

WILL WHITBURN

One of Australia's most popular blackface minstrel comedians of the 1890s and early 1900s, Will Whitburn came to the public's attention in the mid-to-late 1880s with F. M. Clark before moving on to work with J. Billin's US Minstrel and Specialty Company and the Cogill Brothers. Between the mid-1890s and 1907 he worked almost exclusively for Harry Rickards, and mostly in Melbourne. In addition to being a specialist cornerman/eccentric "coon" impersonator, Whitburn also delivered comedy lectures (aka 'stump speeches'), songs and dialect characterisations. His physical appearance also distinguished him from his peers in that he was the only high-profile blackface comedian to have a moustache. Some of Whitburn's biggest song successes were the larrikin-inspired numbers written for him by Lance Lenton, including "The Larrikin Hop" and "Woolloomooloo." Away from the stage he was a respected trainer of trotting horses.

Despite his acknowledged position as one of Australia's most popular blackface minstrel comics of the late 1800s and early 1900s, little is known about Will Whitburn's early life. He is now largely for his long association with Harry Rickards (ca. 1895-1907), he spent more than five years with Frank M. Clark in the mid to late-1880s before moving on to work with J. Billin's US Minstrel and Specialty Co and the Cogill Brothers. One of the things that set him apart from his peers during this period was the larrikin-type persona he affected on stage, a strategy that took advantage of the upsurge in interest from the expanding middle-class demographic in this largely blue-collar social type. He is also believed to have been the only Australian blackface performer to work with a moustache. Whitburn's unusual association with Rickards, whereby he worked for much of this period in Melbourne, is perhaps even more of indication of his extraordinary talent and versatility because very few variety entertainers were able to sustain such a long presence in one city.

Reportedly born in Melbourne sometime around 1863, his earliest recorded stage appearance found to date was for a 5 September 1885 appearance on the bill of the People's Concert (Temperance Hall, Melb) where he presented his own "stump speeches." The following year, aged 23, he was performing as an endman with Frank M. Clark's Silk Stockings Company at Melbourne's Victoria Hall. This association was to last up until 1890. One of his early turns saw him render the song, "Babbling Brook," and appear in the burlesque, *Unemployed Mashers* (21 Aug.). Among the troupe at this stage were George A. Jones and James R. Walsh and William J. King (known professionally as Walsh and King). In 1888 Clark had converted his Silk Stockings troupe into the All Star Combination, and during the year Whitburn appeared in some of the company's classic farce and burlesque productions. The more notable productions were: *Boozed*, with Whitburn as Gee-A-Way the neglected wife of Cop-Out, played in turn by Johnny Gilmore (Victoria Hall, Melb, 25 Feb.); *The Spoonish Stoodents* - aka *The Spanish Students* (Victoria Hall, 6 Oct.); and *The Bushrangers* (School of Arts, Syd, 22 Dec.), which Whitburn is believed to have written himself. Indeed, by this period of his career Whitburn had begun to build a reputation as writer of farces through such works as *The Coachman* (Victoria Hall, 2 Jan.) and *A Dreadful Tragedy* (A of Music, Syd, 13 July). Although it is likely that many of the farces he appeared in during his career were his own creation, only a few have been clearly identified as his.

Sometime around mid-1889 Clark's European Celebrities opened a season at the Academy of Music (Syd), with the company's headline acts by now comprising Whitburn, Slade Murray, Amy Rowe and Clara Spencer (later of Lawton and Spencer). One of the highlights of the year was Clark's *A Hot Night in Balmain*, which saw Whitburn cast in the lead role (20 July). While it has not been determined when he actually ended his association with Clark it was likely to have occurred following the conclusion of the Boston Ideal Company's season at Brisbane's Theatre Royal in May 1890. By the end that month Whitburn was back in Melbourne under engagement to J. Billin at the Victoria Hall. Billin's company, operating mostly under name US Minstrels and Specialty Company (but also at one stage as the Metropolitan Representative Company), included a number of local performers regarded as being among the most popular and influential of the era, including W. Horace Bent, Alf Holland, John Fuller, Amy Rowe, the Leopold Brothers, Georgie Devoe (later the wife of Charlie Fanning) and Fred Davys.¹ Whitburn made regular appearances in the farces and burlesques staged by the company over the next two years, many of which were written, adapted or directed by Horace Bent. These included: *On Strike*, *Koch's Consumption Cure*, *Under the Gaslight*, *Robbery under Arms*, *The Art Student*, *Eva-Angeline*, *Federation* and *In a Fog*.



