

Bernarr Macfadden: Reformer of Feminine Form*

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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."¹ 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."²

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.³ 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 . . ."⁴

* The author would like to thank Dr. William Goetzmann of the University of Texas at Austin for his assistance.

1. *New York Times*, 6 October 1905, p. 9.

2. Clement Wood, *What It Takes* (New York: Liberty Publishing Corporation, 1934), p. 105.

3. Bernarr Macfadden. "The Physical Culture Exhibition," *Physical Culture*, 14:6 (December 1905): 575.

4. *New York Times*. 10 October 1905, p. 9.



The revealing costumes worn by the women finalists in Bernarr Macfadden's "perfect woman" contest scandalized Anthony Comstock, who charged Macfadden with spreading obscenity. This photograph, showing the finalists of the 1904 competition, is included in a souvenir program entitled *The Human Form Divine*, later marketed through the pages of *Physical Culture*. (*The Human Form Divine*, Physical Culture Publishing Company, 1904, p. 3.)

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 the bare torso of Al Treloar, but the fact that Macfadden was exhibiting 'athletic girls' in the Garden.⁶ It was, of course, these "ideal women" that the large crowds turned out to see, though not necessarily to worship. In fact, as the *Times* reported, the introductions to the audience of the "most superbly developed lady from Long Island" and the "Venus from Hoboken" were not received without a bit of "guying." And in a tone of dismay, the *Times* noted that the costumes worn by the women were no

5. Heywood Broun and Margaret Leech, *Anthony Comstock: Roundsman of the Lord* (New York: The Literary Guild of America, 1927), p. 225.

6. Fulton Oursler, "Bernarr Macfadden: His Life and Work," *Physical Culture*, 60:3 (September 1928): 41.

more revealing than those seen nightly in Burlesque houses throughout the city.⁷

The most revealing thing about the entire episode may well have been its symbolic value as we look back to those heady times and attempt to understand Macfadden's leading role in establishing the physicality of women in our culture, a role that has received too little serious consideration. Apparently, Macfadden's forceful personality, Barnum-like love of publicity and unbridled zeal on the subject of physical culture projected the image of a "crank" reformer and thus put off many of his contemporaries. Consequently, most 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 not only established one of the most successful physical fitness ventures of all time--Physical *Culture* magazine--but also created, in 1919, with *True Story*, the "confessional" magazine genre, and helped to redefine the tabloid with his New York *Graphic*, often called the pornographic.⁹ Of special interest is that of the few scholarly efforts produced in the 30 years since Macfadden's death in 1955,¹⁰ none has made any specific attempt to address his views on women and bodily beauty despite the fact that his magazines were brimful of scathing attacks on restrictive women's fashions and prudery as well as of articles on the public's conception of beauty and the role of exercise in producing an ideal female form.

In many ways, Macfadden's early views on these subjects seem to echo those of Catharine Beecher, to whom he refers in *The Power and Beauty of Superb Womanhood*, published in 1901. Though known primarily for her efforts on behalf of women's education, Beecher was also a staunch health reformer who introduced calisthenic exercises in her schools as early as 1827,¹¹ and who published two books advocating calisthenics and light dumbbell drills for women: *Letters to the People on Health and Happiness* (1855) and *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

7. *New York Times*, 10 October 1905, p. 9.

8. William H. Taft, "Bernarr Macfadden: One of a Kind," *Journalism Quarterly*, 45:4 (Winter 1968): 627.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 627-633.

10. William H. Taft, now retired from the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri, is our foremost Macfadden scholar with three published critical articles and a book in progress. His interest has, not surprisingly, been centered on Macfadden's career as a publisher and on his early days in Missouri. In a telephone interview with the author on December 5, 1985, Taft corroborated the fact that no scholarly attention has been paid to Macfadden's views on women.

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, *American Heritage*, 33:1 (December 1981): 22-28. The best discussion of Macfadden's early life is found in Taft's, "Bernarr Macfadden," *Missouri Historical Review*, 63: 1 (October 1968): 71-89.

11. Catharine Beecher, *Educational Reminiscences* (New York: J. B. Ford and Company, 1874), p. 43.

12. Catharine Beecher, *Letters to the People on Health and Happiness* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1855) and *Physiology and Calisthenics* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1856).

