

BOOK REVIEW

Managing the Body: Beauty, Health and Fitness in Britain

BY: INA ZWEINIGER-BARGIELOWSKA
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In the not-too-distant past, serious historical studies of the body hardly existed. At best they occupied a low tier on the academic pecking order. It was common for scholars working in traditional areas to sneer at colleagues doing research on health, beauty, and recreation, not to mention weight-lifting. These subjects were dismissed as frivolous and apt to be classified with the pejorative label of “popular culture.” This *haute culture* perspective is exemplified, for instance, in F. M. Leventhal’s massive *Twentieth Century Britain, An Encyclopedia* (2002) which omits mention of such popular icons as Tom Jones, Richard Burton, Twiggy, or the Rolling Stones. Equally evident is the short shrift given to subjects relating to the body or sports. It was as if the interests and concerns of the great mass of the British people did not matter. The slack has been taken up by the appearance of many inspired accounts by amateurs and buffs in muscle magazines, newsletters, and non-referenced (often self-published) books, but their lack of polish and pedigree has hardly helped the cause of scholarship. There has persisted an alienation or disconnect between professional historians and the public they profess to serve.

Times are changing, however, as scholars are increasingly recognizing the importance of everyday life, the concerns of common people, and the wealth of materials available to examine subjects relating to the use, function, and appearance of the body. Beauty, health, and fitness are no less critical to the public well-being than politics, diplomacy, and war. The North American Society for Sport History, which emerged in

the early 1970s, has helped awaken scholars to these new interests. Likewise, the appearance of David Chapman’s *Sandow the Magnificent* (1994), Jan Todd’s *Physical Culture and the Body Beautiful* (1999), and Kenneth Dutton’s more sweeping *The Perfectible Body* (1995) have laid a foundation for what is now being resurrected as the burgeoning field of physical culture. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska’s study is the latest and arguably the most comprehensive addition to this genre. Although Bernard Semmel’s *Imperialism and Social Reform: English Social-Imperial Thought, 1895-1914* (1960) and Geoff Searle’s *The Quest for National Efficiency: A Study in British Politics and Political Thought, 1899-1914* (1971) provide contextual precedents, they are no more cognizant of the broader interests of the nation than Leventhal. It is Mary Lynn Stewart’s *For Health and Beauty: Physical Culture and the Female Body in France* (2001) that serves as a kind of template for Zweiniger-Bargielowska’s perspective. While Stewart deals exclusively with French women and suffers from limited accessibility to sources, *Managing the Body* is encyclopedic in coverage and brings to light many materials, archival and otherwise, heretofore untapped by historians. It marks a tipping point in bringing credibility to physical culture scholarship.

The author’s focus on the body from 1880 to 1939 is driven by its association with modernism. Western societies in the late nineteenth century experienced an unprecedented change in the quality of life, leading to what historian J. H. Carlton Hayes famously called “A Generation of Materialism.” It included the rise of

urbanized mass consumerism, more rapid forms of communication and transportation (including the motor car), advances in photography, print technology, and medicine, the beginnings of nutrition science, the extension of the franchise (to virtually universal manhood suffrage in Britain), greater access to education, wider employment opportunities, and an expansion of state regulation of public health. Managing the body (especially the male body) in such a way as to ensure maximal health and the functioning of modern society became the ideal. But according to Zweiniger-Bargielowska, “this vision of modernity in terms of progress and the belief that society and the human body could be improved or even perfected was tempered by deep pessimism about the implications of rapid social, political, and technological change” (p. 8). This cultural pessimism was exacerbated by economic and imperial rivalries, especially with Germany, and concerns about physical deterioration after Britain’s dismal performance in the Boer War. These anxieties persisted through the Great War, leading to Prime Minister Lloyd George’s famous declaration in 1918 that “Britain could not maintain an ‘A1 Empire with a

C3 nation” (p. 10). Throughout the entire book, the author argues that physical fitness was viewed as essential to good citizenship and leadership of its empire.

