PART THREE

CIRCUS & CULTURE

Identity increasingly drives cultural history, a possible reflection of a more general shift from identities determined by class, gender, race or ethnicity, to the construction of identities based on niche-market consumption and differentiation.¹

¹ Teo and White, in Teo and White, p.13.
Figure 25

This poster for Bullen Brothers Circus, c.1956, carried a strong American flavour.

Author’s collection.
CHAPTER XI

Promotion & presence

A sight for the gods is the entrance of this great moving colony to a large inland town, preceded by the band, and followed by the youngsters, who turn out to a boy. ¹

The engagement between audience and circus did not begin and end with a performance. The advertising of a circus in advance of its arrival in a city or town, its entry, its presence, its fraternisation, and its departure - the sum of these events, as well as the performance - comprise the spectrum of engagement between circus and people.

A circus travels not only to reach its public but to create its public out of the excitement generated by its sudden yet temporary appearance. To the circus people, each township visited represented a ‘port-of-call’ along a route, a commercial proposition as well as a brief respite for man and beast from the rigours of travelling. Without permanent venues for circus the appearance of a circus in even a large city such as Sydney was a unique event since ‘theatre,

¹ Bulletin, 20 May 1893.
like Bland Holt and those others, showed continuously.\textsuperscript{2} What was the impact on a townscape of a visiting circus? What was communicated by these activities? More specifically, what was communicated that could possibly have any bearing on the formation of Australian identity?

**Advance agents**

The arrival of the *advance agent* was the first indication of the visit of a circus to a city or town. He had to secure grounds, accommodation and provisions in each town for the impending arrival of men, women and horses; arrange advertising and announcements in the local press and post bills throughout the town and outlying districts; and generally attend to public relations on behalf of the circus. His work had to be done early enough to let word of mouth spread throughout town and district in advance of the arrival of the company.

When forming his Royal Amphitheatre and Roman Coliseum, the Wagga Wagga publican and businessman, William ‘Tinker’ Brown advertised in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1855 for not only equestrian and dramatic performers but ‘an active young man with good address to act as agent’.\textsuperscript{3} The advance agent projected the public image of the circus and his personal demeanour was important. By the early 1900s, these men went under more impressive titles such as ‘touring manager’, or ‘advance representative’. A good advance manager ‘would know exactly where the agricultural shows were’, ‘where the other circuses and

\textsuperscript{2} A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.176.

\textsuperscript{3} *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 Aug 1855.
tent shows were going and displayed ‘energy and business aptitude’ that lent credibility to the circus he represented. He did his best to bring ‘the town alive’ so that ‘it was almost a public holiday’ when the circus came to town. Advance agents often came from better-educated backgrounds than the circus people they represented. Frank Bamfield, a former mayor of the Sydney suburb of Newtown, was Eroni Brothers’ advance agent of 1912 and St Leon’s of 1915. He travelled by horse and sulky up to three weeks ahead of the circus and was ‘the type of fellow that looked more like a school teacher’.

In earlier eras, an advance agent kept in touch with the show behind him by letter or telegram, or by travelling back to the troupe to deliver information and gathering instructions. Communication breakdowns occurred if, unbeknown to the advance agent, the circus was held up along the way by, for example, bad weather or impassable roads. In December 1878, ‘by some blunder [of] the advance agent’, St Leons Circus inexplicably turned up in the town of Tumut, N S W, two days earlier than the date the agent had billed for its arrival.

A smaller, struggling circus might not be able to afford to employ an advance agent in which event the advertising and promotion of the circus along its route became a haphazard affair.

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4 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 7.
5 Ballarat Star, 20 Jan 1883.
6 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.173.
7 M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.232.
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Nobody [was advance agent], because I can remember doing the bills with the dates ... They were proper bills with a clown’s head and I can remember writing in black ink the dates you would be there ... We’d post them on to the butcher and general store ... And give them complimentary tickets and ask them to hang the bills in their shop.  9 [St Leons Circus, c.1939].

Advertising

Promotion in the pre-electronic era typically consisted of well-placed, florid advertisement in the local newspaper accompanied by a brief editorial giving further details of the company’s merits, all of which was designed to stir the imagination. Other advertising consisted of handbills and bills placed in shop windows, on billboards or simply nailed to trees or fence posts at strategic points along the road into a town. It was particularly important to plan not simply visually striking advertising, but persuasive messages about the circus’s attractions to reach the people. 10

While the English circus sought to impress the public by emphasising its royal or noble aspirations, the American approach reflected the growing investment in grandness of scale. 11 The visits of the large American circuses in the 1870s and 1880s injected new norms into colonial circus promotion and advertising by rousing ‘the public curiosity to the highest pitch’. 12 Cooper, Bailey & Co. even promoted itself as ‘the Great Moral Show, the one patronised by the clergy’ and

10  Stoddart, p.51.
11  Stoddart, p.39.
12  Pfening Archives: undated clipping, Inglewood Advertiser, Victoria.
adorned its covered vans with pictorial extracts from the scriptures ‘of a very excellent quality’.  

From the American examples, Australian circus advertising became more adventurous. Circuses were no longer promoted merely in terms of the ability of their performers and programmes designed to meet the concerns of ‘the most fastidious’ but began to emphasise quantitative factors: the company’s size, the number of horses it possessed, and the length to which its parades extended. By early 1878, St Leon had discarded the subtitle of ‘Royal Victorian Circus’ in favour of that of ‘Big Show’, the first of a succession of progressively more ostentatious names that underlined the impression left on the colonial circus men by the visits of the giant American circus combinations. Returning to New South Wales after spending the winter of 1878 in Queensland, the same circus was touted as St Leons Big Show & Great Moral Classic Circus and, in mimicry of Cooper, Bailey & Co.: ‘organised and conducted on a scale of massiveness and grandeur unparalleled in the Old World’. By 1880, the St Leons, however, had dropped ‘show’ from its title possibly because the word had become, as in the United States, ‘a synonym for tawdry ostentation’. Furthermore, the term did not satisfactorily differentiate circus from other forms of popular entertainment perceived to be lower on the social scale. The title that Tom FitzGerald gave his circus when opening in Sydney’s Belmore Park on 4 April 1903, FitzGerald Brothers Huge Moving Circus Caravan, New American, London and Continental Hippodrome and Menagerie, seemed to cover all bases.

13 Melbourne Herald, 17 Jan 1877.
14 Newcastle Morning Herald, 4 Nov 1878.
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On the other hand, blatant over-promotion in the American style by a colonial circus invited commensurate condemnation:

When a show is heralded by pompous advertisements, promising almost incredible wonders in language bristling with superlatives like an eastern’s address to his mighty master, and we find the realisation of this to be considerably below its pretensions, we are apt to feel a reaction and condemn the concern in proportion. St Leon Circus was thus ‘trumpeted’. The public were told it was a ‘congress’ of living wonders; full of zoological specimens from every clime and country; and that it would be utterly unlike anything the Australias has ever seen and so on and so forth; when, as a matter of fact, it does not come within cooey of Cooper and Bailey’s either as a circus or as a show, and it is not nearly on so large or liberal a scale as Wilson’s. Nevertheless, had it not been so boastfully presented it would have been welcome as there is some ‘talent’ in the tent.  

[St Leons Circus, Adelaide, 1883].

We have been left with abundant examples of newspaper advertising, but few examples of 19th century poster bills. In the press reports of the day, these were variously described as ‘fine stands of pictures with which the streets are decorated’, and ‘extravagant bills freely posted about’. Some appear to have been artful in the extreme:

[A] gigantic hoarding near the Royal Hotel containing a series of beautiful coloured illustrations of the feats of the performers, which

16 South Australian Observer, 5 Mar 1883.
17 Western Independent, 12 Jun 1880.
18 Port Augusta Dispatch, 2 May 1883.
for size, beauty and costumes, surpass anything we have ever seen before in the colony.\textsuperscript{19} [Burtons Circus, Queanbeyan, N S W, 1862].

However, the ‘nasty practice’ of some companies of covering walls with posters of acts and feats not performed in the tent robbed pictorial posters of much of their credibility.\textsuperscript{20} Misleading or exaggerated advertising adversely affected the reputation of a circus proprietor and his show. In 1921, Wirth Brothers fictitiously billed a young Australian lady rider who had been in their employment for several years as ‘May Wirth’. The representation came to the attention of one of the trade magazines which described it as ‘very misleading’.\textsuperscript{21}

About as far as any self-respecting showmen ventured in this respect was the artful practise of ‘puffing’, promotion with embellishment.

The arenic entertainment provided by the management has repeatedly been declared by competent authorities to be the most satisfactory and complete ever given beneath canvas. It has won the plaudits of admiring multitudes, the praises of the Press, and stands today unapproachable.\textsuperscript{22}

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\textsuperscript{19} Queanbeyan Age, 14 Nov 1874.  
\textsuperscript{20} Onlooker, 1907-08, in St Leon, 1985, p.101.  
\textsuperscript{21} Everyone’s, 9 Nov 1921.  
\textsuperscript{22} Burrangong Chronicle, 19 Aug 1878. 
\end{flushleft}
Adjectives

The use of the qualifying adjectives ‘Royal’ and ‘Great’ in Australian circus advertising is of particular interest. The use of the term Royal is noted as early as 1847, when Radford opened his Royal Circus in Launceston. In 1875, the first circus under the St Leon name, the Royal Victoria Circus, took to the road. Thereafter, and probably as a reflection of the impact of the advertising methods of the visiting American circuses, the term was less commonly used. Instead, the fashion from the 1870s onward was towards the use of ‘Great’ or ‘Grand’ as in Bird & Taylors Great American Circus (1870-3), Burton & Taylors Grand United Circus Company (1874-5), Walhalla & Barlows Great American Circus (1881) and Ridges Grand United States Circus (1883). This was, after all:

... the epoch of high sounding terms. Most things are grand nowadays. Opera is grand; concerts are grand; some hotels are grand, and so a circus has a right to be grand if it likes. \(^{23}\)

The transformation from ‘Royal’ to ‘Grand’ (and presumably ‘Great’) has been interpreted as the American-instigated exchange of a royal appointment (or the impression thereof) for a more democratic image of judiciously balanced mass entertainment; the equation of size with democracy; and an emphasis on the modern and internationalist nature of the travelling circus. \(^{24}\) In time, even the term ‘Great’ would fall out of favour. When organising Silver’s

\(^{23}\) Australasian, 12 Feb 1881.

\(^{24}\) Stoddart, p.53.
Circus, Mervyn King avoided use of the word ‘great’ on any of his advertising as ‘it always read phoney to me’.  

Parades

Parades varied in scale from mere ‘band parades’ to unadorned processions to full dress grand parades. The latter were only feasible in fine weather and if the size of the city or town justified the scale of preparation involved. The grand parade was ‘an advertisement worth fifty times an advertisement in any paper’. The arrival of Ashtons British-American Circus at Clermont in 1873, with its cavalcade of twelve buggies, carriages and other conveyances, together with forty horses ‘was a sight never before witnessed in the Peak Downs district’. The parade of Bud Atkinsons American Circus & Wild West Shows into Molong, N S W, in 1913, consisting of a pageant of performers, led by the band, in motor cars and circus wagons and attired in ‘all sorts of quaint costumes’, was ‘the best part of the show’ quipped the local newspaper. At another extreme, touring Western Australia in 1930 as the Great Depression was breaking out, St Leons Circus had to ‘crawl’ into town under cover of darkness so as to conceal their unregistered vehicles from view.

Arrivals by sea generated even more curiosity. Wilsons San Francisco Palace Circus arrived in Rockhampton, Queensland, in July 1876 by the Lady Bowen ‘with a discharge of cannon and the music of

25 M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.262.
26 Onlooker, 1907-08, in St Leon, 1985, p.74.
27 Australian Town & Country Journal, 3 May 1873.
28 Molong Express, 31 Jan 1913.
29 N V St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.325.
When the ship carrying another large American circus, Cooper, Bailey & Co., docked in Melbourne in 1877:

the great crowd that assembled necessitated the disembarking of the elephants being postponed, and it was dark before any of them came ashore. All of the animals excited universal attention as they were marched along Flinders Street, the camels and other beasts by daylight, and the elephants after dark. To the young people who had gathered on the wharf to watch the unloading, the reality of such strange animals was beyond their conception. [Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s Great International Allied Shows, 1877].

The parade was a fixture of the American circus spectacle as early as the 1870s. At their peak in the late 19th century, the parades of the largest American circuses on home soil were up to three miles in length and took several hours to pass. The processions of the visiting American companies not only excelled their colonial counterparts but also provided welcome examples for colonial companies to emulate. On the morning of 18 January 1877, soon after eight o’clock, ‘tens of thousands’ of spectators, including large numbers of ‘truant schoolchildren’ gathered in Melbourne’s Swanston Street, two hours ahead of the appointed time for Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s procession, ‘one of the largest assemblages of people ever witnessed in the streets of Melbourne’.

30 Pattison, Battler’s Tales of Early Rockhampton, p.89.
31 Pfening Archives: undated clipping.
32 Thayer, 1979, p.28.
33 Stoddart, p.23.
Elephants harnessed to vehicles are quite a novelty to the Victorian youth, most of whom have never seen these monsters. The first item of the procession to appear was the band, seated on top of a lions’ cage, which was closed in, so that the animals inside could not be seen. This vehicle was drawn by ten fine white horses, and the band and drivers wore uniforms of an imposing kind ... The elephants were the principal attractions of course, but the lion, the tiger, and the leopard, on the top of some of the cages, confined simply by a chain, excited considerable attention ... The procession itself was one of great splendor, and certainly unprecedented in the annals of colonial history.  

The calliope, literally a steam powered player piano, completed the procession of Cooper, Bailey & Co. through Melbourne and other cities during its two Australian tours. Although a longstanding institution of American circus, the calliope was a new, albeit abrasive, sound to Australian ears, ‘well-attuned to the discordant screech of a railway engine’. A citizen of Adelaide addressed a letter of protest to the Cooper, Bailey & Co. management, as follows:

Sir: We have been highly delighted and amused, and, I may say, instructed by your grand show during its short stay in our village, and could have wished its stay lengthened but for one thing. That one thing is what the bills call ‘The Steam Piano’ ... Those horrible and fiendish sounds it emits at morning, noon, and evening may be music to an American or South Sea Island fancy, but to the people of Adelaide, who are just emerging into civilization, and not yet cultivated up to that standard, the sounds appear more like what we

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34 Melbourne Herald, 17 Jan 1877.
35 Pfening Archives: unsourced clipping.
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are accustomed to hear described as shrieks from hell ... Yours truly, Paterfamilias.  

In colonial Australia, parades were far less spectacular than the American, usually a loose procession of men, women, horses and wagons through the streets of the town to wherever the circus lot was to be situated, led by the circus band, seated in its bandwagon.

The red wagons, with tent and impediments, piebald horses, midget ponies & c: what a brave sight they made, as they drove around Wild’s corner into Sackville Street, and how every boy, with any respect for himself “wagged it” from school, on that day!  

[Burtons National Circus, Port Fairy, Victoria, c.1865].

One of the earliest examples of a colonial circus procession was Ashtons entry into Brisbane in 1861, its ‘celebrated’ brass band performing musical selections from ‘their new and classical gorgeous chariot’, personally driven by Ashton, and followed by ‘the magnificent baggage vans’, the whole procession forming a ‘Grand Cavalcade de Triomphe’.  

Although circus performances were given regularly in Sydney from 1850, the earliest known street parade was given one morning in 1862 when Gardiners American Circus made its ‘Grand Entree’ into the city headed by ‘their Gorgeous Musical Chariot, containing their celebrated Brass Band, and drawn by ten

36 Conover, 1954.
37 Port Fairy Gazette, 24 Apr 1900.
38 Moreton Bay Courier, 21 Apr 1860.
horses driven in hand’. The same company paraded the streets of Melbourne in 1863 preceded by ‘an allegorical march of clowns’.  

During 1883, as it headed overland from Adelaide to Sydney, the St Leon circus boasted ‘upwards of 100 horses and 50 performers, 20 vehicles, 8 trained stallions, 16 fairy and trick ponies’ as well as a menagerie of wild animals. The procession of the circus through country towns, headed by ‘a magnificent brass band that played ‘spirited airs’, made for an ‘imposing appearance’. Making its entry into Bega, N S W, St Leon was readily acknowledged as the ‘largest show hitherto seen’ in the town. A Windsor, N S W, journalist went to the trouble of confirming St Leon’s claim of a parade length of over half a mile, concluding that ‘the first vehicle had reached Dickson’s before the last passed Station Street’. Visiting the town of Narrabri, N S W, in 1909, Eroni Brothers Colossal Circus advertised a procession ‘one mile long of horses and caravans.’  

Preparations for an entry into a town took place on the road a few miles out:

If the circus was coming into a show town and there was a bit of competition, it needed to come into the town looking respectable ... The show would pull up maybe a mile out of town and camp there in order to prepare for the town parade. The musicians got their

39 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 Apr 1862.
40 *Illustrated Melbourne Post*, 18 Apr 1863.
41 *Illawarra Mercury*, 7 Nov 1883.
42 *Coleraine Albion*, 9 Feb 1883.
43 *Bega Gazette*, 17 Oct 1883.
44 *Nepean Times*, 1 Dec 1883.
45 *Narrabri Age*, 26 Apr 1909.
uniforms out and shook the mothballs out of them. The drivers got down off their wagons. Out came the red paint to paint the hames on the harnesses. We painted all the harnesses and oiled all the reins and leather. We oiled all the collars and gave the wagons a wash. We put four loose greys in the wagons for the parade because they were better looking horses. The other horses were left outside town. A chap stopped out there with them and led them in later after the parade. [Gus St Leons Great United Circus, 1916].

Stormy weather prevented FitzGerald Brothers Circus from reaching Whangarei, New Zealand, until eleven o’clock one evening in 1898. Not to disappoint the crowd that had gathered in wait, the tent was set up and preparations made for a performance. This commenced at two o’clock in the morning and concluded just as day broke.

