PART ONE

CIRCUS & SOCIETY

Whatever changed society changed the show.¹

¹ Disher, p.20.
Figure 2

Poster for Burton & Taylors Grand United Circus Company, c.1876.

National Archives of Australia.
CHAPTER I

Image & legitimacy

This is no penny wild beast show but a genuine circus.¹

During the 18th century, the great English fairs, such as Stourbridge and Bartholomew, were a combination of sideshow, menagerie, bazaar, waxworks and games of chance.² These fairs nurtured other genres of entertainment, such as pantomime, acrobats and ropewalkers and other entertainers, people who ranked alongside ‘rogues, vagabonds and sturdy beggars’ in the English class hierarchy. In 1780, Philip Astley presented equestrian entertainments in the first circus of modern times, a permanent building on the south side of the Thames that he named Astleys Amphitheatre, within which he gave employment to these itinerant entertainers.³

Although Astley never used the word, this new form of entertainment would become known as ‘circus’. This was a reference

¹ Wagga Wagga Advertiser, 13 Feb 1878.
to a circular riding track used in London’s Hyde Park since the time of Charles I known as ‘the circus’, and not, as is popularly thought, the circus of ancient Rome.¹ The Licensing Act excluded Astley’s and other popular venues from presenting performances with dialogue, a privilege that was confined to London’s so-called patent theatres.² By broadly interpreting annual licences granted them, Astley’s and similar venues presented not only displays of equestrianism, but sub-dramatic entertainments such as burlettas, pantomimes and ballets d’action, using placards as a substitute for dialogue.³ ‘Well-to-do’ audiences did not regularly patronise Astley’s until 1828⁴ and although the last restrictions on popular theatrical entertainments were abolished by 1843,⁵ the circus assumed the marginalised social standing of the itinerant entertainers it employed. English showmen remained legally undifferentiated from the ‘rogue and vagabond’ until as late as 1935.⁶

During the period of Astley’s salience in London, an increasing number of itinerant companies - drama, pantomime, puppet shows and circus - travelled the provincial roads of England.⁷ Although some were ‘flourishing’⁸ by the early years of Queen Victoria’s reign, ‘failure and poverty were a more frequent outcome than success’ in a harsh, insecure life.⁹ This itinerant industry existed at

¹ Speaight, p.34.
² Golby and Purdue, p.69.
⁴ Golby and Purdue, p.69.
⁵ Saxon, p.19.
⁷ Cunningham, p.32.
⁸ Cunningham, pp.32, 34.
⁹ Cunningham, p.32.
several levels, the reputation of lower levels detracting from the standing of those above. The grand concerns of Cooke and Batty ‘moved sedately’ from one centre of population to another throughout the summer, exhibiting in permanent or semi-permanent buildings in each place visited. At the next level, were numerous tenting shows, large and small. At the lowest level were the cheap circuses and penny equestrian shows such as those located on the outskirts of London.

All of these shows were continuously harassed by ‘dregs of the local population’ and ‘professional fairground ruffians’. In a countryside inadequately policed, show folk had to stand up for themselves whether ‘great or small, solid or shifty’. Despite great differences in standing and reputation among England’s travelling show people and although a gaffer’s [showman’s] name could be worth a considerable sum, they were an underclass. These were people ‘of no place and no order of life’ and of a lowly status in the English class hierarchy. Circuses in England were conducted not by people with money and respectability, but opportunists with neither and therefore nothing to lose. Circus presented the opportunity for wealth and fame to performers who, almost without exception, came from underprivileged backgrounds.

Entertainments of a circus nature – imitative of the entertainments given in Astley’s and provincial English circuses - were given in the

10 Manning-Sanders, p.89.
12 Chesney, p.76.
13 Chesney, p.74.
14 Carmeli, pp. 213ff.
15 Saxon, p.34.
16 Stoddart, p.49.
17 Stoddart, p.50.
Australian colonies as early as 1833 when ropewalkers appeared on the stage of Sydney’s Theatre Royal. In the following years were seen occasional gymnasts, acrobats and equestrians, while in 1841 the arrival of a circus-style troupe, headed by the presumably Italian Signor Luigi Dalle Case, led to the opening of Australia’s first amphitheatre, albeit shortlived, the Australian Olympic Theatre. When Dalle Case was bankrupted, the ropewalker George Croft took over the management of his troupe for a tour of the ’provinces’ beginning at Windsor, N S W, arguably the first example of toured colonial circus activity. Circus was unequivocally established when, on the evening of 29 December 1847, an English-born publican, horsetrainer and jockey, Robert Avis Radford (1814 - 65), opened his Royal Circus in Launceston and gave the first comprehensive demonstration of the circus arts on Australian soil. Other amphitheatres of suitably colonial proportions were erected in Port Phillip [now Melbourne] by the publican Thomas Henry Hayes (1849), in Sydney by the publican John Malcom (1850) and in Adelaide by an entrepreneur E H Taylor (1850). The Australian circus assumed an itinerant character with the visits of the first companies to the goldfields in 1851. With the demise of the amphitheatres by 1856, the leadership of Australia’s circus activity passed from the early commercial opportunists to a community of professional circus men prepared to adapt to the demands of a perpetually itinerant existence. Two equestrians who performed in Radford’s arena in 1848 – Golding Ashton and John Jones (later known by the professional nom d’arena of Matthew St Leon) - went on to establish family dynasties in a tenting circus tradition. As a result, most of the

18 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 Dec 1833.
19 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 Jan 1842.
20 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 Jun 1842.
21 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 29 Dec 1847.
22 By 1854, Ashton had assumed the name ‘James Henry’ Ashton, presumably to obscure his convict origins.
travelling circuses of Australia may trace their origins, more or less directly, to Radford’s pioneering enterprise.

Australian circus was not created in one moment but by transformation over time while remaining within the broad spectrum of its English origins. But nor was Australian society created in a single moment, since immigration and evolution over time gave it a life of its own while remaining within the orbit of its English origins and susceptible to its influence.  

This chapter seeks to answer three critical questions: To what extent did Old World perceptions of class find voice in Australia? How was circus perceived in its antipodean context from the perspective of class? How did Australian circus proprietors secure and maintain their standing in the eyes of the public?

In addressing these questions, it is recognised that the topic of class, in its Australian context at least, is an immensely complex and much debated topic. In contrast to established notions of class embedded in English society, the notion of class in Australia is less clearly defined. In any case, the phenomenon of class in Australia represents a far more fluid and dynamic proposition than in England. The sense of being permanently bound to one’s class as defined by birth and education, as in England, has had little or no relevance in Australia. It is also recognised that any formulation of answers to these questions is necessarily based on the contemporary observations available, chiefly journalism and, from the early 1900s, eyewitness accounts and therefore reflects whatever biases they may contain.

23 Rickards, p.40.
Old World perceptions of class

Most of Australia’s early circus people were drawn from the circus people and other underclasses of the British Isles. The first circus audiences were substantially comprised of former convicts and their progeny. Circus in Australia inherited or at least reflected some of the accumulated social characteristics of circus in the home country.

In 1842, Sydney’s establishment – its ‘soi-disant’ [self-styled] upper classes - had placed the short-lived Australian Olympic Theatre of Luigi Dalle Case, the first establishment in Australia licensed for ‘Equestrian, Gymnastic and Theatrical entertainments’, at a distinctly lower cultural level than other ‘evidences of civilisation’. A visitor from England that year observed:

They have their theatres, amateur theatricals, promenades, balls, concerts, reviews, bands and other amusements. The Theatre Royal is a very neat house and is tastefully ornamented; and the knights and ladies of the sock and baskin [sic] are most respectable in character and talent ... Signor Dalle Case has a very unique but neat theatre ... [H]is entertainments consist in minor pieces, horsemanship, tomfoolery, and the like.\textsuperscript{25} \textit{[Australian Olympic Theatre, Sydney, 1842].}

The early purpose-built amphitheatres of Radford in Van Diemen’s Land [now Tasmania] (1847 - 50) and Malcom in Sydney (1850 - 56) provided the customary English discriminatory seating arrangements - pit, gallery and boxes - that preserved the inherited social divisions, whether real or imagined. Defined seating

\textsuperscript{25} J Hood, \textit{Australia and the East: Being a journal narrative of a voyage to New South Wales in an emigrant ship with a residence of some months in Sydney and the bush and the route home by way of India and Egypt in years 1841 and 1842}, London: John Murray, 1843, pp.98-9.
arrangements separated ‘the more exceptionable portion’ from the ‘abrupt style and manner’ of the audience in the pit. Opening in Launceston towards the end of 1847, Robert Radford’s Royal Circus was an immediate ‘hit’ but more so for its lower than its upper orders. An observer was on hand to record the opening for the *Cornwall Chronicle*:

... [T]here was a crowded audience; the pit and gallery were thronged and the boxes respectably filled ... Of the performances we must speak highly, as we had no conception that such a finished equestrian entertainment could be got up in Van Diemen’s Land ... [T]here is every hope that the proprietor will have sufficient encouragement to extend the accommodation at the circus, so that it may become an attractive place of amusement, and that respectable families may be induced to attend.\(^\text{27}\) *[Radfords Royal Circus, Launceston, 1847]*.

Since Radford’s boxes were only ‘respectably filled’ and since ‘respectable families’ were not conspicuous, it may be presumed that a ‘thronged’ pit and gallery were not sufficient to qualify the Royal Circus as ‘an attractive place of amusement’ in the eyes of the *Cornwall Chronicle*. It was later reported that police visited the circus to arrest ex-convicts who were not allowed to attend such entertainments.\(^\text{28}\)

Despite their constant appeals to genteel patronage, the efforts of Radford and other early colonial entrepreneurs necessarily catered for both upper and lower orders, and the diverse values espoused by each. The moral guardians of the day were also quick to perceive

\(^{26}\) *Hobart Town Advertiser*, 8 Sep 1848; *Hobart Town Courier*, 8 Nov 1848.

\(^{27}\) *Cornwall Chronicle*, 29 Dec 1847.

\(^{28}\) Author’s Collection: F Braid, letter to author dated Ballina, NSW, 21 Jul 1987.
lapses in taste. In Sydney in 1842, a critic warned Dalle Case not to offend ‘respectable women’ with indelicate acrobatic performances.\(^{29}\) At Moreton Bay, N S W, (now Brisbane, Queensland) in 1847, patronage of George Croft’s ‘amphitheatre’ waned when ‘improper songs’ were sung and Aborigines admitted.\(^{30}\) In Sydney in 1850, a young female apprentice’s inclination to run after the clown, in the ring of the Royal Australian Equestrian Circus, was admonished as ‘a line of conduct [not] at all becoming a respectable filly’.\(^{31}\)

Fortunately for the colonial upper orders, the stage began ‘to adopt and reflect the moral and cultural values of a culture of reason’, in Sydney and Hobart in the 1840s and, although previously frequented by ‘half drunken bushmen’ and prostitutes,\(^{32}\) in Melbourne by the early 1850s. Richard Waterhouse has written:

> In all three cities, managers began to stage a higher proportion of opera and Shakespeare and other serious English plays. Respectable and orderly audiences returned to the theatre as a result ... At the same time, those most likely to cause disruption, the lower orders, were increasingly attracted to the emergent specialised venues – music halls and circus amphitheatres. Here was a sign that the theatre, and indeed colonial culture as a whole, was losing pre-industrial homogeneity and taking on modern and specialised characteristics.\(^{33}\)

The discoveries of gold accelerated these developments. Gold not only swelled the population but significantly altered its composition.

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\(^{29}\) *Sydney Herald*, 7 Feb 1842.

\(^{30}\) *Moreton Bay Courier*, 29 May 1847.

\(^{31}\) *Peoples Advocate*, 7 Dec 1850.


The immigrants of this ‘golden decade’ included a higher proportion of skilled and educated people than the earlier immigrants, most of whom had been forcibly transported as convicts or enticed by bounty.\textsuperscript{34} However, gold did not immediately undo the former homogeneity of colonial audiences and, in the short term at least, probably reinforced it. The ‘happy, successful’ diggers who met Henry Burton and his ‘tired, hungry and travel-worn’ company on the Turon in June 1851, the first to arrive on an Australian goldfield, even cooked a ‘hurried feast’ for the troupe and assisted Burton and his company to prepare a ‘rude enclosure of logs’ for a makeshift circus ring. Neither class of locality nor of person mattered for the performance given that evening under a ‘roof of stars’.\textsuperscript{35} On the cosmopolitan goldfields, discriminatory seating arrangements were neither warranted nor practicable. Even when anchored in Melbourne for more than two years, until the spring of 1854, Rowes North American Circus catered for miners and respectable families alike since ‘money, the great leveller, had overturned every barrier to social distinction’.\textsuperscript{36}

\textbf{Antipodean context}

To the extent that we can rely on the observations of contemporary colonial journalists, our only substantial body of documentary evidence, the lowly status of circus people within the prevailing English social hierarchy was, if not irrelevant, then at least relaxed in its antipodean setting. Their audiences, the ‘currency’ lads and lasses, ‘thought nothing of England and could not bear the thought of

\textsuperscript{34} R Ward, \textit{Australia since the coming of man}, Sydney: Landsdowne Press, 1982, p.113.


\textsuperscript{36} \textit{New York Clipper}, 31 May 1873.
going there’.\textsuperscript{37} Freshly arrived colonists typically disdained the ‘higher order of dramatic representations’.\textsuperscript{38} To Australia’s first audiences, the pre-determined social standing attached to circus and circus people in England was neither known nor material. At the official level, the essentially unintellectual and transient character of ‘innocent’ equestrian-based amusements were considered to be ‘less objectionable than some [theatrical] performances’.\textsuperscript{39} Apart from the early jesters who lampooned members of parliament, the circus was largely apolitical in nature. There is little to suggest that Australia’s circus people harboured any disrespect for the prevailing social order. The more enlightened colonial administrators saw circus entertainments as a means of preventing ‘vicious associations’, to ‘humanise’ the mind and content the people ‘in this new land and fasten them to the soil’.\textsuperscript{40}

Circus also made an economic contribution. Robert Radford’s entrepreneurial activities in Launceston and Hobart Town between December 1847 and January 1850 were valued not only in terms of their ability to deliver innocent, ‘rational’\textsuperscript{41} entertainment to large numbers of Vandemonians but in their contribution to commercial prosperity. With interests embracing horse dealing, the turf and innkeeping as well as the circus, Radford exemplified the merchant class of Van Diemen’s Land evident since the 1820s.\textsuperscript{42} His colonial status was that of a capitalistic entrepreneur rather than the gaffer or

\begin{enumerate}
\item L L Robson, \textit{A history of Tasmania. Volume 1: Van Dieman’s Land from the earliest times to 1855}, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1983, p.177.
\item Archives Office of Tasmania, \textit{Correspondence between Colonial Secretary’s Office and Robert Avis Radford}, CSO 24/4/58.
\item \textit{Cornwall Chronicle}, 3 Jan 1846.
\item \textit{Cornwall Chronicle}, 3 Nov 1849.
\end{enumerate}
‘mountebank’ he might have been labelled had he travelled the English provinces.

Observers occasionally compared and contrasted Radford’s and other early colonial circus enterprises with Astley’s and the provincial circuses of Britain, thereby legitimising these colonial efforts but possibly contributing to the later phenomenon of the ‘cultural cringe’.τ Tasmanian critics acclaimed Radford the ‘antipodean Batty’, a reference to a famous English circus proprietor of the day. One of Radford’s equestrians, a Mr Mills, ‘would not have disgraced’ Astley’s, the premiere London circus.τ Radford’s new Hobart Town amphitheatre, purpose-built in 1848, was ‘as good a building as any’ erected by showmen in English provincial towns.τ

Henry Burton’s arrival on the Turon goldfields in 1851 signalled not only the beginning of the rise of the fully peripatetic circus but the beginning of the end of the fixed location circus amphitheatres of the cities. In the cities, homogenous audiences had already begun to separate into ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’ as permanent venues, now offering theatre and opera, began to cater for ‘respectable and orderly audiences’. In Sydney in 1856, Malcoms Amphitheatre was remodelled and reopened as Our Lyceum, with an inaugural season of Shakespeare.τ In Melbourne in 1857, Lewis’s so-named Astleys Amphitheatre, opened only three years earlier, was transformed into the Princess’s Theatre and Opera House.ττ To patronise these

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44 Cornwall Chronicle, 18 Jul 1849.
45 Cornwall Chronicle, 18 Jul 1849.
46 Hobart Town Courier, 26 Aug 1848.
47 Parsons, p.566.
48 Parsons, p.465.
new venues was to engage in an act of self-definition, as Harold Love has written:

> Opera-goers would instinctively seek out an area of the auditorium where they were among their own social kind, and yet could look out and observe the other kinds safely contained within the boundaries of their areas – a sense which was intensified by the circle and gallery still having their separate external entrances. 49

The peripatetic circus, initially at least, offered little scope for such ‘self-definition’. Deprived of amphitheatres, touring circuses were limited to shorter city seasons and provided, at best, a lowbrow alternative to the new ‘legitimate’ theatres. The larger circuses, at least, preserved the discriminatory seating characteristic of the amphitheatres. Touring New Zealand in 1896, Probasco’s ‘big circus tent, which accommodated a thousand people’, included ‘tiers of planks and seats for the better class of patrons’ not to mention a roll of red carpet to cover the reserved tier’. 50 In Adelaide in 1883, the masses who patronised St Leons Circus, the provision of discriminatory seating notwithstanding, were condemned for preferring Grimaldi to Verdi and ‘a crown’s worth of foolery ... [to] a shilling’s worth of wisdom’. 51 But, until the emergence of rural cinema chains in the 1920s and 1930s, circus entertainments arguably reached more of the common people than any other form of entertainment. At Armidale, N S W, in 1878, owing to the presence of (and noises) from St Leons Circus less than fifty yards away,

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51 *South Australian Register*, 5 Mar 1883.
Madame Carandini and her operatic troupe could only perform to very small houses - ‘their highly musical audience’ notwithstanding.\footnote{Sydney Morning Herald, 15 Oct 1878.}

Many travelling circuses confined, or significantly restricted, their activities to rural areas, coming no closer to the larger cities than the outlying suburbs. They remained an instrument of social levelling since a typical performance in a country town accommodated people of all social classes, of any age, of either sex, and of any race. As he toured Queensland in 1873, a ‘large measure of success’ followed Ashton’s efforts to ‘provide innocent amusement of all classes’.\footnote{Australian Town & Country Journal, 3 May 1873.} At Ulmarra, N S W, St Leon admitted some Aborigines without charge, ‘thus performing a kindly action in an unostentatious manner’.\footnote{Clarence & Richmond Examiner, 18 May 1886.} In the 1860s and 1870s, Burtons National Circus was a familiar visitor to the coastal township of Port Fairy [formerly Belfast], Victoria, Burton’s visits vividly recalled when he died in 1900:

\begin{quote}
All the district, of high and low degree, would be there; the sailors from Rutledge’s wharf – and they were sailormen then, deep sea sailor men, their faces browned with coffee and old Jamaica – stood beside the smartly dressed and intensely horsey-looking stockriders from Tarrone and Dunmore. Merchants, bankers, squatters, and lawyers – all must go to Burton’s.\footnote{Port Fairy Gazette, 24 Apr 1900.} [Burtons National Circus, Port Fairy, c.1865].
\end{quote}

As the colonial capitals and country townships began to emerge into prosperity and respectability in the decades following the gold rushes, there appears firm evidence of condescending, ‘Old World’ attitudes towards circus and circus people, previously not noted in the colonial context. The novelty status that circus and circus people

\begin{footnotes}
52 Sydney Morning Herald, 15 Oct 1878.
53 Australian Town & Country Journal, 3 May 1873.
54 Clarence & Richmond Examiner, 18 May 1886.
55 Port Fairy Gazette, 24 Apr 1900.
\end{footnotes}
enjoyed during the era of the amphitheatres and on the goldfields was now reappraised. In the developing country towns, ‘hawkers’ and aspects of popular culture such as ‘travelling Jews with trinkets, organ-grinders, German bands, Ethiopian serenaders, circuses, electro-biologists, and people of that class’ were ‘now felt to be great nuisances’.  

It seems reasonable to presume that the emergence of these ‘Old World’ attitudes accompanied the arrival of more erudite immigrants not the least of whom were ‘a class of journalist-editors who had been highly educated in Britain’. As in the United States, colonial newspaper editors were among the intellectuals of their communities and, directly or indirectly, contributed to the formation of public opinion. All of Australia’s circus people, whatever their standing, were tarnished by unflattering scenes now occasionally reported in the provincial press: the ‘somewhat celebrated’ black British ropewalker Billy Banham arrested at Tamworth, N S W, in 1860 on a charge of stealing some wearing apparel; the circus proprietor John Jones who absconded from Wagga Wagga, N S W, in 1861 without paying £13 of bills for printing, horse feed, board and lodging; two Indian jugglers, Abdallah and Mohamed Cassim, from Burtons Circus, tried and hanged for the murder of an Indian hawker near Queanbeyan, N S W, in 1862; and the Ronconi Troupe, ‘a mean lot’ which absconded from Waratah, N S W, in 1868 without paying even ‘the boy who rang the bell and posted the bills’. At Inverell, N S W, in 1928, one of the proprietors of St Leons Circus

58 *Tamworth Examiner*, 15 Sep 1860.  
59 *Yass Courier*, 16 Jan 1861.  
60 *Queanbeyan Age*, 2 Apr 1862.  
was fined £25, with costs, for reselling pre-numbered admission tickets to evade tax.  

As early as 1861, the editor of the Wagga Wagga Express warned his ‘brethren of the press’ against the practice of ‘levanting’ by ‘travelling companies’, recommending that they obtain payment before doing business with ‘such gentry’. By 1883, the Murrumburrah Signal charged all theatrical advertisements at double rates and insisted on payment in advance. There were references by the 1870s to the immorality ‘too often found in circuses’, ‘vulgarity’ and the ‘coarse jests which, while they raise a laugh among the mob, cause a flush to rise to the cheek of the refined and respectable’. Evidently, these observations took some root in rural communities as they were gradually subsumed into the emerging order of the New World. Although a ‘high collar’ did not matter in rural Australia, conservative attitudes prevailed well into the 20th century and decorum was important. Recalling his boyhood days in the Gus St Leon circus, Mervyn King said in 1974:

You were catering for a different type of audience in those days. You had to be very careful. You couldn’t go and pull a whole lot of smutty jokes and get away with it like you do now. I don’t think you ever heard the word ‘sex’ mentioned in those days. Clean and tidy and no two-sided gags with a double meaning. [St Leons Great United Circus, c.1916].

62 Everyone’s, 18 Apr 1928.
63 Yass Courier, 16 Jan 1861.
64 Murrumburrah Signal, 19 Apr 1884.
65 Newcastle Morning Herald, 24 Feb 1882.
66 Launceston Examinin, 2 Feb 1884.
Stereotypical views of circus people as a class of a lower order were reinforced by the freedom with which many availed themselves of whatever society had to offer. On the road, the surreptitious way in which provisions were sometimes obtained only confirmed popular condescending perceptions. A journalist travelling with Probascos Circus through New Zealand in 1896 was awake to the origins of some items on the breakfast menu:

At daybreak we called a halt and had breakfast. Fowls, eggs, &c., figured on the fictitious menu and how they were got from the neighbouring farms had better not be inquired into. [Probascos Circus, New Zealand, 1896].

Stereotypical attitudes of circus people were observed well into the 20th century. In Ashtons Circus in the 1970s

[H]ouses are good, but at the same time there is the feeling that a troupe of gypsies has camped on the common, that they will be dirty and dishonest and perhaps the washing had better be brought in. Obstructive regulations, too, make organisation difficult. [Ashtons Circus, c.1970].

