

# LIBRARY VERSUS LIDO

Christopher Woodward explores why writers love swimming, and how he came – through his own testing feats of endurance in the sea – to be suspicious of writers' tales of heroic and reckless feats in the water

**W**hy do writers exaggerate the distances and the dangers of their swims? And why do their biographers believe them? I recently put down a book about the Fitzgeralds, which tells a story of how Scott and Zelda dived 30 feet into the sea one reckless night on the Riviera. According to their friend Sara Murphy, Zelda stripped to her slip, and Scott followed her up the cliff; the dive had to be timed with the waves or each would have been dashed to pieces on the cliff. Pause and look up, and count 30 feet. It is half the height of an Olympic diving board and I, at least, would be much too scared to dive from a cliff that height, sober or elated, day or night. Why, I wonder, do biographers who scrutinise laundry lists and bank accounts never question writers' claims of achievements in the water?

Edgar Allan Poe claimed to have swum six miles up the James River against a turning tide. Charles Baudelaire believed him; I don't. Nor do I believe that Edward John Trelawny swam across the whirlpool below Niagara Falls, as he claimed in a much-quoted letter. If I had the vice of writing illicit, crabby marginalia you can guess in which passages the scribbles would be. But, you may ask me, why do you care?

I care because in my twenties and thirties I taught myself to be a good swimmer. I began with breaststroke and my lips turned blue crossing Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts, on a day when the autumn reflections met in the black centre of the lake. That was the first time I became

suspicious of writers: Henry David Thoreau declaimed about 'bathing' but I do not think he ever swam across the Pond and back. At a 'wild swimming picnic' in memory of Roger Deakin I swam from Grantchester Meadows to Cambridge and the cold penetrated my belly. (Rupert Brooke had the grace to admit that he could only swim 200 yards in the river.) Rounding a lonely rock off the Devon coast, fantasies of a sunless death fly towards you like a field of asteroids. Distances matter if you swim 10 miles in the mist from Lulworth Cove to Weymouth, and every yard a wave hits you in the face. Lord

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Byron would understand. Famously, he declared that he was prouder of swimming the Hellespont than of being a poet.

I am writing in a café in Tarifa, the town that is the southernmost point of Spain. Beside me is Colin Hill, an athletics champion and Channel swimmer. For five days we have looked at palm trees tossing their branches in a crazy east wind. If the wind drops, and changes direction, we will try to swim to Africa: 12 miles across the Strait of Gibraltar. I met Colin on a swim of the Hellespont on the 200-year anniversary

of Byron's crossing. A total of 139 swimmers met on the shore. South Africans and Australians flexed their shoulders and talked loudly and confidently. A man walked over. 'Hi. I'm Harry Mount. I loved your book about ruins.' I gravitated towards his circle of fellow writers and journalists. Thinking about identification if washed up, I slipped my London Library reader's card into my wetsuit. Colin came first. To my surprise, I was twenty-first, and a *Times* columnist declared that I had won 'the literary category'. (Graciously, I point out that the man in front wrote the EasyJet guide to Dublin).

This swim is four times the distance, and we must be fast enough to catch the bit of Africa that sticks out. Colin chuckles about the talk before the Hellespont swim: 'Do you remember all the stories about Greeks and Romans drowning?' The speaker recounting the tales was Charles Sprawson, whom I last saw clapping the swimmers home on the Asian shore. (Charles is a very good swimmer, who swam the Hellespont solo and tried to follow Byron across the Tagus.) His *Haunts of the Black Masseur: The Swimmer as Hero* (1992) is my desert island book, on which I modelled my *In Ruins* (2001). Charles has not tried to write a book since. I have tried, and failed. Is that a coincidence? Am I an ex-writer, I wonder, because I have become a good swimmer?

For eight years I tried to write a book about the British cult of Napoleon. I failed, and should have realised much sooner the impossibility of explaining our obsession

Opposite Weimar Diver, c.1928–30, by Kurt Reichert.





Above, from top *The Swimming Hole*, c.1883–5, by Thomas Eakins, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas; Annette Kellermann, aged 60, in the Yarra River.

with the man. In *The London Library* Napoleon has a longer shelf than anyone except William Shakespeare, and in that darkness you stumble over the bones of men who have intended to write the book, or turn a script into a film: the giant bones of Winston Churchill, Charlie Chaplin, Stanley Kubrick, or obscurities such as G.L. de St M. Watson, author of one of three books on the puzzle of the death mask. The darkness is illuminated by flashes of brilliance such as Lord Rosebery's *Napoleon: The Last Phase* (1900), but the overwhelming sensation in that dark stack is of being buried alive in soil which has been turned over time and time again, like an old graveyard. I have a job so can only write between 6.30 a.m. and 8 a.m. By the end I woke to a grey, fat, silent figure, beckoning to me from the end of the bed. I began to fantasise about swimming around St Helena, an extinct volcano whose flanks slip steeply into the bottomless black Atlantic. If I were the first person to swim around the island would that break Napoleon's hold on me?

