

# Writing Australian Surf Lifesaving's History

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THE SURF LIFESAVING DEBATE HAS been an opportunity to consider the different forms in which history may be written, and not least the ways in which the historian can intrude on the story. Doug Booth is a boardrider, I am a surf lifesaver; according to Booth and others we are members of quite different surfing subcultures, so the ways in which we approach the past, as Murray Phillips has demonstrated, reflect this. Yet this is not the entire story; evidence is read differently, and my "romantic emplotments" contrast sharply with Booth's much more "tragic" stance. Whatever conclusions may be drawn from the debate and the evaluation of it, I am grateful to Murray Phillips and Doug Booth for inviting me to be a participant. Both have forced me to think carefully about historical production, and through his writings, Booth in particular has challenged me to reconsider the ways in which I have analyzed surf lifesaving's history.



Australia's surf lifesaving movement, one of the nation's best known images, is a body always intent on guarding its unique status on the beaches. A volunteer service organization, it has successfully argued that, despite compelling evidence, competition is of secondary importance—designed to produce fitter, more skilled surf lifesavers. However, it has many more faces than these two, and since it began in 1907 those observing surf lifesaving have rarely understood its diversity. I remain convinced that what appears to Booth and various historians, journalists, and sociologists to be a monolithic, disciplined, conformist and deeply conservative organization whose image largely derives from New South Wales, and in particular Sydney clubs, is far more complex than they believe.<sup>1</sup>

Firstly, then, how useful is the Sydney-dominated image? Sydney was where the Royal Surf Lifesaving Society (a still water, inland waterways organization) unsuccessfully made a claim to patrol the beaches, and in the process produced its surf equivalent.<sup>2</sup> These beaches and others in New South Wales where the original surf lifesaving methods and competition developed, eventually became the nursery from which the "Bondi Lifesaver" emerged, that iconic figure of the 1930s, 40s and 50s who reappeared at the closing ceremony of the Sydney Olympics.<sup>3</sup> Because of its pioneering role in surf lifesaving, New South Wales has been the most traditionally conscious of all the Australian states, but one cluster of Sydney clubs is not a state, and New South Wales is not Australia.

More importantly, the clubs themselves were, and remain, different, even individual. Their contrasting origins were one reason for this. The degree to which they focused on surf lifesaving and/or competition was another, plus their traditions and the nature of the beach they patrolled. All fulfilled their primary beach and surf patrolling requirements; however, beyond that point they were free to develop as they wished, and consequently they attracted diverse memberships.

Although the influence of New South Wales and its clubs was pervasive until the 1940s (the state was referred to as the "Head Centre" of surf lifesaving), today's corporate entity, Surf Lifesaving Australia, is a federal body and has been for more than half a century.<sup>4</sup> All states, with their own governing bodies, have equal voting rights regardless of club numbers and membership; consequently, New South Wales can be, and often is, defeated on major issues. The state and its largest clubs should not necessarily be the standard by which everyone else is judged.

So is this a monolithic organization of dedicated volunteers? Consider what Kent Pearson had to say in 1977:

Because the Surf Life Saving Association dominated the Australian surf until the late 1950s, most persons with a serious intent in surfing prior to this joined the Surf Life Saving Association. This was in spite of the increasing polarity between playful and instrumental purposes of surfers within the movement.<sup>5</sup>

This statement has been the key to some of what I have written on the history of the surf lifesaving movement before 1960. As Pearson points out, most people with a serious interest in surfing (note *surfing*, not volunteerism or patrolling the beaches), joined surf lifesaving clubs, where their identification as surfer-hedonists, as opposed to dedicated lifesavers, caused tensions within clubs. In his pioneering study, Pearson also emphasizes how before World War II "board riding had been generally restricted to surf lifesaving club members who based their activities at a particular beach," i.e., their club's home beach.<sup>6</sup>

What Pearson seems to be acknowledging is that the surfing sub-culture he identified in his research—a sub-culture contrasting sharply in some ways with surf lifesaving—in fact existed within the latter movement for at least fifty years. Then, with the introduction of the finned malibu board which coincided with improvements in transport, a "greater degree of consumer affluence," and growing personal freedoms within Australian society, the surfing sub-culture quickly emerged from the clubs.<sup>7</sup> Unknowingly, Pearson provides part proof of this when discussing long, hollow surfboards he found that "in spite of the difficulty of using these boards for wave riding, they were being used more and more for just this purpose [by surf club members] immediately prior to the introduction of the wave riding malibu board."<sup>8</sup>



March-past of Maroubra lifesavers at Bondi Beach, 1950s. COURTESY DUPAIN'S BEACHES, CHAPTER & VERSE, SYDNEY.

