

THE FLEMISH HERCULES

David P. Webster, O.B.E.

One of Astley's finest performers was Peter Ducrow, billed as the Flemish Hercules, having been born in Bruges around 1765. The inscription on his tombstone indicates that he died on 6 January 1815 at the age of forty-nine but the burial register of St Mary Lambeth Churchyard, where he was put to rest, records his age as 57.

Ducrow performed noteworthy feats of strength, appearing before Royalty on several occasions. He was thoroughly professional and used his versatile talents in a great many acts and roles during his career. Eventually demand for his equestrian skills outpaced those for his feats of strength and he became known as an intrepid rider. Whether he was on horseback, the slack wire, or in acrobatics, his strength was obvious in the type of work he did.

In the 1790s Peter was as agile as he was strong, and had tremendous leg power. One of his feats was leaping over the backs of seven horses and through a hoop of fire. I believe that Peter Ducrow first appeared in Britain in June 1792 with Thomas Franklin's presentation at the Royal Circus, London. In his act at this time he jumped over eight horses with four men sitting on them.

When Franklin's company closed at the Royal Circus on 14 October 1792, Ducrow and some of his colleagues made their way to Edinburgh where a circus was based at the New Sadler's Wells Theatre, erected just two years earlier. The season lasted until the end of December when the manager, Riding Master George Jones, and most of this company moved to Glasgow. Ducrow may have stayed with Jones for some time for in May 1795 he was again advertised at the Royal Circus, London, where Jones was one of the lessees. During this season Jones's troop were booked to appear before the Royal family at Frogmore as part of the birthday celebrations for the Queen and Princess of Wales so the Royal Circus was deemed to be appropriately



Andrew Ducrow in an illustration for a performance at Astley's Amphitheatre.

named. Ducrow was on the Royal posters the following year with exhibitions of his wonderful heavy balances of a coach-wheel and ladder with a child poised on it. This youngster was probably his oldest son Andrew Ducrow making his circus debut at the age of three. Peter also did a slack wire act.

Extensive research reveals a wealth of information about this nomadic showman and his young son. The following engagements give just a flavor of their eventful lives. Important bookings were obtained in Portugal and on 25 October 1797, "Mr. Du Crow and the Infant Hercules" appeared at the Theatre Royal, San Carlos, Lisbon. This engagement was often referred to in later advertising in statements such as "Ducrow from Portugal," "from the Theatre Royal, Lisbon." It was good for his curriculum vitae. During his strongman career Ducrow was named in various ways including Duc Crow, Ducroe, Ducreau, Ducross and Myheer Ducrow.

By the following Easter the powerful Dutchman was back at the Royal Circus in London. Always extending his repertoire, later that season he appeared as a well-built slave in "Black Beard." His strength act at that time was titled "The Modern Hercules."

It was the ambition of many circus acts to enter the prestigious ring of Astley's Circus and Peter Ducrow, having proved his worth elsewhere, eventually got this plum booking. On 4 September 1898 he showed his great agility and strength at the Amphitheater in a spectacular act where it was advertised that he somersaulted through a hoop of fire, sailed over seven horses and leapt over a banner twelve feet high.

From 16 April until 31 May 1799, Ducrow was prominent at the Olympic Circus, Shaw's Brow, Dale Road, Liverpool, in the north east of England. The Infant Hercules was also featured in some of the programs during the season. While in Liverpool the bills proclaimed their appearance during the past twelve

months in the Prince of Wales riding school at Carlton House and also for the Royal Family at Windsor. In later advertising there were similar claims for a royal appearance at Frogmore in 1800.

From Liverpool the company traveled south to a circus in Bristol. The temporary nature of the structure was less than perfect and on getting a good house for a benefit, the gallery collapsed. Their lives were never uneventful. Manchester was next on their itinerary and they opened there at the circus on 22 July 1799, alternating appearances between circus and a theatre. Ducrow's second son John, born in or around 1796, was also included in the show and the three Ducrows were given a benefit on 28 August. Andrew was not by any means overlooked and Master Ducrow, it was advertised, would demonstrate his "balancing feats of strength."

