

## Review Article

# *Public Sports History, History and Social Memory: (Re)presenting Swimming in Australia*

Murray G Phillips  
School of Physical Education,  
Exercise and Sport Studies  
University of South Australia

**Alan Clarkson**, *Lanes of Gold: 100 Years of the NSW Amateur Swimming Association*. Lester-Townsend Publishers, Sydney, 1990. Illus., pp. 207.

**John Daly**, *The Splendid Journey: A Centenary History of Amateur Swimming in South Australia*. Open Book Publishers, Adelaide, 1998. Illus., pp. 192.

**John McDonald**, *The First 100: A Century of Swimming in Victoria*. Swimming Victoria, Melbourne, 1993. Illus., pp. 210.

*One of the most fiercely contested areas in Australian intellectual life is history — the teaching of history, the question of hidden histories, the theoretical debates about the retelling of histories, the epistemological problems of what can be known and what can't.<sup>1</sup>*

The Victorian and Edwardian periods gave birth to sporting clubs, associations and societies in Australia and there have been many public histories written, and many more yet to be written, commemorating sporting centenaries. There is, however, a void in the analysis of the process of producing commissioned sporting histories. This review article will compare and contrast three recent swimming histories in the context of the debates, indicated in the opening quotation, that the discipline of history and, more specifically, public history have been involved in over the last decade.

### **Public History as Contested Terrain**

Commissioned histories have taken at least three recognisable forms, including peoples history, public history and applied history. Peoples history, which has its origins in Britain, sought to democratise the historical process, to recognise a variety of forms of historical expression, and to

take up many causes by being '... an advocate for history's losers rather than an apologist for the ruling class'.<sup>2</sup> Public history, which has its roots in America, referred to the employment of historians and the historical method outside the confines of academia in social history museums, foreign affairs offices and in the corporate world. Applied history, as the name suggests, found practical application for the discipline by using historical examples as they resonated with present day decision-makers and policy-makers. Davidson has summarised these different forms of history by analogy: 'People's History is history in blue jeans; Public History is history in a tweed jacket; Applied History is history in a grey flannel suit'.<sup>3</sup>

The three swimming histories under investigation — *Lanes of Gold*, *The First 100* and *The Splendid Journey* — are of the 'tweed jacket' variety as the writers were employed to produce commemorative histories of the swimming associations in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. These books were written to celebrate the associations' centenaries and to make their histories available to a wider public. At times, the authors swapped the 'tweed jacket' for the 'flannel suit' as they sought to influence decision-makers by providing suggestions to ameliorate declining participation rates, scant media coverage and problems relating to facilities.

Throughout this review article, I will use the term public history in a more generic form than indicated above to refer to history outside academia. The swimming histories are written by a sports historian (John Daly) and two sporting journalists (Alan Clarkson and John McDonald). At one level, these different occupational backgrounds indicate the contested nature of public history and, at another level, these authors represent the cultural authority of these occupations that are entrusted, as Michael Kammen argues, with the status of 'memory specialists'.<sup>4</sup> As much as historians may see the domain of the past as their 'turf', they clearly do not have a mortgage on public history nor are they seen as the only writers perceived as capable of completing the task.

### **Challenges to History — Public and 'Private'**

Over recent years, history — and by implication public history — has been challenged from within the discipline and from outside the field. For example, Keith Jenkins in *Re-thinking History* discusses the epistemological, methodological and ideological dimensions of history. From an epistemological perspective, he argues, we can never know the past (something I will return to later), from a methodological perspective

there are many competing, contested and contradictory paradigms, and similarly there are many ideological underpinnings of the historical project.<sup>5</sup> With respect to methodological perspectives, historians may be econometricians, empiricists, feminists, Marxists, neo-Marxists, postcolonialists, postmodernists, poststructuralists and so on. Each of these approaches has the potential to offer ‘... fresh light on the infinitely complex shadow of history; each has its part to play in our interpretative dreams; each supplies another lever by means of which we may move the weight of the past; in order to examine in other ways, from other aspects...’.<sup>6</sup> One of many examples of the competition between historical paradigms and the diversity of the historical project is evident in Hudson and Bolton’s *Creating Australia: Changing Australian History*. In the sporting context, Philip Mosely’s *Sporting Immigrants*, Marion Stell’s *Half the Race* and Colin Tatz’s *Obstacle Race* have challenged the male, white, Anglo-Celtic versions of our sporting history.<sup>7</sup> ‘One past, many histories’ is the slogan that typifies the contested terrain of history and sport history.

