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The Feminism of Bernarr Macfadden:
Physical Culture Magazine and
the Empowerment of Women

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This article looks at the feminism of publisher/editor Bernarr Macfadden as presented on the pages of *Physical Culture* magazine during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Two phases were identified. During the first decade, Macfadden focused on health feminism. During the second decade, Macfadden's feminism had extended to embrace political, economic and legal equality for women. The author makes the following conclusions: Macfadden's feminism can be seen as a bridge between the dress reformers of the nineteenth century and the health feminists of the second and third wave of the twentieth century. Second, Macfadden's magazine illustrates the complexity of links among and between reforms of the Progressive Period. As this article points out, there were strong ties between the feminist movement and physical culture reform, ties heretofore not explored in a scholarly context. Finally, Macfadden's feminism may have been influenced by personal reasons. The father of six daughters, Macfadden wrote that he hoped each would become the "New Woman" he endorsed. Extensive use of links illustrate the article.

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The Feminism of Bernarr Macfadden: *Physical Culture* Magazine and the Empowerment of Women

Media mogul Bernarr Macfadden is known for many things—creating new genres of magazines;¹ launching the *New York Evening Graphic*, a sensational tabloid featuring composographs;² battling for First Amendment rights,³ crusading against vaccinations and much of the medical profession,⁴ fathering “bathing beauty” and “strong man” events,⁵ and supporting health and nutritional stances, which at the time seemed eccentric but have since been accepted as scientifically sound.⁶

Bernarr Macfadden is not generally known for feminism.

However, an examination of *Physical Culture* magazine,⁷ the first publication that Macfadden launched and the one he most closely supervised, reveals an early support of suffrage and what might be called “health feminism”—the empowerment of women through women gaining greater control of their sexuality, their body, their health regimen and their clothing.⁸ This article also chronicles how Macfadden’s feminism evolved to embrace social, political and economic equality for women. It also illustrates the ties that existed between the feminist movement and physical culture reform, ties that have heretofore not been explored in a scholarly context.

Health Feminism

Feminism is a movement for the social, political and economic equality for women.⁹ The health movement grew out of the women's liberation movement and has been seen at the very heart of feminism.¹⁰ For more than 150 years, feminists have seen the connection between health and the empowerment of women.

In the antebellum period, such feminist leaders as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone and Amelia Bloomer embraced dress reform as an advance for women's health -- and women's rights.¹¹ Instead of the long, heavy skirts and motion-restricting corsets, dress reform advocates preferred trousers or Turkish pants beneath a shorter, lighter, less restrictive garb.¹² Although the movement languished once Stanton, Stone and Bloomer gave up the garb when audience paid more attention to their clothing than their message,¹³ dress reform was reinvigorated in the 1870s and 1880s as a new generation of activists discovered the physical freedom that came with light-weight dresses over trousers. Particularly important in this re-awakening was writer/magazine editor/feminist philosopher Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Gilman saw dress reform as a means to an end—improved health and equality.¹⁴

Improving the health of women was a central element of second wave feminism. Building upon the view that the “personal is the political,” *Our Bodies, Ourselves*¹⁵ became a manifesto for a grass-roots health movement that sought to empower women.¹⁶

Bernarr Macfadden, Physical Culture magazine and the Progressive Era

According to James C. Whorton, the physical culture movement has always flourished in times of “general reformist ferment and social optimism when an expanding public spirit enlarged the constituency for perfectionist campaigns.”¹⁷ Whorton¹⁸ and others¹⁹ have emphasized that Bernarr Macfadden was one of the leaders of the Pro-

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gressive Era physical culture movement.

Macfadden used every medium of his time to promote his physical culture cause. He wrote more than fifty books on different aspects of health, sex, exercise and hygiene, in addition to editing an eight-volume encyclopedia of health and physical culture.²⁰ He hosted a radio exercise program and produced eight motion pictures, which showcased the physical culture lifestyle.²¹ However, his reputation—at least as an American health and fitness leader—rested, in large part, upon his monthly magazine, *Physical Culture*.

Bernarr Macfadden seemed unlikely to fill a role as a publisher—or a leader in physical fitness. As his biographers have pointed out,²² Macfadden was born into illness and poverty. The son of a drunken father and an ailing mother, Macfadden (nee Bernard Adolphus McFadden) was born in 1868 in Mill Spring, Missouri, and orphaned at 10. He attended school irregularly; but when he did, his strength was math, not grammar.

The young Macfadden held many jobs as a youth and teen; but the two that seemed to foretell his future were his work as a farm laborer, where he first gained his health through strenuous outdoor activity, and as a typesetter for a small newspaper in Kansas, where he first experienced the publishing life. Once Macfadden came to realize the importance of exercise, he began a career in physical culture, as a boxer, wrestler and fitness trainer (a “kinistherapist,” “Teacher of Higher Physical Culture”).²³ After New York newspapers rejected all his stories on physical culture,²⁴ Macfadden started his own magazine, *Physical Culture*, in March 1899, with the declaration, “Weakness is a Crime.”²⁵

Nor is there anything in his background, which would suggest that he would espouse feminism. Married (and divorced) four times, Macfadden always insisted that his wife—and children—follow a strict physical culture regiment. During childbirth, his wife was not

allowed to be attended by a physician; none of his children was vaccinated.²⁶ Macfadden did rely on many women as he built his publishing empire. His second wife, former nurse Marguerite Macfadden, helped run the Physical Culture City and the Bernarr Macfadden Healthatorium. She also edited *Beauty and Health* magazine and wrote for *Physical Culture*.²⁷ His third wife, champion British swimmer Mary Williamson Macfadden, came up with the idea for *True Story* magazine (Macfadden's most successful magazine), reviewed all manuscripts for that periodical, suggested the idea for the short-lived *Beautiful Womanhood* magazine and became its editor.²⁸

Many writers have dismissed *Physical Culture* magazine as simply a man's fitness periodical.²⁹ However, this ignores the magazine's editorial mission from the start. As Macfadden explained in the first issue, “I believe that all men and women can acquire it [health] if they adopt the proper method and preserve in their endeavors.”³⁰ Again and again throughout the first years of publication, Macfadden emphasized that *Physical Culture* was a “Home Magazine” and offered woman-focused departments as early as November 1899.³¹

The Feminism of Physical Culture

The feminism of *Physical Culture* magazine can be seen in two distinct phases.

