper East Baines River, Gregory National Park. Jack Barry was a stockman, yard builder and station manager from about 1900 to the 1940s.

**JB 97 Boab.** Drover’s Rest, Gregory National Park. The JB is conjoined and is probably the initials of stockman Jack Beasley who was illiterate and used to sign his name this way. He was around from the 1890s until the 1930s. Jack was part-owner of the Mount Stirling block on Stirling Creek and indulged in cattle duffing. He is also said to have been involved in the massacre of Aborigines (see Chapter 9).

**J12 Boab.** East Baines River, Gregory National Park. J12 is an early brand of Willeroo station. After the Willeroo manager was killed by Aborigines in 1892 the cattle were sold to Bradshaw station. It is possible some of these cattle then strayed up the East Baines and someone carved the brand in the tree, or else some human strayed up the river and for some reason did the same.

**Jiminjerry Waterhole Boab.** Bradshaw station. Several boabs here have various names of stockmen and also the initials of the North Australia Observers Unit.

**JL Boab.** Lobby Creek, Bradshaw station. JL probably stands for Jack Liddy who was a stockman on Bradshaw in the 1920s. Remembered as a great horseman.

**J Ryan’s Boab.** Drover’s Rest, Gregory National Park. Probably a drover.

**Julius Peter’s Boab.** Upper East Baines River, Gregory National Park. Julius was a ‘half caste’ stockman in the early part of last century.

**Junction Boab.** Upper East Baines River, Gregory National Park. A signpost boab, alerting travellers that they had reached the junction of ‘Cattle Creek’ and the East Baines. It was carved in 1897. Later ‘Cattle Creek’ became known as Flying Fox Creek.

King Billabong Boab. Bradshaw station. Had numerous names and initials, mostly of Aboriginal stockmen from the 1940s-1950s. A large ‘X’ on the tree was the shorthand name of Tex Moar, a white stockman. The tree died in 1999.

Koolendong Waterhole Boab. Bradshaw station. A boab with a large Aboriginal carving of a bird on it, and also several names.

Koolendong Yard Boab. Bradshaw station. A boab with Aboriginal stockmen’s names on it from the 1940s-1950s period.

Kostin’s Boab. Drover’s Rest, Gregory National Park. Eugene Kostin was a drover in the 1950s-1960s. He is still alive and living in Mt Isa.


Lady Ruth Boab. Bradshaw station. ‘Lady Ruth’ was a boat used by the Nackaroos in 1942-43.

Larry John’s Boab. Upper East Baines River, Gregory National Park. Larry Johns is a ‘half caste’ Aboriginal who was a stockman working for Charlie Schultz. He is still alive, only about 55 years old, and living at Timber Creek.

Lawler’s Grave Boab. Victoria Highway, Timber Creek. John Lawler was a stockman who committed suicide near the Depot in 1909 by cutting his own throat.

Lennie from Beswick Boab. Bradshaw station. Lennie Lawrence was an Aboriginal stockman, apparently from Beswick Aboriginal Reserve.

Lennie Lawrence’s Boab. Bradshaw station. As above.
Lindsay Crawford’s Boab. Bullita turnoff, Gregory National Park. Crawford was the first manager of Victoria River Downs, from 1883 until 1894. The initials have the date 1883 or 1885 – the last number is damaged.

Macartney Gap Boabs. Victoria River, Timber Creek area. Several boabs here have comparatively recent, shallow inscriptions, including motor vehicles and sexual imagery.

McDougall’s Boab. Bradshaw station. McDougall was a Nackaroo. The tree is located on the banks of the Victoria River between Bradshaw homestead and Timber Creek.

WR McDonallder
X30810
NAOU
1942

McPhee’s Boab. Fitzroy station. Jock McPhee was a stockman in the 1890s, made famous as ‘Tam O’Shanter’ in the book *We of the Never Never*. He was involved in a massacre of Aborigines on Bradshaw station in the 1890s and the burning of the bodies. The heat made one of the bodies contract and, in effect, sit up in the flames (see Chapter 8). This so unnerved McPhee’s assistant that he was never the same again, hit the grog hard and in 1905 disappeared at the edge of a waterhole during the night. It was thought he was cooling his legs in the water while drunk and was taken by a crocodile. McPhee perished in about 1910 while travelling in to Katherine.

Mairani Outstation Boabs. Angalarri Creek, Bradshaw station. A number of boabs with initials and names of stockmen. Mairani was an outstation from about 1900 until perhaps the 1920s.

Mick Vandeleur’s Boab. Bradshaw station. His brother and father were owners of the part of Bradshaw station which was then known as Buffalo Springs, in the 1950s. Mick may have had shares himself. The actual inscription is ‘Big Prick Mick’.

Morgan’s Boab. East Baines River, Gregory National Park. Morgan was a Wardaman Aboriginal stockman who worked for Charlie Schultz on Humbert River and later lived at Yarralin Community. He died in distressing circumstances in about 1990.

Moriarty’s Boab. Newry station. The only Moriarty known in the district was there in the 1890s. He was a stockman and one of the early miners in the Kimberley gold rush.

MQM Boab. Angalarri Creek, Bradshaw station. A cattle station brand.
Muir’s Boab. Upper East Baines River, Gregory National Park. Probably Robert Muir, the manager of Willeroo and Delamere stations in about 1917. He was also out in the Tanami desert chasing gold in the 1920s.

‘Mystery Ship’ Boab. Bradshaws Tomb area, Bradshaw station. This is the name I gave to a strange design which looked a lot like certain Aboriginal rock paintings of Macassan boats. However, later the Cambalin Springs ‘house’ boab was discovered and the design on it looks a lot like this one, but is clearly not a boat. It is therefore possible that I was mistaken and that the design represents a building.

‘My Water’ Boab. Upper East Baines River, Gregory National Park. A large boab that has fallen over but continued to live, sprouting vertical branches from the top of the trunk. Somehow a hole has formed on the top side of the trunk, which is hollow, and during the wet season it collects water. It is like a giant water bottle and someone has carved ‘My Water’ on the side in large letters (plate 167).

Naked Woman Boab. Bradshaw station. A lonely stockman’s fantasy – a full sized image of a naked woman, but the top was apparently too high for the artist to complete it, so it has no head.

NAOU Boab. Wombat Yard, Auvergne station. Another Nackaroo camp, this time on the old road between Timber Creek and Wyndham.

Newman’s Boab. Bottle Glenn, Bradshaw station, Victoria River. The name of another Nackaroo.

Nugget and Connie’s Boab. Bradshaw station. Nugget and Connie were Aborigines – a stockman and his wife. Also carved on the boab is a bull.

Oliver’s Boab. Lobby Creek, Bradshaw station. Oliver remains unknown, but was probably an Aborigine.
OP Boab. Drover's Rest, Gregory National Park. 'OP' remains unknown, but it may refer to over-proof rum.

Oriental Hotel Boab. East Baines River, Gregory National Park. One of the hotel boabs described above.

OrientaL Hotel

Prendergast's Boab. Skeahan's Billabong, Auvergne station. S. Prendergast was a drover in the 1930s-1950s.

Pre-1905 Bradshaw Homestead Boabs. Angalarri Creek, Bradshaw station. Two boabs with carvings of sail ships on them, as well as several names.

Price's Boab. Fitzmaurice River, Bradshaw station. Price was a Nackaroo who patrolled through this area on horseback in 1942.

Price's Boab

'Private Road' Boab. Gregory National Park. A signpost boab warning travellers they have crossed the boundary from Bullita into Humbert and are trespassing.

Prossor's Camp Boab. East Baines River, Auvergne station. Prossor was a stockman early last century. The inscription is dated 1909.

Quilty and Underwood 38 Boab. Bradshaws Tomb area, Bradshaw station. Tom Quilty and Olive Underwood were the owners of Bradshaw station from about 1938 until 1950. Tom was married to someone else but his wife wouldn't give him a divorce, so he and Olive 'lived in sin' for years. Olive is still alive, aged about 93, and living south of Perth.

Quilty and Underwood 40 Boab. Angalarri Creek, Bradshaw station. As above.

