

# The Dark Side of Surf Lifesaving

DOUGLAS BOOTH  
*School of Physical Education*  
*The University of Otago*

FOR MOST OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, the Surf Life Saving Association (SLSA) lorded over the most sacred recreational shrine in Australia—the beach. In the late 1990s Ed Jaggard emerged as the foremost historian of this iconic Australian institution. Two objectives underpin Jaggard's work. Firstly, he rejects orthodox histories that celebrate and glorify surf lifesavers as humanitarians and saviors. Secondly, he wants to correct critical social historians who have dismissed surf lifesavers as misogynist, beer-swilling louts. In short, Jaggard attempts to mediate the works of boosters and critics of SLSA. The strength of Jaggard's work is his empirical research. He has scoured the histories of scores of surf lifesaving clubs; he has ploughed through the minutes of SLSA's governing National Council; and he has interviewed a broad cross section of ordinary members and officials. Yet, Jaggard has not fully convinced me that the critics are terribly wrong in their conclusions about the "dark side" of surf lifesaving culture. This article examines two of Jaggard's principal claims: that women played a far more active role in the surf lifesaving movement than critics admit, and that the surf lifesaving association sanctioned high levels of hedonism among its members.

Jaggard refutes critics who claim that women primarily served lifesaving as purely domestic and decorative labor before their official admission into the movement as active members in 1980. He cites several instances of women drilling, marching, sprinting, swimming and rowing, and even women qualifying for the bronze medallion and patrolling.<sup>1</sup>



Surf race start, Manly Beach, 1940s. COURTESY DUPAIN'S BEACHES, CHAPTER & VERSE, SYDNEY.

However, it is a small matter to reconcile these two apparently contradictory positions. Nearly all Jaggard's examples date from the second half of the 1920s and the early 1930s before the governing National Council consolidated its authority over individual clubs. Jaggard's examples are also drawn from outside the Sydney metropolitan area, well away from the Councils prying eyes. Indeed, Jaggard's cases rest primarily on three clubs in Perth—on the other side of the continent. At one point he cites an original member of the City of Perth Club who recalls women working "as hard and as long" as the men; it was a "unisex" club where women "were rostered on to patrols" and where "they competed against men in [sports] events."<sup>2</sup> But the City of Perth Club was hardly representative. Like the neighboring Cottesloe Surf Life Saving Club, its origins were in the humanitarian Royal Life Saving Society (RLSS), an organization that held more progressive attitudes on gender issues and happily trained women and men.<sup>3</sup> In New Zealand, where RLSS controlled surf lifesaving until the 1930s, women remained active members of surf lifesaving clubs until the early 1950s. Ironically, women faded from the surf lifesaving movement across the Tasman after the New Zealand Surf Life Saving Association established closer administrative and competitive ties with Australia's SLSA. The third Perth club upon which Jaggard builds his case is North Cottesloe. It too was atypical, comprising mainly working-class families<sup>4</sup> who did not subscribe to middle-class gender relations.<sup>5</sup>

The overwhelming evidence, from dozens of club histories produced by amateur historians and reinforced by the works of professional historian Sean Brawley, is that women served lifesaving as members of ladies' committees or auxiliaries, assisting in the organization of social functions and fundraising activities or, in the case of North Wollongong Life Saving Club (New South Wales), "making sandwiches."<sup>6</sup>

This does not mean that men did not appreciate women and their contributions to club life. At one annual general meeting, the Palm Beach Surf Club made a special presentation to its vice-president, Alrema "Sammy" Samuels. Members greeted her with "a rousing rendition" of "For She's a Jolly Good Fellow" and presented the renowned surfer with a gold-mounted miniature surfboard.<sup>7</sup> Evidence also exists of individual male officials attempting to circumvent the Association's no-women directives. In the summer of 1928-1929, Madge Brown, a member of the Collaroy Ladies Surf Club, entered heavy surf and supported a drowning man until *two* male lifesavers pulled him from the water. Following the incident, the secretary of Collaroy Life Saving Club, Bert Chequer, proposed his club train women for the Association's proficiency certificate, a qualification involving land-based aspects of surf rescue including operating lines and reels and providing first aid. Chequer recruited five women and trained them to a high standard. But Association officials refused to consider an examination for the women.<sup>8</sup>