The first phase—1899–1909—built on the principles of physical culture to fashion a distinct form of health feminism. Macfadden's magazine offered a range of exercises designed to improve woman's health for her traditional responsibilities as a wife (and sexual partner) and mother. He also carried on a crusade against the corset. During this time period, Macfadden began his battle against “prudery,” which prevented women from obtaining the physiological and birth control information that they needed. The magazine also offered success stories, featuring women

who carried on non-traditional careers and/or lived healthy athletic lives.

In phase two (1911-1919), *Physical Culture* extended its feminism. With writers like birth control crusader Margaret Sanger, radical labor organizer Ella Reeve Bloor and feminist/novelist/magazine editor Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Physical Culture* endorsed equal employment for women, suffrage, liberalized divorce and access to birth control. Women could only take advantage of these opportunities if they followed a healthy lifestyle and bettered themselves physically through exercise.

***Physical Culture* magazine, 1899-1909**

Physical Culture magazine of the first phase faced many challenges. It was searching for the right audience, readers who would embrace a healthy and fit lifestyle. By January 1901, the magazine had a circulation of 150,000.³² A representative of the American News Company, a magazine and newspaper distributor, asserted that no other publication handled by the company had met with such an immediate circulation success.³³

It was also searching for the right editorial mix, which would appeal to men—and women. Accordingly, the magazine offered departments, editorials and feature stories aimed at women. Many of the short stories featured strong, physically fit, intelligent female characters, who served as role models for readers. As Macfadden observed, “Women declare themselves to be in search of emancipation in these days. If they wish to accomplish it, let them study these types and gather what they can from the admiration these fiction heroines attracted.”³⁴

Women readers were encouraged to follow a fitness regiment to achieve their “healthy, vigorous, fully developed, well sexed womanhood.”³⁵ In order to have a “true marriage,” which is “primarily and fundamentally a physical union,” the wife needed to be as strong as her husband, Macfadden

asserted. But too many wives failed to achieve such equality. These wives were victims of the corset; their internal organs crushed; their movement curtailed by the heavy skirts they wore.³⁶ Giving up the corset would mean physical freedom and better health for women. Macfadden editorialized, “Give women the same physical freedom that men possess, and they would work with men shoulder to shoulder....Given opportunities women are unquestionably our equals mentally. They should also be nearly our equals physically.”³⁷

Throughout the Progressive Era, Macfadden’s *Physical Culture* magazine carried on its own brand of dress reform crusade. Women needed to free themselves from two garments—the corset³⁸ and the long, flowing skirts that hindered their movement. Of the two, the corset was the most dangerous. In short stories, editorials, cartoons and features, Macfadden and magazine contributors warned of the lasting physical problems associated with the corset. The corset, according to Macfadden, “saps the very life principle of womanhood causing thousands of our girls to grow to the age which should bring complete maturity, without the slightest indication of well sexed womanhood—a condition which should be theirs by the right of Nature’s law.”³⁹ Long skirts limited women’s movement—and their freedom. As Macfadden wrote with regard to the activity-limiting skirts, “Think you that there is no spirit, no life, no desire for freedom in women. If so, you have mistaken the sex.”⁴⁰

The women, who were presented as role models to *Physical Culture* readers, had shed both corset and long skirts to engage in non-traditional occupations. A number of them were vaudeville stars. For example, the Moulrier sisters, who were pictured in their tights and skimpy (by the standards of the day) vaudeville costumes on the front cover of the June 1900 issue, were horizontal bar experts. “Most any girl could possess the same strength, the same beauty of body as these

athletes if she would make the necessary efforts,” Macfadden argued.⁴¹ Miss Frances Namon had been a physical wreck at age 23 with “troubles peculiar to her sex” but she shed her corset and turned to physical culture, exercising with a punching bag, which became the base of her vaudeville act. Maude Caswell, who just six years before was weak and delicate, took up fencing and built up enough strength to begin a successful career as a photographer in California.⁴²

Macfadden most frequently pictured women in active poses—exercising or participating in sports. The magazine pictured women wrestlers, “lady sharpshooters,” female fencers, cowgirls, swimmers, and track athletes, all in active poses. One photo even pictured a wife posed with her husband hoisted over her shoulders.⁴³

At a time when most newspapers ignored women in sports, *Physical Culture* made it a point to cover women athletics, especially collegiate contests. As one writer for *Physical Culture* magazine observed, “If athletic competition is a good thing, mentally and physically for college boys, it is just as beneficial and necessary for college girls. It will not be said of the college bred girl, as of her sisters, that nearly 40 per cent. [sic] of American women are invalids.”⁴⁴ According to the magazine, college women were setting all kinds of athletic records. At Vassar, one of their top athletes was Inez Milholland, who went on to participate in a number of suffrage events in the United States. Macfadden characterized her:

She [Milholland] may have use for physical vigor, as she states she is fitting herself for woman suffrage work in Great Britain, and from the frequent reports that reach this country of the strenuous contests that occur because of the enthusiasm of the advocates of woman suffrage, it would be decidedly to her advantage to acquire all possible muscular vigor.⁴⁵

Equality of opportunity spilled over to the physical culture exhibitions, where the “most perfectly developed” women were paid exactly the same as the “most perfectly developed” men. Moreover, the women, who competed in athletic contests, were given monetary prizes; men were not.⁴⁶

During this period, *Physical Culture* also carried on a campaign to revise the curriculum for women in college. Women needed to know about their bodies and about sex, Macfadden believed. Thus, colleges needed to provide classes in physiology. The magazine’s survey of colleges showed that many higher education institutions, including Smith College, University of Chicago, Wellesley Adelphi College (Brooklyn, N.Y.) and Barnard College (New York) offered women physiology, while the University of Wisconsin Madison, University of Maine, University of South Dakota and Wooster College (Ohio) did not. The principal at the Girls High School in Brooklyn explained that this class would be too controversial because “such teaching in a public school might be criticized.”⁴⁷

College women weren’t the only ones who needed to know about sex and physiology, Macfadden emphasized. All women (and men)—young and old, rich and poor, married and single—needed this information. During this early period, Macfadden began discussing physiology, sex and birth control in his magazine. However, because of obscenity laws of the day, the writers for *Physical Culture* had to carefully frame their comments.

