

CIRCUS IN THE FAR NORTH 1877-1987

by
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In Australia, like most countries, circus has been an element in the mosaic that constitutes its popular culture. An outgrowth of circus in a modern form as recast in London in the eighteenth century, an Australian circus profession has existed almost continuously since 1847. The athletic, intellectually undemanding nature of equestrian-based entertainments reflected basic Australian values. Despite its pervasive role in Australia's social, economic and cultural development over more than 100 years and the emergence in recent years of a contemporary circus movement, examples of academically grounded research into Australian circus are few. Scholarly works devoted to northern Australia's cultural and social history, in particular, have not meaningfully embraced circus. The author aims to demonstrate the relevance of *some* aspects of Australia's circus history to *some* aspects of the history of northern Australia. Specifically, what special opportunities and challenges did visits to Australia's north pose for circus managers? This essay may guide—and hopefully inspire—deeper investigations into circus and other itinerant entertainments which reached—or failed to reach—Australia's north.

Introduction

In 1768, a former cavalryman, Philip Astley, gave open-air displays of trick riding in a field on the south side of the Thames. Within a few years, he erected a building on the location to present equestrian exhibitions, clowns, jugglers, ropewalkers and acrobats. He called his edifice Astley's Amphitheatre but the establishment was popularly known around London as 'the circus'. In 1824, a decade after Philip Astley's death, the 'glorious' equestrian Andrew Ducrow took over the lease of Astley's Amphitheatre and, under his direction until his death in 1842, the establishment reached the height of its fame.¹ From the late eighteenth century, circus performers and troupes travelled between Europe and North America, delivering novelties and enriching the arts and management of circus on both sides of the Atlantic.

Early colonial circus activity

In New South Wales in the 1830s and 1840s, the Colonial-Secretary licensed itinerant equestrians, ropewalkers and gymnasts to give public exhibitions in the provincial areas.² Late in 1847, a publican and professional equestrian, Robert Avis Radford, opened his Royal Circus at the rear of his inn in Launceston.³ This 'Astley's Amphitheatre on a limited scale' was the first important outpost of circus activity in Australia.⁴ The history of almost any Australian circus of note, including several in existence today, is traceable, directly or indirectly, to Radford's pioneering enterprise.⁵

Immigration and natural population growth, economic prosperity and improved transportation all contributed to the development of a domestic circus industry, while Australia became increasingly feasible as a touring destination, distance and logistics notwithstanding, for companies from overseas, chiefly the United States. By the end of the nineteenth century, Australia had been visited by circuses and circus troupes from abroad, including some of America's largest companies, while circuses, troupes and performers of Australian origin had been seen on every inhabited continent. Until the closure of Wirth Bros Circus in 1963 and another major circus, Bullen Bros, six years later, the circus was one of Australia's principal forms of entertainment, especially in regional areas.

The expanding frontier

Fixed-location amphitheatres were successfully established in Sydney and Melbourne, in 1850 and 1852 respectively. In February 1851, Henry Burton, a professional English circus man, formed Australia's first peripatetic company.⁶ Relying on packhorses and bullocks, he and other early troupes followed the movements of people along ill-formed roads onto the goldfields of New South Wales and Victoria. Colonial circus men found, as had the wandering minstrels of mediaeval Europe and the circus men of the American frontier, that it was easier to change audience than repertoire. To change audience, they had to change location.⁷ By the summer of 1853-54, there is clear evidence of the use of tents.⁸ Light, flexible tents replaced the early cumbersome structures called booths that had to be erected, dismantled and transported between each location visited. After 1854, the circus routes began to extend beyond the familiar precincts of the eastern settlements and the interior goldfields.

As the frontiers of settlement expanded in the post-goldrush era, a growing body of experience of seasonal and regional conditions led to improvements in routing. The favoured playing areas and feasible routes were established by the 1890s. Nevertheless, as with American 'mud shows', the colonial horsedrawn wagon-based circus was 'a string of good days and bad days'.⁹

Circus routes and destinations were gradually developed along the eastern seaboard, extending outwards in huge, ever-increasing loops from the major cities of Sydney and Melbourne. These routes gradually connected the emerging townships of regional eastern Australia. Factors as diverse as population, distance, accessibility, climate and prosperity, defined the routes that the circuses followed. Understandably, Australia's early peripatetic circus activity was concentrated in the more populous portions of the Continent.

