

# Seminar

## Research Question

**Missing link in Australian sports history**

**Three eras**

**‘Silvertail’ perceptions**

**Class**

Silvertail/Proletarian

**Status**

Amateur/Professional

**Sub-themes**

Gender, equipment and technology, scientific developments, politics.  
commercialisation/media

## Literature

At one time *en passant*, no great body of existing knowledge

**Professional sculling**

Adair, *Two Dots in the Distance*; Ripley, *Sculling and Skulduggery*; Bennett, *Sculling in New South Wales*

**The Amateur/Manual Labour Question**

Lane and Jobling, *For Honour and Trophies: Amateur Rowing in Australia*;  
Crotty, *Separate and Distinct? The Manual Labour Question in Nineteenth  
Century Victorian Rowing*

**Five biographies**

Rush, Trickett, Beach, Searle, Antonie, plus *Oarsome Foursome*

**Club books**

Sydney, Leichhardt, Glebe, Mercantile, MUBC, Adelaide ...

**State books**

*The Victorian Oarsman, Rowing in Victoria, Rowing in Queensland, Home  
and Dry* (WA)

***Australian Rowing magazine***

1978 - 2003

**Other sources**

Specialist sports books: Cashman (*Sport in the National Imagination,  
Paradise of Sport* etc; Stoddart, *Saturday Afternoon Fever*, Headon, *The Best*

*Ever Australian Sports Writing*; Bloomfield, *Australia's Sporting Success*,  
Gordon, *Australia and the Olympic Games, From Athens With Pride*

English books

(Re: origins) Halladay, *Rowing in England: A Social History*; Wigglesworth,  
*A Social History of English Rowing*

## **Method**

### **Rigorous research**

Read comprehensively, identified people, events and passages

### **Sound chronology**

Generally year-by-year unless recording consecutive results per significant period, e.g. schools, intervarsity, interstate results per decade

### **Narrative form**

Easy to read, comprehensible to a wider audience. Not only analytical but also descriptive: painting a picture in the mind of the reader of the person, period under examination

### **Photography**

Where thought applicable, photographs to add to reader's imaginings of the period in question

### **Sources**

Primary - Newspapers

*Sydney Morning Herald* (daily), *Bell's Life in Sydney*, *Sydney Mail*,  
*The Referee*, *Town and Country Journal*, *Sporting Globe* (all weekly);  
*The Argus* (Melbourne) daily

Note: Frequent discrepancies and inaccuracies in reports. Double and triple checking required

Oral history transcripts

Trove!

Secondary - magazines, journals, books ... See 'Literature' above

Other sources

Clubs, state organisations, national body

Annual reports, newsletters, regatta programs, team handbooks,  
state and international team managers' reports, photographs,  
newspaper clippings

Fellow historians

Guerin, Coe, Maginn, Sharp, Lockrey, Roll, Anderson, Cooper

Websites

Australian Rowing History etc

Interviews with descendants of outstanding oarsmen/women.

Documents, press clippings, objects from family members. Trickett, Robb, House

## **Results (thus far)**

### **Chapter 1 Origins**

This chapter describes the exploits of early explorers of Australia, and the genesis, at the same time, of sculling in England, first as a form of labour then as a sport. (Doggett) Also examines claims that initial competition among watermen was the precursor to global competition. Describes the formation in England of rowing clubs within elite schools then universities, leading to events nowadays well known on the global rowing calendar, notably Henley and the Oxford-Cambridge Boat Race. The first such race is described, as is the founding of the Royal Regatta and, finally, the onset in England of professional sculling.

### **Chapter 2 Beginnings**

This chapter describes the early use of boats by settlers, the first races in Port Jackson, later known as Sydney Harbour, and in Van Diemen's Land, later Tasmania. It also amends previous records relating to the date of the first regatta, then describes the interest rowing then sculling generated among the populace. The early years of rowing and sculling in South Australia, the Swan River colony, later Western Australia, and Victoria are then recorded. The chapter finally refers to the first sculling rivalry and the establishment of regattas in provincial areas of New South Wales.

