

The Health Reformers: George Barker Windship and Boston's Strength Seekers

Joan Paul*

The nineteenth century was a time of growth for cities, a period when morality and social values were being challenged, and a time of increased health concerns. As more and more people congregated in a single place, many of the problems seemed to be accentuated. Diseases were more prevalent as greater numbers of people caused more sanitary problems, and saloons, brothels, and other places of recreation with dubious moral worth appeared to multiply. Because of health and morality concerns, a fertile ground was provided for the growth of sport and other physical exercises. Some of the prime reasons for the more general acceptance of sport and heavy gymnastics by the mid-1850s were the influx of immigrants who promoted sports and gymnastics, the influence of the Muscular Christianity movement, the realization that muscular development did not connote mental inferiority, urbanization with its accompanying sedentary occupations, the prevailing feeling that America was becoming a degenerate society, and the movement which supported exercise for health's sake.¹ These factors opened the door for the health reformers, often referred to in the literature as the sanitary reformers.² The objective of the sanitary reform movement was to prevent diseases rather than cure them.³

* Ms. Paul is a professor in the Department of Health and Physical Education at Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond, Louisiana 70402. The author wishes to thank professors Melvin Adelman of Ohio State University and Betty Spears of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst for their critiques of an earlier version of this article.

1. For a description of conditions that made the mid-nineteenth century receptive to the sanitary reform movement and the accompanying acceptance of sport and exercise, see Melvin L. Adelman, "The Development of Modern Athletic Sport in New York City, 1820-1870," (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1980); John R. Betts, "Mind and Body in Early American Thought," *The Journal of American History* 54 (March 1968): 787-805; Peter Levine, "The Promise of Sport in Antebellum America," *Journal of American Culture* 2 (Winter, 1980): 623-634; "Saints and Their Bodies," *The Atlantic Monthly* 1 (1858): 582-595; Lewis G. Janes, "Some Radical Ideas About Physical Culture," *The Radical* 3 (written between 1860-1875): 483; Geo. W. Tuxbury, Chairman, "Report of a Special Committee on the Subject of Physical Training," City Document no. 94 (City of Boston: 10 December, 1860): 14 pages; "Resident Editor's Department" *The Massachusetts Teacher* 13 (November 1860): 428-435.

2. The Term "sanitary reformers" most often referred to those primarily concerned with improving the environment by eliminating filthy living conditions. However the term was often used in the literature to describe any of the reformers who were attempting to improve physical, social, and moral conditions of society. Whorton describes most health reformers as "well-read and progressive individuals, conscientious about staying abreast of developing science, but unable to recognize any implication of that science running contrary to their fundamental faith to human perfectability," Quoted in James C. Whorton, *Crusaders for Fitness: The History of American Health Reformers* (Princeton, 1982), p. 8.

3. See Richard H. Shyrock, "The Origins and Significance of the Public Health Movement in the United States," *Annals of Medical History* 1 (1929): 645-665; "Sanitary Reform," *North American Review* 73 (July,

These reformers were concerned with cleanliness, pure air, nutrition, dress, exercise, tobacco, alcohol, and moral reform. Of the different classes of health reformers, the ones who were most flamboyant in creating attention were the strength seekers.

The purpose of this study is two-fold. First, it examines the activities and resulting influence of the most noted strength seeker of that period, George Barker Windship. Second, it investigates generally the impact the strength seekers, particularly around the Boston area, had on shaping nineteenth century attitudes toward health.

The strength movement, as it related to health, was strongest between the late 1850s and the mid-1870s. These dates parallel George Barker Windship's professional promotion of heavy gymnastics.⁵ It is also Windship's name, cited either in praise or condemnation, that is found most often in the nineteenth and twentieth century literature relating to this "strength lifting" period.⁶

At mid-nineteenth century, gymnasiums were built primarily under the guise of health. However, this did not automatically include respectability for the establishment or its proprietor, particularly in New England where puritanical ideals lingered longest. Many early gymnasiums were "regarded in the same light as were billiard saloons and bowling alleys."⁷ Higginson stated that as late as 1861 lifting apparatus had not been introduced into most of these gymnasiums, "in spite of the Roxbury Hercules," a reference to George Barker Windship.⁸ However, there must have been a growing tendency toward lifting heavy weights or Dio Lewis would not have spoken out on this issue as early as 1860.⁹ Lewis felt that the use of heavy apparatus was

1851): 117-135; Richard H. Shyrock, "Sylvester Graham and the Popular Health Movement, 1830-1870," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 18 (September 1931): 172-183.

4. Windship's name, although most often misspelled, appears in practically every American physical education history text written. Each source usually contains one or two paragraphs that refer to Windship's lectures on strength and health, his advocacy of heavy gymnastics, and occasionally his undesirable influence in creating the impression that gymnasiums were only for strong men who were weight lifters. See Charles Emerson, *Physical Culture* (Boston, 1919); Fred Eugene Leonard and George B. Affleck, *A Guide to the History of Physical Education*, 3rd Ed. (Philadelphia, 1947); Deobold B. Van Dalen and Bruce L. Bennett, *A World History of Physical Education*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1971); C.W. Hackensmith, *History of Physical Education* (New York, 1966); Emmett A. Rice, John R. Hutchinson, and Mabel Lee, *A Brief History of Physical Education*, 5th Ed., (New York, 1969); Ellen W. Gerber, *Innovators and Institutions in Physical Education* (Philadelphia, 1971); John S. White, "The New Athletics," *Proceedings of the American Association for the Advancement of Physical Education*, no. 3 (1889): pp. 46-52 in Aileene S. Lockhart and Betty Spears, comps. *Chronicle of American Physical Education: 1855-1930* (Dubuque, Iowa, 1972); Earle F. Zeigler, *A History of Physical Education and Sport in the United States and Canada* (Champaign, Illinois, 1974); Betty Spears and Richard A. Swanson, *History of Sport and Physical Activity in the United States* (Dubuque, Iowa, 1978).

5. White, in "The New Athletics" (1889), gave credit to Dr. Windship for introducing the system of heavy gymnastics to the country, this claim was discredited in Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Gymnastics," *Atlantic Monthly* 7 (March 1861): 283-302. Windship did popularize this movement.

