



*ABORIGINALS & BLACK TRACKER (1389).*

KERRY PHOTO SYDNEY.

# *Wild Australia*

**MESTON'S WILD AUSTRALIA SHOW 1892-1893**

Michael Aird, Mandana Mapar and Paul Memmott



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*Kungkardi*  
Sydney, December 1892  
Photo by Charles Kerry  
Courtesy Queensland Museum



*Kungkardi*  
Melbourne, February 1893  
Photo by John W. Lindt  
© Trustees of the British Museum



*Kungkardi*  
Sydney, June 1893  
Photo by Henry King  
Courtesy State Library of Queensland

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*Wild Australia: Meston's Wild Australia 1892-1893*  
is an exhibition based on a research project initiated  
by Paul Memmott and curated by Michael Aird and  
Mandana Mapar. This exhibition was commissioned  
by Diana Young for The University of Queensland  
Anthropology Museum.



UQ Anthropology Museum

## Introduction

Museum collections of former imperial powers the world over are replete with photographs created in the last decades of the 19th century and the early ones of the 20th. The University of Queensland Anthropology Museum has around eight thousand images, many of which date from this time. Only in the last decade have photographs in ethnographic collections been considered interesting in themselves. Rather they were frequently classified so as to illustrate objects in the collection and any person in the image relegated often to a mere vehicle for this. With the rise of visual anthropology as a discipline over the last two decades photographs have become the subject of research, some of it driven by Indigenous scholars – in America, New Zealand and Australia for example – searching for relatives and countrymen and women. The whole exercise has been encouraged by the digitisation of Museum collections whereby old photographs can be seen on line.

World Wide Web resources provide a dedicated researcher the means to reconnect and re-collect bodies of work that have been scattered over time and space. The photographs of Meston's *Wild Australia* re-printed for this important exhibition at The University of Queensland Anthropology Museum, were taken over an eight-month period in 1892-1893 and reunite for the first time the individual portrait images of troupe members, and the tableaux that they performed.

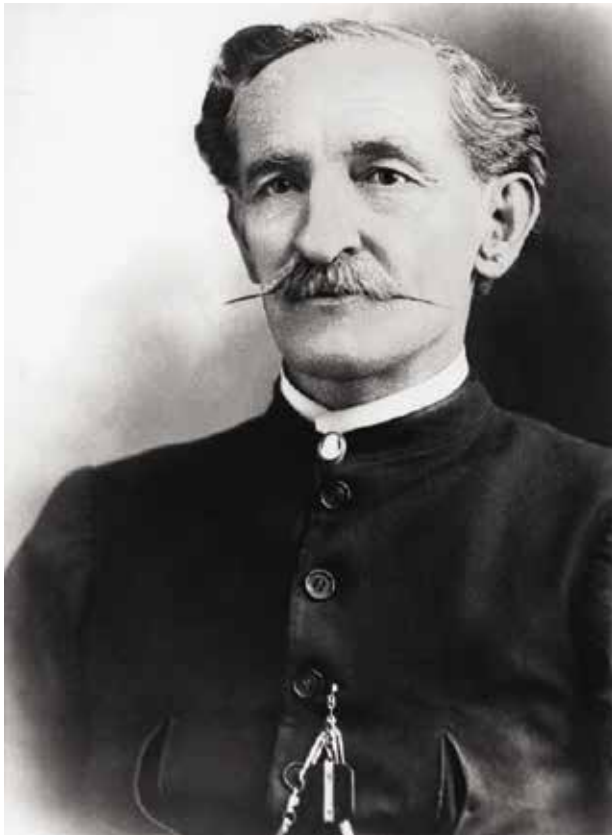
Not until the last few months of 2014 did Michael Aird and Paul Memmott know that they had been working on different aspects of the same material for a quarter of a century. Aird's minutely careful visual analysis of the photographs is here matched by Memmott's research of the historical texts and likely origins of the individuals in the troupe. Their research is combined in the exhibition and enables the identification of each performer by name. Together with Mandana Mapar they have brought together these portraits, many at a large scale. As a visitor, you have the opportunity to engage with the presence of each person and create a kind of intimacy across time and space though sometimes this may be dis-comforting.

Although no biological descendants of the troupe members have been identified to date, the contemporary communities of people identifying with the cultural groups from which the troupe members came have been identified. We are currently looking at the feasibility of travelling this exhibition to North Queensland and the Northern Territory.

The University of Queensland Anthropology Museum has specially commissioned this exhibition. It makes a new contribution to Queensland history. The *Wild Australia* troupe began their rehearsals at a camp somewhere near the present University of Queensland campus at St Lucia, which was then a sugar cane plantation. Photographs from the *Wild Australia Show* have been assembled from collections held at The University of Queensland (the Fryer Library and the Anthropology Museum), Queensland Museum, the State Library of Queensland, the State Library of New South Wales, the Macleay Museum at the University of Sydney and the Powerhouse Museum. In the United Kingdom images were sourced from the private collection of Michael Graham-Stewart and collections in the British Museum and in Oxford University's Pitt Rivers Museum.

