

Weider, Ben, *The Strongest Man in History — Louis Cyr* (Mitchell Press Limited, Toronto, 1976).

Ever since the 1972 Summer Olympic Games, the world has been awed by the fantastic strength of the great Russian weightlifter Vasily Alexeev. Canadians had a chance in July 1976 to see first hand the ability of this huge man in Montreal and a few of us, no doubt, wondered if he could have defeated the phenomenal Louis Cyr. Comparisons are difficult however since Louis Cyr reached the peak of his career in the 1890's and died in 1912, eight years before official weight lifting records were kept.

Ben Weider admits that Louis Cyr was a boyhood hero. He, himself, grew up near Saint-Lin, the birthplace of the French-Canadian strongman and as a boy he and his friends used to play a game known as "Louis Cyr," lifting logs and throwing rocks to determine who was the strongest. Today, Ben Weider is an acknowledged world leader in the body and strength building field being the founder-president of the International Federation of Body Builders. He brings to this book the knowledge and interest of an expert and an enthusiast. The book's strengths and weaknesses stem from this expertise and admitted hero-worship.

This is a popular history. However, even most scholarly historians with a limited knowledge of French will welcome this opportunity to read in English about this legendary figure. Prior to this book, most readers have had to rely on Massicote's *Athletes Canadiens-Franceis*, Mongin's *La legende de Louis*

Cyr and Monpetit's *Nos Hommes Forts*. Even Weider himself published a biography on Cyr in French in 1958, but no mention is made of it in this book.

Weider takes us back to Louis Cyr's early childhood and points out the influence of family and environment in shaping the career of the future strong man. While Louis Cyr's father was of only average build, his mother weighed over 240 pounds and was six feet tall. His grandfather encouraged the young Louis pointing to the village blacksmith as one to be admired. He told his grandson "If you are strong, you are everything! If you are not strong, you are nothing." The parents, with a brood of 17 children to look after, hoped that the growing strength of their son would someday make him a rich man.

Louis Cyr did eventually lay claim to the title as the world's strongest man. His feats were known throughout North America and Europe. Even today, he remains a legendary hero in his native Quebec province. However, was he the strongest man ever in history?

One cannot help but attempt to make comparisons between Cyr and the great Alexeev. The huge girths of the two, their charismatic presence which goes beyond their astonishing size, make for similarities. However, Louis Cyr employed little science in his lifts. His strength came from sheer animal power. The Cyr Style or Military Press employs three almost continuous movements to raise the weight over the lifter's head and at no time does the weight ever touch the body. Thus Weider believes that the long slow continuous lift of 400 pounds by Louis Cyr would be more difficult than a Clean and Jerk lift of 561 pounds by Alexeev.

Weider claims to have studied carefully all the sources and to have sorted fact from fiction and reconciled conflicts in evidence. However, he never tells the reader what his sources were. The book lacks footnotes and a bibliography. The serious reader is left unsatisfied since Louis Cyr was the epitome of a long strength tradition in French Canada, a theme which has contributed to French Canadian nationalism. Still it makes for enjoyable reading and one can hope that Mr. Weider's statistics are accurate.

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