Even the so-called contemporary circus groups of the late 20th century, did not escape condescension, as a former director of Circus Oz, Sue Broadway, wrote:

Houses were very small, and local people regarded us suspiciously as a bunch of weirdo hippies. Regional Australia was clearly

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68 Broome with Jackomos, p.29.
69 Onlooker, in St Leon, 1985, p.89.
70 Fernandez, p.27.
unready for a circus with no animals, scruffy old trucks and a line-up that included women with crew cuts and men in frocks.\textsuperscript{71} \textit{[Circus Oz, 1982].}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Alberto’s Circus & Zoo, between Campbelltown and Swansea, Tasmania, 1973. \textit{Author's Collection.}}
\end{figure}

\section*{Public standing}

The circus profession was well represented when the first showmen’s organisation, the Showmens Association of Australia, was formed in Sydney in April 1909, some sixty years after the first colonial circus entertainments were given. A surviving copy of its journal, \textit{The Showman}, reveals the Association was formed to protect the interests of showmen and enhance their reputation rather than to specifically remove any inherited stain of social marginalisation. Its editorial argued that their nomadism deprived them of an effective political voice.\textsuperscript{72}

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Since its introduction in 1847, Australian circus had evolved along its own path in the more egalitarian and heterogenous social climate of colonial Australia, absolved of much of the stigma attached to the profession by the English class system. The impression gathered by one of the brothers Wirth while touring England in 1897 with their circus, the first and only provincial tour of England by a major Australian circus, seems to confirm this. Participating in a parade at Consett to celebrate Queen Victoria’s Silver Jubilee, the contrast in social orders was made clear to George Wirth, as he later wrote:

We made a fine show of it, and the local clergyman, I remember as, well as the townsfolk, were suprised that circus people, who are looked down upon in England, could be so respectable! They were quite surprised to know that we always carried a schoolmaster to educate our children, and that our womenfolk, at least, went to church on Sunday.^[Wirth’s Australian Circus, England, 1897].

To some extent, Wirth’s observation implied that circus people were not looked down upon in Australia in 1897 as they were in England. Superficially at least, the evidence would suggest otherwise. Only ten years earlier, in 1887, petitioned by ‘the nob’s, Sydney’s mayor compelled Wirths Circus to open in the suburb of Newtown rather than the customary central circus site, Belmore Park.^[Sydney Morning Herald, 19 Dec 1887]. By the 1930s, even a large circus, such as Wirth Brothers, had to take what ground was available when coming to Sydney as public parks were ‘taboo’.^[Wirth, 15 May 1933, p.406]. Yet, these attitudes were probably more the expression of the civic self-interest of an urbanised middle-class than any conscious attempt to resurrect or extend established English notions of class.

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74 Sydney Morning Herald, 19 Dec 1887.
Beyond lapses in taste and decorum, the circus posed little threat to the prevailing social order, and even contributed to its maintenance by providing, like the festivals and carnivals of yore, a de facto form of social control. The early entrepreneurs strove to convince the colonial ‘upper orders’ and the people in general that their entertainments were not only harmless but contributed to social cohesion. Thus do we read how, in Melbourne in 1852, despite opposition to the opening of the visiting American circus of Joseph A Rowe, these entertainments could actually ‘diminish crime and facilitate the operations of the police’ by drawing people ‘away from public houses and dissipation’. Conscious of the strict conditions under which Melbourne’s Bench of City Magistrates had granted his license, Rowe was quick to publicly chastise the editors of The Argus for announcing several months later, without his authorisation, that some diggers planned to use his circus for a meeting. Several months later, the arrival of Burtons Circus on the Ovens successfully diverted the attention of the miners ‘at a critical moment when licence hunting was in full swing’ and forestalled a riot that threatened to take place. When Rowe returned to California in 1854 to invest the returns from his two-year long Melbourne sojourn, he left his wife in charge of the circus. During her husband’s absence, Eliza Rowe assumed responsibility for composing an address to Sir Charles Hotham, on his arrival and appointment as Lieutenant-Governor of Victoria, in appropriately obsequious terms.

76 P Burke, p.201.
77 E D and A Potts, Young America and Australian gold: America and the gold rush of the 1850s, Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1974, p.149.
78 Argus, 20 Nov 1852.
79 Salomon.
80 Argus, 15 Jul 1854.
‘Tis true Sir that we are not subjects to the Crown of Great Britain; yet a sojourn of from two to three years in this city has I hope shown that we respect (as I trust your Excellency will always find we shall do) venerate and cheerfully obey the laws and institutions of the land we live in and are practical lovers of law and order and of those who rule over us. [Rowes North American Circus, Melbourne, 1854].

Much energy was expended by Australia’s circus entrepreneurs in legitimising their image within the new social order, their public on the one hand and the licensing authorities on the other. This craving for legitimacy was not unique to Australian circus. In England and the United States, circus legitimised itself by expressing sentiments in keeping with the values that society espoused. Of English circus, the Australian proprietor, George Wirth, observed:

[The failure] of our own Australian Circus in England, in 1896, was due to our relying on the merits of our show to attract the British public, with insufficient advertising ... We did not parade the streets with glittering waggons and gaudy floats, and gaily be-ribboned horses, clowns, etc., whereas the circuses in England, were classed by the size of their display parade, and not by the performance which the public had to pay to see. [Wirths Australian Circus, England, 1896].

On the other hand, the pioneering English circus historian, Thomas Frost, summarised the American approach to image building in these words:

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81 Public Record Office of Victoria, Parchment address to His Excellency, Sir Charles Hotham KCB, Lieutenant Governor of the Colony of Victoria, from Mrs Eliza Rowe, VPRS 1095/7A/3/37.

82 G Wirth, 15 Apr, 15 May 1933, pp.375, 406.
Americans have a boundless admiration of everything big ... Circus proprietors bring their establishments before the public, not by vaunting the talent of the company, or the beauty and sagacity of the horses, but by announcing the thousands of square feet which the circus covers, the thousands of dollars to which their daily or weekly expenses amount, and the number of miles to which their parades extend. ‘This is a big concern’, say those who read the announcement, and their patronage is proportionate to its extent and cost.  

Over a period of a little more than two years, from December 1847 until January 1850, Robert Radford skilfully blended high culture and popular culture into one, a remarkable savoir faire of contemporary British circus, popular theatre and music hall. However, the content of his programme was determined not so much by public taste but by the expertise of the artists available at the time. When equestrians, acrobats and tightrope walkers were in supply - as was the case during most of 1848 - the programs bore their mark. When legitimate actors became more available from late 1848 and throughout 1849, Radford’s enterprise assumed more of the character of a popular playhouse, while still retaining essential elements of the circus. In forming his circus company at Wagga Wagga, N S W, in 1855, William ‘Tinker’ Brown advertised in the Sydney press for ‘ladies and gentlemen in the equestrian and dramatic profession’ promising ‘instant engagement’ on application. The strategies employed by both Radford and Brown supports the contention that the character of circus entertainments were defined less by what the people demanded and more by what

84 Sydney Morning Herald, 24 Aug 1855.
entrepreneurs supplied. But did this necessarily legitimise circus entertainments as a social institution in the eyes of the public?

Australia’s circus proprietors had to defend their reputations from the hostile attitudes of ‘the most fastidious’, an emerging middle class, a class which stressed morals, manners and right behaviour, and which was quick to label itinerant show people as disreputable when necessary. Early colonial circus advertising was peppered with self-serving statements such as the following:

The strictest attention will be paid to ensure becoming order and conduct; also that no immoral language or improper performance be introduced by the clown or any of the company, in order that the most fastidious can visit this place of amusement without the slightest repugnance. [Nobles Olympic Circus, Sydney, 1851].

Parents and guardians are respectfully informed that these entertainers are noble, graceful and manly, and alike incapable of offending the ear of modesty or causing a stain upon the cheek of beauty, the performances being conducted with that due regard to propriety and delicacy that has hitherto characterised this establishment. [Burtons National Circus, Adelaide, 1862].

While it is apparent that some lesser circus troupes relaxed their moral standards, circus proprietors intent on building and maintaining a name and reputation carefully refrained from

86 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 Dec 1850.
87 Broome with Jackomos, pp.47ff.
88 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 Sep 1851.
89 *South Australian Advertiser*, 4 Jan 1862.
offending this section of Australian society. Australia’s circus entrepreneurs have sought legitimacy by constructing their image in at least five key areas: associations, differentiation, bonding, visibility and identity. None of these areas was mutually exclusive while all, in some way, essentially served the pecuniary imperatives of the markets that circuses were inclined to serve.

Claims of former associations, whether real or imagined, with prestigious symbols of circus in the Old World was a popular path towards securing legitimisation. In Malcoms Amphitheatre in Sydney in 1851, the equestrian John Jones performed an equestrian piece ‘The Mameluke’s Retreat’, ‘an act so much admired at Astleys Amphitheatre, London, when performed by that celebrated Equestrian, Mr Ducrow’. Ashton was no mere colonial rider but the ‘British horseman’ who claimed to have been ‘the apprentice of the celebrated Batty’ and to have ‘performed in London, Liverpool and Dublin, and at most of the important towns in Great Britain and Ireland’. G B W Lewis named his 1854 Melbourne edifice after Astleys Amphitheatre in London and imported many of its performers from ‘old Astley’s’. At Wagga Wagga, N S W, in 1855, William ‘Tinker’ Brown invoked the respectability of ancient cultures by naming his new company his ‘Royal Amphitheatre and Roman Coliseum’.

Until well into the 20th century, claims of patronage – again, whether real or imagined - of monarchs, aristocrats or presidents gave the circus and its performers some stamp of legitimacy. The bareback

90 Sydney Morning Herald, 1 Mar 1851.
91 Hobart Town Courier, 6 Dec 1848.
92 Sydney Morning Herald, 10 Dec 1851.
93 Argus, 29 Aug 1854.
94 Sydney Sportsman, 8 Jan 1908.
95 Goulburn Herald, 20 Oct 1855.
rider Hunter, a former convict and a feature of Ashtons Royal Amphitheatre in Launceston in 1851, was ‘admired in England by nobility and even royalty’. 96 Cardoza’s performances on horseback had been ‘much admired by the Queen of Portugal and the Emperor of Brazil’. 97 Lewis, the promoter of the Melbourne Astley’s in 1854-55, performed before Queen Victoria and the Emperors of Russia and Austria. 98 Ashton had ‘the honour twice to ride before Her Majesty the Queen’. 99 To his Twofold Bay audiences in 1861, the American clown Yeamans claimed to have entertained the President of the United States with his humour. 100 Ashton’s claim, at least, is demonstrably false as he was already serving time as a convict when Queen Victoria ascended the throne in 1837. 101

Patrons of such eminence were obviously lacking in an Australian setting. So, the ‘distinguished patronage’ of the colonial upper orders was prized in lieu. Countless Australian circuses of the colonial era, dressed the names of their companies with the qualification of ‘Royal’, beginning with Radfords Royal Circus [my italics] in Launceston in 1848. The inaugural year of Burton’s Circus, 1851, was given a fillip by the patronage of Governor Fitzroy at Botany Bay on Easter Monday and again at West Maitland, N S W, less than a month later. 102 It was ‘a big thing’ when the Governor of Victoria, Lord Brassey, and Lady Brassey, attended Probascos Circus in Melbourne in 1898. 103 During an extraordinarily lengthy Sydney

96 Cornwall Chronicle, 5 Apr 1851.
97 Sydney Morning Herald, 17 May 1851.
98 Argus, 22 Sep 1854.
99 Maitland Mercury, 12 Feb 1853.
100 Twofold Bay & Monaro Telegraph, 20 Jul 1860.
101 Archives Office of Tasmania, Record of Golding Ashton, convict, CON 31/2, 18/8.
102 Sydney Morning Herald, 18 Apr 1851; Maitland Mercury, 10 May 1851.
103 A St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.79.
season – fourteen weeks - a unique twist to the practice of upper order patronage occurred one evening when FitzGerald’s performance was witnessed by the Archduke of Austro-Hungary, Franz Ferdinand d’Este, then visiting the city aboard a cruiser of the Austro-Hungarian navy.\textsuperscript{104} However, regal or vice-regal patronage did not necessarily extend as far as fraternisation. After the Governor of New Zealand and his lady visited Wirths Circus at Dunedin in 1892, they merely ‘sent around’ their compliments to Marizles Wirth after her equestrian juggling act.\textsuperscript{105} It is therefore surprising to read that the Governor of South Australia, and his wife, after witnessing the performance of ‘Zeneto’ [the Aboriginal tightwire artist, Con Colleano] in Adelaide in 1921, immediately rose from their seats and ran into the ring to personally congratulate him on his act.\textsuperscript{106}

Travelling shows of all genres multiplied following Burton’s 1851 tour of the goldfields. So, visiting Wagga Wagga, N S W, for the race week of 1876, Burtons Circus found itself in a ‘sharper’s paradise’, in the company of not only merry-go-rounds and caged beasts, but fortune tellers and ‘Bohemian sharpers’.\textsuperscript{107} A ‘grand circus’ that descended on Casino, N S W, for a race week in 1880 was but one of a ‘host of Bohemians’ that included panorama shows, freak shows, Punch and Judy, and a hurdy-gurdy, many of which were ‘very contemptible exhibitions, and only intended to support loafers’.\textsuperscript{108} The ‘tribe’ of Greek gypsies which camped with their merry-go-

\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 29 May 1893.
\textsuperscript{105} M Martin, in St Leon, 1984, p.27.
\textsuperscript{106} \textit{Everyone’s}, 4 Jan 1922.
\textsuperscript{108} \textit{Clarence & Richmond Examiner}, 7 Aug 1880.
round in Melbourne suburbs in 1898 were a ‘poverty stricken, hopeless, useless crowd’.  

When, from the 1880s, colonial governments encouraged the development of annual country shows to spread farming knowledge and bond rural communities, circuses increasingly organised their itineraries to visit towns on the emerging ‘show’ circuits only to find that lesser forms of entertainment usually followed in their wake. Local show committees, dominated by the new landed gentry, revived English class attitudes when they excluded ‘show touts’ and gambling tables.

While their numbers fluctuated sharply with the economic tide, a plethora of circus companies, large and small, major and minor, inevitably led to descriptions in the colonial press to ‘this class of entertainment’, ‘this description of show’, ‘this style of amusement’, ‘travelling tentage’, ‘this kind of entertainment’ and so on. To secure legitimation in the eyes of a ‘discerning public’, circus proprietors had to differentiate their offerings from other itinerant entertainments. This was hardly necessary or feasible in relation to offerings placed perceptively higher on the social scale, such as theatrical, musical and operatic companies, but was important in relation to entertainments at the other end of the social scale – and in which company an itinerant circus usually found itself at race weeks and country town.

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110 Broome with Jackomos, p.21.
111 Broome with Jackomos, p.23.
112 Daily Telegraph, 17 Dec 1883.
113 Bendigo Advertiser, 18 Feb 1879.
114 Wagga Wagga Advertiser, 25 Dec 1878.
115 South Australian Register, 5 Mar 1883.
116 Border Watch, 16 Apr 1879.
agricultural shows. During the formative period of their circus, the 1880s, the Wirth brothers found that playing country towns was not only more enjoyable than playing the big cities but more profitable, as Philip Wirth recalled in 1933:

The Agricultural Shows were absolute gold mines for us, as we were frequently able to give as many as twelve performances in one day, and, what is more important, the committees of the shows so appreciated the good taste of our entertainment that we were always asked to return for the next function ... However, tricksters and fakirs grew in numbers around us, and we were forced to use strong methods to awaken the public to the nature of these people. We always took care to keep the name of the circus people unsullied.  

[Wirth Brothers Circus, N S W c.1884].

The Wirths soon entered into a partnership with the Banvard family, a family of English performers, but the arrangement was short-lived as Phillip Wirth ‘hated the way’ Mrs Banvard used to ‘spiel’ on the showgrounds and racecourses. It gave the circus ‘a bad name’.

In the bush, the circus legitimised its image by bonding with local communities by supporting appeals for flood relief, local building funds for churches, hospitals and orphanages, and generally cultivating an air of empathy with the people. The evening the St Leon circus opened in Goulburn, N S W, late in 1884, an extensive fire broke out in Auburn Street destroying over £2,000 worth of property. ‘Yeoman service’ was done by the men of the circus, who worked ‘like Trojans’ in saving property and in endeavouring to quell the fire. In the midst of the confusion:

117 P Wirth, A lifetime with an Australian circus, Melbourne: Troedel & Cooper, 1933, p.31.
... Mr St Leon of the circus troupe picked up a cash box belonging to Mr Crandall and he immediately handed the same over to police.119

[St Leon's Circus, Goulburn, N S W, 1884].

At Tamworth in 1871, James Henry Ashton cancelled an evening’s performance when he heard of the death of ‘Brother’ Cohen a local Mason and member of Ashton’s own craft.120 The goodwill generated as a result of these gestures eventually paid dividends for years to come, as Ashton’s grandson, Leslie, recalled when interviewed in 1976:

Out around Walgett way and those places, people would say ‘Jimmy Ashton’s stuck four or five miles down the road there - horses knocked up’. They’d get a mob of horses out and give us some fresh horses to get us into town.” 121 [Ashtons Circus, Walgett, c.1910].

At Temora in 1899, as Probasco’s circus band serenaded in the main street, two horses attached to a buggy took fright at the ‘blare of brass’ and attempted to bolt before they turned on to the footpath, breaking the bolt and a couple of the undercarriage bars. Probasco jumped from his vehicle and offered to pay the cost of repairing the breakage.122

Visibility was another factor in securing legitimation. Almost always in the public view, the slightest transgression of law or social

119 Goulburn Evening Penny Post, 11 Dec 1884.
120 Australian Town & Country Journal, 10 Oct 1871. Speaight points out (p.150) that masonic affiliations gave many American and European circus proprietors valuable connections and smoothed professional rivalries.
121 L Ashton, 1976, interview.
122 Adelong Argus, 16 May 1899.
decorum, whether real or apparent, could attract attention. Although prestigious permanent circus buildings were erected in European cities during the 19th century for use by circus companies, no such endowment awaited Australia’s early circus proprietors. The early colonial amphitheatres were usually erected in unsavoury areas that tended to define, coincidentally or not, the social standing of the entertainment. In Hobart Town in 1848, the ‘locality’ selected by Radford for his circus was ‘improper’ in the eyes of local actors.\(^{123}\) In Port Phillip in 1849, Thomas Henry Hayes’ shortlived equestrian enterprise in Little Bourke Street concentrated ‘the scum and low villainy’.\(^{124}\) The immediate vicinity of Malcoms Royal Australian Circus in Sydney’s York Street in 1850 was ‘not of the sweetest’ and was frequented by intoxicated vagrants.\(^{125}\) The peripatetic circus avoided this problem of location by erecting its tents in a central, conspicuous position – the ‘lot’ in circus jargon - in each city and town visited. Any vacant ground in proximity to a hotel or a public school was a desirable location for a circus and both were usually centrally and conveniently situated. When interviewed in 1974, a son of the circus proprietor Gus St Leon, said:

> When the circus came to town it was almost a public holiday. Nearly everything stopped ... A lot of them came down and saw the circus put up. It was an event because there was a huge paddock of, say, ten or fifteen acres of nothing, and within three quarters of an hour there was a huge tent ... and wagons all around it. The success of circus in those days ... was the impact that a tented township had on the people.\(^{126}\) [St Leons Great United Circus, c.1914].

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\(^{123}\) Archives Office of Tasmania, *Correspondence between Colonial Secretary’s Office and Robert Avis Radford*, CSO 24/4/58.


\(^{125}\) *Sydney Sportsman*, 7 Feb 1906.

\(^{126}\) A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.173.
The visiting American circus of Cooper, Bailey & Co. went to some lengths to portray a positive, wholesome image when playing the larger cities such as Sydney and Melbourne, its proprietors mindful that impressions gained would be transmitted throughout the country towns in advance of the provincial tour of the circus. ‘Every attention and marked civility’ was paid to patrons:

[The big show on the Sunday puts forth no sign of life, and although hailing from a land where even theatres are open, Messrs Cooper and Bailey permit nothing to disturb the national respect due to the Sabbath day.] 127 [Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s Great International Allied Shows, Sydney, 1877]

Visibility and respectability, however, were not without their contradictions. In particular, the living conditions of circus people were easily visible to the outside world. To an observer at Portland, Victoria, it looked to be ‘a hard, hard life’.128 From the street outside Wirth Brothers Circus playing one of Melbourne’s suburbs in the 1880s, a shadow pantomime was observable through the canvas as a lady trapezian suckled her infant before ‘going on the high ropes’.129 One performer remembered that, as late as the 1930s:

... there weren’t any such things as primus stoves and so you cooked on the open fire and you were very embarrassed about this. When you were putting your tents up, Papa would always put the

128 Hamilton Spectator, 8 Apr 1879.
cookhouse away from facing the street so that people wouldn’t see you cooking on the fire.\textsuperscript{130} [St Leons Circus, c.1932].

So, the professional showman went to some length to raise their image in the eyes of the public wherever possible, or necessary. In a similar vein, the bandmaster of Eroni Brothers Circus around 1914 was:

an old chap ... [who] had a mania for going around the streets busking. My dad didn’t agree with that. That brought bad taste on the circus. You’d see him busking down the street of a daytime, blind drunk then see him up in the circus band that night.\textsuperscript{131} [Eroni Brothers Circus, c.1914].

Finally, legitimation was secured by the adoption or creation of an identity. Many aspects of circus contributed to its identity, from the content of its performance to the visual impact of its presence, from the tidiness of its paraphernalia and layout and to the demeanour and cleanliness of its people. Ultimately, the identity of a circus was embedded in the name it carried as this provided a communicable guarantee of some level of artistic, civic and commercial integrity and even social respectability. Visiting Benalla, Victoria, and its surrounding settlements in 1879, Ashtons was remembered as a circus of ‘old standing’ which had ‘first appeared in Bourke Street East in 1851’.\textsuperscript{132} In Victorian England:

Some circus-menageries were considerable businesses, with quantities of stock and equipment loaded on their long, lumbering wagon trains, and while the family that ran one might be seen

\textsuperscript{130} M Joseph, in St Leon, 1984, p.286.
\textsuperscript{131} M Perry, in St Leon, 1984, p.197.
\textsuperscript{132} Benalla Standard, 14 Nov 1879.
cooking their dinner in black pots outside their caravans like so many gypsies, the gaffer’s name on a bill could well be good for a very substantial sum.\footnote{Chesney, p.74.}

In Australia, the reputation embedded in a name could ‘pull’ a circus through or towards areas where it was customarily welcomed, but ‘push’ it away from places where its image had been tarnished for one reason or another. A new circus carried a fresh name and no stigma of past indiscretions. To be effective and communicable, however, names also had to be attractive and memorable. Since many were neither, many of Australia’s circus people adopted professional pseudonyms - \textit{noms d’arena}\footnote{T Frost, n.d., cited in Saxon, p.25.} - to artificially produce an instant sense of identity. This practice had come into vogue in various branches of the arts in England early in the 19th century but proved particularly valuable in Australian circus since, to local audiences, ‘Australian performers were nothing, supposedly’.\footnote{M Seymour, 1988, interview.} Almost certainly, Australia’s first circus pseudonym appeared in 1837, some years before the first colonial circuses were established. In February of that year, licences to perform rope dancing, tumbling and horsemanship in five country hotels in New South Wales were issued to George Croft and a Thomas Astley, whose surname mimicked that of Philip Astley, the so-called ‘father’ of the modern circus.

As Table 1 demonstrates, some of Australia’s major circus families adopted \textit{noms d’arena} to escape a prosaic or unattractive name on the one hand, and to create a sense of drama, interest, differentiation or just simplicity on the other. So, appearing as a gymnastic troupe at Barry Sullivan’s Theatre Royal in Melbourne in 1865, the London-
born performer John Jones and his young sons became The St Leon Troupe from ‘from the Gymnase Imperiale, Paris’, the name ‘St Leon’ serving the family and its circus activities well in to the 20th century; in 1893, W G ‘Bill’ Perry adopted the name of ‘Eroni’ to promote his circus, thus differentiating it from the rival circus of his brother, Charles ‘Jubilee’ Perry; and, forming their own circus in 1910, Con Sullivan, his Aboriginal wife and children, promoted themselves as the ‘Royal Hawaiians’ and their circus as Colleanos All-Star Circus while at the same time masking their Aboriginal origins. \(^{137}\) These noms d’arenas often became accepted family names.

