

*The FitzGerald Brothers' Circus: Spectacle, Identity, and Nationhood at the Australian Circus*

Gillian Arrighi

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Reviewed by Caroline Daley

Whangarei is not the most obvious starting point for a book about the Australian circus, but that is where *The FitzGerald Brothers' Circus* begins. On a cold and windy night, back in May 1898, hundreds gathered in Whangarei, waiting to be entertained. But bad weather delayed the coastal steamer bringing the circus to town. The FitzGerald company finally arrived at 11 pm. Rather than disappoint their audience, the company got straight to work, erected their tent and began their much-delayed show at 2 am. Their performance was a success, as were their shows at 2 pm and 7 pm that same day. Within 24 hours, having performed for 2,000 people, the circus moved on.

As an opening act, the Whangarei anecdote is not as comical as the clown entrée who amused the crowd before the headline performers entered the FitzGerald Brothers' tent. But Gillian Arrighi's decision to begin her book with a New Zealand story is instructive. This is not a book about the circus in Australia; the FitzGerald Brothers' show was as popular in New Zealand as it was across the Tasman, and even had its moments in Shanghai, Singapore and the other Straits Settlements. Rather, Arrighi has written the story of the rise and ultimate demise of a family business that was of its time and its place. Although modelled on successful circuses in the United States, Britain and continental Europe, Arrighi argues that Dan and Tom FitzGerald created an Australian circus. By this she means a circus that was in tune with its context. Spectacle was always to the fore, but issues of nationhood and identity were ever present.

For those not familiar with the world of the circus, this book offers a well-written introduction to the history of circuses and to the various performers and acts that one might witness in a nineteenth or early twentieth century circus tent. Arrighi has mined the contemporary press, and used the fragmentary sources that the FitzGerald circus left behind, to good effect. Her descriptions of high diving into a small and shallow tank of water, taming lions and training 'talking' horses give the reader a sense of the excitement felt in Brisbane and Invercargill when the FitzGerald's brought their new show to town. And she has an eye for some of the circus's more memorable moments. The comedy of Guillaume and Auguste and their matador act, which involved their small family dog, dressed in a fabric suit, complete with rubber horns, playing the part of the bull, is suitably clownish. Even better is the postscript: when the circus travelled from Queensland to New South Wales, the authorities tried to prevent 'Black', the dog, from crossing state lines. The quarantine issue was only sorted when brother John FitzGerald, a lawyer, got involved. Celebrity dogs and the authorities, it seems, have a long history in Australia.

*The FitzGerald Brothers' Circus*, though, is more than a recounting of tales from the tent. Arrighi argues that the circus *mattered* (her emphasis, 5) and sets out to tell us why. The most important claims she makes relate to ideas of the nation, nationhood and nationalism. At the outset, the FitzGerald brothers stressed that theirs was an Australian company and therefore deserved local support. Their advertisements from the early 1890s were full of 'strident nationalism', imploring locals to 'support Australian Talent', noting that their company 'surpasses that of any other nationality' (37). As the company became more successful, they portrayed themselves as the battlers from the bush who had made good in the city, aligning themselves with the politics of *The Bulletin*. But, Arrighi argues, that parochialism did not last. Accepting James Belich's idea of recolonisation, she notes that the company changed its name to reflect its new-found ties to the motherland. By 1895 they were known as the New London

Company, and during the Second Boer War their lion and elephant act, which saw a lion riding on an elephant's back, was repositioned to stress the superiority of the British lion and the subjugation of Kruger's elephant. Patriotic music now accompanied the animals' performance and the audience were given Union Jacks to wave. In the post-war era the ties to empire became stronger, literally, thanks to the introduction of performances by strongmen and wrestlers and the incorporation of competitive sport into the circus's bill. The muscular Christianity of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* was at home in the FitzGerald Brothers' tent.

It is clear that the FitzGerald Brothers' circus changed over time: the performances in its final year, 1908, were very different from those seen in 1888, when the brothers first put together a travelling troupe. But to claim that this circus had a role 'in shaping ideas about nationhood when the nation was forming' seems over the (big) top – and unnecessary (5). As Arrighi notes, the circus was able to respond quickly 'to prevailing shifts in the cultural or political tenor of the times' (117). It was more likely to reflect society than shape it. The introduction of the Cycle Whizz act in 1902 is a perfect example of this. At a time when bicycling was the newest thing, competitive sport had become commonplace in boys' schools, and commercial products were being endorsed by celebrity athletes like Eugen Sandow, the circus introduced a cycle competition into the show. In the Cycle Whizz, four riders sped around a teacup-shaped track, competing to become the fastest of the night. They rode Red Bird Cycles, they appeared in advertisements for Red Bird Cycles, and their costumes reflected their affiliation with Red Bird. The Cycle Whizz embodied modernity.

It seems odd to want to make claims about this circus and nationhood when the circus is such an international entertainment, the performers employed by the FitzGeralds came from all over the world, and their performances were based on international fashions, sometimes with a local inflection. Rather than focus on the nation, this book should be enjoyed for its wealth of detail about the performers and their performances, its reflections on transgressive bodies, and its discussion of the changing role of animals in the circus. Every now and again that enjoyment will be spoilt by sentences that must have come straight out of Arrighi's doctorate (it is a pity the semioticians were allowed in the tent). And throughout the book readers will be frustrated with the poor quality, and small size, of the illustrations. But in the end, thanks to Arrighi's painstaking research and obvious enthusiasm for her subject, they will be pleased they went to the circus.