In November 1899, *Physical Culture* reprinted an article from *Omega*⁴⁸ that explicitly outlined the benefits of contraception. Written by feminist obstetrician/gynecologist Alice B. Stockham of Chicago, the article emphasized the beauty of sex and the need for information on contraception. For the protection of the mother and the child, Stockham argued, birth control information needed to be freely available. “It gives con-

ditions for health, intellectual development and spiritual growth.”⁴⁹

The lack of freely available birth control information was leading to health problems and legal abuses. Dr. A. Wilbur Jackson reported that desperate women were turning to quack doctors for abortifacients and abortions. Some had even resorted to “infant murder” to limit the size of their families.⁵⁰ Most of these abuses came about because of the “prudishness” in America, Macfadden editorialized. Indeed, “prudishness” was the number one abuse that *Physical Culture* magazine had pledged to battle.⁵¹ “Prudishness”—or “Comstockery” as Macfadden liked to call it⁵²—had stripped women of all information about sex, reproduction and their bodies.⁵³ Anthony Comstock, secretary of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice and special agent of the New York Post Office,⁵⁴ was the “KING OF THE PRUDES,” the “self-elected censor of the morals of his fellows,” Macfadden asserted. Comstock was responsible for keeping mothers and fathers from information that they needed and prevented parents from instructing their children about sex. Macfadden promised to oppose Comstock. “We will fight him and his theories onto the bitter end.”⁵⁵ In this, Macfadden had a personal stake, for he had twice been arrested on obscenity charges.⁵⁶

Between 1899 and 1909, Macfadden laid the foundation for a special brand of feminism—one built upon the principles of physical culture. This form of feminism assured women better health to either carry on their traditional responsibilities as wife (and sexual partner) and mother or to assume less traditional occupations that were featured in the magazine. Moreover, Macfadden and his contributors were emphasizing the right of women to information about their bodies and about contraception. At a time when the “Gibson Girl,” with her corset-constructed torso and her flawless, static, “high maintenance” beauty, dominated the front covers of many

national magazines,⁵⁷ *Physical Culture* offered another image, an active, physically fit woman who was ready to face the challenges of the twentieth century.

The Second Phase of Physical Culture Feminism

By the second decade of the twentieth century, *Physical Culture* magazine was on solid financial footing. With a large, loyal readership (circulation reached 500,000 during this time⁵⁸) and a strong advertising base, *Physical Culture* magazine could pay its writers well. Indeed, Carl Easton Williams, managing editor, boasted in 1922 that *Physical Culture* was the “best paying periodical in New York.”⁵⁹

During this time period, *Physical Culture* introduced its readers to a more radical form of feminism, one committed to social, economic and political equality to women, one that pushed aggressively for birth control and suffrage. That direction had been established before Macfadden announced plans to give up active business and editorial control of the magazine in 1912.⁶⁰ It continued as Macfadden toured the British isles (and wrote for the magazine), and it did not falter when Macfadden returned to America in 1915 and took back editorial control of the publication.⁶¹

The feminism of the magazine owed much to new contributors. Some, such as labor organizer/socialist Ella Reeve Bloor and birth control advocate Margaret Sanger, who faced her own battles over obscenity with Anthony Comstock, had national reputations for radicalism. Essayist and feminist magazine editor Charlotte Perkins Gilman and journalist/humorist Helen Rowland provided their own perspectives to the magazine. Socialist/novelist Upton Sinclair and Havelock Ellis, English essayist and pioneer in the scientific study of sex, added to the conversation.

Physical Culture’s feminism required health and fitness of women. Accordingly, the magazine provided exercises designed to

physically strengthen women so they could face the challenges of the second decade of the twentieth century.⁶² During the second decade of the twentieth century, the magazine built upon its health feminism and pushed for an array of women's rights—economic, legal and political. At the same time, it pushed aggressively for a woman's right to birth control.

As long-time Macfadden collaborator Marion Malcolm⁶³ observed, physical culture had opened all kinds of opportunities for women during the second decade of the twentieth century. She noted that

the influence of physical culture teaching is a factor in the working status of women as it now exists. The woman with a physique that throbs with health and vitality is fitted to add to the family income while being faithful to the duties of her home. Also her physical fitness enables her to undertake businesses and professions that would not be possible to the weak members of her sex."⁶⁴

Times had changed, journalist/humorist Helen Rowland asserted. A "New Woman" had emerged, that the "the helpless woman has passed. Woman has learned to help herself; and she is helping herself to about everything worthwhile the world contains." And that meant a career—and marriage. Work had not "unsexed" women. And when—or if—she marries, Rowland promised, this "New Woman" would be a true "*helpmate*" of man.⁶⁵

Before marriage, however, Charlotte Perkins Gilman felt that the workingwoman needed to have a "man to man" talk with her intended. "Let them [the couple] sit down and talk it out...talk on a business plane, and agree upon a fair deal." A woman did not necessarily have to give up her job when she married, Gilman concluded.⁶⁶

Gilman, too, saw a "New Woman," changing America; but she also faced many challenges:

The New Woman, millions strong, are moving

steadily forward, and the Old Olds (not personally old—we would not call them anything so unforgiveably [*sic*] cruel as they—but antiquated in their ideas and feelings), are forced out of their complacent inertia into a malign activity.