Theatre Jan. (1913), 31.

¹ Georgie Devoe and Fred Davys also worked for Harry Rickards for many years.

VICTORIA HALL

Lessee, F. E. Hinoccha.
Sub-lessee and Proprietor, Frank M. Clark.
Manager, Harry Friedman.

25th WEEK 25th
And Still Pursuing His Prosperous Path.

The PUBLIC CHEERFULLY COME UP SMILING,
And
At Every Performance
PACK the HALL to the ROOF,
To Admire and Applaud
FRANK M. CLARK'S
SILK AND KING'S
Pronounced by Everybody
To be
The GREATEST MINSTREL and VARIETY
COMPANY
In the World.

TO-NIGHT | FRANK CLARK | TO-NIGHT
WILL TIP THE WINNER
OF
The MELBOURNE CUP.

Read **OUR TABLET of GENIUS.** Read

Messrs. WALSH and KING.
W. Whitburn. Geo. Jones. F. Stevens
FRANK M. CLARK.

F. Shannon. J. Gordon. T. Gilpin
J. Lindsay. F. Heywood. E. Rogers.
The WOODWARD BROS.,
The World's Famous Acrobats.
WALTER BARKN,
MISSISS.

Tessie Cleveland. May Melville.
Dora De Yarn. Aggie Atkinson.
A. Leavenport. S. Cameron.

A. Hodgk. A. De Bassa.
J. Capper. N. Atkinson. R. Jennings.
F. Clayton. A. Sheridan.

And
OUR SWINGING BEAUTIES.

The AESTHETIC PARTY.

6 END MEN 6

TO-NIGHT | Grand Holiday Attraction | TO-NIGHT.

Argus 30 Oct. (1886), 12.

After ending his two year association with the US Minstrels around mid-1892, Will Whitburn signed on with the Cogill Brothers, moving from the Victoria Hall to St George's Hall. As with his previous engagements he worked as an endman (Mr Tambo) in the first part minstrel show and then presented his speciality comedy turn while often appearing in the afterpiece (farce) or concluding burlesque. Within a few weeks of joining the troupe Whitburn was presenting his own farces, including the popular *Justice Outdone* (27 Aug.). For the week beginning 15 October he wrote and starred in the first part finale, "Crush" and appeared in the farce, *The Two Tailors*. An *Age* advertisement published in December, which refers to Whitburn as "the original impersonator of a Collingwood larrikin," records that he was still required to perform "The Larrikin Hop" and "Woolloomooloo" such was their popularity (10 Dec. 1892, n. pag.).

It is clear that Whitburn's career up until 1892 had been steadily increasing in popularity, but it was to be the next few years that proved to be his most successful, and certainly his most influential. Arguably the most important factor in his elevation to the top of the Australian variety industry beginning around 1892 was his portrayal of the larrikin. Although he had been performing larrikin-inspired songs while on Frank Clark's payroll, it was not until he had fully developed the larrikin's characteristics that he garnered the level of popularity that turned him into one of the country's leading comedians. Much of this success, too, can be put down to the influence of writer/songwriter, Lance Lenton, who is known to have written two of his most successful larrikin sings - "The Larrikin's Hop" and "Woolloomooloo," (a parody of "Killaloe"). Interestingly, while "The Larrikin's Hop" became a hit for Whitburn in 1894, a *Bulletin* critic writing in 1892 indicates that the song had actually been written for him in 1885 (24 Dec. 1892, 8).

That it took so long for Whitburn to find success with his larrikin-inspired act was likely a combination of several factors. Certainly the larrikin's emergence on the variety stage during the early 1890s as a specific "Australian type" was very much a response to the interest shown by the middleclass audience at that time. Although many within that demographic were distanced from direct contact with the underclass larrikin element they were nevertheless well aware of the nefarious activities of larrikin gangs. Support for this assessment comes from the fact that Harry Rickards' featured larrikin acts at his theatres during the early to mid-1890s in response to the interest shown by his largely middle to-upper middle class audience, but eventually deleted them almost entirely from his programs because the low-comedy elements were very at odds with his desire for sophisticated entertainment. It is also possible that Whitburn's early attempts at delineating the larrikin were resisted by the blue-collar/ working-class element (which comprised variety's biggest demographic), because many of those people attending the less reputable city or suburban variety houses would have been part of, or at least sympathetic to, the larrikin subculture. As the variety stage larrikin tended to be more comical and toned-down, a kind of urban anti-hero built along London coster lines, Whitburn would have been required to find the middle ground between entertaining his audience and not demeaning or offending them.