### **Chapter 3 Context**

This chapter has been inserted into the thesis in order to place in context the role of sport, and particularly rowing, in the development of the colonies. It refers to the political, economic, social and cultural developments that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century, which became arguably the most politically active, economically rewarding, socially constructive and culturally affirming fifty years that the colonies that became the nation of Australia experienced. It was also an era of inventiveness and controversy.

### **Chapter 4 Artisans and Amateurs**

This chapter chronicles the exploits of the earliest professional scullers, their fluctuating fortunes and rivalries. It also critiques their administration – or lack thereof – and relates dubious episodes

involving some of the more unscrupulous participants. It also describes the technical improvements in boat construction during the third quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and charts rowing's progress within each colony. Also described is the rise of the amateur ideal within the sport, particularly within the clubs gradually being established. The beginnings of the Associated Public Schools Head of the River in Victoria are addressed, as is the rise to prominence within the professional sculling ranks of Ned Trickett, a champion in the making.

## **Chapter 5    Champions of the World**

This chapter charts a remarkable era during which Australia's professional scullers come to the fore and capture the imagination not just of the citizens of New South Wales but all the colonies as for more than thirty years they dominate what was then world sculling. Pride of place goes to Ned Trickett, who in 1876 became Australia's first world champion in any sport. There followed Bill Beach, Peter Kemp, Henry Searle, John McLean, James Stanbury and George Towns. The major races are described, likewise the affect of these successes on the colonial population. The administration of professional sculling is discussed, while reference is also made to further technical developments and to the gradual demise of the professionals prior to the rise of amateurism.

## **Chapter 6    A Question of Status**

This chapter, which chronologically runs in parallel with the previous chapter, describes the formation of colonial administrations and the rapid expansion of sculling and rowing at all levels: club, colonial and national. Professional scullers, amateur rowers. Describes the introduction of the Olympic Games and colonial rivalries, notably that between New South Wales (amateurs) and Victoria (more liberal). Also compares similar conflict within the colonies with that in the 'mother' country (Australia more liberal). Finally, just as a new century dawns, it describes the resolution of the conflict.

## **Chapter 7    New Age, Dark Age**

This chapter describes the development and progress made by Australian rowing and sculling as it transitions from intercolonial to interstate competition while maintaining its progress at the university and schools levels. It relates, too, the rapid increase in the number of clubs in all states, the emergence of women's sculling and rowing and the first women's clubs. Also noted are Tasmania's internecine administrative problems, the deeds of expatriates, notably at the London Olympics, the first in which Australian scullers and oarsmen took part, and the exploits of their successors at the Stockholm Olympic Games when representing Australasia. The war

years are recounted, as is, finally, the emergence of an iconic men's eight.

## **Chapter 8 Between the Wars**

This chapter describes the resettlement and activities of the Australian Imperial Force crew following their Henley win, and the campaign to ensure that the King's Cup became the property of the rowing authorities rather than the military. It deals in detail with the resumption of racing at all levels – school, club, and state – the formation of amateur state administrations and two national administrations, and the ongoing administrative developments within professional sculling. Also described is Australia's growing involvement at the international level throughout two decades, first through the emergence of a South Australian eight and its bid to contest the Paris Olympic Games in 1924 then latterly courtesy of the exploits of the remarkable Bobby Pearce and his performances at both the Olympic and Empire Games.

## **Discussion (Socio-cultural)**

### **Chapters 1 Origins**

This chapter introduces the varying demographics involved in the early days of sculling and rowing; the artisans who plied the rivers, built boats and raced in them, and the elite gentlemen who began rowing for recreation, adopted the sport and created events. It is a dichotomy that looms large throughout much of the thesis.

### **Chapter 2 Beginnings**

This chapter further describes the emergence of social strata among those participating in rowing and sculling, and the delineation between the gentleman amateurs and the professional tradesmen, the elite and the proletarian. It identifies in particular the first instance of an issue that became a constant within the sport for decades: the insistence by amateur rule-makers, most of whom are engaged in sedentary professions, that they are at a disadvantage when competing against those engaged daily in manual labour. What is nevertheless clearly evident is that rowing and sculling was extremely popular among the citizenry, regardless of social status.

