

IL DUCE AND THE FATHER OF PHYSICAL CULTURE

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Italian dictator Benito Mussolini was fond of the art of the gesture. Once a journalist, he admired the opinion-massaging potential of a well-executed press item. During his rise to power, photographers most often caught him in showy regalia, making speeches, or half-naked, pitching hay with peasants, muscles and machismo on display. His final photograph, however, was grisly. In the closing days of the European conflicts of World War II, Mussolini was arrested along with his mistress Clara Petacci. Embittered Italians mangled both corpses before allowing news cameras to flash the gruesome images across the wire services.¹ Mussolini's macabre finale preceded Adolph Hitler's by just three days.²

Mussolini's charismatic influence began to be felt nationally when he was named Prime Minister by Italian King Victor Emmanuel in 1922. Self assured and proud of his virility and vigor, Mussolini never missed an opportunity to identify himself as the solution to Italy's ills. Wearing his black shirt, he told Victor Emmanuel, "Majesty, I have come from the battlefield, fortunately bloodless," when the King named him Prime Minister. Actually, he had come from the railway station, but image is everything when making a myth.³

Italy badly needed an infusion of vigor as it recovered from World War I. Dr. Mussolini and his black-shirted followers appeared to have the right medicine. Doubters could refer to his best specimen, *Il Duce* himself, the very ideal of fascist physical prowess: hefting a sledgehammer or tossing a bale, bare-chested, muscles flexing and smile affixed

despite—because of—the effort. Hard work in hard times made a hard man.

As Mussolini's power grew, so did the numbers of his followers. As a term, "Fascism" carried classical connotations that Mussolini liked. In Roman times, *lictors*, or bailiffs assisting a magistrate, carried fasces, elm and birch branches bundled around an axe. These symbolized a sergeant-at-arms' power to lop off refractory heads. *Fasci di combattimento*, "bundles for combat," was Mussolini's 1919 term for Black Shirt precursors, the *squadristi* who chopped down leftists and other enemies in pitched street fights.⁴ Like Communism, its totalitarian cousin, fascism promised to create a new man and new woman who would find actualization as components of the state. To this end, state control of culture, institutions, and identity was a given.⁵ Although Mussolini never managed to wangle the maximum totalitarian sway that Hitler or Stalin did, it was not for a lack of wanting and trying.⁶ Further, it would be a mistake to underestimate Mussolini's drive to power, or to attribute any kind of benignity to his doctrine. Italy's fascists grew more, not less powerful, during the Thirties, as they built a lattice of ties with the Church, financial sector, army, and royal court.⁷ Fascism assured all that it would end decades, even centuries, of stultification by substituting strength and direct action for weakness and dithering. "Mussolini is always right," was the official credo.⁸ Mussolini predicated his rise on his promise to restore lost vigor. Rome had sunk low since the days when men on the Tiber ruled the known world. Impotence depressed a culture that idealized virility. But with slogans like: "He Who Has Steel, Has Bread!" or: "War is To the Male What Childbearing is to the Females!" and "Right Without

Might Is Vain!” and “The Plough Makes The Furrow, But The Sword Defends It!” it was not long before such coercive pep-talks-on-a-poster had energized the Italians.⁹

It would be in German dictator Adolf Hitler that Mussolini found the admixture of hardness and potency that he personally sought. But well before his first meeting with Hitler, *Il Duce* cast an inquiring glance, not northward to the *fuehrer*, but far westward, to a short but strapping physical culture expert who lived, preached, wrote, exercised, and dined—very carefully—in New York.

If all the world is indeed a stage, then Bernarr Macfadden’s twentieth-century role looms decidedly less large than Mussolini’s. But Macfadden is far from forgettable. Recent studies of his life suggest, in fact, that in the world of physical culture—where he was the self-appointed guru—Macfadden’s impact and lasting legacy were enormous.¹⁰ As Jan Todd has written, Macfadden was an agent of change for popular American attitudes towards health, fitness, diet, and feminine physicality. However, said Todd, “Historically Macfadden is difficult to define because his interests and impacts on American culture were so diverse.”¹¹

