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Reports, Silences and Repercussion: Wondering about the Ballistic Biography of the Leichhardt Gunplate

Abstract

One of the most mythologised Australian explorers is the Prussian-born Ludwig Leichhardt, who famously 'disappeared' in 1848. The only seemingly authenticated relic from his final journey is a gunplate, purchased by the National Museum of Australia in 2006. In a context conditioned by the Australian History Wars, the Museum presents the plate in singularising, largely heroicising fashion and occludes the uses to which the gun was once put. However, an expanded object biography—a 'ballistic biography' that wonders about trajectories, interactions with the media through which an object travels, and terminal impacts as well as subsequent repercussions—can contemplate the significance of guns and their parts in Indigenous lifeworlds, and their after-effects. Plumbing these hidden histories and effects can add nuance and complexity to the simpler story of colonial nostalgia accreting around objects like this gunplate in its current institutional setting. By encouraging speculation it can prompt museum visitors into a more activated state.

Keywords

Object biography; cultural biography; historical wonder; Australian colonial history; History Wars; museology

Introduction

It used to be a well-rehearsed point that the Prussian-Australian scientist and explorer, Ludwig Leichhardt, disappeared without a trace in 1848 after leaving the settled areas of New South Wales, bound for the Swan River colony on the west coast of Australia.[1] However, Indigenous ways of rendering the Leichhardt story have recently disputed that 'disappearance.' For example, *The Vanishing: The Rainbow Serpent's Dance*, a 2015 revisionist novel by Pemulwuy Weeatunga (a pen name for the Kabi man John Wenitong), takes issue: Leichhardt 'didn't just disappear in a land that was empty. He disappeared in a land where the desert people already knew that they were coming and that they were destroying things.' (Weeatunga 2016; See also Weeatunga 2015) In his book, Weeatunga imagines the conflict that followed between able Indigenous warriors and the Leichhardt party.[2] The idea of traceless-ness has also been contested from another quarter. After languishing in private hands for a century, a nameplate from a musket Leichhardt may have taken with him on the last expedition was purchased and displayed in the National Museum of Australia (NMA). In a process touted as being like 'a real' Crime Scene Investigation conservators forensically examined the plate (NMA public affairs officer Dennis Grant quoted in Cranshaw 2006; see also Hallam, McLeod and Higgins 2006). We know about the metal used to manufacture it, and its age. Sulphur deposits are consistent with it having been near a firearm; it has been attached to wood; sweat may have corroded it; it has been in a humid climate; but it has also been in an arid place. In a second step, curators and historians have examined the written historical record (Higgins 2006). In 2007 and 2012, one also

[1] Thanks to Darrell Lewis for kindly supplying copies of various historical sources. Thanks to Lindsay Barrett and Paula Hamilton for reading drafts of this article and giving me their views. Thanks also to the peer reviewers for their suggestions.

[2] For other recent Indigenous engagements with the Leichhardt story, see Hurley 2018: Chapter 8.

combed the countryside where the plate might have been found a century earlier (Lewis 2013).

This is something about which the NMA and various individuals care a great deal. And yet the sum of authenticated historical knowledge about this plate's provenance is small: It was apparently discovered, probably at the turn of the 20th century, by an Indigenous man with the generic name 'Jackie,' who was then engaged by a partly literate bushman, Charles Harding (1862-1926)—alternately given as a drover, a prospector, or a surveyor—who ranged far and wide in the Australian interior. It is believed that the plate was attached to a charred gunstock (later discarded) and that this had been lodged in a 'bottle tree' near a 'Mount Inkerman' in the 'Musgrave Range.' The tree is reported to have been marked with an L, and it may have been in a location near the West Australian/Northern Territory border. (There are several Mt Inkermans and several Musgrave Ranges.) In older age, Harding gave the plate to a teenage neighbour, Reg Bristow-Smith of Laura in South Australia, who later made some attempts to see it authenticated. Having been handed down in the family, Bristow-Smith's descendants then sold the plate in the mid-2000s to the NMA for $200,000 (Higgins 2006). There it remains lodged.

In this article, I perform a cultural biography of the plate; one intended to productively open up the larger history of a rather fetishized object. The Australian History Wars and their political sequelae continue to impact on national presentations of frontier history, including at the headland NMA. As Amanda Nettelbeck has shown, the History Wars, which were fought in the 1990s and 2000s between conservatives who adhered to accounts of pioneering feats by Europeans in Australia and revisionists who drew attention to the bloody nature of the Australian frontier, still affect the ways national history is portrayed, including at the NMA.

