

UNCOVERING THE HISTORY OF WILLIAM L. MURRAY, BODYBUILDING'S FIRST CHAMPION

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William L. Murray of Nottingham, was a magnificent type of English manhood.
—*Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 21 September 1901*

My researches in the periodicals and newspapers of his era did not reveal anything at all about his background or abilities and he seemed to disappear from the pages of the magazines almost as soon as the competition was over.
—David Webster on studying Murray's Life**

In September 1901 William L. Murray made bodybuilding history with a victory in Eugen Sandow's "The Great Competition." Announced in late 1898, Sandow's contest began as a "postal competition." After men submitted photos and letters to the magazine, a series of regional (or county) contests were then held in 1899. The regional meets ran over the course of the next two years as they sought Britain's best male physique.¹ At a time when British society was becoming alive to the possibilities of physical culture, Sandow's goal, as he routinely reminded readers of his *Magazine of Physical Culture*, was simple: to provide encouragement to a then-budding movement, while simultaneously highlighting the great physical strides already taken by men in the cause of physical culture.² From among hundreds of submissions, Murray was invited to compete at the 1901 finale in London's Royal Albert Hall. At an extravaganza also featuring numerous athletic displays, Murray flexed and posed alongside his fellow competitors, while Eugen Sandow, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Sir Charles Lawes critiqued the men's physiques.³ Claiming the top prize, Murray was awarded the title of "the most

perfectly proportioned subject" of the King.⁴ Embarking on a music hall career just weeks after his victory, Murray was known forevermore to the public as the winner of Sandow's contest.

Murray's name and story has, for obvious reasons, appeared often in histories of bodybuilding and physical culture.⁵ Sandow's contest is considered by many to be the first major physique contest despite earlier shows held by Edmond Desbonnet in France and John Atkinson in Britain.⁶ This marks Murray as one of the first, if not the first, recognizable bodybuilding champions in the sport's history. Yet, despite his place among the pioneers of competitive bodybuilding, Murray's significance in this regard has not translated into historical attention. Aside from numerous sporadic comments noting his victory in Sandow's contest, few historians have given a detailed account of Murray's life.⁷ One of the few to do so, David Webster, discussed Murray's life and accomplishments in the early 1980s, when access to newspaper records was significantly more limited than it is today. Webster's commentary on Murray was, and is, excellent.⁸ Trawling through newspaper records and even tracking down Murray's family, Webster was able to piece together information about Murray's early life in Nottingham, his career after Sandow's contest and, ultimately, what happened to the trophy Murray won. Since that time, none have attempted to expand on, or match, Webster's short biography.

Two developments have finally made

* "Sandow's Contest," *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 21 September 1901.

** David Webster, *Bodybuilding: An Illustrated History* (New York: Arco, 1982), 37.

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an update to Webster's work possible. First, the digitization of online newspaper records in Britain has made it far easier to find information on Murray's career as a music hall strongman. As Webster noted, many magazines and newspapers seemed to forget Murray soon after the contest. Digitization has made it possible to find references to Murray in multiple regional newspaper sources and, thankfully, in British census and death notices. Second, Murray's family contacted the current author and kindly provided additional information about Murray's history.⁹ This included family anecdotes and scrapbooks which helped clear up several misconceptions about Murray's life.

William Murray did not enjoy the same stratospheric fame that Eugen Sandow did. He did not write any books on bodybuilding, he only sporadically coached individuals, and he did not patent or invent any specialized training equipment. Murray did, however, join a new generation of strongmen and women seeking to forge a living as a music hall strongman. His distinction was his association with Sandow's competition.

This article provides a full biography of William Murray's life, which both utilizes and builds on Webster's excellent research. Further, the article positions Murray as an individual who managed to navigate the notoriously fickle world of music hall strongmen by parlaying his title and reputation into a credible career. For historians and fans of bodybuilding, the article finally fleshes out the biography of one of bodybuilding's first champions.

EARLY LIFE OF WILLIAM LANG MURRAY

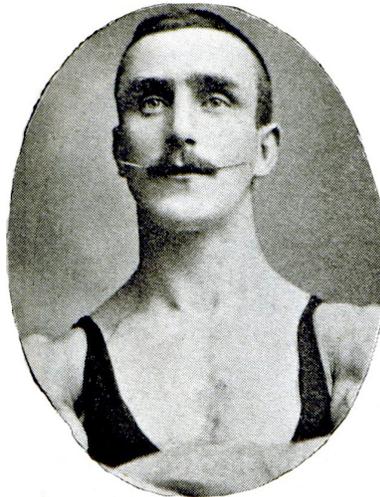
Born in Paisley, Scotland, in 1873, and not 1874 as is sometimes stated, Murray was one of ten children born to Alexander and Elizabeth Murray. He was the second eldest child.¹⁰ During the early 1880s, Alexander and Elizabeth moved south to Nottingham, England, where Alexander and his brother George established a dyeing and finishing firm called "Murray Brothers."¹¹ William, as was common for the period, began his working career at the family firm. The 1891 British Census lists William as an "appren-

tice dyer" when he was 17 years old.¹² Although Alexander and George later parted ways for reasons that are unclear, and Alexander moved back to Scotland, William remained in Nottingham with the rest of his family. Befitting his later athletic career, William was known in his late teens as an all-round sportsman. A brief biography of Murray, published later in his career by a regional newspaper, noted that as a teenager he won several prizes in sprinting and cycling in local Midlands' meets.¹³

He also played alongside his brother Leonard on a local football (soccer) team. Several biographies cite Murray's career as a football player, and one goes so far as to say he played several seasons for Notts County.¹⁴ While it is true that William played for Notts County, then a top-division football team, his appearances amounted to only two games played in 1894, both in friendly or exhibition matches.

