

# Barney Kieran, the Legendary 'Sobraon Boy': From the Mean Streets to 'Champion of the World'

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*This article explores the remarkable career of Bernard Bede (Barney) Kieran, known in the Australian sporting press of the time as 'the Sobraon Boy'. He was born in Sydney in 1886, grew up in the mean streets, was imprisoned aboard the industrial training ship Sobraon and, at the zenith of his sensational world record-breaking swimming career, died suddenly on 22 December 1905. He was only nineteen and was mourned by the public as one of Australia's first sporting icons to be cut down tragically in his prime. Incorporated in this study is the forgotten tragic sporting saga of the first great Australian twentieth-century swimming hero and its connotations of muscularly-based youth reclamation. Consideration is given to the social context, the growing popularity of swimming in the early twentieth century, Sydney and the widespread newspaper coverage of his career and death which helped to create the formation of the tragic sporting hero of Australian myth.*

The epitaph on Barney Kieran's tombstone under a Celtic cross in a squared gravelled grave in the Gore Hill Cemetery in North Sydney reads:

In Loving Memory  
Of  
BERNARD BEDE KIERAN

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DIED 22nd December 1905, Aged 19 years

R I P

Erected by the Public as a tribute to the late  
Champion Swimmer of the World.

He won his laurels by courage, self-denial and patient  
effort. His achievements and manly qualities will long  
be remembered in this, and other countries in which  
His victories were gained. [1]

The marble tombstone has two delicate clusters of shamrocks, suggestive of his Irish cultural origins. The words and phrases of this epitaph – ‘champion’, ‘laurels’, ‘courage’, ‘self-denial’, ‘patient effort’, ‘manly qualities’, ‘other countries’, ‘victories’ – remain resonant today in the Australian sporting ethos of fierce international competition in a wide range of sports. By a memorial to their hero, the public were determined that he would be remembered, that his iconic presence in a new nation would not be displaced easily; such were his remarkable swimming achievements. They saw his story as the social glue that bound their nation together, something that had helped to create their national identity of egalitarian sentiments. Significantly, the champion’s grave is situated in the elite part of the Catholic section of the cemetery with other notables. In death he had left the mean streets for Kings’ Row.

Kieran’s national and international prominence was brief as a lightning bolt. It stormed the public imagination, which was fanned by newspapers and other popular literature. While narratives of his exploits abounded, he never had the opportunity to tell his own story. A boy who had come from nowhere to be someone of importance was a comforting, sentimental and romantic myth that the ordinary person could readily relate to. Through the witnessing of his sparkling talent by the followers of swimming events and prominent newspaper accounts about him, he became a renowned, highly respected and respectable public celebrity, especially after his whirlwind triumphal tour of the United Kingdom and Europe in the northern swimming competition season of mid-1905. And he represented all Australians, having come from humble origins and, by poetic extension, the country’s convict past. There was also a sectional appeal about his achievement as an Irish-Australian Catholic, the reverse to the bushranger Ned Kelly in persona.

He fulfilled postcolonial national ambitions, on the one hand, by beating the English at their own game and, on the other, by gaining recognition in the heartland of the British Empire. Such British recognition and approval was important in mainstream Australian culture. A native-born colonial boy had made a fine name for himself

in the international arena against the best! Frequently labelled – not, as it turned out, so extravagantly – by the press after this return to Sydney as ‘the greatest swimmer the world has ever known’, [2] he was soon to die tragically on 22 December 1905 while competing and breaking records in the Australasian Championships in Brisbane and at the zenith of his record-smashing feats. His death, portrayed in heroic terms by the newspapers, brought him great honour and he thus became a national hero. The public outpouring of grief was so great that more than 30 thousand emotion-filled Sydneysiders – men, women and children dressed in their formal best – crowded out his burial service at North Sydney’s confined Gore Hill Cemetery.

He thus became one of the first of Australia’s tragic sporting heroes of popular culture – cut down in his prime. Several other sporting figures who met untimely deaths were to follow in his footsteps over the first half of the twentieth century and receive a similar public response, especially the boxer Les Darcy [3] and Cecil Healy, [4] the Olympic swimming silver medallist, both of whom died during the First World War; and in the 1950s another famous boxer, the Aboriginal Dave Sands. [5] All their deaths generated public grieving and remembrance on a national scale. All became tragic iconic symbols of nationhood, like the Gallipoli campaign of the First World War.

During his swimming career and after his death, Kieran was considered a model of muscular-based youth reclaimed from a life of petty crime. He experienced a sterner lower-class version of the nineteenth-century muscular Christianity ideology explicit in British boys’ corporate colleges and grammar schools, with its emphasis on character-building, self-control and vigorous organized sport. [6] Such sentiments were echoed on Kieran’s own tombstone. How this was shaped for public consumption and for ideological purposes is explored here. By his widely publicized sporting fame, Barney Kieran had been brought from the edge – the marginalized delinquent street life and imprisonment in the government’s floating industrial school under naval discipline – into the mainstream of respectable citizenship in a newly formed and self-conscious nation of colonial origins. In this new context, he had displayed in public ‘courage, self-denial’ and ‘patient effort’, in fact all the ‘manly qualities’ [7] that were required.