Whilst attempts were made in the early 2000s, at the opening of the NMA, to convey a plurality of accounts of Australia's early colonial history—especially in an exhibition titled 'Contested Frontiers'—this came under fire from conservatives. A public review was instituted in 2003, and this particular exhibition was withdrawn, leading Nettelbeck to suggest that 'perhaps national museums remain encumbered by public expectations that can limit their scope to present contentious history.' (2011: 1115)[3] The Leichhardt gunplate was purchased after the 2003 report, at a time when the NMA was 'bankrolled' by the conservative Howard Liberal government (1996-2007). The institution was emerging as a strong player in the market for 'iconic historical objects,' especially ones from the colonial era (Davies 2006). The country's 'leading institutional buyer' also acquired other relics including a water bottle belonging to two other expired explorers, Burke and Wills, and a table made in England from beefwood collected by the First Fleet. As the Leichhardt gun plate is currently mediated, it services a conservative account of national history by stressing how far west Leichhardt is thought to have reached before perishing. Liberal Party Senator Rod Kemp noted in his media release about the Museum's acquisition, for example, that 'while [the plate] does not tell us where Leichhardt died, it *proves* that he made it at least two-thirds of the way across the continent', thereby ironing out some of the uncertainty in the historical record in the process (Kemp 2006, emphasis added).[4] NMA Senior Curator

[3] For an overview of the Museum's creation, and the debates surrounding it, see e.g. Attwood 2006; Trinca 2013. See also MacIntyre and Clark 2003: Ch 10. For a copy of the published review, see Carroll, Longes, Jones, Vickers-Rich 2003.

[4] The historiographical basis for making this statement is founded on an address by the President of the Royal Geographical Society of Australia (South Australia) in the late 1930s, itself based on the enquiries of the amateur historian J.D. Somerville (Parker/Somerville 1937). Parker/Somerville drew tentative conclusions, including that there was 'very little doubt' that the gunplate was authentic, that there was 'no reason to doubt' Harding's statement about where it had been found, and they thought it 'reasonable to suppose that Leichhardt *could have* reached the vicinity of the Western Australian Musgrave Ranges.' (1937: 68, emphasis added) That divergent conclusions were possible was evident soon after, when other alleged last relics of Leichhardt were found in a different location, or when the doctor and anthropologist J.B. Cleland suggested that the plate had more likely been found in

Matthew Higgins extrapolates: 'for a European to do this in 1848 represents a considerable achievement' (Higgins 2006). Leichhardt has hence become the primary focus of the analysis and coverage, rather than other members of his parties, Indigenous or otherwise, or others who may have come into contact with the plate. The plate's presentation underlines the feats of 'the explorers' more generally. It stresses European achievements in colonial Australia, thereby advancing the triumphal version of colonial history, and assuaging in a small way residual anxieties about settler-Australian tenure and entitlement. Yet the gunplate's complex links to Indigenous lifeworlds—which some historians touched upon in earlier eras[5]—are no less stark; indeed they are ineluctably present, and can be investigated in an expanded type of cultural biography that ought also be conveyed to visitors to the Museum. Because of its links to a colonial gun, and because of the type of ballistic cultural biography we can perform on it, the Leichhardt plate continues to carry, like a Trojan horse, a disruptive, repercussive charge under its veneer of explorer-veneration.

Cultural biography recognises that objects go through life stages: birth, life and death, and that we can read these phases to gain an understanding of the important relationships between people and things, and how they change over time. Objects can have 'inscribed' properties,

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Queensland, where Leichhardt was hitherto thought to have died (Cleland 1939; Grenfell Price 1939). Parker/Somerville's article omitted certain unhelpful things too, such as the view that some of their informants may have been mendacious (Letter, Ellis [Geol. Survey of WA] to Somerville, 28 April 1937). Letters, unless otherwise noted are from the State Library of South Australia (SLSA) Somerville papers.

[5] These links have been progressively elided from the historiography about the gunplate. In the 1930s, there was some isolated discussion of possible Indigenous meaning adhering to the gunplate, including in the private correspondence between the two amateur historians and Leichhardt enquirers, J.D. Somerville and E.E. Larcombe. However, this was far from a major focus of Somerville's published paper (Somerville/Parker 1937. See also Grenfell Price 1939). Giving too much credence to posthumous Indigenous ownership of the gunplate was to admit that it might have travelled 'hundreds of miles', as Larcombe pointed out in a letter to Somerville (Letter, Larcombe to Somerville, 20 Oct 1935). That was inimical to Somerville's desire to pin down where it had been found, and thereby solve mystery of where Leichhardt had died.