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 that 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.

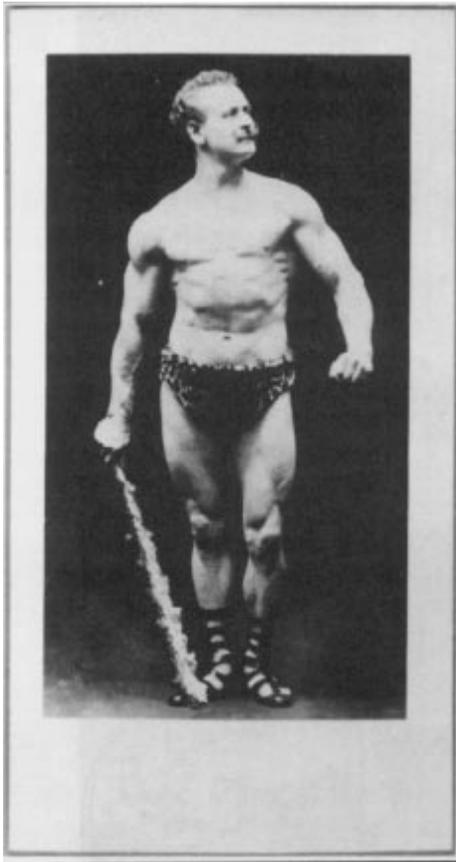
According to Macfadden’s autobiography, he arrived at the Fair by boat, landing at the “peristyle,” a row of huge columns supporting massive, classical statues of athletic figures. As he later wrote, “I shall never forget it.”¹⁴ Performing at the Fair on the midway was a man who was to have another lasting 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, in 1904, began *Sandow’s Magazine*, which continued

13. David F. Burg, *Chicago’s White City of 1893* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1976), p. xiii.

14. Bernarr Macfadden, “My Fifty Years of Physical Culture” in *Physical Culture*, 69: 10 (October 1933): 99.

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 February 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 Johnny Lee Macfadden, the last wife, published *Barefoot in Eden (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall)* in 1962.

16. David P. Webster, *Barbells and Beefcake: An Illustrated History of Bodybuilding* (Irvine, Scotland: privately printed, 1979), p.33.



Professional strongman Eugen Sandow as he appeared in 1893 at the World's Columbian Exhibition. Sandow was then 25 years of age and at the height of his physical development. (Photo by Roland White of England in the Todd-McLean Collection at the University of Texas in Austin.)

McFadden's 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.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.¹⁹ Soon the advertising brochure began to carry a few factual articles, and so it evolved into

18. For an excellent discussion of Great Britain's attitudes regarding health and exercise in the nineteenth century, see Bruce Haley's, *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978). 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).

19. Bernarr Macfadden. "My Fifty Years of Physical Culture." *Physical Culture*. 70:5 (November 1933): 99.

Macfadden's Magazine,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 *Physical Culture*, which was to remain his first love throughout his publishing career.²¹ With it, Macfadden finally had a megaphone for his campaign to reform America-and American women.

The first issue of *Physical Culture* was released in March of 1899 and sold for only five cents;²² the only reference to women in it was in an installment of his novel, *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."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 time. 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."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 *Physical Culture* to wage a constant battle with public censors, saying that they stood "for mystery, secrecy, ignorance, superstition and for the most depraved conception of all that should be divine and holy."²⁵ But his advocacy and prominence had a price, and he received much criticism through the years as a result of his writings on sexual topics and his illustrations of the semi-nude human form. But sex was hardly the only thing

20. Bernarr Macfadden. "My Fifty Years of Physical Culture." *Physical Culture*, 70:6, (December 1933): 23.

21. David P. Webster, "Bernarr Macfadden." *Muscle Meg International*, (Summer 1975): 20-21. The Coulter Papers, File "Macfadden," The Todd-McLean Sport History Collection, University of Texas, Austin.