The first peripatetic circus to reach Moreton Bay (population, c.16,000), La Rosiere's, arrived in 1855 by an overland route.¹⁰ Burton's reached Adelaide (population, c.18,000) in 1856, by ship from Melbourne.¹¹ In 1868, Stebbing's Intercolonial Circus reached Fremantle (population, c.5,000), by ship from Adelaide.¹² While growing population levels stimulated initial circus visits, the paucity of population surrounding these settlements provided limited scope for regional touring similar to that throughout regional Victoria and New South Wales in the great era of pastoral expansion. Only in the 1870s and 80s, were Queensland and South Australia integrated into wider colonial touring circuits and, by the early 1900s, Western Australia as well. By the 1870s, a corridor of overland circus and travelling show routes extended from Adelaide, through provincial Victoria, the eastern half of New South Wales and into southern Queensland.

In 1881, Darwin's population numbered only 3,451 people and, in 1891, only 4,898.¹³ Its isolation, lack of accessibility and lack of surrounding centres of settlement upon which feasible touring routes could be organised, compounded its weakness as a circus destination. Climate posed further obstacles. In Australia's north, extreme heat during the spring (September-November) and summer (December-February) diminished the human capacity for physical exertion required of a circus performance, while the summer monsoons all but prevented the erection of a circus tent.

Regional Australia, north of the Tropic of Capricorn, was the last frontier of Australia's circus activity. If circus companies from the south could not conveniently reach Darwin, they nevertheless constantly expanded their routes in its general direction in the

unrelenting search for new horizons and markets. Despite regional Queensland's paucity of connecting roads, coastal shipping services enabled circus troupes to visit ports as far north as Cooktown by 1875 (Foley's Magnet Troupe) and Normanton (Woodyear's Circus) by 1886.¹⁴

But the populations of the major settlements north of the Tropic of Capricorn, as summarised in Table I, were hardly conducive to their inclusion in Australasian touring circuits:

Table I. Population of major northern settlements, 1871-1947

	1871	1876	1881	1891	1901	1911	1933	1947
Alice Springs							467	
Broome				121		908		
Cairns			278		3,557		11,993	
Charters Towers		943		4,597		15,037	6,978	
Cooktown		2,185		2,620				397
Darwin			3,451	4,898		911		
Herberton			268	1,175			869	
Normanton	110			1,251				234
Rockhampton	6,906		7,435	11,629	15,461			34,988
Somerset	11	187						
Thursday Island						1,411		944
Townsville	1,140						25,876	

The scope of this article will be limited to circus activity in the Northern Territory, the adjacent Gulf and York Peninsula regions of Queensland, and the adjacent Kimberley region of Western Australia.

Port Darwin

In 1869, George Goyder, the Surveyor-General of South Australia, established a small settlement of 135 men and women at Port Darwin. The Port was first used to supply the new settlement of Palmerston. The discovery of gold near Pine Creek, about 200 kilometres south of Darwin, during construction of the Overland Telegraph, gave a boost to the young settlement's development. The first newspaper, the *Northern Territory Times*, was established in 1873. From 1884, the pearling industry brought people from Japan, Timor and the Philippines. In the

1880s, a minor gold rush attracted more than 7,000 Chinese. The Northern Territory was administered by South Australia, until its transfer to the Commonwealth in 1911.

The first recorded theatrical event in the region now known as the Northern Territory, took place at Port Essington in 1839. Settlers staged a farce, *Cheap Living*, in a tin shed dubbed the Victoria Theatre. The Carandini Opera Company visited the town in 1881 as did Pollard's Lilliputian Opera Company on several occasions. In 1883, the Palmerston Dramatic and Musical Society was formed and performed regularly in the Town Hall into the twentieth century.¹⁵

It was not unknown for circus companies shipping across the Pacific to earn additional revenues by giving small-scale performances to island people or exhibiting cages of wild animals on the ship's deck or on the wharf. For many island people, the sight of wild and exotic animals was a complete novelty.¹⁶ Despite its remoteness and disconnectedness from the evolving circus routes of south-eastern Australia, intercontinental shipping occasionally serendipitously delivered circus troupes to Darwin on their way to or from other places.