built in during the 'birth' or production of the artefact, as well as 'affordant' properties; things the objects enable in those who come into contact with them. Critically, object biography allows us to examine how things' meanings alter when exchanged, and even how they are 'reincarnated' in new settings (Kopytoff 1986; Hoskins 1998; Moreland 1999). In the Australian setting, the historians Maria Nugent and Gaye Sculthorpe (2018) have applied an approach somewhat like this to unpack the social history of another iconic object; an Indigenous wooden shield held in the British Museum, and thought by many to have been collected by Captain Cook at Botany Bay in 1770. They are not only interested in analysing the physical properties of that shield, and how it might have been collected and lodged in the Museum; they are also interested in the way in which the shield has been exhibited and engaged in debates since the 1960s. I add to this cultural biography model the notion of ballistics, and also a sense of speculation and wonder.

Ballistics is a specialised field of physics that primarily examines the trajectory of projectiles (from guns, but also from other types of weapons), the ways they interact with the environments or media through which they pass (gases, liquids, or solids), and how they are deformed by ricochets and terminal impacts. I do not mean this in a literal sense--I am not so interested in reading marks on a physical object--but rather in a figurative way. We also need to remember that the trajectory of objects is not necessarily linear, especially in the colonial setting. In the Australian context, Philip Jones (2007) has described how the meaning of things like a shield or a cake of ochre changed as they crossed the frontier, from Indigenous into settler hands. Whilst ways of telling colonial history in the museum are often still caught in either a parallel mode (Indigenous **or** settler), or in a polarised 'triumphalism or catastrophism' paradigm (Graeme Davison in Nettelbeck 2011: 1124), objects that have travelled can help to transcend categories in productive ways. This Leichhardt gunplate is

like Jones' most interesting objects which zig-zagged through the contact zone, passing through Indigenous and non-Indigenous hands and back again, developing various layers of the 'frontier's double patina' of 'ochre and rust' (2007: 7). Ballistic biography can add one other thing too: I am also interested in the concept of repercussion, and its original meanings of echo or reverberation, as well as the recoil that takes place when a projectile impacts. What continuing power to reverberate and cause a 'recoil' might an object still have?

Although not the focus of this article, we might well speculate on the gunplate's changing meanings for the Europeans who have interacted with it since it was found to the historical record in the early part of the 20th century: As an index of a drover's younger life in the outback; as a talisman of the lost Leichhardt; as a personal treasure that always brought the risk of being called a hoaxer; as an historically significant burden that descendants needed to be rid of; as a source of income; and finally as the focus for public colonial nostalgia at the NMA. But what intrigues me most is that the gunplate has a massive hole in its provenance, including the precise location in which it was found, and an account of how it came to be there. Assuming it is authentic, then there are at least 50 years in the gunplate's life that are unaccounted for. I wonder, in particular, what meaning it had for the Indigenous people who may well have handled it during that time. Whilst a traditional object biography might stumble at lacunae like these, scholars have more recently expanded the cultural biography format, including by using speculation and seeking to inject some 'drama' into the object's lives (Joy 2009). What could be more dramatic than a gun at a colonial frontier, handled by Europeans and Indigenous people alike? Used to kill game, natural history specimens, and perhaps people too? Far from being a handicap or an improper method, speculation about an object like this can be quite productive indeed for museum visitors. Current NMA Director, Mathew Trinca (2013), has advocated for a mode of museum display that incorporates both

narrative exegesis as well as playing on the physical and evocative properties of an object, and can thereby better activate visitors. Importantly, that mode can benefit from drawing out gaps in the record. Indeed it is just the gaps that can cultivate an active engagement with the museum display. At an abstract level gaps and questions invoke a sense of wonder, which as Marnie Hughes-Warrington (2018) has shown, is not at all irrelevant to historical enquiry. Wonder has long had a productive and defining—if little explored—role in the ways in which historians have engaged with philosophy and vice versa. The questions associated with the Leichhardt gunplate can remind us of that too.

Acquiring Guns

To unlock the drama of this gunplate, we first need to perform a sleight of hand. We have to imagine that the gun to which it was attached was used not just on the final expedition, but also on the two earlier Leichhardt expeditions. There are far more written sources relating to these expeditions than to the final, disappeared one. We do not know exactly how guns—including the gun to which the plate was affixed—found their way into the possession of Leichhardt's several parties, from the successful first expedition from Moreton Bay to Port Essington in 1844-45, through an aborted attempt to overland from Moreton Bay to the Swan River in 1846-47, and to the final expedition that disappeared in 1848. The parties' guns would have been brought to the Australian colonies, quite possibly as military or police issue, whereafter they were used, serviced and exchanged (Grenfell Price 1939: 42). The forensics suggest that this gunplate was fashioned from something like a brass nail used to attach cladding to ships' hulls, and that the zinc in it may have come from English mines It may have been salvage brass (McLeod 2006; Hallam, McLeod and Higgins 2006). In any event, the metal already had a life prior to being rudely hammered out and stamped 'LUDWIG.LEICHHARDT.1848.' The same may be said of the 'parent' gun: It had probably

seen military or police use--and quite possibly conflict--in the British colonies in Australia, and perhaps elsewhere too.

