BERNARR MACFADDEN:
REFORMER OF FEMININE FORM*

On October 5, 1905, Anthony Comstock of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, accompanied the officers of the New York Police Department as they raided the offices of The Physical Culture Publishing Company and arrested its founder and owner, Bernarr Macfadden. The charge was the spreading of pornography and at issue were the posters for a “Mammoth Physical Culture Exhibition” to be held at Madison Square Garden—posters which showed the winners of the physique competitions held as part of the previous year’s extravaganza. There were apparently two posters which Comstock found objectionable; the first, as the New York Times reports, showed “the women prize winners, ten or twelve young women in white union suits with sashes around their waists...” while the second featured Al Treloar, the men’s winner, “wearing a pair of sandals and a leopard’s skin as a breechcloth.” Once inside the offices, Comstock found even more to offend his delicate sensibilities: various classical renderings; a number of physique photographs; and a painting of the Venus de Milo which, according to Macfadden biographer Clement Wood, Comstock called “obscene.”

Though a large number of posters were confiscated from the Macfadden offices, most of them had already been distributed throughout the city and the ensuing furor raised by the New York press surrounding Macfadden’s litigation in the days between his arrest and the opening of the show whetted the public’s curiosity to such an extent that special police units had to be called out on opening night to handle the 20,000 spectators, 5,000 of whom had to be turned away. As the Times pointed out the morning after the show’s opening, Comstock’s efforts to preserve the morals of the citizenry of New York failed because they generated an enormous amount of free publicity for Macfadden, and because those who were able to get in and see the show saw only a “tame programme of athletic sports, backed up by a dozen women who stood on pedestals behind a muslin curtain...” What had aroused Comstock to action was his belief that nudity (or women whose bodily forms were revealed by union suits) was obscene when it was able to be viewed by others. Comstock claimed to find nothing intrinsically ugly or obscene about the naked human form, but argued that the display of such in any truly public...
way was immoral. As he so delicately put it, “Let the nude be kept in its proper place and out of the reach of the rabble.”\(^5\) Thus it was almost inevitable that he and Macfadden, who more than any other publisher of the era made extensive use of the nude and semi-nude form, should clash.

But as Fulton Oursler, one of Macfadden’s hand-picked biographers, observed, the main issue in the Comstock case was not not only established one of the most successful physical fitness historians have simply considered Macfadden “not worth writing about,”\(^8\) as if the persona of the man somehow outweighed his achievements. But the simple fact is that this strongman-publisher and who published two books advocating calisthenics and light dumbell drills for women: \textit{Letters to the People on Health and Happiness} (1855) and \textit{Physiology and Calisthenics} (1856).\(^12\) The most striking similarity in the thought of Beecher and Macfadden is that both valued improved health and strength of women primarily as a boon to motherhood.

Since Beecher’s writings on health reform influenced most of the writers who came after her, it is difficult to know how much Macfadden gleaned directly from her works, how much came to him second-hand and how much was original. But he was clearly influenced by her in regard to corsets and the “natural” beauty of the ancient Greeks. In fact, from the 1850s onward, the literature of “physical culture” and “gymnastics” is filled with references to “the Greek ideal” and classical statuary; the idea of the healthy, “natural” body of the Ancient Greeks, unfettered by the confining form of Victorian costumes, is exploited by the dress reformers who used it as an argument against the corset and other uncomfortable and unhealthy fashions. In the United States, Greek revivalism enjoyed its greatest popularity during the World’s Columbian Exhibition in 1893, an event which played a pivotal role in Macfadden’s life.

Prior to that time, Macfadden had given ample evidence of the peripateticism which characterized his entire career but in the summer of 1893, like thousands of other Americans, Macfadden made his way to Chicago to view the World’s Columbian Exposition and his life was never the same again. Nor was America, as this World’s Fair marked a turning point in American cultural history. It was a “celebration of America’s coming of age—a grand rite of passage.”\(^13\) It was also America’s chance to show the world that she was ready to take a place among the “civilized” nations.

