
CHAPTER I

Image & legitimacy

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

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

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

¹ *Wagga Wagga Advertiser*, 13 Feb 1878.

² J and A Durant, *Pictorial history of the American circus*, New York: A S Barnes and Co, 1967, p.15.

³ R Manning-Sanders, *The English circus*, London: Werner Laurie, 1952, p.20.

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

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

¹ Speaight, p.34.

² Golby and Purdue, p.69.

³ A H Saxon, *The life and art of Andrew Ducrow and the romantic age of English circus*, Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1978, p.19.

⁴ Golby and Purdue, p.69.

⁵ Saxon, p.19.

⁶ K Chesney, *The Victorian underworld*, Melbourne: Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 1978, p.74; Cunningham, pp.32, 34; Y S Carmeli, 'The invention of circus and bourgeois hegemony: A glance at British circus books', in *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol 29 Iss 1, 1995, pp. 213ff.

⁷ Cunningham, p.32.

⁸ Cunningham, pp.32, 34.

⁹ Cunningham, p.32.

several levels, the reputation of lower levels detracting from the standing of those above. The grand concerns of Cooke and Batty 'moved sedately' from one centre of population to another throughout the summer, exhibiting in permanent or semi-permanent buildings in each place visited. At the next level, were numerous tenting shows, large and small.¹⁰ At the lowest level were the cheap circuses and penny equestrian shows such as those located on the outskirts of London.¹¹

All of these shows were continuously harassed by 'dregs of the local population' and 'professional fairground ruffians'. In a countryside inadequately policed, show folk had to stand up for themselves whether 'great or small, solid or shifty'.¹² Despite great differences in standing and reputation among England's travelling show people and although a gaffer's [showman's] name could be worth a considerable sum, they were an underclass.¹³ These were people 'of no place and no order of life'¹⁴ and of a lowly status in the English class hierarchy.¹⁵ Circuses in England were conducted not by people with money and respectability, but opportunists with neither and therefore nothing to lose.¹⁶ Circus presented the opportunity for wealth and fame to performers who, almost without exception, came from underprivileged backgrounds.¹⁷

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

¹⁰ Manning-Sanders, p.89.

¹¹ P Quennell, (ed.), *Mayhew's London*, London: Bracken Books, 1951, p.501.

¹² Chesney, p.76.

¹³ Chesney, p.74.

¹⁴ Carmeli, pp. 213ff.

¹⁵ Saxon, p.34.

¹⁶ Stoddart, p.49.

¹⁷ Stoddart, p.50.

Australian colonies as early as 1833 when ropewalkers appeared on the stage of Sydney's Theatre Royal.¹⁸ In the following years were seen occasional gymnasts, acrobats and equestrians, while in 1841 the arrival of a circus-style troupe, headed by the presumably Italian Signor Luigi Dalle Case, led to the opening of Australia's first amphitheatre, albeit shortlived, the Australian Olympic Theatre.¹⁹ When Dalle Case was bankrupted, the ropewalker George Croft took over the management of his troupe for a tour of the 'provinces' beginning at Windsor, N S W, arguably the first example of toured colonial circus activity.²⁰ Circus was unequivocally established when, on the evening of 29 December 1847, an English-born publican, horsetrainer and jockey, Robert Avis Radford (1814 - 65), opened his Royal Circus in Launceston and gave the first comprehensive demonstration of the circus arts on Australian soil.²¹ Other amphitheatres of suitably colonial proportions were erected in Port Phillip [now Melbourne] by the publican Thomas Henry Hayes (1849), in Sydney by the publican John Malcom (1850) and in Adelaide by an entrepreneur E H Taylor (1850). The Australian circus assumed an itinerant character with the visits of the first companies to the goldfields in 1851. With the demise of the amphitheatres by 1856, the leadership of Australia's circus activity passed from the early commercial opportunists to a community of professional circus men prepared to adapt to the demands of a perpetually itinerant existence. Two equestrians who performed in Radford's arena in 1848 - Golding Ashton²² and John Jones (later known by the professional *nom d'arena* of Matthew St Leon) - went on to establish family dynasties in a tenting circus tradition. As a result, most of the

¹⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 Dec 1833.

¹⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 Jan 1842.

²⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 Jun 1842.

²¹ *Cornwall Chronicle*, 29 Dec 1847.

²² By 1854, Ashton had assumed the name 'James Henry' Ashton, presumably to obscure his convict origins.

travelling circuses of Australia may trace their origins, more or less directly, to Radford's pioneering enterprise.