After touring the provinces for a year the family went back to London in 1800 and on Monday, 14 April appeared at Astleys. It was supposed to be a short engagement but the Flemish Hercules was re-engaged time after time. At the end of May a new stunt was featured when he balanced a horse. It is believed that this was done in the same manner as Sandow performed the feat. The athlete supported a see-saw platform and a trained horse walked to the middle of the contraption and with a step forward and backward tilted the apparatus first one way and then the other.

A few weeks later on 14 July 1800 the Ducrows appeared before the Royal Family at Frogmore House, Windsor. Although it was not Peter's first royal performance it was certainly a notable one for he and his sons were given the monarch's personal attention. The Frogmore Fete was an informal affair where spectators and some of the performers moved around. Having been entertained by some singing "gypsies," who were in reality actors playing the parts, the Royal party, family and guests, moved on to view the stage allocated to Mr. Du Crow, the Flemish Hercules, who gave a very extensive and impressive exhibition.

The newspapers of that time wrote of "his inimitable performance on the slack wire; and afterwards on the stage his extraordinary feats of strength, such as balancing on his chin three large coach-wheels, also a ladder to which were affixed two chairs with two children on them." That was not all; on his hands and feet he supported a table in the form of a pyramid, and on different parts of this contraption eight people were seated.

His Majesty King George III was astounded and personally questioned Peter Ducrow about his muscles. Ducrow informed him that surgeons said they were one fifth larger in size than those of men who were

taller and heavier.

It was probably on this occasion that the stage collapsed under the weight of Ducrow's apparatus and company. The story has been told in Andrew Ducrow's biography, "...at the fete of Frogmore where (he) his father and brother were engaged: a stage was erected for the exhibition, and in consequence of the weight upon it by some of Mr. D.'s fetes (feats) part of the stage broke in and our hero's little brother fell through. His Majesty instantly rose and came in person to see if the little fellow was hurt. On being answered with the utmost simplicity by the child . . . the King asked him several questions...."

Peter was concerned that his small son was not aware of the importance of addressing the Sovereign and tried to explain to the boy. The King would brook no interference and declared himself content with the title of Mister until the stage was remedied. The result of this memorable appearance was immediate. The Ducrows were quickly booked to appear at Astley's to give the same program as at Frogmore "when his Majesty condescended to honor the Flemish Hercules with his approbation on his superior strength."

For once it truly was a short engagement for four nights only as Peter had other bookings lined up at Norwich, Yarmouth etc. He toured with Astley's and went back to London with them to the Amphitheater when it reopened on Easter Monday 1801.

Ducrow would balance three wagon wheels on his forehead or chin and for a change would sometimes balance two wheels and get one of his sons to climb on top of them! It was a hazardous feat for father and son and the weight must have been well over two hundred pounds. In another feat he would support on his hands and feet a platform with ten men, and on his benefit nights he would increase this to twelve men.

The splendid Flemish artist Pannemaker produced a very detailed circus picture circa 1815 and in it, although not the main subject, there is a strong man with arms folded in the so-called block pose. This is perhaps the earliest example of what became a standard posture for such performers. Since Ducrow was the best known Flemish Hercules of that era, one speculates that the image could well have been based on him. If not depicting Ducrow it could perhaps be Jan van Moritz, who also adopted this *nom d'arena*. Regardless, it is an important early portrayal of the genre, especially since amongst the equipment lying in the ring is a short globe dumbbell and it wasn't until much later that one hand lifting of such weights became a popular part of a strength athlete's repertoire.

Ducrow became quite famous throughout Europe but some snippets written about the strongman

reflect badly on him as an individual. He raised his son Andrew in a very regimented, toughly disciplined way, training him in circus skills from a very early age. Andrew was billed as the Infant Hercules but this was for just one of his acts. The youngster had also to perfect horse riding and rope dancing turns. By today's standards Peter Ducrow's treatment of the lad would be considered cruel and not permitted by law.