According to Macfadden’s autobiography, he arrived at the Fair by boat, landing at the “peristyle,” a row of huge columns supporting massive, classical statues of athletic figures. As he later wrote, “I shall never forget it.” Performing at the Fair on the midway was a man who was to have a lasting impact on young Macfadden—Eugen Sandow, the professional strongman. From Sandow, Macfadden learned the showman’s tricks of muscular display; and though this same showmanship was later used by the smaller Macfadden in his own posing exhibitions, Sandow is not mentioned in any of the three “authorized” biographies, no doubt because Macfadden and Sandow became rivals for the physical culture dollar.\(^15\) In any case, after an enormously successful American tour (It is reported that Sandow, who became a household name in the U.S., was paid $1500-2500 a week for his performances),\(^16\) Sandow returned to England. There he gave lectures and demonstrations; wrote books on physical culture advocating exercise for men and women; opened several physical culture studios; and, began \textit{Sandow’s Magazine}, which continued through thirteen volumes, thus helping to create the proper climate for Macfadden’s later efforts.\(^17\)

Following the Chicago exposition, Macfadden manufactured a home-use exercise machine composed of cables and pulleys and, in 1895, he published Macfadden’s \textit{System of Physical Training}. Though largely a how-to supplement for the “Macfadden exerciser,” the book contained three chapters on training for women, and a fourth, entitled, “Restrictive Dress-Corsets, Belts, etc.” Buoyed by his success, he decided to expand his market into England, and it was there that he finally found the combination of marketing, bombast, common sense, hard work and chutzpah that was to form the pattern of his life.

As he had hoped, Great Britain turned out to be remarkably...
receptive to his ideas on health and exercise.\textsuperscript{18} Modeling himself after Sandow, he traveled from city to city, lecturing and posing, selling his exerciser and handing out a four page brochure which described how to use his machine.\textsuperscript{19} Soon the advertising brochure began to carry a few factual articles, and so it evolved into \textit{Macfadden’s Magazine},\textsuperscript{20} under which name it operated for approximately a year before he returned to the United States. Upon his return, having finally realized that the only forum which would carry his ideas was one of his own creation, he almost immediately founded \textit{Physical Culture}, which was to remain his first love throughout his publishing career.\textsuperscript{21} With it, Macfadden finally had a megaphone for his campaign to reform America--and American women.

The first issue of \textit{Physical Culture} was released in March of 1899 and sold for only five cents;\textsuperscript{5} the only reference to women in it was an installment of his novel, \textit{The Athlete’s Conquest}. But in the April number he began shaping one of the cornerstones of his health campaign: that a healthy sex life is necessary for ultimate physical perfection. Here, Macfadden discusses women’s sexuality for the first time and lays out his earlier belief that the married state is the natural lot of women: “The highest degree of attainable physical perfection can certainly never be acquired unless this condition is entered at the proper period of life.”\textsuperscript{23} Throughout his early writings, Macfadden held up the image of healthy, vigorous wild animals, living in harmony with nature, as an example for men and women to emulate. He saw human sexuality in Darwinian terms: that mating is part of a natural lifestyle and that each person’s eugenic responsibility is to find a healthy, vigorous counterpart with whom they can have similarly healthy, perhaps even healthier, offspring.

Macfadden’s interest in human sexuality was, of course, not uncommon in his times. The progressive era was filled with reform movements, and as historian John C. Burnham says, “the so-called revolution in morals became one of the lasting legacies of progressivism to American life.”\textsuperscript{24} One of the chief thrusts of the progressive campaign was to break the conspiracy of silence which kept people in ignorance about the most basic facts of human life. For his part, Macfadden used the pages of \textit{Physical Culture} to wage a constant battle with public censors, saying that muscular beauty seem at first glance amazingly modern, his words seem surprisingly modern, reminiscent of many recent articles on women’s weight training and bodybuilding:

\begin{quote}
...women have the idea that ‘being muscular’ means the possession of ‘big knots’ of muscle...To illustrate the absurdity of such a fear, one has merely to call attention to the rounded, smooth and symmetrical development of most professional women athletes, though under this beauty of contour there are muscles of steel.\textsuperscript{2} 8
\end{quote}

Unlike Beecher, Dio Lewis,\textsuperscript{29} and other earlier advocates of exercise for women, Macfadden firmly believed that exercise should do more than simply make women “fit.” And in this opinion he was a legitimate pioneer. In \textit{The Power and Beauty of Superb Womanhood}, he again employs his animal metaphors, arguing that the small variation in the strength of male and female animals is proof that women can be nearly as strong as men, and pointing out that “...those very women who marvel at the strength of these athletes [female acrobats] could, in numerous instances, have been as strong, and even stronger, had they gone through the same course of training...”\textsuperscript{30} Again, Macfadden harkens back to the Creeks by reminding his readers that the greatest beauty is seen in those bodies where the muscles are fully developed, as in the statues of Venus, Juno, Diana and Minerva.