Bernard Bede Kieran was born in Sydney, New South Wales, on 6 October 1886 into an impoverished family of Irish origins as the sixth child. His birth was not registered. Both parents were from Ireland and had migrated to Australia. His father, Patrick Kieran, who died in 1891, was a seaman and, later, a casual labourer on the Sydney wharves. After

his death his wife Annie was left to cope financially and emotionally with her offspring. While Barney attended a local convent school for a while and learned to read and write, he rejected that form of control and soon took to the streets, joined a wild gang and began to get into constant trouble with authorities. Out of desperation his mother, in March 1900, had him committed to the Nautical School Ship *Sobraon*. [8] Her decision may have been made for a number of reasons, including her own abject poverty and her son's uncertain future.

### **Aboard the *Sobraon***

Appearing before justices of the peace in a city court in March 1900, Barney Kieran was made a state ward and placed under custody aboard the *Sobraon*, which was permanently moored beside Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour. He was declared a neglected child under the 1866 New South Wales Industrial Schools Act, the first significant child welfare legislation in the early years of colonial self-government. The act catered for destitute and neglected children in providing a place of indeterminate detention that gave industrial training. Barney's sentence, like that of all the *Sobraon* inmates, was indefinite, but in reality for the term of his natural childhood until the age of eighteen. The sentence could include being indentured as an apprentice in a trade and release under supervision. [9]

The act under which Kieran was dealt with at the troublesome age of thirteen [10] was intended for children under the age of sixteen who had been found idly 'wandering' the streets or 'living' in the company of 'reputed thieves', 'common prostitutes' or persons 'with no visual lawful means of support', or who had been found 'begging' or loitering in the streets or public places or 'sleeping in the open air'. [11] Such wide powers were intended to clear the alleyways, streets, wharves, markets and similar precincts of the city of gangs of disorderly or homeless children. Technically, under the colonial legislation they were not viewed as criminals themselves.

The *Sobraon*, as a superior passenger clipper, had been operating as a boys' institution for some nine years after its retirement from the sea when Barney Kieran was placed aboard. It replaced the *Vernon*, a smaller less well-fitted ship, in 1891. [12] The *Vernon* had operated as an industrial school in Sydney Harbour since 1867, the year of the implementation of the 1866 act. The *Sobraon* had markedly superior facilities for its formerly destitute or neglected inmates who were nevertheless imprisoned on it. An advanced disciplinary incentive system

had been put into place by its commander and superintendent, Captain Frederick Neitenstein, an enlightened, knowledgeable penal reformer with experienced maritime background.

‘They were brought under wholesome discipline, schooled and trained in physical culture, and sent to the country to work.’ In one sentence Neitenstein [13] neatly summarized the nautical school ship’s purpose. He believed that the institutionalized treatment provided had a real potential to reform street urchins by combining surveillance with ‘wholesome’ but absolute military discipline, ‘modified restraint’ and, in particular, a training in ‘physical culture’ together with how to earn a living and achieve self-respect. An incentive system based on graduated rewards, competition, grading and marks [14] was in full swing. Neitenstein’s reforming zeal transformed the ship into the most highly regarded model reformatory for boys in the Australian colonies. He aimed to create what he termed to be ‘a moral earthquake’ in each boy that came on board. [15]

Apart from thorough elementary schooling, naval discipline and trade training, Neitenstein placed a great emphasis on ‘rational recreation’ and supreme physical fitness, which incorporated competitive individual and team sports including rugby, cricket, gymnastics and swimming. Such vigorous activity, he believed, was the key to the beginning of the moral regeneration of the free-wheeling street delinquent from the alleyways – boys like Bernard Bede Kieran who, in his case, did indeed respond positively to all of this.

A recreation ground was set up as part of the institution on a flat levelled area of Cockatoo Island, close to where the *Sobraon* was permanently moored, complete with a tidal pool with a high corrugated iron surround, a rugby and cricket field and an open-air gymnasium on an asphalted court with swings, vaulting horses, clinking poles, giant’s stride and parallel bars. Four competitive sporting clubs were provided for the *Sobraon* boys, in swimming, rugby, gymnastics and cricket. These clubs paralleled similar sporting clubs in the community of Sydney, against whom they regularly competed with major sustained success. Before joining, members of the ship’s sporting clubs were required to have developed a good conduct record while on board.

At any one time, the *Sobraon* catered for about 400 inmates of various ages ranging from six years to 16. Ironically, the *Sobraon* became a symbol of a prosperous free colony and served to disguise uncomfortable realities about the unequal distribution of wealth and power. Boys incarcerated there were from the depressed edges of colonial and early postcolonial society.

Thousands passed through the *Sobraon* between 1892 and 1911, when it was closed by the government. During that time it produced a formidable string of outstanding Australian sportsmen. There were leading cricketers such as Bill King, who on many occasions represented New South Wales; prominent lightweight boxers such as Sid Learing and Mick Shannon, who were both exceptionally good professional fighters; and leading early rugby league stars such as Clarrie Horder and Phil Regan. As well, there was Gus Widmer, who achieved fame both as an inter-state competitive runner and a rugby league player. But by far the most outstanding athlete that the *Sobraon* ever produced was the world champion swimmer Bernard Bede Kieran.