What might surprise readers is that the author invokes the names of such iron game icons as Eugen Sandow, George Hackenschmidt, and Thomas Inch as leaders of this movement and *Health and Strength*, later the mouthpiece of the National Amateur Bodybuilders Association, as its major organizational component. It is not unsurprising that paradoxes abound in many of the incipient efforts to perfect the body—how ancient (Greek) wine could be poured into modern bottles, how science could be employed without disturbing nature, how health could be undermined as much by too little as by too much food, and how the physical training regi-

mens could be limited to promoting health, beauty, and fitness without degenerating into the potentially destructive activity of military preparedness. Physical culture idealists sought a more perfect world of health, happiness, and universal brotherhood, yet paradoxically their notions of an interracial global fraternity could not obliterate concurrent social Darwinist attitudes of British racism and cultural superiority.

Sandow was a key figure in commodifying physical culture through his institute, courses, and magazine, and he helped internationalize it through his popular worldwide performances. We are reminded too of how Hackenschmidt inspired working class audiences, being undefeated in over 3,000 music hall wrestling matches. “While Sandow’s system was guaranteed to build muscles of ‘Iron,’ Hackenschmidt forged the iron ‘into the Finest Steel,’” notes the author (p. 43). Hackenschmidt, “The Modern Hercules,” is also juxtaposed with Denmark’s best-developed man, Jorgen Peter Muller, “The Modern Apollo,” in a 1908 issue of *Health and Strength*. Eventually the Health & Strength League, conceived in 1906 by Hopton Hadley, facilitated the growth of virtually every

physical culture activity and boasted a membership that approached 200,000 by World War II. Although physical culturists sought to manage their bodies in a modern way, it was Greek aesthetics and *mens sana in corpore sano* that framed their ideals.

Like the Greeks, the emphasis was on the male body, and this hegemonic masculinity coincided with links to other cultural forces, particularly during the Edwardian period. Eugenicist fears of racial degeneration from a higher fertility rate of the lowest classes and a lower fertility rate of the middle classes and concerns about the national physique stemming from the high rejection rates of military recruits in the Boer War provided a beginning. Subsequently the inability of British soldiers to cope with the rigors of outdoor life in South



Ettie Rout was a leading physical culturist who epitomized the image of modern femininity in the 1910s and 1920s and radicalized the women’s fitness agenda during the interwar period.

Africa led to the formation of the Boy Scouts by General Sir Robert Baden-Powell, the “hero of Mafeking.” It became Britain’s most popular youth organization, claiming a membership of 150,000 by 1913. Its founder, explains the author, “vehemently condemned tobacco and alcohol” and “advocated personal cleanliness, oral hygiene, nasal breathing, daily bowel movements, and continence” (p. 83). No less important was the Empire Day movement, celebrated by an estimated nine million school children throughout the empire in 1913. Though designed to encourage patriotism and imperial unity, it encouraged youth to enjoy open air exercise. That the iron game was an integral part of this national regeneration is evident from Zweiniger-Bargielowska’s coverage of Sandow’s “Great Competition” at the Royal Albert Hall in 1901, often cited as the first bodybuilding contest.

The contribution of the modern woman to this fitness movement was predictably that of “race mother.” Indeed Sandow claimed that women had as much right to health and strength as men and that beauty was impossible without health. The ideal of the age was Venus de Milo, whose measurements closely coincided with those of modern physical culturist Annette Kellerman, who was regarded by experts such as Dr. Dudley Allen Sargent as the “perfect woman.” Hardly less entitled to this claim was Ettie Rout, a New Zealander who radicalized the women’s fitness agenda.

Rout refused to wear a corset and she sported sandals. She adopted other staples of the emancipated female dress reformer, including male sartorial elements such as men’s overcoats, hats, and boots, worn with plain skirts. Rout experimented with knickerbockers but discarded them as ‘too extreme for comfortable city wear’ in view of the public response, although she used them for hiking at weekends. A tall energetic woman who gained a public profile as a campaigner for women’s rights, Rout was also a vegetarian and free thinker. She was among the first women to cut her hair short and a pre-war photograph shows a confident Rout in a swimming costume epitomizing the image of a modern femininity.