Though Macfadden’s notions of feminine strength and muscular beauty seem at first glance amazingly modern, his thinking was not altogether ahead of his time. Though the stereotype of the delicate, weak, even ailing, Victorian woman described by Catharine Beecher\textsuperscript{31} was probably accurate for the first
of 1903 the title was changed to *Beauty and Health: Women’s Physical Development* and circulation soon exceeded 80,000.  

The success of the magazine, however, owed less to a name change than it did to Macfadden’s instinct for the mood in *fin de siècle* America. For example, in a stroke of editorial and public relations genius, he announced in the December 1902 issue of *Women’s Physical Development* that, “knowing as I do the vast importance of strength and beauty and health in women, I have determined to offer for the year 1903, a prize of $1,000.00 to be presented to the best and most perfectly formed woman.”  

In the months which followed, Macfadden’s editorial column carried a reference to the contest every month. The brilliance of the idea was that besides generating an enormous amount of publicity throughout the country, it provided his new magazine with hundreds of photographs and stories of “physical culture women,” all of which helped to humanize *Beauty and Health*. By the May issue the contest had grown and the plan now called for regional competitions to be held in 13 cities across the country: New York, Boston, Buffalo, Philadelphia, Washington, Pittsburgh, New Orleans, Cincinnati, Chicago, St. Louis, Minneapolis, Denver and San Francisco. These preliminary competitions were to be conducted under the auspices of local physical culture clubs and the winners would be sent to the semi-finals at Madison Square Garden in New York. The winners of this competition would then be furnished round trip passage plus expenses for a two week stay in London where they would meet the European semi-final winners for the world title. As it turned out, however, the European winners traveled to New York and the finals were held there, between December 28, 1903, and January 2, 1904, as the climax of a “Monumental Physical Culture Entertainment.” Besides the two physique contests, races for men and women, fencing championships, wrestling bouts and several fasting competitions were held during the exposition.  

Emma Newkirk of Santa Monica, California won the 1904 competition; she stood 5’ 4½”, weighted 136 pounds, and had a 35 inch bust, 25 inch waist, 36 inch hips and 231/2 inch thighs.  

It is especially interesting to note that the panel of judges who chose Miss Newkirk was composed not only of athletes but of “prominent sculptors, physicians and physical cultivists.”  

As for Newkirk, Macfadden also featured the fact that despite the many offers she received after the contest to pose for artists and appear in theatrical reviews, she, “like a true woman,” returned to Santa Monica and married her sweetheart.  

Though Macfadden lost money on the show, the publicity generated by it was beyond price, and so plans were soon underway for a second competition, set for October of 1905. This time, thanks to Anthony Comstock, Macfadden did not have to hype the gate and the women’s contest went off on schedule, although the rules had changed considerably from the previous year. At the 1905 show, the competitors had to be more than simply aesthetically pleasing to the panel; in addition to the posing contest, all the competitors had to participate in a series of eight athletic events: 50 yard run, 220 yard run, 440 yard run, running high jump, two hand lift, half mile run, one mile run and three mile “go as you please.”  

This altered format meant that though Marie Spitzer of New Haven, Connecticut placed only fourth in the posing part of the competition, she was chosen as the “perfectly developed woman” by virtue of the fact that she finished first in six of the eight athletic events.  

Historian Thomas Beers coined the term “Titans” for this “new woman” who rose like a phoenix from the ashes of the “White City” of 1893 Chicago. As Ernest P. Earnest wrote in *The American Eve in Fact and Fiction*, “Whether or not the American government had discovered women [following the Chicago World’s Fair] the American public did so...the papers and magazines were full of accounts of titanesse...”  