Quilty and Underwood 49 Boab. Wombat Waterhole, Auvergne station. As above.
Retribution Camp Boab. Retribution Creek, Auvergne station. A huge old boab with many names and initials and 1890s dates; also pictures of horses, boxers, etc. The name ‘Retribution Camp’ carved on it without doubt refers to an early undocumented shoot-up of the Aborigine. Reg Durack told me that in the ranges higher upstream there are springs with the name ‘Retribution’. It seems likely that whatever the retribution amounted to took place near the springs (see plates 168-170 and fold-out, page 380).

RJJ Boab. Old Bradshaw homestead, Bradshaw station. RJJ remains unknown.

Roderick Creek Sorcery Boab. Roderick Creek, Gregory National Park. The boab has a series of human figures carved on it, some of which are inverted. They have hands and other body parts distorted and swollen which indicates the intent to inflict such problems on a victim.

Rodney’s Boab. Old Bradshaw homestead, Bradshaw station. Probably carved by Rod Quilty, son of Tom and Olive.

Rod Quilty’s Boab. Bradshaw station. As above.


Rollo Barry’s Boab. Bradshaw station. As above.

Royal Hotel Boab. Upper East Baines River, Gregory National Park. One of the East Baines River hotel boabs, explained above.


Saddle Creek Boab. Argument Gap, Auvergne station. Has pictures of a ship and a bull’s head.


Six Houses Boab. Lobby Creek, Bradshaw station. Has pictures of six houses on it, and nothing else. They are classic simple ‘schoolkids’ houses, possibly done by children from a stock camp.

Skeahan’s Billabong Boabs. Auvergne station. Two boabs with unidentified names on them.

‘Snail’ Boab. Lobby Creek, Bradshaw station. Has a strange snail-like design carved on it but no names or dates.
Sorcery Boab. Crocodile Yard, Bradshaw station. Another boab with inverted human figures and a snake-like design, almost certainly Aboriginal sorcery designs. Nearby there is a conical stone.

Springer’s Grave Boab. Auvergne Lagoon Creek, Auvergne station. In about 1920 a man named Adolph Springer died under this boab, which is on the old road. He was buried where found. The boab has a cross carved on it but does not have his name or a date. There are several other names on the tree.

Spring Creek Yard Boab. Gregory National Park. Has the name of a yard builder and a 1960s date on it.

LH with Toyot a
Build yard 15/8/65

‘Stingray’ Boab. Bradshaw homestead area, Bradshaw station. Has a strange stingray-like design on it, probably Aboriginal.

Strange Mark Boab. Bradshaw station. Has a well-carved but unidentifiable design.

Swanson’s Boab. Wombat Waterhole, Auvergne Station. Swanson remains unknown.

The ‘Diamond’ Boab. Line Creek/Victoria River junction. The tree has a row of playing card symbols on it. The largest is a diamond that has a JC hanging from the bottom. This probably refers to Jim Campbell who was also known as ‘The Diamond’ or ‘Diamond Jim’ because of his brands with the diamond in them (see Chapter 9 and plate 171).

The Governor’s Boab. Bullita station turn-off, Gregory National Park. A boab marked by the Aide de Camp of George Le Hunte, the Governor of South Australia, during a tour he made in 1905 (see plates 95, 172).

The Bottle Rum Camp Boab. Parry’s Lagoon Road, East Kimberley. Nothing known about this inscription.

‘Thy Will Be Done’ Boab. Upper East Baines River, Gregory National Park. This boab is only a couple of hundred metres from Jim Crisp’s grave and almost certainly refers to his death. Crisp was speared in 1919. In the 1890s a teamster was speared in the East Kimberley and his body was discovered by a fellow named Philchowski. In 1913 Philchowski was speared and his body was discovered by Jim Crisp. Then Jim Crisp was speared. One can’t help but wonder if whoever discovered Crisp’s body was watching out for a spear for the rest of his life!
Tom Cole’s Boab. West Baines River, Auvergne station. There were several Tom Coles in the region and it is impossible to know which one carved the tree. One wrote his biography, *Hell West and Crooked*. The others were a father and son who were drovers and station workers from early last century.


Triffit’s Boab. Victoria River bank, Coolibah station. Triffit remains unknown.

Tunney’s Boab. Victoria Highway, Argument Gap, Auvergne station. Tunney was a natural history collector, working for a museum in Perth, Western Australia, and also for a private collector. He passed through the area in 1902.

Watton 1936 Boab. Drover’s Rest, Gregory National Park. Probably the name of a drover.

Wangkangki Boab. Sundown Creek, Victoria River Research Station. This is the boab illustrated by Thomas Baines and recorded as being 58 feet in circumference. It is also a Dreaming tree for Walujapi, the black-headed python.

Warnawarnal Boab. Jasper Creek, Victoria River Research Station. The most incredible boab I’ve ever seen. It is not very high and not the largest in circumference, but all its branches extend out from the trunk, sag down and run along the ground for some distance, and then raise their ends upwards again. Two branches were torn off during a storm a few years back but last time I visited the tree the damage was healing over. The branches spread forty paces wide and it looks like a giant alien being or a giant octopus. It has some names and initials, including those of two Stock Inspectors of the 1960s. It is, as might be expected, a Dreaming tree (plate 173).

WD Boab. East Baines River, Gregory National Park. WD remains unknown.

White’s Boab. Crocodile Yard, Bradshaw station. White was a Nackaroo from Tasmania. There was no camp here so he was passing through.

Wrong Birthday Camp

Wombat Waterhole Boab. Wombat Yard, Auvergne station. A big old boab with numerous names and dates, including those of several Nackaroos.
Appendix B

WHAT ABOUT LEICHHARDT?

In Chapter 2 I looked at the various expeditions known to have visited the Victoria River district between Gregory’s time and the arrival of the first settlers. Four official and eight private expeditions are known to have entered or passed through the region, but there were probably others that we know nothing about. One of the most intriguing possibilities is that a party of explorers may have come from the east and passed through the region long before the land-seekers and prospectors came, before Darwin was established, and even before Gregory explored the region – the expedition of the long-lost explorer, Ludwig Leichhardt.

Accompanied by five white men, two Aborigines, twenty mules, fifty bullocks and seven horses,1 Leichhardt set out in 1848 from Canning Downs, the ‘furthest out’ station on Queensland’s Darling Downs. His aim was to cross the continent to Swan River Settlement in Western Australia.2 Instead, he and his entire party vanished and their disappearance remains the most enduring mystery of Australian exploration.

Before presenting my case for Leichhardt having passed through or near to the southern Victoria River district, I want to make two points about the man himself, points which have an important bearing on any theory about his fate. First, the studies by Webster3 and by Roderick4 show that Leichhardt was not the incompetent bushman and leader that he was long believed to be. He was at least equal to and probably better than any of the other explorers of his time, and he is unlikely to have led his last expedition into disaster through ignorance or some ill-advised decision. Second, according to Professor Rod Home,

2 Ibid: p. 1000. L. Leichhardt to E.D. Thompson, 24-2-1848
Leichhardt was the best-trained scientist to work in Australia up to that time and was a disciple of the great German scientist, Alexander von Humbolt. Humbolt was the originator of the idea that the earth, and its oceans and atmosphere, was an integrated physical system, and as a 'Humboltian' scientist Leichhardt would have been dedicated to discovering the broad structures of the flora, fauna and topography of Australia.

To return to my central theme, there have been many theories as to the route Leichhardt took on his 1848 expedition. Some have him passing more or less westward into Central Australia and dying there. Others, aware of Leichhardt's stated intention, suggest a route similar to that which I will outline here and either have him dying in the Gulf country or possibly reaching the eastern edge of the Tanami Desert, or even 'Warburton's Sand Hills' (the Great Sandy Desert). At least one writer has him cutting southwest through the Tanami and dying there, but others who have him reaching the edge of the desert suggest that he then retreated and took another route, including turning southwards and eventually perishing near the Simpson Desert.