**Summary**

From its earliest British origins, circus was associated with performers, managements and audiences of low social standing. These views were reinforced by longstanding legal differentiation between itinerant entertainers and popular entertainment, on the one hand, and legitimate theatre on the other. Even as legal differentiations were removed and popular entertainments allowed to flower, the circus has, until this day, never completely escaped its inherited marginalised status. To a considerable extent, the introduction of circus to Australia was accompanied by the transplantation of these Old World attitudes. Although largely freed of the condescending and restrictive attitudes with which circus activities were labelled in England for hundreds of years, circus in Australia had to contend with other imperatives, those imposed by an emerging social order. While this social order subsumed some of the Old World proclivities, it expressed others completely new: the absence of a pre-existing culture, a vague sense of nationalism and social status based more on pecuniary priorities than birth and

\(^{136}\) *Argus*, 27 Jan 1865.

\(^{137}\) *Warialda Standard*, 28 Nov 1910; *Western Star*, 10 Feb 1917.
education. As the colonies became prosperous, the differentiation between highbrow and lowbrow entertainments became more apparent. Reaching its public was more than just a matter of physical presence for the circus in Australia. From its inception until the present time, Australian circus had to generate audiences from a population continuously and rapidly changing in size, character and domicile. A circus had to create, shape and continuously update a legitimacy to connect with its public and to appease the prevailing social order. The desire for legitimacy was, and continues to be, a constant theme in Australian circus.

Figure 4
St Leon Brothers Circus, on the bank of the Murray River, Loxton, South Australia, 1911. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Pic Acc 5250.
CHAPTER II

People & class

Within their community, barriers of colour, religion and class have no place.¹

In 19th century England, circus performers were not only placed towards the lower end of the English social hierarchy but also at the lower end of the social hierarchy within the world of entertainers.² Circus in England was by no means a ‘class-free utopia’³ and possessed its own unwritten behavioural conventions.

Australia’s circus people also existed on the fringe of an emerging social system and somewhere beyond its prevailing norms and values, and the stability, security and predictability it had to offer. They developed their own ‘network of communicative action’, a social system of their own.⁴ Despite the condescension facing them, most circus people were ‘very honest people’.⁵ George Wirth, one of the proprietors of Wirth Brothers Circus, described Australia’s circus

¹ Fernandez, p.38.
² Saxon, p.34.
³ Stoddart, p.50.
⁴ Habermas, 1979, cited in Swingewood, p.63.
⁵ M King, 1989, interview, Tape 7.
people in 1925 as ‘very conservative, a little world of themselves’. He went on to say:

Circus people are simple reticent folk, as a rule, and they wear their Sunday clothes and Sunday manners, while they are being critically examined by outsiders ... Circus folk are really simple souls who live a life apart, and a singularly sheltered life at that. They have their own standards, their own code of ethics and manners, their own way of life. And their views are really somewhat puritanical.

What social characteristics define Australia’s circus people as a class and where have they stood in relation to each other and in relation to conventional examples of society? This chapter examines early circus people in Australia as a class which, over time, developed unique social symbols and patterns of social behaviour. This examination includes identification and discussion of entrepreneurial figures who were influential in shaping and determining these symbols and patterns. It includes a consideration of the changing nature of circus entrepreneurship in the face of broader social and economic questions. It also examines the role of family and gender in defining circus people as an identifiable class. These objectives are achieved by letting the circus people speak for themselves as far as possible rather than by the application of a formally structured analysis of class.

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6 G Wirth, 14 Jan 1933, p.36.
7 G Wirth, 15 Jul 1933, p.90.
Entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurs had the initiative to assemble the human and other resources necessary for the production of circus entertainments. During the first ten years of circus activity in Australia, 1847 - 56, activities of a circus nature were entrepreneured by the men listed in Table 2. The immediate observations that can be made from this list are that Australia’s earliest circus people were male, drawn from the British Isles (82%) and the USA (18%), mostly free arrivals, mostly equipped with professional experience prior to their arrival in the colonies, and many were adequately educated in contemporary terms. The father’s (or guardian’s) occupation, where known, further suggests the social milieu from which many of these men sprang. Anecdotally at least, what homogeneity is suggested by this incomplete profile of Australia’s earliest circus entrepreneurs tends to parallel an observation of British circus people as ‘escaping all categories of class, intellect, of background, of profession’.  

8 Henry Burton’s ‘exquisite suavity and pompousness’ made for a strong contrast with his contemporary, James Henry Ashton. Ashton ‘had not the class’ of Burton and was ‘a showman of a distinct type and bygone period’, his ‘brigandish’ manner of speaking containing ‘a little Romany articulation and etymology à la St Giles’.  

9 That Burton sprang from a quite different social background to Ashton is given further weight by this passage from a 1900 obituary:

[Of] Burton himself, professionally, what an incomparable ringmaster he made! Fully six feet in height, of commanding erect carriage, and a pleasant resonant voice – he would be attired in faultless evening dress, lights flashed from diamond stud and ring,

8 Carmeli, pp. 213ff.
9 Bulletin, 26 Dec 1891.
that would have been classed as ‘loud’ by most men – Burton was the idol of the ladies.\(^\text{10}\)

Such contrasts are understandable when we learn that Burton, ‘trained’ as a ringmaster in Cooke’s, was the son of a Lincolnshire gentleman (‘esquire’), while Ashton was a tinker’s son, former Essex stable boy and convict. Yet Ashton perpetuated an Australian circus dynasty that survives to this day, while Burton left no such legacy, lost his accumulated fortune in a disastrous speculation, and ended his days in poverty in the Melbourne Dramatic Home.\(^\text{11}\)

**Family**

Despite crude travelling conditions, Australia’s early show people began to re-create much of the lifestyle of the fairground people and travellers of England. The family, rather than the individual entrepreneur, proved to be the mainstay of the Australian circus. Knowledge of performing techniques and circus skills were shared, developed and retained between family members. A family provided a source of artists and labour and a supportive environment. A large family was ‘the key’ to obtaining a good living from a successful circus.\(^\text{12}\) Until the appearance of a contemporary circus movement in the 1970s, unfettered by claims of history or tradition, the circuses of Australia remained largely family-based organisations. Mervyn King was well acquainted with this family orientation:

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\(^\text{10}\) *Port Fairy Gazette*, 24 Apr 1900.

\(^\text{11}\) *Salomon; Age*, 12 Mar 1900.

\(^\text{12}\) M King, 1989, interview, Tape 5.
People & class

Of course, the idea in circus was to have a family and that way you could run a circus. In the depression, his wife was still having kids and there was hardly enough to feed half of them let alone feed the lot of them.\textsuperscript{13} [St Leons Circus, c.1932].

The ‘family’ pattern of Australian circus was readily observable by the late 1800s with troupes such as those of Ashton, Eroni (Perry) and St Leon (Jones) entering their third generation of professional activity. To a patriarchal, sometimes matriarchal, figure fell the responsibilities for leadership and control. In the larger urbanised circuses of the early 1900s, Wirth Brothers and FitzGerald Brothers, the family devolved much of the management to trusted lieutenants. The larger family-based horsedrawn wagon shows - called ‘road shows’ in the motorised era - accumulated reputations over several generations of travelling and performing. In these family-based circuses, entrenched attitudes, inter-generational conflict and sibling rivalry sometimes stifled any well-meaning suggestions and ambitions. Of the circus proprietor, Walter St Leon, his son Allan recalled in 1974:

As long as he made enough to live on, he was satisfied. We young fellows wanted to push along and make the show bigger and better but Dad would not have any of that ... So we gave up.\textsuperscript{14} [St Leon Brothers Circus, c. 1912].

The occupational characteristics of circus life - itinerancy, community and marginalisation - inevitably socialised circus people into well-

\textsuperscript{13} M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.272.
\textsuperscript{14} A St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.90.
defined career and lifestyle choices. Outwardly at least, circuses took pride in their moral tone as *The Bulletin* commented in 1892:

> The ladies are mostly married to members of the company they travel with and monogamy is almost a masculine rule of the perfesh [sic; professional?].

Deprived of wider social and educational opportunities, circus people ‘did not mix with anybody else’.

Circus families moved in and out of each other’s shows, intermarried and brought forth a new generation. Marriage between circus people also gave greater assurance that any children were ‘circus types’, suitably proportioned for a life of physical performance and labour. The hotel, at least, was a medium for fraternisation with the local people and may explain why several sons of circus families took publicans’ daughters as wives. As late as 1971, it was still observed that circus people:

> live in a closed community. It is them against the world in many ways. They do not mix outside so they intermarry. They seldom read the papers or remember where they were last week.

Yet by the 1970s, the situation had altered appreciably since earlier days, as Mervyn King recalled:

> [Y]ou’re more or less living a civilised life today ... If they want to go home for the weekend it’s only just a matter to jump in a ‘plane and

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15 *Bulletin*, 19 Mar 1892.
16 M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.257.
17 Fernandez, p.38.
you’re there in an hour. They’re not so isolated, whereas in those
days they probably wouldn’t see their parents for two years and
three years.\(^\text{18}\)

**Performers**

Beyond a proprietor and his (or her) family, there were the
employed circus performers, the more exceptional of whom were
proudly promoted in the bills of the day.

In opening his Royal Circus in Launceston in December 1847,
Radford announced that his little company included not merely
‘equestrians’ but *theatrical* equestrians ‘formerly attached to the
London stage’ [my italics].\(^\text{19}\) That some - perhaps most - of Radford’s
little company of performers may have been former convicts was
left unsaid but given a population comprised mostly of former
convict and ‘lower orders’ the oversight probably mattered little.
The elements of ‘histrionic, comic and equestrian genius’\(^\text{20}\) presented
in each evening’s programme represented ‘the united efforts of the
company, clown and the orchestra’.\(^\text{21}\) A few months after his
Launceston opening, Hobart Town’s actors vigorously objected to
Radford opening an amphitheatre in the capital. However, their
objections did not outwardly reflect any sense of class distinction
between theatre and circus people, as well they might have given the
lower status of the latter in England, but on the actors’ pecuniary

\(^{18}\) M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.250.
\(^{19}\) *Cornwall Chronicle*, 22 Dec 1847.
\(^{20}\) *Cornwall Chronicle*, 15 Mar 1848.
\(^{21}\) *Cornwall Chronicle*, 15 Jul 1848.
considerations of ‘livelihood’, ‘remuneration’ and the need to support their ‘large families’.  

The most popular performers, like the most popular circus companies, accumulated reputations over many years and places of giving performance before the public. In Hobart in 1866, as a member of Foleys Californian Circus, the Aborigine William ‘Billy’ Jones walked a rope stretched at a height of about fifty feet from the top of the circus king pole to the Theatre Royal on the other side of Argyle Street. His performance made such an impression on spectators that he was readily recognised by many in the audience when he visited Hobart nearly twenty years later, in 1884, as the ringmaster of St Leons Circus. By the turn of the 20th century, the more highly prized performers were described as ‘specialty artists’, who were ‘stars in their way, and are paid simply to go through their performance and nothing more’.  

At least until the early 1930s, when recorded music and panotropes began to be used, circuses carried their own bands of musicians. The status of musicians in the circus hierarchy varied according to circumstance. Bert Houten, the ‘always well-dressed’ bass player in Gus St Leons Great United Circus in 1912, ‘would not lift a finger to help’ around the circus. With Probascos Circus in New Zealand in 1896, it was observed that the bandsmen ‘frequently lend a hand to get the tent down’ but apparently had no other responsibility outside of music. If absorbed into a circus family, a musician might

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22 Saxon, p.24; Archives Office of Tasmania, Correspondence between Colonial Secretary’s Office and Robert Avis Radford, CSO 24/4/58.
23 Mercury, 7 Jun 1866.
24 Mercury, 14 Feb 1884.
26 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.178.
27 Onlooker, in St Leon,1985, p.76.
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take a more active role in the daily routine of the circus. In Perry Brothers Circus in the 1920s, one of the Perry girls, Lizzie, married a musician, Aubrey Lovett, who ‘used to play the cornet in the band’ but was also ‘a sort of jack-of-all-trades’. In Sole Brothers Circus, Bill Sole, a musician by profession, took the role of ‘boss tentman’ and left the management of the circus to his wife, Eliza. He was remembered as ‘a good worker around the tent [who would] do as much work as any two men’.

Women

The circus proprietor Matthew St Leon thought it ‘not proper’ for his wife and daughters to travel with the circus. The income his circus generated allowed him to keep them ‘in plush’ in Melbourne. His restrictive attitude was not typical however. In most circus families, women played a decisive – and sometimes a dominant - role in the conduct of the enterprise. Women gave a circus community its stability, its moral tone and, although there were ‘not too many duchesses in circus life’, a part of its popular image. In the hierarchy of the circus, a proprietor’s wife often assumed the status of a matriarchal figure, especially if her husband was preoccupied with other aspects of the enterprise. An elderly circus lady, Madge Seymour, spoke in this vein when interviewed in Brisbane in 1988:

Generally it’s the woman that holds them together … I don’t know why … But they seemed to be the ‘brain’ for the party, maybe because they’re not performers as a rule and they can see what’s

28 N V St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.322.
29 A St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.96.
31 R Harvey, 1970, personal communication.
32 N V St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.333.
going on ... They always seem to have the knack of watching things and seeing what should be done. If you’re standing off something you can see what should be done ... Mrs Perry held them. Mrs Sole was the same [and so was] old Granny [Mrs James] Ashton.  

Although not born into the circus life, James Henry Ashton’s wife Elizabeth travelled continuously with her husband. Each Sunday in whichever town the Ashton circus happened to be, she dressed in her bonnet and black silk shawl to attend church. Of Ashtons Circus of a later generation, it was said:

Phyllis Ashton not only brought up her young family and looked after the household chores, but also trained horses, rehearsed acts, and drove a five ton truck, complete with a trailerful of animals. 

[Ashtons Circus, c.1950].

After the deaths of Dan and Tom FitzGerald within a few months of each other in 1906, Mrs Tom FitzGerald, ‘an attractive, capable woman’, took over the management of FitzGerald Brothers circus and brought it back to Australia. Previous to her husband’s death, she had looked after the juvenile performers, made and repaired the circus costumes, and filled in gaps in the programme with her equestrian act. Although the ‘plucky young woman’ intended to make the FitzGerald name stand out again ‘as high as Kosciusko’,

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33 M Seymour, 1988, interview.  
34 Fernandez, p.20.  
35 Author’s Collection: unsourced clipping.  
the ‘opportunists’ whom she engaged and relied upon ‘ran the circus into the ground’. 38

While women filled the customary roles of wives and mothers, cooks and seamstresses, capable female performers were few and therefore highly prized and heavily promoted in the circus advertising. The early imbalance between male and female performers, adults and children is suggested by the analysis presented in Table 3, a numerical summary of the artists known to have passed through Radford’s Circus during the two years of its operation between December 1847 and January 1850. In all, at least seventy-five artists - acrobats, equestrians, musicians, singers, actors and so on - were employed for varying periods in Radfords Royal Circus. Suggesting the later, almost chronic, shortage of capable female performers, only one of Radford’s female performers was actually a circus performer, Elizabeth Louise Mills, the ‘Miss Howard’ in Radfords Royal Amphitheatre in Launceston in December 1848. 39

Whether as performers or proprietors – and sometimes both – Australia’s circus women were typically born or raised in ‘the business’. In 1851, the famed equestrienne, Madame Rosina (Mrs Henry Burton), a former apprentice of Ducrow, gave her first colonial performances. So did Ashton’s young wife and pupil whose ‘graceful attitudes and confidence’ were evident in the duet with her husband of ‘Mercury and Pandora’. 40 Jennie Kendall (c.1841 - 1915), a ‘splendid and fearless rider’ who had served her equestrian apprenticeship in Malcom’s in the 1850s, adopted the professional name of Madamoiselle La Rosiere and was the ‘draw’ of Burton’s

38 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.176.
39 Hobart Town Courier, 21 Oct 1848.
40 Cornwall Chronicle, 12 Apr 1851.
Circus in the 1860s and 1870s. She was one of the few women who performed the difficult ‘bounding jockey’ act. In Brisbane, in 1879, the twice-widowed Jennie married William Woodyear, Burton’s business manager. Early in 1880, the Woodyears took over the insolvent Henry Burton’s circus, retaining the prestigious name of ‘Burton’ for a time to promote the circus. By 1884, with Jenny retired from active circus riding and having given birth to her thirteenth child, their circus was thenceforth promoted as Madame Woodyears Electric Circus. In Sole Brothers Circus, founded in 1917, it was Mrs Eliza Sole (the former Eliza Perry, a daughter of the circus proprietor, W G Perry) who took the upper hand in its management rather than her husband, William ‘Bill’ Sole, a circus bandsman and boss tentman. When her husband was killed in 1923 by the explosion of an acetylene gas circus lighting plant, Eliza carried on with her grown children, even taking the circus to Africa for an extensive tour of three years, 1926–28. As the South African archives show, Eliza personally attended to the rigorous immigration, entry and exit procedures that underscored the visit. Yet, Eliza also continued to carry out the roles more typical of a circus woman:

She used to do the cooking for the tent hands and performers ... Mrs Sole used to rouse the tent hands by shouting out ‘Breakfast, youse

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42 Registrar-General, Queensland: Marriage certificate, William Woodyear and Jennie Kendall, #6502, 1879.
43 Sydney Morning Herald, 19 Jan 1880.
44 Bulletin, 30 Aug 1884.
45 Sydney Morning Herald, 4 Jun 1923.
46 National Archives of South Africa, Sole Bros Circus, PIO40:3653E.
men’ and they’d all come in with their plates and billycans.\textsuperscript{47} [Sole Brothers Circus, c.1929].

Some professional roles in circus were closed to women. In the Gus St Leon Circus in the 1910s, ‘they looked down on having a girl playing in the band’\textsuperscript{48}, while female performers were excluded from some acts. One of these was the revolving ladder act, which the Gus St Leon family learned in Mexico, as Mervyn King recalled:

They would never have a woman sitting astride a ladder. It was not the right thing for a woman to do. In those days, you would never see women riding astride. They would ride sidesaddle.\textsuperscript{49} [Gus St Leons Great United Circus Company, c.1916].

In her novel \textit{Haxby’s Circus} (1930), based on her observations gathered during a period spent travelling with Wirth Brothers Circus, the Australian author Katharine Susannah Prichard perceptively recognised the burden the circus culture placed on women in producing the next generation of circus performers:

A machine for churning out acrobats and bare-back riders - that’s all he thinks I am ... It’s the show all the time with your father - the damned show. That’s all he thinks about ... and my job’s to supply [the] performers.\textsuperscript{50}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{47} N V St Leon, in \textit{St Leon}, 1984, p.328.
\item \textsuperscript{48} M King, 1989, interview, Tape 6.
\item \textsuperscript{49} M King, in \textit{St Leon}, 1984, p.276.
\item \textsuperscript{50} K S Prichard, \textit{Haxby’s Circus}, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1988, p.105.
\end{itemize}
Other women in circus, drawn from outside circus life, had little to contribute to the maintenance of the circus beyond the care of their immediate family and a decorative role in the ring or the circus parade.

My mother ... was never good enough to ride in the act in the show ring, something that disturbed her quite a lot because ... everybody said that she was ‘dead wood’.  

Much of the post - 1945 success of Bullen Brothers Circus was due to Lillian Bullen’s ‘colourful and forceful’ personality. Her husband, Perce Bullen, co-founder and co-proprietor, enjoyed painting and decorating his circus caravans and left the responsibilities of managing the human relationships of the circus to Lillian. ‘Tiger Lil’, as she was popularly known:

had the fruitiest voice when she was talking to the Lord Mayor and the roughest tongue you can possibly imagine when she was talking to the tent hands.  

[Bullen Brothers Circus, c.1956].

The power that Mrs Bullen exerted over the family corporation brought the circus to a standstill at Singleton, N S W, in 1963, when she fired her husband and sons from the board of directors.  

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51 N V St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.329.  
53 N V St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.331.  
Children

Despite the not infrequent arrival of performers from England, the United States and elsewhere, and performers moving from one troupe to another, the circus entrepreneur constantly faced the challenge of maintaining the strength of his company and programme. The addition of even only two or three performers could materially improve the quality of a circus programme, by preventing delays between acts and diversifying the entertainments, since many performers could perform different acts.

As in England, an apprenticeship system was introduced in the early amphitheatres to redress the colonial shortage of performers, especially female performers. To circus entrepreneurs, juveniles and youths were cheaper to employ, more controllable and provided a lengthier period of service than older performers. Their supple limbs were adaptable to the physical demands of training and performance. While results were mixed - some apprentices absconded while others had only short-lived careers - several graduated to play key roles in the development of circus in Australia such as Thomas Bird, James Melville and Jennie Kendall.

Radford presented two juvenile brothers, the Baldwins, as well his own son, Jack, in his circus in Van Diemen’s Land during 1848. Soon after the opening of the Royal Australian Equestrian Circus, La Rosiere advertised for several young females ‘as apprentices’. Probably during 1851, aged about fourteen years, James Melville was apprenticed to John Malcom. Children were often drawn from less-privileged backgrounds as well as abandoned or illegitimate

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55 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 1 Mar, 5 Aug 1848.
56 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 Nov 1850.
children since ‘some funny things happening in those days with children’.

As the itinerant circuses began to reach the settlements emerging on the colonial frontier, another source of children for ‘apprenticeship’ emerged. These were Aborigines, usually the product of miscegenous unions, and the outcasts of both races. Most of the circus families of the colonial period carried at least one Aboriginal performer, reflective of the practice in British circus of employing a token black or mulatto.

Townspeople easily lightened themselves of children born out of wedlock, unwanted because of the associated stigma, by giving them away to a travelling circus. In 1915, the base-born infant Mervyn King was given away to the Gus St Leon circus by his guardian, his paternal grandfather, Martin Fitzhenry, a retired schoolteacher:

One day old Mr Fitzhenry, my grandfather, took me in a sulky and we drove from Ballina to Uki ... My grandfather told me that I was going to go with them [the Gus St Leon circus] on a ‘holiday’ ... I was only seven years old and soon I found myself doing a man’s work ... I became an acrobat and worked for the St Leons for the best part of twenty years.  

In Melbourne in 1896, FitzGerald Brothers were fined £400 under the Factories Act for ‘employing girls for more than 48 hours [per week]’. These perverse practices may have confirmed the

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58 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 35.
59 Saxon, pp.331-32.
60 M King, 1989, interview, Tapes 1, 2.
61 Armidale Express, 15 Sep 1896.
‘vagabond’ status of circus in relation to settled society. Probably as a result of the introduction of adoption and other welfare legislation, known instances of exploitation and mistreatment of children in circus receded over the course of the 20th century, while the earlier hardships and rigours of circus life for children were gradually relaxed. In Ashtons Circus in 1971:

Every effort is made to make life good for the children. They have tennis racquets and bicycles, in spite of the congestion in the caravan homes. They have pets, too. Their birthdays are celebrated. They are never forced to go in the show but go into the pony act and a dance routine whenever they feel like it, which is most nights. They take part in every conceivable sport and hobby so whenever the show lays up for a few days the young ones grasp the opportunity to fly to the ski grounds or visit the local aero club to get their flying hours up to date ... As you might expect with their sense of balance and high degree of co-ordination, circus children master the elementary stages of a sport like waterskiing the first time they try it.  

Warbs

The men ‘who did the work around the circus’, rather than the performers, were responsible for the ‘poor character’ attributed to circus people. In the argot of Australia’s circus people, these were the ‘warbs’, the tentmen, grooms and general hands employed for menial work, and the lowest stratum in the social hierarchy of the circus. In England, local town labour alleviated the need for a circus

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63 T H Lynn, in St Leon, 1984, p.66.
64 Hughes, p.616.
to carry a ‘motley gang’ of working men.\(^\text{65}\) Not so in Australia, where distances were longer and each stand [a stay in a town] typically shorter. At Dubbo, N S W, in 1916, Wirth Brothers’ working men suddenly decided to enlist in the army as the circus was about to be loaded on its special train and proceed to the next stand, Coonamble, N S W. A compromise was reached when the circus managers guaranteed the men their jobs back if they failed their army medical test - provided everything was loaded onto the train so the circus could arrive in Coonamble to schedule.\(^\text{66}\)

After a stint with Perry Brothers Circus in the 1930s, Mervyn King took the job of ‘boss’ tentman with Wirth Brothers Circus:

> When they gave me the job they lined the men up and they said, ‘Now is there anybody here from Perry’s?’ They knew that I had been with Perry’s, and Perry’s and Wirth’s were at loggerheads. God, I seen about six Perry tenthands which knew me. I said, ‘No, I can’t recognise any of them’. But I thought I’ll have a few on my side anyhow. You can’t take it over with a bunch of new men.\(^\text{67}\) [Wirth Brothers Circus, c.1934]

Despite their lowly station within the circus community, the working men were often the most visible to the public outside the actual circus performance. The arrival of Probascos Circus at Milton outside Dunedin in 1897 was thus observed:

> A number of vans, laden with tents, ropes and paraphernalia each with two or four horses in the shafts, and directed by unkempt drivers, arrived first. On the top of these baggage wagons, damp

\(^{65}\) Fernandez, p.71.

