

Swimming at the Olympic Games: Its Impact on Australian Society, 1900-1925

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And I have loved thee, Ocean
... For I was, as it were, a child of thee,
And trusted to thy billows far and near,
And laid my hand upon thy mane.
-As I do here.

[Lord Byron]

In January, 1911, “Nomad” of The Herald of Melbourne wrote in a column headed “Swimming: A Fascinating Sport—Why You Should Learn”:

Perhaps no sport offers so many physical advantages as swimming. . . To begin with, in the chemical properties of sea water may be found the cure for many of the evils to which flesh is heir. Sea water cleanses, heals, soothes, and—a point that should be of interest to the opposite sex—has been pronounced excellent for the skin and complexion. Then the exercise itself develops the chest and lungs as perhaps nothing else will, while it rounds the limbs and makes for graceful movement.

Australia’s involvement with swimming at the Olympic Games began in 1900 when Freddy Lane won a gold medal in the 200 metres freestyle event and by the year “Nomad” wrote the cited extract, competitive swimming was a significant activity which had ramifications permeating many different aspects of Australian society.

Of course, it was not until 1912 that Australians Fanny Durack and Mina Wylie came first and second, respectively, when swimming was introduced as an Olympic event for women in Stockholm. However, prior to then, Annette Kellerman, the pioneer of women’s swimming in Australia, had gone abroad to launch a show-business career capitalising on her extraordinary aquatic skills. Kellerman’s feats, as well as the lively discussions and debates pertaining to the inclusion of Durack and Wylie in the Australasian Olympic team in 1912 because of the New South Wales Ladies Swimming Association rule that none of its members could swim in the company of males, provide interesting insights into the effects of swimming at the Olympics on the social behaviour and attitudes of, and towards, women in Australian society.

The Australian Gallery of Sport and Olympic Museum, located at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, has recently acquired archival material pertaining to the sporting career of Frank Beaurepaire. For several weeks in 1989 it was the author’s privilege to assist in the initial research and categorising of this collection of diaries, postcards, scrapbooks, photographs and artifacts. Beaurepaire won Olympic silver and bronze medals in the 400 and 1500 metres freestyle events, respectively, in London in 1908 at the age of seventeen. By 1910, following his triumphant tour of Great Britain and the continent, he was indisputably a world-champion. The publicity and euphoria associated with his achievements was obviously related to his subsequent appointment to the position of Chief Instructor of Swimming and Life-saving for the Education Department of Victoria—a significant post for a 19 year-old!

Beaurepaire’s appointment provides an indication of the concern for appropriate instruction and attitudes towards swimming during this era. In the state of Victoria during the decade 1890-1899 there were 1924 accidental drownings (16 per 100,000); the following decade, 1900-1909, this had decreased to 1518 (12 per 100,000). It was clear that Beaurepaire had a big task; his efforts and those of others were considered in the light of gender and age issues in swimming.

The fact that Beaurepaire won medals in swimming in the 1920 and 1924 Olympic Games leads one to question his absence from the Australasian team at the Stockholm Olympics in 1912. The issue of his “professional” status because of his employment as a swimming instructor, and the concept of amateurism in swimming was explored.

The paper concluded with an examination of the afferent and efferent relationships of the success of Australian swimmers at the Olympic Games from 1900-1924 and Australia’s national identity. This fledgling nation, which had become a Commonwealth in 1901, extolled the virtues of its internationally successful athletes and considered them as excellent ambassadors of the good things about life in Australia. Swimming heroes such as Freddy Lane, Annette Kellerman, Barney Kieran, Frank Beaurepaire, Harold Hardwick, Cecil Healy, Fanny Durack, Mina Wylie and Andrew “Boy” Charlton epitomised the best in Australian character and physique. As one columnist remarked:

If all young Australians were like Beaurepaire,
we should be like the Greeks of Plato’s time.