**Diana Young**  
**Director**

**The University of Queensland Anthropology Museum**



Archibald Meston  
Brisbane, c.1900  
Courtesy State Library of Queensland

## Archibald Meston's Wild Australia Show, 1892-1893

The *Wild Australia Show* was conceived by Archibald Meston and was a travelling troupe of twenty-seven Aboriginal people conscripted from the Queensland frontier who performed in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne during 1892 and 1893 in preparation for departure on an international tour in the era of World Exhibitions. However the plans were curtailed by contractual disputes, scandals of financial incompetence and accusations of the capture of certain troupe members against their will in chains. Archibald Meston emigrated as a child from Scotland to Australia with his family in 1859. His profession was journalism; he wrote for the popular press during his entire life. A member of Parliament by the late 1870s, Meston's political connections and writing skills resulted in him being commissioned to perform various tasks for government throughout his career.

Meston was exploitative in the manner by which he invented himself, without training or expertise, as a Queensland and Australian expert on Aboriginal culture, 'race' analysis and policy creation. He relentlessly and unashamedly advocated himself as such an expert through his journalism, despite being challenged by others, until eventually there was a broad public belief in his expertise.

The *Wild Australia Show* was planned by Meston to be simultaneously a demonstration of the superior classical physique and skill of the 'wild' Aborigines, one which the world could be seeing for the last time due to the 'doomed race' theory and hence part of the spectacle. It was also a lecture tour whereby Meston could project his ideology for change in Aboriginal Australia upon the general public and promote his 'racial engineering' scheme of protection reserves and separation of 'half castes', 'quadroons', and children of mixed racial origin.

Meston appointed a junior partner for his *Wild Australia Show* project, Brabazon Harry Purcell, who was promised a third share of the profits. His roles were to find and conscript the members of the troupe in the outback of Queensland, to make a collection of three thousand Aboriginal artefacts, and to manage the troupe whilst on tour.

The troupe members came from the following groups: the Wakaya people of the central-east of the Northern Territory (taken when visiting on the Queensland border), groups from around Normanton (including Kuthant, Kurtjar, Arapa, Walangama, Mayikulan), Kalkadungu from the west of Cloncurry, Prince of Wales Island in the Torres Strait and the Kabi Kabi of the Mary River basin. The images of the troupe were captured by the three leading studio photographers in Australia at the time: Charles Kerry and Henry King in Sydney and John W. Lindt in Melbourne.

The troupe members were brought to Brisbane in September 1892 and a rehearsal campsite was established at the St Lucia reach of the river. Their dress rehearsal was for the Queensland Press Club who came upstream for their annual picnic. Their public performances in Brisbane were held at the Exhibition Ground through December that year. This set a pattern of a dual performance style, one indoors which combined a lecture by Meston or Purcell and stage performance, and another outdoors that although with some lecture content permitted more athletic display. For example the advertisements for the night-time Exhibition Ground performances featured ‘campfire displays’, ‘aerial flight of fire-tipped spears and boomerangs’ as well as spear and boomerang fighting.

The troupe left Brisbane by steamer boat for Sydney just before Christmas and opened at the Bondi Aquarium venue on 26 December 1892 with some nocturnal performances at the School of Arts. The troupe was shipped to Melbourne on 25 January 1893 and they opened on the following day at the internationally renowned Melbourne Exhibition Hall but after three days, the performances stopped due to contractual disputes and withdrawal of investment funds. Meston fled back to Queensland but Purcell remained loyally with the troupe, finding some bridging loans and then organising modest performances to raise funds. Meston and Purcell blamed one another for the project’s failure and their ongoing dispute became quite bitter.

Purcell secured a steamer passage for the troupe back to Sydney in late May where they performed at Her Majesty’s Opera House. The Queensland Under Colonial Secretary demanded the troupe be brought home and eventually arranged payment for their return to Brisbane on 22 July 1893. Upon arrival, the Mary River troupe member, Yamurra, was interviewed by a journalist in Brisbane and stated that he had had plenty of fun, a ‘budgery time altogether’, that ‘Sydney and Melbourne great big places’ ... ‘but cold, my word!’

After the saga of the *Wild Australia Show*, despite its adverse publicity, Meston was nevertheless able to resurrect his political reputation. In 1894 he was commissioned by Horace Tozer, the Colonial Secretary to “prepare plans for improving the lot of Queensland Aborigines”. Upon the legislation of *The Aboriginal Protection and Sale of Opium Act 1897* he was given an appointment until 1904 as the ‘Southern Protector of Aborigines’, working south of the Tropic of Capricorn in Queensland, which involved him removing hundreds of Aboriginal people from their tribal lands throughout Queensland and moving them to a small number of near-coastal reserves. The new Act of 1897 did not produce the romantic albeit misconstrued outcomes that he fantasized, but rather different processes of hardships and cultural change, and certainly not the extinction of mixed descent peoples.