One daybreak I put down my pen,

picked up a towel, and walked across London Fields to the Lido. Climbing out after a swim a few months later, a sudden vision: Napoleon was floating on his back in the Lido. He was in full uniform and in the early sunshine medals sparkled on his high, round belly. He was drowned. I was free, and did not put my shoes on as I walked back across the grass.

To the obsessive swimmer the world of suits and elbows, tables and chairs, soon becomes less real than the world inside the pool. Two minutes in the clarity of water is worth twenty minutes twitching on land. At long, air-conditioned meetings I would close my eyes and imagine blue water rising to fill the room. And once I imagined *The London Library* welling up with blue water, and kicking my legs up through the stacks to an open shimmering sky.

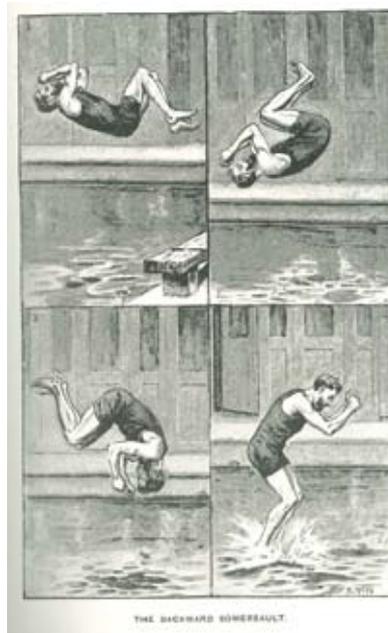
My hunch is that for many *Library* members a pool would be the perfect annexe. Writers love swimming, as Sprawson explores in his beautiful descriptions of Percy Bysshe Shelley plunging into mountain pools, Iris Murdoch into fast country rivers, or Jack London fantasising that the perfect wife would be able to swim beside him through the breakers and far out to sea. But why aren't they very good at it, with the one exception of Byron? Perhaps the answer is obvious: writers are not good at swimming for the

same reason they are not good at boxing, or football. They are reflective, and self-doubting, and step outside themselves at the decisive moment.

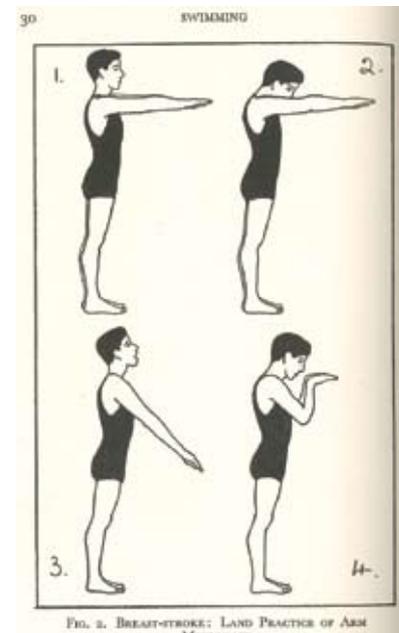
While Colin zaps zombies on his iPhone I read Fernando Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet* (published posthumously in 1982), snatched from the classics section of W.H. Smith at Gatwick Airport. Its opening pages are a masterful analysis of contemplation versus action: 'For those few like me who live without knowing how to have life, what's left but renunciation as our way and contemplation as our destiny?'

But it's deeper than that, I think: immersion in water takes us back into the past. It is a paradox, as the water in seas and rivers is eternally new. Somehow, it is easy to think of the past as contained in a stone, or the touch of trees, or footsteps on a dusty path. But water has no memories. It can chill you, or drown you, but it doesn't care, and it won't remember.

Swim coaches tell you to make alphabetical lists in long-distance training. In Dover Harbour the Channel swimmers meet to swim laps, a kilometre at a time. I make a list of animals, as instructed; battles of the Napoleonic Wars; more animals. But I have just met a girl called Zoe and after six kilometres begin an A-Z of the girls I have kissed. In the water names forgotten on land resurface. There is no one whose



Left to right Illustration by S.T. Dadd from A. Sinclair's and W. Henry's *The Badminton Library: Swimming* (1908); illustration from Harold E. Annisson's *Games and Recreation Series: Swimming* (1937).



name begins with Q, U, V, W or X; 'Venetia's cousin' doesn't quite count. It is the first time I've made such a list, and I'm a little shocked, then sad, weighing the waste of so many starlit, leafy moments. My pace drops even more with an alphabet of unrequited crushes. But at 'S', the coach whistles us into the shore.

