

REVIEW OF “FROM SEA-BATHING TO BEACH GOING: A SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE BEACH IN RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL”

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Abstract: Review of the book *From Sea-Bathing to Beach-Going: A Social History of the Beach in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*. By Bert J. Barickman, edited by Hendrik Kraay and Bryan McCann.

Keywords: Beach; Brazilian History; Social History.

Resenha de “From Sea-Bathing to Beach Going: A Social History of the Beach in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil”

Resumo: Resenha do livro *From Sea-Bathing to Beach-Going: A Social History of the Beach in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*, de Bert J. Barickman, organizado por Hendrik Kraay and Bryan McCann.

Palavras-chave: Praia; História do Brasil; História Social.

From Sea-Bathing to Beach-Going: A Social History of the Beach in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. By B. J. Barickman. Edited by Hendrik Kraay and Bryan McCann. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2022. Pp. xxviii + 287. Hb US\$95, Pb, \$US29.95.

A social history of Rio de Janeiro’s Atlantic Ocean beaches, *From Sea-Bathing to Beach-Going* is based on an ‘unfinished manuscript’ (p. xiii) composed by Bert Barickman, a highly respected historian of Brazil at the University of Arizona. Barickman died in 2016 and two colleagues, Hendrik Kraay (University of Calgary) and Bryan McCann (Georgetown University), completed the book which includes five chapters (four fully fleshed out by Barickman and the fifth taken from an article he published in this journal),² a Preface co-authored by Kraay and McCann, an Introduction by Kraay, and an Epilogue by McCann. Chapter 1 explores the reasons why Cariocas bathed at the beach in the nineteenth century. One reason was medical advice and this is the focus of Chapter 2. Urban planning at the turn of the twentieth century

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² B. J. Barickman, ‘Medindo maiôs e correndo atrás de homens sem camisa: A polícia e as praias cariocas, 1920–1950’, *Recorde: Revista de História do Esporte*, 9, 1 (2016): 1–66.

resulted in the displacement of many poor Cariocas from downtown and Chapter 3 examines the subsequent social and spatial segregation of Rio de Janeiro's beaches as one effect of dislocation. Capturing the principal title of the book, Chapter 4 shifts attention from sea-bathing to the 'invention' of beach-going and tanning in the 1920s, most notably at Copacabana. Chapter 5 traces the policing of bathers' bodies between the 1910s and 1940s as city officials and senior police attempted to discipline the way beachgoers presented themselves in public. Finally, the Epilogue offers what McCann calls an 'episodic overview' of the period between the 1950s and 1990s and which he contrasts with the 'fine-grained history' of the five chapters (p. 174).

The foundation of *From Sea-Bathing to Beach-Going* arguably rests on Barickman's reassessment of a popularly-accepted view that Rio de Janeiro's beaches underwent a rapid transition in the 1920s as the primary interest of visitors shifted from sea-bathing, as therapy, to the sand, as a site of sociable leisure. Barickman traced this contention to the memoirs of Luiz Edmundo, a prominent journalist and man of letters. Edmundo, Barickman claimed, 'directly or indirectly' influenced 'nearly every author who has taken up the issue in recent decades' (p. 31). Barickman rejected Edmundo's position and presents evidence to show that Cariocas visited the beach prior to the 1920s for a plethora of reasons: to "refresh themselves ... on hot summer days," 'to wash themselves' (p. 40), 'for amusement [and] sociability' (p. 41), to display their 'partially undressed bodies' as a measure of their corporeal capital (p. 62), to partake in 'hygienic exercise' that "improve[d] ... the race" (p. 43), for simple 'fun' or to just while away time (p. 44). Slaves from Africa and Indigenous Brazilians, Barickman commented, also went to the beach as part of their cultures and traditions. In Barickman's words, 'there is no shortage of sources to indicate that sea-bathing' among nineteenth century Cariocas 'was *not* merely a "medical prescription" but 'already a form of "recreation"' (p. 46). His key sources were Brazilian novels and short stories, non-fictional accounts by European visitors, and the social pages in the magazine *Revista Illustrada*. Further evidence, he added, is found in the growth of the city's bathing facilities as amusement and recreational centres.

