



HARVEY GREEN

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FIT FOR AMERICA

In Memory of Warren Susman Mentor, Scholar, Inspiration

· PREFACE ·

We often think of the world in metaphor, with our bodies as the touchstone. We speak, read, and write of the "body politic" or a "corpus of data." Such images may be the easiest to comprehend because they are so close to us.

With an understandable bias to the present, most of us think that the ideal of "good health" and the ways people try to achieve it have been a constant throughout modern history. The differences between the past and present seem only a matter of degree. The advances of medical and biological sciences have lengthened our lives, and thus our expectations are greater than our forebears'. Yet it is not true that our vision of health and our notions of the ideal body size and shape are the same as those of a century and a half ago. Similarly, we of the last quarter of the twentieth century did not invent aerobics, weight-lifting, exercise machines, "health" foods, or the variety of other ways we employ to attain the bodily state we desire. But if there has been continuity between the 1830s and the 1980s, there has also been change. Americans of the last century became interested in health, fitness, and sports for different reasons and with different hopes for themselves and for the human race than we have today. Those of the thirty years before the advent of the Civil War had ideas and concerns different from

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the individuals of the three decades that followed the conflict. Americans of the turn of the century and the 1920s and 1930s had theories, thoughts, and plans of action different from and in addition to those of the early nineteenth century.

This study investigates those ideas, realities, and the solutions offered to problems of health and fitness as they changed over a century. It is primarily an analysis of the American middle class—that group above the level of subsistence but below the realm of great wealth, who participated in a market economy and bought many if not most of their goods and services. The range of sources investigated includes trade materials such as catalogs of goods and advertising; diaries, letters, and journals; artifactual materials; professional texts such as medical books and athletic instructional manuals; and advice books and household guides. No one of these sources is adequate by itself. Trade catalogs do not tell the researcher that people bought items (although a series of references over time would be a strong indication of such behavior). Diaries, letters, and journals are by definition individualistic. and perhaps a product of people eccentric because they kept or saved them. Artifacts are mute, and some may survive because they were not used, while the most commonly used pieces were "used up" and discarded. Professional texts, instruction manuals, and advice books tell us what people were supposed to do, but leave open the question whether people really did those things. Taken together, however, these sources might provide an image that is valid and from which conclusions can be drawn.

The themes of regeneration and renewal run continuously through this book, as does the idea of individual responsibility for one's social position. The latter is, as James C. Whorton has demonstrated, a corollary to the widely held idea that nature (an expression or metaphor of God's work and will) is essentially good, and human maladies or complaints are a result of people's inability to live within that system without being victimized by their own passions.

The constancy of complaint and urging for our fellow citizens to better themselves physically arose from essentially different sources between 1830 and 1860, 1860 and 1890, and 1890 and 1940. In the three decades before the Civil War, the millennial spirit of religious enthusiasm and a concern for the fate of the republic after the death of the great leaders of the eighteenth century provided the impetus to reform human beings and their society. After the war, the new maladies of the growing urban and village middle class, off the farm and working away from home, as well as new

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technologies and new theories about disease, stimulated a renewed drive for health. By the 1890s, a profound sense of cultural pessimism had set in among many of the nation's middle class, as well as its elites, and they turned to new activities and new foods and developed a new standard of the human body. Sport, the "strenuous life," breakfast cereals and other health foods, body-building, and the ideas of innovators such as John H. and William K. Kellogg, Charles W. Post, Bernarr Macfadden, and Dudley Sargent altered the way Americans responded to their own bodies and their culture.

The subject of health and fitness had received scant attention until recent years. Ronald Numbers's Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White, Stephen Nissenbaum's Sex, Diet, and Debility in Jacksonian America: Sylvester Graham and Health Reform, and Paul Starr's The Social Transformation of American Medicine are valuable studies. James C. Whorton's Crusaders for Fitness: The History of American Health Reformers has been both an inspiration and an invaluable source of information. Donald J. Mrozek's Sport and American Mentality, 1880–1910 treats the rise of sport in a sophisticated analytical framework. These books are essential to any student of American culture. It is my hope that this study, by looking at some different sources and analyzing some different questions, will enlarge our understanding of this complex phenomenon of which we continue to be a part.

· ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ·

Many people have aided in the preparation of this book. The board of trustees of the Strong Museum have for many years encouraged research and writing that investigate American cultural life between 1820 and 1940. Bill Alderson, director of the museum, has also been a consistent advocate of this and other works in the humanities. Without their enthusiastic support, this project could not have come to pass.

Research for this book was funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and I am very grateful to the Endowment staff, particularly Andrea Anderson, for their support and aid. Several libraries were extremely useful in the course of my research, and I was fortunate to have the help and enthusiasm of some very fine librarians. Mary Huth and Karl Kabelac of the University of Rochester Library's Division of Rare Books and Manuscripts kept a watchful eye out for materials that might be useful from the time they knew of the project, and were always available when I needed them. Spencer Crew, Lorene Mayo, and John Sleckner of the Collection of Business Americana, Archives Division, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, gave me access to the incredibly rich collection for which they care, and their colleagues Michael Harris of the Division of Medical Sciences, Ellen Hughes of the Division of

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I am especially indebted to Elaine Challacombe and Kathy Lazar of the Strong Museum Library. Throughout the long gestation period of this project, they went out of their way to find important sources for me, and in the process began to build a major collection of research materials on nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American culture. No book of this sort is ever possible without great librarians, and my institution is blessed with a staff of them.

