

LONG VOYAGES AND MUSCULAR VIGOUR: MARITIME THEMES IN AUSTRALIA'S CIRCUS HISTORY

INTRODUCTION

The circus in modern form emerged in London in the late eighteenth century. It became an important feature of the leisure landscape, not only in England but throughout the world as industrialisation and colonialism fostered international trade and commerce and, of course, shipping. Shipping delivered people to Australia, whether bonded or free, who brought their ingrained notions of entertainments seen at home, including circus. Since these entertainments were not indigenous to Australia, entrepreneurs, artists, equipment and animals, repertoires and ideas were necessary to reproduce them on Australian soil. Again, shipping delivered these essential resources and, in so doing, demolished distance and, to some extent, time as well.

Shipping stimulated circus activity on Australian soil that otherwise may not have taken root, either as early as it did or as decisively. Shipping transferred circus companies from less to more promising economic conditions, and gave large circus companies—American companies especially—a pressure valve by which to survive and prosper during difficult times at home. Circus remained a major form of mass-entertainment in Australia until the emergence during the 20th century of electronically distributable forms of amusement—cinema, radio and television specifically.

This paper seeks to answer the fundamental question: How were the character and practicalities of circus activity in Australia shaped and defined by shipping, particularly inter-continental shipping? This essay may guide—and hopefully inspire—deeper investigations into

shipping's critical role in keeping a distant land supplied with the fruits of contemporary culture.

BACKGROUND

In 1779, Philip Astley presented organised equestrian entertainments in the first circus of modern times in a permanent building on the south side of the Thames, which he named Astley's Amphitheatre.¹ Although Astley never used the word, his establishment was popularly referred to as 'the circus', a word used at the time to describe the open-air circular recreational riding tracks in and around London and not, as is popularly thought, the circus of ancient Rome.² Astley built other amphitheatres, including the Olympic in London in 1806, which consisted of sheets of iron and canvas affixed to a framework of timbers obtained from a captured and 'knocked-up' French man-of-war.³

The travelling circus companies, which arose in provincial England early in the nineteenth century, performed in 'pavilions', which were cumbersome yet transportable buildings of timber and canvas. Although a vast sailmaking industry supported the Royal Navy and a large merchant fleet, England's circus men did not immediately realise the potential for canvas circus tents although England's nautical history and achievements were widely celebrated in equestrian-based pantomimes and other circus spectacles. Only when an American circus man, Richard Sands, crossed the Atlantic in 1842 and toured the British Isles under canvas did English circus managers begin to emulate the American practice.⁴

Circus in America dates from 1792 when one of Astley's equestrians, John Ricketts, crossed the Atlantic with his troupe to Philadelphia, where he opened an amphitheatre.⁵ In 1836, the Scottish circus proprietor Thomas Taplin Cooke chartered the *Royal Stuart* to carry his company of some 130 people and 56 horses and ponies from Greenock to New York, the longest voyage any complete circus had made up to that time. Cooke's daughter remained in the United States, marrying an American circus man, William Cole. Many years later, their son, William Washington Cole, shipped his own large circus from San Francisco to Sydney.⁶

Apart from the examples of Ricketts, Cooke and a few others, British circus men had little incentive to take to the sea and visit foreign lands,

even those of Continental Europe. Travelling the English countryside in comfortable horsedrawn caravans along ‘splendid’ roads was an easier proposition than, for example, joining the ‘mud’ shows that travelled the rough roads and trails of the American frontier or travelling as far as Australia to cope with rudimentary bush roads.⁷ On the other hand, nineteenth century American circus men stood in closer proximity to Australia—some 30 days sailing time between San Francisco and Sydney compared to 60 or more between London and Melbourne—and bore lighter shipping costs and sacrifice of revenue during the period in transit.

LUIGI DALLE CASE

Small troupes of *histriones*, men and women who performed wherever they could find an audience, wandered Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire. The *histriones* and their successors, the minstrels of the medieval ages, walked and trundled along expanding trade routes, transcending national loyalties and ethnic identities.⁸ Following in the tradition of the *histriones* was the (apparently) Italian gymnast, Luigi Dalle Case, whose wandering proclivities took him beyond Continental Europe. In 1839, this self-styled ‘Professor of Gymnasics’ and his troupe called into Buenos Aires, co-incidentally at the time of the visit of the French fleet.⁹ They subsequently wandered to Cape Town, Mauritius and Bourbon, the main port of the French Indian Ocean colony of Ile de France (now known as Reunion). To have voyaged directly and purposely from London to Sydney in 1841 would have taken upwards of 120 days. However, having already wandered as far as Ile de France, it was a relatively short passage from there to Sydney. Dalle Case and his troupe sailed by the 290-ton sailing ship *Salazes* from Bourbon, Ile de France, on 27 May and disembarked in Sydney after a voyage of 44 days.¹⁰ Visiting the isolated outposts of the British and French empires was evidently lucrative as Dalle Case was a man ‘of some means’ by the time he arrived in Sydney in July 1841.¹¹

It would be fair to say that, before 1841, no circus-style entertainers had freely wandered so far across the earth’s surface as Dalle Case and his troupe. Yet, their arrival in Sydney was more serendipitous than pre-determined. Before the 1830s, the distant and underpopulated penal colonies of Australia offered few prospects for visits of circus troupes

and performers from England or America.¹² By 1841, the population of Sydney numbered less than 30,000.¹³ But by this time, the essential foundations of a free market—as distinct from a penal—economy had been laid.¹⁴

Following a series of initial appearances on the theatre stage and in hotel saloons, Dalle Case was granted a ‘general’ licence to give a short-lived series of equestrian, gymnastic and theatrical entertainments in January 1842.¹⁵ He finally departed Sydney on 13 October 1842 by the schooner *Water Lily* for Hobart Town.¹⁶ The *Water Lily* arrived after an unusually long voyage of 15 days, having sailed by way of the notorious penal settlement of Norfolk Island that lay about 1,500 kilometres east of Sydney.¹⁷ It is quite possible that Dalle Case and his troupe gave an entertainment for the military establishment on the island, especially since a small theatre was available. However, no corroborative information has come to light. Early in November 1842, the troupe opened in Hobart Town’s Royal Victoria Theatre as ‘Signor Dalle Case’s Foreign Gymnastic Company’.¹⁸ In 1843, the troupe proceeded to India and China and eventually returned to Cape Town, by way of Mauritius.¹⁹ Details of his life and career from that point are shrouded in mystery.