Australian circus was not created in one moment but by transformation over time while remaining within the broad spectrum of its English origins. But nor was Australian society created in a single moment, since immigration and evolution over time gave it a life of its own while remaining within the orbit of its English origins and susceptible to its influence.²³

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

In addressing these questions, it is recognised that the topic of class, in its Australian context at least, is an immensely complex and much debated topic. In contrast to established notions of class embedded in English society, the notion of class in Australia is less clearly defined. In any case, the phenomenon of class in Australia represents a far more fluid and dynamic proposition than in England. The sense of being permanently bound to one's class as defined by birth and education, as in England, has had little or no relevance in Australia.²⁴ It is also recognised that any formulation of answers to these questions is necessarily based on the contemporary observations available, chiefly journalism and, from the early 1900s, eyewitness accounts and therefore reflects whatever biases they may contain.

²³ Rickards, p.40.

²⁴ H Love, (ed.), *The Australian stage: A documentary history*, 1984, p.138.

Old World perceptions of class

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

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

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

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

²⁵ J Hood, *Australia and the East: Being a journal narrative of a voyage to New South Wales in an emigrant ship with a residence of some months in Sydney and the bush and the route home by way of India and Egypt in years 1841 and 1842*, London: John Murray, 1843, pp.98-9.

arrangements separated 'the more exceptionable portion' from the 'abrupt style and manner'²⁶ of the audience in the pit. Opening in Launceston towards the end of 1847, Robert Radford's Royal Circus was an immediate 'hit' but more so for its lower than its upper orders. An observer was on hand to record the opening for the *Cornwall Chronicle*:

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

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

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

²⁶ *Hobart Town Advertiser*, 8 Sep 1848; *Hobart Town Courier*, 8 Nov 1848.

²⁷ *Cornwall Chronicle*, 29 Dec 1847.

²⁸ Author's Collection: F Braid, letter to author dated Ballina, NSW, 21 Jul 1987.

lapses in taste. In Sydney in 1842, a critic warned Dalle Case not to offend 'respectable women' with indelicate acrobatic performances.²⁹ At Moreton Bay, N S W, (now Brisbane, Queensland) in 1847, patronage of George Croft's 'amphitheatre' waned when 'improper songs' were sung and Aborigines admitted.³⁰ In Sydney in 1850, a young female apprentice's inclination to run after the clown, in the ring of the Royal Australian Equestrian Circus, was admonished as 'a line of conduct [not] at all becoming a respectable filly'.³¹

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

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

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

²⁹ *Sydney Herald*, 7 Feb 1842.

³⁰ *Moreton Bay Courier*, 29 May 1847.

³¹ *Peoples Advocate*, 7 Dec 1850.

³² R Waterhouse, *Private pleasures, public leisure: A history of Australian popular culture since 1788*, Sydney: Longman Australia Pty Ltd, 1995, p.44.

³³ R Waterhouse, 'Audiences', in Parsons, p.65.

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

Antipodean context

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

³⁴ R Ward, *Australia since the coming of man*, Sydney: Landsdowne Press, 1982, p.113.

³⁵ M Salomon, 'An old time circus', *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 3 Aug 1904, p. 34.

³⁶ *New York Clipper*, 31 May 1873.

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

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

³⁷ L L Robson, *A history of Tasmania. Volume 1: Van Dieman's Land from the earliest times to 1855*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1983, p.177.

³⁸ Meredith, n.d, cited in Love, *The Australian stage: A documentary history*, 1984, pp.45-6; R Waterhouse, *From minstrel to vaudeville: The Australian popular stage, 1788-1914*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1990, p.26.

³⁹ Archives Office of Tasmania, *Correspondence between Colonial Secretary's Office and Robert Avis Radford*, CSO 24/4/58.

⁴⁰ *Cornwall Chronicle*, 3 Jan 1846.

⁴¹ *Cornwall Chronicle*, 3 Nov 1849.

⁴² R M Hartwell, *The economic development of Van Diemen's Land, 1820-1850*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1954, p.19.

'mountebank' he might have been labelled had he travelled the English provinces.

Observers occasionally compared and contrasted Radford's and other early colonial circus enterprises with Astley's and the provincial circuses of Britain, thereby legitimising these colonial efforts but possibly contributing to the later phenomenon of the 'cultural cringe'.⁴³ Tasmanian critics acclaimed Radford the 'antipodean Batty',⁴⁴ a reference to a famous English circus proprietor of the day. One of Radford's equestrians, a Mr Mills, 'would not have disgraced' Astley's, the premiere London circus.⁴⁵ Radford's new Hobart Town amphitheatre, purpose-built in 1848, was 'as good a building as any' erected by showmen in English provincial towns.⁴⁶

Henry Burton's arrival on the Turon goldfields in 1851 signalled not only the beginning of the rise of the fully peripatetic circus but the beginning of the end of the fixed location circus amphitheatres of the cities. In the cities, homogenous audiences had already begun to separate into 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' as permanent venues, now offering theatre and opera, began to cater for 'respectable and orderly audiences'. In Sydney in 1856, Malcoms Amphitheatre was remodelled and reopened as Our Lyceum, with an inaugural season of Shakespeare.⁴⁷ In Melbourne in 1857, Lewis's so-named Astleys Amphitheatre, opened only three years earlier, was transformed into the Princess's Theatre and Opera House.⁴⁸ To patronise these

⁴³ J Hughes, (ed.), *Australian words and their origins*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1989, p.150.

