

Managing the Body: Beauty, Health and Fitness in Britain, 1880-1939

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Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska's new history of the body, health and fitness in Britain is a wide-reaching and detailed study of relevant cultural practices and government policies between the Victorian period and the eve of the Second World War. Much recent work has focused on these themes, including Michael Hau's study of German life-reform movements, racial science and leisure culture, *The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany: A Social History 1890-1930* (1), drawn especially from the archives of the German Hygiene Museum in Dresden, Liz Conor's groundbreaking *The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s* (2), which takes a much more theoretically complex approach to modern bodies and visual culture than historians often achieve, and indeed my own widescreen perspective on war, modern bodies, consumption and sexuality across various networks in the Anglophone world, *Reconstructing the Body: Classicism, Modernism and the First World War*. (3) *Managing the Body* fits within this trajectory of scholarship, as well as engaging with a plethora of scholarly articles in academic journals on imperial militarism, racial hygiene, national efficiency, and eugenics and with histories of sport and the body in Europe and Britain. What is important about Zweiniger-Bargielowska's book is its specific focus on Britain, bringing together all the main themes relevant to the periods 1880–1914 and 1918–39.

Part one covers material familiar to scholars in this area – degeneration and urbanity; imperial fitness and nationhood; racial constructs of motherhood. Part two covers themes such as the Lloyd George's trope of 'building an A1 Nation' by improving health and fitness after the First World War and through the inter-war period; the reconstruction of men's bodies (a theme which I saw in terms of a global social and political emphasis on medical rehabilitation, coalescing with new modes of sexualisation and consumerist

subjectivity, but which Zweiniger-Bargielowska also rightly frames in terms of national policies specific to British concerns). These chapters mine this material in great detail, revealing the length and breadth of public and political interest in rebuilding the nation after the war and in creating a confident and fit male body that could be regarded as reconstructed. *Managing the Body* also focuses on modernity and the female body, but importantly examines the mass appeal of such images and discourses, finally turning to the campaigns for national fitness through the 1930s in the run-up to another global war also involving the mobilisation of all male and female citizens in British society.

The central idea that the body was ‘managed’ provides an important link between government reforms and a coalition of various associations that ‘shared an ideological affinity’, from the National League of Physical Education and Improvement to the New Health Society, the Health and Strength League and the Sunlight League, as well as private commercial ventures, small-scale operators and local activists. The theme of management is expressed through notions of modern progress, organisation and efficiency, and practiced in workplace reform and the bureaucratisation of the body in various government agencies and institutions, such as the Ministry of Health, as well as influential voluntary organisations such as the Central Council for Health Education and the Board of Education. Managerialism was also seen in national campaigns designed to mobilise and motivate the British public after the First World War and through to the 1930s. Though implicit, there is a gesture to Foucault’s governmentality threaded through much of the chapters; more explicit is his notion of biopower.

Managing the Body is underpinned by Foucault’s ideas about the regulation and control of the body, through both a range of disciplinary techniques crafted in state institutions and also ‘techniques of the self’ such as the body cultures explored in the book. These point not just to top-down discourses and their persuasive power but to the investments individuals will make into shaping their bodies in particular ways, preventing illness, fashioning healthy physiques and identities, and ultimately constructing their selves as individuals and citizens. As Zweiniger-Bargielowska argues, ‘a well-managed body was not only the goal of social policy but also an integral aspect of fashioning the self’. This project was steeped in the aims of modernity and progress, yet, as is pointed out, the belief in improvement and transformation was also tempered by pessimism about the implications of rapid social change and underpinned by longstanding anxieties about racial and social degeneration. This ambivalence could extend to anti-modernist stances among some groups, manifesting in pastoral ideals of a return to nature. Others, however, such as the New Health Society and Sunlight League, embraced modern technology and science, and many body culture enthusiasts represented themselves using the latest trends in modern photography, self-fashioning and posturing. The book does historical thinking a great service by taking such a nuanced approach to an eclectic group of body enthusiasts and reformers; it is important to acknowledge their range and variety, especially when little has been left for the historical record except local traces and suggestive fragments that link to wider body movements and social ideas. Thus while some health groups revered nature and an arcadian past, others revered the technological body, aligning fitness with modernity.

The concept of moral and social improvement was signified by physical fitness, which easily fed into and derived from the eugenics movement. Zweiniger-Bargielowska argues that these ideas also coalesced around notions of citizenship linked to a growing concern with public health that reformers and governments were increasingly willing to intervene in; she does not quite say it but the concept of ‘embodied citizenship’ comes to mind. Importantly, the book shows how this ideal and practice were threaded through various British institutions over a long period of time – from the imperial imagining of a fit empire and Edwardian manliness, through different manifestations of the working and middle classes, and in such organisations as the Scouts and Lads’ Drill Associations, to the post-war politicisation of fitness in Lloyd George’s militarised call for the nation to be A1 and not C3, which were military categories of fitness applied to scrutinise working-class citizen soldiers in the First World War. Indeed, the significant processes of the militarisation and bureaucratisation of the British body, begun in the Boer War but especially exaggerated during the First World War, could have been much more explicitly theorised. Public institutions were created and transformed by military processes. While peace in 1918 saw degrees of de-militarisation, much of the discursive machinery of the wartime state remained intact, with consequent effects on civilian

discourse.