Yet Zweiniger-Bargielowska contends that the “quest for a beautiful, healthy, and fit female body can only be understood fully within the context of contemporary debates about motherhood” (p. 124). Women in this context were not necessarily relegated to a separate sphere, however, especially when maternalism reduced the likelihood of infant mortality and provided an opportunity for eugenic feminists to promote greater legal and political equality for women. Furthermore, the emergence of the Girl Guides in 1910—as a complement to the Boy Scouts—administered by Baden-Powell’s sister Agnes, placed girls on a trajectory to be efficient race mothers.

The 1920s witnessed an increase of state initiatives and voluntary organizations focusing on preventative medicine and life reform. Britain would become, in the wake of the most devastating war in history, “a fit country for heroes,” declared Lloyd George. But it was future Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain who, as Minister of Health, took the lead by securing reform of the poor law and passage of a substantial package of social reforms that increased the role of the state in the health of the people and paved the way for the welfare state after 1945. Hardly less influential was Sir George Newman, a lifelong Quaker who served as Chief Medical Officer of Health from 1919 to 1935. It was Newman who formulated a national health policy based on hygiene, proper diet, fresh air, and exercise for the great mass of the people. Physical education was the key, and Newman worked assiduously to promote health consciousness in schools and to increase the availability of local clinics for medical treatment. Voluntary organizations included the Sunlight League to offset vitamin deficient diets and prevent so-called “diseases of darkness;” the People’s League of Health which sought to eliminate alcoholism, slum conditions, and sweated labor; and the New Health Society, founded in 1925 by Sir William Arbuthnot Lane to transform Britain from a C3 to an A1 nation. Lane’s society, according to Zweiniger-Bargielowska, saw the bowels as central to health and considered chronic intestinal stasis or constipation as the root cause of “all the troubles in civilized life” (p. 169). As a cure, Lane, a surgeon, performed hundreds of colectomies (colon removals). Less drastic measures, including a roughage diet, were advocated by the Manchester-based Vegetarian Society, whose needs were filled by an increasing number of health food stores. What made these body management nostrums

somewhat controversial politically was that they drew inspiration from the liberal ethos of self-help and character formation and less from socialistic ideas of state intervention.

Spearheading the post-war physical culture movement was *Health and Strength* and the Health and Strength League, which not only admitted women and girls in 1919 but contributed to a destabilization of traditional class hierarchies. Most members were lower-middle and working class youth who were drawn by its ideal of a “healthy mind in a healthy body” to become real men. Although Sandow died in 1925, Hackenschmidt, Thomas Inch, and Monte Saldo continued to serve as role models for athleticism and healthful living. Leaguers also gained a physical culture identity by sporting *Health and Strength* ties of old gold, maroon, and black and by purchasing pennants, blazer badges, sweaters, scarves and various other accoutrements. There was also a *Health and Strength Annual* that listed 413 physical culture clubs and gyms in 1930. But the high point of league activities was its annual display, which was endorsed by King George VI in 1938. It was attended by nearly 3,000 persons who witnessed exhibitions of weightlifting, strand-pulling, acrobatics, and folk dancing. Such mass spectacles, however, were sharply distinguished from the hyper-masculine rallies conducted by Sir Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists.

The Fascist physical ideal exaggerated masculine features and it projected an image of violence and brutality which was rather different from the tempered masculinity of the good citizen. Fascism also embodied a politics permeated by an aggressive militarism based on internal and external enemies and a patriarchal gender order. The ideology exalted a male camaraderie which had to reconcile the imperative for action with the principle of discipline and guard against the dangers of homosexuality (p. 208).

Britain’s physical culture community, on the other hand, led by *Health and Strength* and exemplified by Hackenschmidt, though espousing a disciplined body and loyalty to king and country, remained well within the political

mainstream.