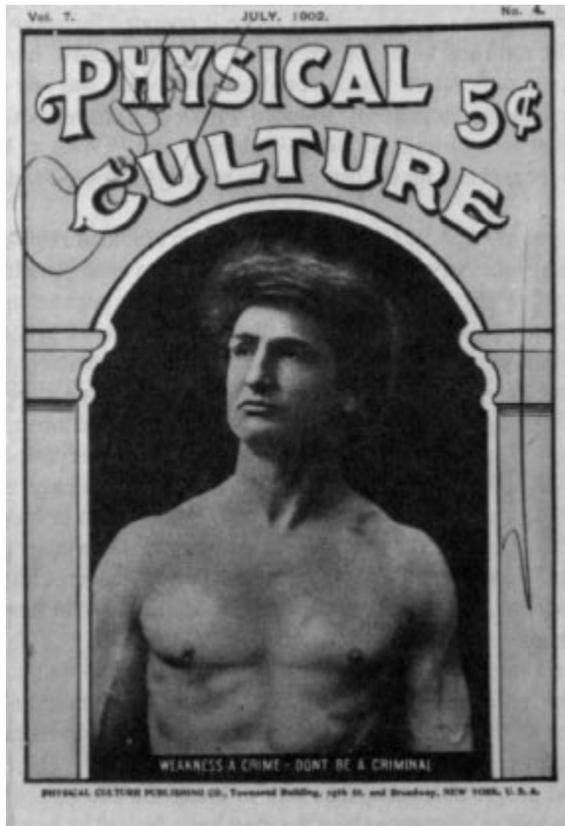
When Macfadden returned to America, the magazine was purchased by his business partner, Hopton Hadley, who changed the name to *Health and Strength*. It continued to specialize in weightlifting and bodybuilding news while Macfadden's new *Physical Culture* turned more to health. *Health and Strength*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

22. William H. Taft, "Bernarr Macfadden." *Missouri Historical Review*, 63:1 (October 1968): 82.

23. [Bernarr Macfadden], "Can the Highest Degree of Attainable Physical Perfection Be Acquired if Absolute Continence Be Observed?" *Physical Culture*, 1:2 (April 1899): 28.

24. John C. Burnham, "The Progressive Era: Revolution in American Attitudes Toward Sex," *Journal of American History*, 54:4 (March 1973): 885.

25. William H. Taft, "Bernarr Macfadden," *Dictionory of Literary Biography*. (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1984), Vol. 25, *American Newspaper Journalists: 1901-1925*. Perry J. Ashley, vol. editor.



Bernarr Macfadden never hesitated to use himself as a living illustration of the effectiveness of his methods. He frequently appeared on the cover of *Physical Culture* magazine. (*Physical Culture*, 7 (July 1902), cover.)

Macfadden covered in the second and succeeding issues of *Physical Culture*. In fact, it is in the same second issue that the first “women’s” articles appear, including Macfadden’s first magazine exercise prescription for women—a series of “gymnastic movements” for developing the muscles of the neck. And by June of 1899 a special section of *Physical Culture* was established for women, the “Department for Information Relative To THE CULTIVATION OF PHYSICAL BEAUTY.” In this section, two of Macfadden’s major themes regarding women and beauty are expressed: that all beauty has its roots in a physical, active life²⁶ and that, “there can be no beauty without fine muscles.”²⁷ As he writes, his words are surprisingly modern, reminiscent of many recent articles on women’s weight training and bodybuilding:

26. [Bernarr Macfadden], “The Exhilaration of a Superb Physique Necessary to Beauty,” *Physical Culture*, 1:4 (June 1899): 81.

27. [Bernarr Macfadden], “Erroneous Ideas of Muscle,” *Physical Culture*, 1:4 (June 1899): 82.

. . . 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.²⁸

Unlike Beecher, Dio Lewis,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 *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

COMSTOCK, KING OF THE PRUDES



THE COMSTOCK THEORY OF TEACHING BOYS AND GIRLS

Following the vice squad's raid on Physical Culture Publishing, Macfadden launched a full-front attack against Anthony Comstock and the narrow-minded world view he represented. This cartoon is only one of several which appeared in *Physical Culture* in the following months as the "evils of prudery" became a dominant theme in the magazine. (*Physical Culture*, 15 (February 1906): 162.)

