

The Circus In Strabane

"The three main circus shows photographed by Cooper (or J.W. Burroughs - who ran the studio in Railway Street, Strabane in the years preceding Cooper - 1901-1913) were Duffy's Circus, Buff Bill's American Circus and Hanneford's Canadian Circus. The photographs of Duffy's Circus were, almost certainly, all taken during the visit to Strabane in 1911. Duffy's Circus was begun in the late 19th century by John, who died in 1909; by the time Duffy's Circus arrived in Strabane in 1911, it was run by John's widow, Annie. One of John Duffy's sons, James, married Lena Kayes, daughter of William Kayes who ran the famous Buff Bill's American Circus in Ireland before and after the First World War, Kayes himself being 'Buff Bill' thus avoiding any nasty copyright issues. Ned Hanneford's Canadian Circus toured Ireland up to 1916. It was renowned for its menagerie, including lions and 'bears that talk'. It also featured a splendid street parade headed by an ornate, gilded bandwagon drawn by 8 sleek horses. Cooper's photos of Hanneford's Circus must have been taken before 1914, a period which seems to have been the heyday of circus visits to Strabane."

William Kayes was a knife thrower and sharp-shooter, and the owner of a travelling circus which emulated "Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show".

He was born in Peebles, Scotland, in 1856. His father was Richard Kayes, musician in a travelling show who was born at Merthyr Tydfil in Wales and his mother Ann (nee Newsome) was born in London. William's siblings were Jane (born 1847 in Bristol), James (born 1849 in Cornwall), Richard (born 1851 in Upper Mills), Timothy (born 1854 in Dundee), Ellen (born 1857), Ann and Thomas (born 1858 in Sunderland), Mary (born 1859) and Joseph (born 1862).

William and his brother Richard (the Great Ricardo) were sharp-shooters and knife throwers. They developed a cowboy act and travelled the length and breadth of Ireland. It was said that William could throw six knives into a cigarette card. The show developed into a Wild West Show similar to the famous American, Buffalo Bill and when the brothers parted, William took on big cats and ponies and it gradually became a travelling circus with name changes from Buff Bill's Wild West Show in 1898 at Houghton-le-Spring; Buff Bill (Kayes) Menagerie in 1899 in Newcastle; Buff Bill's Circus in 1899 at Sunderland Winter Fair; to Buff Bill's Menagerie in 1900 at Newcastle Town Moor.

William was married twice, firstly to Harriet Reader and they had 3 children William Jnr. (Young Macomo), Timothy and Helen. Then in 1899 he married Elizabeth Baker in Hamilton, Lanark. She was born in 1878 in Penzance, the daughter of Tom and Eliza Baker an established circus family. She was a tight-rope walker, dancer and juggler. They had ten children, Tommy (lion tamer), Pricilla (lion tamer), Arthur (amusements manager), Johnny (bare-back rider), Jimmy (bare-back rider), Betty (bare-back rider), Richard (circus manager), Selena, Violetta, Carrie and Pattie.

In the 1910s, Bill's eyesight was failing and Elizabeth took over the running of the Circus. When the First World War broke out and Tommy enlisted, it was up to Elizabeth to become a Lion Tamer and keep the show on the road. However it was in 1933 that William became ill at St. James's Croft, Hightown Salford. He was taken to the Jewish hospital in Cheetham, where he died on 23rd November, aged 77. He was buried in A4 of the Dissenters portion, Weaste Cemetery on November 27th 1933.