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Novel Routes: Circus in the Pacific, 1841-1941

*Through their promotion of Christianity, capitalism and the nation state, the entry of the Europeans into the Pacific altered, irrevocably, the character and development of Island societies. While the literature gives ample coverage to European explorers, missionaries, beachcombers, whalers and settlers, limited attention has been given to professional entertainers. A broad mix of entertainers—circus troupes at first, followed by theatrical, marionette, musical, variety and other ‘thespians’—began to cross the Pacific from the mid-19th century. For some of these entertainers, the Pacific was merely a seaway by which to reach distant lands; for others, the Pacific offered its own attractions to be explored and exploited. This article considers the negotiation of the Pacific by one specific category of entertainers—circus—in the century from 1841 to 1941. Developed out of the author’s presentation at the conference, Another World of Popular Entertainments, at the University of Newcastle, in June 2013, this article is intended to encourage deeper research into the delivery of popular entertainments across, around and within the Pacific. Dr Mark St Leon is a Sydney-based sessional university lecturer. He is the author of *Circus: The Australian Story* (Melbourne Books, 2011) and the doctoral thesis *Circus & Nation* (University of Sydney, 2007)¹.*

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Introduction

The development of circus and its proliferation throughout the world paralleled Western commercial expansion during the ‘age of empire.’ Each was driven by the Industrial Revolution: Western colonial expansion by the need to procure, firstly, the raw materials needed to sustain domestic industrial production and, secondly, to create the markets needed to consume excess

production;² the circus, by the need to economically deliver affordable entertainment to the masses with money to spend and anxious to relieve either the drudgery of new industrialised workplaces or the boredom of frontier isolation.³

The touring activities—whether regional, national or international—of circus proprietors and other peripatetic entertainers, mirrored the strength and direction of commercial expansion and promoted both cultural exchange and cultural nationalism.⁴ This was as true of the circus as of other popular entertainments that entered the Pacific. The circus proprietors and their troupes, large or small, who entered the Pacific were driven by the pursuit of profit and adventure, not science and discovery.

This article considers the negotiation of the Pacific by circus entrepreneurs in the century between 1841 and 1941, chiefly with respect to the causal economic factors; logistical challenges; emergence of defined touring routes and circuits; and engagement with Indigenous people and societies. These themes are examined in the course of my summation of the key developments of circus history that took place within, across and around the Pacific during the century indicated.

Pacific Shores

The circus entrepreneurs who emulated Astley's entertainments, in England and in the United States, early in the 19th century revised a lesson known since ancient times: to attract an audience, it was easier to change location than to change programme.⁵ The lands that were (to Western eyes at least) the newest, offered the newest locations. By the 1840s, the unrelenting proliferation of circus-based entertainments had reached the 'new' lands on the shores of the Pacific.

On the Pacific's western side, Signor Dalle Case and his 'Foreign Gymnastic Troupe' of acrobats, gymnasts and ropewalkers landed, without prior announcement, in Sydney in July 1841, having sailed from Rio de Janeiro by way of Cape Town. They gave a series of performances culminating in the opening of the short-lived Australian Olympic Theatre, jolting the infant city's moribund theatre scene into action.⁶ Some six years later, in December 1847, Robert Avis Radford opened his Royal Circus in a pavilion—a 'humble imitation' of Astley's—in Launceston, Tasmania.⁷ These initiatives not only laid the foundation of circus in Australian colonies pockmarked with British penal settlements but stimulated theatrical competition as entrepreneurs hastened to satisfy an increasingly free and cosmopolitan population.

On the Pacific's eastern side, the American circus man, Joseph A. Rowe, brought his troupe overland from Maracibo, Venezuela, to the Pacific shore at Guayaquil, Ecuador, in November 1848. In May 1849, they shipped for Panama to join 'the great tide' of gold-seekers bound for San Francisco. The Olympic Circus that

Rowe opened on Kearney Street in October 1849 would be remembered thereafter as California's 'pioneer' circus.⁸ As theatrical and variety companies continued to arrive in California, Rowe announced that he and his troupe would seek new audiences by sailing for the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii), thence China, a 'novel route' for the time.⁹

Crossing the Pacific

Rowe sailed for Honolulu early in 1851 where his entertainments drew patronage from 'delighted natives' and pleased King Kamehameha.¹⁰ Reflecting missionaries' concerns over the perceived immorality of such entertainments however, Honolulu's main newspaper, *The Polynesian*, refrained from covering Rowe's activities.¹¹ Nevertheless, Rowe remained and toured the larger islands of Maui and Hawaii as well. Clearing as much as \$1,400 per night, he could afford to purchase his own 204-ton brig, the *General Worth*. As news of the discovery of gold in Australia drifted across the Pacific, the little continent replaced China as his ultimate goal. On December 12, 1851, after a stay of some 11 months in the Sandwich Islands, Rowe and his troupe sailed for Papeete, intending to sail from there to Port Phillip.¹²

Condescending descriptions and portraits of 'cannibals' had informed European perceptions of the Pacific for some 300 years. These perceptions were reinforced by Defoe's popular 1719 novel, *Robinson Crusoe*. By the time Rowe entered the Pacific, Europeans had acquired at least a broad, if 'lopsided,' knowledge of Oceania owing to the initial incursions of explorers, traders and missionaries.¹³ By the 1850s, many Island communities were not only being converted to Christianity but also colonised, if damagingly so.¹⁴

