

## **From Lambeth to Niagara: Imitation and Innovation amongst Female Natationists.**

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The development of English swimming throughout the nineteenth century relied heavily on the activities of swimming professors and their families who promoted the sport through challenges and competitions and established classes for the teaching of swimming and lifesaving. Like many of their contemporaries, the leading swimming family of the period, the Beckwiths, expanded these activities beyond their Lambeth base to include summer seasons at seaside resorts as well as appearances in crystal tanks on the stages of variety theatres and music halls. Female members of the family proved particularly popular and Agnes Beckwith became the most recognised and acclaimed natationist of the period, particularly after her visit to America in 1883. Five years later it was being reported that a Clara Beckwith was due to appear in a tank scene at the Providence Museum and advertisements began appearing in 1893 for a Cora Beckwith, 'Champion Lady swimmer of the World' and demonstrator of the 'famous Beckwith Backward Sweep'. This paper explores the life courses of these two natationists who appeared regularly on stage and in travelling fairs in America over the decades following Agnes's visit. In newspaper advertisements and interviews, both women emphasised their British roots and their connections to the Beckwith dynasty as well as claiming credit for outstanding swimming feats. In announcing her intention to swim Niagara Falls in 1901 Cora, born Cora MacFarland in Maine in 1870, asserted that she had previously swum the English Channel alongside Matthew Webb. Clara, born Clara Sabean in Nova Scotia in 1870, was even more forthcoming about her entitlement to the Beckwith name by stating in her 1893 autobiography that she had been born in Lambeth in 1867, and identifying her father as William Manning Beckwith, Champion Swimmer of England. Both women not only appropriated the Beckwith name but they also annexed the Beckwith routines, including endurance floating and ornamental swimming, and this paper highlights these similarities before reflecting on some generic commonalities in these women's life courses.

### **Introduction**

In the late Victorian period, English amateur sportsmen created regulatory bodies to govern their activities, organisations that proved highly effective in reinforcing the ongoing exclusion of both women and working class participants, especially sporting professionals. Faced by a 'double jeopardy' those working class females who had been making a living from displaying their physical talents retreated further from an already limited competitive arena into the world of entertainment. In contrast to their middle-class counterparts, working class women generally lacked the necessary freedom of choice, money and time for leisure activities but, for a very small number of these women, sports-like amusements had always provided an alternative working environment. During the eighteenth century, the 'European Championess' Elizabeth Stokes recorded forty-five boxing victories<sup>1</sup> and a century later female pedestrianism established an intermittent presence in the Victorian sporting landscape. Born in Lambeth in 1841, Ada 'Madame' Anderson worked as an entertainer and theatre manageress before becoming a pedestrienne in 1877, performing a number of long-distance walks including 1,250 miles in 1,000 hours at Plymouth in November 1877 and 1,500 miles in 1,000 hours at Leeds in April 1878. Her appearances in America in 1878 stimulated a pedestrian vogue involving over a hundred working class women, many of whom later became professional cyclists.<sup>2</sup> The formation in 1890 of the Original English Lady Cricketers (OELC), recruited from the lower-

1 Weekly Journal or British Gazetteer, October 5, 1728; November 23, 1728; Daily Post, June 6, 1732.

2 Census 1871 RG101487: 2; Dahn Shaulis, 'Pedestriennes: Newsworthy but Controversial Women in Sporting Entertainment, *Journal of Sport History*, 26, no.1 (1999): 31-35.

middle and upper-lower classes, marked the creation of the first professional women's teams in any sport. After practising privately in London under the guidance of two male professionals, the OELC toured the country playing exhibition matches before large crowds but the teams disbanded after the promoters absconded with the profits.<sup>3</sup>

The most prominent female professionals of the period were swimmers who received much more public approval than other paid performers partly because of their age, marital status, bodily appearance and gracefulness.<sup>4</sup> By the end of the century, working class 'naiads' and 'mermaids' were performing before all social classes, in the variety theatre as well as in the swimming pool. Lurline exhibited in a crystal aquarium at the Oxford Music Hall in the 1890s and in October 1889, Ada Webb, 'Champion Lady High Diver of the World and Queen of the Crystal Tank', appeared at the *Canterbury Theatre of Varieties* where her underwater feats included eating, drinking, smoking, peeling an apple, answering questions, sewing, singing, taking snuff and writing.<sup>5</sup> The Wallenda Sisters were popular during 1898 and Elise Wallenda remained underwater at the *Alhambra* for four minutes forty-five and a half seconds in December beating the record made by Annie Johnson at Blackpool in 1889. Annie Luker's dives from the Westminster Aquarium roof were widely admired and Marie Finney was presented with a gold medal in recognition of her 'clever and plucky dive from London-bridge' prior to giving a tank exhibition at the *Trocadero Music Hall* in 1889.<sup>6</sup> Many female natationists also generated careers as swimming teachers. Recreational swimming was considered eminently suitable for middle class women since it had utilitarian value as a lifesaving activity, especially important given the increasing opportunities for foreign travel, and it provided beneficial exercise in segregated surroundings, which is why it received consistent support from female doctors.<sup>7</sup> London teachers included Fanny Easton, who was working as a swimming mistress between 1881 and 1911, as well as appearing in swimming entertainments, and the Humphrey sisters, Charlotte and Jane, who spent all their working lives teaching swimming.<sup>8</sup>

At the New Marine Palace Baths, Margate, in 1884 Professor Frederick Beckwith was teaching in one bath whilst in the other his 'accomplished mermaid of a daughter', Agnes, was teaching women's classes with 'marked intelligence and good-nature'.<sup>9</sup> Frederick involved the whole of his immediate and most of his extended family in aquatic activities between 1850 and 1900 and the Beckwiths became the most renowned swimming family in Britain, with Agnes as

3 Kathleen E. McCrone, 'Class, Gender, and English Women's Sport, c. 1890-1914', *Journal of Sport History*, 18, no. 1 (1991): 166.

4 Claire Parker, 'Swimming: The "Ideal" Sport for Nineteenth-Century British Women', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 27, no. 4 (2010): 682.

5 Robert Watson, 'Comparative Generations', in *Swimmers and Swimming or, The Swimmers Album*, Charles Newman (London, Henry Kemshead, 1899), 22; British Library Evan 645. *Canterbury Theatre of Varieties*, October 14, 1889; *Era*, January 5, 1889, 25; 23 August 23, 1890, 22; April 21, 1894, 26; *Penny Illustrated*, March 5 1887, 151; *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, September 29, 1883, 11; June 23, 1885, 4.

6 *Manchester Times*, September 21, 1900, 8; *Daily News*, December 20, 1889, 3.

7 Frances Hoggan, *Swimming and its Relation to the Health of Women* (London, Women's Printing Society, 1879), 1-8.

8 *Licensed Victuallers' Mirror*, April 15, 1890, 174; Census Returns. Easton 1881 (337/61/1818), 1891 (141/84/67), 1901 (1253/76/40), 1911 (RG147287RG78PN355RD132SD3ED10SN146); Charlotte Humphrey 1871 (165/19/30); Charlotte and Jane Humphrey 1881 (31/10/13), 1891 (22/91/11), 1901 (23/123/12), 1911 (RG14PN162RG78PN5RD2SD2ED21SN99).

