Sequins under the Big Top: Women in the Australian Circus

John Ramsland

The present generation has the sawdust in its blood, but it is blended with gum leaves. The girls are not only pretty, but graceful, most daring and ambitious, and in this their first ‘metropolitan’ session they have firmly established themselves as favourites. Here, practising in the ring, they are quiet modest lasses, very anxious to excel.


Gina stared at her mother. There was no mistaking the significance of Lotty Haxby’s glance.

‘When?’

‘Oh, in about four months’, Mrs Haxby said in the same tone of weary irritation. ‘And I don’t mind telling you I’m fed up, Gina. Had as many babies as I want. A machine for churnin’ out acrobats and bare-back riders that’s all I am ... It’s the show all the time with your father — the dammed show. That’s all he thinks about ... cares for ... and my job is to supply performers.’

Katharine Susannah Prichard, Haxby’s Circus (1930)

Prichard’s Haxby’s Circus, set in the 1920s, concentrates on the ordinary working lives of a small travelling family circus. In the novel the circus woman is represented as a human incubator for the next generation of circus performers. Such a cultural tradition requires the woman to produce a large family, to contribute to performance and to carry out duties on the circus site. Dorothy Ashton, one of the great Australian circus matriarchs, put it in this fashion in the early 1950s: ‘I figured it like this ... stock’s as good as money and it didn’t look as if we’d have too much money. We had eight children’. Dorothy Ashton, a bare-back rider, and James Hay, a circus musician, produced the six brothers and two sisters of ‘the gold-plated troupe of circus performers’ called The Flying Ashtons who were to top the bill in Europe and America, having started modestly as the sole performers in their parent’s small outback circus ‘under leaky canvas’.

In a manner similar to a social historian, Prichard attempts to define and analyse the nature of Australian society encapsulated in the microcosm of the Australian travelling circus. Yet few social historians have bothered with circuses. Prichard wrote her novel soon after travelling with Wirth’s Circus as their ‘assistant lion tamer’, as she called herself in the novel’s acknowledgments. With Wirth’s, she travelled across the countryside in a hectic season, taking down her daily observations in note form.

Her inspiration for the novel came during the 1914-18 war, while she was visiting her brother who was a general practitioner in the Victorian town of Pyramid Hill. A seriously injured woman circus rider was brought to the surgery after an accident. Prichard stayed with the woman and comforted her until treatment could be arranged.
Her brother was attending another case when the injured girl was brought to the country surgery by her father. After talking with the girl’s father, Prichard resolved to write a novel about her one day. In time the girl was fictionally rendered as Gina, the central character in *Haxby’s Circus*.

Gina encapsulates Prichard’s observations about the treatment of women in family circuses and of the changing status of the individual female performer through life’s good and bad fortunes. The world that Prichard depicts is one of relentless wandering, of pitching the big top on bare paddocks beside a small outback town, and then trailing off on the long dusty roads again. It was a courageous but cruel world — at times a hard and hungry world.

Gina is able to realise her potential through adversity and triumphs as the circus proprietor. Her career begins as a graceful bare-back rider — the star of the show. She suffers a tragic accident that turns her into a hunch-back confined initially to the drudgery of mending circus costumes in the work tent. Eventually she re-emerges to take over the circus management after her father’s sudden death. Gina’s rise to a high status, while not unusual in post-colonial circuses, would have been less possible in the nineteenth century. At the novel’s end Gina, dressed in ‘black satin’ or a ‘dress of figured silk’ and heavy jewellery, an ‘amber necklace’, ‘ear-rings’ and ‘two or three diamond rings’, becomes an ‘exacting taskmaster, very strict and finicky about her instructions being carried out’. She rages, as her father had, ‘at anybody who ... did not train systematically’. In a real sense, she becomes the very image of a typical circus matriarch.

By 1953, the Ashton family had been in the circus business for 118 years and could boast five generations of sawdust ring history. Their press releases proclaim the Ashton’s to be Australia’s oldest, best known family circus operators and the family boasted that an Ashton could be found in every circus, sideshow and vaudeville company in the country. Indeed, their fame was spreading throughout the world. Their names could be seen on the billing at the New York latin quarter and at the London Palladium, in lights outside great European theatres and on circus posters in Australia, Britain, the United States, Europe and South Africa. Like all circus families, however, their fortunes fluctuated through the generations and through good and difficult times.