⁴⁴ *Cornwall Chronicle*, 18 Jul 1849.

⁴⁵ *Cornwall Chronicle*, 18 Jul 1849.

⁴⁶ *Hobart Town Courier*, 26 Aug 1848.

⁴⁷ Parsons, p.566.

⁴⁸ Parsons, p.465.

new venues was to engage in an act of self-definition, as Harold Love has written:

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

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

⁴⁹ H Love, *The golden age of Australian opera: W S Lyster and his companies 1861-1880*, Sydney: Currency Press, 1981, p.138.

⁵⁰ *Onlooker* (pseud.), 'Spangles and sawdust: A chronicle of colonial circus life', in *The Theatre*, issues of 2 Dec 1907, & Jan-Aug, Oct & Dec 1908, reproduced in M St Leon, *Australian circus sources*, Sydney: The Author, 1985, p.80.

⁵¹ *South Australian Register*, 5 Mar 1883.

Madame Carandini and her operatic troupe could only perform to very small houses - 'their highly musical audience' notwithstanding.⁵²

Many travelling circuses confined, or significantly restricted, their activities to rural areas, coming no closer to the larger cities than the outlying suburbs. They remained an instrument of social levelling since a typical performance in a country town accommodated people of all social classes, of any age, of either sex, and of any race. As he toured Queensland in 1873, a 'large measure of success' followed Ashton's efforts to 'provide innocent amusement of all classes'.⁵³ At Ulmarra, N S W, St Leon admitted some Aborigines without charge, 'thus performing a kindly action in an unostentatious manner'.⁵⁴ In the 1860s and 1870s, Burtons National Circus was a familiar visitor to the coastal township of Port Fairy [formerly Belfast], Victoria, Burton's visits vividly recalled when he died in 1900:

All the district, of high and low degree, would be there; the sailors from Rutledge's wharf - and they were sailormen then, deep sea sailor men, their faces browned with coffee and old Jamaica - stood beside the smartly dressed and intensely horsey-looking stockriders from Tarrone and Dunmore. Merchants, bankers, squatters, and lawyers - all must go to Burton's.⁵⁵ [*Burtons National Circus, Port Fairy, c.1865*].

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

⁵² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 Oct 1878.

⁵³ *Australian Town & Country Journal*, 3 May 1873.

⁵⁴ *Clarence & Richmond Examiner*, 18 May 1886.

⁵⁵ *Port Fairy Gazette*, 24 Apr 1900.

enjoyed during the era of the amphitheatres and on the goldfields was now reappraised. In the developing country towns, 'hawkers' and aspects of popular culture such as 'travelling Jews with trinkets, organ-grinders, German bands, Ethiopian serenaders, circuses, electro-biologists, and people of that class' were 'now felt to be great nuisances'.⁵⁶

It seems reasonable to presume that the emergence of these 'Old World' attitudes accompanied the arrival of more erudite immigrants not the least of whom were 'a class of journalist-editors who had been highly educated in Britain'.⁵⁷ As in the United States, colonial newspaper editors were among the intellectuals of their communities and, directly or indirectly, contributed to the formation of public opinion. All of Australia's circus people, whatever their standing, were tarnished by unflattering scenes now occasionally reported in the provincial press: the 'somewhat celebrated' black British ropewalker Billy Banham arrested at Tamworth, N S W, in 1860 on a charge of stealing some wearing apparel;⁵⁸ the circus proprietor John Jones who absconded from Wagga Wagga, N S W, in 1861 without paying £13 of bills for printing, horse feed, board and lodging;⁵⁹ two Indian jugglers, Abdallah and Mohamed Cassim, from Burtons Circus, tried and hanged for the murder of an Indian hawker near Queanbeyan, N S W, in 1862;⁶⁰ and the Ronconi Troupe, 'a mean lot' which absconded from Waratah, N S W, in 1868 without paying even 'the boy who rang the bell and posted the bills'.⁶¹ At Inverell, N S W, in 1928, one of the proprietors of St Leons Circus

⁵⁶ Rev J Morrison, *Australia as it is*, 1867, quoted by Cannon, 1973, p.247.

⁵⁷ Cannon, 1973, p.253.

⁵⁸ *Tamworth Examiner*, 15 Sep 1860.

⁵⁹ *Yass Courier*, 16 Jan 1861.

⁶⁰ *Queanbeyan Age*, 2 Apr 1862.

