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Tens of thousands of women were using municipal swimming pools by 1914, the explanations for which have been well rehearsed in a literature which invariably focuses on the gender appropriateness of swimming and on the medical support given to the activity. This paper will not reprise these arguments any further, except to suggest that issues of medical and gender acceptability may have been somewhat removed from the consciousness of many working women, but concentrates instead on the influence of female natationists who performed regularly in front of all classes of society. The focus here is on Agnes Beckwith, but many naiads, "river or spring nymphs", operated in the late nineteenth century. "Lurline", "an artiste from the moment she stepped on to the stage until she took her departure", was renowned for her exploits in a crystal aquarium at the Oxford Music Hall. The Wallenda Sisters at the Alhambra, in 1898, were the talk of London and on 14 December, Elise Wallenda remained underwater for 4 minutes and 45½ seconds, beating a record established by Annie Johnson at Blackpool in 1889. Annie Luker's dives from the Aquarium roof were widely admired, and, prior to giving a tank exhibition at The Trocadero Music Hall in 1889, Marie Finney was presented with a gold medal in recognition of her "clever and plucky dive from London-bridge".

Performing in a tank, diving, and holding breath underwater were just a few of the activities engaged in by professional natationists who also swam in endurance events, raced for money, produced and performed aquatic entertainments in indoor and outdoor facilities, promoted swimming competitions, and, crucially, because it gave them a regular income, taught individuals and groups the arts of swimming and lifesaving. This was an especially important source of income for female professionals because social constraints meant that swimming instructors normally taught only their own sex. Fanny Easton, for example, was working as a swimming mistress between 1881 and 1901, as was Mrs. Newman. When the Amateur Swimming Association instituted their professional teaching qualification, certificate 15 was awarded to a Miss Muriel Austin.

Many women entered swimming teaching through kinship ties. At the Royal York Baths, Regent's Park, in 1866 ladies learnt swimming from Mrs. Woodbridge, the wife of a noted Professor, a term routinely adopted by expert practitioners in nineteenth century activities as a way of announcing that they earned their living through the activity and that they were available for teaching engagements, although it was rare for females to be referred to as "professor". Frederick Beckwith designated himself as Professor from 1861, having established his credentials by winning the Championship of England, and at Margate in 1884, the professor taught in one bath whilst Agnes, his "accomplished mermaid of a daughter", imparted the knack of swimming with marked intelligence and good-nature to the fair sex in another.

The important thing for professionals was to bring oneself to the notice of the public. Like their male counterparts some women established reputations through endurance swims. Fourteen year old Agnes was already teaching London Schools classes for girls, when she swam five miles from London Bridge to Greenwich on 1 September, 1875. Professor Harry Parker's sister, Emily, also under fifteen and an established swimming teacher, swam seven miles from London Bridge to Blackwell on 4 September and, a week later, Laura Saigemann, a swimming teacher in Brighton, was racing over five miles in the sea. In 1876, Agnes swam over 10 miles in the Thames, and in 1878 she swam 20 miles in six hours and 20 minutes. She subsequently wrote to *Bell's Life* expressing her "earnest desire to attempt to swim across the Channel" and soliciting sponsorship to enable her to take time off from teaching and giving entertainments to prepare properly. Although Agnes never attempted the Channel, in May 1880, she completed a thirty-hour swim, taking all her meals in the water and occasionally reading accounts of her swim while still swimming, and in September she completed 100 hours in six days.

Endurance swimming came in for criticism because of the physical excesses involved. *John Bull* would be "sorry to see many girls disporting themselves for the public amusement" and noted that since Agnes and Emily were the daughters of professors of swimming, the events seemed to be "a clever advertising ruse", a sentiment echoed in the *Manchester Guardian* and *The Examiner*, while *The Penny Illustrated* advised Agnes to stick to teaching. *The Illustrated Household Journal and Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* observed of the 30 hours swim that it had "recently had our attention invited to many feats of "endurance," but to none as objectionable as this".

