

That Summer At Boomerang: magic in the detail of surfing legend
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The bare bones of the story of Duke Kahanamoku and Isabel Letham are the stuff of Australian surf legend. At Freshwater, Sydney, in the summer of 1914, Kahanamoku, the strikingly handsome Hawaiian Olympic swimmer, surfer and all-round waterman, plucked 15-year-old Letham from the beach to dazzle gobsmacked spectators with the art of walking on water.

What actually happened is much more interesting and complex than the mythology. But this is not simply a history bent on debunking myths: that Kahanamoku introduced surfboard riding to Australia and New Zealand, or that his tour proved the White Australia policy did not discriminate against men of colour. The real magic of this book lies in the loving, atmospheric detail with which surf historian Phil Jarratt recreates the lives and worlds of Kahanamoku, Letham and the idiosyncratic characters who came together that summer, 100 years ago.

Written in the style of a non-fiction novel, *That Summer at Boomerang* opens with the young Kahanamoku watching his father playing checkers on the sand at Waikiki beach and betting away his last canoe. Jarratt sets the scene, drawing the reader into the tiny community of Waikiki at the end of the 19th century, where "native families eked out a living from the sea or in small market gardens" and a small number of planter barons built their mansions. Jarratt has a good ear for dialogue and captures the distinctive Hawaiian patois.

These early chapters combine elegy for the fading world of Hawaiian royalty, their surfing traditions and the indignities endured by native Hawaiians as control of their island was wrested from them, with Kahanamoku's growing confidence as he comes into his own as a waterman and as beach culture at Waikiki starts to take off. Waikiki's charm draws people from around the world and gradually we meet key entrepreneurial figures whose grand schemes will eventually see Kahanamoku brought to Australia.

Kahanamoku first crosses paths with Australian swimmers at the Stockholm Olympics. His charged encounter with one of the two women swimmers to represent Australia, Mina Wylie, nicely anticipates the tender, mutual admiration that would later evolve between Kahanamoku and Letham.

When we meet Letham, she is in the company of her close friend, Claude West, with whom she shares a passion for the sea and fearlessness in the surf. Both are in a state of excitement about the arrival of Kahanamoku in Sydney. While the moment when Letham rides the wave with Kahanamoku is the one immortalised in standard surf histories, Jarratt recognises the importance of other encounters, such as when he visits Letham's house for afternoon tea. It's one of the most memorable and assured episodes in the book and captures how lives can turn on seemingly small events.

Creating engrossing, extended drama out of a series of swimming carnivals is no mean feat and Jarratt does an impressive job of conveying the buzz that surrounded Kahanamoku, the

occasional racial tensions and the expectations placed upon him. But just as Kahanamoku begins to weary and grow homesick as his tour goes on - Brisbane, Newcastle, Melbourne, New Zealand - so too does the narrative begin to drag. That Summer at Boomerang ends strongly, however, with Kahanamoku's return to Hawaii and life at Freshwater after his departure. Summer fades and the shadow of war grows darker, leaving no one untouched. The epilogue, which poignantly traces the fortunes of the main characters, returns the narrative to an elegiac note, making the memories of that summer glow even more brightly.

In the story of Isabel and Kahanamoku, Jarratt has gone beyond cliches of nationhood in the form of the bronzed Aussie, or stereotypes about the beach boys of Waikiki, and has given us a feel for life as it was lived - on the public stage and behind the scenes.