6. See note 3 above.

7. Quoted in Ledyard w. Sargent, ed., *Dudley Allen Sargent: an Autobiography* (Philadelphia, 1927), p. 62; see Hackensmith, *History of Physical Education*, p. 353.

8. Higginson, "Gymnastics," p. 18.

9. See Dio Lewis, "Physical Culture," *The Massachusetts Teacher* 13 (September 1860): 375-377.

a mistake, and he continued to fight the strength movement with his voice and pen well into the 1880s.¹⁰

Between 1861 and 1876 a number of gymnasiums were operated in Boston, and four or five became well known as “strength-health” establishments. All of the gymnasiums were described by the proprietors as contributing to health, but all were not operated by strength seekers. The gymnasiums that became the leading establishments in strength development as a means to health were Windship Gymnasium, D. P. Butler Gymnasium, J. Fletcher Paul Gymnasium, and the old Tremont Gymnasium founded by Charles Follen and directed by Charles H. Bacon and later by Robert Jefferies Roberts after the Young Men’s Christian Association purchased it.

The health-strength philosophy was accepted prior to the development of these gymnasia that preached the merits of strength as a means to health. George Barker Windship propagated the health-strength notion throughout much of the country several years before the strength developing gymnasiums became common to the Boston area.

George Barker Windship

From 1859 through 1861 Windship became the foremost missionary for strength of all health reformers.¹¹ He preached his message, which seemed to fluctuate between declaring strength and health synonymous and in promoting a type of trinity-strength, development and health-throughout the middle and northeastern United States and into Canada. He spoke of theories of training known today as interval training and the principle of overload. Besides his obsession with strength development, his lectures included advice on ventilation; diet; cooking in copper, brass, or bell metal pots: the harmful use of tobacco and alcohol; sleep and rest needs; proper clothing; and the frequency of bathing. Besides being an eloquent speaker who illustrated his strength through astonishing feats. Windship had other credentials giving him more attention and respectability than most strength seekers. Windship was born into a high social position and was a fourth generation graduate of Harvard College and Harvard Medical School.¹² His maternal Great Grandfather. Jo-

10. Dio Lewis, “Dumb Bell Exercises,” *Lewis Gymnastic Monthly and Journal of Physical Culture* 2 (May 1862): 121-168; Dio Lewis, *The Dio Lewis Treasury* (New York, 1886).

11. See G. B. Windship, “Autobiographical Sketches of a Strength Seeker,” *Atlantic Monthly* 9 (January 1862): 102-115; Van Dalen and Bennett, *A World History* (1971), p. 375; Windship, “Physical Culture,” *The Massachusetts Teacher* 13 (April 1860): 126-132; G.B. Windship, “Ventilation,” *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* (8 April 1863): np in *Letters*, May-Windship Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

12. Amos Windship, George’s great-grandfather (the first generation Windship to receive a medical degree from Harvard), was a rogue and a scoundrel who was dismissed from Harvard early in his sophomore year for cheating. He later received his bachelor and medical degrees from there because of fraudulent use of an influential friend. See *College Papers*, 2nd Series, 29, Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Clifford K. Shipton, “Biographical Sketches of Those Who Attended Harvard College in the Classes of 1768-1771,” *Sibley’s Harvard Graduates* 17 (1975): 673-679 for complete details of Amos Windship’s misdeeds. The Windship family favored the story that Amos was a famous surgeon who sailed with John Paul Jones during the War for Independence. See Louisa Hope Currie, comp., “A Family Genealogy,” (1972), May-Windship-Barker-Archibald File, Massachusetts Historical Society; Francis S. Drake, *The Town of Roxbury: Its Memorable Persons and Places* (Roxbury, 1878); “George Barker Windship, M.D.,” *Boston Journal* (September 1876): np in John Langdon Sibley, *Sibley’s Collectanea Biographica Harvardiana*, 1876-1880, 4 (Cambridge, 1881): 212.

seph May, arrived in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1640 and was a founder of the Massachusetts General Hospital and the Boston Asylum for the Insane.¹³ Both his father, Charles May Windship, and his grandfather, Charles Williams Windship, were prominent Boston physicians, so this heritage opened doors of the city to George.¹⁴

Three dominant reasons contributed to Windship's life commitment to development and promotion of strength. The initial one was for personal revenge." When he entered Harvard in 1850 at the age of sixteen, he was five feet tall and weighed one hundred pounds.¹⁶ His diminutive size made him the brunt of jokes of older and larger classmates. Windship's college story was much like the weakling that was depicted on the back of comic books who always had sand kicked in his face by the bully. But after a Charles Atlas course, the weakling turned into a he-man who could more than protect himself. For George Windship, gymnastics became the course that changed his reputation into being known as the strongest boy at Harvard rather than the smallest.¹⁷ A second reason for his continuing interest in strength development was his own ego. Windship prided himself in being known as one of the strongest men in the world, and several times made reference to the fact that he could out-lift any man. The third factor was his total conviction that strength was the essential ingredient of health.¹⁸ This last reason became the central theme of his message and the crux of his influence on philosophical thought with the public, the schools, the YMCA, and the establishment of private gymnasiums.

George Barker Windship was not a model undergraduate student at Harvard. Perhaps his mind was too much on his frailties and their correction, because he wrote that almost all of his nights were spent usually alone working out on the gymnastic apparatus. The Harvard faculty minutes from 1850 to 1854 show that George experienced some academic and disciplinary problems and there was real concern his senior year if he would graduate.¹⁹ How-

13. See Samuel May, "Memoir of Col. Joseph May, 1760-1841." Reprinted from *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register* (April 1873): 4-9. Louisa May Alcott, author of *Little Women* and the cousin of William Andrus Alcott, a Boston health reformer of the 1830s, was a cousin of George Windship's on the May-side of the family. See "Guide to Recently Assessed Manuscript Collections, K-F." May-Windship-Barker-Archibald File. 1775-1922, Whorton, *Crusaders for Fitness*, p. 49.

14. *New England Historical and Genealogical Register and Antiquarian Journal* (Boston, 1853), Harvard University Archives; Currie, "A Family Genealogy" May-Windship-Barker-Archibald File. *The N. Y. Spirit of the Times* in "To Lecture Committees." (14 July, 1860) in May-Windship Papers.

15. See Windship, "Autobiographical Sketches," (1862); *Daily Evening Traveller* (21 September 1876): np in Sibley, *Harvardiana* (1881): 36; Lewis G. Janes, "Geo. B. Windship, M.D.—His Relations to Physical Culture." *The Herald of Health* (nd): 359-363.