In their "malign activity," the "Old Olds" used the Bible, appeals to tradition and sentiment, anything to stop the changes that the New Woman would bring. Although reactionary women pointed to women's place as in the home, Gilman countered, "Woman's place is in the world. Woman's work in the world is to make it better. Her home will be to her what it is to her husband, their common place of love and comfort, of peace and privacy; but the world will be to them both a larger home, such as only man and woman together can make."⁶⁷

Gilman also emphasized the right of women to birth control. Only the woman should decide when—and if—to become a mother. "Shall he, whose share in the undertaking consists of a brief pleasure, force upon her, whatever her health or wishes, the long nine months of gestation, the pains of parturition, the long period of lactation, the still longer time of care and service entailed by motherhood," Gilman asked.⁶⁸

At *Physical Culture* magazine, two writers spoke most frequently—and most eloquently—on the need for access to information on birth control. Havelock Ellis, English essayist and pioneer in the modern, scientific study of sex, was the dominant writer on this topic.⁶⁹ His friend Margaret Sanger, who started the first family planning and birth control clinic in the United States and founded the American Birth Control League (now Planned Parenthood), joined the conversation in 1916 on the pages of *Physical Culture* magazine.⁷⁰

It was a coup for *Physical Culture* that Ellis, internationally known for his scientific studies on sex, agreed to write a series of articles on birth control for the magazine. Ellis was a popular—albeit controversial—author in

the United States. His *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* had been released in America in 1900. Ellis garnered further notoriety when a book dealer was prosecuted for obscenity for selling another one of his works, *Sexual Inversion*.⁷¹ It was a natural pairing when Ellis agreed to write for *Physical Culture* magazine. The magazine boasted, “PHYSICAL CULTURE ever had stood for woman’s right to her own body, and in keeping with this attitude, it gives its editor great pleasure to announce this [Ellis’] important series of articles.”⁷²

Ellis’ series for *Physical Culture* never provided specific contraceptive instructions; such would violate postal obscenity laws. Margaret Sanger had already discovered that providing explicit contraceptive methods violated the law.⁷³

Ellis’ articles merely emphasized that women needed access to contraceptive information. But that, too, was a violation of the obscenity laws.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, neither Ellis nor Macfadden, who was back in the United States, was ever indicted for the articles. In his articles, Ellis argued that birth control would only improve the quality of children and make them “better, from every point of view, to produce a few superior beings than a vast number of inferior beings.”⁷⁵ Moreover, birth control would actually reduce the number of abortions. “Every attempt to **discourage** birth control **promotes** abortion,” argued Ellis.⁷⁶

Abortion was something that neither *Physical Culture* nor Macfadden embraced. Abortion was not only illegal but morally reprehensible, the magazine argued. But, by depriving women of birth control, postal authorities, doctors and ministers were in cahoots with the abortionists. The magazine emphasized:

shame upon the clergyman, be he affected by bigotry or narrow mentality—shame most of all upon the doctor whose hands are red with the blood of suffering womankind, who stand shoulder to shoulder with the professional

abortionist, in striving to bar woman from ownership of her body and her soul.⁷⁷

In 1916 Margaret Sanger began to contribute to *Physical Culture* magazine. Back from England—she had fled the country after being indicted for violating the federal obscenity laws for *The Woman Rebel*, the eight-page newsletter that promoted contraception, Sanger was already nationally known as a radical birth control proponent, even before she opened the nation’s first birth control clinic in Brooklyn later in 1916.⁷⁸

In *Physical Culture*, Sanger reiterated many of her earlier arguments in favor of birth control. Mothers needed contraceptive information to limit the number of children in their families, so that the children could be born strong and healthy into financially stable homes. “Through involuntary motherhood, misery and disease and ignorance and stupidity have been multiplied a million fold in this world,” Sanger wrote in *Physical Culture* magazine. Notwithstanding the law, affluent women and wives of physicians already had access to such information but the poor were condemned to ignorance and large families. “The weapon of Birth Control would place into the hands of all women the power to decide—to make the important choice,” of where and when to have children. She concluded:

The women and the mothers of America, not the courts, alone have the *power* to decide the cause of Birth Control.

ASSERT THAT POWER!⁷⁹

In this, Sanger had an ally in *Physical Culture*. The magazine had long supported the right of women to information about their bodies. But during the second decade of the twentieth century, the magazine reemphasized the right—and argued that any law -- which prevented access to information -- should be struck down. The editor explained his reasons:

...to enable woman to own her body and own her mind, and to assume her rightful station in the world, we must revoke those laws and customs that make it a crime to inform her what conditions are prohibitive or conducive to the inauguration of human life.”⁸⁰

According to *Physical Culture*, “misguided” citizens opposed birth control in the mistaken idea that it would be injurious to the chastity of women and would reduce their willingness to have children.

We must repeal our iniquitous legislation prohibiting the dissemination of information on birth control, not merely because millions of women are bringing into the world children unwelcome and unprovided for—not merely because an even greater number avoid marriage and parenthood because of the uncontrollable hazards of parenthood due to the ignorance enforced by the law—but because millions of other women suffer mental and physical handicaps because of their lack of real knowledge on this subject.

Physical Culture explained that men and women will limit the size of their families one way or the other. “Intelligent birth control or injurious birth control or even abortion.” The editor asked, “It is ours to choose. Which?”⁸¹

One way to achieve these reforms was to give women the right to vote. Politics—and America—would change with woman suffrage, the magazine emphasized. Wherever women had the right to vote, *Physical Culture* argued, women and men had both been elevated:

There can never be Government by the people until all the people have the right of suffrage. It is inconceivable that anyone should regard our Republic as a Government by the people when one half its citizens are disfranchised.

And the half which is disfranchised is that which is most likely to incline to justice...to desire good laws for the sake of their children.⁸²

But this was in keeping with positions that the magazine had long held. The “New Woman,” strong in body, mind and spirit, deserved the vote. The magazine explained in 1914:

That this magazine is unequivocally in favor of woman suffrage may seem redundant to those who understand its policies and who have been acquainted with its work during past years. In truth, the justice and the logic of woman’s demands for the ballot have always seemed to us so obvious that no ground for discussion has seemed to exist.⁸³

During the second decade of the twentieth century, *Physical Culture*’s “New Woman” was strong, healthy and intelligent, quite capable of facing the challenges of the new century and taking advantage of the opportunities of the times. She was a true partner in a marriage of equals. She was as comfortable in the home as outside it. She had demonstrated that a career would not “unsex” her. She had earned a right to the vote—and the nation desperately needed her input.