1894

Source: State Library of Victoria
"Dramatic Costume Football Match"

While there are signs that Whitburn was becoming "thoroughly at home as a larrikin" as early as 1890 (LOR: 4 Oct. 1890, 6), it was not until around 1892 that he began to attract the sort of attention that saw him elevated to the top of the industry. Indeed, the *Bulletin* went so far as to suggest that it was the authenticity of Whitburn's material that set him apart from a number of "imported artists who had recently been presenting a coster-type larrikin act" (24 Dec. 1892, 8). An earlier issue of the magazine provides additional insight when its variety critic writes: "Will Whitburn takes the shine out of Lonnen's larrikin song... being indigenous to the soil and having considered the lilies of the 'push' how they grow, from his youth upwards" (10 Dec. 1892, 9). While larrikin-inspired acts and songs largely disappeared from Rickards' shows by the time Whitburn first appeared on the circuit his on-stage persona still retained a good deal of the larrikin characteristics and in this respect remained central to his trademark delivery.

It is not yet clear how long Will Whitburn remained with the Cogills, or when he started with Harry Rickards, although this may have been as early as 1894. Research shows that he was on Rickards bill at the Opera House (Melb)

from the beginning of January 1896, which suggests that he had been with the company from at least late 1895. His long connection with Rickards' Melbourne operations is quite unusual for the period, with few variety artists able to dictate such contracts - which further indicates his high position in the Australian variety industry. Although Whitburn had good reason to remain in Melbourne as much as possible due to his commitments as a horse breeder and trainer, his decision not to spend more time in Sydney was due largely to the fact that his brand of humour did not go over with that city's audiences until later in his career. In reporting on Whitburn's return to the stage in late 1912 after a five year lay-off, the *Theatre* magazine's variety critic writes: "One of the strangest phases of Will Whitburn as a comedian in the old days was that Sydney audiences never seemed to appreciate his humour as they did in Melbourne. The appreciation which he is now meeting at the Tivoli, however, shows that the Sydney audience of to-day differs from that of 10 years ago. Whitburn is one of the most original comedians Australia has ever produced" (Dec. 1912, 11).

MR. HARRY RICKARDS'
NEW TIVOLI VAUDEVILLE AND SPECIALTY
COMBINATION.
A GREAT HOLIDAY PROGRAMME TO-DAY.
 Mr. Rickards has much pleasure in announcing to the amusement loving public of Sydney and suburbs that whilst in London he engaged a large number of Star Artists, amongst whom

MRS. SIMS BEEVES,
 Widow of England's Greatest Tenor, is the third to arrive (per S.D.L. Barbarossa), and will make her first appearance in Australia TO-DAY, SATURDAY, AT THE MATINEE, in selections from her late husband's repertoire.

THIS (SATURDAY) AFTERNOON AND EVENING,
 Reappearance of Three Old Sydney Favourites,
Mr. JAMES HARVEY Mr. LAL LOGIE
Miss FLORENCE BANGER.
 They have Arrived, they have Appeared,
 They are the Talk of Sydney and Suburbs.

They Are Wonderful,	THE TWO CIRNOCS.
They Are Astounding,	THE TWO CIRNOCS.
They Are Marvels,	THE TWO CIRNOCS.
They Are Stupefying,	THE TWO CIRNOCS.
They Are Bewildering,	THE TWO CIRNOCS.
They Are Myxifying,	THE TWO CIRNOCS.
They Are Inexplicable,	THE TWO CIRNOCS.

THE CIRNOCS.
THE NOTED HANDCUFF KINGS,
 who Challenge and Defy Police, Locksmiths, and Public Performers to secure them with any regulation Handcuffs, Chains, and Locks.

MISS JENNY GREY
 will introduce for the first time in Australia the Great Speciality, **THE DEVIL'S FORGE,** from Carmen.

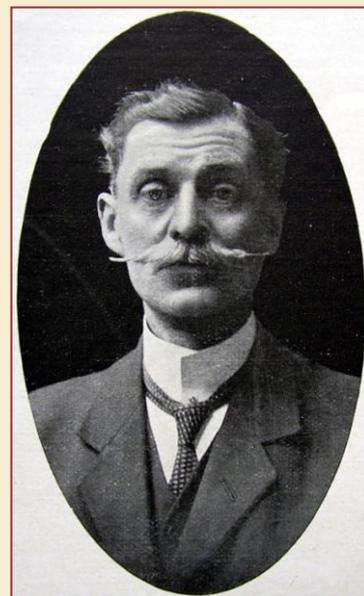
MR. WILL WHITBURN.