16. Windship, "Physical Culture." p. 128.

17. Windship grew to almost five feet seven inches and weighed nearly one-hundred and forty pounds by graduation, which was a normal size for the mid- nineteenth century. See "Resident Editor," *The Massachusetts Teacher*, (1860), p. 430.

18. George Windship's health had not been vigorous until he pursued gymnastics and weight lifting. The improvement of his personal health through exercise had a profound influence in shaping his professional life. See Windship, "Autobiographical Sketches," p. 105; Windship, "Physical Culture," p. 128: *The Boston Journal* (9 June 1859): np in "To Lecture Committees," (9 July 1859) May-Windship Papers, Van Dalen and Bennett, *A World History*, p. 375.

19. Windship was admitted in 1850 to the freshmen class on probation (Sixty-four of the ninety-one freshman were admitted on probation that semester) His major academic deficiency was mathematics However, he was threatened with failure to graduate his senior year because of the many admonishments received for

This Thursday Ev'ng,
JUNE 23d, 1859,
— AT —
CITY HALL!
CAMBRIDGE,
Dr. WINDSHIP,
WILL
LECTURE
ON PHYSICAL CULTURE,
And illustrate by FEATS OF STRENGTH; one of which will be
the
LIFTING WITH HIS HANDS 929 LBS.,
The Greatest Weight on Record.

TICKETS 25 CENTS.

Doors open at 7½ o'clock. . . . Lecture to commence at 8.

[From the Boston Transcript, June 9th.]

There was a fine audience, among which were many of our most distinguished citizens, at the Music Hall, last night. The lecture was one of the greatest successes we have ever witnessed. The style was eloquent and vigorous. Dr. Windship has all the qualifications of the consummate elocutionist. He was frequently interrupted by the most animating bursts of applause.

The lecturer performed some remarkable feats (after the lecture). Mr. C. J. B. Moulton, city sealer of weights and measures, being present, weighed before the audience the iron discs, lifted by Dr. W. by the hands alone, and certified that the whole amount lifted by the lecturer was 929 pounds, a feat it will be found difficult to parallel.

May-Windship Papers. Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

ever. Windship did graduate with his class in the spring of 1854 with a Bachelor of Arts degree.²⁰

unexcused absences from recitations and prayers. See Faculty Records, 13 and 14 (1850-1855): 9, 81-82, 181-183, 186, 218, 227, 295, 301, 310, 329, 338, 358, Harvard University Archives; President's Papers/James Walker Letters, 4 (nd): 46-47, Harvard University Archives.

20. Class Record, Personal File, Harvard University Archives.

In the summer of 1854 Windship went to New York in quest of becoming an actor. While there he was introduced to a weight lifting machine, and this marked his first departure from gymnastic apparatus work to weight lifting. After becoming thoroughly convinced that he had little chance of fulfilling his childhood dreams of acting, he surrendered to his father's urging and entered Harvard Medical School that fall.²¹ During Windship's medical preparatory school days, he moved away from the German-style gymnastics and into weight lifting. He found this to be the quickest and most efficient method of achieving strength. By the time Windship earned his M.D. degree in 1857,²² his reputation as a strongman had spread throughout the city. George had developed a lifting apparatus in his family's backyard which consisted of a large cast sunk in the ground with a barrel filled with stones sitting inside. Windship attached a rope to the barrel with a hoe handle for a grip. He started with four to five hundred pounds and was lifting between six and seven hundred pounds in a few weeks. The biggest of the Irish strongmen of Boston tried but could not lift his apparatus-much to George's satisfaction.²³ One fall afternoon in 1857 a gentleman looking at Windship's lifting apparatus remarked to George, "If you are as strong as they tell me, what is to prevent your seizing hold of me, (I weigh only 180 pounds), holding me at arm's length over your head, and pitching me over that fence?" George replied that if the man would give him six weeks to practice, he could oblige him.²⁴ The man agreed to return at the end of that time. George got an oblong wooden box, filled it with bricks, and practiced throwing it over his six and one-half foot vaulting bar. After the prescribed time passed, George sent a message for the man to come over. As the man walked into the yard and before he realized what was going to happen, George grabbed him by his belt and collar, lifted him struggling above his head, and promptly threw him over the fence. The man was described as fat, and he found the pressure from the lift and the landing on the other side of the fence most disagreeable. However, he expressed his satisfaction with the strength of Windship.

From 1858 to 1862 Windship practiced medicine with his father in Roxbury, Massachusetts.²⁶ He also began his whirlwind lecture tours during this period.²⁷ Approximately two weeks prior to Dr. Windship giving his first public lecture on physical culture, the Boston newspapers carried articles an-

21. See Windship, "Autobiographical Sketches," pp. 105-106.

22. Medical students at Harvard had to be employed the three years of their professional studies under the direction of a regular practitioner of medicine. George spent the three years under his father, Dr. C. M. Windship. See *Catalogues of the Officers and Students of Harvard University (1856-57 Medical School Catalogue)*, Harvard Archives. During the summer of 1856 Windship served as a medical assistant to a Dr. Walker at the Lunatic Hospital in South Boston. See Windship, "Autobiographical Sketches," p. 109. Windship joined the Massachusetts Medical Society in 1858. Barbara A. Adler (Administrative Affairs, the Massachusetts Medical Society), Letter to author, 6 July, 1981.

23. See Windship, "Autobiographical Sketches," p. 107.

24. George Windship always appeared to ask for time when presented with a challenge. He put off his college tormentor two years before they were to fight.

25. Windship, "Autobiographical Sketches," p. 109.

26. *Boston Journal*, 14 September, 1876.