9 *Era*, June 14, 1884, 5; *Penny Illustrated*, May 27, 1876, 10; July 19, 1884, 2, 6; *Fun*, August 6, 1884, 57.

its leading light.<sup>10</sup> She swam in North America and in Europe creating such an international reputation for herself as an exhibitor and teacher that the name 'Beckwith' became synonymous with female swimming excellence. Recognising the commercial potential, American natationists Cora MacFarland and Clara Sabean both claimed English origins and appropriated the Beckwith surname, adopted Agnes's performance routines and made long and successful careers as 'Champion Lady Swimmer of the World'. This paper first considers briefly the natational activities of Agnes whose activities spanned over forty years both at home and abroad, and then discusses these imitators and their claim to a Beckwith lineage. All these women had a lifetime's association with swimming, as teachers, competitors and performers, and, in order to uncover commonalities, their stories are presented here as a series of short biographies. Biographies as a source of history have often been treated with suspicion. Channing described biographies as panegyrics and declared that no 'department of literature is so false as biography',<sup>11</sup> while Bourdieu regarded biographies as illusions, arguing that the straightforward, one-dimensional life story could not exist and that lived lives were chaos. However, he also recognised that individual life-stories can be seen as reflections of social structures and it is by exploring the lives of individuals that scholars can illuminate what Mills called the 'historical push and shove' of society. Merely by existing, each person contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of society and to the course of its history, and, as E. P. Thompson demonstrated, the Victorian working classes were not merely the passive victims of historical processes but active agents who participated in shaping their world.<sup>12</sup>

### **Agnes Beckwith**

On 24 August 1875, Captain Matthew Webb became the first man to swim the English Channel, immediately establishing himself as a Victorian celebrity.<sup>13</sup> Partly to 'puff up' himself and Agnes, Professor Beckwith took advantage of the interest generated by Webb's success and embarked on a series of endurance swims featuring his daughter, beginning on 1 September 1875 with the fourteen-year-old swimming five miles in the Thames from London Bridge to Greenwich. Contemporary reports described Agnes as slim and diminutive, dressed in a tight bathing costume of rose-pink lame, trimmed with white lace and with her long flaxen hair neatly bound by a ribbon.<sup>14</sup> On 3 May 1876, Agnes swam three quarters of a mile in the Tyne and she completed over ten miles in the Thames, from Chelsea to Greenwich Pier, on 5 July. Large crowds watched her use breaststroke, interspersed with displays of trick swimming, to reach Greenwich, apparently as fresh as when she started, after two hours forty six minutes and twenty five seconds.<sup>15</sup> In July 1878, the now seventeen-year-old swam twenty miles in the Thames and within a month she was writing to *Bell's Life* expressing her wish to attempt the Channel.<sup>16</sup> Even though this never materialised, Agnes continued to undertake endurance

10 Agnes Alice Beckwith, GRO (1861/birth/September/Lambeth/1d/319) born 14 August.

11 William Ellery Channing, *A Discourse Delivered at the Dedication of the Unitarian Congregational Church in Newport, Rhode Island July 27* (Boston: S.N. Dickenson, 1836), 44.

12 Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998); C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 12; E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Random House, 1963).

13 Watson, 'Comparative Generations', 21.

14 *Manchester Guardian*, September 2, 1875, 8; *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, September 3, 1875, 2; *New York Times*, September 18, 1875, 12; *North Otago Times*, November 25 1875, 5; *Grey River Argus*, November 9, 1875, 2.

15 **Newcastle Courant**, May 5, 1876, 5; *Daily News*, July 6 1876, 3; *New York Times*, July 18 1876, 8 citing the *London Echo*, July 6, 1876; *Otago Witness*, September 9, 1876, 17; September 30, 1876, 5.

16 *Penny Illustrated*, July 27, 1878, 14; *Bell's Life*, August 10, 1878, 12.

challenges and, at the Royal Aquarium in Westminster in May 1880, she completed a thirty-hour swim, taking all her meals in the water and reading daily accounts of her swim while still swimming.<sup>17</sup> On Monday 13 September 1880, Agnes began swimming for a hundred hours in six days in the Aquarium whale tank and subsequent Beckwith advertisements described Agnes as 'Heroine of the 100 hours' swim'.<sup>18</sup>

While endurance swimming continually came in for criticism because of the physical excesses involved, racing proved slightly more acceptable. Although competition was difficult to find for female professionals, Agnes did compete in three matches against Laura Saigeman, winning the first but losing the next two.<sup>19</sup> Of all the aquatic activities, ornamental swimming was considered the most appropriate for female natationists and aquatic displays utilising swimming baths and glass tanks in aquaria, circuses and music halls provided extensive opportunities for swimming entrepreneurs. Agnes, who had begun this type of performance as part of the family business in 1865, was appearing regularly at Lambeth Baths by the beginning of the 1870s.<sup>20</sup> In February 1872, Agnes and her brother Willie debuted as *Les Enfants Poissons* in a plate glass aquarium at the *Porcherons Music Hall* in Paris and Agnes was among the main attractions at the new aquarium in Brighton during August 1872.<sup>21</sup> In the 1880s, Agnes was recorded as having had 151 weeks of continuous engagement in the tank facility at the Westminster Aquarium.<sup>22</sup> Wherever she performed, Agnes was consistently described as 'a veritable mermaid', swimming, floating, diving and turning somersaults through hoops, as well as kissing her hand to spectators in 'the most bewitching style'.<sup>23</sup>

In 1882, Agnes married William Taylor, a theatrical agent who was already managing the family in their swimming engagements, although she kept the Beckwith name for public performances.<sup>24</sup> Agnes and Willie exhibited in North America in 1883 when Toronto papers reported that their aquatic displays had attracted thousands of spectators and that their engagement had been extended by over a week.<sup>25</sup> She also swam in France and Belgium

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17 *Bell's Life*, May 8, 1880, 8; May 15, 1880, 12; *Reynolds's Newspaper*, May 9, 1880, 8-9; *Inter Ocean*, May 29, 1880; *Evening Post*, July 12, 1880, 2; British Library. Evan. 2756 London Westminster Royal Aquarium 1880 Poster.

18 *Bell's Life*, June 26, 1880, 8-9; July 3, 1880, 8; *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, June 27, 1880, 5; July 4, 1880, 1; *Bristol Mercury and Daily Post*, July 3, 1880, 6.

19 *The Times*, August 26, 1879, 9; *Penny Illustrated*, August 30, 1879, 10; *Graphic*, August 30, 1879, 211; *Northern Echo*, August 20, 1894, 3; *Bell's Life*, September 27, 1879, 5.

20 *Era*, January 26, 1868, 16; March 29, 1868, 11; *Liverpool Mercury*, February 15, 1868, 6; *Penny Illustrated*, June 19, 1869), 391; *Bell's Life*, September 21, 1870, 4; July 22, 1871, 9.

21 *Era*, February 4, 1872, 10; August 18, 1872, 5.

22 *Baily's Monthly Magazine of Sports and Pastimes*, April 1884, XLII(290): 183; *Swimming Notes*, May 3, 1884, 8.

23 *Bell's Life*, August 17, 1872, 6; September 26, 1874, 8; November 14, 1874, 8; *Era*, August 18, 1872, 5; May 4 1873, 7; May 18, 1873, 3; June 1, 1873, 3; August 10, 1873, 3; August 17, 1873, 3; November 9, 1873, 3.

24 Agnes Alice Beckwith GRO (1882/marriage/March/Lambeth/1d/520). Census Returns 1891 (394/27/12), 1901 (383/89/3). The couple were at 130 Kennington Road, Lambeth, in 1891. William, 40, *general agent*, b. Rotherhithe. In 1901, they were at 20 Crampton Street, Newington, and William was a *theatrical agent*.

25 *Penny Illustrated*, May 5, 1883, 279; August 18, 1883, 10; *Reynolds's Newspaper*, May 13, 1883, 8. Willie, his wife, Agnes and William Taylor left on Thursday 17 May 1883 on the *City of Berlin*; *New York Times*, June 5, 1883, 2; *Macon Weekly Telegraph*, September 30 1883, 6; *New York Clipper*,

during the 1880s as well as appearing with Hengler's Cirque in Liverpool and Glasgow and with P.T. Barnum's 'Greatest Show on Earth' at Madison Square Garden in 1887.<sup>26</sup> Describing her performance one reporter recalled the thrill of excitement that stirred the crowd when Agnes stepped out on the elevated stage and bowed gracefully before the 7,000 pairs of admiring eyes before diving into a huge water tank. The 'picturesque aquatic expert' was a comely, blue-eyed, twenty-four-year old English girl with soft hair hung in small curls upon her shoulders and no performer in the whole circus presented a more striking picture. A flowing robe of old gold was wrapped about her from her throat to her feet as she stepped out upon the platform. She tossed off her rubber overshoes and, then flinging aside the robe, she revealed her limbs encased in flesh-coloured tights and a dark-hued jersey drawn snugly about her waist. She dived and waltzed like a swan, turned somersaults, swam under water and climaxed the performance by propelling herself along with graceful undulations of the body while her hands and feet were bound fast together.