In November 1805 Ducrow and his sons were hired to appear at the Olympic Circus in Edinburgh, Scotland. Advertising claimed that the celebrated Flemish Hercules "being his First Appearance in this kingdom" would go through the same program as he had given before the Royal Family at Frogmore. It was not of course his first appearance in Scotland, although probably the first time his two sons had appeared with him there. The lads were particularly popular and were now treated as stars in their own right, with a head and hand-balancing act being a highlight. The *piece-de-resistance* in this was a balance on a 12' ladder that broke in half and left Andrew balanced on one side.

The season extended over the Festive season until, in the final week, the Ducrows were given a benefit on 4 February 1806. Moving immediately to Glasgow, the family appeared at the Olympic Circus, Albion Street, Glasgow. Fortunately the bills for this show are preserved in the Library of Glasgow University.

After Glasgow there were appearances in Liverpool where the trio made numerous appearances on the program. During this season the circus used the best drawing I have seen of Peter Ducrow's coach-wheels and boy balancing specialty. It appears on the bill of May 8, 1806, a week before they were given their benefit in Liverpool. During the autumn of 1806 they performed in a Manchester circus; all the time Andrew's talents and acts became more diversified.

The strongman, like so many of that ilk, became a proprietor when he built an amphitheater at Bathwick Fields in Bath. Back in London in 1807 they were engaged by William Davis who had an ulterior motive in keeping them at Astley's. He wished to promote his own two sons as horsemen and he kept the Ducrow name out of the program. The most Peter could get in his billing was "Herculean Equilibriums," no mention of his name or his sons. In the last week of the season when they received a benefit the Ducrows showed what they could do. Andrew did his riding and tightrope acts, polandric balances (after the Little Polander, balancing master) with ladders, chairs and tables and Peter performed his strength act, including a feat where he supported on his hands and feet a platform bearing ten persons.

By 1811 Peter had more or less phased out his feats of strength and other performances, concentrating

instead on becoming business manager for Andrew, his talented son. He traveled all over the country with him, doing quite well in his self appointed task. There was a full engagement book and they obtained good fees, but perhaps these had as much to do with Andrew's abilities as Peter's negotiating skills.

On one tour while they were in Edinburgh, Peter got drunk and the room was accidentally set alight during the night. Andrew managed to put out the fire but aggravated a previous leg injury. He forced himself to perform although in great pain. At his next engagement, which was in Wales, he had to do most of his tight-rope work on one leg.

The Ducrows went to London to finish a very financially successful tour and with his earnings Peter Ducrow rented the Royal Circus and Equestrian Academy, then known as the Surrey. After restoring the ring he presented a series of shows. This was probably around 1813-1814. I have been unable to find many details about their activities in 1813 but have noted that Andrew Ducrow wrote of his appearances at the Surrey in 1814 when he included a most dangerous ropewalking feature in his act. A rope was fixed from the stage to the gallery and balanced on this he wheeled a boy in a barrow right up the rope and back down again. The journey from the gallery back down to the stage was particularly difficult and after the first experience the boy defected.

Peter Ducrow's last seasons at the Royal and at the Surrey were bad ones which left him bankrupt and he died a little later on 6 January 1815. It is my view that the Flemish Hercules has never been given the credit which is rightly his and there seems to be a number of good reasons why this may be the case. The Napoleonic conflicts, which coincided with his career, had greatly restricted his free movement in Europe. In spite of this he still became a very significant figure in the history of strongmen. There is also the question of his brutal personality, which may not have been so different from others of his era but nevertheless did not earn him many friends.