Thus, by the end of the second decade of the twentieth century (when the House of Representatives and Senate finally approved the nineteenth amendment), Macfadden’s feminism had grown from one based on physical culture (or pushing for women to assume greater control of their sexuality, body, health regimen and clothing) to one that also embraced economic, social and political equality.

Conclusions

The feminism of Macfadden and *Physical Culture* magazine—and its evolution—is important to study for a number of reasons. First, Macfadden initially cast his feminism in a health perspective, one that can be seen as a bridge between the dress reformers of the nineteenth century and the health feminists of the second and third waves of the twentieth century. Although Macfadden never gave up his views of empowering women through

greater control of their own sexuality, body, health regimen and clothing, his *Physical Culture* magazine also became a voice for the economic, social and political equality in the second decade of the twentieth century.

Second, Macfadden's magazine illustrates the complexity of links among and between the reforms of the Progressive era. As this article points out, there were ties between the feminist movement and physical culture reform, ties that seem logical given the content of *Physical Culture* magazine; but these ties have seldom been explored in a scholarly context. It is unclear if the feminist connection existed in other physical culture publications of the time period of the Progressive Era. Certainly, this suggests a new area for future research.

Finally, Macfadden and his magazine dem-

onstrates how feminism changes and grows. Macfadden's feminism may have evolved for personal reasons. The editor was the father of six daughters and he wanted good health and equal opportunities for each. He wanted each to become a "new woman" -- healthy and fit-- "graceful, vital, with the force of buoyant life pulsating in every part of their splendid bodies." But he also wished for them independent lives. "I want them also to be self-supporting. They should be able to earn their own living in some useful occupation. Then they have the self-confidence which enables them to face the problems of life with equanimity."⁸⁴ Given the editorial content of *Physical Culture* magazine during the first two decades of the twentieth century, Macfadden wished the same for his women readers.

Notes

¹An official of the American News Co. remarked at the time of the launch of *True Story* magazine: "Macfadden had the first new idea in the publishing field in the last fifty years." That periodical catered to a whole new audience and offered a fresh editorial content (the first person narrative of supposedly true, highly emotional stories). As quoted in Theodore Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), p. 296. When Macfadden launched *True Detective* magazine, he established yet another niche in American publishing that remains a "rich historical source of national and international crime," according to Macfadden's long-time friend and editor Fulton Oursler.

²The *Graphic*, also known as the "pornoGraphic" by New Yorkers offended by its sensationalism and manipulated photographs, folded in 1932. For additional details, see Frank Mallen, *Sauce for the Gander* (White Plains, NY: Baldwin Books, 1954).

³Macfadden was involved in two cases. The first revolved around his Physical Culture Exhibition at Madison Square Garden in 1905. He was charged with distributing obscene pictures and posters to promote the event. The pictures in question had already appeared in *Physical Culture* magazine. In that case, he was given a suspended sentence. Robert Lewis Taylor, "Physical Culture, Part II—Weakness Is a Crime," *New Yorker*, October 21, 1950, p. 53. The second case involved a serial by popular writer John Russell Coryell, "Growing to Manhood in a Civilized (?) Society," which appeared in *Physical Culture* magazine. That serial was discontinued after the March 1907 issue because of Macfadden's arrest for distributing objectionable materials through the mails. The story dealt with venereal diseases and premarital sex. The U.S. District Court in Trenton, N.J., found Macfadden guilty, fined him \$2000 and sentenced him to two years in prison. President William H. Taft eventually pardoned him. For an interesting perspective on the case, see Mary Macfadden and Emile Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips: The Story of Bernarr Macfadden* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1953), p. 119. For Macfadden's perspective on his arrest, see "THE EDITOR'S ARREST—MY PROTEST AGAINST COMSTOCKERY," *Physical Culture*, April 1907, p. 251.

⁴Macfadden did not believe in vaccination and saw much quackery in the medical profession. In *Physical Culture* magazine, Macfadden wrote about the misconceptions of the medical profession and railed against vaccination. For a fuller discussion of Macfadden's personal and professional attitudes toward the medical profession, see Macfadden and Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips*, pp. 355-357. The American Medical Association saw Macfadden as a menace. Morris Fishbein, "Exploiting the Health Interest," *Hygeia*, December 1924, pp. 744-48.

⁵ Macfadden started his Physical Culture Exhibition in 1904 at the Madison Square Garden in New York City. The *Saturday Evening Post* saw it as the forerunner of all bathing beauty contests. See Alva Johnston, "The Great Macfadden," *Saturday Evening Post*, June 21, 1941, p. 9. That assertion has been echoed by historians. See, for example, John D. Fair, "Mr. and Miss America Contests: A Tale of Contrasting Cultures in the Twentieth Century," *Journal of the Georgia Association of Historians*, 2002, pp. 1-44.

⁶ Individuals who did not embrace the principles of physical culture often dismissed Macfadden as an "eccentric" or a "fanatic." See, for example, Johnston, "The Great Macfadden," pp. 9-10. Nonetheless, historians have had to admit that many of Macfadden's "fads" have come to be accepted by American medical experts, including the shortcomings of white bread, the need for exercise and the importance of a moderate diet. See, for example, William H. Taft, "Bernarr Macfadden," *Missouri Historical Review*, Vol. 63 (October 1968), p. 85.

⁷ Like many Macfadden magazines, *Physical Culture* has not been collected and retained by many academic institutions or libraries. The researcher used three different collections—Oberlin College, The Popular Culture Collection at Bowling Green State University and Cleveland Public Library—to piece together an almost complete run of *Popular Culture* during this time period. However, several volumes were missing from the analysis, specifically 1901 and 1910; the 1909 volume was incomplete. Every issue was examined during the preparation of this article.

