What marvellous watermen the South Sea Islanders are to be sure! The Wickham brothers are two good examples of their prowess in the element ... (Referee, 22 January 1913, 4).

In his seminal study examining tours by non-'white' sportsmen to Australia in the federation period, Andrew Honey (2001: 46) argued that negative racial stereotyping was common and such tours ‘probably strengthened, rather than weakened, the racial images that lay behind the White Australia Policy’. The White Australia Policy, which informed the immigration policies of the newly created Commonwealth of Australia for decades after 1901, ideologically and practically positioned people of Anglo-Celtic heritage as racially superior and discriminated against those from other racial backgrounds. More recent research has complicated this understanding about the racial impact of visiting non-'white' athletes. Two separate studies focusing on Japanese sporting tourists to Australia in the 1920s and 1930s, for example, argued that cultural difference was racialised in those tours, but that often the goodwill generated by the visits mitigated against racial images underlying the White Australia Policy (Brawley, 2011; Osmond, 2013).

This paper returns to the question of how non-'white' sportsmen were racialised by focusing on Pacific Islander aquatic sportsmen, namely two brothers from the Solomon Islands who ‘made a splash’ in competitive swimming in early twentieth century Australia – Alick Wickham (Figure 1) and his younger brother Edward (Ted) Wickham (Figure 2). Unlike the sporting tourists addressed by Honey, including another Islander, the Hawaiian Olympic swimming champion Duke Paoa Kahanamoku, the Wickham brothers resided in Australia: Alick for nearly three decades and Ted for several years. While previous research on Alick Wickham has argued that he was accommodated positively as an exception to the standard derogatory stereotyping of Pacific
Islanders in Australia in the early years of Australian federation, and noted the existence of a ‘Nimble Savage’ stereotype that described the supposed natural aquatic advantage of Islanders, the focus of that research was on memory (Osmond and Phillips, 2004) and mythologising (Osmond and Phillips, 2006) that arose from this sporting racial stereotype. This paper will focus instead on press constructions of the Wickham brothers during their sporting careers, specifically on how media reporting of their activities was largely positive and challenged prevailing negative racial images. The contemporary relevance of this historic case study lies in the continuing media practice of offering racially essentialist commentaries on Pacific Islanders in sport, particularly in the rugby codes where the numbers of Islander players are proportionally high (Grainger, 2009; Lakisa, Adair and Taylor, 2014).

Figure 1: Alick Wickham, 1914.

While long-term residency differs from short-term visits, the Wickhams provide a valuable case study because their prominence over an extended period of time offers a useful lens onto how they were perceived and identified as Islanders. Unlike in the case of non-‘white’ sporting tourists, whose novelty might favourably influence racial constructions, we might expect that any race-based fascination with prominent Islander resident athletes would dissipate over time as they became familiarised. In fact, as this paper will argue, obsession with of the Islander origins of the Wickhams did not fade, but rather came to dominate press constructions.

While newspapers offer one voice only among many, an examination of the press is useful for several reasons. For one, it is a rare surviving voice from this era. While breakfast-table discussion and pub-counter rants are lost to us, newspaper accounts of the Wickhams remain well-preserved and, with digitisation, readily accessible through on-line portals like the National Library of Australia’s Trove. The press is also useful because it contains a wide range of reporting from diverse groups of commentators. But quite apart from their usefulness as a rich and ready repository, newspapers are an active voice and not ‘mere buckets of words with no agency or function of their own’ (Nicholson, 2013: 71). Perhaps most significant for this essay, the press did not simply report, but also constructed events, individuals and groups in particular ways and influenced how they were received.

