Project Title: How Meston's 'Wild Australia Show' Shaped Australian Aboriginal History

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Summary

The Wild Australia Show (1892-93), staged by a diverse company of Aboriginal people for metropolitan audiences, provides the focus for an interdisciplinary study of performance, photography, collections and race relations in colonial Australia. Using archival and visual records, and in partnership with key cultural institutions and Indigenous communities, the research seeks to produce an authoritative and original interpretation of the Show situating it within local, national and transnational narratives informed by contemporary Indigenous perspectives. It aims to illuminate Aboriginal agency in the ensemble, reconnect Aboriginal kin to performers, and chart changing concepts of race at a critical juncture in Australian history.

Impact Statement

This project aims to contribute new perspectives on Aboriginal history, & how public perceptions of Aboriginal people were shaped by influential colonial figures and contemporary politics; and to illustrate the impact of the Show on socio-economic policies, & the flow-on effects for Indigenous Australians. This research seeks to redress known knowledge gaps in Aboriginal history, performance and culture, & reconnect descendants of the troupe members, thereby contributing to spiritual wellbeing.

Aims and Background

This research maps the complex intersections of Aboriginal agency, performance and material culture with the politics and history of race in the Wild Australia Show and its aftermath. Archibald Meston toured the Wild Australia Show in 1892 in what was one of the first examples of manipulating and marketing Aboriginal people for a broad audience. Journalist, explorer and entrepreneur, Meston’s views on race directly influenced government policy and the State-based Aboriginal protection Acts. He commodified Aboriginal people and culture for public display in photographs and performances, reinforcing racial stereotypes under the guise of popular entertainment and ethnic instruction. Meston conscripted 27 Indigenous people from the Queensland frontier for choreographed performances on stages in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne.

His advocacy and stylised representations of Aboriginal culture affected the treatment and perceptions of Aboriginal people. Meston was appointed Queensland’s Southern Protector of Aboriginals in 1898 after colonial legislation adopted his ideas about the protection and incarceration of Indigenous people. Photographs and artefacts from the Wild Australia Show were traded worldwide, and performances were reported by the international press, contributing to a widespread understanding of what it meant to be Aboriginal in Australia. As a representation of Aboriginal identity and history, this proposal argues that the Show’s enduring legacy is evident in mainstream attitudes and policy, museum collections and cultural tourism practices.

Although the Wild Australia Show is occasionally referenced in existing literature, its influences and legacy have not been critically examined. This research explores how Meston’s Wild Australia Show shaped Australian Aboriginal history, with a focus on three theme areas:

1. **Politics and performance**: How did Meston’s ideologies about race shape the representation of Indigenous people in the Wild Australia Show? How did his views influence politics and society along the eastern seaboard? What were the experiences and agency of the Aboriginal performers in the Show, and what can we learn about the origins and legacy of Indigenous cultural performance?
2. Consumer perceptions and markets: What social norms did the Wild Australia Show challenge? What ideologies did it reinforce? What was the perception of the show by the public as well as local Aboriginal peoples in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne? How has the commodification of Indigenous culture in the Show contributed to contemporary understandings of being Indigenous in Australia?

3. Re-connections and Collections: Can exhibiting the Wild Australia Show re-connect the performers to their extended kin in Australia through images and artefacts? And what meanings and values does the show have for today’s Aboriginal people, organisations and artists. How will a detailed history of the show value add to major cultural collections in Australian institutions?

The research team will engage with Australian Indigenous communities to generate new knowledge about the Wild Australia troupe and the impact of the show. This includes community data collection in the three states in which the show toured, with the support of our Partner Organisations – the Queensland Museum Network (QM), Museum Victoria (MV), and the State Library of NSW (SLNSW). The proposal’s interdisciplinary research team has strong credentials in anthropology, Aboriginal and colonial history, visual analysis, material culture, and curation. These research strengths allow for genealogical research, photographic analysis, qualitative interviewing, and international research that will generate new knowledge about the Show and its influence.

The aims of these interdisciplinary and overlapping research interests are to:

- redress historical gaps and inaccuracies in our knowledge of the Show, its performer identities, artefacts and photographs, as well as its reception in Australia and around the world;
- analyse the beliefs, values and socio-political context underlying the creation, commodification and commercialization of this piece of intercultural performance and varying responses to and perceptions of its dramatic expression within colonial society and its subsequent history;
- provide alternative narratives of Indigenous/settler relations that can contribute to the deconstruction of myths about “being native” in Australia at the turn-of-the-century;
- re-connect descendants of the troupe to their history and thereby help to reclaim this past and its enduring resonances for contemporary Indigenous Australians.