The flagship of the Ashton family by the 1950s continued to be the travelling tent circus itself. At that time it was run by Douglas Ashton who was then in his mid-thirties. In 1937 he had married Phyllis Kelroy, a young trapeze artist whose parents had worked for Ashton’s since she was a small child. Apart from performing with her proprietor husband in the high trapeze, she gave birth to three children: Lorraine, Mervyn, and Jan — already by the early 1950s seasoned circus performers. Douglas Ashton had taken over the proprietorship of the circus from his father. In his turn Mervyn, who had married the trapeze artist Nikki Hicks, has taken over from his father and at present runs the Ashton Family Circus. But they are under the mentorship of Douglas and Phyllis Ashton as patriarch and matriarch of four existing generations of Ashtons still living in the circus community, which amounts to twenty nine persons including seven school age children.

The Ashton’s are a close knit and proud circus family. They are widely recognised as the aristocrats of the Australian circus. Douglas and Phyllis Ashton, now both in
their 70s, claim consistently in news releases that not one of their children, grandchildren, or great grandchildren has left the circus. Their own three children have married a clown, a lion-tamer and a trapeze artist respectively. All have now produced their own families and the next generation of circus performers. The matriarch and patriarch live in a well appointed caravan which is always strategically parked near the entrance of the big top and is known as the ‘front door’ where family come for advice and instruction at all hours of the day or night. They negotiate with local suppliers and put away the night’s takings. Officially retired, both work behind the scenes to provide a subtle form of social control for the younger generations of performing Ashtons. They have spent their entire life on the road as did their parents.

In her role as matriarch, Phyllis Ashton, does not smoke or drink and sets high standards of conduct. Her days as an active performer came abruptly to an end when she injured her back in a fall from the trapeze. Now she is active at the business end and keeps the accounts dealing with group tax, payroll tax, workers’ compensation and other matters. In her youth her life as a performer was much harder. In one article in a popular magazine during the early 1950s she was depicted as:

Slim, blonde, green-eyed Phyllis Ashton, like all circus wives is something of a miracle worker. She cooks, sews, washes, irons, organises, trains horses and turns up smartly for her acts. One day a driver quit without notice and she had another task tossed in her lap. Without instruction she took over the three-ton truck and handled it so well she’s still got the job.

Phyllis’ father-in-law, Joe Ashton, met his bride in the audience at Maitland. He had an act where the pony was supposed to pick out the prettiest woman in the audience. One night he made sure that the pony stopped in front of a young woman he had noticed earlier. He met her after the show. Ivy Fullford was eighteen at the time and a well-known swimmer, foot runner and skater. Her athletic skills made her an ideal mate for a circus man. Aspects of circus marriage had to have practical commercial considerations. The two honeymooned at Dorrigo, camping on the river bank where Joe taught his new wife the first steps in a number of acts. She swung on the Roman rings and learned to ride the ponies bareback. After a couple of weeks Joe bought a small tent and the couple were suddenly in the circus business. The honeymoon functioned, clearly, as a process of initiation into circus life.

His grandson Mervyn followed the same pattern when he married Nikki Hicks who had excelled at sport, especially competitive swimming and diving and who had been extensively trained in ballet. Mervyn Ashton recognised her athletic ability soon after she joined Ashton’s as a dancer and successfully trained her instead as a trapeze artist. At the age of eighteen, however, while she was performing the cloud swing — a complex series of balances, somersaults and turns on a slack, horizontal rope high in the big top — she fell about twenty-eight feet onto her chest, just missing the ringbox. Knocked unconscious, her injuries included a broken left hand, seven broken ribs, a fractured elbow and shoulder. She spent two months in hospital. She later had a damaged kidney removed. She refused to accept the advice that she would never swing the trapeze again but began a rehabilitation program which included squeezing a tennis ball in her hand and carrying buckets of water to the circus caravans. Eventually, she returned to the trapeze.
At the age of twenty-two Nikki Hicks became part of the circus family when she married Mervyn Ashton. Now in her fifties she is the senior trapeze artist in Ashton’s Circus — a performance career of remarkable longevity. Her son Joe, who is in his early twenties, is the principal flyer and performs with her on the high trapeze each night as does her daughter Bekki. Although born outside the circus life, Hicks assimilated into its extended family demands with success and full acceptance.

