

2020 Premier’s History Teachers Association History Scholarship

Radical

The contested history of surfing, politics, protest and the counterculture in Australia

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# Introduction

How can History teachers work to engage their students? As History teachers, we know that student engagement is contingent upon providing meaningful and significant educational content. We aim to foster and nurture a passion for historical inquiry in our students but can sometimes slip into a pedagogy that is driven by a prescriptive and content focussed reading of curriculum. Yet across the Stage 5 and 6 History syllabuses there exist numerous opportunities for History teachers to energise teaching and learning through creative approaches that reflect, recognise and prioritise lived student experience and harness teacher expertise and enthusiasm. The history of surfing and politics may at first glance appear to be a very niche topic. Yet, the beach, and in a broader sense beach culture, is an undeniable mainstay of the Australian historical narrative. For many students (and not just in coastal locations such as where I teach) surfing (in its myriad forms) is very much part of their lived experience. Within this tribal surf culture in which many of our students are enmeshed, is a rich, vibrant and contested set of histories waiting to be explored by our students.

In undertaking this study tour, my ambition was to create teaching units and resources to allow for the topic of surfing and politics to be integrated as a case study in Years 10, 11 and 12 History settings. In Year 10 History this topic could be addressed as a Popular Culture Depth Study, in relation to ‘beliefs and values that have influenced the Australian way of life’. The topic could also be undertaken as a school-developed topic (perhaps as part of a wider ‘Australia in the Vietnam War Era study). In Year 11 Modern History, the topic could be included under Contestability of the Past, The Construction of Modern Histories and History and Memory. The contestability of the widely accepted historical narrative of Australian surf culture would also provide an excellent case study for investigation in History Extension.

# Focus of Study

By 1971 Nat Young (multiple Australian surfing champion and winner of the 1966 World Championships in San Diego) had effectively retired from competitive surfing (Jarratt 2018). His surfing life had become an expression of a wider countercultural movement that had come to define youth culture in Australia in the second half of the 1960s and into the early 1970s. Radicalised and politicised by the anti-Vietnam war movement, many younger Australians had come to embrace a revolutionary mindset that sought to challenge and reject pre-existing mainstream social values. Surfers, already perceived by many as agents of ‘moral decline’ (Baker 2013), were a natural fit for this revolutionary counterculture and Nat Young encapsulated this radical surfing spirit succinctly in 1971 by claiming that surfers, ‘simply by surfing…are supporting the revolution’ (Laderman 2014). This story, that surfers were (and are) countercultural rebels and that Australian surf culture was (and is) infused in a history of rebellion has become a foundational narrative in the history of Australian surfing. Yet this history is far more complex.

Although iconic Australian surfers such as Wayne Lynch were able to become underground cult heroes of the protest movement for actively dodging conscription during the Vietnam War, Australian surfers also undertook active service in the Vietnam War. The Peter Badcoe Club, built by the Australian military as a rest and recreation centre at Vung Tau, was essentially an Australian surf club, complete with equipment donated in 1966 by Australia’s leading surfboard manufacturers, and used daily by Australian surfing servicemen on leave (Scott 2009).

Similarly, although two-time world champion Australian surfer Tom Carroll took a powerful stand by leading an anti-Apartheid boycott of professional surfing events in South Africa during the 1980s, his position was not widely supported, and surfing in Australia remains largely mono-cultural and is only just beginning to acknowledge its role as an agent of colonisation, discrimination and exclusion. Further, despite the high profile environmental activism of surfers such as Heath Joske and Sean Doherty and the ‘back to nature’ narrative themes that inform many contemporary depictions of Australian surf culture, not all surfers are environmentalists, nor politically progressive.

The focus of my study was to attempt to unpack the complexity of these divergent histories and to assess the contestability of some of the accepted historical narratives of the political history of surfing in Australia. In order to complete this task, I travelled across four Australian states, visiting key locations and undertaking a range of interviews with key protagonists, be they professional athletes, journalists, authors, academics, artists and activists – all surfers and all with a deep connection and unique insight into the history of Australian surf culture.