Some 100 miles east of Norfolk Island the *General Worth* sustained damage to sails and spars and Rowe was obliged to pull into Auckland to effect repairs. While delayed there, Rowe and his troupe delivered New Zealand its first series of circus performances.¹⁵ The *General Worth* sailed into Port Phillip on May 1, 1852.¹⁶ With the proceeds from the brig's sale, Rowe built an 800-seat pavilion of timber and canvas at the corner of Stephen (now Exhibition) and Lonsdale Streets, Melbourne. At the same time, he found it necessary to muster public support to defeat local theatrical interests opposed to his presence.¹⁷ On the evening of June 28, 1852, Rowe opened to a tightly-packed audience of 1,500 people and caused "no little sensation throughout the city."¹⁸ (Fig. 1) There he stayed for over two years. He resisted the temptation to take his company onto the goldfields, having learnt in California that he could both avoid the discomfort of the goldfields and enjoy greater returns by remaining anchored in the metropolis.¹⁹

When, in October 1854, Rowe and his wife returned to San Francisco, they were reputedly laden with £40,000 in "cash and numerous chests of treasure."²⁰

Rowe's success, and the Australian gold fever generally, encouraged numerous actors and actresses, dancers, musicians, equestrians and other 'thespians' to cross the Pacific to Melbourne and Sydney. American circus and other show proprietors continued to consult Rowe for his intimate knowledge of Australia before he died in obscurity in San Francisco in 1887.²¹



Figure 1. "Ye people of Australia proceeding to enjoy themselves at Mr Rowe's Circus," Lonsdale Street, Melbourne, from Arm Chair, February 25, 1854. Image courtesy Dixon Library, State Library of NSW.

Excursions into and across the Pacific sprang not only from the American coast. From Melbourne in 1855, the ex-patriate American and former rival of Rowe is San Francisco, William H. Foley, took his 'Victoria Circus' across the Tasman Sea to Auckland.²² The Otago gold rush of the early 1860s "drew hordes" of entertainers to New Zealand, the Maori wars notwithstanding.²³

Adventure-seeking Australian circus performers also started to set foot on American soil. The superlative equestrian, James Melville crossed the Pacific to Valparaiso with his small troupe. Reaching San Francisco late in 1856, they joined Lee & Bennett's Circus.²⁴ (Fig. 2) Fresh from his Australian experience and knowledgeable of Australian conditions, Melville apparently inspired several fêted circus artists to cross the Pacific to Australia.²⁵

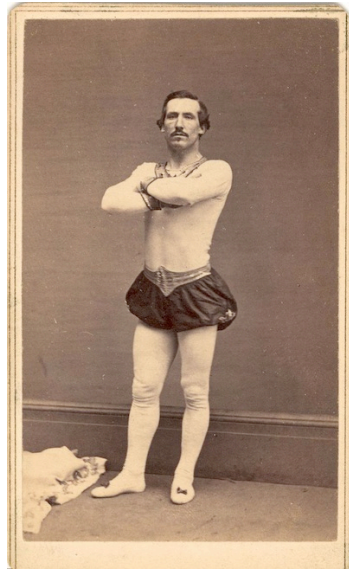


Figure 2. James Melville [1835-92], bareback rider, Australia's first international circus star. Image courtesy the Meserve Kunhardt Collection, MES 27647, Picture History, Pleasantville, New York.

Opening the Orient

While the initiatives of Dalle Case, Radford, Malcom, Rowe, Melville and others unleashed a trans-Pacific 'thespian' traffic, events were taking place elsewhere on the Pacific rim that would not only create new markets but also new sources of human material for circus.

As a result of the First Opium War, China leased the island of Hong Kong to Great Britain and opened four ports to foreign trade under the 1842 Treaty of Nanking. Other Western powers concluded treaties with China and the treaty port of Shanghai emerged as a major centre for international trade and commerce. Before the end of 1842, a theatre was under construction in Hong Kong.²⁶ Entertainers of Western origin began to arrive, among them, early in 1844, the ubiquitous Signor Dalle Case and his gymnastic troupe from Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania), by way of India.²⁷

In 1853, the United States forced Japan to open its doors to Western trade and commerce when Commodore Perry entered Tokyo Bay with an armed fleet. Within a few years, Japan had concluded treaties and formalised relations with the United States and other powers and Western traders soon took up positions in designated 'treaty ports' such as Yokohama and began to draw Japan out of its longstanding seclusion. The first Japanese emissaries visited the West and Western curiosity was piqued by accounts of Japanese culture and civilisation.²⁸

An American acrobat unintentionally played a small but significant role in straddling both the cultural and geographic distance that had hitherto separated Japan from the West. Richard Risley Carlisle, professionally known as 'Professor

Risley,' was the exponent of the still-popular 'Risley' act of 'foot-juggling' whereby one performer, lying on his back, nimbly 'juggles' another, smaller performer with his feet.

