

In an age when the thought, let alone the actual practice, of using animals to entertain crowds is somewhat abhorrent, it is surely remarkable that the interest in lion training or taming can fascinate so many people today. Maybe it is because the practice does not exist any more in mainland Britain that makes it all the more fashionable to extract as much information about the history of lion taming. The more terrifying the story the better it would seem fuels our desire to know more on the subject.

In an attempt to satisfy such urges a series of histories will be presented here based on factual accounts of early menageries. George Wombwell, although not a 'lion tamer' in the modern sense of the phrase, he was surely the most famous of animal trainers along with his employees specifically given the task of controlling lions and tigers during each and every show they put on up and down the country. Although some stories ended in tragedy for the trainer, reports were changed to either dramatise the circumstances when reports appeared in the newspapers or they were simply reported incorrectly, often by absent reporters.

William Dellah (Montarno)

Dellah (also reported as Deliah Montarno and Sagarno) was a lion trainer working in one of the late (after 1850) George Wombwell's travelling menageries. The name Montarno was probably a chosen *stage* name and his real name was probably William Dellah. Montarno was probably African or African Caribbean although his exact place of birth is not known. He had been associated with Bostock and Wombwell's menagerie for more than twenty years up to the time of his untimely death in 1892.

The name Montarno is similar to Maccomo (the African Lion King), a then famous lion tamer with Manders Menagerie one of Wombwell's competitors. Martini Maccomo, also of African Caribbean descent joined Manders at Greenwich Fair (date unknown) after requesting a place in the wild beast show whilst on shore from a recent voyage. Not to be outdone by the competition, Bostock and Wombwell would want to have their very own *Negro* lion king and thus William Dellah was hired at some point (possibly 1867). Little is known about the career of Montarno except the extensive reports concerning his death and that a Latin American, Bronco Boccaccio, had been his understudy and had taken over from Montarno during 1892. It is with Bronco I start the report of Montarno's tragic death.

Sometime during the summer of 1893 Wombwell and Bostock menagerie had landed in the USA via the transatlantic steamship Bovic¹. Frank Bostock had apparently arrived some six weeks prior to the arrival of the animals and their keepers and had set about finding quarters. The newspaper report is very detailed and describes the housing of animals, including five lions, at a stables in New York². Although the detail is not relevant to the death of Montarno, it is important in as much as it describes Montarno's death by Wallace a famous Wombwell lion. Frank Bostock had brought over Bronco Boccaccio as trainer, but it had been Frank Bostock that had described to the newspaper reporter Montarno's earlier death by Wallace. This cannot be true as will be seen later in this article.

¹ The Bovic likely sailed from Liverpool to New York. The Bovic was part of the White Star Line which specialised in the transport of livestock. It is more than probable that Frank Bostock was moving permanently to New York on this trip since he had brought so few animals with him.

²The Sun(New York), October 27, 1893, Page 3 This report also mentions one Pauline Nana in the party together with Fred Izan as the understudy to Bronco.

However it serves to show how showmen cannot resist falsifying facts when potential business is at stake. A lion named Wallace was present in New York and any myth surrounding a lion with that name would serve as excellent crowd drawing potential given the reported rumour that Wallace had killed two men on previous occasions³.

Montarno's death, though no less gruesome than death by lion, was quite different to the New York reported account. John S Clarke, in his text *Circus Parade* describes it as follows:

He[Montarno] entered the cage to perform with two bears and one spotted hyena at a quarter to ten one winter's night. There was some mud upon his boots and when he turned in the cage after closing the door he slipped and fell⁴.

Clarke never observed the accident in person though his knowledge of early circus and menagerie life is probably second to none. Curiously, Clarke referred to Montarno as Sargano. He would probably have relied on newspaper reports of the time. The accident, which occurred at Hednesford in the West Midlands of England, was on March 14th 1892. The Penny Illustrated picks up the story thus:

the larger of the bears immediately pounced upon him and seized him at the back of his head with its teeth, causing serious injuries. Montarno was armed only with a stick and it was seen that he was completely powerless, the bear tearing him about the head and face in a most savage manner. On screams from the onlookers brought Mr Frank Bostock from his office to the scene. After some minutes...the bear released its hold and the lion tamer with terrible gashes about the face...was dragged from the den...⁵

Even with one Doctor Butler in attendance, the 45 year old Montarno was dead within half an hour of his removal from the cage.

In a New Zealand newspaper account, it was reported that Frank Bostock had entered the cage following the attack on Montarno. The bears were previously thought to be quite docile, states the report, but the hyena had taken a dislike to Frank Bostock on previous



NEGRO LION-TAMER, MONTARNO, WORRIED TO DEATH IN WOMBWELL AND BAILEY'S MENAGERIE, HEDNESFORD, STAFFORDSHIRE.

³ This is not the Wallace of George Wombwell but obviously the name would be recycled to facilitate the marketing of the menagerie as it travelled around the globe.

⁴ John S. Clarke, *Circus Parade* (JM Classics, 2008) p89 First published in 1936

⁵ *The Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times*, Saturday, March 26, 1892; pg. 194; Issue 1608

occasions. Ignoring this Frank Bostock entered the cage with a cane handed to him from within the audience. The report continues:

An inquest on the body of Montarno was held Tuesday afternoon. Frank C. Bostock, proprietor of the menagerie, said efforts were made to get the animal off the man by means of folks, etc.; but seeing these were of no avail witness entered the den and tried to beat the animals off, but it was some time before he succeeded. The bears were considered the quietest animals in the show and the last they would expect to attack the trainer...In reply to questions, Mr Bostock said there were at least 20 persons in the establishment who would go into the bear's den as they were considered quite safe⁶.

The doctor explained that the cause of death was probably the initial wound to Montarno's head. The jury returned a verdict of accidental death.

John S Clarke in his text had added a somewhat wry note:

Never fall down in a cage of wild animals⁷.

These were probably very wise words, but sadly they came far too late for the wretched William Dellah, the *African Lion King*.

⁶ Auckland Star, Rōrahi XXIII, Putanga 108, 7 Haratua 1892, Page 3

⁷ Clarke p89