EARLY COLONIAL CIRCUS ACTIVITY

Robert Avis Radford had arrived in Adelaide by way of Cape Town in March 1841 on the 450-ton steamer *Corsair* which had departed Deal the previous October.²⁰ An expert horseman, Radford had been charged with the care of several fine horses for the long voyage.²¹ Radford soon moved on to Launceston, a minor seaport of some 10,100 people in 1848, and a penal settlement, but also the centre of thriving equestrian and horse breeding activities. With his earnings from equestrian activities, Radford acquired the license for the aptly named Horse & Jockey Inn.²² In December 1847, he opened his Royal Circus adjacent to the inn.²³ Over two years, Radford delivered remarkable programs, culled from contemporary British circus, popular theatre and music hall. Nautical themes—featuring sailors, pirates, shipwrecks, smugglers, and so on—were conspicuous.

Given the island colony’s dependence on the sea for communication and commerce, Radford’s emphasis on nautical themes may not have

been coincidental. Shipbuilding was Tasmania's first major industrial enterprise and encouraged the growth of associated trades such as cooperage, mast and blockmaking, ropemaking, sailmaking and sawmilling. In the 1840s, Hobart Town turned out more ships than the other Australian colonies combined. Sealing and whaling were important contributors to the island's economy, while smuggling was so rampant that public accounts were distorted.²⁴

Although Radford's entrepreneurial activity eventually ended in insolvency, he had launched a colonial circus industry. Two of his equestrians, John Jones and Golden Ashton, both former convicts, later founded colonial circus dynasties in the tenting tradition. Both Jones' and Ashton's presence in Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) can be attributed to the British system of transportation. In the early 1850s, the locus of colonial circus activity shifted to the Australian mainland with fixed-location amphitheatres opened in Sydney and Melbourne. As with Radford, nautical themes were conspicuous while programs had to be periodically changed in order to sustain audiences and revenues.

Although Australia represented neither an attractive nor feasible destination for a complete English circus, some Englishmen were nevertheless lured by the prospect of adventure in the Antipodes and, especially during the gold rush era of the 1850s, pecuniary reward. Learning of 'the fine feats of the colonial boys in riding', Henry Burton, formerly the manager of Cooke's Circus, and his wife, the renowned equestrienne Rosina Lee, sailed from London in 1849 by the *Constant*. The voyage almost ended in tragedy a fortnight before reaching Port Adelaide when a boy knocked over a keg of burning tar in the hold. Sufficiently enthused of prospects in the colonies, Burton began to organise his own circus. At Beaumont & Waller's pleasure grounds on the shores of Botany Bay, he broke both men and horses into the 'business'. An inaugural performance on Boxing Day 1850 was attended by some 2,000 people. Many arrived by 'the most magnificent steamer in Port Jackson', the *Sir John Harvey*, which carried a bar and quadrille band to relieve the tedium of the voyage.²⁵ Visitors to Botany Bay could see displays of non-indigenous wild and exotic animals which, if the American custom is any guide, were probably procured in foreign lands by speculative sea captains and sold on arrival in the colonies.²⁶

When an English gymnast, George Lewis, decided to open an

Antipodean version of Astley's Amphitheatre in Melbourne at the height of the gold fever, he dispatched his agent, a Mr Birch, to London to engage the finest circus artistes available. Over the summer of 1854-55, three 'drafts' of performers, as well as horses, dresses, properties, chandeliers and fittings, arrived in Melbourne within a few weeks of each other by the ships *Callibar*, *Stebonheath* and *Champion of the Seas*. The Bergs, a Continental family of equestrians, Adolphe Berg, his wife and two children, Antoinette and Robert, with their horses, arrived along with 17 other artistes by the *Stebonheath* in December 1854.²⁷ After 109 days at sea, however, the Bergs and their horses could not immediately appear before the public as the 'long voyage had relaxed the muscular vigor'. When Lewis insisted on immediate rehearsals, Antoinette and Robert were seriously injured. Adolphe Berg sued Lewis for breaking their contract, and the Bergs were awarded damages of £500, triggering Lewis's bankruptcy and the closure of his amphitheatre.²⁸

Henry Burton's and other troupes followed the people onto the goldfields from 1851. By the summer of 1853-54, we have clear evidence of the regular use of tents by peripatetic colonial circus companies.²⁹ The colonial circus men found, as American circus men had already found, that an itinerant, tented company could standardise its program, thereby minimising the need for periodic change and innovation that was incumbent on a fixed-location amphitheatre.³⁰ In this era, Sydney supported at least one sailmaker, Lane & Co., at 648 Lower George Street. As well as tents, this firm also supplied equipment which any peripatetic circus would find useful such as 'tarpaulins, dray covers, tether ropes ... rosin'.³¹ Appearing with his company in the New England township of Armidale in April 1860, the circus proprietor Ashton boasted of his 'new and spacious marquee capable of accommodating one thousand persons comfortably fitted up by Mr Anderson, sailmaker, Newcastle'.³²

PENAL TRANSPORTATION

Over a period of some 80 years, from 1788 until 1868, some 159,000 male and female prisoners were transported to the penal settlements of Australia. Their labour laid the foundations of modern Australia.³³ A large proportion were unskilled or semi-skilled working people who

came from London and other provincial centres of the British Isles.³⁴ Presumably many had experienced the delights of Astley's and other early amphitheatres and travelling circuses. We know that their number included at least a few people who received, prior to transportation, some training in one aspect or other of the circus arts—equestrians, ropewalkers, tumblers—and would play important roles in the foundation of an Australian circus industry.