\(^{66}\) Forbes Times, 16 Jun 1916; Australian Variety, 28 Jun 1916.

\(^{67}\) M King, 1989, interview, Tape 5.
and steaming tentmen snatched an uneasy term of sleep, with their legs dangling over the side. The drivers from a stalwart African Negro to a Queensland Aboriginal boy, looked as hard as nails and their fertility in the use of expletives surpassed that of the most accomplished stage manager ... It was difficult to ascertain in most cases what colour their clothes had originally been.  

Circus hands received such ‘wretched rates’ of pay that they slept in tents or under wagons on the circus lot and cooked their own meals. They were liable to be roused out of their beds in the morning with a bucketful of cold water.

Since fighting and drinking among ‘the working men’ were readily visible to the public, some circus proprietors avoided employing the ‘roughies’ where possible.

On one occasion when were we with Perry’s, we came to a mining town. It could have been Ipswich or Gympie ... There had been

\[Probascos Circus, New Zealand, 1896].\]

\[Probascos Circus, New Zealand, c.1896].\]

\[Probascos Circus, New Zealand, 1896].\]
some disturbance with the tent hands and the miners during the day in a pub. There had been a fight. There were quite a lot of fights between the townspeople and the circus people. Apparently the tent hands had beaten up these miners. The miners got their friends together and said they were going to do the circus over, after the show ... Sure enough, when the circus finished with the high jumping horses, the people in the audience, who were mostly miners, pulled out their sticks, weapons and chains and were about to start attacking the circus and doing damage like rooting up the tent and things like that. So the Perry boys armed the elephants. They put chains in the elephants trunks and let the elephants loose. Then they mounted all the people who could ride on to the horses and gave them chains also. They rode through the middle of these miners and dispersed them in no time.\textsuperscript{72} [\textit{Perry Brothers Circus, Queensland, c.1928}].

A report of the opening of the large American circus, Cooper, Bailey and Co., in Sydney in 1877, may have held up a mirror to the colonial circus community when it observed that there were:

no roughs connected with [Cooper, Bailey & Co.]. Each man is a gentleman in his place. We heard no ill-mannered remarks made. There was an entire absence of the smell of whiskey emitting its sickening odours from the mouths of the employees.\textsuperscript{73}

From another source, however, we read that Cooper, Bailey & Co. brought with them a gang of workmen, who, at the least sign of trouble, ‘turned out with pick handles, and struck and spared not’.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{72} N V St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.329.
\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Australian Town & Country Journal}, 1 Dec 1877
\textsuperscript{74} W St Leon, quoted in \textit{Onlooker}, in St Leon, 1985, p.75.
Despite their lowly station, circus hands could nevertheless embrace ‘men of family and education’ as well as ‘men of neither’, such as a medical student who ‘had a nervous breakdown and was told to get away’ from his studies for a while and a ‘schoolteacher [who] went broke after he got caught up with a couple of con men’. Within the hierarchy of the circus, stigma on the grounds of Aboriginality - or any other race - seems to have been non-existent. The working men of Fitzgerald Brothers Circus in 1905 were ‘the customary queer composite of races and classes’ and included Germans, Maoris, Japanese and Malays. Of the eight or nine tenthands employed in Gus St Leons Great United Circus around 1915, the Aborigine Tommy Rapp was remembered as ‘a nice fellow, a real gentleman’ and ‘well-liked around the show’. However, few Aborigines were employed since ‘they wasn’t allowed to move around’. In any case, townspeople frowned upon their employment as ‘cheap labour’.

Aborigines

Australia’s circus people were more kindly disposed to the Aborigine than other white Australians, an attitude that appears to have been reciprocated, for the few circus Aborigines were loyal employees and, in several cases, exceptional circus artists. Early in 1851, Burton presented an ‘Indian’ rider, a term suggestive of an Aborigine and thus, arguably, the first appearance of an Aborigine in any genre of the European performing arts. In 1853, Ashton procured a young

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75 Te Whero [pseud.], ‘A morning in a circus tent: Behind the scenes at FitzGerald’s show’, in Sydney Mail, 26 Apr 1905, p.1056.
76 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 7.
77 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 7.
78 Te Whero.
79 M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.277.
81 Sydney Morning Herald, 25 Feb 1851.
Aborigine from Tamworth, N S W, dubbed him Master Mongo and trained him to perform ‘many and daring feats on horseback’ in less than two years. In May 1852, John Jones returned to Sydney from Bathurst, N S W, and its surrounding goldfields with ‘his talented company and stud of horses’ as well as a pair of Aboriginal boys, the first confirmed appearance by Aborigines in a circus arena. One of these boys was William ‘Billy’ Jones who was to enjoy a lengthy career with almost every Australian circus of note, as equestrian, rope-walker and ringmaster.

He made his first appearance at Sofala [in 1851 or 1852]. The circus tent [of the proprietor John Jones, whose surname Billy took as his own] consisted of side walls only ... [He] was ‘carried’ round by a rider standing up on a horse. The rider had tights, but Billy was dressed in trousers and shirt and was barefooted. A large sum of money was thrown into the ring as a reward for his pluck by the diggers of the Turon.

Billy Jones’ obvious Aboriginality was neither promoted nor concealed and was no barrier to his acceptance by either public or profession. However, the unashamed presentation of Aboriginal infants and youths as ‘Aboriginal’ equestrians in circus, a polite novelty in the 1850s, soon fell out of step with emerging sensibilities. By the 1870s, the descriptive label ‘Aboriginal’ was quietly replaced by ‘South American’, ‘Brazilian’ or ‘Wild Indian’. For example, the young Aboriginal performer, Edward Campbell, was presented as ‘Antonia, the Brazilian horseman’ in Ashtons Circus at Grafton, N S W, in 1874. Although the Aboriginal acrobat, Ernie Gilbert, ‘was like one of the family’ in Sole Brothers Circus in the early 1920s, he did

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82 *Illustrated Sydney News*, 6 May 1854.
83 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 May 1852.
84 *Bulletin*, 9 Mar 1895.
86 *Clarence & Richmond Examiner*, 7 Jul 1874.
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not accompany the circus on its South African visit because there ‘they treated the coloured people terrible’. 87

Community

Not only were there social hierarchies within each circus community but hierarchies existed within the community of circuses. To an old Australian circus lady, Mary Sole (1892 - 1975), the proprietors of Australia’s largest, most prestigious circus, the Wirths were the ‘aristocrats of show business’88 while the Walter St Leon family were ‘a nice family ... sort of, you know, refined and that’. 89

Yet, circus people held condescending attitudes towards each other whether on personal or professional grounds.

Wirth’s was top ... but not in size, in quality ... [T]hey had had a bit of overseas experience. They knew how to present their programme a bit better than the other people here. Perry’s always had a bigger show but a lot of it was junk, rubbish ... I don’t think you could split Perry’s and St Leon’s as far as size, but if it came to quality you’d say St Leon’s would leave them for dead. 90

... the two FitzGeralds [were very popular men], more so than the Wirths. The Wirths were snobs by comparison. 91

87 M Lindsay, in St Leon, 1984, p.119.
88 M Lindsay, in St Leon, 1984, p.112.
89 M Lindsay, in St Leon, 1984, p.106.
90 M King, in St Leon, 1984, pp.271-72.
91 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.184.

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Recalling the break-up of a short-lived circus partnership between the James Ashton and Walter St Leon families, Mrs Walter St Leon was described by one of her sons as:

a well-educated lady ... [The Ashtons] had never had any schooling because they were on the road all their lives ... Mother didn’t like [the Ashton girls] getting mixed up with her boys. \(^{92}\) [St Leon Brothers Circus, 1912]

In that year (1912) two St Leon circuses travelled New South Wales, the Great United Circus of the Gus St Leon family and the smaller St Leon Brothers Circus of Gus’s brother, Walter. Gus St Leon found it necessary to inform the townspeople of Gundagai, N S W, that his circus had ‘no connection with St Leon Bros Side Show [sic]. This is the big show’, \(^{93}\) although his reasons for making this perplexing distinction are not known.

Many circus people continued to distinguish themselves from supposedly lower levels of the entertainment hierarchy well into the 20th century. The remnants of St Leons Circus had seen better days when:

we finally got stuck ... at Wallangarrah ... [and we] camped there. Mum stayed with us and Uncle Syl and Papa went and did a few sideshows which was very demeaning for them. \(^{94}\) [St Leons Circus, Wallangarrah, N S W, c.1938].

\(^{92}\) A St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.87.
\(^{93}\) Gundagai Times, 29 Oct 1912.
Although the Bullen family conducted one of Australia’s largest and most successful circuses in the post-war period, the family’s origins tainted their standing in the eyes of the longer established Australian circus families. They ‘weren’t really circus people’ as, in their formative period in the 1920s, ‘they used to play sideshows only’.

**Summary**

Although capitalist entrepreneurs were the first to produce colonial circus entertainments, their devotion to the circus lasted no longer than the pursuit of their pecuniary objectives. By 1856, an initial entrepreneurial period had come to an end and the professional circus family – headed by a patriarchal, sometimes matriarchal, figure - had emerged as the medium by which circus entertainments were typically delivered throughout Australia. With a circus proprietor and his family surrounded by the employed artists and apprenticed performers, the supernumeraries and working men, the people of a circus comprised a small, mobile community. While divorced from the social conventions of urbanised society, contemporary observations suggest that Australia’s circus communities evolved their own self-serving, hierarchical social systems. The circus family’s itinerant, transient and self-contained existence defined its separateness from settled society. Its activities were marginal to those of the settled communities, whether of city, town or bush. Australia’s itinerant circus families belonged everywhere but nowhere. Circus people were peripheral to the existence of settled communities, and largely irrelevant to them, apart from the entertainments purveyed and various aspects of commercial interaction. Socialisation, training and education inevitably narrowed the career and other lifechoices available to

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95 N V St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.331.
circus progeny. Furthermore, within the wider circus community, a somewhat vague hierarchy of circus families, based on factors such as longevity, professional reputation and education, has been apparent. The family has remained an essential feature of the Australian circus until the present age. The circus provides its family with a livelihood and a sense of identity. The family provides the circus with identity also, with expertise and inter-generational continuity. Over the course of the 20th century, the rise of the urbanised, corporatised circuses and, later, the rise of a contemporary circus movement, replaced or altered the rationale of the family-based company.

Figure 5

Figure 6

William ‘Billy’ Jones (c.1842-1906), Aboriginal ringmaster, FitzGerald Brothers Circus, c.1900. Author’s collection.

Figure 6a

The Australian circus family of Alfred St Leon (1859-1909), photographed in the United States c.1900. Author’s collection.
Figure 6b

The Australian circus family of Gus St Leon (c.1851-1924, photographed in San Francisco c.1901. Author’s collection.

Figure 6c

The personnel of Perry Bros Circus lined-up outside the circus in Townsville, Queensland, about 1936. Author’s collection.

Figure 6d

The proprietor of St Leon’s Circus in Brisbane, 1882. Author’s collection.
CHAPTER III

Life & work

They were tough old days ... Hail, rain or shine, blankets wet, sleep where you could. Up at five o’clock in the morning to feed 135 head of horses.¹

Nineteenth century circus people were ‘the most colourful representatives’ of a distinct class of mobile Australians: the travellers, brokers between two worlds, people who supplied small and isolated settlements with goods and services for which local demand was either too small or too intermittent to justify full-time local businesses.²

Enticed for want of an audience onto the goldfields and then to the emerging townships of the interior, Australia’s earliest itinerant circus proprietors were forced to work out - by trial and error - the economics and practicalities of presenting circus entertainments on a new frontier, to negotiate new terrain, climatic conditions and the emerging rhythms and patterns of Australian life.

¹ M Perry, in St Leon, 1984, p.193.
Recalling the formative period of Wirth Brothers Circus in the 1880s, George Wirth wrote:

I got some of my earliest lessons in bush lore – and bush law – on that trip. For instance, we must always cross a creek or river before we camped, so that the sudden and unexpected floods of those parts [outback Queensland] would find us on the right side of the stream. ³ [Wirth Brothers Circus, Queensland, c.1884].

Departing Albury, N S W, for Deniliquin, N S W, to perform at the Edwards River races in April 1858, Ashton and his troupe returned within a few weeks after ‘indifferent success’ owing to the sparseness of the population.⁴ But, by 1875, when Ashton played the towns of New England, N S W, ‘the enterprising proprietor’ had reduced the travelling circus business to ‘a perfect system’ and learnt not to stay in any town ‘longer than necessary’.⁵ As the frontiers of settlement expanded, a growing body of experience of seasonal and regional conditions led to improvements in routing. The favoured playing areas and feasible routes were established by the 1890s. Nevertheless, as with American ‘mudshows’, the horsedrawn wagon-based circus was ‘a string of good days and bad days’, since performances were given at nearly every settlement along the route, however small.⁶

Just as Australia’s working people craved regular hours, satisfactory conditions of work and remuneration to cushion themselves from the more disagreeable aspects of their existence, Australia’s circus people settled into routines to soften

³ G Wirth, 14 Jan 1933, p.82.
⁴ Australian Border Post, 1 May, 15 May 1858.
⁵ Australian Town & Country Journal, 2 Jan, 1875.
the realities and hardships of their own marginalised and itinerant existence. These routines inevitably contributed to defining circus people as a class.

By the early 1900s, Australia was already one of the most urbanised nations on earth. For the masses, urbanisation meant lives, leisure time and disposable incomes regulated by such factors as ‘fluctuations of the stock exchange, the movement of ships, the regular pulse of the steam-driven factory, [and] the timetable of the suburban railway’ rather than the seasonal rhythms of the countryside. A whole way of life characterised the itinerant circus community, of which the delivery of entertainment was but one aspect. How did their life and work differentiate circus people from other, particularly urbanised, Australians?

**Roads**

The one constant factor for all circus people was travel and with it, apart from the rail-based circus, the road. The road premeditated challenge, endurance, companionship and living conditions. Even comparatively short distances represented a challenge when, with wagons and horses, eighteen to twenty miles was a fair day’s travelling. Until the appearance of macadamised roads of blue metal in the years before the First World War, early roads were ‘hacked’ out of the wilderness, ‘just earth roads and the horse tracks in between the wheel tracks’ that threw up ‘plenty of dust’. Travelling widely, circus people

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8 G Davison, J W McCarty and A McLeary, p.192.
9 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.183.
10 A St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.91.
accumulated an intimate knowledge of travelling conditions in different regions.

Cheering item for our shire councillors. St Leon’s Circus which has toured all over Australia, had something to say of the roads. The Far South Coast roads are infinitely better than those of Victoria, both for surface and easy grades, and they are superior to many in this State. [Gus St Leon’s Great United Circus, Bega, N S W, 1912].

Teamsters with their teams of oxen and big loads cut up the roads badly, and if a showman’s wagon did not fit in within the tracks the teamsters left behind it was slow going. On the Yorke Peninsula, South Australia, the limestone roads were ‘white and very glary’ and were negotiated slowly in an era before sunglasses. We can read reports of the ‘heavy state of the roads’ between Beaufort and Ballarat, Victoria, (1879), ‘the frightful state of the roads between Windsor and Wollombi’, N S W, (1886), and the ‘bad state of the roads’ between Barmedan and Temora, N S W, (1898). These conditions retarded a company’s progress and led to cancellations of previously announced dates.

If the ‘pulling’ power of a potential, but remote, audience was too great to resist, then the showman might have to apply his ingenuity for improvisation to reach his destination. Thus, John Jones left ‘the weightier portion of his apparatus’ behind in the bush because of flooded creeks when he brought his

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11 Bega Standard, 20 Dec 1912.
14 Evening Post, 13 Dec 1879.
15 Newcastle Morning Herald, 30 Mar 1886.
16 Wyalong Argus, 9 Aug 1898.
National Circus to Wagga Wagga, N S W, in the winter of 1859. In 1881, Ashtons Circus crossed country from Grafton to the Bellingen River, N S W, despite advice that the track was so bad it would take eight days to complete the trip.

All went well for a couple of days then we commenced to strike the rough country and many a time we had to cut our road through scrub and ravines and only travel a couple of miles in the day ... We had to lower the wagons down a hillside with the aid of blocks and tackle. Eventually after 12 days of hardship we struck the Bellingen and played Fernmount. [Ashtons Circus, N S W, 1881].

Half a century later, as a motorised Ashtons Circus travelled the outback of North Queensland, the river crossings were so deep between Charleville and Mount Isa that one truck carried railway sleepers to build makeshift bridges. When circuses from Australia began to visit New Zealand with some regularity during the 1870s and 1880s, they found rail facilities lacking, especially on the west coast, where reliance was placed on steamers and teams.

At one place the whole circus was swung across a gorge in a cage. The roads on the gorges were very narrow, with only room for one vehicle to pass at a time, and the this danger made the journeys more exciting. [Wirth Brothers Circus, New Zealand, 1890].

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17 Wagga Wagga Express, 9 Jul 1859.
18 Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales: F Jones, letter to John D FitzGerald, in FitzGerald, J D, Papers, MS.Q284
19 Fernandez, p.5.
20 G Wirth, 1925, p.48.
We were travelling in the South Island, somewhere near Lake Whakatip. One of the trucks pulling a menagerie cage ran off the road for some reason, and it hurtled down to the bottom of this very deep gorge. The animals in the cage, lions or tigers, didn’t escape. They decided to rig a gantry with the circus king poles. They stopped all the traffic in both directions. They were up two thousand or three thousand feet crossing this range. In rigging the king pole they put the acetylene lights up and with a rig they pulled the menagerie cage up the side of the gorge and even got the truck up. [Perry Brothers Circus, New Zealand, c.1928].

For a horse-drawn circus, travelling along poorly formed roads in cold and wet weather was not only unpleasant but hazardous and meant delay and financial loss. An account of the difficulties encountered by the St Leon circus in mid-western New South Wales in 1891 co-incidentally provides a rare glimpse of colonial circus life:

We left Condobolin on Sunday morning 2 August in miserably wet weather and all went merrily until we reached the Flour Mill Gate when our troubles began. From the Gate to Burrawong station, the road was completely under water reaching in places to the horses’ shoulders. The wagons were heavily loaded consequently the company had to wade through the water the best way they could, on foot, the ladies and children being no exception. We were three hours up to our waists plodding along, two valuable trick dogs were drowned, and the property wagon capsized spoiling the performer’s wardrobes and musical instruments. Some little amusement and consternation was caused when we saw our ‘tucker’ boxes floating along majestically. From Burrawong we ‘double banked’, averaging four miles a day, the horses being 12 hours in harness daily; no wonder the circus presents a rather dilapidated appearance, the harnesses and poles having suffered severely, all our company garments and blankets have

21 N V St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.323.
been soaked. I can assure you that this experience of circus life has not been a happy one, and I believe was the worst experience this company ever had, and they have travelled through Australasia several times. The troupe is a very large one and the loss of a week is a serious matter to the proprietors.\footnote{St Leons Circus, N S W, 1891}.

In the winter of 1885, the newly formed Wirth Brothers Circus travelled overland through Western Victoria to South Australia, an episode vividly recalled by George Wirth in his \textit{Round the World with a Circus}:

Luck and rain were dead against us again as we went from town to town. Day after day it rained, and yet we struggled on ... We stuck to the business as a loving parent would to a dying child. After a few more weeks, we got a fine day at Donald. It was show time, and that meant the town full of people. We forgot all about our last few weeks’ nightmare in getting the wet and mildewed tent up and erecting the seats in anticipation of a bumper house that night, and we were not disappointed. No one to have seen that performance that night would have thought we had gone through such heart-rending times for the last six weeks. This was in the winter of 1885. Soon it was spring, and all our hopes and confidence returned as if by magic.\footnote{G Wirth, 1925, pp.34-5.}

At Hungry Hill, on the Australian Alps, N S W, the road turned to mud and gravel in wet weather. Mervyn King said a circus ‘would be days getting over it’.\footnote{M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.267.} Crossing the Alps to reach Bega, N S W, in mid-winter 1899, Probascos Circus encountered serious difficulties en route:

\footnote{Forbes \& Parkes Gazette, 14 Aug 1891.}
Two of Probasco’s wagons were smashed and several horses killed between Nimitybell and Bombala. As the circus descended Black Jack Mountain, two mules attached to a light vehicle were washed over a fence, the driver and the animals narrowly escaped drowning. A larger van got bogged in a stream. For 12 hours and in pouring rain, several of Probasco’s men went without food or shelter as they attempted to salvage the circus vehicles. All the blacksmiths from the surrounding localities were engaged for several days effecting repairs. [Probascos Circus, Australian Alps, 1899].

Before the completion of a coastal road and rail routes, tours of northern Queensland were best undertaken by coastal steamer. If a circus chose to execute its tour with covered wagons, the logistical challenges were immense. To cross deep, unbridged rivers, wagons were floated across to the other side by lashing logs and even the king poles to the sides of the wagons. Wrote Philip Wirth in 1933:

My brother John and I swam the swollen river with sash lines in our mouths, and though the current was so strong that it carried us about 80 yards downstream, we managed to get ashore on the opposite bank. Then we were able to drag across the pulleys and ropes which were used in the erection of the Big Top, and attach them to a great gum tree. We were then able to pull the wagons across the river bed. It was a strange sight to see the wagons, five of which had covered tops, disappear down into the river on one side out of sight, and then slowly emerge on the other. Then we set to work to make rafts of the wagon seats, on which we floated the canvas and other gear across. The whole procedure took two days, and we were forced to work almost naked, the mosquitoes and sand flies were able to add their stings to the torture of sunburn. [Wirth Brothers Circus, c.1884].

25 Pambula Voice, 2 Jun 1899.
26 P Wirth, 1933, pp.27-8.
About 1934, a pantomime showman, Jack O’Donnell was unable to get his five ton truck across the Proserpine River, Queensland, despite the efforts of his working men and a local man who specialised in dragging vans out of the river with a five horse team and block and tackle. When Adrian St Leon, a circus man with the show, caught up with the stranded company, O’Donnell hailed him down:

Jack said, ‘St Leon! Can you get me out of this river? All these poofers I’ve got working for me can’t move the truck’. So I said to the man who owned the five horses and the tackle ... ‘How much tackle have you got?’ ‘Well,’ he said, ‘in addition to what I’ve got here I’ve got another two sets ...’. So, that meant that he had ten wheels ... and he already had ten wheels attached to the gear ... So I went to the furthest bank of the Proserpine River. You know, you cross it about twenty times in the course of about a mile. I attached some of the gear to the trunk of a tree there and then I attached a three and a two block to another three and a two block to the end of the rope to the three and two block that they already had ... Then I put all ... the pantomime hands on the end of the rope there and then this man’s five horse team on to that and pulled it out. Jack said, ‘St Leon’s the only bloke that can get us out of this trouble. All you poofers that I pay big money to can’t do a bloody thing for me’. Well, it was only a matter of knowing circus technique. That was all." [O’Donnell & Rays Pantomime Company, Queensland, c.1934].

Constant travelling intimately familiarised both man and beast of the circus with the land and its topography. Mervyn King was a youth in Gus St Leons Great United Circus when the company returned to its winter camp at Curlwaa, NSW, after two years absence:

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27 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.172.
As soon as we got to the river these two ponies just went straight in, swam the river, they’d been away for two years, and straight up to the fruitblock. We got across after a few hours of waiting - about fourteen wagons I suppose the circus had then - and there were the two ponies up where they were bred and born. Swam the river too - it was a pretty deep river. They never even hesitated. So that always stuck in my mind, the memory of it, to know that they were in their own territory.\footnote{Gus St Leons Great United Circus, Curlwaa, N S W, c.1920.}

Acquaintances were naturally made with other travellers along the way.