Of all his diverse activities—and Macfadden’s life was replete with odd episodes—there may have been none more bizarre than his liaison with Mussolini. The outgrowth of Macfadden’s interests in politics and self-promotion, the hookup occurred during the Great Depression, in 1930. Macfadden, whose depth of perception regarding Italy did not penetrate beyond admiration for Mussolini’s apparently energetic leadership, took a trip there under semi-official auspices. Assigned to study juvenile health and welfare for a White House Conference on Child Health and Protection, Macfadden met Mussolini for the first time in Rome.¹² The dictator’s manly handshake and purposeful stride captivated the American, who marveled that such “a natural born emperor” displayed “no unseemly egotism.”¹³

No doubt, Macfadden was pleased by Mussolini’s greeting, in which the *Duce* pronounced himself familiar with the American’s work, adding, “I, too, am a physical culturalist.”¹⁴ Adding to his bona fides, the dictator made other observations. “A sound mind presupposes a sound body,” he said. “The dynamism of the body is related to the dynamism of the intellect.”¹⁵ *Now, mens sana in corpore sano* was hardly a novel formula, but by his own recollection, Macfadden found

Il Duce’s profundities arresting. “What the Dictator had said was so amply obvious in the dictator’s own life,” noted Macfadden, adding that if other world leaders could just see life as Mussolini did then the world would be a better place.¹⁶ Mussolini agreed.

At their first meeting, Mussolini held forth on a range of subjects from the sub-par physiques and soporific attitudes of Asiatics, to the wonders wrought by cultivating proper habits. The most palatable portion of their conversation, however, centered on food. “I am a great believer in raw fruits,” *Il Duce* announced when Macfadden praised the abundant fresh foodstuffs in Italian kitchens. “I have raw fruit each meal. There is a bunch of grapes for me at the breakfast table each morning. We can have grapes all the year around in Italy. Some are especially retarded for the winter, after the harvest, while others, coming from our African colonies, are especially advanced for spring.”¹⁷ Using fresh local ingredients to good culinary effect, of course, was an Italian habit predating fascism, but the *Duce* was happy to claim whatever credit he could.

Never one to pass up a chance at proselytizing his own nutritional beliefs, Macfadden informed his host, “Your soldiers eat too much. If I had a few of your men for three weeks, I guarantee you they’d be better soldiers.”¹⁸ As the conversation continued, Macfadden told Mussolini that he felt the men would also benefit from a different exercise routine. Ever impetuous, Macfadden then offered to train for free a group of Italian military men at his New York health resort as a way to prove to Mussolini the efficacy of his methods. For Macfadden, who also possessed a Barnum-like love of publicity, the connection with one of the world’s emerging leaders was a press agent’s dream. “MUSSOLINI AND MACFADDEN TRY A NOBLE EXPERIMENT TO PREVENT WAR” ran the self-congratulatory headline in Macfadden’s newspaper the *Graphic*, accompanied by photographs and a caption spelling out Mussolini’s conviction that a nation fit and vigorous was best able to live peaceably.¹⁹ Whatever else Macfadden believed about Mussolini or Fascism remained hidden behind his enthusiasm for *Il Duce*’s embracing of physical culture ideals. For his part, Mussolini was putting fascist theory into practice, albeit with an improbable partner.

Macfadden: Form/Fortune/Fitness

As Robert Ernst’s excellent biography of Macfadden makes clear, Macfadden’s decision to

invite the fascists to his health resort at Dansville was an act set in motion by a life history tilted with the desire to be recognized and honored. Born to a modest and dysfunctional Missouri family in 1870, a young Bernard (his name changed along with his fortunes) endured a childhood marred by illness, poverty, the early death of his alcoholic father and suffering mother, and stints in an orphanage. The gym provided this child with both physical and mental sanctuary, and young Macfadden, inspired in part by the German immigrant Turnverein movement, built himself up. His career as a physical culture crusader took hold during the 1890's, and he embarked on his lifelong formula of dispensing tips on exercise, diet, and healthy living.²⁰

As scholars and disciples alike have testified, Macfadden's was a holistic approach. His lessons formed the backbone of a growing publishing concern. Magazines like *Physical Culture* not only detailed his opinions and regimens, but put them within reach of a national audience. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, these grew into a publishing empire, and Macfadden emerged as the nation's most confident proponent of physical culture. His advice covered everything from food preparation to weightlifting to sex.²¹ It was the sex part—whether articles dealing with the act, or editorials decrying restrictive clothing, or photographs celebrating the physiques of men *and* women—that caused Anthony Comstock and others in the peck-sniffery pack to bay their charges of indecency at Macfadden's heels.²²