There is a third rather interesting speculation. Although this resume gives a fairly comprehensive overview of the career of the Flemish Hercules there are a few gaps, partly caused by circus politics. The influential circus manager and proprietor William Davis was closely associated with many of Ducrow's bookings over the years. He and the Ducrows did not get on at all well for they both had two sons they were trying to develop and promote on almost identical lines. Neither of Davis's sons was of comparable caliber to Andrew Ducrow as an equestrian or versatile performer. Davis would frequently suppress the names of the Ducrows in bills and in programs, giving the act a title or descrip-



One of Andrew Ducrow's most notable contributions was the introduction of posing on horseback. Here is the top part of an advertisement for Astley's Amphitheatre, that reads, "Mr. Ducrow, the Celebrated Equestrian at Astley's Amphitheatre Performing Roman Defence to the Different Attitudes of the Gladiators taken from Drawings made for Napoleon Buonaparte."

tion without actually naming the performers. I also note that in Davis shows the name Du Crow was sometimes used. Numerous such ploys seem to take parental rivalry a little too far.

In spite of many obstacles Peter Ducrow had seen his oldest son, so physically abused by him, become a busy artiste and popular with the public. Little did he know that his offspring would become a legendary figure with lasting fame in the circus world.

ANDREW DUCROW - THE INFANT HERCULES

While Peter Ducrow was appearing in Astley's circus his son Andrew was born in the Nag's Head, Southwark High Street on 10 October 1793. Little Andrew had to begin training as soon as he could walk and his name soon became a talking point amongst the fraternity of the sawdust ring. The lad first appeared in an act at three years of age and at four he was justifiably billed as "The Infant Hercules."

A biographical article about young Ducrow, published in the Edinburgh *Opera-Glass* on 4 Sept. 1884, states that between the age of three to fifteen the boy had to work around sixteen hours a day on a regular basis. I believe this would probably include education, domestic chores and circus training. As a very small boy he was put on the tight-rope and told to stay there or be "leathered." At four he appeared in public as a rope walker and at seven he made his first appearance with Astley.

Andrew knew that if he did not work long and hard he would get a thrashing. Once during a performance at Bath young Ducrow fell off his horse and the

Flemish Hercules dashed in and carried him out of the ring. His apparent affection was appreciated by the spectators but behind the scenes there was a different behavior. The audience believed the boy's cries of pain were caused by his leg injuries but this was not so. Instead of sympathy the lad was horsewhipped for being careless and for putting himself out of action. In future he could not allow himself to be accident-prone with a parent like this. On one occasion Joe Grimaldi is said to have remonstrated with the tyrannical father for hitting Andrew. Ducrow responded saying that it was best to "make an impression when the wax is soft." "Yes," retorted Grimaldi "But the w(h)acks were not soft!"

Andrew received a great education at a good acting school in London and excelled in mime. Apart from his father he had three excellent tutors, J.H. D'Egville (sometimes Dagueville), a noted ballet master at the Opera House, Jack Richer, a superb rope dancer who was also praised for his facial and physical appearance, described once as the "best-made man in England." The third teacher was Collett (Collet) from a famous family of equestrians and his teachings were fundamental in Ducrow Jr.'s future success.

At fifteen Andrew Ducrow was earning a very good living, receiving £10-£15 a week as a rider and tightrope walker. He had not been a sturdy lad and away from his father's influence he was quite unruly. He fell for a Miss Saunders, who was with acrobats and riders at shows in Bath. The young lady, much more experienced in the ways of the world, rejected him and the motivation provided by this, combined with ever

increasing physical work, may have led to him developing a fine physique. While appearing in Edinburgh the noted anatomist Dr. Bartlett saw the young circus star and told his anatomy students to go to see the act so they could study the perfect human body. Bartlett also hired Andrew Ducrow to model at one of his lectures and placed him between two skeletons. Old Peter was scared, thinking they were preparing to dissect his meal ticket! In passing it should be noted that the mature Miss Saunders married one of the acrobats, a vaulter named Brown and in time their children became circus stars all over the world. Some of them changed their name to Toumaire while others retained the family name. One of the Browns appeared in Cooke's Circus doing acrobatics and feats of strength.