We stopped somewhere right up in Queensland, out towards the other side of Roma. There was nobody around, no houses or anything like that. You’ve got about thirty or forty people following up behind you and plenty of time to talk. This fellow wanted to yarn I suppose. The outback people are strange like that. They haven’t seen anyone for a long time and it’s a bit of a novelty to see somebody else.\footnote{Gus St Leons Great United Circus, c.1916.}

The show was going along through the black soil one day, the horses were pulling. A big car passed and the big squatter who was driving and the friends he was taking home all gave the circus people the ‘hoy’ as they passed. The show got along a few miles to find the same car bogged. The St Leons hooked a couple of their horses on and pulled the car out of the bog. After they got them out of the bog the squatter said to Honey. ‘How many best seats have you got?’ Honey told them how many chairs. ‘How much are they?’ He booked the whole lot for the

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item M King, in St Leon, 1984, pp.235-36.
\item M King, 1989, interview, Tape 12.
\end{itemize}}
night and paid him right there and then.\textsuperscript{30} [\textit{Gus St Leons Great United Circus, c.1912}].

\section*{Routine}

After finishing in a country town, the FitzGerald tents were pulled down and everything packed onto the wagons ready to start on the road early the following morning. A ‘commissariat’ wagon went ahead of the other wagons, the man in charge chose a camp near water, pitched a dining tent, built large fires, cooked breakfast and prepared the tea ready for the ‘hungry army’ of men and horses following behind.\textsuperscript{31} In the Gus St Leon circus of 1916, Gus led the route from one town to the next, choosing the tracks or roads for the circus to take.\textsuperscript{32} Gus ‘knew every mile of road, every twist and turn of it, throughout the length and breadth of Australia’.\textsuperscript{33} The St Leons ‘only travelled eight or nine miles before dinner [lunch] and probably eight or nine after’.\textsuperscript{34} Spreading out as much as ‘half a mile, three quarters of a mile’ from each other on the dusty roads of outback Australia, a wagon train that was too long became unmanageable.\textsuperscript{35} The Gus St Leon family ‘never went in for too big a show’ not only because of size but ‘it was always more expense, more mouths to feed’.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{30} S St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.139.
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Bulletin}, 20 May 1893.
\textsuperscript{32} A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.183.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Theatre}, 1 Jul 1922.
\textsuperscript{34} M King, 1989, interview, Tape 7.
\textsuperscript{35} M King, 1989, interview, Tape 12.
\textsuperscript{36} M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.274.
People of the circus worked together to cope with the hardships. It was not a life for weaklings but ‘young people who had plenty of stamina’.\(^ {37}\) They depended on each other for emotional and professional support.

You would look forward to getting into a town where you knew you were going to meet with another show because you would be meeting a lot of people you knew.\(^ {38}\) [Gus St Leons Great United Circus, c.1912].

As in American circus, where the employment of multi-skilled performers expanded the size and depth of a programme at little or no additional expense,\(^ {39}\) Australia’s circus people typically possessed a number of skills useful in and around a circus since ‘everyone worked hard’ and you had to be ‘a jack-of-all-trades in the circus then’.\(^ {40}\) In Perry Brothers Circus in the 1930s, the bandsmen left the bandstand one by one:

\begin{quote}
to go into the ring and do some act or some other chores until finally only Jimmy Perry on trumpet and myself on the sousaphone would be left to play the acts until the others returned.\(^ {41}\) [Perry Brothers Circus, c.1934].
\end{quote}

Not only did performers execute a number of roles in the ring but they often handled other roles around the circus as well. Some were capable boxers or jockeys, cooks, signwriters or blacksmiths. Mervyn King recalled:

\(^ {37}\) A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.183.
\(^ {38}\) S St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.129.
\(^ {39}\) Thayer, 1971, p.2.
\(^ {40}\) M Joseph, in St Leon, 1984, p.294.
If you went with the circus in those days the first thing you were asked was ‘What work do you do?’ The reply might be ‘Oh, bars and trapeze. My two boys play instruments’. That was the natural thing. If they came with the circus and they did not play music it was not long before they did learn.  

A clarinet player, formerly with the British army, joined the band of the Gus St Leon circus around 1915. He ‘led the band by night and shoed the horses by day’. These were adaptable people, ‘good rough engineers’ capable of improvising solutions to logistical problems as demonstrated by the following experience of Perry Brothers Circus in outback Queensland in the early days of motorisation:

[At] Charters Towers or Winton ... it was extremely hot with temperatures well over the hundred mark and they had tractors to pull the various wagons off the train and those tractors had grooved wheels ... that used to dig into the road and give themselves a lot of pull or traction on the dirt so they could pull these very heavy wagons loaded with tents and poles, menagerie cages and things like that. Well, as soon as they got on to the surfaced area coming into this town the town clerk ... had come out to meet them and of course these tractors were damaging the road surface, being so hot, just eating into the tar. He forbade them to come into town ... So the tents and wagons were put in a large area outside the town and all through the night they made bands of steel and welded them in the camp fires and then put them onto the tractor wheel in such a way that only this big band of steel was making contact with the surface and wasn’t damaging the road.

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42 M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.229.
43 The Outdoor Showman, Aug 1952.
itself. So the next morning they were allowed to take the various wagons into
the town to perform that night.\textsuperscript{44} [\textit{Perry Brothers Circus, Queensland, c.1928}].

The invisible force of superstition regulated life and work in some circus
families. The Perry family, especially, held to superstitions passed down
through its Perry, Eroni and Sole progeny.

Every morning, she [Mrs W G Perry] emerged from the dressing tent, sniffed the
air and decided whether the canvas should go up or not. No meteorologist could
compete with her. Some of the old lady’s superstitions have stuck ... and to this
day, it is fatal to introduce a carpet slipper or a twisted whip handle.\textsuperscript{45} [\textit{Eroni
Brothers Circus, c.1900}]

Of course, FitzGerald’s went broke, went into liquidation. My people bought an
elephant and a lion act from them. The first night they put it in the circus was at
Bateman’s Bay. They got the lion act off the boat that afternoon and put it in the
circus that night ... The night they opened with Eroni’s Circus they all got out. It
was a Friday night and ever since then the Eronis, Perrys and Soles have been
suspicious of travelling on Friday. They’re very superstitious people, these
people, like most of the old circus people.\textsuperscript{46} [\textit{Eroni Brothers Circus, Batemans Bay, N S W, 1907}].

Within their own transitory world, Australia’s circus people inevitably
developed a distinct argot. While we lack a comprehensive record of Australian
circus vernacular, we may presume that it was constantly enriched as it was

\textsuperscript{44} N V St Leon, 1989, interview, Tape 16.
\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Bulletin}, 27 Nov 1919.
\textsuperscript{46} M Perry, in St Leon, 1984, p.201; \textit{Bulletin}, 21 Feb 1907.
joined by people of many different cultures, nationalities and backgrounds, for example: Aboriginal bareback riders, German musicians, Japanese acrobats, Indian jugglers, Spanish riders and Mexican gymnasts, not to mention English business managers and Maori tent hands. From examples yielded by recorded interviews and other sources, we know that it comprised words and terms transposed from the English circus and fairground, American circus slang presumably introduced with the visits of the large American combinations in the latter decades of the 19th century, and locally developed circus terms. The English term for a somersault, a ‘flip-flap’, was customary in Australian circus speech. So was the American circus slang for a horse, a ‘resin-back’. On the other hand, there appear to have been a number of words and terms used by the local circus profession which may not have received a currency beyond Australia, indeed beyond the local profession. Few of the commonly used Australian circus terms appear in dictionaries of Australian words, suggesting that settled society was largely quarantined from whatever linguistic developments took place within the circus community. Prosperity, higher general standards of education, media accessibility and globalisation have inevitably retarded the evolution of Australian circus speech.

Camps

Given the underdeveloped state of provincial roads and the horses’ limits of endurance, it was two to three days travelling between the more distant outback towns during the wagon era, with overnight camps made on the road along the way. Speaking in 1989, Mervyn King recalled these occasions:

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Any time the circus camped on the road at night there was a band practice ... A ten or twelve piece band would strike up playing out in the bush at eight or nine o’clock at night. There would not be another soul around for miles but all of a sudden you saw people bobbing up wondering what the hell it was. [Gus St Leons Great United Circus, c.1916].

In the Hyland family circus, the children and young horses slept together to keep warm. In the summertime, the Gus St Leon circus always camped alongside a river, creek or clear water dam. A ‘good river bank’ provided an excuse to camp for a few days, to train horses or break in new acts.

[Perrys Jubilee Circus] ... camped a mile or two out of town, during which they completely renovated their whole turn out. New horses will be introduced, and several entirely new acts, which have been in rehearsal since last showing in Moruya. [Perry’s Jubilee Circus, Moruya, 1894].

We made our way leisurely from one country town to another, putting in every spare moment in hard practice, and we managed to perfect some splendid new acts. We had no teachers and whatever we achieved was due solely to our own perseverance. [Wirth Brothers Circus, c.1884].

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49 Moruya Examiner, 26 Jan 1894.
50 P Wirth, 1933, p.35.
Life & work

The circus used to stop for an hour for dinner camp and we’d put up this little wire and practise. We used to practise together and we used to say to one another, you know, ‘do this’ and ‘do that’. 51 [Eroni Brothers Circus, c.1914].

Married couples made their own camp some distance from everyone else. 52 Other romantic liaisons had to be conducted with discretion.

For a young man to be caught getting out of a single girl’s living wagon was the worse thing in the world. To have a bit of a romance they had to take to the bush. It had to be very secret. A lot of couples in the circus kept company with one another and eventually they married. 53 [Gus St Leons Great United Circus, c.1916].

A strict code of morality was observed within the show’s community. There was no promiscuousness with even engaged women. Promiscuity was restricted to the town girls that the circus boys met. 54 [Gus St Leons Great United Circus, c.1914].

Between the outback Queensland towns of Morven and Augathella in 1908, Lennons Circus pulled up on the road to allow two of its number, the circus bandmaster, Allen Stewart, and one of the circus girls, Lillietta Ashton, a granddaughter of James Henry Ashton, to be married. The ceremony was performed under a brigalow tree by a travelling parson. 55

51 G Perry, 1987, interview.
52 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 7.
54 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1989, p.183.
55 Richmond River Herald, 20 Nov 1908.
The ‘morality of Protestantism’ and the hedonism of the ‘workingman’s paradise’ sustained a range of social practices – ‘bizarre in the sunshine of Australia’ – such as the maintenance of traditional Sundays.\textsuperscript{56} Theatrical entertainments of any kind were forbidden on the Sabbath until well into the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Society even frowned on a circus travelling on Sundays so troupes usually made camp in the bush to pass the day in relaxation. Having played Moruya, N S W, one Saturday night in 1883, the St Leon company packed up and left about midnight in the direction of Bateman’s Bay, N S W, where they were to play on the Monday night, evidently to camp along the way.\textsuperscript{57} The St Leons still engaged in this practice nearly half a century later:

In those days it was frowned upon to be seen working on a Sunday so you would move out early that morning and go halfway to the next town or a nice river somewhere and camp for the day. Early Sunday afternoon would then be taken up with practice and then the men would usually have a band concert between themselves just around the campfire.\textsuperscript{58} [St Leons Circus, c.1928].

For all its demands, circus life gave plenty of opportunity for the exchange of conversation, whether at camps in the bush or while travelling along the road.

We did not seem to have any hang-ups ... You were not lonely because you were brought up in an atmosphere where each supported each other’s companionship.\textsuperscript{59} [Gus St Leons Great United Circus, c.1914].

\textsuperscript{56} Rickards, pp.183, 238; Horne, p.36.
\textsuperscript{57} Moruya Examiner, 27 Oct 1883.
\textsuperscript{58} M Joseph, in St Leon, 1984, p.295.
\textsuperscript{59} A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, pp.183, 185.
The drive over the mountains through the fresh morning air, with the wild landscape bathed in glorious sunshine made one feel glad to be alive ... The company, like the scenery, was good, and many a lively jest and joke and story, enlivened the journey. \footnote{Probascos Circus, New Zealand, c.1896}.

Despite the evidence of companionship, surprisingly little of Australia’s circus history was captured and passed down to succeeding generations. The adoption of self-contained caravans by travelling showpeople by the 1940s, if not earlier, and the later introduction of television began to break down this former sense of community and oral tradition. \footnote{Salomon.}

**Winter**

During the winter months, when it was too wet or cold to travel, a company might ‘winter camp’ on a large tract of property and turn its horses loose to graze. In the early 1860s, Henry Burton even purchased a property, Redbank, on the banks of the Murrumbidgee River near Deniliquin, N S W, where, in the English style, his circus went into quarters each winter. \footnote{S Hodge, quoted in Broome with Jackomos, pp.35-6.} In the 1910s, the Gus St Leon circus made regular winter camps at Glenoak, near Clarencetown, N S W. Recalled Adrian St Leon in 1974:

\begin{quote}
We rented about 400 acres off Mr Stock at Clarencetown for grazing the horses and one thing and another. We lived about ... a quarter of a mile away from his house ... We used to go to the dances with the girls on the weekends. We would go over to his place of a night where we had previously lit the stove ... and we’d sit there, all of us, with our feet near the oven ... and we’d talk about Germany
\end{quote}

\footnote{Onlooker, in St Leon, 1985, pp.98-9.}
and the war. He’d changed his name from ‘Stauk’ to ‘Stock’ I think.\textsuperscript{63} [Gus St Leons Great United Circus, c.1916].

During the winter camp, vehicles were repaired and repainted, new costumes made and old ones repaired, new acts broken in, horses trained and a route planned for the coming year of travel. The children of the circus attended a local school for the several weeks or months the show was closed up.

When you [left] your winter quarters, everything was painted spick and span. You could almost be sure that it would rain for a week or a fortnight. You’d be ploughing through mud. That’s the last you’d see of the paint on the wheel and that sort of stuff ... You could always bet you’d get a wet season and lose all your work.\textsuperscript{64} [Gus St Leons Great United Circus, c.1916].

By the 1880s, the populations of Western Australia and Queensland had grown sufficiently for circuses to regularise their tours of these colonies and enjoy their milder winter climates, even if the excursion ‘only paid expenses’.\textsuperscript{65}

Children

That many, perhaps most, circus people were born into or reared from early childhood within Australian circus further defined their separateness from settled society. Circus life was not only unique: it was also harsh and especially so for children.

\textsuperscript{63} A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.163.
\textsuperscript{64} M King, 1989, interview, Tape 4.
\textsuperscript{65} A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.170.
At Geelong, Victoria, in January 1879, a so-called Arab tumbler, an American known professionally as Hadj Hamo was charged with mistreating his thirteen year old apprentice through ‘a flogging’ he gave him in the circus tent.

It appears that the boy failed in practice and Hadj Hamo cut him several times on the chest and on the legs with a whip that caused blood to flow freely. As Hamo and his pupil did not appear to be on the best of terms ... the Arabian promised to send the boy home to his parents in Maitland N S W today ... the proprietors of the circus ... have given him notice to dispense with his services.  

Hadj Hamo’s severity must have paled in comparison to the cruelty inflicted by a black American acrobat named Jack Ice. At a sitting of the Supreme Court in Broken Hill, N S W, in April 1890, Ice was charged with the murder of a five-year-old boy, Charles Godfrey. In opening the case, the Crown Prosecutor dwelt upon the inhuman and shameful conduct of the deceased boy’s natural father, a South Australian government official, in virtually selling the child when a mere baby to Ice. The jury, after a retirement of only fifteen minutes, returned a verdict of guilty of the lesser crime of manslaughter. Mr Justice Windeyer was ‘much affected’ as he addressed the prisoner before sentencing.

Before completing a tour of Tasmania in 1888, the childless John and Louisa Wirth of Wirths Circus ‘adopted’ two young sisters, Gertie, about five years of age, and May, about two.

Their mother had abandoned the children while their father was away for several days. The girls were so hungry they would go and rummage in the dirt boxes for

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66 Geelong Advertiser, 30 Jan 1879.
67 Silver Age, 24 Apr 1890.
food until a neighbour saw them, took them in and gave them something to eat. The children were brought to the circus the night before it was to leave ... When their father was sent for, he came to the circus. He wanted the children to join the circus. Afterwards, Gertie and May learnt the ‘business’ and became fine circus artists.  

The two sisters were experienced performers who had travelled the world by the time they appeared in Wirth Bros Circus at Cobar, N S W, in 1906. Billed as ‘The Leon Sisters’ [sic] they gave a dental performance ‘each sustaining herself or the other in mid-air by means merely of a grip of the teeth’.  

Then again, children born into the circus might not be wanted for one reason or another. The young pregnant wife of the Mauritian gymnast, Zinga, fell violently from her horse as it paced St Leon’s ring at Nyngan, N S W, during the showtime of 1891. Rushed from the tent, she gave birth prematurely and died of her injuries two days later. Zinga walked the busy streets of Nyngan, carrying his tiny newborn son in a saddle-bag, waving a ten-pound note in the air, exhorting anyone from among the throngs of people to relieve him of his newborn child until it could be returned to its mother’s family in New Caledonia. A railway fettler and his wife took the child and raised it as their own.  

The remarks of Frank M Jones, the manager of FitzGerald Brothers Circus, in 1901 were not only illuminating of circus apprenticeship practice but remarkably forthright.
Life & work

... We get them as young as possible, when about five years of age, and they are placed under instructors for every branch - riding, acrobats, tumbling, dancing, etc. - each child, no matter what line he may be in training for, is taught dancing, in order to secure gracefulness. We have a tutor who looks after their scholastic education, every afternoon. In cities where a lengthy season is in progress, they all attend school, and are never allowed to neglect their church duties on Sunday. Rehearsals commence at 6 o’clock in the morning and continue until noon every day, except when we have matinee performances.72 [FitzGerald Brothers Circus, 1901].

On the other hand, the romance of circus life outweighed the hardships for some young children.

There was a great lot of variety of life, visiting fresh towns or cities, the animals, sleeping in wagons or a tent and the general outdoor life ... The training was not pleasant for the old man was a very severe instructor.73 [St Leons Circus, c.1891].

Other young people found themselves caught up in a circus life and career by chance, as was the case with the aforementioned Frank M Jones.

Nunn and I found ourselves in the tent one morning, watching some of the performers practising off a leaping board, with Mr Ashton supervising things generally ... Nunn and I asked if we could have a try with them. ‘Come along’ was the reply. After getting the strength of the board I went ahead, with the result that I was asked by Mr Ashton if I would like to travel with the circus ... 

72 F M Jones, quoted in New Zealand Mail, 21 Mar 1901.
73 T H Lynn, in St Leon, 1984, p.67.
Within a few months I was doing doubles off the leaping-board. Then I started clowning and riding. Later I did four-horse and six-horse, bounding jockey and carrying acts but big leaping is what I specialised in.\(^74\) [Ashtons Circus, c.1882].

From as young as four years of age tumbling was the ‘ABC’ of circus work.

Whether we pulled up for dinner camp or if it was just an early night camp, they rolled out the mat and had me and the other kids practising for an hour or two. They did not waste any time.\(^75\) [St Leons Circus, c.1916].

I started my circus training when I was about four in the simple things in the acrobatic act ... We trained any time we had the opportunity. When we were camped between towns we practised. If we were in a town we rolled the mats out anywhere behind the tents where the town kids wouldn’t be around.\(^76\) [St Leons Circus, c.1925].

While some circus people and families were noted for their ‘pretty stiff’ training methods,\(^77\) other circus families took a benign view of training their young charges and ‘would always get the best out of you by praising you’.\(^78\)

Circus children might receive some elementary ‘three R’s’ education within the circus community but many received little schooling, as ‘they were on the road

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\(^{74}\) F M Jones, ‘Circus stars and stories: A forty years retrospect’, in The Theatre, 1 Apr 1919.
\(^{75}\) M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.274.
\(^{76}\) M Joseph, in St Leon, 1984, p.295.
\(^{77}\) M Joseph, in St Leon, 1984, p.284.
\(^{78}\) M Joseph, in St Leon, 1984, p.284.
all their lives’.\footnote{A St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.87.} Sometimes older members of a troupe, often musicians who had some claim to literacy, assumed teaching responsibilities. When Ashtons Circus reached its peak in 1937, its thirty two children had a tutor of their own\footnote{Fernandez, p.6.} but employed teachers were rarely effective. When a young female teacher was engaged by the Gus St Leon circus about 1916 ‘there was too many single men’ paying her attention and she moved on.\footnote{M King, 1989, interview, Tape 3.} Attendance at schools in the towns through which the circus passed was only feasible if the show was in town for several days:

On the one day stand, if they sent you to a local school, it was a waste of time. You didn’t learn anything. You were always just answering questions. What do you do? Where do you go? Either that or [the] kids [would be] poking fun at you. You had a different sort of cap on to what they wore.\footnote{M King, 1989, interview, Tape 8.} \[Gus St Leons Great United Circus, c.1918\].

But some circus families took a more serious view of education than others. The Gus St Leon and Walter St Leon families temporarily retired from circus life to settle at Tamworth, N S W, (1896 - 98) and Bega, N S W, (1899 - 1903) respectively to give their children some formal education.\footnote{M Lindsay, in St Leon, 1984, p.106.} ‘The real old Mrs Ashton’, James Henry’s widow, who travelled with Eroni Brothers Circus in the early 1900s, gave the circus children their schooling, and, on Sundays, lessons in religion.\footnote{M Perry, in St Leon, 1984, p.195.} About 1907, boxing troupe showman Con Sullivan settled his growing family for a time at Lightning Ridge, N S W, to give his children some

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\textsuperscript{79} A St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.87.  
\textsuperscript{80} Fernandez, p.6.  
\textsuperscript{81} M King, 1989, interview, Tape 3.  
\textsuperscript{82} M King, 1989, interview, Tape 8.  
\textsuperscript{83} M Lindsay, in St Leon, 1984, p.106.  
\textsuperscript{84} M Perry, in St Leon, 1984, p.195.
schooling and teach the older ones circus skills, before the family got started with their own circus.\footnote{W Colleano, in St Leon, 1984, p.211.}

**Provisioning**

Larger, established circuses were organised along business lines with salaried business managers and treasurers. With 100 horses, and eighty performers and accompanying agents, canvas-men, grooms, rouseabouts, cooks and so on, FitzGerald Brothers Circus of 1893 comprised a ‘pretty large colony’ that had to be provisioned like an army corps.\footnote{Anon, ‘FitzGerald Brothers’ Monster Australian Circus & Menagerie’, in The Bulletin, 20 May 1893a.} As Probascos Circus was set up near the railway station at Milton, New Zealand, in 1896, Jack Webb, the ‘town agent’, did the rounds of the town for three hours to ‘fix up’ the local butcher, baker, and publican, and contract horse feed, board and lodging of the artists, and meat and flour for the grooms and tentmen.\footnote{Onlooker, in St Leon, 1985, p.69.} In cities and larger towns, where a circus might stay for several days or weeks, accounts were opened with local suppliers for the provisions and services the circus required. A circus wanting to preserve its reputation was also sure to pay its accounts before departing a town. At Narrabri, N S W, in October 1882 all accounts against St Leons Circus had to be presented to the grandly titled (and named) ‘Town Agent & Treasurer’, Lancelot Booth, at the Fitzroy Hotel, by ten o’clock on the morning of the company’s last day in the town.\footnote{Narrabri Herald, 25 Oct 1882.}

The ‘kitchen’ of some shows carried unsavoury reputations.\footnote{M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.257.} Smaller circus companies, unfettered by fixed itineraries, lived off the land as required. In
every river, there was ‘fish in abundance’. Meals of dampers and ‘puftaloonies’ [scones] cooked on open fires were favourites of the circus families. Others had a ‘marvellous life’ by living on ‘the best pigeons, rabbits, hares and ducks’.

I know one place we were three or four days on the plains. Generally, we camped where water was but I remember once there was no water so they had to go on for water. Well, you know what children are like if they want a drink of water. We had to wait until about midnight before they came back with water. They had to go a long way for it and bring back these barrels of water loaded into one of the open wagons. [St Leon Brothers Circus, c.1904].

In the horsedrawn circus, routes were mostly determined by the availability of grass ‘as the horses had to come first’. If grass was not in abundance, the circus horses might be left in a farmer’s paddock or amongst crops to graze overnight.

The farmers used to go mad if they’d catch up with this ... If any of the horses got loose then they’d go walkabout because they’re in a different area and they’re looking for feed. They’d finish up in somebody’s crop somewhere and you’re in trouble. [The farm people would] hold them. [They’d] lock the gate. [Gus St Leons Great United Circus, c.1916].