Matthew Arnold wrote his poem 'Dover Beach' (1867) in one of these hotels above the shingle. In *Thyrsis* (1865), water became a vessel of grief for his dead friend Arthur Hugh Clough, and of the nostalgia of Arnold's middle age. Swimming was an escape into an idealised childhood for Victorian writers, Sprawson shows us. For Charles Kingsley, for whom 'A woodland bathe to me always brings thoughts of Paradise'. (Were Adam and Eve the first swimmers?) Richard Jefferies, the nature writer and farmer's son, lying cramped and dying in a small room in Clapham, transported himself to the lake in Wiltshire in which he swam as a boy: 'the water did not seem to resist him, it parted and let him through. Between the strokes he glided buoyantly, lifted by the water as swallows glide on the plane of the air. All this portion of the water was in his power, and his elasticity as his stroke compressed it threw him forward. He did not see where he was going, his vision was lost in the ecstasy of motion, all his mind was concentrated in the full use of his limbs. The delicious delirium of strength - unconsciousness of reason, unlimited consciousness of force - the joy of life itself filled him.' But you cannot be 'lifted' by water, and water does not 'part' or 'let you through'. Your limbs push water out of the way. It is not 'elastic', and cannot be compressed by your stroke. The medium Jefferies describes is memory, not water.

It is Tuesday. By Friday, the coastguard tells us, the sea may be calm enough to cross. Colin zaps more zombies. Staring at the white-caps I mouth from memory the last words of *The Great Gatsby* (1925): we beat against the current boats borne back ceaselessly into the past.

What do you think about in a race, I ask Colin. He divides his ideal time into quarters, and dedicates each to one of his four children. Quickly, I realise that I am guilty of another literary delusion: to romanticise the sportsman as 'the other': purposeful, and concentrated, and untroubled by self-



The author (right) with Immanuel Kant (left), 2011. Photograph by Rick Morris Pushinsky.

reflection and fantasy. I am wrong: Colin, it turns out, has the latest Cormac McCarthy in his bag, and we compare notes on Richard Matheson's zombie masterpiece *I am Legend* (1954). Colin sees the drowned Greeks too. The difference is that he has a stronger leverage of mind.

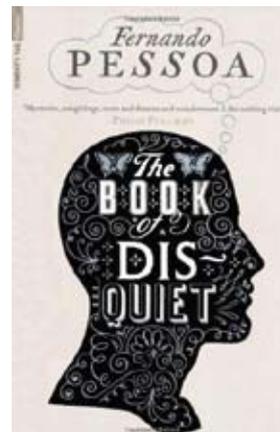
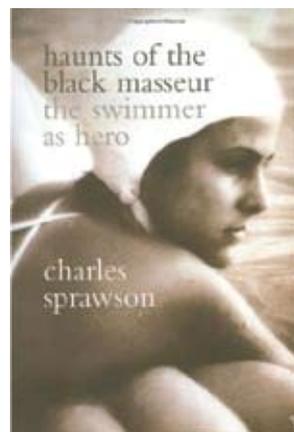
*Friday 8 October, 10.20 a.m.*

Because of the ten-day blow there is a queue of swimmers in the town: at the front a policeman from Chicago who swam the Channel fifteen years ago, and behind us two young Germans. My only chance of a swim is to join the American, if I am fast enough in a trial. I swim at his speed for a hundred strokes. But he pulls away. A few hundred metres later, I give up. There is a ruthless but refreshing clarity in judging sporting ability. And there is also the writer's

curse: through a crack in the moment, you picture an ending, and the ending is what happens.

The two young Germans are faster too. I pack for home; my wetsuit lies flat and black on the floor like Peter Pan's shadow. At least failure is more interesting to write about, I reflect. Suddenly, the coastguard calls: the authorities will permit a second crossing in the afternoon, on condition that the first group crosses quickly. From the cliff we watch their escort boat reach the shipping lanes. I sit and look at the silhouette of Morocco and resist the temptation to imagine an ending.

*Christopher Woodward completed the crossing in 4 hours 11 minutes. He is believed to be the first member of The London Library to have swum the Strait of Gibraltar.* ●



Left to right Charles Sprawson's *Haunts of the Black Masseur: The Swimmer as Hero* (1992), 2009 edition; Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet* (1982), 2010 edition.