27. *Boston Transcript*, 14 September 1876 np in William Abbot Everett, comp., *Harvardiana* 4 (1872-1892): 1854. Harvard University Archives.

nouncing the up-coming lecture and verifying the sound qualifications of Windship.²⁸ His first lecture on May 30, 1859 was, however, a catastrophe. Before an overflow crowd in Mercantile Hall, a few minutes into his speech his voice began quaking, became weak, and then Windship dropped to the platform floor. After several minutes backstage, he reappeared, apologized, and attempted to resume. However, the man billed as the strongest man in the world was overcome once again with stage fright. Windship managed to walk off the stage under his own power, but the crowd had to be given the choice of a raincheck to his next lecture or a refund of the 25¢ admission charge.²⁹

Dr. Windship gave his first successful lecture on June 8, 1859 in the Boston Music Hall before an estimated crowd of one to two thousand people.³⁰ His lecture was attended by ladies and gentlemen, with many of the Boston physicians in the audience.³¹ For approximately an hour he lectured and gave demonstrations of his strength. Windship lifted 929 pounds of iron disks with his hands, shouldered a barrel of flour weighing 214 pounds, and raised 98 pound dumbbells alternately above his head.³² A city sealer of weights and measures was present to verify the amount of weight Dr. Windship lifted. The *Boston Transcript* called the performance “one of the greatest successes we have ever witnessed.”³³ Now Windship seemed to be living his dream—his lectures and exhibitions gave him the audience and applause craved by an actor, his demonstrations of superior strength boosted his ego, and he felt he was promoting good health as expected from a doctor of medicine.

Almost every week for the rest of the 1859 lecture season Goerge was in a different city entertaining and instructing his audiences on the necessity of developing strength for the good of their health. His lectures were always well attended by “distinguished citizens,” and he created quite a furor in the cities where he lectured. Newspapers stated that Dr. Windship’s lectures indicated a revived interest in the subject of physical education and that it was fortunate a gentleman of his quality and cultivation had taken up the subject.³⁴ By the end of this season. Windship’s name was known in much of the United States and Canada, and the newspapers referred to him as the “American Samson.”³⁵

28. “Lecture on Physical Education,” *Evening Transcript* (18 May, 1859): np in John Langdon Sibley, *Collectanea Biographica Harvardiana, 1842-1875, 2 (1876)*: np, Harvard University Archives.

29. “Lecture on Physical Culture—The Lecturer Swoons—Panic Among the Audience,” *The Atlas and Daily Bee* (Boston), 31 May, 1859, np; “Lecture Postponed,” evening *Transcript*, 31 May, 1859, np; *Poster from Letters*, May-Windship Papers.

30. *The Boston Journal*, 9 June 1859; *The Boston Ledger*, 9 June, 1859; *The Boston Transcript*, 9 June, 1859; “Lecture on Physical Culture,” *Evening Transcript* 9 June, 1859.

31. *The Atlas and Bee*, Boston, 9 June, 1859.

32. *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, 16 June, 1859; John Langdon Sibley, *Sibley’s Private Journal, 1846-1865, 1* (23 June, 1859): 492, Harvard University Archives.

33. *The Boston Transcript*, 9 June, 1859, Windship was reported to have an eloquent and vigorous style with all the qualifications of the “consummate elocutionist.” Windship’s speech was “frequently interrupted by the most animating bursts of applause,” extolled the *Boston Transcript*.

34. *The Boston Traveller*, 15 June, 1859, np in “To Lecture Committees,” 9 July, 1859 an 14 July, 1860, May-Windship Papers; *The Hampshire and Franklin Express*, 1859, np in May-Windship Papers.

35. *Harvard College, Class ’54*, nd, Harvard University Archives, “Phrenology in Boston,” *The Phrenology Almanac* (1859): 11-15, May-Windship Papers; *Philadelphia Medical and Surgical Reporter* in “To Lecture Committees,” 14 July, 1860.

The highlight of Windship's tours was the demonstrations of strength which he performed at the end of his lectures. He used these as illustrations of his own health and what could be accomplished by any ordinary person. He added more varied feats of strength to his performances by the middle of that summer because he found the audiences more receptive to gimmick lifting.³⁶ Reportedly, he chinned himself twelve times with one hand, pulled himself up with either little finger until his chin was six inches above the bar, raised 200 pounds with either little finger, climbed an inclined ladder with one hand while touching only every third rung, put up a dumbbell of 141 pounds without bending his knees, raised a 180-pound dumbbell with a jerk, and alternately raised two 100-pound dumbbells over his head.³⁷ Windship was now twenty-five years old, weighed 143 pounds, and was five feet seven inches tall.³⁸

During the 1860s Windship continued lecturing throughout the middle and eastern United States and into Canada. Being a Harvard graduate, having a good medical practice, having a connection with several of the Boston hospitals and public institutions, and being a descendant of important professional men helped Windship continue to draw large crowds from the scientific, literary, legal and medical professions.³⁹ He continued adding more novel ways of lifting in 1860 when he began patterning his lifting techniques after Thomas Topham, the famous eighteenth century strongman from England. He, like Topham, stood on a seven-foot platform that had a chain or rope running up from a hole cut in the center. He bound several kegs of nails weighing approximately one-hundred and seven pounds each, and then lifted them with the use of a wooden handle attached to the chain. Later that year Windship developed a wooden yoke that fit across his shoulders and began lifting near two-thousand pounds in this manner. Occasionally Windship requested twelve of the heaviest men in the audience to get-upon a platform suspended beneath his lifting trestle. Newspaper accounts told of him lifting the men on the platform and holding them up for a considerable period of time with no apparent difficulty.⁴⁰

There is evidence that Windship continued his lecture tour through April 1861, but there is no evidence that he continued after this.⁴¹ The Civil War

36. G. B. Windship, Letter to E. Fletcher, Esq., Roxbury, Massachusetts, 14 October, 1859, the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

37. *The Boston Cultivator*, 23 September, 1876, np in Sibley's *Harvardiana*: "Lecture on Physical Culture," *The Atlas and Daily Bee*, 31 May, 1859.

38. *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, 16 June, 1859; *Evening Transcript*, 9 June, 1859.

39. "Acorn" New York Spirit of the Times, probably published in June, 1859, np in "To Lecture Committees," 14 July, 1860.

40. *Harvard College, Class '54*: Windship, "Autobiographical Sketches," pp. 114-115. *The Philadelphia Press* in "To Lecture Committees," 14 July, 1860.