People who believe that Leichhardt travelled directly westward into Central Australia have not looked at, or have ignored, what Leichhardt explicitly stated he planned to do. Possibly Leichhardt would have liked to have travelled directly across the continent, but he had long believed that there were 'great desert lands' in Central Australia, and he knew this idea had been at least partially confirmed by Charles Sturt's discovery in 1845 of arid sand-dune

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6 For example, see S.E. Pearson, 'The Fate of Ludwig Leichhardt', The Pastoral Review, 16-11-1929, pp. 1061-1063; F. Scarr, 'The Fate of Leichhardt', Sydney Morning Herald, 5-7-1880; Charles Todd, 'The Explorer. The Fate of Leichhardt (sic), The Adelaide Observer, 23-10-1880.
7 'The Alleged Leichhardt Relics', Sydney Morning Herald, 1-1-1881. This article is a reprint of a letter from the Brisbane Courier, signed 'W.F.B.'
9 'Leichhardt's Fate', The Sydney Mail, 6-3-1880.
and stony desert country in the centre. Leichhardt was very cautious with respect to water, or the lack of it. On his trek to Port Essington in 1844-45 his practice was to ride ahead of the main party to search for water. If he found sufficient he would move his party forward, but if the country was dry his party would stay where it was until water was found elsewhere.

With the knowledge he had that there was extremely dry country in Central Australia, Leichhardt devised a plan to avoid the arid zone, a plan first outlined in a lecture he gave in Sydney in 1846. Briefly, it was to start out northwards along his Port Essington route, and when he reached the McKenzie River to follow it up and cross the divide to the headwaters of the Flinders River. From there he would make for the headwaters of the Albert River and, follow that river up to ascertain the latitude of its sources, and the nature of the country. Again I would try a westerly course, to come successively to the heads of the Nicholson, the Van Alphen [possibly now Settlement Creek], the Abel Tasman [the Calvert], the Robinson, and the Macarthur, and from the latter river I would hope to reach the waters of the west coast...

This is precisely what he tried to do. In 1846 he set out along his original route to Port Essington, but through illness and other reasons his party was forced to turn back after travelling about 900 kilometres.

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14 G. Lang to F. Mueller, 20-4-1865. 'Dr. Leichhardt (Correspondence Respecting Proposed Expedition in Search of)', *Journal of the Legislative Council of New South Wales, Session 1865*, vol. 12: 13.
Back in the settled districts Leichhardt began to reorganise for a second attempt, but before he set out he learned that Major Mitchell had discovered and named the ‘Victoria River’ (now the Barcoo) in western Queensland,\(^\text{18}\) and also that explorer Kennedy had subsequently shown that Mitchell’s ‘Victoria’ was almost certainly Sturt’s ‘Coopers Creek’, which ran into very dry country.\(^\text{19}\) As a result Leichhardt modified his earlier plan. In at least four of his last letters,\(^\text{20}\) and in verbal statements,\(^\text{21}\) he said that he intended to go out to Mitchell’s ‘Victoria River’ and then head to the north (see map 19). For example, in a letter he wrote to Phillip Parker King in March 1848, Leichhardt declared, ‘My intention is to go from the Victoria to the Northward, until I come to decided waters of the Gulf’, and his ‘Humboltian’ thinking was revealed when he added, ‘If I succeed I shall solve three

\(^{18}\) Ibid: 450-51.
\(^{19}\) Sydney Morning Herald, 8-3-1848; C. Roderick, Leichhardt the Dauntless Explorer, 1988, p. 466.
\(^{21}\) Moreton Bay Courier, 19-2-1848, reprinted in Sydney Morning Herald, 6-3-1848.
very interesting questions – the Northern, North-western, and Western Water Sheds." There can be no doubt that when he set in April 1848, this was his plan and there is evidence that he stuck to it.

In the Gulf country Leichhardt hoped to find what he called a ‘collar range’ from which the Gulf of Carpentaria rivers flowed to the north, and possibly unknown rivers flowed inland, perhaps providing a line of travel towards Swan River Settlement. North of the desert country found by Sturt is the Barkly Tableland where water is extremely scarce throughout much of the year. Leichhardt set out at the beginning of the dry season, so if he had tried to head west or north-west into the Barkly Tableland, dry conditions are likely to have forced him further north. Once he reached the Gulf rivers and started heading westward, he would soon have discovered there was no ‘collar range’ – the Gulf rivers rise gradually off the Barkly Tableland. Nevertheless, he is likely to have kept to the headwaters of the rivers in the hope of finding an inland-flowing stream.

In sum, Leichhardt did not just want to go in as direct a line as possible from Moreton Bay to Swan River Settlement. He wanted to add to scientific and geographical knowledge, and especially, to determine some of the major geographical structures of the continent. To this end he had two objectives: to determine the inland extent of the northern rivers, including the Gulf rivers and the Victoria River and perhaps even the Fitzroy River, and to outline the limits of the dry inland country. He hoped that in the process he would find a stream flowing inland from his supposed ‘collar range’ or ranges that he could use as a ‘highway’ towards Swan River Settlement. Of course, where such a stream was found would determine how much of his main objectives he could achieve.

24 According to Ferdinand von Mueller, a countryman and friend of Leichhardt, ‘He contemplated nothing less than crossing the continent at its widest extent from east to west, confiding either on the sources of the northern rivers, or trusting to the corresponding southern watercourses rising in the dividing ranges and table lands of the north, until some propitious, though perhaps widely separated waters, would lead him to the settlements of the south-western coasts.’ (F. Mueller to Colonial Secretary, New South Wales, 22-5-1865. ‘Dr Leichhardt. Correspondence Respecting Proposed Expedition in Search of.’ Journal of the Legislative Council of New South Wales, Session 1865, vol. 12, p. 5).
In the years after Leichhardt disappeared reports came in from various places of trees marked with an ‘L’, of Aboriginal stories about white men perishing or being speared long before the first settlers arrived, and of relics in remote areas which might have belonged to Leichhardt. There were also reports of ‘wild white men’ here and there who might have been survivors of the expedition. Indeed, so many such ‘clues’ were found that some have joked that Leichhardt must have explored most of the continent, scattered wagon loads of equipment about as he went, and as The Bulletin remarked in 1889, ‘been killed over and over again in as many different places’25 Most of the reports were only poorly investigated, or not investigated at all, but every time one came in new theories were proposed or old ones modified. In most instances these reports are now impossible to verify and have to be taken at face value.

One problem with devising theories about what happened to Leichhardt is that it is difficult to find many of the ‘clues’. Some have been well publicised and are easily found, but others are hidden in old official reports or newspaper files, or even in the minds of people today. Some which were once well-known have since been ‘lost’, and some were never taken seriously as possible evidence. As a result, theories have often been put forward with only limited knowledge of the number of possible ‘dots’ on the map. In this appendix I examine the ‘dots’ I have found leading to, and beyond, the Victoria River country (map 20). Exactly how these ‘dots’ should be joined is not of paramount concern here. Wherever Leichhardt went it is likely that at times he was forced to backtrack and travel in a different direction, so to try and map his exact route from the available clues is problematic. What is central here is the fact that there are ‘dots’ scattered along his proposed route, including in the Gulf country, the southern Victoria River and northern Tanami Desert, and beyond.

Map 20: In very broad terms this map shows the locations of various discoveries which may indicate the line of travel Leichhardt took on his 1848 expedition, and his ultimate resting place.

'L' indicates the locations of trees marked with an L and not on the line of travel of Leichhardt's expedition to Port Essington.

'L?' is the location of the L tree somewhere near Anthony Lagoon that William Frayne said he had heard about.

'E' indicates the location of the supposed Leichhardt hut on Elsey Creek.

'J' is the location where Aborigines called out 'white fellow Jummy!'

'LP' is the location where Charles Harding is believed to have found the brass plate marked 'Ludwig Leichhardt 1848' (see plate 174).

'C' is the location where Carnegie encountered an Aboriginal family who had an old-fashioned iron tent peg, a matchbox lid and part of a saddletree in their possession. It was probably somewhere between this place and Lake Gregory that desert Aborigines saw the white men and Aborigines on horseback come from the north-east. And later found their bodies.
In the 1850s several trees marked with an ‘L’ were discovered on the Barcoo-Cooper system, and in the absence of evidence from further north, theories about his fate centred around south-west Queensland or eastern Central Australia – he went westward and died of thirst, or he had been killed by Aborigines. However, during the mid-1860s several ‘L’ trees were located on or near the Flinders River, far to the north of the ‘L’ trees on the Barcoo-Cooper.