**Paul Memmott**  
**Director**  
**Aboriginal Environments Research Centre**  
**The University of Queensland**



Travel route of the *Wild Australia Show* troupe during 1892-1893 including the tribal territories of origin of troupe members  
 Map by Aboriginal Environments Research Centre  
 The University of Queensland

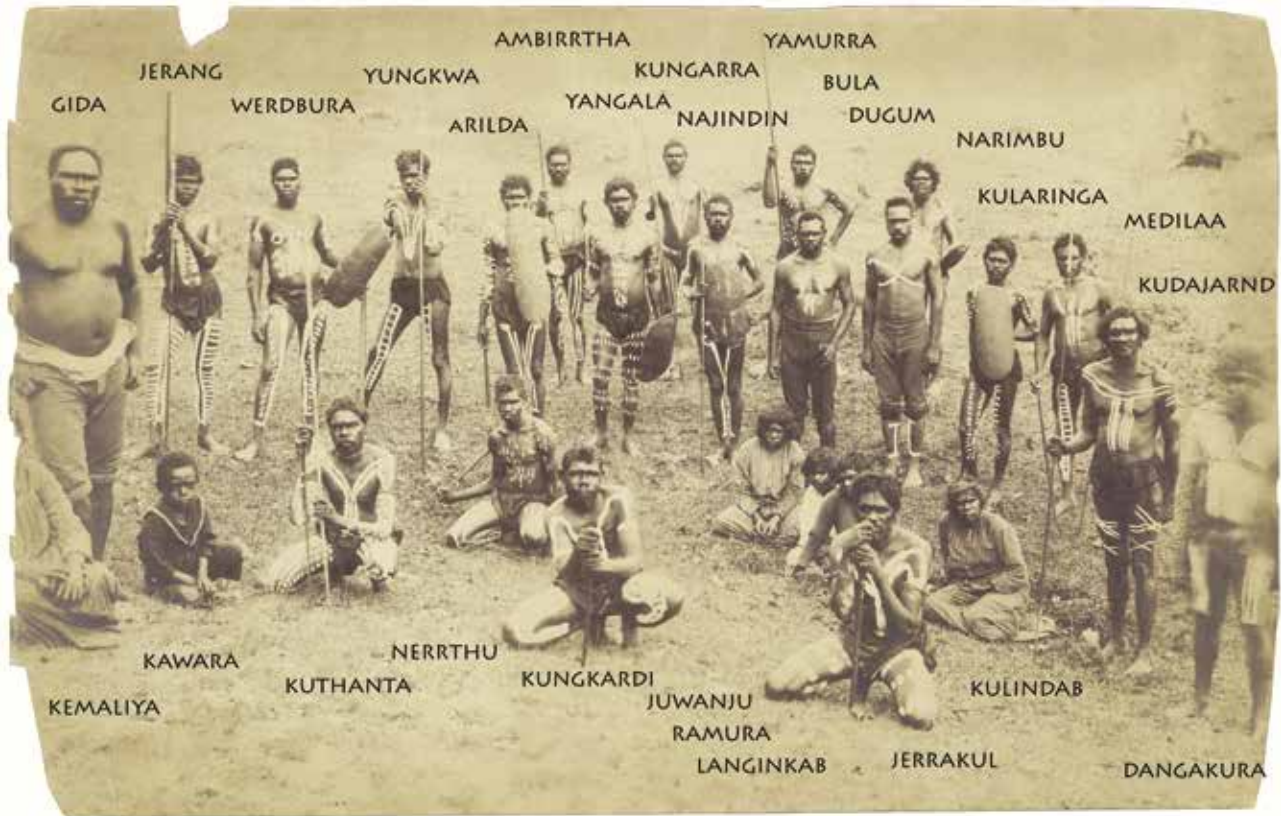
The travel route on the map and the names of the troupe and their tribal groups are the result of a difficult and intensive research process over twenty-five years and possibly subject to some changes if new data come to light. As in most historical research projects, we were presented with limited and often contradictory information. For example some one hundred and twenty identified photographs of the troupe had been reproduced in many outlets and captioned in different ways, and we are still finding more.

