

A Social History of Swimming in England, 1800 - 1918

Splashing in the Serpentine

Edited by
Christopher Love



Sport in the Global Society

A Social History of Swimming in England, 1800–1918

Covering a time of great social and technological change, this history traces the development of the four classic aquatic disciplines of competitive swimming, diving, synchronized swimming and water polo, with its main focus on racing. Working from the beginnings of municipal recreational swimming, the book fully explores the links between swimming and other aspects of English life and society including class, education, gender, municipal governance, sexuality and the Victorian invention of the amateur–professional divide in the sporting world.

Uniquely focused on swimming—relatively neglected in the history of sport—this is the first study of its kind and will be an important landmark in the establishment of swimming history as a topic of scholarly investigation.

This book was previously published as a special issue of *The International Journal of the History of Sport*.

Christopher Love is an independent Scholar.

Sport in the Global Society

General Editors: J.A. Mangan and Boria Majumdar

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A Social History of Swimming in England, 1800–1918

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Series Editors' Foreword

SPORT IN THE GLOBAL SOCIETY was launched in the late nineties. It now has over one hundred volumes. Until recently an odd myopia characterised academia with regard to sport. The global *groves of academe* remained essentially Cartesian in inclination. They favoured a mind/body dichotomy: thus the study of ideas was acceptable; the study of sport was not. All that has now changed. Sport is now incorporated, intelligently, within debate about *inter alia* ideologies, power, stratification, mobility and inequality. The reason is simple. In the modern world sport is everywhere: it is as ubiquitous as war. E.J. Hobsbawm, the Marxist historian, once called it the one of the most significant of the new manifestations of late nineteenth century Europe. Today it is one of the most significant manifestations of the twenty-first century world. Such is its power, politically, culturally, economically, spiritually and aesthetically, that sport beckons the academic more persuasively than ever to borrow, and refocus, an expression of the radical historian Peter Gay 'to explore its familiar terrain and to wrest new interpretations from its inexhaustible materials'. As a subject for inquiry, it is replete, as he remarked of history, with profound 'questions unanswered and for that matter questions unasked'.

Sport seduces the teeming 'global village'; it is the new opiate of the masses; it is one of the great modern experiences; its attraction astonishes only the recluse; its appeal spans the globe. Without exaggeration, sport is a mirror in which nations, communities, men and women now see themselves. That reflection is sometimes bright, sometimes dark, sometimes distorted, sometimes magnified. This metaphorical mirror is a source of mass exhilaration and depression, security and insecurity, pride and humiliation, bonding and alienation. Sport, for many, has replaced religion as a source of emotional catharsis and spiritual passion, and for many, since it is among the earliest of memorable childhood experiences, it infiltrates memory, shapes enthusiasms, serves fantasies. To co-opt Gay again: it blends memory and desire.

Sport, in addition, can be a lens through which to scrutinise major themes in the political and social sciences: democracy and despotism and the great associated movements of socialism, fascism, communism and capitalism as well as political cohesion and confrontation, social reform and social stability.

The story of modern sport is the story of the modern world—in microcosm; a modern global tapestry permanently being woven. Furthermore, nationalist and

imperialist, philosopher and politician, radical and conservative have all sought in sport a manifestation of national identity, status and superiority.

Finally, for countless millions sport is the personal pursuit of ambition, assertion, well-being and enjoyment.

For all the above reasons, sport demands the attention of the academic. *Sport in the Global Society* is a response.

J.A. Mangan
Boria Majumdar

Series Editors
Sport in the Global Society

Introduction

Swimming is a ubiquitous activity in England today. Thousands of people go swimming daily in the numerous municipal and private facilities across the country. Many people think nothing of going down to the local swimming pool or water park for enjoyment. Gone are the days when only a small segment of the population would willingly venture near the water, and an even smaller segment of the population could actually swim. For such a ubiquitous activity, however, swimming has been poorly served when it comes to academic research on its history.

This monograph has been prepared to help rectify the previous lack of attention swimming has received by exploring the development of swimming as a sport and recreational activity in England between 1800 and 1918. It also seeks to explain the deeper social origins of the emergence of swimming in England, in addition to seeking an explanation of the consequences of the new leisure form on English society at large. Finally, the collection is intended to contribute to (and refine) the broader historiographical debate about the emergence of popular leisure in these years. To retain focus and coherence the studies in this collection all focus on activities that are related to swimming, as opposed to other aquatic activities such as rowing and sailing. This involves coverage of the competitive and recreational forms of swimming, diving, synchronized swimming, water polo and aquatic lifesaving, along with their closely related sub-fields. [1]

Despite the massive expansion of the study of sport and leisure in England since the 1970s, very little has been written about swimming. Attention has focused notably on sports such as cricket, football, horse racing, and rugby, which have large popular followings. These are, primarily, team games, which are seen as inherently more *social*, because of the complex bonding rituals that take place between players and spectators. Swimming has, however (and despite its popularity), been largely ignored. Tony Mason in the introduction to *Sport in Britain: A Social History*, published in 1989, reported that

As late as 1960 the National Council for School Sports was only concerned with athletics, cricket, football, rugby and swimming and all are covered in this book save the latter. Swimming's absence is unfortunate. We would have liked to have found a place for it, in part because in excess of 6 per cent of the population were swimming by 1980 – more if you include the under-sixteens – and also because of its long-standing role in many communities as a competitive sport from the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Unfortunately not enough work has been done on the subject. [2]

Eleven years later, when Mason and Richard Holt collaborated to produce *Sport in Britain 1945–2000*, they could still find very little on the history of swimming, which consequently received scant mention in the text (and no specialist works on the topic were listed in the bibliography). [3]

And yet, as Mason has indicated, swimming was, and remains, an important recreation and competitive activity in England. Nicholas Orme – one of the few historians of swimming – has written: ‘Social history throws light upon swimming, and in turn the history of swimming, once constructed, illuminates the societies which have practised it.’ [4] Unlike other physical activities such as cricket, gymnastics and football, which were appropriated by different social classes to reinforce class identity or status, swimming was never indulged in simply by one class or social group. Swimming was enjoyed by diverse elements of society and came to reflect English society *at large*, with all of the cultural prejudices, preconceptions, contradictions and ideals of that culture. At one level, swimming was a part of the great recreational explosion of the 1870s and 1880s. But the progression of swimming also reflected changes in English society at large, notably gender relations and class relations, and did so down to the present.