Risley sailed from Astoria, Oregon, late in 1857 with his protégé Charles and the contortionist D'Evani, and re-traced Rowe's first voyage across the Pacific to reach Melbourne the following September. Their skillful and innovative acrobatics captured the colonial public's attention while the little troupe entailed fewer managerial complications and less operating expense than a larger one. The best of Australia's gold-rush days had passed. With civil insurrection at home, Risley moved into Asia. By October 1863, he reached the treaty port of Shanghai with his 12-man equestrian circus. They were marooned in Shanghai's foreign settlement during the dismal winter of 1862-63 but quarantined from the surrounding chaos of the Taiping rebellion. Risley lost members of his troupe to illness, death or desertion. As winter turned to spring, Japan presented a promising and possibly profitable frontier, despite its mysteries and possible dangers.²⁹

With his remaining performers and horses Risley shipped from Shanghai for Yokohama where they arrived in March 1864. Not only was this the first Western circus, and indeed, the first Western performing troupe to land in Japan, but Risley's prolonged stay would provide him with the unique opportunity to evaluate Japan's rich acrobatic tradition. Risley would not only introduce the Western concept of 'circus' to Japan but would introduce Japanese performers to the world. In 1866, in terms of the Convention of Edo, the Japanese government revoked the edict that had prevented its subjects from leaving the country. By the autumn, Risley had organised a troupe of Japanese performers—his Imperial Japanese Troupe—to put before Western audiences. His acrobats bearing freshly-issued passports, Risley and his troupe sailed from Yokohama for San Francisco to open in January 1867. After shipping for Panama, they crossed over the isthmus to the Caribbean coast from where they shipped for New York, and later London, and international fame.³⁰ (Fig. 3)

An international scramble for authentic Japanese performers ensued. Flaunting their exquisite skills, more of Japan's acrobats and wire-walkers descended on Yokohama hoping to attract the attention of Western entrepreneurs. As a result, two troupes arrived in Melbourne on P. & O. mail steamers late in 1867: Buhicrosan's Troupe on November 14 and Lenton & Smith's Great Dragon Troupe on December 16.³¹ Thus began a lengthy injection of Japanese talent into Australia's circus community. (Fig. 4)

While the Japanese influence on Western circus and the popularity of Japanese troupes with Western audiences were pronounced, no authentic Chinese acrobatic troupes are known to have visited Australia and few reached the United States. In 1864, Charley Shay's Monster Quincuplexal [sic] and Celestial Troupe

consisting of (reputedly) Chinese jugglers and sorcerers and “fourteen other star performers” travelled the New England states.³²

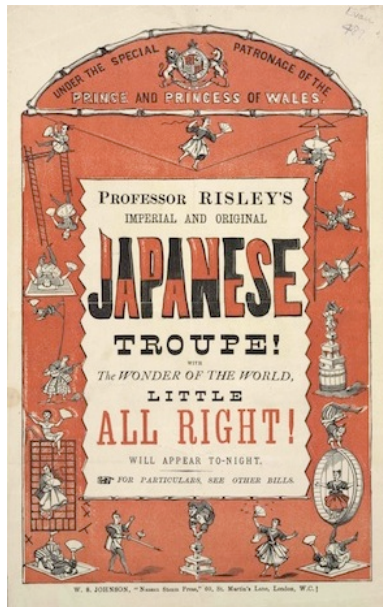


Figure 3. Poster for Professor Risley's Imperial and Japanese Troupe as it appeared in London in 1868. © The British Library Board, Evan 489.



Figure 4. Japanese performers Sacaranawa Decenoski (c.1846-84) and his adopted son Togawa Iwakichi 'Ewar' Deconiski (c.1867-1938), Melbourne, 1878. Author's collection.

Why did China, in comparison to Japan, send so few acrobatic troupes abroad? There is no clear answer, especially since Chinese opera, theatre and musical troupes (some of which included acrobatic performers) had catered specifically to Chinese miners and labourers in Australia and California during and after the gold rush periods.³³ The massive Chinese presence on the Australian and Californian goldfields had been resented in the 1850s and the prevailing condescension held towards 'celestials' was enshrined in anti-Chinese legislation enacted on both sides of the Pacific. However, another, deeper reason may be found in the decline of the court-sponsored acrobatic tradition during the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1911). By the 19th century, “the imperial acrobatics were not comparable with before. [sic]”³⁴

Civil War and Aftermath

The prospect of visiting Australia appealed to adventurous American circus men, and thespians generally, but the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861 deferred ambitions. Access to foreign ports was dramatically reduced, owing to the shortage of shipping services as well as the danger of attack by Confederate raiders and privateers.³⁵

Even as war raged, the Australian equestrian James Melville managed to travel the American mid-west at the head of his own circus. The pristine neutrality of Melville's 'Australian' Circus allowed it to move freely "along the Mississippi River in a sternwheel steamboat, landing and giving performances ... to Union soldiers one day and Confederates the next."³⁶

In the aftermath of the Civil War, an excursion across the Pacific held more promise for a circus based on the American west coast than a lengthy trip back to the war-ravaged east. During the summer of 1865, a 'coalition' was formed in San Francisco between the circus identities James Cooke, Ella Zoyara (actually, a young Creole man named Omar Kingsley who performed in female costume and style) and John Wilson to tour their Great World Circus (substantially Wilson's company) through Hawaii, Tahiti, Australia, India, China and Europe.³⁷