This discovery was made following correspondences between Murray's family and a later club historian for Notts County.¹⁵ Part of the confusion about Murray's football experience likely comes from Murray's own self-promotion. Marketing himself as an "all-round athlete" rather than a strongman, Murray often boasted about his career as a footballer.¹⁶ When Murray

won Sandow's contest in 1901, a local newspaper gushed that Murray is well known "in Nottingham as a good footballer and an all-round athlete."¹⁷ Interviewed by the *Eastern Evening News* in 1904, Murray himself credited his lower body strength to his experience "in running, football, and cycling."¹⁸ Such comments helped ingratiate Murray within the footballing community, and by 1906 *The Football News* reserved special praise for "our friend" William Murray who was well known to the periodical's readership.¹⁹ It was during this period in the 1890s that Murray began experimenting with physical culture exercises. While certain newspaper articles claimed that Murray came to physical culture after an injury during a game for Notts County ended his football career, there is little evidence from Murray's own interviews or his family recollections to substantiate this theory.²⁰ For example, the *Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette* gave



W. MURRAY (Nottingham).
Gold Medal.

William Murray submitted this photograph as part of his entry into Eugen Sandow's Great Competition. It appeared as one among many such images in *Sandow's Magazine of Physical Culture* in the months leading up to "The Great Competition."

the following account of Murray's introduction to physical culture following an injury supposedly incurred during a match for Notts County: "He was removed to an inn in the vicinity, and there had to undergo an operation. It was two months before was able to go to his home at Daybrook, being then in a very poor condition; but he has finally recovered and turned his attentions naturally to some means of recovering his vigour and strength."²¹

This was the only time a newspaper attempted to detail Murray's physical culture interest and there is reason to be suspicious of its validity. What system Murray used to recover from his injury is equally obscure. For obvious reasons it was claimed after his victory in Sandow's competition that Murray was a devoted follower of Sandow's exercises, but Murray himself claimed to use his own training systems in building his body.²²

Given that Murray played in only two friendly matches for Notts County in 1894, the injury story appears unlikely. Far more likely is that Murray, like many men of his generation, was introduced to physical culture through repeated exposure in newspapers, magazines, and music hall performances.²³ Although Eugen Sandow intensified England's interest in physical culture with his victory over fellow strongman Sampson in 1889, gymnastics and physical training was already being practiced in the country prior to this time. Jan Todd's work on the history of dumbbells, barbells, and Indian clubs made clear that weight training in Britain had a following prior to the popular ascent of physical culture in the late nineteenth-century.²⁴ From the 1860s, Nottingham, like several other burgeoning industrial hubs, welcomed a series of gymnastic societies and gymnasiums open to men and, oftentimes, women.²⁵ Murray's generation benefitted from this older Victorian health interest and capitalized on new physical culture exercises, training systems, and training equipment.

In 1860 the British military created a mandatory training system for troops.²⁶ Created by Scottish gymnast Archibald MacLaren, the military's system relied heavily on dumbbells, Indian clubs, and rigorous calisthenics. This system, which remained in place until the early 1900s, helped in many ways to prepare British society for the advent of physical culture.²⁷ In the past, historians have commented on the British peculiarity for games during the nineteenth century. In Scandinavia and many parts of mainland Europe, societies were coming

alive to the possibilities offered by gymnastics and physical training. Britain, on the other hand, seemed far more preoccupied with sports rather than physical training for many decades.²⁸ MacLaren's system helped, albeit temporarily, bring more focus to gym-based activities. When British schools and public gymnasiums began experimenting with physical training, they asked for military officers.²⁹ Likewise, many civilian men during the 1860s and 1870s were introduced to physical training through their participation in volunteer armies.³⁰ Murray's career began after this development and certainly benefited from its impact. Eugen Sandow and other strength athletes from the 1880s and 1890s intensified the British interest in strength



This image of William Murray as the grand prize winner of The Great Competition of 1901 appeared in Sandow's *Magazine of Physical Culture*.

cultures but this interest had been building slowly since the mid-century at least.

Equally important was the rise of organized sport during this period. While the growth of rugby, football, and cricket has been dealt with in great detail by historians, it is worth highlighting the prestige given over to elite athletes in British society.³¹ This was most clearly found in the “muscular Christian” ethos, which encouraged the belief that a strong and athletic body was reflective of a morally upright and admirable man. Strongly promoted in British fee-paying schools, the ‘muscular Christian’ ideal nevertheless spread into wider sporting patterns.³² The respectability given to sport in British society, especially middle and upper-class sport, created a space for new sporting celebrities to emerge. W.G. Grace, a late nineteenth-century cricketer, is generally regarded as Britain’s first sporting celebrity. A trained physician, Grace embodied the “amateur athlete” trope expected of British athletes whereby individuals devoted themselves to sport for the love of the game rather than a desire to earn a living.³³ Discounting the social class implications of depicting professional athletes as somehow lesser, the combination of the amateur athlete with the “muscular Christian” made being an athlete a respectable thing for British men.³⁴