Bekki has achieved great fame recently, especially amongst circus folk themselves. On the 22 June 1994 at Brisbane she performed the rare feat of a triple somersault on the trapeze before a capacity crowd who displayed their appreciation with thunderest applause. It is believed that Bekki Ashton is the first Australian woman to perform the triple. She has joined a legendary band internationally that have achieved this most difficult feat. Bekki, like all traditional female circus performers, presents herself to the audience in an elaborately designed skin tight costume that emphasises her well conditioned legs and her feminine shape. The emphasis on gender differences is important in traditional circus costume design.

Not only is the Ashton family hierarchical and extended like the other Australian circus families, it is also self-perpetuating. The young learn their skills at a very early age, develop into accomplished performers in their teenage years and slowly drift into administrative, leadership roles as their physical stamina begins to wane in middle age. Ashton family members claim that they were never pushed into performing but a subtle, invisible pressure is nevertheless there. An illustrative description concerns Jan Ashton in 1971:

Jan at fourteen can talk maturely about her life. She always watched the show when little and hoped that she would have talent. She grew up using the gear as toys. At the age of four she was in the ring assisting her sister in the whip act. At ten she had an act of her own, a simple bare-back ballet. June of the wardrobe coached her in arabesques, pirouettes and points to the roller. Although Jan prefers performing with horses she wants to master everything — it is so necessary in emergencies.

Jan’s day is a long hard one: up at about six-thirty. At the new lot she helps Phyllis get dinner and unpack the caravan; ornaments are put out every day. She does school work from one till four, sent by the Correspondence School in Sydney. At five-thirty there is a snack before she gets dressed to go on duty at the big top door from seven till eight ... She is in the show early on the single trapeze. Soon after comes her ballet on horseback. After a short spell she joins the other young girls for an aerial ballet in fluorescing costumes ... After the show there’s supper so Jan is never in bed until after eleven. Her only grizzle is that they never get a meal in peace. She is proud of the circus and its good name and wants no other life.

Jan’s circus work ethic was by this time so internalised that she was a part of the ongoing circus culture which gave her, as a young adolescent, a strong sense of identity and belonging. Later in the 1970s she married another circus performer from Spain, Brazil Rodríguez. In 1997 their daughter Tamara Rodríguez turned seventeen. A second daughter, Shantel, is eight. Both daughters are training and performing under parental guidance. Thus does the Ashton circus dynasty pass on its knowledge to the next generation. The circus gains and loses the occasional
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traveller along the way but the family circus corporate remains in a steady state from generation to generation. ¹¹

The quintessential circus matriarch was Dorothy Ashton, the sister of Joe Ashton who led, guided and controlled The Flying Ashtons, the world famous aerialists, in the 1950s. All were her sons and daughters. Dorothy trained her children and single handedly led them to the top of their profession. They successfully toured South Africa, England, Europe and America including a term with Sonja Henie’s famous ice show and a command performance in England. ¹²

Dorothy Ashton was born in Young, New South Wales, in 1896. Her grandfather, James Ashton, ran Ashton’s Circus as its founder and she spent her early life as a bare-back rider, tumbler and all-round performer, touring under canvas and living in horse-drawn circus caravans. In 1923, at the age of twenty-seven, she married Jim Hay, a trumpet player with the circus and together they produced eight children, the next generation of performers. The growing family lived in poverty in a tent during the great depression on the outskirts of the industrial town of Lithgow, New South Wales. Jim Hay made a few shillings playing his trumpet in the street and chopping wood. Then they were moved into a small house provided by the generous Lithgow community who had recognised their plight. Later they shifted to a house in the inner Sydney suburb of Newtown and Jim began to train the youngsters in circus performance skills in the back yard.