41. *Boston Transcript*, 14 September, 1876. Rice et al. (1969), p. 150 claimed Windship continued his touring lectures into the 1870s. On perhaps Windship's last lecture tour before the War, he matched lifting strength in Chicago against William Thompson of that city and William Curtis of New York. The Chicago newspapers claimed Thompson showed greater lifting ability by winning the \$200 award. The Boston newspapers explained that a hook on Windship's lifting apparatus broke during the lift and he withdrew because of lacking the stature to use Thompson's lifting apparatus. See "Resident Editor's Department," *The Massachusetts Teacher* 14 (April 1861): 159: "Physical Culture Roxbury Versus Chicago," unidentified newspaper clipping in May-Windship-Barker-Archibald Papers.

must have curtailed his travels and probably affected his national influence. In 1863 George Windship moved his private medical practice from Roxbury to the basement of the Park Street Church in Boston. Although his practice prospered, the majority of those seeking out Windship were curious observers and those who wanted to become weight lifters.⁴² Windship used lifting apparatus with his patients and apparently did some teaching, but did not establish a gymnasium until after the War.⁴³ The rivalry of the strength seekers and their gymnasiums apparently reached its peak in Boston between 1867 and 1877.

Gymnasium Rivalries

George Windship opened his combination gymnasium and medical office on Washington Street next door to the Boston Theatre in late 1866 or early 1867.⁴⁴ The Windship Gymnasium more than held its own with the other private gymnasiums in Boston as well as the Young Men's Christian Union and the YMCA after they purchased the Tremont Gymnasium in 1872. According to some sources Windship's became the most famous gymnasium for strength seekers in the country. His gymnasium was described in the newspapers as unique and modern, and well patronized by the young men in the city.⁴⁵

Apparently rivalries began developing after the War among the Boston health reformers preaching strength, particularly between David P. Butler, J. Fletcher Paul, and Windship. Paul's specialty was the "Health Lift," which he called "a thorough gymnastic system for ladies and gentlemen." Paul

42. "Dr Windship Raises Twenty-Six Hundred Pounds," *Evening Express*, (21 November, 1863): np in May-Windship-Barker-Archibald File.

43. "George Barker Windship, M.D." *Boston Journal*, 16 September, 1876.

44. *Boston Directory*, Reel 3 (1867-1868). The building is still standing and is listed on the National Register as Washington Street Theatre District. It is now occupied by the New Adams House Restaurant See Boston Landmarks Commission, the Bostonian Society, Old State House, 206 Washington Street. Boston, Massachusetts. Soon after opening his gymnasium on Washington Street, he married Rebecca Haskins George Windship was thirty-four years old when he married on April 28, 1868. They had no children. See *Register of the Family of May*, May-Windship Papers.

45. *The Boston Cultivator*, 23 September, 1876. Even though Windship's gymnasium was described as well patronized, his financial negotiations a few years prior to his death and his financial assets at the time of his death counter indicated monetary success in his profession. In August 1871 he bought a house on Maywood Street in Roxbury from his father-in-law, Ralph Haskins. He sold the house back to Mr. Haskins on March 15, 1875, for \$1, at which time the deed was made out to Rebecca Haskins Windship "to her sole and separate use, absolutely free from the will and control of her said husband." See Suffolk Deed, LIB., #1064 (1800-1890, Boston, Massachusetts Court House) pp. 68-70, LIB. # 1260, pp. 234-236. Windship still owed one-half of the \$8000 he had paid for the house (LIB. #1339). At Windship's death his personal estate, which consisted of his gymnasium only, was inventoried at a total value of \$857. See Commonwealth of Massachusetts Probate Court. #59122, George B. Windship Administratrix's Inventory, 491 (23 October. 1876) 186. After his business expenses, taxes, counsel fees, and funeral expenses were paid and his gymnasium equipment sold by his wife at approximately one-half of its appraised value; Rebecca, his wife, was left with \$131.97 cash from his estate. See Commonwealth of Massachusetts Probate Court, #59122. Rebecca G. Windship—Administratrix of George B. Windship, 493 (22 January, 1877): 374.

46. Janes, a writer and supporter of Butler, wrote uncomplimentary remarks about Windship. He accused Windship of being an invalid for some time prior to his death. See Lewis G. Janes, "Geo. B. Windship," *Herald of Health*, p. 362. A New York newspaper (*New York Star*, nd) even published an article claiming that Windship had died of consumption and that he had been a sickly and miserable man while performing his feats of strength. An unidentified Boston newspaper clipping titled "An Imaginative Star." (nd, np) in the May-Windship-Barker-Archibald File stated that "If the editor of the Star were to pay a visit to Dr. Windship's gymnasium, he would find the healthiest "consumptive" he ever got hold of". Janes was more than likely responsible for the New York story as most of his writing was listed from that city.

claimed he could double a person's strength in three months. He stated that his system would not fatigue or exhaust the person, but would refresh and invigorate him or her. Some of his leading claims of health were that he could remove dyspepsia and indigestion, tone the nervous system, improve the circulation, warm the extremities, and increase one's general vitality. Paul stated that his Health Lift was recommended by the leading physicians.⁴⁷

D. P. Butler's specialty was called the "Lifting Cure." He opened his gymnasium in 1867, the same year Windship opened his, and their rivalry appeared greatest. Almost as a slap at Windship, Butler advertised that his system was not an indiscriminate straining to lift heavy weights, but the scientific development of the interior vital forces instead of the external muscles.⁴⁸ However, his machines adjusted up to 1250-pound lifts, which certainly would appear heavy enough to strain.

One of Butler's most unusual claims was that his Lifting Cure produced symmetrical development of the body-reducing the proportions that exceeded normal standards and increasing those that were deficient. For example, he claimed that men below five feet, six inches at whatever age almost always increased in stature while those exceeding five feet, ten or eleven inches would usually diminish under the same process. If the waist were larger than the chest, the chest would be increased and the waist reduced; or conversely, if the chest were abnormally developed and the waist small, the waist would be enlarged while the chest would be reduced.

The health effects of the Butler's Lifting Cure were noted as curing and preventing organic disease, giving strength to the weak, removing deformities, restoring displaced organs, ridding one of congestion and improving circulation, stopping pain, improving digestion, curing diseases peculiar to women, preventing and curing consumption and other lung diseases, and curing nervous debility.⁴⁹

Like Paul, Windship advertised a guarantee to double one's strength in three months. Windship's guarantee went further, however, as he promised to triple strength in a year. Windship claimed as late as 1873 that his establishment was the only one in the city that used the yoke lifter, and that this developed the most strength and was more health-promoting than any other exercise. As Butler and Paul listed the diseases they could cure through strength development from lifting, so did Windship. He stated that strength was "an invaluable aid to medicine in the treatment of asthma, dyspepsia, obesity, pulmonary disease (first stage), chronic rheumatism, neuralgia, torpor of liver and bowels, and "general debility."⁵⁰

Strength Developing Equipment

All three men advertised patented lifting machines for sale through their

47. *Boston Directory*, Reel 8 (1875): 1363.