From Sea-Bathing to Beach-Going contains a score of interesting arguments. Five stand out in my reading: the limited impact of international tourism on the development of beach-going in Rio de Janeiro, the emergence of Copacabana as the city's premier beach, the long-lasting restrictions on the hours that beach-goers could bathe, the aggressive policing of bathers' costumes in the name of preserving decency and morality, and the relationship between tanning and racial identity. Barickman concluded that 'tourism had little influence in shaping the history of beach-going' in the city in the twentieth-century (p. 64). He drew this conclusion after scouring official statistics of foreign visitors to Rio de Janeiro; he highlighted the small numbers by comparing them with those at other beach resorts. For example, he

calculated that ‘17,608 ... foreign tourists visited Rio de Janeiro in 1938’ whereas Blackpool, Britain’s most popular seaside resort, ‘welcomed four million visitors in 1913 and seven million in 1931’ (p. 87). Barickman’s interpretation of government documents was that

authorities and upper-class Cariocas ... did not want foreigners to regard their city as primarily a beach resort. In their view, Rio de Janeiro was first and foremost Brazil’s national capital, a “civilized” and “modern” metropolis on par with the world’s other great cities but also with a key difference: the extraordinary beauty of its natural setting. (p. 88)

Nor did ‘mass international air travel ... turn Rio de Janeiro into a major destination for beach-going tourists’ (p. 89). Here Barickman turned to the logic of geography: ‘the city was too far from North America and northern Europe, whose middle classes had much more accessible beaches ... in, respectively, the Caribbean and the Mediterranean’ (p. 89).

Barickman acknowledged that the 1920s were a pivotal period in the development of Rio de Janeiro’s beaches, especially Ipanema and Copacabana. But he insisted that the reasons were complex, ‘a mix of technological changes; patterns of urbanization; the influence of medicine, eugenics, foreign fashion and real estate speculation; the expansion of Rio de Janeiro’s upper and upper middle classes as well as investment by government and privately-owned utility companies’ (p. 100). Here Barickman revealed his skills of synthesis, distilling the mix to four principal factors: ‘Copacabana’s development as a fashionable, elite residential neighbourhood; the growth in automobile ownership; the establishment of an effective lifeguard service in the 1910s; and perhaps most important, the rise of tanning as a fashionable custom’ (p. 100). ‘Together’, he concluded, ‘these factors promoted beach-going as a fashionable leisure activity in Rio de Janeiro and helped make Copacabana and Ipanema the city’s “elegant” and “aristocratic” beaches, as the press regularly called them’ (p. 100). Once again, concrete evidence underscores the argument. For example, statistics pertaining to population density, which ‘tripled’ at Copacabana between 1920 and 1940 (p. 111), and photographs of the beach in different years (e.g., p. 101, p. 107 and p. 109) illustrate the discussion around ‘patterns of urbanization’.

Barickman’s history of the development of lifesaving on Rio de Janeiro’s beaches piqued my interest as an historian of the Australian beach. His narrative shows many parallels with the history of the surf lifesaving movement in Sydney, most notably with respect to the dates of first formal organization (early twentieth century), the authority that lifeguards assumed over sea-bathers and beach-goers, and the uneasy relationships between city officials and lifesaving officials. As apposite evidence of lifeguard authority, Barickman cited the English traveller W. H. Kobel who wrote that ‘bathing at Copacabana is by no means [a] free

and easy proceeding ... there are high and stern authorities who lay down the law as to where the cosmopolitan inhabitants ... shall bathe, and how they shall do it' (p. 122). Kobel could just as easily have been describing the situation on Sydney's ocean beaches.³