Of course, modern swimming did not develop in isolation in England alone. Throughout the eighteenth century, in both Europe and North America, swimming began to develop as a leisure activity. It is not the purpose of this collection to recount the history of swimming in Europe and North America, but it is important to remember that indigenous swimming traditions emerged there independently. As with English swimming, however, very little has been written about the history of swimming in other countries.

The aim of this collection is quite straightforward; to explore the history of swimming in England between 1800 and 1918. But it also seeks to explore how swimming reflected different aspects of English culture during this period. The collection is organized along thematic lines, with a total of ten studies, prefaced by this introduction. At the conclusion of the collection a short chronology of English swimming between 1747 and 1918 has been provided for the reader’s reference.

The first study, “‘An Overview of the Development of Swimming in England, c.1750–1918’”, presents a historical overview of the development of swimming in England between roughly 1750 and 1918. It serves as a reference frame for the rest of the collection while also providing an overview of some of the main issues to be examined in the remaining studies. The second study, ‘Swimming and Gender in the Victorian World’, examines gender issues in the swimming world, in terms of how gender affected swimming practices, and how both men and women set about swimming along gendered lines during the period under review. This is followed by ‘Social Class and the Swimming World: Amateurs and Professionals’, which examines the role played by class and by the related issue of the amateur/professional debate in swimming.

'Local Aquatic Empires: The Municipal Provision of Swimming Pools in England, 1828–1918' studies how municipal bodies eventually came to provide almost all the swimming facilities in England by 1918, and how they promoted swimming in general. This is followed by a series of case studies highlighting three specific municipal areas in 'Holborn, Lambeth and Manchester: Three Case Studies in Municipal Swimming Pool Provision'. The role played by the great public schools surveyed by the Clarendon Commission in the promotion of swimming are examined in the sixth study, 'Swimming at the Clarendon Schools'. Paired with the previous study is 'State Schools, Swimming and Physical Training', which looks at the very enthusiastic attachment to swimming in state schools and the important role state schools played in promoting the activity. The eighth and ninth studies both survey the connection between the swimming world and Victorian humanitarianism. "'Whomsoever You See in Distress": Swimming, Saving Life and the Rise of the Royal Life Saving Society' focuses on the creation and expansion of the Royal Life Saving Society, the first organization to explicitly link swimming skills and humanitarian values into one method of saving life in response to the terrible toll of drownings in late Victorian England. The ninth study, 'Swimming, Service to the Empire and Baden-Powell's Youth Movements' looks at the humanitarian service component of the Scouting and Guiding movements. While different from the methods employed by the Royal Life Saving Society, Baden-Powell's movements helped spread many of the same messages as the Royal Life Saving Society. Finally, the tenth survey, 'Health, Cleanliness and Empire', looks at the inherent connection between swimming and concepts of health and cleanliness, especially at the end of the nineteenth century at the time of the great expansion of the British Empire.

The research for the present work began seven years ago and has since gone through several revisions. I certainly hope that this collection lays the foundations for further research on a neglected but important topic; the history of swimming in Victorian and Edwardian England. Although the collection is my own work, it could not have been completed without the assistance of others. I can in no way adequately thank all of those who aided me in my research, so a simple listing will have to suffice. I extend a sincere thanks and acknowledgement to everyone who has provided me with various help and assistance. Specific thanks go out to the staff of the British Library, at the St Pancras Reading Rooms, especially the Rare Books and Manuscript Room, the Colindale Newspaper Library and the Document Supply Centre at Boston Spa; the staff of the Public Record Office; the staff of the Wellcome Library; the staff of the Camden Local Studies Library; the staff of the Lambeth Archives; the staff of the City of Westminster Archives; the staff of the West Yorkshire Archives Service repository at Sheepscar, Leeds; the staff of the York City Archives; the staff of the Manchester Central Library Local Studies and Archives Service, especially Katharine Taylor and Debbie Cannon; Emma Langham at the Amateur Swimming Association; Brenda Sullivan, secretary of the London Schools Swimming Association; Lt. Col. (ret'd) A.A. Forbes, curator of the Army Physical Training Corps Museum; Mrs Pat Styles of the Scout Association archives; Mrs Margaret Courtney, archivist of the

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Christopher Love
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
August 2006

Notes

- [1] The activity referred to as either 'competitive swimming' or 'speed swimming' by the layman is actually simply referred to as 'swimming' by the *Federation Internationale de Natation Amateur* (FINA), the world governing body of swimming, diving, water polo, long-distance/marathon swimming and synchronized swimming. For purposes of this collection, reference to the sporting discipline of swimming will always be explicitly pointed out, while the generic term 'swimming' will be used to describe all areas of aquatic sport, leisure and recreation collectively when required.

- [2] Mason, 'Introduction', 5.
- [3] Holt and Mason, *Sport in Britain*.
- [4] Orme, *Early British Swimming*, x.

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