

# Men in skirts

## A DECIDEDLY GROTESQUE PAGEANT

Ian Warden tells the story of a protest held by the beach-going men of Manly, Bondi and Coogee 100 years ago

One hundred years ago, on the morning of Sunday 20 October 1907, dozens of Sydney's hitherto manliest of men emerged on the sands of the Manly, Bondi and Coogee beaches wearing women's clothes. They were making a protest and so were just a little bit indignant, but were really, one newspaper reporter saw, 'a good-natured crowd, full of harmless fun'.

Huge crowds, alerted to what was going to happen, were on the beaches to see the fancy-dressed fellows. 'There never was such a crowd on this beach before', regular Bondi folk told the reporter from *The Daily Telegraph*, who duly reported that Bondi beach was packed by 'a swarm of humanity'. *The Australian Star* thought that 'thousands were present' at Bondi.

The gentlemen of the press, guaranteed something grotesque to report and especially to photograph on what would normally be a sluggish news day, were at the three beaches in force. The next day's coverage in the dailies and the following week's coverage in the weeklies were extravagant. The National Library of Australia's newspaper holdings bring the ancient event alive.



These were the days when newspapers used multiple headlines, and so, the morning after the protest the *Telegraph* chortled and gasped: 'Bathers in Skirts. Bondi Beach Parade. A Grotesque Turnout. An Immense Crowd'.

What was this 'skirt brigade', as the Sydney press called them, agitating about? The *Star* reported the next day that the men at Bondi had worn:

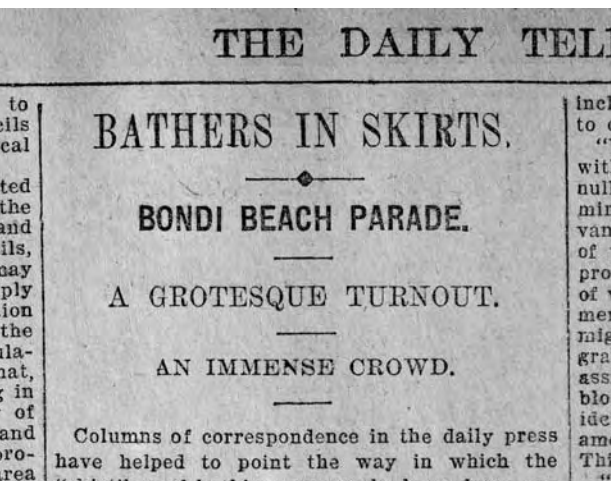
long skirts of many colours, evening dress costumes, petticoats and various other undergarments [with] the central figure a tall youth in a long red muslin dress, the material being so extremely thin that his lanky form could be plainly seen.

What on earth had driven the protesting manly men to such undignified extremes?

To help explain, we should note that, on the previous Friday, Australia's iconic Surf Lifesaving Movement had been born. There had been a Sydney meeting of indignant surf swimmers and members of hitherto small surf lifesaving clubs from individual beaches at which it had been agreed to join forces to fight against the 'municipal attitude' of the mayors of the beach-blessed municipalities of Waverley, Randwick and Manly. Speakers

above:  
*Some Suggestions at Bondi*  
reproduced from the *Sydney Mail*, 23 October 1907  
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below left:  
'Bathers in Skirts ... An Immense  
Crowd'  
reproduced from the *Daily  
Telegraph*, 21 October 1907  
Newspapers and Microforms  
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above:  
NSW Government Printing  
Office  
*Surf Bathing, Manly Beach,  
New South Wales* 1900  
gelatin silver photograph  
28.0 x 36.0 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an13294757

below:  
*Costumes that Offend Mrs  
Grundy*  
reproduced from the *Sydney  
Mail*, 23 October 1907  
Newspapers and Microforms  
Collection  
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at the meeting alleged that, even though these councils owed so much prosperity to the fact that beach bathing was fabulously popular now and drew huge crowds to the beaches, the councils were spending next to nothing on facilities for beach users. Nor were they spending anything on equipment for the volunteers who were rescuing more and more swimmers from the invitingly sparkling but sometimes treacherous surf. One speaker seethed, to heartfelt agreement, that the facilities for swimmers at Manly 'are a disgrace to civilisation'.