In December 1848, 'the British horseman, Mr Ashton', gave extraordinary displays of equestrianism in Radford's Amphitheatre in Hobart Town.³⁵ This was Golden Ashton, the son of a 'travelling tinker' baptised at Rochford, Essex in 1820.³⁶ From the time he was able to 'cross a horse', Golden acquired equestrian skills in circuses on Essex fairgrounds.³⁷ But, in 1836, described as 'a sweep, tin man and brazier', he was convicted for theft and sentenced to transportation.³⁸ In May 1837, after a 134-day voyage, he was landed from the 296-ton, Indian-built *Frances Charlotte* with 149 other youths at Point Puer, the special receptacle for boy convicts located near the infamous Port Arthur. The boys landed at Point Puer were typically 'bewildered tykes, many of them hardened in theft and flashness'.³⁹ At the end of the voyage from England 'each boy could read when he disembarked at Point Puer, although very few ... [could read] at the beginning of the voyage'.⁴⁰ Freed from servitude in 1844, Golden sought outlets for his equestrian capabilities that eventually led to the formation of Ashton's Circus by 1852. The two Ashton circuses of today, conducted by Golden's direct descendants, are probably the oldest in the English-speaking world.

The other major proponent of early Australian circus to arrive as a convict was a London tumbler, John Jones. As a youth, Jones performed in London's streets under gaslight before graduating to Astley's Amphitheatre as a 'tumbler'.⁴¹ The alleged theft of a coat worth £2 in October 1842 led to seven years transportation.⁴² Jones was initially incarcerated on the hulk *Leviathan*, the decommissioned 74-gun man o'war that had seen action at Trafalgar in 1805.⁴³ After the start of the War of Revolution prevented the further transportation of felons to the American colonies, hulks such as these were increasingly used to relieve the pressure on English prisons.⁴⁴ In 1818, after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the *Leviathan* was 'retro-fitted' into a floating prison that could accommodate as many as 580 prisoners.⁴⁵

After eight months' on the *Leviathan*, Jones and other prisoners were transferred to Southhampton and taken on board the 614-ton, Indian-built, *Forfarshire*. After a 107-day passage, the *Forfarshire* arrived in Hobart Town in October 1843 with Jones and 238 other male prisoners. In family legend, this convict transport was merely a 'sailing ship' and, although no corroborative evidence has come to light, was 'almost wrecked' coming around Cape Horn.⁴⁶ After discharging her human cargo in Hobart Town, the *Forfarshire* proceeded in ballast to Hong Kong, presumably to take on cargoes of tea and silk for the return journey to England.

Issued with his ticket-of-leave in July 1847, John Jones soon found employment as an acrobat in Radford's Royal Circus in Launceston.⁴⁷ In 1851, Jones organised his own circus on the goldfields at Sofala, New South Wales. In 1865, he adopted the professional pseudonym of 'St Leon' and perpetuated several generations of artists active in circus in Australia and the United States as late as the 1960s.⁴⁸

One of the greatest forced and longest migrations in world history had therefore the unintended consequence of instigating circus activity on Australian soil with the first circus personnel, not to mention delivering potential audiences required for the formation and development of a colonial circus industry. Along the way, Ashton, Jones and their like, released on deck each day for exercise, saw how seamen worked with a common will to harness the power of the prevailing winds with canvas and ropes. They would remember these scenes when they came to erect their tents of canvas and ropes in trying Australian conditions such as tropical monsoons, dust storms and gale force winds.

AMERICANS

In the 1830s, Australians began to look to the United States as a source of ideas, a tendency strengthened by the gold rushes of the 1850s.⁴⁹ Considerations of race, a common language and cultural similarities strengthened the relationship between these two communities on either side of the Pacific.⁵⁰ Given the distance separating these two frontier societies, shipping would prove vital to creating and sustaining this intercourse. Unwittingly, the colonial-born rope-walker John Quinn took the first symbolic steps on behalf of Australian circus in the direction of the United States, when he gave an exhibition by walking

along the forestay to the main topmast of an American whaling ship, the 377-ton *Junior*, lying at anchor in Hobart Town's harbour, cheered by those below.⁵¹

In the period before the Civil War, America was already prominent as a seafaring nation and her ships sailed every ocean and visited the great seaports of the world. Enterprising American showmen, ever on the lookout for fresh territories to visit and exploit, first ventured to foreign lands in this era. A circus tour abroad could prove novel, interesting and profitable.⁵² It was also a means by which the harsh, snowbound winters that confined the typical northern circus 'season' to the period between March and November, could be avoided. The American circus man embodied the pioneering spirit that opened up the West.⁵³

While the United States became embroiled in Civil War (1861-65), circus activity was subdued and interest in trans-Pacific intercourse waned.⁵⁴ Any ship of the United States ranging the oceans of the world was prey for a free-roaming Confederate raider. One such raider, the CSS *Shenandoah*, audaciously called into Melbourne in January 1865 *en route* to the Pacific to seek the American whaling fleet.⁵⁵ Feted during their brief stay, the *Shenandoah's* officers and men were treated to an evening at Melbourne's Theatre Royal, which included gymnastic and trapeze performances by 'The Wonderful St Leon Family'.⁵⁶ The *raison d'être* for the *Shenandoah's* surreptitious voyage was soon overturned by the defeat of the Confederacy.