⁶¹ *Newcastle Chronicle*, 25 Apr 1868.

was fined £25, with costs, for reselling pre-numbered admission tickets to evade tax.⁶²

As early as 1861, the editor of the *Wagga Wagga Express* warned his 'brethren of the press' against the practice of 'levanting' by 'travelling companies', recommending that they obtain payment before doing business with 'such gentry'.⁶³ By 1883, the *Murrumburrah Signal* charged all theatrical advertisements at double rates and insisted on payment in advance.⁶⁴ There were references by the 1870s to the immorality 'too often found in circuses,'⁶⁵ 'vulgarity' and the 'coarse jests which, while they raise a laugh among the mob, cause a flush to rise to the cheek of the refined and respectable'.⁶⁶ Evidently, these observations took some root in rural communities as they were gradually subsumed into the emerging order of the New World. Although a 'high collar' did not matter in rural Australia, conservative attitudes prevailed well into the 20th century and decorum was important. Recalling his boyhood days in the Gus St Leon circus, Mervyn King said in 1974:

You were catering for a different type of audience in those days. You had to be very careful. You couldn't go and pull a whole lot of smutty jokes and get away with it like you do now. I don't think you ever heard the word 'sex' mentioned in those days. Clean and tidy and no two-sided gags with a double meaning.⁶⁷ [*St Leons Great United Circus, c.1916*].

⁶² *Everyone's*, 18 Apr 1928.

⁶³ *Yass Courier*, 16 Jan 1861.

⁶⁴ *Murrumburrah Signal*, 19 Apr 1884.

⁶⁵ *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 24 Feb 1882.

⁶⁶ *Launceston Examiner*, 2 Feb 1884.

⁶⁷ M King, in *St Leon*, 1984, p.276.

Stereotypical views of circus people as a class of a lower order were reinforced by the freedom with which many availed themselves of whatever society had to offer.⁶⁸ On the road, the surreptitious way in which provisions were sometimes obtained only confirmed popular condescending perceptions. A journalist travelling with Probascos Circus through New Zealand in 1896 was awake to the origins of some items on the breakfast menu:

At daybreak we called a halt and had breakfast. Fowls, eggs, &c., figured on the fictitious menu and how they were got from the neighbouring farms had better not be inquired into.⁶⁹ [*Probascos Circus, New Zealand, 1896*].

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

[H]ouses are good, but at the same time there is the feeling that a troupe of gypsies has camped on the common, that they will be dirty and dishonest and perhaps the washing had better be brought in. Obstructive regulations, too, make organisation difficult.⁷⁰ [*Ashtons Circus, c.1970*].

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

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

⁶⁸ Broome with Jackomos, p.29.

⁶⁹ *Onlooker*, in St Leon, 1985, p.89.

⁷⁰ Fernandez, p.27.

unready for a circus with no animals, scruffy old trucks and a line-up that included women with crew cuts and men in frocks.⁷¹ [*Circus Oz*, 1982].



Figure 3

Alberto's Circus & Zoo, between Campbelltown and Swansea, Tasmania, 1973. *Author's Collection*.

Public standing

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

⁷¹ S Broadway, 'Circus Oz - the first seven years', in *Australasian Drama Studies*, No.35, Oct 1999, p.178.

⁷² R Broome with A Jackomos, *Sideshow alley*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1998, p.43.

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

We made a fine show of it, and the local clergyman, I remember as, well as the townsfolk, were surprised that circus people, who are looked down upon in England, could be so respectable! They were quite surprised to know that we always carried a schoolmaster to educate our children, and that our womenfolk, at least, went to church on Sunday.⁷³ [*Wirth's Australian Circus, England, 1897*].

To some extent, Wirth's observation implied that circus people were *not* looked down upon in Australia in 1897 as they were in England. Superficially at least, the evidence would suggest otherwise. Only ten years earlier, in 1887, petitioned by 'the nobs', Sydney's mayor compelled Wirths Circus to open in the suburb of Newtown rather than the customary central circus site, Belmore Park.⁷⁴ By the 1930s, even a large circus, such as Wirth Brothers, had to take what ground was available when coming to Sydney as public parks were 'taboo'.⁷⁵ Yet, these attitudes were probably more the expression of the civic self-interest of an urbanised middle-class than any conscious attempt to resurrect or extend established English notions of class.

⁷³ G Wirth, 'Under the big top: The life story of George Wirth, circus proprietor, told by himself', in *Life*, 15 Jul 1933, p.25.

⁷⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 Dec 1887.

⁷⁵ G Wirth, 15 May 1933, p.406.