Customarily, a circus entered a town in procession mid-morning or mid-afternoon and made its presence known by passing down the town’s principal streets on its way to the lot. If rain prevented a parade on arrival or if a circus was late arriving in town, a circus might mount a smaller procession later in the day if possible:

A band of six headed by Professor Gee emerged and climbed into a handsomely built orchestra wagon, before four white horses were attached. Probasco, attired in a gorgeously plush jockey uniform with Hessian boots, and his partner, Finlay, in the glory of a red coat, white pants and high boots, and several of the artists dressed in their nice costumes appeared and mounted their steeds. The ladies were

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46 M King, in St Leon, 1989, p.262.
assisted to mount, and the cavalcade, heralded by the bandwagon, started round the town to advertise the show.\footnote{Onlooker, 1907-08, in St Leon, 1985, p.70.} \cite{ProbasosCircus, New Zealand, 1896}.

The bandwagon was an ‘almost inevitable sight’ when a circus visited a town during the horse and wagon era.\footnote{Mercury, 11 Feb 1881.} Circus bandwagons typically carried six or eight bandsmen, a bass drummer positioned on a platform at the wagon’s rear and a trombone player facing out of the wagon’s side so that he could move his slide without hindrance:

\begin{quote}
[In 1882] we had, in addition to our five other wagons, a beautiful bandwagon built for us by Pickles & Sons, the great wheelwrights and blacksmiths. These were built in record time of two weeks and were painted orange and green. We were all proud of these striking vehicles which made a great impression on the onlookers as we paraded into the various towns.\footnote{P Wirth, 1933, p.32.} \cite{WirthBrothersCircus, c.1882}.
\end{quote}

We always had a terrific bandwagon. This fellow in Albury, Dallinger, used to make all our stuff. He’d make the bandwagon. It was beautiful to look at, mostly glasswork. It had a curve up the back and used to have seats. We used to sit facing the street this side and facing the street that side, back to back. It was a magnificent sight. We used to put four horses on that, four greys ... In those days, I suppose you’d pay five or six hundred pounds. They wouldn’t make the things today.\footnote{M Perry, in St Leon, 1984, p.202.} \cite{EroniBrothersCircus, c.1914}.
The best bandwagons were elaborately decorated with glass or mirrors inlaid upon scrolled wood-panelling. Valuable bandwagons were carefully wrapped in protective canvas for journeys between towns.\textsuperscript{52}

Some of the smaller circuses had their own ‘folksy’ approaches to giving a town parade:

When Ashtons paraded, the whip would be suddenly cracked. All the circus horses would lie down. Then the whip was cracked again and all the horses would sit up. The band would open with a tune to bring the people out of their shops and homes. The horses would return to a standing position and then, on a further command, return to a trot to the circus ground where the tents were already being erected for the evening’s performance.\textsuperscript{53} [Ashtons Circus, c.1912].

During any extended stay in a city, the company’s band might serenade the streets during the day, conveyed in its chariot and followed by a pony drag from which handbills were distributed to onlookers. Circus proprietors had their own techniques for drawing the populace out of their homes:

There was a song called \textit{Gee, But This is A Lonesome Town}. If none of the locals seemed to be interested in seeing the circus, you could hear the musicians going around the town in the bandwagon to give

\textsuperscript{52} V Gill, in St Leon, 1984, p.100.
\textsuperscript{53} D Ashton, in St Leon, 1984, p.302.
the town a liven up and playing that at four o’clock as a little joke among themselves.\textsuperscript{54} \cite{St Leon Great United Circus, c.1916}.

A ‘really good brass band’ – Soles Brass Band – which accompanied the circus of W G Perry on its travels through Queensland in 1890, was ‘driven around the town each afternoon, crowds of boys and girls running alongside and on the footwalks’.\textsuperscript{55} In revenge for a rough notice given in a Maryborough, Queensland, newspaper in 1894, Ridge’s Circus band was sent to the editorial premises ‘in six-horse splendour and serenaded the staff with the Dead March in Saul’.\textsuperscript{56}

In the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, circuses had to face a growing body of restrictive municipal regulations. The 1920s were the beginning of:

\begin{quote}
... harassing times for circus proprietors who have long been accustomed to the free spirited conduct of their business. The distribution of handbills is now prevented in many places, and posting of bills is often restricted to expensive set hoardings. The arrival of the circus in full panoply with band playing at the fore is another method of advertising upon which shire clerks have come to frown.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

By the 1970s

\textsuperscript{54} M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.254.
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Western Star}, 29 Nov 1890.
\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Bulletin}, 13 Jan 1894.
\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Bulletin}, undated clipping, c.1920.
... A lot of the towns [that] you go through now you’re not allowed to parade and amplifiers are prohibited. Why, I don’t know. There’s too much traffic in the towns. [If] you come in with ten or twelve trucks [you’d] maybe hold it up a bit. There’s regulations by the hundred now. It don’t matter what you do, you’ve got to get written authority. You got to do this and you got to do that. So the circuses don’t bother with all the trouble they got to go to. They just go straight in off the ground. They might do a dry parade, no band, no sound, just five or six of the trucks one behind the other. 58

Lots

Since Radford’s day, Australian circus rings were dressed, as in England, with a thick layer of sawdust to cushion the movement and possible falls of men and beasts and to absorb the urine of the animals. Each city and town had its customary circus lot, usually a large open, grassy paddock that was both reasonably central and level. In the cities and larger towns, a prominent but vacant corner block was often a preferred circus location. Beginning in 1877, the St Leon circus played Wagga Wagga, N S W, on the same allotment at the corner of Traill and Gurwood Streets opposite the Squatter’s Hotel, ‘so central and suitable [a] place’. 59 Visiting Melbourne in 1880, the same circus played on a ‘vacant lot’ at the corner of Nicholson and Gertrude Streets 60 where it prospered for several nights before shifting location ‘and then that forlorn corner knew it no more’. 61

58 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 8.
59 Wagga Wagga Advertiser, 23 May 1877.
60 Argus, 27 Jan 1880.
61 Australasian, 7 Feb 1880.
some towns, the circus pitched its tent in close proximity to a public bandstand, or rotunda, artistically decorated for the purpose. Since a public house allowed the circus patrons the pleasure of a drink at intermission, publicans sometimes paid a circus to play on vacant ground near their hotel.

Almost invariably hotels would sponsor you to play in their back paddock. It was eleven o’clock closing and it was the understanding that you’d give a twenty-five minute intermission so that the audience would have time to go up to the pub and have a booze-up … Many times it would run into an hour and then you’d start the second half of the show when the publican would come down and say everything’s right. ‘Okay, away we go.’ Then on other occasions, publicans would pay you to use their back paddock. Instead of you having to pay to use the grounds, they’d pay you to use it. That was quite a common practice with all circuses, not only St Leons. [Gus St Leons Great United Circus, c.1914].

Apparently refused the use of Belmore Park, and unable to occupy central ground in the city for its visit to Sydney late in 1883, St Leon ‘most respectfully’ informed the people that his company would visit the city’s principal suburbs beginning with Newtown. After several weeks, the company secured ‘a suitable piece of ground’ situated ‘in the vicinity of the Haymarket’ at the lower end of Pitt Street, ‘opposite Mr Robinson’s coach factory’. There, a ‘grand opening performance’ was given in its ‘large and elegant marquee’ on Saturday evening, 15 December 1883. Although St Leon was denied

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62 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, pp.174-75.
63 Sydney Morning Herald, 1 Dec 1883.
64 Daily Telegraph, 17 Dec 1883.
the use of Belmore Park, an American company, Chiarinis Royal Italian Circus, was inexplicably allowed to open its third Australian tour on the same site, within days of St Leon departure.  

**Accommodation**

In the larger country towns such as Toowoomba, Inverell and Glen Innes, where a circus gave performances over several nights, the ‘principals’ of a well-established company might stay in hotels as much for prestige as for comfort. During his visit to Geelong, Victoria, in 1879, St Leon gave his address as the Prince of Wales Hotel, and his progeny continued the custom:

> The people of the circus did not want to look like a lot of tramps. They wanted to show that they were able to conduct themselves as any other ordinary citizen and not be seen to be living like gypsies, in wagonettes comparable to a dog kennel. A stay in a hotel gave a lift because the company were afforded the luxury of hot baths and a little privacy.  

"[Gus St Leon Great United Circus, c.1914]."

Before the widespread use of caravans in the post-World-War-II period, living wagons and tents erected on the circus lot were the usual form of accommodation for the smaller less-affluent circuses, and for the grooms and tentmen and employed circus performers of the larger companies. Some living wagons were elaborate, while tents could be carpeted and furnished to a degree. In 1906, Eroni

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65 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 Jan 1884.
66 *Geelong Advertiser*, 1 Feb 1879.
68 M Lindsay, in St Leon, 1984, p.123.
Brothers Circus visited Parkes, N S W, in its brightly painted and well-appointed Dallinger-built living wagons.

The life that these people lead is necessarily one of hardship but in the splendidly fitted up vans there are at least some of the comforts of home. A peep into these revealed apartments resembling the cleanliness and general appointments of a modern bedroom in a superior dwelling.69

The Dallinger was a very special wagon. Having one of those was nearly like having a Rolls-Royce car today. They would cost about £150. They were very well constructed. A Dallinger could be picked a mile off because of the way the top was built. They had seating for three people at the front. There was a bed in the back and a little bed underneath with access through the tailboard or at the front ... When they camped, they would just let the tailboard fall down and run their awnings off the back.70

In the capital cities, the travelling circus and other showpeople used the well-established theatrical boarding houses. These included Macs Hotel in Franklin Street, Melbourne and, in Sydney, Mrs Moreni’s boarding house, ‘the only respectable house’ in Palmer Street.71 As well as providing accommodation, these establishments served as clearing houses for showpeople’s information, mail and messages. The showpeople kept Moreni informed of their movements so that she could forward mail to a post office along the route. A small

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69 Parkes Examiner, 15 Aug 1906.  
70 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 8.  
71 S St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.138.
weekly newspaper, *The Hawklet*, published a theatrical column through which showpeople left messages for each other.\(^72\)

In wet weather, the circus draught horses might be accommodated in the dry stables of various hotels to rest them well before the ‘monotonous toil ahead’ of hauling heavy wagons along drenched roads in steady downpour.\(^73\)

**Comfort**

The ‘doors’ of the circus typically opened at seven o’clock of an evening, the programme commencing with an overture from the band at eight o’clock ‘sharp’.\(^74\) A big city programme customarily lasted from two to two and three-quarter hours. Country town performances were known to last for nearly three hours\(^75\) and even, in the case of Ashtons Circus in 1875, until past midnight\(^76\) but circus programmes were usually limited to two hours in country areas because people ‘had to get up early in the morning to milk the cows and do the farmwork’.\(^77\)

For St Leon’s 1881 Hobart opening, the entrance to the ground as well as the pathway to the tent were brilliantly lit with gas while equal attention was given to the lighting inside the ‘well-appointed’ tent. At Armidale, N S W, in 1878, the St Leons erected their ‘splendid, new and costly canvas brilliantly lit up with gasoline and

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\(^72\) S St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.138.

\(^73\) *Onlooker*, 1907-08, in St Leon, 1985, p.73.

\(^74\) *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 Dec 1883.

\(^75\) Coleraine Albion, 15 Jan 1879.

\(^76\) *Australian Town & Country Journal*, undated clipping, c.1875.

\(^77\) A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.187.
made comfortable for visitors.\textsuperscript{78} Audience safety and comfort were sometimes sacrificed to expediency in the case of late arrival. Damp weather, especially, tested not only the waterproofing of circus tents but the soundness of their erection and the seating within.

It was a late arrival [at St Marys, Tasmania]. We got in probably [at] two or three o’clock [in the afternoon]. It might have been stuck up a little bit recklessly or the ground was wet ... the seats came down ... People were laying in the grass until they got doctors down to attend to them. I couldn’t put a number on it but there’d have to be twenty, maybe more, hospital cases.\textsuperscript{79} [\textit{St Leon Great United Circus, c.1920}.]

During the winter of 1880, St Leon introduced ‘the pleasing novelty’ of warming his tent with a number of charcoal stoves.\textsuperscript{80} People who patronised St Leons Circus in Adelaide in 1883 could order carriages for the ‘respectable hour’ of ten o’clock in order to return to their homes after the performance.\textsuperscript{81} Visiting Launceston, Tasmania, the following year, the St Leons made arrangements with the colonial railway authorities.

\textit{The mail train for Hobart, leaving at 8.30, will be delayed till half past 10 tonight, thus enabling country visitors to view the circus performance and return to their homes the same evening.}\textsuperscript{82} [\textit{St Leons Royal Palace Circus, 1886}].

\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 15 Oct 1878.
\textsuperscript{79} M King, 1989, interview, Tape 23.
\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Western Independent}, 10 Jun 1880.
\textsuperscript{81} \textit{South Australian Register}, 5 May 1879.
\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Mercury}, 13 Oct 1886.
Tear-down

As an audience returned to their homes, or even as the programme was in its closing stages, a circus might already be in a state of disassembly.

While men, women, and sleepy, but happy children are discussing the wonders of the show in their rustic homes over supper, the circus man continues his toil. That huge tent and all its satellites must come down; that vast round of seats, benches, frames, pegs, scaffold poles, and ropes; the wardrobe, the housing of the horses; all must be packed, and packed so that they may be found and replaced at a moment’s notice. The animals must be fed, the men and women too. This great moving town must be got under way. 83

At the close of its return three week Sydney season, the evening of 5 May 1877, Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s animals, tents and paraphernalia were transported ‘with great expedition’ through the night to Redfern Station and loaded on a special train to convey the company to Orange, N S W, the first port-of-call for its rail tour of the colony. 84 At Goulburn, N S W, this American circus

... had to proceed on the same night and were busily loosening ropes and pulling out pegs while the performance was going on and the tent was full of people. A thundersquall came up before the performance was really over and blew down the tent very nearly

83 Onlooker, 1907-08, in St Leon, 1985, p.73.
84 Sydney Morning Herald, 7 May 1877.
causing serious accident. [Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s Great International Allied Shows, 1877].

Departing a town’s spare ground early in the morning after an overnight stay ‘leaving their filth and refuse behind’ for the townspeople to remove, did not endear the circus people to the locals.

Summary

Although transient, the peripatetic circus temporarily altered the landscape with its uplifting presence and a carefully crafted ambience that temporarily bridged the divide between ‘showies’ and ‘townies’. The circus commercialises what is popular, specifically the intellectually undemanding entertainments preferred by the people. The work of the advance agent, the advertising and the spectacle of its procession and presence are gratuitous invitations designed to treat the people to the spectacle within the tent, to popularise the commercial and, in so doing, legitimise the marginalised. The presence of a circus in a town was an act of communication. So also were the innumerable acts of social and commercial intercourse generated by its presence. Circus people not only sent ‘messages’ but brought and received them as well. All of these exchanges, however complex or naive, radiant or bland, elevated or banal, indelible or transient, contributed to the formation of values that lie at the heart of Australian culture.

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86 Grenfell Record, 7 Jun 1884; N V St Leon, 1990, interview.
Figure 26

Ashton’s British-American Circus, in outback Queensland in 1873, showing the bandwagon with bandmembers seated thereon. From the *Australian Town & Country Journal*, 3 May 1873. *State Library of New South Wales.*
Sights & sounds

This was the nation’s culture: middle to lowbrow and very nearly universal ... Virtually nothing in the almost universal middlebrow mix was Australian, save by adoption.\(^1\)

Circus performances saturate their audience with powerful visual, auditory, olfactory and, to a lesser degree, tactile messages\(^2\) while music’s sonority contributes to, and is affected by, the context of the performance. The circus was accompanied by a range of unusual odours, some pleasant, others not, that added to the total sensory experience. These included the fragrance of sawdust, pungent mixtures of saltpetre and charcoal that simulated gunpowder during battle scenes;\(^3\) odours emitted by crude lighting systems; and the smell of animals, domesticated, wild and exotic. How has the spectrum of engagement between circus and audience altered over some 150 years?

\(^1\) Malouf, p.14.
\(^3\) *Hobart Town Courier*, 20 Jun 1849.
Spectacle

As discussed in Chapter XI, the circus spectacle truly began with the appearance of the advance agent and the bills he placed strategically in shop windows, on sidewalls, street corners and hoardings, days or even weeks ahead of the arrival of the circus and its procession into a town. Gratuitous outdoor exhibitions, processions and parades served to whet the public’s appetite for the evening’s exhibition.

The spectacle proper was, of course, the performance and, in the well-established 19th century circuses at least, this began with a grand entree and procession of performers and horses around the ring. These could be in the style of a ‘Roman Entree’, ‘a solemn cavalcade of equestrians, clad in the costumes of Charles II days’⁴, or a ‘Grand Entree’ led by lady riders.

The ladies and gents paraded on horseback, doing figures like quadrilles - ladies in colourful velvet robes and plumes in their hats riding side saddle, whilst the men wore red hunting costumes, and as they left the ring after the grand parade, all the horses bowed in unison to the audience.⁵ [St Leons Circus, Adelaide, 1883].

A good programme held an audience ‘spellbound’, while ‘heavy applause’ rewarded the efforts of each artist along the way, culminating in ‘loud and boisterous’ applause at the finale.⁶ In Launceston in 1849, Radford’s entertainments were flatteringly

⁴ *South Australian Register*, 5 May 1879.
⁵ *South Australian Register*, 5 Mar 1883.
⁶ *Daily Telegraph*, 28 Dec 1883.
described ‘as of a pleasing character, and exhibited a good deal of real taste and ability in the getting up, as well as care and judgement in the performance’.\(^7\) Circus proprietors did their best to extract everything possible from the limited resources available. Over several generations the St Leons perfected their system of presenting a programme that ‘gradually increased in interest’.\(^8\) Each portion of the entertainment followed one another in quick succession, with or without interval.

Bud Atkinson had a terrific respect for the St Leons’ ability to run a programme. It was a non-stop programme. There was not a second’s delay between acts. As soon as one act went out of the ring there was another going in right away.\(^9\) [St Leons Circus, New Zealand, 1920-21].