On 27 June 1877, the Dutch steamer *Atjeh* left Adelaide bound for Sourabaya, Batavia and Singapore. The *Atjeh* carried one cabin passenger, Dr. Morrice, who had been appointed Colonial-Surgeon for the Northern Territory.¹⁷ At Cooktown, the *Atjeh* collected a portion of Cooper, Bailey & Co., a large American circus, at the close of its first Australian tour. In his memoirs, one of Cooper, Bailey & Co.'s managers, George Middleton, later recalled the performance given at 'Cookstown' [*sic*] at the end of the tour of the circus 'up the coast of Australia on our way to Java' where:

the only ground we found large enough on which to erect our tent was down at the edge of the water. Our tent was extended on the beach and before the performance was finished the tide had come in, and there were our seats standing in the water ... Our troupe was made up of first class artists, but the only music we had was an old fashioned hand organ.¹⁸

The *Atjeh* shipped from Cooktown on 16 July carrying the main portion of the Cooper, Bailey & Co circus to Java, just as one of the proprietors, James A. Bailey, returned to New York to procure fresh talent and novelties for a second Australian tour of the circus, to commence in Sydney later that year.¹⁹ It is not

implausible that, when the *Atjeh* called into Port Darwin, Cooper, Bailey & Co gave a performance, if on a reduced scale, for the local people. However, neither the several contemporary accounts of the company's Australasian tour nor contemporary issues of the *Northern Territory Times* provide any corroboration.

The year 1881 brings first definite mention of a circus performance in Darwin. That October, the steamer *Tambora* called in to Port Darwin. It carried an American circus, John Wilson's, fresh from a 'golden harvest' of performances in Batavia and Surabaya.

On Thursday evening a number of the troupe gave a performance in Palmerston. The hall [*sic*] was well-filled and the people seemed much amused. The circus proper, consisting of caravans of lions, tigers, and boa constrictors, was not sent on shore, as time would not permit, but large numbers who had never seen the monarch of the woods had a free inspection on board the Steamer.²⁰

That Wilson's circus performance was given in a 'hall' and not in a tent tells us that it was delivered on a reduced scale. A performance given in a hall would not have allowed equestrian or trapeze acts for example, and would have entertained only a few hundred people, not the several thousands that Wilson's large tent was capable of accommodating. Subsequently Wilson's toured Australia's southern colonies by rail before returning to the United States.

Another five years passed before, in November 1886, the schooner *Halley Bayley* arrived in Port Darwin 'with a circus troupe' on board. This troupe was a colonial one, Woodyear's, which had just given a 'successful season' in Normanton.²¹ Lying on the southern extreme of the Gulf of Carpentaria, Normanton had become a busy port in the few years after gold was discovered at Croydon, 150 miles inland, the year before.²² Woodyear's Circus was the natural successor to Australia's first peripatetic circus, Burton's, which began travelling in 1851. The Woodyears, William and Jenny, had taken over the circus of the pioneering but insolvent Henry Burton in Sydney in 1880. Earlier in her circus career, Jenny was known as professionally as the equestrienne, Mdlle La Rosiere. During 1885-86, the Woodyears had toured their circus throughout the Pacific, visiting places such as Fiji, Samoa, Tahiti and Honolulu, and the company was now *en route* for a tour of South East Asia and the Far East.²³ Despite 'the supposed general depression and consequent scarcity of cash', the Woodyears

received 'sufficient support' to induce a stay in Darwin of several weeks. On 19 December, the troupe sailed for 'Amboina' [*sic*; now Ambon] by the schooner *Ellerton* under Captain J. Leitch and his crew of three sailors.²⁴ Ambon was the headquarters of the Dutch military command of the Moluccas. A few months later, Captain Leitch wrote to the *Northern Territory Times* to furnish details of the *Ellerton's* voyage and arrival at Amboina.

We... experienced very heavy weather and high seas, until getting between Sermattan and Baba on the 27th [December]... We had to put in to Hoya Bay in the island of Ceram to procure grass [for the horses]... on New Year's Day... We went all round the native village, and after getting the grass aboard, we left the Island for Amboina, which we reached on the 5th January. Here the feed for the horses again ran out, and the boat went ashore, about half way up the harbour, to procure grass, while we lay becalmed. A sea breeze, however, set in, and we anchored in 35 fathoms, off the township of Amboina. The following day we landed all the horses and the circus properties. The first performance was given here on the 12th January. The inhabitants were delighted with the novelty of the sight, and we remained there till the 5th February, when we weighed anchor and started for the Banda Group, where we arrived on the following day. The circus played here to very successful houses for the next week.²⁵