### **A swimming career commences**

Aboard the *Sobraon*, Kieran was trained in carpentry and naval discipline. In the *Sobraon* tidal baths he began to excel at swimming during his recreational hours in the late afternoons. Soon he was admitted to the swimming club and began competing against other Sydney clubs, much encouraged by the *Sobraon* staff, especially the ship's exceptional school-master William Hilton Mitchell, who soon became his chief mentor. The *Sobraon* authorities realized they had discovered an athlete of outstanding potential who could provide an exemplar of the success of their youth rescue programme.

By the age of seventeen Kieran's swimming had become so noticeably outstanding that Mitchell arranged for him to give a swimming demonstration to Walter Bethel, the influential chair of the North Sydney District Amateur Swimming Club, in its baths in Lavender Bay. Bethel, a government child welfare administrator by profession, was so impressed that he organized special coaching for Kieran with the well-known swimming coach Robert Robertson Craig. Kieran was then entered in the New South Wales championships while remaining a *Sobraon* boy accommodated in his hammock at night below deck aboard the ship.

When Kieran began his career, Port Jackson was considered to be 'the swimmers' paradise' with an ideal climate, with several tidal baths already open for inter-club competition of a high standard in 'its far reaching arms'. Once a place for open-water swimming competition in the late nineteenth century, across the harbour 'the agile form of grey nurse or blue pointer' sharks brought that to an end, and 'the era of baths began'. In the early 1900s new tidal baths were erected at Rushcutter Bay, Balmain and Manly in the harbour itself and on headlands beside ocean surfing beaches at Bronte and Coogee. District and private clubs, some new and

some well-established, dramatically expanded their membership. Competition was fierce and of a high standard. Harbour facilities for competitive swimming soon became overcrowded and inadequate. The swimming boom was in full swing and large numbers of spectators crowded into baths to watch the various events.

Richmond 'Dick' Cavill of the famous swimming dynasty had adopted the 'crawl' stroke for speed swimming and it was taken on rapidly by other prominent competitors. [16] Dick Cavill reigned supreme, the most popular sportsman of his time. Between 1900 and 1904 he had won eighteen Australian and twenty-two New South Wales championships. Overseas, in England in 1902 he clocked under a minute (58.6 seconds) for the 100 yards freestyle, the first swimmer to achieve this feat officially. His reputation thus had become international. [17]

By the 1903–4 season, Sydney had twenty-nine clubs affiliated to the New South Wales Amateur Swimming Association, with a membership of 1,160 competition swimmers. [18] Kieran, then, had plenty of competition and prominent, experienced swimmers to face. In his own performance, the high standard was to drive him on to greater heights. He first came to prominence when swimming for the *Sobraon* club in the same season. He finished four times a close second to the established Australasian champion, Dick Cavill. He then beat him in the Australasian 880 yards and the mile championships in record time. [19]

By late February 1905 Kieran's status had advanced swiftly, and a journalist for the *Sydney Mail* was moved to write:

B.B. Keran [*sic*] has been breaking more world records and the question is when is he going to stop. At Bronte Baths on Saturday he negotiated 500 yards in 6m 10 3-5s. It was the State Championship. As far as the race was concerned the event was devoid of interest, as it was not thought Keran had any chance of losing, barring accident. . . . At four to go (15 laps in all) the champion led by a full 30 yards, and eventually touched a little short of 50 yards ahead of Craig, who swimming strongly was half a lap from Smith. The figures put up by Keran were as previously stated. . . . The world's record, previously accredited to D. Billington (England), was 6m 25 2-5s more than the new record. [20]

The question of 'when is he going to stop' was echoed as the dominant topic in conversation, in sporting circles as well as newspapers. The event in breaking the world record occurred on Saturday 18 February. On the following Monday evening, two days later, at Pyrmont Baths, the dynamic, supremely fit Kieran took out another world record, this time for the 440 yards New South Wales championship (5 minutes 25 2/5

seconds, being 4/5 seconds lower than the world record). While the *Sydney Mail* took some time to spell his name correctly in its sporting columns, the ‘champion was greeted with great applause at the finish’ of this event. He had broken another great Australian’s world record, that of Dick Cavill. [21] Cavill did not swim in this event, despite the myth that Kieran beat him to the finishing line. Kieran was the new hero of the hour and joined Cavill in the great line of Australian champions from Freddy Lane of the first Olympic Games in 1900 to Andrew ‘Boy’ Charlton, who starred in the 1924 Paris Olympics.

By March 1905, while still misspelling his name, the *Sydney Mail* was loudly heralding Kieran to its vast city and country readership as ‘the sensation of the swimming world’: ‘It was anticipated from his display on his first public appearance that there was a champion in him, but probably not even faintly imagined that he would have all “distance” world records at his mercy.’ [22]

In the previous month alone Kieran had captured five world records in the space of three weekends; in the 1903–4 season he had already taken out two in March 1904. As these records rapidly accumulated, his following grew. His celebrity was instantaneous – excitement around his performances was palpable. Each record was achieved in a different Sydney baths around the harbour and alongside surfing beaches. His followers travelled excitedly from all quarters, rather than the more usual sectional local swimming club following, to see him perform. The *Sobraon* Boy had become a sporting legend with all ranks of society.