Again, Rowe's 1852 route was re-traced. After visiting Honolulu, Papeete and Auckland, the company landed in Sydney and opened on the evening of March 5, 1866.³⁸ A tour of the cities and towns of Australia's eastern-most colonies ensued until Wilson and Zoyara parted from Cooke to take their own company to New Zealand. Cooke continued to tour regional Australia until forced to liquidate his enterprise.³⁹ In 1867, Wilson and Zoyara's company toured through India, Burma, Ceylon, Penang, Singapore, Java and Manila, where both proprietors were thrown in gaol after an altercation with Spanish officers inquisitive about Zoyara's gender. Wilson and Zoyara and their troupe toured the port cities of China before sailing, in September 1868, from Shanghai for San Francisco, to open on Christmas Day some four years after their 1864 departure.⁴⁰ (Figs. 5, 6 & 7)

In his trans-Pacific excursion of 1852-54, Rowe had demonstrated the feasibility of taking a circus troupe *across* the Pacific and back. Cooke, Zoyara and Wilson's Great World Circus never reached Europe as intended but what was left of the original company did manage to return to San Francisco, thus completing the first *circumnavigation* of the Pacific by a circus company.



Figure 5. The Irish clown and jester, James Cooke (r.n. Paddy Kaye, d.1880), one of the proprietors of Cooke, Zoyara & Wilson's Great World Circus. Image courtesy the Meserve Kunhardt Collection, MES 12379, Picture History.

Figure 6. Omar Kingsley (1835-78), who performed in female costume as the bareback rider 'Ella Zoyara.' Image courtesy the Meserve Kunhardt Collection, MES 21253, Picture History.



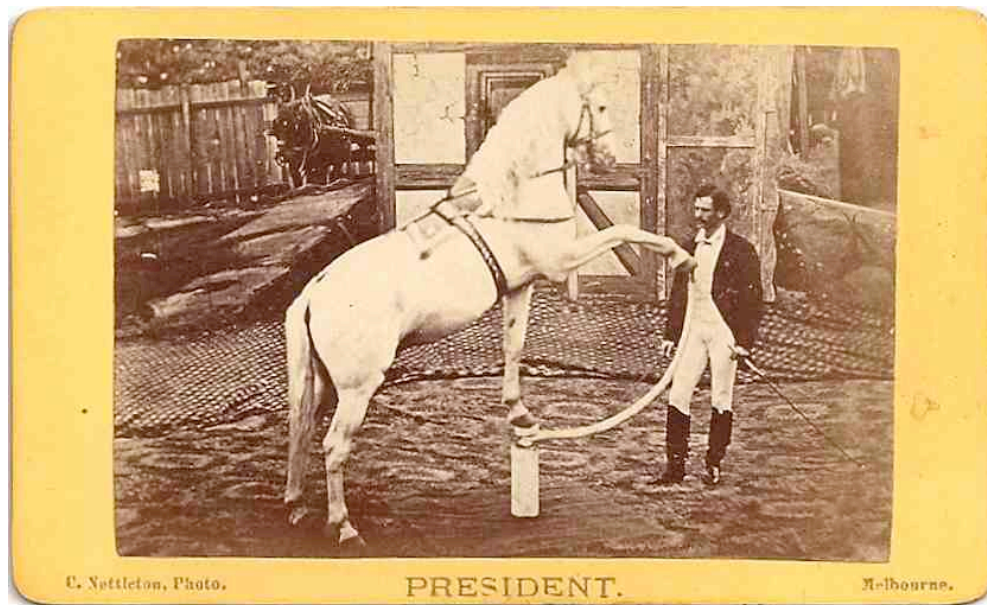


Figure 7. Omar Kingsley returned to Australia in 1875-76 as the ringmaster and horse trainer for Wilson's San Francisco Palace Circus. Author's collection.

Access

Two key developments materially contributed to the recovery and expansion of trans-Pacific trade and commerce and, by extension, trans-Pacific circus activity in the immediate post-Civil war era. These were the completion in May 1869 of a trans-continental railway linking America's eastern and western seaboard;⁴¹ and the inauguration in March 1870 of a regular mail steamship service between San Francisco and Sydney.⁴² (Figure 8) The itineraries of the major circuses based on the eastern seaboard began to include the West Coast, an obvious springboard for an excursion across the Pacific to the 'fabled land' of Australia and possibly beyond.⁴³

Although a tour of the Asian land mass offered potentially the greatest financial return for an American circus intent on crossing the Pacific, disease or calamity threatened. Major differences in language and culture complicated business and communications. Beyond the safety of the treaty ports, China was wrecked by civil strife and maladministration. While opened to the West for trade through its treaty ports, the rest of Japan remained inhospitable. On top of these factors, the countries and colonies of Asia lay mostly within the Northern Hemisphere and gave no enticement for an American circus wanting to avoid a winter at home since tents could not withstand tropical monsoons or typhoons.



Figure 8. As well as providing the first regular trans-Pacific mail service between Australia and North America, the PMSS City of Sydney delivered several large American circus companies to Australia's shores. Author's collection.