Racing was slightly more acceptable and Beckwith organised ladies swimming tournaments in London in 1889 and 1890, which featured Maud St. John, Annie Luker, Rose St. John, Alice Sinclair, Olivette Flower, and Alice May. At White Rock Baths, Hastings, in 1892 fourteen young ladies entered for Beckwith organised events. Ornamental, or scientific swimming, however, was regarded as most appropriate for female natationists. *Hearth and Home* said, "People talk of the grace of skirt dancing, or of the agility of lawn tennis, of the gyrations of the practised skater, but surely the true poetry of motion is exemplified in the movements of the ornamental swimmer." Agnes had begun this type of display in 1865, when the Professor introduced her as a two year old who "greatly surprised the audience by her swimming and floating, although quite a baby". She was following in the footsteps of sister Frances ("Jessie"), described by *The Times* in 1863 as realising the "idea of a Naiad". Agnes and brother Willie debuted as *Les Enfants Poissons* in a plate glass aquarium at the Porcherons Music Hall in Paris in February 1872. Agnes was "a veritable mermaid", swimming, floating, diving and turning somersaults through hoops, as well as "kissing her hand to the delighted and astonished spectators in the most bewitching style". By 1874, the Professor had augmented his entourage with son Charles and was presenting a "trio of naiads" in Agnes, Laura Saigeman and Miss Martyr. *The Era* regarded this positively, since by attending these amusements ladies would be motivated to "acquire the knowledge and skill" of natation. Beckwith's aquatic entertainments continued to prosper into the 1880s, during which he focussed much of his energies at the Westminster Royal Aquarium, where the professor displayed "Feats of Natation" in the whale tank, including illustrations of the swimming strokes and methods of lifesaving. Spectators could watch the family demonstrating undressing, smoking, and "eating two sponge cakes under water". Frederick remained mindful of the value of females in helping to generate teaching numbers and, in 1885, he introduced Alice Sinclair, "the Lady Godiva, and champion ornamental swimmer of the world", Minnie Ward, and Alice May. To cater for increasing demand, Frederick advertised ladies classes at Lambeth Baths on Tuesdays and Fridays 11 till 4, with dresses for sale or hire, and at the Aquarium where the tepid bath was open daily from 7 a.m. as a School of Swimming.

The utilitarian value of swimming in saving life was constantly emphasised by swimming professionals wishing to recruit paying pupils. Agnes, who had proved her skills when saving a drowning lady at Margate in 1884, was interviewed by *Hearth and Home* at the Aquarium in 1891 where she demonstrated the proper mode of relieving the distressed, and how, in case of probable drowning, to "clutch" the unfortunate. The great point is to keep the person's mouth above water, at the same time keeping the drowning person from grasping you, and "I know no better method than diving under the water and coming up suddenly behind, seizing the head of the subject under the lower jaws, keeping the lips above water, while you throw yourself on your back and swim to shore."

Agnes married William Taylor in 1882, although she kept the Beckwith name, at least for public performances. Taylor, a theatrical agent, was an integral part of the Beckwith community and when Agnes appeared in Bournemouth in 1892, William, her "business-manager", was given two galas as a benefit. Agnes swam in America, France, and Belgium 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. By the end of the 1880s, the Beckwith exhibitions had been refined into an amusing and instructive

swimming entertainment which featured, among others, the professor's wife, a swimming teacher herself, on the piano, the infant sons of Willie Beckwith, the Misses Milly Cranwell and Clifford, Bobby Beckwith, aged four, and Agnes, the duck or naiad of this aquatic family. *The Graphic* recorded that Agnes displayed a "line of beauty and the poetry of motion in such a graceful manner as to call forth repeated applause from the large company...and near the finish a bouquet was thrown to her, which, after inhaling, she placed in the sanctity of her somewhat *décolléte* costume". Invariably, the swimming annexe was filled to overflowing, for which the Beckwiths, according to *The Licensed Victuallers' Mirror* deserved the "tanks" of the public.