During this visit, Agnes gave an interview that established something of a template for her imitators. When asked how she learnt to swim she said that she had inherited the art from her father, Professor Frederick Beckwith, and that she had learned to be as fond of water as a fish in the Lambeth baths in London when she was only four years old. She exaggerated somewhat in saying she had only been twelve-years-old when she first swam a public endurance trial in the Thames but she faithfully recorded her subsequent swims of ten and twenty miles. She recalled her continuous swims of thirty hours and one hundred hours in a week at the Westminster Aquarium but embellished a sixty hours swim and her racing performances against Laura Saigeman, and she falsely claimed success in an endurance swim from Sandy Hook to Rockaway on her previous visit in 1883.<sup>27</sup>

Agnes returned to England to lead her own group of female swimmers and one observer of the troupe declared that by their graceful and expert performances they had popularised the art of swimming. These swimmers pleased everyone who saw them by their charming appearance in their pretty costumes,<sup>28</sup> reinforcing the impression that the appeal of female natationists to many male admirers often had as much to do with their physical appearance as their skill. Agnes herself had been considered as having a well built and robust figure when she was eighteen, and, at twenty-one, the *New York Times* described her as of under medium height, well built, weighing 134lbs, with a pleasing face, light blue eyes and blonde hair which clung about her head in curls.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the closure of the Westminster Aquarium and the deaths of her father and brothers during the 1890s, Agnes carried on exhibitions and teaching and she remained the most prominent female swimmer of the period even though her physical charms may have

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June 16, 1883), 208.

26 *Bell's Life*, May 6, 1882, 6; *Liverpool Mercury*, February 8, 1887, 5; *Era*, March 5, 1887, 16; *New York Clipper*, April 23, 1887, 94.

27 *Lancaster Daily Intelligencer*, April 2, 1887, 4; *Atlanta Constitution*, July 1, 1883, noted that Agnes, 'the champion English swimmer, is daily taking a ten mile swim in the ocean, starting from Rockaway pier on Saturday next she will blurt from Sandy Hook, and expects to reach Rockaway at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, the distance being twenty miles.'; *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, July 14, 1883, 337 recorded that Agnes swam about fifteen miles before a storm forced her out of the water 'much against her will'.

28 *Era*, January 1, 1898, 22; January 29, 1898, 20, 22; January 21, 1899, 20; *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, December 24, 1899, 13; Charles Newman, *Swimmers and Swimming or, The Swimmers Album* (London, Henry Kemshead, 1899) includes portraits of several prominent female swimmers whose bathing suits were quite risqué for the 1880s and suggest a style of public dress that may not have been universally acceptable.

29 *New York Times*, June 5, 1883, 2.

diminished for some spectators. In 1901, she was living in Newington, Southwark, with her theatrical agent husband and two of her aquatic troupe and, on 19 February 1903, she had her only child, William Walter Beckwith Taylor, at 72 Clapham Road, Kennington, Lambeth. William subsequently performed alongside his mother, being advertised as 'the youngest swimmer in the World' in 1908, and Agnes continued to appear and teach at venues as far afield as Hastings, Dover, Aylesbury and Manchester, where she performed at the Industrial Exhibition during June 1910. In 1911, now aged fifty and accompanied by eight-year-old Willie, she was boarding in Hemel Hempstead and describing herself as an ex-professional swimmer.<sup>30</sup> In 1916, Agnes, now a widow, married Leopold Solomons, an 'optologist', on 2 August in Exeter with her son acting as a witness. For the next twenty-five years, the family lived in the Streatham area of London during which time the family name was anglicised to 'Beckwith' Saunders with son William adopting the name Jack Beckwith Saunders on 15 January 1938. Following Leopold's death in 1941, Agnes joined her son in Bridport, Dorset, where he was landlord of The Sun Hotel, and on 30 August 1948 Agnes, Jack and his wife and two children sailed from Southampton for South Africa on the Carnarvon Castle, eventually settling in Port Elizabeth. On 14 March 1949, Agnes was admitted to Nazareth House, a care facility run by Nazarene nuns, where she died on 10 July 1951. She was buried in the South End cemetery, Port Elizabeth, where her name appears on a memorial plaque alongside other patients cared for by the Nazarene community.<sup>31</sup>

### The 'Beckwith' name

Even in England, the true identity of Beckwith troupe members was often blurred because of the practice of assigning the family name to all and sundry, irrespective of familial relationships. Some, like Agnes's half-sister Lizzie, the professor's youngest daughter, were genuine 'Beckwiths' and Frederick employed Lizzie, sometimes called 'Nellie', in his shows from a very young age.<sup>32</sup> By 1896, Lizzie had also established herself as a song and dance artist, initially in conjunction with fellow natationist Florrie Newton as the 'Sisters Beckwith', a popular act that appeared all over the country.<sup>33</sup> By 1900, she was being variously billed as a serio and dancer, or a soubrette, sometimes under the name of Beth or Bessie Osland, derived from her mother's maiden name. In a letter to the *Era* in August 1898 she signed herself Lizzie Beckwith (otherwise Beth Osland, soubrette) and an advert in the same issue referred to both Lizzie Beckwith, High Diver, and Beth Osland, Soubrette and Dancer.<sup>34</sup> Lizzie followed in the footsteps

30 *Daily Mirror*, August 8, 1904, 2; August 10, 1904, 2; August 22, 1904, 2; September 21, 1904, 10; September 23, 1904, 10; *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, December 31, 1908, 3; *Manchester Guardian*, June 20, 1910, 1; June 23, 1910, 1; June 24, 1910, 1; June 25, 1910, 1; June 27, 1910, 1; June 28, 1910, 1; Census 1911 (RG14PN7747 RG78PN383 RD141 SD1 ED8 SN122).

31 GRO (1916/marriage/July/Exeter/5b/174); GRO (1941/death/October/Surrey/2a/443); Principal Probate Registry of England and Wales, Llandudno, March 1942; Manifest List for Union Castle Line, The Carnarvon Castle departing Southampton 31 August 1948; Nazareth House Records.

32 *Bell's Life*, May 4, 1886, 1; May 25, 1886, 1; *Era*, June 15, 1889, 15; June 7, 1890; August 29, 1891, 15; September 5, 1891, 8; *Northern Echo*, August 12, 1890, 4; *Licensed Victuallers' Mirror*, October 13, 1891, 490; *Horse and Hound, A Journal of Sport and Agriculture*, September 23, 1893, 593.

33 *Era*, June 23, 1888, 15; May 25, 1889, 20; August 10, 1889, 7; September 12, 1896, 21; September 19, 1896, 19; September 26, 1896, 20; October 3, 1896, 22; October 24, 1896, 31; November 7, 1896, 28; November 14, 1896, 23; December 5, 1896, 31, 32; January 23, 1897, 22, 29; February 6, 1897, 16; February 13, 1897, 15, 19; September 11, 1897, 15; November 27, 1897, 14, 30; December 11, 1897, 26; December 25, 1897, 21; January 8, 1898, 9; February 5, 1898, 29; February 12, 1898, 19; February 19, 1898, 24; February 26, 1898, 19, 20; April 2, 1898, 34; May 21, 1898, 26.

34 *Era*, August 6, 1898, 18, 21, 22. A soubrette sang light songs or played comedy routines in the role of a maid-servant. A serio came on stage walking like a puppet hung on wires and delivered a ditty with a fixed smile.

of Agnes when she visited America in July 1904 to appear in variety in New York.<sup>35</sup> Appearing with the Fay Foster Burlesque company in Baltimore in September Elizabeth Beckwith, of London, and Walter A. Tapscott, of Lexington, obtained a marriage licence but Lizzie died from pneumonia in Victor, Colorado, only three months later.<sup>36</sup> Charles Beckwith's daughter Aggie appeared in a swimming carnival at the Lambeth Baths in 1899<sup>37</sup> and Willie's wife, Emma, an accomplished ornamental swimmer,<sup>38</sup> was probably the 'Ethel Beckwith' who appeared regularly with Agnes and her 'Wonderful Troupe of Lady Swimmers'. Non-familial Beckwith performers included Dora at Hastings in 1889 and May and Mabel at Bournemouth in 1891.<sup>39</sup>

Following Agnes and Willie's performances in the 1880s the Beckwith name appeared in North American newspaper reports long after their return to England. An Annie Beckwith, described as a 'noted English natator', emerged in Boston in 1888 and issued a challenge through her manager, Fred Kyle, to float or swim for six days against any woman in America. Annie was described as a charming young woman, not yet nineteen years old but 'very womanly' in appearance. She was almost five feet five inches tall, weighed about 140lbs and had an almost perfect figure, a very sweet face and blonde hair. Reports described her as the first cousin of the natationist Miss Agnes Beckwith, the natational 'wonder of the world', and, although Annie had not yet achieved a record as good as her cousin's, her performances had marked her out as the equal of any female natator in Europe. Supposedly, she had recently won a six days' floating competition in one of the large halls of London, defeating many good female natators in the process. A year later, newspapers were reporting a six-day swimming contest in Boston between an Alice Beckwith and a Miss Rodgers, which ended with Alice, described as not yet nineteen-years-old and a cousin of the 'famous English swimmers' Agnes and Willie Beckwith, winning with a total of forty-two miles and forty-one laps.<sup>40</sup> It is quite possible that both 'Annie' and 'Alice' were pseudonyms and that, given their reported ages, they were, in fact, either Clara or Cora 'Beckwith', American born natationists who both had long and successful careers.