His record at this stage could be tabulated as in Table 1. His amazing tour de force swept through all the officially recognized distance swims; at the beginning of March 1905 he held the 220, 300, 440, 500 and 880 yards

**Table 1** Barney Kieran’s World Record Times, as at 1 March 1905

Distance	Baths	Date	Kieran’s world record time	Previous record
300 yards	Domain	25 Feb. 1905	3m 31 4/5s	3m 34 3/5s
200 yards	Coogee Aquarium	21 Feb. 1905	2m 13 3/5s	2m 20s
440 yards	Pymont	20 Feb. 1905	5m 25 3/5s	5m 26 1/5s
500 yards	Bronte	18 Feb. 1905	6m 10 3/5s	6m 22 1/5s
1,000 yards	Rose Bay	11 Feb. 1905	12m 52 1/5s	13m 32 1/5s
1,760 yards	Bondi	19 March 1904	24m 36 1/5s	24m 56 1/5s

Source: Adapted from the *Sydney Mail*, 1 March 1905.



New South Wales championship titles, as well as the 220, 440, 880, and mile championship titles of Australasia.

A few days later, on Saturday 4 March 1905, in another extraordinary performance at the Public Schools Championship Swimming Carnival held at the Drummoyne Bath, Kieran broke his own world record for the mile and at the same time won the New South Wales championship for the distance. He was up against strong swimmers from other clubs: C.N. Smith of the Enterprise Club; R.R. Craig, his swimming coach, of Mort's Dock Club; R. Healy of the East Sydney Club; as well as another inmate, W. Watkinson from the *Sobraon* club:

The men started by the pistol shot, and Keran [*sic*] at once made the pace, swimming in a style that commanded the admiration of the spectators. He began to forge ahead in the first lap, the only one who was not left behind at almost every stroke being the Mort's Dock representative, Craig, who at the end of the 20th lap retired, leaving Healy second and Smith close up third, while Watkinson was out of it. As far as Keran was concerned, the race had now soon resolved itself into a procession, and went on increasing his lead to the finish, ultimately winning by over 200 yards in 23m 16 4-5s, and beating his previous record (a world's) by 1, 19 2-5s. In the last lap he spirited in astonishing fashion, showing clearly that if he had had anyone to push him in the earlier stages of the race the time would have been shorter. [23]

At the end of the race Kieran was still 'quite fresh' and showed no signs of distress. The excited crowd enthusiastically 'cheered his great performance'. [24]

A fortnight later, on Saturday 18 March 1905 at the East Sydney Club Carnival at Rushcutters Bay, again the call was made for Barney Kieran to 'furnish the figures'. He lived up to expectations by breaking his own world half-mile record. There was a 'hush of expectancy' as he touched the line and when the megaphone operator roared out that the half-mile record had been reduced by 18 1/5 seconds there was loud and continued applause from the huge crowd of devoted Kieran followers. The new record was 11m 50 3/5 seconds. [25]

The 1904-5 summer season of competitive swimming in Sydney was a singular remarkable triumph for B.B. Kieran, the '*Sobraon* lad'. Single-handedly, he even brought fame to the *Sobraon* Swimming Club. By the time the season closed he held the world's records for all the recognized distances from 200 yards to one mile. He had defeated some of the records of great international champions and celebrated swimmers: F.C.V. (Freddie) Lane, R. (Dick) Cavill (all of Australia), and D. (Dave)

Billington and George Best (of England). He now reigned supreme, apart from Cecil Healy, the great specialist sprinter of the 100 yards.

### **Overseas**

As the season finally broke up at the last carnival in Sydney on 1 April 1905, a movement had been initiated to send Kieran to England for the European summer competitive season to compete in the English Championships. A public subscription was established to raise funds for the cost of the voyage and accommodation. At the very last carnival of the season at the North Sydney Baths in Lavender Bay, Kieran consolidated his own championship status as the greatest distance swimmer that Australia had seen by defeating his own 440 yards world record at 5 minutes 19 seconds after breaking Dick Cavill's world record for the same distance at Pyrmont on 20 February of the same year. [26] It was his first and last swim for his new club after being released from under the custody of his mentor, Mitchell.

Sufficient funds were raised from an enthusiastic public for Kieran to travel to England. Support for the champion was rock-solid. Around £171 had been donated by Kieran's admirers to assist with transportation and other expenses. [27] By May he had received an official invitation from the Royal Life Saving Society to compete in the King's Cup:

The Royal Life Saving Society recognizing the national character of the trials of speed and endurance involved in the competition, and of the advisability of Great Britain and her off shoots being represented, successfully if possible, having extended an invitation to the Australian swimmer B.B. Kieran, the Sobraon boy, to go to England under the aegis and as a guest of the society to win the King's Cup and, further, have offered to pay half of the expenses. [28]

The Royal Life Saving Society's invitation was a fulsome one, clearly recognizing Kieran's growing eminence as an international. It had another motive: as a Swedish swimmer had won the King's Cup the year before, it was concerned that the cup be returned to its rightful place in the British Empire. It was important from a nationalistic viewpoint to win it back from what was described as a foreign country – even if it were to go to an 'offshoot' of the empire. Pride of race and the status of the British Empire were at stake. So the invitation was in reality subjective in nature: to ensure that the Swedes were blocked out of winning the trophy again. Instead, it could go to Dave Billington, the English Champion, or more

likely to Barney Kieran, the sensational Australian champion. The contest was planned to be centred within the empire and not outside it.

