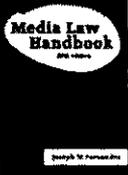


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Douglas Booth

## Nudes in the Sand and Perverts in the Dunes

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The trouble is that the nudists have no shame. They still think that they are in the Garden of Eden and have never heard of original sin. When my brother was six years old ... he came out of the bath with no clothes on. My father gave him such a whipping he still bears some of the scars, but at least he learned modesty. I believe the nudists should be horsewhipped until they bleed if necessary, so as they know the meaning of shame. A stint in the army would do them no harm, then force them to read the bible and give them a good sound whipping. That would instil some de-cency into them.

*Balgowlah (Sydney) resident, 1991 1*

In 1976 the New South Wales labor government declared clothes optional at two secluded Sydney metropolitan beaches. Over the next few years it designated several more clothes optional beaches. Although 'free' or nude beaches left public nudity confined to the geographic and social margins, they represented a major shift in official attitudes towards the public display of the body. For the next 17 years, sea and sun-bathers of both sexes and all ages flocked to nude beaches. But in 1993 the minority NSW liberal government inserted a clause in its new local government act which allowed local councils to reclothe nude beaches. Within six months there were no free beaches under council jurisdiction in NSW. This article analyses the undressing of bathing bodies in NSW and their redressing with particular reference to Sydney's Reef beach. It offers a case study in the politics of the revealed body and shows that bathing bodies constitute an historical site of struggle between pleasure and discipline.

Public bathing generated a tension within the middle classes in the eighteenth century. On the one hand, medical practitioners alerted them to the therapeutic benefits of bathing in cold water at a time of rising concern about public health. On the other, christian traditions located social order and stability in the renunciation and repression of hedonism: civilisation was synonymous with an asceticism and temperance that demanded 'denial of the flesh and the control of emotion'.<sup>2</sup> The middle-classes believed that the display of flesh in public was sinful and they confined public bathing to segregated and enclosed baths.<sup>3</sup>

In 1834 the *Sydney Gazette* described bathing as the town's 'favourite recreation'.<sup>4</sup> Space and rudimentary baths initially shielded unclothed bodies from public view but naked bathing in the built environment soon prompted intervention. Governor Macquarie objected to this 'indecent and improper custom' and banned bathing at the government wharf and dockyard in 1810.<sup>5</sup> Three decades later, the government prohibited bathing in all waters exposed to public view between 6.00 am and 8.00 pm.<sup>6</sup> Nuisance inspectors policed bathing hours, although they took little action against unclothed bathers before the 1890s. For example, in 1889 the mayor of Manly instructed inspector Leahy to ignore naked bathers before 7.00 am.<sup>7</sup> New bylaws passed two years later, however, required bathers to wear costumes at all times.<sup>8</sup>

The middle classes' obsession with health fostered what Christopher Lasch calls a 'therapeutic outlook': the body became exposed to endless private and public examination 'for tell tale symptoms of psychic stress, for blemishes and flaws' and 'for reassuring indications that ... life is proceeding according to schedule'.<sup>9</sup> The therapeutic outlook helped legitimise the revealed body and supplant the reserved, modest, restrained and hidden Victorian body. But it also fuelled hysteria among moralists and led to a debate over daylight bathing and bathing costumes.

Ambitious middle-class groups, including health faddists, physicians, physical educators, utopians and property owners, endorsed bathing for their own financial and social interests. However, moralists, known as Mrs Grundies or more colloquially as wowsers, called it depraved and corrupt behaviour: bathing signified absence of restraint and self-control over bodily desires, and it stimulated desire for flesh, aroused erotic thoughts and encouraged sexual crimes.<sup>10</sup>

At the turn of the century, municipal councils in NSW regulated bathing under the local authorities act. Sydney's Manly and Randwick councils imposed an 8.00 am curfew: Waverley permitted bathing at Clovelly at all hours provided bathers were 'properly and becomingly clad'.<sup>11</sup> Police, however, prosecuted bathers under section 77 of the police offences act.<sup>12</sup> In October 1902 William Gocher, proprietor and editor of the *Manly and North Sydney Daily*, began the struggle to legalise daylight bathing. He bathed at midday in Manly waters on three consecutive Sundays. On approaching and leaving the sea Gocher covered himself with a mackintosh and he wore a neck-to-knee costume in the water. Gocher's dress and decorum proved that respectable gentlemen could discipline their desires and police inspector-general Fosbery declined to prosecute. Fosbery wrote to the chief secretary in November 1902 informing him that if 'bathers wear suitable costume and public decency is not outraged, I am unable to see that a practice permitted for so many years should be stopped'. The police would only intervene, he added, to ensure decency.<sup>13</sup> In the early twentieth century, a science of bathing, part of the penetration of science into every social practice, lent credence to the therapeutic outlook of social reformers.