### Equestrians

In colonial circus, horses and feats of horsemanship were the most important elements of the circus programme and equestrians were usually featured as star performers. Elaborate equestrian spectacles such as *Richard Coeur De Lion, Mazeppa, The Battle of Austerlitz* and *The Battle of Waterloo*, each of which was produced for Van Diemen’s Land audiences by Robert Avis Radford during 1848-49, were not seen in touring circuses. The equestrian drama *The Shipwrecked Sailor*, originally the Ducrovian equestrian piece *The Vicissitudes of a Tar*, presented in the St Leon circus in Adelaide in 1883, was evidently one of the last of Ducrow’s spectacles presented in Australian circus.\(^10\)

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\(^7\) *Cornwall Chronicle*, 19 Aug 1849.
\(^8\) *Warnambool Standard*, 9 Mar 1880.
\(^9\) A F St Leon, in *St Leon*, 1984, p.159.
\(^10\) *South Australian Advertiser*, 25 Apr 1883.
Circus equestrianism by the late 1860s onwards assumed increasingly acrobatic styles, reflecting equestrian developments already taking place in the United States and Europe. Inspired by the equestrian exhibitions given in the large American shows, young equestrians began to vault and tumble on horseback like acrobats, or display some inventiveness such as the ‘novelty’ of an equestrianised suspension-bar act - two men riding abreast and carrying between them a bar upon which a another man went through an ordinary suspension bar performance. In Ashtons Circus in 1875, the rider ‘Signor’ Wilson turned a back somersault ‘in the air ... alighting upon a bareback steed in full career’ a significant departure from the equestrianism previously seen in Australian circus up that point.

**Equestriennes**

Although in limited supply, female riders lent an air of charm, respectability and sophistication to the circus performance, such as the ‘Madamoiselle Elvira’ (so-named for a famous American equestrienne of the day) promoted on the St Leon bills of 1878 as ‘a model of youth, grace and beauty... from the equestrian schools of Berlin, London, Paris and the principal cities of Europe’.

Female riders delivered *haute ecole* acts side-saddle into the 20th century but, as with male riders, the classical and graceful poses inherited from the circus of England were gradually replaced by a more sensational style of riding in the latter half of the 19th century. The earliest local example appears to have been Madame La Rosiere (Jenny Kendall), the ‘draw’ of Burtons ‘fine show’ during its tour of Queensland in

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11 *Otago Daily Times*, 24 Feb 1886.
13 *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 4 Nov 1878.
1869 who performed the bounding jockey act.\(^\text{14}\) The daring performances of Minnie Cordella on her ‘flying steed’, in Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s Circus in 1877, caused ‘the wildest excitement’.\(^\text{15}\) In New Zealand in 1897, a chronicler entered Probasco’s tent just as ‘the lights flared and hissed round the ring’ to see the audience excitedly absorbed in what seemed to be the last few rounds of a lady rider in muslins, who, leapt to earth every other moment and then back on to her horse ... At last the act was over, the lady was assisted from her horse and, with lots of mud clinging to her dainty dress, danced back into the arena in response to a well-earned round of applause.\(^\text{16}\) [Probascos Circus, New Zealand, 1896].

In the 1880s, female equestrian jugglers began to appear such as Miss Rossini who gave ‘an excellent display of juggling with balls, sticks etc., while the horse was cantering round’.\(^\text{17}\) But by 1908 ‘even juggling on horseback, with the exception of the clever act supplied by Marizles Wirth, of Wirth Brothers’ Circus’, had fallen out of fashion.\(^\text{18}\) When female performers were few, the absence of female riders, especially, was lamented as a ‘great drawback’.\(^\text{19}\) Following the example of the famed American equestrian Omar Kingsley, whose performances as ‘Ella Zoya’ beguiled colonial audiences in 1866, local circus companies began to overcome the shortage of female riders by dressing male performers in female costume, bewigged and imbued with an appropriate set of female mannerisms for their performance as women in the ring. The most

\(^\text{14}\) Pattison, Battler’s Tales of Early Rockhampton, p.89.
\(^\text{15}\) Burrangong Chronicle, 19 Aug 1878.
\(^\text{16}\) Onlooker, 1907-08, in St Leon, 1985, pp.70-1.
\(^\text{17}\) Launceston Examiner, 25 Oct 1886.
\(^\text{18}\) Onlooker, 1907-08, in St Leon, 1985, pp.78, 97.
\(^\text{19}\) Dunolly & Betshire Express, 17 Mar 1885.
capable managed to bewitch all but the most sceptical observers. In the early 1900s, Philip St Leon did a ‘colossal’ riding act dressed in female costume and bewigged as ‘Senorita Phillipina’, few suspecting the rider’s disguise. A Bega, N S W, observer was duly captivated:

Senorita Phillipina is undoubtedly one of the cleverest horsewomen we have seen, her tumbling on the naked back of a tall horse, followed by a startling act in which she bounds to the back of a galloping horse landing in a standing position facing its tail brought forth rounds of applause. [Gus St Leons Great United Circus, 1912].

De-intellectualisation

The raison d’être of circus was not to address the great questions of the age or even to enrich the intellect or soul with profound wisdom or instruction, although it rose, as if by chance, to these heights on occasion. Instead, its purpose was to present elements of, spectacle and surprise, danger and humour, that touched the basic human senses. These stimuli temporarily attached some colour and dimension to the lives of people, relieving them, if briefly, of their isolation and boredom. A steady ‘de-intellectualisation’ of the Australian circus performance, in favour of the sensational, was apparent.

Over time, more athletic, less artistic, representations replaced most of the traditional equestrian spectacles while those retained underwent transformation in style and execution to accommodate local tastes and capabilities. The ‘posture riding’ of Thomas Bird at

20 M Lindsay, in St Leon, 1984, p.124.
21 Bega Standard, 17 Dec 1912.
Sydney’s Exhibition Building in Prince Alfred Park in 1870 featured his ‘splendid imitation of the trussing of the different kinds of poultry, from the chicken to the goose’. The comic act of horsemanship, ‘The Peasant’s Frolic’, popular in English provincial circuses of the 19th century, depicted the foibles of a drunken peasant on horseback. The piece, first presented in Radford’s in 1848, remained a favourite in Australian circuses of the bush until well into the next century but the title ‘The Peasant’s Frolic’, with its overtones of servility, had no relevance in a land which had never known an agrarian peasant tradition. What class distinction emerged in rural Australia lay between the ‘squatters’ and hired, and increasingly unionised, labour. In the Australian backblocks ‘The Peasant’s Frolic’ became known simply as a ‘Johnny Walker act’, after the brand of Scotch whisky, a casual title to which everyone (squatter or hired hand) related. Similarly, the popular riding act in the grand circuses of the Victorian era, known as a pas de deux, where a male rider stood astride two horses and held a lady aloft as they circled the ring, eventually became known as merely ‘a carrying act’ in its Australian context.

The tableaux vivant of Radford’s era resurfaced in the early 20th century as ‘living statuary’ performances where perhaps half-a-dozen performers represented ‘well known historical groups usually seen on public buildings and in the parks of large cities’.

A large Montgolfier balloon was launched from Radford’s arena in Launceston in January 1849, prior to the performance. In April 1905,

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22 Sydney Spectator, 12 Apr 1911.
23 Bulletin, 19 May 1900.
25 Hobart Town Courier, 13 Jan 1849.
the FitzGeralds presented The Great Herbert Trapeze Troupe of Aerial Gymnasts to their Sydney audiences with the ridiculous, yet topical, assertion that the famous troupe had ‘solved the problem of Aerial Flight’.  

James Perkins, who performed with the St Leon company in 1879, played a violin and drank a glass of water while standing on a wire so thin it was almost invisible and ‘with a deftness that excited the astonishment of the audience’.  

In the same circus, the American gymnast, Hadj Hamo, ‘The Arab Wonder from the Desert of Arabia’, was vociferously applauded for his performances of simultaneously juggling daggers and firing off guns, before jumping off a solid slab of stone and turning a somersault over as many as seven horses.  

In the St Leon circus in 1883, the younger Banvard’s back somersault off the high trapeze into the hands of his father was ‘too perilous to be pleasant’.

**Drama**

The brief, semi-theatrical presentations inherited from English circus such as ‘Dick Turpin’s Ride to York, or The Life and Death of Bonny Black Bess’ and farcical afterpieces such as ‘The Tailor in Difficulties’, ‘A Lord for an Hour, or a Tinker’s Joke’ and ‘An Old Way of Paying New Debts’, were sources of dramatic relief in the old circus programmes. These pieces were intended to send the audience home in good spirits. A short equestrian interlude, ‘Dying to Save the Colours’, a scene from the Zulu Wars, was introduced to Australian

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26 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 Apr 1905.  
27 *Geelong Advertiser*, 29 Jan 1879.  
28 *Wagga Wagga Advertiser*, 8 Dec 1877.  
29 *South Australian Advertiser*, 19 Mar 1883.
audiences by the South African circus of Frank Fillis in 1892-94 and proved popular. It was soon imitated:

The lights were turned low, the band played patriotic music and in dashed St Leon, mounted on a superb grey charger. He was quickly followed by some of the troupe dressed as Zulus, who vigorously attacked the Englishman. After a fierce onslaught, a la Astley’s Amphitheatre, in which the Englishman, albeit severely wounded, sent the Zulus to kingdom come ... The faithful horse, with his mouth, assists his fallen master to rise and with his head pushes him in front and out of the ring ... [The] act, if well done, never fails to rouse enthusiasm among the onlookers ... [T]e whole act is designed not for the glorification of the rider, but to show the training of the animal.  

This act - about nine or ten minutes in duration and ‘pretty long for an act in those times’ - drew to a close with a stirring patriotic tune from the circus band, such as ‘Comrades’ or ‘Old Soldiers Never Die’.

Humour

Among the earliest clowns were Englishmen, skilled in the art of purveying ‘jests, wits and bon mots’, who mimicked Shakespeare and giving burlesques of parliamentary candidates soliciting the votes of their constituents. The grand equestrian and pedestrian act entitled ‘Yankee Doodle’s Come to Town Upon his Little Pony’,

30 Onlooker, 1907-08, in St Leon, 1985, pp.96-7.
32 M Seymour, 1988, interview.
33 Yass Courier, 18 Sep 1858.
presented in Ashtons Amphitheatre in Launceston in 1851, featured not only a clown, Mr Carter, but also the characters of harlequin, columbine and pantaloon, the traditional characters found in *commedia dell'arte*. The celebrated English clown Reuben Cousins (John Plevy Bumpuss) toured with Ashton in 1857 ‘acknowledged by all who have seen him to be the only Shakespearian clown in the colonies’. Another Shakespearian jester, singer and clown, Walter Airey, not only brought:

> a high moral and intellectual tone into all of his professional sayings and doings, which are entirely new; but he has also introduced a style of dress which is rich and handsome in the extreme ... [H]is sayings are calculated to tickle the fancy of the masses, while they incur the admiration of the most intelligent audiences. [Bird & Taylor’s Great American Circus, Sydney, 1871].

**The best circus clowns took their vocation seriously:**

> I was surprised to find how sedate and serious the men are away from the ring. We laugh only by profession, one told me with a deep sigh. But it is hard work, and every penny is earned. The qualifications are many; one has to be a comedian, as well as an acrobat, and if a musician so much the better. [Probascos Circus, New Zealand, 1896].

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34 The harlequin was a mute character invisible to clown and pantaloon; the columbine, a short-skirted dancer who was harlequin’s mistress and pantaloon, a foolish old man wearing spectacles, pantaloons and slippers and always ridiculed by the clown.

35 *Goulburn Herald*, 14 Feb 1857.


37 *Onlooker*, 1907-08, in St Leon, 1985, p.93.
The 19th century clown purveyed his humour through songs and poetry as well through ‘witty sayings and comicalities’. In St Leons Circus in 1883, the ‘jocose, sentimental and recitative’ style of the English clown Banvard included ‘apposite Shakespearian quotations [that] repeatedly brought the house down’, while St Leon claimed that his ‘three great clowns’ contained ‘all the fun and humour of the best days of Grimaldi’, an allusion to the great English clown. Gus St Leon, although renowned as a bareback rider, sang a good rollicking song and had ‘more than the average ability to cackle jokes of the ring’.

There is ample evidence to demonstrate that the quality of Australian circus clowning, generally, steadily depreciated in erudition, taste and novelty. By the 1870s, there were increasing references to the staleness and coarseness of circus clowning and ‘the stereotyped jokes and buffoonery that we have seen and wearied over from our youth up’.

The unsophisticated youngsters thought the clown a fellow of infinite jest. Truly, ‘where ignorance is bliss, ’tis folly to be wise’, and no one could be hard hearted enough to undeceive the appreciative little laughing ones. [St Leons Circus, Adelaide, 1883].

Mr St Leon would do well to remember that a circus is a favourite place of amusement for children and no language should be used,
Sights & sounds

even in joke, which a father would not wish his children to hear. 43
[Burtons National Circus, Adelaide, 1873].

Some circus clowns tapped into prevailing sentiments by singing ‘a very good song about the working men’ or an original song such as ‘The Latest News of Beach & Hanlan’ or play ‘The Blue Bells of Scotland’ and ‘Yankee Doodle’ on a wooden gridiron. 44 Clowns capable of presenting new jokes were prized, while some conscientiously adopted a more ‘folksy’ approach by attuning their humour to the townspeople for whom they were performing, 45 but as a rule:

in colonial circuses the art of clowning is neglected. It is a hard task to make the public laugh, and the clown must always remember the gulf between humour and vulgarity ... To be even a decent clown in a circus requires the art of an actor, the diction of an elocutionist, and the agility of an acrobat. To get these attainments in one individual is practically impossible. Consequently circus proprietors in the colonies don’t even try to make their clown an interesting individuality ... Hence we have any rouse-about in the show rigged up in an extravagant costume, and painted like a barber’s poll, permitted to let himself loose on a long-suffering audience. 46

Extended clowning entrees addressed to some extent the growing deficiency of dramatic spectacle in Australian circus. In Probascos Circus in 1896, an original new entree, ‘The Rival Clowns’, portrayed a vigorous confrontation between two clowns over their ponies that

43 South Australian Advertiser, 24 Mar 1874.
44 Clarence & Richmond Examiner, 23 Sep 1884.
45 D Ashton, in St Leon, 1984, p.310.
46 Onlooker, 1907-08, in St Leon, 1985, p.95.
seems to have crystallised the Australian proclivity for one-upmanship.

Clown one produced a beautiful Shetland, and wagered clown two, the usual bottle of wine, that he could not produce its equal. Clown two thereupon rushed out of the ring and re-entered leading a pony the very duplicate of the one owned by the first clown. More arguments, and what is technically known as ‘business’ followed, and clown two produced a piebald pony and challenged his brother jester to equal it. No sooner said than done ... Whatever one clown produced, whether a grey, black, chestnut, or what, a duplicate was produced by the other clown, and as the pairs held by the grooms stood together in the ring the sight was a goodly one. All the pairs were evenly matched in height. Finally clown one produced a dappled grey pony, and the other, after a lot of argument, and gags about his pony being in pawn, at Ikey Mo’s, our popular benefactor in time of financial trouble, produced a toy wooden animal, which brought the act to an hilarious end.47 [Probascos Circus, New Zealand, 1896].

Costumes

Early circus costumes were modest forms of apparel, made of ‘mere tinfoil and calico’48 or ‘body dresses and tights’ decorated with spangles made of tin.49 In Probascos Circus in 1897, clowns selected their own ‘rig-out’, including the ‘knockabout’, ‘cricket’, ‘sausage’ and ‘band’ suits that could be stretched to extraordinary lengths, and readily put on and promptly taken off.50 On the other hand, if a large circus employed a costumiere, it could boast costumes conspicuous

47 Onlooker, 1907-08, in St Leon, 1985, p.98.
48 Onlooker, 1907-08, in St Leon, 1985, p.84.
49 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.163.
50 Onlooker, 1907-08, in St Leon, 1985, p.91.
for ‘real velvets and satins’\textsuperscript{51} or even ‘uniforms, trappings and paraphernalia ... of the richest descriptions’.\textsuperscript{52}

Performers arriving from America and Europe brought their own up-to-date performance attire, such as the American gymnast Alf Honey in 1908 who ‘always had good tights that he had brought with him’,\textsuperscript{53} and the Jandaschewsky family of musical clowns who brought their elaborate costumes with them when engaged to FitzGerald Brothers Circus in 1900.\textsuperscript{54} The artists who arrived from London to join St Leons Circus in Adelaide in 1883 may have been responsible for some portion, at least, of the company’s ‘entirely new wardrobe, new horse trappings, splendid entree dresses’ mentioned when the company turned up in Ballarat, Victoria, a few months later.\textsuperscript{55} That Australian circus fashion followed - rather than lead - international trends is demonstrated by the reaction given The Five St Leons, an acrobatic troupe, in the United States in the early 1900s. The troupe’s old-fashioned body dresses and circus tights made a favourable impression on American audiences long accustomed to seeing acts in evening or walking dress.\textsuperscript{56}

Female equestrian costume underwent some radical changes partly to facilitate adaptation to the new style of equestrianism but partly also, it would appear, as a reflection of the gradual, if slow, emancipation of women. The equestrienne of the 1850s typically wore a skirt that reached just below the knee, a close-fitting bodice, stockings and cross-gartered ballet shoes. By 1912’s standards of

\textsuperscript{51} Onlooker, 1907-08, in St Leon, 1985, p.84.
\textsuperscript{52} Albury Border Post, 12 Dec 1877.
\textsuperscript{53} M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.261.
\textsuperscript{54} Webber.
\textsuperscript{55} Evening Post, 9 Aug 1879.
\textsuperscript{56} Bulletin, undated clipping, c.1909.
dress for female circus bareback riders, the performing attire adopted by the superlative Australian equestrienne, May Wirth, was decidedly innovative. Her skirt was only thigh length, slit at each side to the waist.

By the 1920s, ‘the cream coloured tennis type of outfit’, began to replace the older styles of dress. In the less affluent country circuses, the costumes, while ‘clean’ were ‘not as glamorous as they have today’. These were sometimes designed and made by the performers themselves since ‘beautiful frocks’ were unaffordable.