Like their counterparts in Sydney, city officials in Rio de Janeiro passed laws restricting the hours that beach-goers could bathe. These laws continued in Rio de Janeiro for decades after they were abandoned in Australia (and New Zealand).⁴ In the Brazilian city, officials primarily controlled bathing hours by regulating the hours lifeguards patrolled. Only in the summer of 1951 were lifeguards at Copacabana permitted to operate all day, from early morning to evening 'with no interruption in the middle of the day' (p. 123). Officials in Rio de Janeiro and Sydney also both passed laws governing the bathing costumes worn by men and women, ostensibly to preserve decency and morality. But whereas in Sydney enforcement was the responsibility of a few Beach Inspectors appointed by local municipalities, in Rio de Janeiro city officials 'mobilized a small army of "civil guards, secret agents, delegates and acting delegates" and even mounted police' (p. 145). In some instances, Rio de Janeiro's enforcers even targeted lifeguards. Barickman recounted an incident in 1948 in which the Policia Especial (Special Police) severely beat a lifeguard. Jeered by nearby beachgoers, the police retaliated by 'indiscriminately' throwing tear gas cannisters and attacking them with their nightsticks (p. 153).

Barickman attributed the emergence of tanning as 'a fashion at Rio de Janeiro's oceanfront beaches' to 'eugenics, heliotherapy, or French fashion, or some combination of all three' (p. 128). He also analyzed the 'complex implications' of tanning on 'notions of color and race' (p. 128). To assist this analysis, he consulted theoretical and philosophical literature, including works by feminist scholars Ann Stoler and Sara Ahmed, and argued that 'the distinction between the color of a tanned white body and that of someone of mixed African and European ancestry' was 'anything but obvious or clear cut' to observers in the 1920s and 1930s (p. 128 and p. 129).

Barickman was cognizant of language and translation when interpreting the relationship between tanning and racial identity in Brazil. He proposed that any interpretation should consider the 'polysemous' word '*moreno* (or *morena* in the feminine)', a term which

³ In 1910, Egbert Russell, an English visitor to Sydney, wrote that 'the members of the surf clubs are entrusted with the task of maintaining order on the beaches; and the word "order" is interpreted in so drastic a manner as to surprise people used to similar resorts in Europe and America. When he was here last Christmas, [the American writer] Jack London was astounded to see two youths, in the act of dragging a third by his heels into the water, ordered to desist by a life-saver. The surf life-savers ... are "whales" on order; and it is rare, indeed, that anybody hears of an incident which might not receive the hearty endorsement of the whole Council of Churches'. Egbert Russell, 'Australia's amphibians', *Lone Hand*, January 1910, p. 265.

⁴ Douglas Booth, *Australian Beach Cultures: The History of Sun, Sand and Surf* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 192 note 23 and 193 note 32.

'lacks any exact equivalent in English', but which designates the bronze (*bronzado*) and golden (*dourado*) skin colors resulting from suntanning (p. 132). According to one prominent thesis at the time, 'the practice of tanning and of making oneself *moreno*', or alternatively *amorenamento*, 'allowed beach-goers'

to participate in an ideological project that defined Brazil as on its way to becoming a *moreno* nation, forged physically and culturally through miscegenation. Thus, they could see their *amorenamento* ... at the beach as a contribution to ... 'the *aurora morena* [moreno dawn] of the nation's flesh [*a carne nacional*], awaiting the miracle of a strong race'. (p. 133)

Barickman challenged this thesis: upper- and upper middle-class (white) bathers did not surrender their white identity. On the contrary,

the *amorenamento* of bathers at the beach in Copacabana and Ipanema was fully compatible with a racial hierarchy. [T]anning in no way represented a step toward the elimination of color and racial distinctions. Whites "toasted dark brown" by the sun would continue to see themselves at white, and ... they would remain at the top of the racial hierarchy. The practice of tanning did not result in an end of racism or an end to the profound racial inequalities that still plagued Brazil'. (pp. 134-35)