By this time these longboard riders were also beginning to look beyond their home beaches, "to try other surfs nearby. . . ." Not only did this occur in New South Wales. Their Western Australian counterparts were among the first to surf Yallingup in the state's southwest, as well as Cable Station, Dutch Inn and Trigg Point, all Perth breaks. The "surfari" was becoming a reality in the 1950s, and it was frequently surf club members who were the instigators.<sup>10</sup> Their presence in the clubs has rarely been acknowledged because surf lifesaving has always been very image ("guardian of the beaches") conscious. Pearson's pinpointing of club-based *surfers* suggests the need to clearly understand the motivations of those who walked through the clubhouse doors.

There have always been members for whom surf lifesaving, beach patrols, and the camaraderie of belonging to a group were paramount—the quintessential lifesaver. Others joined for different reasons. Those who patrolled, and who participated in intra- and interclub competition (the latter, surf carnivals), enjoyed both volunteerism and the various forms of competition that catered for a wide range of abilities. In addition, because of

the competition opportunities, surf lifesaving has always attracted members for whom patrols were a tiresome obligation, to be avoided whenever possible, or handed over to a substitute so they could concentrate on rowing, paddling, beach sprinting or swimming. Lastly, in every club until the 1950s or even later, there were members who were surfers—hedonists, body, chestboard, surfboard, skis—and whose lives at the beach were dominated by surfing.<sup>11</sup>

The surfer-hedonists are one of the focal points of the newly opened "Watermarks" exhibition at the Australian Maritime Museum in Sydney. It includes the observation that before the 1950s surf lifesaving clubs were the home of surfing in Australia. Their buildings and surrounds sometimes became sites of cottage industry, where members and friends built, modified, and painstakingly maintained their surf craft—especially surfboards and skis.<sup>12</sup> For these members who made up well-defined groups in many clubs, patrols and competition were often a distraction from their primary interest—surfing. Yet, provided they paid their fees and more or less met their patrol obligation they were welcomed.

Turning now to discipline and conformity, Booth has criticized me for underestimating the degree to which surf lifesaving enforced them. During the first half of the twentieth century, surf lifesavers experienced the need for discipline and conformity primarily when they trained for the all-important Bronze Medallion, their passport to patrolling the beaches and participating in interclub competition.<sup>13</sup> The training took anywhere between one and two months, but afterwards, apart from patrol obligations, members were often free to enjoy themselves in almost whatever way they chose. As Sean Brawley has shown in his histories of the Palm Beach and Collaroy clubs, discipline was often lax or nonexistent and conformity to a specific standard of behavior or outlook was difficult to attain because there were different standards among different groups of members.<sup>14</sup> In this environment it is hardly surprising that surfer-hedonists coexisted with dedicated, rule-bound members for whom patrols were their reason for being.

The degree of conformity can be misunderstood too, because surf lifesaving has been adept at disguising its inner tensions and accommodating the many "rebels" who constantly challenged its authority. The soon-to-be published history of the North Cottesloe (W. A.) club includes a lively description of one of the club's many jousts with the W. A. State Centre of surf lifesaving.<sup>15</sup> Controversy erupted over a ludicrous "breach" of beach patrol regulations, the fact that the surf rescue ski did not have a proper bung (plug)<sup>16</sup>, but instead a cork, and therefore the club was immediately suspended from the forthcoming State Championship competition. This so enraged the Club's secretary (a lawyer, referred to as the Great Jimbo) that he refused to accept the decision, as well as that of the Disputes Committee, which threw out the club's appeal:

He ranted and raved at the Disputes Committee about their ineptitude and promised them that he would have a writ on State Centre's desk the next day. True to his word, he prepared a writ, a copy of which was forwarded to State Centre with a letter informing them that he would file the writ at the Supreme Court, and seek an injunction restraining the State Centre from conducting the State Championships until the question of what is a bung was determined, or unless this matter was rationally sorted out and the suspension of North Cott from competing in the State Championships lifted.

