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**‘Wild Australia’:  
performers, productions and politics**

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# Introduction: Meston's miscellany and its hidden histories

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□ Archibald Meston, Queensland Museum, Indigenous history and biography

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Archibald Meston (1851–1924) had a knack for self-promotion and self-aggrandisement. During a long and motley career in Queensland, Meston tried his hand as a farmer, politician, explorer, impresario, and government employee, but it was writing and journalism that sustained him (Taylor 2003). He wrote hundreds of articles and stories for newspapers and other publications on a diverse range of topics, including many that dealt with Aboriginal issues (Taylor 2003, p. 121), and by that means he gradually established himself as an expert on Aboriginal culture and society, although he was not without his critics. Like other so-called experts, Meston claimed his knowledge was acquired firsthand: from Aboriginal people he knew in his youth when living with his family in northern New South Wales and later during his travels and adventures through frontier Queensland. Although he claimed special access to Aboriginal cultural knowledge, he was not always a reliable witness and on more than one occasion found himself at the centre of debates and controversies when veracity of what he wrote was queried by others more knowledgeable and more qualified than him (Meston 1894a,b, 1901a,b; Harper 1894; Petrie 1901a,b).

Rarely deterred and seemingly immune to correction, Meston persisted in using his claimed status as expert on and interpreter of Aboriginal cultural life as a means to make money and to secure his own financial future. It was the grist for the mill of his journalism (Taylor 2003); the metier of the Wild Australia Show, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performance troupe he instigated and toured in the early 1890s (Aird et al. 2015); and the credentials for commissions from and paid positions with the Queensland government (Thorpe 1978). Today, Meston's reputation and place in Queensland's history is ambivalent and contested. For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who associate Meston most closely with the repressive Queensland *Aborigines Protection Act* introduced in 1897 (a version of which remained on the books until the 1960s), he is a reviled figure since no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person or family was free from the legislation's restrictions, impositions and humiliations. Little surprise then that Meston has been a target within wider political movements seeking to reckon with colonial pasts and their enduring legacies, including the current 'statue wars' and Black Lives Matter movements that are taking place globally.

While the details of Meston's own life are well-documented (Stevens 1974), and much has been written about his prodigious literary output (Taylor 2003, 2004), this volume contributes further analysis and applies new methodologies and perspectives. Certain activities in which Meston was engaged, such as collecting Aboriginal material culture, have not yet received the attention they deserve, but the preliminary research in the misnamed 'Meston collection' in the Queensland Museum by museum studies scholars and curators Lindy Allen, Chantal Knowles and Sophie Price finally begins to bring Aboriginal culture to the fore and moves Meston's influence to the background. In their jointly authored paper, they spell out in illuminating detail the donations and sales of ethnographic objects that Meston made to the Queensland Museum over many years. Through reassembling the Meston collection they tease out the reasons for Meston's collecting as well as the relationships which he forged with curators. By this means they reveal the ways in which collecting was – like all of Meston's activities – done with an eye to fashioning himself as an authority on Aboriginal people and for personal financial gain. The two were mutually dependent, but he was not always terribly expert or effective in shoring up either. As Allen, Knowles and Price show, more often than not Meston was a poor negotiator – but what their analysis does make clear is that his travels, his networks, his enterprises and his employment put him in contexts in which collecting – or acquiring – material culture was possible.

Creating a reliable inventory of objects associated with Meston is a vital first step in collections research. It provides a foundation on which to research and reconstruct the actual episodes in which objects that travelled into the Queensland Museum's collections via Meston's mediation were initially exchanged, and to begin to examine questions concerning the conditions under which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people parted with objects they had made, and the meanings that such objects held for them as well as their hopes about the work that those objects might do to

persuade and convince metropolitan museum-visiting audiences of the value of Indigenous culture, traditions and futures.

