

# *The Beach: An Australian Passion*

By Robert Drewe

From an Indigenous food source to a hedonistic playground, the beach has long been a national obsession. Robert Drewe's lyrical examination of Australian beach culture, in this new National Library of Australia publication, combines imagery from some of Australia's most celebrated photographers with his stories—a favourite boat, a capsicum-strewn beach, a summer holiday and an unwelcome great white.

Drewe looks at the sunny, salty sexiness of the beach that first enticed the crusading Mr William Gocher into the ocean at Manly in 1903, defying authorities in his neck-to-knee bathing costume. We've come a long way from sunbathing in stockings and pantaloons to the unabashed display of sun-kissed bodies of all shapes and sizes at any beach in the country today. But the beach also has a dark side as a place of tragedy, violence and danger, a place where sharks attack prone surfers and prime ministers disappear.

## **About the author**

Robert Drewe is one of Australia's most prominent authors. He was born in Melbourne but his writing has been shaped by the Swan River and the Indian Ocean coast, where he learned to swim and surf after his family's relocation to Western Australia.

In *The Beach*, Drewe turns his attention to the favourite coastal theme, but in a new way: a mix of history, reminiscence and lyrical description, complemented by photographs from the National Library of Australia's collection.

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ROBERT DREWE

THE BEACH  
*An Australian Passion*



After all that teenage canoodling in the sand dunes or beach shacks, on the offshore islands and in the camping areas, most contemporary Australians invariably honeymoon at the beach, preferably an island one. (When did you last hear of someone honeymooning at Meekatharra? Moree?)

Later, as parents, our ordinary Australian couples take their families on regular holidays to the beach—often to the same beach where those earlier events occurred. (Interestingly, these beach holidays give parents and children the opportunity to engage in a role reversal: the adults shed their ponderous grown-up habits, play games and 'act the goat', while the children are permitted to stay up late, experiment with alcohol, eat junk food, and perform adult tasks with outboard motors.)

And, finally, in increasingly large numbers, Australians retire to the particular stretch of coastline befitting their class and superannuation.

Incidentally, those people who haven't moved voluntarily to the coast might find themselves there anyway, deposited by their children in one of the old people's homes which line the Esplanades and Ocean View Parades of venerable beach suburbs from Cottesloe, to St Kilda, to Manly.



Maggie Diaz (b. 1925), *Beach Father and Son*,  
St. Kilda, Melbourne c. 1965



But the father of all ocean swims is the 20-kilometre Rottneest Channel Swim, from Cottesloe Beach, Western Australia, to Thomson Bay on Rottneest Island. Held every February, this deepwater swim is so popular that a ballot is held to limit the number of entrants. One of the world's largest open-water swims, it's an event that attracts more than 2000 hypothermia-and-stinger-battling swimmers and 10,000 spectators.

◀ Peta North, *Participants in the Rottneest Channel Swim*

With this event, 15-year-old Isabel Letham became the first Australian known to ride a surfboard in the Australian surf. Forty-nine years later in 1964, the first Australian to achieve international surfing fame, and bring surfing to the general sporting public's notice, was 19-year-old Midget Farrelly, the inaugural World Surfing Champion.

Farrelly has said that, until about 1960, 'An ironing board was the first surfboard that somebody had 20-odd years ago. I used to ride an ironing board in the surf in Takapuna in New Zealand as a kid and a lot of other kids had ironing boards too. Wooden ironing boards.' He recollected that, in the 1960s:

*Surfing was basically held within the confines of the surf lifesaving club movement. Apart from the Hawaiians coming to Australia, we hadn't really seen much to indicate that surfing was anything other than a part of surf club life, so I was in the Freshwater Surf Club around that time.*

*In the 1960s surfers were portrayed as complete alternative life-stylers. The Flower Power drug or dope thing was given greater emphasis than it deserved, and at one stage it was said that if you weren't into dope you didn't know what you were doing in the waves anyway.*

*The Australian Surf Riders Association set out to promote surfing, formed rules for judging and eventually set up a world contest body. At the first world contest the prizes for the event were trophies. At that stage no one thought of giving money as a prize. It was more or less unthinkable, competing for money.*

Though observable at the fun-and-healthy-exercise level at any ocean beach, surfing these days is synonymous with certain towns and regions on the coasts of the Pacific, Indian and Southern oceans.