Four decades later, it was the United States Navy's Great White Fleet which visited Australia. Anchoring at Albany, Western Australia's only deepwater port, St Leon's Circus was there to meet some 14,000 sailors that came ashore hungry for entertainment. So also was Mrs Tom FitzGerald's Circus, Lance Skuthorpe's Buckjumping Show and other tented entertainments,

We were in Albany when the American White Armada [sic] came out. They couldn't find any anchorage but Albany, good water there. We showed there and FitzGerald's came in—Mrs Tom FitzGerald ... She ran opposition to us in Albany. We used to get a fair crowd. All the Yankee sailors would pay well. Of course, in those days, amusement was cheap, two or three shillings for the price of a ticket. Both shows did a fair bit of business. 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 ...⁵⁷

The unification of America's eastern and western states by rail in 1869 was a fillip to trans-continental commerce including circus. In 1870, Australia and the United States came into closer communication with the inauguration of a regular service between Sydney and San Francisco by the Pacific Mail Steamship Company.⁵⁸ By 1872, most of America's large circuses, based in the east, had adopted rail as their preferred mode of transport making it relatively straightforward for these companies to reach California, the obvious springboard for a visit to Australia, the 'fabled land in the south seas'.⁵⁹ However, after 'the panic of 1873', the American economy entered a period of 'low ebb' that lasted until the early 1880s. Half the circus companies that set out in the northern spring of 1875 did not survive the season. In 1876, some American circus managers worried that people would save their money to travel to the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia rather than go the circus.⁶⁰

An American circus man, John Sullivan Noble, had landed in Adelaide in March 1851, with his troupe of six people and four horses, after a 54-day voyage from Cape Town by the 171-ton brig *Wanderer*.⁶¹ Unwittingly, Noble precipitated more than 60 years of sea borne circus traffic between Australia and other lands, chiefly the United States. This and other international circus traffic, summarised in Table I, saw not only the transfer of circus people, troupes and sometimes entire companies, but alternative cultural values. The most intense period of intercourse occurred during the period 1873-91 when hardly a year passed without Australia being visited by a major American circus or Wild West show.

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Table I
Circus companies visiting Australia, 1851-1912

Company	Origin	1st Tour	2 nd Tour	3rd Tour
Noble’s, J S, Olympic Circus	USA	1851-54		
Rowe’s, J A, North American Circus	USA	1852-54	1858-59	
Cooke, Zoyara & Wilson’s Great World Circus	USA	1866-67		
Chiarini’s Royal Italian Circus	USA	1873	1880	1884-85
Blondin’s Great Variety Circus	UK/Fra	1874-75	1875-76	
Wilson’s San Francisco Palace Circus	USA	1876	1877	1881-82
Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s Great International Shows	USA	1876-77	1877-78	
Cole’s, W. W., Concorporated Shows	USA	1880-81		
Fryer & Co.’s Equescurriculum	USA	1885-87		
Harmston’s Great American & Continental Cirque	UK/US A	1890	1897-98	
‘Happy Jack’ Sutton’s Wild West Show	USA	1890-91		
Carver’s, Dr W. F., Wild America	USA	1890-91		
Sells Bros’ Greatest Show on Earth	USA	1891-92		
Fillis’s Great Circus & Menagerie	Sth Afr	1892-94		
Bristol’s Great American Circus	USA	1897-98		
Texas Jack’s Wild West Show	USA	1898		
Jordan’s, The Flying, Circus Carnival	USA	1897-98	1899	
Bostock & Wombell’s Novelty Circus & Menagerie	UK	1905-06		
Bud Atkinson’s American Circus & Wild West	USA	1911	1912-13	

Although an entire article could be devoted to any of these tours and, in several cases, an entire book, I have chosen four of the American visitors for detailed comment from the perspectives of international shipping and logistics.

Joseph A. Rowe

Soon after Noble, a compatriot circus man, Joseph A, Rowe, arrived directly from America’s shores. With the discovery of gold in California in 1849, Rowe had only to ship his small circus from the proximate location of Lima, to reach the gold-stricken city of San Francisco where he opened his Olympic Circus. Mounting competition led Rowe to seek new vistas. Early in 1851, he chartered the *Leveret* to carry his troupe to China by way of Honolulu, a ‘novel route’ for the time.⁶²

The visit to Honolulu, where the company played for King Kamchamcha and large houses of ‘delighted natives’, was profitable enough for Rowe

to purchase the 200-ton brig, *General Worth*, only four-years old with 'excellent passenger accommodation'.⁶³ But, learning of the discovery of gold in Australia, Rowe altered course for Melbourne, sailing by way of the Society Islands and Auckland. Eastward of Norfolk Island by 160 kilometres, a strong gale damaged the sails and spars of the *General Worth* but the vessel was able to reach Auckland where repairs were made. Rowe also delivered New Zealand its first circus exhibitions.⁶⁴

Reaching Melbourne, Rowe was forced to await the outcome of his application for a theatrical license. Deprived of income in the city's gold-inflated economy and committed to building an 800-seat timber and canvas edifice within which to present his circus, Rowe put the *General Worth* up for sale, describing it as a 'fast-sailing American built brig' and 'well-adapted for the intercolonial trade'.⁶⁵ That Rowe may have accommodated his troupe and stock on the *General Worth* as it lay at anchor awaiting sail is not implausible, although no evidence comes to light. Eventually, after more than two successful years in Melbourne, Rowe returned to San Francisco in October 1854 reputedly in possession of £40,000 in cash and treasure.⁶⁶

Cooper, Bailey & Co. Great International Allied Shows

In 1876, 'the outstanding operator in circus history', James A. Bailey, the managing partner of the large circus of Cooper, Bailey & Co., realised that he could not only avoid debilitating economic and competitive factors at home but also benefit from Australian colonial prosperity generated in the wake of pastoral and agricultural expansion after the goldrush era.⁶⁷ Furthermore, an Australian tour could be scheduled for the winter months when an American circus typically closed up. When Cooper, Bailey & Co. reached San Francisco in September 1876, preparations began in earnest. Bailey paid US\$17,000 to charter the *City of Sydney* from the Pacific Mail Steamship Company and sent 42 rail cars of the circus, each 50 feet long, back to Philadelphia for storage.⁶⁸

Bailey lightened the company of excess properties and stock since the Australian colonies, with less than two million people, could not sustain audiences of the size known in the United States. The company ultimately shipped for Sydney included a trimmed-down menagerie, 20 horses and ponies, and about 60 men and women, including the proprietors, agents, performers, sideshow freaks, grooms, keepers and