### **Chapter 3 Context**

This chapter puts into context issues and events recorded in the two earlier chapters and those to be discussed later in the thesis. References to a yearning for a republic, for example, reflect the sense of independence that developed within both rowing and sculling and the population overall, in rowing's case as a result of its extraordinary popularity. The subject of self-rule is later mirrored in chapters dealing

with the establishment of colonial and state rowing associations, while reference to the dislike of aristocracy reflects the proletarianism and individual identity later demonstrated by the professional watermen already discussed and the professional scullers yet to appear. This equates with references to the colonists having no sense of cultural inferiority, and the populace throwing off the shackles of convictism and establishing a uniquely *Australian* identity. Indeed the professional scullers were to demonstrate a fierce and parochial sense of superiority! Ahead will come further reference to united communities when describing how the deeds of the professional scullers inculcated in the community an ever-growing sense of nationalism. The subject of colonial constitutions, notably those of New South Wales and Victoria (the first conservative and the second liberal) will be mirrored in later chapters when what transpired to be a decades long stand-off between the two colonies/states regarding amateur and professional status is discussed in depth.

#### **Chapter 4    Artisans and Amateurs**

This chapter has reinforced the remarkable popularity of rowing as the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century began, the professional scullers being particularly admired, a degree of skulduggery and malpractice notwithstanding. This can in part be attributed to a fundamental lack of governance within the sculling sector of the sport, the contestants, their sponsors and supporters instead operating totally independently. The challenges to English, Canadian and New Zealand opponents nevertheless indicated a willingness on the part of the colonial scullers to demonstrate that they were far from inferior to their overseas counterparts and worthy descendants of their imperial contemporaries. The chapter has also reported the rise of amateurism, notably among the rowing clubs now appearing, and the beginnings of discord, particularly between the colonies of New South Wales and Victoria, regarding the eligibility of amateur and manual labour contestants. In a broad sense, therefore, there are two disciplines operating: professional scullers and amateur oarsmen, both of which appeal to a broad proportion of the population, regardless of status and class.

#### **Chapter 5    Champions of the World**

This chapter has provided further evidence of the popularity of rowing and sculling in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this time courtesy of the seven professional scullers who by their deeds between 1876 and 1907 proved themselves not only equal to but better than their English, Canadian and New Zealand opponents and put not just Australian sculling but Australia itself on the world map. As the *Town and Country Journal* commented in 1888: ‘Southern hemisphere sculling ... made Australians and Australia famous throughout the world’.<sup>1</sup> In breaking down perceptions of Australia’s cultural and racial inferiority

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<sup>1</sup> *Town and Country Journal*, 3 November 1888, p.924.

they inculcated within the populace a sense of uniqueness within the measurement of social progress and a sense of nationalism in the years leading up to federation.

Metaphors for such popularity were the extraordinary response by all classes to the overseas victories recorded by Ned Trickett and Bill Beach, both of whom were welcomed home by crowds numbered in the hundreds of thousands. As professional sculling historian Stuart Ripley observed about Beach's triumphant return: '[It] confirmed the significance that sport and sportsmen played in the development of a nationalistic psyche. [Beach] had defeated all-comers and placed Australia and Australians at the forefront of international sport. English crowds had seen him out-row northern hemisphere aspirants. His feats fostered perceptions of the healthy, strong Australian, while his successes and demeanour provided a role model for youth and adult alike'.<sup>2</sup>

Sadly the metaphor for Searle was the outpouring of grief by the populace at his passing and the massive crowds at his funeral. This, too, epitomised the extraordinary regard in which Searle and his counterparts were held. It was, moreover, not only the population at large but also the press that welcomed, supported and recorded the exploits of the sculling heroes, resulting in saturation coverage that frequently exceeded that given to national and international news. The victories recorded by the scullers also meant that over time a good proportion of the races were held in New South Wales, from which the world professional sculling championship was subsequently administered, albeit in an ad hoc manner.

