

MAKING THE LEAP

by Michael Winkler

Abandonment is the reckless first cousin of total commitment. You can't have one without the other. I was perched on a cliff in Studley Park surrounded by the smells of eucalyptus, but my thoughts were way out to sea. I was thinking about teenager Jesse Martin sitting on his tiny yacht somewhere beyond the Horn. Was he in the middle of a gale, sailing under fair skies, or becalmed in the horse latitudes? He set out to circumnavigate the globe; when you do that, you don't get a lot of choice in terms of the weather.

I had come to the cliff because I wanted to stand on the site where Alick Wickham set a world high-dive record in 1918, plunging a phenomenal distance into the depths of the Yarra. In the dark days of the Great War Wickham's feat drew a crowd of about sixty thousand. All of those people to watch one man, a Solomon Islander by birth, risk his neck.

I was on my own, straining for echoes of that crowd eight decades earlier, but the bush was quiet save for a malevolent pair of sleek black crows, fat as footballs, and the leaf-rustle of a lizard or a snake. It was a good day for thinking. The city was ten minutes away, but somehow belonged in another hemisphere all together. The Yarra sat at the bottom of the cliff, brown and benign. An old river. And a river that looked a long, long way down. I wouldn't have jumped into it with a parachute and a safety harness.

Interestingly, the dive was made just upstream from Dights Falls, the site where Batman conned the Aborigines out of the land where this city now stands. In the midst of commerce and dealing-down and the booming business of growing a city, a simple act of courageous risk-taking seems oddly elevating - almost noble. We talk in terms of leaps of faith; taking the plunge; throwing ourselves into something; getting in deep; diving head-first into a situation: he did this literally, but the resonances are figurative.

Interesting, too, that Wickham was a black man, superbly built with a deep chest and a tight crop of fuzzy dark hair. Not one of 'our' black men though, but an Islander. Perhaps this made him seem merely exotic rather than alien and threatening. Perhaps it meant that his feat could be viewed in terms of the achievement itself, rather than being distorted through the ugly prism of racial stereotyping.

Wickham's leap was designed to raise money "To Augment the Amelioration Funds for Returned Soldiers", and indeed a large sum was raised. More than that, however, it lifted the spirits of a city ground down by almost four years of war. The advertisement in The Age was determined not to downplay his effort: "PRINCE WICKYAMA [Wickham's theatrical alias] will undertake the most PERILOUS dive that has ever been attempted in any part of the WORLD. Leaping off the dangerous cliffs on the Yarra from a height of 205 feet 9 inches...it is estimated that Prince Wickyama in his hazardous descent will be going at the RATE OF 100 MILES PER MINUTE by the time he strikes the water." The capitalisation is theirs; the thrill was to be ours.

The Age of the following day records that at 5.00 pm Wickham crossed the Yarra by canoe and ascended the platform where he stood for some minutes surveying the scene. "When a second bugle call rang out, and Wickyama crouched for the jump there was a strained silence, broken only by gasps from hysterical women in the crowd." The impact of hitting the water ripped the three costumes he wore from his body and he had to signal for a blanket before he climbed out. After the dive and a moment of silence there came,

"a burst of applause from every throat that might have been heard miles away." Most of the men present threw their hats into the air, many of them landing in the Yarra and floating lazily off downstream. It didn't matter; Wickham's leap of faith had made risk-taking possible, even to the abandonment of personal possessions. John Wren had laid on a bet of 100 pounds, and Wickham collected. Wren was President of the Deep Rock Swimming Club - one of his more respectable claims to fame.

(Incidentally, Wickham is responsible for the quintessence of Australian beach culture. He introduced the Australian crawl as a stroke to the Western world in 1898, and he started the surfboard craze in 1908. He was our great Boy of Summer, and we've forgotten him.)

Jesse Martin shouldn't be so forgotten. His exploit is nowhere near as spectacular as Wickham's, but no less remarkable for that. His endeavour requires guts of an elastic, enduring sort, not the rifle-crack courage needed to leap off a diving platform. He was interviewed via satellite phone on the radio recently and as he spoke I had a vision of water and vastness and utter, utter aloneness. He sounded poised, even chirpy.

I could no more imagine myself sailing alone around the world than I could envisage diving off a high cliff. Most of us never sail our boats far from the shore. We choose to ply our trade in well-charted waters, to put into safe harbour every evening, to sail where the winds are never fierce or fluky. Yet somehow it lifts the soul to think that one of us - one of Us - is prepared to risk everything. Whether that be a headlong hurtle into a river or a prolonged feat of maritime endurance, we need these daring people to remind us what humans are capable of. To widen the horizons of the possible, and explore the further limits on our behalf.

A trip to Studley Park was about as adventurous as I would get this week. I took a last look at the distant Yarra, shrugged off a moment of dizziness, and headed home to spend a sleepy evening in front of the television.