The names of the troupe members have been deciphered from all of the various photo captions and press articles but particularly from an album of the twenty-seven members compiled by the photographer Lindt in Melbourne in March 1893 and which was fortuitously procured and conserved by the British Museum in London. Whilst each photographer included short captions on their photos with names and tribal identities, there is much variance in both, making identification a confusing exercise, partly due to the difficulties that colonial Australians had in hearing the (to them) foreign Aboriginal voice expression and partly because Aboriginal people each carried multiple names and identity labels. However each member of the troupe had a distinctive appearance, both in terms of face, physique and body scars, allowing for research purposes a sorting of the multiple photos of each of the twenty-seven individuals. Through the further analysis of all of the confusing captions together with known anthropological information on language and tribal groups, we were able to infer more objective biographic profiles for each individual. Advice on preferred orthographic spelling of the names and language groups was then sought from linguist Gavan Breen at the Institute for Aboriginal Development (also assisted by Dr Paul Black).

Similarly the travel routes are the best we can construct from press articles and official government correspondence, but again there are contradictions and a need for ongoing study.

**Paul Memmott, 2015**

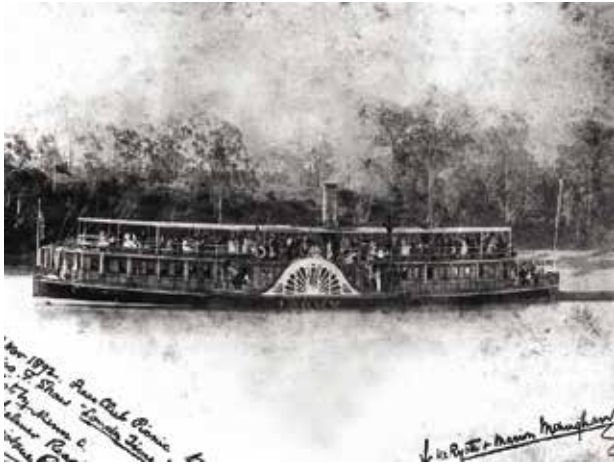




Queensland Press Club Picnic  
 Chelmer Reach, Brisbane River, 12 November 1892  
 Courtesy Michael Graham-Stewart

“On November 16th 1891 Mr A. Meston agreed with me to select and get together a troupe of aboriginals for a tour round the world ... With that intention I started from Brisbane with him on the 28th November 1891 for Cloncurry and the west, after some months and before collecting any aboriginals I wired Meston to get ‘Government permission’ for removal of any blacks in this colony to the coast. He replied on the 7th June 1892 to Boulia ‘Colonial Secretary says no permission required except leave colony take your time no hurry best wishes A. Meston, Brisbane’.”

**Brabazon Purcell, 1893**



Queensland Press Club Picnic aboard the "Natone"  
Chelmer Reach, Brisbane River, 12 November 1892  
Courtesy State Library of Queensland

“The complimentary picnic given by the Queensland Press Club in honour of Miss Shaw, the special commissioner of the Times, took place on Saturday afternoon. Miss Shaw was received on arrival by two ladies connected with the Press who had kindly undertaken to represent the committee. The weather was all that could be desired, the sun’s rays being tempered with an invigorating cool breeze. At about half-past 2 o’clock the steamer Natone, having on board about 150 ladies and gentlemen, left the Queen’s Wharf, and sped her way up the river. On reaching St. Lucia Mr. Purcell boarded the steamer with a party of Mr. Meston’s aborigines. The journey was continued as far as Chelmer, where the steamer anchored at a short distance from the bank, and Messrs. Meston and Purcell, with the blacks, went ashore in boats, and gave a capital exhibition of boomerang and spear throwing. Mr. Purcell, who looked after the spear throwing, fixed a paper target, and the blacks soon riddled it, throwing the spears from their woomeras or throwing sticks. After this they threw light spears by hand at one another. To give some idea of the keenness of their vision, it may be mentioned that the men at whom they were thrown, although without shields, did not attempt to get out of the way of the spears, but simply knocked them aside, often smashing them with their woomeras. The wonderful force obtained by the use of the woomera was demonstrated by the great height to which the spears could be thrown. The guest of the occasion took great interest in the flight of the boomerangs and spears, and, indeed, all on board were much pleased with the exhibition. Mr. Meston and party having returned on board, the homeward journey was commenced. The time was spent in pleasant converse, admiring the beauty of the scenery and in listening to Benvenuti’s string band. Light refreshments were served out during the afternoon, and Queen’s Wharf was reached at about 6.30 p.m., after a most enjoyable trip.”