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90 M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.233.
91 W St Leon, 1986, interview.
92 G Lewis, in St Leon, 1984, p.149.
Accidents

If a menagerie was attached to a travelling circus, an occasional incident was sure to occur on the road. In the spring of 1884, as the St Leon circus travelled the Northern Rivers, N S W, a tiger’s cage was overturned on the rough roads ‘while travelling over the Richmond ... between Broadwater and Woodburn’. The ‘dangerous customer’, leaped from its cage. The ‘circus people and their attendants’ were ‘equal to the occasion’ and after some difficulty, threw a ‘coil of rope’ around the animal and recaptured it.95

Performers were sometimes injured in the course of their performance, audiences succumbed to the collapse of tiered seating, and the circus people were prone to the ordinary hazards of their occupation. Some accidents were the result of mistaken judgement, others the result of unforseen forces of nature.

We ... were enjoying our evening meal with great satisfaction when ... there was a sudden thunderstorm, and one of our men was killed by lightning ... [T]he poor fellow crumpled up in a second.96 [Wirth Brothers Circus, Queensland, c.1884].

Those of our readers who attended performances of the Hayes and Benhamo Circus company, and had the pleasure of witnessing the graceful riding of Mdlle Annereau will regret to hear of that lady's death. At one of the performances she had a severe fall, her injuries, contrary to the general supposition at the time,

95 Sydney Mail, 27 Apr 1884.
96 P Wirth, 1933, p.28.
being very severe ... An inquest is to be held at the hotel at 2 o'clock today.\footnote{Star, 11 Sep 1878.}
\cite{Hayes and Benhamos Circus, New Zealand, 1878}.

Given the volume and intensity of physical activity in the circus ring, however, reports of performers meeting with accidents were surprisingly infrequent possibly because a ‘performer’s work depends for its safety on steady nerves and trained muscles’.\footnote{G Wirth, 15 May 1933, p.409.}

At Ballarat, Victoria, one evening in January 1879, over 2,000 people were seated in St Leons Circus.

\cite{At about 20 minutes past eight o’clock, without any warning, part of the seats, rising five or six feet in height, gave way precipitating about 200 people to the ground. The greatest confusion prevailed - women fainted, children screamed and a general uproar ensued ... When something like order was restored, a good many people commenced to take their departure, and attention was then drawn to the condition of another batch of seats, which appeared to be sinking backwards. All at once they went down with a crash and fully 200 more people found themselves on the ground. The previous scene was re-enacted and amid great excitement the ring was rushed by a large number of frightened people, while to make matters worse, a number of lads tore their way in through and under the canvas and commenced yelling out for the return of their money or tickets ... The proprietor distributed 400 tickets gratis for tonight’s performance. In speaking of the accident, Mr St Leon attributed it to the removal of some of the wooden jacks which support the seats and complained of the nuisance caused by}
larrikins and drew attention to the want of more police protection. 99 [St Leons Circus, 1878, Ballarat, 1878].

The labour-intensive nature of moving a circus and mounting a performance exposed working men to danger. At Yass, Victoria, in 1879, a ‘generally useful hand’ named Robert Ryan, aged about twenty four years, met with a fatal accident in the service of St Leons Circus.

... It appears that Ryan was engaged in performing some duty in the erection of the marquee which required him to climb the central pole. This he succeeded in doing, but on approaching the top, either from giddiness or some other cause, he slid down the pole at a rapid rate, and became actually impaled by the front part of his person on a projecting hook that was fixed to the pole for the purpose of fastening ropes to it. The injuries he sustained are of a most terrible character and Drs Campbell and Perry, who were speedily called have no hopes for his recovery’. 100 [St Leons Circus, Yass, 1879].

On the evening that FitzGerald Brothers Huge Combined Shows opened in Sydney in 1896, Charles Peart, a high diver engaged from London the previous year, was fatally injured when he misjudged his plunge into a small tank of water from the interior roof of the tent. 101 A few months later, at Greta, near Newcastle, N S W, an Aboriginal performer in the small West’s Circus, Alex Orlandi, lost his life.

99 Ballarat Courier, 18 Jan 1879.
100 Goulburn Evening Penny Post, 9 Oct 1879.
101 New York Clipper, 23 May 1896.
The unfortunate fellow, who possessed a magnificent physique, came out and taking a long run, made his spring from a block in the centre of the ring, but the block tilted slightly and the performer came head first to the ground with a sickening thud, whilst half way around in the second evolution, causing as far as could be seen at the time, a partial concussion of the spine. Attendants were standing around holding a net, as is usual in such feats, but the suddenness of the catastrophe prevented them from averting it in any way.  

[Wests Circus, Greta, 1896].

While technological innovation improved circus economics, it ironically increased the possibility of fatal accident. The reputation of Blayney, N S W, in the argot of the circus people, a ‘showman’s graveyard’, acquired its literal meaning in June 1923 when Bill Sole and his brother-in-law, Charles Perry, were killed by an explosion of acetylene gas while fixing the lighting plant before performance. As the large American circus of the Sells Brothers travelled on its four special trains southwards from Tenterfield to Armidale in 1892, the last of the trains ran into the preceding one, to which a sleeping car was attached. One man was killed and several injured. When Ridgeway’s, a small family circus, travelled through South Australia in 1928, one of its motor lorries stalled at a level rail crossing near Balaklava, just as a rail car bound for Adelaide approached. In the resulting collision, the lorry was dragged about sixty metres, the proprietor George Ridgeway was killed and eight family members were injured.

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102 Newcastle Morning Herald, 17 Aug 1896.
103 M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.260.
104 M Lindsay, in St Leon, 1984, p.108.
105 Queensland Times, 28 Apr 1892.
106 Everyone’s, 3 Oct 1928.
Summary

While urbanisation gave predictability, comfort and security to lives centered on the factory or office, Australia’s circus families fell into routines dictated by their own work – improvised, open-air and healthy, but also demanding and dangerous. For urbanised people, the distinctions between daily work and private life were clear. For itinerant circus people, such distinctions were heavily blurred since both aspects of existence were heavily contingent on each other. Urbanisation was accompanied by orderliness and respectability. The wandering lifestyle of Australia’s circus people tended to reconfirm the marginalised social status with which wanderers in the Old World had been identified for centuries.

Figure 7

Pole wagon, Gus St Leon’s Great United Circus, c.1915. Author's collection.
Figure 8
Circus camp in the bush, c 1914. Gus St Leon’s Great United Circus, with Gus fourth from the right. Author’s collection.

Figures 8a & 8b
Unloading the rail-born elephants and menagerie cages of Perry Bros Circus & Zoo, after arrival at Bathurst, N S W, in 1935. Author’s collection.
Figure 8c
An elephant hauls the menagerie cages of Wirth Bros Circus from the train to the circus lot, location unknown, about 1910. *Circus World Museum.*

Figure 8d
Erecting the tent of Alberto’s Circus, Tasmania, 1973. *Author’s collection.*
The colonist ... is not himself amusing, but he thoroughly enjoys himself.¹

The distinction between ‘mass culture’ and ‘the culture of the masses’ is often narrow. Williams argued that there are no masses, only the diversity of ways of seeing people as masses needed by an urbanised industrial society to facilitate political and cultural exploitation.² A more precise understanding of the interconnection between ‘mass’ and ‘culture’ comes from a clearer perception of audience composition and behaviour. Indeed the audience, and audience behaviour, are the missing link and the forgotten element in cultural history.³

As Australia’s places of settlement became better defined so did the routes connecting them. The travelling circus also linked these groups of population. In the period from about 1830 until about 1900, Australia, like the United States, was too busy occupying its

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³ Levine, p.1379.
interior to be much affected by the outside world. As in the Australian outback, the circus was America’s most popular form of rural entertainment. The travelling shows went to the people and gave them, often, the only entertainment they had all year.

It was a compendium of biological research but more important still, it brought to our ears the latest band pieces and taught us the most popular songs. It furnished us with jokes. It relieved our dullness. It gave us something to talk about.

Audiences are complex amalgams of cultures, tastes and ideologies. They come with a past, with ideas, values, expectations, a sense of how things are and should be. An analysis of the literature of Australian circus - advertising, press criticism, articles and interviews - can tell us something, not only about circus, but about the people for whom it catered. The ephemera provides a barometer of society’s cultural tastes. The circus entertainment brought people together under the one roof, people who might not otherwise have occasion to fraternise with each other. People saw a circus performance as part of a wider social group and shared the experience with their immediate social group after the fact. An increasingly urbanised native-born element in Australia’s population, creatures of a derivative colonial environment, began to filter the information that the world had to offer in ways different to an

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6 M Garland, quoted by Culhane, p.142.
7 Levine, p.1381.
8 Levine, pp.1395-96.
Englishman or an American. To what extent did the circus, intentionally or otherwise, mirror and contribute to social cohesion?

Australians

Most of Australia’s original settlers left the British Isles involuntarily as convicts, or voluntarily as emigrants of the poorer classes anxious to better their lot. In contrast to the colonists who established Britain’s North American colonies in pursuit of religious freedom and tolerance, the working class Britons who settled Australia some 200 years later carried a disdain of upper classes and a love of leisure.

To class-conscious British eyes, the 19th century settler colonies, such as Australia, were:

full of the dross and detritus of the British metropolis: convicts and their progeny ... poor rejects from the slums and back streets of Birmingham and Glasgow; failed professionals in the law and the church and the military ... the white trash of their time.

Out of the cultural baggage they brought with them and their frontier experiences, these ordinary people constructed a new frontier world. Their democratised, popular culture was articulated and disseminated nationally around the turn of the 19th century by poets and writers, and journals such as The Bulletin. Each succeeding

9 Rickards, p.107.
10 Waterhouse, in Teo and White, p.116.
11 M Lake, ‘On being a white man’, in Teo and White, p.69.
12 H M Teo and R White, Introduction, in Teo and White, pp.15-6.
generation of town dwellers was increasingly divorced from the traditions of ‘home’ and increasingly accumulated some of their own to betoken remembrance.

In *The Australian Legend* (1958) Ward assembled the origins of a distinctive Australian character among the native-born (European) working people of the back districts - the bush - of Australia, the same territory frequented by travelling shows such as circus. There thrived egalitarianism and mateship, a disdain for authority, local as opposed to imperial patriotism, a commitment to pragmatism, a contempt for intellectual pursuits, and a virulent racism.\(^{13}\)

[The basic elements of that outlook which later came to be thought of as ‘typically Australian’: a comradely independence based on group solidarity and relative economic plenty, a rough and ready capacity for ‘stringy bark and green hide’ improvisation, a light hearted intolerance of respectable and conventional manners, a reckless improvidence, and a conviction that the working bushman was the ‘true Australian’, whose privilege it was to despise ‘new chums’ and city folk. We have seen that this ethos sprang mainly from convict, working class, Irish and native born Australian sources but that these streams coalesced ‘beyond the Great Divide’ where remoteness and the peculiar geographical, economic and social conditions transmuted them into something new which yet included them all.\(^{14}\)]

The large crowd of farming people who gathered near a new bridge to see St Leons Circus, at Stoney Creek, near Mudgee, N S W, in March 1891, gave tangible expression to some of these sentiments. After reading the programme, they retired to hold a meeting.

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\(^{13}\) Waterhouse, in Teo and White, p.114.

\(^{14}\) Ward, 1958, p.106.
A deputation was appointed to interview the proprietor and inform him that his charge of two shillings was excessive, that one and all were willing to pay the level shilling but that if he were resolved to adhere to the two, they meant to strike for home again. Wisdom prevailed and he took the level shilling. His seats were full and the audience enjoyed themselves. [St Leons Circus, Stoney Creek via Mudgee, 1891].

Townies

Although both features of imported European civilisation imposed on Australia’s natural and ancient landscape, transient showpeople existed somewhere outside and beyond Australia’s newly-settled communities.

Such exhibitions are in no way calculated to promote the advancement of science or social progress. Still, it is curious and interesting enough to see these extraordinary feats of skill performed in the heart of what was so lately a perfect wilderness.

The term ‘townie’ was the Australian equivalent of the American circus term of ‘towner’ brought here by large American circus people in the 1870s and 1880s. The settled people were townies, the people from whom circus audiences were drawn and upon whom the circus people depended for their livelihoods. Whether the term

15 Sydney Mail, 4 Apr 1891.
16 Bendigo Advertiser, 30 Jun 1855.
townie was employed as one of endearment or one of condescension depended on the occasion.

The term townie served to differentiate the people who were domiciled in one place for life and work from the ‘showies’, people whose existence obliged them to move from place to place. Implicit in this simplistic ‘them and us’ division of society were differences in attitude, values and way of life. Townies belonged to their town and district but no other. Showies moved between towns and districts, belonging to all and belonging to none. In some respects, the showies shared the social station of other itinerant workers and rouseabouts. While urbanisation saw increasing numbers of people and families settled in homes, the very source of a circus audience, some rural towns were also natural stopover points for large numbers of itinerant workers moving about a region. With little entertainment other than that ‘afforded beneath the roof of a public house’, these workers added a rough element that towns such as Wagga Wagga, N S W, endeavoured to mellow by encouraging ‘rational amusements’ and the growth of social and cultural institutions.17

Ever on the lookout for fresh pastures and virgin territory, the ‘fabled land in the southern seas’18 inevitably attracted the visits of American circus men. Some left documented observations of Australia and valuable perspectives on Australian townspeople in their letters home. The members of Cooper, Bailey & Co. were surprised to find Sydney ‘so large and well-built’ and such a ‘busy

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commercial’ city. Some provided poignant perspectives on Australia’s way of life, perspectives which Australians, in their splendid isolation, could not themselves have volunteered. In contrast to their own ‘towners’, American circus men found their ‘well-behaved’ Australian patrons compliant. They ‘pay their money, walk in, and do as they are told’. Shortly after arriving in Sydney with Cooper, Bailey & Co. in 1876, W G Crowley wrote to the New York Clipper to say that ‘there is plenty of life here, though in business matters the people are slow and old-fashioned’.

A few months later, Crowley described the people of Adelaide as ‘quiet, orderly and sociable’, surpassing those of most Australian towns in their kindness and courtesy to strangers.

The hotels are numerous and up to the average of Australian hotels, which is not saying a great deal: for hotels here appear to be run principally for the bars attached to them. Barmaids serve at all bars - a system with many attendant evils and no redeeming features. Women stop in and drink at the bar very often, and you can see men, women and children running in and out with their pitchers of beer. Drinking is carried to a far greater excess here than in the United States or Canada.

The visit of Cooper, Bailey & Co. also gave its management insights into Australian labour proclivities. In America, circus tent men had no set hour for their meals. If an outfit was delayed it was just a

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19 Crowley, p.7.
20 New York Clipper, 28 Apr 1877.
21 New York Clipper, 20 Jan 1877.
22 New York Clipper, 20 Jan 1877.
23 New York Clipper, 2 Jun 1877.
matter of ‘hustling’ until the tent was up and the doors were opened, and everyone retired to eat. The sideshowman George Middleton recalled that Cooper, Bailey & Co. was late one day arriving in one of the ‘interior towns’ on the Australian tour and had to hire local men to help unload and set up the tents. Despite the urgency of the task and Bailey’s protestations, the local men insisted upon sitting down for half an hour’s smoke.  

_Audiences_

In a major provincial centre such as Tamworth, N S W, ‘circuses always receive large patronage’ and a visiting circus always attracted ‘a good number’ even during ‘dull times’.  

A good house like Inverell and towns like [it] could hold probably 600, maybe 700 people. They’d always put seating up for about 250 to 300 for the average night. [Gus St Leons Great United Circus, c.1916].

Circus audiences were typically ‘filled with grown men and grinning boys’. When Probascos Circus opened in Alexandra, New Zealand, on race night in 1897, there was opposition in the form of a bazaar to raise funds for the local hospital but ‘all the attractions of a bazaar are powerless against a circus’.  

25 _Australian Town & Country Journal_, 26 May 1877.  
26 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 3.  
27 _South Australian Register_, 5 May 1879.  
28 _Onlooker_, in St Leon, 1985, p.91.
A town’s juveniles would ‘muster strongly’ to witness the equestrian and acrobatic feats of a visiting circus, their curiosity aroused several weeks in advance by ‘grossly exaggerated’ posters as well as the:

sight of the pictures posted up on the gum trees near our ancestral home at Wattle Gully; [there was] the subsequent delicacy of the negotiations with a stern father and a religious mother; and the diplomatic triumph of these negotiations. Then followed the awful joy of the entrance within the mysterious canvas.  

The children of poorer families could but:

hover outside [the tent]. They burn with envy at their more fortunate fellows who are charmed and merry spectators at the equestrians and the sawdust wit of the clowns of which they occasionally hear snatches.

In 1883, the English writer, Richard Twopenny, speculated that a circus obtained a more critical and appreciative an audience in Australia than anywhere else in the world due to the popularity of horses and horsemanship throughout the colonies. Such was the esteem in which the horse was held in colonial Australia that a circus was often promoted in terms of the number of its men and horses – with bipeds and quadrupeds sometimes counted as a single figure.

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29 Port Fairy Gazette, 24 Apr 1900.  
30 Geelong Advertiser, 7 Feb 1880.  
31 Mount Alexander Mail, 25 Mar 1885.  
32 Twopenny, pp.219-20.  
33 Illawarra Mercury, 7 Nov 1883.
The more detailed accounts of colonial circus performances lend support to Twopenny’s observations.

The stud of horses is a feature. It is very complete, and the class of animals above the average. Indeed there are amongst them some really splendid animals of great docility and high training, and amongst those we have to place first on the list a splendid brown stallion, Emperor, exhibited by his trainer, Mr Jones. He displayed a wonderful amount of intelligence and in addition to the ordinary waltzing tricks, and walking on his hind legs, he created a good deal of laughter and surprise by untying handkerchiefs from his hind feet and discovering the handkerchiefs buried in the ring. A handsome black stallion, exhibited by Miss Ida Vernon, also displayed a high degree of intelligence and careful training, as did also the horse Echo, ridden and exhibited by the same lady. The company as a whole is very well constructed. The entree act was picturesque. Mr Alfred St Leon in the somersault equestrian act was elegant and successful, and Mr Gus St Leon created a sensation by the cleverness with which he managed seven horses. The Olympian feats on two horses by Messrs Gus St Leon and Eugene Alfred are really surprising as specimens of fearless riding, graceful combinations and clever steadiness. The wonderful manner in which these two men perform on horseback what clever gymnasts would find difficult on the ground, must be seen to be appreciated.34 [St Leons Circus, Auckland, 1885].

Yet, Twopenny might well have added that circus programs based more on spectacle than speech relieved patrons of any need to develop intellectual insights or perspectives. Just as importantly, a frontier society which emphasised material matters over cultural

34 New Zealand Herald, 9 Oct 1885.
pursuits, easily appreciated the athletic, intellectually undemanding nature of the circus performance.

In the same year that Twopenny wrote, it was also observed that the ‘orthodox’ humour of circus clowns simply served to demonstrate ‘how much we colonials revere the antique’.\^{35} Only ‘colonials’ of recent arrival held critical faculties of a superior order, as when the first troupe of Japanese acrobats visited Australia in 1868.

Adelaide has never before seen an entertainment of the kind which would bear comparison with it and those who have had an extra-colonial experience would have great difficulty in recalling to memory anything to surpass it.\^{36}

From one townie’s perspective, ‘none was much of a show but there was nothing else to do so most of the people usually turned up’.\^{37} For a young boy in Killarney, Queensland, in 1922:

\begin{quote}
[There was] not much entertainment and the circus made a big impression on a kid ... [There were] no picture shows in those days except travelling picture shows maybe once a year.\^{38}
\end{quote}

During the First World War, ‘it was mostly women and children in the audience’ since ‘the men were all out of the country’.\^{39} When

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\^{35} \textit{South Australian Register}, 5 Mar 1883. \\
\^{36} \textit{South Australian Register}, 28 Jul 1868. \\
\^{37} Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales: F Burke, letter to author dated Innisfail, Queensland, 1970, ML MSS 2165. \\
\^{38} Author’s Collection: G Mills, personal communication, 1994. \\
\^{39} S St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.139. \\
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country townships staged functions for soldiers and held enlistment rallies, the arrival of a circus was not allowed to intrude into the round of activities. 40 Towards the end of Wirth Brothers season in Adelaide in September 1916, an evening’s performance was given for returned soldiers in uniform. 41

As late as the 1930s, the visiting circus was ‘basically the only form of entertainment’ in country areas apart from vaudeville shows such as George Sorlie and Bartons Follies. 42

The itinerant circus continued to appeal to the farming community well into the 20th century because of the country peoples’ natural interest in horses and riding 43 and because the circus people had the time to professionalise what was already familiar to most country people:

In those days people could ride, all good riders, good buckjump riders, but the circus people could practise more. They could stand up on the horses, and jump from the ground on their backs, do somersaults on them and ride carrying other artists on their shoulders. 44

The instructional virtues of a visiting circus in 1880, the Scone, N S W, correspondent of the *Australian Town & Country Journal*, remarked

41 *South Australian Register*, 8 Sep 1916.
42 N V St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.327.
43 N V St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.327.
44 D Ashton, in St Leon, 1984, p.304.
that ‘a few shillings spent on such an entertainment certainly benefits the rising generation’. 45

**Relationships**

Conscientious circus proprietors actively fostered relationships with the townspeople, especially key civic and business identities. At Wellington, N S W, in 1898, a local merchant bought up a bundle of tickets from Probasco and freely distributed them among the youth of the district. 46 Colonial showmen knowingly forwarded complimentary tickets to a newspaper office 47 although this was not always to their advantage. While some editors waxed enthusiastically with the inducement of a free pass, others frowned on tented amusements. 48

When Henry Burton visited Port Fairy, Victoria, the leading citizens met him and invited him to their homes to dine. 49 St Leon ‘with his well known and accustomed liberality’ presented a handsome riding whip to the rider of the horse which won the 1877 Wagga Wagga Cup amid the cheers of the audience, 50 a gesture which the FitzGeralds, then the Wirths, later emulated in presenting each year’s winner of the Melbourne Cup with a gold mounted whip. 51 Travelling the outback of eastern Australia as the Great United Circus from 1909, the Gus St Leon family made a ‘great many special friends’ in every town, especially hotelkeepers and small business

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46 Wellington Gazette, 25 Apr 1898.
49 Port Fairy Gazette, 24 Apr 1900.
50 Wagga Wagga Advertiser, 12 Dec 1877.
51 G Wirth, 1925, pp.139-40; P Wirth, 1933, p.106.
owners, the people with whom they were most likely to transact business. 52

The local girls in the town would get very wrapped up in the circus boys like the sailors when they come in now. It’s all new blood in the place. 53 [Gus St Leons Great United Circus, c.1916].

An element of audience flattery prior to departing a city or town smoothed the way for future visits. Before the St Leon company shipped for Melbourne in January 1884 after a successful Sydney season, the proprietor thanked the public and announced, with apparent sincerity, that never during his entire career and travels in the circus profession had he ‘met with such patronage, or more appreciative audiences’. 54

At each year’s Easter season, Wirth’s management distributed hot-cross buns and bottles of ginger beer among the poor children of Sydney on Good Friday. 55 At Ballarat, Victoria, in 1877, Cooper, Bailey & Co. admitted the children of the Orphan Asylum without charge. 56 As St Leon Brothers Circus toured North Queensland in 1904, people were caught cutting holes in, or crawling under the tent to get a ‘peep’ at the show but in one town:

getting up towards Charters Towers, a woman came and said, ‘Would you ask your father how much we would have to pay if we

52 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.182.
54 Sydney Morning Herald, 10 Jan 1884.
55 P Wirth, 1933, p.106.
56 Pfening Archives: unsourced clipping.
just came in and saw Dick Turpin? They couldn’t afford to pay for tickets ... [Father] just let the poor beggars in, he felt sorry for them.  

[St Leon Brothers Circus, North Queensland, 1904].

For smaller circuses, possibly lacking professional management, the ‘up-and-down’ nature of the business required suitably flexible responses to commercial pressures. In 1851, Ashton abandoned his Launceston amphitheatre and quietly departed for the mainland ‘without beat of drum, leaving numerous creditors to deplore his exit’, possibly explaining why he never visited the island colony again. Country town merchants who supplied the travelling circuses with kerosene and other crucial provisions such as chaff, bran, oats and groceries, became conditioned, like the newspapers, to insisting on payment on delivery.