As historian Bede Maxwell puts it, by the 1930s Australia's surf beaches had become "stronghold[s] of entrenched masculinity:" "no women—no worry" was "graven in the tissue of every surf lifesaving official's heart, no matter how gallant a gentleman in his unofficial capacity."<sup>9</sup> In other words, in the patriarchal climate of interwar Australia, purely individual initiatives had no institutional or social impact.

During the Second World War, the New South Wales SLSA refused to let women patrol the beaches in the absence of men.<sup>10</sup> After the war, the president of the Bondi Surf Life Saving Club, Tom Meagher, claimed that female lifesavers would challenge the laws of creation:

[When] the Creator... fashioned Adam, he designed him to fit into a surf belt, to take the strain and bashing . . . that he would get in fighting out and dragging a heavy line through the surf, and then taking the entire strain of the pull back to the shore of himself and patient (or patients) ... on his chest. Can anyone suggest that He designed Eve to take the same punishment?<sup>11</sup>

Of course, Meagher's creative creationist argument ignores the fact that swimming, in all its forms, is first and foremost a highly technical pursuit, independent of strength. Nor does it account for the possibility of alternatively designed belts.<sup>12</sup>

Repeated incidents proved Meagher and his colleagues wrong, but they clung doggedly to their myopic beliefs. Not infrequently, their intransigence produced some pitiful conclusions. In 1943, Betty Abbott, a New South Wales breaststroke champion and superb surf swimmer, witnessed a rip carry a man out to sea at Collaroy. As Brawley describes it, "Abbott and her friends ran to the clubhouse to find it locked. With no recourse they broke in and recovered the reel. Abbott then donned the belt with her girlfriends operating the reel and line. In a strong swim Abbott reached her patient and both were safely returned to shore." Instead of praising their heroics, officials rebuked the women for breaking into the clubrooms.<sup>13</sup>

Lifesavers deemed clubhouses sacred male space. At Palm Beach, clause 38 of the club's rules decreed, "No female shall be permitted to enter the clubhouse or the precincts

thereof except by invitation of the Committee." Late one night in 1937, a female supporter in the company of a former secretary of the club, George Wray, used a toilet in the clubhouse in contravention of clause 38. Officials subsequently summoned Wray to appear before a disciplinary committee to "show cause why he should not be asked to resign." Wray tried to distance himself from his companion. He told the hearing that he had "suggested" she use "the open spaces." An unsympathetic committee suspended him for one month.<sup>14</sup> Wray had betrayed his brothers.

Even when individual clubs relaxed their no-women rules, the men-only culture remained firmly in place. In 1949 the Torquay Surf Life Saving Club in Victoria voted to allow members of the Ladies Auxiliary to enter the clubrooms. Such was the "undercurrent of unexpressed hostility" towards females on club property that few bothered to take advantage of the new rule.<sup>15</sup> In the 1950s, Queensland's Surfers Paradise Surf Life Saving Club finally allowed women into the clubhouse but only on Sunday nights to cook the evening meal!<sup>16</sup>

Isolated exceptions make interesting case studies, but they do not amend Sean Brawley's conclusion that "by the early 1930s surf lifesaving was very much a male institution."<sup>17</sup>

What then of Jaggard's claim that SLSA sanctioned high levels of hedonism among its members? Jaggard contends that surfer hedonists constituted a sizeable group within the lifesaving movement, and when they were not on patrols they were "travelling far and wide in the search of... perfectly shaped waves." Referring to the famous photograph of Adrian Curlewis, the longstanding president of SLSA, performing a headstand while riding a wave on his surfboard, Jaggard suggests that inside the man who would become a judge and receive a knighthood there "lurked the free-wheeling, hedonistic surfer searching for the ultimate surfing thrill."<sup>18</sup>

By identifying multiple identities, Jaggard makes an important contribution to the history of surf lifesaving. But multiple identities have to be carefully evaluated against the institutional structure that shaped lifesaving culture and the strong pressures that the association exerted on members to contain their hedonism.