Leitch returned to Darwin with the *Ellerton* and his crew but the Woodyears and their troupe continued through the islands of the Indonesian archipelago and onto the mainland of South East Asia. The Woodyears were reported at Hong Kong in September 1888, Kobe in July 1889, and Calcutta in December 1890.²⁶ Although not the first Australian circus to move beyond Australia's shores, Woodyear's was the first Australian circus to extensively tour overseas and must have lent inspiration to other Australian circus proprietors. In February 1888, the circus of Gus and Alf St Leon sailed from Cooktown to reach Normanton although it did not proceed to Darwin.²⁷

In 1900, nearly seven years after departing Adelaide with their large circus, the Wirth family had almost completed an odyssey touring through South Africa, South America, England, India and South East Asia. From Java, plans were made to ship the circus on its final leg to Australia. The question was whether, from

Samarang, the circus should ship to Fremantle or to Brisbane. One of the Wirth brothers, George, returned to Australia ahead of the company and endeavoured to have the company return to by way of Thursday Island but the Queensland authorities would not let the horses land from Java. At the same time, FitzGerald Bros, now Australia's leading circus, had arrived at Townsville to commence its tour of Queensland.²⁸ As a result, the Wirth circus:

had to sail to Singapore and transship from there. We did not even take the horses onto the wharf but loaded from the *Mosssel*, which had brought them from Java, to the *Karakatta*.²⁹

Whether the Wirths returned to Australia by way of Thursday Island or Fremantle, the return journey to Australia provided an opportunity to call in to Port Darwin but the various Wirth memoirs provide no suggestion that such a visit was countenanced. The *Karrakatta* made its first landfall at Broome and there the Wirths delivered this coastal settlement a performance, although not strictly a circus performance:

We spent the night there and went ashore [in rowboats] to the hotel and gave a sort of musical evening to the people there... The audience threw shillings and half crowns, all silver... When we went down to the boat the following morning, the tide had gone out. We walked on the bottom of the ocean to the steamer. The boat was laying on its side. We could hardly walk on the decks. We had to wait for the tide and sail away early that morning. We had a good trip over and landed at Fremantle.³⁰

As the Woodyears had found in 1886, the visit of a circus to a remote location starved of regular professional entertainment could repay, many times over, the cost and trouble of making the visit. Nevertheless, since even touring Queensland remained a daunting proposition for circus companies before the development of adequate road and rail connections, visits to Darwin were even more challenging. In 1905, the Irish-born circus man, Will 'Jerry' Baker, apparently travelled his circus as far as Thursday Island as, from there, he telegraphed the office of the *Northern Territory Times* to inquire 'what business for circus' (sic) in Darwin. Baker confidently expected the town could yield £300 in takings but was informed that he would be lucky to 'scoop' £100 in one week.³¹ This was insufficient inducement for Baker who returned southwards.

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Although Baker could not reach Darwin in 1905, a larger circus did briefly visit that year, the only one to come to notice since the Woodyears' visit of 1886 and possibly the first to actually exhibit in Darwin beneath a tent. This was FitzGerald's Circus, Australia's premier circus of the day. The previous year, Dan and Tom FitzGerald had divided their large, rail-based company into two separate enterprises. While the main FitzGerald company, under the direction of Dan, made an annual circuit around the six Australian states and New Zealand each year, the FitzGeralds sent a smaller company on tour through South East Asia. As Dan FitzGerald explained when interviewed in Sydney in April 1905:

Last June, instead of, as was our custom, disbanding our old company when the new company arrived from Europe, we decided to try the experiment of taking the old company on to new territory. It was too good to disband, though the acts were a bit stale in Australia and in Maoriland... So Tom took the company out... [by way of] German and Australian New Guinea, Thursday Island, Banda, Ceram and Amboina, in the Molluccas, Macassar... in [the] Celebes. At Macassar there was such a rush for seats that the military had to be called out to restore order.³²

Evidently, therefore, the 1905 visit to Darwin took place when the FitzGeralds sent their second company on a tour of the East again. The company arrived in Darwin by the steamer *Airlie*:

The tent will be erected, for one night only, in the Railway Yard... Mr Pettit, the advance agent, arrived here by the steamer *Australian* to make preliminary arrangements... [The] circus is making an extended tour through Java, the Straits Settlements, and India,³³

Thus was given, as far we know, the first complete circus performance in Darwin under a tent, its essence being captured in the enthusiastic report that appeared some days later in the *Northern Territory Times*:

About eleven o'clock on Wednesday morning last the unaccustomed strains of a brass band were heard floating over the town and harbor... There were very few of the animals landed. In fact, we hear that the majority of these have gone on to Batavia by another boat, there to await the arrival of the portion of the troupe that is visiting this port. Amongst the many

performers, the Herberts must be given praise for their daring aerial evolutions. Aeric, of the same troupe, however, was the more sensational in his daring exhibitions of balancing on a swinging trapeze, at a good height... The troupe of performing dogs were also very clever in their turn. In trick cycling, it must be said that Allan Kerr is exceedingly clever and does feats but little expected. In a distinct role of their own, the musical Weatherlys extract as much melody with their novel instruments as could be conceived... Dr Gordon is a wonder in his feats of strength, and especially in that portion of his performance in which he breaks a trace chain by pulling it with his teeth and also lifts a dumbbell, said to weigh four cwt., from the ground by his teeth whilst standing on his hands. Pippis and Dummy, in a comic entree, are clowns of much merit, and quite apart from others we have seen. Mr. W. Anderson, in a jockey turn was very claver, and gives a fine exhibition of his skill as a circus rider. The performance of the Japanese Sumo wrestlers concluded the evening's programme. There was a bumper house and the curtain dropped at 10:30.³⁴

In the early decades of the twentieth century, a number of large horsedrawn circuses, and numerous small ones, regularly serviced Australia's eastern states but few of these ever ventured further afield and none reached Darwin as far as we know. Australia's largest circus, after the collapse of the FitzGerald circus, was Wirth's Circus but, being rail-based, confined its Australasian touring program to urban centres served by the various railway systems. The Gus St Leon circus travelled the eastern Australian states by horses and wagons but never travelled further north than Cairns. Mervyn King could recall Australian outback circus life as far back as 1915 when, at the age of seven, he was apprenticed as an acrobat to the Gus St Leon circus. Interviewed in 1989, this 81-year-old veteran of Australian circus recalled:

I've never been to Cooktown. I've never been to Normanton. None of the shows that I know ever went up that far. They got about as far as Cairns... Well, there was no roads I don't think.³⁵

After the visit of the FitzGerald circus in 1905, no other circus is known to have visited Darwin until the appearance of Hyland's Circus in 1918. The founder of Hyland's Circus, John Thomas

Roberts (1854-1911), was 'a great bushman' and had once been a station manager in the Cape River region in eastern Queensland. He began to put on exhibitions of trick riding and, by 1890, Roberts' displays were transformed, with the addition of his family, into a small travelling circus. Roberts adopted the professional name of 'Hyland' and his circus became known as Hyland's Vice-Regal Circus. Most of the Hyland children became accomplished circus performers and musicians, despite being afflicted at different ages with Leber's disease, a form of congenital blindness inherited from their mother.³⁶ The Hyland boys were remembered as 'marvellous [horse] breakers but blind as a bat'.³⁷ Late in 1905, after some 20 years touring Australia's eastern seaboard and New Zealand, the lure of gold attracted the Hyland circus family to Western Australia.³⁸

The Hylands remained in Western Australia to become the state's *de facto* circus, delivering entertainment on the goldfields and to remote interior settlements as far north as Broome.³⁹ In September 1908, it was reported that the family was settled 30 miles out of Sandstone where they were mining for gold but, in 1909, the family packed up and travelled to Carnarvon as Hyland's Circus once again.⁴⁰ From Carnarvon, the Hylands shipped for Broome intending to visit Singapore. Finding that the quarantine regulations would prevent them bringing their horses back from Singapore, they settled at Broome where they bought the Star Hotel. The family mounted a circus program on an adjacent vacant block twice a year and later ran Broome's first 'picture show'.⁴¹

John Roberts Hyland perished while returning to Broome overland from Halls Creek in November 1911 after a pony-buying expedition. The family reorganised the circus late in 1912 and, starting at Geraldton, travelled until the start of the Great War in 1914 when they settled at Yarloop.