Beyond lapses in taste and decorum, the circus posed little threat to the prevailing social order, and even contributed to its maintenance by providing, like the festivals and carnivals of yore, a *de facto* form of social control.⁷⁶ The early entrepreneurs strove to convince the colonial 'upper orders' and the people in general that their entertainments were not only harmless but contributed to social cohesion. Thus do we read how, in Melbourne in 1852, despite opposition to the opening of the visiting American circus of Joseph A Rowe, these entertainments could actually 'diminish crime and facilitate the operations of the police' by drawing people 'away from public houses and dissipation'.⁷⁷ Conscious of the strict conditions under which Melbourne's Bench of City Magistrates had granted his license, Rowe was quick to publicly chastise the editors of *The Argus* for announcing several months later, without his authorisation, that some diggers planned to use his circus for a meeting.⁷⁸ Several months later, the arrival of Burtons Circus on the Ovens successfully diverted the attention of the miners 'at a critical moment when licence hunting was in full swing'⁷⁹ and forestalled a riot that threatened to take place. When Rowe returned to California in 1854 to invest the returns from his two-year long Melbourne sojourn,⁸⁰ he left his wife in charge of the circus. During her husband's absence, Eliza Rowe assumed responsibility for composing an address to Sir Charles Hotham, on his arrival and appointment as Lieutenant-Governor of Victoria, in appropriately obsequious terms.

⁷⁶ P Burke, p.201.

⁷⁷ E D and A Potts, *Young America and Australian gold: America and the gold rush of the 1850s*, Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1974, p.149.

⁷⁸ *Argus*, 20 Nov 1852.

⁷⁹ Salomon.

⁸⁰ *Argus*, 15 Jul 1854.

Image & legitimacy

'Tis true Sir that we are not subjects to the Crown of Great Britain; yet a sojourn of from two to three years in this city has I hope shown that we respect (as I trust your Excellency will always find we shall do) venerate and cheerfully obey the laws and institutions of the land we live in and are practical lovers of law and order and of those who rule over us.⁸¹ [*Rowes North American Circus, Melbourne, 1854*].

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

[The failure] of our own Australian Circus in England, in 1896, was due to our relying on the merits of our show to attract the British public, with insufficient advertising ... We did not parade the streets with glittering waggons and gaudy floats, and gaily be-ribboned horses, clowns, etc., whereas the circuses in England, were classed by the size of their display parade, and not by the performance which the public had to pay to see.⁸² [*Wirths Australian Circus, England, 1896*].

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

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

⁸² G Wirth, 15 Apr, 15 May 1933, pp.375, 406.

Americans have a boundless admiration of everything big ... Circus proprietors bring their establishments before the public, not by vaunting the talent of the company, or the beauty and sagacity of the horses, but by announcing the thousands of square feet which the circus covers, the thousands of dollars to which their daily or weekly expenses amount, and the number of miles to which their parades extend. 'This is a big concern', say those who read the announcement, and their patronage is proportionate to its extent and cost.⁸³

Over a period of a little more than two years, from December 1847 until January 1850, Robert Radford skilfully blended high culture and popular culture into one, a remarkable *savoir faire* of contemporary British circus, popular theatre and music hall. However, the content of his programme was determined not so much by public taste but by the expertise of the artists available at the time. When equestrians, acrobats and tightrope walkers were in supply - as was the case during most of 1848 - the programs bore their mark. When legitimate actors became more available from late 1848 and throughout 1849, Radford's enterprise assumed more of the character of a popular playhouse, while still retaining essential elements of the circus. In forming his circus company at Wagga Wagga, N S W, in 1855, William 'Tinker' Brown advertised in the Sydney press for 'ladies and gentlemen in the equestrian and dramatic profession' promising 'instant engagement' on application.⁸⁴ The strategies employed by both Radford and Brown supports the contention that the character of circus entertainments were defined less by what the people demanded and more by what

⁸³ T Frost, *Circus life and circus celebrities*, London: Tinsley Brothers, 1876, pp.223-24.

⁸⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 Aug 1855.

entrepreneurs supplied.⁸⁵ But did this necessarily legitimise circus entertainments as a social institution in the eyes of the public?

Australia's circus proprietors had to defend their reputations from the hostile attitudes of 'the most fastidious',⁸⁶ an emerging middle class, a class which stressed morals, manners and right behaviour, and which was quick to label itinerant show people as disreputable when necessary.⁸⁷ Early colonial circus advertising was peppered with self-serving statements such as the following:

The strictest attention will be paid to ensure becoming order and conduct; also that no immoral language or improper performance be introduced by the clown or any of the company, in order that the most fastidious can visit this place of amusement without the slightest repugnance.⁸⁸ [*Nobles Olympic Circus, Sydney, 1851*].

Parents and guardians are respectfully informed that these entertainers are noble, graceful and manly, and alike incapable of offending the ear of modesty or causing a stain upon the cheek of beauty, the performances being conducted with that due regard to propriety and delicacy that has hitherto characterised this establishment.⁸⁹ [*Burtons National Circus, Adelaide, 1862*].

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

⁸⁵ M Kwint, 'Astley's amphitheatre and the early circus in England, 1798-1830', Oxford University: D Phil, 1994, cited by Stoddart, p.72.