Aquatic events held in tanks in aquaria, circuses, and, later, in music halls, extended the earning possibilities for swimming professionals. In the second half of the nineteenth century the music hall acted as an alternative to the pub as a focus for popular culture and in places like Lambeth, music-hall proprietors became centres of local patronage networks. In 1892, a committee convened to organise a benefit at the *Canterbury Theatre of Varieties* for Willie included representatives from professional and amateur swimming, other professional sports, and from the music hall. The artistes who appeared reflected the cream of music hall talent and included Marie Lloyd and Lu Lu, "America's gymnastic marvel".

In the 1890s, the Beckwith aquatic careers became more theatrical than sporting with different members of the family and their connections appearing at different times. The Beckwith troupe spent the 1891 summer season at Morecombe People's Palace and Aquarium where they gave a "most refined performance". In the 1892 and 1893 summer seasons, the Beckwiths appeared twice daily in Hastings, combining a comic aquatic farce with an exhibition of the natatory art. Throughout 1893 and 1894 they gave tank performances and aquatic entertainments in music halls, circus rings, aquaria, and swimming baths as far afield as Manchester, Middlesborough, Chesterfield, Leeds, and Crystal Palace. At the Grand Chinese water carnival, Royal Agricultural Hall, Islington, in July 1894 they introduced a new comic sketch, "An Aquatic Elopement", and at the World's Fair in both 1894 and 1895, their "clever and graceful feats of natation" gave hints in one of the most useful as well as ornamental of physical exercises. When the Glasgow Industrial Exhibition opened in June 1895, the outdoor attractions included parachuting by the Spencer Family and aquatic displays by the Beckwith family, and the company had a short, well attended, season in Sunderland in August.

Willie appeared independently with his wife, Emma, and other lady swimmers as at Scarborough Aquarium in 1890 and 1892. Agnes and Ethel Beckwith gave tank performances at Bristol People's Palace in 1895 and at the Royal Foresters' Palace of Varieties in London in February 1896. Later that month they were at Brighton Empire Variety Theatre and at the Gravesend Grand Variety Theatre in May where their clever tank performance "needs no praise". At a benefit for Agnes in Scarborough in September 1896 Miss Mabel and Miss Ethel, plus four of Miss Beckwith's pupils, gave an exhibition. Agnes and Ethel were warmly applauded in Hull in October, and they subsequently appeared together in Chatham and Leeds, where Edith Beckwith had been billed on her own in October 1895. Agnes, billed as champion ornamental and long distance swimmer of the world, and Charles, champion trick swimmer and diver of the world, frequently appeared in tandem performing writing, eating, drinking under water and various other feats with grace and skill. Charles also became closely associated with the "Water Rats", a group of sportsmen and entertainers, which included music hall impresario George Adney Payne. His daughter Aggie continued the family tradition, appearing at a swimming carnival at Lambeth Baths in 1899 alongside Millie Cranwell.

In 1874 the introduction of female natationists had been regarded as a "novelty" but now Agnes was managing her own "talented troupe of lady swimmers" and her "company of naiads" could be regularly seen in a "fine swimming exhibition in a large crystal tank". In July 1891 Agnes commenced a three months' engagement at Bournemouth where,