Elsewhere I have argued that SLSA adopted a peculiar ideology of humanitarian-athleticism. This was a deliberate strategy to justify its tenure on the beach in the face of opposition from middle-class moralists repelled by public exposure of underdressed surfbathers. It was also a strategy to win local councils ambivalent about hordes of surfbathers invading their peaceful precincts. Consistent with that ideology, surf lifesavers disciplined beachgoers and constrained their own hedonism.<sup>19</sup> Egbert Russell, who commented on Australian beach culture in the early twentieth century, reported lifesavers at the Sydney suburb of Manly rigorously policing beachgoers: "Two youths, in the act of dragging a third by his heels into the water, [were] ordered to desist by a lifesaver," and a "lifesaver sternly ordered a girl to cease from diving from the shoulders of her male escort." Thanks to the intervention of lifesavers, Russell continues, "it is rare, indeed, that anybody hears of an incident which might not receive the hearty endorsement of the whole Council of Churches."<sup>20</sup>

The rules of North Wollongong offer insights into the institutional structure of lifesaving: "When the whistle blows at 9:50 am it is to remind active members to assemble in front of the club room and to be in readiness for the march-past, [rescue and resuscitation] and bronze [medallion] drill. At the final whistle, 10:00 am, the drill starts."<sup>21</sup>

In his seminal study of surfers and surf lifesavers in Australia and New Zealand, Kent Pearson found many lifesavers riding boards. However, according to Pearson, surfers and lifesavers conceived the activity in different terms. Surfers pursue "like" rather than "common" interests, and surfing breaks effectively place them in competitive environments. By contrast, lifesavers emphasize the "social aspects" and evaluate surfing in terms of camaraderie and cooperation.<sup>22</sup> Greg Noll, a member of an American lifeguard team that introduced the malibu surfboard to Australia during a visit in 1956, confirms Pearson's conclusion:

The idea of finding a surf spot in a remote area was not what it was about in Australia in those days. As we travelled from one [surf lifesaving carnival] to another we saw several great looking places along the way. I remember one spot we passed. You looked down off a cliff and about a mile away there were these beautiful lines stacked up, wave after wave. We were riding in the back of a truck with our boards and I started pounding on the cab with my fist. The driver, an Aussie, stopped and asked me, "What's the matter mate?" I said, "Jesus Christ, look at the surf down there! Has anyone ever surfed it?" The guy thought I was crazy. He said, "Why would anyone want to go down there?" Like, there wasn't a surf club down there, so what's the point? He refused to drive us there.<sup>23</sup>

Jaggard's determination to refute "simplistic public images" of a "monolithic" association comprised of highly disciplined sentinels also draws our attention to another critical aspect of surf lifesaving culture, namely, the "extraordinary larrikinism." Lifesavers' behaviors, Jaggard notes, "were often precariously close to being unlawful, exhibiting a cheerful contempt for authority. Club social functions were excuses for wild drinking binges."<sup>24</sup> Sean Brawley offers numerous examples in his histories of the Palm Beach and Collaroy clubs. In 1949 fourteen members of Palm Beach gate-crashed a function at a private residence. They "stole food and drink, damaged the switch box while turning the lights on and off and insulted the hostess. One member... knocked out the host as he attempted to remonstrate with the group."<sup>25</sup> On another occasion, "the owner of the Newport Arms Hotel banned the whole club after a member threw a bottle through the hotel's television screen."<sup>26</sup> A local magistrates court once convicted and fined six members of the Collaroy Club for malicious damage. After becoming intoxicated, the group had lit a bonfire on the beach fuelled with council-owned signs, a wooden handrail taken from the steps between the beach and the headland, and wooden palings removed from the fence of a local hospital.<sup>27</sup>