The first discovery was of two ‘L’ trees at one location, ‘cut by a skilled hand’, and in a condition which suggested they had been cut many years before. These were found in 1864, or earlier, by a man named Gilliott, the superintendent of ‘Mr. Hanning’s station’ on the Cloncurry River. Apparently Gilliott did not publicise his discovery, but he or his men told Donald McIntyre about them when McIntyre passed through the station on his way from the upper Darling River to the Gulf of Carpentaria. McIntyre visited the trees and when he later published an account of his expedition they came to the attention of the authorities and the general public, and he was incorrectly credited with their discovery.

The Cloncurry River is a western tributary of the Flinders River and not on the route of Leichhardt’s expedition of 1844-45. Some wondered whether the trees had been marked by explorer William Landsborough who travelled up the Flinders in 1862, but Landsborough had travelled on the opposite side of the river, and in any case, few believed that an experienced bushman like McIntyre would not know the difference between a tree marked

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27 *The South Australian Advertiser*, 22-7-1858.
28 ‘Meeting in Reference to Dr. Leichhardt’, *The Empire* (Sydney), 12-9-1857; *The South Australian Advertiser*, 9-8-1858.
29 ‘Late Explorations on the Shores of Carpentaria’, *Brisbane Courier*, 12-1-1865.
30 ‘The Late Explorations and discoveries on the Paroo, Flinders, and Shores of Carpentaria’, *Riverine Herald*, 31-12-1864.
31 ‘Leichhardt’s Marked Trees’, *Riverine Herald*, 3-6-1865, p. 3, c. 1; ‘Traces of Leichhardt’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21-10-1865. The *Riverine Herald* report says the station was owned by ‘Hanning’ but the *Sydney Morning Herald* gives the name as ‘Henning’.
32 ‘The Late Explorations and discoveries on the Paroo, Flinders, and Shores of Carpentaria’, *Riverine Herald*, 31-12-1864; ‘Late Explorations on the Shores of Carpentaria’, *Brisbane Courier*, 12-1-1865; ‘From the Darling to Carpentaria’, *Brisbane Courier*, 17-1-1865; in view of the fact that McIntyre was being credited with the discovery of the ‘L’ trees, a man named Barnett, who had been with him on his overland trip, wrote to the *Riverine Herald* to clarify that the marked trees had actually been located by Gilliott (Riverine Herald, 3-6-1865, p. 3, c.1).
two years earlier and one marked fifteen or sixteen years earlier, in 1848. Not far from the marked trees McIntyre also found two aged horses (some accounts say mules), and for many this clinched it. The trees were generally accepted as relics of Leichhardt's 1848 expedition, and taken as evidence that Leichhardt did not perish in western Queensland or head into Central Australia, but rather had followed his original plan. Other discoveries were soon made which added considerable weight to this claim.

In the same year that McIntyre made his discovery a land-seeker named McDonald travelled from Port Denison (Bowen) to the Nicholson River, and 'fifteen miles west of the Flinders' he found an 'L' tree. This location precludes the possibility that it was marked by Landsborough or was one of those found by McIntyre. However, the exact route McDonald took is unknown. If he crossed the district close to the coast, the tree he found might have been marked by Leichhardt during his first expedition, but if he was further inland the tree may well have been marked by Leichhardt during his last expedition.

In 1865 a man named Hays found another 'L' tree, this one on the banks of the Flinders on about 170 kilometres east of the one found by Gilliott. The tree was reported as one of 'poor Leichhardt's', so presumably the marking was taken to be too old to have been made by Landsborough in 1861. In 1873 a prospector named Goodfellow is said to have found a dead tree marked 'LL', 'on the William River, a stream which enters the Flinders River from the west, upstream from the Cloncurry River junction. Like the trees found by Gilliott and by Hays, the location of this tree was too far south to have been marked by Leichhardt during his 1844-45 expedition. Being on the west side of the Flinders it could not have been marked by Landsborough, and having a double 'L' it could not have been one of the trees found by McIntyre. Finally, the double 'L' also indicates that it was not the same tree that McDonald had found.

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34 'Late Explorations on the Shores of Carpentaria', Brisbane Courier, 12-1-1865.
36 The Brisbane Courier, 16-2-1865.
37 Port Denison Times, 4-10-1865.
The tree found by Goodfellow was burnt down shortly after it was discovered. Neither it nor any of the other marked trees found subsequent to Gilliott's discovery appear to have become known to people like Ferdinand Mueller and others concerned with the fate of Leichhardt, or to subsequent researchers. What their existence amounts to is that, in the Flinders River-Cloncurry River region, five ‘L’ trees were found at four widely separated locations. The one found by McDonald might have been marked by Leichhardt during his Port Essington expedition but the other four cannot readily be explained as the work of Landsborough or anyone else whose name began with ‘L’, and this renders it virtually certain that Leichhardt passed through the area on his final expedition.\(^39\)

We know that once Leichhardt reached the Flinders River his intention was to head westward to the Albert River, follow it up to the headwaters and continue west from there, and there are clues to the route he may have taken. Writing in 1906, a man named William Frayne claimed that in 1882 he was prospecting in the Limmen River country, in the Gulf of Carpentaria, when he heard about a reward of £1000 being offered by the New South Wales Government for relics from Leichhardt’s last expedition.\(^40\) Frayne said he had heard of ‘a tree marked “L” on the divide at the head of the Nicholson Creek’, a tributary of the Macarthur River, and another ‘L’ tree out on the Barkly Tableland, somewhere near Anthony Lagoon. On modern maps there is no Nicholson Creek forming part of the Macarthur River system, so exactly where on the ‘divide’ the supposed ‘L’ tree was is unclear (and Frayne said it was subsequently cut down). The name ‘Nicholson Creek’ suggests that it might have been an access route from the Macarthur River to the Nicholson

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\(^39\) In January 1881 the *Sydney Morning Herald* ran a series called ‘The Story of the Leichhardt Expedition’. In part four (26-1-1881) of the series a detailed account is given of the discovery in 1861 of a it an ‘L’ tree on the Flinders River, ‘about 12 miles above Mount Brown’ (about fifty to sixty kilometres above the junction of the Cloncurry River and the Flinders River). The source of this information is not given, but two points can be made. First, if the date of 1861 is correct, it could not have been marked by Landsborough, and the overgrowth of bark and wood also precludes Landsborough. Second, the location suggests that the tree could be the same as the one found by Henning in 1865. If the report is correct and it was not the tree found by Henning, it could represent yet another Leichhardt-marked tree on the Flinders River.

\(^40\) W. Frayne to the Secretary of the Royal Geographical Society of South Australia, 18-5-1906. The reward of £1000 was actually made by *The Bulletin* magazine (25-12-1880), rather than by the New South Wales government.
River. Wherever this ‘L’ tree was located, Frayne decided to begin a search there and then head into the Anthony Lagoon region.

Travelling inland from the Macarthur River headwaters towards Anthony Lagoon, Frayne would have come to Creswell Creek, a relatively large inland-flowing stream which runs generally west and south-west across the Barkly tableland and past the present day Anthony Lagoon homestead. Some distance south-west of Anthony Lagoon, Creswell Creek disappears into a large flood-out area now known as Tarrabool Lake. This ‘lake’ is usually dry and beyond it are extensive plains with very few waterholes. The ultimate fate of Creswell Creek would not be known to an explorer coming down from the headwaters, and it would therefore have been an attractive route for them if they were trying to head south-west. Frayne travelled down Creswell Creek until he reached the big flood-out, and though he ‘hunted about a good while’ on the dry plains, he found nothing.\footnote{W. Frayne to the Secretary of the Royal Geographical Society of South Australia, 18-5-1906. State Library of South Australia, Research Note 732.}

Given Leichhardt’s known caution with respect to water, there is no way he would have gone out onto the Barkly Tableland and marked a tree near Anthony Lagoon unless he had a chain of waterholes or a watercourse to follow. If he had followed his intention of travelling along the headwaters of the various Gulf rivers and looking for a stream flowing inland from a ‘collar range’, he would eventually have come to the headwaters of the Nicholson River. The Nicholson has a long branch which flows from west to east, and beyond its western headwaters rises Creswell Creek, the first stream of any significance to flow inland to the west and south-west. If Leichhardt found this creek it would undoubtedly seem like the stream he had dreamed of. Assuming Leichhardt did follow Creswell Creek and marked a tree ‘somewhere near Anthony Lagoon’, he eventually would have come to the big flood-out found by Frayne.