⁸⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 Dec 1850.

⁸⁷ Broome with Jackomos, pp.47ff.

⁸⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 Sep 1851.

⁸⁹ *South Australian Advertiser*, 4 Jan 1862.

offending this section of Australian society. Australia's circus entrepreneurs have sought legitimacy by constructing their image in at least five key areas: *associations, differentiation, bonding, visibility* and *identity*. None of these areas was mutually exclusive while all, in some way, essentially served the pecuniary imperatives of the markets that circuses were inclined to serve.

Claims of former *associations*, whether real or imagined, with prestigious symbols of circus in the Old World was a popular path towards securing legitimisation. In Malcoms Amphitheatre in Sydney in 1851, the equestrian John Jones performed an equestrian piece 'The Mameluke's Retreat', 'an act so much admired at Astleys Amphitheatre, London, when performed by that celebrated Equestrian, Mr Ducrow'.⁹⁰ Ashton was no mere colonial rider but the 'British horseman'⁹¹ who claimed to have been 'the apprentice of the celebrated Batty' and to have 'performed in London, Liverpool and Dublin, and at most of the important towns in Great Britain and Ireland'.⁹² G B W Lewis named his 1854 Melbourne edifice after Astleys Amphitheatre in London⁹³ and imported many of its performers from 'old Astley's'.⁹⁴ At Wagga Wagga, N S W, in 1855, William 'Tinker' Brown invoked the respectability of ancient cultures by naming his new company his 'Royal Amphitheatre and Roman Coliseum'.⁹⁵

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

⁹⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 Mar 1851.

⁹¹ *Hobart Town Courier*, 6 Dec 1848.

⁹² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 Dec 1851.

⁹³ *Argus*, 29 Aug 1854.

⁹⁴ *Sydney Sportsman*, 8 Jan 1908.

⁹⁵ *Goulburn Herald*, 20 Oct 1855.

rider Hunter, a former convict and a feature of Ashtons Royal Amphitheatre in Launceston in 1851, was 'admired in England by nobility and even royalty'.⁹⁶ Cardoza's performances on horseback had been 'much admired by the Queen of Portugal and the Emperor of Brazil'.⁹⁷ Lewis, the promoter of the Melbourne Astley's in 1854-55, performed before Queen Victoria and the Emperors of Russia and Austria.⁹⁸ Ashton had 'the honour twice to ride before Her Majesty the Queen'.⁹⁹ To his Twofold Bay audiences in 1861, the American clown Yeamans claimed to have entertained the President of the United States with his humour.¹⁰⁰ Ashton's claim, at least, is demonstrably false as he was already serving time as a convict when Queen Victoria ascended the throne in 1837.¹⁰¹

Patrons of such eminence were obviously lacking in an Australian setting. So, the 'distinguished patronage' of the colonial upper orders was prized in lieu. Countless Australian circuses of the colonial era, dressed the names of their companies with the qualification of 'Royal', beginning with Radfords *Royal Circus* [my italics] in Launceston in 1848. The inaugural year of Burton's Circus, 1851, was given a fillip by the patronage of Governor Fitzroy at Botany Bay on Easter Monday and again at West Maitland, N S W, less than a month later.¹⁰² It was 'a big thing' when the Governor of Victoria, Lord Brassey, and Lady Brassey, attended Probascos Circus in Melbourne in 1898.¹⁰³ During an extraordinarily lengthy Sydney

⁹⁶ *Cornwall Chronicle*, 5 Apr 1851.

⁹⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 May 1851.

⁹⁸ *Argus*, 22 Sep 1854.

⁹⁹ *Maitland Mercury*, 12 Feb 1853.

¹⁰⁰ *Twofold Bay & Monaro Telegraph*, 20 Jul 1860.

¹⁰¹ Archives Office of Tasmania, *Record of Golding Ashton, convict*, CON 31/2, 18/8.

¹⁰² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 Apr 1851; *Maitland Mercury*, 10 May 1851.

¹⁰³ A St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.79.

season – fourteen weeks – a unique twist to the practice of upper order patronage occurred one evening when FitzGerald's performance was witnessed by the Archduke of Austro-Hungary, Franz Ferdinand d'Este, then visiting the city aboard a cruiser of the Austro-Hungarian navy.¹⁰⁴ However, regal or vice-regal patronage did not necessarily extend as far as fraternisation. After the Governor of New Zealand and his lady visited Wirths Circus at Dunedin in 1892, they merely 'sent around' their compliments to Marizles Wirth after her equestrian juggling act.¹⁰⁵ It is therefore surprising to read that the Governor of South Australia, and his wife, after witnessing the performance of 'Zeneto' [the Aboriginal tightwire artist, Con Colleano] in Adelaide in 1921, immediately rose from their seats and ran into the ring to personally congratulate him on his act.¹⁰⁶

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

¹⁰⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 May 1893.

