

A Tragic Plot? A Reply to Jaggard and Phillips

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ED JAGGARD'S WORK HAS FORCED me to think seriously about surf lifesaving and to be much more diligent in providing evidence for my arguments and claims. Certainly his response to my criticisms above will help to further revise and refine my historical understanding of surf lifesaving.

My challenge with respect to female involvement and participation in the physical aspects of surf lifesaving prior to 1980 rested on the inadequate size of Jaggard's sample. I stand by my position based on the evidence at the time: three clubs in far away Western Australia hardly undermined the orthodox critical view that women *primarily* served lifesaving as domestic and decorative labor between the 1920s and 1970s. Nonetheless, when I issued that challenge I half-suspected that Jaggard would increase his sample. And he did. In his reply, Jaggard cites several new examples of active women surf lifesavers in Western Australia, Queensland and New South Wales. Just as important, Jaggard makes a highly pertinent observation that is worth repeating: "In many instances the women who enjoyed surf competition have been deliberately written out of club histories." Thus, I concede that Jaggard proves his point: During the first half of the last century, women were far more actively involved in lifesaving in many parts of Australia than previously acknowledged. No less significant in adding to our historical knowledge of SLSA, Jaggard provides a stronger framework for analyzing the uneven geographical distribution of active female participation in surf lifesaving. This framework rests on the federal structure of SLSA and attempts by New South Wales to control the whole association. The knowledge passed to

us by Jaggard, combined with his analytical framework, opens up a plethora of new questions for future research. Who were the New South Wales officials who opposed active female participation? What are their biographies? Was opposition to women in New South Wales unanimous or dictated by specific individuals? Under what conditions did New South Wales officials dictate national policy on women in what was a federally structured association?

Murray Phillips's contribution extends far beyond the lifesaving debate. His application of Hayden White's model to interrogate and analyze a specific historical debate is innovative in sports history. At the very least, Phillips introduces many sports historians to a work that has profoundly influenced the broader discipline and especially intellectual history and the philosophy of history. Even the staunch critic Richard Evans in referring to White's influence concedes that an "awareness ... of the literary and narrative elements" in historical research and writing "is no bad thing."¹ Initially I found Phillips's case seductive; under clearer light, I am less than fully convinced.² In this reply I want to address three issues: White's model as a set of ideal-type explanations; the precise origins of the lifesaving debate; and the nature of historical practice.

Broadly speaking, I agree with Phillips's application of White's categories of trope, emplotment, argument and ideology to Jaggard's and my works. Although I do suggest that the similarities Phillips finds in Jaggard's and my use of contextualist argument is a more recent occurrence. A comparison of Jaggard's early work (e.g., "Saviours and Sportsmen: Surf Life Saving in Western Australia 1909-1930," *Sporting Traditions*, 1986) with his more recent endeavors (e.g., "'Tempering the Testosterone:' Women, Masculinity and Surf Life Saving in Australia," *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 2001) reveals a definite shift from formalism to more contextualization. But White's categories of explanation are ideal-types and individual historical works, let alone bodies of works, simply do not fall into a single precise category of trope, emplotment, explanation or even ideology. As Keith Windschuttle observes, "The academic historian today who writes within an empirical, realist framework can often be dull and boring, it is true, but it is rare to find one who is so devoid of wit that he or she fails to make one or two ironic observations about his or her historical subjects."³ Indeed, with respect to tropes, White himself recognizes elements of synecdoche, metonym and irony in the texts of several "masters of nineteenth-century historical thinking," including Jacob Burckhardt, Karl Marx and Alexis de Tocqueville, which he analyzes in *Metahistory*, as well as in E. P. Thompson's twentieth-century classic *The Making of the English Working Class*.⁴ A similar case can surely be made with respect to emplotment. Notwithstanding the dominant modes of emplotment identified by Phillips, elements of tragedy seep into Jaggard's work (e.g., the narrative of the bung) while one could arguably discern elements of romance in my (implicit) support for the individualism associated with surfing.

What is the source of disagreement between Jaggard and me? Does the debate emanate from factual discrepancies or from questions of interpretation? In attempting to answer this question, it needs repeating that the lifesaving debate emanates from two of Jaggard's principal claims: women played a far more active role in the surf lifesaving movement than critics admit; and the surf lifesaving association sanctioned high levels of hedonism among its members. But this debate, it needs stressing, is not about basic facts.

Jaggard and I agree that official SLSA policy excluded women from active participation in surf lifesaving from the late 1920s until the late 1970s. Similarly, we agree that the surf lifesaving movement has always attracted hedonists, much to the chagrin of officials who feared that hedonists threatened the SLSA's official *raison d'être* and especially the often tenuous relationships between local clubs and municipal councils.