The key point here is that larrikinism and vandalism do not contradict surf lifesaving's "conformist image." Jaggard himself makes a particularly important observation in this context when he writes that "discipline and larrikinism ... are opposite sides of the same . . . coin."<sup>28</sup> Sociologists have long argued that much of the anti-social behavior committed by sporting groups—fighting, obscene language and songs, nakedness, drunkenness and vandalism against property—goes unreported or is ignored, or even socially sanctioned, because the middle classes in particular regard it as non-threatening youthful exuberance or cathartic behavior. This is especially true when the perpetrators shelter in respectable institutions such as lifesaving clubs.

Sociologist John Loy offers a powerful explanation of the anti-social behavior, or raw masculinity, found in traditional sporting cultures. The very structure of traditional life-

saving meets the criteria for his concept of an agonal fratriarchy—a brotherhood consisting of men who compete with each other in physical contests for prestige. Firstly, lifesavers were members of modern tribal groups.<sup>29</sup> Modern tribal groups provide young men with comradeship, a sense of their own community, excitement and adventure and the opportunity to release youthful aggression through innocuous, if often immature, physical exploits.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, initiates seeking to join fratriarchies are subjected to various forms of bodily mutilation, physical testing, and verbal abuse. Initiation rites are the structural and symbolic means by which members of agonal fratriarchies bond.<sup>31</sup> The probationary system at Palm Beach Surf Life Saving Club was replete with initiation rites. New members—known as freshers—had to "jump through a few informal hoops" including swallowing concoctions such as tomato soup laced with gin. As the system developed full members could demand freshers perform some antic or menial task. One such task was the human cuckoo clock—strutting into the lounge every fifteen minutes and squawking. Freshers were also physically accosted and deprived of sleep.<sup>32</sup> At the Collaroy Surf Life Saving Club in the late 1950s, members used to dig a hole about six feet deep in the sand on Sunday afternoons and throw in young boys. As the afternoon wore on and they became increasingly intoxicated, the lifesavers amused themselves by urinating and vomiting on their helpless captives.<sup>33</sup> Shrieking like a cuckoo, gobbling raw sausages, or gulping warm beer might seem benign initiation rituals. But by emphasizing "toughness, withstanding pain and humiliation, obedience to superiors, and [the use of] force to obtain compliance," fraternities foster "an interpersonal style" that privileges "intragroup trust and loyalty" over concern for the welfare of others. This is Loy's third criterion for his concept of an agonal fratriarchy: as "the least macho" members drop out under the pressure, extreme fraternal cultures can emerge.<sup>34</sup> The Palm Beach Club is a case in point: many members who had not experienced like attention in other fraternities, notably boarding schools and university colleges, resigned from the club and left behind a fully-fledged agonal fratriarchy.<sup>35</sup> Fourthly, in Loy's words, "fratriarchies foster male domination in at least three ways: they bring men together, they keep men together, and they put women down."<sup>36</sup> This helps explain why men opposed women lifesavers.

In conclusion, Jaggard needs to address the strong social pressures exerted on the early movement to suppress hedonism. Notwithstanding his identification of an important paradox—namely the presence of larrikinism in a conservative sporting institution—I maintain that he underestimates the regimented institutional structure that shaped early lifesaving culture.



<sup>1</sup>Ed Jaggard, "Chameleons in the Surf," *Journal of Australian Studies* 53 (1997): 187-189; Ed Jaggard, "Australian Surf Life-saving and the 'Forgotten Members,'" *Australian Historical Studies* 112 (1999): 29.

<sup>2</sup>Jaggard, "Chameleons," 188.

<sup>3</sup>The Surf Bathing Association of New South Wales, SLSA's predecessor, had supplanted RLSS as the premier beach lifesaving association in Australia before the First World War. See Douglas Booth, *Australian Beach Cultures: The History of Sun, Sand and Surf* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 70-72.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*; Jaggard, "Australian Surf Life-saving," 29-30.