Public histories may be about recovering lost histories, but in the main methodological polemics are not the major concern of commissioning authorities. Commissioning bodies usually pose questions relating to the past that they wish to be pursued. This situation fuels one of the largest criticisms of public history in that the writer is asked to answer questions posed by others.<sup>8</sup> Is the historical project distorted when the topics, the time frame, the length of the project, the anticipated audience and the literary style are outlined for the historian? Will the answers to the questions be accepted, modified, appropriated or even made public? Do commissioning bodies prefer cultural editing in order to produce positive versions of the past? This is literally the minefield that public historians wearily tread through.

Acknowledgment of the limitations of public histories — centred around impositions placed by external agencies — is important, nevertheless, it would be naïve to conceptualise the pursuit of history as intrinsically motivated and directed, free from the influence of others. Indeed there is a long line of history that has served a multitude of masters: history with a moral flavour as exemplified by Herodotus’s accounts of the Greeks’ struggles against the Persians (good triumphing over evil); history for religious purposes as epitomised in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* (an ‘unfolding story of a providential plan’); and history for political agendas as has occurred in

histories of nation states.<sup>9</sup> As Jenkins argues 'History is never for itself; it is always for someone'.<sup>10</sup> Public history is at one end of the spectrum that acknowledges the ideological dimensions of all historical endeavours.

Other criticisms of the historical process also apply to public history. History has been critiqued widely from within and from outside the discipline over the last two decades and its dismembering has taken three very broad tangents. Firstly, there are the problems of perception. This concern centres on the personal dimensions of working with data, 'facts', and the selection of material as well as the process of interpretation and the design of meaning. Critics argue that personal perceptions and preferences ensure that impartial detachment is a dream rather than a reality. Secondly, there are the problems of language. Poststructural theorists have raised many questions about the nature and functions of language that impinge on many fields. Historians are particularly vulnerable to post-structuralist attacks as they have to interact with past usage of language in the form of written texts and they also use language to frame, conceptualise and explain their work. Language is too powerful to treat as neutral as it does not simply describe events, but places parameters, constraints and boundaries around our perceptions, interpretations and experiences. Thirdly, there are the problems of scepticism. Philosophical scepticism, which is inextricably linked to the previous two issues, questions whether it is possible to know the 'truth'.<sup>11</sup> Southgate summarises these concerns: 'Taken together the related challenges from psychology, linguistics, and philosophy, present a formidable problem for historical study, for they have served to undermine the foundations of the subject as traditionally conceived'.<sup>12</sup>

These types of critiques of the historical process articulated in Southgate's *History: What and Why? Ancient, Modern and Postmodern Perspectives* and more recently in Berkhofer's, *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse*, and Poster's *Cultural History and Postmodernity* have created heated debate and controversy.<sup>13</sup> Tension along these lines has also permeated the discipline of sport history and have recently been sensitively analysed by Catriona Parratt.<sup>14</sup> Parratt describes the 'postmodernist, linguistic, literary and cultural turns' that have resulted in a shift in some works from the social history pursuits of causality and context to the cultural history pursuits of analysing meaning.<sup>15</sup> Several examples in sport history — Vertinsky's *The Eternally Wounded Women*, Cahn's *Coming on Strong* and Syndor's 'A History of Synchronised

Swimming' — were described to highlight the use of postmodern concepts of representation, discourse and language.

