

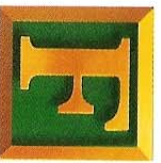


Review STYLE in the Handbook of Literary Terms, page 832.

Gertrude Ederle

Lewis Cole

A President called her “America’s best girl.” But whatever became of “The Most Popular Personage of Her Time”?



or two months, she lives in the Hotel of the Lighthouse in Cap Gris-Nez,¹ France, at the edge of the English Channel. She eats grass, soup, fried eggs, and veal. There is no running water in her room, only a pitcher and washbowl; no electricity, just candles. Every day she works with her trainer, a fusty-looking Yorkshirer with a walrus mustache and heavy-lidded eyes. Sometimes journalists come around and interview her. It is summer, 1926, and she is a 19-year-old Olympic gold medalist, a plain American girl—bobbed hair, broad smile—preparing to swim the channel.

It’s her second attempt. A year before, she was six and a half miles from the Dover coast when she asked for some beef tea and swallowed salt water while drinking it. She gagged and her trainer pulled her out of the sea. Fifty years later, she is still indignant at the betrayal. “Oh, I was so angry,” she tells an interviewer. “I’d only swallowed some salt water. My trainer sent someone in to get me. They said I was unconscious. I was no more unconscious than you are.”

Her first trainer had tried to swim the channel

twenty times and never succeeded; the trainer for her second bout accomplished it in his eleventh attempt, the second coast-to-coast channel swim in history. The first passage had been made thirty-six years earlier by an Englishman called Captain Webb, who swam the channel in twenty-one hours and forty-five minutes. When Webb finally reached France, his face was encrusted with salt, a red line stretched across the back of his neck marking the strain of keeping it out of the water. Webb had swum the breaststroke the entire way, and he was running a 101-degree fever. The English received him as though he were an explorer, a Cecil Rhodes² of the waves, and hosted him at town gatherings, the stock exchange, and private parties where they gave him money. Eight years later, he died while trying to swim the rapids of Niagara Falls. “His object,” as one biographer wrote, was “not suicide, but money and imperishable fame.”

1. *Cap Gris-Nez* (káp grē nā’), peninsula on the north French coast nearest to England.

2. *Cecil Rhodes* (1853-1902), statesman and businessman who extended British interests in South Africa.

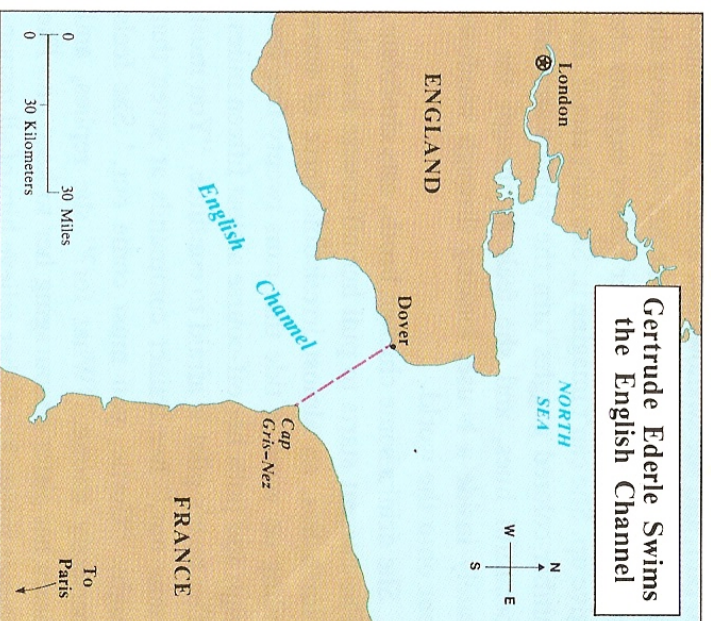
“Gertrude Ederle” by Lewis Cole in *womensSports Magazine*, May 1977. Reprinted by permission of the author.

Women had tried the swim before, but always failed. “None of my sex will ever accomplish this particular stunt,” an Australian had declared after three unsuccessful attempts. The girl doesn’t agree with this popular notion. She has a 7½-inch chest expansion—larger than Jack Dempsey’s, as she is proud to point out—and has swum long distances since she was fifteen: her mother had promised to let her bob her hair if she entered every race that summer and tried her best. “I proved women’s lib forty-five years ago,” she says later. “People said women couldn’t swim the channel, but I proved they could.” Besides, an old coach of hers has always argued that the American crawl was just as good a stroke as the Australian; she wants to prove him right.