Alick and Ted Wickham

Alick and Ted Wickham were the sons of Somerset-born Francis (Frank) Wickham (1850 - 1926), who was shipwrecked in the Bougainville Strait around 1875 and settled in the Solomon Islands where he became a prosperous and influential trader and planter (Golden, 1993: 211). Alick and Ted, whose mother was Pinge Naru, from Simbo, were born on 1 June 1886 or 1887 (Wickham, 2001; Referee, 31 March 1926, 19) and circa 1892, respectively. The children, including an older half-brother, Harry,
and three sisters, Edna, Possie and Rachel Tottie, were raised in the Roviana Lagoon on New Georgia where the sea featured prominently in their lives and swimming was a popular recreation. The local swimming stroke, a version of the crawl (freestyle) stroke, called the *tuppa-ta-palla*, and feet-first diving, would influence the brothers’ Australian athletic careers.

Frank Wickham had personal and trading connections with Australia, including a brother in Ballina, New South Wales (NSW) (*Northern Star*, 1 September, 1925, 6), and sent all three sons to Sydney for education or training. Harry attended Fort Street School in 1899 and 1900 before returning to Roviana (Glebe, 2000). While the precise date is unclear, it appears that Alick arrived in Sydney around 1901. Initially apprenticed to a Macquarie Street dentist, George Slate (Wylie), in Sydney he worked at various jobs, including as a barber (Sands, 1910: 552) and with the tramways (*Referee*, 17 April 1918, 14).

It is easy to imagine the teenaged Alick running through Sydney’s Domain to the nearby baths at Woolloomooloo to wash away the blood and gore from Slate’s surgery, or simply to relive a familiar pleasure. Whatever Wickham’s motivation, he began swimming competitively soon after his arrival and quickly attracted attention for his unusual style. His first recorded race was at Sydney’s Bronte Baths on 9 March 1901, where he won the 66-yards Boys Handicap in 44 seconds (*Referee*, 13 March 1901, 6). In 1913, the Sydney sporting identity E.S. Marks recalled that ‘much comment was excited by the peculiar swimming of the little dark boy [Wickham], which ‘violated all the known canons of racing’ (*Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)*, 16 January 1913, 9). In 1930, the chief honorary coach of the New South Wales Amateur Swimming Association, Dudley Hellmrich, argued that this event, which he misdated as occurring in 1897, led to the introduction, and naming, of the crawl stroke. Hellmrich claimed that Wickham’s race attracted the attention of prominent coach, George Farmer: ‘Young Alick’s speed, peculiar action, and continuous movement through the water, astounded Farmer, who excitedly exclaimed, “Look at that kid crawling!” George Farmer’s exclamation at Bronte was therefore the cause of the world’s speediest swimming stroke being

dubbed the “Crawl” (Hellmrich, 1930: 11). Based largely on Hellmrich’s colourful account, and despite compelling evidence that the crawl was practiced and named before Wickham’s arrival, Wickham has been mythologised for introducing the crawl stroke to Australia and to international swimming competition (Osmond and Phillips, 2006).

What is beyond dispute is that Farmer trained Wickham from 1902 and produced a national swimming and diving champion whose achievements were reported internationally (*The Times*, 21 February 1910; *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, February 21, 1910, 3). He held several national and NSW state titles, including the unofficial world record over a fifty-yard length from 1904 to 1915. Wickham was also the inaugural Australasian diving champion in 1904, and the New South Wales state champion from 1908 to 1912. He was well known as a regular performer of aquatic stunts at swimming carnivals, most famously a high-dive of sixty-two metres into the Yarra River in Melbourne in 1918 at a patriotic swimming carnival (*Herald*, 25 March 1918, 2).

