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Forgotten Members: Women in Australian Surf Lifesaving 1906-1980

For most of the twentieth century the Australian surf lifesaving movement has provided the nation with one of its most enduring icons, the male surf lifesaver patrolling the beaches. Like the bushman before him, the lifesaver has been identified as a national 'type', a masculine image reinforced by numerous club histories. In the Australian public's mind, women played no part in this humanitarian movement until 1980, when they were first allowed to patrol the beaches with their male counterparts. Any prior involvement has been ignored or treated dismissively ("no more than hall sweepers or cake makers"), thereby strengthening the masculine mythology.

The reality of women's presence in surf lifesaving prior to 1980 is very different. as evidence from most Australian states demonstrates. Although prohibited from beach patrol they ran, swam and marched on the beaches at their own surf carnivals. besides having an undoubted presence in surf lifesaving clubs. The purpose of this paper is to begin to dispel the myths by offering an inclusive rather than exclusive analysis of an organization which needs to confront its own history.