The State Centre, knowing it would look ridiculous "if something as petty as whether a

bung was a bung if it was made of foam and not cork, ended up in the Supreme Court" eventually backed down.

The point is that throughout Australia some individual, group, or club was, and is, repeatedly challenging one or more of surf lifesaving's many levels of authority—boats in conflict with a club's board of management, clubs challenging a branch's jurisdiction, individuals or clubs appealing against penalties imposed by states, and states at odds with Surf Life Saving Australia.<sup>17</sup> Dozens of club histories document specific periods of rule bending or breaking, often resulting from the same attitude expressed by the Great Jimbo: "Don't worry about what they [some higher authority] want, just do what we want and we'll sort the rest out later."<sup>18</sup>

If many saw the ridiculousness of some of the rules for which surf lifesaving was renowned—going their own way regardless of the consequences, there were others who worked to change the movement in quite fundamental ways. There were members who chafed at the movement's strong conservatism. During the long presidency of Judge Adrian Curlewis little could be done, but when he stepped aside in 1975 there was the opportunity for changes never imagined by those muscular figures so memorably captured for us by photographer Max Dupain in the 1940s and 50s.

In his report on the 1975-1976 season, in the middle of a tumultuous decade in Australian life, Collaroy SLSC's club captain John Bradford wrote:

There is too much looking back in the Surf Lifesaving movement. We live in a constantly changing world. How can lifesaving remain static in such dynamic surroundings? With some notable exceptions the approach to lifesaving and the attitude of many of the movement's officials is a relic of the 1930s. Unless these attitudes change the movement will die before 1985.<sup>19</sup>

Like many in surf lifesaving at the time, inside and outside New South Wales, Bradford could see beyond the image to unfortunate realities such as unpopular military style discipline, over-reliance on outdated rescue methods, and a blinkered refusal to indulge in examination and self-criticism. As far as Bradford was concerned as well as others the heyday of the reel line and belt as the primary rescue method, and all it symbolized, was over.<sup>20</sup>

His opinions were shared by the highly respected Queensland State Administrator Jack McMaster who believed, "Now is the time to take stock, pause and contemplate, then drop into first gear and do what has to be done; move."<sup>21</sup> One club? One state? What about Surf Lifesaving Australia itself and its National Council? Almost co-inciding with Curlewis's departure was the arrival of the first Executive Director, the obsessive Gus Staunton, and he was not prepared to play surf's Nero while Bondi drowned:

In November 1977 our Chief Superintendent . . . will be holding a Board of Reference Conference, during which a major review of our training, instruction and examination manuals will take place. A complete re-structure of our awards will occur and bronze medallion training will be completely updated with major emphasis on the physical ability of the candidate to carry out various rescues utilising board, ski, rescue tube and belt. . . .<sup>22</sup>

One wonders why the Conference was needed, if there was such certainty about the outcomes! Staunton's message for much of his period in control was "don't look to the past for answers, look forward, look elsewhere."

The result? In his recent history of Queensland surf lifesaving, *Preserving Lives, Preserving Values* (2000), Robert Longhurst observes that:

Surf lifesaving in Queensland and throughout Australia would undergo a radical transformation between 1975 and 1990. What had been for over half a century a masculine volunteer organization, surviving on the takings of chook raffles and traffic-light collections, developed in less than a generation to become a family affair, a broad based national community service organization, embracing and pioneering the latest in technology and marketing. The surf life saving movement also became a recognized pacesetter in sports and leadership training for young Australians.<sup>23</sup>

He could have added how the transformation also embraced full membership for women, despite the efforts of the movements misogynists, especially in New South Wales.

However, rebels jousting with authority, and those determined to implement significant changes, did not succeed in altering surf lifesaving's rhetoric. In turn, this has occasionally confused those observing the movement's development. The public rhetoric has always been, and continues to be, essentially conservative, and even head-in-the-sand, a good example appearing in SLSA's 1978 *Annual Report*, on an issue that still arouses much the same response:

[W]e must all constantly remind ourselves of the rightful role of competition—in the SLSA system. Competition is used as a stimulus to members—achieve and maintain fitness that may not otherwise be possible. Further, by contests to test our lifesaving skills—one against the other—we are better prepared for that moment of peril when a human life may rest in the balance of our ability.<sup>24</sup>

Bradford was correct: surf lifesaving's rhetoric usually reflected a much earlier era, hence that of the 1980s seemed rooted in the 1950s, despite the changes. Terminology such as "March Past," "patrols," "drill," "officers," together with those long familiar shibboleths "No lives lost while patrols on duty" (they have been, in almost all states), "Swim Between The Flags" (ignored by an increasing proportion of the population), and "Vigilance and Service" (almost a mantra) contrasts sharply with the realities of high-powered rescue equipment, individualism (the ironman event symbolizes this), and growing flexibility.<sup>25</sup> The rhetoric has often defied these realities—to surf lifesaving's detriment.