Beyond the end of Creswell Creek, the next permanent waters are in roughly a north-south line, more or less where the overland telegraph line was later built and where the Stuart Highway runs today. The closest of these are sixty to one hundred kilometres to the west
and south-west, between present-day Powells Creek and Tennant Creek. Whether Leichhardt would (or could) have travelled beyond the end of Creswell Creek would depend upon the time of year he arrived there. If it was the wet season he could conceivably have moved on, but if it was the dry season he would either have had to wait for the summer rains, or retreat and find a more northerly route through the Gulf river country.

Of course, if Leichhardt made it to the end of Creswell Creek and there was enough water in Lake Tarrabool for him to move forward, he may well have done so. When explorer John McDouall Stuart reached Tennant Creek on June 6\textsuperscript{th} 1860 he discovered marks ‘very much resembling old horse-tracks’.\textsuperscript{42} This was twelve years after Leichhardt left Queensland and it might be thought that tracks could not last that long, but instances where horse tracks remained visible for many years after they were made can be found scattered throughout the historical record.\textsuperscript{43}

Further north, in July 1862 Stuart encountered a group of Aborigines near Newcastle Waters, one of whom was a boy ‘much lighter than the others, nearly a light yellow.’\textsuperscript{44} Yellow is the colour often ascribed to people of mixed European and Aboriginal descent.\textsuperscript{45}

Newcastle Waters Aborigines had (and have) strong social links with neighbouring Aboriginal groups so the mother of the boy could have become pregnant anywhere within a few hundred kilometre radius, including the northern Tanami, the southern Victoria River country or the Roper River headwaters.

The northern and north-western parts of the Tanami Desert are the scene of a number of stories and discoveries that might relate to Leichhardt, but there is no reason to presume that Leichhardt actually crossed the desert from east to west. If he did make it as far as the

\textsuperscript{43} To give one example, when John Forrest was exploring part of Western Australia in 1869, he found horse tracks from Austin’s expedition of 1854 (J. Forrest, \textit{Explorations in Australia}, Sampson Low, Marston, Low & Searle, London, 1875, p. 27).
\textsuperscript{44} J.M. Stuart, \textit{The Journals of John McDouall Stuart}, 1865, p. 432.
eastern edge of the Tanami he would soon have discovered that there are no water courses to follow for more than thirty or forty kilometres to the west or south-west, and even if there had been widespread rain I believe it unlikely he would have risked his expedition on what would have obviously been ephemeral waters. Instead, it seems more likely he would have found a way directly north, or retreated along his outward track and then headed towards the Gulf rivers. He would then have continued with his original plan to follow the watersheds of the northern rivers and tried to find another stream flowing inland from a ‘collar range’ at the headwaters of the Roper, the Victoria, or even the Fitzroy. The ‘L’ tree that Frayne said existed on the divide at Nicholson Creek may well have been marked by Leichhardt during such a retreat. Before outlining the Tanami discoveries I will deal with a number of discoveries and stories from the northern rivers country which some claimed were evidence of Leichhardt’s passing.

When Gregory explored the Victoria River and Sturt Creek valleys in 1855-56 he made many discoveries, including that fact that Sturt Creek ended in a huge salt lake (now known as Lake Gregory), but he found no sign of Leichhardt in either region. However, on his way overland to Queensland he found the remains of a campsite on the western headwaters of the Roper River, on a creek which he named after the expedition surgeon, Joseph Elsey. In his first report on his expedition, published in 1858, he merely noted ‘Several trees near the camp had been cut with iron axes.’46 As he neared the settled districts, Gregory came across two camps that definitely were from Leichhardt’s earlier expeditions. Then, a little over a year after his return to civilisation he was sent to western Queensland specifically to search for traces of Leichhardt, and on the Barcoo River he found another definite Leichhardt camp, identified by a tree marked ‘L’. In this camp were the remains of a lean-to made by Leichhardt’s party.47

Eventually Gregory produced at least three other descriptions of the Elsey camp, each with different details. The number of trees cut down increased to ‘many,’ \(^{48}\) then to ‘twenty to thirty big wattles from six to nine inches through’, \(^{49}\) and then returned to ‘several’ again. \(^{50}\) He mentioned that in the camp there were the burnt remains of a lean-to, ‘built by cutting notches in standing trees and resting a large pole therein’, and there was also a heap of ashes that would have taken several weeks to accumulate. \(^{51}\) He also said that he and his men had searched for anything of European origin, but none was found. \(^{52}\)

Figure 6: An artist’s impression of the way the hut on Elsey Creek would have looked before it was damaged by fire (Sydney Mail, 6-3-1880).

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\(^{48}\) Sydney Morning Herald, 9-2-1874 (reprinted from the Brisbane Courier).

\(^{49}\) ‘The Fate of Leichhardt’, Sydney Morning Herald, 17-2-1880. This report refers to a letter Gregory wrote to E.W. Lamb to correct a mistake Lamb had made in a letter to the Sydney Morning Herald (7-2-1880). Gregory apparently told Lamb that ‘it is correct to say that there were in the locality indicated evidences which led him to believe it had been Leichhardt’s camp; but there was not a tree marked L. There was the humpy, and there were twenty or thirty big wattles from six to nine inches through, cut round, and remains of old campfires. The humpy was on Elsie Creek about a mile back permits [from its] junction with the Roper.’


\(^{51}\) Ibid.

\(^{52}\) Sydney Morning Herald, 9-2-1874 (reprinted from the Brisbane Courier).
Gregory correctly noted that the Elsey campsite was about one hundred and fifty kilometres west of Leichhardt’s Port Essington route and located ‘Exactly where a party going westward would first receive a check from the waterless tableland, between the Roper and Victoria Rivers, and would probably camp and reconnoitre ahead’. The absence of any European material suggested to Gregory that if it was an explorer’s camp they had moved on, rather than being destroyed by Aborigines.\textsuperscript{53} While it is clear Gregory believed this camp was made by Europeans, in none of his published writings does claim it was made by Leichhardt. However, in at least two newspaper articles he was cited as making this claim.\textsuperscript{54} The fact is that there are problems in accepting the Elsey Creek camp as having been made by Europeans, let alone by Leichhardt.

First, at the time he found the camps on the Burdekin, McKenzie and Barcoo, Gregory was not struck with the supposed similarities between them and the camp on Elsey Creek. In fact, in his official and unofficial accounts of his expedition in search of Leichhardt he expressed the opinion that Leichhardt had probably died of thirst somewhere to the northwest of the Barcoo, or possibly had been killed by Aborigines.\textsuperscript{55} However, it would appear that the significance of the Elsey Creek camp grew in his mind over the years and by 1871 he was reported in the Brisbane Courier as suggesting that it ‘must have been’ a Leichhardt camp.\textsuperscript{56}

Second, the trees in the Elsey camp could have been cut by Aborigines because in northern Australia they had occasional access to iron axes obtained from visiting Macassan sailors, and they may also have received iron axes along trade routes from the Queensland frontier.\textsuperscript{57} Indeed, in the vicinity of the Roper River, Leichhardt, and Stuart both saw iron

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Brisbane Courier}, 15-4-1871, p. 4, col. 7; ‘The Fate of Leichhardt’, \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 17-2-1880
\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Brisbane Courier}, 15-4-1871, p. 4, col. 7.
axes or signs of their use, and apart from the evidence of iron axes being used at the Elsey camp, Gregory saw evidence of their use in a camp near the Macarthur River.

Third, the shelters made by Aborigines varied significantly in size and method of construction, and in the Elsey region some were said to be constructed in a manner similar to the remains seen by Gregory. Fourth, Aborigines only made bark shelters during the wet season, and during prolonged periods of heavy rain and flooding they often stayed in one place for weeks, so a large heap of ashes like the one Gregory apparently saw could easily accumulate. Finally, it would be extraordinary if Leichhardt's party had camped there for several weeks, and used their axes to cut down trees and build a substantial shelter, but did not follow the usual practice and mark a tree with an 'L', or other markings.