The colonies of Australia and New Zealand were peaceful, administratively uniform, climatically mild and English-speaking. By the 1870s, each possessed modern shipping, port, rail and telegraphic facilities.⁴⁴ Circus personnel, properties and animals could be efficiently loaded, transported and unloaded. Instructions could be telegraphed to and from advance agents. Although the population of the Australian colonies nudged only two million, widely distributed, and while there were only a handful of cities with populations greater than 100,000, a circus could be run in Australia just as in America.⁴⁵

Trans-Pacific Circus Activity, 1872-92

During the period 1872-92, not a year passed without a major American circus crossing to either Australia or New Zealand or both. They brought menageries of wild and exotic animals rarely seen in Australasia and novelties such as sideshow 'museums' containing curiosities such as "genuine Arizona Indians" who performed war dances.⁴⁶

Undoubtedly the 'panic of 1873,' which saw the American economy enter a recessionary period lasting until the early 1880s, was a considerable incentive for these tours. Those circus companies that survived the particularly harsh season of 1875 began to look beyond the United States for opportunities.⁴⁷ When one of the largest, Cooper, Bailey & Co's Great International Allied Shows, reached San

Francisco in the autumn of 1876, its management began to make preparations for an Australian tour.⁴⁸ It was a much smaller circus that eventually shipped for Sydney but still included a sizeable menagerie and sideshow ‘museum of curiosities.’⁴⁹ When Cooper, Bailey & Co landed back in New York some two years later, a distance of 120,000 kilometres had been travelled across the Pacific and back and throughout eastern Australia, New Zealand and South America.⁵⁰ (Fig. 9)



Figure 9. Cooper, Bailey & Co's Great International Allied Shows inaugurated its second Australian tour in Sydney in November 1877. The circus opened on Bell's Paddock at the corner of College and William Streets, opposite Hyde Park from where this photograph was taken. Today, the location is occupied by the Cook & Phillip Park Aquatic and Fitness Centre. Image courtesy of Fred Pfening III, Columbus, Ohio.

Tours of Australasia provided American circus men with the opportunity to acquire native animals. W. W. Cole returned to the United States in 1881, his menagerie enriched with kangaroos, ostriches and cockatoos “from the South Sea Islands” [sic].⁵¹ Apart from their revenue-generating possibilities, native animals were much less expensive procured directly from source than if acquired through dealers in New York or Europe. In New York in 1882, a kangaroo cost US\$2,000, the same price as a camel, while a wombat, at US\$12,000, was more expensive than a lion and lioness, at US\$9,000.⁵² (Fig. 10)

Figure 10. In this trade card dating from about 1870, the American showman P. T. Barnum boasted the addition to his menagerie of the "largest kangaroo ever captured." Author's collection.

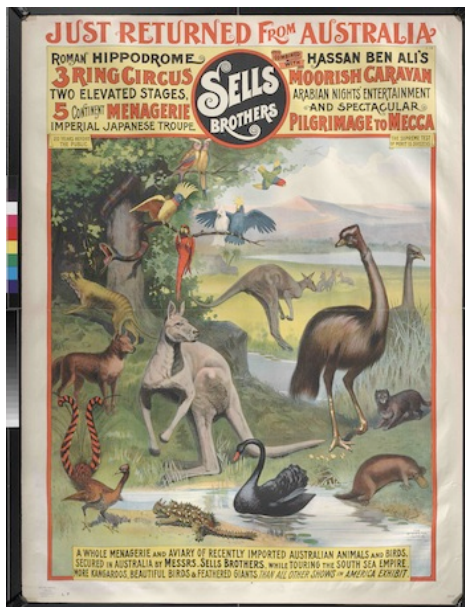
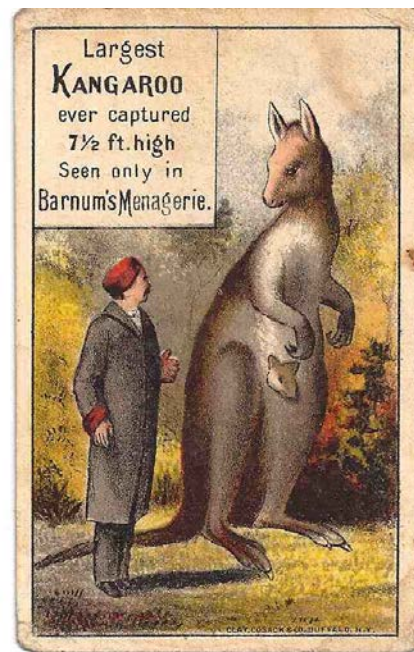


Figure 11. Returning to the United States after its 1891-92 tour of Australia, Sells Bros introduced to home audiences its "whole menagerie and aviary of recently imported Australian animals and birds." Image courtesy of Tibbals Digital Collection: TR 2004.2722.685, John & Mable Ringling Museum of Arts, Sarasota, Florida.

The largest American circus to tour Australasia during the period of intensive trans-Pacific circus traffic, Sells Bros, was also the last to cross the Pacific during the period 1872-92.⁵³ (Fig. 11) Thereafter large American circuses, consumed by 'territory' wars, could ill-afford a season's absence abroad lest a rival invade its home 'territory.'⁵⁴ But disincentives also appeared on the Western side of the Pacific. Two Australian circuses, Wirth Bros and FitzGerald Bros, emerged by the late 1880s to serve Australasia with international programmes attuned to local tastes. In 1893, the failure of the banks plunged the colonies into a recession and forced Wirth Bros to embark upon a seven-year long world tour.⁵⁵ From New

Zealand in 1897, the American Wild West showman, 'Happy Jack' Sutton, dissuaded his compatriot showmen from visiting Australia. (Fig. 12)