Stuart Ripley has also addressed the socio-cultural status of the scullers, in particular the relationship between the sculling artisans and their upper class sponsors, and believes that the scullers' working class epithet was 'based on sound premises'. They were, after all, labourers who came from working class families. He has also referred to education levels among scullers being, at best, primary grade; to the spectator throngs that lined the riverbanks confirming that the sport was for the common folk, and to a master/servant relationship between backers and scullers. He has nevertheless also referred to prices of steamer and grandstand tickets being aimed at the affluent, and to the fact that the majority of those patrons were wealthy gentlemen who enjoyed gambling. Furthermore, the scullers' backers were businessmen with sufficient financial resources to offset the cost of boats, training, accommodation, loss of wages and stake money. The ceremonies at which the winners' purses were presented also demonstrated, Ripley contends, that professional sculling was for the privileged. It was restricted by ticket or invitation, patronised by civic leaders and dignitaries, and the dress code was 'evening attire'. This, Ripley states, reinforced privilege and excluded the majority and poor.

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<sup>2</sup> Ripley, S., *Sculling and Skulduggery*, Walla Walla Press, Sydney, 2009, p.27.

So although professional sculling attracted in the main a working class audience and its competitors were plucked from the lower ranks, this does not, Ripley believes, automatically classify it as working class.<sup>3</sup>

While the death of Searle and its attendant outpourings to an extent marked the beginning of the end of the popularity of professional sculling, there is little doubt that this was an era in which the associated sports of rowing and sculling were never more popular.

## **Chapter 6    A Question of Status**

This chapter has examined class relations in colonial rowing through the prism of the contentious manual labour question. This generated protracted debate around the status or eligibility of participants based on perceptions that manual labourers and other forms of artisan gained an advantage on those among the clerical and business ranks for whom rowing was simply a form of recreation. The amateurs tended to be wealthy private school and university graduates who saw sport as recreation and certainly not as a profitable business. They were also more likely to become administrators of the sport.

The chapter has also described the decline of old world attitudes and compared resolutions by Victoria to the manual labour question with those arrived at in New South Wales and in England.<sup>4</sup> The New South Wales Rowing Association definition of an amateur was inflexible, whereas that of the Victorian Rowing Association was more pragmatic. To officials in the original colony ‘professionalism was viewed as a character trait, a defect in one’s personality’<sup>5</sup> while in Victoria a man was an amateur providing he did not row for money or receive money from other sports. Indeed in Melbourne it was possible to compete as an amateur in some sports but receive money prizes from others.<sup>6</sup> In both colonies, too, the definition of an amateur varied from club to club. (Sydney and Mercantile v Glebe and Leichhardt)

Thus, while the ‘amateur-professional’ debate was ostensibly about fairness in sport, it eventually became based on class.<sup>7</sup> In a society, moreover, ‘where binary opposites drove the rhetoric of public discourse, the amateur ethic took the moral high ground’,<sup>8</sup> and rowing

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<sup>3</sup> Ripley, S., *Sculling and Skulduggery*, Walla Walla Press, Sydney, 2009, pp.156-157.

<sup>4</sup> Crotty, M., (1988) Separate and distinct? The manual labour question in nineteenth-century Victorian rowing, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 15:2, 152-163, p.153.

<sup>5</sup> Lane D. and Jobling I., *For Honour and Trophies: Amateur Rowing in Australia 1888-1912*, p.10.

<sup>6</sup> Cashman, R., *Paradise of Sport*, Walla Walla Press, Petersham NSW, 2010 (Revised edition), p.46.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen, M., op.cit.

<sup>8</sup> Senyard, J., op. cit., p.1.

moved ... away from its origins as an extension of employment to rowing as a recreational contest'.<sup>9</sup>

Also examined and discussed has been the imperial influence exerted within the development of colonial rowing, witness the emulation by the Intervarsity contest of the Oxford-Cambridge boat race and the 'borrowing' by inter-colonial eights of their crew colours.