In 1909, at the height of Alick’s renown, his father retired to Sydney. Ted, his youngest son, followed him in late 1909 (*SMH*, 5 January 1910, 11) and was an itinerant visitor to Sydney over the next year two years while continuing to spend time in the Solomons (*Brisbane Courier*, 4 January 1911, 6). While Ted dabbled in swimming and diving competition in the 1909/10 season, where his ability attracted favourable press attention (*Referee*, 15 December 1909, 9; *Arrow*, 18 December 1909, 6), he made his mark as a swimmer after settling in Sydney in late 1911. Following one race in which Ted posted a creditable time in the 100 yards, the *Sydney Morning Herald* (1 November 1911, 11) enthused: ‘The younger Wickham’s performance, accomplished immediately after a long sea voyage, was most meritorious and is another proof of the great adaptability of the Islanders to the water, their extraordinary natural speed, and the fact that the “crawl” is their very own style of propulsion’. In 1912/13, Ted won the national 100-yard championship, held in Tasmania; captured the New South Wales 220-yard breast-stroke championship; and trialled for the Australian Olympic swimming team in 1912. He moved to Adelaide in 1913, where he won the 220-yard Championship
of South Australia the following year. During the First World War, Ted enlisted in the 1st/6th Battalion, London Regiment in England, and was killed on 15 September 1916 in the Battle of the Somme (Referee, 8 November 1916, 10).

Figure 2: Ted Wickham, 1913.

Source: Tasmanian Mail, 13 February 1913. (Courtesy of State Library of New South Wales).

Alick remained in Sydney, married with one daughter, but from the 1920s began to spend more time in the Solomons (Arrow, 26 February 1926, 14; SMH, 8 August 1934, 18) to where he returned permanently by 1935. He settled in Munda on the Roviana Lagoon and remarried to a local woman, Ima Tako, with whom he had twin sons. Wickham continued to enjoy swimming and entertaining visitors with his water tricks, which were reported in Australia by returned visitors (Australian, 26 October 1968, 12). He died in Honiara in August 1967, aged 80 (Pacific Islands Monthly 38, 1967: 27). In recognition of his contributions to Australia and international competitive swimming, the Government of the Solomon Islands posthumously honoured him in 1984 with a postage stamp; more recently, the Bulletin included him in its ‘100 Most Influential Australians’ (4 July 2006, 98).

**Expected constructions – Political and racial context**

It would not be unreasonable to expect that Australian racial attitudes towards Pacific Islanders at the turn of the twentieth century would have shaped press constructions of the Wickham brothers. Colonial attitudes included an enduring ‘beautiful and the damned’ (Thomas, 1993: 44-46) racial dichotomy that emphasised noble savagery, idealised physicality, and paradise on the one hand, and ignoble savagery and heathenism on the other. Negative stereotypes were reinforced in the sugar cane fields of Queensland, where over 50,000 ‘Kanaka’ labourers were ‘recruited’ for work from 1863 to 1904. These workers, chiefly Melanesians, experienced systematic maltreatment, abuse and degradation (Evans, Saunders, and Cronin, 1993).

Sydney, however, was not Queensland. Pacific Islander ships’ crew and sailors were commonplace in nineteenth-century Sydney: ‘by the early 1870s it was possible to man a vessel with Pacific Islanders without leaving Circular Quay’ (Mullins, 1995: 71). Without overstating the claim, the presence of these sailors likely strengthened historic associations between Islanders and the water. This Nimble Savage stereotype, which will be discussed in more detail below, would facilitate the accommodation of swimmers like the Wickhams.

Overall, however, notions of Islander racial inferiority and associated negative stereotypes were widespread throughout the country. Attitudes of ‘white’ racial superiority that affected Islanders found formal expression in the White Australia Policy, and in specific legislation such as the 1901 Pacific Islands Labourers Act that led to the mass deportation of Islanders by 1908, and the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act that excluded non-‘white’ migrants (Moore, 1999). Based on these factors, the opportunities for the Wickhams might have been limited. This was the case for at least one other Islander: a Fijian swimmer named Sala Bogi was barred on racial grounds from participating in swimming races in Kalgoorlie in 1900 (*West Australian*, 19 December 1900, 6). Competitive swimming opportunities for the Wickham brothers were not guaranteed by any stretch;
nor were favourable press constructions of the brothers when they did enter the water. If anything, Honey's argument that visiting non-'white' sportsmen strengthened negative racial images might be expected to hold true in the case of the Wickhams.