The idea that an athlete was an admirable figure came to be applied to the organizer of Murray’s 1901 competition, Eugen Sandow. Entering the British consciousness as a weightlifter and strongman, Sandow deftly parlayed the admiration for athletic bodies in Britain into a lucrative career. During the 1890s and 1900s Sandow slowly, but expertly, began to position himself as more than a strongman. He opened alternative health institutes which promised to cure diseases through physical culture exercises alone. Magazines, children’s toys, books, nutritional supplements, private lectures, and women’s corsets were all sold by Sandow in the pre-war period.³⁵ Since mid-century, elite strongmen in Britain had received a certain amount of societal attention. As an example, the heavy Indian club swinger, Professor Harrison, played before Queen Victoria in the 1850s.³⁶ Underpinning part of Sandow’s fame was the assumption, based on the respect given to athletes in Britain, that Sandow’s physique and athleticism were reflective of a large intellect. This explains how and why Sandow was asked to comment on military training, public health, nutrition, eugenics and so on. The ability to move from mu-

sic hall to mainstream, as Sandow and many of his contemporaries did, was reflective of the vibrant and exciting sporting world of which Murray found himself a part. Sandow emerged as an excellent example of how one could enhance their relevance as a strength athlete by appealing to much larger social movements.

Turning to Murray, this explains his promotion of the idea that he was an all-round athlete rather than just a strongman. Although it was possible to earn a living solely as a strength athlete, promoting oneself as an all-round athlete appeased conservative Republicans, and later assuaged early Edwardian concerns that Murray, Sandow, or other strongman entertainers might be less worthy, or less noble, than other men.³⁷ Unfortunately, there is frustratingly little information about Murray’s work at the time of Sandow’s contest in 1901. In 1891, Murray worked as an apprentice dyer. Murray was not captured by the 1901 Census, but we do know that in 1900 William taught boxing to local schoolboys “in a room over a pub in his local hometown of Arnold, Nottingham.”³⁸ At the time of Sandow’s competition in 1901, there were some suggestions that Murray was an instructor at Sandow’s School of Physical Culture in Nottingham.³⁹ That Sandow excluded all Sandow School instructors from competing in his “Great Competition” on the day of his finale in September 1901 makes this suggestion unlikely.⁴⁰ Similarly, many of Sandow’s instructors proudly advertised their connection with Sandow; Murray did not.⁴¹ What we do know is that Murray was, at the very least, a consumer of Sandow’s magazines. Begun in 1898, *Sandow’s Magazine of Physical Culture* was the avenue through which the Great Competition was announced. To enter the competition, entrants had to submit a photograph of themselves alongside six magazine coupons.⁴² This was the beginning of Murray’s career as a physical culturist.

BECOMING THE BEST DEVELOPED MAN IN GREAT BRITAIN

In order to promote the spread of Physical Culture, and to afford encouragement to those who are anxious to perfect their physiques, the proprietors of ‘Physical Culture’ propose to hold a unique competition, to the winners of which, prizes of the value of over 1,000 guineas will be

awarded . . .⁴³—*Sandow's Magazine of Physical Culture*, 1898

In late 1898, *Sandow's Magazine of Physical Culture* announced his "Great Competition," which would evaluate British and Irish men based on their physiques. This was a contest open not to the professional athlete, but rather to the amateur physical culturist, which fed on the previously discussed esteem for amateur athletes at this time.⁴⁴ First announced in the July issue of *Physical Culture*, Sandow's contest envisioned a three-tiered process by which applicants would first submit a photograph of themselves to Sandow's magazine for evaluation.⁴⁵ If someone passed the photography round, they were invited to regional Sandow contests. Winners at the regional contests would, finally, be invited to Sandow's competition at the Royal Albert Hall in London. Although it was hoped that this process could be managed over the course of a single calendar year, logistical and political challenges prolonged the process. It is impossible to know how many initial entrants participated in the contest. One, perhaps fanciful, newspaper estimate put the number at more than 1,000 photographs over the course of six months.⁴⁶

As prizes for the finale, Sandow offered the lofty title of "Best Developed Man," as well as a golden statuette of Sandow said to be worth £500. A silver Sandow statuette worth £60 would be given to the runner-up and a bronze statuette worth £20 was reserved for the third-place contestant.⁴⁷ Following the preliminary photograph round, Sandow hosted 12 regional competitions, with five found in England, four in Scotland, two in Ireland and one in Wales. In these 12 contests, 656 men competed, which represented roughly £33 in entry fees alone, which was a handsome fee for Sandow.⁴⁸ Murray competed in the Nottingham contest where he finished ahead of G. A. Hickling, J. Briggs and R.C. Twist to win a gold medal.⁴⁹ Judging these shows was Sandow himself, a Dr. Beaumont and, occasionally, a sculptor chosen to adjudicate at the finale itself, Sir Charles Lawes. The judging process was split between the following areas: general development, equality or balance of development, the condition and tone of the tissues, general health, and condition of the skin.⁵⁰ The criteria, which focused on a variety of health metrics, were thought to encompass the numerous ways in which one could evaluate overall health and vibrancy.