48. Lewis C. Janes, *Health Exercises: The Rationale and Practice of the Lifting Cure or Health Lift*, 7th Ed. (New York: 1873).

49. *Ibid.*, pp. 28-30.

50. *Boston Directory*, Reel 7, p. 1075.

gymnasiums. Paul did not begin advertising his lifting machine until 1876, and undoubtedly this was his "Health Lift" machine.⁵¹ Between 1865 and 1880 Butler patented many different machines for developing strength through lifting. He had machines for sale that varied from economical to expensive in his attempt to reach the common man as well as the more wealthy. Butler, unlike Paul and Windship, did not sell his equipment outright but only sold through a lease which prevented the machines from being used publicly without special arrangements being made.⁵²

Windship also patented and sold his equipment as early as 1865. His first patent was for a graduated dumbbell he invented which allowed flat disks to be interchanged on a bar by a spring-pin. His dumbbells could be adjusted easily from 8 to 101 pounds which was described as a decided improvement over the ones then on the market.⁵³ Later that year he patented a lifting apparatus that he referred to as the Exercising Machine. This invention allowed yoke lifting with the shoulders and handle lifting. It was adjustable to the size and strength of the person using it.⁵⁴

Dr. Windship patented two other important pieces of strength developing equipment in 1872 and 1873. The Atmospheric Lifter and Strength Tester was described as a decided improvement in lifting apparatus. It consisted of a piston rod with an air-pump housed inside which controlled the weight by the admission or expulsion of air to or from the cylinder. This allowed a lifter to substitute the machine for weights and was also one of the earliest dynamometers invented as it gave a gauge reading of the exertion expended.⁵⁵

The last piece of equipment, called the Apparatus for Physical Culture, was his most versatile and inclusive invention. It provided for yoke and handle lifting, hand shoving or pushing and pulling pulley-weights, rowing, hand lifting, leg exercising, a horizontal bar for pull-ups, and an arm exerciser. This piece of apparatus was a forerunner of the Universal Gym.⁵⁶

Other Influences

Besides the patented lifting equipment, most of the strength seekers had several other things in common. They were all concerned with improving health and were more interested in preventing diseases than curing them.

51. *Ibid.*, Reel 9, p. 1300.

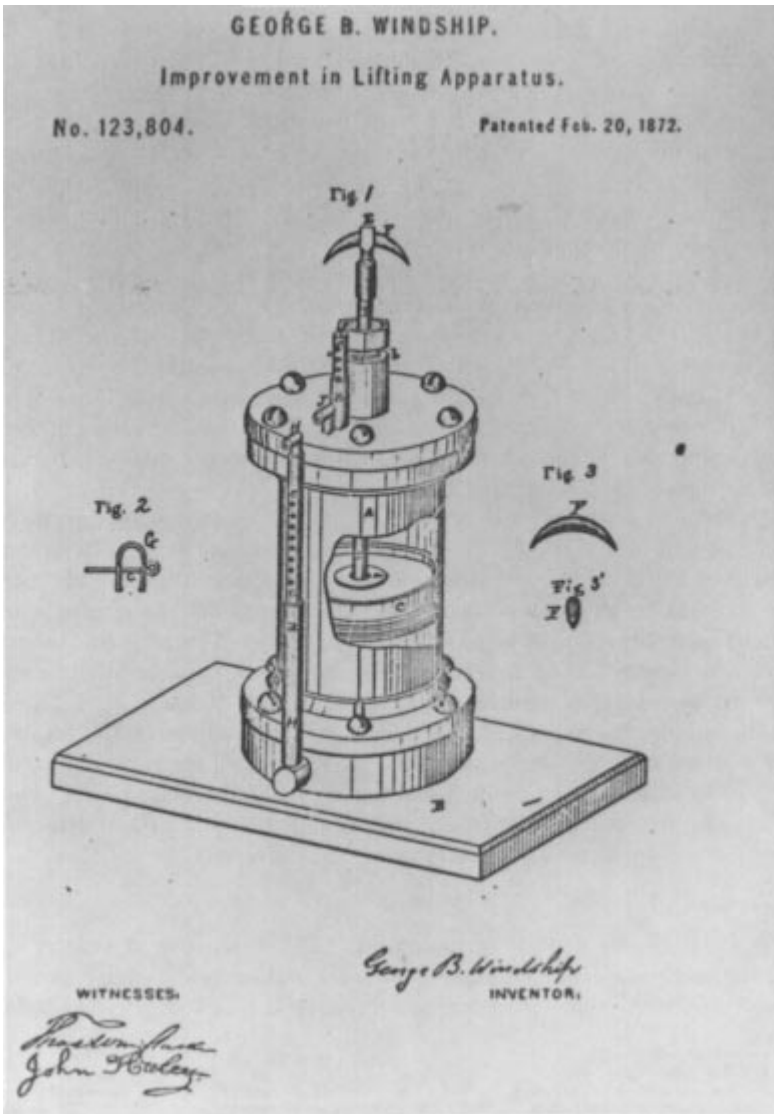
52. See Janes, *Health Exercises*, p. 38. U. S. Department of Commerce, Patent and Trademark Office has the following patents on file by D. P. Butler: Weight-lifting Apparatus, no. 48,050 (6 June, 1865); Weight-Pulling Apparatus, no. 48,051 (6 June, 1865). Dumb Bell, no. 48,514 (4 July, 1865); Lifting-Bar, no. 55,618 (19 June, 1866); Gymnastic Apparatus, no. 85,996 (19 January, 1869); Lifting Apparatus, no. 87,465 (2 March, 1869); Lifting Bar, no. 92,792 (20 July, 1869); Exercising Machine, no. 223, 799 (27 January, 1880); and Exercising Machine, no. 223, 798 (27 June, 1880).

53. Windship, G.B. "The Practical Graduating Dumb-Bell," (advertisement with picture and description) *May-Windship Paper*, U.S. Department of Commerce, Patent and Trademark Office, n. 46,413 (14 February, 1865).