While these objections cast serious doubt on the Elsey camp being one of Leichhardt's, as settlers moved into the Northern Territory other discoveries were made which led some to believe Leichhardt had passed up the Roper valley and continued into the Victoria River district. On the Roper River in the mid-1870s there was said to have been a general belief that Leichhardt had passed the Elsey going west on his last trip, and trees had been discovered '8 to 10 feet apart with 2 inch Auger Holes that had been used for hammocks, and this was known to be a custom of Leichhardt'. Similar auger holes were found in 1930, this time on four or five trees on Willeroo station, west of the Elsey Camp. In this instance it seems unlikely that auger holes would still be visible after the passing of eighty years, and a problem with both claims is that, as far as I can determine, there is no evidence

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60 For example, see John Lewis, *Fought and Won* (W.K. Thomas and Co., Adelaide, 1922, p. 90) for a description of a hut south of Daly Waters which was constructed quite differently from that at Elsey Creek.
61 ‘The Explorer. The Fate of Leichardt (sic)’, *Adelaide Observer*, 23-10-1880 and 31-10-1880.
62 Ethnographic observations of wet season life are unavailable for the Elsey region, but enforced wet season sedentarism certainly was the case in parts of West Arnhem Land (C. Schrire, *The Alligator Rivers: Prehistory and ecology in western Arnhem Land*. Terra Australis 7, Department of Prehistory, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, 1982, p. 25).
64 Ibid.
that Leichhardt used a hammock in this way. In addition, if Leichhardt had travelled up the Roper Valley, and made the auger holes, some trees marked with an ‘L’ should also have been discovered. It should also be remembered that Leichhardt wanted to determine the watersheds of the rivers and the northern limits of the desert, so he is unlikely to have travelled close to the actual Roper River. Instead, he would have kept to the southern edge of the Roper catchment, and such a course could have brought him to Elsey Creek.

A final point in connection with the Elsey camp and the Roper River catchment concerns a claim made by Lochie’ McKinnon, the self-styled ‘Last of the Bagmen’. In the 1950s and 1960s Lochie was in the habit of wandering the back-country alone with a packhorse ‘on holidays’. On an ephemeral waterhole somewhere in the dry country south or south-west of Elsey Creek, Lochie claims he found a tree marked with an ‘L’. In view of his claim one can’t help but think of Gregory’s proposition that men trying to go west from the Elsey camp would have to ‘reconnoitre ahead’ to find water. Following up Elsey Creek leads you in a south-west direction, straight into the general area where Lochie says he found the ‘L’ tree. However, it should also be noted that the same area would be entered if you travelled west from the south-west corner of the Roper catchment.

Another possible ‘clue’ which caused some interest at the time was discovered by two landseekers, Sullivan and McDonald, who travelled through the Victoria River country in 1878 (see Chapter 3). Near the Gregory Creek-Victoria River junction they met Aborigines who McDonald said ‘were anxious he should visit their camp nearby’, indicating to him, he believed, that they had a white man with them, and repeating the words, ‘White fellow Jummy, white fellow Jummy.’ McDonald started to go with them, but when they entered a dense thicket of cane grass he feared an ambush, and did not investigate further. This was in Wardaman country, and in view of later events McDonald was probably wise to avoid the dense thicket (see Chapter 7).

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65 Personal communication, Lochie McKinnon. Lochie made the same claim in a taped interview held by the Northern Territory Oral History Unit (TS 636).
McDonald's report led to speculation that 'white fellow Jummy' could have been a survivor of Leichhardt's expedition. However, when Alfred Woods went out to the same area on the expedition that led to the formation of Delamere station (see Chapter 3) he knew of Macdonald's claim, and with the assistance of Aboriginal interpreters he made inquiries among local Aborigines. These Aborigines claimed no knowledge of the supposed white man, and when similar inquiries were made among 'blacks from distant parts' who came in to Springvale (Katherine) they all agreed that, 'No more whitefellow outside.' It would therefore seem likely that the Aborigines met by Sullivan and McDonald had learned their English from Europeans at the Telegraph Line, rather than from a white man stranded in the bush. The line had been erected in 1871-72, and was only about 170 kilometres away (see Chapter 6).

One of the stories from the early days of Victoria River settlement tells of a raid by a group of Aborigines on the newly established Wave Hill homestead. They were caught in the act, and as they attempted to escape across the river one man was shot dead. When the settlers examined his body they were convinced he was of mixed European-Aboriginal descent, and old enough to have been fathered by a member of either Gregory's or Leichhardt's expeditions.

Finally, like Aborigines in many parts of the outback, those in the Victoria River district maintain traditions of a white man or white men being killed in the district before the settlers and cattle came. Once they gave up violent resistance and began working for the settlers, the Aborigines eventually heard about Leichhardt, and they now believe that it was 'old Leichhardt' who was killed. While the details vary according to whoever tells the story, the basic facts are that one or two white men were travelling westward or south-westward, and that one or both were killed somewhere in the south-west corner of Victoria River Downs.

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67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 B. Buchanan, In the Tracks of Old Bluey, Central Queensland University Press, Rockhampton, 1997, p. 105; also see C. Flinders, 45 years in the great nor-west of Western Australia, unpublished typescript, 1933, for a similar account.
Senior Mudbura elder, Albert Lalka Crowson (now deceased), told me that two men had come from the north-east and he described in detail the route taken. When they got to Seale Yard, Albert said, 'He come to pull up for camp, he see 'im Aboriginal people and do wrong – he bin shoot people. After that, that old people bin come around, bin spear 'im. That kardia [white man] name, 'im Leichhardt!'  

The only record of any Europeans travelling from the east and going missing before the first settlers arrived on the Victoria concerns the two prospectors, Forgan and Ahern, discussed in Chapter 3, but marked trees provide solid evidence that these men made it as far as south-central Kimberley. Albert's version of the story says that the white men had a bullock wagon, but it is virtually certain that Leichhardt took no wheeled vehicle with him. However, oral traditions do vary through time, and from teller to teller, and it is possible that the detail of the bullock wagon was merely an embellishment. If the story has any basis in fact the possibility that Leichhardt's party was involved cannot be entirely dismissed.

One of the stories from the Tanami proper concerns an Aboriginal woman who was taken from Tanami to Darwin in about 1909 and who supposedly told the whites that 'the old blacks of her tribe spoke of bullocks being in the Tanami district with bells on before white men came to the country at all.' Another story comes from Jack Beasley, one of the very early stockmen in the Victoria River country (see Chapter 9 and plate 112), who claimed that in the desert south of Wave Hill 'he met up with an old lubra who had an adult halfcaste son.' Presumably the son was middle aged, because, 'from her account of his origin, Jack formed the opinion that he was the son of a member of Leichhardt's party.'

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70 Taped interview with Albert Lalka Crowson, by Darrell Lewis, Daguragu, 1990.
72 J. Lovegrove to J.D. Somerville, 4-11-1935, State Records of South Australia, PRG 15/62, pt. 7.
73 Hoofs and Horns. September 1953: 53.
Finally, in 1911 L.C.E. Gee, the mining warden on the Tanami goldfield, heard rumours of the discovery on Sturt Creek of traces of Leichhardt’s long-lost expedition.\textsuperscript{74} Exactly what these ‘traces’ might have been was not stated. It may have been nothing more than the ‘strong conviction’ of many Victoria River and East Kimberley cattlemen that Leichhardt’s party had reached Hooker Creek and continued south into the desert\textsuperscript{75} but it is equally possible that Gee had heard about a relic found in the Sturt Creek area, of which more below. In any case, at the time little seems to have been done to follow up on his information.

If Leichhardt did enter the Victoria River country, the question arises of why no clear traces of his passage were found by Gregory or others who came after him. The fact is that a party of explorers need not leave many signs of their passing. It would be a matter of chance if tracks of livestock remained visible after five or six tropical wet seasons, and lean-tos would only last until the first flood or fire swept them away, or the white ants did their work. Even if an effort was made to leave signs, a later explorer could easily miss them. This was the case with the ‘L’ trees found by McIntyre, but missed by Landsborough because he travelled along the opposite side of the river.