In light of this agreement about the facts, the debate emerges from interpreting how SLSA policies operated in practice. Compounding this disagreement over interpretation is the fact that Jaggard and I ultimately draw our conclusions from two different archives: a surf lifesaving archive and a general beach archive. At this point in time, the former, I contend, rests on quite small foundations: perhaps three score of club histories composed by amateur historians, two club histories produced by one professional historian,⁵ an incomplete, unpublished "official" history of SLSA,⁶ three "unofficial" histories of SLSA,⁷ two academic investigations into the behavior and ideology of surf lifesavers,⁸ the minute books of individual clubs, state associations and the national council (all of which suffer from acute archival silence), widely scattered press reports, specialist surf lifesaving magazines (all of which have had short lives),⁹ and the memories of individual members and officials which have yet to be systematically recorded. By contrast, the archive pertaining to general Australian beach culture is enormous. Primary sources includes parliamentary debates and reports, official correspondence between government officials and between elected officials and their constituents, court decisions, legal cases and law books, municipal records, community newsletters, newspaper reports and editorials, press releases, transcripts of interviews with surfbathers and surfers, archival newsreels, radio and television broadcasts, specialist surfing films, long-running specialist surfing magazines, websites of surfing companies and organizations, posters, cartoons, flyers, biographies, photographs, advertisements, and even graffiti.

Given our respective reliance on two different archives, it is hardly surprising that Jaggard and I reach different conclusions. Indeed, I maintain that Jaggard primarily induces conclusions from the surf lifesaving archive, while I deduce more from the broader beach culture archive. "The Dark Side of Surf Lifesaving," for example, refers to the impressions of Australian lifesaving made by the legendary American surfer Greg Noll in his biography as well as drawing on the theories of sociologist John Loy. The debate over the photograph of Adrian Curlewis performing the headstand on a surfboard further illustrates this difference. Curlewis demonstrates a level of skill that suggests he was a regular surfboard rider; this implies he enjoyed the pastime. But there is nothing in the photograph to indicate he was a "free-wheeler in search of the ultimate surfing thrill." Boardriding lifesavers in the inter-war years lived a universe away from surfers in the last quarter of the century whose lifestyles are popularly associated with free-wheeling, a lifestyle which in the words of legendary surfer Bill Hamilton placed them at "the very fringe of society:"

. . . the surfing lifestyle really lends itself to the very fringe of society—it's such a free-and-easy lifestyle, and it has so much to do with individual freedom—an almost irresponsible kind of freedom. [S]urfers are edge-riders. We've made a decision . . . to live on the fringe of society and not be active citizens and participants in society, unless we want to. The act of going surfing is a very selfish endeavor. It's an experience that has nothing to do with anything except you and the ocean, period.¹⁰

Curlewis was an establishment figure. He graduated in law from Sydney University, captained the Palm Beach Surf Life Saving Club for five years between 1923-1924 and 1927-1928, and served as president of SLSA from 1933 to 1975. Free-wheeler is simply the wrong term to apply to Curlewis. In fact, in the early 1960s Judge Curlewis chaired the New South Wales Youth Policy Advisory Committee. In its report the Committee blamed delinquency on what it called "unattached" and "unclubbable" young people.¹¹ The message was loud and unmistakable. Surfers leaving lifesaving clubs and heading off on "surfaris" constituted a social problem; lifesaving clubs were an antidote to such social ills. In short, drawing from the broader archive and applying a comparative method to the interrogation of language (in this case the term "free-wheeling") leads to an entirely different interpretation of how SLSA policies operated in practice.

The fact that Jaggard and I trawl different archives undoubtedly offers an explanation that is no less plausible for our respective narratives than White's theory that historians create or imagine history. Of course, the fact that Jaggard and I employ different sources does not invalidate Phillips's conclusion that the lifesaving debate "illustrates that the material at the disposal of the historian offers more than one possibility." Most historians accept this point. Jaggard leans towards this position when he warns historians against conflating official conservative rhetoric with a movement that has "accommodated a surprising range of attitudes and behaviors." Nonetheless, this is not the same as saying, *à la* White, that history is invented or imagined. On the contrary, the freedom for historians to invent history is remarkably constrained.

In *Australian Beach Cultures* I describe myself as a surfer with a particular animosity towards surf lifesavers. I trace these feelings to several early experiences:

[At Torquay, Victoria] the lifesaving fraternity "appropriated" the main surf beach for their carnivals [at least once every summer]. The local club literally sealed the beach behind a wall of hessian. Before entering this inner-sanctum one had to pay an entrance fee to watch what was billed as a sporting spectacular but which struck me as nothing more than regimented drill interspersed with a few less than exciting beach sports. As far as I was concerned, lifesavers had seized public space for private benefit.