54. *Ibid.*, no. 49,945 (12 September, 1865).

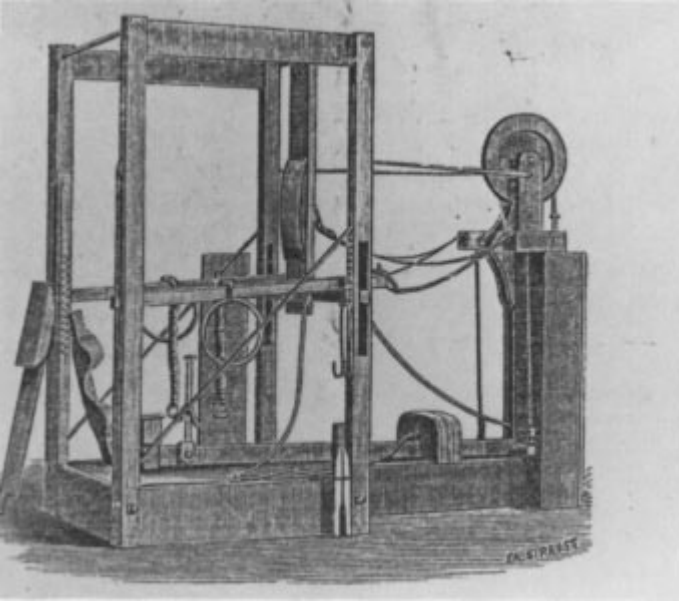
55. *Ibid.*, no. 123,804 (20 February, 1872).

56. *Ibid.*, no. 134,578 (7 January, 1873). Eighteen-sixty to 1880 was a fertile period for the invention of weight lifting apparatus. There apparently were some rudimentary pieces of equipment for lifting prior to this era, but it was these early strength seekers who laid the groundwork for the later more sophisticated apparatus invented by Sargent and other physical educators.



George Barker Windship, Atmospheric Lifter and Strength Tester patented February 20, 1872. U.S. Department of Commerce, Patent and Trademark Office.

They also felt urbanization leading to more sedentary occupations had been a prime factor in causing physical degeneracy. Because of this the strength seekers attempted to appeal to businessmen, professional men, students, and other persons in sedentary occupations. Butler and Paul also included women in their establishments while Windship apparently did not. Butler claimed to be the original inventor of the side lift, and his biggest boast for this was that



George Barker Windship, Apparatus for Physical Culture. A forerunner of the Universal Gym Patented on January 7, 1893. Department of Commerce, Patent and Trademark Office.

ladies could do it without “assuming the gymnastic dress.” However, he warned that women in “close-fitting corsets and garments supported around the hips” could not obtain a thorough exercise without negative effects, so they should always “dress out.”⁵⁷

The health reformers advocating strength also included other elements as essential to total well-being. The most common health areas taught were good nutrition, the essentials of sleep and rest, the importance of fresh air, the removal of filth from the streets, and the importance of bathing.⁵⁸

The strength seekers were a definite factor in shaping attitudes toward health in the nineteenth century. Their influence in promoting health through strength seemed to permeate the thinking of the general public, medical men, educators, and the early YMCA program directors during the late 1850 to 1876 period. Windship’s name was often connected to the strength/health reforms occurring in these various spheres. It was Windship who reached the most people with his lectures and demonstrations around the country. As early as 1859 a New York newspaper stated that “of all the sanitary reformers, Dr. Windship of Boston, will probably become the most popular.”⁵⁹ Almost every city had its home strongman that it supported, such as Thompson in Chi-

57. Janes, *Health Exercises*, p. 44.

58. Windship stated that any good thing could be taken to excess. He recommended bathing once a week in cold weather and twice in warm. See Windship, “Physical Culture,” pp. 128, 130.

59. Quoted in the *New York Times*, nd, np in “To Lecture Committees,” 14 July, 1860.

cago and Curtis in New York, but none appeared to receive the publicity of Windship.

The expressed feeling of the public was that Windship and the Health Reformers who advocated strength development were exerting "a powerful influence in reforming the habits of the rising generation of New England, and in checking the physical degeneracy of [the] people." The hope was also expressed that effeminacy, which had become an increasing vice among the more cultivated communities, could be eradicated by the strength seekers.⁶⁰ Windship was referred to as a true philanthropist in helping to rid the country of a national evil—"the neglect of physical exercise."⁶¹

Besides Windship's lectures concerning the importance of strength to health, he also exerted his influence on the public about other sanitary matters. His lectures preceding his "practical demonstrations" were filled with his beliefs about such things as the relationship of diet to health, breathing fresh air day and night, receiving enough sleep and rest, preventing artificial heat indoors above seventy degrees, and wearing clothes loose enough to allow freedom of movement. Of course strength and health was always the central theme of his talks, and many of the principles he taught are still applicable. He preached the gradual harmonious development of the body. Windship advised his listeners to perform twenty different lifts rather than repeating one feat twenty times. He stated that as strength increased lifting exercises "should be more intense, but less protracted." He recommended that weights be lifted thirty to forty minutes every other day rather than twenty minutes daily.⁶²

The medical profession showed an interest in the theories of the strength men, as most newspapers mention many of the doctors in the various cities attending Windship's lectures. Some physicians, convinced of strength's role in the protection of good health, also used his equipment in hospitals and in their private offices. Windship always preached that greater health could be obtained through exercise than with pills and powders.⁶³

Hitchcock, Hartwell and other prominent physician-physical educators referred to the fact that Windship and the strength seekers had affected physical education, particularly in the 1860.⁶⁴ They credited Windship with helping to revive an interest in physical education. He reportedly had an influence in the development of gymnasiums,⁶⁵ the use of heavy equipment in the gymnas-

60. *The Boston Traveler*, 15 June, 1859

61. Quoted in *N.Y. Spirit of the Times* in "To Lecture Committees," 14 July, 1860.

62. See Windship, "Physical Culture," pp. 126-132; Windship, "Ventilation," np; *The N.Y. Tribune* (1859) in "To Lecture Committees," 9 July, 1859; *Philadelphia Inquirer* in "To Lecture Committees," 14 July, 1860.

63. "George Barker Windship, M.D.," *Boston Journal*, 16 September, 1876; *The Troy Daily Arena* in "To Lecture Committees," 14 July, 1860.

