Bernarr Macfadden: Reformer of Feminine Form

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This study attempted to examine the influence of strongman/publisher Bernarr Macfadden on the prevailing attitudes regarding the feminine physique at the turn of the century and to trace the development of his concept of feminine beauty. Macfadden, whose career as a health reformer blossomed with the birth of Physical Culture magazine in 1899, argued vociferously for a new, athletic feminine ideal – an ideal which emulated that seen in ancient Greek statuary - and used the pages of Physical Culture and his later magazines.
such as *Women’s Physical Development* to speak strongly in favor of the abolition of the corset, to recommend vigorous exercise for women, and to advocate the need for physical strength in women.

Macfadden was clearly influenced in his thinking by the writings of Catharine Beecher, as were most writer’s on women’s health in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Both Beecher and Macfadden saw the fitter, stronger feminine ideal in Darwinian terms: stronger women meant fitter, stronger offspring. Macfadden was also influenced, however, by his sojourn at the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893, where in a “city” modeled after the finest aspects of Grecian culture, he saw, for the first time, classical statuary. It was also in Chicago that Macfadden met a living embodiment of the classical male physique, strongman/bodybuilder Eugen Sandow, and learned from Sandow the showman’s tricks of muscular display.

To publicize his ideas regarding women, Macfadden sponsored a number of “physique” contests for women, the most famous of which was undoubtedly the 1905 “Mammoth Physical Culture Exhibition” held in Madison Square Garden before a sell-out crowd. The fame attached to this particular contest came from the fact that Anthony Comstock, head of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, took umbrage at the posters Macfadden was using to advertise the contest - posters which showed some of the women contestants dressed in “white union suits with sashes around their waists” - and raided Macfadden’s offices on the charge of pornography. Comstock's efforts created such publicity, that on the night the show opened, more than 20,000 people turned out to watch.

Though Macfadden’s was only one voice in an era of progressive reforms for women, his voice, through the pages of his magazines, reached hundreds of thousands of men and women in the early part of this century. Though many did (and do) consider Macfadden to have been a crank and a “health nut,” his boldness in putting the bodies of stronger, fitter and more vigorous women on proud display in his magazines and in Madison Square Garden, did have an effect on *fin de siecle* American women. By 1915, as one contemporary woman writer noted, men were attracted to “husky young women who can play golf all day and dance all night.” Through Macfadden’s efforts, women who longed to live vigorous and active lives and to be athletic as well as attractive, at long last had role models.

Three of the participants in the Sport Literature Session were Don Morrow, Michael Oriard, and Dick Keller.