The youngsters, assisted by their parents, started to do an aerial act with Coles Varieties and Sorlies, two popular variety travelling shows who toured the countryside. By the time the youngest girl Ruva was in the act they were with the powerful Tivoli Circuit in the metropolises of Melbourne and Sydney. During the second world war the two eldest boys joined the military forces and the rest of the show travelled around the country entertaining troops. About this time their father dropped from the scene. After the war they re-formed under their mother’s sole leadership and performed again with the Tivoli Circuit. They then accepted an offer to tour South Africa for a lucrative fee. From South Africa they went to England and tumbled their way to the top under their mother’s astute guidance.

They appeared in the London Palladium — mecca for all variety artists — a record seven times and often topped the bill in Paris and most European capitals. They appeared several times on English television and had a six month run on Broadway, New York, at the latin quarter, followed by a further six months in Miami. By that time they were among the highest paid variety acts in the world. ¹³ They had become a significant part of the modern international entertainment scene, despite the traditional nature of their act. Dorothy ‘Ma’ Ashton had masterminded the whole campaign:

For a matriarchy, absolute and apparently endless, is what Dorothy Ashton has evolved with her little scheme. Undoubtedly this deceptively homely figure, warm, erratic, hair-raisingly candid and sometimes touchingly naive, is ring-mistress of her circus in every sense of the word. She signs the contracts, decides when and where and for how long her children will perform, doles out money to them more or less as she sees fit, plans their acts, designs their costumes, shepherds them around the world, pays their hotel bills, sees them out of bed in time to catch trains, ar-
ranges passports and visas, helps them pack. Wherever the Ashton children are, there is their mother, fussing, soothing, directing and educating.14

Her matriarchy was represented in popular magazine articles as benevolent. She used tact, humour and displayed physical stamina to cope with her adult children’s high spirits. She manipulated modern transportation to maximise profits and had an excellent grasp of international cash flow in the entertainment world. She embraced modernity while still maintaining the traditional cultural relations and social control of a circus family. Some of the older children were married and she planned to incorporate her grandchildren into the act when they came of age. At one level she seemed like a behind-the-scenes manipulator of a troupe of puppets but, according to the representation of her in the popular media, her control only lasted as long as the curtain was up and she was pulling the strings.15 The Flying Ashtons performed before George the VI and his family, Queen Juliana and Prince Bernhardt of Holland, King Feisal of Iraq, the Duchess of Kent, Winston Churchill and General Montgomery.16 While their surname was actually Hay, they had adopted the Ashton name for professional reasons. There are matriarchal elements in its adoption as well.

In the golden age of the circus, which lasted from the turn of the century to the mid 1920s, the Australian bare-back rider, May Wirth, made her American debut in spectacular fashion in 1912 with Barnum and Bailey’s Circus at Madison Square Gardens in New York. For the occasion, Madison Square Gardens was decorated with electric signs proclaiming ‘May Wirth, the Australian Wizard rider, the Champion of all times’. Her act was introduced with the spectacle of two dozen horsemen in hussar uniform galloping around the hippodrome and forming a guard of honour to welcome the seventeen year old Australian to her packed, excited American audience.17 The young Australian performer had immediate and spectacular success on the American entertainment scene.

For a few accomplished performers in early twentieth century Australia, only unremitting training and commitment could reap such international fame and glory. Their spectacular international careers reflected the high quality of Australian circus of the period and the training that was provided within them. May Wirth, who was born in Bundaberg, Queensland, in 1894, was the daughter of John Zinga, an unevenly-tempered gymnast, of Mauritian creole origin, and Dezeppo Marie, a performer of Indian, Jewish and English extraction. Born into a family of circus performers, May’s future world of show business seemed predestined. She was only three years old when her father began to teach her the basics of tumbling and contortion work. At the age of five, she did her first act in show business, a little contortion act. But, in 1901, her mother, unable to take any more domestic violence, deserted Zinga. She offered May to the powerful Wirth circus family for adoption. No official papers record May’s transfer to her new family. May, then seven years of age, wept at being seperated from her mother, brothers and sister. But in her new surroundings, Australia’s most prestigious circus, her career as a performer would flourish.

