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Elephants in the High Street

Why is an elephant unlike a tree? – Because a tree leaves in the spring, and the elephant leaves when the menagerie does. (*Bristol Mercury*, 23 December 1871)

In 1855 a contributor to *Blackwood’s Magazine*, William Aytoun, recounted his childhood experiences of visiting George Wombwell’s travelling menagerie on Edinburgh’s Castle Mound. Writing nostalgically about his boyhood encounters with the wild beasts, the now grown-up menagerie customer described how he had been enticed into the show, that ‘mysterious quadrangle of wagons’, by the ‘huge and somewhat incongruous pictures of lions, tigers, panthers, leopards, wolves and boa constrictors making their way towards some common centrepiece of carrion’. The entry fee paid, Aytoun ventured into the menagerie ‘with a far more excited feeling than any middle-aged traveller experiences when he first catches a glimpse of Timbuctoo’, and, descending a flight of stairs into the interior of the exhibition, was immediately assailed by the ‘strange and wildly tropical... commixed odour of sawdust, ammonia and orange peel. A hideous growling, snarling, hissing, baying, barking and chattering’ assaulted the young visitor’s ears as he penetrated further into the menagerie. Apprehension, however, was soon replaced by enchantment as the boy scrutinised in turn each of the caged animals and observed its movements. Years later Aytoun still remembered seeing ‘Nero, the indulgent old lion, who would stand any amount of liberties’. He recalled admiring the handsome zebra, ‘whom we greatly coveted for a pony’, and fondly recounted proffering a bun to the amicable elephant – ‘what a nice beast’ – who ‘from nine in the morning till six in the dewy eve... must
have swallowed as many [cakes] as ought to have deranged the digestion of a ragged school’. Aytoun was more wary of Wallace, ‘the Scottish lion – a rampant, reddish-maned animal, who would not tolerate the affront of being roused by the application of a long pole’.

Aytoun’s recollections encapsulate the distinctive ambience of the travelling wild beast show and conjure a vivid picture of how the layout, atmosphere and contents of the menagerie mediated visitors’ perception of its inmates. Detailing his memories of Wombwell’s show from a distance of some twenty years, Aytoun still recalled, quite graphically, the sights and sounds that had greeted him upon entering the zoological establishment. He was convinced that ‘the ambulatory menageries were most valuable schools for instruction in natural history’ in the days when ‘there were no zoological gardens’, and he contended, for this reason, that ‘the names of Wombwell and [fellow menagerist] Polito’ should be regarded ‘with reverence’. Still more interestingly, the now grown-up Aytoun presented his visit to Wombwell’s collection as a truly magical and awe-inspiring experience that encompassed a whole gamut of emotions – from ‘intense delight’ on viewing the gentler animals to an ‘ecstasy of fear’ at the sight of the Bengal tiger, whose eyes flicked open as he walked past as if ‘waking up from some pleasant reverie of masticated Hindoo’. These memories – though inflected with humour and exaggerated for comic effect – elucidate the physical reality of visiting a travelling menagerie and the exotic associations it evoked in at least one spectator. They show how proximity to the beasts, with all the associated smells, sounds and anxieties, could make a trip to the itinerant animal collection an informative and multi-sensory experience (Figure 3.1).¹

This chapter looks at the place where most nineteenth-century Britons would have had their first encounter with an elephant or a lion: the travelling menagerie. Ever expanding in scope, peripatetic wild-beast collections functioned simultaneously as a source of rudimentary zoological knowledge and a popular form of entertainment, complementing contemporary amusements like the pantomime, ethnographic exhibition or moving panorama.² Although zoological gardens had emerged in London and in several provincial cities by the 1830s, menageries continued to attract a broad range of visitors throughout the century, and served sectors of the population who, through class or geography, lacked easy access to static zoological collections. Relatively neglected by historians, their range, longevity and popularity are yet to be fully appreciated.