The Australian press was convinced that there was no one more likely to win the trophy than Kieran, because of his astonishing recent performances and 'amazing times' in distance swimming. [29] Aside from the King's Cup and its life-saving endurance exercises, they predicted that every distance in the English and foreign (European) championships would be easily within his reach. In the latter, they were to be proved correct. Before leaving for England, Kieran remained under an exacting training schedule, which had begun years before aboard the *Sobraon*, to maintain his superb fitness. It proved to be absolutely necessary.

Before Kieran's departure a major controversy emerged over who was to be his chaperone throughout his tour. At first W.W. Hill, the secretary of the subscription fund who was also the honorary secretary of the New South Wales Amateur Swimming Association, was appointed at two meetings of the fund-raising committee. He held the medallion of the Royal Life Saving Society. Kieran then refused to accept Hill as his travelling companion. Hill withdrew after 'much angry debate, innuendo and contradiction'. This left the road clear for Kieran's schoolmaster mentor from the *Sobraon*, William Hilton Mitchell, to be elected. [30]

Kieran's celebrated sporting achievements as he departed for England were shaped by the *Sobraon* authorities into propaganda for the boys' reformatory and as an ideal place of disciplinary training:

Swimming is prominently to the front: and last year's world champion B. Kieran, who is an ex-inmate, is at present on his way to England, and probably to the Continent in search of further laurels. His former teacher, Mr W.H. Mitchell, accompanies the lad, and will act, not only as a guardian, but also a wiser counsellor and friend. It is unnecessary to add that hundreds of 'Sobraon' boys, past and present, deprive pleasure at his success. [31]

The rhetoric of 'Give me a boy young enough, and I will make anything out of him' was strongly echoed. At Kieran's success, the *Sobraon* enhanced its own reputation. The New South Wales Industrial School Authorities had released him from the ship to the executive protection of Walter Bethel, the president of the North Sydney Amateur Swimming Club. Before leaving for overseas, he trained in the North Sydney baths at Lavender Bay.

Kieran arrived in London accompanied by Mitchell on 17 June 1905 after the long arduous sea journey. On 26 June he gave an exhibition swim at the exclusive Bath Club, Piccadilly. He lowered the record time

for 600 yards by 17.6 seconds. 'He is a fish, not a man' shouted one of the excited male spectators. [32]

Kieran, still recovering from his sea journey, lost his much publicized competition against the great Dave Billington in a race for the Mile Championship of England. Soon after, at Blackpool in the Life Saving Competition for the King's Cup, Billington again defeated Kieran, who came in a close second. It was the last time for Kieran to know defeat.

In the race for the championship of the Mersey on 6 July 1905, an open national race over about a mile, the Australian champion led all the way and won by 300 yards. He swam 'splendidly and won the easiest victory ever recorded in the race'. [33] The crowd lining the banks, many of them of Irish background, went wild with excitement. Kieran had become acclimatized and struck form at the right moment, which was to last him the rest of his spectacular European tour: he won every race he entered thereafter, including those with handicaps.

On 16 August a cable message 'of the week' was received and relayed to the reading public of the *Sydney Mail* eagerly awaiting news across New South Wales:

On the 8th inst. The Half-mile Swimming Championships of England was swum in Leicester, and won by Kieran in 11m 28s. Billington was 15 yds away. . . . Kieran's world's record for the half mile is 11m 11 3-5s. In this race he lowered the English record from 11m 35s, put up by Billington in 1904. . . .

On Saturday the New South Wales lad won the 100 yds Championship at the international meeting at Stockholm. His time was 1m 10 2-5s. He has also won the 500 metres race (535 yards) in the world's record time of 7m 18 2-5s; and the mile, his time being 28m 2 1-5s. In the 500-metre race he led throughout. [34]

The Royal Life Saving Society had arranged a 'Continental trip' for Barney Kieran to Sweden and also to appear at the Royal Life Saving Society's social galas in Scotland and Ireland. [35] At the international meeting in Sweden Kieran won four events, setting a world record. After returning to England he defeated Billington for the 500 yards title in the world record time of 6 minutes 7 1/5 seconds. Then in September he won the 220 yards title and his third English medal for the 300 yards. He also gave diving displays in Scotland and Ireland as well as winning several races over unrecognized distances. [36]

## **The return**

Kieran's public modesty, sportsmanship and remarkable ability to break records and win major races were given strong publicity. As reporters emphasized on many occasions, he seemed to be unspoiled by success. By the time of his return to Australia his public image had been fully constructed. He had been shaped into a national symbol. Politicians and distinguished personages constantly feted him, but he remained of a retiring, almost shy but happy disposition.

Kieran's ship docked in Melbourne and he continued to Sydney by train to Redfern Station, where a crowd of officials from the New South Wales Amateur Swimming Association, the Royal Life Saving Association and other sporting bodies awaited him as well as fans, fellow competitive swimmers, relatives and friends. His welcome home was a 'hearty one' and later in the day he attended official functions at the New South Wales Sporting Club in Hunter Street, Sydney: one at 5.0 p.m. held by the NSW Amateur Swimming Association and one at 8.0 p.m. by the Royal Life Saving Association. The verbose speeches by officials, politicians and other dignitaries rolled on late into the night as they vied with each other.