Leichhardt provisioned his parties in different ways. Mostly, members were not employees but joined in the hope of future rewards. These might be adventure, the prospect of subsequent remuneration, squatting claims to land traversed, or in the case of 'ticket of leave' convicts, a pardon. Some expeditioners were collectors of natural history specimens, and one—Johnny Murphy—came as a teenage boy, as a favour to his family. What persuaded Indigenous people like the former whaler Harry Brown, or the erstwhile native policeman Charley Fisher (see figure 1), to join is less clear. Pemulwuy Weeatunga's novel imagines some plausible reasons, relating to the prestige these men gained, at least by comparison with other Indigenous people eking their existence at the outskirts of European settlement (2015: 18-19). Leichhardt relied on expeditioners bringing some private property with them, and that included personally-owned firearms. The bird collector on the Port Essington expedition, John Gilbert, carried his own gun, for example. After Gilbert died in 1845, Leichhardt corresponded with the former's employer, John Gould, since he wanted to take Gilbert's gun on his next exploration, and thought that Gould should donate it given their joint interest in the natural history of the Australian continent (Letter, Leichhardt to G. Bennett 2 Sep 1846, Aurousseau 1968: 901-02). At least one scholar has 'hazarded' the view that Gilbert's old gun was in fact the one to which the Leichhardt plate was attached (Cleland 1939: 50). The gunplate has long provoked historical wonder.

[Insert Figure 1]

Caption: Harry Brown and Charley Fisher, as portrayed in a lithograph in Leichhardt's 1847 Journal of the Port Essington expedition.

Leichhardt also acquired general stores, including gunpowder and some firearms too (Grenfell Price 1939: 42). These were partly for men—Indigenous and ticket of leave convicts—who would have been unlikely to have been allowed their own. Indeed, privately owned firearms were fairly rare before the 1840s-1850s, partly because of cost, and partly because of concerns about the possibility of an uprising amongst convicts (Collins 2017: 117). In addition, Leichhardt benefited from the largesse of well-wishing squatters who provided livestock to overland as food, and other equipment besides (Sprod 1989: 212). One conjecture is that the plate's parent gun was presented to him in one of the outer settled areas, and that the plate was prepared by an unskilled station blacksmith (NMA n.d.). If it had been presented in town, so the argument goes, one would have expected a higher degree of workmanship. Instead, the brass has been roughly filed; it has been cold-worked; the 'W' in Ludwig has been made with an upside-down 'M' stamp, and the '4' in 1848 is also improvised (McLeod 2006). It is this roughness and the gunplate's convenience of bearing that iconic name that also raise the question of a hoax. Leichhardt's disappearance led to many hoaxers claiming, especially in the 19th century, to have discovered where his resting place was, and to have recovered objects like diaries from it (Lewis 2013).

First Reports

Thanks to Glen McLaren's work (1996) on how Australian bushcraft developed over the nineteenth century, we know a lot about how guns were used on expeditionary travel. Two factors contribute to knowing even more about how Leichhardt and his fellow expeditioners used firearms. Leichhardt wrote a great deal, including a published *Journal* from the Port Essington expedition, logbooks, letters, and private diaries (Leichhardt 1847, 2013; Aurousseau 1968). The diaries show how, during the early 1840s Leichhardt developed his

collecting and exploration skills at the fringes of 'settlement' and beyond, and how he used (or did not use) a firearm in that context. Long-running debates about Leichhardt's controversial leadership have also ensured that the journals of several of his fellow European expeditioners have been published (Sprod 1989, 2006; Gilbert 2014).

