

Veronica Raszeja, *A Decent and Proper Exertion: The Rise of Women's Competitive Swimming in Sydney to 1912*. ASSH Studies in Sports History, No. 9, University of Western Sydney, 1992.

Illus. pp. 191. \$7.

Women's sport, note Australian historians, has traditionally generated less interest among Australians than have sportsmen or racehorses.¹ Nevertheless, a number of recent books and monographs have begun to reverse this trend by reconstructing the traditions of women's sport in Australia and bringing to light a rich heritage of female sporting participation and achievements, gained despite deliberate attempts by Australian men to keep sport within the male domain. Marion Stell's history of Australian women in sports covers a vast canvas with sports of every kind, using the record of female achievement in these sports as a backdrop against which to examine ongoing efforts by men to ban, ignore or trivialise sporting women. Richard Cashman and Amanda Weaver have explored similar long-standing prejudices by using women's cricket as an intriguing historical case study.² Veronica Raszeja's study of the rise of women's competitive swimming in Sydney is a further fascinating case study of the history of sport and gender relations in Australia.

In *A Decent and Proper Exertion: The Rise of women's Competitive Swimming in Sydney to 1912*, Raszeja examines the seemingly smooth acceptance and approval bestowed upon women's participation in competitive swimming in Sydney in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with a questioning eye. Why, she asks, in the midst of controversy and compromise over the emergence of the female competitive spirit, did swimming become so much more acceptable than other competitive sports, and remain so free from many of the constraints put on the public behaviour of women? 'Why were women swimmers who broke world records in 1902 hailed as "plucky Australians", while

those attempting to run races, jump higher than one another – or even cycle faster – were condemned as masculinised abominations? And, in the final analysis, what did the rise of women's competitive swimming contribute to the overall push for women's physical emancipation?' (p. 12).

Swimming, of course, may be a special kind of sport requiring a particular kind of historical analysis. Turn-of-the-century women fiction writers, who typically tended to be rather silent on the subject of sport and female athletic achievement did write about swimming as a form of female empowerment. In 1899, for example, Kate Chopin in *The Awakening* portrayed her heroine Edna as dangerously playing out a desire for risk and adventure that was denied outlets in her domestic life by swimming 'far-out'. Swimming for Edna, wrote Chopin, intoxicated and empowered her. It symbolised a special mastery of her body and its environment. It was a complex sign of both potential feminine ability in a masculine world and the frustration of that potential through the world's sexual politics.

As Raszeja points out, limited research has been done so far on the ramifications of women's competitive swimming for the physical emancipation of women and the opening up of their sporting options, so we know very little really about the 'special' nature and meaning that swimming has held for women in the past. What Raszeja demonstrates so well, however, is that while women's competitive swimming was not, ultimately 'special' enough to remain immune from Victorian establishment opposition and concerns about appropriate feminine behaviour, there were unique features about the sport which offered protection from criticism. For example, she suggests that since the physical effort – the speed, power and endurance – required to be seriously competitive was hidden within a cool, aquatic environment, criticism about unsightly and unladylike exertion remained muted. Nor was there body contact, or weaponry such as sticks, bats and balls, to

cause potential offence. Furthermore, swimming had traditionally been extolled as health enhancing and hygienic, both qualities enhancing the acceptability rating of the sport for women as well as men and schoolchildren.

Despite these advantages, female competitive swimming was still a woman's sport and could not ultimately escape prevailing attitudes towards Victorian womanhood. Administrative tussles over the management of women's swimming events added weight to other expressed anxieties over the revealing costumes and public exhibitions of striving female swimmers, culminating in the re-segregation of the sport in 1906. In this year, the New South Wales Ladies Amateur Swimming Association (NSWLASA) moved to ban male spectators from all ladies' swimming events, protecting women from the voyeuristic male gaze as well as avoiding potential censure and further restrictions from the male-dominated NSWASA. In a finely-tuned argument, Raszeja weighs the pros and cons of these restrictions upon women's sport showing how, in the short run, they were a boon to women's competitive swimming while in the long run they became dysfunctional and almost denied the opportunity for Fanny Durack and Mina Wylie to compete and win medals for swimming at the 1912 Olympic Games.

Using a separate spheres perspective as an organising device, she thus carefully examines the nature and elasticity of the boundaries surrounding women's social and sporting space in turn-of-the-century Sydney and concludes that the space gained by women swimmers in the movement toward greater equality was significant, though hardly enough to create a 'big splash'. The use of this perspective to examine ideologies which have governed women has proved to be popular and useful, though postmodern historians of gender relations suggest that it tends to emphasise difference rather than elucidating the reciprocity between gender and society, and to be somewhat insensitive to matters of class, ethnicity and race. Raszeja points out the middle-class bias in her discussion but it would have been interesting to have had more points of

comparison between men and women swimmers, and some discussion about the experiences of women swimmers in different clubs and venues and in different types of competitions and carnivals. Nevertheless, this monograph is an excellent addition to the burgeoning scholarship in sport history and gender relations.

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1. Marion K Stell, *Half the Race: A History of Australian Women in Sport*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1991, p. viii.
2. Richard Cashman and Amanda Weaver, *Wicket Women: Cricket and Women in Australia*, NSWUP, Kensington, 1991.