### **Clara 'Beckwith'**

On 22 August 1868, James Manning Sabean, 27, married Jane Wade, 21, at Parker's Cove, Annapolis, Nova Scotia and Clara Maria, baptised in November 1874, was born to the farming couple on 22 October 1870.<sup>41</sup> The family lived in a small old house on Academy Square and

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35 Manifest List for S.S. Umbria arriving in New York July 1904.

36 *Morning Telegraph*, September 30, 1904, 6; *Daily Mirror*, March 1, 1905, 6; *Nottingham Evening Post*, March 4, 1905, 6.

37 *Era*, June 10, 1899, 19. GRO Agnes Harriett Beckwith (1884/birth/December/Lambeth/1d/367). Census 1891 (393/58/37). GRO (1884/marriage/June/Chelsea/1a/579) Charles Beckwith, 23, teacher of swimming, Emily Beckwith, 24, Agnes Beckwith, 6, Charles Beckwith, 4.

38 Newman, *Swimmers or Swimming or, The Swimmers Album*; GRO (1877/marriage/December/Lambeth/1d/688); Census 1891 (391/132/7) 281 Kennington Road, Lambeth, William H. Beckwith, 33, professional swimmer, Emma Beckwith Wife, 33, Frederick E. Beckwith Son, 4; *Era*, July 30, 1892; August 6, 1892, 22. Emma, Willie and son Frederick appeared together at Scarborough alongside Olivette Flower.

39 *Era*, October 5, 1895, 12; October 19, 1895, 7; February 1, 1896, 16; February 29, 1896, 8; March 7, 1896, 21; May 9, 1896, 23; October 10, 1896, 22; January 23, 1897, 29; May 8, 1897, 20; February 27, 1897, 23; May 25, 1889, 20; July 4, 1891, 16; September 26, 1896, 21.

40 *Boston Herald*, November 6, 1888, 3/8; *Star*, March 6, 1889, 3.

41 The Library and Archives Canada. 1871 Census, Clarence, Annapolis, Nova Scotia; Roll, C-10543; Page#6; Family No, 21; 1881 Census, New Caledonia, Annapolis, Nova Scotia; Roll, C-13172; Page#6; 7

Clara helped by selling mushrooms and marsh greens or by begging. She became a proficient swimmer after taking lessons from a Mr. W. W. Clark in the Annapolis River and, around 1887, the now seventeen-year-old went to Boston where, after attracting attention on the beaches by her aquatic stunts, she was recruited as a performer in the Boston American Swimming Pool and subsequently promoted around America as Clara 'Beckwith'.<sup>42</sup> By 1889, Clara's repertoire included tank displays and competitive swimming for wagers. On 26 September Clara and Valeska Neilson, 'champion of Germany', signed articles to swim eight and a half hours per day for six days at the Grand Museum for \$1,000 a side and a purse of \$1,000.<sup>43</sup> During 1890, Clara appeared with a group of young females in the large tank at the Boston Grand Museum where the troupe played polo and called their performances 'Yale vs. Harvard'.<sup>44</sup> Reports in 1891 recorded the exhibitions of 'Diving, Swimming and daring Feats' given by Clara, 'Champion Female Swimmer of the world', at Lakeview, Lowell,<sup>45</sup> and she appeared as a special feature of the female pedestrian tournament at Kernan's Lyceum Theatre in 1893. In July she was at Tony Pastor's Theatre as Clara Beckwith, 'Woman Fish', where her performances were described as 'interesting and instructive', and Clara was at Pastor's again in October as the 'Water Queen' who lived, ate, walked, played, waltzed, read and acted under the water, a performance described as the 'Eighth Wonder of the World'. When she appeared in the Summer Garden in 1894, she was described as the 'bewitching, captivating Water Nymph'.<sup>46</sup> Between August 1895 and February 1896, Clara ate, drank, sewed and 'disported herself in her swimming tank' day and night at Proctor's Theatre and at Proctor's Pleasure Palace in New York, where the entertainments, which lasted from noon until midnight, included vaudeville, minstrelsy, acrobats, dancers, singers and performing animals, including the 'original comedy elephants'.<sup>47</sup>

Her show was described in detail in 1893. After 'Miss Clara Beckwith the champion lady swimmer of the world,' had been introduced, the 'trim figure in Mephistophelian red tripped up the stepladder to the top of the tank and sank into the water'. When entirely submerged she turned somersaults under the water and lay calmly at the bottom as if sleeping. She played with a 60lb dumbbell underwater, ate a banana, drank a bottle of milk and then took a slate and piece of chalk down to the bottom of her tank where she wrote her name on the slate and pressed it close against the sides for the audience to read. She sewed two pieces of cloth firmly together, taking about twenty-five stitches without coming to the surface, and then walked along the bottom on her hands. Her final exhibition, of the way in which a person drowns, was so realistic that many spectators 'experienced cold chills at the screams of the supposed victim'. Finally, she sank to the bottom in the position of a drowning body and lay there, face

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Family No. 27.

42 Charlotte Isabella Perkins, *The Romance of Old Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia*, 1934, revised 1952.

43 *New York Clipper*, August 10, 1888-1890, 355; *Ploughkeepsie Daily Eagle*, September 26, 1889, 2; *New York Times*, September 28, 1889.

44 *New York Clipper*, August 9, 1890, 342; *Boston Daily Globe*, September 23, 1890, 2.

45 *Lowell Daily Courier*, June 30, 1891; July 8, 1891; July 16, 1891; August 10, 1891.

46 *Washington Bee*, May 20, 1893; *The Sun*, July 17, 1893, 8; October 29, 1893, 3; *Evening Telegram*, July 18, 1893, 4; *New York Times*, October 29, 1893; *New York Daily Tribune*, October 29, 1893, 22; *Washington Times*, August 14, 1894, 3.

47 *New York Times*, August 18, 1895, 11; October 24, 1895, 13; November 3, 1895; November 24, 1895, 12; *Era*, August 24, 1895; October 26, 1895; November 9, 1895; *New York Daily Tribune*, November 19, 1895, 5; *New York Times*, November 19, 1895, 5; *The Sun*, November 24, 1895, 3; *Spirit of the Times*, December 21, 1895, 752; *New York Dramatic Mirror*, December 21, 1895, 19; *Era*, February 1, 1896.

downward, after which she allowed herself to rise and float at the surface just like a dead body. Then she turned over and became again 'the modern mermaid'.<sup>48</sup>

Clara described herself as being five feet four inches and weighing 156lbs and her appearance clearly added to her popularity.<sup>49</sup> Newspaper reports in 1893 described her as so upright that she looked taller and younger than her age, which she gave as twenty-five, with dark brown hair, grey and clear eyes and a complexion so good that it confirmed swimming as being a great beautifier. She was a well-formed and strong young athlete who was so well built that she did not seem heavy enough to weigh 150lbs, her average weight, and her arms were generally so well hidden by soft silk sleeves that one would never dream she could lift 200lbs dead weight. In her swimming suit Clara showed the almost perfect development which her training had produced.<sup>50</sup> When sculptor M. De Berselli worked on a statue of 'The Diving Girl' he chose Clara as his model, considering her the most 'perfectly formed woman in America', and he described her measurements in detail:

She has development of muscle with no superfluous flesh. Her head in length measures 9½ inches, so does her foot; her chest measures 30 inches, and she can easily expand it three inches more; her hip measures 40 inches, upper arm 12½ inches, lower arm 10½ inches, neck is 13½ inches, whereas my measurement of the calf is 14½ inches. This model will enable me to add new grace and beauty to the subject.<sup>51</sup>

Clara married on 8 June 1898, which probably accounts for the fact that there are few references to her in subsequent years although Pleasure Palace bills in 1899 did include Clara in a 'natatorial' act in a glass-sided tank.<sup>52</sup> Her husband was Stanley William McInnis, a founding member of the Canadian Dental Association, and when he died in November 1907, he left Clara a wealthy widow.<sup>53</sup> In a rare display of honesty regarding her origins Clara described herself at her marriage as Clara Marie Sabean born 28 October 1870 in Nova Scotia but in the 1901 census she declared that she was then twenty-seven having been born on 26 October 1873 in England and arriving in Canada in 1887. In Boston, on 25 November 1908, Clara, now calling herself Clara M. Beckwith McInnis, 36, born circa 1872 in England, married again, this time to musician Clement G. Miller. In 1910, Clara claimed her age was thirty-six, that she had been born in England to an English mother and father and that she had arrived in America in 1890.<sup>54</sup> This heritage had been crafted over some years and had been made explicit in her

48 *Wheeling Register*, July 29, 1893; *Auburn Bulletin*, July/August 1893, 6; *Lewiston Evening Journal*, July 31, 1893, 2.