# Significant Learning

One set of questions I asked of all the contributors to this study was directed to ascertain an understanding of a notion of an intersection between surfing and politics. How would they define the history surfing in a political context? At what point (or points) do they believe surfing and politics have intersected historically? To what extent is the history of Australian surfing a political history? Where do surfing and politics continue to intersect? Unsurprisingly, all participants identified a political element to surfing. Each interviewee brought divergences in emphasis and perspective, but all agreed that surfing, and the history of Australian surfing in particular, is a highly politicised space. This was succinctly encapsulated during my interview with Professor of History at the University of Minnesota, Scott Laderman (author of *Empire in Waves: A Political History of Surfing*) when he stated.

“Surfing exists in a political universe, and its pleasure is political” (S. Laderman, personal communication, March 24, 2022)

I also concluded each interview by asking participants to ruminate on the Nat Young quote referenced earlier and asked each to consider the question; is surfing still (or was it ever) an act of political rebellion? To this notion there was some significant conjecture. Yet this notion underpins my study to a considerable degree. In essence because it is this historical narrative – that the history of Australian surf culture is a history of counterculture and political rebellion - that my study seeks to investigate.

## Surfers and Protest During the Vietnam War Era

In the ABC television series *Bombora – The Story of Australian Surfing* (2009), champion Victorian surfer Wayne Lynch is eulogised for his ‘outlaw’ lifestyle evading the authorities looking to make an example of him for refusing to be conscripted into the Vietnam War. The program celebrates Lynch and other high-profile surfers such as Nat Young as ‘heroes’ of the era, at the forefront of a counterculture of which Australian surfers were ‘among the first to create’. This is also the perspective that is clearly foregrounded at the Australian National Surfing Museum in Torquay which I visited on tour. The museum presents a version of Australian surfing history that is very much embedded in countercultural representations. Surfers are celebrated for their rebelliousness and non-conformity to mainstream values.

My interview with surf historian and author Tim Baker, provided particular insight into the development of the Australian surfer/rebel archetype. Baker traces the rebellious surfer archetype back to the split that began to emerge between the surf lifesaving clubs and surfboard riders in the immediate post World War Two period. The surf lifesaving clubs, under the leadership of Burma Railway survivor Adrian Curlewis, pivoted further toward a quasi-militaristic interpretation of the club motto (‘vigilance and service’) and thus came to represent establishment values. Boardriders were portrayed as self indulgent leisure seekers by the surf lifesaving establishment and an enmity (that continues to this day) between the two great tribes of the Australian surf became entrenched. During this period, the surf lifesaving clubs were seen as representative of pro-war Australia, while boardriders were coming to be viewed as anti-establishment and firmly anti-war. Interestingly, and somewhat controversially, Baker posits that this enmity and ‘cultural divide’ has to some extent, defined the historiography of Australian surfing and that, as a result, an important legacy has been somewhat erased from the historical narrative. According to Baker, the ‘cultural divide’ is typified in the parallel histories of the two towering figures of 1960s Australian surfing, 1966 World Champion, Nat Young and 1964 World Champion, Midget Farrelly. Nat became an icon of the surfing counterculture while Midget (who was fiercely anti-drugs) was painted as a ‘square’ and seen to embody the establishment values surfers were rebelling against. As such, Midget’s crucial role in the history of Australian surfing has been somewhat diminished (T. Baker, personal communication, April 18, 2022).

Australian surf culture during Vietnam War era should be understood as more than just a ‘cultural divide’ between the counterculture and mainstream located on Australian beaches. On a beach at Vung Tau in Vietnam, Australian conscripts were surfing. At the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, I was able to view archival footage depicting Australian soldiers surfing at Vung Tau. The surfboards that the soldiers are riding were proudly donated in 1966 by a group of Australian surfboard manufacturers and they can be seen depicted (in suits and ties) handing the boards over to the Australian Army (Scott 2009). These representatives of Australian surfing were clearly happy to support Australian troops in Vietnam at the time.

