

The Explorer and his Vintage Wine

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What is the most valuable Australian wine? Many will automatically say Penfold's Grange Hermitage. A collection of 40 vintages, from 1951 to 1990, has sold at auction for \$138,000. That's a staggering \$3450 for each bottle. But what is the greatest impact on the desirability of a bottle of wine? Afficionados of the wine industry say that a wine that is very rare and difficult to find will push the demand, and the price, higher. And if a wine has a certain charm, or if the winemaker has a certain 'reputation', this also increases the price.

There is a wine that is certainly so very rare, there may not be any left surviving. More surprisingly still, the story of how the wine came to be made is largely unknown. If the wine was discovered, it would certainly demand a higher price than even Penfold's Grange Hermitage. What wine could this be?

We must first go back to the winemaker. The odd thing is, he isn't even known as a winemaker. Ludwig Leichhardt is far better known as one of Australia's early explorers.

Leichhardt was not your average explorer. In an age when nearly all of Australia's explorers were British or of British descent, Leichhardt was

Prussian. When most other explorers were from a military or rural background, Leichhardt was, depending on the point of view, a botanist, a geologist, or a scientist. Born near the river Spree in Prussia, in a small town called Trebatsch, now in modern Germany, he studied at the Cottbus high school, then, with a yearning to know more, studied at the University of Berlin, then later at Paris. The adventures of Alexander von Humboldt, the scientist who explored much of Latin America making scientific discoveries on the way, inspired and enthused Leichhardt.

On 1st October 1841, after years of study, Leichhardt said goodbye to everybody he knew, his family and all his friends. Travelling alone, he stepped aboard a ship bound for Australia. The ship sailed from Gravesend on the Thames, then a few weeks later stopped momentarily at Cork, Ireland, to pick up immigrants. On the 26th the ship set sail for Australia, on the far side of the world.

On 14 February 1842, after almost five long months at sea, the ship finally slowed to a stop, and the sailors let loose the anchor, hearing it splash into the green waters of Port Jackson. The twenty-eight-year old Leichhardt looked over the water to see the frontier town of Sydney, with a bustling population of 42,000, shrouded in constant drought-breaking rain. Full of enthusiasm, Leichhardt had selected Australia because of his burning ambition to make discoveries – of pretty well any kind, be it plants, minerals or fossils, and also to explore and discover new lands. Some exciting discoveries had already been made, and so much was still

completely unknown about Australia. So many new birds, plants and animals had already been discovered here. There were bound to be many more. Much of the land was also completely unknown. Leichhardt had written about his plans to his brother-in-law back in Prussia:

...The interior, the heart of this dark continent, is my goal, and I will never relinquish the quest for it until I get there...

Once ashore, Leichhardt applied to Sir Thomas Mitchell, the NSW surveyor and explorer, eager to accompany him on his next expedition. However, the wheels inside government turned very slowly. An application for funds for any expedition had to go to London by sailing ship, taking months to arrive, months more for a decision, and many more months for the answer to come back by sailing ship. What to do? He mingled, he exchanged views with important people of the time and, as a good botanist would do, he started collecting botany specimens.

It is a blessing to us today that Leichhardt wrote often to friends, both locally and overseas, almost writing in a manner of a modern travel writer, making detailed observations of incidents and life at the time. When reading his letters, it is a surprise to find that, of all things, wine was often on his mind. He wrote to a friend, Mark Nicholson, soon after his arrival:

.... I was from my earliest childhood particularly fond of horticultural pursuits. I did not only cultivate the vine for obtaining grapes but I pressed the grapes and made the wine. Wherever I saw the vine cultivated as in

France, in Italy and in Switzerland I gathered knowledge on it in those countries. Here in Sydney I hear it continuously spoken of.

What were his plans? Surprisingly, Newcastle bubbled to the top, appearing to have good potential. In June 1842 Leichhardt wrote to a friend in Paris:

Tell Mr Brongniart that I shall not forget about sending him impressions of fossil plants. I've already seen a few from the collieries at Newcastle. After I finish my botany course I shall go to Newcastle on Hunter's River, to collect as many geological specimens as I can.