49 Clara Beckwith, *In the Swim, Autobiography of Miss Clara Beckwith, The World's Champion Lady Swimmer. The Theory and Practice of Swimming Explained and Illustrated by the Modern Mermaid* (Baltimore, Wm. U. Day Printing Co. 1893). No page numbers provided.

50 *Wheeling Register*, July 29, 1893; *Auburn Bulletin* July/August 1893, 6; *Lewiston Evening Journal*, July 31, 1893, 2.

51 *Bush Advocate*, April 29, 1893, 5.

52 *Sun*, March 26, 1899, 9; March 29, 1899, 7; *Era*, April 15, 1899.

53 Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online 1901-1910 (Volume XIII) [I. I. Mayba](#) 2000 University of Toronto/Université Laval (afn,1154-6S5). Father, Joshua Manning Sabean (afn, 114X-7D2 ). Mother, Abigail Jane Wade (afn, 114X-7F8 ). Spouse, S. W. McInnis Hon. (afn, 1154-6RX ); Perkins, *The Romance of Old Annapolis Royal*.

54 The Library and Archives Canada. Census of Canada 1901. Brandon City, Brandon, Manitoba, Page#2; Family No.19; Marriage details for Clement Miller. Groom's Father - John C Miller, Saloon/Hotel Keeper, born Hannover, Germany, circa 1836; Mother - Henrietta E. Vogel, born Saxony, Germany, circa 1838. Bride's Father - Manning Beckwith, Mother -Abbie J Wade.

1893 autobiography in which Clara claimed that she had been born in Lambeth, England, on 26 October 1867. Her father, William Manning Beckwith, had been champion swimmer of England for ten consecutive years and, after he relinquished the title, it had then passed to her brother Willie who had successfully defended it ever since. The professional careers of her father and brother had been a succession of triumphs and in their many contests with noted swimmers, in which the conditions included almost every imaginable test of skill and endurance, they had never experienced defeat. Her younger brother, Charles, was also an excellent swimmer, but had no desire to become a professional expert, while her sister Agnes, who had swum nine miles in the ocean, was an expert of the highest order. Because the constant topics in the home had revolved around swimming, Clara had naturally become deeply absorbed in the subject and, motivated by the skill and proficiency attained by her sister, she had tried to match her success. Clara's first public appearance had been when she was thirteen-years-old, after which her father had predicted that eventually she would be recognised as the 'Champion Lady Swimmer of the World.' With his encouragement, she had adopted swimming as a vocation and issued challenges to all English professional female swimmers but, after there had been no acceptances over a two-year period, the title of Champion had been conceded to her.

After failing to find suitable competition in England, Clara had said 'farewell to Lambeth and its fond associations', and travelled to America about 1882, establishing her residence in Boston. Having won a reputation 'on the other side of the Atlantic' as the 'World's Champion Lady Swimmer,' her arrival in America was widely reported but two years elapsed before her challenge was accepted by Miss St. John, the conditions being to swim from Little Orchard Island to Fort Independent and back. Miss St. John had proved to be a clever, strong swimmer, but Clara's greater muscular development and endurance had enabled her to win easily. Some months later, she had competed in a novel six days' contest against six professional lady swimmers, who each swam for only one day, whilst Clara was engaged to swim every day, contesting against them individually. She was also obliged to swim more miles in the six days of the match than the total miles accomplished by her opponents, Cora Rogers, Annie Fern, Bertha Goodwin, Anna McVeigh, Kate Anderson and Mary Roberts, who totalled 63½ miles to Clara's 74½ miles. Clara had then arranged a six days' race with Mr Leavitt, the champion swimmer of Lowell, but he retired after the first day and since then her claim to the title of 'Champion Lady Swimmer of the World' had been undisputed.<sup>55</sup>

A newspaper interview with Clara in July 1893, which was widely syndicated, allowed her to reinforce her Beckwith origins in the public imagination. Clara claimed to have saved several people from drowning and to have remained under water for over 2½ minutes. She had been born in Lambeth, England, and was a member of the famous Beckwith family of swimmers, of which William, Charles and Agnes were the 'shining natatorial lights'. When asked how she had learnt to swim she said 'Oh, it's born in me, I guess. My father was the champion swimmer of England for ten years, and then he gave way for my brother William, who is the champion now. All my family swim. Father and Willie and Charley and my sister Agnes – you see it's in me.' Clara went on:

'We lived near the beach, and I was always running down to the water, but I had never been taught to swim and I didn't know how. One day, when I was twelve years old and I was paddling around a big wave came along and carried me off my feet. I caught my breath and struck right out with a breaststroke and, because I did not know how to turn around, I kept on swimming until someone saw me and came to my rescue in a boat. The longest swim I attempted was nine miles from the English mainland to a ledge of rocks. It

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Bride's Marital Status –Widowed; 1910 Census.

55 Beckwith, *In the Swim*, no page numbers provided.

took me five and a half hours and when I got there my eyes were so bloodshot I could scarcely see and my face was so badly eaten by the salt water that it was almost raw'.<sup>56</sup>

In her autobiography, Clara observed that during her professional career the press had conferred on her many unique titles, among them 'The Modern Mermaid,' 'Neptune's favored daughter,' 'The water Nymph' and 'Naiad of the deep.' She was only grateful that her nature was not susceptible to flattery although she was naturally proud of being recognised as the 'Champion lady Swimmer of the World'. This pride emanated from the knowledge that her achievements had been acquired by perseverance, hard work and a determination to 'win unquestionable success in my life's vocation'. It was her earnest wish, apparently, in reciting incidents of my 'life in the water' to consistently avoid all semblance of egotism and self-laudation.<sup>57</sup> However, this went somewhat against the normal practices of professional natationists, including Clara, and Cora 'Beckwith', another self-proclaimed 'Champion Lady swimmer of the World', proved to be far less reticent.

### **Cora 'Beckwith'**

Cora McFarland was born in 1869 in Maine to John McFarland, carpenter and box maker, and his wife Eloise, both from Maine. Within twenty years, she had become a professional natationist performing as Cora 'Beckwith' in the big tank at the Grand Dime Museum, to the 'infinite satisfaction of thousands'. The other attractions included her future husband Charles M. Ernest, real name Charles MacClanahan, who performed a 'burnt cork comedy' routine with his partner Tom Lewis, in which they created stereotypical caricatures of a black person by using burnt cork to blacken the skin and exaggerate their lips as well as wearing woolly wigs, gloves, tailcoats or ragged clothes.<sup>58</sup> Three years after their daughter Beulah was born, on 7 August 1890,<sup>59</sup> Cora, the 'champion lady swimmer of the world', was giving exhibitions at the Retail Clerks' Picnic at Wildwood in 1893, and when she performed at the Casino in 1894, she achieved the marvellous feat 'never before attempted' of floating, eating and living in a tank for seven days.<sup>60</sup> Having completed a six months' engagement at Frank Hall's Circus in Chicago, Cora became the principal feature when the Circus Royal and Venetian Water Carnival opened in San Francisco in 1895 giving exhibitions of swimming and diving as well as introducing 'many strange tricks of her own invention'. Apparently, this 'amphibious swimmer had been lionized by society wherever she had appeared' which might have spoiled her but for the 'brave little lady's level head'.<sup>61</sup>

Theatre impresario Jake Rosenthal, who was involved with both Al Jolson and Houdini, became Cora's manager in 1895<sup>62</sup> and Cora subsequently divorced Charles before marrying

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56 *Wheeling Register*, July 29, 1893; *Auburn Bulletin* July/August 1893, 6; *Lewiston Evening Journal*, July 31, 1893, 2.