*The Brisbane Courier, 14 November 1892*



Queensland Press Club Picnic  
Chelmer Reach, Brisbane River, 12 November 1892  
Courtesy Michael Graham-Stewart



Brisbane, 1892  
Photo by Will Stark  
Courtesy Macleay Museum  
University of Sydney

“Considerable interest attaches to the first public appearance of the aborigines who have been assembled from various tribes in the far West and North-west to illustrate Mr. Archibald Meston’s lectures on “Wild Australia”. The work of preparation has occupied much time. It was not to be supposed that savages gathered as those have been from districts separated by many hundreds of miles, speaking dialects and practising customs which rendered them as strange to each other as they were to the white man, could be brought at once to act in concert. They are now well acquainted with each other and with what is required of them, and no doubt when they have settled down to their work the whole entertainment will be particularly interesting. Mr. Meston has had appropriate scenery painted by the well-known scenic artist Vennermark, and the displays will take place amidst surroundings

representing as closely as possible those in which the blacks have lived. The first lecture will be given in Her Majesty’s Opera House on Monday week, 5th December, and if Mr. Meston can but place before his audiences the life history of the tribes represented in his group of thirty-two aboriginals, leaving them to tell their own story as far as possible in their own graphic way, the entertainment will be both attractive and instructing.”

*The Brisbane Courier, 23 November 1892*



Brisbane, 1892  
 Photo by Will Stark  
 Courtesy Pitt Rivers Museum  
 University of Oxford

“Preparations are now being completed for the opening at the Opera House on Monday next of the novel entertainment to be known as Meston’s Wild Australia. It is understood that each evening Mr. Meston will select a different phase of aboriginal life as the subject of his remarks, and this will be fully illustrated by the aboriginals themselves. The living demonstration will simply be explained by the words of the lecture, and the blacks will them-selves exhibit their manners and customs, their modes of warfare, of camp life, and of hunting in a way that would not be approached by lecturer or painter. But what and can be lent by either of these latter will be afforded by the lectures of Mr. Meston and the scenes painted by Mr. Vennermark.”

*The Brisbane Courier*, 28 November 1892



Archibald Meston  
 Brisbane, 1890s  
 Courtesy Queensland Museum



Archibald Meston  
 Brisbane, 1890s  
 UQ Anthropology Museum Collection

Photographs by

# Charles Kerry

Sydney  
December 1892

“‘Wild Australia: Aboriginals in Queensland – A Dying Race’ (from the Sydney Daily Telegraph), saying the exhibition at the Bondi Aquarium and elsewhere is not ‘merely an indiscriminate collection of aboriginals gathered anyhow’; Archibald Meston ‘who is in charge of them, is a member of the Aborigines Protection Board of Queensland, was formerly a member of the Queensland Legislature, and was a member of the scientific expedition to the Bellenden-Ker Range and furnished the Govt of the Northern colony with the official report on the subject’; said Archibald Meston was the bearer of a letter from the Colonial Secretary; Archibald Meston told a reporter ‘I have been arranging this trip for last twelve months. My intention was to make a tour of the world delivering a series of ethnological lectures on the aborigines of Australia in order to dispel prevailing ideas with regard to natives of this continent. For that purpose I went to considerable trouble and expense to select representative men from the wild tribes of the West and North of Qld, where they, so far, have not been contaminated by civilisation’; also said ‘They are like a lot of children. They know nothing of drink or opium, or of any vice at all in fact. I would not have taken civilised blacks in any circumstances whatever. I obtained permission from the Queensland Government, which holds me absolutely responsible for their safe return’; after Sydney, he planned to visit ‘Victoria, South Australia, possibly New Zealand and then England in the summer. We also tour the European continent and eventually we shall proceed through America’; etc, etc”

*The Queenslander*, 14 January 1893



Bondi Aquarium, December 1892  
Photography by Kerry & Co. Tyrrell Collection  
Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney

“The show concluded with ‘a tableau representing the murder of a swagsman by a native, and shooting of the criminal by a black trooper’.”

*The Week*, 9 December 1892



*Langinkab*  
Sydney, December 1892  
Photography by Kerry & Co. Tyrrell Collection  
Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney





*Kudajard*  
Sydney, December 1892  
Photography by Kerry & Co. Tyrrell Collection  
Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney



Bondi Beach, December 1892  
Photo by Charles Kerry  
UQ Anthropology Museum Collection

“The blacks of the Spinifex Desert, the Wakii, have a superstitions dread of the ocean, as they imagine that their ‘Aranja’, or evil spirit dwells therein, and would get them if they went too near the sea ... For this reason he had some difficulty in persuading them to accompany him on his tour. When they arrived at Townsville, and were asked to drink the salt water, they did so, but on finding it salt they covered their faces with their hands, repeating the word ‘Aranja’. However, as soon as they saw that no dreadful results followed, even when they tasted the salt water, their fears were allayed.”

**Brabazon Purcell, 1894**



Narimbu, Kudajard and Dangakum  
Sydney, December 1892  
Photography by Kerry & Co. Tyrrell Collection  
Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney

Photographs by

**John W. Lindt**

**Melbourne  
February 1893**

“He would touch on their manners and customs, and show them that, although the aborigines had been looked upon as rather an ignorant and lazy kind of race, yet they stood very high in the estimation of all who had had anything to do with them, or who had the opportunity of studying their social laws and customs, that were based on a fixed code of morals which would not be a disgrace to any civilized community. He admitted they were not endowed with an immense amount of brain power, but in mere physical prowess they excelled their white brothers.”