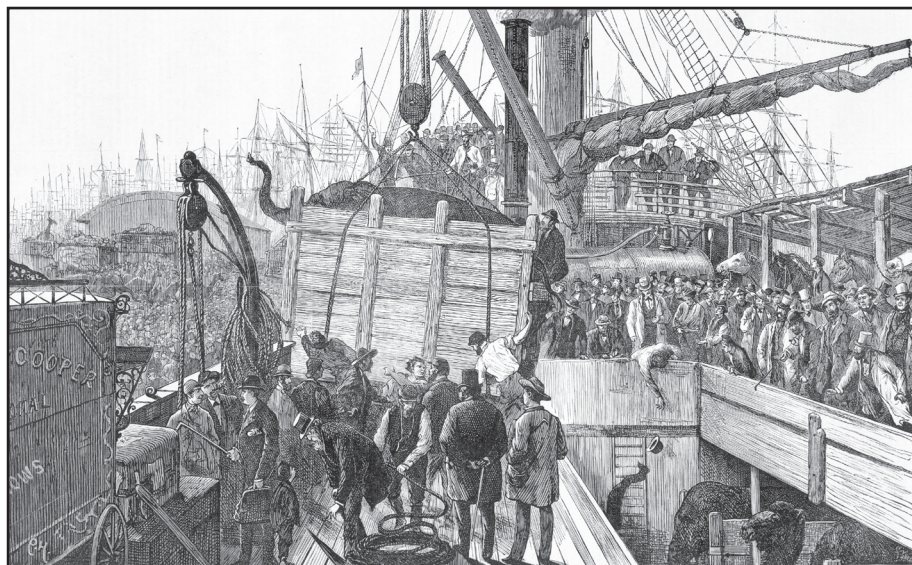
tent men. Each of the elephants and camels was methodically placed in its own transportable wooden box for the voyage. Other menagerie beasts were kept in iron-bar cages, which could be lifted off their horsedrawn carriages and stored in the vessel's hold. The carriages were dismantled and their frames, wheels, axles and poles duly numbered and stored for the trip.⁶⁹

The *City of Sydney* departed San Francisco late on the morning of 8 November 1876. A 'pleasant' 28-day voyage across the Pacific followed. During an overnight stop in Honolulu, the animals were exhibited on board the *City of Sydney* to the local people for 50 cents admission. Fellow passengers, Corbyn's Georgia Minstrels, provided plenty of entertainment during the voyage—singing, dancing and comedy. Birds 'of strange feather' followed the vessel, and 'glorious' equatorial sunsets and sunrises were admired.⁷⁰ The *City of Sydney* entered Port Jackson at daybreak on 6 December 1876 after a voyage of 6,730 miles. Advance agents had already extensively advertised the circus throughout the city. Since the *City of Sydney* ran on a regularised timetable, upwards of 15,000 people could confidently assemble along Sydney's wharves and foreshores to witness its arrival that morning.⁷¹

After its successful inaugural Sydney season, the circus shipped by the steamship *Macedon* on 13 January 1877 for Melbourne. In the Victorian capital, Cooper, Bailey & Co. took possession of the western side of the swampy flat between St Kilda Road and South Melbourne.⁷² This site, adjacent the Yarra River, facilitated the transfer of the menagerie and paraphernalia from the steamer to their temporary home without having to pass through the busy part of the city.⁷³

In 1877, there were only two feasible ways for a circus to travel between Melbourne and Adelaide: either overland through 600 miles of a dry, dusty country, or shipping by steamer between the two places, a voyage of two days and two nights along a monotonous, sandy coast line on a stormy, choppy sea. Cooper, Bailey & Co chose the latter and departed Melbourne on the morning of 7 March.⁷⁴ After playing Adelaide and its surrounding townships, another steamer, the *Claude Hamilton*, was chartered to take the circus across the Bass Strait to play Launceston. Three trains took the company across Tasmania to the capital, Hobart.⁷⁵

The *Claude Hamilton* collected the company after its Hobart season



Landing wild animals from the steamship *Macedon* for Cooper and Bailey's Circus. *Illustrated Australian News*, 21 February 1877, Courtesy of State Library of Victoria.

to bring it back to Sydney. The ship was caught in a gale off the Iron Pot Lighthouse. With only the circus and its animals for ballast, the ship began to roll and the animals were badly knocked about. The giraffe tried to steady herself by spreading her legs but ended up strangling herself. The animal's carcass was thrown overboard.⁷⁶

The circus opened in Sydney on Saturday, 12 April 1877, but a planned parade through the streets of Sydney had to be deferred for several days when it was found that the company's showpiece, a large band chariot, had not yet arrived from Melbourne.⁷⁷ After a tour of the provincial towns of New South Wales as far as incomplete rail lines were available, the circus shipped from Newcastle for Brisbane on 2 June. After Brisbane, the circus was conveyed by coastal steamers to play the main coastal ports of Queensland, such as Rockhampton and Townsville, as far north as Cooktown.⁷⁸

From Cooktown, another steamship, the *Atjah*, carried the circus to the East Indies, landing it at Surabaya, Batavia, Samarang and other ports in Java. In the meantime, James A. Bailey returned to New York in order to engage novelties for a planned second Australian tour. These fresh artists and attractions were entrained across the United States and

shipped from San Francisco by the *City of Sydney*.⁷⁹ During the voyage, the ship's engine failed and the vessel drifted for several hours in a rough Pacific sea until the engine could be repaired.⁸⁰

After a second inaugural Sydney season, opening on 26 November 1877, Cooper, Bailey & Co. followed almost the same itinerary as on their first tour, again using a nimble combination of colonial steamer and rail services. The contract price for coastal shipping was £2,000. The contract gave James A. Bailey the option to drop the Adelaide visit if he wanted, thus saving £1,300, and the further option of a 360-day lease should he wish to extend his Australian stay.⁸¹ Neither option was exercised. A season was given in Adelaide before shipping for Hobart, from where the company crossed the Tasman Sea to visit the principal New Zealand cities of Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland. At this point the second and last Australasian tour of Cooper, Bailey & Co. was concluded.

