

Bernarr Macfadden

From Pornography to Politics



JOHN STUART

BERNARR MACFADDEN is distinguished for making America muscle-conscious. His methods for developing the bulging biceps have made him a millionaire. During many of his sixty-seven years he has fasted on Mondays and walked daily the twenty-seven miles from home to office. In his crusade for "physcultopathic" health he has written an encyclopedia prescribing varieties of diets and knee-bending exercises as cures for diseases ranging from earache to syphilis. In one of his creative moments Macfadden discovered the trick for determining the sex of your next offspring, thereby giving the world's geneticists the greatest belly laugh in years. When the business of making every male in America an expert weight lifter waned, Macfadden began publishing the heart-rending confessions of unhappy stenographers and frustrated barbers. In 1924, five years after he gave America True Story magazine, he put out The New York Evening Graphic, the greatest venture in pornography of all times. Of late Mr. Macfadden has become politically ambitious. Friends whisper that he would like to take his morning setting-up exercises on the north porch of the White House.

I am afraid that Bernarr Macfadden will die a disappointed man. Years ago he propagandized for the establishment of a Portfolio of Health in the presidential cabinet. It was a good idea and it still is. But Macfadden thought that he was the best fitted man in America to hold the secretaryship. And the idea got no further than the pages of his Physical Culture magazine.



Unfortunately, those people who have turned their noses up at such things as True Story or True Romance are not the people who regularly read Macfadden's magazines. Millions of working-class and lower middle-class citizens absorb his reactionary editorials and wallow in the politely-dressed filth of his confessionals. Macfadden primarily appeals to those whose lack of education or political understanding makes them vulnerable targets for his vicious demagoguery. Under the guise of "common sense" he plays with their deep-seated prejudices and aspirations. The fact that bourgeois life has corrupted the relationship between the sexes makes it possible for Macfadden to earn millions annually by adding to that corruption. The factory girl in search of a husband is advised what pitfalls to avoid; the perplexed housewife is told how to keep her husband; all the little domestic and love-life problems rising from a defunct society Macfadden has made peculiarly his own. He exploits the lowest in public taste. The cult of body-worship has been stretched to provide remedies for all the world's ills. Macfadden justifies his publications by saying that they accurately represent American life. And Macfadden's picture of America is portrayed by the titles of a few of the stories appearing

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in his twelve magazines: "I Was Ashamed of My Mother," "Week-End Madness," "My Moment of Temptation," "Park Avenue Siren," "Not Made to Be a Wife," "My Road of Shame."



THE origins of Bernarr Macfadden (né Bernard Mcfadden) are humble. In almost every detail his career conforms to the classical American pattern of the young man's rise from the log cabin to either the presidency or the baronial mansion. He hails from the Missouri of 1868. His father was a drunkard, a fact which is responsible for Macfadden's hatred of liquor. After his mother succumbed to tuberculosis, Bernarr was taken in by an uncle who owned a hotel. As a child, Macfadden survived a half-dozen diseases and a scalding in a tub of boiling water. Later he was to suffer blood poisoning from vaccination. Many of Macfadden's fantastic ideas on correct living are traceable to a lonely, sick adolescence.

His education, little as there was of it, was not of the best. Work on a farm strengthened him until his cheeks glowed with health. After a day of chores, Bernarr read the currently popular romances that were thoroughly perfumed with the scent of sweetness and light. In time he found himself consecutively employed at a dozen different jobs. And then a racking cough overtook him. It was quietly said that Bernarr's days were numbered. But Bernarr knew better. He joined a gymnasium and climbed back to health with a set of dumb-bells. From the moment he appeared in trunks and sweat shirt the world was doomed to years of Mac-

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fadden pseudo-science.

Macfadden's advancement as a gymnast amazed his instructors. They must have thought him slightly unhinged in the cranial region as he went about tackling the parallel bars or the trapeze with demoniac enthusiasm. When it was physically impossible to carry himself across the gymnasium floor, Macfadden devoted himself to studying the theoretical aspects of muscle stretching. William Blaikie's *How To Get Strong and How To Stay So* made a tremendous impression on the young student. Blaikie provided him with the dubious scientific equipment which later, it seems, qualified Macfadden to call himself the father of physical culture. Of course, Bernarr has credited the Greeks for contributing a few ideas on how to keep the body beautiful. And while it has profited him to keep a few illusions alive, Macfadden is neither the father nor the founder of physical culture in this country. The Dutch Colonists in New York were physical-culture fans long before Bernarr arrived. As for actual systems of physical training, Dr. Dio Lewis spent many years of his life before and after the Civil War quietly developing gymnastics for improving the health of Americans.