As benefits a headline-seeker and headline-maker, Macfadden did not shy away from controversy. *Physical Culture* assailed the medical establishment, making an enemy of the AMA, which countered that Macfadden was a quack.²³ Having supported Franklin D. Roosevelt, in tandem with major domo Fulton Oursler, Macfadden later disparaged the New Deal, gaining an anti-union reputation.²⁴ In a dubious move given his pas-de-deux with Mussolini, Macfadden named George Sylvester Viereck editor of *Liberty*, the publishing conglomerate's socio-political organ. Viereck's World War II imprisonment for pro-Nazi activities made Macfadden's earlier, friendly stance towards Europe's strongman ruler retroactively less innocent.²⁵

Macfadden himself also possessed political ambitions. Having supported New York's mayor Jimmy Walker, Macfadden hoped to be named the city's public health commissioner.²⁶ In 1930, with the

Depression new, Macfadden hoped to land himself a Cabinet appointment as secretary of the as-yet-uncreated Department of Health.²⁷ His plans to establish the need for such a department depended upon his plans to show the nation his own indispensability. All these twists and turns, the support-then-renunciation of FDR, the personal ambitions for office, the admiration for foreign leaders who seemed to be riding the wave of the future while a confused America remained mired in the muck of Depression, were very typical for the times in question. The maneuvers occurring before 1930 form the backdrop to Macfadden's invitation to train the Italians.

Setting Up the Trip

While in Rome, Macfadden's main contact was General Renato Ricci, Undersecretary of State for Physical Education. Ricci outlined Italy's plan, "Of making physical education just as much a part of the courses of general education as were the usual academic studies."²⁸ If that sounded good to Macfadden, imagine how much he liked hearing about how Mussolini established the job, which Ricci filled. Ricci penned the introduction to the book written about the training plan. Entitled, "What Bernarr Macfadden Did for Italian Physical Culture," the essay was a boilerplate example of theory and practice.

*Italy today is in the midst of a revival of a sports and athletic tradition which dates back from the times of the Romans. If we have not appeared in great number amongst the winners in the great international athletic events, it really is not because we have no athletic tradition, but because that tradition was allowed to lie dormant and only a little awakening was needed to bring it back to its full grandeur.*²⁹

Dutiful party man that he was, Ricci laid credit for the awakening at the feet of his *Duce*.

When Macfadden visited Italy, he toured the nation, had an audience with the Pope, and visited training facilities and stadiums. United Press correspondent Thomas B. Morgan, who wrote a slim volume on the endeavor for the Macfadden Book Company, described some aspects of the trip.

Going along the Tiber, he was able to



The Italian cadets pose with Macfadden aboard the S.S. Conte Biancamano just prior to their departure for Italy on 17 July 1931.

witness hundreds of healthy brown bodies which had been exposed to the natural sun rays and not alone did they seem like a galaxy of Greek gods, but they radiated the glowing spirit of physical fitness. Along the seashores there were hundreds of camps where children and youths of all ages stayed for the summer to bask in the sun and store up a plentiful supply of nature's own curative qualities, All were beautifully tinted in a golden tan made possible by the fact that their bodies were all exposed except for their little loin girdles in the form of trunks.³⁰

This was Macfadden's kind of set-up—not, he hastened to add, for any salacious reason. Any indecency would be on the part of those objecting to such naturally healthy comportment. Along Adriatic shores, real morality existed: "A true healthy atmosphere, both physical and moral, with none of the prudery and false

modesty which pervades the countries of puritanical modesty."³¹

The forty Italian naval cadets, ranging in age from late teens to early thirties, sailed into New York on February 23, 1930. Macfadden could show them no sun-ripened bodies on the beach, but they enjoyed a host of extracurricular activities. The first night he took them to a wrestling match; the next day, they enjoyed an official reception at City Hall, where Mayor Walker shook each cadet's hand after receiving a fascist salute. Later outings included theatre trips, a drill performance for newsreels, and a night at the Met, courtesy of Otto Kahn. A road trip through Connecticut, New York, Ohio, and Kentucky brought receptions, baseball games, and the like. The capper was a trip to Washington, when the Italian ambassador accompanied them to a meeting with the President at the White House. In the written account, Hoover's words earned rather less of Macfadden's attention than Mussolini's had.³²

The Regimen: Sports/Exercise/Diet

Their six-month stay under Macfadden's eye,

at a Tennessee military school and at the Dansville health hotel, left plenty time for training. The regimen, like much of Macfadden's physical culture when divested of rhetoric, was simple, based on sound principles, and fairly effective. Diet, sport, and exercise formed a triad upon which to build and measure the progress of the "boys."