## Boycott of South African Professional Surfing Events

I was very fortunate to be able to visit the home of two-time World Surfing Champion Tom Carroll for an extensive interview. Carroll was able to relate to me a very personal perspective on the experiences that influenced him to lead a boycott of professional surfing in South Africa. Carroll first competed in South Africa in 1981 as a nineteen year old and during our interview he explained his shock during that first visit of the experience of blatant racism and profoundly racist attitudes. Referring to himself as ‘just a happy go lucky surfer’, Carroll went on to explain that, after securing his second world title in 1984, he came to the realisation that he could no longer continue to tacitly support the Apartheid regime by competing in South Africa. He felt the need to ‘make a stand that I do not support this’ (T. Carroll, personal communication, March 21, 2022). Although he received some support from a small minority of fellow surfing professionals, the prevailing reaction from within the surfing community was negative. Carroll was accused of unnecessarily mixing politics with sport, he lost his major sponsor (which was South African owned) and was largely ostracised by the governing body of professional surfing, the Association of Surfing Professionals (ASP). Carroll’s stand was highly controversial. South Africa had been a revered surfing destination since its perfect waves were revealed to the world in the hugely successful 1965 film *The Endless Summe*r. South Africa was a major stop on the ASP world tour and its events were lucrative in points and prizemoney for the travelling surfers. An international boycott movement was beginning to take hold across other sports by the mid 1980s but participants in individual sports were free to compete. Carroll could not count on any support from the ASP (who continued to sanction events in South Africa and, through its executive director Ian Cairns, railed against the politicisation of the sport). However, Carroll did receive influential support from the Australian government and particularly Prime Minister Bob Hawke. During our interview, Carroll fondly recalled the support from Hawke and the opportunity to meet with, and be thanked by, Nelson Mandela when Mandela visited Australia in later years.

In his book *Empire in Waves*, Scott Laderman (2014, p.91), calls Tom Carroll’s boycott the moment ‘when surfing discovered it was political’ and he outlines the fact that both the boycott led by Carroll and the anti-boycott led by the ASP, are political actions. Tom Carroll recalls that at that time in his life he was ‘not ready to become activist’ and prefers to think of his protest as an act of humanity. It is clear however, that this moment in the history of Australian surfing is a moment when surfing and politics intersected.

## The Politics of Corporate Surf

The Victorian coastal town of Torquay was an important destination for my tour. Torquay is often referred to as the home of the Australian surf industry as it is the birthplace of two of the so-called ‘big three’ global surf companies, Rip Curl and Quiksilver (the third, Billabong, originated on the Gold Coast). These three corporate behemoths of the Australian (and global) surf industry certainly exist in a ‘political universe’ (Laderman 2014). With their inexorable rise through the 1980s and 90s, these companies metamorphosed from essentially humble backyard industry origins, into truly global corporate heavyweights. For example, Quiksilver, through an aggressively expansionist business strategy, had increased its revenues to $1.8 billion by 2006. Booth (2017) describes the rise of corporate surf as a moment of ‘cultural hegemony and industrial imperialism’. Corporate surf brands, its stores now located in large shopping malls (often far removed from the ocean), were expertly able to market a vision of surf culture to a global consumer base of (mostly) young customers, many of whom had never, and would never, actually surf. Of course, this market, and its extreme profitability, was created on the back of the poverty and desperation of cheap labour in the developing world (Laderman 2014).

I was able to interview Doug Lees, former publisher of *Surfing World* magazine (Australia’s longest running surf publication) and ask him specifically about the influence of the global surf companies on the Australian surf media. Lees was clear in his assessment that, during his time as a media publisher, the surf companies morphed from their maverick, anti-establishment origins, into tightly controlled corporate entities that wielded their market power over the surf media in order to push a corporate company line.