**Brabazon Purcell, 1894**



*Ambirtha*  
Melbourne, February 1893  
Photo by John W. Lindt  
© Trustees of the British Museum



*Ramura*



*Dangakura*



*Najindin*



*Jerrakul*



*Arilda*



*Kungarra*

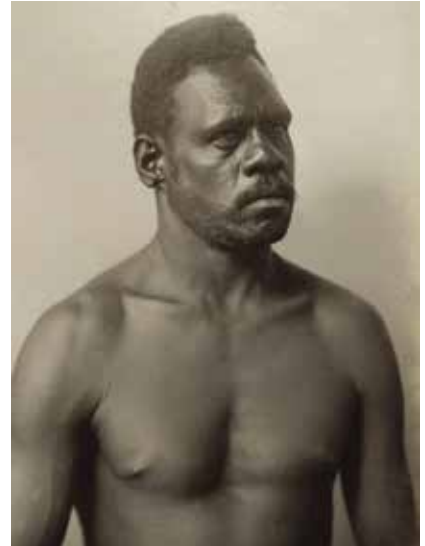
All images:  
Melbourne, February 1893  
Photo by John W. Lindt  
© Trustees of the British Museum



*Juwanju*



*Nerthu*



*Bula*



*Werdbura*



*Madila*



*Kalaringa*



*Kemaliya and Gida*



*Kawara and Gida*

“The Prince of Wales Islanders ‘Gidda’, ‘Duhgoom’ and ‘Bulla’, Gidda’s wife ‘Camaleea’ and a boy ‘Cowra’ 9 years of age were brought down by Purcell against my express instructions as I wanted no Papuans. However they came of their own accord, and left Brisbane on a clear understanding that they were to be fed and clothed and well treated and finally sent back to Thursday Island. None of the blacks in the party were to receive wages and had no such expectation. No time of absence was mentioned as that was impossible. They all expected to be away for about ‘2 years’ = ‘24 moons’.”

**Archibald Meston, 1893**

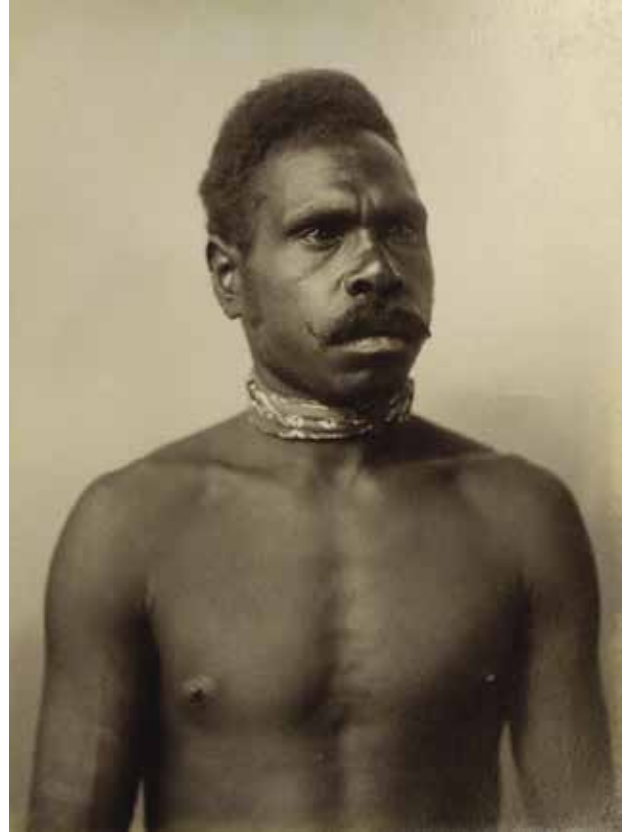
“... the king of Prince of Wales Island, his wife, and adopted son, an intelligent looking little fellow of five or six. The lecturer said that many people had asked him for this child, but he had promised the old king that he would not part him from the boy. His word would not be broken ... The circumstances that led to the adoption of the boy by the king was as follows: it is customary among the blacks that when twins are born the weakest should be exposed on a river bank or sea-shore, and left to be eaten by crocodiles or drowned. This boy had been rescued by the king from this perilous position, adopted, and reared.”

**Brabazon Purcell, 1894**





*Dugum*



*Dugum*

“On the the Prince of Wales Group the number of natives is gradually diminishing; they will soon die out altogether. The civilisation of Thursday Island kills them off by its contact; meanwhile Misgidda, commonly known as ‘Tarbucket’, presides over about sixty natives, the remnant of a once powerful and numerous tribe. Misgidda and his wife, together with Doogoom and Bulla, joined the troupe of aboriginals who were taken to Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne by Messrs. Purcell and Meston. They returned to Thursday Island after their adventurous tour, and are now living at Prince of Wales Island none the worse, to all appearance, for their southern experiences.”