I can remember one place - old Gus, fiery old fellow he was [with a] quick temper - the chaff came down [to the circus]. They were just packing them on the wagon and the fellow said, “Oh, wait a while. I want paying for that first. None of that business of being loaded up saying ‘good-day’ or ‘goodbye’”. “Oh, do you”. [Gus] picked up the bag of chaff and dropped it on the fellow. “Here, take the lot”. He dropped all the load and left it there. [He] wouldn’t take it. The fellow who was trying to give him the hurry up about it thought he was going to beat him to the money. That’d get right up Gus’s skin.  

[Gus St Leons Great United Circus, c.1916].

But the circus people also found themselves the victims of unfairness. With the onset of the Great Depression, when Ashtons Circus was

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57 G Lewis, in St Leon, 1984, pp.146-47.
58 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 19 Apr 1851.
once again a large circus, ‘a big family show’, country town police sergeants stood at the tent door to prevent unemployed men squandering their dole money at the circus. At one township in New Zealand, the people would not pay Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s advertised prices and stood in crowds outside, some throwing stones at the tent and cutting loose a circus horse. ‘A wire went down to the capital’ and the next day twenty-five ‘first-class boxing men’ were on the ground, liberally distributed among the crowd and instructed to arrest the first stone-thrower. As St Leon Brothers Circus departed Bega, N S W, one Monday morning early in 1909, a new van horse dropped dead near the Central Hotel. Were the St Leons the victims of unfair dealing or simply unlucky?

The animal had only been locally purchased that day. The seller had told the circus people to bring the horse back if it did not give satisfaction. When the horse died the carcass was carried back in a dray. [St Leon Brothers Circus, Bega, 1909].

To rural townspeople, a visiting circus brought some relief from isolation, tedium and monotony. In the more remote districts, this was ‘a benefit which dwellers in cities [could] hardly appreciate’. The visit of Foleys Californian Circus to Singleton, N S W, in 1862 was ‘quite a treat’ for townspeople in ‘one of the dullest of dull places’. Ashtons Circus almost exclusively identified itself with ‘the requirements of the people in the interior towns and bush’ and

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60 Fernandez, p.4.
61 Onlooker, in St Leon, 1985, pp.75-6.
62 Bega Budget, 6 Jan 1909.
63 Australian Town & Country Journal, 3 May 1873.
64 Singleton Argus, 21 May 1862.
65 Australian Town & Country Journal, 2 Jan 1875.
gave countless benefits in aid of local charity, flood relief or building funds, attracting people for up to ten miles around.\textsuperscript{66} Touring New Zealand in 1885-86, the Royal Palace Circus of Gus and Alf St Leon passed through Rotorua in the aftermath of activity from a nearby volcano. The novelty of the visiting circus surpassed even that of a volcanic disruption.

The advent of a real live circus to such an outlandish place as this created no small degree of sensation and excitement during the early part of yesterday. Such a sight has never been seen here and every other subject, volcanoes and all, was for the day swallowed up in the one engrossing cry of ‘the circus’.\textsuperscript{67} [\textit{St Leon’s Royal Palace Circus, Tarawera, NZ, 1886}].

Forming his circus at Wagga Wagga, N S W, in 1855, ‘Tinker’ Brown headed overland to Victoria. The company’s arrival at the ‘remarkably quiet town’ of Albury, N S W, coincided with the announcement of the ‘entire abolition’ of customs duties on the Murray River. Brown and his company took an active part in the celebrations, his brass band of eight musicians, large equestrian company, and richly caparisoned horses leading a celebratory procession of some 200 horsemen and twelve gigs and carriages through the town. As many as 1,000 people attended the circus that evening.\textsuperscript{68}

Benefit performances allowed the colonial circus proprietor to give something back to the community and establish a reservoir of

\textsuperscript{66} \textit{Australian Town & Country Journal}, 19 Jun, 28 Nov 1874.
\textsuperscript{67} \textit{New Zealand Herald}, 16 Aug 1886.
\textsuperscript{68} \textit{Goulburn Herald}, 19 Nov 1855.
goodwill. We read of Ashton’s performance at Maitland, N S W, for a new hospital in 1852 which raised £25 2s\(^69\) and Jones’ donation of the proceeds of an evening’s performance, £46 2s, to the funds for a new orphan asylum at Geelong, Victoria, in 1854.\(^70\) With these gestures, the early circus proprietors connected and identified their own entrepreneurial activities with the emerging communities.

While some towns, such as Moonta and Wallaroo, on the Yorke Peninsula, South Australia, were especially favouried by the circus people,\(^71\) others were typically indifferent to travelling shows. Towns such as Molong and Blayney, N S W, were known as ‘showmen’s graveyards’ in the argot of the circus people.\(^72\)

The heyday of the circus band coincided with the peak of popularity of the town band, a popular phenomenon in the late 19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) centuries. Circus music therefore had to sound better, or at least more interesting and exciting, than the music produced by the rural and suburban brass bands of the day.\(^73\) Visiting Mudgee, N S W, in 1875, the St Leon Royal Victoria Circus had to contend with the attractive counter attraction of the local Volunteer Band, which gave ‘several pleasing selections in the Market Square’.\(^74\) The visit of a circus to a town offered local bandmen the opportunity, otherwise infrequently available to them, to hear a professional band playing its own repertoire of musical selections. If a town band and the circus band were of a comparable standard, there was the additional

\(^{69}\) Maitland Mercury, 31 Jul 1852.
\(^{70}\) Argus, 1 Jun 1854.
\(^{71}\) M King, 1989, interview, Tape 7.
\(^{72}\) M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.260.
\(^{73}\) Whiteoak, 1999, p.61.
\(^{74}\) Australian Town & Country Journal, 1 Dec 1875.
possibility of the two bands performing together. Thus, the ‘full strength of the Grafton City Band’ took part in a benefit performance that ‘Monsieur St Leon and troupe’ gave in aid of the hospital at Grafton, N S W, in April 1878.  

Cities

Due to the high costs of grounds and publicity, Australia’s major centres of population, the capital cities, represented ambivalent commercial propositions for most travelling circus companies. Only the largest and more prestigious – such as Burton’s, FitzGerald’s, Wirth’s – regularly moved between city and town. They also enjoyed the business and publicity that a city season generated over several weeks, sometimes months, without having to shift location. The largest and most influential of the Australian colonial capitals, Melbourne, was Australia’s ‘boss show place’. So enthusiastically was FitzGerald Brothers Circus received in Melbourne in 1892 that an initially projected ‘short season only’ actually lasted fourteen weeks. Following an unprecedented 118 performances, a lengthy tour of Melbourne suburbs was undertaken and the credentials of FitzGerald Brothers Circus established as the leading circus in the country. City patronage and publicity was not only an endorsement of a company’s merit and reputation but were essential for a subsequent country tour. To tour Western Australia successfully, for example, the initial objective was a season in Perth

75 Clarence & Richmond Examiner, 30 Apr 1878.
76 Bulletin, 16 Feb 1905.
‘to get the city publicity’, so that the the country people saw ‘your name in the city papers and read everything about you’.

The smaller family-based circuses preferred the freedom and hospitality of the bush, the discomforts and hardships of the life notwithstanding. Ashton’s visit to Adelaide in 1865 was the family’s last known city appearance until 1905, when the younger James Ashton and his daughters appeared in Sydney with FitzGerald Brothers Circus. The visit was captured in a picturesque, if romanticised, account.

[The Ashtons are for the first time in a great city. Yet, they represent a third generation of circus artists ... They have the sawdust in their blood, but it is blended with gum leaves ... Their father is the genuine Australian bush artist. Only when the lights go up and the crowds throng into the tent is he reconciled to the city. Throughout the day he dreads the noise and the bustle, sighing for the quiet of the roadside and the smell of the gums, and when the show is over he misses sorely those roadside camps, with for sole roof only the gemmed vault of heaven, crossed by the tracery of grotesque branches which the true Australian bushman loves. [FitzGerald Brothers Circus, Sydney, 1905].

By 1971, a newer generation of the Ashtons aimed to take the circus to ‘the people’, a euphemism for the city suburbs as well as outback towns.
A happy self-acceptance of their ‘paucity of glamour’ explains why the St Leon and Eroni circus families of 1914 preferred to show ‘where a high collar didn’t matter’. During some thirty years of touring (1893 - 1922), Eroni Brothers Circus visited Melbourne twice and Sydney not at all. No advance agent ever succeeded in ‘making the Eroni outfit show six days a week in the country’ and despite ‘big business’ in Melbourne in 1901, ‘old Bill’ Eroni closed the season prematurely, leaving a lot of money behind, as there was ‘too much noise’. Although the original St Leon circus [1875 - 89] played all of the colonial capitals, apart from Perth, its city visits seem to have been more serendipitous than routine. For example, St Leon’s visited Sydney only twice during this period (1883-84, 1889). Later generations of the St Leons were similarly reticent about big city openings, as Mervyn King recalled:

They always had a good programme, a good show and that but they were either short of money most of the time or... there was too much cost for opening in a city. They would stick to the country more whereas the other shows would go for the city publicity which is always good publicity for the country. [St Leons Circus, c.1928].

Larrikinism

Town larrikins and showground pickpockets were plentiful. W G Crowley of the American circus Cooper, Bailey & Co. wrote that ‘the rough element is very numerous here’. Much of this larrikinism

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82 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, pp.173-74.  
83 Bulletin, 9 Jul 1914.  
84 M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.256.  
85 Crowley, p.9.
was concentrated, inexplicably, in Melbourne, early circus proprietors commenting that:

nowhere in the wildest bush do they meet with such larrikinism as in the Melbourne suburbs. As soon as they come to the refined city of Melbourne a hoard of young vagabonds try to cut the ropes, slash the tents, pull down the fences, and generally work havoc.\(^86\)

Visiting Hobart as a fourteen-year-old acrobat with St Leon & Soles Circus in 1922, Mervyn King saw numerous brawls on the ground started by ‘young fellows walking around, [with] nowhere to go and doing nothing’.\(^87\) Towards the end of its controversial Australasian tour of 1880-81, Sydney press criticism highlighted the disruptive element present at the large American circus of W W Cole:

The seats were too low, and between them and the ring a space existed which became filled with youths, who, by standing and crowding around the ring, thoroughly precluded the majority of those who had paid for their seats from satisfactorily witnessing the performances ... Occasionally a tribe of larrikins would engage in amateur tumbling which was diverting to those who could not see anything else, and sometimes two would challenge each other to go out to fight.\(^88\) *[WW Cole’s Concorporated Shows, Sydney, 1881]*.

The huge crowds generated by the visiting American circus, Cooper, Bailey & Co., attracted the ‘light-fingered gentry’ who travelled ‘after

\(^86\) Anon, 1884.
\(^87\) M King, 1989, interview, Tape 14.
\(^88\) *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 Apr 1881.
the show’ in order to relieve the unsuspecting of their purses and wallets in the crush for tickets at the circus. The pickpocketing incidents reported during Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s Australasian tours were unusual. The smaller crowds that the Australian circuses attracted evidently did not provide the same scope for pickpockets to ply their craft. Since ‘grift’ was an established feature in American circus, it is plausible that many of these pickpockets followed Cooper, Bailey & Co. from the United States.

Outback

‘In the quiet places, in the distances’, a passing circus was ‘practically the only break in the sadness of the bush’. Although overland trips were both ‘tedious and difficult’ the travelling circus counted on the kindness and hospitality of people along the way. The Gus St Leon Great United Circus played any place but ‘a very minor village in those early days’. The Australasian Pastoralists Review, a mouthpiece of squatter conservatism, conceded that every station of any size and township, however small, bore the imprint of Ashton’s ring. Even remote mining and railway construction camps yielded suitable audiences. The Ramornie Meat Works, outside Grafton, N S W, was sufficiently attractive for the St Leon circus to play one night there in August 1877. Departing Wagga Wagga for Urana, N S W, in September 1879, Ashtons Circus played a one night stand at

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89 New York Clipper, 28 Apr 1877.
90 Bulletin, 5 Feb 1906.
91 Salomon.
92 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.178.
93 Australasian Pastoralists Review, 15 Feb 1889.
94 Clarence & Richmond Examiner, 31 Jul 1877.
Brookong station en route. Station owners might engage a circus to entertain their working men, the overseers deducting the admission money from the wages to pay the circus proprietor a cheque after the show. Thus, St Leon Brothers Circus moved by steamer down the Darling River, N S W, from Bourke to Wentworth in 1912, playing ‘at some of the stations where there was shearing’ along the way.  

After a visit to Roma, Queensland, in May 1888, Ashton’s advertised its northerly route through the towns of Mitchell, Morven and Charleville ‘en route for Blackall show and races with the largest troupe travelling the colonies’. Such announcements were carefully conceived to not only inform the townspeople along the way but allow time for word to spread throughout the district. Where the population warranted a stay of several nights, ‘everyone in the district turned out’ to see Henry Burton’s show, some making journeys of several days in bullock teams.

Afternoon performances were given for the benefit of families from outlying areas, to enable them to return to their homes before nightfall. For Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s visit to Ballarat, Victoria, in 1877:

School children arrived from Smythesdale and Buninyong, and family parties drove in from Bungaree and other outlying towns, but were disappointed to find that that there was not the slightest hope of seeing the show that day. Many of the hotels in and around Lydiard

95 Wagga Wagga Express, 1 Oct 1879.  
96 A St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.87.  
97 Western Star, 10 May 1888.  
98 Salomon.
Street were crowded with the visitors from the country. 99 [Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s Circus, Ballarat, 1877].

Provincialism

Suitably sensitised to their audiences over many years of touring, circus people easily drew contrasting conclusions about the cultural proclivities of the townies and regions for which they catered.

We also went up north a bit, playing Tambo – the very centre of Queensland – Blackall, Barcaldine and Longreach. This was well out in the west, where men are men, and women are women – whatever their means. At any rate, the people of western Queensland, far out on the open, rolling plains, are the most hospitable, open-handed, open-minded folk I have met. 100 [Wirth Brothers Circus, Queensland, 1884].

Holden Brothers Circus, established about 1910, confined its activities to Victoria but small itinerant shows tended to avoid this state altogether as it was ‘always a bit of a hard state’. 101 After an Adelaide season of 1865, Ashtons Circus confined its activities to rural areas, mostly the year-round warmer climates offered by Queensland and New South Wales and consistently avoided Victoria which was ‘very strange, conservative … [and] not much good for show business’. 102 The Ashton’s contemporaries, the St Leons, likened Victorians to the ‘very conservative’ New Zealanders although ‘you made good

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99 Pfening Archives: unsourced clipping.
100 G Wirth, 14 Jan 1933, p.82.
102 A St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.79.
money in Victoria just the same’. After a difficult tour of New Zealand in 1914, the Wirths vowed to never again visit ‘the land of wowsers and excessive rail freight [charges]’. New Zealand’s exacting travelling demands notwithstanding, George Wirth considered it a ‘fine country’, especially its Maori population who were inclined to ask ‘the price of the best seat, mister’ rather than the price of the cheapest, ‘as might a white man’.

The activities of travelling circuses highlighted a gulf, whether real or imagined, between the self-styled sophistication of the urban centres and the simplicity of the bush. In a city audience, the people from the country were easily conspicuous either through their general demeanour or by their enthusiasm for even the most stereotyped performances such as ‘the clean somersault over the horse’s backs by three of the company’ which took the country people by surprise in St Leons Circus in Hobart in 1884. Touring New South Wales in 1908 with the remnants of FitzGerald Brothers Circus, the widowed Mrs Tom FitzGerald had to deal with some unfounded perceptions of country people. The Sydney magazine, The Bulletin, published a clarification on her behalf.

The country-district inhabitant had got the idea into his intellectual attic that all the valuable beasts ... and properties belonging to the late combination, FitzGerald Brothers, had been disposed of by auction. But this idea should be dusted out of the country district man’s attic... It was only some of the surplus from the late Mr Dan FitzGerald’s portion of the Australian show that was sold. Mr Tom

103 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.187.
104 Hawklet, 6 Jan 1916.
105 G Wirth, 15 Apr 1933, p.313.
106 Mercury, 14 Feb 1884.
FitzGerald took the best of the plant with him on his last trip to India ... after the disbandment of Dan’s combination. It is still FitzGerald’s Circus. Mrs Tom FitzGerald retained her late husband’s professional goods and stock. [FitzGerald Brothers Circus, N S W, 1907].

Summary

The circus collected people together and delivered to them a collective experience. It linked isolated groups of people as it rolled from place to place. It catered for and reflected the tastes of the mass of people. It threw into relief the emerging parochial subtleties of regional Australia. The circus served as an instrument of social cohesion, delivering a more or less predictable entertainment experience to a large proportion of the population, a precursor to the standardised entertainment that the electronic media would more economically, less labour-intensively, deliver from the mid-20th century, largely undifferentiated from town to town, region to region.

Figure 9

Alfred St Leon [1859-1909], somersault rider with St Leon’s Royal Victoria Circus, photographed at Tamworth, N S W c.1878. Author’s collection.
This Australian girl, appearing in America for the first time this year, put over the exhibition that caused the performers to stand around watching her during rehearsals.\footnote{Variety, 30 Mar 1912.}

While the term ‘nation’ infers the existence of a society and an economy within its borders, it recognises the existence of social and economic divisions and differences between individuals and groups of individuals.\footnote{Barker, p.132.} Since at least 1847, one such group of individuals present within the Australian nation was its community of circus people. Leaving aside its primary and considerable contributions to the formation of a modern Australian culture, how has this transitory group of people participated in the act of building a new nation and confirmed the existence of Australia as a ‘place’ in the world, the tyranny of distance notwithstanding?
May Wirth

Despite her extraordinary skill as an equestrienne, seventeen year old May Wirth [born May Emmeline Zinga, 1894], an adopted girl of the Wirth circus family, did not feature highly on the Wirth programme in 1911. Only two years earlier, the repression of Australian talent, observable in other branches of the performing arts, caused *The Theatre* to lament that:

... Australians have been kept back too long, through Australians themselves, because of their want of a patriotic spirit, or out of sheer stupidity, being disposed to pay outsiders more for giving them less. Managers of course have had to cater to these un-Australian Australians accordingly.  

Instead of May, an American trapeze troupe, The Flying Jordans, and some ‘ferocious’ animal acts claimed the attention of Australian audiences that year. May was simply ‘a remarkably pretty girl who rode and drove eight ponies and turned somersaults on a cantering grey’.  

But, a year later, the Bundaberg-born girl gave her debut with Barnum & Bailey in New York’s Madison Square Gardens, now ‘the first appearance in America of the world’s greatest lady bareback rider, exhibiting feats of equestrianism never before attempted by a woman’. The *New York Clipper*, a weekly journal devoted to American show business, enthused:

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3 *Theatre*, 1 Feb 1909.  
4 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 Apr 1911.  
She is announced as the greatest female rider that ever lived. Whether this is so or not ... Miss Wirth is the best equestrienne [we have] ever seen.6 [Barnum & Bailey's Circus, New York, 1912].

Even more polished after three years' experience in Barnum & Bailey's and the indoor circuses of England and Continental Europe, May and her troupe paid Australia a return visit during 1915-16, under engagement to Wirth Bros Circus. Once again, she was confronted by Australian provincialism. The entrepreneur, J D Williams, who witnessed May's extraordinary debut with Barnum & Bailey in 1912, was stunned to see the girl 'in her own country' passed off by Australian audiences 'without a hand!'7 The performing seals presented by the American 'Captain' Huling, attracted more attention. Understandably, May Wirth was only too happy to return to the United States and the adulation of America's towners. At the Coliseum in Chicago, for example:

[T]hey clear four stages and two rings when it is time for the dashing little horsewoman to skip in for her act. The average daily attendance at the giant showplace is between 10,000 and 12,000 and the Australian girl is star of the long bill.8 [Ringling Brothers Circus, Chicago, 1917].

May Wirth had spent most of her life and career in the United States when interviewed in 1971.

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6 New York Clipper, 30 Mar 1912.
7 Mitchell Library, State Library of N S W, unsourced clipping filed in M St Leon, Further papers relating to the history of circus in Australia, ca.1912-1994: Research material concerning May Wirth, the famous bareback rider, ML MSS 7366/2.
8 Bulletin, 24 May 1917.
... the Australian people are a very peculiar people. They don’t make over their own. They didn’t make over Madam Melba like other countries did ... Of course, they used to say, ‘There’s young May’ ... But the act that made a hit out there was a seal act, [Huling’s] seals. And oh, that got my nanny goat because I had been made so much of in Barnum’s Circus. I was headline billing and everything else you know ... we were treated like royalty, and to go back to Australia where I was just young May.⁹

Despite tributes in Florida newspapers, May Wirth’s passing in Sarasota in 1978 – some sixty two years after she had given her last performance on home soil – escaped the attention of the Australian media.

Con Colleano

After Colleanos All-Star Circus folded early in 1923¹⁰, the entrepreneur Jack Musgrove engaged the Colleano family for his Tivoli vaudeville circuit and offers were received from America.¹¹ The acrobats of this family – children of an Aboriginal mother - were presented in Arabian costume as The Akabah Arabs. The Tivoli management paid one of the Colleano siblings, Con, a tightwire performer, a weekly salary of £60.¹² This was considerably more than any Australian circus could pay, twice as much as his last salary on the rival Fuller circuit, but considerably short of the US$375 – about £150 - and other benefits, such as his own apartment on the circus

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⁹ M Wirth, 1971, interview.
¹⁰ Everyone’s, 21 Mar 1923.
¹¹ Everyone’s, 14 Mar 1923
¹² W Colleano, in St Leon, 1984, p.205.
train, he would earn by 1933 as a ‘center ring’ attraction in America’s largest circus, Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey.\textsuperscript{13} By 1923, the Colleano family had left Australia for South Africa, England and the United States. For its international audience, the Colleanos found it prudent to overlook their Aboriginal, and eventually their Australian, origins. The Ringling management introduced the young Con Collecano to the American public in 1925 as ‘the Australian wizard of the wire’. But by the 1930s, he was heralded in American and British publicity as a ‘caballero ... from a famous Spanish family of circus performers’,\textsuperscript{14} while his mother was ‘a Spanish dancer whose parents had come from Las Palmas’\textsuperscript{15} rather than the Aboriginal woman from Narrabri, N S W, she really was. In San Francisco in September 1929, Collecano asked George Wirth to ‘bring him back to Australia and star him’ in Wirth Brothers Circus, a proposition that the Australian circus magnate declined.

I told him of May [Wirth’s] reception in her native land, and assured him that once back in Australia the public would never believe him to be the champion that he certainly was in America. I explained, too, that I could not pay him the salary he was then getting, because he would not draw it in the box office! ... Australians do not want their own performers but foreigners.\textsuperscript{16}

As the lucrative American and European circus, vaudeville and fair circuits kept the Collecano family in employment, regular news of their activities gradually vanished from Australian trade magazines.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[13] Author’s Collection: Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey manifests, 1933.
\item[15] Croft-Cooke and Meadmore, p.28.
\item[16] G Wirth, 15 May 1933, p.407.
\end{footnotes}
Con Colleano gave the final performance of his extraordinary career in Honolulu, Hawaii, in 1960 and died in Miami, Florida, in 1973. Neither milestone came to the attention of the Australian press. Performers ventured beyond Australia’s shores well before May Wirth and Con Colleano and continued to do so well after, but, in many ways, the experiences of Wirth and Colleano were a denouement, and salutary.

‘Australian’

Being Australian evidently stood for more beyond Australia’s shores than being Australian within. Indeed, the appellation of Australian was rarely used in domestic circus advertising. Only when Australian circus companies and performers ventured overseas did they pay superficial homage to contrived national origins. Several examples illustrate this point. The circus which G B W Lewis toured through provincial Victoria in 1857 was Lewis’s Victoria Circus & Vatican; the circus he presented to vice-regal patronage in Hong Kong in 1862 was Lewis’s Australian Hippodrome. The circus which James Melville and Henry Adams brought to the settlement of Moreton Bay, N S W, in 1855 was promoted as Adams and Melville’s National Circus & Hippodrome; the circus which Melville brought to Chicago, Illinois, in 1864 was Melvilles Australian Circus. For almost twenty years from 1855, Henry Burton toured his circus throughout the eastern colonies as Burton’s National Circus; but it was Burton’s Australian Circus that he brought to New Zealand in 1878. Madame

17 *Geelong Advertiser*, 28 Sep 1857.
19 *Moreton Bay Courier*, 12 Jan 1855; *New York Clipper*, 1 Oct 1864.
20 Lorgnette, 14 Jan 1879.
Woodyears Electric Circus opened in Sydney in 1884, but opened in Tahiti and in Honolulu, Hawaii, the following year as Woodyears Royal Australian Circus.