Although there was a disproportionate stress among physical culturists on the male body, women’s fitness activities, based on Edwardian precedents, also generated a mass appeal in the interwar period, so much so that they threatened to destabilize traditional *gender* hierarchies. The body, states Zweiniger-Bargielowska, became “a key site for the construction of femininity. A modern, actively cultivated body was yet another aspect of women’s liberation along with political emancipation, greater gender equality, and expanding employment opportunities after 1918. A sign of the times, coinciding with the men’s dress reform movement, was a revolutionary transformation in women’s wear—fewer, lighter, and looser-fitting garments—that enabled not only freer athletic movements but invited the male gaze and an erotic appeal unthinkable in Victorian times. It was most evident in a Ladies’ Physical Excellence Competition launched in 1928 by *Health and Strength* which offered £100 for Britain’s best-developed female. Subsequent competitions became one of the most popular features of the magazine. There were also men’s competitions, and pictures of women and men dressed in swimming costumes, published on the same page, arguably helped to foster gender equality. Reducing inequalities was also the object of physical culturists and life reformers who advocated birth control and greater sexual knowledge for women. As an aspect of women’s liberation, argues the author, the fitness culture “created a host of new careers and job opportunities, freed women from Victorian conceptions of modesty, and increased female access to public spaces and leisure facilities” (p. 278).

The 1930s are probably best remembered for Britain’s failed foreign policy initiatives, but Zweiniger-Bargielowska contends that the government’s domestic policies were relatively successful; the nation enjoyed high rates of economic growth with rising real incomes and mass consumption on an unprecedented scale. The British diet was “more plentiful and of a higher quality than ever before” (p. 288). Shorter working hours, more paid holidays, and greater disposable income enabled members of the middle class and a substantial portion of the working class to take advantage of such leisure activities as hiking, camping, cycling, swimming, and sunbathing. Public expenditure on parks, swimming pools, pleasure gardens, cricket pitches, and football fields increased dramatically. But there were still many pock-



Comedic actor and singer George Formby played a cowardly barber who overcame his fears in the ring—and life—in the musical feature film, *Keep Fit*, released in 1937. His costar was Kay Walsh.

ets of nutritional deprivation and health deficiencies, thus giving rise to the Leftist phrase of “Hungry England.”

To counter this perception, the government under Neville Chamberlain launched its National Fitness Campaign in 1937 to shift the national focus from food to exercise. Despite the growing threat of Nazi Germany, the scheme rejected the notion of any quasi-military physical training and adopted the rationale of physical culturists that exercise should be pursued for its own sake, as a means to promote general health and happiness. Subsequent legislation allocated £2,400,000 to fund propaganda initiatives, train instructors, and improve recreational facilities. The highwater mark of the campaign was the hit film, *Keep Fit*, a George Formby comedy which included several hit songs. The lyrics of “Biceps, Muscle, and Brawn” embodied a well-worn physical culture motif.

Why am I forgotten, by the girl I love,
because my clothes hang on me like a sack.

I know I’m not athletic and look a bit pathetic,
and wear most of my chest upon my back.

The nation’s got an A1 plan, and I might

turn into a man,
If I’d biceps, muscle and brawn.¹

Formby became the most popular male film star of the late 1930s and “an icon of Britishness during the war” (p. 326). Physical culture had entered the cultural mainstream.

Unfortunately the National Fitness Campaign had to be suspended upon the outbreak of World War II, but the efforts of social reformers, according to Zweiniger-Bargielowska, were validated by the emergence of a kindler and gentler masculinity promoted by *Health and Strength* and a nation more attuned to health and fitness. How much it countered competing images of hunger, unemployment, and poverty in the 1930s is debatable, but the author maintains an upbeat tone throughout her study, concluding that physical culture provided the grounds on which there was a modicum

of consensus between Left and Right. That largely voluntary social reform measures were eventually superseded after 1945 by the more sweeping entitlements of the welfare state, however, should not diminish their importance. For physical culturists their legacy is no less significant. There is a tendency to regard training procedures and precedents prior to World War II as the dark ages and not relevant to the present. This account, however, brings to light a rich international tradition that is rooted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most importantly, *Managing the Body* helps us come to grips with the sometimes nebulous field of physical culture and endows sources, movements, and personalities heretofore regarded as unworthy of serious study with enhanced respectability. Encyclopedic, authoritative, and integrated with other forces shaping modern civilization, the book may be viewed by physical culturists as a tribute to their noble (albeit sometimes eccentric) efforts to achieve beauty, health, and fitness. Unfortunately the hefty price of the book at \$115 will prevent most of them from buying it and thereby returning the favor.

NOTE:

1. www.lyricsfreak.com/g/george+formby/biceps+muscle+and+brawn_20795319.html.