**Government Resident at Thursday Island, 1894**

All images:  
Melbourne, February 1893  
Photo by John W. Lindt  
© Trustees of the British Museum

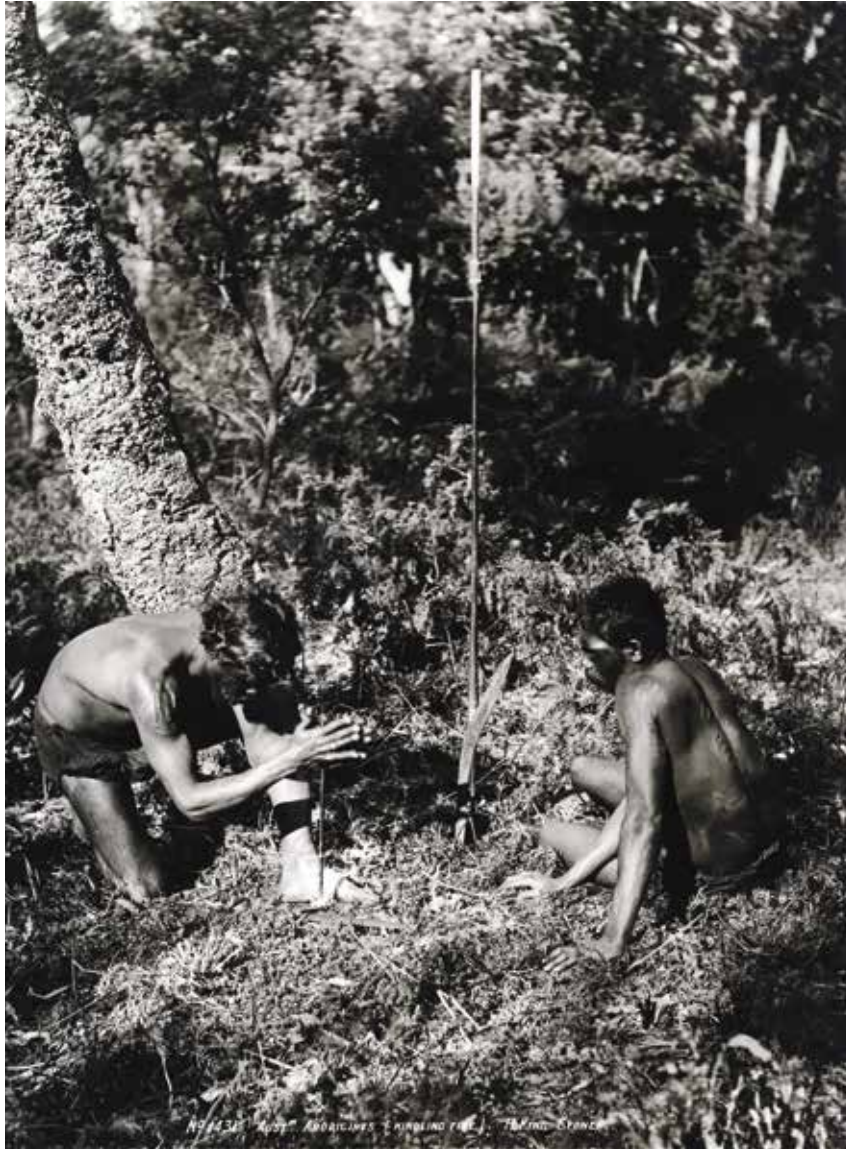
Photographs by

# Henry King

Sydney  
June 1893

“How I have come to tour with them is this. In the first place I obtained permission from the Queensland Government, which holds me absolutely responsible for their safe return. The Government empowers me to appeal to the assistance of the authorities in any of the British dominions, and I am responsible for their safe keeping and their safe return. After our season here we go to Victoria, then to North Australia, possibly to New Zealand, and reach England in the summer. My intention first was to proceed direct to Chicago, but one of the immigration laws of America would require me to deposit 3200 pounds with the immigration agent there, to be held by him until we left the United States. However, I am not very enthusiastic about Chicago.”

