

# **COME HERE TO ME!**

## **Dublin Life & Culture.**

### **Swimming with Anna Livia: The Liffey Swim at 100**

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This year, the 100th edition of the Liffey Swim will take place in Dublin. The event was famously captured by Jack B. Yeats in 1923, a year when the press reported that the swim was “witnessed by many thousands, who defied the rain and cheered the leading swimmers at the finish.” The terrible weather of that year is absent from the beautiful depiction of Yeats, and so too are the stubborn swans, who “cruised about with proud majestic mien in the water in front of the barge” for half-an-hour before the men contested the swim.



**Jack B. Yeats – The Liffey Swim (1923)**

The first Liffey Swim, competed in 1920, was instigated by swimmer Bernard Fagan. A mere 27 men contested the first race, won by J.J Kennedy. It was a time of war and revolution of course; in his statement to the Bureau of Military History, Alfred Burgess, brother of revolutionary leader Cathal Brugha, remembered watching the swim one year, a welcome distraction from the politics of the day:

On one occasion I was looking at the Liffey Swim, from the southside of the Liffey, right opposite Lalor's. Down under Lalor's was a lorry load of Auxiliaries, and in one of the windows in Lalor's was Cathal, looking out of the window at the Liffey Swim also.

For Dubliners, the Liffey occupies a centrally important place in our identity. We define ourselves partly by which side of it we call home, while the "the brewery tugs and the swans" made their way into the poetry of writers like Louis MacNeice. To Joyce, the river was Anna Livia Plurabelle. In more recent times, Damien Dempsey would sing of how "the Liffey cuts the city like a meandering blue vein." No matter how much we love to gaze at her from Grattan Bridge, jumping into the Liffey is another thing entirely.

From the humble beginnings of 1920, the race has grown into a spectacular event, attracting international swimmers. Last year, 320 men and 219 women completed the Liffey Swim. As a spectator event, it has long drawn crowds too. More media coverage in the past went on Dubliners watching the event than Dubliners competing in it. Take this from 1928:

From windows and roofs the progress of the competitors was keenly watched, and hundreds of people availed of lorries, motor cars, hackney cars, in fact, vehicles of every description to view the swimmers.

Youngsters evinced no trepidation in taking up hazardous positions on the ladders leading to the river and on the parapets of bridges. Their enthusiasm was unbounded, and with them the Liffey Swim is an event that is eagerly anticipated each year. They greeted the victor with wild cheers when he ascended the steps at Butt Bridge, and the Gardaí had to make a passage to enable the competitors to make their way to Tara Street Baths.



**1928 coverage of the Liffey Swim, Irish Independent.**

Between 1936 and 1939, the Liffey Swim took place from Bull Wall to Dollymount Strand, at a time when there was real concern about the health risks of pollution in the River Liffey, fears which would later lead to the race being moved upstream in the 1977-1979 period. C.J Smyth, the leading authority on the Liffey Swim, has written about these concerns:

The deterioration of Irish rivers, the increasing incidents of pollution, the seeming indifference of official bodies and the ineffectiveness of advisory boards to the government were a time-bomb waiting to explode. Pollution levels in the Liffey would reach crisis point in 1977 when the river was declared unsafe for humans to swim in.

While the location has shifted, there has been perfect continuity in so far as there has been a race each and every year.



Eleven-year-old Francis (Chalkey) White, of the Guinness Swimming Club, winner of the Independent Cup for the Liffey Swim.

**Francis (Chalkey) White, 1966 winner (Irish Independent)**

The competition has produced its own heroes too. The youngest ever winner, Francis 'Chalkey' White, was eleven at the time of his victory in 1966, and

would go on to repeat the achievement the following year. The son of a Guinness brewery worker, he represented the Guinness Swimming Club, and was described as a “wisp of a boy” in the press. Even younger, Mairéad Doran would emerge victorious in 1979 in the equivalent ladies competition at the age of ten.

The involvement of women in the Liffey Swim has not been without controversy, indeed it was not until 1991 that women were permitted to compete in the same course as men. Prior to this in the 1970s, women contested for the The Tommy May Cup, named in honour of a 1950s winner of the Liffey Swim. As early as the 1920s, some championed the idea of women participating in the event in letters to the press, though unsurprisingly there was later clerical opposition to this idea from Archbishop McQuaid and others. To McQuaid, “Mixed athletics are a social abuse, outraging our rightful, national tradition.”

The crowds observing the event may be somewhat smaller than in earlier decades, but the race maintains an important place in the identity of the city. In 1988, during Dublin’s Millennium celebrations, they raced towards the Dyflin, a reconstructed Viking longboat which served as the finishing line. Still, contemporary accounts are not unlike those of the 1920s, with *The Irish Times* noting of the 2014 race:

Crowds lean over river walls and bridges along the way cheering them on, while some supporters jogged along foot-paths cheering on their man or woman, all the way through the city centre.