Finally, what of Booth's comments on my conclusions about women in surf lifesaving (the forgotten members) before 1980? From the 1920s to at least the 1960s there were many who, 18 to 20 years of age or older, refused to allow their membership to be confined to the fundraising women's auxiliaries. These groups were barred from any lifesaving activities on the beaches; they were pie makers, hall cleaners and social organizers, roles that some younger women were not willing to accept.

In many instances the women who enjoyed surf competition have been deliberately written out of club histories, nevertheless a range of sources reveal that in Queensland they were certainly competing in the late 1920s and early 1930s, in various branches of New South Wales in the same two decades, as well as in the 1950s.<sup>26</sup> In March of 1953 Sydney Branch, the largest grouping of clubs within New South Wales, joined with the Surf Life Saving Association in exclamations of horror when women from fifteen of its clubs enjoyed their own carnival at Maroubra.<sup>27</sup> Three hundred took part in beach and water events, prompting the Association to request that the clubs that had loaned equipment to the women should appear before a judiciary committee!<sup>28</sup> At the same time, farther north, women's carnivals were held without this heavy-handed interference.<sup>29</sup>

In Western Australia at various times between the 1920s and the 1960s Albany, Bunbury, Leighton, Cottesloe, North Cottesloe, City of Perth, Scarborough, North Beach and Geraldton surf lifesaving clubs all had associated women's clubs, only two of which were directly influenced by the Royal Life Saving Society whose attitude was to encourage women's *active* participation in all its activities.<sup>30</sup> A history of continuous competition for more than forty years suggests these W.A. women, like their Queensland and New South Wales counterparts, found their niche outside the fund-raising auxiliaries to which men tried to confine them, and away from the patrol shelters from which they were banned.

None of this alters the reality that until 1980, and in the instance of some clubs, well beyond, surf lifesaving was a masculine organization. Indeed the presence of *separate* women's surf clubs highlights this—and also points to the concern male lifesaving clubs had about women who ran, swam and drilled, because, as I have argued elsewhere, they challenged the ways in which surf lifesavers defined their masculinity.

For example, in 1974 the North Steyne (Sydney) club was one of those encouraging young women to train for the Bronze Medallion, the passport to active, patrolling membership.<sup>31</sup> At the time women were prohibited from being examined for the award, but there was a school of thought who believed if the women demonstrated their skills in training this might pressure the Association to lift the ban. In what was seen as a boost to this campaign, a New Zealand women's team who had recently toured Sri Lanka was invited to provide a display of members' skills at North Steyne. In lively surf they swam, drilled, swam in the rescue belt—many of the events male Australian surf lifesavers enjoyed. The report said the women's abilities were impressive.<sup>32</sup> Soon afterwards, when surveyed about the likely admission to full membership, the North Steyne club unanimously opposed such a breakthrough.<sup>33</sup> The about-face may have been a consequence of the display and the obvious challenge to members' hitherto unchallenged masculine world.

The presence of women competing in the surf before 1980, while banned from being examined for the Bronze medallion, raises the question of evidence. Booth earlier queried the value of Western Australian examples, but when there are others from New South Wales and Queensland, spread over several decades, how many are required for the evidence to be convincing? My argument is not that the "forgotten members" could be found in every club and state before 1980; instead, those who did fight for the right to compete should not be written out of surf lifesaving's history but included, along with the far better known women's auxiliaries.<sup>34</sup>

The surf lifesaving movement has, throughout its history, accommodated a surprising range of attitudes and behaviors. Nevertheless, these have been largely hidden from the public's view because the movement's powerful position on the beaches has continually relied on the projection of an image which best served its interests—monolithic, disciplined, conformist, masculine, a beach-based army serving the public. The image was the product of beach patrols, competition and rhetoric that disguised various realities, including the far-reaching changes of the 1970s and 1980s when the movement redefined itself. While this paper may be judged by some, particularly Booth, as yet another attempt at "historical mediation," its real purpose is to reiterate what I have stated elsewhere: the differences between Australian surf lifesaving's public face and internal realities are one of the keys to understanding its history.