Sand, surf, sunshine and the free winds of heaven make up the prescription which is confidently recommended as a sort of universal medicine. This, if not the elixir of life, must surely be part of it, and is certain to tone up the system and lengthen the life. It is plain that he who wishes for a royal road to health and happiness should take the first step to it by getting sunburnt. It is well understood that a well-browned skin is much healthier than a white one. So the sun-worshipper looks with pity upon his pallid brother as one who stupidly neglects a most evident good.<sup>14</sup>

The new therapeutic and scientific techniques challenged nineteenth century christian notions about the correct presentation of the body. *The Australian Star*, for example, now recommended that readers search out those 'brown

skinned specimens of manhood' who spend their weekends at the beach.<sup>15</sup>

Bathers' costumes and mixed bathing outraged Mrs Grundy who perceived a lowering of 'the common standards of propriety that prevail amongst civilised nations'.<sup>16</sup> 'A mother of girls' said that the 'heaps of sprawling men and lads, naked, but for a nondescript rag around their middle' had forced her to leave Balmoral beach. The so-called bathing costumes 'might put an Aboriginal to shame', and she advocated flogging as just punishment.<sup>17</sup> 'Daily dipper' denounced sun-bathers who 'put themselves on the same level as dogs'.<sup>18</sup>

Under pressure from Mrs Grundy, Manly, Randwick and Waverley councils and the department of local government drafted a new set of beach ordinances in 1907. They proposed that bathers wear an additional loose fitting tunic over the body-hugging neck-to-knee costume.<sup>19</sup> Property owners, land speculators and a myriad of small business people including food, transport, souvenir and entertainment vendors, attacked the proposal. As one of their number lamented, 'but for prudishness and false modesty the waves breaking on the sands might have been rolling sovereigns into the pockets'.<sup>20</sup> Tunics, enthusiasts argued, would negate all therapeutic benefits. Member of the legislative council, R.D. Meagher said if bathing was to have a 'salutary effect on skin, nerves, and tissue', salt water and sunlight must strike the body. He accused wowsers of undermining the new woman:

Where is Mrs Grundy going to stop? Our Australian girls no longer consider it good to wear pale and uninteresting complexions like the heroine of the *Young Ladies' Journal*, but are devotees to Old Sol and Neptune — these bronze Venuses, with Ozone in their nostrils, and vitality in their constitutions ... 21

Bathers protested against tunics and the government retreated, although restrictions on sun-bathing and mixed bathing remained.<sup>22</sup>

In the 1920s and 1930s burgeoning consumerism propagated a new culture of pleasure and a new tolerance of the revealed body. Consumer culture 'required a new lifestyle embodied in the ethic of a calculating hedonism, and a new personality type, the narcissistic person'.<sup>23</sup> The beach was the most visible site of hedonist culture in Australia — a place where the attractive sons and daughters of the middle classes mixed freely in backless costumes, shorts and brassieres, and trunks, 'displaying their bodies with cheerful eroticism'.<sup>24</sup> Consumer culture helped liberate the body from Mrs Grundy's repressive regimens, although it too contained its own methods of discipline. Through advertising, consumer culture creates the desires it promises to satisfy, including the desire for, and loathing of, any deviation from mesomorphic bodies.<sup>25</sup> It manipulates people to adopt rigorous self-imposed regimens (diet and exercise) to achieve their desires. Moreover, under the gaze of public surveillance individuals feel compelled to conform to ideals redefined as normal.<sup>26</sup> Beach beauty contests, which began after the 1914-18 war, are a perfect example of the new permissive disciplinary techniques. While John Rickard describes them as a 'local adaption of glamorous Hollywood images for 'an audience of suburban voyeurs', exhibitionism contains its own method of discipline.<sup>27</sup> For example, the *Sunday Times*, an early contest promoter, reminded 'surfer girls' about the relationship between self-discipline and beauty:

The girl who wants to look charming in a surfing costume must be fastidious in all her habits and wise in all her exercises. She must dance and walk well. She must eat sensibly. She must avoid all excess. Otherwise, sooner or later, come all the enemies of beauty.<sup>28</sup>

Briefer costumes gave women new freedoms but they also enticed them to reveal more of their bodies which were then subjected to new disciplinary methods to ensure they conformed to the 'correct shape'. The new methods included exercise, dieting and consumption of toiletries and accessories.

