

**Reviewed by David Chapman**

# Donald Dinnie: The First Sporting Superstar

**By David P. Webster & Gordon Dinnie**

Edited by Charles Allan (Ardo Publishing, 1999)

As David Webster has shown so many times, the Scots are fond of strongmen. Of all the Caledonian supermen, however, none could ever compare in strength or stature to Donald Dinnie. Even in Dinnie's lifetime, he was accorded a place as a national hero, and after his death he has continued to be respected and admired for the many feats of strength that he performed.

This is a lively account of an extraordinary athlete — a man who was skilled as both a wrestler and a professional strongman. It was on the fields of Highland Games, however, where Dinnie felt most at home, and it is here where his reputation was first forged. No one could have been more Scottish than the mighty Donal', and this undoubtedly accounts for the affection in which he is still held by the Scottish people.

Dinnie was born near Aberdeen in 1837 just a few days before the coronation of Queen Victoria, and he passed away in 1916 during the height of the Great War. He thus spanned a pivotal time in the history of sport. As an itinerant participant in Scottish games, in effect Dinnie became one of the world's first true professional athletes. He was able to make a living as a competitor thanks to the many Scottish athletic associations that were then coming into existence around the world. As life became harder for those in the homeland, they began a diaspora that sent the Scots among the Sassenachs. The Celts in North

America, South Africa, and the Antipodes all retained a love for the land of their roots and its sports and customs. The Highland Games that these immigrants kept alive around the world meant that champion athletes like Dinnie would be invited to participate in sporting events wherever the bagpipes skirled.

Dinnie competed in many Highland Games events, but it was in wrestling, hammer-throwing, stone-putting, and caber-tossing that he excelled and eventually became unbeatable. Thanks to his growing reputation, the young Scotsman ventured on his first foreign tours to Canada and the United States in the early 1870s and there he found enough to keep him going until he was drawn in 1883 to New Zealand and Australia where he lived and competed for the next 14 years.

In addition to being a great competitor in the strength events at the Games, Dinnie came to represent his people both at home and abroad. He was intensely proud of his Celtic heritage, and no matter where he traveled or competed, he became a beacon for his fellow countrymen, drawing every Scot within miles to his side. No matter where he went or what the occasion, Dinnie always wore a kilt; in fact, it is said that he never owned a pair of trousers.

It is most remarkable that Dinnie was able to make a comfortable living as an athlete, but unfortunately he did not invest his earnings wisely, so



Although this life study of Dinnie is creased and water-spotted, it still explains, more graphically than words, why Dinnie was able to dominate the power sports of the Highland Games for so many years.

Courtesy David P. Webster

when he eventually returned to Great Britain in 1897, he had to continue work as a strongman on the music hall stage. He was sixty when he returned to Europe and settled in London, but he was forced to appear on the stage until he was seventy-five years old. Thanks to a series of benefits that were conducted in his honor, Dinnie was able to earn enough money to live on a small annuity until his death in 1916.

Dinnie's story is well told by Webster and Gordon Dinnie (a self-described "distant cousin" of the great man). Many facts are presented here for the first time, and the magnificent illustrations from the Dinnie family as well as from Webster's legendary collection are helpful and illuminating. Thanks to Webster's broad knowledge of strongmen, he is able to place the great Scotsman in an appropriate historical matrix, comparing him with other famous athletes of past and present.

In addition to introducing hitherto unknown information, the authors have done so in a facile and

readable way. This book is a good read, and it can be enjoyed by those who want to dive deep into sport history as well as those who simply want to take a shallow dip into the peaty waters of Scottish culture. Those who want detailed footnotes or academic rigor must look elsewhere, however. There are very few sources that are credited, and sometimes one longs for attributions. For instance, when we are told that due to a land bust, Dinnie was forced to sell 12 blocks of land (presumably in Australia) for only £30, we might wonder where those figures came from. Fortunately, Webster is a reliable enough historian so that his accuracy can be taken for granted.

This is a handsome volume, and it is well worth having in one's library. The story it tells of the growth of global sports superstardom is one that has received short shrift. Historically speaking, it is worth a Dinnie Stone in gold.

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## A PHYSICAL CULTURE BIBLIOGRHPHY

Compiled & Published by David Horne

This publication fills a long felt want and is in the "must have" category for all avid physical culture readers, collectors, and those interested in sports history. Even if you are simply hooked on nostalgia, this tome makes interesting reading. Many years ago Terry Todd pointed out the need for such a reference book and now at last we have an author who had the diligence and patience necessary for such a painstaking task.

This bibliography covers the period up to and including 1955, and features over thirteen hundred titles from the well known to the obscure. There are also fifty-seven illustrations, mainly of mail-order muscle building courses. Authors are listed alphabetically beside book titles along with the number of pages, publishers names, and date. While almost entirely in English, some foreign publications are also included.

David Home, who is a practicing physical culturist and master of grip strength, not only compiled the entries, he personally collated and assembled the 110-page paperback, finishing it with spiral binding. It can truthfully be said it is all his own work, and he can be proud of the results.

I have already had fun noting those I have in my library and those I have read. Better still is finding some

books I should try to obtain. There is a wide range of subjects – the culture of the physique before it became specialized bodybuilding, physical education, even some boxing and wrestling. These combat sports have not been comprehensively reviewed for obvious reasons. David has included some non-physical culture books that were written by authors well known in our activity. This is done to illustrate the versatility of these personalities, with Hackenschmidt and Sandow being good examples. The list of Sandow's small health-related booklets will be of considerable interest to collectors. For me, the biggest surprise in the book was to see fifty-five publications listed under the entry for George Jowett. While these included small booklets and advertising brochures it showed he was an even more prolific writer than I had imagined.

David is currently at work on a second volume which will be available soon. Because his first book was privately published, only a small number of copies were printed and the edition is now technically "out of print." However, readers can contact David at [irongrip@ntl.com](mailto:irongrip@ntl.com) about the possibility of ordering either volume. Congratulations, David, for a job well done.

David Webster is offering *IGH* readers his book on Donald Dinnie for \$20 US (this includes postage), an \$8.00 discount. To order, send check or money order to:  
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