The National Endowment for the Humanities provided funds for a colloquium of scholars that convened in May 1984 for the purpose of analyzing and criticizing the plan for this book and the exhibition that will accompany it. Neil Harris brought his immensely broad knowledge of American popular culture and material culture to bear on the project, and provided helpful commentary throughout the long writing process. Dr. Edward Atwater, who holds an advanced degree in the history of medicine as well as an M.D., helped me place the series of often "irregular" medical practices within the broader framework of American and Western medical history. Michael Harris, who is both a pharmacist and a first-rate curator at the National Museum of American History, not only was of immeasurable aid in the analysis of the direction of this project, but also was instrumental in the location of key artifacts that altered the direction of my analysis. Throughout the year, Donald Mrozek gave me the benefit of his creative genius and the example of his evidently boundless energy. Don suggested possible speakers for a symposium, worked over my plans and outlines, and graciously helped in innumerable ways. His own works have been an inspiration and an example of clear thinking. I hope I have been able to utilize all these talents in the best way.

Mary Lynn Stevens Heininger helped me with some of the research, especially on Bernarr Macfadden, and also read and commented on the

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Many of the Strong Museum's curatorial staff have made this project better than it ordinarily might have been. Chief among those is Patricia M. Tice. She not only researched and acquired many critically important artifactual materials for the book and exhibit, she spent a number of hours reading the manuscript and analyzing it with her own considerable skills in the English language. The project is far better for her efforts. Deborah A. Smith came to the museum late in this effort, but has been instrumental in locating, researching, and cataloging a superb collection of photographic and other paper materials. Mary-Ellen Earl Perry paid particular attention to the clothing and fine arts that constitute the artifactual evidence used in this book, and Blair and Margaret Whitton provided encouragement and enthusiasm, as well as the relevant artifacts of childhood for the project. Gretchen Fuller graciously helped with word processing whenever she could.

Melissa A. Morgan coordinated the complicated operation of getting approximately two hundred artifacts photographed for this book. She was prompt, organized, and helpful, especially when what seemed like a good idea on paper made a substandard photograph. The Strong Museum is fortunate to employ two extraordinarily fine photographers. Tom Weber and Michael Radtke photographed and printed all the images of the artifacts and illustrations in the Strong collections, and their work is not only technically superb, but exemplary of the way an image can interpret the visual world.

Kathryn Grover, director of publications at the museum, deserves special recognition for her efforts in transforming this manuscript into a book. We worked together feverishly—nights, weekends, and holidays, in addition to the "regular time" we could get to work on the project—and her contribution as editor and conscience are inestimable. Judy White was somehow able to read my handwriting and enter the manuscript into a word processor. As well as handling the mechanical parts of the job, she was ever vigilant for those areas where I was unclear, and encouraging about those where I had succeeded. Without Kathryn and Judy I would have not finished the book.

Wendy Wolf of Pantheon Books, a first-rate editor, not only carefully

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worked over the manuscript but supported and pushed me from our earliest discussion of the project in 1981. All historians should be as fortunate as I have been in my dealings with editors and publishers. Kathryn's only drawback is that she roots for the Red Sox while Wendy and I favor the Yankees.

Susan Williams, to whom I am lucky enough to be married, gave me encouragement and counsel throughout the project. As a curator at the Strong Museum, she also helped find, research, and analyze artifacts related to the book and exhibition. Even as she was working on her own book on Victorian dining, she was always looking out for research materials essential to my work. Often I would find research cards on my desk with quotations and citations that proved to be critical, and it was she who had found them. She understood when I disappeared every night and weekend to write during the long haul of 1984.

Other family members helped, with their support and their forbearance. My parents, Herman and Bess Green, have been important for their constant support of my career choice and their genuine interest in the work. My mother- and father-in-law, Helen and George Williams, similarly have supported and tolerated the historians' sometimes odd hours.

Friends and colleagues help not only the substantive but also the emotional element of a book. William B. Waits, Mark Connelly, and Bill McGrath were there when they were needed. I am also indebted to good friends Linda and Michael Kirschen, Sam and Mimi Tilton, Peg and Andy Hemenway, and the numerous faithful and talented baseball players who made my summers bearable as I tried to write.

My greatest debt, however, is to Warren I. Susman, who died suddenly in April 1985. He was my mentor at Rutgers, and more than any other individual helped me to learn to think about history and becoming a historian as a process of understanding and explication. His sense of scholarship as a complex and humane process that must be broadly conceived and his unquestioned brilliance as a thinker have been both inspiration and challenge. He died before he could read this manuscript, and it is much the poorer for it. In both his intensity for teaching and his commitment to cultural history, I have an example for a lifetime.

Harvey Green Rochester, N. Y.





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MILLENNIAL DREAMS AND PHYSICAL REALITIES, 1830-1860



CHAPTERONE



HEALTH, MEDICINE, AND SOCIETY

The struggle of men and women of great heart against prejudice, superstition, and vice has inspired authors and readers for centuries. In "The Young Doctor," a short story in the July 1841 issue of Godey's Lady's Book, Timothy Shay Arthur (1809–1885) utilized this theme to address a controversy that erupted in the United States in the 1830s and that persists to this day: the nature of proper medical treatment, the role of physicians in American society, and the definition of good health. The dramatic tension in the story centers around the sickness of "Mrs. Absalom," a crotchety lady with no use for one of her attending physicians, young James Barclay. She scoffed at the young man's recent medical training and his reliance on new theories of treatment, which she thought "as good as nothing." She considered "mustard plasters and foot-baths, with perhaps a little rhubarb" useless.¹

She preferred Doctor Bailey, her trusted physician of many years who had just taken Barclay on as a partner. Unlike Barclay, an "eclectic" physician, Bailey was a product of the "heroic" school