**Actual constructions**

While colonial thinking defined Alick Wickham as being of mixed race – a ‘Person of Mixed European and Aboriginal Native Descent’ in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate (Registration of King’s Regulation, 1907) and sufficiently ‘European’ in Australia to be exempt from the deportation orders of the *Immigration Restriction Act* – the Australian press and public constructed him wholly as an Islander. This was likely because of his skin colour, which was described as ‘very dark’ (Wickham, 1936). In the earliest newspaper reports of his swimming races, segments of the NSW press cast Alick in unmistakably pejorative terms as a ‘kanaka’ (*Sydney Sportsman*, 19 November 1902, 6), ‘cullud’ (*Sydney Sportsman*, 3 December 1902, 6), a ‘darkie’ (*Sydney Sportsman*, 10 December 1902, 6), the ‘little coon from the South Sea Islands’ (*Wellington Times*, 5 March 1903, 3) and as a ‘boy’ (*Referee*, 9 December 1903, 4). Underscoring racial difference and associated qualities, the *Sydney Sportsman* (3 December 1902, 6) reported that he lacked ‘the “cunning” of the palefaces’ ['white' swimmers].

As Alick emerged as an exceptional swimmer, however, these negative racial descriptors were overtaken by ‘softer’, and often favourable, adjectives. Typical epithets during his career included ‘coloured’ (*SMH*, 16 January 1913, 9), ‘coal-hued’ (*Referee*, 10 January 1912, 8), ‘dusky’ (*Catholic Press*, 6 December 1906, 6), ‘copper’ (*Referee*, 9 March 1904, 4), ‘bronzed’ (*Referee*, 15 October 1913, 14) and ‘South Sea Islander lad’ (*SMH*, 2 March 1903, 4). All were favourable in context compared with the earlier ‘coons’, ‘culluds’ and ‘darkies’. It must be acknowledged that the media used catchy adjectives for many swimmers, but the nature (links to skin colour) and frequency
of those that were applied to Wickham indicates the pervading racial consciousness. As a successful swimmer, Alick was increasingly exempt from the most negative constructions; the *Referee* (13 April 1904, 4) went so far as to claim him as ‘Australian’ in 1904 after he became the third person in the world to swim 100 yards in less than one minute and again after his ‘world record’ in the 50 yards (29 March 1905, 4).

By the time Ted Wickham began attracting attention for his swimming ability, Alick was a very well-known and popular swimming champion. As a result, Ted was spared the pejorative descriptions ascribed to Alick on his arrival. Instead, he was ‘Alick’s brother’ (*Arrow*, 18 December 1909, 6) or ‘the new Wickham’ (*SMH*, 6 December 1911, 11). ‘In future,’ wrote the sports columnist for the *Sydney Morning Herald* in late 1911 (6 December 1911, 11), ‘the members of the Wickham family will have to carry their initials, as the younger brother is fast approaching the standard set by Alick’. As with Alick before him, newspaper readers of Ted’s exploits frequently encountered a ‘bronzed’ (*Referee*, 15 October 1913, 14) or ‘dusky’ (*Adelaide Advertiser*, 22 January 1914, 12) swimmer and a ‘South Sea Islander’ (*Launceston Examiner*, 18 February 1913, 2).