The Probasco circus ... [and] FitzGerald Brothers ... is about all the circuses in Australia. All others are snap shows. After the great boom in variety business in Australia, the calm has come and left many good people to hustle for a cold winter ... stranded specialty companies are reported in many colonies.⁵⁶

In contrast to the Americans, English circus entrepreneurs and performers were not as conspicuous in or around the Pacific. It has been asserted that English circus men lacked the pioneering spirit and inventiveness that led their American counterparts to tour abroad.⁵⁷ Be this as it may, the economics of bringing a large circus all the way to Australia and then returning to England were adverse in the extreme. Only two large circuses of English origin ever toured Australasia, Harmston's in 1890 and again in 1897-98, and Bostock and Wombell's in 1905-06, but neither arrived directly from England. Harmston's home territory stretched from India, around southeast Asia, the Philippines, China and Japan. The Harmston family re-organised its circus in San Francisco in 1890 and returned to its Asian heartland by way of New Zealand and Australia.⁵⁸ Harmston's launched its 1897-99 tour of Australasia from Singapore.⁵⁹ Bostock and Wombell's tour of Australasia was launched as an afterthought to their tour of South Africa. Finishing in Melbourne, E. H. Bostock disbanded the company and put the circus properties and animals up to auction rather than expensively ship everything back to England.⁶⁰ (Fig. 13)

If English circus companies were rarely seen in the Pacific area, Continental companies were even less conspicuous. Louis Soullier's equestrian troupe travelled across Russia and China to reach Japan in 1866 and returned with a troupe of Japanese acrobats.⁶¹ Chiarini's Royal Italian Circus (a substantially American company despite the Roman birthright of its proprietor) toured the Americas, Asia and Australasia thoroughly and crossed the Pacific several times between 1856 and 1896.⁶²



Figure 12. In San Francisco in 1890, the Wirth brothers of Australian circus fame engaged 'Captain Happy Jack' Sutton (1853-1913) and his 'wild west' show for an Australasian tour. Sutton remained active in circus in Australia before returning to the United States in 1902. Image courtesy of the Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

Figure 13. The Lukashima Troupe of Japanese acrobats toured Australasia in 1905-06 with an English circus and vaudeville company, Bostock & Wombell's. Author's collection.



Island Shows

The obvious beneficiaries of this era of intensive trans-Pacific circus traffic were the people on either side of the Pacific basin: on one side, the circus patrons of Australasia and, on the other, several American circus proprietors whose wealth and professional reputations were duly enhanced. What of the Island communities spread across the Pacific basin?

Even at major ports-of-call such as Honolulu and Levuka, the entertainment delivered by large, transitory American circus companies, if any, was usually limited to on-board exhibitions of sideshow curiosities and menagerie animals.⁶³ However, the major ports and shipping routes lay well beyond the reach of most Island

communities. Island populations were small. In any case, rudimentary port facilities and shallow waters between adjacent islands precluded the visits of the large ships needed to carry a major circus, its people, equipment and animals.⁶⁴

Small, seaborne circus troupes could nimbly service these and other island groups in the Pacific without the logistical constraints that faced large circus companies. They could make single return excursions to specific locations such as Honolulu (from San Francisco) or Suva or Noumea (from Sydney) or a lengthy circuit of selected islands. Commercial activity fostered circus activity. By the 1870s cannibalism was largely abolished in the Fiji Islands, a sure inducement for showmen to tour islands inhabited by about 150,000 people.⁶⁵ The more persistent of these small, seaborne circus companies were known in Australian circus vernacular at least, as 'Island shows.'⁶⁶ They delivered not only entertainment to Islander communities but their circus artists, costumes, animals and music generated instant contrasts with the Islanders' own cultures.⁶⁷

Many, perhaps most, Island shows were launched from Australia. The Pacific promised not only profitable new territory for exploitation but also the relative comfort and security of travelling by small vessels instead of the rigour of horsedrawn travel along crude outback roads. Woodyear's Australian Circus visited Fiji, Honolulu and Tahiti during 1885 before moving into southeast Asia.⁶⁸ Hayes', Montgomery and Brillianso's Circus visited the islands of Fiji in 1890, as did McMahon and Baker's Circus in 1913.⁶⁹ During 1895-96, Harry Wirth's Pacific Circus visited Norfolk Island, New Caledonia, New Hebrides, Fiji, Raratonga and Hawaii before travelling to Japan and China.⁷⁰ Although each of these island shows was organised in Australia, not all returned to Australian shores. William Woodyear died of cholera in Calcutta in 1890, Harry Wirth of sunstroke aboard the ship bringing him to Hong Kong in 1896. Their respective circuses were disbanded soon after their deaths.⁷¹

Bysack, a 'native,' presumably Indian showman toured the islands of the Pacific with his circus early in the 20th century.⁷² 'King Ohmy,' an Englishman whose true name was Joseph Smith, brought his Great Aerial and Acrobatic Troupe to Noumea and Suva in 1890.⁷³ Beginning in 1915, the American showman E. K. Fernandez regularly toured the larger islands of Hawaii with a company of star circus artists he engaged from the American mainland.⁷⁴