Their initial physical exam showed all to be in reasonable shape. Their sports calendar revolved around six pastimes, some of which were unfamiliar: basketball, baseball, tennis, wrestling, boxing, and track and field. To these were added swimming and American football. Work in the latter was restricted to scrimmages. In basketball—as in other sports, swimming included—the sailors used outdoors facilities instead of the indoors whenever possible. Track & field work culminated in a Field Day. Regular gymnasium work in tumbling, pyramid-building, and balancing built skills applicable to the various games.

Baseball was the favorite sport, despite its novelty. Macfadden noted that, "The throwing muscles were underdeveloped," no surprise for products of a soccer-playing nation.³³ Progressive throwing and catching drills, accompanied by blackboard instruction on the rules, all led to five-inning intramural games, with box scores recording the action. By Macfadden's account, the "boys" loved the action, and were each presented with equipment before their return journey, in order to spread the horsehide gospel to their homeland. Building a knowledge base so that each cadet could teach the sports taught him when he returned to Italy was a major component of Macfadden's envisioned plan.³⁴

But the men did more than play sports. Each day began with "Setting Up Exercises" and combined stretches and calisthenics designed to improve "coordination and precision."³⁵ Macfadden stressed proper performance in each exercise, and every cadet had to show teaching competence in each maneuver. They also worked on posture—"Strengthening the spine," as he put it, was a longstanding Macfadden priority.

Macfadden's diet plans revolved around balanced health, as he spelled out again and again over the years. Intake for the cadets was, "commensurate with the day's activities," bearing in mind energy requirements and the need for weight control. This was no fat farm. Still, Macfadden's food notions were basic and moderate, if not by 1930's lights, then by today's standards. Fruits and vegetables formed the core of the

menu, prepared differently for the sake of variety. Whole grains came in cereals and breads, meat and eggs supplementing. Milk was the beverage of choice.³⁶ Modern sophisticates who scoff at Macfadden on other scores must give the man fair due when considering how advanced many of his food attitudes really were. Worth remembering, also, is the fact that his foes thought his dietary schemes were bunk.

Regarding beverages, the Italians had to face an obstacle right off the bat. As Ricci put it, they were used to "Taking wine with their meals...ever since their birth, almost."³⁷ Prohibition was a hardship that they bore with, "Spartan fortitude," the fascist general noted approvingly, adding that his men, "Profited by the regime of strict abstention and American training systems."³⁸

Results

In the book summarizing the encounter, Macfadden presented before and after photos of each cadet, along with a report card that exhaustively recapitulated weight, body measurements (neck, arm flexed and unflexed, forearm, waist, chest normal-contracted-expanded, hips, thigh, calf, ankle, knee); weight-training results (two-hand press repetitions: 73 1/2 lbs.; left and right arm presses: 30 lbs.; abdominal lift: 30 1/2 lbs.; deep kneebends, or squats: 103 lbs.); and times for the 100 yard dash and the mile. Without lengthy statistical analysis, let it be stated that, while weight changes were often negligible, with a few modest reductions, body measurements showed perceptible gains, and weightlifting and running performances showed demonstrable improvements. One hopes Ricci found these achievements as noteworthy as the cadets' teetotaling feats. The results point to the germinal sense of Macfadden's fitness and diet regimen. Eating right, in appropriate amounts, while training effectively—it still means getting bigger where you want, smaller where you want, and stronger all over.

Conclusions

In summary, Bernarr Macfadden, a sixty-year old man who nursed both political ambitions and controversial doctrines relating to health, fitness, and diet, admired Mussolini as the dynamic embodiment of certain ideals. Cosseted on his Italian sojourn and certainly in over his head regarding matters of international affairs and socio-political analysis, Macfadden offered to reciprocate by teaching a group of young military

men the finer points of his physical culture lifestyle. Forty of these young men departed their purportedly energetic society during the first full year of the Great Depression. They spent six months in a supposedly decadent democracy, eating, exercising, playing, and living according to Macfadden's plan. They manifested measurable gains in size, strength, speed, and endurance. Then, they returned to Italy.