Racial constructions of the Wickhams were clearly shaped by such epidermal and ethnic descriptors, but factors such as personality, physicality and especially aquatic ability also contributed to their representation and to stereotyping. An accommodating, humble and modest personality aided the Australian reception of many non-‘white’ athletes, including Kahanamoku (*Sun*, 22 February 1915, 6) and the African American cyclist, ‘Major’ Taylor (Ritchie, 1996: 74, 245). The ‘popular’ (*Referee*, 14 March 1906, 6) Alick Wickham possessed an ‘attractive personality’ (*Referee*, 26 November 1913, 3) and was a ‘greater favorite among swimmers generally than many of his pale-faced rivals’ (*Sydney Sportsman*, 29 June 1904, 4). Kahanamoku’s personality was compared with Wickham’s: ‘In manner, he is free, easy, and companionable, reminding one of Alex. [sic] Wickham. He is of modest disposition’ (*Daily Telegraph*, 30 October 1912). Less was reported about Ted’s personal demeanour, but on one occasion the press used a head-hunter analogy to describe his
competitive spirit. At the 1912/13 NSW State Championship Carnivals: ‘Ted Wickham was out after scalps. His eyes shone with the light of battle lust. He was eager for the fray’ (*Referee*, 15 January 1913, 1). Given that the Wickhams were known to hail from a region of the Solomon Islands notorious for head-hunters in the nineteenth century (Golden, 1993: 2011), the colourful description wittingly or otherwise evoked associations of stereotyped Islander savagery; in this instance, however, the negative allusion was inverted to complement Ted.

Physicality cannot be separated fully from skin colour; as David Spurr (1993: 22) has argued, the body is the essential ‘sign by which the primitive is represented’. Hence the *Sydney Morning Herald’s* (16 January 1913, S) description of Alick and Ted in the 220-yards breast-stroke championship of NSW in 1913: ‘The starter’s signal to go sent the competitors away together and the dusky forms of the Wickham brothers immediately shot to the front’. Descriptions of the Wickhams’ bodies also regularly evoked the stereotype of attractive, sunny-dispositioned Islanders: Alick, for example, was painted as a ‘manly young’ islander whose ‘pleasant smile twinkled all over his face’ (*Referee*, 17 April 1918, 14). Accounts such as the ‘ebony, statue-like form of the ever popular Rubiana [Roviana] native, Alick Wickham’ (*Sunday Times*, 6 April 1913, 22), combined idealised corporeal description with skin colour and reminders of ethnic origin. Reports of the bodies of non-‘white’ people in the colonial era also frequently emphasised the animalism of their subjects. Alick was a ‘flying dark fish’ (*Referee*, 3 December 1902, 4), for example. A description of the ‘lightning-like rapidity of a panther’ (*Referee*, 15 January 1913, 1) exhibited by Ted Wickham in the pool is therefore not simply creative writing, but an example of the way that Pacific islanders were likened to porpoises, dolphins, and, occasionally, sleek mammals like panthers. As in another instance, where Hawaiian surfers displayed ‘pantherlike grace’ (Desmond, 1999: 297), this reference to Ted was positive.

It was in reports of their aquatic abilities that the press most regularly and vividly constructed the Wickham brothers in positive terms and in ways that emphasised racial ability linked
to their origins in the romanticised South Seas. As emphasised in the quotation from the *Referee* that opens this essay, the brothers were not only admired as ‘marvellous watermen’ but were also racially constructed as such. On Alick’s Sydney debut, the *Arrow* (15 November 1902, 3) reported that he was a ‘revelation in the way of darting over [the water] ... even the finny denizens of the deep stare aghast at this latest marvel...’ An outstanding swim by Ted in 1911 was described as ‘another proof of the great adaptability of the Islanders to the water, [and] their extraordinary natural speed...’ (*SMH*, 1 November 1911, 11). Their ability was described as innate: Alick was a ‘true son of Nature’ (*Referee*, 15 January 1913, 9) and Ted a ‘born swimmer’ (*Adelaide Mail*, 22 November 1913, 1).