Andrew Ducrow originated the concept of equestrian 'Poses Plastique', the portrayal of classical statuary on horseback, and in the 1820s there were more prints and engravings of him than of any other stage or ring performer of that era. These pictures often depicted his excellent physique in the roles he popularized.

Andrew appeared at the Amphitheater during one season before leaving Britain, with his father, for bookings on the continent. He went back to mainland Europe after his father's death having married a Miss Griffiths, a horsewoman from Liverpool, on 24 May 1818, and they, along with his sisters, two boys and ten horses traveled all over Europe, filling his money bags to overflowing.

The first of these engagements was Blondin's Cirque Olympique for a tour of Belgium. Another was with Franconi Circus Olympique, then in Holland. He was acclaimed in Paris in 1814 and gradually became the idol of France. Ducrow produced a fresh equestrian act in 1828 that took England by storm. His great talent for posing and mime were seen to advantage in his presentation entitled "Raphael's dream" where the finest conceptions of ancient Greek sculptures were portrayed by him *while standing on horseback*. The act evoked immense and sustained applause at every exhibition. Such was Andrew's popularity that William IV had a temporary amphitheater constructed for a performance by Ducrow on 19 November 1832. The great equestrian was summoned to the Palace the next day to receive the congratulations of the King via the Earl of Erroll.

The posing part of Andrew Ducrow's act was so popular that many others copied it and one of these was an acrobat, Constantine, who traveled from London to star in James Wild's traveling circus which was at Keighley Fair in Yorkshire. The rival Walleth Circus appeared at the same time but was poorly attended until Walleth made overtures to Constantine over a few bottles of beer. Walleth managed to buy all the acrobat's props to depict Ajax, Achilles and other heroes from

Homer. From then on Wild's Circus was deserted, Constantine dejected and Walleth triumphant, with the new posing act drawing full houses to his circus.

Andrew inherited some of his father's traits and was well-known for his coarse speech and blunt manner. Clyne, the German rope-walker, was hired by him in 1832-3 to traverse rope from stage to balcony, and at rehearsal was reluctant to begin, saying the rope was not properly secured. Ducrow's home was next door to the amphitheater and he went straight there from his breakfast, still in dressing gown and slippers. He snatched the balancing pole from the German and mounted the rope. "Afraid for your pretty face, are you? Well I am not so pretty," and with his dressing gown flapping wildly around him he went right up the rope and down again, snorting that there was nothing to fuss about! On the other hand, in spite of his bluster, it is on record that he looked after his employees very well in times of distress.

Always trying to progress, Ducrow managed Astley's Amphitheatre from 1825- 1841 and on 20 May 1840 had an afternoon visit from Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. The Royal box was preserved and effigies of the Sovereign and Price Consort thereafter presided over the circus scene.

There is a tragic end to the Ducrow saga when he went out of his mind in 1841 after his circus was destroyed by one of the many fires that haunted early shows. He partly recovered but on 22 January he suffered a stroke in which he lost the use of one side of his body. He also lost his speech. A second stroke followed and on 27 January 1842 at 8:30PM he slipped away at the age of forty-eight. He left £47,000 to his second wife Louisa (nee Woolford) and he was laid to rest in an impressively built mausoleum at Kensal Green Cemetery in London. His fame lives on as an important, indeed a *pivotal* part of circus history.

Further Reading

*To the best of my knowledge this is the first comprehensive study of the Flemish Hercules, Peter Ducrow, as a star in his own right. Much more has been written about Andrew Ducrow, who was undoubtedly the most famous circus star of that era, the epitome of a romantic age. Most of his activities as an actor animal trainer, choreographer, designer etc. are outside the scope of this article but for those whose interests go beyond the Infant Hercules period and his physical accomplishments, many excellent books are to be found. By far the best is **The Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow** by A. H. Saxon, Ph.D. of Yale University.*

For additional materials the excellent collections of circus bills at the British Library, Victoria and Albert Museum and the Universities of Glasgow and Aberdeen are also worthy of study.