⁸ Wendy Kline has noted that the women's health movement had its roots in women's liberation. As she observed, the unifying characteristic of all branches of feminism (liberal, cultural, socialist, radical and multiracial) was the assertion that the "personal is the political." Kline wrote, "...feminists asserted that the most private aspect of their identity -- relationship, sexuality, health and family life -- were indeed political issues." Kline emphasized that the "health feminists" demanded that women gain greater control of their bodies as a means to political, economic and social empowerment. Wendy Kline, "Please Include This in Your Book: Readers Respond to Our Bodies, Ourselves," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, Vol. 79:1 (Spring 2005), pp. 85-86.

⁹ Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000).

¹⁰ Wendy Kline, "Please Include This in Your Book: Readers Respond to Our Bodies, Ourselves," pp. 81-110.

¹¹ Susan J. Kleinberg, "Introduction," in D.C. Bloomer, *Life and Writings of Amelia Bloomer* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975, reprint of Arena Press edition 1895), pp. x-xi.

¹² For a full explanation of the fashion of the day and the dress reform garb, see Amy Kesselman, "The 'Freedom Suit': Feminism and Dress Reform in the United States, 1848-1875," *Gender & Society*, Vol. 5: 4 (December 1991), pp. 498, 500.

¹³ Bloomer, *Life and Writings of Amelia Bloomer*, pp. 68-75 and Theodore Stanton and Harriot S. Blatch (eds.), *Elizabeth Cady Stanton as Revealed in Her Letters, Diary and Reminiscences* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1922), Vol. 1, pp. 172-174.

¹⁴ Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote extensively about dress reform and health in her magazine, *The Forerunner*. She also discussed the issue in *Herland* and *Women and Economics*. For a fuller discussion of this subject, see Melyssa Wrisley, "'Myself as a Self': Charlotte Perkins Gilman and American Dress Reform, 1875-1886," Women's History Conference, Rochester, New York, March 2006.

¹⁵ *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was originally published as a booklet in 1970. It was expanded and was published as The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies: Ourselves: A Book by and for Women* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973).

¹⁶ Carol S. Weisman, *Women's Health Care: Activist Traditions and Institutional Change* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) and Sheryl Burt Ruzek, *The Women's Health Movement: Feminist Alternatives to Medical Control* (New York: Praeger, 1978). *Our Bodies, Ourselves* promoted an extraordinary reaction from readers.

¹⁷ James C. Whorton, *Crusaders for Fitness: The History of American Health Reformers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 11-12.

¹⁸ Whorton, *Crusaders for Fitness*, pp. 297-303.

¹⁹ R. Marie Griffith, "Apostles of Abstinence: Fasting and Masculinity during the Progressive Era," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 52: 4 (December 2000), pp. 599-636; Donald J. Mrozek, "The Scientific Quest for Physical Culture and the Persistent Appeal of Quackery," *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 14:1 (Spring 1987), pp. 76-82; Jan Todd, "Bernarr Macfadden: Reformer of Feminine Form," *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 14:1 (Spring 1987), pp. 61-75. Even contemporaries saw Macfadden as a key figure in the physical culture movement, see "Macfadden's Pill," *Time*, September 21, 1931 (<http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,742287,00.html>, retrieved January 21, 2008).

²⁰ The largest number of these books were non-fiction, although Macfadden also wrote novels with physical culture themes. Bernarr Macfadden (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Health and Physical Culture* (New York: Macfadden Book Co., 1931).

²¹ Ann Fabian, "Making a Commodity of Truth: Speculations on the Career of Bernarr Macfadden," *American Literary History*, Vol. 5:1 (Spring 1993), pp. 51-76.

²² Robert Ernst, *Weakness is a Crime: The Life of Bernarr Macfadden* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991); William H. Taft, "Bernarr Macfadden: One of a Kind," *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 45: 4 (Winter 1968), pp. 627-633; William R. Hunt, *Body Love: The Amazing Career of Bernarr Macfadden* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1989); Fulton Oursler, "The Most Unforgettable Character I've Met," *Reader's Digest*, July 1951, pp.78-82

(<http://www.bernarrmacfadden.com/mucim.html>, retrieved January 12, 2008); Bruce M. Swain, "Bernarr Macfadden," in Sam G. Riley (ed), *American Magazine Journalists, 1900-1960, First Series* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1990), pp. 205-209.

²³ Robert Lewis Taylor, "Physical Culture, II—Weakness Is a Crime," p. 40.

²⁴ Taylor, "Physical Culture, II—Weakness is a Crime," p. 44.

²⁵ *Physical Culture*, March 1899, p. 3.

²⁶ A fact bitterly denounced by his third wife in her book. Mary Macfadden and Emile Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips: The Story of Bernarr Macfadden* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1953).

²⁷ See, for example, *Physical Culture*, April 1904, supplement; "A Delicious New Year Dinner," *Physical Culture*, January 1905, p. 638, and "Ideal Babyhood," *Physical Culture*, January 1906, pp. 53-55.

²⁸ Macfadden and Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips: The Story of Bernarr Macfadden*, pp. 179-181, 219-220, 349-350.

²⁹ See, for example, Ann Fabian, "Making a Commodity of Truth: Speculations on the Career on Bernarr Macfadden," *American Literary History*, Vol. 5:1 (Spring 1993), pp. 51-76.

³⁰ Bernarr Macfadden, "The Development of Energy, Vitality and Health," *Physical Culture*, March 1899, p. 4.

³¹ "Humanity and Health," *Physical Culture*, November 1899, p. 73. A new set of women's columns, including a dress department written by his wife Marguerite, was added in April 1904. See also "Publisher's Department" for comments on *Physical Culture* as a "Home Magazine," November 1904, p. 478-479.

³² According to Henry F. Pringle, the circulation of *Physical Culture* eventually reached 500,000 during World War I. Henry Pringle, "Another American Phenomenon, Bernarr Macfadden—Publisher and Physical Culturist," *The World's Work*, October 1928, p. 664.

³³ "Our Marvelous Growth," *Physical Culture*, January 1901, p. 181. The editorial content of the magazine—with many stories and departments aimed at women and written by women—suggests that, at the very least, women readers represented a substantial portion of the circulation. Moreover, Macfadden often asserted that *Physical Culture* magazine was a home magazine. (See, for example, "Publishers' Department," *Physical Culture*, November 1904, p. 478.) In addition, Macfadden always included women in his various ancillary activities, including the Physical Culture exhibitions, where women were judged in the "most perfectly developed woman" contest and competed in a variety of sporting events.