The brothers did not disassociate from their Melanesian origins, and frequently played to this through their aquatic activities. Both Alick and Ted regularly demonstrated traditional Roviana feet-first diving, the ‘South Sea Island natives’ jump’ (*SMH*, 5 January 1910, 11), in a popular routine that the Australian press called the ‘honga-honga’ (*Sunday Times*, 6 April 1913, 22; *Adelaide Mail*, 22 November 1913, 1). After Alick turned professional in 1914 he deliberately capitalised on his exotic Islander associations, appearing in a tank act with Odiva the ‘Sensational Samoan Diving Queen and her Wonderful Pacific Ocean Seals and Sea Lions’ (*Truth*, 28 February 1915, 2; *Argus*, 19 January 1915, 4) and, most famously, as ‘Prince Wickyama’ in a record-breaking high dive in Melbourne in 1918 (*Herald*, 25 March 1918, 2) and in later carnival events (*Argus*, 12 April 1921, 5).

Alick Wickham’s ability to safely embrace his racial identity as a Solomon Islander and to leverage from it in career terms indicates his positive construction in the press. Initial negative descriptions of Alick, as discussed above, were quickly transformed as he emerged as a notable swimmer in Australia. In constructions of both Wickham brothers as watermen, race and ability were effectively inseparable. A cartoon by the Australian artist, Lionel Lindsay, published in the Sydney *Evening News* (21 March 1904, 6), exemplified the use of swimming to differentiate Alick from
negative depictions of islanders by juxtaposing the sprightly young swimmer winning the 100-yards national championship in 1904 against a bone-gnawing cannibal in a costume event at the same swimming carnival (Figure 3).

Interpreting the positive constructions

Three factors help explain the largely positive press constructions of the Wickham brothers: the Nimble Savage stereotype, prior exposure to Islanders and the nascent aquatic cultures of Australia in this period. Racial stereotypes are products of deterministic ideologies combined with political
and economic structures that impose discriminatory and exclusionary practices. As noted above, Pacific Islanders in Australia in the federation period were positioned low on the rungs of racial ascendancy that privileged ‘whites’, and were subject to discriminatory employment and immigration practices. Simultaneously, however, there existed a long-standing romanticised notion of Islanders as possessing a special affinity with water and a natural swimming prowess. This more ‘positive’ Nimble Savage stereotype, a sportised version of the Noble Savage, grew from early European exploration of the Pacific and was reinforced by visitors, writers, artists and others (Osmond and Phillips, 2004). James King, lieutenant on James Cook’s third Pacific voyage, provided a blueprint in 1779 after observing Hawaiian surfboard riders and swimmers: ‘By such like exercises, these men may be said to be almost amphibious’ (Beaglehole, 1967: 628). In 1913, when the Wickhams were at the height of their renown, King’s comment reverberated in the Sunday Times (6 April 1913, 22) – ‘Of all the races, the South Sea Islanders are probably the greatest living swimmers...’ – and in the sorts of press jottings about the brothers’ natural aquatic skill summarised above.

Such constructions of the Wickhams were contextualised by a number of prior encounters with other Pacific Islander swimmers in Australia that had helped reify the Nimble Savage. When ‘Cooper’, an otherwise unidentified ‘Kanaka’, won a 300-yards race at Sydney’s Domain Baths in 1855, the Evening News (19 February) questioned why nobody complained given the advantages provided by his ‘unequal’ abilities as an islander. In 1863, the Melbourne Argus, commenting on an exhibition by Maori swimmers in Melbourne, encapsulated the stereotype: ‘The spectators, who had probably read of the wonderful feats of swimming performed by savage tribes ... expected to see these tawny natives display great prowess in the foamy deep, and eclipse the most expert English or Australian swimmers’ (Argus, 12 January 1863, 5). And in 1872, a ‘South Sea Islander’ named Jamie won an underwater swimming contest at Sydney’s Robinson’s Baths ‘without any (apparent) effort’: other Islanders were entered in separate races that day and performed a floating and swimming
exhibition titled the ‘Gambols of Pearl Divers’ (SMH, 2 April 1872, 5). Thirty years later, newspaper readers learned that a Sydney swimming champion [likely Sid Cavill] had been beaten by a ‘sturdily-built dusky maiden’ (Referee, 24 August 1898, 6) in Samoa, and a visiting ‘dusky [Maori] lady’ defeated an Adelaide swimmer (West Australian, 23 January 1904, 8).