28. Ibid.

29. Dr. Dio Lewis, following in Catharine Beecher's footsteps, advocated physical training for women during the middle years of the nineteenth century, publishing his classic work, *The New Gymnasrics for Men, Women and Children* in 1864 (Boston: Ticknor and Fields). He is also credited with establishing the first normal college for physical education instructors in 1861, in Boston. For further biographical information on Lewis see Fred Eugene Leonard's, *A Guide to the History of Physical Education*, Second Edition, (Philadelphia: Lea and Febiger, 1927), pp. 255-267.

stronger, had they gone through the same course of training . . .”³⁰ Again, Macfadden harkens back to the Greeks 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 Beecher³¹ was probably accurate for the first part of the nineteenth century, the increase in college education for women in the second half of the century meant that more women were exposed to sports and methods of physical training in the United States than had been the case in most countries since the days of Sparta.³² And, since many of these same women were to become involved with the various reform movements that dominated American life in the late nineteenth century, they were especially amenable to discussions of dress reform. As historian Valerie Steele put it, “The increasing popularity of sports for women probably gradually influenced the ideal of feminine beauty and this may have had a delayed and indirect effect on fashion.”³³

What these late Victorian sportswomen (and Macfadden) had to fight was the culturally ingrained notion that, unlike animals, each of the human sexes has a definite and particular beauty that “would be ugliness with the other, and vice-versa.”³⁴ men and women in the first half of the nineteenth century, any sort of muscular development on women was seen as useless and unattractive: strength was beautiful in men and ugly in women. According to Steele, many early Victorians believed that feminine beauty was a compensation for feminine weakness.³⁵ But by the 1870s ethereal frailty was on its way out and the “combination of points recognized as a good figure” consisted of a well-developed bust, a tapering, (corseted) waist and large hips.³⁶ By the 1890s, however, the plump, hourglass figure had further evolved into an “S” shape (with the bust thrust more forward and in greater prominence and the hips thrust further back), and “prettiness” had given way to height, grandeur and sturdiness.³⁷

Historian Thomas Beers coined the term “Titaness” for this “new woman”³⁸

30 Macfadden, *The Power and Beauty of Superb Womanhood* (Spotswood, N.J.: Physical Culture Publishing Company, 1901), p. 22.

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).

32. Ernest P. Earnest, *The American Eve in Fact and Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), p. 229.

33. Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 96.

34. Gabriel Prevost, quoted by Valerie Steele in *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era 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.

38. Earnest, *The American Eve in Fact and Fiction*, p. 208.

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 titanesses . . .”³⁹

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 Chicago World’s Fair.⁴⁰ As drawn by illustrator Charles Dana Gibson, the Gibson Girl was tall, relatively slim though well formed, and often engaged in sports and exercise, creating a fashionable, fresh image. It has even been said that the appeal of the Gibson Girl was in the knowledge that she would mature into the Titaness⁴¹ and find, as Macfadden might have put it, the “power and beauty of superb womanhood.”

One thing which must be said about Macfadden is that although he lacked formal education, he was never ignorant of the *zeitgeist*, and this insight led him to launch the first women’s fitness magazine, *Women’s Physical Development*, in October of 1900. *Physical Culture* had by then been in operation little more than a year but it had grown so rapidly—there were more than 100,000 subscribers by 1900⁴²—that Macfadden was convinced the market could support separate publications for men and women. Another example of his firm belief involving the relationship of women and exercise is his placing on the cover of the August, 1900 issue a buxom young woman with dumbbells in hand—the first *Physical Culture* covergirl. As for *Women’s Physical Development*, the magazine did well enough, although according to Oursler, the “cumbersome” title hampered public acceptance.⁴³ But in March of 1903 the title was changed to *Beauty and Health: Woman’s Physical Development* and circulation soon exceeded 80,000.⁴⁴

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.”⁴⁵

In the months that 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

39. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

40. Earnest, *The American Eve in Fact and Fiction*, p. 208.

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.”