¹⁰⁵ M Martin, in St Leon, 1984, p.27.

¹⁰⁶ *Everyone's*, 4 Jan 1922.

¹⁰⁷ E Irvin, *The Murrumbidgee turf club: Its early history*, Wagga Wagga, N S W: The Author, 1960, p.31.

¹⁰⁸ *Clarence & Richmond Examiner*, 7 Aug 1880.

round in Melbourne suburbs in 1898 were a 'poverty stricken, hopeless, useless crowd'.¹⁰⁹

When, from the 1880s, colonial governments encouraged the development of annual country shows to spread farming knowledge and bond rural communities,¹¹⁰ circuses increasingly organised their itineraries to visit towns on the emerging 'show' circuits only to find that lesser forms of entertainment usually followed in their wake. Local show committees, dominated by the new landed gentry, revived English class attitudes when they excluded 'show touts' and gambling tables.¹¹¹

While their numbers fluctuated sharply with the economic tide, a plethora of circus companies, large and small, major and minor, inevitably led to descriptions in the colonial press to 'this class of entertainment',¹¹² 'this description of show',¹¹³ 'this style of amusement',¹¹⁴ 'travelling tentage',¹¹⁵ 'this kind of entertainment'¹¹⁶ and so on. To secure legitimation in the eyes of a 'discerning public', circus proprietors had to differentiate their offerings from other itinerant entertainments. This was hardly necessary or feasible in relation to offerings placed perceptively higher on the social scale, such as theatrical, musical and operatic companies, but was important in relation to entertainments at the other end of the social scale - and in which company an itinerant circus usually found itself at race weeks and country town

¹⁰⁹ *Bulletin*, 17 Dec 1898.

¹¹⁰ Broome with Jackomos, p.21.

¹¹¹ Broome with Jackomos, p.23.

¹¹² *Daily Telegraph*, 17 Dec 1883.

¹¹³ *Bendigo Advertiser*, 18 Feb 1879.

¹¹⁴ *Wagga Wagga Advertiser*, 25 Dec 1878.

¹¹⁵ *South Australian Register*, 5 Mar 1883.

¹¹⁶ *Border Watch*, 16 Apr 1879.

agricultural shows. During the formative period of their circus, the 1880s, the Wirth brothers found that playing country towns was not only more enjoyable than playing the big cities but more profitable, as Philip Wirth recalled in 1933:

The Agricultural Shows were absolute gold mines for us, as we were frequently able to give as many as twelve performances in one day, and, what is more important, the committees of the shows so appreciated the good taste of our entertainment that we were always asked to return for the next function ... However, tricksters and fakirs grew in numbers around us, and we were forced to use strong methods to awaken the public to the nature of these people. We always took care to keep the name of the circus people unsullied.¹¹⁷
[Wirth Brothers Circus, N S W c.1884].

The Wirths soon entered into a partnership with the Banvard family, a family of English performers, but the arrangement was short-lived as Phillip Wirth 'hated the way' Mrs Banvard used to 'spiel' on the showgrounds and racecourses. It gave the circus 'a bad name'.¹¹⁸

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

¹¹⁷ P Wirth, *A lifetime with an Australian circus*, Melbourne: Troedel & Cooper, 1933, p.31.

¹¹⁸ M Martin, in *St Leon*, 1984, p.14.

... Mr St Leon of the circus troupe picked up a cash box belonging to Mr Crandall and he immediately handed the same over to police.¹¹⁹
[St Leons Circus, Goulburn, N S W, 1884].

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

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

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

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

¹¹⁹ *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*, 11 Dec 1884.

¹²⁰ *Australian Town & Country Journal*, 10 Oct 1871. Speaight points out (p.150) that masonic affiliations gave many American and European circus proprietors valuable connections and smoothed professional rivalries.

¹²¹ L Ashton, 1976, interview.

¹²² *Adelong Argus*, 16 May 1899.

decorum, whether real or apparent, could attract attention. Although prestigious permanent circus buildings were erected in European cities during the 19th century for use by circus companies, no such endowment awaited Australia's early circus proprietors. The early colonial amphitheatres were usually erected in unsavoury areas that tended to define, coincidentally or not, the social standing of the entertainment. In Hobart Town in 1848, the 'locality' selected by Radford for his circus was 'improper' in the eyes of local actors.¹²³ In Port Phillip in 1849, Thomas Henry Hayes' shortlived equestrian enterprise in Little Bourke Street concentrated 'the scum and low villainy'.¹²⁴ The immediate vicinity of Malcoms Royal Australian Circus in Sydney's York Street in 1850 was 'not of the sweetest' and was frequented by intoxicated vagrants.¹²⁵ The peripatetic circus avoided this problem of location by erecting its tents in a central, conspicuous position – the 'lot' in circus jargon – in each city and town visited. Any vacant ground in proximity to a hotel or a public school was a desirable location for a circus and both were usually centrally and conveniently situated. When interviewed in 1974, a son of the circus proprietor Gus St Leon, said:

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

¹²³ Archives Office of Tasmania, *Correspondence between Colonial Secretary's Office and Robert Avis Radford*, CSO 24/4/58.