assisted by Miss May and little Miss Mabel Beckwith, she gave daily exhibitions of swimming, diving, floating and fancy swimming. After spending the Christmas Music Hall period at the Standard in Pimlico she returned to Bournemouth for the 1892 summer season where she "met with a flattering and enthusiastic reception from her many friends and admirers". Novel items included swimming through the figures of a quadrille by Miss Beckwith and her troupe. In May 1893, Agnes appeared with her pupils as Queen of the waves at Captain Boyton's Water Show at Earls Court London, before completing another summer season at Bournemouth, while the 1895 and 1896 seasons were spent in Scarborough. These summer engagements were interspersed with appearances in music halls and circuses, and involved other participants such as Miss Wilson, Milly Cranwell, "pretty and plump", and the "pretty and lissom" Miss Clifton. *The Era* declared that by their graceful and very expert performance the art they practice so well is popularised and that many visitors would be motivated to "study natation" after seeing the charming appearance of these ladies in their pretty costumes. Appearance was often commented on. *The Licensed Victuallers' Mirror* observed that Olivette Flower was not only a beautiful swimmer, but "a damsel that might with confidence be entered in a beauty show and backed to win".

Agnes's half-sister, Lizzie, the professor's youngest daughter, bridged the gap between sport and music-hall even more than Agnes by using her swimming ability to carve out an entertainment career. The Professor employed Lizzie in his shows alongside other female swimmers including Olivette Flower and Minnie Ward around the country between 1889 and 1893. Her remarkably agile swimming and the graceful natation of Miss Clifton, were worth a long journey to witness and should induce many ladies to learn to swim. Lizzie's racing ability brought forth "a plentiful crop of challenges from other naiads", and Beckwith issued a challenge on behalf of his daughters in the *London Sportsman* to all and sundry among the female sex of the world, for a swimming match, the stake-money to be large or small.

In her early days Lizzie often appeared on bills as "Nellie" as when she accompanied Agnes in her engagement at the *Canterbury Music Hall* in 1887. *The Era* regretted that the tank at the Canterbury did not have sufficient space to allow Agnes to display to the full that grace and beauty of style which is, perhaps, unequalled. She performs her various feats under water, such as drinking a bottle of milk, writing her name and that of her companion on a slate, and picking up a number of shells, with the certainty and ease expected from so skilful a performer. Her acrobatic feats are also cleverly done, and prove that Miss Beckwith has had gymnastic training. Indeed, her finely developed physique more than hints this fact. Miss Nellie is already an accomplished pupil, and her performance is creditable to one so young. From the moment the two performers "took to the water" their every movement was watched with evident interest by the audience through the plate-glass front of the tank, which is elegantly built up between scenery depicting foliage, possibly to suggest the haunt of Undine or some equally historic water nymph.

By 1896, however, Lizzie had established herself as a song and dance artist, initially in conjunction with fellow natationist, Florrie Newton as one half the "Sisters Beckwith" who performed in Ramsgate and Dover during 1896, "winning all hearts with their cleverly-rendered Pierrot and coon songs". Frederick, "the originator of all water Shows", subsequently advertised Lizzie and Florrie in two distinct turns as high divers, sea swimmers and tank performers or, alternatively, as Lizzie Beckwith and Florrie Newton, Song and Dance Artists. While the Sisters Beckwith continued to "gracefully illustrate some remarkable feats in natation", the song and dance act became increasingly popular and appeared all over the country.

Following Fredrick's death in May 1898 and the marriage of Florrie to George Bland, of Blarney and Bland, Irish comedians, Lizzie reverted to a solo music hall act, often as a tank performer. As a swimmer she performed at Ramsgate Pier Pavilion in 1899 with Mr.

Austin in a Monte Cristo feat and again with Miss Mary Cochrane, champion swimmer. Elsewhere, she appeared as a soubrette, serio, and dancer, sometimes as Beth or Bessie Osland, after her mother's maiden name. A soubrette sang light songs or played comedy routines in the role of a maidservant. A serio would come on the stage walking as if a puppet hung on wires and with a fixed smile to deliver a ditty.