No longer a member of a struggling family of employed performers, she lived now in the compartment of her new parents — Marizles Wirth Martin and her husband John Martin — on the Wirth circus train. In Marizles Wirth Martin’s care, May’s station was now clearly above the common lot of employed performers. She received
a schooling in the ‘three R’s’ for two hours every day. Her tutor was George Anderson, an old-fashioned schoolmaster who was the manager of the circus. Her ‘schoolroom’ was the dining car of the circus train. But, with the notable exception of geography, May disliked lessons. The largest circus in Australia at the time was her combined real home, school, and playground. The youngster took to all facets of circus life. She travelled the length and breadth of Australia and New Zealand in Wirth’s Circus, an education in itself. Circus children grow up quickly in the adult world of itinerant show people, mixing constantly with all ages, races and nationalities. May’s knowledge of geography throughout Australasia developed well beyond what any child could learn from a textbook.

Marizles Martin, a founding member of the Wirth Bros Circus, was a sister of George, John and Phillip Wirth and married to John Martin, a bandsman in the Wirth circus band. From her foster mother May inherited the powerful professional name of ‘Wirth’. Marizles and John Martin’s only natural daughter, Stella, born in January 1892, was two years older than May. But, while Stella was being afforded convent boarding school education, May’s raw talent was cultivated through long hours of arduous training. However outwardly kind and generous the Wirth’s treatment of May was — adopted circus children were rarely treated as well — she was adopted for commercial exploitation, a role which the astute Wirth spared her natural daughter, Stella.

Immediately after May had been adopted by the Martins, they left Melbourne for Ballarat by train to catch up with the circus as it played through provincial Victoria. The girl had been neglected. Marizles had her hair shaved off during the trip to cure a head infection. Marizles later recounted the episode which was a somewhat ignoble start to what was to prove an astonishing career: ‘I had May’s head shaved bald and made her a tight cap to wear. She cried when she saw her hair falling. The only consolation was when I told her that her hair would grow curly. I made her some clothes and she felt very happy.’

Under Marizles’ guidance and through hard, regular training, May developed into a fine equestrienne. Her new professional career was underway by 1904. At first the eight year old was billed as ‘Little May’, ‘May Martin’ or, after the great American circus, as ‘May Ringling’. May’s ability soon was acclaimed by audiences in rural and urban Australia. She featured prominently on the program of the popular Wirth Bros Circus.

On 3 April 1911 the Sydney Morning Herald described May, now fifteen years old, as ‘a remarkably pretty girl who rode and drove eight ponies and turned somersaults on a cantering grey’ at the opening performance of the season in Sydney. A star-studded show by Australian standards, May was universally acclaimed as its most popular, talented star.

A month later, May, together with her stepmother and stepsister, left by ship for America. Their expectations were to be realised in a country that had developed a strong, diverse entertainment industry. Under Marizles’ supervision she gave a riding exhibition for John Ringling in New York soon after her arrival and within a short time she gained a much envied star engagement with Barnum and Bailey for its 1912 program. She was to become ‘the brightest light of that monster organisation’. By
1913 she had won an engagement as the principal star at the Olympia in London. There she appeared before royalty at a gala performance. By this time, despite her youth, she was acclaimed as ‘the foremost circus equestrienne in the world’. May’s sister Stella performed on horseback in the same act. Marizles acted as ring-mistress during the performance of May and her troupe of riders who were elegantly gowned in grey and silver evening dress. Frank White, another Australian equestrian who was later to marry May, worked with her as a dress-suited gentleman ‘of very English type’ during the acrobatic and equestrian ringplay.¹⁹

Strengthened by her London acclaim, May returned to Australia in early October 1915 for a season with Wirth Bros Circus. The Bulletin reported her international stardom in its usual sardonic manner: ‘A feature of this season’s tour of Wirth Brother’s Circus will be Miss May Wirth who, a couple of years ago, was acclaimed by USA critics to be the finest circus horsewoman in their country — which of course, meant the world’.²⁰ May and her troupe were now billed as the Royal Martin Wirth Family and appeared in the 1915-1916 season with Wirth Bros Circus on tour throughout Australia and New Zealand. Although May performed brilliantly on her white charger, she found local audiences curiously apathetic in comparison to her experience overseas, possibly because they had seen it all before.