³⁴ "Muscular Heroines of Great Authors," *Physical Culture*, December 1899, p. 130.

³⁵ "Can the Highest Degree of Attainable Physical Perfection Be Acquired If Absolute Continence Be Observed?" *Physical Culture*, April 1899, p. 28.

³⁶ Bernarr Macfadden, "Physical Weakness—Marital Unhappiness," *Physical Culture*, January 1900, pp. 173-174.

³⁷ Bernarr Macfadden, "Corset Makes Women Old," *Physical Culture*, May 1900, p. 82.

³⁸ In 1900, Macfadden identified six curses that needed to be eliminated and number one was the corset. The others were: the drug curse (during this time Macfadden ran a number of investigative articles that focused on the patent medicines of the day), the alcohol curse, the curse of sexual ignorance, the curse of muscular inactivity and the curse of over-eating. Bernarr Macfadden, "Strong, Beautiful Bodies for Girls and Young Women," *Physical Culture*, June 1900, p. 115.

³⁹ Bernarr Macfadden, "The Corset Curse," *Physical Culture*, December 1900, p. 121. See, also, August 1900, p. 202 and April 1902, pp. 624-625.

⁴⁰ Bernarr Macfadden, "The Curse of Prudishness," *Physical Culture*, November 1900, p. 85.

⁴¹ Bernarr Macfadden, "Strong, Beautiful Bodies for Girls and Young Women," *Physical Culture*, June 1900, p. 115.

- ⁴² J. Walter Smithson (a pseudonym for Bernarr Macfadden), "From Weakness to Strength and Beauty," *Physical Culture*, August 1900, pp. 198-200.
- ⁴³ See, for example, *Physical Culture*, April 1902, p. 38; August 1903, p. 173; June 1907, p. 421; January 1904, p. D, and July 1900, pp. 150-151. See, also, front covers June 1904, March 1906 and November 1908.
- ⁴⁴ Edward R. Bushnell, "Record-Breaking College Girls," *Physical Culture*, February 1907, pp. 119-122.
- ⁴⁵ Bernarr Macfadden, "Girls Break Records," *Physical Culture*, July 1908, pp. 58-58.
- ⁴⁶ Men were not paid because, as amateurs, they were not allowed to receive monetary rewards. Women had no such restrictions. Bernarr Macfadden, "OPENING OF THE PHYSICAL CULTURE EXHIBITION FOR 1905," *Physical Culture*, October 1905, p. 316. Equal opportunities were seen in a number of different elements. Women were admitted in almost the same numbers to the Macfadden Physical Culture institutes. See, for example, the graduating class of 1907, *Physical Culture*, November 1907, p. 292. Women were also encouraged to dress in less restrictive fashions at the Physical Culture City in New Jersey. According to one writer, that shocked many neighbors, "when the girls appeared on the village streets not only in bloomers but without stockings." See Pringle, "Another American Phenomenon," p. 664.
- ⁴⁷ Walter M. Stevens, "Sex Physiology and Women's Colleges," *Physical Culture*, February 1906, pp. 134-138.
- ⁴⁸ Thus far, the author has been unable to locate material on this publication.
- ⁴⁹ Alice B. Stockham, "Controlled Parenthood—The Individual," reprint from *Omega*, *Physical Culture*, November 1899, p. 96.
- ⁵⁰ Dr. A. Wilbur Jackson, "The Dread of Motherhood," *Physical Culture*, February 1904, pp. 135-136.
- ⁵¹ "Editorial Department," *Physical Culture*, July 1904, p. 94.
- ⁵² Bernarr Macfadden, "THE EDITOR'S ARREST—MY PROTEST AGAINST COMSTOCKERY," *Physical Culture*, April 1907, p. 251.
- ⁵³ Bernarr Macfadden, "The Curse of Prudishness—The Gorgon Horror of Modern Life," *Physical Culture*, November 1904, pp. 474-475.
- ⁵⁴ This position gave Comstock the authority to inspect mail, seize obscene materials and arrest the senders. For details of the many prosecutions, see Heywood Broun and Margaret Leech, *Anthony Comstock: Roundsman of the Lord* (New York: The Literary Guild of America, 1927), pp. 216-217, 229, 236-236.
- ⁵⁵ Bernarr Macfadden, "COMSTOCK, KING OF THE PRUDES," *Physical Culture*, December 1905, pp. 561-563.
- ⁵⁶ His first arrest was for distributing posters advertising his physical culture exhibition of 1905 and the other for using the mails to distribute objectionable materials, a serialized novel in *Physical Culture* magazine. In both cases, Macfadden was found guilty. In the exhibition case, he received a suspended sentence. In the second case, he was fined \$2000 and sentenced to two years in jail. President Taft later pardoned Macfadden. See Robert Lewis Taylor, "Physical Culture, Part II—Weakness is a Crime," *New Yorker*, October 21, 1950, p. 53 and "THE EDITOR'S ARREST—MY PROTEST AGAINST COMSTOCKERY," *Physical Culture*, April 1907, p. 251.
- ⁵⁷ For a discussion of the illustrations on magazine covers during the early twentieth century, see Carolyn Kitch, *The Girl on the Magazine Cover: The Origins of Visual Stereotypes in American Mass Media* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
- ⁵⁸ Pringle, "Another American Phenomenon, Bernarr Macfadden—Publisher and Physical Culturist," *The World's Work*, October 1928, p. 664.
- ⁵⁹ Annie Riley Hale, "These Cults": *An Analysis of the Foibles of Dr. Morris Fishbein's "Medical Follies" and an Indictment of Medical Practice in General...* (New York: National Health Foundation, 1926), p. 144.
- ⁶⁰ Macfadden explained that he hated the grind of business, "the perpetual scheming for profit." Macfadden said he planned to devote his time "to the advancement of our principles, without monetary consideration" and organize a nationwide group to advance physical culture principles. He professed that through the physical culture unions, he would educate the public. In 1913, Macfadden traveled to Britain, found a new bride but returned to America in 1915. He soon took back the editorial direction of *Physical Culture* magazine. Bernarr Macfadden, "The Editor Resigns," *Physical Culture*, August 1912, pp. 117-120.
- ⁶¹ Although Macfadden announced his retirement in 1912 from the day-to-day oversight of the magazine, he never fully gave up control of the magazine. He continued to write for the publication, even as he traveled to the British Isles. Other individuals who oversaw *Physical Culture* during Macfadden's absence were: Charles Desgrey, John Brennan (managing editor), John Brisben Walter (the former editor of *Cosmopolitan*, who edited *Physical Culture* only three months when he resigned in disgust, complaining about the interference with his work) and Carl Easton Williams (managing editor). Macfadden took over as editor of the magazine with the October 1916 issue. As Macfadden wrote, "I am as frisky as a young colt. I am possessed of more energy, more enthusiasm than when I first