She’ll get a red roadster if she does. Her father has promised it to her. He’s a well-to-do butcher who taught her how to swim; after her first channel attempt, there were rumors that he had bet on her challenge, and now there are stories that he’s playing the odds on her again, \$25,000 against \$175,000, but she’s pretty sure he hasn’t chanced that much. “He made \$25,000,” she says. “At least I think he did: Pop never told me much, but I knew he was betting.”

If her strength and steady stroke pull her through the water to the other side, she’ll be rich when she returns to the States. She already has a manager, a lawyer who has split the \$8,000 cost for the second try with her father, and the *Daily News* has bought the exclusive rights to her story. The paper promises to buy her a roadster too. “A strange mixture is this girl,” writes a columnist, “with the simplicity of Shaw’s Joan of Arc³ and many attributes of a male giant.” How can anyone not root for her? She’s brave, charming, determined, innocent—a sweetheart.

She waits for the weather to clear—plays tennis, golf, cards; cuddles with rabbits she finds in the fields. She fashions a new bathing suit with her sister, a bra and panties cut from her old tank



suit. On her first attempt, a tank suit chafed her skin and weighted her down.

One morning, her trainer wakes her at 4:30. She eats a breakfast of toast and coffee, puts on her bathing suit, cap, and tinted goggles, covers herself with sheep grease to insulate her body from the channel cold. The newsmen board the tug that will follow her, singing “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” to her in the dawn. She sings the verses back to them as she starts. Her father and sister are also on board. It’s a party. She’s ecstatic. “Please help me, God,” she thinks.

The swim is twenty-one miles, point to point, and the columnists continue their serenade during the first hours, singing “Yes, We Have No Bananas” and “After the Ball Is Over.” From the boat, her father and sister read cables to the girl, shouting the words out to her as she swims. In the late morning the sky clouds, and swells of water, spray, and foam slap up against her face. It begins

3. *Shaw’s Joan of Arc*, the title character in British playwright George Bernard Shaw’s *Saint Joan*.

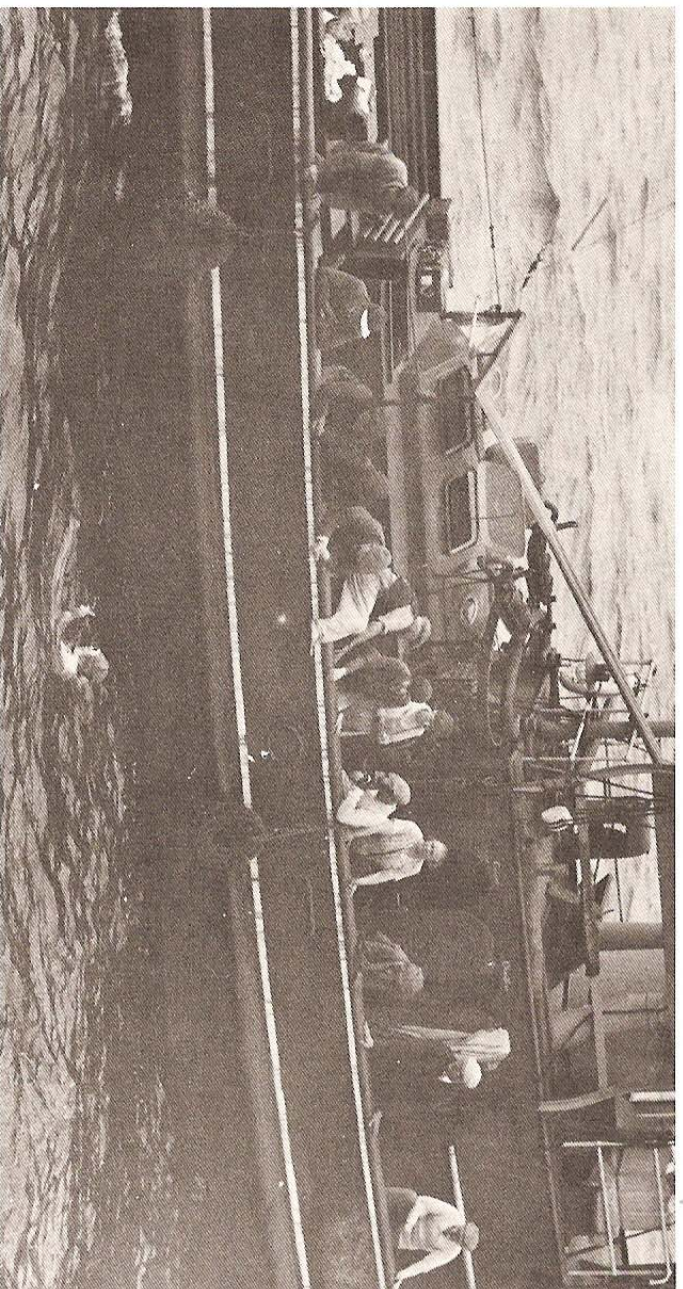
to rain, and she swallows salt water. She has made her father promise not to take her out unless she requests it, and at noon, her trainer suggests she give up. She can't imagine it. She isn't afraid. Her amber-colored goggles turn the white water into beautiful hues, and she feels as though she is safely inside a house, looking through windows out onto the world.