[In Durban, South Africa] not only did every racial group have its own precisely defined territory along the . . . foreshore, so too did every recreational group: swimmers, surfers, windsurfers and fishermen all had their own demarcated space. Moreover, "violations" were vigorously policed, with surfers a particular target for over-zealous lifesavers who never shied from using violence to forcibly remove surfers who dared encroach swimmers' space, irrespective of time or conditions.¹²

But these experiences do not predispose me towards inventing or imagining the history of surf lifesaving nor do they prevent me from finding historical truths about surf lifesavers. One's integrity as an historian depends on presenting all the evidence, including that which challenges personal experiences (e.g., examples of lifesaver heroism in the surf or superior sporting performances), and then carefully evaluating the range of evidence before drawing conclusions. In this sense, the rules and protocols of the historical guild preserve a form of objectivity. This is not the absolute objectivity that Geoffrey Elton advocated in *The Practice of History*.¹³ Rather, it is of the qualified form advocated by Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob in *Telling The Truth About History*.¹⁴

On the one hand, qualified objectivity acknowledges that all histories begin from the personal interests, cultural attributes and the *a priori* assumptions of the historian, and that no knowledge is neutral.¹⁵ Qualified objectivity also recognizes that the production of all knowledge involves struggles between different interest groups. On the other hand, qualified objectivity acknowledges the presence of discoverable stable bodies of knowledge, that historical evidence imposes definite limits on the factual assertions that can be made, and that the rules of academic rigour constrain historical interpretations.¹⁶ With respect to rules, the key requirement is that historians provide sufficient details about their sources so that they can be readily checked and verified by others.¹⁷

In conclusion, Phillips's contribution to the surf lifesaving debate derives from the attention he draws to that most basic of all historical questions, the one that lies at the fore of Hayden White's work: How do historians transform the past into history? It is a question that has received wide attention in mainstream history but that has been largely overlooked by sports historians. However, as I have tried to highlight in my reply to Phillips, White's approach does not mean the abandonment of empirical history. Rather it means adding new forms of investigation to historical practice. Historians need to concern themselves not only with "how literary and rhetorical conventions and forms shape historical discourse but also with how those conventions and forms constrain the representation of history and thereby the patterning of the past itself as history."¹⁸



¹Richard Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta Books, 1997), 126. For a more sympathetic appraisal, see Robert Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 135.

²Comments made by anonymous reviewers were also extremely useful in helping me to formulate my reply to Murray Phillips, and I thank them for their efforts which were considerable.

³Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing Of History* (Sydney: Macleay Press, 1994), 241.

⁴Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), xi, 203, 250, 262, 281, 282, 285-286, 296, 315-316, 324-325, 377-378, 429-430; Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 15-19.

⁵Sean Brawley, *Beach Beyond: A History of the Palm Beach Surf Club 1921-1996* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1996); 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).

⁶Jack Winders, *Surf Life Saving in Australia* (Unpublished manuscript, National Council offices of the Surf Lifesaving Association of Australia, Sydney, c.1972).

⁷Barry Galton, *Gladiators of the Surf* (Sydney: Reed, 1984); Frank Margan and Ben Finney, *A Pictorial History of Surfing* (Sydney: Paul Hamlyn, 1970); C. Bede Maxwell, *Surf: Australians Against the Sea* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1949).

⁸Graig McGregor, *Profile of Australia* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1966); Kent Pearson, *Surfing Subcultures of Australia and New Zealand* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1979).

⁹For example, *Australian Surf Lifesaver* (1997-1999), *Surf in Australia* (1936-1946), *Surf Sports Magazine* (2000-), and *The Surf: A Journal of Sport and Pastime* (1917-1918).

¹⁰Drew Kampion, "Up A Lazy River with Bill Hamilton," *The Surfer's Journal* (2000): 79, 81.

¹¹Youth Policy Advisory Committee, *Report 41/1962-63* (Sydney: New South Wales Government, 1963), 23-24.

¹²Douglas Booth, *Australian Beach Cultures: The History of Sun, Sand and Surf* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), xx, xxi.

¹³Geoffrey Elton, *The Practice of History* (London: Fontana, 1969).

¹⁴Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling The Truth About History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 241-251.

¹⁵This corresponds to White's "explanation by ideological implication." Interestingly, Keith Jenkins argues that White "rather unexpectedly down-plays the ideological." In Jenkins's words, White "says that historians *initially* trope the field and that tropes therefore *prefigure* and *precede* the modes of argument, emplotment and ideology." But Jenkins argues that it is "the ideological mode which *predetermines* which trope will be used to metaphorically ['figure things out' in the first place]." Keith Jenkins, *On "What is History?" From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White* (London: Routledge 1995), 174.

¹⁶See also Evans, *In Defence of History*, 126.

¹⁷Phillipe Carrard, *Poetics of the New History: French Historical Discourse from Braudel to Chartier* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 159. For a recent affirmation of the limits imposed on historical interpretation, see Penelope Corfield, "Review Article: The State of History," *Journal of Contemporary History* 36 (2001): 159.

¹⁸Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*, 135.