¹²⁴ E G Finn, *The chronicles of early Melbourne 1835 to 1852: Historical, anecdotal and personal*, Melbourne: Ferguson & Mitchell, 1988, p.490.

¹²⁵ *Sydney Sportsman*, 7 Feb 1906.

¹²⁶ A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.173.

The visiting American circus of Cooper, Bailey & Co. went to some lengths to portray a positive, wholesome image when playing the larger cities such as Sydney and Melbourne, its proprietors mindful that impressions gained would be transmitted throughout the country towns in advance of the provincial tour of the circus. 'Every attention and marked civility' was paid to patrons:

[T]he big show on the Sunday puts forth no sign of life, and although hailing from a land where even theatres are open, Messrs Cooper and Bailey permit nothing to disturb the national respect due to the Sabbath day.¹²⁷ [*Cooper, Bailey & Co.'s Great International Allied Shows, Sydney, 1877*]

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

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

¹²⁷ *Australian Town & Country Journal*, 1 Dec 1877.

¹²⁸ *Hamilton Spectator*, 8 Apr 1879.

¹²⁹ *Bulletin*, 17 Nov 1900.

cookhouse away from facing the street so that people wouldn't see you cooking on the fire.¹³⁰ [*St Leons Circus, c.1932*].

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

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

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

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

¹³⁰ M Joseph, in St Leon, 1984, p.286.

¹³¹ M Perry, in St Leon, 1984, p.197.

¹³² *Benalla Standard*, 14 Nov 1879.

cooking their dinner in black pots outside their caravans like so many gypsies, the gaffer's name on a bill could well be good for a very substantial sum.¹³³

In Australia, the reputation embedded in a name could 'pull' a circus through or towards areas where it was customarily welcomed, but 'push' it away from places where its image had been tarnished for one reason or another. A new circus carried a fresh name and no stigma of past indiscretions. To be effective and communicable, however, names also had to be attractive and memorable. Since many were neither, many of Australia's circus people adopted professional pseudonyms - *noms d'arena*¹³⁴ - to artificially produce an instant sense of *identity*. This practice had come into vogue in various branches of the arts in England early in the 19th century but proved particularly valuable in Australian circus since, to local audiences, 'Australian performers were nothing, supposedly'.¹³⁵ Almost certainly, Australia's first circus pseudonym appeared in 1837, some years before the first colonial circuses were established. In February of that year, licences to perform rope dancing, tumbling and horsemanship in five country hotels in New South Wales were issued to George Croft and a Thomas Astley, whose surname mimicked that of Philip Astley, the so-called 'father' of the modern circus.

As **Table 1** demonstrates, some of Australia's major circus families adopted *noms d'arena* to escape a prosaic or unattractive name on the one hand, and to create a sense of drama, interest, differentiation or just simplicity on the other. So, appearing as a gymnastic troupe at Barry Sullivan's Theatre Royal in Melbourne in 1865, the London-

¹³³ Chesney, p.74.

¹³⁴ T Frost, n.d., cited in Saxon, p.25.

¹³⁵ M Seymour, 1988, interview.

born performer John Jones and his young sons became The St Leon Troupe from 'from the Gymnase Imperiale, Paris',¹³⁶ the name 'St Leon' serving the family and its circus activities well in to the 20th century; in 1893, W G 'Bill' Perry adopted the name of 'Eroni' to promote his circus, thus differentiating it from the rival circus of his brother, Charles 'Jubilee' Perry; and, forming their own circus in 1910, Con Sullivan, his Aboriginal wife and children, promoted themselves as the 'Royal Hawaiians' and their circus as Colleanos All-Star Circus while at the same time masking their Aboriginal origins.¹³⁷ These *noms d'arenas* often became accepted family names.

Summary

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

¹³⁶ *Argus*, 27 Jan 1865.

¹³⁷ *Warialda Standard*, 28 Nov 1910; *Western Star*, 10 Feb 1917.

education. As the colonies became prosperous, the differentiation between highbrow and lowbrow entertainments became more apparent. Reaching its public was more than just a matter of physical presence for the circus in Australia. From its inception until the present time, Australian circus had to generate audiences from a population continuously and rapidly changing in size, character and domicile. A circus had to create, shape and continuously update a legitimacy to connect with its public and to appease the prevailing social order. The desire for legitimacy was, and continues to be, a constant theme in Australian circus.



Figure 4

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