

BACK TO ‘NATURE’?

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Surfbathing and Surf Livesaving in Australia and New Zealand: A Comparative Analysis

Orthodox histories of the Australian and New Zealand beach typically begin with the functionalist assumption that surfbathing is a ‘natural’ activity, synonymous with sunshine, clear and warm water, golden sands, and curling waves. For Frank Margan and Ben Finney, “it was only a matter of time” before Australians “took the plunge,” while Stephen Barnett and Richard Wolfe believe that it was “inevitable, given [New Zealand’s] equable climate and access by the vast majority of its population to a wealth of fine beaches, that...swimming in the sea would eventually be commonplace.” But there is nothing natural about surfbathing: disinterest is strong in many congenial climates and alluring settings. Culture, and in particular, attitudes towards the presentation of the body in public, remains the principal determinant.

Therefore, an examination of the cultural conditions that initially restricted the public display of the bathing body, and the transformation of those conditions, is necessary to understand the history of surfbathing in Australia and New Zealand. According to the dominant view, initially propagated in the 1930s by officials of the Surf Life Saving Association of Australia who were then delving into the origins of their association, the first surfbathers were young rebels who defied repressive and prudish Victorian laws prohibiting bathing in public. But surfbathing was never a generational issue. Rather, it was a site of tension and debate within the middle classes. Medical practitioners, health faddists and small business interests claimed that surfbathing was a healthy sport that contributed to local economies; moralists condemned it as an indecent pastime.

This paper offers a comparative analysis of the early middle-class factions in organized surfbathing in both countries. They established clubs which became the foundations of surf lifesaving associations. Although initially reluctant to assist the surfbathing clubs, local councils quickly re-appraised their positions and accepted them as a way to defray the costs of protecting surfbathers’ safety. Yet, despite their identical class composition and similar objectives, the lifesaving movements in Australia and New Zealand adopted distinct philosophies, particularly with respect to sport. These reflected critical variations in socio-political circumstances, and as such they reinforce the importance of analyzing concrete local and regional conditions before drawing general conclusions about the origins and diffusion of sporting cultures.