Despite its charms, the Pacific threw up challenges of its own for Western circus proprietors. As well as the financial and logistical frustrations that might confront a circus anywhere, there were the perils of tropical climate, weather and disease as well as bureaucracy, shipwreck and piracy. Touring the Hawaiian Islands in 1898, Bert Willison had to rely on plantation managers to move his circus as "transport companies failed to connect."⁷⁵ When Willison attempted to enter the mainland United States his show was seized for unpaid customs duties.⁷⁶ The Gus St

Leon circus from Australia interrupted its 1905 travels through Mexico to ship for Panama, intending to entertain canal construction workers. The company narrowly escaped an ambush by Indians when their sailing vessel was becalmed close to shore.⁷⁷

By the late 1870s, New Zealand's predominantly European population approached half-a-million people, a sufficient inducement for the circus proprietor, Henry Burton, to tour his Australian Circus throughout New Zealand.⁷⁸ Burton's tour anointed New Zealand as a feasible objective for larger Australian circus companies.⁷⁹ Well into the 20th century, tours of New Zealand promised "a feast of money" for any Australian circus able to afford a passage across the Tasman.⁸⁰ Some Australian circus companies, such as Barton's, Ridgway's and Sole Bros even remained in New Zealand for numbers of years. Thus circuses from Australia needed to venture no further into the Pacific in search of business. In any case, the heyday of the island show had run its course by the time war broke out in the Pacific in 1941, if not well before.

It is apparent that over the century from 1841, the activities of circus companies and troupes within, across and around the Pacific saw the emergence of five, reasonably well-defined routes or circuits. These were an eastern Pacific circuit that served the western coastal lands of the Americas and Hawaii; a trans-Pacific circuit out of San Francisco that served the eastern port cities of Australasia; a trans-Tasman/western-Pacific circuit that served the port cities of New Zealand, Fiji and New Caledonia, plied mostly by Australian circus companies; a Southeast Asian circuit served mostly by locally-based circus companies, especially Harmston's; and the intra-Pacific tours of countless, mostly unknown small circus troupes or 'Island shows' that moved serendipitously between the islands of the Pacific.

Cultural Exchange

From the first Western contacts, Pacific Islanders eagerly sought or emulated the prestige of European artefacts, technologies and customs.⁸¹ Yet, contented with their own, the Pacific people were selective in what they derived from the Europeans and only took what they wanted.⁸² The people of Samoa had already adopted European card-playing when Woodyear's Australian Circus visited in 1885. Otherwise, to Western eyes at least, the Samoans possessed "not a great variety of games or sports" apart from wrestling, surfing, pig-hunting and pigeon-catching. After Woodyear's departed, the Samoans diligently recalled, replicated and performed everything they could remember of the circus programme.⁸³

The visitors as well as the visited found the contrasts uplifting. The Wirth brothers shipped their circus from Sydney to Noumea for 'carnival time' in 1888. The Noumea visit was instructive of French as well as of Melanesian culture. The

young circus men were even allowed to exhibit on Sundays, an impossibility in Australia at the time:

Everything was quaint and strange and different. And as everyone was jabbering away in French, the charm was complete ... We had a delightful seven-weeks' season at Noumea ... [Not] only the simple [sic] natives, but the French soldiers and the people generally, made much of us ... We even put on the essentially English act, Dick Turpin's Ride to York, with great éclat. It proved a highly popular item, although I suppose our audiences knew less about Dick Turpin than they did of Nebuchadnezzar.⁸⁴

Islanders appreciated performing troupes of any kind but authenticity was essential. In 1901, a marionette show from Australia called in to Raratonga and Tahiti:

[The] marionettes just looked like little people. The natives thought they were little people. One day, one of the watchmen ... fell asleep and the natives came in and saw it worked by strings and ... [there were] no more attendances.⁸⁵

Observable from all perspectives, the performance in a circus ring was instantly authenticated.⁸⁶ Based more on spectacle than dialogue, circus was easily understood across cultures yet flexible enough to embrace other genres such as music, singing, dancing, pantomime and dramatic spectacles such as *Dick Turpin's Ride to York*. In Suva in 1895, three young female circus artists performed a song and dance interlude based on the popular tune of the day, *The Little Alabama Coon*, and "fairly carried away the house."⁸⁷

Despite their appreciation and emulation of circus entertainments, only a small number of Islanders, all Polynesians, developed into professional circus artists. Heni Tauteka, a Maori female gymnast, toured the Australian colonies with Eugene Beda's variety troupe in 1876.⁸⁸ Touring Hawaii in 1898, Bert Willison engaged for his circus programme a band of 'Hawaiian natives' whose music was "pretty and tuneful."⁸⁹ Toa Fredo, a Maori contortionist, travelled Australia in 1932 with Thorpe McConville's Wild Australia and later married into the Ashton circus family.⁹⁰ On another level, Maori labourers, strong and reliable, were frequently engaged by Australian circuses that toured New Zealand. On FitzGerald Bros' circus lot in Sydney in 1905, they took their place amongst the "queer composite of races and classes" of labouring men.⁹¹