The shy champion was relieved to depart from the public arena that evening, exhausted from travel and the ear-bashing. He went to his mother's home in Burton Street, North Sydney. He now had a stepfather as his mother had remarried as Mrs Conlon. He had two half-sisters and three half-brothers, as well as five surviving brothers and sisters who were Kierans. As a sporting champion he was now accepted into his mother's second marriage home.

## **The last days**

Kieran's return to Sydney via Melbourne allowed him little time to prepare for the coming Australasian Championships in Brisbane in early December. He himself felt that he was not fit enough to compete in the heats and therefore was not selected to represent New South Wales officially. Nevertheless, the North Sydney Amateur Swimming Club financed his travel and other expenses to Brisbane. He went by train reluctantly. The North Sydney Club, by successfully urging him to go, may have signed his death warrant. The Australasian Championships were commenced in the Dry Dock, South Brisbane, on Saturday 2 December 1905. On that first day there was a great attendance to watch the 440 yards

championship with two representatives each from New Zealand, Queensland and New South Wales (R. Healy and, unofficially, B.B. Kieran [37]) and one from Victoria. They represented the cream of competitive swimmers from New Zealand and Australia. As the world and Australian record-holder for the distance, Kieran had no difficulty in leading all the way and winning with great ease. He was loudly applauded by the packed crowd who were there in the main to see their great champion swim.

Kieran next won the 220 yards breaststroke championship in an easy victory by twelve yards against a Queensland swimmer, leading all the way. On the same day he contested the diving championship and came a close second with a dive from a tower of 23 yards. The winner covered 24 yards. [38] Three events in one day was an exhausting schedule.

Before a 'great crowd' at Boorootabin Baths in Brisbane, Barney returned to the water for the Australasian Championships on Wednesday 6 December 1905. He competed in both the 220 yards and 800 yards titles, taking out both in the one mid-week evening as well as breaking another world record in the 220 yards, F.C.V. Lane's long-standing record. It was the only one that had previously lain outside his grasp by 1.5 of a second.

But the half-mile event (800 yards) was the last race he would swim in. He won 'amid great cheering' by twenty yards. That evening he collapsed at his lodgings in great pain and was rushed to hospital. On the following Saturday it was announced at the baths that Kieran could not start in the mile event of the Australasian Championship due 'to colic'. [39] Unfortunately the situation was far more serious.

Daily reports of his illness received in Sydney first referred to colic, but then came the news that he had been operated on for appendicitis. For a while the daily messages reported that he was improving rapidly, though 'cruel' rumours were rapidly spreading that he was dead. This naturally had a frightening effect on his friends, relatives and the general public.

As a result the *Sydney Mail* dispatched an urgent call for clarification from its Brisbane correspondent. The answer was that Kieran was making satisfactory progress but still in hospital. During the following week further groundless rumours of his death were generated. Then came definite news that a change for the worse had occurred. There was now little hope for his recovery. His mother was sent by train with Mitchell, his mentor, to be at his bedside. Their travel expenses were paid by the North Sydney District Swimming Club. On the night of Friday 22 December, shortly before midnight, the world champion died in the St Clare's private hospital, Brisbane, twelve days after his final swimming triumph.

The popular media responded emotionally for the benefit of the legions who were his followers:

Here was a youth cut off at 19 years of age. A youth who had set the world wondering; wondering that he should be the foremost in the world in the pastime he had taken up. Two years ago almost to the day he was practically unknown. . . . In the following March he did become champion, not of New South Wales, but of Australasia, over half a mile in the then sensational time of 11m 29 4-5s – a world's record. . . . He was the greatest athlete in his line the modern world has seen. . . . The circumstances of Kieran's death make the event inexpressibly sad. [40]

Almost immediately, arrangements were made by The North Sydney District Swimming Club to bring together other sporting associations and the general public to consider what steps could be taken to 'suitably perpetuate' Barney Kieran's memory. [41] He was buried at Gore Hill Cemetery after his body had been transported in state by the mail train which left Brisbane at 6.15 a.m. in a slow ceremonial from Brisbane to Sydney. The train slowed down or stopped at every country station to recognize the hundreds of small groups of country mourners standing beside railway tracks on the way. His remains thus transported were accompanied by his mother, Mrs Conlon, and his mentor, William Hilton Mitchell. At Gore Hill Cemetery the cortège had great difficulty in reaching the grave site, such was the press of the huge crowd that had attended. The cortège had left the family residence in Burton Street, North Sydney at 3.0 p.m. on Christmas Day, the *Sobraon* band leading the way to the muffled sounds of the Dead March. Various officials of sporting bodies marched behind. Throughout the harbourside city, public emotion had ran high – competitors and officials in swimming carnivals wore black armbands, and other swimming club fixtures were cancelled in his memory. Emotional stress was felt throughout the Australian sporting world.