Macfadden engaged in wrestling bouts whenever his job as a laundryman permitted. He also opened a school and the whole of St. Louis passed by his door wondering what the word "Kinistherapist" on his shingle meant. Bernarr was beginning to create the first of his spectacular labels to bring in the trade. But soon Macfadden closed his school. The beer-drinking Germans of St. Louis had other ideas about how to spend their time after a day of labor.

And then Bernarr wanted to have his name on the title page of a book. In the back of his mind a novel was brewing. *The Athlete's Conquest* was to bring before America the profound thoughts of one Bernarr Macfadden on the important problems of health and life. The novel's hero was to be a child of the gymnasium, a boy who fought from weakness to strength to success. In fact it was to be a fictional autobiography. With his ideas clearly in mind and his imagination working on all cylinders, Bernarr set to work. But he was slightly handicapped. He knew practically nothing about grammar and punctuation and his spelling was atrocious. But a mind determined, particularly a mind toughened by ambition, could dissolve even such hindrances. He spent a year in quiet study and contemplation as a physical-training instructor in a small school. After submitting the manuscript to a publisher, Macfadden visited him for the reader's decision. The book was rejected. It seems that it lacked a plot and that his expression was as "crude as crude oil." Macfadden offered to pay for his debut in American literature. But the publisher, a sensible person, refused to be bribed. Later the book appeared, after considerable sandpapering, in Macfadden's *Physical Culture* magazine.

Strangely enough Macfadden didn't hanker for a chance in New York. He had spent a season at the Chicago World Fair as dem-

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onstrator for an exercising machine. And when it was all over he turned his eyes to Boston. Macfadden yearned for membership in the intellectual sanctums of the city. William Dean Howells was holding forth there as America's number one literary man. Certainly there was room for the author of *The Athlete's Conquest*. But Macfadden accidentally stopped for a few hours in New York, breathing deeply of its sights and sounds and there awoke in him the old conquering spirit. This town must be his. And the Cabots and Lowells were once again saved!

I HAVE stressed Macfadden's early career because it decisively proves that he had no training or education in science and medicine. Nor did he in his later years acquire this equipment. He is, in simple language, an outrageously ignorant man when it comes to biology or physiology. Furthermore, he has no particular love for science because men in the laboratories have frequently torn to pieces his empirical formulas for health and body building. His rise as a physical culturist can be accounted for by the fact that working people could not afford expert medical advice. For fifteen cents an overworked and underpaid wage slave could find assorted remedies and treatments for his ills. If you had eye trouble or an intestinal disease Macfadden could furnish a cheap cure. It was only natural that the circulation of Macfadden's health literature would increase by leaps and bounds. Undoubtedly much of Macfadden's success is due to the same medical profession which has so persistently fought him. The profession has called him names within the confines of its professional literature. If physicians had exposed Macfadden by taking their analyses of his methods directly to the people who read *Physical Culture*, Macfadden's story would have been considerably different. Instead the medical profession attacked him because essentially he was cutting in on their business. And, after all, the American Medical Association is opposed to socialized medicine which would have made Macfadden and many like him an impossibility.

How much faith Macfadden has in his own health principles is worth analysis. I am reasonably assuming that if a man advocates a course of procedure to cure or alleviate certain ailments, he will fight anything which might interfere with the successful outcome of his prescribed treatment. Years ago Macfadden attacked the sale of patent medicines as unreliable and harmful curatives which defrauded the public of millions of dollars. In the place of quackery and nostrums, Macfadden offered his own health system. His principles of physical culture are based on so-called natural healing through exercise and diet. In cases of constipation he warns against "cathartics of all kinds. . . . All drugs are harmful; they lessen one's vital efficiency, they dry up the glands that furnish the digestive juices and in many ways they spell disaster to the physical organism." (*Macfadden's Encyclopedia of Health*). In the November 2, 1935, issue of *Liberty*, there

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is an advertisement for Feenamint, a cathartic. For that matter, there were five patented cathartics advertised in the October 26 and November 2 issues of the same magazine from which his readers could choose. One of these patented cathartics advertised is Sal Hepatica, which was condemned by the American Medical Association because of its capacity for damage. About alcohol Macfadden has the following to say (*Encyclopedia*, page 117):

That alcohol in its various forms is one of the greatest causes of disease, we think no physician will deny and no careful observer will dispute. . . . Do not touch, taste or handle the dangerous stuff, for then, and then only, is one safe.