Syndor's presentation on synchronised swimming, which drew on Walter Benjamin's view of history, raised the ire of many sport historians who attended the North American Society for Sport History (1997) and epitomises the wider debate in historical circles. As the title suggests, Windshuttle's *The Killing of History: How a discipline is being murdered by literary critics and social theorists* deplores the postmodern influence on history while Appleby, Hunt and Jacobs' *Telling the Truth About History* and Evans's *In Defence of History* are measured, reasoned and reflective responses to the critics.<sup>16</sup> In essence, these authors argue in different ways and to different degrees that despite the challenges there is an underlying belief in an 'historical heartland' — concepts like evidence, similarity and difference, cause and effect, continuity and change - that gives history its credibility.<sup>17</sup> What I propose to do in this review article is to compare the three histories of swimming to investigate the 'historical heartland' issue in the context of public sport history. These books examine swimming associations in three different states of Australia, and while it is important to acknowledge geographical dimensions, what do they share in common and what differences do they exhibit in constructing the historical project? Does an historical heartland exist in these books and are there defining features?

### **Swimming Histories and the 'Historical Heartland'**

The most common feature of the swimming histories is their diligence in recording the successes of the athletes that have reached state, national and international prominence. In fact, the swimming performances become the centre pieces of *Lanes of Gold* and *The First 100* as, I assume, these swimmers are taken as a reflection of the work of the administrators and as a measuring stick of the accomplishments of the respective associations. *The First 100* even details the careers of swimmers from other states (and countries) which bear no relationship to the efforts of the Victorian administrators but are possibly included because of their national and international significance. Both *Lanes of Gold* and *The First 100* provide detailed appendices that record winners of championships, record holders and those who have made representative teams. *The Splendid Journey* recognises the great swimmers, and duly acknowledges their careers, but does not spend as much ink on their individual achievements and does

not provide any statistical material on the swimmers preferring, instead, to list the trophies presented over the years for various competitions.

All books explain the contributions of administrators of the various associations. *The Splendid Journey* details the role of administrators in their amateur capacity and, as Australian sport was injected with government funding, as professionals. *The First 100* and *Lanes of Gold* spend less time on the changing dimensions of Australian sport and more on the individuals who ensured the day-to-day and long-term organisation of the swimming associations. *The Splendid Journey* gives high priority to contextualisation of administrative developments, *The First 100* does not place much emphasis on context, and *Lanes of Gold* even less.

The coverage of swimmers and administrators consume the majority of these histories, yet they are handled in contrasting ways. This theme of diversity continues as other topics are not considered at all, or partially remembered or made into major sub themes. I will highlight several of these issues to make this point. Pre-Association history of swimming is one example. What was the value accorded to swimming history prior to the establishment of the swimming associations? Each author treats this issue differently: to set up the need for an organising body; or to sketch early competitions, early baths and clubs; or to outline alterations in swimming styles and strokes. One interesting approach (appropriate in the postmodern context) is in *Lanes of Gold* which provides an informative early history in a chapter entitled 'In the Beginning' at the end of the book.

Similarly, related sports which were initially organised by swimming clubs and associations — water polo, diving and synchronised swimming — are dealt with in contrasting ways. *Lanes of Gold* gives full chapters to the 'rough and tough sport' (water polo) and the 'poor relation' (diving), and *The Splendid Journey* recognises the tension between swimming, diving and water polo but does not expand on the relationship. *The First 100* is the only history to include synchronised swimming in any depth with details of the sport's involvement in the Melbourne Olympic Games, the first national championships in 1965, the introduction of international competition at the Pan Pacific Championships in 1974 as well as describing the role of successful swimmers and important administrators.

The issue of country swimming and the relationship to city-based associations in South Australia is explained in *The Splendid Journey*. Daly goes to considerable trouble to present the problems faced by country

swimmers, the dearth of facilities and the struggles of individuals to develop the sport, as well as attempts by urban administrators to assist their country colleagues. *Lanes of Gold* provides the organisational history of rural swimming including the administrator's personalities, the country championships and outstanding swimmers. *The First 100 Years* is far less willing to grapple with swimming in rural areas and only two of 200 pages is given to the topic.