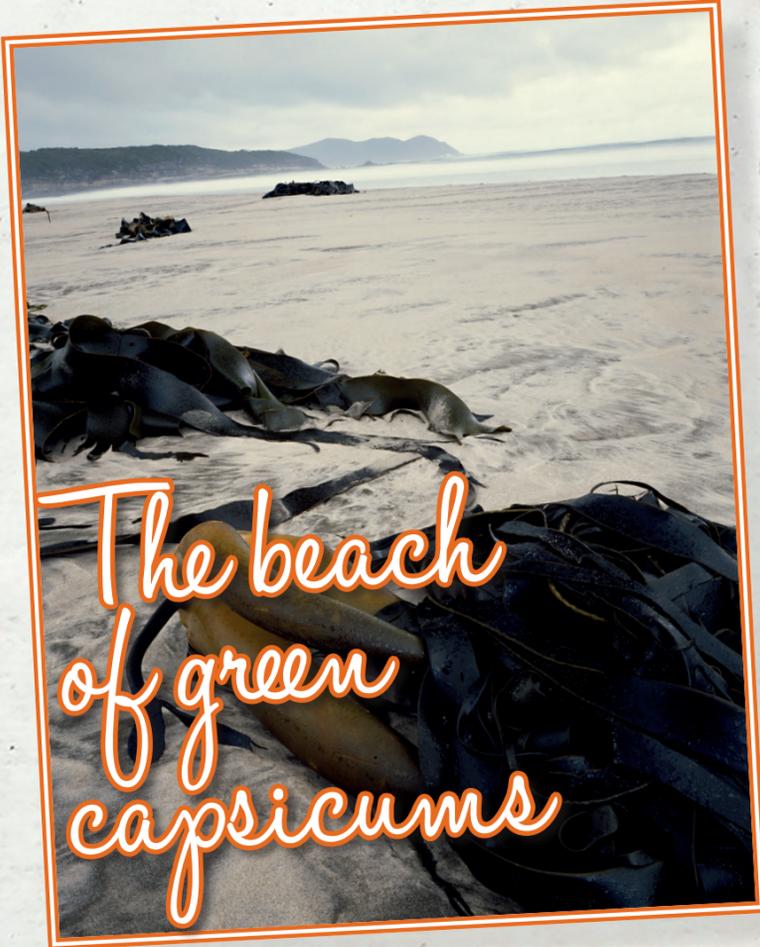
Ray Leighton (1917–2002), *Surf Sirens*, Manly Beach, New South Wales c. 1942



Good surf spots have never remained secret for long, and those beaches that are especially celebrated range from the Byron Bay to Angourie stretch of the north coast of New South Wales; the Margaret River region of Yallingup and Prevelly Park in Western Australia (with waves from mild to monstrous); Sydney's northern beaches (the best string of city-suburban surf beaches in the country); Crescent Head, Seal Rocks and Pacific Palms in New South Wales; Snapper Beach (the Gold Coast site of elite surfing events) and Noosa's famous long point break in Queensland; and, Victoria's Bells Beach, home of the world's longest running surfing competition: the Rip Curl Pro.

John Witzig (b. 1944), *Surfer, Bob McTavish, Standing next to a 1948 Holden Complete with Surfboard on the Roof Racks, National Park, Noosa Heads, Queensland 1966*

Peter Dombrovskis (1945-1996),  
Bull Kelp, South Coast, Tasmania c. 1994



The beach  
of green  
capsicums

I was jogging along deserted Killcare Beach on the central coast of New South Wales just before dusk when, in the distance, I noticed a big black animal. It stood out dramatically on the sand at the high-water mark. It was crouching on its haunches, and, as I ran along the shore, I saw that it was staring in my direction.

When I jogged nearer I could see it was a dog, and when I was closer still I saw it was a large Doberman. Immediately my mind went through the usual man-encounters-strange-dog quandary. Do I bluff this out and boldly keep running? Or will this potentially savage dog see through that ruse and spring up and chase me?

I slowed to a walk, heart beating fast. The dog still stared at me. It crouched there watchfully, sleekly, motionlessly, and I could see its teeth bared in a silent snarl. But as I passed below its vigilant position overseeing the beach it made no attempt to chase me. Once a decent interval of sand was between us, I began jogging again, looking over my shoulder occasionally. I reached the end of the beach, turned, and started jogging back. Of course, when I reached the Doberman's vicinity—the sun had set and the shadowy shape of the dog loomed threateningly—I slowed to a walk again.

The dog still crouched there menacingly, staring out to sea, ever vigilant. Waiting for its owner who was in the ocean, I decided. My impression of the dog changed. It was loyally, anxiously, waiting for its master or mistress to come ashore. Had something happened to them? Had they been swept out in a rip? The surf was wild and choppy. I couldn't see any towel or belongings left on the sand. The dog's guard position didn't falter.

Next evening I went jogging again. Though further along the beach, the Doberman was still there, still crouching on the sand as if about to spring into action. I didn't stop this time and the dog made no attempt to chase me. On my way back, I walked towards it, strangely nervous, and perceived that its eyes were open and its jaws were locked in a rictus snarl. It was dead.

Next day, the Doberman, which had refused to lie prone, or be rolled on its side by the surf, or to look the least drowned—which had in fact insisted on continual crouched vigilance—was gone.

The time of the drowned dog followed a week of king tides, which followed ten days of torrential rain. All this fierce stormwater eroded the beaches and surged into the bays and rivers. Surf pounded and frothed in the car parks and threw dead sea creatures across the coast road. Shags and giant blue jellyfish, bigger than dinner plates, washed up, wings and beaks and tentacles tangled together as if a plague or a marine massacre had struck them.

A few days afterwards I found the beach mysteriously carpeted in green capsicums. Thousands of capsicums, all green, not a red one amongst them, fresh and unaffected by seawater, covered the sand and bobbed shiny and buoyant as plastic bath toys in the shallows.

Had some fanciful capsicum freighter jettisoned its cargo? Hardly for weight reasons, if so: the capsicums weren't much more than air with a shiny jacket. What could the explanation be? This flotsam and jetsam was even more curious than the drowned dog. It gave the beach a vivid enamel sheen. It felt slightly ridiculous standing amongst them; like being in a cartoon.

It made me feel surprisingly cheery, though, walking along the shore and kicking capsicums ahead of me. In a difficult period in my family's life, I was feeling heartened by capsicums—how funny was that? And then, ahead of me, at the high-water mark, the Doberman was crouching there again.