Music

The conventional circus band comprised brass, woodwind and percussion instruments, and its ensemble structure, repertoire, and performance style tended to reinforce established circus practise. For the performances of his Royal Circus during 1848 and 1849, Robert Radford engaged an ‘orchestra’ led by Alfred Howson, of a prominent London musical family. In 1849, Radford engaged the band of the 96th Regiment for one select performance at his Hobart amphitheatre. Hores Saxe Horn Band, a band of brass instruments, supported the performances of Nobles Circus, which opened in Melbourne in 1852. At the other extreme, some of the early circus ‘orchestras’ were makeshift affairs comprising ‘a couple of fiddlers, a

58 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.163.
60 J Whiteoak, p.61.
61 Cornwall Chronicle, 26 Dec 1849.
62 Cornwall Chronicle, 13 Feb 1849.
63 Argus, 28 Jun 1852.
tin whistle and a sheepskin drum [which] discoursed the popular melodies of the day.\textsuperscript{64}

The ‘German’ bands which arrived during the gold-rush era to entertain on the diggings, subsequently moved on to serenade country race meetings, picnics and pleasure resorts. Many German musicians, indeed complete bands of German musicians, were soon engaged as circus bandmen. The six-piece German band Ashton engaged for his circus at Goulburn, N S W, in 1857 had grown to eleven pieces by the time he visited the Adelong, N S W, diggers a year later: three clarinets, two cornets, four horns, one tenor drum and one bass drum.\textsuperscript{65} Musicians of German origin remained conspicuous as bandmen in Australian circus into the early years of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.

Circus bands had to contend with obstacles unknown by town bands. The volatile nature of the live circus performance, unreliable lighting, chaotic noise and acoustics, unsteady platforms and horse-drawn bandwagons, were impositions on circus bandmen, whether well-trained or self-taught. These factors may account for some of the condescending descriptions of circus music that was ‘tolerably well executed’\textsuperscript{66} and bands that were ‘small but noisy’.\textsuperscript{67} The ‘dire dissonance’ of Ashtons band made Brisbane’s nights ‘hideous’ during its visit in 1861.\textsuperscript{68} Despite the absence of aural evidence, some contemporary accounts and memoirs confirm the musical discipline, tone, and precision achieved by the better circus bands, whether

\textsuperscript{64} Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales: Handbill for St Leons Circus, c.1921, ML MSS 2165.
\textsuperscript{65} Yass Courier, 21 Aug 1858.
\textsuperscript{66} Burrangong Chronicle, 29 May 1880.
\textsuperscript{67} South Australian Advertiser, 5 Mar 1883.
\textsuperscript{68} Bell’s Life in Victoria, 18 May 1861.
large or small. With Ridges Royal Tycoon Circus at Cowra, N S W, in March 1880, the small band of the Wirth family was ‘well worth listening to, several operatic selections being rendered with exquisite taste’.

Apart from the choice and delivery of appropriate music, the chief challenge in providing a musical accompaniment to a circus performance lay in the need to synchronise the tempo and mood of the music with the constantly varying action in the ring. Traditional circus acts required specific types of musical accompaniment.

As soon as you hear a six-eight march you immediately think of a girl riding on a horse. ‘Over the Waves’, a waltz, is for flying acts. Then you’ve got to have a good strong heavy march for a lion act.

[St Leons Circus, c.1928].

In this respect, a very small cohesive ensemble of experienced circus musicians provided a more agile accompaniment than a large band, augmented with hired non-specialist players. A critic’s observation of ‘six magnificently attired equestrians on richly caparisoned steeds’ who made ‘their quadrupeds dance a set of quadrilles … in excellent time with the orchestra’, probably commended the skill of the circus musicians as much as the horses and their riders.

Circus bands of the late 19th and early 20th century ranged from three or four brass instruments and a drum, typical of a small family

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69 Cowra Free Press, 17 Mar 1880.
70 M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.276.
71 J Whiteoak, personal communication, 14 Aug 2006.
72 Maryborough & Dunolly Advertiser, 10 Feb 1879.
Sights & sounds

circus such as Seymours Family Circus,\textsuperscript{73} to the large bands of concert standard comprising twenty or more players. As well as leading the circus procession into each town visited and enlivening the streets with its melodies in the afternoon, the band of course provided accompaniment for the performance.\textsuperscript{74}

Under the conductorship of Carl von der Mehden FitzGerald Brothers’ circus band of the early 1900s provided ‘actual’ music,\textsuperscript{75} and musical selections devoid of ‘blatant, blaring noise and ... [which] suit each in turn’.\textsuperscript{76} At least two of his band compositions, ‘Bucephaleon’ and ‘Tarador’, were published for standard brass band. A former pupil of von der Mehd, Reg St Leon, wrote ‘some good marches and waltzes and stuff, gallops, ideal circus music’. The band he led in his father’s circus around 1916 was described as ‘equal to any band you’d find in the country’.\textsuperscript{77}

The aftermath of World War I saw the beginning of the decline of the permanent circus band. Increasing unionisation led musicians to seek ‘extra payment for every blast on their instruments, even down to playing outside the circus tent prior to the commencement of the show’.\textsuperscript{78} By the 1930s, Wirths Circus dispensed with a live band of musicians for its country tours, at least, in favour of recorded background music that precluded any synchronised accompaniment to the performance. With the emergence of a ‘new wave’ circus movement in the 1980s, the question of music in circus underwent a

\textsuperscript{73} Lord, 1961.
\textsuperscript{74} Geelong Advertiser, 24 Jan 1879.
\textsuperscript{75} Sydney Morning Herald, 16 Apr 1903.
\textsuperscript{76} Times of India, Bombay: undated clipping, c.1902.
\textsuperscript{77} M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.239.
\textsuperscript{78} Bulletin, undated clipping c.1920.
thorough redefinition. During its tour overseas in 1991, the musical
director of Circus Oz, Julie McInnes, had:

no time ... to sit home and write out parts, let alone teach them to
anyone. So we ended up with some wild, organic music, some of the
best we’ve ever done, I think.\textsuperscript{79} [Circus Oz, 1991].

Programme

With the onset of the industrial revolution, Britain entered into a
state of almost continuous transformation and many of the
developments in Australia’s history have been a repetition, or at
least a reflection, of developments in Britain.\textsuperscript{80} The development of
Australian circus, in particular, broadly mimicked the three major
ePOCHS in the history of English circus from its beginnings in London
in the 1760s, identified by Hippisley-Coxe:

During the first ninety years or so, the prevailing feature was the
horse ... [Then] a new influence was to be felt which, although it
never supplanted the horse, did alter the balance of the programme
... The first group of showmen who left the fairgrounds to join the
equestrians of the circus: the acrobats, ropedancers and jugglers ...
The acrobats and gymnasts of the circus reached their greatest
success at the beginning of the [20\textsuperscript{th}] century ... World War I caused
their decline. Many were killed or injured and others deprived of the
time and place to practise; furthermore, the depression that followed
made directors look for ways of saving money. This they achieved
by relying more on house numbers, which left little room for outside
acts. These numbers were found amongst the wild animals and their

\textsuperscript{79} Age, 13 Sep 1991.
\textsuperscript{80} Malouf, p.22.
trainers, which had formed the second group of performers to leave the fairground for the circus. So we come to the third phase, the rise of the animal acts, which while not achieving the total eclipse of either man or horse, put both further in the shadow.  

As Twopenny observed in 1884, the colonial taste in theatrical matters closely followed the English. Although horses and horsemanship remained a central feature of Australian circus programmes until 1950s, the larger circuses had incorporated acts more typical of the ‘music hall’ from the 1890s and some had attached menageries and wild animal acts a decade earlier. By 1908 a local observer lamented the passing of the equestrian displays, an ‘essential feature’ of the 19th-century circus:

The modern circus, with its highly sensational wild beast and acrobatic feats, is apt to neglect the equestrian side of the show. A lot of the early and attractive features of the circus in horsemanship have dropped out, and a revival of many of them would be quite a novelty to the present generation. With the exception of The Olympians, The Bounding Jockey, and a hurricane hurdle act, most of the old feats have been dropped, elbowed out to make way for gentlemen who dive into tanks of water, or ladies who insert their lovely heads into the jaws of ferocious lions. It is some time since the circus arena has seen The Highland Lovers, The Life of Joan of Arc, Ducrow’s rollicking tar and other equestrian acts.

By the 1960s, the enormous costs of importation notwithstanding, Australian circus managements increasingly filled out their

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81 Hippisley Coxe, pp.33-5.
82 Twopenny, pp.215-16.
83 *Onlooker*, 1907-08, in St Leon, 1985, p.81.
84 *Onlooker*, 1907-08, in St Leon, 1985, pp.78, 97.
programmes with less-than-exceptional foreign artists and the mediocre variety acts readily seen on television or in clubs. The cumulative effect of these trends on Australian circus was clearly apparent by the later decades of the 20th century:

These shows today [1973] are terrible I think. There’s no horsework now. They’re all vaudeville acts I call them. You never see any good tumblers or acrobatics, wirewalkers, nothing like in those days. They were good, well trained.  

When I look at the circuses now [1974], you see that they’ve lost the art. They can’t teach anybody. There’s no teachers anymore. It’s going to die right out or it’s going to become a joke.

Summary

The chief observation to make of the sights and sounds offered in Australian circus programmes over the space of some one and a half centuries is the transformation that occurred. The first programmes were imitations, on a lesser scale, of those of Astley’s and other English circuses of the 1840s, and already well defined after more than sixty years of development. Programs thereafter were constantly, if somewhat belatedly updated by the importation of performers and troupes from, principally, England, the United States and Japan. Local performers and troupes, whether Australian-born or Australian-bred, were increasingly products of these influences as well as the natural influences of their domestic surroundings. But

85 A St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.90.
86 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 3.
programmes were increasingly adapted and modified to suit domestic tastes. The dramatic and thoughtful qualities of circus, as portrayed by the equestrianism of Ducrow, *commedia dell’arte*, hippodramas and numerous pantomimic afterpieces, either receded in importance or underwent modification to address local tastes and accommodate local performance abilities.

**Figure 27**
Miss Isabella Irwin, a native of Maitland, N S W, ‘leaping through garlands from the back of a horse at full speed, which she executed with great speed and elegance’ in Ashton’s Amphitheatre, York Street, Sydney. *Illustrated Sydney News*, 30 Jun 1855. *State Library of New South Wales*. 

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Figure 28
The personnel of Ivan Bros Top of the World International Circus, photographed in Sydney at the commencement for its short-lived tour, 1936. Author’s collection.

Figure 29
The Five St Leons, Australian acrobats as they appeared in American vaudeville, c.1908. Author’s collection.
Figure 29a
Sequential scenes of Con Colleano in performance on the tightwire, c.1935. Author’s collection.

Figure 29b
Miss May Wirth, ‘lady somersault rider’, appeared at the Wonder Zoo and Circus of the German animal dealer, Carl Hagenbeck, at London’s Olympia in 1913. Author’s collection.
CHAPTER XIII

Beasts & curiosities

[T]he Australian knows more or less what a horse is going to do [but]
he’s not so sure about a lion.¹ [Wirth Brothers Circus, Sydney, 1911].

Menageries of wild ‘beasts’ and exotic animals, and sideshows, were lesser forms of entertainment and not to be confused with circus. Gradually, the more enterprising circus proprietors overcame or ignored earlier attitudes towards these entertainments and by the close of the 19th century, the presence of menageries and sideshows had become almost inseparable from the notion of circus in the eyes of the public.

Most of the large travelling circuses of 19th century England carried a menagerie as a side attraction, while the largest travelling menagerie enterprise of the day, Bostock & Wombwell [sic], engaged in circus activities as a sideline.² Censured by the clergy over semi-nude athletes in the ring and the gambling on the showgrounds, American

¹ Sydney Morning Herald, 3 Apr 1911.
² Manning-Sanders, p.125.
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circus owners began to acquire menageries to market them for their educational and religious values.³ By the 1820s, there were some thirty itinerant menageries, often billed as ‘travelling museums’, travelling the American back roads and frontier.⁴ In 1878, Cooper, Bailey & Co., its menagerie vans decorated with parables from the scriptures, was promoted to its Australian patrons as ‘the great moral show, the one patronised by the clergy’.⁵ Placards advertising Sells Brothers’ Australian tour in 1892 presented pictures of hippopotami with the caption ‘Blood Sweating Behemoths – See Book of Job’.⁶

What role have sideshows, especially menageries of wild and exotic animals, played in Australian circus over 150 years?

Menageries

Public exhibitions of wild and exotic animals are noted in Australia as early as 1850, although earlier displays may well have occurred. In that year, two Sydney entrepreneurs, Beaumont and Waller, opened their ‘zoological gardens’ at the Sir Joseph Banks Hotel, Botany Bay, N S W. Their menagerie consisted of an elephant, a Bengal tiger, a Himalayan Black Bear, wolves and other animals.⁷ Coincidentally, Beaumont and Waller’s resort was also the site of some of Australia’s earliest circus activity including Ashton & Cardozas Grand

³ Davis, pp.17-8.
⁵ Anon, 1892.
⁶ Anon, 1892.
⁷ Sydney Morning Herald, 18 Apr 1851.
Equestrian Exhibition on Easter Monday 1852. An English writer who visited Sydney in this period, also noted:

a menagerie in Elizabeth Street that contains an elephant, two or three monkeys, a lion and a lioness and a few other animals of the cat species. In summer time, these animals are kept in a wooden building in the street and on the setting in of the rainy season they are removed to Botany Bay. The prices of admission to these places are from one shilling to three shillings and sixpence.

How these wild and exotic animals were brought to Australia is not known. However, if the American experience is any guide, they may have been acquired by speculative sea captains en route for the colonies and sold on arrival. In due course, locally established entrepreneurs kept showmen supplied with many types of wild and exotic animals.

In Melbourne in 1852, James Ellis opened his ‘Cremorne Gardens’, modelled on and named after the London pleasure gardens of which he was formerly manager. The elephants and camels exhibited there in 1854 were also presented in the Cirque National that the American clown and equestrian W H Foley opened in Melbourne in July 1854. In September 1854, after Ellis was bankrupted, Cremorne Gardens was taken over by the theatrical impresario, G S Coppin. In

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8 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 Apr 1852.
9 Askew, pp.105-06. See also *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 Aug 1852.
10 Coup, cited in Davis, p.17; Ogden, p.245.
11 M Lindsay, in St Leon, 1984, p.122.
12 Public Record Office of Victoria, *Petition of James Ellis of Cremorne Gardens praying that he may keep his house open during [a] certain portion of Sundays*, VPRS 1189/242/K54/14281.
13 *Argus*, 4 Jul 1854.
June 1860, John King, a discharged soldier ‘who had good experience with camels’, arrived from Karachi by the ship *Chinsurah* with several camels Coppin had ordered, some of which were subsequently acquired by the Burke & Wills expedition for £50 each.\(^{14}\) More than twenty years later, it was claimed that one of two ‘gaunt looking’\(^{15}\) camels exhibited with the St Leon circus was ‘said to have belonged to Burke and Wills’ ill-fated expedition’.\(^ {16}\)

In Sydney in 1852, a ‘splendid boa constrictor’ together with a collection of Australian animals and birds were exhibited at the Hunter Street premises of one J Wilcox, a taxidermist.\(^ {17}\) There are infrequent references to the exhibition of wild animals in the ensuing decades, including mention of the lion-tamer Don Fernandez in Melbourne and Sydney during 1858,\(^ {18}\) Wombell’s Victorian Branch of Wild Animals in Sydney and Maitland in 1859\(^ {19}\) and ‘Three Monster Australian Alligators’ at the Royal Hotel, Castlemaine, Victoria, early in 1860.\(^ {20}\) A German immigrant named Tullipan exhibited a lion in South Australian country towns in 1873.\(^ {21}\) Despite the often ‘sickly things’ exhibited by ‘wild beast’ showmen of the day\(^ {22}\) and the misgivings of local show committees, menageries of wild and exotic animals were among the myriad of sideshows exhibited on

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\(^ {15}\) *Coleraine Albion*, 9 Feb 1883.

\(^ {16}\) *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 Jan 1884; *Clarence & Richmond Examiner*, 22 Sep 1884.

\(^ {17}\) *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 Aug 1852.

\(^ {18}\) *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 Aug 1858.

\(^ {19}\) *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 May 1859; *Bells Life in Sydney*, 18 Jun 1859.

\(^ {20}\) *Mount Alexander Mail*, 11 Jan 1860.

\(^ {21}\) *South Australian Advertiser*, 20 May 1873.

\(^ {22}\) *Clarence & Richmond Examiner*, 23 Sep 1884.
Australian showgrounds, as they were on the fairgrounds of England and the United States.

Although reduced in size for their Australasian tours, Cooper, Bailey & Co. and other large American circuses demonstrated how a circus could be augmented with sideshows. Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s sideshows included its ‘museum of curiosities’, a concert show, and a portion of its menagerie, claimed to be ‘the first and only extensive’ one brought to Australia.23 The menagerie included six elephants, five camels, several lions, two tigers and ‘a number of other livestock difficult to manage’.24 Nearly all the animals in Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s menagerie were a novelty to ‘these good people’ wrote the circus press agent, W G Crowley.25 American circuses did not regularly include wild and exotic animals in the ring performance until the 1890s,26 but, during its Australian tour, Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s lions’ cage was pushed into the arena by an elephant, their trainer ‘Professor’ Johnston firing off pistols into the air as he boldly entered the enclosure. He fed the lions with raw meat from his naked hand, and placed his head in the largest lion’s mouth, in the manner of the famous lion-tamer van Amburgh.27 Having successfully assuaged colonial tastes, J A Bailey knew exactly what to engage for Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s second Australasian tour of 1877-78. Returning briefly to New York, he advertised in the New York Clipper for ‘living curiosities of all descriptions’. Among the animals he acquired was a rhinoceros, the first ever to be sent to Australia.28 When Sell Brothers visited in 1891, its menagerie included a hippopotamus for which

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23 Anon, 1880.
24 Anon, 1884.
25 New York Clipper, 2 Jun 1877.
27 Manning-Sanders, p.209.
28 New York Clipper, 29 Sep 1877.
Peter Sells claimed not only a novelty for ‘this part of the world’ but credibility as well:

[The] Cooper & Bailey show [sic] extensively advertised a Hippopotamus ... [but] [i]t was a South American Tapir, a much smaller animal and it died soon after it came here. 29

Their visits to Australia opened the eyes of American circus men to the wonders, human and natural, that Australia had to offer. It is possible that Cooper, Bailey & Co. acquired native Australian animals on their Australian tour. Certainly W W Cole made several acquisitions as, shortly after his return to the United States, an advertisement for his menagerie boasted:

two cages [of] over one hundred and fifty snow white cockatoos [,] ... a white buffalo from Australia, which attracted considerable attention, as did also the kangaroos and ostriches from the South Sea Islands. 30 [W W Cole’s Concorporated Shows, USA, 1881].