## **Chapter 7    New Age, Dark Age**

There is little doubt that this was the era in which Australian rowing and sculling fully embraced the amateur ideology, the metaphor through which this embrace took place being an almost obsequious rush to emulate England's Henley Royal Regatta wherever and whenever possible. At the forefront of this phenomenon was the apparent need to present the 'copycat' regattas as social rather than sporting events, just as had always been the case at Henley Royal, even going so far as to select the same names for trophies as those presented in England. A further example came when the win by the 'Sydney' crew at the 1912 Henley Royal Regatta was perceived as the 'pinnacle' triumph, with the subsequent loss at the Olympic Games virtually disregarded. To that extent, therefore Australia also embraced imperialism.

The Corinthian ideal also came to the fore with the reference to sportsmen being regarded as ideal recruits because of their fitness, and the presumption, based on the muscular Christian ideology popularised in the late nineteenth century, that sport also built character and was therefore the ideal training ground for war.

There can be little doubt, though, that rowing and sculling remained immensely popular, witness the comparison of a schools regatta in Melbourne with the Melbourne Cup and an Australia versus England cricket test, and the paean of praise for the interstate regattas.

## **Chapter 8    Between the Wars**

Throughout the two decades described above the inherent socio-cultural tensions surrounding the issues of class and status within Australian rowing and sculling remained. First came the assumption that the Murray Bridge crew could not represent Australia at the 1920 Antwerp Olympic Games because they were 'only working men'. Then, on the eve of their departure for Paris in 1924, the Olympic Games having been described as 'the aristocracy of amateur sport' and the 'Cods', as they were known, as the quintessential amateurs, the crew self-consciously abandoned their habit of taping a Murray cod to the bow of their boat as a means both of abandoning their proletarian image and assuming their perceived new amateur status. A reality

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<sup>9</sup> Senyard, J., op. cit., p.3.

check came, however, when the Henley Royal Regatta stewards refused them entry because they were labourers. The second “Henley-on-Canal” regatta in Sydney had meanwhile been derided for not being ‘social’, in the manner of its annual Melbourne counterparts.

In 1929 rowing appeared to be at the height of its popularity, witness the fact that in Perth that year several other sporting events were postponed in the face of the support for the interstate regatta. There continued, too, massive support for schools rowing, thus reinforcing the imperial nature of the sport at that level. However, an indication that rowing crossed social boundaries came when on two separate days at the APS regatta in Melbourne two quite different demographics watched the racing: an elite ‘schools day’ crowd supported the Friday heats, following which, on Saturday, ‘people’s day’, a proletarian crowd watched the finals.

By contrast came the almost complete decline of professional sculling, the reputation of which was only partly lifted in the latter part of the 1930s through the infrequent exploits of the by now professional Bobby Pearce. It had also become apparent that Australia’s interpretation of the amateur/manual labour laws was far more liberal than that of England. Towards the end of the period in question, however, Australia became starkly aware that at the international level its form of amateurism was found wanting in the face of sport in other countries being regarded as of national importance. A metaphor for the situation was Australia’s propensity for relying on a single club crew to take on international opponents rather than selecting oarsmen from throughout Australia.

## **Conclusion**

Identifies a clear delineation in rowing’s demographics

Status: Professional and Amateur

Class: Proletarian and ‘Silvertail’

Addresses a long drawn out and sometimes bitter conflict

The first Era dominated by the professional scullers

Among first of Australia’s sporting heroes – welcome home crowds, death of Henry Searle, huge press coverage

Did much to inculcate a sense of nationalism in population

Put Australia on the world map

Broke down perceptions re: Australia’s cultural and racial inferiority

Sport for the masses

However, a master/servant relationship with sponsors

Lack of governance led to gradual decline

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century ended, more rowing clubs – and more amateurs

Protracted manual labour/silvertail, professional/amateur debate, more about class than fairness

Amateur ideology and imperialism firmly embraced, witness establishment of 'Henley' regattas, social occasions

Also adopted the Corinthian ideal of Muscular Christianity and the concept that sport prepared young men for war

Schools rowing expanded, adopted amateurism

Empire Games

Second Era belonged to the amateurs

Thesis fills a void in the recording of Australia's sporting and social

history