57 Beckwith, *In the Swim*, no page numbers provided.

58 Census 1870 and 1880; *Boston Daily Globe*, July 28, 1889, 10; *New York Clipper*, April 6, 1880/1890, 56.

59 Eleanor Rives, 'Beulah Meyer gets a kick out of life', *Herald*, February 9, 1977, Section 2, 1.

60 *Saint Paul Daily Globe*, June 11, 1893, 12; June 25, 1893, 13; July 2, 1893, 8; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 1, 1894, 25-26; April 8, 1894, 26; July 15, 1894, 27; September 3, 1894, 6.

61 *San Francisco Call*, April 5, 1895, 13; April 6, 1895, 14; April 7, 1895, 14; April 16, 1895, 8; April 21, 1895, 22.

62 *New York Clipper*, May 19, 1920, 15; *New York Clipper*, May 18, 1895, 173.

Rosenthal.<sup>63</sup> Jake promoted Cora to managers of seaside and summer resorts, summer gardens, outdoor entertainments and first class vaudeville houses as an exponent of natatorial feats, emphasising her availability for long distance and endurance water tests. Between 1895 and 1898 Cora floated in a tank at Frank Hall's Casino, appeared with other swimmers at the Clark Street Museum and floated for thirty days at the Boston Zoo where 'Dr Greene's Nervura' apparently recuperated her strength on a daily basis. During 1898, her troupe of young swimmers could be seen 'disporting themselves and showing their proficiency in the art of swimming' in a tank in the lecture hall at Austin and Stone's Museum.<sup>64</sup> In 1899, Rosenthal became joint manager at Fairmount Park where, towards the end of June, Cora could be seen, free of charge, twice daily in her unique exhibition of fancy swimming. Large crowds watched her perform a range of fancy strokes, illustrate how drowned bodies rose to the surface and give free swimming lessons to women. After concluding her engagement, Cora remained in Kansas City for another week to give swimming lessons to a number of women and children<sup>65</sup> and these lessons also proved a popular adjunct to her appearances at Cedar Point in July where the way she handled herself in the water was a 'matter of wonder and admiration to all who see her'. During her career, she had reportedly saved forty-nine people from drowning and she was an inventor of strokes, one of which was peculiar to herself. Her act comprised ten movements: English sidestroke, Beckwith backward sweep, imitation of a Venetian gondola, the dead float, the positions of males and females after drowning, double overhead stroke, combination, two strokes in one, imitation of a tug boat, revolution stroke, three strokes in one, waltzing in water and imitation of a water wheel in motion.<sup>66</sup> When she talked about the teaching of swimming in 1900 the reporter observed 'Now all ye people listen and learn. It is the great Cora Beckwith that speaks and her's is the only way'.<sup>67</sup>

At the Pan-American Exposition at Buffalo between May 1 and November 1, 1901, Cora's Natatorium featured the 'World's Greatest swimmer, Champion Trick and fancy swimmer of All Europe and Pan American'. Every day, Cora performed fifty acts, strokes and dives, besides testing her endurance underwater, a feat for which she supposedly held the world's record of two minutes thirty-one seconds.<sup>68</sup> Cora's concession was one of the few that made money, about \$15,000, during the Exposition season and her performances attracted worldwide attention as well as encouraging further bookings. For the entrance money of between fifteen and twenty-five cents she could be seen 'living, sleeping, and eating in the water' in a shallow tank filled with four feet of water. Cora, who spent nine hours every day in her pool, was described as having 'sleek hair as black as jet, with flesh as soft and pliable as that of a baby'. Her body shape had been moulded by its long caress with water and although 'a trifle stout' was 'in its full strength of a superb womanhood'. Her hands and feet were 'prettily turned, and her shoulder and torso muscles were as finely developed and as brawny as those of the most

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63 Rives, 'Beulah Meyer gets a kick out of life'.

64 *New York Clipper*, May 23, 1895/6, 194; September 28, 1895, 469; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 23, 1896, 3; *Boston Daily Globe*, November 28, 1897, 30; *New York Clipper*, May 1, 1898, 136; September 11, 1898, 456; November 27, 1898, 645.

65 John M. Olinskey et al. *The Illustrated History of Fairmount Park*, [www.oldfairmountpark.com/](http://www.oldfairmountpark.com/); *Kansas City Journal*, June 16, 1899, 10; June 19, 1899; June 23, 1899, 10; June 20, 1899, 11; June 25, 1899, 17; June 28, 1899, 5; July 2, 1899, 16.

66 *Sandusky Star*, July 13, 1899; July 14, 1899; *Star*, July 17, 1899; July 21, 1899.

67 *The Denver Sunday Post*, July 15, 1900, 12. How to swim: A female expert says all may easily learn.

68 *Buffalo Express*, August 9, 1901; September 22, 1901; *Syracuse Journal*, July 20, 1901, 3.

expert boxer.<sup>69</sup> Other reports on her appearance were a little more reserved in their praise. In 1900 Cora was described as a large and decidedly 'chubby' lady with generous proportions inclined towards the Minerva-esque. She has a bright, pretty face, so small as to be almost out of proportion to her large body, and big, bright sparkling eyes and a pleasant mouth that looks as if it never said anything but pleasant words. This small, pretty head is covered with smooth brown hair, and set upon a pair of shoulders that would do credit to a James J. Jeffries. The upper part of her breast and back is covered with bunches of muscle as hard as iron bands. Her great, magnificent, white shoulders set up around her strong throat like the shoulders of a gladiator. Her arms are as soft and bicepless as the arms of the most indolent society woman. She dresses quietly and in very good style, and is always accompanied by a little German poodle called 'Baby'.<sup>70</sup>

Just as Agnes Beckwith spent her summer seasons at English seaside resorts, Cora established her own summer season touring the fairs, carnivals and festivals; although in her case, she had to take the paraphernalia of her performances with her since there were no swimming baths available.<sup>71</sup> Between 1902 and 1904, Cora appeared at the Casino in Toledo, at McBeth's Park, Lima's Beauty Spot, and at the Logan Free Carnival, commencing 28 April 1903, where she was described as a remarkably handsome woman and a picture of physical culture.<sup>72</sup> Later that year she appeared alongside Darling's dog and animal show and she performed at a Military fair and carnival at the Saratoga armory in February 1904 as the 'human fish'.<sup>73</sup> At the 'Redmen's Powwow and carnival' in 1904 the most instructive and interesting feature was the 'artistic' performance given at regular intervals during the afternoon and evening by Cora. She illustrated the various strokes used by different nations, a number of strokes of her own design, the positions in which drowned men were found and a method of floating, described as 'mystifying', in which not a muscle moved, her body taking up a position of natural rest with every tendon relaxed.<sup>74</sup> In July 1908, she departed on her annual summer tour to give her first exhibition at Stillwater, Minnesota. Despite her public appearances and her years in the public eye, Cora was described as 'the most retiring and domestic of women' in her private life. Her career and her exploits had been notable and, in the course of her professional life, she had saved thirty-seven people from drowning, including Lewis Louis Hedge, the well-known sugar magnate. She had been made an honorary member of the New York Life Saving Guard, presented with two gold medals for heroic bravery and had apparently completed a book entitled *The Art of Swimming*.<sup>75</sup> Agnes Beckwith spent her winters in England touring indoor facilities with a troupe of female swimmers and Cora replicated this practice in America over a period of many years. At the Clark Street Dime Museum in 1901, her school of women

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69 Pan-American Exposition at Buffalo in the State of New York from May 1 to November 1, 1901

<http://panam1901.org/documents/panamwomen/corabeckwith.htm>; *Daily Public Ledger*, June 15, 1904, 2.

70 *The Denver Sunday Post*, July 15, 1900, 12. How to swim: A female expert says all may easily learn.

71 *Police Gazette*, June 25, 1904, 2; *Elyria Chronicle*, July 20, 1904; July 21, 1904; *Elyria Reporter* July 27, 1904.

72 *Perrysburg Journal*, August 1, 1902; *Times Democrat*, August 2, 1902; *Ohio Democrat*, April 23, 1903.

73 *Poughkeepsie Daily Eagle*, November 2, 1903; *Morning Star*, February 5, 1904, 4; February 8, 1904, 5.

74 *Daily Public Ledger*, June 15, 1904, 2.