The other feminine image which dominated the American consciousness during these years was that of the Gibson Girl, who also came into prominence as a result of the *White City* of 1893 Chicago. As Ernest P. Earnest wrote in *The American Eve in Fact and Fiction*, “Whether or not the American government had discovered women [following the Chicago World’s Fair] the American public did so...the papers and magazines were full of accounts of titanesse...”  

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As the years passed and more such contests were held, Physical Culture continued to grow, reaching a high of more than 340,000 subscribers early in the Depression. By that time, Macfadden was reportedly worth more than $30,000,000, and his publishing empire was so widespread that the combined circulation of his magazines was over 7,355,000, more than those of either William Randolph Hearst or Henry Luce.54

Macfadden’s bold campaign to change the way American culture viewed womanly beauty, rooted as it was in the nineteenth century ideals of neo-classicism and naturalism, was essentially a campaign for functional beauty. To Macfadden the body should not only have proportion and symmetry but should also be servicable—strong, capable, enduring and therefore healthy. Though Macfadden’s zeal for the family unit and the role of the woman-wife within it grates a bit in these more modern times, it is not surprising considering his early childhood and the loss of his mother, after which loss he seems to have always yearned for supportive feminine influences. Furthermore, the Industrial Revolution had made dramatic changes in the social structure of America so that in 1900, for instance, when Women’s Physical Development was first launched, more than 6,000,000 American women worked outside the home. And it must be remembered that America had just passed through a decade in which the number of women who entered the work force increased at a rate faster than the birth rate. A further telling statistic is that in the decade following 1900, an unprecedented 954,000 divorces were granted,55 which gave Macfadden and hundreds of other Americans another substantial reason to be concerned about the future of the American family.

But his concern was real and it helped to fuel his reformist engine. Historically, Macfadden is difficult to define because his interests and impacts on American culture were so diverse. But if he did nothing else, he took the verse from Corinthians seriously, “Whatsoever cometh to thy hand, do it with all thy might.” And, as Hofstadter points out in The Progressive Movement: 1900-1915, a distinguishing characteristic of the era was not simply a belief in “progress” but activism. The progressives argued that “social evils will not remedy themselves, and that it is wrong to sit by passively and wait for time to take care of them...they did not believe that the future would take care of itself.”56

Macfadden’s activism found a focus in the Victorian belief, expressed best by Herbert Spencer, “that the preservation of health is a duty...all breaches of the laws of health are physical sins.”57 Working within this concept, Macfadden adopted his famous motto, “Weakness is a Crime, Don’t be a Criminal,” and with typical turn of the century eclecticism, he took those aspects of popular culture that met his needs–neo-classicism, Darwinism, dress reform and concern for the family–and synthesized them into a “new woman” who satisfied his philosophical, aesthetic and sexual tastes and filled the role of surrogate maternal figure. That he was so successful in his efforts is partly a result of technological printing advances such as the Hoe rotary art press which made it possible for magazines to print photos and pictures at less expense than ever before,58 thereby enabling him to use the very sorts of images which had so profoundly stirred him and many other Americans at the Chicago World’s Fair. That he would be roundly criticized for his efforts was, of course, all in the best tradition of the reformer.

But was Macfadden really successful in his campaign to change the American image of feminine beauty? Did he make a significant contribution to the esthetic shift that caused Dorothy Dix, in 1915, to describe the type of girl that was attractive to men of her era as a “husky young woman who can play golf all day and dance all night...”?59 The evidence suggests that clearly he did. Though Macfadden was only one voice in the campaign against such things as the corset, his voice was the loudest and it reached hundreds of thousands of men and women in the early part of this century. And, in particular, his boldness in putting the bodies of stronger, fitter and more vigorous womanhood on proud display in his magazines and in Madison Square Garden, dressed in their union suits and sashes, meant that women who longed to live more vigorous and active lives, and be athletic as well as attractive, now had role models, even if they were only a “Venus from Hoboken.”