In 1891, Frederick declared himself very proud of "Agnes, for she's been a credit to my system of teaching, and I am glad I brought her up as a professional lady swimmer." The public acceptance of female swimming professionals like Agnes and Lizzie reflected the common consensus that swimming was a suitable activity for females, always provided that the exercise was not too violent. The attempt of Fraulein Walburga von Isa Cescu, the Austrian swimmer, to cross the Channel in 1900 highlighted the ability of women to swim in endurance events, but this was clearly excessive as far as amateur administrators and doctors were concerned, a view that clearly had some longevity. By 1904 the ASA recognised twelve distances as record events for men and only one, the 100 yards, for women. At the 1912 Games, when women were admitted for the first time, and Mrs. Holmes and Mrs. Jarvis attended as their chaperones and trainers, competitors were restricted to the 100-metre freestyle and the 400-metre freestyle relay. In the years since the 1875 endurance swims of Agnes, Emily, and Laura, the capacity of women to exert themselves and the propriety of distance performances had clearly been redefined by male doctors and amateur sportsmen. This was somewhat at odds with the efforts of London swimmer Lily Smith a year later, who nearly died on 22 August 1913 while making a wonderfully plucky attempt to swim the Channel and with the achievement only ten years later of Gertrude Ederle who became the first woman to swim the Channel in 1922, using the front crawl throughout and breaking the existing men's record.

Agnes and Lizzie were not the last of their kind, although subsequent aquatic performers discovered new mediums for their talents. Annette Kellerman established New South Wales records for 100 yards and the mile as a sixteen year old in 1902. From 1903, she gave swimming and diving exhibitions, developed a mermaid act in an entertainment centre and swam with fish in a glass tank at the Exhibition Aquarium. In 1905, she swam records for five, ten, and fifteen miles before travelling to London, 'for more people, more theatres, and more money', where she swam 25 miles along the Thames from Putney Bridge to Blackwall in 3½ hours in front of huge crowds. The *Daily Mirror* editor invited her to attempt to become the first woman to swim the Channel and for six weeks she trained up to a hundred miles a week. When she failed in August 1905, it was not for lack of endurance but because she lacked "physical strength".

Kellerman was subsequently well paid by *L'Auto* newspaper for swimming seven miles on the Seine, with hundreds of thousands of onlookers. She defeated Baroness Isa Cescu in a 22-miles 'Tulu to Vienna' swim in Austria, returning for a winter season at the London Hippodrome before touring America in 1906, as a 'vaudevillian aquatic star', earning as much as \$1250 a week. Her theatre-hippodrome performances were integrated water ballet and high-level athletics and included 60 and 90-foot dives into a small pool. She appeared with fish in a giant glass tank at the New York Hippodrome and for two years, fourteen shows a week, she performed as the 'Australian Mermaid' and the 'Diving Venus'. She married her manager, James R Sullivan in 1912, and her live vaudeville-music hall presentations gradually merged into a new career on the silent screen. She wrote three books, including *How to Swim* (1918), produced shows and owned health spas, exercise emporiums, and special food shops.

When Aileen Riggin turned professional in 1926, she appeared at the pool at the Dolville Casino in Miami Beach, in a glass tank at the Hippodrome in New York and at the Briercliff on the Hudson where she went "to teach swimming and to be around the pool to greet. Just like a golf pro". Riggin appeared in a travelling glass tank with Gertrude Ederle and then gave exhibitions around the world. She then appeared with Johnny

Weismuller in Paris, became a sports consultant for a new shop on 5th Avenue, in New York, got an agent to ghost write her articles, and became a hostess on a cruise ship. At Jones Beach in New York she taught swimming and gave exhibitions. Aileen subsequently appeared in films and eventually became diving coach at the Los Angeles Athletic Club.

The close relationship between entertainment and sport, established and encouraged by swimming professors, was not unique either to the sport or to the age. Professional athletes, aware of the transitory nature of their earning potential from sport, have always explored every potential avenue to capitalise on their reputation. For those unable to establish a sufficiently powerful public presence their engagement with sport can be brief but for others, such as Agnes, whose performances spanned the range of cultural activities that could be associated with swimming, her long-term survival was a function of her ability to appeal to as broad a church as possible. Her success in this respect is reflected by her recognition in the wider popular imagination of the late nineteenth century, epitomised by having a coursing greyhound named after her and by the poems and gentle jokes that referred to her.