In the early twentieth century, a range of other Islanders who appeared in the baths and on the beaches of NSW helped to reinforce the stereotype of the Nimble Savage created by these earlier encounters. These included crew from two Solomon Islander vessels who dived from their ships’ rigging in Sydney harbour (Referee, 1 April 1903, 6; Referee, 26 January 1916, 16); surfing displays by Ellice [Tuvalu] Islander sailors in 1912 (Sun, 28 December 1912, 7); and a Fijian cricket team which participated in swimming races, displays and a surf rescue in 1907 (Bulletin, 19 December 1907, 24; Referee, 11 December 1907, 4). Reportage of the latter event at Newcastle noted that ‘Prince Ratu Kadavu Levu’, the ‘powerful Fijian’ who swam to the rescue of a local man, was ‘cleaving the water as if it was his natural element’ (Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate, 24 December 1907, 4). The surf had its own romanticised associations with Islanders, illustrated by the names given to two surfboards built at Manly in the early 1900s: Honolulu Queen and Fiji Flyer (Maxwell, Surf: 235). While Fiji may be a surprising link to surfing, the surfboard name reveals the breadth of the imagined, sportised Pacific beyond Hawaii. As further illustration of the constructed Pacific links, the Manly Daily, in its inaugural issue, claimed that ‘the Board Swimming, or Shooting the Breakers a la Samoa, by expert swimmers, is considered one of Manly’s greatest attractions during the summer’ (28 July 1906, 2).

The embryonic state of aquatic sports involving surfing, swimming and diving in federation Australia also facilitated positive associations with the Pacific because Islander techniques helped Australians to develop new competitive and practical skills. While swimming was not new, and organised competition had been a feature of colonial Australian sporting life for many decades (Phillips, 2008), the quest for speed led Australians to look externally for new, more efficient and

faster strokes and techniques. Just as the then-dominant trudgeon stroke was borrowed, likely from South America (Colwin, 2002: 14), Islanders provided the inspiration for the crawl stroke, and individuals like Alick Wickham provided prototypes for the stroke’s development. The Wickhams and other Islanders also entertained, inspired and instructed with their indigenous diving techniques, and Alick’s own skills earned him several championships. In surfing, ‘Tommy Tanna’ helped Sydney locals pioneer body-surfing, Alick Wickham became a noted surf swimmer, and Duke Kahanamoku boosted the popularity of surfboard riding. In swimming, diving and surfing, the inspiration and example of Islanders helped in no small way to boost Australian nascent aquatic skills, aid in the development of the beach as a recreational and sporting site, and position the nation globally as an aquatic powerhouse. This practical value of reputed Islander water skills, romanticised in the Nimble Savage stereotype and reified in prominent individuals like the Wickhams, helped ensure their positive construction at a time when Pacific Islanders were, as a whole, widely derided, debased and discriminated against.

Conclusion

Like the aforementioned ‘Major’ Taylor, the visiting American cyclist whom the *Bulletin* (17 March 1904, 26) described as a ‘black and brilliant reproach to the White Australia Policy’, the Wickham brothers presented a challenge to the prevailing racist ideology. Although physically dark-skinned, and constructed by the press as Pacific Islanders, they defied negative racial stereotypes. Their presence in the pools and in the press certainly did not help strengthen the tenets of the White Australia Policy. As individuals, their presence alone could not provide a large enough assault on negative racial stereotypes to weaken the policy and its underlying racial assumptions, but press constructions of the duo did provide readers with an alternative perspective on Islanders. In this case, the competing narrative to Thomas’ ‘damned’ Islanders corresponded with a form of his
‘beautiful’ (Thomas, 1993): the aquatically gifted and thus romanticised Nimble Savage. As argued here, the Wickhams embodied this sporting stereotype in swimming circles, but the reporting of their deeds reified this ideal and broadcast it to a wider audience.

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