Still, there were perceptive critics who were more appreciative. In April 1916, the Sydney Morning Herald observed after the opening night of Wirth Circus in the newly built hippodrome on the corner of Campbell and Hay Streets, Sydney, that: ‘Miss May Martin Wirth’s youthful grace gave distinction to her equestrian dancing, in which she faced either way whilst her white charger cantered round, and dainty somersaults captivated the crowd, ending in a presentation of flowers, which included the tactful ringmistress Mrs Wirth ... [Marizles Martin]’.²¹ Finding her Australian experience limiting, May returned with her adoptive family to the United States to rejoin Ringling Bros’ Circus as a main attraction. They were soon joined by another brilliant Australian rider, Phillip St Leon, who had been billed as ‘Miss Phillippina’. Again, May and her troupe were well received by enthusiastic American audiences: ‘May Martin Wirth, of the Australian Circus family, has been astonishing Chicago at the Coliseum, where they clear four stages and two rings when it is time for the dashing little horsewoman to skip in for her act. The average daily attendance at the giant showplace is between 10,000 and 12,000 and the Australian girl is star of the long bill.’²² She remained in the United States to pursue her career. She was the star of the Ringling Circus (later combined with another Ringling owned circus organisation to form Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey’s Combined Shows) until 1927, except for the seasons of 1921 and 1923 when May and her troupe were featured with the Walter L. Main Circus and in between, in 1922, when they played at major fairs throughout rural America. During the winter off-seasons, she and her troupe appeared on vaudeville or toured Europe.

At her peak May Wirth confessed she had always wanted to achieve whatever circus boys could do and was never satisfied until her goal was accomplished. In fact, few male riders managed to surpass what she could perform on horseback, while no other female bareback rider equalled her. An eminent American circus ringmaster, Fred Bradna, estimated her as the ‘finest equestrienne of all time’ in his book The Big Top.²³ May Wirth was small in stature but muscular from her early
training. For her performance, she customarily bobbed her dark brown hair with a large pink bow that became her trade mark. She had been trained during girlhood in wire walking, acrobatics, trapeze work, bars and ballet dancing. Equestrians needed a practical background training in all these arts to achieve perfection in circus bareback riding. She could perform a series of seven somersaults on a horse in one circle of the ring — a spectacular, difficult act. She performed jumps from the floor of the sawdust ring to the horse and landed either on her feet or in riding position. On horseback she was able to make a series of three somersaults followed by a forward somersault. She could take off facing the tail of the horse and turn a back somersault with a half-pirouette in order to land near the horse’s neck, faced towards the horse’s head, a trick accomplished by very few circus performers. In 1931 she and her troupe even took part in Kalman’s opera *The Circus Princess*, which featured the riders galloping on their steeds around a circus ring on the stage of the Chicago Opera House. In 1937, at the age of forty-three, May Wirth retired. She died in Florida in 1978, forgotten in her native Australia.

Circus Oz, founded in the same year, represents a more recent phenomenon in circus culture and has achieved international fame, having performed in Luxemburg, Amsterdam, Bonn, Brussels, London, Edinburgh and Los Angeles. Its performance style is a radical departure from the traditional family-centred travelling circus with its sharp gender differentiation as displayed and manifested in costume design and other performance factors and its hierarchical patriarchal-matriarchal structure. The members of Circus Oz view themselves ideologically as a ‘collective of performers, technicians, artists, show-offs and very ordinary people’ who live and work together in a ‘tribe’ rather than a ‘nuclear family/production unit’. Their stance is anti-family, utopian and anti-nuclear as well as being strongly focused on political and social issues such as feminism, collectivism and Aboriginal land rights. Hence costume design avoids sharp gender differentiation. Performances are spiced with radical social comments and are an eccentric mixture of acrobatics, rock’n’roll, juggling, trapeze, jug band and socio-political satire. Trained animals are not used and considered ideologically unsound. Circus Oz’s 1984 appearance at the olympic arts festival prompted the *Los Angeles Times* to acclaim it as ‘a bright beautiful bunch of wonderfully androgynous Australians, straight from the planet Oz who may have redefined Circus forever’.