It was financially advantageous for the visiting American showmen to procure Australian species on location rather than ‘from dealers in New York or Europe’. In New York in 1882, an ‘Australian kangaroo’ was procured for US$2,000 (the same price as a ‘sacred’ camel) while an ‘Australian wombat’ was acquired for US$12,000 (more expensive than ‘a lion and lioness with cage’ costing US$9,000). 31 In 1883, two years after the circus of Cooper, Bailey &

29 Sydney Morning Herald, 13 Nov 1891.
30 Colorado Chieftain, Pueblo, 26 Jun 1881, cited in Slout, p.293.
31 J J Jennings, Theatrical and circus life; or secrets of the stage, green room and sawdust arena, Mansfield, Ohio: Mansfield Union Publishing Co., 1883, p.600.
Co. was transformed, through several changes of ownership, into Barnum & Bailey, P T Barnum sought human additions from Australia to augment his sideshow attractions.

The great Barnum, being anxious to add some specimens of Australian aboriginals [sic] to his collection of curiosities – animate and inanimate – authorised an agent named Cunningham to procure a consignment of nine from Queensland. All things went well until Monday last, when the matter was brought under the notice of the Brisbane Police Magistrate, who is dubious as to whether the penalties for kidnapping will be incurred by the ruthless showman if he persists in his endeavour to deport the guileless blackmen from their native woods to a prominent position beside Jumbo ... General and Mrs Tom Thumb, and other human and animal incentives to the increase of patronage and entrance money.  

The travelling ‘wild beast show’ that the St Leon circus acquired during its 1882 tour of Queensland, was the first significant example of the permanent attachment of a menagerie of wild animals to a colonial circus company. The ‘wild beast show’ in question appears to have been the same as the ‘Great Living Menagerie’ exhibited in Roma, Queensland, the previous August under the management of one F Stanton. This consisted of such animals as a ‘Russian’ bear, a ‘Zulu’ tiger, a cheetah, ‘The Great Snake Killer’ (actually a mongoose) as well as several specimens of monkeys. At Mackay, Queensland, in July 1882 the menagerie was promoted in the circus advertising as a ‘sideshow’ presented ‘in conjunction with Mr St Leon Circus’

32 *Burrangong Chronicle*, 23 Feb 1883.
33 *Northern Miner*, 18 Jul 1882.
34 *Australian Town & Country Journal*, 7 May 1881.
implying that the menagerie was still under separate management.\textsuperscript{35} However, as the St Leon circus returned to New South Wales late in 1882, the company was promoted as St Leons Circus & Menagerie of Wild Animals, Hippodrome and Mastodon Marvels of Creation, \& Great International Allied Shows, suggesting that the menagerie had been acquired outright.\textsuperscript{36}

St Leon gradually added ‘a great many more rare specimens of the animal kingdom’ to his menagerie as he travelled Australia.\textsuperscript{37} During his tour of Tasmania early in 1884, he appealed for ‘Tasmanian Tigers and Devils. The highest price given’.\textsuperscript{38} As a result, four Tasmanian tigers, the first to be seen in captivity, were acquired for public exhibition, as were two Tasmanian Devils.\textsuperscript{39} For people on the Australian mainland, these animals were as wild and exotic as any animals imported from Asia or Africa. During its tour of the Northern Rivers district later in the same year, St Leon advertised for ‘carpet and other snakes’.\textsuperscript{40} During an 1883 Adelaide season it was announced that there was ‘another importation of savage animals by the management’.\textsuperscript{41} St Leon claimed that the procurements were made ‘at a great expense [and] solely for this grand troupe’.\textsuperscript{42}

The menagerie added to the variety of odours, some pleasant, others not, that tinged the atmosphere surrounding the circus. In 1883, St

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Daily Mercury}, 22 Jul 1882. \textsuperscript{36} \textit{Narrabri Herald}, 18 Oct 1882. \textsuperscript{37} \textit{Burrangong Argus}, 31 Aug 1884. \textsuperscript{38} \textit{Mercury}, 19 Oct 1886. \textsuperscript{39} \textit{Burrangong Argus}, 31 Aug 1884. \textsuperscript{40} \textit{Clarence & Richmond Examiner}, 23 Sep 1884. \textsuperscript{41} \textit{South Australian Advertiser}, 19 Mar 1883. \textsuperscript{42} \textit{Illawarra Mercury}, 7 Nov 1883.
Leon came in for sharp criticism over the conduct of his menagerie, in particular:

the sanitary condition of the cages. On Saturday evening the effluvium which assailed the nasal organs of the audience was highly offensive and some very prompt measure should be adopted to prevent a re-occurrence by deodorising the cages.  

For city seasons, one charge admitted to menagerie and circus. In provincial towns, a separate charge was made to see the menagerie during the intermission of the circus performance, a procedure that aggravated country people. The St Leon circus received ‘rats’ from the Gundagai, N S W, newspaper for charging admission prices of 5s and 3s and making the ‘rustics’ part with even more to see his menagerie.  

By the close of the 19th century, the major Australian circuses such as FitzGerald Brothers, Wirth Brothers and Eroni Brothers, and some smaller circuses, carried their own menageries and wild animal acts featured prominently on their programmes. From the proceeds of their lengthy Melbourne season of 1892, the FitzGerald brothers ‘purchased’ a complete menagerie including ‘a den of savage lions’, in time for their Sydney season the following year. Before departing for South Africa with their circus at the end of 1893, the Wirths took:

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43 Port Augusta Dispatch, 2 May 1883.
44 Bulletin, 6 Jan 1883.
kangaroos, emus, birds of all kinds, snakes and all kinds of
Australian things and off we went. That menagerie was an instant
success. The Boers came 300 miles to see it and altogether we cleared
£10,000 pounds in 12 months. 46 [Wirth Brothers Circus, South Africa,
1893-94].

Dealers, such as Carl Hagenbeck in Germany, supplied animals to
circuses all over the world. 47 The FitzGerald Brothers purchased a
‘zoological circus’ from Hagenbeck for their 1897-98 tour, reputedly
at a cost of 60,000 marks. 48 In 1900, FitzGerald Brothers menagerie
consisted of fifteen cages of wild animals all of which were displayed
in a separate menagerie tent. 49 The most expensive single act in
FitzGerald Brothers Circus that year was the lion and elephant
tricycle act, purchased by Dan FitzGerald from Hagenbeck at a cost
of £3,000. 50 For its last Sydney Easter season, 1905, FitzGerald
Brothers presented two ‘beautiful young Burmah’ elephants under
their trainer, ‘Captain’ Weatherley. 51 Procured from Calcutta, these
were possibly the first elephants presented in Australia by an
Australian circus. When a baby elephant belonging to Eroni Brothers
Circus died on the road between Coonamble and Bullagreen, N S W,
in 1906, the proprietors estimated their loss at £500. 52 Sole Brothers
Circus, founded in 1917, built up its menagerie from scratch, at first
from local sources.

46 Anon, 1931.
47 Hippisley Coxe, p.144.
48 Sydney Morning Herald, 22 Dec 1897.
49 Sydney Morning Herald, 15 Sep 1900.
50 Anon, 1901.
51 Te Whero.
52 Coonamble Independent, 18 May 1906.
[Y]ou’ve always been able to buy a certain amount of animals out here. The first elephant they got, they bought off Nellie Jordan and then they got one from some zoo ... After that, my brother went overseas and he brought three elephants back ... They were thrilled about him buying Jenny.  

Visiting Deniliquin, N S W, with his circus in 1905, E A ‘Ted’ Foley (the son of W H Foley who presented elephants and camels at his Cirque Nationale in Melbourne in 1854) brought with him:

a fine collection of wild animals [which] have been secured from India and other places. The expenses of Mr Karl Bauer, the manager of the circus, in securing these animals amounted to £1,800 pounds while the cages alone ran to £500.

By 1911, Wirth Brothers Circus carried fourteen cages of wild animals on its circuit of Australia and New Zealand. These animals included the hippopotamus ‘Lizzie’, purchased from the German dealer Carl Hagenbeck the previous year for £1,250. Philip Wirth claimed the entire collection was worth £10,000.

We can’t insure the animals, because the companies refuse to issue policies respecting them, with the result that every death means an absolute loss to us ... The giraffe I showed here in Sydney ... cost me

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53 M Lindsay, in St Leon, 1984, p.122.
54 Independent, 5 May 1905.
55 Shoalhaven Telegraph, 30 May 1911.
Visiting Nowra, N S W, early in 1940, the train of Perry Bros Circus was unloaded at nearby Bomaderry and 18 cages of wild animals together with the ‘huge amount’ of equipment were transported by road to the township.  

Apart from satisfying the curiosity of patrons, a menagerie of wild and exotic animals was a largely passive matter and divorced from the elements of surprise, danger and humour found within the ring. From the 1890s, and possibly earlier, anthropomorphic performances involving these wild animals and their subjugation to their human handlers became regular features of the programmes of larger Australian circuses, a trend already underway in European and, more especially, American circus. As Hippisley-Coxe pointed out, the rise of the animal acts by the end of the 19th century marked the commencement of a distinct historical phase in the development of modern circus:

> With the deterioration of economic conditions [in the 1930s] the preponderance of animal acts grew [further]. In the menagerie tent, elephants, lions, tigers and bears brought in extra gate money ... and in the ring they performed.  

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56 Anon, 1911; *Sunday Sun*, 3 May 1908.  
57 *Nowra Leader*, 17 Jan 1940.  
58 Hippisley Coxe, p.35.
In Australia, the rise of animal acts in circus also mirrored their decreasing appeal as showground attractions. By the 1920s, patrons ‘just didn’t want to see lion acts on the showgrounds’.\(^{59}\) A former welterweight boxer, Dave ‘Afrikaander’ Meekin, made ‘a very glamorous liontamer’ since he was ‘a very good looking man who dressed with gold epaulettes and so forth’.\(^{60}\) But it was only when an elderly English lion-tamer in his employment, ‘Captain’ Lindo, was clawed while working Meekin’s lions at the Lismore, N S W, show that Meekin:

> got a few good days out of that ... The lion jumped on him [and] put him in hospital. They had the uniform up with plenty of blood on it. They packed them ... I think that’s the only money Dave got. So he was glad to unload them to St Leon’s to get them fed and looked after.\(^{61}\) [St Leons Circus, 1928].

With the decline of the family-based circus, the role of wild animals in circus continued to increase in critical importance in the period after World War II. So also did the cost of procuring, transporting and feeding them. By 1963, the cost of simply landing a single small elephant in Australia had risen to £2,000:

> close on £1,000 to buy it (from zoos or agents in Singapore, Burma and Thailand, hundreds more to ship it, and then the cost of weeks during blood-tests and quarantine at Taronga Park Zoo. To feed an elephant costs £20 a week because they eat almost incessantly ... Bears cost at least £300 and are expensive to maintain. A leopard will

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59 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 27.  
60 M Joseph, in St Leon, 1984, p.293.  
61 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 27.
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cost £700, a lion £500 or more. The only satisfactory investment are
the elephants which can outlast a circus generation. 62

Sideshows

For its first Australian tour of 1876-77, Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s
sideshows proved to be even more profitable than the big show
itself, 63 the expense of this part of the establishment being very light 64
while additional revenues were generated from the sale of books
and photographs. 65 The sideshows, specifically the concert show and
the ‘museum of curiosities’, were actually ‘privileges’ owned by one
George Middleton. The concert included performances more
characteristic of music hall than circus: a ventriloquist, a pair of Irish
comics, singers and dancers, ‘Professor’ Mitchell’s fire-eating
exhibitions, clubswinging, juggling, banjo solos, 66 and a troupe of
Afro-American singers, the Tennessee Minstrels. 67 The museum of
curiosities – a ‘freak show’ in circus argot - included a pair of albinos,
several boa constrictors billed as ‘monster serpents’ 68 and Ann E
Leak, the ‘armless lady’. Of all of Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s sideshow
exhibits, Leak’s sewing, embroidery, crocheting and handwriting
with the use of only her left foot and toes drew the keenest
admiration of her Australian patrons. 69

62 Higham.
63 New York Clipper, 24 Feb 1877.
64 New York Clipper, 28 Apr 1877.
65 New York Clipper, 24 Jul 1877.
66 New York Clipper, 26 Jan 1878.
67 Pfening Archives: unsourced clipping.
68 Pfening Archives: unsourced clipping.
69 Pfening Archives: unsourced clipping.
The sideshow accompanying W W Cole’s Circus during its Australian tour of 1880-81 included a company of ten Indians ‘led by Dick Deadeye’. These were ‘genuine’ Arizona Indians, including a squaw, who went through a war dance. This was possibly the first exhibition of American ‘Red’ Indians on Australian soil and a precursor to the American Wild West shows and troupes which began to visit Australia in 1890.

Possibly inspired by these examples of American enterprise, some Australian circus proprietors began to feature sideshows to complement the main circus attraction, albeit on a modest scale. As the bandsmen for Ashtons Circus during 1881-82, the Wirth brothers ran ‘a small acrobatic sideshow’ before striking out with their own circus. In 1888, Ashtons Royal Anglo-Saxon Circus & London Equescurricleum toured Queensland accompanied by a ‘baby giant show’ and for a shilling people saw the mysterious ‘great giant of the future’. Touring the backblocks of N S W and Queensland during 1898-99, Probascos Circus was accompanied by the phonograph sideshow of Alf Onzalo who:

... had the first Edison phonograph in Australia. He used to have that outside the circus and charge so much for these records ... [which were] round cylinders ... He made a lot of money out of that. And then he made one record himself. He shaved a record off that wasn’t much good and made one himself. It was some cockney giving his evidence in the Bow Street Court, London. There was a bit of

70 Slout, p.291.
71 Sydney Morning Herald, 6 Apr 1881.
72 M Martin, in St Leon, 1984, pp.22ff.
73 Bulletin, 16 May 1903.
74 Western Star, 10 May 1888.
swearing in it and so that was for gentlemen only. He made a ton of money out of that. [Probascos Circus, 1898-99].

The sideshows that accompanied Wirth Brothers Circus in 1909 included one which featured the black American boxer Jack Johnson, the victor of the Burns-Johnson boxing match at Sydney’s Stadium the previous December:

If anybody could knock Jack Johnson out they got a hundred pounds or something, but he’d just put one fist out and the bloke was knocked out ... That was in a little sideshow ... I know I’ve seen Jack Johnson twice in Condobolin with Wirths Circus ... but we got under the tent to see him. We kids, we had no money to go in. [Wirth Brothers Circus, Condobolin, N S W, 1909].

Outside Eroni Brothers Circus, a boxing troupe showman, Con Sullivan, presented a sideshow with some of his sons:

Old Con, he was a fighter in his day... Sullivan was his right name. He used to put a sidewall up after the circus ... After the circus finished the circus [audience] come out, and they’d announce it outside. ‘So and so’ is going to challenge the local champion or something, outside in the tent. [Eroni Brothers Circus, c.1914].

By 1916, the Sullivans operated a major circus in their own right, promoted as Colleanos All-Star Circus, the various members of the
Colleano – formerly Sullivan - family as its acrobats, trapeze artists and tightwire walkers.

Although many Australian circuses acquired menageries, and incorporated wild and exotic animals in the performance, sideshows did not become the featured side attraction of circus in Australia as they were to circus in America. The American concept of a ‘midway’, containing numerous exhibitions of the freakish and peculiar, or of an after-show concert, was unknown in Australian circus. In the Walter St Leon circus around 1912, there were no sideshows because ‘they just had circus on their mind and that was it’. Australian circus proprietors were either unwilling or unable to develop the sideshow concept to the extent of American circus, despite ongoing examples of American enterprise into the 20th century.

Mrs Bud Atkinson ... paid the salaries and all the expenses of the circus out of the concessions. They sold that many concessions - sideshows, peanuts, drinks, anything you like to mention, souvenirs, American cowboy caps, anything to remember the circus by. They were miles ahead of what we are doing today in our agricultural shows. [Bud Atkinson’s American Circus & Wild West Shows, Sydney, 1912].

Instead, the showground circuits that sprang into existence in the late 19th century have remained the customary outlet for sideshow activity to this day.

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78. A St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.95.
79. A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.158.
Carnivals

The term ‘carnival’ first appears in the context of Australian circus with the visits of an American combination, The Flying Jordans Circus Carnival, in 1897-98 and 1899. However, there is little to suggest that this was a carnival in the familiar sense, replete with sideshows, merry-go-rounds, swings and ferris wheels. Rather, the Jordan enterprise seems to have been principally a circus in the conventional sense. Indeed, genuine carnivals and circus rarely joined forces although they were found in each other’s presence on Australian showgrounds. One reason for this was the different logistics demanded of each enterprise.

Certain parts of a carnival you can put up in one day but the circus used to do one-nighters in this country, in towns very small and particularly when you went back to the wagons. When motorised things were starting to get around a little bit they couldn’t play any more than two or three nights in a town. Out of that two or three nights it would probably take a day and a half, two days to put up enough of the carnival to get any effect from it. So it just wouldn’t work.

An early example was the King Carnival, run by an American showman, Harry Handy and with which the Colleano circus family travelled northwards along Australia’s eastern seaboard from Sydney in 1914. In 1929, Sole Brothers Circus returned to Australia after a three-year tour of southern Africa in the company of a carnival owned by one Marcovich, played Parramatta and

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80 Kalgoorlie Miner, 17 Jan 1898; Sydney Morning Herald, 16 Sep 1899.
81 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 38.
82 Mount Morgan Chronicle, 3 Jul 1914.
Bankstown, N S W, and then ‘went away to the bush and done our money’. Marcovich ‘broke out on his own and just stuck to carnival’ large enough to require ‘a whole special train’ for the move north into Queensland.