The mass mobilisation of society – the inclusion of men and women in the institutions of war-waging – is also a key aspect of the period. *Managing the Body* is right to explore the appeal of body cultures not just to men but also to women. The democratising of the nation at war included women as never before, and body cultures were quick to see their new markets. Though masculinity – and reconstructing the male body – was a central concern of reformers, body culturists and governments alike in the aftermath of the war, women were also central to this project. Following the work of Frank Trentmann and Matthew Hilton, the book extends the notion of the modern consumer as a ‘new civic persona’, to which commercial body cultures appealed, but which also connected free trade to civil society, rather than to conflict between classes, labour and capital. The consumerist appeal to women was particularly strong – and body culture marketing was directed at them. In a period of perceived post-war racial decline, the ideal of national vigour also gave women a special role, as they had in the war as workers and mothers of soldiers. Now they could be idealised as mothers of the fit nation, which, as *Managing the Body* points out, had specific implications for the British Empire and its need to bolster the imperial dream in the aftermath of a devastating war. The book traces the ideal of the race mother between the 19th century and 1920s, and shows that though this feminine figure was fundamental to imperialism and patriotic duty, she was not incompatible with the emerging image of the modern woman. The various nuances of racial motherhood feature as important discussion points in the book. Just as manliness was revered in Edwardian England, culminating in the ideals of military masculinity forged and ruined (to the extent that it had to be reconstructed) in the First World War, maternalism was a complementary ideal across these periods of British history.

The section on physical culture draws appropriately on a select range from a mass of work on this subject; however, the sections on obesity and dress reform, covering familiar ground for the 1920s, endorse the arguments pursued by many other scholars. Though bringing together some old and some new evidence, most usefully for the period of the later 1930s, the second half of the chapter would have been even more enriched by deeper engagement with the secondary literature, though as with all books space was no doubt a consideration. The significant theme of the reconstruction of the male body, in various physical and sexualised facets, is pursued through a range of discourses, motivations, and technologies, opening up a further need for the different frameworks and nuances of masculinity to be explored. On a few occasions, the idea of masculinity in this chapter seems rather one dimensional, when there is equal evidence for the diversity and instability of masculinities and a comparable search for male intimacy in the period. It would be most useful to understand more about the homoerotic gesture and queer performance of the male body within fitness display and consumption, and the potential to unsettle the certainty of heteronormative health and efficiency and its reproductive ends.

While the familiar trope of fascist body culture has received so much attention in the scholarship, and again in *Managing the Body*, the British story of post-war and inter-war sexuality remains elusive. How do we explain the way images of fascist supermen, and articles suggestive of moral panic about men’s sexual failure (masturbation, venereal disease, homosexuality, obesity, degeneration) sat alongside the homoerotic, playful, and intimate imagery of male bonding? Social and cultural historians can read in between the pages of literature and photography that sexualised and spectacularised men’s bodies, to see, for instance, the ways in which men used the gymnasiums and body magazines to meet other men, giving their body-measurements, forwarding postal addresses and publishing self-made photographs. How can we develop a sensitivity to understanding these practices in the body world in which men were the subjects of surveillance and biopowerful discourses at the same time as they were engaging in self-fashioning, self-display and modes of being that may not be confined to the signifying practices of heterosexuality or even the national project of fitness politics? Historians of queer sexualities, such as Laura Doan and Matt Houlbrook, might have helped disentangle this problem of norms, discourses and practices. Their work suggests that sexual practices in the past are unfamiliar and not recognisable as homosexual and heterosexual identities and subjectivities. *Health and Strength*, for instance, contains imagery that could only be considered ambiguous and coquettish in its production of youthful male (and female) sexuality and its provocation of a desiring male readership. The hetero/homosexual subject does not have an identity in this period; perhaps we cannot

recognise the sexualities of the 1920s as they rupture the logic of identity politics and its projected pre-histories. Matt Cook's work on homosexuality and the city of London before 1914 explores the dynamics of male sexuality through the public spaces and private lives of late Victorian culture. This raises questions about the interwar period as the growth in gymnasiums and body cultures enabled new forms of encounter unlike the Hellenic gentleman's club or the rent-boy culture of the city that Matt Houlbrook highlighted. There appear to be many contradictions in the British society of the 1920s and 1930s, not just in the presentation of bodily discourses but also in how people accepted them, interpreted them, and lived their lives within and against powerful sentiments such as physical order and racial fitness. *Managing the Body* explains well the obsession with A1 national bodies, physical regeneration, race mothers and fathers, and stricter forms of social control underpinned by political ideology, yet it is possible that people do not always conform to the discourses they seem to participate in. There are equally significant cultural connections between beauty, health, fitness and sexuality that remain a hidden though integral part of how different people shaped their lives in Britain across this fascinating period of history.

The final chapter on national fitness in the 1930s presents important new evidence and weaves its way through a range of ideas that connect the political to the social and cultural. The National Fitness Campaign of the National Government, launched by Chamberlain, links the history of the earlier period to developments on the eve of the Second World War, as the work of reformers and health professionals was 'finally elevated to the status of a major government policy' (p. 330). The old A1 citizen, juxtaposed against the 'C3 anti-citizen', had returned to the public sphere and a Britain that was once again preparing for war. *Managing the Body* is a welcome addition to historical research on the body in Britain and elsewhere; it is an excellent book that will be used in undergraduate and postgraduate courses for a long time to come.

Notes

1. Michael Hau, *The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany: A Social History 1890–1930* (Chicago, 2003). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Liz Conor, *The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s* (Bloomington, IN, 2004). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Ana Carden-Coyne, *Reconstructing the Body: Classicism, Modernism and the First World War* (Oxford, 2009) [Back to \(3\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7852>