Now it had come to pass that the popular desire to frolic and bask in the sea and on the beach while wearing relatively little

had left lots of people outraged by the 'indecent' of these displays. British Victorian prudery had kept Australians off their own alluring beaches and out of their irresistibly gorgeous surf until late in the 19th century but, as soon as a few pioneering bathers had challenged the appropriateness of this imported prudery in this wonderfully sun-kissed new land, the hedonistic, swimsuited stampede down to the golden beaches and into the sapphire seas had begun. The new hedonism clashed with the old, lingering outrage at perceived indecency.

Some of the outrage surviving in Sydney in October 1907 seems to have belonged to the mayors of Waverley, Randwick and Manly. Only a few days before the Friday meeting of the aggrieved, they seem to have threatened to issue a new ordinance that would force some extra modesty upon male bathers. The existing ordinance already insisted on 'a costume which shall, wet or dry, cover the body from the neck to the knee and be of such material as not to disclose the colour of the skin [by becoming transparent when wet]'. But now the mayors (ridiculed by the press as men in league with 'Mrs Grundy', the high priestess of wowsers) seemed to want even more forced decency than this. And at some point in this debate one of the mayors seems to have said (although later all mayors denied ever using the word) that men bathing and sunbathing on the beaches were going to have to wear a swimsuit that incorporated a kind of 'skirt'. It would be a second layer on top of the swimsuit already worn and would come down, from the waist to somewhere on the thigh, to conceal the sometimes obscenely protruding parts of a man in a swimsuit and especially in a wet, clinging one.

This multi-mayoral proposal (real or imagined) was mentioned obliquely at the aforementioned great meeting (the man from the *Telegraph* reported 'laughter' when the issue was raised) and it seems



COSTUMES THAT OFFEND MRS. GRUNDY.



THE SKIRTED BATHERS OF BONDI BEACH.

left:  
*The Skirted Bathers of Bondi Beach*  
 reproduced from the *Sydney Mail*, 23 October 1907  
 Newspapers and Microforms Collection  
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below:  
 Unknown artist  
*Complying with the Regulations, Surf Bathing in NSW*  
 reproduced from the *Bulletin*, 24 October 1907  
 Newspapers and Microforms Collection  
 NX 252

likely that it was then and there that the demonstration was conceived for the next Sunday to heap ridicule on the idea.

This shortness of notice would explain why, even though the men in skirts did well to collect even *some* women's clothes in so short a time (there were heavy borrowings, the press thought, from mothers, sisters, wives and sweethearts), a lot of the clothing wasn't very fashionable and pretty. 'The "skirts" worn by some of the masqueraders were conspicuously ancient, and had evidently been rescued from the domestic scrap heap', one reporter thought. Then, too, no mother, sister, wife or sweetheart was going to lend anything treasured and elegant for a horseplaying man to wear to a rough occasion at which the wearer had pledged to wear the garment into the surf as an extra demonstration of the impracticality and daftness of the mayoral brainwave.

And, hilarious throughout, the demonstrations seem to have been at their silliest when men minced down the beach and into the waves. The striking young man at Bondi in the long red muslin dress seems to have stayed in female character throughout the morning's shenanigans. The *Telegraph* reported the next day:

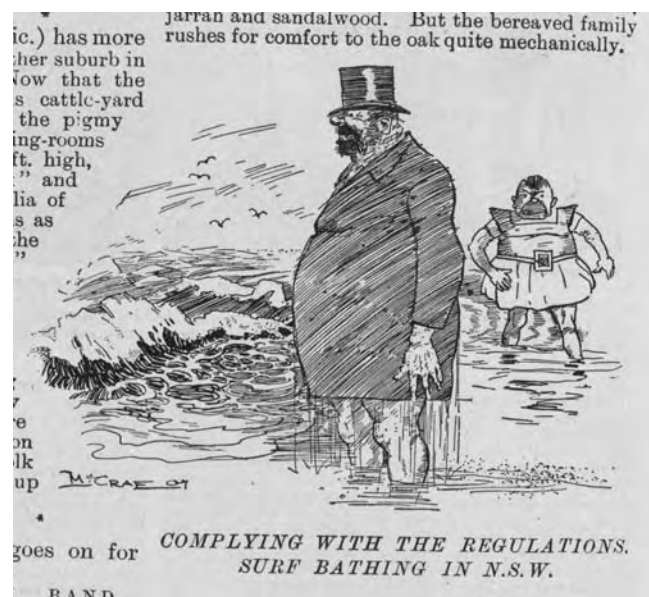
The tall youth proceeded to the water's edge ... and, holding up his skirt, allowed a breaking wave to wet his feet ... Immediately this event

occurred the most weird and blood-curdling screams rent the air, and a small army of skirted life-savers raced to the scene and rescued the 'maiden' in trouble.

Lots of other men in skirts seem to have gone well out into the water to display how impossible it would be for a man to swim properly in a 'skirt'.

At Manly, and to 'screams of laughter', skirted men went into the sea. 'Impeded at every stroke', the man from *The Sydney Mail* reported, 'the "skirt brigade" floundered about in the breakers in utter helplessness.'

The demonstration at Bondi seems to have been the largest of the three. There was a procession. It began at about 10.30 am with the 'brigade' shimmering into view from somewhere near the dressing sheds. They carried two banners and a pole of one of the banners had a large empty jam tin fixed to it, somehow representing the head of the Mayor of Waverley, while a pole of another banner had a dead bird fixed to it





HOW THE MANLY BEACH BATHERS OBEYED THE ORDINANCE.

*How the Manly Beach Bathers Obeyed the Ordinance* reproduced from the *Sydney Mail*, 23 October 1907  
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to represent, journalists thought, the state of wakefulness of the council's aldermen. The *Star* reported next day:

As the procession moved round the beach, questions were put by the leaders and replied to in chorus by their crowd of followers.

'Will we wear skirts? — No!'

'Are we downhearted? — No!'

'What shall we do with [mayor] Watkins? — Drown him!'

... When the [Bondi] demonstrators arrived at the cliffs, they were arranged under their banners to be photographed ... Here, too, much bantering was indulged in and cheers and hoots were given heartily as follows: 'Three cheers for surf and sun bathing.' 'Three hoots for Mr Watkins.' 'Three hoots for the aldermen and their ordinances.'

The *Telegraph* called the Bondi procession a 'cavalcade' and the event 'a pageant' and thought that, though it wasn't a pageant 'as gorgeous as a Venetian carnival', it did have the great virtue of being 'decidedly grotesque'.

It noted that 'the procession was musical, but its repertoire was conspicuously limited [as] the recalcitrant surf bathers playfully declared in song their determination to hang a certain municipal dignitary' in revenge, the reporter said, for that dignitary's idea of 'unsexing' the men by making them wear skirts.

But for all these mentions of drowning and hangings, the men were, the *Telegraph*

stressed, 'full of harmless fun ... their chief aim being to accentuate the fact that they weren't going to wear skirts when having their plunge in either the surf or the [swimming] bath'.

The following Wednesday, the *Mail*, a weekly, in a coverage that featured two pages of photographs and reports, was sure that the demonstration had been a triumph.

Ridicule was heaped upon the idea to enforce a grotesque costume upon bathers [and] it may be taken for granted that the Mayoral skirt will be returned to the dressmaker ... So long as a decent and proper costume is worn the bather will be able to revel in his healthful pastime. There will be no need for the encumbrance of a petticoat.

Mrs Grundy and her disciples surely lost a major battle to the hedonists on that newsworthy morning in Sydney in October 100 years ago.

'Fancy forcing this crowd into skirts!', an elderly Bondi gentleman marvelled to the *Telegraph* reporter during the morning's protest. 'Why', he said, pointing to where splendid sea met splendid beach, 'you might as well try and stop those breakers from rolling in.'

IAN WARDEN is a Canberra-based writer with a background in newspapers