From Sea-Bathing to Beach-Going is a welcome addition to the literature. It will appeal to social and cultural historians, historians of beaches, and those who like historiographical clarity. Social historians of Brazil, and beach cities elsewhere, will profit from the way Barickman tied Rio de Janeiro's beaches to the city's class and racial past. His picture of the intersection between class and the beach in the nineteenth century, for example, is most evocative. Sea-bathing at this juncture—when a small upper class, including those 'engaged in the trans-Atlantic slave trade', and a tiny white-collar middle class ruled over a large free class, the majority of whom 'lived in poverty and sometimes in miserable poverty' (p. 6)—'was primarily a predawn or early morning activity' (p. 10). The first visitors 'arrived at the city's beaches at three or four o'clock in the morning; most ... would be ... on their way home or to work before six or seven o'clock' (p. 10). Beaches were regularly polluted by sewage and trash dumped by slaves overnight; any expectation that 'tides would disperse the filth' (p. 15) was often a forlorn hope.

Historians of the beach will appreciate Barickman's acknowledgement of the slave and Indigenous influence on sea bathing among Cariocas. As he suggested, African cultural traditions, not 'learned treatises defended at the Rio de Janeiro medical school', influenced slaves and their children to bathe in the sea,⁵ while 'Indigenous peoples who lived near and around Guanabara Bay knew

⁵ For a fuller explication see, Kevin Dawson, *Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

how to swim well and regularly entered the water' (p. 45). Alerting historians of beaches elsewhere to developments in Brazil could, potentially, challenge orthodoxies. The Surf Lifesaving Association of Australia, which still clings to a view that it leads the world in surf safety, will be surprised to learn that 'Rio de Janeiro's lifesaving service ... won the admiration and respect of beach-goers and repeated praise from the press. Even the *New York Times* reported favourably' (p. 123).⁶

According to Kraay, Barickman had planned two chapters to cover the post-1950s and that he had intended to analyze the different activities in which beachgoers engaged, what they wore, how they behaved, and the distinct cultures that form around the lifeguard posts on Rio de Janeiro's beaches and which constitute a form of 'microgeography' (p. xix). McCann's Epilogue captures Barickman's key points, including illusions of 'democratic' beaches (p. 184). Indeed, a recent article in the *New York Times*⁷ testifies to Barickman's argument that 'social [and cultural] distinctions [do] not disappear on the sand' (p. 184).

From Sea-Bathing to Beach-Going is an exemplar of professional historical practice. Barickman had extensive knowledge of the archives, a sharp eye for detail and a canny ability to interpret statistics, official documents, photographs and literature; the text parades sensitivity towards popular culture and insights from across the humanities and social sciences. It is beyond my scope to comment on Barickman's skill with Brazilian Portuguese but I do want to convey what one peer has said. Martha Santos, a former graduate student and enthusiastic supporter of the project to publish the book, comments that his published work on the beach was 'written in a Brazilian Portuguese voice that is richly textured, often humorous, and deeply embedded in *carioca* culture, folklore, and urban geography'. Santos, surmises that Barickman 'conceptualized and wrote the chapters ... in Portuguese—his beloved foreign language—first. After that, he wrote the chapters in English and then returned to the Portuguese versions to make them even better'.⁸

Barickman is not the only one deserving praise. Kraay and McCann's willingness to edit the book was a noble act of respect and generosity. Other colleagues, too, made significant contributions. Pedro Falk, a PhD student at the University of Calgary, for example, compiled the mammoth 31-page bibliography from the footnotes in the original

⁶ For a critical history of the Surf Life Saving Association of Australia see, Ed Jaggard (ed.), *Between the Flags: One Hundred Summers of Australian Surf Lifesaving* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2006).

⁷ Hurubie Meko, 'He was swimming at Rockaway after hours. He ended up in handcuffs', *New York Times*, August 9, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/09/nyregion/rockaway-beach-arrest.html?smid=em-share>

⁸ Martha Santos, 'In memory of B. J. Barickman: *Historian, Teacher, Mentor*', *Luso-Brazilian Review*, 54 (1), 2017: 3.

manuscript. *From Sea-Bathing to Beach-Going* is a fine text by historians of Brazil.