The chief mourners at Barney Kieran's funeral were Mr and Mrs Conlon (his stepfather and mother), Mr and Mrs Duck (his brother-in-law and sister), Misses Rose, Alice and Annie Kieran (his sisters), Mr Joseph Kieran (his brother), Misses Veronica and Rose Conlon (half-sisters) and Messrs Matthew, Lawrence and Jack Conlon (half-brothers), Mrs Teague (aunt) and Mr W.H. Mitchell, 'the champion's great friend and counsellor'. The service at the grave was conducted by Father Dowling, SL, of St Mary's Church, North Sydney. [42]

Responses to the sad event came from a wide variety of sources. Captain William Mason, the superintendent of the Nautical School Ship *Sobraon* wrote:

The untimely sad death of our young champion swimmer, B.B. Kieran, was a great grief to his numerous comrades here aboard. Deservedly popular, his numerous victories were followed and rejoiced in by hundreds who never failed to extol his triumphs, whilst they could always find ample reasons for explaining away any slight reverse of fortune experienced. He was a good, honest athlete, and as unassuming as he was courageous and manly. The 'Sobraon' and his shipmates have good reason to be proud of his example and achievements. [43]

His iconic characteristics as a sporting hero are here well defined: 'numerous victories', 'good', 'honest', 'unassuming', 'courageous' and 'manly'. In other words, the ideal Australasian athlete.

By August 1906 the public monument to perpetuate his memory had been erected above his grave. It was unveiled by Sir Francis Suttor on the afternoon of Sunday 20 August 1906. Suttor paid high tribute to the late champion who had contributed much to the sport. Mr J.W. Turner and Captain Mason also addressed the crowd, which was made up of representatives of various sporting bodies. The *Sobraon* band played selections and the boys from the ship sang a hymn. [44]

The *Sydney Sportsman*, a racy and usually hard-bitten working-class journal, lamented the loss of the young champion to the sporting public in emotional and sentimental prose: 'Poor little Barney Keran [*sic*] has swum his last lap in this sphere'. The very last, according to the ideology of such journalism, he proved himself champion, even at the Australasian Championships when he was 'stricken with his fatal illness'. At that meeting he won three Australasian championships and the 'pathos of it' was he broke the world record in 220 yards which 'he had set his heart on gaining' and which thus far had eluded him. Ironically, it was in his last race that he broke the standing record by 1/5 of a second. He had completed 'an unbroken string of world's bests' from 200 yards to the mile. Thus with the passing of B.B. Kieran

Australia loses one of the brightest jewels in sport; our country loses one of its most manly and truest spirits; and a fond mother loses her loving and loyal son . . . may his memory even be kept green in our minds and our affections for he remains deeply planted in our hearts. God rest his soul. [45]

Under a sketch portrait of the champion in the same sporting journal, which was read widely by the sporting fraternity in Sydney, an extended 'In Memoriam' verse followed in the Irish vein of a lament sung at a wake, part of which read:



Oh we'll miss you Barney Keran in the bright days of Spring.  
When the water it is sparkling, when the birds are on the wing;  
When we line up with the starters we will think of days of yore  
Of the boy who lead the leaders who was always to the fore.  
Of the boy who had the speed,  
Of the boy who held the lead,  
With the champions behind him – oh it's heavy hearts and sore  
That will feel the gnawing pain  
When the season comes again  
For we miss you, miss you Barney you have gone forever more. [46]

Early in the New Year the Kieran Memorial Fund was inaugurated by the North Sydney Swimming Club at the Masonic Hall, North Sydney. It sought successfully to involve the New South Wales Amateur Swimming Association. The proposed memorial over the champion's grave was in recognition of his 'magnificent achievement: of the honesty of his career, and the modesty of his conduct'. Collections were made at all carnivals associated with the NSWASA. The money was quickly raised to erect the memorial inscribed with the characteristics of modesty, strength, determination and energy that were to serve 'as a model for future athletics'. [47] And so the words 'champion swimmer of the world' were inscribed upon the marble tombstone that still can be viewed in the cemetery at Gore Hill, North Sydney.

When the wild young Barney Kieran was removed from the larrikin gangs against his will and placed aboard the *Sobraon*, his life had been turned in a new direction that moved him from obscurity to a celebrity in the sporting world. When he came aboard the training ship for the first time, though, he was dressed in ragged clothes and underfed with the look of street-wise neglect. He was immediately given a bath, nursing care, a hair cut and a smart new naval uniform to wear. Thus transformed, he then was ordered to the ship's side with his bundle of old clothing. He was instructed to throw it into the harbour, symbolizing the rejection of his past. Through this precise, simple ritual he began a new way of life – a highly structured organized set of endlessly rotating activities which would last until his young adulthood and which included many hours of intense physical and sporting activities under the constant surveillance and evaluation of instructors and supervisors. In this process, he was to discover the art of competitive swimming which was to lead him to great international heights, but also to an early tragic death. In his brief life, he achieved universal public appeal with all social classes, as well as a strong sectional affinity with Irish Australians, as the fulfiller par excellence of the demanding expectations of the sporting world in Australian culture in

terms of his many victories, his manly qualities, his will to win and his modest public persona. The words on his tombstone were thus in a spectacular manner earned. Fundamentally, he fulfilled the new and now more mature nation's craving for a tragic legendary hero who was not an outlaw.