As this begins to suggest, our overarching aim in compiling this set of papers is not to produce yet more information and knowledge about Mr Meston himself – although inevitably that is and will continue to be a by-product of the research.<sup>1</sup> Rather, our guiding principle in each of the articles, and for the overall research project from which they have emerged,<sup>2</sup> has been to ask the question: what other histories, stories and meanings are hidden and held in the various assemblages and activities to which Meston contributed, however large or small a part he played at the time, or how overblown and exaggerated his involvement and influence has since become? The longer we have spent working on and with Meston-related materials (archival, literary, visual, material and so on), the more evident it has become that his hugely inflated image has for far too long eclipsed the lives and legacies of others who had the fortune or misfortune to come into his orbit. Careful not to reproduce the colonial ways of seeing that Meston employed, we have instead worked to contextualise and understand the perspectives and experiences of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people whose lives intersected with his.

Two papers – one on the many photographs of the performers in the Wild Australia Show and the other a detailed biography of one of those men – engage directly with the problem of Meston's long shadow by showing the ways in which a sustained interest in and curiosity about the lives of others can work to bring previously overlooked (and often unnamed) bit-players in his oft-told life story into the spotlight, while he in turn is pushed to the wings. The work to recover individual lives from the mass of "Meston's miscellany" is patient and painstaking labour, requiring extensive contextual knowledge across a range of fields, and the application of new interpretative methodologies that grapple creatively and imaginatively with the limits of the sources available, and engaging with descendants and their memories, perspectives and knowledge.

Yet, as the two papers make clear, the rewards for slow research, productive collaboration, and careful reconstruction are incredibly rich.

In the early 1890s, Meston embarked on an audacious project when he and Brabazon Purcell formed the Wild Australia Show (briefly known as Meston's Wild Australia Show). This was a troupe of twenty-seven Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who toured the eastern Australian colonial capitals from late 1892 until mid-1893 (McKay and Memmott 2016). As impresario, Meston played a major role in that intriguing enterprise, but it would be mistaken to accord him the leading role in its short-lived success. That accomplishment belongs to the performers themselves, who were consummate performers and also created a cohesive and supportive 'family' despite coming from different places and not sharing a common language. As they explain in their jointly authored paper, for Michael Aird and Paul Memmott the Wild Australia Show was a common interest but for quite different reasons. For Aird, a historian of photography, it was the large and widely reproduced and distributed collection of photographs of the troupe members that had captured his imagination. For Memmott, it was the fact that some of those photographs were of Wakaya men and women, the group whose early land claims and native title research he was working on.

Building on their shared interest and knowledge, and with assistance from Mandana Mapar, Aird and Memmott commenced the work of identifying the names and details of each of the troupe members and restoring them. This was the foundation for researching and writing the lost histories, meanings and biographies of the Wild Australia Show. As the troupe was increasingly treated only as a generalised phenomenon – as a group rather than a dynamic complex of individual lives – and as it faded from view and memory, the stories of the 27 people who travelled far from home to perform their culture for the edification and entertainment of metropolitan audiences became harder to retrieve. Assembling the large archive of photographs provided the means to begin to ask questions such as: Who were the 27 men, women

and children who made up the troupe? Where did they come from? What was their experience of touring and performing? How did they navigate the world of popular performance and the associated demands of audiences and their 'managers'? As Aird and Memmott explain, this initial inquiry into the Wild Australia Show culminated in an exhibition at the Anthropology Museum at the University of Queensland, but rather than an endpoint this was the origin for a longer research journey to trace the lives, experiences, effects and legacies of a Queensland performance troupe who took the stage in the age of world's fairs and ethnographic live exhibits (Qureshi 2011).

Photographed by three different metropolitan studios, as well as some freelance photographers, the visual archive for the Wild Australia Show is extensive, and it has taken some time to re-assemble the collection of images that were produced at the time the troupe was touring and performing. Photographs are highly mobile objects, constantly reproduced and circulated widely. Over time, as Aird and Memmott show, various photographs of the troupe or individual troupe members became detached and distanced from their original creation and purpose. They would circulate as a generalised image of "Aboriginality" or "primitiveness", rather than as the portrait of a known and named performer. Body marks and facial features were clues to identification. Cross-checked with archival sources, in time the personal names had been restored to all 27 performers along with the language and cultural groups, and 'country', from which they hailed. This work of reconstruction is a powerful gesture of restoring humanity to a group that has not only been largely forgotten, but which was sometimes dehumanised in the accounts given of them and the reception they received.