A 1,418-ton clipper ship, the *Golden Dawn*, was chartered for £1,500 to carry Cooper, Bailey & Co. on the first leg of its homebound voyage. Sailing from Auckland about 5 May 1878, a 'long and risky' jump of over 7,000 miles was made to Callao.⁸² The voyage took 59 days and the vessel was out of sight of land for all but five days.⁸³ The elephant Titania died shortly after departing Auckland and her carcass was thrown overboard. Puzzled fishermen later saw her swollen carcass floating outside Auckland Harbour.⁸⁴ Tales of the sea 'sarpint' began to circulate until tides carried the carcass back to shore, but New Zealanders then rashly concluded that the *Golden Dawn* must have been shipwrecked.⁸⁵ At a later point on the voyage to Callao, the rhinoceros broke out of its pen and attacked one of the remaining elephants, adding to the 'terrors' of the long, stormy voyage across the South Pacific.⁸⁶ By the time Cooper, Bailey & Co. landed back in New York in December 1878, a distance of 76,000 miles was travelled since departing San Francisco two years earlier, and most of that by sea.⁸⁷

W. W. Cole's Concorporated Shows

William Washington Cole, born in 1847, a grandson of the British showman T. T. Cooke, operated a large rail-based circus successfully throughout the United States in the late 1870s as W. W. Cole's 'Great New York and New Orleans Zoological and Equestrian Exposition'.

In 1876, the same year that Cooper, Bailey & Co. mounted its first Australian tour, Cole also began to make discreet enquiries about a tour of Australia. Evidently Cole was reacting to the same economic imperatives that earlier drove Cooper, Bailey & Co. out of the United States for nearly two years.

We are fortunate to have the letters that Cole wrote to his San Francisco representative, 'friend Davis', in the years leading up to the tour. The letters provide, *inter alia*, valuable insights into the mind of one of America's pre-eminent nineteenth century showmen and the logistical problems he methodically addressed to ship a large circus across the Pacific. The major letter from this collected correspondence is dated 13 August 1876 and deserves close study. Reproduced in part below, Cole's faulty spelling and grammar has been retained:

Well the more I think about learn of Australia the more favorable I am to going there. I could fix the animals on the steamer so that they would make the trip easily. I would take all the animals I could get into ten cages take 14 or 15 horses, 6 ponies, 1 elephant 4, 6 or more camels according to expense and a circus company of from 14 to 20 people 4 or 5 baskets of wardrobe 2 canvases in bales no poles. My season would be done here by November 1st at which time I would start from this side [eastern United States] for the Pacific Coast. The next thing to consider will be the cost of getting over the water ... well I wish you would go to the steamship co and get a written proposition from them that is an estimate of what they will charge for transportation for what I have mentioned. State if each passenger is allowed any & how much baggage if they land everything on the dock free of additional expenses. Ascertain what port they land at, what kind of weather they have in Australia after December, a number of cattle would have to be taken to be killed for the meat eating animals, also quantity of grain & hay in bales to feed the hay eaters and the horses & elephant. . . . I would like to keep it from [Montgomery] Queen (rival circus proprietor) that I had made any inquiries about going over as it might hurry him up and start him out there sooner than he intended ... There is nothing to induce a man to stop in United States and run a circus menagerie. Times are hard, no money anywhere ... ⁸⁸

However, over four years passed before—in October 1880—W. W. Cole's Concorporated Shows finally shipped from San Francisco. Cole shipped by the same vessel that Cooper Bailey & Co. had relied on, the *City of Sydney*. The ensuing tour lasted almost five months, commencing in Auckland on 29 November 1880 and finishing in Sydney on 15 April 1881. The *City of Sydney* carried the company back to San Francisco by way of Honolulu, where smallpox had recently broken out. In his

memoirs, Cole's lion tamer, George Conklin wrote:

It was early in the day when we sailed into the Golden Gate and everyone was more than anxious to get ashore, and all expected to [within] a few hours; but the anchor chain had hardly commenced to rattle through the hawse hole when a boat with a quarantine officer ran alongside and the doctor shouted to the captain, 'Did you stop at Honolulu?'⁸⁹

Although there was not a single case of sickness on the boat, the ship was ordered into quarantine for 30 days. Food would be sent out for the performers and the animals. Cole was even prevented from sending word to his three advance agents already at work billing San Francisco. But, when these three men learned of the quarantine, they did 'what agents are paid to do'. They made, as Conklin stated, a 'fix' and at midnight that evening the company was transferred ashore.⁹⁰

Sells Bros

The Sells Bros of Columbus, Ohio, operated a major railroad circus throughout the United States during the 1870s and 1880s. The brothers toured their circus, promoted as 'The Pride of America and Wonder of the World', through Australia's five eastern colonies between November 1891 and May 1892.⁹¹ It was not a completely incident-free tour. Upon the arrival of the SS *Monowai* in Sydney, the New South Wales government veterinary surgeon claimed to have discovered symptoms of disease in the circus stock and ordered all of the horses placed in quarantine. The company had to open on the city's Moore Park without horses.⁹²

Returning to the United States by the *Monowai*, Sells Bros made capital out of their Australian tour in their touring publicity. However, the colonial quarantine regulations may have dissuaded other American circuses from Australian tours. In any case, the Australian colonies soon entered into a period of economic depression, while American circus managers, consumed in the infamous 'territory wars' of the 1890s, lost their earlier enthusiasm for overseas touring lest they lose their competitive position at home. By the end of the nineteenth century furthermore, the population of the Australian colonies had reached some four million and, for a time, Australia could support two large circuses of international standing—FitzGerald Bros and Wirth Bros—eliminating the need to import large, complete circus companies from across the seas.