Another issue central to Australian sport — amateurism — leaves contrasting imprints on these books. *The Splendid Journey* contextualises the development of swimming in terms of the amateur/professional dichotomy and the first four chapters place the establishment of the Amateur Swimming Association in a struggle against the professional movement which had dominance for many years. In contrast, *The First 100* fails to acknowledge the importance of amateurism in the early years as exemplified by the lack of discussion of the implications of the Victorian Swimming Association changing its name to the Victorian Amateur Swimming Association. *Lanes of Gold* in a similar vein outlines the central role of coaches, particularly in New South Wales where the likes of Forbes Carlile, Harry Gallagher, Don Talbot were very influential, yet the impact of the amateur ideology which defined their working conditions, their relationship with swimmers, and their role in the sport was absent.

An additional topic not covered with any consistency was the geography of swimming and bathing venues. In *The First 100*, there is little discussion of swimming venues as cultural sites nor of their geographical location with respect to Melbourne or the city's waterways. *Lanes of Gold* is more generous in this area describing many of the old swimming pools which existed in Sydney Harbour, associated rivers and on the beach fronts. *The Splendid Journey* explores a range of issues from the clubs that were based on the Torrens River and the Port Canal — their rise, their demise and their social character — and other swimming venues like the pools not in the waterways and their cultural heritage in Adelaide.

The social and cultural context of the sport is an area that also reveals attention at different levels. For instance, all three books cover the role of women in swimming, the establishment of female swimming clubs and associations and the key female sporting administrators. Yet both *The First 100* and *Lanes of Gold* do not attempt to explain the social and cultural conditions that firstly led to segregation and then integration in

the sport. *The Splendid Journey* provides rationales for these issues and points to a general feature of this book: to explain changes in the sport — administrative, competitive and cultural — against a backdrop of gender tensions that have always existed in society.

In summary, I have deliberately adopted a postmodern perspective by not accepting the distinction made by some scholars between 'high history (written by historians) and 'low' history (written by 'others').<sup>18</sup> Instead I have compared these histories on the assumption that the features of the 'historical heartland', described previously, manifest themselves in the content material and the analysis of this material. The three authors have provided contrasting histories of swimming. There is commonality in the issues — swimmers, administrators, related sports, rural swimming, geography and venues, and women — yet the emphasis given varies markedly and the way these issues are conceptualised is vastly different ways in each book. This brief comparative synopsis illustrates the diverse representations of swimming history and is indicative of the many factors — psychology, language, philosophy and ideology — working in the historical process. I think these swimming books indicate that the 'historical heartland' issue in public histories is as susceptible to critique as it is in history.

### **Public Sporting History and Social Memory**

The swimming books further highlight the distinction between the past and history. The past is what has actually occurred while history is what historians make of the past. Historians can never recover the past because the content is limitless, but they can offer a selection of the past; historians can never recover the past because the past is gone, but they can offer an interpretation of the past; historians can never recover the real past as they are of the present, but they can offer versions of the past viewed through the present. According to all these criteria, history is less than the past, yet the dynamic is not that simple. Through hindsight — new documents, ideas and concepts — historians have the potential to actually know more than was ever possible in the past.<sup>19</sup> Given this interpretation, history is best understood as a discourse about the past. What the swimming histories represent are three discourses about our swimming pasts.

Many of the readers of *Sporting Traditions* are fully aware of the epistemological problems of history just raised, yet these issues have not

been discussed in the context of public sport history. Should we abandon public sport history because it is plagued by many problems facing historians? Should public sporting history be avoided by historians because the process involves answering questions posed by others? My response to both these questions is that even though public history (and history) is problematic, there is a place for these endeavours.

