



The Sculpture Machine

Reviewed by David Chapman

Michael Anton Budd, *The Sculpture Machine: Physical Culture and the Body Politics in the Age of Empire* (NY: New York University Press, 1997), 218 pp. ISBN 0-8147-1267-3.

Early steam engine inventor, James Watt, spent his waning years working on a delightfully improbable invention: he attempted to develop a mechanical device for copying the naked human physique. It was supposed to revolutionize the art of sculpture and make records of the body easy and accurate, but the inventor never completed his work. It mattered little, however, since Watt's contraption would have been made redundant by the quickly emerging technology of photography. Nevertheless, it demonstrates the Victorian fascination with the body and of the equivocal relationship that often attends art, life, and sexuality.

According to author Michael Budd, this joining of science and physique is a perfect metaphor for what he terms "body politics," and his book, *The Sculpture Machine*, demonstrates the changing role of the physical body in Regency and Victorian culture. Budd points out that as machines began to define physical worth, humans were bound to come up wanting. It took some time for other yardsticks to be found, but health, strength, and beauty eventually won out over brute mechanical force and soulless efficiency.

Budd also attempts to draw a parallel between political and social events in nineteenth-century Britain and the rapidly forming recreation of physical culture. The author tries to show that physical power and political power began to be joined at this time through

a variety of means, but most importantly by the advent of Victoria's little imperialistic wars or rather by the production of soldiers who were fit to fight them. Music hall strongman, Eugen Sandow, came into this mix at the height of Victorian expansionism, and he came to symbolize the new man who would go out and conquer the lesser breeds beyond the law. It is the route that Sandow and others took on this quest that makes *The Sculpture Machine* so interesting.

Physical culture was linked in several ways to many of the progressive and reformist philosophies of the day, and Budd makes a good case for demonstrating the linkage between Sandow and such advanced thinkers as George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, and the Darwinians. Against this background, there was another force working in Victorian society, and that was the emerging gay culture of the day. Oscar Wilde had been tried and convicted in disgrace in 1895, and ever after he came to represent "the other" against which "real men" could judge themselves. Budd points out, however, that Wilde and Sandow had much more in common than either man might want to admit. Both were media-made men who had learned early in their respective careers how to manipulate public attention to their own causes. In addition, the photos that were so important to physique athletes also became significant to the emerging homosexual subculture since pictures of muscular men posed in nothing but a fig leaf helped condition the public to male nudity and alternate sexuality.

While Britain was dealing with its inner demons, it was also expanding at an unprecedented rate when it came to territorial acquisition. Budd shows quite convincingly how physical culture was used as a tool by the English to steel themselves for combat and to mark their physical differences from the racial "others" just as they had used it to delineate themselves in terms of masculinity. Budd shows how Sandow's tours of the Empire helped press an unacknowledged imperialist agenda. Physical culture in general was used to reinforce the White Man's perceived superiority, but Sandow also gained adherents among the natives of India and the Far East who showed their English colleagues that physical perfection was not the sole domain of the Caucasian race.

Sandow's popularity in the colonies clearly demonstrated that the gospel of fitness was (among other things) cross-cultural in its appeal.

The era of physical culture as opposed to bodybuilding ended, like so many other institutions, in the carnage of World War I. The myth of endurance and physical perfection was exploded when the fit and muscular men were mowed down by modern weapons of mass destruction with the same sickening ease as the weak and frail. Fitness was no longer a shield against death. The postwar world was a vastly different place, and Sandow's grip on the fitness world was surrendered to other more aggressive businessmen. To make matters worse, large segments of the potential audience for exercise publications and gymnasium memberships were either no longer interested in growing muscles or dead. Physical culture and Imperialism both received mortal wounds in Flanders' fields.

Despite the sweep and scope of Budd's story and his skill at getting his points across, there are a few things I have trouble with. I was annoyed by the surprising number of nagging little errors: Sandow's real name was Friedrich Muller, not Ernst; the strongman's mentor was Louis Attila, not Osgood. Sandow never endorsed or advertised Bovril or Spalding products; nor did he wear bronze makeup or pose for *cartes-de-visite* photos (they were cabinet photos). These are all minor errors, but they denote an uncharacteristic reliance on inaccurate source materials in an otherwise well researched book.

Then there are the endnotes, around a hundred of them for each chapter. I found them very interesting, but excessively long and involved. I wish Budd had chosen to incorporate most or all of these into the text itself; it would have made reading his book a great deal easier. Still, the problems are minor and the payoffs are great for anyone reading this book.

Michael Budd's look at the early fitness industry is a masterful work that puts Sandow and others like him in the context of their social, sexual, and imperial milieu. This book is essential to a thorough understanding of the era and it is one of the first to demonstrate that as they were reshaping the map, the British were also reshaping themselves.