64. Edward M. Hartwell, "Presidents Address—The Conditions and Prospects of Physical Education in the United States," *Proceedings of the American Association for the Advancement of Physical Education* 6 (1893): 13-40; Edward Hitchcock, "A Report of Twenty Years Experience in the Department of Physical Education and Hygiene in Amherst College to the Board of Trustees," (Amherst, Massachusetts: 1881) in Arthur Weston, *The Making of Physical Education* (New York: 1962).

65. *Troy Daily Arena*, nd, np in "To Lecture Committees," 14 July, 1860.

ums, and probably most important the philosophical idea that strength was health. Windship also supported the notion that the most important objective of physical education was health.⁶⁶ He has been most condemned for declaring strength to be health and leading some of the early programs into muscle-building.⁶⁷ Rice et al. stated that it took physical education almost one hundred years to live down the notion that the development of great strength was its primary purpose.⁶⁸ However, Windship never advocated bulky muscles or appeared interested in body building. Even though Windship eventually lifted 1250 pounds with his hands and 2700 pounds with his yoke, he only weighed 148 pounds at his heaviest and never quite reached five feet, eight inches in height.⁶⁹

Windship influenced the physical programs of the YMCA most through Robert Jefferies Roberts, one of the most important personalities in the history of this organization. Roberts joined the Tremont Gymnasium in 1864 when he was fifteen. When Windship opened his gymnasium approximately two years later, Roberts began to attend this one, too. George Barker Windship became his model and Roberts became a strength seeker who attempted to develop himself into a miniature Hercules.⁷⁰ Roberts was only five feet, five inches tall and weighed 145 pounds, but with a yoke on his shoulders he could lift 2200 pounds, sit-up from a lying position with a 100-pound weight behind his head, push up a 120-pound dumbbell with each hand, and demonstrate other feats of superior strength. Roberts began teaching at the Boston YMCA in 1873 and was made its superintendent in 1875. A disciple of Windship, he initiated heavy gymnastics into the Young Men's Christian Association.⁷¹ Another example of Windship's influence on the YMCA was a book written by William Wood of the New York YMCA in 1875.⁷² Wood claimed his book was one of the most important books ever published on physical culture. It was popular enough to have a minimum of three printings. This book includes many things Windship advocated, and the section on "Rules for Preserving the Health" is directly from an April 1860 article on physical culture written by Windship.⁷³ Several of Wood's paragraphs are taken verbatim from the Windship article although no credit is given. Examples like this show Windship did have an influence that was not acknowledged and perhaps not even recognized as being a Windship influence.

66. Not only was health the major objective of physical education, it was the prime justification for including physical education in the schools. See Gerber, *Innovators and Institutions*, p. 227; Richard K. Means, *A History of Health Education in the United States* (Philadelphia: 1962).

67. See Edward Hitchcock, "Athletics in American Colleges," *Journal of Social Science* 20 (Jul 1885): 27-44; White, "The New Athletics," *Proceedings*, p. 83.; Edward Hitchcock, *Annual Report of the Professor of Hygiene and Physical Education to the Trustees of Amherst College* (23 June, 1891): 7.

68. Rice et al., *A Brief History*, p. 150.

69. *Boston Transcript*, 14 September, 1876.

70. Hackensmith, *History of Physical Education*, p. 357.

71. See Leonard and Affleck, *A Guide to the History*, pp. 316-317; Spears and Swanson, *History of Sport*, p. 122.

72. See pp. 287-290, 310, 320 in William Wood, *Manual of Physical Exercises*, 3rd Ed. (New York: 1875).

73. See Windship, "Physical Culture," *The Massachusetts Teacher*, pp. 126-132.



George Barker Windship, Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Stephen J. Kovack, Photographer.

The End of an Era

The influence of Windship and the other Boston strength seekers appeared to be severely damaged when Windship died suddenly at his home on September 12, 1876 at the age of forty-two.⁷⁴ His early death seemed to contradict all of his claims of health and long life being possible through strength.⁷⁵ The

74. His death was variously attributed to paralysis, apoplexy, prostration, and heart disease. See "George Barker Windship, M.D.," *Boston Journal*, 16 September, 1876; *The Boston Cultivator*, 23 September 1876, *The Boston Transcript*, 25 November, 1878: np in Everett, *Harvardiana*, stated that Windship's trip to the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition had been too exciting for him. It said that while there he gave his entire attention to mechanism. (He died at his home one month after the Exposition.) Windship's death certificate simply states apoplexy as the cause (Registry of Vital Records and Statistics, no. 91970), State Department of Public Health, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts). Windship is buried at Forest Hills Cemetery in Boston. Mark J. Duffy (The Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts), Letter to author, 30 June, 1981.

75. See *The Boston Cultivator*, 23 September, 1876; Edwin Checkley, *A Natural Method of Physical*

cause may not have been Windship's death, but it does appear unusual that Paul's and Butler's Gymnasiums closed the year after.⁷⁶ The modification of Robert's YMCA program to a milder form of gymnastics about this time also lends weight to the possible impact Windship's death had on destroying the synonymity notion of strength and health.⁷⁷ Other factors that helped bring the strength era to a close were the exerted influence of Dio Lewis in directing exercise toward a milder form, the comparatively few men who had the ability or inclination for heavy lifting, and the growing popularity of outdoor sports.⁷⁸ Certainly strength seekers as competitive weight lifters and as body builders continued to operate their gymnasiums and health spas throughout the rest of the nineteenth century and until the present. But their role as health reformers never seemed to reach the dimensions of influence achieved in the 1860s and 1870s. Perhaps they as well as their herald, George Barker Windship, were misdirected, but nevertheless, they were a historical force in molding attitudes toward early sport, health, and physical education programs.

Training. Rev. Ed. (Brooklyn, New York, 1894); William Gilbert Anderson, *Anderson's Physical Education* (Broadway, New York, 1897); Emerson, *Physical Culture*.

76. Boston Directory, Reels 11 and 12 (1878 and 1879).

77. Leonard and Affleck, *A Guide to the History*, p. 317.

78. See William Blaikie, *How to Get Strong and How to Stay So*, (New York, 1879); Hitchcock, "A Report of Twenty Years Experience," 1885; Hitchcock, *Annual Report of the Professor*, 1891; Gerber, *Innovators and Institutions*, 1971.