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7. New York Times, 10 October 1905, p. 9
9. Ibid., p. 627-633.
10. Since the original version of this article appeared in The Journal of Sport History in 1987, two biographies have appeared on Macfadden’s life. William R. Hunt’s Body Love: The Amazing Career of Bernarr Macfadden (1989) was published by Bowling Green State University Popular Press in Bowling Green, Ohio. Robert Ernst’s Weakness is a Crime: The Life of Bernarr Macfadden was released in December of 1990 and is published by Syracuse University Press.
11. In addition to these two new texts, William H. Taft, now retired from the school of journalism at the University of Missouri, has published three articles on Macfadden which examine his early days in Missouri and his career in publishing. The best of these is Taft’s “Bernarr Macfadden,” Missouri Historical Review, 63:1 (October 1968): 71-89. Other scholarly treatments include one dissertation: Clifford Waugh’s Bernarr Macfadden: The Muscular Prophet, (State University of New York at Buffalo, 1979) and a single article by Ben Yagoda, which appeared in American Heritage, 33:1, (December 1981): 22-28. None of these sources examine Macfadden’s impact on women’s exercise.
15. In 1929, three biographies appeared, written by Macfadden associates: Fulton Oursler, The True Story of Bernarr Macfadden; Grace Perkins (Oursler), Chats With the Macfadden Family, and Clement Wood, Bernarr Macfadden: A Study in Success. All three were published by the Lewis Copeland Company in New York. A shortened version of Wood’s work, retitled What it Takes: A Study in Success, appeared in 1934 from Liberty Publishing in New York Oursler’s biography was serialized in Physical Culture under the title “Bernarr Macfadden—His Life and Work,” running from September of 1928 through May of 1929. Through the years, Macfadden included much biographical information in Physical Culture magazine, of which the most important sources are the 23 articles which comprised “My Fifty Years of Physical Culture,” from April 1933 to Macfadden 1935. Macfadden’s third wife, Mary, tells the story of her years with Macfadden in Dumbbells and Carrot Strips, co-authored by Emile Gauvreau in 1951 (New York, Henry Holt and Company); while Johnnie Lee Macfadden, the last wife, published Barefoot in Eden (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall) in 1962.


17. Charles T. Trevor, Sandow the Magnificent, (London: Mitre Press, n.d.), p. 4018. For an excellent discussion of Great Britain’s attitudes regarding health and exercise in the nineteenth century, see Bruce Haley’s, The Healthly Body and Victorian Culture, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976) Haley’s belief is that “No topic more occupied the Victorian mind than Health—not religion, or politics or improvement or Darwinism,” (p. 3) and that the mind-body (mens sana in corpore sano) relation involved fundamental questions “about the relation of natural law to human growth or culture.” (p.22).


When Macfadden returned to America, the magazine was purchased by his business partner, Hopton Hadley, who changed the name to Health and Strength. It continued to specialize in weightlifting and bodybuilding news while Macfadden’s new magazine, Physical Culture turned more to health. Health and Strength ceased publications in 1984, making it the longest running physical culture magazine ever.


31. In Letters to the People on Health and Happiness, Beecher reports on an informal survey she conducted during her travels throughout the United States that convinced her “that there was a terrible decay of female health all over the land,” (p.121) and that “the standard of health among American women is so low that few have a correct idea of what a healthy woman is,” (p.122).


34. Gavriel Prevost, quoted by Valerie Steele in Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Em to the Jazz age, p.102.

35. Steele, Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age, p.103.

36. Ibid., p. 108.

37. Ibid., p. 218.


39. Ibid., p. 228.


41. Ibid., p. 231.

42. Printed on the cover of Physical Culture, 4:2, (November 1900) are the words, “Paid Circulation for October, 102,000.”


44. Ibid.

45. [Bernarr Macfadden], $1,000 for the Most Perfect Woman,” Woman’s Physical Development, 5:3, (December 1902): 126.


47. “$5,000 in Prizes, “Physical Culture, 6:7, October 1903, p. 332


50. Marion Walford, “A Rival of Miss Newkirk,” magazine clipping in the “Women’s Physical Culture” file, Todd-McLean Sports History Collection, University of Texas, Austin. (Article appears to be from Physical Culture.)


52. “The Athletic World,” Physical Culture, 14:6, (December 1905): 494, The “two-hands-lift” was done using a “lifting machine” of the type popularized by George Barker Windship in the mid-nineteenth century. The athlete stood on a platform above the weight, and pulled upward using a handle attached by chains or pipe to the weights below. In modern terminology it is called a hand-and-thigh lift and as the weights are moved one or two inches, exceptionally large poundages can be raised. One of the women competitors in this contest lifted 550 pounds.