founded this publication.” “Bernarr Macfadden, “With the Editor,” *Physical Culture*, October 1916, p. 3. For additional details, see Macfadden and Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips: The Story of Bernarr Macfadden*, pp. 179-180.

⁶² See, for example, Carl Easton Williams, “Maternity Exercises,” *Physical Culture*, October 1910, pp. 63-68 and Dorothy Pearl Buchanan, “Beginning and Advanced Exercise,” *Physical Culture*, October 1918, pp. 37-39.

⁶³ Malcolm and Macfadden collaborated on a book in 1904, *Health–Beauty–Sexuality, From Girlhood to Womanhood...* (New York and London: Physical Culture Publishing).

⁶⁴ Marion Malcolm, “Woman and the World’s Work,” *Physical Culture*, July 1911, pp. 64-65.

⁶⁵ Helen Rowland, “The Passing of the Helpless Woman,” *Physical Culture*, October 1911, pp. 359, 360.

⁶⁶ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Business Side of Matrimony,” *Physical Culture*, January 1914, p. 8.

⁶⁷ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Woman Who Won’t Move Forward,” *Physical Culture*, February 1914, p. 126, 128. Gilman also wrote “If I Were a Man,” a short story, for *Physical Culture*, July 1914, pp. 31-34.

⁶⁸ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Passing of Involuntary Motherhood,” *Physical Culture*, April 1914, p. 333.

⁶⁹ For additional information on Havelock Ellis, see Vincent Brome, *Havelock Ellis: Philosopher of Sex, A Biographer* (London, Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1979).

⁷⁰ In October 1916, Sanger was arrested, after she opened a birth control clinic in Brooklyn. Earlier, Sanger had her own run in with the post office. In 1914, she was indicted for violating obscenity laws for sending *The Woman Rebel*, a monthly newsletter promoting contraception, through the mails. This was the same law that snagged Macfadden. Macfadden believed in Margaret Sanger’s birth control activities and made many financial contributions to her work. See Macfadden and see Macfadden and Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips: The Story of Bernarr Macfadden*, p. 231. For additional information on Margaret Sanger, see Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), pp. 99-109.

⁷¹ Brome, *Havelock Ellis: Philosopher of Sex*, pp. 101, 119 and Phyllis Grosskurth, *Havelock Ellis: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), p. 290.

⁷² “The Revolt of the Involuntary Sex,” *Physical Culture*, July 1915, p.2.

⁷³ In 1914, Margaret Sanger was indicted under the postal obscenity law for the distribution of *The Woman Rebel*. In 1915, her husband was arrested for violating obscenity laws by distributing “Family Limitation,” a 16-page pamphlet which contained explicit instructions on contraceptive methods, including withdrawal, condoms, douches, suppositories, sponges and plugs. William Sanger spent 30 days in jail for distributing the pamphlet. For additional details, see Chesler, *Woman of Valor*, pp. 102, 109.

⁷⁴ In 1914, Sanger was indicted for sending “indecent” material through the mail. The Post Office confiscated the first issue of *The Woman Rebel* with a notice that she would be subject to criminal prosecution if she continued. She did so, although she attempted to cloak her newsletter from the prying eyes of Post Office inspectors by dropping bundles of the periodical into mailboxes across the city of New York. Her ploy was discovered and Sanger was arrested and charged with four criminal counts, which carried a maximum sentence of 45 years. She left the country before standing trial. See Chesler, *Woman of Valor*, pp. 99-102.

⁷⁵ Havelock Ellis, “Birth Control,” *Physical Culture*, September 1915, p. 40.

⁷⁶ Havelock Ellis, “Birth Control: Birth Control in Relation to Morality and Eugenics,” *Physical Culture*, November 1915, p. 79.

⁷⁷ “The Editor’s Viewpoint,” *Physical Culture*, November 1915, p. 3.

⁷⁸ Chesler, *Woman of Valor*, pp. 99-102 and 112.

⁷⁹ Margaret Sanger, “A Message to Mothers,” *Physical Culture*, April 1916, p. 15.

⁸⁰ “The Sword of Damocles,” editorial, *Physical Culture*, April 1915, p. 318.

⁸¹ “Which?” editorial, *Physical Culture*, May 1916, p. 3. In this *Physical Culture* was ahead of its time. Although *Harper’s Weekly* carried a series on family limitation from April to November 1915, the topic was generally avoided by mainstream publications. As Chesler pointed out, the *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping* generally avoided the topic until the 1930s. The *New York Times* carried only three articles on the subject in 1914, 14 in 1915 and 90 between 1916-1918. Small-town newspapers provided little coverage. See Chesler, *Woman of Valor*, pp. 129-130.

⁸² “Why Woman Suffrage Is So Great An Issue For Our Republic,” editorial, *Physical Culture*, July 1916, p. 22a. For an earlier *Physical Culture* perspective on suffrage, see “Editor’s Note” in Gertrude Winder Haywood, “What the World Owes Women,” *Physical Culture*, September 1912, p. 359.

⁸³ “The Womanly Woman and ‘Woman’s Rights,’” *Physical Culture*, January 1914, unnumbered page.

⁸⁴ Bernarr Macfadden, “Wives and Mothers,” *Physical Culture*, May 1923, p. 62.