Two issues of Liberty carried advertisements for five brands of whiskey. Nor is Macfadden less vehement in his denunciation of tobacco. He agrees with a statement quoted in his *Encyclopedia* from another source. "I denounce it [cigarette smoking] simply because of its blighting, blasting effect on one's success in life. . . ." There is hardly an issue of Liberty placed on the stands without at least a one-page cigarette advertisement. In his treatment for colds, Macfadden nowhere advises the use of drugs or medicines. He believes in starving the cold. Liberty has carried many advertisements for cold remedies, notices for cough drops and medicines to clear stopped-up nostrils.

Macfadden believes in his principles of health building so long as they do not interfere with profits. As soon as they do, his elaborate exercises and diets are tossed into the waste basket.

MACFADDEN'S purchase of Liberty magazine in 1931 gave him the opportunity to branch out into national affairs. Liberty's circulation runs well above 2,000,000 weekly. It rivals The Saturday Evening Post in the low level of its contents (Macfadden told one of his biographers that the people aren't ready for great literature) and the reactionary tone of its editorials. The editorials are signed by Macfadden and when he does not write them they are subject to his approval. The editorials read as though Hearst, Coughlin, Easley and the American Liberty League were called in as consultants. If Macfadden is not officially connected with these tories, he has given them ample support by echoing their programs in his publications. (Liberty's editor, Fulton Oursler, is a member of the Sons of the American Revolution, the male counterpart of the other organization of decayed old ladies.) For Red-baiting, for opposition to anything socially progressive and for all around viciousness, Macfadden can run rings around almost every other professional patriot in the business.

It was inevitable in Macfadden's case that preaching the big biceps would lead to the worship of strength and strong men. And naturally one of Macfadden's heroes is Mussolini. His admiration for Il Duce led him once to say that "there are times when I believe that America needs a Mussolini. . . ." In 1930, Macfadden traveled to the Venezia

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Palace to meet the strong man of Europe. After talking with many fascist dignitaries Macfadden brought to this country, at his own expense, forty of Mussolini's young proteges for a course in physical culture. The fascist government in appreciation later awarded Macfadden the Order of the Crown of Italy. Macfadden is also an admirer of Mussolini's tactics in suppressing liberals and radicals who under fascism are, of course, labeled outlaws and brigands. In an editorial under the head of "How the Communists Plan to Wreck the country" Macfadden recalled that

when Mussolini took over the reins of government he determined to stamp out Sicilian brigands. He arrested all of them. He put them in lion cages similar to those we use in circus parades. And then he made a show of them in a parade through Sicily. The public was told to look upon these outlaws. Here was their last chance to see them. They were facing death sentences. This unique policy, it is said, entirely exterminated lawlessness in Sicily.

Macfadden suggests the same method to quell the "Reds" in this country. In another quiet, contemplative mood Macfadden wrote:

"Death to the traitors" should be the slogan from now on. At any minute the nation is likely to be forced into a fight for its life. There should be no need for additional laws to protect us from such a band of wholesale murderers—the disciples of Bolshevism in its most violent form. Give the same penalty quickly administered that they have prepared for their victims.

It would seem that in preparation for this editorial Mr. Macfadden, philanthropist and humanitarian, read a few pages of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Macfadden's humanitarianism also extends to the Soviet Union. He has frequently employed those two prominent authorities on Russian affairs, Matthew Woll and Isaac Don Levine, to write articles generating good will to 160 million people by suggesting that they be wiped from the face of the earth.

On foreign affairs Macfadden's comments are exhilarating.

Japan has made a good start toward ruling the Far East. She has brought order out of chaos in Shanghai and Manchuria (Manchukuo). People can now live safely under civilized conditions in these countries. Wherever Japan's power is extended similar improvements are effected, and she should be applauded and commended for the progressive spirit which her officials have manifested.