She drinks some chicken broth, eats chocolate. The current starts to pull her off-course into the North Sea, an almost irresistible force of wave piling on wave, a tide that runs twenty-five feet high and pulls her off-course almost fifteen miles. The boat's pilot is afraid to continue. "You must come out," her trainer commands at seven that night. "Gertie, you must come out." She feels perfectly strong. "What for?" she replies, and hears her sister encouraging her to keep on. The trainer insists her father relieve him of all responsibility; the pilot demands another 100,000 francs or he'll abandon her. In the sea, she sucks blocks

of sugar because the salt water has swollen her tongue, eats a few chunks of pineapple, prays, keeps stroking. She never refers to the cold, cramps, exhaustion, and jellyfish that other channel swimmers complain about. "I felt a lot better than my poor father on the tug," she says. "I found out later that he cried when he saw me struggling through the roughest spots."

On the English coast, people begin to gather, lighting bonfires to greet her. At 9:40 P.M. she sounds and stands. Her father warns her from the boat to watch out for off-shore tides, and she falls into a pool of deep water, but rights herself and keeps walking to the beach. She will be disqualified if anyone assists her before she's on land. She hears and sees the crowd, stumbles, and when her skin touches the pebbly beach, she knows she's reached England—the fifth person ever to have swum the channel, the first woman, a champion.

Headlines announce her victory throughout the



In a tugboat, newsmen accompany Gerttrude as she endures the icy-cold waters of the channel.



A large New York crowd, and one proud mother, welcomes home a victorious Gertrude.

States and two million people greet her in New York on her return, the greatest reception in the city's history. Her time of fourteen hours, thirty-nine minutes sets a new record and President Calvin Coolidge calls her "America's best girl." She is "Acclaimed by Popular Consent to Be the Most Popular Personage of Her Time"; Babe Ruth comes in second. Songs are written to her: "You're such a cutie, you're just as sweet as tuffinutti; Trudy, who'll be the lucky fellow?" Offers come down like confetti—movies, appearances, shows—and she starts on a tour of the United States for \$6,000 a week.

She keeps none of it. Her father and lawyer take a third weekly, her agent a sixth, other agents and managers the rest. Two years after her triumph, she suffers a nervous breakdown and can't work. Four years later, she loses her hearing because of a childhood impairment and the channel's cold waters. Three years after that, she seriously injures her back. She moves from one odd job to the other—a hostess and instructor at a

Westchester pool, a performer doing aquaplane stunts, a worker for an airplane company during the war. Her parents die. "Yes, I'll get married when Mr. Right comes along," she says at twenty-five, "but he hasn't shown up yet." She never marries; she lives with a woman companion in a house out in Queens, where she moved when Billy Rose hired her to work in his Aquacade show. In his memoirs he claims that one night she miraculously heard the applause of the audience after her number and cried for an hour. Her scrapbook weighs thirty-five pounds.

Does she keep reliving her triumphant swim in her mind, or do the journalists constantly make her recall it? Over and over again, she repeats the story, tirelessly, just as her arms once pulled her through the sea: no, father didn't take money from her; no, she still thinks her record is unbroken; no, she never regretted the swim. "When I hit the beach that night at Kingston," she says, "my tongue was so sore and swollen from salt water that I couldn't talk. I think it did something to the tongue muscles or something, because ever since then when I try to talk fast or say a big word, I can't. So instead of the big word I say, 'You know what I mean.'" Sometimes the story becomes confused: who ever did pay for that red roadster, anyway, her father or the *Daily News*? She rejects ill thoughts, just as she dismisses the idea that she couldn't have made it on her first try. Her deed, somehow, continues to command attention but not keep it, and, through the years, the stories and pictures of her in the papers—smiling or in tears—become an illustration for each decade's new fable: an unfortunate in the '30s, a loyal soldier in the '40s, a good Samaritan in the '50s.

Now she lives alone and teaches deaf children how to swim—the desire of her entire adult life. "When we're in the water," she tells one journalist when she starts the job, "we're not in this world. That is a feeling I fully understand."