The lives of some of the troupe members are easier to compile and tell than others, due to a complex of factors, but mainly their interactions with colonial institutions and authorities which means that they are more likely to appear in archival records. Gida is a case in point, and he is the focus of the second paper in the volume. Our research

on the Wild Australia Show has been keen to try to understand the nature of the relationships between and among the performers since we believe that this holds the key to how it was that they stayed together throughout their troubled tour and despite their differences appeared to have formed a cohesive group. Our speculation is that this rested partly on the roles assumed by three of the senior or older men, prominent among whom was Gida. In Gida, Archibald Meston found someone prepared to stand up to him and insist upon his own autonomy and authority, however circumscribed it was. Travelling with the Wild Australia Show did not define Gida's life. Rather, as Memmott and Richards show, it was an episode within a rich existence that responded intelligently and creatively to rapidly changing conditions. Gida had an ability to make friendships or alliances with powerful white men, like John Douglas, and he may have initially seen Meston in similar terms.

Telling the life of Gida both before and after the Wild Australia Show requires a multi-pronged approach – and builds not only on the work of other scholars, but it is also deeply informed by family memory and history. Through consultation with descendants, Memmott and his colleagues were able to clear up details of Gida's life and legacies. In time, our hope is that each of the troupe members will have their life story told, however speculatively, given that the surviving records of the lives of individual performers is too often confined to the relatively short period in which they were members of the troupe. For a number of the troupe members, the colonial archive contains little or nothing about their lives before being recruited (and indeed the conditions under which they were recruited often remain opaque), and we lose sight of them again (at least archivally) once they are repatriated home in the middle of 1893. Our biographical efforts are limited to the most prominent performers among them, which, in addition to Gida, was the Wakaya man Kudajarnd, and the Kabi Kabi man Yamurra, who are to be the focus of separate biographical

entries in the forthcoming Indigenous Australian Dictionary of Biography overseen by Shino Konishi and others (Konishi 2019).

The final paper in the volume returns to one of the most controversial episodes in all of Meston's meddling in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland: the drafting of *The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act, 1897*. It is widely assumed that Meston was a key architect and author of the Act, and the paper puts that assumption under the microscope by tracing in detail the original drafting of the Act (as opposed to its implementation). In their analysis, Memmott and Richards argue that while Meston had been active in early discussions about protective legislation, his actual contribution diminished a good deal in the drafting and writing of the Act. As with much legislation, the final document was the result of a compromised and pragmatic process. Although Meston might have claimed to be an author, his hand only touches it lightly and it appears to be yet another case of his own exaggerated claims about his importance and relevance. As in the other papers that make up this volume, the aim in revisiting the writing of the Act has been to dig deeper into the Meston mythology, and what we have again found is that the reality is more complex than the myth suggests. A number of people were involved in conceptualising and drafting the restrictive legislation that would govern Aboriginal people's lives for much of the twentieth century – but because of the myths that have grown up around Meston – a product of his own self-promotion – he remains intimately associated with the Act and reviled because of it.

The papers in this volume all engage with collections and objects – including the Act which can be considered an artefact of sorts – associated with Archibald Meston. But rather than mobilise these collections to learn more about Meston the man, our project is interested in unearthing the histories and lives that have for too long been hidden within them. This, then, is what we mean by “Meston's miscellany”. That descriptor refers to the various collections of objects, photographs,

writings and so on, which are now widely dispersed and often poorly documented, and which the papers in this volume work to reassemble, describe and analyse. And to our overarching argument that Meston might himself be better understood as 'miscellaneous' – or marginal and peripheral – to the other histories we pursue and tell. It takes some effort to see beyond the long shadow he has cast and to peer beneath his overblown image, but the effort, as we hope this collection of papers proves, is worth it. It is overdue, we believe, to go beyond analysis of colonial representations of Aboriginal people, such as those Meston produced and peddled. And to turn attention to using his extensive archive to tease out the complexities of Indigenous people's experiences and cultural practices across diverse colonial contexts.

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## □ ENDNOTES

1. Queensland historian Jonathan Richards is working on a biography of Meston.
2. The research is part of the ARC Linkage Project [LP160100415]: How Meston's 'Wild Australia Show' Shaped Aboriginal History, (University of Queensland, The Australian National University, Museums Victoria, Queensland Museum and State Library of New South Wales), 2016–2020.