Initially it was hoped that Sandow's

competition would be held some time in 1900. Disrupting these plans was the outbreak of the Second South African War in 1899.⁵¹ Erupting in October 1899, the war was an issue of great embarrassment for the British Empire. Although the British were confident of a speedy victory, the war was protracted as Boer and African forces outmaneuvered British troops in the field through a series of quick victories.⁵² British defeats in the war's opening campaigns led to a great deal of soul-searching back home about the health and strength of British troops. As more men were sent to fight, newspaper stories began anxiously noting the large number of British men who failed the basic physical requirements for enlistment. Contrasting British men with their Boer or African counterparts, it was claimed that the former were physically weaker and that this was contributing to British losses.⁵³ Eventually Britain overcame Boer and African forces but not until thousands of additional men were sent to South Africa.⁵⁴ Sandow's contest, inadvertently, benefitted greatly from these anxieties. During the conflict, *Sandow's Magazine of Physical Culture* began citing the number of strong Sandow pupils that had enlisted.⁵⁵ When concerns about British men's strength circulated in British newspapers, Sandow offered to train prospective British soldiers free of charge.⁵⁶ Stories of Sandow's exercises being used in prisoner-of-war camps were likewise used by Sandow to show his universal appeal.⁵⁷

The Second South African War helped elevate Sandow's position in British society as an individual who could influence both personal and institutional fitness. More importantly, Sandow's contest, which served to discover the best physique in Great Britain, now seemed to be offering a practical solution to a serious geo-political problem. His contest encouraged men to increase their strength and muscularity at a moment when British men seemed to be physically degenerating. So, although Sandow complained in his physical culture magazine about needing to delay his contest's finale due to the war—the war undoubtedly raised the profile of what he was doing.⁵⁸ On the night of the contest, in September 1901, Sandow and his organizers made several efforts to link themselves to the war. These included exhibitions of military drill and the announcement that all proceeds would go to a charity fund for those widowed by the South African War.⁵⁹

The contest finale, held at the Royal Albert Hall in London, was supposedly a sell-out

affair with tickets ranging from £3 3s for a box, to a single shilling for a promenade.⁶⁰ The audience was described in various media outlets as enthusiastic and engaged by the night's proceedings. Sandow's own magazine claimed that traffic around the Hall reached a standstill as thousands of spectators made their way to the show.⁶¹ The night began with Chopin's Funeral March, played by the Band of Irish Guards in homage to the late American President William McKinley who had been assassinated days earlier by anarchist Leon Czolgosz. This performance was followed by a drill display by boys from the Watford Orphan Asylum, led by a Sergeant King. Commenting later on the display, Sandow's magazine stressed that the purpose of the Watford display had been to demonstrate the boys' physical development from training. Over the course of the evening, the audience was met with wrestling and fencing displays, a demonstration of Sandow's workout equipment and more songs, one of which was said to have been penned by Sandow himself ("The Athlete's March"). Next came a military gymnastics display led by Colonel Fox.⁶² Interestingly, it appears that medals were awarded for some, if not all, of the sports/activities on display (which ranged from chest expanding to wrestling and gymnastics). This was nowhere near the scale of the events hosted by Bernarr Macfadden in his American contests of the 1900s but nevertheless highlighted the encompassing nature of Sandow's show.⁶³

The final event of the evening was, of course, the physique display in which the competitors or, the "magnificent specimens of the race," were brought to the stage dressed in black tights and leopard singlets.⁶⁴ Judged by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes series, Sir Charles Lawes, a famous sculptor, and Sandow himself, the men were whittled down from an initial 60 to just 12. In between the original group and the select few chosen for further consideration, Sandow gave a posing performance of his own which, according to later reports, served as a timely reminder of his own credentials in organizing such a competition.⁶⁵ When the 12 men were brought back out, they stood atop individual plinths, and flexed their muscles while the judges, and the audience, discussed their strengths and flaws. At times such examinations took on a farcical appearance, as illustrated when Sandow "went on his hands and knees to examine the nether limbs of the men."⁶⁶ At the end of such deliberations, it was decided that William Murray from

Nottingham was the winner, having defeated D. Cooper from Birmingham, and Middlesex's A.C. Symthe. Greeted with rapturous applause, an announcement was made that the gathering would become a yearly event to further the cause of perfecting the British race.⁶⁷

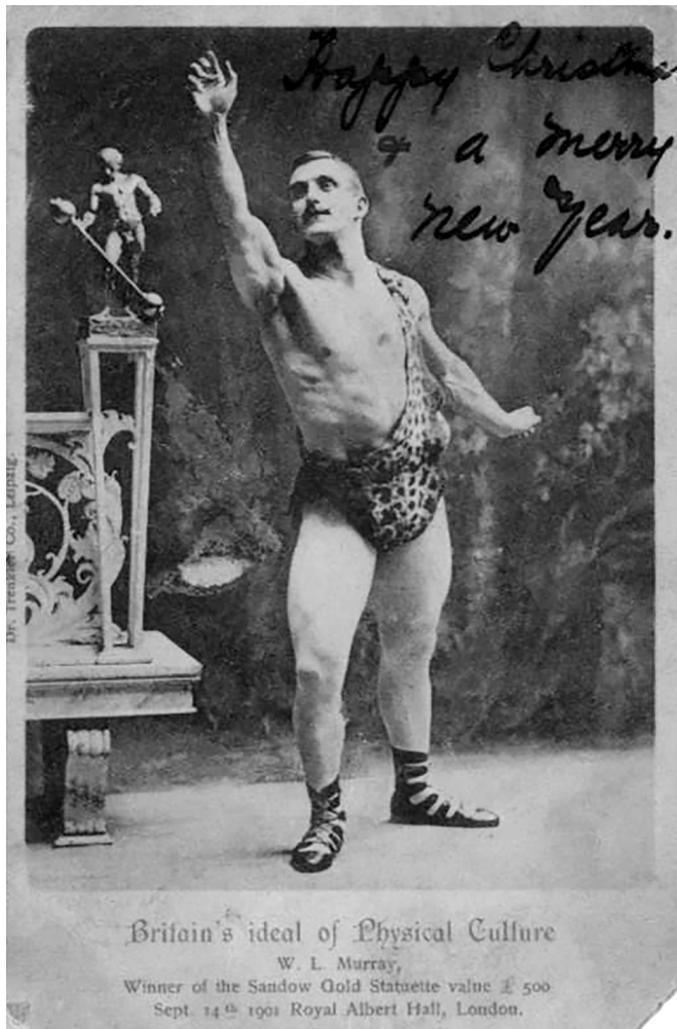
While this never happened, the contest marked the beginning of Murray's performing career despite his initial confusion about what to do next. Arthur Conan Doyle later recounted Murray's post-victory experience in his memoirs:

As I left the place of banquet I saw in front of me the winning athlete [Murray] going forth into the London night with the big golden statue under his arm. I had seen that he was a very simple countryman, unused to London ways, so I overtook him and asked him what his plans were.

He confided to me that he had no money, but he had a return ticket to Bolton or Blackburn, and his idea was to walk the streets until a train started for the North. It seemed to me a monstrous thing to allow him to wander about with his treasure at the mercy of any murderous gang, so I suggested that he should come back with me to Morley's Hotel, where I was residing.

When at last we reached the hotel I told the night porter to get him a room, saying at the same time, 'Mind you are civil to him, for he has just been declared to be the strongest man in England.' This went round the hotel, and I found that in the morning he held quite a reception, all the maids and waiters paying homage while he lay in bed with his statue beside him.

He asked my advice as to selling it, for it was of considerable value and seemed a white elephant to a poor man. I told him he should open a gymnasium in his native town and have the statue exhibited as an advertisement. This



William Murray illustrates Britain's "Ideal of Physical Culture" and his winning form on this cabinet card. He also shows his readers the "solid gold" statuette that he won and which later was determined to be gold-plated.

he did, and I believe he has been very successful.⁶⁸

Murray, as the next section will discuss, did not open a gym. Instead, he began a career as a music hall strongman. Before discussing that, however, it is worth noting the broader reaction to Murray's victory. In British newspapers, Murray was celebrated for his "splendid" physique, and for being the most "developed" specimen in Britain.⁶⁹ In terms of British physical culture media, few periodicals existed outside of Sandow's own magazine of physical culture. An obvious exception to this was *Health and Strength* magazine, which reported its own evaluation of the contest. Written by Professor Josef Szalay—who was sued by Sandow in 1903 over copyright infringement—the article proved to be one of the few critical ones.⁷⁰

Later substantiated by another contributor to *Health and Strength* named "Strong Arm," Szalay began by commending Sandow for organizing such a worthwhile show before citing several complaints he and others had. In the first instance both Szalay and Strong Arm took issue with the contest's selection criteria, but for different reasons.⁷¹ Less impressed with Murray's physique than others, Szalay claimed that "I fancy the first prize, if awarded to Mr. Cooper, of Birmingham, would have more satisfied the greatest part of the spectators."⁷² Strong Arm went further in criticizing the decision to make competitors wear black tights which, they believed, hid Murray's underdeveloped legs.⁷³ Strong Arm also claimed that on the night of the contest several dozen competitors were barred from competing after a last-minute decision was taken to exclude those individuals who worked in Sandow's physical culture institutes.⁷⁴ While Szalay's complaints could be brushed off as the inevitable result of a contest based on subjective measures, Strong Arm's were more serious. They insinuated that Sandow and his organizers had wantonly interfered with the contest's criteria. The result of this was that, although Murray had a fine physique, he may have competed against a slightly easier group. There was little to substantiate Strong Arm's accusations and they were certainly not repeated in any periodical. Such commentary nevertheless highlighted the attention that Sandow's contest garnered both inside and outside the world of physical culture. Such interest was quickly used by Murray to build his career in the music hall circuit.

"THE BULWELL HERCULES": MURRAY THE STRONGMAN

In the immediate aftermath of his victory Murray appeared, if Conan Doyle's account is truthful, entirely unsure of what to do with his victory in Sandow's competition. What directed his mind to performing is unknown, but it is clear that the music hall and variety act offered a great deal of opportunity to the performer blessed with creativity. In late 1902, Murray began touring Ireland and Great Britain with his strongman act.⁷⁵ Much like Sandow, Murray benefitted greatly from the cultural importance of the music hall in British society. Music halls, much like the American vaudeville theater, were the primary means of entertainment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁷⁶ Ex-

isting prior to the nineteenth century, they rose in importance during this period. While it is difficult to ascertain the exact number of music halls and stages that existed during this period, it is important to stress their accessibility. Aside from London, which boasted dozens, if not hundreds of stages of various sizes, regional towns in England often offered a multitude of halls to perform in.⁷⁷ This meant that Murray, like so many other strength performers of his era, had the opportunity to play throughout the British Isles. It would be spurious, of course, to say that this was an easy life, but it is important to note that at the time of performing, music hall shows had never been more popular.⁷⁸ Equally important was the kind of show on offer. From the 1880s, variety acts had grown in popularity. Such shows were defined by the multitude of performers they contained, all of whom were given a short period of time to entertain the audience. Thus, Murray would regularly share the play bill with clowns, singers, jugglers, and a host of other entertainers. Strength feats were particularly attractive in variety shows during this period as they could be offered as a stand-alone segment or incorporated into one of the many other acts. One of Murray's contemporaries, the Indian club swinger Tom Burrows, was known to perform endurance feats in the music hall while musicians completed their sets.⁷⁹