Bullen Brothers Circus, had its origins in a small travelling carnival, ‘a small sidewall show out in the west of Queensland and New South Wales’, in the early 1920s. With the few shillings he saved, a young Kiama, N S W, ‘cub’ journalist, Perce Bullen:

... began a vagabond life, travelling around the country shows. His first break occurred when a showman, down on his luck, sold him a performing sheep and pony. In 1918, he married Lillian Croan, a vaudeville dancer, and they began to realise their show business dreams together. They improvised a travelling circus-carnival beginning with a merry-go-round. Dave ‘Afrikaander’ Meekin, a showman, sold an elephant to the Bullens. Then they added a shooting gallery, performing horses, monkies [sic] and dogs and a small sideshow where Perce, billed as ‘Captain Alfredo’, introduced a single performing lion.

By 1923, Bullen and his wife had made enough money to organise their own circus, to become Australia’s most successful of the post-war period.

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83 A Sole, in St Leon, 1984, p.222.
84 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 38.
Animal welfare

Although the condition of circus horses occasionally gave rise to ‘well grounded complaint’, the welfare of circus animals seems to have concerned neither public nor press until the closing decades of the 20th century when the exhibition of wild and exotic animals increasingly drew the chagrin of animal liberationists. Until then, attitudes to wild and exotic animals were confined to their merits as subjugated exhibits. After St Leon’s death in 1903, it was recalled that he:

was a man whom animals instinctively respected and in whom they found a particularly empathy. St Leon once turned up with his circus in a northern Victorian town at a time that allowed him to put this talent to special effect. A pair of big bears, owned by a couple of Russian showmen, were left in a hotel stable after their owners had committed some crime and fled the township to avoid the law. The bears had been kept in the stable so long that they became famished and quite unmanageable, and made furious dashes at anyone approaching the stable door. A great terror prevailed in the neighbourhood and it was feared the bears would break out. The police were sent for and preparations were made to destroy the animals. St Leon arriving was timely. He offered to quieten the brutes and feed them. He opened the door and went in and presently came out with a big brown bear on each arm and conducted the animals into the circus cage that had been brought for their reception exactly as if they had been ladies. Then he rode in the cage with the bears through the street to his circus where the bears were fed. [St Leon’s Circus, c.1890].

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87 Mercury, 11 Feb 1881.
88 Punch, 23 Apr 1903.
Apart from Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s giraffe which looked ‘painfully cramped’ as it extended its head through a caravan trapdoor during street parades, genuine expressions of concern over the welfare of circus animals were rare. Of more concern to contemporary observers were the danger these animals posed if they escaped, the noise of their cries at night or offensive ‘effluvium’ emitted from their cages. No instances of public protest or censure come to light until the 1970s when the animal-liberation movement orchestrated negative publicity over the use of any animals in circus, whether wild, exotic or domesticated. In Australia, as elsewhere, circus animal-keeping practices were brought under intense media scrutiny and many local councils banned circuses with animal acts. These developments represented a growing denial of man’s domination of nature and a growing resentment at perceived ‘cruelty’. In their place, ‘new forms of otherness and mutuality’ were now sought from nature, such as the prevention of social and environmental exploitation.

Certainly by 1990, a climate of ‘mutual distrust and intolerance’ had arisen between Australia’s traditional circus owners, on the one hand, and contemporary circus protagonists, municipal councils, the RSPCA and the animal welfare groups on the other. A significant number of the municipalities in the state of Victoria, especially in Greater Melbourne, had banned circuses, chiefly on animal rights grounds, although land use and resident objections over noise and traffic were also concerns. The issue of animals in circus was placed firmly on the agenda at the Circus Summit that year. Held in

89 A W Grieg, ‘When the circus came to town’, Argus, 8 June 1930.
90 Stoddart, p.29.
91 Stoddart, p.76.
Melbourne, the ‘summit’ was Australia’s – possibly the world’s - first national conference of circus people. Representatives of traditional circus expressed resentment at boycotts and ‘several instances of violence and damage to circus property’ as a result of the animal liberation movement. While acknowledging ‘a changing public perception about animals in circus’ and conceding that Australian circus managements needed to ‘rethink and to move animal husbandry standards forward’, it was also argued that ‘it is in the best interests of animals to be trained’ and that circus animals live longer than animals in zoos or at liberty. Speakers representing the contemporary circus movement were challenged from the floor about their policy towards animals in circuses but denied any particular antipathy. Circus Oz had no performing animals not so much for ‘political’ reasons but because the company usually worked ‘in cities and often in theatres’ and that, in any case:

animal acts are seen differently now because we’ve tamed the wild to extinction; and working animals have now disappeared from our lives as working animals.

Although satisfied that circus owners cherished their animals, it was the ‘caging or tethering’ and the ‘lifetime of confinement’, not their training or performing, that were unacceptable to the animal liberation movement. Animal-welfare specialists from various government agencies pointed to legislation at Federal, State and local levels relevant to the importation, protection and exhibition of

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animals. Nevertheless, it was important for Australia’s circuses to ‘move towards a uniform set of criteria, accepted at a national level,’ 97 to aim for ‘the production of a solution rather than the maintenance of a confrontation’. One project in train was the development by a professional veterinarian of a ‘Code of Ethics for the Management of Animals in Circuses’ on behalf of the Federation of Circus Proprietors. 98

Summary

Menageries and sideshows were not a part of the original concept of circus. Nevertheless, in Australia as elsewhere, economic and social imperatives saw menageries and sideshows increasingly linked with circus and indeed incorporated within its raison d’être. Although showmen often justified their use in terms of their supposed educative qualities, they were also the means by which the variable economics of circus operation were ameliorated. To uncritical audiences, they became subsumed within the popular image of circus. Issues over the use of animals in circus, in particular, have been the key factors in defining today’s bifurcation between conventional and ‘new wave’ circus.

Figure 30
The interior of Wirth Brothers Circus somewhere in Queensland about 1910. The attention of the audience is firmly fixed on a lion posing on its pedestal inside an enclosure. *Powerhouse Museum, Sydney. 95/28/214-3.*

Figure 31
Possibly more than any other art form derived from the Old World, the circus proved peculiarly appropriate to Australians’ pursuit of athletic glory and ingrained irreverence for pretentiousness and authority. In Australia as elsewhere, the circus packaged feats of human and equine skill and agility for audience consumption. As we have seen, circus programmes were increasingly dominated by acts brought together from the music halls, fairgrounds, and by the presentations of wild and exotic animals. But, was this art? When the *Cornwall Chronicle* placed reviews of Radfords Royal Circus in 1848 in a column headed ‘Sport & c.’, was this an editorial classification of convenience or a genuine perception? Superficially, circus would appear to have more in common with sport than theatre. Like sport and unlike great theatre, conventional circus has neither sought to address the questions of the age nor enrich the intellect or soul with pearls of wisdom or instruction. Conventional circus entertainments have embraced, as has sport, elements of spectacle and surprise,

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1 Twopenny, pp.202-04.
danger and humour, stimuli that have temporarily brought some
colour and dimension to the lives of ordinary people.

The ‘interconnections’ between sport and modern culture are widely
acknowledged. From the earliest days, sport provided Australians
with a welcome break from the drudgery of the working day. Australia’s temperate climate was a natural inducement to outdoor leisure activities, while urbanisation fostered the development of spectator sport, a welcome outlet for a society uncertain and even divided about its origins and history. Sport became an important tool in the ‘civilising process’, producing what the dominant cultural group considered to be appropriate modes of behaviour.

Many years after visiting Australia, Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s privileges manager recalled that he had never been in a ‘country’ [sic] where the people were as fond of athletic sports, horseracing, rowing, cricket and so on, as they were in the Australian colonies. Although somewhat oblique, there were some direct allusions to sport within the context of the Australian circus performance. At Grafton, N S W, in 1884, St Leon’s so-named ‘second clown’ gave a rendition of his original song ‘The Latest News of Beach and Hanlan’, a song that commemorated a sculling contest of the day between two famous oarsmen. In the 1890s, FitzGerald Brothers instituted an annual custom of presenting a gold-topped riding whip to the winning jockey of the Melbourne Cup, a practise that was taken over by

\[\begin{align*}
2 & \quad \text{B Stoddart, in Vamplew and Stoddart, p.269.} \\
3 & \quad \text{B Stoddart, in Vamplew and Stoddart, p.269-71.} \\
4 & \quad \text{Rickards, pp.99, 101.} \\
5 & \quad \text{B Stoddart, in Vamplew and Stoddart, p.275.} \\
6 & \quad \text{Middleton, p.54.} \\
7 & \quad \text{Clarence & Richmond Examiner, 22 Sep 1884.}
\end{align*}\]
Wirth Brothers from 1906. As the Gus St Leon Great United Circus moved around the suburbs of Sydney during March 1915, ‘the pick’ of its seventy horses was Chicko, ‘the football pony’, which was trained to kick a large football across the ring, thus putting audiences ‘in shrieks of laughter’.

While their respective paths of development have been largely exclusive of each other, Australian sport and circus certainly share many defining characteristics that demand our attention and explanation. Equestrian displays, an essential feature of Australian circus well into the 20th century, were a reflection of ‘our international reputation for sporting proclivities’. Is it merely coincidental that modern Australia should produce not only sportsmen and women of world class, but also several performing artists of similar standing in international circus? To what extent have circus programmes been adapted to satiate the innate ‘sporting proclivities’ of Australians?

Contests

Although a circus act involves an element of ‘contest’, it was most often a contest between the performer and the natural elements of balance and gravity, or between a performer, in terms of his abilities, and his audience, in terms of its expectations. Although not completely unknown, athletic-like contests between performers before a paying audience were rare. During Wirth Brothers Circus season in Melbourne in 1888, for example, the riders Paddy Montgomery and George Wirth competed ‘for the jockey

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8 P Wirth, 1933, p.106.
9 Theatre, 1 Apr 1915.
10 Onlooker, 1907-08, in St Leon, 1985, p.81.
championship of Australia’, with Wirth ‘an easy winner’.¹¹ Rarer still were direct contests between rival circuses, since competition between companies was minimised by the monopolistically inclined distribution of routes and playing territories.

In Washington in 1857, the American equestrian, James Robinson (who later visited Australia with Cooper, Bailey & Co.), ‘won’ a contest over the rider James Hernandez for the ‘champion rider of the world’.¹² The contest served as a model for other aspiring performers, be they riders, leapers or wire-walkers and so on, desirous of carrying the title ‘champion’. Nevertheless, anyone could publish a claim to the championship of any line of performance skill and, if his challenge went unanswered, the title of ‘champion’ was his.¹³ Challenges posted in American, as in Australian, circus usually went unanswered.

In Australia, the few challenges that were publicised served as an advertisement for the main circus performance, as when Ashton bet £50 with a local identity, a Mr Dangar, that he could ride and drive three horses, ‘erect and barebacked’, from East Maitland to West Maitland, N S W, in fifteen minutes.¹⁴ Given the paucity of settlement and the distribution of circus companies throughout the colonies at any point in time, meaningful challenges between entire companies were largely impractical, even if desired. One significant exception was the Romanesque contest that materialised in Adelaide in May 1873 between Bird & Taylors Great American Circus and Burtons National Circus for the circus premiership of the colonies. The two

¹² May, p.204.
¹⁴ Maitland Mercury, 2 Mar 1853.
companies ‘pitted’ against each other in a test of agility and daring on the city’s Exhibition Grounds.

The two troupes arrived in the city almost simultaneously and they have divided the attention of the circus-loving public. Their rivalry resulted in a challenge from Bird and Taylor to Burton to test the merits of their respective establishments. This was accepted and the Exhibition Ground was selected as the arena. The opinion was expressed outside that the often-exhibited antagonism between the two companies was assumed to excite the popular interest, and that in reality the proprietors of the two concerns were acting in concert. This is emphatically denied by both owners, who allege that there was no collusion whatever ... Mr Burton secured the £200, his troupe being the winners of the greater number of races. The contest was nearly equal, the National Circus Company only winning by one event.  

The Adelaide contest set in train events that re-shaped the ‘landscape’ of Australian circus. By the end of 1873, Thomas Bird and Robert Taylor had parted company, Taylor entering into partnership with the victor, Henry Burton, in a new company called Burton & Taylors Grand United Circus Company. For a time, Bird carried on alone, managing to fill out his company with some wayward members of Chiarinis Royal Italian Circus. By mid-1875, the St Leon family, which had participated on Burton’s side in the Adelaide hippodrome, parted company from the Grand United Circus Company to form its own circus, St Leons Royal Victoria Circus. The St Leons soon absorbed Birds Great American & Italian Circus and

15 South Australian Register, 25 May 1873.
16 Wagga Wagga Advertiser, 29 Nov 1873.
17 Wangaratta Dispatch, 24 Jan 1874.
by 1877, St Leons Circus was fancied ‘the best show on the road’. By early 1878, Taylor had dissolved his partnership with Burton to join the St Leons as ringmaster. By 1880, Burton was bankrupted, the remnants of his circus taken over by Mrs Woodyear – his former equestrienne and star of the 1873 hippodrome, Madamoiselle La Rosiere – and her husband.

Although we find no other example of a directly-contested competition on the scale of the Adelaide Hippodrome of 1873, circus companies indulged in lighthearted contests if they happened to ‘play opposition’ to each other.

Sometimes there would be three circuses in town, Eroni’s, Perry’s and St Leon’s. Well you had what was called a Roman race on the showground. That was free. The circus used to go out with their few horses, or their two teams. You’d go out with your bandwagon, play on the showgrounds with your two racing teams behind you. They’d be dressed in Roman dress, stand up on the horse and go around in a fair dinkum race.

Even at the height of their rivalry, neither Wirth Brothers and FitzGerald Brothers in the early 1900s, nor Wirth Brothers and Bullen Brothers in the 1950s, sought a direct confrontation on the scale of the 1873 Adelaide hippodrome, despite ‘playing opposition’ from time to time.

\[18\] *Gundagai Times*, 23 Nov 1877; *Albury Border Post*, 12 Dec 1877.
\[19\] *Queensland Times*, 3 Sep 1878.
\[20\] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 Jan 1880.
\[21\] M King, in *St Leon*, 1984, p.255.
Challenges

The excitement unleashed by the 1873 Adelaide Hippodrome, together with the increasing presence of large American circuses such as Cooper, Bailey & Co., had the cumulative effect, for a time, of fostering a more competitive climate in Australian circus. St Leon claimed that his eldest son, Gus, was:

the champion performer, who has challenged Australia to do more acts and better than any performer in the colonies for the sum of £200, commencing with horsemanship, in 30 different acts. 

St Leon claimed that his eldest son, Gus, was: 

While the equestrian prowess of Gus St Leon prowess as an equestrian was widely acknowledged and well-documented, an extensive examination of the public record provides no independent substantiation for his claim of ‘champion’. The St Leons nevertheless issued public challenges in equestrian feats for extraordinary sums, from between £100 and £1,000 and between £500 and £1,000, sometimes with the further assurance of ‘man and money ready at a moment’s notice’. As the large American circus, W W Coles Concorporated Shows, concluded its Australian tour in Sydney in April 1881, St Leon exhibited at Cowra, several hundred miles to the west. From this safe distance, Gus St Leon announced his challenge to any performer in Cole’s company for a stake of £1,000. None of Cole’s performers answered the challenge and, in any case, Cole’s company sailed for San Francisco two days later. In fact, none of

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22 Wagga Wagga Advertiser, 1 Dec 1877.
24 Bendigo Advertiser, 31 Mar 1885.
26 Cowra Free Press, 15 Apr 1881.
these proclamations appear to have materialised beyond the level of self-congratulation, although they may constitute an interesting comment on Australia’s emerging pecuniary proclivities.

We are nevertheless left to ponder the challenge that Gus St Leon is supposed to have directly issued to the famous American equestrian, the aforementioned James Robinson, during the first tour of Cooper, Bailey & Co. For its first Australian visit, commencing in Sydney on 18 December 1876, 27 Cooper and Bailey presented Robinson as the ‘champion bareback rider of the world’. 28 Although the public record is silent on the matter, Gus St Leon’s challenge for Robinson’s laurels was enshrined in family folklore:

... It followed my father’s reputation ... Robinson backed out, he wouldn’t be in it. My father was doing somersault work on a resinback as they called it in those days. This Robinson virtually only done vaulting and jockey jumps ... whereas my father would do the same thing and do somersaults in between. 29 [St Leons Circus, 1877].

**Jumpers**

Some Australian circuses that followed the agricultural shows in the interwar period (1919 – 39) presented horses and dogs in ‘high jump’ contests on the showgrounds, in which the animals competed for record high jumping titles.

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27 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 Dec 1876.
28 Robinson did not join Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s second Australian tour of 1877-78.
29 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.178.
The St Leons had a pony called Gus, named after old Gus St Leon, that I won a few kids’ high jumping events on. We went to an agricultural show up in northeastern Victoria once, a one-day show with ‘under twelve’ high jumps. I went into that on the circus pony, Gus. They started the jump with a bush sapling laid between two big kerosene cases. The country boys had little ponies and came over to compete too. The stick was too low for Gus. He wouldn’t jump it. Gus knocked it down three times and I was out. The people didn’t ‘boo’ me or anything. They thought I’d come on a jib horse. Later on in the programme was the open high jump. I come out again on Gus, the circus pony, and everyone laughed. The jumps started off at four feet. Gus cleared that easily. He cleared it at four foot eight and up to five feet. At six foot four he cleared it again and I won the contest. I thought they were going to run me out of town or something.30 [St Leons Circus, c.1920].

The challenges issued to the local people to ‘jump’ their own horses or dogs in contests in the circus ring sustained the interest of the audience to the programme’s close:

The Soles always had good jumping greyhounds. They had one called Whiskey, a dog that could jump a height of fifteen feet six inches off a jumping board ... Sole’s had high jumping horses called Glimpsie, Marmion and Landlock. They bought Landlock for a good price, about £500 ... Actually, Perry’s Circus went in more for these jumping horses. They carried on for years with them and eventually had all the record holders.31

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30 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 2.
31 M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.254.
Racing

As well as panning for gold and shearing, circus people supported themselves and families during lean times by gambling at two-up or wagering at billiards. However, the strongest overlaps between circus and sport occurred in the areas of racing and boxing. Some circus people carried their own racehorses to race at country race meetings while some circus riders were skilled as jockeys, although the two styles of riding demand different capabilities.