Background: how a travelling show could teach the world about being Aboriginal. The Wild Australia Show emerged at a critical time in colonial history when the perception of Aboriginal people on the frontier was shifting from one of a threatening population justifiable of extermination (McGregor 1997), to that of a ‘subject’ people requiring protection. By the 1890s Australia’s Indigenous population had dropped to its lowest in the colonial era, their numbers having diminished due to introduced diseases and so-called dispersals, a euphemism for the systematic killing and displacement of Aboriginal people on a ruthless and violent colonial frontier particularly across the Queensland frontier during the second half of the nineteenth century (see Cole 2004; Sutton 2005; Bottoms 2013).

The Wild Australia Show was conceived by Meston as a travelling troupe of 32 Aboriginal people conscripted from the Queensland frontier. Some 27 eventually performed in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne during 1892-93 in preparation for departure on an international tour to Chicago, the host of the 1893 World Fair. Meston’s vision for the Wild Australia Show was to be a demonstration of the superior physique and skills of the “wild” Aborigines, presented for the last time because of theories of likely racial extinction. The Show never left Australia, however, as plans were curtailed during the Melbourne leg of the tour due to contractual disputes, scandals of financial incompetence, and accusations of troop members being held against their will in chains. Instead, the Wild Australia Show achieved an international market through concepts, images and artefacts traded overseas.

During the troupe’s tour to Sydney and Melbourne, striking portraits of the performers were taken by three leading Australian studio photographers: Charles Kerry (Sydney), Henry King (Sydney), and John W. Lindt (Melbourne) (Frost 1974, Burke 1983, King 1983). These photographs were traded through global networks and are held by museums, libraries and private collections around the world, where they continue to communicate ideologies about Australian Indigenous people to international audiences.

A year after the Australian tour finished, Meston was commissioned by the Queensland Government to set out his views on racial engineering, which were published as Queensland Aboriginals, Proposed System for their Improvement and Preservation (Meston 1895). He made a case for Aboriginal Reserves
as isolated settlements administered by an Aboriginal Protector with a capacity to contract indentured labour to free settlers. This position, which Meston promoted during the Show, became enshrined in *The Aboriginal Protection and Sale of Opium Act, 1897* under which Meston was appointed Protector for Southern Queensland. By 1911, other states (WA, SA, NSW, and later the Northern Territory) had also embedded these principles of subordination and confinement in legislation (Rowley 1970: 227). Subsequent variants of the Queensland Act directly affected generations of Aboriginal people for the next six decades, and further sanctioned policies that led to the Stolen Generations and the Stolen Wages controversies. The relationship between the Show and the development of government policies is a central concern of this proposal.

![Figure 1: Travel route of the ‘Wild Australia Show’ troupe during 1892-93, with the tribal territories of origin of the troupe members. (Map by Aboriginal Environments Research Centre, University of Queensland.)](image)

![Figure 2: One of the many advertisements for the Show that appeared in metropolitan newspapers.](image)

**Existing evidence: gaps and inaccuracies in what is known.** Through seed research in 2014, CI Paul Memmott and Michael Aird identified significant knowledge gaps in Australia’s understanding of the background to the Wild Australia Show and its contemporary implications. Initial investigations by the project team found the misrepresentation of troupe members in more than 120 photographs, through inaccurate labelling and provenance of images, which have been reproduced through an international network trading in Indigenous photographs. This research discovered that the troupe members came from the Wakaya people of the Northern Territory; groups from around Normanton including Kuthant, Kuthjar, Arapa, Walangama, Mayikulan; Kalkadungu people from west of Cloncurry; Prince of Wales Island in the Torres Strait; and the Kabi Kabi in south-east Queensland (Aird et al. 2015). What is not known are the particular circumstances in which the performers were recruited; the relationships which developed among them; their experiences on tour; and the nature of their dealings with Meston and his partners. A particular and novel aim of this research is to focus on the performers’ experiences, as far as the visual, material and archival sources allow, contextualised through a broader scholarship on indigenous performance in colonial and imperial contexts (see Poignant 2006; Treagus 2008).
Although some significant bio-historical research on Meston has been published (Evans 1975: Thorpe 1978, 1984; McKay 1996; Walker 2002; Taylor 2003), and despite references to the Wild Australia Show, no in-depth comprehensive research on the Show has been undertaken to date. As a result, we do not have an understanding of the Show’s constituent events, ideological conflicts, and impacts on shaping and influencing views about Aboriginal people in the wider Australian society and internationally. The most insightful research has been done by Thorpe (in terms of Meston’s complex psychology) and Taylor (on his construction of Aboriginality), while in contrast, the lack of a coherent history of the Show led to errors in Walker (2002). The sociological global context for the proposed presentation of the Show at the World Fair in Chicago has been researched by McKay (1996), involving such issues as attracting immigrants, foreign investment, and finding new markets for Queensland’s products while displaying its most “primitive, Stone Age” people.

