



ROLICK, REEL, RESCUE!

Jeff Carter (b.1928)
March Past, Wanda Beach,
1965
b&w photograph
24.6 x 36.4 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3107806

Ian Warden celebrates the centenary of Australia's first Surf Life Saving carnival

On the afternoon of 25 January 1908, an amused *Sydney Morning Herald* reporter was present when 'a festive old holidaymaker tottered out of a hotel at Manly' into the paths of two giant octopuses and a terrifying leviathan of 'a sea-serpent ... which ambled along the Corso on its 40 brown legs'.

'Those brown legs belonged to members of the Surf Club whose bodies were covered with the canvas trunk of the green monster,' the reporter explained. The bewildered drunk allegedly fled 'with a scream', not knowing that what he'd seen was part of the grand fancy dress procession accompanying Australia's, and the world's, first-ever surf carnival.

The carnival, an enormously popular success (from midday onwards every steamer from Circular Quay to Manly was

packed to almost dangerous capacity, and one paper estimated the enthralled Manly crowd at 30 000) was the first promotional extravaganza of the Surf Bathing Association of New South Wales. The substantial new Association had been formed at a spirited meeting of several small, young, pioneering surf clubs at the Sydney Sports Club on 18 October the previous year. That's why 2007 was celebrated as the centenary of Australia's iconic Surf Life Saving movement.

Australia has 11 000 beaches, and Australians make an estimated 80 million visits to them every year. Surf Life Saving Australia's CEO Brett Williamson says that in this centenary year his movement will be priding itself on 'over half a million lives saved, and hundreds of thousands of good citizens developed'.

The movement's invention in 1907 reflects the fact that it was only then, in the first years of the 20th century, that Australians began to flock down to the sea to swim in it—and so sometimes get into trouble in it.

But why were Australians so slow to take the plunge into what we now think (80 million visits a year!) is our irresistible surf?

'Nature has been so bountiful to us in Australia, in providing these glorious stretches of golden beach, bathed in beautiful life-giving sunshine, backed by those long Pacific rollers breaking on our shores in foam and crystal spray, that it seems hardly credible,'—the foreword to the 1923 *Surf Life Saving Handbook* marvelled—that 'our predecessors of a couple of generations [ago] lacked the desire to accept the gifts providence had so abundantly provided.' It was only about 15 years earlier, the foreword continued, that 'surf bathing ... became general, with a rush such as has never been experienced with any class of sport'.

The anonymous writer explained that the revolution had come when 'certain parties of bathers defied the law against bathing outside certain hours, provided they were decently clad'. New South Wales laws of the 1830s, trying to relegate swimming in the sea and harbour to times when no one would be shocked by it, had forbidden swimming in the sea after 7.00 am and before dusk. But as the more liberal and unbuttoned twentieth century gathered pace, more and more sea-seduced swimmers flouted the prudish regulations, making them increasingly unenforceable. The forces of decency (by 1907 their leaders included the much-mocked mayors of the seaside municipalities of Manly, Waverley and Randwick) began to sound increasingly shrill and ridiculous. Indeed, some of the indignation at the now famous 18 October 1907 meeting had to do with a mayoral edict

that male swimmers at the beach, already encased in neck to knee costumes, must now also wear a 'skirt' that for modesty's sake concealed a chap's nether regions. Cartoonists at the *Bulletin* had fun with this notion, and so did hundreds of protesting, sarcastically cross-dressing male swimmers who on the day after the 18 October meeting went to Bondi and Manly in motley skirts, frocks and gowns. (See previous story, 'Men in Skirts', *NLA News*, November 2007.)

The bathing 'rush' was sped up not only by widespread informal flouting of the swimming laws, but by several pivotal challenges to the laws. Manly newspaperman William Gocher's advertised defiant intention five years earlier (1902) to take three swims in Manly's surf at illegal times on three successive Sundays is the most folklorically famous of these challenges.

Gocher wasn't arrested until after his third swim. Many years later, his daughter Mrs Marie Mahoney reminisced for the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the family had been so sure that dad was going to win his court case that 'Mum had already bought us all our costumes at Mark Foy's. Dad came straight home [from court] and said, "Come on, we're all going to have a surf." We were that excited, all of us. The following Saturday and Sunday there were so many people on the beach, crowds of them.'

The 'rush' took momentum from some powerful supporters, including some in commerce. By 1907, following Gocher's pioneering rebellious dips, Manly seems to have been enjoying a bathing-driven economic miracle. At the 18 October meeting, Mr F.W.G. Donovan, president of the Manly Surf Club, reported that in the

below left:
Unknown photographer
An Octopus
reproduced from *Sydney Mail*,
29 January 1908
Newspapers and Microforms
Collection
NX 182

below right:
Unknown photographer
*Competitors in the Fancy
Costume Competition*
reproduced from *Australasian*,
1 February 1908
Newspapers and Microforms
Collection
NX 236



five years since 'all-day surf bathing' had been embraced at Manly, the municipality had boomed. Property had gone up in value as much as 300 per cent, the population had increased by 50 per cent, and in the last year, Donovan rhapsodised, people had clambered aboard the steamers at Circular Quay to make 2 750 000 visits to Manly to spend a day 'a million miles from care'.