JUST RETURNED FROM AUSTRALIA

ROMAN HIPPODROME
3 RING CIRCUS
 TWO ELEVATED STAGES,
5 CONTINENT MENAGERIE
 IMPERIAL JAPANESE TROUPE

SELLS BROTHERS

COMBINED WITH
HASSAN BEN ALI'S
MOORISH CARAVAN
 ARABIAN NIGHTS' ENTERTAINMENT
 AND SPECTACULAR
PILGRIMAGE TO MECCA

20 YEARS BEFORE THE PUBLIC

THE SUPREME TEST OF MERIT IS SUCCESS



DEPARTURE OF SELLS BROTHERS' ENORMOUS UNITED SHOWS FOR AUSTRALIA
 OCTOBER 17 1891 ON STEAM-SHIP MONOWAI, THE LARGEST OF THE UNION S.S. CO'S MAGNIFICENT FLEET.
 THE MOST REMARKABLE AND SUCCESSFUL TOUR ON RECORD.—TRAVELING OVER TWENTY THOUSAND MILES BY SEA AND
 FIFTEEN THOUSAND MILES BY LAND EXHIBITING IN OVER ONE HUNDRED OF THE LEADING CITIES AND TOWNS IN AUSTRALIA.

The Union Steamship Company's steamer *Monowai* carried Sells Bros circus from San Francisco to Sydney in 1891. Courtesy of the Circus World Museum Inc, Baraboo, Wisconsin, USA

Japanese

In 1866, the Japanese Government revoked the edict under which for two centuries Japanese subjects were prohibited, on pain of death, from leaving the country. This revocation gave effect to the Convention of Edo, signed by Japan under pressure from the Treaty Powers. Article 10 provided that 'all Japanese subjects may travel to any foreign country for purposes of study or trade' and that 'Japanese in the employ of foreigners may obtain Government passports to go abroad on application to the Governor of any open port'. Contrary to expectation, the first to avail themselves of the opportunity to travel abroad were not merchants or their employees, but jugglers, acrobats and other performers recruited by foreign entrepreneurs in the Treaty Ports.⁹³

By the end of 1867, two troupes of Japanese performers—the five members of Buhicrosan's and the 12 members of Lenton & Smith's—had arrived in Australia on successive sailings of the P & O mail steamers from Ceylon. Buhicrosan's troupe joined the R.M.S. *Geelong* at Point de Galle on 23 October and disembarked at Melbourne on 14 November.⁹⁴ In the interval between their departure from Japan late in March and their arrival in Melbourne on 16 December, Lenton & Smith's troupe performed in Hong Kong, the Philippines, Java, Singapore, Penang and Calcutta.⁹⁵ Many of these Japanese performers remained in Australia leading to several decades of Japanese involvement in Australian circus.

Australian Argonauts

Between 1851 and 1861 the population of Australia's colonies nearly trebled, from 405,356 to 1,145,585, although this was still less than four percent of the population of the United States.⁹⁶ The prospects offered by six small and widely-separated domestic colonial markets were not made any better by the paucity of connecting roads and bridges—vital to effective touring operations. On the other hand, the expansion of intercontinental shipping services during and after the gold rush period encouraged circus managers to seek audiences beyond the Australian mainland. Circus troupes of Australian origin visited New Zealand as early as 1855.⁹⁷

The earlier failure of his Melbourne version of Astley's Amphitheatre did not restrain G.B.W. Lewis from further entrepreneurial ventures.

He toured China and India with his Australian Hippodrome during 1861-62.⁹⁸ From India, Lewis's clown, Reuben Cousins, and his wife, returned to Australia by the Sydney-bound 891-ton *Vernon*. A daughter, Vernon Ida Cousins, born *en route*, inherited the name of her birth ship, as was custom and, in her teens, she graced Australian circus bills as an equestrienne with the contrived name of 'Ida Vernon'. The *Vernon* arrived in Sydney on 5 February 1863 after a total passage time from London of 93 days.⁹⁹ In 1865, Reuben Cousins formed his own circus—Cousins' Oriental Circus—and departed Melbourne for a tour of South East Asia and India. The tour prematurely terminated when Cousins died of cholera at Batavia.¹⁰⁰ The *Vernon* was permanently anchored in Sydney Harbour in 1867 as a boys' reformatory.¹⁰¹

Other circuses of Australian origin ventured across the seas. Henry Burton took his Great Australian Circus through New Zealand in 1878, as did Gus and Alfred St Leon in 1885.¹⁰² Woodyear's Circus visited Fiji, Tahiti and Honolulu in 1885, from where it was planned to ship for Manila.¹⁰³ Wirth's Circus visited New Caledonia in 1888, New Zealand in 1890 and, as will be discussed separately below, departed for South Africa in 1893.¹⁰⁴ By the early 1900s, New Zealand was firmly integrated into the wider touring routes of the major Australian circus companies, FitzGerald Bros and Wirth Bros, New Zealand promised 'a feast of money' for any other circus that could afford the fares.¹⁰⁵ However, the cost of transit across the Tasman was by no means cheap; a 'jump' from Auckland to Townsville in 1901 cost FitzGerald Bros over £3,000.¹⁰⁶

Circus odyssey

In 1893, the aftermath of the 'land boom' left the eastern Australian colonies mired in depression. In the words of one of the Wirth circus brothers, 'things were bad'. The Wirths decided to take their circus to South Africa.¹⁰⁷ The company departed Port Adelaide in November by the steamer *Damascus*, the Wirths having to pay additional money for the vessel 'to come out of her course to pick us up'.¹⁰⁸ Apart from the first two days crossing the Great Australian Bight, the Indian Ocean was like a 'mill pond' all the way:

About eleven o'clock each morning we all practised our different acts so as to keep fit. Captain Douglas, of the *Damascus* let us form a ring down in one of the holds, and there, too, we had a regular gymnasium. But, of course, there

could be no horse-riding we had over 40 horses with us and as the horses had to have exercise as well as we, we gave it them in the early morning, walking them up and down the lower deck while the sailors hosed their legs with seawater. We had had their shoes removed before they were brought on board the horses, I mean, not the sailors so they were not so likely to slip. It is absolutely essential that the Circus man keep in training and in good physical condition from day to day. If this is not done he or she will soon be out of work and will have to begin all over again ... So the trapeze people rigged their apparatus, and the horizontal bar artists his three bars, while the acrobats ... had their carpet down, and we horseless riders had to join in everything, even to ballet dancing, to keep us fit and our muscles in good working order. In the evenings we used to have the band up on deck, and play classical and dance music.¹⁰⁹

The *Damascus* reached Cape Town on 30 November. The horses smelt land and whinnied a day before it was sighted.