Fate appeared to make this inevitable when the Scott brothers appeared to give Leichhardt an invitation to visit their properties. In July he wrote to his good friend Dr William Nicholson in England:

I've entered into a very stimulating association with a Mr Robert Scott and his brother Walker Scott. I have certainly found their collection of minerals and shells instructive in the extreme. Their properties are near Newcastle and Maitland on Hunter's River, and I shall hie myself there as soon as my lectures are right out of the way...

Leichhardt then travelled, from Sydney to the central coast and on to Newcastle. People working in remote homesteads often lived a lonely life, and were happy when visitors arrived unexpectedly. But a visit from a

European with many stories to tell, was more pleasant still. And it was here that Leichhardt's keen eye first noticed some of the earliest vineyards being started in the area. In October he again wrote to Nicholson, back in England:

When I came to Newcastle I too was convinced that this part of the country could very quickly become covered with flourishing vineyards, given the necessary labour; and that although we can hardly expect Madeira [wine] it will be possible to produce a really good wine. I spoke to Mr Scott about it... he seems to want us to try our hands at pressing wine as soon as the time is right for it... quite a number of land-owners are making serious preparations... My own theory is that wines of superior quality will be produced only on the limestone soils of the upper Hunter, in the Wellington Valley and on the volcanic soils of Portland Bay.

Leichhardt travelled endlessly. With a curious mind and a sense of purpose, he collected plant and mineral specimens wherever he could, and in the process, charmed the early settlers. Early in the new year, in January, 1843, Leichhardt travelled along the Hunter Valley. He wrote to his brother in law in Germany:

Vineyards of some size have been laid out at several places. The vines withstand even the most oppressive heat, the leaves keep fresh and green, the bunches are big and the grapes large, yet the stones are smaller and further apart than I've seen in the better wine-growing districts in Europe.

No good wine has yet been pressed, though many have tried. The wine is never the less quite palatable. Whilst I was at Newcastle I was entertained by a Mr Walker Scott, and here at Glendon I am the guest of his brother, Mr Helenus Scott. They have about 80,000 acres of land, on which about 9,000 head of horned cattle are running almost wild, and a number of herds of sheep are being moved about by shepherds..."

On the same day, Leichhardt also wrote to his good friend Lieutenant Lynd in Sydney:

...From Harper's I went to Mr Wyndham, whose vineyard I wished to see, and who was spoken of to me as a man of great experience. The present state of the colony has made him leave his vineyard to the cattle, though he is far from discouraging any other from the pursuit of cultivating the vine... I communicated to him my plan of a squatting expedition into the interior, and he believed that it would not only be the least expensive but at the same time the most profitable for science... A fortnight ago I arrived at Glendon, but before this saw the vineyard of Mr Kilman, who treated me with a very good glass of wine of his own making... Glendon is like a little village; the cottage of Mr Scott being surrounded by a number of buildings, stables, stores, workshops, and lower down a long street of little cottages for the people which Mr Scott employs on his farm. A fine garden and a nursery and a vineyard are connected to the farm...

For the next few weeks Leichhardt explored the local area. He travelled to the thick forests surrounding Mt Royal, north of present day Singleton, collecting botanical specimens, often camping for days at a time alone in the bush.

...I went with an old sawyer who had been felling cedar in these mountain forests for nine years, and you'd hardly believe how much he had to tell about the richness of the forests...