Some of the early equestrian pieces brought from England, such as ‘Jockey & Jenny’, imparted the flavour of the racecourse to circus audiences. Australia’s first successful circus entrepreneur, Robert Avis Radford, was a professional jockey and trainer. As far back as the 1850s, before a circuit of country agricultural shows was firmly established, travelling circuses often timed their arrival in a country town to coincide with a local race week. With the appearance of a more acrobatic style of circus horsemanship, the so-called ‘bounding jockey’, suitably attired, began to make his appearance in circus, performing ‘jockey jumps’ – rapid bounding by a rider, usually dressed in a jockey’s costume, to and from a horse’s back as it cantered the ring at a steady pace. Bounding jockey acts were seen in Australian circus as late as the 1950s.

In the early 1900s, Jack Denner travelled the outback with Eroni Brothers Circus with his racehorses which he raced at country meetings. The association inspired Denner and his family to form their own circus about 1907. In North Queensland especially, horses were raced at local meetings at almost any time of the year. A

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32 V Gill, in St Leon, 1984, p.100.
horsetrainer used to accompany Perry Brothers Circus on the trip ‘up north’, along with ‘six or seven racehorses’.

Perry’s in New Zealand bought a mare called *Lotus*, a very good horse ... They were always interested in racing. They always had a few racehorses with them when they went North ... They travelled for about three days to St George. They took the whole circus. They had the mare on the back of the truck. She became used to the elephants, feeding with them and so on ... She was twenty to one or something, a good price ... They had the elephants tied where the racecourse was coming around. Of course, when they come around the bend, half the horses went that way because of the elephants. Horses get very frightened of them. But she ['Lotus'] just kept going on and she won the race. They told the Perrys, very politely, to ‘Get your horse out of town or we will put you out for life’. [Perry Brothers Circus, c.1934].

As ‘practically the only break in the sadness of the bush’, FitzGerald Brothers Circus compared favourably to even a country race meeting.

The Secretary of the Victorian Racing Club tells a story of a Queensland bushman at Flemington, looking over the great crowd on Cup Day and saying, ‘By gum, its lucky for you Dan FitzGerald wasn’t having a matinee today!’

On Wirth Brothers Circus in 1906, the equestrian Philip St Leon perfected his female impersonation riding act as ‘Senorita Phillipina’, an act that required the execution of a jockey style riding act (with

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33 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 37.
34 *Bulletin*, 5 Feb 1906.
female wig and costume), jumping ‘up and down just like a bloody greyhound all the way round’ the circuit of the ring. When the Gus St Leon Great United Circus was re-formed in 1909, ‘Senorita Phillipina’ held a starring place on the bill for the next seven years, attracting the special attention of bookmakers whose interests were normally confined to the racecourse.

... Bookmakers in every town used to doubt that it was a woman because of the muscular legs ... they were pressing too hard with questions about him. [Philip’s sister] Daisy used to have to substitute for Philip in the same costumes, the same make-up, everything exactly the same, and then, with an eye-dropper, put drops of glycerine on her face as though she was perspiring. As soon as Philip finished his act, he’d race straight to the dressing room, which was always right behind the pad room. Daisy would be waiting in the pad room there heaving on her breath ... In the meantime the bookmakers would race around from the front of the tent to the back to try and prove - they had bets laid out - that it was a man. That went on for years that part, but mostly in Queensland. [Gus St Leons Great United Circus, c.1914].

**Boxing**

Travelling circuses often found themselves in the company of boxing troupes on the showgrounds while boxing troupes were sometimes attached to a circus as a sideshow. Many circus people were capable boxers as well. Boxing was not only a popular sport but also a useful skill for circus people regularly confronted with ruffianism on the showgrounds and larrikinism in the cities and towns.

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35 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.181.
36 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.182.
Any circus had to be able to defend itself. We had larrikins in those days, not as bad as they are now and not as nasty but bad and nasty just the same. They would want to tear your tent apart. You had to chase them away. There was a certain amount of unemployed also who were always looking for a fight.\textsuperscript{37}

When the ‘Great White Fleet’ of the United States Navy anchored at Albany, Western Australia, in September 1908, some 16,000 American sailors were met by the various Australian entertainments that had detoured to greet them, including the circuses of Mrs Tom FitzGerald and the St Leons:

Both shows did a fair bit of business. Mrs Tom FitzGerald had The Flying Herberts. A fellow called Steve Outch was one of the Flying Herberts … The Yanks wanted some boxing. They had some men in their navy and they wanted to try them out. The American sailors hired one of the tents. I forget whether it was FitzGerald’s or ours … They hired the tent to put on this boxing contest. Steve was a bit of a surprise to me. I knew he could use his hands a little bit. This Duey Smith, the champion of Western Australia was there and nobody would have him on to box with him. So Steve said, ‘Oh, I’ll take him on!’ I was in Steve’s corner of course and I could hear this Duey saying, ‘Ease up! Ease up!’ This Steve was giving him a hiding! Anyway, I think the match ended in a draw. They wouldn’t go against the champion. But Steve was all over him … He was only a lightweight too.\textsuperscript{38}

In 1910, a former boxer and boxing-troupe showman, Con Sullivan, his Aboriginal wife and young family, started on the road in

\textsuperscript{37} M King, 1989, interview, Tape 10.
\textsuperscript{38} A St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.83.
northern New South Wales as Collino Brothers Circus. The transition from boxing show troupe to circus was not a smooth one, however, and from time to time, the Sullivans had to fall back on their boxing skills.

They had big trouble up at Liverpool [N S W]. There was a fight up there. Somebody passed a remark to Con about one of his sisters and Con flattened him ... [He was a] tremendous fighter. [Colleano Circus, 1918].

By 1925, Con Colleano was a prestigious ‘center ring’ attraction of Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey with his extraordinary act on the tightwire. Yet, he still carried his boxing skills with him and was the boxing champion on the Ringling show three years in a row. Colleano refined the artistic aspects of his tightwire act by adopting a distinctly Spanish ambience, thereby bringing ‘a new excitement and aesthetic satisfaction into the circus’. While the climax of his fifteen-minute performance was the forward somersault, its opening scenes were more evocative of the ‘sport’ identified with Spain.

Picturesquely dressed as a matador, he advances into the ring and, with his scarlet capo, makes the traditional passes at a bull. So vivid was the mental image evoked that the audience saw not a circus ring but the sun drenched arena of a Spanish town and the ritual and pageant of an actual bullfight.

40 E Trevail, 1987, interview.
41 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 10.
42 Croft-Cooke and Meadmore, p.28.
Other than the Colleanos, the boys of the Perry family ‘could also look after themselves if they had to’.

They had professional boxers on their show to teach them. They had five ex-showground boxers. One was an ex-professional, Willy Quandro. They gave him a job in the show because he had been in jail for some reason. He taught Henry Perry and his brother, Alby, to box ... I have heard both Jimmy Sharman and Snowy Flynn say that Henry Perry in his day would have beaten any welterweight in the country. Henry wasn’t a professional fighter but he could certainly look after himself if he got tangled up in anything.43 [Perry Brothers Circus, c.1934].

In the outback, shooting and fishing were popular pastimes for the circus people and so also were games of cricket with the ‘locals’:

On one occasion, during the closed season, Alf Honey went out shooting and came back to the camp with a brace of ducks. He had them slung over the butt of his rifle on his shoulder as he walked into camp. As he walked into he could see a police sergeant who had dropped by to visit. Honey just tipped the butt of the gun up and let the ducks slide off into the long grass.44 [Gus St Leon’s Great United Circus, c.1914].

We got on the train at Port Augusta ... And we stopped at various places along the way, until we’d reached Kalgoorlie ... the train used to pull up and deliver the food and meat, there was a butcher on board, and they would have chilled beef, which they would carve up for the various stations along the Transcontinental Railway. And

44 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.184.
also there was enough time on one of those stations, I think it was at Forest, to have a cricket match. And the locals played the circus cricket and the circus lost badly. [St Leons Circus, c.1930].

Summary

Although each has developed along its own path, Australian sport and Australian circus have shared defining characteristics especially with regard to athleticism and popular display. Australia’s agreeable climate provided a rationale for sporting achievement as well as an energetic circus industry. The athletic increasingly replaced the artistic in Australian circus programmes presumably to satisfy audiences for whom sport took precedence over intellect. In the milieu in which it was found, Australian circus inevitably overlapped and even embraced sporting activities such as racing and boxing.

Figure 31a
The American horsetrainer Omar Kingsley pictured here with the horse President in Melbourne during the visit of Wilsons San Francisco Circus to the city in 1876. Earlier in his circus career, Omar Kingsley rode in female costume as the dashing horsewoman, Ella Zoyara. Author’s collection.

45 N V St Leon, 1991, interview, Tape 15.
The Aboriginal tightwire artist Con Colleano [1899-1973] was also a skilled boxer. *Author’s collection.*

**Figure 31b**
Figure 32

A circus rider in jockey outfit, Walter ‘Mickey’ St Leon [1909-c.94], a ‘jockey’ rider in Sole Brothers Circus, c.1932. Author’s collection.
CHAPTER XV

Then & now

The Romantic celebration of man’s benevolent mastery over nature symbolised by his ennobling and skilful horsemanship which ... lay at the core of the circus’s appeal no longer has any purchase over contemporary imaginations.¹

As in the United States, the period from the 1870s to 1920s proved to be a golden age for Australian circus. In this era, Australia produced two circuses of international standing, Wirth Brothers and FitzGerald Brothers, two circus performers of international acclaim, the bareback rider, May Wirth (1894 - 1978) and the Aboriginal wire artist, Con Colleano (1899 - 1973), while circus companies and troupes of Australian origin were seen in places as distant as New Zealand (Burtons Great Australian Circus, 1878), Tahiti (Woodyears Royal Australian Circus, 1885), New Caledonia (Wirth Brothers Circus, 1888), South Africa (Wirth Brothers Circus, 1894), China ([Harry] Wirths Pacific Circus, 1896), England (Wirths Australian Circus, 1898), India ([Tom] FitzGerald’s Circus, 1902), Mexico (the Gus St Leon family, 1904) and Cuba (the Alfred St Leon family, 1906).

¹ Stoddart, p.76.
Nevertheless, by the latter decades of the 19th century, the circus was already an ‘antique form of entertainment’. Furthermore, the family-based tradition in Australian circus entered into decline by the early 1900s. Some were simply tired of the demands of circus life. After the younger James Ashton’s death at Dubbo in 1918, his children gradually left the circus business. Some drifted into travelling vaudeville shows or left show business altogether. Only the family of the younger Ashton brother, Fred, carried on with circus.

The decline of the family-based circus weakened the memory bank of circus knowledge and impaired the future development and enrichment of domestic performing skills. Mary Sole, who was born into circus life in her grandfather’s circus, Eroni Brothers, at Wentworth, N S W, in 1892:

was the only one ever to do that swinging trapeze, a very good act
... I said to Mary many times later, when I was a young man, ‘Why
don’t you teach it to somebody?’ She said, ‘I can’t ... I couldn’t teach
anybody ... because I’d expect them to do it as good as I done it’.

Standards

The expectations of Australian circus audiences, once adjudged the most critical in the world, became attuned to progressively lower or altered standards of circus performance. Between the failed tour of Bud Atkinsons American Circus & Wild West Show in 1912 and the first tour of Great Moscow Circus in 1964, no complete circus

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2 Coleraine Albion, 9 Feb 1883.
3 Fernandez, pp.15 ff.
4 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 3.
company is known to have visited from overseas in this period. Local audiences were thus deprived of first hand benchmarks for comparison, apart from the international acts engaged by Wirth Brothers and other large Australian circuses. The increasing diversity and sophistication of alternative forms of entertainment, such as cinema and television and the weakening attachment of an increasingly urbanised people to the horse contributed to the malaise. In the century from the 1850s, the range and quality of entertainments toured throughout Australia steadily increased. In 1908, ‘moving picture shows’ began to tour the country districts and, by 1915, the first cinemas had been erected in country towns. The emergence of rural cinema circuits with almost immediate access to the latest European and American films led to a dramatic reduction in the number of travelling companies, circus and otherwise.

Despite the impact of the Great Depression the constraints placed on travelling show activity during World War II, and the decline of the family-based circus, circus remained a popular and financially feasible form of entertainment in the immediate post-1945 period. By the early 1960s, there were about seventeen circus companies travelling Australia.

The introduction of television from 1956 posed a new threat to the viability of the Australian circus industry although it took up to a decade for television to reach the country towns. The Wirth family blamed the closure of its circus in 1963 on television, although it would appear that mismanagement materially contributed to its decline. In 1953, Silvers Circus closed although the attractive name of ‘Silver’ was quickly assumed by rival companies. Mervyn King remembered:

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When the television came in, we jumped the gun a bit. We thought it was going to do like it did with the American shows, put ‘em off the road. So we closed up, sold the plant up but television didn’t have the impact on the country people for a long time.\(^6\)

By the 1960s and 1970s, the severity of the decline of circus as an Australian institution was clearly apparent. Several of the family-based circuses - chiefly operated by descendants of the Ashton and Perry families - continued to travel Australia in the tenting fashion. Other, smaller circuses travelled for a part of the year or catered for specific venues such as performances given at shopping centres. But circus, in Australia as elsewhere, had entered an age where not only had the economics of operation altered significantly from earlier times but people’s expectations of entertainment as well:

They used to mostly lay up in the winter. They could afford to do it in those days because they didn’t have to rely on a lot of acts for the show. The family was the programme. It didn’t cost a lot of money and the kids would go to school and get two or three months schooling. They go all the year round now. The overheads are higher and to keep their company together they go to Western Australia where it’s a mild winter, or Queensland.\(^7\)

[The circuses] have a different system now. They only play three days a week, Thursday, Friday and Saturday and they can have

\(^6\) M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.230. Since Silver’s ceased operations in 1956, several years before television was seen in the rural areas, King’s account lacks complete credibility. A more fundamental reason for the closure of Silver’s was offered by King’s former advance agent: ‘Mervyn had the biggest road show in Australia in those days. When he started to interfere with the ... [circus] women, that was the end of it’.

\(^7\) M King, 1989, interview, Tape 7.
Then & now

matinees on Sunday. You couldn’t have a matinee on Sunday in those days. You couldn’t even travel sometimes on a Sunday. It was forbidden. The whole set-up has changed completely. It’s much harder now because you’re working more. Those days, everything, your timber was all Oregon and your canvas was light. Now everything is steel. Your poles are steel and your seats are wider. They’re heavier and your tents are vinyl. The whole section of a canvas tent wouldn’t weigh as much as one section. The whole six sections wouldn’t weigh as much as one-quarter of the vinyl tent. You don’t get the experienced labourers anymore because they don’t stay that long in a tent job. When I was a kid they’d probably have three or four men with them for six or seven years, maybe ten years.

Today it’s different, completely different. It’s just takes you a bit more money to run it. It’s killing circus now. It’s just too dear to run. They got to charge too much money for the people. Circus is a family entertainment ... If they go to the circus it’s mother and father and daughter and son. They all go. To take a family to an entertainment today prices start at fifteen dollars and eighteen dollars, five and six dollars for kids. You’re up for sixty or seventy dollars before you have a bag of peanuts. So I think it’s going to kill it.

Decline

In 1963, Wirth Brothers Circus ceased independent operations, unpaid taxes and other debts forcing it into business with Ashtons. Sole Brothers’ ‘small but attractive’ circus was forced into partnership with ‘a rather seedy’ vaudeville show. The remaining family travelling circuses continued to ‘struggle on’, outwardly, at least,

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8 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 7.
10 Higham.
Then & now

managing to evoke an air of festivity and visual charm. But, in 1969, Australia’s remaining large circus, Bullen Brothers, gave its final performance at Parramatta. The Bullen family re-focused its commercial interests on wildlife ‘safari’ parks, proven popular and viable in the United Kingdom, and the regular importation of the Great Moscow Circus with the entrepreneur Michael Edgley. The Ashton family also diversified its business interests, opening wildlife parks at Bacchus Marsh, Victoria, and Raymond Terrace, N S W.

What was happening to circus in Australia? Unrelenting urbanisation provides a significant part of the answer. Between 1911 and 1996, the proportion of Australians living in rural areas declined from 43% to 14% of the population. The comments of Stafford Bullen on his father’s death in 1974 seem to provide another part of the answer:

... I don’t think we will ever put the circus back on the road again ...
It is not what it used to be any more. People have other forms of entertainment and the kids in the country are moving down to the cities when they have the chance.

While technological progress improved mobility, communication and other aspects of circus management and production, it also raised community cultural expectations. In 1963, the seventy-one-year-old Mary Sole, senior member of the Sole Brothers Circus family, ‘bitterly’ complained of ‘Australians’ lack of respect for circus people. Television broadcasts of circus programmes ‘stimulated

11 Higham.
12 Fernandez, pp.129ff.
15 Higham.
interest’ in live circus and audiences of post-war immigrants further boosted its popularity but, in the opinion of Doug Ashton, proprietor of Ashtons Circus in 1971, ‘Australians do not appreciate their circus’. In the countries of Europe, performers were ‘looked up to as artists’. Some Australian circus artists once thought little of at home were ‘now stars overseas’ but circus artists visiting Australia were puzzled by ‘the Australian public’s attitude’ to its own circus community.\(^\text{16}\)

This ‘crisis of relevance’ was not unique to Australian circus. In retrospect, the crisis faced by American circus during the 1950s and Australian circus during the 1960s can now be seen as periods of adaptation of the institution to changing economic, social and cultural realities.\(^\text{17}\) Looked upon as a ‘low form of entertainment’ by the cultural establishments of Europe and North America, many were convinced that its seeming lack of sophistication would ensure its decline as the world progressed towards higher aesthetic values.\(^\text{18}\) In Australia, the pressing need to articulate and express an Australian culture found expression in the rapid expansion of subsidy to the arts in the late 1960s.\(^\text{19}\)

**New wave**

The conventional circus had reached a level of intransigence. Inevitably, the original Astleian model was not refinable any further without redefining its underlying *raison d’etre*. In retrospect, the closure of the Silver, Wirth and Bullen circuses, and the fall from public grace of the remaining Australian circus companies, proved to

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\(^\text{16}\) Fernandez, p.27.  
\(^\text{17}\) Bouissac, pp.3-4.  
\(^\text{18}\) Bouissac, pp.3-4.  
\(^\text{19}\) Rickards, p.216.
be not so much the end of the genre but the tentative beginnings of a new era in Australian circus. Within a few years of Bullen’s 1969 closure, a new, contemporary circus movement emerged, challenging the form and content of conventional circus with approaches informed by the radical arts practice of the late 1960s and 1970s in such areas as: the use of performing animals; the nature of training and performance; and the development of performance narratives. One account dates the birth of this movement from early 1973 when the so-called New Circus gave its performances at a wine festival in the Adelaide Hills, South Australia. Aspects of its programme were not dissimilar to those of the smaller circus troupes that had travelled Australia since the 1850s.