While tracks and lean-tos might disappear within a few years, trees cut with steel axes and marked trees could be expected to last much longer. Just how long would depend largely on the species involved and its location. On the one hand, I have seen living trees burn and fall during a slow-moving late dry season bushfire on Victoria River Downs, so many trees in the region may be relatively short-lived, but on the other hand, some years ago I discovered a coolibah tree on the edge of a waterhole which had an inscription on it, cut by explorer Forrest in 1879 (see plates 27 and 28).\textsuperscript{76} In this instance the branch bearing the inscription was dead, so if bark had once grown back over the inscription it had since peeled off again.

\textsuperscript{74} ‘Resurrecting a Mystery’, \textit{Northern Territory Times & Gazette}, 14-7-1911.
\textsuperscript{75} L.C.E. Gee to W. P. Auld, 24-5-1910. Correspondence file 1885-1915 of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia (South Australian Branch).
The main exception here is the boab tree. Once beyond the juvenile stage, boabs are virtually fire-proof. They are extremely long-lived trees and their wood is soft enough to be cut with a pocket knife (see Appendix A). The fact is that in the Victoria River district no ‘L’ boabs have ever been reported. This suggests that if Leichhardt did cross the region his route was south of the ‘boab belt’, which covers only about the northern third of the Victoria River country.\footnote{During National Trust historic sites surveys throughout the district I have sought out boabs to check for early inscriptions (see appendix A), so this distribution pattern is based upon personal observation.} A route along the southern fringe of the district would fit well with Leichhardt trying to delineate the watersheds of the northern rivers while also trying to find a stream flowing inland to the west, or south-west. If trees south of the boab belt were marked by Leichhardt, they were missed by Gregory, and by the time the settlers arrived almost thirty years later, such trees could have been destroyed by fire, or had their bark grow over the inscription.

A route along the southern watersheds of the Roper and Victoria Rivers and into the northern fringes of the Tanami would account for the story of bullocks with bells before the settlers came, the existence of mixed-ancestry people in the region, and for the apparent absence of marked trees and metallic relics in the Roper River or Victoria River country.

Furthermore, such a route would make it much less likely that later explorers and settlers would discover any traces of the expedition. First, in much of this region there are few trees large enough to be marked. Second, fires burn quite severely in the desert and desert fringe, and could have destroyed any marked trees or any non-metallic relics. Third, much of the Tanami is sandy country, so any relics lost or discarded there could be hard to find. Finally, very little of the Tanami was ever taken up by European settlers, and most of them did not stay long, so in comparison with the Victoria River cattle lands the chances of evidence being discovered was much reduced.

None of the stories and pieces of ‘evidence’ described above is conclusive or even particularly compelling as to the fate of Leichhardt, but they take on more significance in
In July 1920 a brass plate stamped ‘Ludwig Leichhardt, 1848’ was lent to the South Australian Museum (plate 174). It was never exhibited and the following year was returned to the owner, a Mr H.R. Bristow-Smith, and it was not until 1934 that J.D. Somerville, the President of the Royal Geographical Society of South Australia (RGSSA), began an exhaustive investigation into the origin of the plate.

One of the first things Somerville discovered was that the plate had been given to Bristow-Smith by a man named Charles Harding, and that Harding had since died and was thus not available for interview. As a result, all the information Somerville collected about the origin of the plate came from Bristow-Smith or others who knew Harding, and it was somewhat confusing. To try and sort things out, Somerville drew upon numerous other sources, and his findings were published in the Proceedings of the RGSSA in 1937. The following is a summary of what he learnt.

In the late 1800s and/or early 1900s, Harding was working as a drover in the East Kimberley district. He also did some prospecting in the arid country to the south (probably during the wet season when droving was not possible, but the rains made water readily available in the desert). On one of these prospecting trips, Harding had an Aboriginal assistant with him, a ‘boy’ named ‘Jacky’, and it was Jacky who found a partly burnt and rusted firearm ‘in a “bottle tree” marked with an ‘L’. The detail of the tree being marked with an ‘L’ is especially significant because it almost certainly precludes the possibility that the gun had been passed along Aboriginal trade routes far from the place where it was lost, discarded, or taken from the owner.

Attached to the gun was the brass plate marked ‘Ludwig Leichhardt 1848’, the name ‘Leichhardt’ being correctly inscribed with a double ‘h’. Jacky showed the relic to his boss

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78 J.D. Somerville to R. H. Bristow-Smith, 18-8-1936. Bristow-Smith family papers.
79 Charles Harding was born at Kanmantoo on August 1st 1862 and died at Laura in March 1926. R.H. Bristow-Smith to J.D. Somerville, 14-8-1935. Bristow-Smith family papers.
who discarded the gun but kept the plate, and carried it around the outback in his saddlebags for many years. Harding was illiterate and could not have made the plate himself, and it seems unlikely that he was the victim of some strange hoax. Apparently he treasured the plate and there can be little doubt that he believed it to be genuine, but he never sought personal acclaim by publicising it.

When Somerville tried to pinpoint the location where Harding obtained the plate, he was told five key facts:

* It was found ‘in a bottle tree’
* It was found about a days’ ride from the Musgrave Range.
* It was near a Mount Inkerman.
* It was about 90 miles from the Western Australian border.
* It was not far from Sturt Creek.

Initially this set of facts caused some confusion. The location of Sturt Creek was never in question, but Somerville could not find a Mount Inkerman on any available map, and the only Musgrave Range he could find was in the north-west of South Australia, close to the Northern Territory border and 800 kilometres east-south-east from the salt lake at the end of Sturt Creek.

The discovery of the gun ‘in a bottle tree’ also complicated matters. The term ‘bottle tree’ was known to refer to boabs (*Adanosia gregorii*), but initial investigations suggested that boabs were restricted to areas well north of the Sturt Creek country. ‘Bottle tree’ was known also to be the colloquial name of the Queensland kurrajong (*Brachychiton rupestris*) and it was thought that some bushmen might call any kurrajong species a ‘bottle tree’. In addition, there were reports that kurrajongs existed near the South Australian Musgrave Range.
Through extensive correspondence with cattle station managers, police, surveyors, botanists, geologists, anthropologists, miners and others, and examination of various published reports, these matters were largely resolved. First, it was learned that the Gardiner Range bordering the east side of Sturt Creek was named the ‘Musgrave Range’ by explorer Peter Egerton Warburton in 1873. Second, it was discovered that a peak near the western end of this range was known to local Aborigines as ‘Inkermane’, and third, that there was a scattering of boabs in the desert country east of Sturt Creek, separated from the ‘real’ boab country to the north by at least 100 kilometres (some said over 300 kilometres). Some of these boabs were in the vicinity of the Gardiner Range. As a result Somerville was satisfied that the plate had been found in the Sturt Creek region rather than near the South Australian Musgrave Range. It is interesting to note that in the vicinity of the ‘Musgrave’ (Gardiner) Range, Warburton discovered an old iron tomahawk in an Aboriginal camp. The fact that the name ‘Leichhardt’ on the plate was spelt correctly with a ‘double h’ – something the average bushman of the time was not expected to know – was an additional factor in convincing Somerville that the relic was genuine.

If it is accepted that Leichhardt reached the Sturt Creek area, the question remains whether he perished or was killed in the vicinity, continued on, or retreated to another region. A few writers have considered the possibility that Leichhardt and his men made it to the edge of the Tanami, or even to the edge of the Great Sandy Desert, but could not go further and instead retreated and turned to the south, making it to Central Australia where by one means or another they eventually died. Others believe that the expedition broke up in the north and that one or two members managed to join Aboriginal tribes, where they lived out their days – hence the stories of ‘wild white men’. However, there is one more piece of

83 Ibid: 199.
85 E. Favenc, ‘The Story of the Leichhardt Expeditions’, South Australian Register, 2-2-1881 (reprinted from the Sydney Morning Herald); ‘Leichhardt’s Fate’, The Sydney Mail, 6-3-1880.
87 For example, see ‘Leichhardt’s Fate’, The Sydney Mail, 6-3-1880.
evidence which suggests that at least some expedition members continued on down Sturt Creek to Lake Gregory, and beyond.