Public sporting histories are crucial because they create a relationship between the past and the present: they create social memory. Chris Healy defines social memory as 'made up of relatively discrete instances in a network of performances: enunciations in historical writing, speaking, (re)enactment, (re)presentation and so on; the surfaces of historical discourses; the renderings of memory practices'.<sup>20</sup> Memory practices and the related concept of nostalgia have taken many forms in sport. People, places and events are remembered in architecture (the Bradman Stand at the Sydney Cricket Ground), films and videos ('The Kangaroos' — the origins of rugby league in Australia), matches (the Centenary Test in Cricket between Australia and England in 1977), museums (the Australian Gallery of Sport at the Melbourne Cricket Ground), plaques (the tablet at the Melbourne Cricket Ground detailing the centenary of the 1858 game between Scotch College and Melbourne Grammar School), stamps (commemorating the centenary of test matches in rugby union), rituals (the various grand final matches) and statues (Wally Lewis at Lang Park, Brisbane). The swimming histories are important, like the examples cited above, because they install social memory.

Equally importantly, public history provides an avenue for academics to engage with the wider public and recover some of the lost opportunities as social commentators. Robert Dessaix in *Speaking Their Minds: Intellectuals and the Public Culture in Australia* laments the limited forums available for public debate, and also recognises the failure of academics to become public intellectuals.<sup>21</sup> Sporting histories provide an opportunity (admittedly one amongst the limited alternatives) for historians not only to relate to the public, but to create and install social memory. Public history helps to determine how the sporting past is remembered in our sporting present, and to create a link between historians and public intellectual culture.

### Notes:

- 1 Robert Dessaix, *Speaking their Minds: intellectuals and Public Culture in Australia*, ABC, Sydney, 1998, p. 186.

- 2 Graeme Davidson, 'Paradigms of Public History' in John Rickard and Peter Spearitt, eds, *Packaging the Past? Public Histories*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1991, p. 9.
- 3 Davidson, 'Paradigms of Public History', p. 12.
- 4 Michael Kammen, *Mystic Cords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1991 cited in Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton, eds, *Memory and History in Twentieth-Century Australia*, CUP, Melbourne, 1994, pp. 23-4.
- 5 Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, Routledge, London, 1992.
- 6 Beverley Southgate, *History: What & Why? Ancient, Modern, and Postmodern Perspectives*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 88.
- 7 Wayne Hudson and Geoffrey Bolton, *Changing Australian History: Creating Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1997; Philip Mosely, Richard Cashman, John O'Hara and Hilary Weatherburn, *Sporting Immigrants: Sport and Ethnicity in Australia*, Walla Walla Press, Sydney, 1997; Marion Stell, *Half the Race: A History of Australian Women in Sport*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1991; and Colin Tatz, *Obstacle Race: Aborigines in Sport*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1995.
- 8 Davidson, 'Paradigms of Public History', p. 7.
- 9 Southgate, *History: What & Why?*, pp. 28-57.
- 10 Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, p. 17.
- 11 Southgate, *History: What & Why?*, pp. 58-85.
- 12 Southgate, *History: What & Why?*, p. 85.
- 13 Southgate, *History: What and Why?*; Robert F. Berkhofer's, *Beyond the Great Story History as Text and Discourse*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1997; and Mark Poster, *Cultural History and Postmodernity: Disciplinary Readings and Challenges*, CUP, New York, 1997.
- 14 Catriona M. Parratt, 'About Turns: Reflecting on Sport History in the 1990s', *Sport History Review*, vol. 29, 1998, pp. 4-17.
- 15 Parratt, 'About Turns: Reflecting on Sport History in the 1990s', p. 4.
- 16 Keith Windshuttle *The Killing of History: How a discipline is being murdered by literary critics and social theorists*, Free Press, 1997; Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 1994; and Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History*, Granta, London, 1997.
- 17 Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, p. 16.
- 18 Poster, *Cultural History and Postmodernity*, p. 114.
- 19 David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985.
- 20 Chris Healy, *From the Ruins of Colonialism: History as Social Memory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 5.
- 21 Dessaix, *Speaking their Minds*, pp. 3-29.