It is not recorded whether Macfadden ever praised Mussolini for bringing his light and wisdom to Ethiopia.

Of course Mr. Macfadden is a peace-loving man. He believes in peace because "peace always pays larger dividends." But if the world must have war Macfadden feels that "if a man has unusual strength and vitality, with the accompanying determination and will power, a few months of training will make him an efficient soldier. A powerful handy man is hard to kill even with the most modern bullets. . . . If you can put your men out in the field with the vitality of wild-cats, they will indeed be difficult to beat." Writing about the low physical condition of men drafted into the last war Mac-

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fadden stated:

And now there is talk of another war, what about the flower of our national manhood this time? . . . The very life of this nation is liable to be at stake in the near future, and upon the vitality of its people will depend whether or not we are to endure or to go down to enslavement.

This statement in addition to establishing the link between Macfadden's physical culture and militarism must have delighted the hearts of Hitler and Mussolini. It is strange that Macfadden neglects remarking about this country's vitality after a war. There is no record that he ever visited a veteran's hospital.

Arming "to the hilt" is another of Macfadden's high-minded principles for the preservation of peace. He apparently followed the senatorial investigation of the munitions industry and concluded that

our legislators would like to take all the profits out of war. That is undoubtedly desirable. But our first thought should be the protection of the lives of our citizens. If our manufacture of implements of war is restricted and profits curtailed or eliminated, from what source will we obtain war materials that may be necessary to save the life of this nation?

The du Ponts and Krupps ask the same question. As for international disarmament conferences:

If we kept our amateur diplomats at home and went our own way in accordance with the dictates of our own intelligence protecting our country by the most modern methods without consulting with other nations, we would be in a far better position. . . .

A solution for unemployment can also be found in preparedness.

While the whole world seems to be turning toward military madness, there is general acceptance of the airplane ascendancy in warfare. But we are still plugging along. Maybe in a few years we will recognize the need of being prepared for aerial warfare, and when that happens, a few hundred thousands of our unemployed can be used to build and fly ships and prepare for our next war—which will be in the air. . . .

One of these days Macfadden will be awarded a gilded swastika for the following: "With the impending clash of arms and the hectic war preparations in every country throughout all Europe, Hitler can hardly be blamed for desiring the protection necessary to the life and liberties of his people."

On our domestic crisis Macfadden's commentaries are indeed refreshing. He at least differs with the academic opinions of all economists. "The prevailing ignorance throughout this country as to the fundamental principles of health building accounts for much of the poverty and misery which our people are enduring at this time." Can Macfadden mean that if all Americans had exercised for ten minutes each morning the depression would never have reached these shores? Perhaps he can devise a set of gymnastics to end unemployment and starvation. Taxation of big business and soaking the rich drives Macfadden into an editorial frenzy. "Can any sensible citizen find any plausible excuse for a legislative procedure that passes on prosperity to the poor by lowering the financial status of the rich?"

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Macfadden coos to the workingman with a patronizing benevolence and good will to mask his semi-fascist attitude toward labor.

There may be excuses for strikes during normal times, but when every business executive is straining to his utmost to maintain his business and pay his bills, a strike at this time only invites disaster to both workers and owners. . . . The fight labor is making at present to control business will put all super-executives out of business. . . . Labor is responsible for jobs only. It has no investment at stake; no sacrifice or thrift is involved. Consequently it can be more drastically inconsiderate. . . . A long continued fight between labor and capital means disaster for both, and there are but few exceptions. . . . Labor mustn't be given too much power. I'm recognized, of course, as one of the outstanding friends of labor.

A few years ago Macfadden threatened to move his organization out to New Jersey to escape dealing with New York unions. Because Macfadden believes that capital and labor "are working together for the good of each other," he has preached a friendly relationship between the employer and employe through mutual organization—or the company union (Macfadden Employees Association, for example).

It is quite natural that Macfadden's politics come from the same sordid greed as do his true stories and true romances. A man cannot simultaneously publish pornographic "literature" and liberal editorials. Reactionary politics is in harmony with Macfadden's Bourbon philosophy. In his editorials, as in his pseudo-scientific health propaganda, Macfadden displays astounding ignorance. And when ignorance and wealth are all a man possesses, particularly a man with an audience of more than seven millions monthly, the amount of damage that man can do is inestimable. Macfadden is competing for honors with William Randolph Hearst.

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