<sup>1</sup>See, for example, my "Chameleons in the Surf," *Journal of Australian Studies* 53 (1997): 183-191, and "The Australian Surf Lifesaver as a National Symbol, 1920-60," in *Australian Identities*, ed. David Day (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 1998), 58-72.

<sup>2</sup>Sean Brawley, "'Our Lifesavers': The Royal Life Saving Society and the Origins of Surf Lifesaving in Federation Sydney," Unpublished paper, 2000, in possession of the author.

<sup>3</sup>The mass rescue at Bondi in February 1938, "Black Sunday," has also contributed to the image.

<sup>4</sup>The current federal body was formed in 1949, although at first not all states sent delegates to meetings, preferring to use resident delegates to represent their interests.

<sup>5</sup>Kent Pearson, "Surfing SubCultures: A Comparative Analysis of Surf Life Saving and Surf Board Riding in Australia and New Zealand" (Ph.D. thesis, University of New England, 1977), 331.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>To a degree even boat rowers regarded the club surfboats as craft to be used for long surfing sessions. See Jaggard, "Chameleons."

<sup>12</sup>This was depicted in the film *Thrills of the Surf* (Cinesound, c.1949).

<sup>13</sup>The time from joining to passing the Bronze Medallion exam was a period of orientation (often very intense) to club life and demands.

<sup>14</sup>Sean Brawley, *Beach Beyond: A History of the Palm Beach Surf Club 1921-1996* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1996) and *Vigilant and Victorious—A Community History of the Collaroy Surf Life Saving Club 1911-1995* (Collaroy Beach, Sydney: Collaroy SLSC, 1995).

<sup>15</sup>The piece, entitled "The Great Jimbo," that will be the prologue to the North Cottesloe history, was written by Steve Wilson. The remainder of the paragraph is derived from it.

<sup>16</sup>Hollow rescue skis needed to be periodically drained; hence the metal-rimmed drainage hole normally had a screw-in plug. When this was lost, it was replaced by a cork. "Bung" referred to whatever was inserted in the hole.

<sup>17</sup>For this reason, under the heading "Discipline," many club constitutions go to inordinate lengths in their procedures.

<sup>18</sup>Wilson, "The Great Jimbo."

<sup>19</sup>Brawley, *Vigilant and Victorious*, 291-292.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>Robert Longhurst, *Preserving Lives, Preserving Values: A History of Surf Life Saving in Queensland* (South Brisbane: Surf Life Saving Queensland, 2000), 220.

<sup>22</sup>Surf Life Saving Australia, *70th Annual Report*, 6.

<sup>23</sup>Longhurst, *Preserving Lives*, 219

<sup>24</sup>Surf Life Saving Australia, *71st Annual Report*, 11.

<sup>25</sup>The contrast between decades old rhetoric and new realities was clear in the Associations *Annual Reports* in the 1980s.

<sup>26</sup>See E. Jaggard, "Australian Surf Life Saving and the 'Forgotten Members,'" *Australian Historical Studies* 30 (April 1999): 23-43.

<sup>27</sup>*Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 March 1953, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 15 March 1953, p. 17, 8 April 1953, p. 3. Later, in September it was reported that there were plans to hold another carnival in the 1953-1954 season with twenty clubs being involved.

<sup>29</sup>Professor Noeline Kyle of Queensland University of Technology has recalled women's carnivals in the 1950s in her unpublished paper, "The March of Time: Women at the Beach in the 1950s!" in possession of the author.

<sup>30</sup>The two RLSS-influenced clubs were Cottesloe and City of Perth.

<sup>31</sup>File: "Females Seminar," N.S.W. State Centre S.L.S., State Center Archives, Narrabeen, New South Wales; *Sun Herald*, 2 February 1975, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup>File: "Females Seminar."

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>The clubs were happy to allow the auxiliaries to exist because they were no threat to their hegemony on the beaches, they could control them and define their space, and they were the beneficiaries of their fundraising.