The voyage proved the beginning of a seven-year odyssey that touched on four continents. As well as extensively touring the provinces of South Africa, the Wirths visited Mauritius and Madagascar. From the various possibilities of England, India, Australia and South America the Wirths reached agreement with their artists that the latter was the next preferred destination with the ultimate objective of reaching Mexico. As there were no regular boats plying between South Africa and South America, the SS *Umona* was chartered at a cost of £2,000 to take the company to Monte Video. Some of the circus artists did not appear by the scheduled departure time. With demurrage set at £100 per day, the Wirths balked:

When it got too late ... [we] hired a steam tender, at a cost of £50, to let the steamer go out over the sand bar. Otherwise we would have to wait for the tide to take us over the sand bar.¹¹⁰

The *Umona* departed Durban on 11 August 1895.¹¹¹ The steamer carried no other cargo but had sand in the hold for ballast. Apart from a 'hurricane storm' one night, the voyage was 'beautifully calm'. The riders could ride the horses around a makeshift ring in the sand and other performers could practise their routines in the hold to keep fit during the voyage. The *Umona* reached Monte Video on 1 September 1895 after a 21-day voyage.¹¹² An eventful 15 months was spent visiting cities and towns of the Argentine, Brazil and other countries.¹¹³

The South American visit culminated in a final stand on the waterfront at Pernambuco, near Rio De Janeiro, in November 1896. On the last night, the circus was heavily patronised by the resident English population.

Just before interval, word reached the circus management that a mob of Brazilians, furious that England had annexed a small island off the coast of Brazil, was heading for the circus, intending to kill all the English in the audience. Forewarned, the English patrons quietly departed by the circus back door at interval to board their yachts, boats and launches moored on the waterfront outside. As for the Wirths and their company, they narrowly escaped harm when the mob was informed that the circus people were not English but a 'compagnia Australiano'. That night the circus was taken aboard the *Liguria* to ship for Birkenhead. The Wirths recognised the *Liguria* as the mail boat that once plied between England and Australia.¹¹⁴

The Wirths spent almost two-and-a-half years in England, the first Australian circus to visit the country where Philip Astley, more than a century earlier, had organised the first circus of the modern era.¹¹⁵ The Wirths eventually shipped for Durban on 16 April 1899 by the *Braemar Castle*. However, touring inland, it was obvious that war preparations were underway.¹¹⁶ Returning to Cape Town, the company sailed by the *Dunolly Castle* for Delagoa Bay, Mozambique, (now Maputo Bay) and Colombo (Ceylon) later in 1899. From Colombo early in 1900, the circus shipped for Madras and Rangoon. The circus opened at Singapore on 24 March and at Batavia on 9 April. The Wirths intended to 'enter' Australia through North Queensland but these plans were changed when it was found that the rival FitzGerald Bros had made a 'jump' directly from Auckland to 'right up north'.¹¹⁷ In any case, the steamers plying between Singapore and Western Australia were easier to catch. The company shipped from Java to Singapore by the *Mossell* and there transferred to the *Karrakatta*:

Out first port-of-call was Broome ... We spent the night there and went ashore to the hotel and gave a sort of musical evening for the people there ... When we went down to the boat the following morning, the tide had gone out. The boat was laying on its side. We could hardly walk on the decks. We had to wait for the tide and sailed away early that morning. When we had first gone ashore, we had to go in rowboats. When we returned we walked on the bottom of the ocean to the steamer.¹¹⁸

The circus arrived in Fremantle on 8 August 1900, almost seven years after departing Adelaide.¹¹⁹ Apart from its almost bi-annual tours of New Zealand and a single visit to Java in 1935, Wirth's Circus did not tour overseas again. To Philip Wirth, there was no country on earth to

equal Australia for circus touring.¹²⁰ Restoring its name and reputation before the Australian public after its extended absence, Wirth's remained Australia's pre-eminent circus until its final closure in 1963.

Wirth's Circus relied critically on imported artists for its annual Australian programs. In early 1918, Wirth's opened offices in New York for the booking of circus attractions and offered artists a round-the-world tour embracing Australia, India and South Africa.¹²¹ In the aftermath of the First World War, *Variety* reported the difficulty of securing passages for artists bound for Australia as the available 'outgoing' boats were few.¹²²

Conclusion

Despite the fixed-location nature of the early circus enterprises, circus proprietors in England, America and eventually Australia, found that mobility was vital if revenues were to be sustained. For those entrepreneurs and artists who pursued ambitions beyond their native lands, the international market for circus was potentially unlimited and transcended both political and natural boundaries. Shipping was critically important for the proliferation of circus throughout the world, but particularly for Australia, given its remote location.

Penal transportation, immigration, natural population growth and economic prosperity all contributed to the development of a domestic Australian circus industry, while improved shipping access made Australia increasingly feasible as a touring destination for circus companies from overseas, chiefly from the United States. By the end of the nineteenth century, international shipping services had delivered to Australia some large circus companies and numerous circus troupes and individual performers, and had delivered circuses, circus troupes and circus performers of Australian origin to every inhabited continent.

There is an implicit assumption in national histories that their primary task is to discover what makes a nation, a people, distinctive, rather than to reveal what is shared and often casually interconnected with histories and societies elsewhere.¹²³ As discussed in this paper, the destiny of circus in Australia not only reflected but was strongly determined by seemingly unconnected circumstances and events across the seas. Today, contemporary Australian culture is regarded as a derivative culture, the result of neither wholly organic growth nor wholly imposed

hegemony but the results of a continuing series of cultural imports and internal transcultural exchanges constantly re-worked in response to local, national and global imperatives.¹²⁴ Since the 1840s, circus has been a part of the mosaic of emerging Australian culture, its growth and development fostered, whether deliberately or serendipitously, along the way by the development and expansion of inter-continental shipping.

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