Early in 1890 an intriguing story came to attention of the great nineteenth century botanist, Ferdinand Von Mueller. Some time in the previous year or so a man named Alexander McPhee, ‘a well known and daring Australian bushman’ based at Lagrange on the Eighty Mile Beach south of Broome, heard through local Aborigines of a white man living with a tribe deep in the Great Sandy Desert. McPhee decided to go with the local Aborigines to find this white man. About 400 kilometres to the east-south-east, his guides brought him to Joanna Spring, made known to Europeans and given its European name by explorer Warburton in 1873.

At Joanna Spring McPhee met Jun Gun, who turned out to be neither a white man nor a man of European-Aboriginal ancestry – his mother claimed she had never seen a white man until McPhee turned up. Instead he was said to be either an albino, or ‘a very lightly coloured man of real Australian type’ (plate 175). Possibly McPhee was disappointed that Jun Gun was an Aboriginal, but while he was at Joanna Spring he learnt from the oldest members of Jun Gun’s tribe that a long time before, in the country of a neighbouring tribe about ‘ten days walk to the southeast’, two whites and two Aborigines came into that region on horseback from the northeast. The Aborigines told McPhee that the horsemen headed for rocky outcrops, no doubt hoping to find water in rockholes, but without success. First their horses died, then the party split up and one by one each of the men also perished. McPhee was told that the Aborigines had seen the men come and later found them dead,

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88 *The West Australian*, 6-1-1890; ’The Lost Leichhardt Expedition’, *The Times* (London), 4-9-1890.
90 The spelling of his name varies from Jun Gun to Jun Jun, Junjun, Jungun, Junquin and Jongon.
91 *The West Australian*, 6-1-1890.
93 Ibid: F. von Mueller to A. McDonald, 25-9-1893; ‘The Albino from Western Australia’, letter from A. McPhee to the Editor of *The Argus*, 5-2-1890.
and still had a number of their possessions, including an iron axe and harness from the horses.94

Von Mueller was a countryman and personal friend of Leichhardt's, and had taken a lifelong interest in Leichhardt's fate. When he heard of McPhee's story he was certain that the perished men must have been from Leichhardt's party.95 He arranged for McPhee to bring Jun Gun to Melbourne where he was put on display at Krietmeyer's Waxworks, and, on February 14th 1890, McPhee addressed a meeting of the Victorian Branch of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia.96 Von Mueller subsequently was influential in the formation of the Elder Expedition of 1891 which was sent to explore the Great Sandy Desert, and to search for traces of Leichhardt. Prior commitments prevented McPhee from leading the expedition and instead David Lindsay took command. As it turned out, extremely dry conditions and other problems caused the expedition to be cut short well before it could complete its original aims.97

Needless to say the expedition found no relics of Leichhardt, but in 1896 at Family Well, about 300 kilometres south of Joanna Spring, the Carnegie Expedition met Aborigines who had in their possession an iron tent peg, the lid of tin match box and part of a saddle tree.98 Then, as now, Family Well was one of the most remote places in Australia, and I think it would be surprising if in this area, at this time, one family group possessed three items of European manufacture obtained via trade. One cannot help but wonder if these were some of the people McPhee had been told about, who were said to still have some items taken from the white men who came from the north-east and perished 'long ago'.

Carnegie claimed that in his time (1896), heavy iron tent pegs were old-fashioned and had been replaced by pegs of wood, and he remarked that only a large expedition would carry such pegs. 99 It is worth noting that on Leichhardt’s second expedition he had two tents for all hands, 100 and may have had a single large tent on his last expedition. 101 Carnegie sent the items to J.A. Panton, a man who was then the Melbourne City Magistrate, part-owner of Ord River station in the Kimberley 102 and, according to Carnegie, an authority on Leichhardt. 103 For what it is worth, in Panton’s view the tent peg was quite likely to have been part of Leichhardt’s equipment. 104

How far Aborigines would get in ‘ten days walk’ southeast from Joanna Spring would depend on a number of factors, including the availability of water and the ages of the people making the trip, but McPhee, who had experience of desert Aborigines at La Grange, was of the opinion that the Aborigines with the relics were ‘about 200 miles further to the south east.’ 105 It is interesting to note that ‘about 200 miles’ (330 kilometres) southeast from Joanna Spring a point is reached about 300 kilometres south of Lake Gregory, and that this is within the Aboriginal territory that encompasses Family Well. 106

As well as the livestock he set out with, Leichhardt’s party would have had a large amount of equipment, including many metal objects – pots and pans, cutlery, water bottles, stirrup irons, harness buckles, shoeing gear, horseshoes and nails, bullock and horse bells, rifles and pistols, ammunition, powder flasks, sheath knives, pocket knives, coins, chronometers, a telescope, axes, clothes with metal buttons, and more. This is an awful lot of gear to go missing, and stay missing for more than one hundred and fifty years. In the outback various

100 E.M. Webster, Whirlwinds in the Plains, 1980, p. 96.
103 D. Carnegie, Spinifex and Sand, 1898, p. 246
104 Ibid.
105 Transactions of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia (Victorian branch), vol. 8, pt. 1, 1890, p. 23.
relics probably lost in the mid-nineteenth century have been found over the years. For instance, a fully loaded cap and ball revolver was found on a station in the Gulf country in about 1970,107 and many years ago a buffalo hunter found a double-barrelled, muzzle-loading pistol in the Adelaide River country.108 Yet, with the probable exception of the ‘Leichhardt plate’, Leichhardt’s entire expedition and all its equipment disappeared.

Of course, if something was found today it could be difficult to know if it had belonged to Leichhardt or to someone else. One early account says that Leichhardt was meticulous and had all his equipment marked, but marked with what is not stated.109 The Leichhardt plate shows that he had at least one gun marked with his name, and it is known that before he set out he was given a pair of silver-mounted double-barrelled pistols with his initials and those of the donor engraved on them.110 Possessions being marked or otherwise, I believe that if Leichhardt’s party perished anywhere that later became pastoral land, then with a century or more of stockmen, fencers, well-sinkers, police patrols, prospectors, ‘doggers’, station Aborigines on walkabout, and other people criss-crossing the country, something would have turned up by now. Therefore, I think it highly likely that Leichhardt’s party must have perished in a region where Europeans never settled and which they seldom visit – one of the big desert areas.

A ‘perish’ in one the large deserts could also explain why only two animals that might have belonged to Leichhardt were ever found. The ability of livestock taken on droving trips to return many hundreds of kilometres along their outward track is well known.111 Indeed, at

107 Personal communication, Alan Andrews, who found this pistol on Wondoola station, south of Normanton.
110 R. Bennett, ‘The Fate of Leichhardt’, South Australian Register, 26-1-1881. The donor was Richard Bennett and the guns had ‘RB to L.I.’ engraved on them.

The disappearance of all or almost all of Leichhardt’s animals suggests that few were ever turned loose through injury or managed to escape, and that he had killed most of them for food before he and his party perished, or that he had taken them too far for them to return and far enough that most of them had died before the tide of later exploration or settlement reached them. Of course, neither bullocks nor mules can have offspring to be found by the explorers and settlers who followed. The riding horses and mules would probably be the last animals to survive and if Leichhardt’s party died while trying to cross a desert area, their livestock is also likely to have perished. Bearing in mind Leichhardt’s stated intention to travel across the north in the general vicinity of the headwaters of the northern rivers, and taking into account McPhee’s story and the distances and locations involved, the following scenario may be what happened to Leichhardt:

The gun found by Harding’s Aboriginal assistant near the Gardiner/Musgrave Range was lost or discarded there by Leichhardt (or one of his men), who then continued on to Sturt Creek. Sturt Creek trends south-westerly and could have seemed to Leichhardt to be the headwaters of the river he hoped to find which would lead him to Swan River Settlement. Apart from Creswell Creek and one or two others, Sturt Creek is the only large inland-flowing stream in Northern Australia that trends west or south-west. He therefore followed it down, only to find that it terminated in a huge salt lake – bitter waters indeed!

Faced with desert country beyond the lake, he had several choices. He could return up Sturt Creek and seek another route to the west, or he could head back the way he had come, perhaps to try for a route towards Central Australia. Or, he could take his chances in the desert. I have pointed out that Leichhardt was cautious with respect to water, but at this point he was a lot closer to Swan River than to the Darling Downs, or any settled areas via