<sup>5</sup>Jennifer Hargreaves, *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sports* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>6</sup>John Palmer, *History of North Wollongong Surf Life Saving Club, 1908-1996* (Wollongong, New South Wales: North Wollongong Surf Life Saving Club, 1997), 150.

<sup>7</sup>Sean Brawley, *Beach Beyond: A History of the Palm Beach Surf Club 1921-1996* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1996), 45.

<sup>8</sup>Sean Brawley, *Vigilant and Victorious: A Community History of the Collaroy Surf Life Saving Club 1911-1995* (Collaroy Beach, Sydney: Collaroy Surf Life Saving Club, 1995), 77-78.

<sup>9</sup>C. Bede Maxwell, *Surf: Australians Against the Sea* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1949), 201-202.

<sup>10</sup>Brawley, *Vigilant and Victorious*, 166.

<sup>11</sup>Kent Pearson, "Conflict, Stereotypes and Masculinity in Australian and New Zealand Surfing," *ANZJS (Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology)* 18 (1982): 128. See also "Believes Women 'Too Weak' for Surf Events," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 March 1953.

<sup>12</sup>For most of the twentieth century, SLSA relied on the reel and belt as its principal rescue equipment. Wearing a chest-mounted belt attached to a reel-line, lifesavers swam to their patients, held them, and were pulled back to shore by a team.

<sup>13</sup>Brawley, *Vigilant and Victorious*, 166-167. See also Jaggard, "Australian Surf Life-saving," 36.

<sup>14</sup>Brawley, *Beach Beyond*, 46.

<sup>15</sup>Ken Pollard, *History of Torquay Surf Life Saving Club* (Torquay, Victoria: Torquay Surf Life Saving Club, 1996), 123-124.

<sup>16</sup>*Bronzed Aussie Gods*, producer Nick Bleszinski (Bryon Bay Light Source Films, 1999), videocassette. According to one early female auxiliary at Surfers Paradise (Mrs Kolkka), before they allowed women into the clubhouse, men forced their female partners to "wait outside till they were finished doing what they were doing and then they'd take us home."

<sup>17</sup>Brawley, *Beach Beyond*, 46.

<sup>18</sup>Jaggard, "Chameleons," 185, 187.

<sup>19</sup>Booth, *Australian Beach Cultures*, 39, 65-75.

<sup>20</sup>Egbert Russell, "Australia's Amphibians," *Lone Hand* (1910): 265.

<sup>21</sup>Palmer, *North Wollongong*, 184.

<sup>22</sup>Kent Pearson, *Surfing Subcultures of Australia and New Zealand* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1979), 91, 152.

<sup>23</sup>Greg Noll and Andrea Gabbard, *Da Bull: Life Over the Edge* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1989), 71.

<sup>24</sup>Jaggard, "Chameleons," 183, 187, 189-190. See also Barry Galton, *Gladiators of the Surf* (Sydney: Reed, 1984), 60.

<sup>25</sup>Brawley, *Beach Beyond*, 109.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>27</sup>Brawley, *Vigilant and Victorious*, 187-189.

<sup>28</sup>Jaggard, "Chameleons," 190.

<sup>29</sup>John Loy, "The Dark Side of Agon: Fratriarchies, Performative Masculinities, Sport Involvement and the Phenomenon of Gang Rape," in *International Sociology of Sport Contemporary Issues: Festschrift in Honor of Günther Luschen*, eds. K. H. Bette and A. Rutten (Stuttgart: Naglschmid, 1995), 266-267.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 270-271.

<sup>32</sup>Brawley, *Beach Beyond*, 136.

<sup>33</sup>Nat Young, *Nat's Nat and That's That* (Angourie, New South Wales: Nymboida Press, 1998), 10.

<sup>34</sup>Loy, "The Dark Side," 271.

<sup>35</sup>Brawley, *Beach Beyond*, 136.

<sup>36</sup>Loy, "The Dark Side," 267.