When they became public companies…and when they started going into shopping centres, they definitely changed to try and control us more. When I first started, the magazines told stories of surfers and the surf companies followed and sponsored the surfers, and by the end the surf companies definitely tried to control the surf media…for financial gain (D. Lees, personal communication, March 21, 2022)

One surfwear company that defied the corporate hegemony was Mambo. During the 1990s, as Australian society descended into a toxic national debate come to be defined as ‘the culture wars’, Mambo reacted with an undeniably countercultural range of heavily ironic political t-shirt designs that attacked conservative icons and sold in large numbers. T-shirts depicting John Howard as MAD magazine’s Alfred E. Neuman proclaiming ‘What, Me Sorry?’ or Pauline Hanson on a matchbox labelled ‘Rednecks’ left no doubt as to Mambo’s political allegiances. I interviewed Mambo artist Gerry Wedd about this period, and he described the way in which the head of the company, Dare Jennings, expressly encouraged political art from its stable of artist/designers. For example, Wedd explained how he created the t-shirt ‘Muraroa Mon Amour’ depicting French nuclear testing in the Pacific. Mambo’s most high profile cultural moment came when it was commissioned to design costumes and props for the 2000 Sydney Olympics opening ceremony and there is no doubt that the involvement of Mambo contributed a subversive element to the celebrations. However, as Mambo became more successful and was embraced by a more mainstream clientele, the brand lost some of its underground allure and was ultimately sold by founder Dare Jennings shortly after the triumph of the Olympics (*Mambo: Art Irritates Life* 2017).

Another surf company that has actively rebelled against the mainstream corporate model of the ‘big three’ is Patagonia. Patagonia, although based in the US, has been a key supporter of environmental causes in Australia and supported one of its brand ambassadors, Australian surfer Heath Joske, to spearhead the Fight For the Bight/Big Oil Don’t Surf campaign to stop oil exploration in the Great Australian Bight. Patagonia markets itself as a brand that has ‘transcended corporate culture’, however it too has received criticism for producing its apparel with cheap labour in developing nations such as Bangladesh and El Salvador (Laderman 2014, p.143).

## Environmental Protest and Activism

Surfers have a long history of association with environmental protest. The very first issue of the self proclaimed, ‘surfers bible’, *Tracks* magazine, decorated its cover not with a surf image but with an image of chimney stacks belching pollution skyward. *Tracks* reflected the surfing counterculture from which it emerged in 1970 and ‘plunged into leftist politics, and went gunning for rutile miners, bent politicians…(and) crooked cops’ (Walding 2003, p.76). Organisations such as SAND (Surfers Against Nuclear Destruction), formed in 1984, and Surfrider Foundation, formed in 1991, had explicit environmental agendas and tackled issues such as destructive coastal developments, sewage outfalls and sand mining. Surfrider Foundation has continued to grow and is the highest profile environmental surf organisation in Australia today. More recent groups such as Surfers For Climate (with an explicit climate action focus) and campaigns such as Fight For the Bight/Big Oil Don’t Surf (the ultimately successful campaign to stop oil extraction in the pristine waters off the Great Australian Bight) show that the environmental legacy of the original counterculture surfers continues in some form to this day.

During my tour I was able to meet with Sean Doherty (Surfrider Foundation Chair and current owner/editor of *Surfing World* magazine) and Josh Kirkman (CEO Surfers for Climate) and interview them both about the current levels of environmental activism within the surfing community. Kirkman expressed some optimism for the future but explained that politically engaged environmental activism in the surfing community is starting from a low base.

“A lot of surfers are not engaged in this space at all…30% of surfers see themselves as slightly engaged in environmental discussions and then, of that percentage, only a very small percentage are actually doing anything about it. So, we are a really poor group of environmentalists on the whole” (J. Kirkman, personal communication, March 22, 2022).

Doherty had an interesting take on the decline of surfing environmentalism outlining that although key environmental issues activated surfers in the 1980s and 90s (particularly sewage outfalls which directly impacted surfer’s experience of the ocean), once these directly experiential concerns were remedied, surfers tended to retreat to a less engaged and more hedonistic pursuit of the surfing experience.

“Once there was nothing that directly affected us, there was no real movement. Everybody was too busy surfing” (S. Doherty, personal communication, March 29, 2022).