Towards the close of the war, some of the family gave a brief, wartime season in Darwin. The circus, under the direction of the blind Tom Hyland, arrived in Darwin by the ss *Bambra* in July 1918.⁴² As well as riding and trapeze displays by the Hyland siblings, Maud, Evelyn and Tom, the entertainment included buckjumping displays.⁴³ The circus was an outright novelty for Darwin's juveniles while the buckjumping and roughriding displays appealed to the 'bushmen'.⁴⁴ An entertainment in aid of the funds of the local convent school raised £8 and, during the course of the evening, the Rev. Father Fanning took the opportunity of thanking Tom Hyland and other members of his

'talented' family.⁴⁵ The Hylands also gave a benefit in aid of the local branch of the Red Cross Society which raised 'somewhere in the vicinity of £60', for which His Honor Mr Justice Bevan stepped into the arena, and, on behalf of the committee, cordially thanked the Hyland family for their generosity.⁴⁶ As it concluded its Darwin season of almost eight weeks, the *Northern Territory Times* expressed the wish that, 'with the dawn of peace and more normal conditions generally', Darwin would be favoured with another visit from the Hylands.⁴⁷

From Darwin, Tom Hyland and another blind Hyland brother, took what remained of the circus to North Queensland 'because they couldn't do anything else but circus'. One of their sisters recalled:

[The] poor boys they took a man with them they knew and... we saw them later [as]... and they said they would have done well if they'd only had one of us to look after the money and the clothes. But everybody robbed them with the money, see.⁴⁸

The remaining references to visits to circuses to the Northern Territory, suggest that Darwin remained a difficult proposition, logistically and commercially. Barton's Circus, which had its roots in the sideshow that the Worley family ran on South Australian showgrounds in the 1880s, sailed from Fremantle for Java in 1928, calling into Carnarvon and Broome, but not Darwin, *en route*.⁴⁹ Late in 1931, the *Northern Territory Times*, reported that 'as soon as the roads permit travelling, a circus, complete with artists, performing dogs, and travelling talkies, is due to arrive at Darwin' and that, if they found conditions 'satisfactory', they intended to make periodic visits to the North.⁵⁰ The identity of this circus however is uncertain, not the least because the proposed visit did not materialise. In 1935, the Sydney show business magazine *Everyone's* reported that Wirth's Circus had called into Darwin *en route* to Sourabaya. However, a review of contemporary issues of the *Northern Territory Times*, has failed to yield any corroboration of the visit.⁵¹

Wirth's visit to the 'top end', had it materialised, could have carried some symbolism. Some 65 years earlier, the original Wirth family, highly skilled German musicians, wandered the goldfields, townships and outback of south-eastern Australia as an itinerant 'German' band. In a generally credible autobiography, George Wirth (1867-1941) wrote how, in 'the latter part of 1860', the family camped

... with the Burke & Wills' exploring party for a while, and father was able to give them valuable information concerning roads through Victoria to the Darling River.⁵²

In 1965, Alberto's Circus, conducted by the family of Albert Perry, completed its tour of Queensland with a 'trek' from Cloncurry to Darwin, by way of Tennant Creek, Elliott, Katherine, Pine Creek and Adelaide River. Alberto's was the successor to the famous Perry Bros Circus, which began travelling Queensland in 1889. At the Warrabri Settlement south of Tennant Creek, the Aboriginal children saw not only their first circus but also their first elephants which initially aroused some anxiety. Despite friendly audiences encountered in the Territory, Tennant Creek proved an exception where the Perrys found people quite 'disinterested' in circus:

Even during the afternoon, the people would not even bring their children along to have a free look at the animals, some of which, such as the elephants, had not been on show in the Territory for many years.

Visiting Darwin at the time of the Royal Darwin Show, Alberto's Circus was better received, its '18 or 19 acts' embracing 'the usual repertoire of juggling, tumbling and performing animals'. Oats and hay had to be brought from Alice Springs for the two circus elephants at an approximate cost of £50 per ton. After its Darwin season, Alberto's Circus headed back overland to Brisbane. The same circus next visited the Northern Territory in 1987.⁵³

Alice Springs

If Darwin held few prospects for a touring circus, Alice Springs, in the far south of the Northern Territory could not have been much better despite its accessibility from the south and the completion of a rail connection from Oodnadatta in 1929.⁵⁴ In October 1949, Gill Bros Circus & Rodeo visited Alice Springs, the first definite visit of a circus to the town. However, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that Lennon's Circus reached Alice Springs by horse and wagon from the south, about 1930. Intending to transport the circus overland to Darwin, the Lennons entered into negotiations with local Afghans for camels. The consideration offered the Afghans was unusual, to say the least. About seven years of age at the time, Emily Lyons was an 'adopted' or 'apprenticed' acrobat, a waif who had been abandoned to the circus by her natural mother. The little girl's worth to the circus

people was a negotiable commodity, as the 67-year-old Lyons recalled when interviewed in 1990:

[It] was only sand, it was desert... [There] was date palms there and... there was these men, they were all real dark and they had like... turbans and these big long coloured clothes... and the women had these things on them... I was... fair dinkum... getting swapped over... Yes, for camels, because we had no money to buy 'em... Oh, yes, swapping kids for anything... Fair dinkum.⁵⁵

Unable to procure the camels they needed, the Lennons headed across the Nullarbor to Western Australia instead.⁵⁶ At this stage, without reliable rail or motor transport and a formed road, camels provided the only means of conveying goods northwards from Alice Springs.⁵⁷

Burke & Wills

Although strongly identified with the history of central and northern Australia, camels were both exhibited and deployed in circus in Australia and it may be appropriate to briefly illuminate the links between these two branches of Australian history.

Camels and other exotic animals were exhibited in Melbourne as early as 1854, at James Ellis's pleasure grounds, Cremorne Gardens.⁵⁸ How Ellis procured his camels at such an early stage is uncertain but many non-indigenous animals were landed in Australia by speculative mariners. Captain Charlesworth of the *Royal Saxon* was active in this regard in 1851.⁵⁹ Ellis's camels and other animals were presented in performances at the Cirque National in Melbourne in July 1854.⁶⁰

In June 1860, John King, a discharged soldier 'who had good experience with camels', arrived from Karachi by the *Chinsurah* with six camels for Cremorne Gardens, which by then was under the management of the theatrical entrepreneur, G.S. Coppin. Coppin subsequently sold some of these camels to the Burke & Wills expedition for £50 each.⁶¹ The expedition organisers imported another 25 camels from Peshawar and Afghanistan, and enlisted three sepoys.⁶² Burke & Wills engaged John King for the expedition. On the northwards journey, the camels deserted and left the exploration party to its fate. The recalcitrant camels wandered overland and, a year later, turned up in Adelaide. Of the four explorers who reached the Gulf of Carpentaria, John King was the only one who survived the return journey.⁶³ Twenty

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years later, travelling south-eastern Australia, St Leon's Circus exhibited two 'gaunt looking' camels. Truthfully or not, St Leon claimed that one of the camels was 'said to have belonged to Burke and Wills' ill-fated expedition'.⁶⁴

Conclusion

In their relentless search for audiences, the circus people of Australia constantly extended their routes beyond the control settlements ever since the first peripatetic circus took to the road in 1851. The evidence shows that, although the circus people were keen to extend their routes as far as possible, the commercial and logistical obstacles of operating in a large, sparsely populated continent often hampered them. While growth in population, trade and commerce and the expansion of transport systems gradually demolished these obstacles, Darwin, the Northern Territory and Australia's far north generally long remained the last frontier for Australian circus.

Appendix

As a fillip for researchers investigating the history of entertainments in the Northern Territory, I provide the following references to visitors, other than circus, extracted from the *Northern Territory Times* for the period 1888-91.

18-Feb-88	Hamilton's Dramatic Company
23-Jul-88	Youngman's, Rev E. Popular Lectures
24-Jul-88	Jarley's, Mrs, Celebrated Waxwork Exhibitions
04-Sep-88	Harding's Mikado Opera Company
28-Jun-90	HMS Penguin Variety Troupe
24-Jul-91	HMS Taurang Entertainments
14-Sep-91	Corbett, Professor J.W., illusionist & ventriloquist

Notes

- ¹ G Speaight, 1980, *A History of the Circus*, Tantivy Press, London, p 57.
- ² New South Wales Archives Office, Colonial Secretary's Office, Register of Oaths and Licences: Licences, Public Exhibitions, 1821-63, 4/5784. Microfilm Reel #2331; Dixson Library, Correspondence between Colonial Secretary's Office and George Croft and William Radwell, Archival Estrays, List 22/2 Add 159.
- ³ Archives Office of Tasmania, CSO 24/4/58
- ⁴ *Cornwall Chronicle*, 25 and 29 December 1847.
- ⁵ Hobart Town Courier, 1 April, 26 August 1848.
- ⁶ M Salmon, 'An old time circus', *Australian Town & Country Journal*, 3 August 1904, p 34.

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