43. Oursler, “Bernarr Macfadden: His Life and Work” 60:6 (December 1928): 111.

44. *Ibid.*

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

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 York⁴⁶ where the finals were held 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.⁴⁷

Emma Newkirk of Santa Monica, California won the 1904 competition; she stood 5'4 1/2", weighted 136 pounds, and had a 35 inch bust, 25 inch waist, 36 inch hips and 23 1/2 inch thighs.⁴⁸ 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 culturists.”⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ Though Macfadden lost money on the show,⁵¹ 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 game 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.⁵²

46. Webster, “Bernarr Macfadden:” p. 22.

47. “\$5,000 in Prizes,” *Physical Culture*, 6:7 (October 1903): 332.

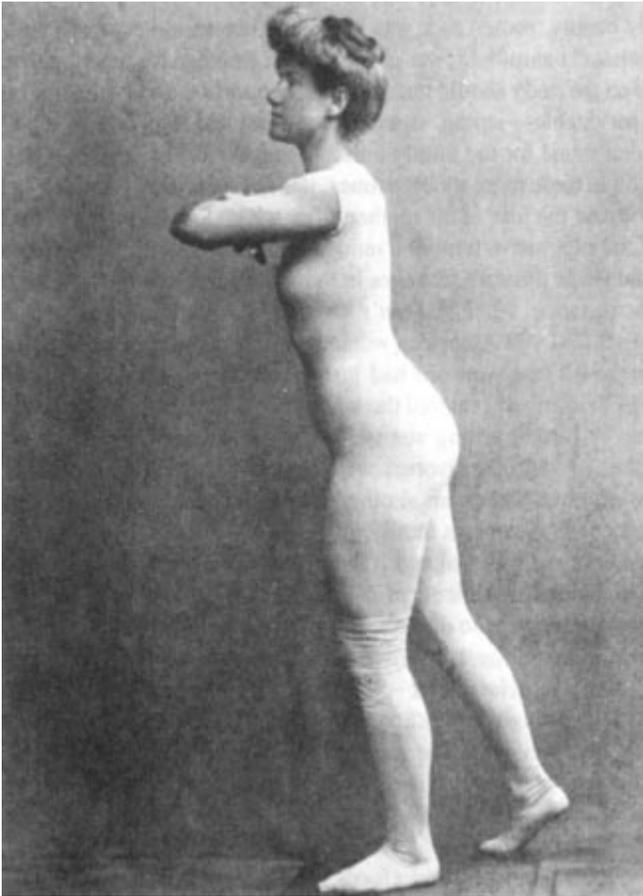
48. L. E. Eubanks, “The Female Form—Ideal and Real,” *Physical Culture*. magazine clipping in the “Women's Physical Culture” file, Todd-McLean Sport History Collection, University of Texas, Austin.

49. “The Great Physical Culture Exhibition,” *Physical Culture*. 11:2 (February 1904): 113.

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

51. Macfadden, “My Fifty Years of Physical Culture,” *Physical Culture*, 71:3 (March 1934): 70.

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



In 1904, Santa Monican Emma Newkirk was judged to have the most perfect figure in Macfadden's first physique contest for women. This publicity shot was taken at the time of the show. (*The Human Form Divine*, Physical Culture Publishing Company, 1904, p. 4.)

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.⁵³ By that time, Macfadden was reportedly worth more than \$30,000,000 and his publishing empire had spread so widely 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

weights below. In modern terminology it is called a hand-and-thigh lift and as the weights are moved only a few inches, exceptionally large poundages can be raised. One of the women competitors in this contest lifted 550 pounds.

53. Taft, "Bernarr Macfadden: One of a Kind." p. 624.

54. Yagoda, "The True Story of Bernarr Macfadden," *Ameriron Heritage*, 33:1 (December 1981): 26.

womanly beauty, rooted as it was in the late 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

55. 1900 Census statistics reported in Rheta Childe Dorr's, "The Role of American Women," written in 1910 and contained in: Richard Hofstadter, ed., *The Progressive Movement: 1900-1915* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1963), p. 84.

56. Richard Hofstadter, ed., *The Progressive Movement: 1900-1915* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1965), p. 84.

57. Haley, *The Healthy Body in Victorian Culture*, p. 17.

58. Richard L. Watson, *The Development of National Power* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976), p. 63.

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 aesthetic 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."

59. Quotation from Dorothy Dix cited in James R. McGovern. "The American Woman," *Journal of American History* (September 1968): 317.