Gunshots issued regularly over the course of an expedition, and it is tempting to view the musket as the iconic article of the frontier, representing lethal power imbalances between Europeans and Indigenous people, as well as the environment. (It is curious then that guns are missing from Philip Jones' book, *Ochre and Rust*.) Whilst this image has its truth, it tends to reduce muskets into a killing machine wielded only by Europeans. In fact, they were used in various ways, and they were often borne by Indigenous people, as we will see. Leichhardt himself was no great marksman. Indeed one irony of the 'Leichhardt gunplate' is that he probably did not handle it much at all; he had poor eyesight and mainly left the shooting of game and natural history specimens to others in the party.[6]

The image of lethal guns as icons of the frontier can also overstate their reliability. Muskets like those belonging to the Leichhardt party were not rifled and were therefore much less accurate than modern firearms (McLaren 1996). They did not use cartridges and were time-consuming to load and discharge. If a gun were looked after as well as this gunplate was manufactured, then it may not have been very accurate at all. Powder got wet, shot ran out and had to be replaced with gravel, and guns rusted and broke regularly. To keep them operational, the expeditioners even resorted to emu fat, prizing something that Indigenous

[6] On the whole, Leichhardt was in the habit of preferring to use the sword he carried with him, which had the advantage of dispatching animals without expending valuable powder and shot, but which also subsequently gained him the contempt of various Europeans, for whom 'bushmanship' and success as an explorer—often seen during the early and mid-19th century as a type of subset of military activity--consisted partly in the ability to use a gun.

people also set a great value upon, but for a different reason. Here Jones' dual patina of ochre and rust could be supplemented with emu fat. After a hard life on the Port Essington expedition, the late John Gilbert's gun needed a great deal of repair to be serviceable again (Letter, Leichhardt to G. Bennett 2 Sep 1846, in Aurousseau 1968: 901-02).

Beyond shooting to kill or scare (about which more below), muskets featured in a surprising variety of ways in mid-century colonial Australian life, including as a way of marking rituals like the Queen's Birthday, or expressing youthful exuberance, as Diane Collins (2017) has shown. In the expeditionary context, musket fire featured especially as a form of signalling. A shot might be fired to signal that a reconnoiterer had discovered water. Lost expeditioners also used gun 'reports' to identify where they were, and the main party might use them to guide a lost person back. As a signal, a report carried further than a shout or trumpet call, and extended the envelope of European safety. But of course muskets *were* used to kill—especially food and scientific specimens—on the Leichhardt expeditions. Not infrequently the one became the other, once the valuable skin had been carefully removed and stored. Of the marksmen, the naturalist Gilbert frequently commented in his journal about going out for a 'ramble' with his gun, on the look-out what he called 'new productions' (Gilbert [2014], 26 March 1845). Care had to be taken that a specimen was not destroyed when shot; a keen eye and the right weight of ball was required. Without the guns, the Port Essington party would neither have survived, nor would it have acquired so many new specimens that were sent to Europe and inserted into Linnaean classificatory schemes. Those specimens still reside in England, in Australia and in North America—presumably with traces of gun-smoke attached—generating interest and speculation on the part of curators. For example, in a painstaking process undertaken over many years, Clemency Fisher (2014) of the Liverpool Museums has sought to identify and locate all of the still extant specimens shot and collected

during the Port Essington expedition, by Gilbert, the Indigenous expeditioner Charley Fisher, Johnny Murphy and others.

In several cases, Indigenous people were also targets, or—and this is where the power of a gun often resides—were given to understand that they might be targets. A gunshot, or even the sight of a gun, was a device by which the Leichhardt party could and did seek Indigenous compliance with their wishes, if it did not cause people to flee immediately. Hence, guns defused what the Leichhardt party perceived on more than one occasion as a threatening situation. However, in her reading of Leichhardt's 1847 *Journal*, Diane Collins has observed how a gun's report might not have the desired effect on an Indigenous audience, if it was not known and if it did not combine with a visual signal, such as a bird falling from the sky; laughter could sometimes be the response (2006: 5-6). The surviving journals suggest the Leichhardt parties did not use guns to belligerently attack Indigenous people, although the activities of Harry Brown and Charley Fisher on one occasion in late June 1845 are unclear, and we will discuss this soon. (Of course, other things may have been taking place beyond the radar of individual European journal writers, or which they chose not to record.) In general, Leichhardt appears to have valued smooth relations with local people. He also thought that hostilities were unlikely if one were more than '100 miles from the settled districts' (Gilbert quoted in Sprod 2006: 96).

Notwithstanding that view, during the Port Essington expedition there was an Indigenous attack on the party on the evening of 28 June 1845, and John Gilbert was speared, with the Europeans then retaliating with gunfire. This attack may have been in response to the expeditioners intruding on a sacred site, or perhaps to an assault by Fisher and/or Brown on the local people (Sprod 2006: 98). The Leichhardt party used four of their guns to ward off