Doherty explained his work with Surfrider Foundation as being a ‘dance’ between the officially apolitical stance of Surfrider with the fact that ‘every [environmental] issue…is buried in politics’. One interesting issue that Doherty highlighted is the continuing political divide between surf lifesaving clubs and surfers. In a scene redolent of the ideological warfare between these groups in the 1960s, Doherty explained that in the recent campaigns against the threat of oil and gas drilling along the Victorian coast, the surf lifesaving movement has refused to offer even token support, despite being equally threatened by potential environmental impacts. According to Doherty, politics is very much at play in this issue with surf lifesaving clubs remaining strongly aligned with government and industry, and still inherently conservative in their outlook.

Both Doherty and Kirkman believe that the issue of climate change and the imminent threat this poses to coastal environments has become a key issue in galvanising a re-energising of the political and environmental consciousness of surfers. As with previous galvanising environmental issues, Kirkman and Doherty believe that, because it has the potential to dramatically impact the surfing experience, climate change will become, and needs to become, the key focus of surf based environmental activism into the future.

## Localism and the Gentrification of Coastal Communities

One issue that continually arose during my study tour was that related to localism and gentrification in coastal communities. Sean Doherty has written about the way many young surfers can no longer afford to live in the regional surf towns or recently gentrified, former working class coastal suburbs, in which they grew up (Doherty 2022). During our discussion Doherty elaborated on this theme, outlining the impact of the covid pandemic in both increasing the popularity of surfing, and accelerating the rush for coastal housing. This, he explained, has elicited a profound cultural impact upon long standing surfing communities. The interesting flipside, according to Doherty, is that the influx of wealthier families seeking coastal (and often explicitly surfing) lifestyles, has in some ways made for a more engaged and influential coastal demographic. The demographic shift has made surfers not only more ‘respectable’ but has also brought a wealthier and more politically savvy professional class that surfs and can become a powerful (and difficult to dismiss) mobilising force in advocating for protection of the coast.

University of Queensland academic, Rebecca Olive has also written about localism and coastal communities. In surf culture, ‘localism’ can be understood as a sense of ownership of the surf, which is claimed by surfers who live, and have lived for some time, in close proximity to a surfing location. These ‘local’ surfers often display hostility (sometimes violent in nature) toward anyone considered an outsider. Olive herself takes issue with term ‘localism’, describing it as ‘a soft word for a highly exclusionary practice…linked to colonisation and racist politics’ (Olive 2019). Olive (2022) has outlined how the covid pandemic served to exacerbate an extreme form of localism that pitted often locked down city and suburban surfers against those lucky enough to live within legal travelling distance of the ocean. Once restrictions were eased, coastal communities were inundated with visitors and the antagonism continued. I interviewed Rebecca Olive at the University of Queensland and she expanded on this to discuss the extent to which the pandemic has amplified ideology, in particular, ‘the neo-liberalism that runs through the surfing community’ (R. Olive personal communication, April 14, 2022). Olive views this neo-liberal ideology as manifest in coastal real estate; those lucky enough to secure coastal property in the past in locations such as Byron Bay, are now determined to maximise their capital and exclude outsiders. Ironically, many of the lucky property owners were originally countercultural emigres to coastal regions in the 1960s and 70s.

# Conclusion

I undertook this study tour in order to develop a set of resources that can be used across a range of NSW History curriculum points. The politics of surfing is undoubtedly a niche topic, but I believe it will resonate with many students (and not just those that are active surfers themselves). The topic provides a great opportunity for teachers and students to investigate contested historical narratives and allows for immersion into a uniquely Australian historiography. In this regard the topic is engaging and accessible for a diversity of learners, with the opportunity for pedagogical approaches ranging from descriptive investigations of history, through to the higher order thinking required of deeper historical and historiographical understanding.

I believe a surfing and politics case study can be integrated into Year 10 History, Year 11 Modern History and HSC History Extension and I intend to create and collate resources across these three distinct subject areas. For Year 10 History this topic can be incorporated into a Popular Culture depth study or an Australia in the Vietnam War Era depth study. The topic would also suit a school developed study in Year 10 History Elective.