One of the first shows Murray played came in May 1902 when he featured in a strongman act in Derbyshire. This was followed by performances in Nottingham, London, and Dublin, Ireland.⁸⁰ Murray's victory in Sandow's contest may have afforded him some celebrity during this time but it is telling that shows advertising his upcoming feature noted his association with Sandow rather than his own strength act. Throughout Murray's career, even when his popularity as a strongman truly took off, he was presented as the man who won Sandow's contest.⁸¹ Performing throughout Britain at this time, Murray's positioning on the card bill typically hovered around the middle.⁸² It was only in 1904 that Murray began to headline shows and act as the final performance.⁸³ This likely represented an increase in both wages and, more significantly, recognition that he now had some form of star attraction.

By 1904 Murray began to attract far more attention for his shows and his services. Remarkably, it took until this time for a British newspaper to solicit an in-depth interview from Murray. *Sandow's Magazine of Physical Culture* ran until 1907, but never once interviewed Mur-

ray about his experiences despite the fact that many of Murray's competitors wrote to detail their memories of the contest.⁸⁴ Similarly, British newspapers, including those from Murray's hometown, wrote positively about the event, and about Murray's physique, without ever seeking Murray out for further comment.⁸⁵ This explains why his life has suffered from repeated misreporting, and also why David Webster initially struggled to put together Murray's biography. His interview with the *Eastern Evening News* in 1904 thus provided a window to Murray's own insights on his career. When questioned on how he classed himself, Murray insisted he was an "all round athlete" and not a strongman: "Please don't refer to me as a strong man—a navy is a strong man—but rather as an all-round athlete. I don't perform my feats of brute strength. I do them mostly through the knowledge of the position and the training of the muscles, and most of my success is due to a fine physique combined with a right use of my head."⁸⁶

In this regard, Murray was following in Sandow's footsteps in marketing himself as more than a mere strongman. From the mid-1900s until his effective retirement from the stage in 1909 or 1910, Murray's act had an Ancient Roman theme. Posing on stage as a Roman centurion or gladiator, Murray ran through a series of poses before finally engaging in some strength acts.⁸⁷ Murray's apparent aversion to the term *strongman* was likely a marketing one. Continuing in his interview Murray claimed not to be a "faddist" or dogmatic in his training and nutrition: "I believe in living just a pure healthy life. I eat just what I fancy, and I smoke and drink in moderation but I do not drink spirits."⁸⁸

Such comments provide some hints as to why Murray did not market any nutritional supplements or workout devices during this period. His status as Britain's best developed man would likely have attracted companies seeking to associate themselves with his physique. This was a period when physical culturists like Sandow, Arthur Saxon, Eustace Miles, and Thomas Inch promoted everything from Plasmon (a milk powder protein supplement) to Hovis Bread.⁸⁹ Murray's simplicity in diet was also echoed in his exercise system. Unlike others who claimed to have derived their strength and power from a certain device or way of training Murray claimed that his love of sport, in a variety of capacities, helped build his body.⁹⁰ At a time when others were selling patented workout devices, such comments set Murray aside

from his contemporaries. In terms of his actual strength, few columns noted his best lifts. One of the few newspapers to do so during the early 1900s, noted the ease with which he lifted 125 pounds and 200 pounds—although they did not specify how he lifted them.⁹¹ In 1908, the *Dover Express* wrote that Murray was capable of balancing “a real Roman chariot on his chin and the lifting with one hand of a bar bell weighing 140 lbs above his head.”⁹²

One of the few services that Murray did offer was individual coaching or advice. Published in 1904, again during Murray’s time in Norwich, was a newspaper article offering individuals the chance to meet Murray and learn how to build their own physiques.⁹³ This does not appear to have lasted particularly long, but it was indicative of Murray’s efforts to expand his economic opportunities. Whereas others sold special nutritional supplements or devices, Murray briefly marketed his expertise. His vagabond lifestyle as a performer likely hindered his chances of success as, aside from well-known physical culturists

like Sandow, physical culture instructors tended to operate from local gymnasiums where they could be regularly met. Where Murray did experience greater success was in artistic posing. In 1905 Murray posed for Sir Charles Lawes, the sculptor who had judged Murray’s physique during Sandow’s 1901 show. Posing as Amphion and Zethus in Lawes’ recreation of *The Death of Dirce*, Murray’s physique was shown at the Franco-British Exhibition of 1908 and was also placed in the Royal Academy.⁹⁴ This, as the *Oxford Journal Illustrated* reported in 1910, was the beginning of several sculptures based on Murray’s body.⁹⁵ Such engagements only ever served as a secondary form of income in Murray’s career, as evidenced by the fact that he kept performing during this period. Interestingly, there exists no record of Murray’s bodily measurements during his strongman career, or even from his victory in 1901. Given the stress

that Sandow, and other performers, placed on their perfectly proportionate physiques, this is a strange absence from Murray’s own self-promotion.