Having accomplished much, and running short of supplies, Leichhardt rode back to his temporary home base at the Glendon homestead. This is where a most unexpected event occurred. In fact, it would be difficult to believe, if it wasn't written in Leichhardt's own hand. He wrote about it to his friend Lieutenant Lynd in Sydney:

Let me tell you how I was occupied these last 12 days. When I came back from Mt Royal I found that Mr Scott had not yet done vintage and that his grapes were spoiling fast. My wine mania rose and I set immediately to work to show my skill. The small burgundy grapes were collected and crushed by two rollers, which I had seen to crush the beetroot, and which Mr. Scott had made according to my plan. I put the juice of an excellent quality, which I determined by a saccharometer I made myself, into a big wine cask and left it to ferment in a kind of cave dug into the neighbourhood of the vineyard. Two days afterwards the young and sweetwater grapes were gathered and pressed and put also to ferment on another plan, which will

prove of great influence on colonial wine making. After having put the liquid in the cask one shuts it airtight and passes one leg of a bent tin or lead tube (a syphon) into the bung hole. The external leg is placed in a mug filled with water, preventing any communication between the interior of the cask and the external air. This method is followed in France and I saw it followed here in the fermentation of sugar beet. The carbonic acid formed during fermentation pushes its way through the water, but the atmospheric air never can get into the cask. You see that I had two improvements, (that of crushing the grapes with rollers instead of treading them with feet, and the syphon) in my favour. The rainy weather commenced and kept the temperature 68 to 71 degrees (69 degrees being the regular temperature for good fermentation). This proved also very favourable. My juice fermented in 10 days and when I racked it off it proved to be a strong spirituous wine. I have put it now into other casks and time must clear it. You shall assuredly taste it one day. This success under other very unfavourable circumstances will prove useful to me in case I have to turn my attention to wine making.

Leichhardt also wrote to Herr Kirchner, the Consul for Hamburg in Sydney, apparently pleased with his efforts:

...if you happen to see Mr. Robert Scott tell him that there's a good '43er [vintage] awaiting his return to his pleasant estate, but I mustn't sing its praises too long before they're due...

What type of person would drop everything, and voluntarily spend twelve days working hard for a new found friend? Having made the wine, Leichhardt then travelled by horseback, through the New England district up into Brisbane and then on to the Bunya Bunya mountains. He followed what today would be called a rough bridle track through the bush. Months later, during July, while in these remote mountains, his thoughts obviously went back to the wine he had made back at Glendon. He wrote to Helenus Scott:

My wanderings have been extended far beyond my original intentions, as always some opportunity was offered for visiting new parts of the colony, and I am almost afraid, I shall not be in Glendon in time to put your wine into new casks, which should be done as soon as the temperature increases. If you however paid attention to syphons and to the sweetness of the water, I would propose to let the syphon remain, till the blossoming time and the fermentation movement is over and to draw off the wine immediately afterwards, should I not be able to return. I have seen a great part of the colony and I am now almost at its northern extremity, just ready to start for Wide Bay...

So what became of Leichhardt? From the Bunya Bunya mountains, he eventually travelled back to Sydney, where he organised his First Expedition. This group of volunteers, equipped with donated supplies, subsequently discovered many of the major rivers and mountains in Queensland and the Northern Territory, irritating the professional

explorers of the time. In 1848, Leichhardt organised another expedition and, with a band of seven men, pack mules, horses and cattle, set off from the Darling Downs in an attempt to reach the settlement on the Swan River, in Western Australia. They were never seen again.

So what became of the wine Leichhardt made? We really do not know. However, we do know that just a few years later the Scott brothers had fallen on hard times, and were declared insolvent. They were forced to live through the indignity of seeing their estate broken up and sold:- their farm, their cattle, and all their possessions. There is, in an edition of the Maitland Mercury of 1848, a long list of all the personal belongings being sold at auction. In amongst the 600 head of cattle, blacksmiths tools, and a thousand books belonging to the unfortunate Scott brothers is a one-line listing:

“about 50 casks of Colonial wine, consisting of Hock, Burgundy, and Sauterne.”

Is it possible some of this wine was made by Leichhardt? And what if, by any chance, there is an old oak cask sitting in a cellar in the Hunter Valley somewhere marked “Glendon 1843”, how valuable would it be? Well, that is hard to say. But we do know that, if a wine is very rare and hard to find, and, if the winemaker has a certain ‘reputation’, it could very well be priceless.