Sydney Morning Herald 26 Dec. (1903), 2.

It appears that Will Whitburn was contracted to Harry Rickards on an almost exclusive basis up until sometime around 1907, with most of this time being spent in Melbourne - first at the Opera House and later at the Bijou. His position in the company throughout his association with Rickards was essentially the same as Charlie Pope and Irving Sayles - the two African-American comics whose careers were also long associated with the Tivoli organisation. Indeed, the 1912 *Theatre* article describes the comedian as the "idol of Melbourne audiences [whose] jokes never seemed to grow stale, though they were often hoary with age" (ibid, 11). Among the Australian performers who appeared on the same bill with Whitburn during his Tivoli years were Fred Leslie, Charlie Fanning and Georgie Devoe, Harry Shine, McKisson and Kearns and Ida Rosslyn (aka Ida Tauchert, aka Mrs Jack Kearns). Although primarily a solo act, Whitburn did occasionally appear in ensemble turns and even pantomime. He made a cameo appearance, for example, in Rickards' 1898 pantomime *Jack the Giant Killer* (Bijou Theatre, Melb), taking up his role on 26 February as a later edition feature act. The previous year, too, he was one of Rickards' artists to feature at a benefit for the Distressed Actors' Fund (Princess Theatre, Melb, 27 Mar.). Among the stellar company for that night were J. C. Williamson, Bland Holt, Julius Knight, J. B. Atholwood, John Cosgrove, Percy Kehoe and veteran actor, Olly Deering.

During his last seven or eight years with Harry Rickards, Will Whitburn, along with veterans like Charles Cogill, Arthur Elliott and Tom Edwards, helped influence and develop the talents of many local comedians whose careers would be carried out in the post-WWI revusical era, including Gus Franks, Les Warton, Fred Bluett, the Driscoll Brothers and Ward Lear. Sometime in 1907 Whitburn retired to his 25 acre property "Murrumbeena," situated near Notting Hill, beyond Oakleigh on the outskirts of Melbourne. The house is said to have formerly belonged to the late Auditor General, J. V. Bagge (B: 5 Sept. 1907, 9). His equestrian interests were by this stage mostly in the breeding and training of trotters. This passion for horses is said to have dated back to his youth when he toyed with a career in the trotting industry, and one report even records that as a driver he not only stood just as much ahead of his rivals as he did as a comedian, but that during his racing career "accumulated large amounts of money." It also appears that Whitburn's decision to leave the variety industry was due to the clash between matinee performances and trotting meetings. (TT: Dec. 1912, 11)

Following his come-back engagement on Hugh D. McIntosh's Tivoli circuit in late 1912 Whitburn returned to his trotting interests in Melbourne (ARG: 16 Dec. 1912, 11). He made at least one other appearance on the stage, sometime around the mid-1920s, taking on a leading role in a novelty show, *Ye Olde Nigger Minstrels*. A few years later, on 29 July 1928, he died at his Melbourne property aged 65 years. In reporting his death, *Everyone's* noted that it was Whitburn's ability to work along entirely different lines of comedy from his contemporaries that made him stand out and above the rest (8 Aug. 1928, 49).



Theatre Dec. (1912), 11.

His forte was a specialty act which saw him narrative a comic story while changing the letter "n" in words to an "l." Another classic routine which he performed regularly over the years was a burlesque railway porter sketch. Whitburn's physical appearance also distinguished him from his peers in that he was the only high-profile blackface comedian to have a moustache. Some of his biggest song successes were the larrikin-inspired numbers written for him by Lance Lenton, including "The Larrikin Hop" and "Woolloomooloo." Away from the theatre Whitburn's great passion was for horses. A more than proficient jockey during his younger years, he turned to training and breeding trotters following his retirement from the variety industry (ca. 1907). He did, however, occasionally return to the stage, with one of his final feature appearances occurring a few years before his death in 1928. Aside from his solo comedic work, Whitburn is known to have written several minstrel farces - including *A Dreadful Tragedy* (1885), *The Bushrangers* and *The Coachmen* (both 1888), *Justice Outdone* and *The Twins* (both 1892). He also appeared in many other farces and burlesquers, along with the occasional pantomime.