1879 ode in *Fun*

Agnes Beckwith

Winner of the Ladies' Swimming Championship of England

The agile Agnes all proclaim

The lady champion aquatic,

And warm admirers hold her fame

To equal that of heroes Attic.

While FUN fair Agnes fame concedes

He cannot with his heroes band her

She rivals in such doughty deeds

Not *Hero*, surely, but *Leander!*

Par excellence the diving belle,

She has no equal in the water;

Yet 'tis not strange she swims so well,

Since of a *swimming race* the daughter.

1880 in *Funny Folks*, A-nymph-atic Compliment,

Some admirers compare the graceful amphibian Miss Beckwith, to a river goddess. She does, indeed, resemble some aquatic *dive-in-ity*.

1889 in *Fun*,

Jones (coming out of the Aquarium) – "I say, Smith, why is Miss Beckwith like a woman who is supporting her child in a bath"

Smith ~ "Give it up"

Jones ~ "Because she holds her own in the water"

It is undoubtedly true that the development of swimming for women was affected by the nuances of class and gender that permeated the sporting environment of the later nineteenth century but attempts to explain this development often fail to appreciate the lives of those who lived at the time. It has been suggested, for example, that Agnes's endurance feats illustrated one of the small steps that women took "in the journey towards acceptance in the male-dominated recreational sphere" and reflected the early efforts of women "to claim swimming as a feminine activity", thus linking these swimming professionals to the "new woman" movement, by suggesting that they consciously took opportunities to assert their independence beyond the more restrictive social roles of earlier decades. Claims like this ignore the contexts within which these women lived and illustrate a continuing vision of history as a linear chronology inevitably intertwined with the concept of "progress". These women were not looking forward to a

time when things would be better or "progress" would take place. They were living in the present and acting as a function of their history not their future, except in the short term of identifying where the next pay cheque might be coming from. However, this is not to minimise their impact. In doing what they did, their contributions, collectively and individually, inadvertently underpinned the structures and attitudes of modern swimming. Agnes Beckwith had a lifetime's association with swimming, as teacher, competitor, and performer. The death of her father and brothers during the 1890s and the closure of the "Aq", combined with increasing maturity of years, may have affected her earning potential but she carried on exhibitions and teaching. Adverts for the forthcoming "Mirror" Gala Day at Crystal Palace in 1904 offered "Miss Agnes Beckwith's Grand Swimming Entertainment" at reduced prices, while visitors to the Manchester Industrial Exhibition during June 1910 were encouraged to visit Miss Agnes Beckwith's Swimming Performances in "Old Manchester". Consistently described in publicity material as the "Premier Lady Swimmer of the World", "her graceful feats" were credited with increasing the numbers of women swimming by the end of the century. *The Penny Illustrated* noted in 1890 that "The favour with which the Beckwiths are held in the public estimation is testified to by the fact that...I can see no signs of any abatement in the interest taken in the performance. It is a very well-arranged and pretty performance, and it is easy to understand what an inducement it has been for ladies to learn swimming when they see what the lady members of the company accomplish". *The Manchester Times* in 1900 styled Agnes "the pioneer of lady swimmers" since "it cannot be denied that to her may be assigned the great popularity of swimming by ladies of the present day".

Inevitably, professionals like Agnes looked after their own interests first but, without their entrepreneurial skills and their ability to adjust the activity to the available facilities, swimming would have lacked any public profile. Through her teaching, her demonstrations and exhibitions, her endurance events that demonstrated what a female swimmer was capable of, and her later orchestration of female aquatic troupes, Agnes was as responsible for the appreciation of swimming among females by the start of the twentieth century as any individual or organisation. Not through some grand design on her part but by her living her life within the constraints and opportunities of her day to day world. Part of that world, of course, was the presence of her father, the patriarchal Professor Beckwith.