the attack, though not before Gilbert had been killed and two other Europeans seriously injured (Sprod 2006: 73). The party surmised from blood they found the next morning that 'one or more' Indigenous people had been killed by their gunfire, or at least severely injured (Phillips, quoted in Sprod 2006: 73). The three gunmen were the Indigenous men Fisher and Brown and the young European Johnny Murphy (Sprod 2006: 99, 100). Although the Indigenous scholar Greg Blyton (2015) notes in a salvage biography of Brown how men like Fisher and Brown were important in defending the party, he elides the Indigenous marksmen's role in this instance: The idea of Indigenous people shooting other Indigenous people is an understandably uncomfortable one, although this too is an aspect of the contested frontier. On the other hand, Johnny Murphy's role as possible killer remains in the young person's picture book, *Young Murphy*, written by Gary Crew (2005). Murphy's own journal indicates that he styled himself as quite a marksman, and frequently recorded his talents (Sprod 2006: 300). Murphy had been at Gilbert's side when his friend fell and he 'fired at the black-fellow who had speared' him (Roper, quoted in Sprod 2006: 100). If the Leichhardt gunplate was attached to Gilbert's old gun, as J.B. Cleland wondered in the 1930s, and it were used the night Gilbert died, then we can think, figuratively, of Indigenous blood still adhering to the gunplate. But what makes this idea even more 'repercussive' and uncomfortable is that the gunplate probably had a minor's and/or Indigenous fingerprints on it too.

Of those who handled the guns in the Leichhardt parties, the Indigenous men were particularly good shots; in the various journals we often read about Charley Fisher's success in shooting game, for example. Whereas Leichhardt had poor eyesight, he prized Indigenous guides partly for their very sharp eyes (Leichhardt 1847: 118). Fisher 'had a reputation as a tracker' (Roderick 1988: 241), and that ability to recognise signs in the landscape may have

predisposed Indigenous people like him to excellent marksmanship. Fisher had practical experience in handling guns too, having been a native 'policeman' (Roderick 1988: 241). After the Port Essington expedition, Fisher was even employed to shoot bird specimens for John Gould (Letter, Leichhardt to R. Graham, 27 Sep 1846, in Aurousseau 1968: 906). Given the Indigenous men's skills, the Europeans (and particularly Leichhardt) frequently entrusted the guns to them (Grenfell Price 1939: 42). This was even though there were times when the Europeans were suspicious of the men, or when they had become threatening. On one occasion early in the Port Essington expedition, Fisher had, according to the Europeans, become 'insolent' and 'very impudent,' although it is not clear from the record what caused his 'very bad humour' (Leichhardt 1847: 14; and Sprod 2006: 95, quoting Gilbert [2014], 17 Oct 1847). When Gilbert 'endeavoured to check him', Fisher '*threatened to fire a ball into [him]*' (Gilbert quoted in Sprod 2006: 95, emphasis added). This vivid utterance could make the Leichhardt gunplate a symbol for the idea of armed Indigenous resistance, such as that later associated with a man like Jandamarra in Western Australia, although it did not develop far in this instance.[7] Given their reliance on Charley for game, the Europeans could not (or would not) do much to rein in his gun-toting. Despite the threat, the gun was soon returned to Fisher's hands. Several months later, another serious incident occurred. After Leichhardt accosted Fisher for going off in search of possums and honey, Fisher struck Leichhardt in the jaw and dislodged two of his teeth; Fisher was banished and Brown opted to join his countryman, but within a few days both were allowed back, albeit with Fisher's axe temporarily confiscated. He was soon out shooting again to supplement the expeditioners' meagre cookpot.

[7] On Jandamarra, see e.g. Pedersen and Woorunmurra 2011. See also Gapps 2018 on how some Indigenous people actively engaged with guns during the 'Sydney Wars' in the Sydney basin.

The guns' access to easy food may have been one important reason why the banished Indigenous men were keen to be readmitted to the party. And yet there is other evidence to suggest that Indigenous gun culture on this expedition was not just about more readily securing food for themselves and the Europeans. There was protection in a gun, and there also seems to have been some degree of power and prestige these men attached to bearing firearms. That could be wielded against Europeans, as the threat to fire a ball into Gilbert showed, but perhaps also against local Indigenous people too. Pemulwuy Weeatunga (2015: 18-19) postulates that for men like these, bearing a firearm was a type of boon and recompense for their in-between lives, but that it could also be misused. Weeatunga suggests these men were afforded a type of trigger-happy, swashbuckling power and that may have caused violent retribution from local warriors. Written evidence here is scant, as what may have been happening was beyond the visual surveillance of journal-keeping Europeans, although it was occasionally audible to them. An alibi was always at hand for Fisher's and Brown's gun use; that they were out obtaining game or using the guns to signal. On one occasion on 27 June 1845, for example, Gilbert heard gunshots he intuited had come from Brown and Fisher, followed by the shouts of local Indigenous people. According to Gilbert, Brown and Fisher claimed to have surprised local people poised to spear livestock. However, the Europeans did not 'credit' the account, given that the shots appeared to come from a different direction than where they thought the livestock were (quoted in Sprod 2006: 97). Instead, Gilbert thought that Brown and Fisher had 'surprised' the local people at their camp, with a view to seeking favours from the local women, and that 'the [local] men perhaps resisted' (quoted in Sprod 2006: 97). In another later incident, when the whole party encountered a local Indigenous person by chance, Fisher strongly urged the expeditioners to 'shoot him' lest they themselves later 'be killed,' though Leichhardt stated for the record that he was 'horrified at the idea of shooting a poor fellow' (1847: 322-23). Overall, Fisher in