A surfing and politics historical study would also provide a relevant case study for Nature of Modern History in the Year 11 curriculum and would present a highly relevant case study for a History and Memory unit of work. This could be undertaken through an analysis of how memory can turn to myth and how this myth has been reflected in surf films such as *Morning of the Earth* (1972) and documentaries such as *Bombora* (2009). The same syllabus based key historical questions could be applied to an analysis of more recent examples of political expression by surfers, such as environmental activism.

The topic also has great potential as a History Extension case study. For example, an investigation of the role of surfers during the Vietnam War could consider emphasis and omission in historical narratives and the construction of foundational historical myths. In understanding and challenging the entrenched narrative of the countercultural rebelliousness embedded in the history of Australian surf culture, students would be encouraged to apply historiographical ideas and methodologies to the Constructing History key questions.

I plan to disseminate my research through the creation of a website containing units of work and an archive of resources. I have many hours of recorded interviews which I am in the process of editing with the intention of creating a short audio documentary podcast of my topic. I will be submitting an article for publication in the History Teachers Association of NSW journal, *Teaching History*. I will also be presenting my findings to professional colleagues at my school and hope to be given the opportunity to present at other forums.

The study tour has been deeply illuminating in a number of ways, not least of which being recognising the significant omissions and limitations of my research. I have not adequately addressed the question of Indigenous surfing in Australia. From the forcible dispossession and colonisation of the coast, through to the entrenched racism long embedded in Australian surf culture, this is a topic deserving of far deeper analysis and evaluation, and worthy of a study tour in its own right. Similarly, my research neglected to contend with the often problematic history of the politics of gender in Australian surf culture. Again, this a topic that deserves in depth analysis in its own right.

For the specific sub-topics that I was able to address during the study tour, my research has attempted to grapple with the inherent contradictions and questions that exist in any rich cultural history. Beach culture and surfing are inextricably linked to a broader sense of Australian national identity and as history teachers it is our duty to empower our students to learn to question, challenge and re-evaluate entrenched historical narratives. I am confident that the resources I intend to develop from this research, will allow to teachers and students in NSW to do just that.

Finally, as to the key question I posed to each interviewee, asking them to reflect on Nat Young’s quote from 1971 and consider the question; is surfing still (or was it ever) an act of political rebellion? The responses to the first part of the question were consistent. All were convinced that surfing is no longer an act of rebellion. The corporatisation of the culture and its adoption by the mainstream masses, make this inconceivable in the present day. It is also questionable whether surfers ever actually contributed to a politically rebelliousness counterculture to the extent to which they like believe.

It is not difficult to be a “rebel” when one defines rebellion as simply choosing to surf. Yet that seems an extraordinarily facile conceptualisation. Was it really the case that, amidst the twentieth century’s campaigns for peace, national liberation and class revolution, wave riding could seriously be equated with these extraordinary struggles? (Laderman 2017, p.59).

That said, Australian surfing does have a complex history and the second element of the question is more historically contentious. The culture undeniably has moments of rebellion and not all surfers were purely hedonistic in their engagement. Many surfers have, as with the pioneering Australian surf traveller of the 1960s, Peter Troy, realised that ‘the game is giving back’ (Crockett 2010, p.21). Surfers do remain uniquely equipped to become politically active custodians of the Australian coasts. Further, as surfing line-ups become more diverse, surfers are creating (and continue to have the opportunity to create), a more progressive culture. A culture that embraces diversity and learns from and redresses the elements of the culture that have fostered discrimination and exclusion. In recognising the contestability of the historical narrative of Australian surfing, and challenging its pervading mythologies, a much more nuanced understanding of the history of the politics of Australian surfing is attainable.

# Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank the History Teachers Association of New South Wales and Premier’s Scholarships for providing the opportunity to undertake this study tour. I extend my deepest thanks to all the wonderful interview subjects who willingly gave up their time to contribute to this study. I very much look forward to using the opportunity afforded of me to be able to share teaching and learning resources and insights with professional colleagues and students in New South Wales schools.

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