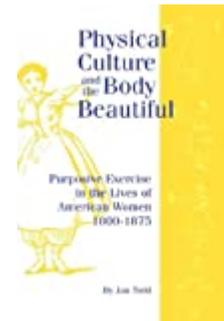




Jan Todd. *Physical Culture and the Body Beautiful: Purposive Exercise in the Lives of American Women 1800-1875.* Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1998. ix + 369 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-86554-561-8.



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Equality through Exercise

After reading this book I feel like one of the subjects of the “light calisthenics” popular during the 1830-1850s: I know I’ve been to the gym and exercised, but I didn’t get in a very good workout. Jan Todd has written an intriguing, detailed, and informative book on the evolution of women’s exercise in early-nineteenth century America, but her methodological shortcuts remind me of a weight lifter who jerks the bar up without “cleaning” it properly. This is not to say that readers cannot learn some important points from this book, but that it does not reach its potential.

Before addressing Todd’s methodology, her argument deserves attention. The author begins by outlining her three most important points: that nineteenth-century women engaged in far more exercise than previously thought; exercise and its social implications revise our understanding of Barbara Welter’s “cult of true womanhood”; and that exercise “empowered” its practitioners (p. 4). Todd introduces the concept of “Majestic Womanhood,” which refers to a physically bigger and stronger gender that claims social and intellectual equality with men. The exercise movement took place within

the larger context of antebellum reform, and borrowed some moral overtones from that cultural trend.

This book is organized chronologically, with each of eleven chapters tracing the development of a certain phase of women’s exercise history. Interestingly, Todd establishes a dichotomy between Rousseau’s ideal of protected women who exercised little and Mary Wollstonecraft’s advocacy of vigorous activity. It is in the back and forth between these two conflicting ideas that Todd centers her analysis.

Her most insightful research comes in dating the beginnings of women’s exercise to the 1810s and 1820s, when several New England girls’ schools included “purposive exercise” as part of their curriculum. The term “purposive exercise” pervades the text and defines Todd’s subject as activity undertaken with the intent of physical and personal improvement. As such it limits her discussion to organized exercise and excludes such common activities as horseback riding, walking, and housework that occupied many nineteenth-century women. Perhaps this is because Todd relies so heavily on published exercise manuals and institutional histories.

Still, Todd musters her evidence to demonstrate the change in women's exercise from relatively active gymnastics in the first three decades of the century to almost passive calisthenics in the middle decades. Her discussion of Catharine Beecher as the leader of this transition is particularly useful. Strikingly, Todd refers to Beecher's role as the equivalent "of the late-twentieth-century advertising executive," that of a promoter (p 157). Turning conventional wisdom on its head, the author persuasively argues that Beecher was not the inventor of female exercise, but popularized others' ideas and promoted women's exercise in general.

Beecher was conservative in her approach, favoring gentle activity for women in a socially acceptable framework. Although Todd faults Beecher's limited goals, she correctly suggests that Beecher's efforts opened the world of exercise to women who might have otherwise never participated. It was left to another group of exercise pioneers, who believed in the phrenological principle that bigger bodies and bigger brains (achieved through vigorous exercise) led to smarter people, to bring exercise to the masses. A detailed analysis of Dioclesian Lewis, a physician, exercise entrepreneur and moral reformer, discusses the mechanics of this popularization. In a final chapter Todd uses the letters of one woman, Lizzie Morley, to illustrate women's reactions to their new regimens. It is here that Todd makes her most significant point: "purposive training was important to [women's] struggle for identity and equality" (p. 290).

Persuasive and compelling as that last chapter may be, it only highlights the book's methodological limitations. Throughout Todd relies on published exercise tracts, journals, and gymnastics textbooks. Her use of manuscript sources is limited, although she tells readers that she looked in vain for such information. The problem here is not simply lack of sources (with which I sympathize), but an unconvincing presentation. Without evidence (besides Morley and a very few others) of

women's responses to exercise, the claims made in promotional literature are questionable. More discussion of reader response might reveal whether these effusive assertions were met in reality. Todd needs to analyze her sources more skeptically to be fully persuasive. The fact that all of her sources come from the Northeast or Europe further limits her interpretation.

My other methodological complaint rests with the paucity of historiographical context in this book. Rarely does the author explain the significance of her findings in terms of the larger scholarship. To offer one example, we learn that Dio Lewis, whose story occupies three chapters, was born in 1823 in Auburn, New York, but Todd fails to discuss the influence the religious revivals and reform movements in the "Burned Over District" might have had on this important exercise pioneer. Indeed, since Todd asserts that Lewis was radical in his calls for equality through exercise, this omission is glaring. Overall, we get little sense of how this book fits into the historiography of reform, or even health reform movements, which may be its largest contribution.

I should say that despite my criticisms, I liked this book very much. It ventures into new ground and reassesses our understanding of gender and exercise. Some of the anecdotes and illustrations are outstanding fodder for lectures. Still, it has its flaws. Todd is a professor of kinesiology and health education, fields where my critique may not be as appropriate. My hunch is that this work will be well regarded in that area, as it should be. But as a historical work, it offers us a detailed portrait of elite, Northeastern women's exercise in the nineteenth century. Additional work is needed to explain the larger importance of the excellent information Todd has presented.

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