From 1904, the time of his first interview, to 1908, Murray’s act does not appear to have changed greatly. As late as 1908 *The Nottingham Daily Express* reported on Murray’s Roman act which featured muscular poses, feats of strength and balancing acts. For his final act, Murray lifted “what is termed a real Roman chariot and balances it for a moment on his chin.”⁹⁶ When the *Oxford Journal Illustrated* took a photograph of Murray for the periodical in 1910 it did so with Murray in his full centurion outfit. Such images were also used in the photographs Murray sold during this period.



After winning *The Great Competition*, Murray began a strength act. As part of his show, he posed as a Roman soldier and finished by balancing a Roman chariot on his chin.

It was in 1910 that Murray transitioned into managing other performers. The same periodical, the *Oxford Journal Illustrated*, called Murray a “courteous and genial manager” who was responsible for the latest successes of a Mr. Milton Bode. Noting his “muscularity and splendid propor-

tions,” the unnamed journalist regretfully wrote that Murray was no longer performing, and instead, was content managing the successes of others.⁹⁷ Once more Murray’s records are not easily accessible through the 1911 British Census, although family members have been able to resolve confusion about his pre-War livelihood. In 1912 Murray was resident manager at the Newcastle Hippodrome Theater, which opened that year.⁹⁸ Despite the excitement surrounding the position, Murray did not stay at the theater particularly long. In fact, he emigrated the following year to Canada to join three of his sisters who had already made the move to North America. His reputation preceding him, Murray’s arrival in Hamilton, Canada was announced in the local newspaper. According to the *Hamilton Herald*, Murray was planning to open a physical training school in the city while staying with his three sisters.⁹⁹ The outbreak of the Great War the fol-

lowing year hurt these plans. The United States did not join the War until 1917, but Canada, owing to her imperial relationship with Great Britain, entered the War in its early months. Murray was part of the first batch of 33,000 Canadian men who enlisted in the War effort.¹⁰⁰ Murray, himself, was sent to France.

A still underexplored area in the history of physical culture is the impact that the Great War had on the first generation of strongmen and women. Arthur Saxon's wartime experience contributed to his failing health.¹⁰¹ Sandow's companies went bankrupt and future physical culture stars like Alan Mead were injured during the conflict.¹⁰² Murray's fortunes were sadly similar. During his wartime service, Murray's lungs were damaged, permanently, in a gas attack.¹⁰³ According to David Webster, this did not stop Murray from entertaining wounded troops with feats of strength. In return for his services in keeping troop morale strong, Murray was awarded a guitar inlaid with mother of pearl by Lady Astor.¹⁰⁴ Returning to Britain at the end of the conflict, Murray did not return to the stage but instead moved back into the career he had as a teenager. The "best developed" man in Great Britain and Ireland retired from the stage, married in 1924, and spent the next decade working as a hosiery dyer.¹⁰⁵

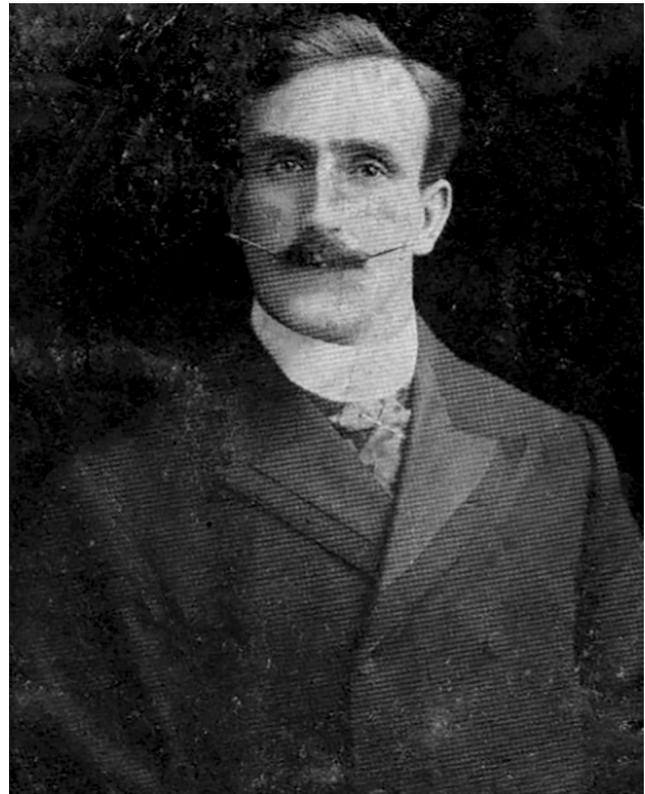
When Murray passed away in 1949, local newspapers in Nottingham began to pay tribute to the "Bulwell Hercules" who had once boasted the best body in Ireland and Great Britain. His obituary spoke of his all-round athleticism: "He also posed for many leading sculptors. An all-round sportsman, he won many prizes for cycling and running and once played full-back for Notts County. During the First World War he served with the Canadian forces..."¹⁰⁶ Other papers focused on his physique: "A man of exceptional physique, he won the gold medal of England in his early days as the finest developed man in the country, and also won the Sandow statuette."¹⁰⁷ All mentioned his association with Sandow.