Manly mayor, A.T. Keirne, illustrates the shift in disciplinary methods. Under ordinance 52 bathers had to wear neck-to-knee costumes in the water and additional clothing over their costumes when on the beach. In the summer of 1916-17, Keirne urged the minister for local government to prosecute bathers who wore 'indecent' kimonos over their costumes. But a decade later he criticised this law. Kimonos not only limited healthy exposure to the sun they also imposed unnecessary financial burdens on bathers. High standards of decency had been achieved at Manly, Keirne boasted, without recourse to the law.<sup>29</sup>

One-piece costumes gave way to shorts and brassieres for women and trunks for men in the 1930s. Mrs Grundy deplored backless costumes and low necklines. Reverend Ebbs of Manly even recommended that 'wearers ... be hunted off the ocean and harbour fronts'.<sup>30</sup> But there was a more general recognition that ordinance 52 was obsolete and unenforceable. Following requests to clarify the law, the minister for local government, Eric Spooner in 1935 amended the ordinance.<sup>31</sup> Bathing suits now had to cover the chest and front of the body between the armpits and the waist, and the whole of the trunk. Costume legs had to be at least three inches long and women had to wear 'half skirts'. The press lampooned Spooner who appeared in cartoons dressed in grandmotherly garb. He justified the new regulations citing complaints, including one from the Bega branch of the country women's association which urged 'rigorous' action against men wearing trunks.<sup>32</sup>

Bathers generally ignored the regulations which were neither policed nor policeable. Even the conservative surf lifesaving association of Australia, which initially approved Spooner's ordinance, joined the protest.<sup>33</sup> Explaining its new position, the association expounded the dual doctrine of therapeutic benefit and self-discipline which permitted unashamed displays of the body: 'it should be our aim to encourage young men to take pride in their physique. This cannot be better encouraged than the opportunity to expose their rippling muscles to sunshine, fresh air and public eye'.<sup>34</sup> Broad public acceptance of trunks and shorts and brassieres partly reflected the failure of Mrs Grundy to prove that exposed flesh engendered moral decay. On the contrary, the Australian beach reflected the health, fitness and youth of the nation. As Adelaide's *Advertiser* put it, 'most people, even if they are not personally enthusiastic about trunks, see nothing seriously objectionable in the wearing of them, and, for this reason are not prepared to support a general ban on their use'.<sup>35</sup>

Local councils immediately banned the bikini upon its arrival at the end of the second world war. Manly mayor Anderson called it 'a direct challenge to our sense of decency'.<sup>36</sup> Many women, too, expressed reservations. The secretary of the NSW women's swimming association thought few girls would be brazen enough to wear bikinis, beachgoer Ellen Parker doubted whether she would find a boyfriend brave enough to escort her in a bikini.<sup>37</sup> In 1946 a crowd of several hundred followed Pauline Morgan as she walked along Bondi Beach wearing a bikini. In the excitement she was knocked to the ground and almost trampled. Eventually she reached the dressing pavilion where an inspector ordered her to change.<sup>38</sup> But the shock of the bikini soon wore off. As Peter Burger reminds us, 'nothing loses its effectiveness more quickly than shock; by its very nature it is a unique experience' which repetition fundamentally changes.<sup>39</sup> In the 1950s women bought the bikini en masse, although inspectors sent wearers of the briefest costumes from the beach for the next two decades.

Attitudes towards the presentation of the body underwent a radical change in the 1960s. Naked bodies appeared in films, on television and in weekly picture magazines such as *Australasian Post*, *Pix* and *People*. This nudity was partly a logical conclusion of growing tolerance, in the words of John Clarke et al, tolerance is a double-edged sword: when 'new social impulses are set free they are impossible to fully contain'.<sup>40</sup> Women began removing their tops on main suburban beaches in Sydney in the early 1970s. There was barely a murmur of opposition. When Father James O'Reilly, from St Patrick's church Bondi, co-ordinated two petitions against the practice, which he said was contrary to christian modesty, Waverley