Everyone's 8 Aug. (1928), 49.

ENGAGEMENTS CHRONOLOGY

- 1885:** PEOPLE'S CONCERTS (Temp Hall, Melb; 5 Sept.)
- 1886:** PEOPLES' CONCERTS (Temp Hall, Melb; 17 Apr.) ► F.M. CLARK (Vic Hall, Melb; 17 May; > see also ca. 21 Aug. - ca. 16 Oct - ca. Dec. *)
- 1888:** F.M. CLARK (Vic Hall, Melb; 2 Jan. - * > see also 25 Feb.) • (A of M, Syd; ca. June/July * > see 13 July) • (Vic Hall, Melb; 6 Oct.) • (A of M, Syd; 22 Dec.)
- 1889:** F.M. CLARK (A of M, Syd; 1 Jan. - * > See also 20 July)
- 1890:** F.M. CLARK'S BOSTON IDEAL Co (Th Royal, Bris; ca. Apr/May) ► J. BILLIN (Victoria Hall, Melb; ca. May - Dec. * > US Minstrels & Specialty Co)
- 1891:** J. BILLIN (Victoria Hall, Melb; 1 Jan. - Dec. * > US Minstrels & Specialty Co; See also 17 Jan. / 28 Mar. / 21 Feb. / 2 May / 30 May and 12)
- 1892:** J. BILLIN (Vic Hall, Melb; 1 jkan. - ca. Feb. * > US Minstrels & Specialty Co) ► COGILL BROS (St Geo's Hall, Melb; ca. Aug. - Dec.* > see 20 Aug. / 10 Sept. / 8 Oct. and 10 Dec.)
- 1896:** HARRY RICKARDS (Op House, Melb; ca. Jan to July and ca. Oct - Nov.)
- 1897:** DISTRESSED ACTORS' FUND (Princess's Th, Melb; 27 Mar.)
- 1898:** HARRY RICKARDS (Op House, Melb; Jan - Dec.)
- 1899:** HARRY RICKARDS (Op House, Melb; Jan - 3 Feb.) • (Bijou Th, Melb; 4 Feb. - Dec.)
- 1900:** HARRY RICKARDS (Bijou Th, Melb; 1 Jan. - May. * > See also Sept and Dec.; possibly all year)
- 1903:** HARRY RICKARDS (Tivoli Th, Syd; 26 Dec.)
- 1904:** HARRY RICKARDS (Tivoli Th, Syd; 1 Jan.) • (Op House, Melb; 18 June)
- 1905:** HARRY RICKARDS (Opera House, Melb; 1 Jan.)

1906: HARRY RICKARDS (Opera House, Melb; 18 June)

NB: Whitburn is reported in 1907 to have begun concentrating on his business as a breeder and trainer of trotters (at his property at Notting Hill, near Oakleigh, Victoria. Ctd. B: 5 Sept. 1907, 9)

1912: TIVOLI THEATRES (Tivoli Th, Syd; 27 Nov.) • (Op House, Melb; 16 Dec.)

1913: TIVOLI THEATRES (Op House, Melb; 1 Jan. - *)

1927: TIVOLI THEATRES (Tivoli Th, Melb; 30 July > Tivoli Old Time Minstrels)

FURTHER REFERENCE

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"Will Whitburn Dies in Melbourne." E: 8 Aug. (1928), 49.

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See also:

A: 16 Oct. (1886), 12 • 30 Oct. (1886), 12 • 2 May (1891), 12 • 20 Aug. (1892), 12 • 10 Sept. (1892), 12 • 8 Oct. (1892), 10 • 27 Mar. (1897), 12 • 23 Oct. (1897), 12 • 8 Oct. (1898), 12 • 8 Apr. (1899), 12 • 24 June (1899), 12 • 6 Jan. (1900), 12 • 31 Mar. (1900), 12 • 12 May (1900), 12 • 1 Sept. (1900), 12 • 1 Dec. (1900), 12 • 18 June (1904), 16 • 3 Dec. (1904), 16 • 25 Dec. (1912), 10.

ARG: 16 Dec. (1912), 11.

B: 5 Sept. (1907), 9 • 29 July (1909), 30 • 22 Oct. (1925), 34.

SMH: 29 July (1889), 2 • 28 Dec. (1903), 3 • 29 Nov. (1912), 2.

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