CONCLUSION

Seeking to trace the history of the Sandow trophy in the 1970s, David Webster first attempted to meet, and then successfully met, Murray's descendants in Nottingham where he found Murray's original gold statuette from Sandow. It was here that Webster realized that Sandow's advertised gold trophy was, in fact, gold-plated. Webster's discovery was a small, but significant, reminder of what Murray's life

can tell historians about Sandow and his business operations.¹⁰⁸ Because of Sandow's "Great Competition" of 1901, Murray's legacy is, in one sense, intimately tied to the fortunes and operations of Eugen Sandow. Murray first entered the world of physical culture because of Sandow's contest, and it was through his victory there that he earned a title that would sustain him for the next decade. Throughout his time performing, Murray was advertised first as the winner of the Sandow trophy and then as a performer in his own right. That Murray and Sandow did not appear to engage with one another professionally after 1901 did little to weaken this connection and, in fact, several newspapers would later erroneously claim that Murray toured with Sandow for several years.¹⁰⁹

Looking past 1901, Murray's life highlights the opportunity, and the difficulties, faced by strength athletes during this period. During his career, Murray travelled from town to town, slowly moving into becoming the main attraction of music hall shows before transitioning into management. From 1901 to 1904 his act slowly evolved from strength acts to a Roman-inspired show, featuring posing and strength. The need to incorporate posing into



Murray, like Sandow, generally dressed as a gentleman and as many Edwardian men did, he carefully waxed his impressive mustache.

his performances was reflective of a new public interest in the “body beautiful” spurred on by Sandow and other high-profile performers. Being strong was no longer enough for many performers; they also had to highlight the beauty of their musculature. As a former physique star, Murray fit neatly into this new world of physical culture performances. Where he diverged from many of his colleagues was in labelling himself as an all-round athlete rather than as a strongman. Owing to his athletic past, Murray preferred to see himself as a fully developed performer, one whose strength stemmed from athletics, soccer, and of course, physical culture. The consequence of this decision was that Murray, unlike many others, failed to capitalize on the burgeoning world of physical culture commerce. Murray’s decision to incorporate posing into his routine, while simultaneously eschewing the idea of selling specialized systems and diets, was reflective of the multiple physical culture pathways at this time.

Finally, Murray’s experiences during the First World War provide a sad reminder of the

impact that the conflict had on the first generation of physical culturists. More work needs to be done on the impact that the war had on shortening, or in some cases, ending physical culturists’ careers. Murray’s health was permanently injured during the conflict and likely contributed to his decision to move away from his plans to run a physical culture institute. Depending on one’s motivation, Murray’s life tells much about the nascent world of physical culture in Great Britain, from Sandow’s legacy to the trials of the strongman performer and, of course, the impact of War. There is much to be learned then from Sandow’s first, and only, Most Perfectly Developed Man.



NOTES

1. “The Great Competition,” *Sandow’s Magazine of Physical Culture* 1, no. 6 (Jul-Dec 1898): 79-80.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Arthur Conan Doyle was known, of course, as the creator of Sherlock Holmes, while Charles Lawes was a sculptor and athlete who had participated in rowing, endurance running, and cycling contests.
4. “The Final of the Counties at the Crystal Palace,” *Sandow’s Magazine of Physical Culture* 4, no. 3 (1900): 88-96.
5. David L. Chapman, *Sandow the Magnificent: Eugen Sandow and the Beginnings of Bodybuilding* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 129-145; Conor Heffernan, “The Irish Sandow School: Physical Culture Competitions in Fin-de-siècle Ireland,” *Irish Studies Review* 27, no. 3 (2019): 402-421; Dominic G. Morais, “Branding Iron: Eugen Sandow’s ‘Modern’ Marketing Strategies, 1887-1925,” *Journal of Sport History* 40, no. 2 (2013): 193-214.
6. Chapman, *Sandow the Magnificent*, 130-131. John Atkinson’s show was held in 1898 and won by former Sandow trainee Launceston Elliot. Desbonnet claimed to have intermittently held contests from 1892 onwards.
7. *Ibid.*, 133-135.
8. Webster, *Bodybuilding: An Illustrated History*, 37-38.
9. I am indebted to Murray’s relative Heather Belcher who shared personal scrapbooks, family anecdotes and newspaper records. The material derived from these sources will be referred to as *Heather Belcher Scrapbook* in this article.
10. “William L Murray–Abbey Paisley, Renfrew Scotland,” *1901 Scottish Census Records*.
11. *Heather Belcher Scrapbook*.
12. *Ibid.*
13. “Nottingham’s Strong Man: Death of W.L. Murray,” *Nottingham Evening Post*, 7 February 1949.
14. *Ibid.*; “Death of Bulwell Hercules,” *Nottingham Journal*, 7 February 1949; Webster, *Bodybuilding: An Illustrated History*, 37-38.
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16. “A Renfrewshire Sandow,” *Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette*, 28 September 1901; “A Strong Man in Norwich: An Interview with Mr. W.L. Murray,” *Eastern Evening News*, 22 August 1904.
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22. “W.L. Murray,” *Oxford Journal Illustrated*, 5 October 1910.
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27. Nikolai Bogdanovic, *Fit to Fight: A History of the Royal Army Physical Training Corps 1860–2015* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 13-17.
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 35. Morais, "Branding Iron."
 36. Todd, "The Strength Builders," 75.
 37. Stone, "Deconstructing the Gentleman Amateur."
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 40. *Ibid.*
 41. Heffernan, "The Irish Sandow School," 416-420.
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