Donovan seethed that it was high time for seaside councils enjoying this new swimming-driven prosperity to spend revenue on facilities (presently 'a disgrace to civilisation'), both for swimmers and for those committed to saving their lives. 'Hear, hear,' the congregation of surf club officials thundered.

This rush underway by 1907 is a fascinating episode in Australian history. Until then, Australians visiting the seaside at all imitated the etiquette-inhibited British, who at their fashionable resorts treated the sea as something to be promenaded and posed beside while inhaling its therapeutic breezes—but not something to be entered. Despite Australia's opalescent seas being gorgeously, sensually inviting to body and soul, as contrasted with the forbidding grey, chilly seas of Britain, photographs and paintings of Australians at the seaside show, right to the end of the nineteenth century, well- and *fully*-dressed people who are almost never in it.

Then the rush began—but the sudden stampede into the sea also brought risks and tragedies. C. Bede Maxwell's *Surf* (1949), a definitive history of the surf life saving movement, is sub-titled *Australians Against the Sea*, and explains the part that sudden life-saving necessity played in

the movement's formation. She describes a double drowning on one terrible day at Manly in 1902, and tells how at the ensuing inquest there was heartbreaking mention of 17 previous drownings at Manly. By then, every popular Sydney beach had known tragedies or near-tragedies. People weren't naturally amphibious, and the sea was often unforgiving of misplaced bravado.

'Manly being so popular, we got all sorts,' veteran lifesaver Fred Notting reminisced to Bede Maxwell. 'Billabong swimmers from the bush, cockney stewards from the ships in the harbour, suburbanites best acquainted with water as it comes from the tap. Types like these took their first look at the sea, went in and then went *out* into it! Getting them back could be murder. Our chaps came in bleeding all over from body scratches, clawmarks oozing on their faces!'

Perhaps it was in part because they felt they had to differentiate themselves from the undisciplined rabble they were saving from themselves that the movement adopted, very early, a disciplined quasi-military, uniform-wearing style resulting in the magnificent surf carnival march pasts that have become one of our nation's iconic rituals. The National Library's Ern McQuillan photograph of Prince Charles meeting lifesavers at North Bondi in 1966 shows them lined up in serried ranks, troops awaiting his inspection.

And, like a regiment, the movement was still very much a man's club at the time Bede Maxwell wrote her book: 'Of obstacles to be negotiated during the compilation of this book,' she handwrote on the title page of the copy she donated to the Library, 'none was

below left:
Unknown photographer
The Birth of Venus
reproduced from *Australasian*,
1 February 1908
Newspapers and Microforms
Collection
NX 236

below right:
Unknown photographer
*Gathering of Non-competitive
Surf-bathers*
reproduced from *Australasian*,
1 February 1908
Newspapers and Microforms
Collection
NX 236



more formidable than [the] ingrained surfers' prejudice against members of my sex being in any way connected with the activities of this Ultra Masculine Movement.'

'Early on, I was advised that the unofficial motto of the Surf Life Saving Association of Australia was "No Women—No Wongs! [Chinese]"'

But once she'd cleared that obstacle, she continued, 'my self-imposed task became as pleasant and as exhilarating an indulgence as a country gallop'. And in her book she's very welcoming of the breakthroughs made when the clubs at last began to train women as lifesavers. The 2006 Australian Life Saving Championships at Kurrawa in Queensland (organisers boasted that with 8000 competitors the event had twice as many participants as Melbourne's Commonwealth Games) had thousands of bronzed goddesses as well as bronzed gods representing their clubs.

The extensive press coverage, with photographs, of 1908's first-ever surf carnival reveals it to have had (as well as crowd-luring gimmicks like the 40-legged sea-serpent, and a re-enactment of Captain Cook's landing) some of the underlying serious, lifesaving purposes displayed ever since in carnival events. 'The programme of sports opened with a life-saving display,' the *Herald* reported, 'followed by an exhibition of rescue and release drill by the Surf Club. After this [members] showed their prowess in handling the surf boat in the breakers ... the skill shown ... brought forth great applause.'



The impressed reporter of the *Sydney Mail* enthused that 'The inter surf-club life saving competition with line and belt proved an exciting event,' with six teams of six men 'competing to see which could most quickly save their designated "drowning man".'

The great movement that has since saved 500 000 of those of us lured into the seductive crystal spray (but often best acquainted with water only as it comes out of a tap) was underway.

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above:
Ern McQuillan (b.1926)
Prince Charles at North Bondi Surf Club, with Club President Charlie Christenson, 25 May 1966

b&w photograph; 20.2 x 25.3 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3562116

below:
Unknown photographer
Landing of Captain Cook
reproduced from *Sydney Mail*,
29 January 1908
Newspapers and Microforms
Collection
NX 182