Archibald Meston, 1893



Yangala and Kuthanta  
Sydney, June 1893  
Photo by Henry King  
UQ Anthropology Museum Collection



*Narimbu*  
Sydney, June 1893  
Photo by Henry King  
Courtesy State Library of Queensland



*Kungkardi*  
Sydney, June 1893  
Photo by Henry King  
Courtesy State Library of Queensland



Yungkwa



*Kuthanta*



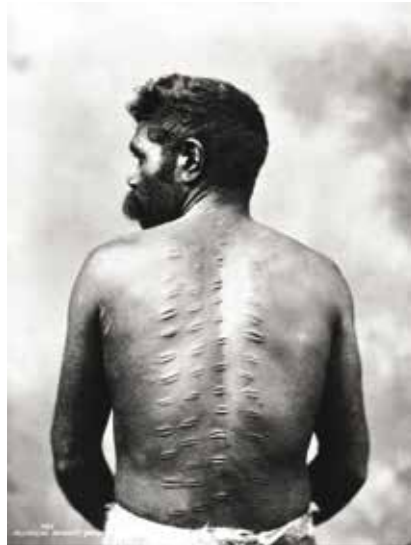
*Jerang*



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*Kudajard*



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*Yungkwa*

All images:  
Sydney, June 1893  
Photo by Henry King  
UQ Anthropology Museum Collection



Above:  
Sydney, June 1893  
Photo by Henry King  
Courtesy UQ Fryer Library

Left:  
Sydney, June 1893  
Photo by Henry King  
Courtesy UQ Fryer Library



“The blacks resumed their journey north by the S.S. Wodonga on Saturday. They will be landed some at Cooktown and some at Thursday Island. The others will go on to Normanton. On their arrival at the respective ports, the police will take charge of the blacks, and see they reach their own tribes.”

***Morning Bulletin, 17 July 1893***

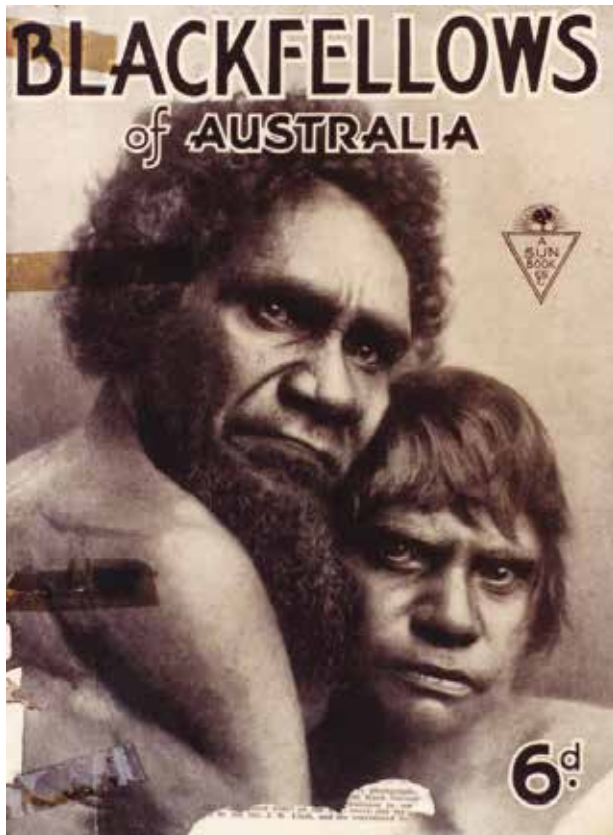
I have been fortunate to be able to locate over one hundred and twenty different photographs of the *Wild Australia* performers. These images form an important historical document.

Over the eight or so months that the *Wild Australia* troupe performed, their journey was well documented by notable photographers. Several photographs exist of their time in Brisbane, with some of these taken by Will Stark, a very active photographer in south-east Queensland around that time. On their arrival in Sydney, Charles Kerry documented the twenty-seven members performing on Bondi Beach and at the Bondi Aquarium. He also took individual portraits in his studio. When they were in Melbourne, their portraits had been taken for a series by John W. Lindt. On their return to Sydney in late May 1893, Henry King took a number of outdoor images and studio portraits.

The photographs by Kerry and King show many similarities; both used plain studio backdrops and photographed subjects mostly from the waist up. Kerry had many of the performers decorate themselves in body paint and traditional ornaments, while King preferred them unadorned. The portraits taken by Lindt are also very similar in style to those taken by Kerry and King, but there are some minor differences in composition and they seem to focus more on the facial expressions of the sitters.

It is amazing that these twenty-seven individuals were photographed by Kerry, Lindt and King, three of Australia's most famous photographers at the time, and that they received so much attention from the press. In July 1893, the performers boarded a boat to be returned to their traditional countries and they then seem to have disappeared from the history books.

**Michael Aird, 2015**



Kudajarn and Langinkab on the cover of *Blackfellows of Australia*  
 Published 1936  
 Photo by John W. Lindt  
 Courtesy Rosemary Fleay-Thomson

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Front cover image:  
Bondi Beach, December 1892  
Photography by Kerry & Co. Tyrrell Collection  
Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney

Back cover image:  
Queensland Press Club Picnic  
Chelmer Reach, Brisbane River, 12 November 1892  
Courtesy Michael Graham-Stewart



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