75 *Cedar Falls Gazette*, July 14, 1908; *Herald*, July 15, 1908, 6.

swimmers were a chief attraction in the curio hall and Cora's 'Neptune's Daughters' featured on the bill at the Strand in 1917 in a diving act considered one of the 'prettiest and best aquatic entertainments in vaudeville'. Four young women took part in a programme consisting of all sorts of trick and fancy diving and the triple somersault executed by one of the water nymphs had never before been seen in an act of this kind.<sup>76</sup> In 1920, Cora again undertook a road tour with her diving girls after a retirement of two years.<sup>77</sup>

Cora died in 1924 after a short illness<sup>78</sup> and her death certificate referred to her as Cora 'Beckwith' Rosenthal. Reports of Cora's performances from 1894 onwards had established connections between her and the genuine Beckwith family both in terms of lineage and of natational performances. When performing at the Casino in 1894 she was referred to as Cora Beckwith of England, in 1895 she was described as an amphibious swimmer who had been delighting the 'British public for years' and in 1899 she was advertised as a British subject coming direct from the Royal Aquarium in London.<sup>79</sup> Some reports made explicit connections to the Beckwiths. 'I began when I was 2 years old. My father was a professional and the keeper of the Royal Aquarium at Westminster. He used to pitch me over the side just for fun, and I used to think it was fun, too. When I was 5 years old I was giving exhibitions; when I was 11 I swam the Thames. When I was 13 I did what no one had done before, though what plenty of people have done since – jumped from London bridge, and when I was 15 I swam the channel.<sup>80</sup> She had been born into an English family of noted swimmers and she had taken to the water as a child following the example of her father, who was a famous swimmer in his day. As a fourteen-year-old, Agnes Beckwith had covered the five miles between London Bridge and Greenwich in the amazingly short time of one hour and eight minutes while her 'sister, Miss Cora Beckwith', had floated ten hours a day for forty consecutive days.<sup>81</sup> Overseas newspapers certainly confused the two women describing Miss Cora Beckwith as a lady professional swimmer familiar to London and declaring the Lambeth baths and the Royal Aquarium as her 'old friends'.<sup>82</sup>

#### **'Puffing up' Cora: The Niagara rapids ballyhoo**

One reporter in 1899 observed that the ballyhoo surrounding Cora's shows was one of its major drawing cards<sup>83</sup> and Cora consistently claimed credit for some unique feats, not least the swimming of the English Channel, aged fifteen or sixteen, either alongside Webb or having been the only female or indeed person to have ever done so. It was even suggested she had

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76 *New York Clipper*, June 8, 1901, 319; *Manitoba Free Press*, January 6, 1917, 14.

77 *New York Clipper*, March 7, 1917, 6; May 9, 1917, 16; June 27, 1917, 14; May 15, 1918, 17; April 7, 1920, 17.

78 Death Certificate Index - Dubuque County (1917-1926) Page 142. Rosenthal, Cora Beckwith Born 16 Sept. 1870 Maine Died 09 Feb. 1924 Dubuque Mother's Maiden Name - Tyler 031-1461 D2158.

79 *Chicago Daily Tribune* Apr 1, 1894 pp. 25-26; April 8, 1894, 26; July 15, 1894, 27; September 3, 1894, 6; *San Francisco Call* 5 April 1895, 13; 6 April 1895, 14; 7 April 1895, 14; 16 April 1895, 8; 21 April 1895, 22; *Omaha Daily Bee*, 9 August 1899, 2; 13 August 1899, 8; 18 August 1899, 2; 19 August 1899, 5; Olinsky, *The Illustrated History of Fairmount Park*.

80 *The Denver Sunday Post*, July 15, 1900, p.12

81 *Sandusky Star* Ohio 14 July 1899; *Syracuse Journal*, 20 July 1901, 3; *Daily Public Ledger*, 15 June 1904, 2; *Evening Telegram*, 16 August 1906, 4.

82 *Daily Express*, August 16, 1901, 5; *Singapore Free Press and Merchantile Advertiser*, September 10, 1901, 3; *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 27, 1901, 4.

83 *Omaha Daily Bee*, August 9, 1899, 2; August 13, 1899, 8; August 18, 1899, 2; August 19, 1899, 5.

coached other channel swimmers.<sup>84</sup> This, combined with her many other aquatic feats, had made her 'the most talked of woman in the world'<sup>85</sup> and Cora extended this 'ballyhoo' by announcing regularly that she would swim the Niagara rapids. The idea first emerged in 1895 when she proposed to make an attempt on 2 June, although it was really in July 1901, at the time of her engagement at the Pan-American Exposition, that the 'World's Greatest swimmer', perhaps not coincidentally, revived the prospect of swimming the rapids.<sup>86</sup> Described as 'an unmarried woman' from Buffalo she was apparently sincere in publically stating her intention to swim the whirlpool rapids on Wednesday 25 September. When asked if she was not worried that she would meet the fate of the late Captain Webb, who had been drowned there, she said:-

'I have no fear of the rapids. I have visited them three times recently and thrown sticks and stones into the water and have failed to find anything awful about the rapids. I shall visit them every Sunday from now until the date of my performance to study the currents and get the proper bearings. I expect to get through the rapids without any difficulty by floating on my back. That is the way I swam the rapids at Egg Rock Lighthouse in the harbour of Lynn, Mass. Those rapids you know have never been successfully passed by boat and no other swimmer has ever successfully attempted to swim them'.<sup>87</sup>

In one interview Cora said she had seen Webb swim to his death after she had told him 'that he was foolish to keep so near the Canadian shore'. There was only one thing in the gorge 'which possesses a terror for me' and she had seen 'it the other Sunday for a moment, when the angry waters disclosed the razorlike lip of a ledge of bright red granite'. She had looked for the ledge for 'fully an hour, and in all that time only twice did it disclose its sinister shape' and she thought she had found a way to save herself from it. According to Cora, 'Captain Webb could not float. I can, and have done so for ten hours a day for forty consecutive days.' In addition, she could stay underwater for four minutes so her plan was to just float down the rapids making no movements except those necessary to keep her nose and mouth above water. The whirlpool may seize me and keep me down, but not for ever. One minutes, two minutes, three minutes, perhaps. Then if it lets me look at the sky long enough to say 'Scat' I shall be ready to be drawn down again and give it another battle. 'If I can swim out of the edges of the vortex, then my conserved strength will tell'.<sup>88</sup>

The announcement certainly seems to have generated the requisite interest. Cora, who declared she was swimming the rapids not for glory but because she needed the money, was invited to Richmond to give an exhibition some time before the proposed attempt and George H. Farrell who was preparing to cross the Falls on a bicycle delayed his attempt because Cora wanted him to do a double act with her.<sup>89</sup> In London, Signor Balleni, the only man who had ever

84 Rives, 'Beulah Meyer gets a kick out of life'; *Chicago Daily Tribune* April 1, 1894, 25-26; April, 8, 1894, 26; July 15, 1894, 27; September 3, 1894, 6; *San Francisco Call*, April 5, 1895, 13; April 6, 1895, 14; April 7, 1895, 14; April 16, 1895, 8; April 21, 1895, 22; Olinskey, *The Illustrated History of Fairmount Park; Sandusky Star*, July 14, 1899; *Ohio Democrat*, April 23, 1903; *Omaha Daily Bee*, August 9, 1899, 2; August 13, 1899, 8; August 18, 1899, 2; August 19, 1899, 5; *St. Paul Globe*, July 21, 1901, 4; *Minneapolis Journal*, July 20, 1901, 3; *Daily News*, July 20, 1901; *Syracuse Journal*, July 20, 1901, 3.

85 *Daily Public Ledger*, 15 June 1904, 2.

86 *San Francisco Call*, April 6, 1895, 14; *Buffalo Express*, July 12, 1901; August 9, 1901.

87 *Minneapolis Journal*, 20 July 1901, 3; *Daily News* 20 July 1901; *Syracuse Journal*, 20 July 1901, 3.

88 *Daily Express*, 16 August 1901, 5; *Singapore Free Press and Merchantile Advertiser*, 10 September 1901, 3; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 September 1901, 4.