particular seems to have been aware of the power residing in the guns the Europeans allowed and encouraged him to bear, and occasionally he threatened to use that power against Europeans, and quite possibly against local Indigenous people too. This makes it hard to locate him within polarised schematic images of faithful helper, resistance fighter or race traitor.

Shots in the Dark

After the written historical record peters out in 1848, it is difficult to know the trajectory of the guns the Leichhardt party carried. That is certainly so in the absence of knowing exactly where the party travelled and where this gunplate was found, and the lack of adequate means for accessing whatever local Indigenous accounts might persist in such an area. While the expedition progressed, guns would have continued to be used in the manners described above, but several subsequent possible scenarios relate to the demise of the party. The shot or powder may have run out, or the guns ceased to work and been jettisoned as excess weight. Being sought-after metal items (see below), they may have been bartered with local people for assistance, say, in finding water or food. It is possible that the guns were lost. Or that local Indigenous people took them, although this seems unlikely unless it happened by force, given the guns' value as guarantors of the intruders' safety, and the prospect that they would have been tightly held. Perhaps the owners of the guns simply expired, by thirst, starvation, misadventure or homicide, and the guns began to rust beside their bodies. Or perhaps, as possible evidence in a future murder investigation, killers carefully disposed of them. Another possibility is that a defunct gun was used to mark the owner's burial place, as a makeshift headstone. When Gilbert died on the Port Essington expedition, he was buried and a fire was lit over the grave so that Indigenous people might not disturb it. The Europeans then carved Gilbert's name into a nearby tree as a memorial. Perhaps a named

gun-stock lodged in a tree might have fulfilled similar purpose. Recall that the gunstock was reported to have been found in a tree, and that it was charred.

The exit-point of these scenarios is not necessarily a simple death of the European object; its dropping out of human ownership and lodgement in an environment where it continued to corrode, waiting to be found by the Indigenous man Jackie decades later. The more intriguing possibility is the uptake of these guns, or parts of them, into Aboriginal material culture. Philip Jones provides an account of how metal objects—especially the iconic metal axe head—were highly valued by Indigenous people well ahead of the frontier (2007: 112-129). Metal had been introduced to the northern coastal regions of Australia by visiting Macassans. It was traded widely, and there is evidence that metal objects were in use well in advance of the explorers crossing through the would-be 'blank spaces.' The Port Essington party came across some evidence of this. For example, they discovered what they (perhaps erroneously) assumed to be a remote white man's camp, given the neat cuts to saplings, which they concluded had been made by metal axes. Metal articles from horseshoes to canisters were clearly prized by many of the Indigenous people whom the Leichhardt parties encountered. Indeed Indigenous people were very resourceful at re-purposing all sorts of metal articles, with pieces of dray wheels, hoops from barrels or firearms, saddle trees and many other things being hafted to handles, creating axes that were invaluable in crafting articles or raiding trees for possums, honey, and potable liquid.

Though greatly valued, metal articles like these had an ambiguous trajectory through Indigenous society. Makeshift metal axes were much more effective than stone axes. They saved the time otherwise needed to grind down stone axe heads. But they also pushed axes into the hands of women and younger men, who would not otherwise have had access to such

things. They could assist greatly in everyday life, but also had a 'corrosive social effect' (Jones 2007: 120). We can speculate about the gun barrel's use as an Indigenous implement, retained and prized by a new owner. Was this just another valuable piece of metal to be used for chopping, hacking or digging? To what special use might a tube of metal have been put? The alleged presence of part of the gun near a 'bottle tree' is intriguing. Perhaps the barrel was used to tap potable liquid from these trees, something it is known that Indigenous people did in another more laborious fashion with other water-filled trees (compare Leichhardt 2013: 168-9, 195). Indeed, it is thought that Indigenous people planted baobab trees (one type of bottle tree) in places far away from those trees' usual coastal range, and where the people could later harvest from them (Somerville/Parker 1937: 43; Letter, Larcombe to Somerville 20 Oct 35). Or did this slowly corroding object overall elicit more of a corrosive effect on the social life of its new owners, like the one described by Philip Jones?