Departing Australia for South Africa with their circus in 1893 to escape the onset of an economic depression, the Wirths’ excursion developed into a seven-year odyssey that touched four continents and included a lengthy tour of England. The extensive tour and exposure forced the Wirths to explore and define the Australian identity in ways unimagineable in the Australian backblocks. In South Africa, the Boers travelled from as far as 300 miles away to see not only the Australian circus but the all-Australian menagerie of wild animals the Wirths assembled before sailing from Adelaide. Recalled Philip Wirth:

In that year, the Boers and the British were at peace and neither could do enough for us, because we were Australians. In 1894 the Jamieson raid took place, the Boers came to eye us with suspicion and business suffered accordingly ... and from Durban [we] sailed to Montevideo, South America. [Wirth Brothers Circus, South Africa, 1894].

Mistaken for an English company during a period of anti-British hysteria in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1896, the Wirths and their company made preparations to defend themselves with stakes and revolvers. Philip Wirth wrote:

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21 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 Sep 1884.
22 *New York Clipper*, 14 Nov 1885.
23 P Wirth, 1911.
Word came that the Brazilians were after the scalps of the English colony, and after doing a great deal of damage to their homes were converging on the circus with the intention of killing them all ... We quietly spread word of the news of the trouble among the British portion of the audience, and when the interval came they all strolled out as though heading for the bar ... Before they left they told us that we were in no danger whatever as we had only to tell the rioters we were Australians and they would not molest us.24 [Wirth Brothers Circus, Buenos Aires, 1896].

The Wirths’ subsequent, extensive tour of England 1896-99, although inauspicious, remains the only known tour of the British Isles by a major Australian circus, until the arrival of the first contemporary groups in the 1980s. Among other things, their English experience demonstrated that the Australian and English models of circus had already diverged from each other.

[The failure] ... of our own Australian Circus to England, in 1896, was due to our relying on the merits of our show to attract the British public, with insufficient advertising ... We did not parade the streets with glittering waggons and gaudy floats, and gaily be-ribboned horses, clowns, etc., whereas the circuses in England, were classed by the size of their display parade, and not by the performance which the public had to pay to see.25 [Wirths Australian Circus, England, 1896].

In April 1899, after more than two years in England, the Wirths sailed for South Africa, the first leg of their journey home to Australia, landing in Johannesburg shortly before the outbreak of

24 P Wirth, 1933, p.78.
the Boer War. As South Africa descended into conflict, the Wirths found it prudent to refrain from taking sides whatever their loyalties.

[In Johannesburg, Colonel Baden-Powell asked that he might be allowed to hold a meeting in our tent. Though, of course, our sympathies were with our own race, we wished to remain entirely neutral for the sake of our own safety ... Later, General Cronje, Tchard Kruger and Lieutenant Eloff made the same request, but in each case I made the same reply. 26  [Wirth Brothers Circus, South Africa, 1898].

By 1900, the Wirths had returned to Australia and immediately commenced touring on home soil. In contrast to the enthusiastic use of the word ‘Australian’ when abroad, the Wirths had to present their Australian audiences with credentials gained elsewhere. Thus, the Wirths Australian Circus [my italics] that entertained English audiences at Southport in 1898, including the Prince of Wales, 27 became Wirths Royal Circus on its return [my italics]. 28

His faith in Australia and commitment to its values confirmed, Philip Wirth swore he would ‘never leave Australia again ... It is so much cleaner; the conditions are freer; and the people support you better’. 29 Evidently, Wirth spoke from a business point of view since the experience of his adoptive niece, May, described earlier in this chapter, would hardly suggest the ‘support’ of Australian audiences.

26  P Wirth, 1933, p.89.
27  G Wirth, 1925, p.107.
28  Brisbane, p.116.
29  P Wirth, 1911.
Whatever, his brother George expressed similar sentiments, even more poignantly, when interviewed in 1933.

We seem to suffer from an inferiority complex, and are apt to let the people from other nations think and act for us ... I, as a youth, had very little faith in anything Australian. It had become a sort of convention to belittle Australia. ‘It’s only colonial!’ was enough to damn anything from a mountain to a mousetrap ... My eyes were opened, however, after we had travelled awhile in distant lands. Our self-respect began to come up, and we grew proud of our country and our countrymen. We were glad to appreciate Australia as a clean-living, upright, able, but over-diffident people who are rather too much afraid of their brother’s ridicule.30

Despite sustained competition from Perry Brothers Circus during the 1930s and growing competition from Bullen Brothers in the post-war period, Wirth Brothers dominated the Australian circus scene until the 1950s.

Nation

In their transcolonial travels, several companies seem to have actively fostered a sense of Australia above and beyond a mere collection of six disparate British colonies. But, in the earliest days of Australian circus, appeals to national sentiment were more British than Australian in nature, such as the early colonial appearances of the ‘renowned British horseman’ [my italics], Ashton, and his subsequent promotion of his circus as Ashtons British-American

Circus [my italics] or Ashtons Anglo-Saxon Circus [my italics]. A patriotic spectacle that romanticised the role of a British soldier in the Zulu War, *Dying to Save the Colours*, was still seen in Australian circus well into the 1900s. The early equestrian acts, borrowed from Ducrow, tended to confirm British sensibilities and were also presented in Australian circus as late as the 1920s.

Another new feature introduced, or rather an old feature revived, was The Three Nations, a picturesque equestrian act, in which the male rider, garbed as a British tar, representing England, mounted the back of a galloping steed. After some characteristic bye-play [sic] to incidental music, he changed to an Irish ‘bhoy’ [sic] by gradually throwing off his clothes, and wound up by changing to a Highland costume, illustrating Scotland, and thus completing the unity of the three nations.

Expressions of ‘nation’ in Australian circus were evident well before Federation, when Jones and La Rosiere opened the ‘Royal Australian Equestrian Circus’ [my italics] in Sydney, at the rear of Malcom’s Adelphi Hotel, in 1850. The use of the word ‘Australian’ in circus advertising was infrequent thereafter, however. By late 1854, Henry Burton had settled on the title of Burton’s National Circus [my italics] in promoting his company, the first circus to consistently entertain audiences in cities and country alike. Burton used this title until early 1873 when he met and defeated his main rival, Bird & Taylors Great American Circus [my italics], in a hippodrome contest in Adelaide for the circus premiership of the colonies. Just as Burtons was not truly

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31 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 Apr 1918.
33 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 Oct 1850.
34 *Mount Alexander Mail*, 10 Nov 1854.
national, Bird & Taylors was not truly American since its coterie were Australian born and bred.

An itinerant company’s origins and its touring intentions, whether actual or imagined, conferred a Europeanesque sense of place on Australia in the context of a larger world. From where a circus came in the world, if only allegedly, was calculated to raise its importance in the eyes of Australia’s people. On the Californian goldfields, J A Rowe had named his circus Rowe & Co’s Olympic Circus.35 In Melbourne, however, he gave his establishment the name North American Circus, to capitalise on the geographic, if not national, origin of his company, although his retinue included several locally engaged performers. To name his circus the ‘United States Circus’ might have offended British sensibilities. During 1883, St Leon proclaimed his company ‘the largest and best show that ever visited Australia’ and the ‘greatest and most magnificent company that ever visited this part of the globe’ when in fact his circus was a locally organised company.36 The large American circus, Sells Brothers, boasted of coming ‘10,000 miles to visit you’, while mischievously expropriating Barnum & Bailey’s subtitle of ‘Greatest Show on Earth’ for its 1891-92 Australian tour.37

In circus advertising, the announced touring ambitions of a circus were just as important as its claimed origins. During a ‘regular season’ made through Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska and the Pacific states in the northern summer of 1876, Cooper, Bailey & Cos

35 A Dressler, (ed.), California’s pioneer circus, Joseph Andrew Rowe, founder. Memoirs and personal correspondence relative to the circus business through the gold country in the 1850s, San Francisco: H.S.Crocker, 1926, p.9.
36 South Australian Advertiser, 7 Mar 1883; Illawarra Mercury, 7 Nov 1883.
37 Australian Town & Country Journal, 14 Nov 1891.
promotion of its forthcoming Australian tour contributed to the ‘big business’ received. St Leon announced farewell colonial tours for his company in 1880, prior to its ‘departure for India, China and Japan’ and again in 1883, previous to its departure for the ‘the Calcutta Exhibition’. Genuine or not, none of St Leon’s plans materialised.

With his National (later Grand United) circus, Henry Burton was the generally accepted ‘king of the ring’ beginning with his travels onto the goldfields in 1851 until, from 1877, St Leons Circus replaced Burton’s as ‘the best show on the road’. As the mantle of Australia’s premier circus was passed from Burtons to St Leons, then FitzGeralds and then, by 1906, to Wirths, so also was some de facto sense of authority as a national company. Departing Sydney after a successful summer season in January 1884, a few days ahead of the arrival from New Zealand of Chiarinis Royal Italian Circus - actually, an American circus! (my italics), St Leon proclaimed his circus ‘a thoroughly legitimate Australian company and they defy competition’ (my italics). By the early 1890s, the laurels of Australia’s major circus had passed to the FitzGerald brothers, Dan and Tom. Outwardly at least, the FitzGerals’ advertising mirrored the prevailing Australian nationalist spirit fostered by the Sydney magazine The Bulletin. The Australian-born sons of Irish immigrants not only acknowledged their Australian origin but revelled in it in a manner not previously noted in circus advertising. Commencing a

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39 Illawarra Mercury, 7 Nov 1883.
40 Gundagai Times, 23 Nov 1877.
41 Sydney Morning Herald, 10 Jan 1884.
42 Dan was actually born in New Zealand in 1859 but came to Australia as a babe-in-arms.
lengthy and successful Melbourne season in 1892, the FitzGerald brothers proudly announced their circus as:

an Australian speculation worked with Australian money, Australian brains and Australian artists. You have just had an inroad of all kind of circuses English and Continental, Wild West Indians, Cowboys, and American Shows. Now we claim to give a performance by Australian born artists who are equal to any known athletes in the world.  

[FitzGerald Brothers Circus, Melbourne, 1892].

The FitzGerald brothers cast themselves as an ‘Australian firm of management’, who ‘far from disguising their nationality actually revel and glory in it’. But Tom FitzGerald revealed the emptiness of their nationalist aspirations when he announced, towards the end of the Melbourne season, the brothers’ intention:

to introduce annually entirely new and original circus presentations ... English and American artists will be specially sought and induced for an Australian tour by me or my brother on visits which we propose taking.  

[FitzGerald Brothers Circus, Melbourne, 1892].

By the time a contemporary circus movement began to emerge in the 1970s, the conventional Australian circuses were few in number and depleted in quality. There was none to take the place of a company nationally recognised in size and prestige. The breech was soon filled by a small contemporary group called Circus Australia.

43 Argus, 16 Apr 1892.
45 Age, 23 Jul 1892.
Under its registered trading name of Circus Oz, this company assumed its self-proclaimed role as Australia’s national circus company, despite its questionable credentials as a circus in the conventional sense. By the late 1990s, there was a ‘real explosion’ in the use of circus-based skills in contemporary Australian performance. By this time, Federal Government annual support for circus groups had grown to AUD$1 million in a climate of contracting public and corporate subvention for the arts.46 Much of these funds went to groups politely labelled ‘physical theatre’, small groups of performing artists relying significantly on circus-derived techniques to inform a theatrical or choreographic presentation. Since, at the same time, the Australia Council openly acknowledged its ‘unique responsibility to reflect Australia’s evolving national identity to its citizens and to the world’, and the arts as ‘central to national identity’, it must be presumed that its support of these groups was made, in part at least, with these objectives in mind.47

Contrasts

It may be no co-incidence that, with the march towards Federation, American literature, periodicals and plays became a stronger influence on Australian culture during the 1890s.48 But the visits of the large American circuses such as Cooper, Bailey & Co, W W Cole and Sells Brothers had already given colonial audiences a taste of American culture and threw parochial colonial approaches to matters of organisation and procedure into sharp relief. The Americans:

46 Author’s Collection: B Strout, Australia Council, letter to author dated Redfern, NSW, 16 Apr 1997.
48 Churchward, xxiv-v.
worked together with a common will, and no matter what the bulk of the vans they had to shift or the security with which they had been affixed to the railway trucks, their removal to the ground was the work of a ‘jiffey’. Indeed it was frequently remarked that the Yanks knew ‘how to do a thing’ and what it was worth, without troubling themselves about the rule of three or the rule of thumb; and really their smartness was astonishing. Their preparations for erecting the tents were also marked with great activity.\(^49\)

When, in 1928, a Sydney youth arrived in Vancouver, British Columbia, at the start of a North American working holiday, the dynamism of American circus was confirmed. His arrival coincided with the opening of Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey circus in the Canadian city.

I had never been out of Sydney other than Woy Woy or Gosford. So it was quite an experience to go on a ship and arrive in Vancouver and suddenly see this huge circus. ... I saw them putting it up. It was bloody amazing. They used to have these Negroes around hammering these skinny stakes in. They’d each take a swing, the next one, the next one, so the bloody stakes would go in, in no time. Of course, I’d never heard Americans talking. I recall the boss in charge of the operations, getting the tent up and all that. You could hear his voice all over the place. “Goddammit”, he said, “It's action what we want around here! Action! Not thinking! Action!” I’ll always remember that.\(^50\)

\(^{49}\) *Mercury*, 5 Apr 1877.

\(^{50}\) W Carty, 1987, interview.
Although admired for their organisational skills, other features of the visiting American circuses were subjected to less flattering critical evaluation. In his poem, ‘A Word to Texas Jack’, (c.1899), the poet Henry Lawson disparaged the visiting American Wild West showman about his cumbersome Western saddle, American swagger, and survival instincts.

As poet and as Yankee I will greet you, Texas Jack,  
For it isn’t no ill-feelin’ that is gettin’ up my back;  
But I won’t see this land crowded by each Yank and British cuss  
Who takes it in his head to come a-civilizin’ us.  

During Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s first Australian tour, Victorian provincial newspapers took an anti-American stance, with prevailing English moral standards providing the benchmark for comparison.

The English style of show is honest and without humbug. The American Cooper and Bailey style of exhibition (however good it is) is conducted in a ‘smart’ and offensive style, and we guarantee would never run a second time through these colonies. The concert that follows the circus is a ‘swindle’ (at least decent English folk call it so) and we advise all readers of this paper never to pay a shilling in future for three poor songs and a couple of breakdowns, although a thousand Maryborough folk were induced to do so.  

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52 Pfening Archives: unsourced clipping.
Figure 10

The Australian riders, George & Elsie St Leon, featured at the outdoor circus, Coney Island, New York, and celebrated on the front cover of The Billboard, 6 August 1910. Author’s collection.

Ideas

Circus performers and troupes of Australian origin had ventured overseas as early as the 1840s. If and when they returned, they brought fresh ideas of performance and production. Malcom’s former apprentice, Thomas Bird, travelled California and Mexico in the early 1860s meeting ‘unbounded applause’ for his performances on the corde volante. In India in 1866, his contemporary, Robert Taylor, Ashton’s former apprentice, ‘created a perfect furore among the native population’ astounding even the Indian jugglers with his feats on the globe volante ‘and the dexterity with which he handled knives, balls and swords while standing on that insecure footing’. Both Bird and Taylor eventually returned to Australia and, reacquainted with each other, inaugurated their Great American Circus in Sydney in 1870.

Arriving in the United States in 1901, the Gus St Leon family spent two seasons with Ringling Brothers (1902-03), toured Mexico with Trevinos Circus (1904) and then formed its own circus, El Circo Angloamericano, for a further tour of Mexico and Central America

53 South Australian Advertiser, 22 Jul 1865.
55 Sydney Morning Herald, 30 Jun 1870.
(1905). By late 1908, the entire family had returned to Australia and their Great United Circus was inaugurated at Liverpool, N S W, on 19 April 1909.

The St Leons were the first people to do what we call the revolving ladder act in this country. That was an act that they had seen in Mexico. Well, every circus has done revolving ladders since. [Gus St Leons Great United Circus, 1909].

Some Australian circus artists who had ‘made good’ in the large circuses of America and Europe returned home enculturated with ideas and expectations that proved unrealistic on home soil.

We were blown down once in Gundagai. We were all ready for the show, practically ready for the band to go out, and this terrific storm came up and took everything. He came over to me and said, ‘I could have told them how to put that tent up so it wouldn’t blow down’. So I said, ‘Well why didn’t you tell them, Dad?’ He said, ‘Oh, they’d only say that they do it this way in the States. They wouldn’t take any notice of me ... You’re not in the States now, you’re in Australia and that’s a different thing altogether’. [Gus St Leons Great United Circus, Gundagai, 1912].

After some twenty years in American circus, Philip St Leon returned to Australia in 1937 ‘to put the family on their feet again’ with a ‘Buffalo Bill type of rodeo’. The project proved abortive.

57 Theatre, 1 May 1909.
58 M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.276.
59 S St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.131.
It looked good enough but they had old second-hand trucks that were no good. Philip tried to do it a little on the cheap. He didn’t put enough money into it and the show wasn’t any good. He went back to America. He’d been out here four or five months I think ... You see, Philip had been away from Australia for too long. He’d lost contact with Australia ... Philip done a bit of money, might have been four or five thousand pounds.  

[Cody Brothers Circus & Wild West, c.1937].

Home

Although various groupings of the Wirth, Colleano and St Leon families gravitated to the lucrative entertainment markets of North America and Europe, other Australian circus families were not so adventurous. Albert Perry, a wire-walker who was regarded as the equal of Con Colleano, technically if not artistically, preferred to remain in Australia with his family and its circus. The Ashton family were similarly reticent of overseas engagements and it was not until the 1930s that various Ashton groupings were lured overseas to South Africa, England and the United States.

They never liked getting too far away from Australia, the Ashtons. They had dozens of offers to go overseas. The young boys, like Jimmy for instance, [was] a terrific whipcracker, ‘No’, he said, ‘What, go over there? Might never get back to Australia’.  

60 M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.269.
61 Manning-Sanders, p.258; H R ‘Snowy’ Graham, letter to editor, The Outdoor Showman, Jan-Feb 1961, p.3.
Of those of Australia’s circus people who ventured overseas, many were only too happy to forsake the opportunities the wider world had to offer and return home. By the time Willisons Circus reached Honolulu, Hawaii, after touring South East Asia and the islands of the Pacific for several years, many of Willison’s Australian performers were ‘looking forward to their return home with glad hearts’.  

Passing

With the passing of Australia’s first generations of circus people, not only were their achievements celebrated, but so also was their affinity with land and people. News of James Ashton’s death at the Metropolitan Hotel, Gladstone, Queensland, in January 1889 was published in newspapers throughout the colonies. The obituary published in the *Rockhampton Morning Bulletin* was a testament to the circus man who had travelled the bush and outback for forty years:

> Until ill health compelled him a few months ago to desist he never left the ring. He travelled through almost every town in Australia and Tasmania ... His last appearance in the ring was at Broadsend where he received quite an ovation, and, in thanking the audience for their kindness, informed them that he did not anticipate seeing them again, but hoped their patronage would still be extended to his family should they again visit that part.  
> [Ashtons Circus, Gladstone, 1889].

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63 *New York Clipper*, 21 May 1898.
The ‘old man’ St Leon was described, not incorrectly, as ‘the oldest circus proprietor in [Australia]’ when he died in Melbourne in April 1903.65 The Wirth brothers ‘sent’ their band to play a requiem at the graveside.66

St Leons Circus was a power in the land [in the 1880s] ... It travelled the backblock townships far beyond the railroad’s reach, and its cavalcade of horses, and team of waggons, headed by the glittering band carriage, was quite an event in our dead old township when it arrived once a year or so.67

The ‘large and representative’ cortege that followed the remains of Dan FitzGerald to their interment in Sydney’s Waverley Cemetery in February 1906 included several luminaries of Australian show business.68 His passing was:

felt in the quiet places, in the distances, amongst the bushmen whose weariness for many years was solaced by the show run by the two [FitzGerald] brothers. In many districts, FitzGerald’s Circus was practically the only break in the sadness of the bush.69

When the circus identities Alfred ‘Perc’ Bullen and Mary Sole died, in 1974 and 1975 respectively, their passings were also memorialised in the popular press but in recognisably less subliminal language than was accorded earlier generation of circus people. Superficial,
utilitarian terms reflective of the modern commodity culture into which they, the circus and Australia had grown over the course of the 20th century were now employed.

Alfred ‘Pop’ Bullen, ‘Mr Circus’ to two generations of Australians, died in a Penrith hospital yesterday aged 78 ... [T]he former printer established one of the country’s best loved circuses ... When Bullen’s Circus closed five years ago, it had given hundreds of thousands of performances throughout Australia. After the closure, ‘Pop’ Bullen ... established two lion parks and an animal park ... [U]ntil Mr Bullen had suffered two strokes recently, he had been involved in the daily running of the business. 70

Like all good circus folk, she [Mary Sole] was born on the road ... It was in her blood, the circus. The smell of sawdust was in her nostrils ... [K]eep the show on the road ... that’s what she did. Through hard times and all weathers ... Mary [and her husband] ... battled their way with Sole’s Circus, around Australia and New Zealand. She walked the wire. She flew on the flying trapeze ... All the time she sold tickets, organised the finances and the banking, negotiated with councils for sites, supervised the canvas making, the trucking, the shunting and looked after her family ... On Thursday afternoon she died. The other day, from all over Australia, the circus folk came to say goodbye. 71

Earlier folkish, symbolic conceptions of ‘the land’ and ‘the bush’ were now replaced by popular, pedestrian perceptions of ‘throughout Australia’, ‘around Australia’ and ‘all over Australia’. The mystique

71 Daily Telegraph, 23 Apr 1975.
and intimacy of circus was now eroded by patronising allusions to ‘Mr Circus’, ‘all good circus folk’ and ‘the smell of sawdust’. The solitude and sadness of the bush were no longer the cause for remark they had been almost a century earlier. What had happened? Had the city replaced the bush as the habitat of the ‘real’ Australians? Whatever the reason, Australia itself had altered over the course of the 20th century judging by the memories of senior circus people:

It was a good life, a very interesting life when you think back on it because those days are gone now. You can’t even camp on the side of the road now. Some bugger wants to hit you on the head or shoot you or some damn thing. That’s the way the country has drifted.  
\[Gus St Leons Great United Circus, c.1916].

We travelled Gippsland again [1888], this time with a slap-up show... I drove eight horses in our band waggon through the Gippsland bush, and it was some bush in those days, with tall, straight beautiful trees as thick as grass. One wonders where they have all gone to, and wonders why, why they have been allowed to go.  
\[Wirth Brothers Circus, Gippsland, 1888].

**Summary**

The novelty of the 19th century peripatetic circus brought not only relief from the monotony of the bush and tedium of isolation but conferred a sense of place on Australia and its emerging communities. The visits of large American circuses such as Cooper, Bailey & Co. had confirmed Australia as a place in the world. Australian circuses and performers advertised Australia and shaped

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72 M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.233.
73 G Wirth, p.35.
an identity for this place, beyond Australia’s shores, in ways neither apparent, imagined nor manufactured by Australians in their isolation. International odysseys shaped the identity of Australian circus people in ways they could not have imagined had they remained fixed to Australia’s soil. The challenges of Australian circus tours overseas threw the tranquility, climate and resources of the island continent in sharp relief but so also the provincialism of Australian values and Australia’s commercial limitations.

**Figure 11**
Bundaberg-born May Wirth [1894-1978], ‘center ring’ star of Ringling Bros Circus, Chicago, 1917. _Author’s collection._
Figure 12

Sydney-born Elsie St Leon [1884-1976], America’s ‘Queen of Equestriennes’, New York, 1908. Author’s collection.