## Notes

- [1] Transcription of epitaph on the tombstone of Kieran's grave in the Catholic section of Gore Hill Cemetery, lane 660.
- [2] A similar phrase appeared on his tombstone.
- [3] See Ruth Park and Rafe Champion, *Home before dark, the story of Les Darcy, a great Australian hero* (Ringwood, 1995).
- [4] See John Ramsland and Grant Rodwell 'Cecil Healy: A soldier of the surf', *Sporting Traditions: Journal of the Australian Society for Sports History*, 16 (2) (May 2000), pp. 3–10.
- [5] See Ray Mitchell, *The fighting Sands* (Sydney, 1965); also John Ramsland and Christopher Mooney, *Remembering Aboriginal Heroes* (Melbourne, 2006), pp. 99–139.
- [6] See J. Mangan, 'Duty unto death, English masculinity and militarism in the age of new imperialism', in Roy Lowe, ed., *History of education major themes* (London, 2000), pp. 539–67.
- [7] Words inscribed on his tombstone.
- [8] G.P. Walsh, 'Kieran, Bernard Bede (1886–1905)', in Bede Nairn and Geoffrey Serle, eds, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 9 (Melbourne, 1983), pp. 588–9.
- [9] John Ramsland, *Children of the backlanes: Destitute and neglected children in colonial New South Wales* (Sydney, 1986), pp. 114–15.
- [10] Walsh, 'Kieran'.
- [11] An Act for the Relief of Destitute Children (Industrial Schools Act), 12 Sept. 1886, *Public General Statutes of NSW 1862–1874* (Sydney, 1874), pp. 3731–4.
- [12] See John Ramsland, 'Life aboard the nautical school ship *Sobraon*, 1891–1911', *The Great Circle: Journal of the Australian Association for Maritime History* 3 (1) (1981), pp. 30–44.
- [13] Neitenstein was commanding officer of the nautical school ship between 1878 and 1896, after which he became comptroller-general of prisons in New South Wales.
- [14] Stephen Garton, 'Neitenstein, Frederick William (1850–1921)', in Bede Nairn and Geoffrey Serle, eds, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 10 (Melbourne, 1986), pp. 674–5.
- [15] *Ibid.*
- [16] T. Whero, 'Sydney swimming and swimmers', *Sydney Mail*, 10 Feb. 1904.
- [17] J.G. Wilhems, 'Cavill, Frederick (1839–1927)' [and including his sons; Richmond, 1884–1938, being the youngest], in Bede Nairn and Geoffrey Serle, eds, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 7 (Melbourne, 1979), p. 593.
- [18] Whero, 'Sydney swimming and swimmers'.
- [19] *Ibid.*

- [20] 'Swimming, Keran's [sic] remarkable records', *Sydney Mail*, 1 March 1905.
- [21] 'Swimming', *Sydney Mail*, 22 Feb. 1905, p. 505.
- [22] 'Swimming, Keran's [sic] remarkable records', *Sydney Mail*, 1 March 1905.
- [23] 'Swimming. Extraordinary performance by Keran [sic]', *Sydney Mail*, 8 March 1905.
- [24] Ibid.
- [25] 'Swimming', *Sydney Mail*, 22 March 1905.
- [26] Swimming. B.B. Keran's [sic] performances', *Sydney Mail*, 5 May 1905.
- [27] 'Swimming. B.B. Kieran's visit to England, The King's Cup', *Sydney Mail*, 3 May 1905.
- [28] Ibid.
- [29] Ibid.
- [30] Ibid.
- [31] Nautical School Ship *Sobraon*, report for 30 April 1905, Votes and Proceedings of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly, session 1905, p. 2.
- [32] Walsh, 'Kieran'.
- [33] *Sydney Mail*, 12 July 1905 (captions to photographs of D. Billington, the English champion swimmer and B.B. Kieran); 'Kieran's Tour', *Sydney Mail*, 30 Aug. 1905.
- [34] *Sydney Mail*, 16 Aug. 1905 (under photograph of B.B. Kieran).
- [35] 'Swimming – Kieran's tour', *The Sydney Mail*, 30 Aug. 1905.
- [36] Walsh, 'Kieran'.
- [37] He was not chosen and did not complete in the official NSW trials, but instead, was supported for his travel by his own club, North Sydney. This was not an uncommon practice at the time.
- [38] 'Swimming', *Sydney Mail*, 6 Dec. 1905.
- [39] 'Swimming', *Sydney Mail*, 13 Dec. 1905.
- [40] Swimming by Wanderer, 'Kieran Dead', *Sydney Mail*, 27 Dec. 1905.
- [41] Ibid.
- [42] 'Funeral of the late B.B. Kieran', *Sydney Mail*, 27 Dec. 1905; 'The late B.B. Kieran – the funeral – an immense gathering', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 Dec. 1905.
- [43] Nautical School Ship *Sobraon*, Report for the year ended April 1906, Votes and Proceedings of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly, session 1906, p. 6.
- [44] 'Swimming. The late B.B. Kieran', *Sydney Mail*, 22 Aug. 1906.
- [45] *Sydney Sportsman*, 27 Dec. 1905.
- [46] Ibid.
- [47] *Sydney Sportsman*, 3 Jan. 1906 and 28 Feb. 1909.

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