89 *St. Paul Globe*, July 21, 1901, 4; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 5, 1901, 6; *The Times* (Richmond VA), August 7, 1901, 5; *The Sun*, August 19, 1901.

leapt into Niagara and 'lived to tell the tale', was strongly against the attempt. He believed the feat impossible, except for some miraculous fluke, and observed that Cora was a clever little woman with a good name and it would be a shame to hear her finishing her successful career with a disaster.<sup>90</sup>

Presumably Cora heeded his advice since this attempt does not appear to have taken place. In July 1902, Rosenthal appeared in Buffalo apparently to make arrangements for her to tackle the rapids on 4 September although he did not say whether Cora, who was currently swimming in Detroit, would swim down or up the rapids. The ballyhoo was repeated in 1903 and again in 1904 when Cora 'upped the stakes' by declaring that she would swim the rapids 'or perish'. 'I can die only once and if I do in attempting this voyage it will be quickly over. I have spent days and weeks in studying the deadly rapids. Reiterating that Webb's death was due to his striking a ledge of bright red granite on the Canadian side of the stream she said would try to avoid this death dealing monster. She also repeated details of her proposed strategy which involved floating and submerging for a period of a few minutes.<sup>91</sup> *The Niagara Falls Gazette* was sceptical about her 'fairy tales' about a swim through the whirlpool rapids. When Cora was doing stunts at the Pan-American she attracted notoriety to herself by telling how she intended to swim the rapids some day before the fair ended. Now she was 'handing out a few dope stories' again. Miss Beckwith was a good swimmer but 'she never swam the whirlpool rapids and does not intend to'. In 1912, Cora again announced that she would risk her life attempting to swim the Whirlpool Rapids at Niagara Falls on 27 October and, despite the lack of any concrete evidence, it was being reported in 1917 that 'some years ago' she had 'attained unlimited newspaper publicity throughout the country by swimming a dangerous passage at Niagara Falls, one which was never before accomplished by a lady swimmer although many times attempted'.<sup>92</sup>

### Some reflections

The close relationship between entertainment and sport highlighted here by the biographies of these 'Beckwith' natationists was not unique to the activity, or to the period, since professional athletes, aware of the transitory nature of their earning potential, have always explored every potential outlet in order to capitalise on their reputation. While women earning their living by swimming-related activities were few in number, their public performances contributed to the widespread acceptance of female swimming around the turn of the twentieth century, at which point Agnes remained the most prominent female swimmer in the public imagination, both at home and abroad.<sup>93</sup> Although she was never able to convert this social capital into personal financial capital, her appearances in America in 1883 and 1887 stimulated imitation and, by adopting the name and appropriating the methods and techniques of the original, both Clara and Cora transported her skills across America. There is some evidence that these women were aware of each other's existence. In 1889, Clara concluded that Cora had decided not to respond to her recent challenge for a six days' swimming match so she offered her rival for the

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90 *Sunderland Daily Echo*, August 22, 1901, 6; *Republic*, September 12, 1901, 4.

91 *Buffalo Express*, July 31, 1902; *Ohio Democrat*, April 30, 1903; *Washington Times*, August 26, 1904, 5; *Telegram*, August 26, 1904, 11.

92 *Niagara Falls Gazette*, August 26, 1904; *Urbana Daily Courier*, August 28, 1912, 4; *Manitoba Free Press*, January 6, 1917, 14.

93 De Saint-Clair, G. *Natation* (Quatrième Edition Petite Bibliothèque Athlétique Librairie Paris: Armand Colin, 1921), 8. Miss Agnès Beckwith, fille du professeur de natation, âgée seulement de quatorze ans, par-courut la distance qui sépare Greenwich du pont de Londres, soit 12463 mètres; en juillet 1878, elle fit sur la Tamise 16 kilomètres en six heures. Je ne crois pas que ce record ait jamais été battu par une femme.

title of champion woman swimmer another chance to prove her superiority. She would swim Cora in a six-day race, letting her name the hours for swimming, and she was willing to wager \$2000 against Cora's \$1000 that she would win the race. Furthermore, Clara would give her opponent five hours start but reserved the right to name the time and place of holding the match. A cheque for \$500 had been left with the *Herald* as an earnest of good faith.<sup>94</sup> The fact that Cora did not respond is almost certainly a sign of good judgement since the swimming careers of the two women would suggest that Clara was more used to racing in this kind of event and would have started with an advantage. This has echoes of the reluctance of Frederick and Agnes Beckwith to engage in head-to-head races with opponents such as Teresa Johnson, who were patently faster over short distances, since defeat would dent Agnes's claims to be the world's leading female natationist.

Much more work needs to be done to uncover what Bale calls the 'layers of truth'<sup>95</sup> regarding these natatorial careers but even at this stage these women's lives raise some interesting points, not least their connections with the rural American traditions of Wild West shows, fairs and local entertainments. Other questions arise about the use of physical display as entertainment, making it a distinct entity and separate from sport, the methods used by professionals to 'puff up', the content of natatorial displays, the influence of males as managers and husbands and the use of emerging technology. Clara, who generally appeared on stages rather than at fairs, performed on one occasion in a tank ten feet long, four feet wide and eight feet deep containing salted water and heated to a temperature of 92° while, at the Lyceum in Washington, she had a tank fifty feet long.<sup>96</sup> Because her summer was predominantly spent in rural fairs, the organisation and equipment required by Cora was substantial and her entourage was extensive. Charles C. Snyder of Charleston had been the showman for Cora in 1897 but, by 1912, her roster included Jake Rosenthal, manager and lecturer, George M. Hobbs, lecturer and press agent, C.H. Jennings, Mrs. G.M. Hodge, ticket seller, Clarence H. Mitchell, in charge of natatorium, and Will Clemens, Jr., in charge of the canvas. When the Circus Royal and Venetian Water Carnival opened in San Francisco in 1895, the circus ring was covered with a 'tremendous rubber', filled with four feet of water, and lithographs of her performances were made available later that year.<sup>97</sup> In 1899, the spectacular night exhibition she gave in Fairmount Park was lit by searchlights while the front of her 'Blue Grotto' on West Midway later that year, which resembled the entrance to a huge stone cave, was surrounded by electric lights. When Cora appeared at the Logan Free Carnival in April 1903 an excavation fifty feet long and twenty feet wide was made for the exhibition and, in 1904, she exhibited in a portable tank fifty feet long. In April 1906, Cora was preparing a new outfit for the season, including a canvas, a fresh ten-foot by fifty-foot tank and a special coach and baggage car. In 1907, another new tank and tent were used during the season, the tank holding 40,000 gallons of water, heated by the boiler that powered the merry-go-round, and at the Marion Inter-State Fair, in August 1908, Cora performed hourly exhibitions in an artificial lake.<sup>98</sup>

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94 *Boston Herald*, September 11, 1889, 3/8?

95 John Bale, 'Ernst Jokl and Layers of Truth', in *Sporting Lives*, ed. Dave Day (Manchester: MMU IPR Publication, 2011), 1-15.

96 Beckwith, *In the Swim*, no page numbers provided; *Wheeling Register*, July 29, 1893; *Auburn Bulletin* July/August, 1893, 6; *Lewiston Evening Journal*, July 31, 1893, 2.

97 *Quincy Daily Journal*, May 23, 1907, 1; *New York Clipper*, September 21, 1912; May 23, 1895/6, 194; *San Francisco Call*, April 5, 1895, 13; April 6, 1895, 14; April 7, 1895, 14; April 16, 1895, 8; April 21, 1895, 22.

98 *Kansas City Journal*, June 16, 1899, 10; June 19, 1899; June 23, 1899, 10; June 20, 1899, 11; June 25, 1899, 17; June 28, 1899, 5; July 2, 1899, 16; *Omaha Daily Bee*, August 9, 1899, 2; August 13, 1899, 8; August 18, 1899, 2; August 19, 1899, 5; *Ohio Democrat*, April 23, 1903;

Part of this emerging technology was the improvement in communications and this narrative highlights the increasing international reach of the Beckwith 'brand'. By adopting the name and appropriating the methods and techniques of Agnes, both Clara and Cora perpetuated the 'Beckwith' legend and, in a world that was still less globalised than it is today, it was comparatively easy for them to duplicate routines without fear of any consequences, especially since the professor and his sons died during the 1890s. Although Lizzie was performing in America at the same time as Cora was touring the rural fairs, no one was ever really in a position to dispute either the appropriation of the Beckwith name or the feats that had proved popular with the paying public. In fact, even if the real Beckwiths had been aware of these initiatives, they may have remained sanguine about anything that kept the name 'Beckwith' in the public arena. If imitation really is the sincerest form of flattery then the original Beckwiths may have been perfectly satisfied with the situation.

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*Police Gazette*, June 25, 1904, 2; *New York Clipper*, April 2, 1906, 270; April 27, 1907, 278; October 21, 1911, 8; *Austin Daily Herald*, September 24, 1907; *Urbana Daily Courier*, August 28, 1912, 4; *Iowa City Citizen*, August 19, 1908, 8.