Metal tools and objects were sometimes valued in Indigenous society to an extent that they were so closely associated with a person that they would be buried with them: One real possibility is that the Leichhardt gunstock was lodged in the tree burial of an Indigenous person, or a European who had been adopted by an Indigenous group (Somerville/Parker 1937). Jones notes that although metal was not accounted for in traditional Indigenous cosmologies—there were no totem ancestors responsible for it—prized metal objects 'hovered on the edge of sacrality,' even if we lack a good understanding of the special meanings and relationships Indigenous people formed with them (2007: 118). Did the aesthetics of intricate gun parts or a knurled gunstock give them some greater Indigenous value than, say, a piece of simple hoop iron? There is Central Australian evidence from the early 1860s, for example, of an Indigenous man wearing the spring from a breech-loading rifle around his neck (Grenfell Price 1939: 42). Were these parts put into ceremonial use, as

the work of Nicholas Thomas (1991) on entangled objects, including guns, in the Pacific might suggest? Many local Indigenous people would have seen expeditioners—European and Indigenous—use firearms, and may have treasured them highly for the unexpected things that they could cause (on Indigenous observation of firearms, see Sprod 2006: 98). Did these guns have value as a war trophy? Or were guns conversely so tainted by the lethal uses to which they were put, that they were best left alone?[8] Was a musket stock simply an encumbrance to light-travelling Indigenous people; something to be tucked away at a campsite for possible future use, or discarded and forgotten entirely?

We also have little clear idea about the meanings that old gun parts may have had for Indigenous people in the later context of pastoralism and mineral prospecting. How did Charles Harding's Indigenous assistant, Jackie, react when he came across the old gun at the dawn of the twentieth century? Did he recognize the gunstock as part of an Indigenous burial, and hence as something to be left alone? Did he simply think that it would be a European relic of interest to his boss? What was Jackie's reward, if anything, for finding this object in a labour economy probably based mainly around the supply of provisions?

Conclusion

It is undoubtedly true that since the bushman Charles Harding took possession of it, this plate has been seen as a European relic, rather than something that had been in Indigenous hands for much of its life; that it is perceived as having much more rust than ochre. Rescued during a conservative era, it has been used at the National Museum of Australia to further the fascination with the lost Leichhardt, and reinforce the notion of European achievement in

[8] It is thought, for example, that Indigenous people would not have been inclined to take something until well after the fact of a murder, as they tended to shun such a spot (Grenfell Price 1939).

Australia. Yet it is time to look again at this iconic object, which might seem to have finally lodged in a type of 'terminal impact' on a pedestal in Canberra. To see beyond the mythologised name of Leichhardt, and to wonder how the gun to which it was once attached was used, not only by Europeans at the frontier, but also by Indigenous people. That casts up questions about Indigenous ingenuity, and networks of trade and ceremonial life. About the ballistics of metal as it travelled through a changing human environment, ricocheting off established practices and impacting others. But ballistic biography must needs also be concrete and ugly too. A colonial gun was and remains an arresting thing, and it can cause us to recoil. Ballistic biography must also bring into focus the dark side of the frontier. That most obviously includes the Indigenous people who may have been killed by the gun to which this plate was once affixed; its symbolism of killing, dispossession and colonisation. But the plate raises other uncomfortable questions about complicity too, for example about Johnny Murphy's, aged 15 when he may have shot an Indigenous man. What impact did that cause on a young man's life? The unsettling repercussion of our ballistic biography does not stop there. What are we to make of Indigenous intermediaries like the crack marksman Charley Fisher? Ambiguously poised somewhere between saving the lives of the Leichhardt party by shooting game, propelling the European 'discovery' of new species of fauna, possibly violating the rights of other Indigenous people, and threatening to 'fire a ball' into his would-be European masters. This experimental ballistic biography has shown the value of wondering about objects' trajectories through culture and their impacts—glancing or otherwise—in unlocking the narrative potential of dumb things with holes in their provenance, especially from the colonial era. But the idea of lingering 'repercussion' shows that ballistic biography can usefully evoke an object's current afterlives, and emotional reach too. Although the method is tailored to the object that I have examined here, we could also

fruitfully apply it to other travelling things, propelling wonder and other affect into the display and regard of a museum's loaded objects.

Archival sources

Bristow-Smith family, collection of correspondence and newspaper cuttings, courtesy of Darrell Lewis, private collection.

J.D. Somerville collection, SLSA PRG 15/62 6&7

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