SIGNIFICANCE AND INNOVATION
The project is based on an interdisciplinary approach to research of Aboriginal performance in colonial and imperial contexts, which brings together anthropology, history, visual analysis, and collections research, and in which exhibition development and reconnection with collections constitutes a critical component of the research engagement with Aboriginal communities. From the archival and ethnographic research, the study would produce the first concise and comprehensive chronology and history of the Wild Australia Show, its influences and impacts, and its enduring resonances.

This proposal aims to document detailed histories of the performers and their involvement in the Show, adding to scholarship on Aboriginal agency and mobility at a critical time in colonial history. An exhibition (2015) and research by Memmott and Aird provide the framework for a travelling exhibition of images that can reconnect Aboriginal people to their kin in the troupe. This engagement with Aboriginal communities has the potential to identify related communities that have deep connections with the people in the archival photographs. Through the interdisciplinary research, this reconnection extends to the extensive collections of artefacts alienated from communities in the public institutions, including the Partner Organisations. The combination of research on the Show and the reception of the photographs in Aboriginal communities will contribute to historical memory and identity formation. Innovative approaches to the re-presentation and reinterpretation of archival photographs, based on extensive archival research (for example, as in Aird’s Transforming Tindale – see Besley 2015) will stimulate intercultural dialogue between Indigenous and other Australians.

The significance of the research is based on its:
• contribution to new perspectives on Aboriginal history and the way in which public perceptions of Aboriginal people
• were shaped by popular performance, visual representation, and influential colonial figures
• illustration of the Show’s impact on social policy, and the enduring effects for Indigenous Australians
• reconnection of Wild Australia Show’s descendants and communities to artefacts, photographs and other materials
• direct engagement of Aboriginal people with their colonial histories, and
• knowledge production that supports future major exhibitions by Partner Organisations that can challenge contemporary mainstream attitudes to race and Indigenous cultural performance
Frequently acquired during unequal power relations, collections of Indigenous material present a major challenge for museums and public institutions. This project contributes innovative ways to reconnect material to affiliated communities and present collections to the public with narratives that contextualise material culture. For the Partner Organisations, the research has the potential to add value to their extensive public collections of artefacts and documents from the early colonial period: e.g. Queensland Museum holds 875 collection items attributed to the troupe’s managers Meston and Purcell and a pastoralist associate, Coghlan. The research provides a possibility for richer interpretations of the significant public collections of Indigenous artefacts and archival material. The research and reconnection to Aboriginal descendants of the Show’s ensemble establishes new narratives for people and objects.

As sites of knowledge production, cultural institutions participate in a value creation process through circulation of their collections. Objects (including photographic images) gain new meaning as they are interpreted by members of home communities and also by the broader population of the museum audience. The curation of the traveling exhibitions, and the recalibration in response to reception, is able to establish interactive practices between Indigenous communities and public collections. As a result, the images contribute historical and aesthetic knowledge to the visual archives of local, regional and national communities.

For Aboriginal People: Importantly, this research has the potential to engage the descendants of troupe members in the recovery of the history of their ancestors and through this to strengthen their connection to their history and heritage. Connection to one’s history and heritage has been identified as contributing to health and wellbeing. Understanding the historical events that led to the separation of families and of people from their tribal lands is of high priority to many Aboriginal people today, yet younger generations have only a sketchy knowledge of it. This knowledge aids affected people to deal with grief and anger, and build and strengthen their cultural identities. This project therefore has a capacity to contribute to the mental and spiritual wellbeing of Indigenous Australians, both in urban and regional communities. In this way it will contribute positively and effectively to, and is clearly aligned with, The Australian Government’s Science and Research Priority Number 9, ‘Health’.

Significance for Aboriginal people is also likely to be generated from Michael Aird’s ongoing analytic methodology in his style of curatorial visual anthropology as reviewed by Besley (2015) of his work:

"His work makes a strong claim for photography’s capacity to define Aboriginal history, on Aboriginal terms that are separate from contemporary politics, connected instead to an enduring social world of reciprocity, kinship and community. Aird’s research demonstrates that Aboriginal people have always engaged with contemporary media and sought to control the conditions of their representation, even in the most difficult of circumstances. His exhibitions and publications bring this insistence to public attention, prompting dialogue and continued probing."