Why did the Pacific produce few circus artists? The Islands' longstanding isolation, the absence of Indigenous acrobatic traditions and infrequent circus traffic only partially explain this paucity. Despite similar constraints, Aboriginal acrobats and riders had featured in Australian circus troupes since the 1850s. The

outstanding Colleano family, of partly Aboriginal origin, was conspicuous on international circus and vaudeville circuits between the 1920s and the 1950s. Why this apparent dichotomy? In 1931, an unnamed yet “world famous” anthropologist asserted that the hunting and gathering proclivities of Australian Aborigines had developed the keen eyesight and agility that enabled many to become good boxers. These were precisely the physical qualities required of nimble circus performers. The same anthropologist asserted that the seafaring, warfare and horticultural proclivities of the Maori tended to produce “steadfast” soldiers and “methodical” wrestlers. While admirable qualities, these were less important to the circus artist.⁹²

Pearl Harbor

Since Astley’s era in late-18th century London, circus artists have comprised a fluid international fraternity, transferring their skills and allegiances to wherever they could work to better their professional and pecuniary advantage. Within this fraternity, language, nationality and politics were negligible considerations.⁹³ Nevertheless, neither circus nor its international fraternity of artists could be quarantined from the world conflicts of 1914-18 and 1939-45, nor from the economic depression that occurred in between, each of which left their mark on circus activity in and around the Pacific.

In 1914, Germany boasted some 200 acrobatic troupes and was one of the world’s major suppliers of circus acts. With the commencement of hostilities that source was eliminated while artists from Allied nations were increasingly called up for service. ⁹⁴ During the four years of conflict, large Australian circus companies were forced to rely on ‘stock’ home acts, while importing what they could from places closer to home such as Japan or the still-neutral United States.⁹⁵

As shipping services were restored and economic conditions improved, international circus activity slowly recovered after World War 1. The traffic in circus artists moving across the Pacific between Australia and the United States was sufficiently strong by 1923 for the leading circus magnates, the Wirths in Australia and the Ringlings in the United States, to formalise an agreement for “the mutually advantageous exchange of performers.” More attention would be given by Ringling’s to importing Australian acts considered suitable for American audiences. Acts would appear in the circus of each country in the course of a year but in opposite seasons, the height of the Australian circus season taking place just as American circuses were closed for the winter.⁹⁶

During the 1930s, a number of large German circus companies sought to escape difficult economic conditions at home and, by accident or design, visited countries potentially aligned with Nazi Germany in the years leading up to World War 2. At the formal invitation of the Japanese government, Hagenbeck’s shipped from Hamburg for Yokohama in 1933 for a six-month long tour of Japan. It was the

only major Continental circus to reach the Pacific from Europe. Hagenbeck's visit to Japan fostered not only goodwill but allowed Japanese military planners the opportunity to study the logistical methods of this large, rail-borne circus. Hagenbeck's sought to return home by way of Australia but "the long sea voyage" precluded the possibility.⁹⁷

Troupes of Japanese acrobats and other performers had regularly visited Australia since 1867 but the last 'Japanese' acrobatic troupe to tour Australia, The Uyeno Troupe, actually comprised American citizens of Japanese birth or descent. Their repertoire reflected traditions both Japanese (such as foot juggling of tubs and barrels) and Western (such as springboard somersaults). The Uyenos had featured on Wirth's circus programme as early as 1921.⁹⁸ The troupe sailed from San Francisco to land in wartime Melbourne in October 1940. Although carefully promoted as The American Uyenos, the mere presence of these Japanese-Americans caused Australian military intelligence to examine the immigration files of all Wirth's 'alien' employees. As the war in the Pacific got underway, the Uyenos were obliged to join several thousand other 'enemy aliens' in an internment camp at Tatura, Victoria for the duration of the war.⁹⁹ In 1946, the Uyenos were forcibly repatriated to Japan rather than the United States. At the time, it was reported that the "Australians are deporting all Japanese [to Japan] regardless of their wishes."¹⁰⁰

From the outbreak of war in 1939, circus activity in Australia was progressively weakened by petrol rationing, lighting restrictions and manpower shortages. With the declaration of war on Japan in December 1941, people fled the coastal areas fearing imminent invasion. This was highly inconvenient for Sole Bros Circus, which had already booked grounds along the east Australian coast as far north as Brisbane. The coastal towns were now blacked out and drained of audiences. Perry Bros Circus, following a parallel itinerary in mountainous country and unimpeded by blackouts, gladly accommodated the audiences of coastal refugees. When the two circuses eventually reached Brisbane early in 1942, each was obliged to cease operations and their trucks and equipment were requisitioned for military purposes.¹⁰¹

As a morale-building measure, only Wirth's Circus was permitted to continue touring for the remainder of the war, although its programme was severely reduced and its daily advance was severely limited by a daily ration of petrol.¹⁰² It may be safely conjectured that circus activity within the Pacific basin was curtailed for the war's duration.

Conclusions

This article has considered the negotiation of the Pacific by circus entrepreneurs during the century between 1841 and 1941, chiefly with respect to: causal economic factors; logistical challenges; the emergence of defined touring

routes and circuits; and engagement with Indigenous people and societies. These themes were examined in the course of my summation of the key developments of circus history that took place within, across and around the Pacific during the century.

For circus, barring the most remote continents, the Pacific was possibly its last frontier. Whether within, across or around the Pacific, the popular appeal and infinite adaptability of this agent of capitalist expansion and Western values were tested as they had not been tested before. The Pacific both informed, and was informed by, circus activity and thus, through their negotiation of the Pacific, circus entrepreneurs took subtle but important steps to connect the world.

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