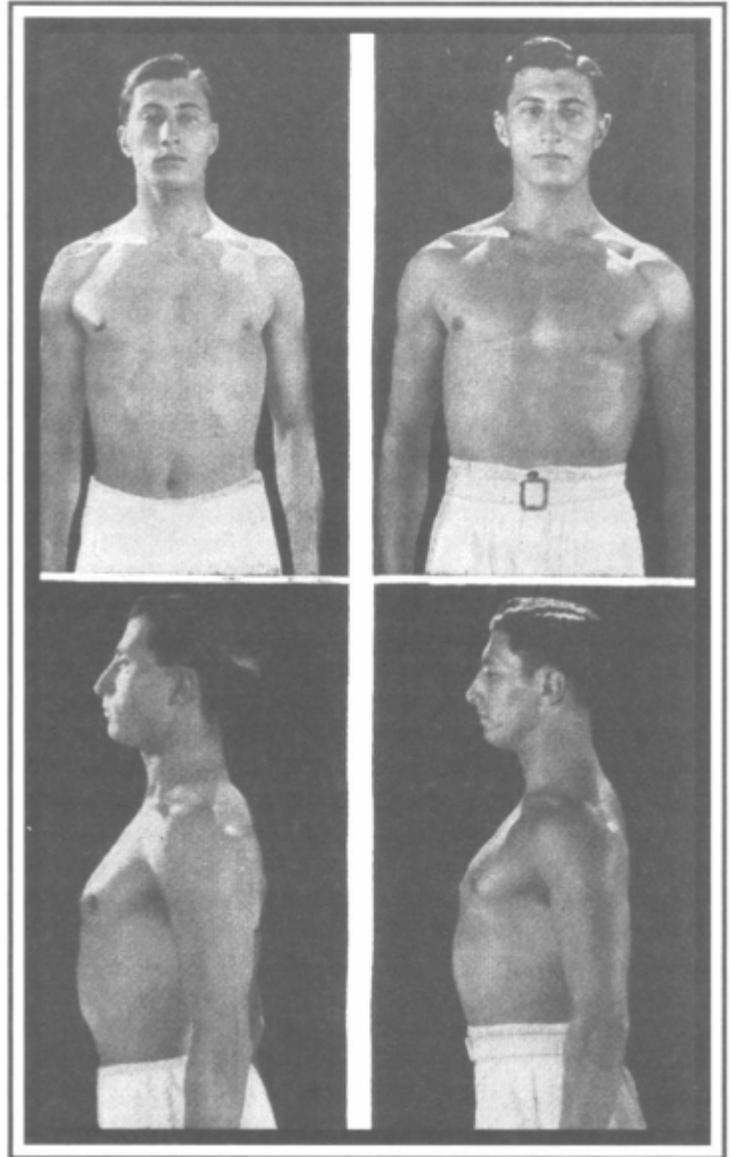
Did their sojourn cement relations between democratic America and fascist Italy? Did their love of baseball or their sightseeing ensure peace between the two nations? Did Mussolini, dazzled by Macfadden's practice and theory, make physical culture the central value of his governance?

Of course not. Insofar as Macfadden dreamed of large-scale or enduring effects from what amounted to a training camp, he was kidding himself. His ideas on fitness and diet were not at all ridiculous; in fact, many of them were far ahead of their time and would later find widespread acceptance. In this department, Macfadden's work with the Italians was a success. He promised to make his charges more fit, and he did.

On the other hand, he surely had other agendas. Was Macfadden a closet fascist or a wannabe dictator? Ernst's biography makes it clear that eccentricity, vanity, and naivete were more applicable to Macfadden than a will-driven intention to remake his society and crush all dissent. But on the subject of dictators, Macfadden brought on criticism through his own words and actions. His later appointment of Viereck seems more disturbing than the inveigling of Mussolini.

Macfadden was not the only Depression-era American who thought that foreign tyrannies showed dynamism which democracies could not match. Potentates claiming to know a better route to the future scorned democracy as infirm and short-sighted. As late as 1941, many high-profile Americans failed to see the true nature of what went on in Italy, Germany, and the USSR. Many otherwise discriminating observers had their vision clouded by tours of Potemkin towns and factories, by the rhythmically stomping soldiers on parade, or by what looked like the bright light of tomorrow glinting off the bemedaled chest of a field marshal. In Macfadden's case, the mirage of Mussolini in 1930 shimmered with illusions of fitness, better diet, and active life.