[O]n a glorious sunny day, they pulled up in their 1936 Chevrolet truck and set up for a show. The back of the truck folded down to reveal a small stage with a honky tonk piano and a drum kit. A platform was mounted on the roof, and a cable stretched from it to a pole about four metres high - this was the tightwire rig. A trumpet fanfare, a drum roll and the show began. The repertoire included a slackwire and juggling act from Jack Daniels, a highwire act (dressed as Pierrot) from Tim Coldwell, sword swallowing and fire eating from Mick Harbison and a plate-spinning act from Dave Black. There were at least two clown gags - ‘Sharpshooter’, which involved one clown attempting to shoot a balloon off the head of another, and much breaking of balloons, and everybody’s favourite - ‘Honeybee’. All this accompanied by live music from Buzz Leeson.²⁰

It is probably no coincidence that a contemporary circus movement should have emerged in South Australia at this time as the State’s Labor government had increased ‘opportunities for celebratory

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²⁰ Broadway, p.172.
performance’.\textsuperscript{21} In Melbourne, the Soapbox Circus was established by the Pram Factory in 1976, a show in a concert format that featured the Captain Matchbox Whoopee Band and incorporated juggling, group acrobatics, jitterbug, puppetry, mask and political satire. Its ‘circo-drama’ about the Indonesian takeover of East Timor was ‘a decided innovation in the generally apolitical, unintellectual tradition of Australian circus’.\textsuperscript{22} In Melbourne in 1977, Circus Oz played at John Pinder’s Last Laugh Theatre Restaurant for five months to packed houses and critical acclaim.\textsuperscript{23} During the run of New Circus at the Last Laugh, members of Soapbox Circus came to see the show, from which encounters Circus Oz was conceived in 1978.

We began with high ideals and enormous ambition. Many of us shared a belief that circus was the ideal live performance form to represent the emergent Australian culture. It was an artistic demonstration of physical co-operation offering strong roles for women. It was non-elitist, accessible to audiences of all ages, non-verbal - communicating across cultures and encompassing different cultures in its performances, and geographically suitable - tourable through vast distances and not dependent on hard top venues. We believed that if there were to be national opera, music, dance and theatre companies, then there should also be a national circus. We looked to the role models of China and Russia - where circuses and acrobatic troupes were supported by the state and drew their talent from fully resourced training schools. With this ambition in mind we incorporated the company as Circus Australia Ltd. - and for reasons of brevity and marketability, dubbed the show ‘Circus Oz’.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{21} Broadway, p.172.
\textsuperscript{22} Author’s Collection: unsourced clipping.
\textsuperscript{23} Broadway, p.173.
\textsuperscript{24} Broadway, p.173
Subsidy

The increasing largesse of Australia’s governments, Federal and State, towards funding of the performing arts did not immediately extend as far as circus, some questioning whether circus belonged to the performing arts at all. Those who remembered and admired Wirth Brothers Circus expressed the opinion that, in many other countries, ‘such a good show’ would have received government assistance to overcome the crippling rail costs that eventually finished it.\footnote{Fernandez, p.37.} When Circus Oz achieved the status of one of Australia’s major performing arts organisations in 1986, the recipient of regular funding from the Australia Council and state funding bodies, it was on its perceived merits as a theatre rather than a circus organisation.\footnote{Australia Council, 1986, Annual Report.}

Its basic performing routines embellished with political and social comment, Circus Oz began to accumulate an adult following and international recognition with appearances at the South Pacific Festival of the Arts, Port Moresby (1980), a six-city tour of Holland and Belgium (1982), and, participation in the Olympia Arts Festival held in conjunction with the Los Angeles Olympic Games (1984).

Wherever we went the response was fantastic - no-one had seen anything like this. We had invented a new kind of Circus and no-one else was doing it.\footnote{Broadway, p.176.}

In 1997, the Victorian government purchased a decommissioned navy drill hall in Melbourne as a home and rehearsal space for the company.
Circus Oz spawned or inspired a number of similar youth-based circus groups, many of whose members served with this ‘flagship’ company. These groups included the Flying Fruit Fly Circus (Albury-Wodonga, N S W, 1979), Rock ‘n’ Roll Circus (Brisbane, 1986), Womens Circus (Melbourne, 1991) and Circus Monoxide (Bathurst, N S W, 1994). Many of these groups were built on the principles that had guided the development of Circus Oz: a multi-skilled company extolling the virtues of teamwork, both on-stage and off; members’ sexual equality; a desire to produce popular accessible theatre; and an openness to experiment. With strong roots throughout the Riverina, the ‘Fruit Flies’ conducted a full time training programme for local children and performed at the Edinburgh Festival, Italy’s Veneto Festival, while its aerialists appeared with the Great Moscow Circus during its Australian tours. Its members benefitted from training programmes with the Nanjing acrobats from China. Furthermore, the Flying Fruit Fly Circus revived some traditional acrobatic, clowning, trapeze and wire-walking skills, at risk of being lost to posterity. In 1985, the Flying Fruit Fly Circus was one of thirty-one known circus training schools around the world. As the ‘circus with an attitude’, Rock ‘n’ Roll Circus combined performance skills with contemporary social issues and themes to generate works of originality while Circus Monoxide pursued its mission to take ‘New Circus’ to regional Australia.  

People

Some of the original number of Circus Oz had sprung from theatrical backgrounds. Its artistic director, Sue Broadway, for example, was the daughter of a vaudevillian Alf Broadway. But, by

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and large, this new generation of Australian circus people came to their profession with neither the experience of the older circus families nor the benefit of pre-existing training facilities as one might find in older countries. A ‘mountain of tasks’ were involved in the management of a conventional circus.

\[\text{Marketing, packing, freight, tent erection and maintenance, animal husbandry and grazing, insurance, safety regulations, contracts, training, on the road repairs, education of children, compliance with municipal by-laws, and so on.}\]

The practicalities of circus management therefore came as something of a ‘nasty shock’ to this new class of circus people.

Over the tour, which lasted three months, the sheer physical effort of putting the tent and seats up and down, and the emotional effort of surviving as an isolated community brought out all the inherent conflicts in the group. Many of our friends and helpers had moved on, leaving us with less hands for the physical work, and less support.

The paucity of professional experience and skills was addressed to some extent by appropriating what local experience was available. Several members of Circus Oz took jobs with Frank Gasser’s Circus Royale for a season to learn about tents, seating, rigging, trucks, fairy floss and other essentials of circus life, including a range of performing skills. Ashtons Circus played a benign and pivotal role in assisting this new Australian circus community, equipping many of

29 Bolton, p.16.
30 Broadway, p.178.
the people in the contemporary circus movement with circus skills and know-how. A former member of the Seven Ashtons, Mickey Ashton, became the resident instructor for the Fruit Fly Circus. As western relations with China thawed, Australia’s contemporary circus movement benefited from one of the low-level gestures of goodwill:

The Fruit Fly Circus and Circus Oz brought eight Chinese acrobats to Albury-Wodonga for three month of intensive training with Australian artists of all ages. It was to prove a major turning point not only for the two companies involved but for the development of contemporary circus in Australia ... The Chinese had passed on to the students a whole new repertoire of skills - group bike, hoop diving, teeterboard, bike balance, chair balancing, egg balancing, contortion with glasses - as well as a much stronger technical base for acrobatic training.  

Figure 32a

May Wirth, Australian barenack rider, executes a ‘back-across’ in the backyard of Barnum & Bailey, USA, 1913. Author’s collection.

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31 Broadway, pp.180-81.
International

The re-emergence and reshaping of circus in Australia mimicked - possibly anticipated - developments in both Europe and the USA since the movements in each part of the world were influenced by similar causal phenomena.

Firstly, a combination of bad publicity and high-profile animal rights campaigning around the issue of circus animals has resulted in intense media and, in the United Kingdom, RSPCA scrutiny of circus animal-keeping practices as well as the outright banning by many local authorities of circuses with animal acts ... Secondly, there has been a growing excitement of interest in what has popularly been dubbed the ‘new circus’. Though there exist huge variations in both scale and style within the ‘new circus’ movement, what unites them all is their rejection of animal performances as well as a common genesis in the alternative arts of the 1970s, particularly street theatre, mime and dance - all of which of course are deeply traditional in their origins.32

As in Europe, an exodus of state-trained performers from China and, later, the former Eastern Bloc countries fuelled the Australian growth of new circus. Other contributions derived from ‘renegades’ from traditional circus, and likewise others who moved into circus after training in areas such as theatre and dance.

The broadening of the availability of skills has had two consequences. Firstly, there is now more artistic interchange between circus and other performance-based arts so that circus skills are more in evidence within contemporary dance, opera and theatre.

Secondly, ‘new circus’ is frequently more theatrical and narrative or theme-based than the conventional circus has been at any stage since the 19th century.\(^{33}\)

**Current state**

To the purists, the seemingly amateurish displays and theatrical emphasis of Australia’s contemporary groups disqualified them as ‘circus’ in the conventional sense. In the eyes of Australia’s arts establishment on the other hand, the efforts of the traditional itinerant companies, family based and commercially operated, represented popular, variety style entertainment that simply reinforced the ‘poor cousin’ status of traditional circus in relation to the other branches of the performing arts.

[The] taste-makers of Australia would totally dismiss the Traditional Circus as an art-form, and would quickly denigrate our home-grown culture at the first sighting of the Corporate Cirque du Soleil.\(^{34}\)

While the contemporary groups explored and extended the artistic boundaries of circus, their achievements rested upon the financial support of government arts funding bodies, not to mention the expropriation of the more obvious idiosyncrasies of the art form. On the other hand, although many of the traditional groups thoroughly professionalised and upgraded their operations after years of indifference, most had still to rediscover the subtle, elusive quality of the circus arts that once roused the sensual instincts of adults and children alike. The ongoing, albeit decreasing, reliance on the

\(^{33}\) Stoddart, p.29.
\(^{34}\) Bolton, p.16.
presentation of wild animals in some of these conventional companies was an anachronism.

By 1997, some twenty or more circus companies throughout Australia attracted annual audiences of about three million and generated some $57 million in annual revenues. Broadly speaking, the field was now bifurcated between non-profit contemporary groups on the one hand, devoid of all but the human species, and the family-based traditional itinerant companies on the other. Some of the latter had been active for well over one hundred years, their programmes dependant to varying degrees upon the presentation of animals, whether domesticated, exotic or wild. The contemporary groups were further divided between the avant-garde ‘new wave’ companies, which were constantly pushing the meaning of circus to (and even beyond) conventional limits, and the youth-focussed community circus groups which were flowering in various forms and guises. By 2001, the number of commercially operated, conventional circuses travelling Australia had grown to eleven suggesting that the genre had found a new vigour for itself.\(^{35}\)

The opening of a nationally funded circus school in 2001, the National Institute of Circus Arts, (some forty years after the establishment of the National Institute of Dramatic Arts! [my italics]), as well as the recognition of circus skills within several state education systems, focussed and strengthened developments. Together, these initiatives have fostered new circus and the dissemination of circus skills. Parallels can be drawn between these developments and the circus of the 19th century.

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... At a time when so much recent media publicity has highlighted circus cruelty and outdatedness, such projects bring opportunities to nurture new talents and showcase the various fusions which define and distinguish new circus but any reparation of image which result is also good for business generally in that it raises the profile of circus as a whole. Yet public suspicions of vagabondism and outlawry which tainted the circus's early reputations have never entirely been shaken off and these projects in which circus workers promote good citizenship, social and personal responsibility and intra/cross community bridge building confirm an ideal rather than a demonising image of the circus, without either being the whole picture ... has functioned to open up the possibilities around the future role and shape of the circus. 36

By the end of the 20th century, the achievements of Australian circus as well as its aspirations were captured and recognised in tangible forms. Several books, encyclopedias and biographical dictionary entries appeared. In 1997, Australia Post issued a commemorative set of stamps to mark the sesquicentenary of Australian circus.

Where once the large Australian circuses of FitzGerald Brothers and Wirth Brothers had mimicked American systems of circus management, the nimbleness and freshness of contemporary Australian circus now had something to impart to American business management. The following observations of a contemporary Australian circus group turned up in an American management textbook in 1991.

Circus Oz is a truly magical organisation built on trust and mutual respect. Each person in the troupe is clearly responsible for the quality, creativity and productivity of his or her own workload is

36 Stoddart, pp.61-2.
involved and committed to the success of the enterprise as a whole. Through its participative structure the Oz company has solved the problems that bedevil so many American corporations today: how to do more with less, how to be the best. The greatest show on earth with limited resources. The Oz solutions are to empower and involve its people. One moment a performer is catching his mates as they fly through the air with the greatest of ease, and the next moment he is a trampoline expert, a jumping jester who always ends in an upright position ... Circus Oz offers a promising head of what the quality company of the future will be like. In the face of growing competition at home and abroad ... quality driven organizations are turning away from the authoritarian management practices of the past and focusing instead on their greatest potential – their own people.  

Summary

Since its appearance in a modern form in London more than 200 years ago, circus has undergone continuous redefinition while retaining its essential institutional characteristics. As features of ‘European’ civilisation transferred and accommodated in a new land, the arts of the circus and their management underwent, and continue to undergo, re-negotiation and modification. Although Australian circus has undergone tremendous change over the course of some 150 years, in terms of its numerical strength, artistic quality, organisation and philosophical direction, it remains today, even in its bifurcated forms, a major cultural institution in its Australian setting, possessing a demonstrable heritage and an ambience that is recognisably Australian.


38 Horne, p.92; Bell and Bell, xi.
Figure 33

Madamoiselle La Rosiere (Jenny Kendall, later Mrs William Woodyear [1841-1915]), female jockey rider in Burton’s Circus, c.1870. *Author’s collection.*
Figure 34
The ‘Australian’ equestrian, Scottish-born James Melville (1837-92), photographed with his three sons in the United States c.1870. Melville served his equestrian apprenticeship in Malcom’s Amphitheatre, Sydney. *Pfening Archives.*
CONCLUSIONS

It was a very good circus, for although they did nothing which everybody had not seen many times before, what they did do was very good of its kind, and the large audiences which thronged the tent appeared very much to enjoy what they saw.\(^1\)

In this thesis, I assembled fifteen major themes apparent in Australia’s circus history, a significant if somewhat misunderstood branch of the performing arts. I blended information gathered from newspapers, correspondence, interviews, archival material and published books. These themes were organised in the broad areas of society, enterprise and culture although none of these areas are mutually exclusive. Whether perceived as a part of Australia’s social history, as a surrogate indicator of economic development, as a part of her popular culture, or all of these, the diversity of material contained with Australia’s circus heritage is both bewildering and compelling.

Australian circus is representative of the circus in a modern form, as conceived by the so-called ‘father’, Philip Astley, in London in 1780 and replicated thereafter by countless circuses and circus performers on both sides of the Atlantic before its introduction to the Australian colonies. I have differentiated the circus in its modern form from the

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\(^1\) Australasian, 7 Feb 1880.
circus in its ancient form, demonstrating that two are only linked tenuously, if at all.

The modern circus tradition as created by Astley, refined by Ducrow, and replicated by others represented the wellsprings of Australian circus, in terms of their transfers of basic idiomatic conception, artistic content, technical foundations, organisational execution and its first generations of personnel. These transfers were initially obtained directly from English sources but increasingly through the medium of the American circus, itself a derivative of the Astleian model, from Continental European circus and performance traditions and from distinctly alternative sources especially the Japanese and, more recently the Chinese, performance traditions. To Australian circus fell the task of adapting and integrating these raw materials, by trial and error, into the environment in which it found itself, one distanced from its source, one of limited, widely distributed and parochialised populations, limited infrastructure, immense distances, extremes of terrain and climate, and social, economic and cultural systems and practices which, of themselves, were constantly changing in both the domestic and international spheres. At the same time, Australian circus was faced with the task of legitimising itself in the eyes of the established order, and if not completely removing the stigma associated with itinerant entertainers in the Old World, then at least accommodating what remained of it.

The result of all this adaptation was that a recognisable community of Australian circus was established in the decades after 1847, one that by the end of the 19th century had exhibited itself, not only throughout the domestic sphere but the international one as well. This was still recognisably ‘circus’ but with a twist for, in its splendid isolation, circus in Australia acquired or retained characteristics that
Conclusions

circus elsewhere had not, or was quarantined by distance, delay or circumstance from acquiring all of the characteristics of circus elsewhere.

In this study, I have shown that threads of Australia’s circus history are woven throughout the fabric of Australia’s social, economic and cultural history. I have presented this thesis on the basis that the whole of Australia’s circus history from 1847 to the present time is an historically continuous study despite changes in the character of both circus and Australia over this period: from its fixed location amphitheatre mode into a recognisable touring format by the 1850s, to a touring circus at three recognisable levels by the late 19th century (the large rail shows, the large wagon or motorised road shows, and the small barnstorming shows) to the bifurcation of Australian circus into conventional and new wave streams from the early 1970s.

Notwithstanding the personal bias that is inevitably brought to this study by a descendant of one of Australia’s earliest and more enduring circus families, I sought and objectively applied evidential material from a wide range of sources. I embraced historical and contemporary developments, conventional and new wave genres, American and British antecedents, public ambience and internal milieu, and the contribution of Australian circus to, and its place in, the building of a new nation.
Figure 35

The acrobatic equestrienne May Wirth (1894-1978), second from right, with the Wirth Family of riders, New York, 1912. Circus World Museum.