Circus programs have always had the prerogative of a necessary gender balance. Female circus stars were always at least as popular as male stars and audiences always demanded both. The juxtaposition of the male and female body was basic to the visual representation of most circus acts. The Australian circus still caters for its audiences by exhibiting the harmoniously functioning female and male human body with complete control over nerve or sinew. Since its re-invention at the close of the 18th century, the circus has always been embedded in the physical action of circus acts as moving human sculptures. Horse riding, wirewalking, clowning, acrobatics, juggling, lion-taming, trapeze work and so on are traditionally performed by both males and females. Costumes have only been gradually modified. The physical agility of the human body and the spectacular blending of colour, light and sound are what audiences have come to expect. While modernity in technology has been embraced by circus management, the actual performance of the human performer in the circus has remained strongly traditional.
Marriage in the Australian circus appears always to have been a coolly arranged affair. Clear consideration was given to the woman’s athletic potential on the sawdust ring, to her stamina in coping with the manifold rigours of the life, to her ability to adapt to changing conditions, and to her child-bearing capacities. This was especially the case with women entering into marriage alliances from outside the circus environment, for example, Ivy Fullford and Nikki Hicks, both competitive swimmers of renown. Women born within Australian circus tended to marry members of other prominent circus families, or at least circus employees. A case was the marriage of three third generation Ashton sisters — Kate, Stella and Gladys — to three brothers from the Perry Circus Family — George, Mick and Charles. Thus two major circus dynasties, the Ashtons and the Perrys, developed powerful family alliances.

Life for a woman in the travelling circus seems like an endless odyssey. Many Australian circus families have been in circus life for seven generations. Everyone within the Australian circus family knows each other well—relationships are primary and social control is informal, but strong and effective. Circus is their world, their tradition, their life. There is a keen sense of right and wrong. Although the social structure of the circus community seems egalitarian, well defined differences in status are still evident. People marry within the circus community. Children of circus families have lived, worked and matured in the close company of adults. Each generation is born into a similar world, the cohesive folk culture of the preceding generation. The long experience of previous generations is handed down intact to young beginners. People of the circus family work together, spent their leisure together and share similar values. The circus community is seemingly unchanging, unified, small and familial, isolated and self-sufficient, yet publicly visible. Katharine Prichard captured the atmosphere of the travelling circus community when she wrote:

The circus lived a life separate and apart in all the country it travelled through. With the pride of a wandering race, the circus folk held themselves aloof, knowing that people who stuck fast in towns and on farms regarded them as freaks, curiosities, thieves and chicken stealers, and with the ethic of a nomadic and adventurous people, despised and were contemptuous of the stick-in-the-muds.

Circus children — female and male — grow up with a deep abiding sense of belonging to the folk culture of the circus world. The circus, in a palpable sense is their family. But: ‘The light moves away in the wake of the jinker; the sound of men’s voices singing some noisy popular air grows fainter and fainter. The light fades away in the blackness of the night and all is quiet. The circus has gone’.

Endnotes

2  Ibid.
3  Katharine Susannah Prichard, Haxby’s Circus, dedication opposite p. 1.
5  ‘Saga of the Circus’, People, 22 April 1953, p. 15.
7  John Stapleton & Brendan Road, ‘Behind the Facade of the Circus Folk’, The Sydney
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Morning Herald, 3 January 1990, pp. 10-11.
8 ‘Saga of the Circus’, pp. 16-18.
11 Ramsland with St Leon, op. cit., p. 92.
12 ‘Saga of the Circus’, People, 22 April 1953, p. 16.
15 Ibid, p. 27.
16 Ibid.
18 Marizles, Martin (interview with) in Mark St Leon ‘Australian Circus Reminiscences’, unpublished manuscript, Auchmuty Library, The University of Newcastle.
20 The Bulletin, 7 October 1915.
21 The Sydney Morning Herald, 4 April 1916.
24 Greaves, The Circus Comes to Town, p. 41.
25 Ramsland and St Leon, op. cit., p. 57.
26 As cited in Ramsland and St Leon, op.cit., p. 96.
27 ‘Saga of the Circus’, op. cit., p. 15.
28 Prichard, Haxby’s Circus, op. cit.