No less than Winston Churchill once remarked



Macfadden published before and after photos of each participant. Attilio Pregellio, shown here, weighed 143 pounds upon arrival and 142 when he departed. During the five months training, he put two inches on his chest and added half an inch to his biceps. He also decreased the size of his hips by 1/2 inch but added two inches to his waist. Macfadden tested the men in repetition lifting, in a mile run and in the 100 yard dash. Attilio cut his time in the 100 from 12 seconds to 10 $\frac{2}{5}$, and in the two hand press, using 73.5 pounds, he did 18 repetitions at the beginning of the study and 28 at the end. In the squat, with 103 pounds on his shoulders, he made 18 in the beginning of the experiment and 100 repetitions at the end.

that he was, "Charmed by Signor Mussolini's gentle and simple bearing."³⁹ An ambivalent American book published one year before Macfadden's trip, while noting the *Duce's* violent side, paid homage to his "Marvelous" energy and called him "The Wild Man of Europe."⁴⁰ FDR's envoy Sumner Welles wooed Mussolini in spring 1940, urging neutrality in the war underway. Ezra Pound remained madly loyal throughout World War II. Along this spectrum, Macfadden fit somewhere in the middle, closer to Churchill's mistaken first impression and FDR's diplomatic blandishment than to Pound's anti-American hate-mongering.

Academicians veer towards overarching conclusions, the better to dramatize a study. It would be exciting to say that Macfadden's involvement with Mussolini proves that the father of physical culture was a not-so-closeted fascist. But the truth is more mundane. The worst that can be said about this episode is also the best: Macfadden, that idiosyncratic booster of decent fitness principles, was snookered by a charismatic dictator, years before many in the world saw Mussolini and his system for what they truly were. In matters of fitness, Macfadden, while controversial, was no quack. But when it came to international relations, that is exactly what he was. When Macfadden and Mussolini met, it is true that one man represented a dynamic social system that was flexible and strong enough to lay claim to the future, while the other stood for an order that was phony, cruel, and doomed. The trick was knowing which was which. Neither the *Duce* nor the physical culture guru got that one right.

NOTES:

¹ Mussolini was killed on 28 April 1945. Cesare Salmaggi & Alfredo Pallavisini, *2194 Days of War* (Milan: Arnoldo Modadori/Barnes & Noble, 1987), 724.

² *Colliers' Photographic/The Picture History of World War II 1939-1945*, (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1946), 253.

³ Richard Overy & Andrew Wheatcroft, *The Road to War* (London: Macmillan London, 1989), 150.

⁴ Anthony Rhodes, *Propaganda-The Art of Persuasion: World War II* (Seacaucus, NJ: Wellfleet, 1987), 69.

⁵ Mabel Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self The Political Culture of Interwar Italy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 4-5.

⁶ Overy & Wheatcroft, *Road to War*, 150.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁹ Rhodes, *Propaganda*, 82.

¹⁰ See, for instance: Robert Ernst, *Weakness is a Crime: The*

Life of Bernarr Macfadden (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press 1991).

¹¹ Jan Todd, "Bernarr Macfadden: Reformer of Feminine Form," *Journal of Sport History*, 14(Spring, 1987): 74.

¹² Ernst, *Weakness*, 103.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁴ Thomas B. Morgan, *Italian Physical Culture Demonstration* (New York: Macfadden Book Co., 1932), 25.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

²⁰ Ernst, *Weakness*, 19 & 1-10. (Readers in search of more detailed biographic material are directed to this seminal volume, which is both lively and rigorous.)

²¹ *Ibid.*, 17-52.

Ibid., 38-52, & Todd, "Bernarr Macfadden," 61-75. (Todd's perceptive article is the source of record for those interested in Macfadden's pioneering attitudes regarding feminine athleticism and form.)

²³ Ernst, *Weakness*, 113.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 142-143.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 121.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 305.

²⁷ Mary Macfadden & Emile Gavreau, *Dumbbells & Carrot Strips* (New York: Henry Holt, 1953) 299.

²⁸ Morgan, *Italian Physical Culture*, 13.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

³² *Ibid.*, 47-81.

Ibid., 100.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 100-102.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 84-105.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 7

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ William Manchester, *The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill, Visions of Glory 1874-1932* (New York: Laurel, 1989) 19.

⁴⁰ John Bond, *Mussolini: The Wild Man of Europe* (Washington, D.C.: Independent Publishing Co., 1929), 13.

