

Vertinsky, Patricia A. *The Eternally Wounded Woman: Women, Exercise and Doctors in the Late Nineteenth Century*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1990. Pp. 279. Notes, bibliography, index. \$59.95.

The major problem with Patricia Vertinsky's long-awaited exploration of the relationship between the medical community and the lives of nineteenth-century women is the slothful way in which Manchester University Press, her publisher, has promoted what is perhaps the most important monograph to appear in the field of women's sport history in the past decade. It is understandable that Vertinsky would be happy to have her work included in Manchester Press' series on International Studies in the History of Sport, because of the prestige of the series as well as the fact that her book relies as often on British sources as it does on American or Canadian ones. However, the \$59.95 price of the book, the apparent ineptitude of Manchester Press' order department in the early months after the book's 1990 release, and the absence-eighteen months after publication-of any scholarly reviews of *The Eternally Wounded Woman* are, quite frankly, deplorable. Recently, North American distribution of the book has been turned over to St. Martin's Press which will, it is hoped, do a better job promoting this valuable piece of scholarship. It would be a heavy blow to the fields of women's studies and sport studies if Vertinsky's work remains lost in the trans-Atlantic shuffle and fails to be recognized, as it properly should be, as the seminal study on the historical influence of late nineteenth-century medical beliefs and how those beliefs controlled not only women's physical activities but popular beliefs about most aspects of women's lives.

If, as Foucault has argued, the study of the professional writings of "experts" on the human body brings us "closer to an understanding of the social reality of the time," (10) then Vertinsky's painstaking scholarship does indeed shed new light on the world of late nineteenth-century women. Though both professional and lay "experts" spoke out regarding questions of reproductive health and exercise in the late nineteenth century, Vertinsky has limited her study to the writings of mainstream medical practitioners, arguing correctly that establishment medical discourses had a greater impact on the lives of women than did the preachings of irregular physicians or lay experts. As Vertinsky observes, ". . . medicine was active, interpretive work through which a particular social reality was constructed. . . . The labelling of normal female functions such as menstruation and menopause as signs of illness requiring rest and medical observation did not, in itself, make women sick or incapable of vigorous activity. It did, however, provide a powerful rationale to persuade them from acting in any other

way.” (11) Among the most useful aspects of Vertinsky’s work are her three opening chapters, in which she explores this body of professional medical literature and demonstrates the ways in which it affected women during different phases of their lives. Vertinsky takes great pains to analyze sources and their intended audience. This allows her to demonstrate various ways in which medical professionals influenced the lives of women from menarche to well past menopause.

Vertinsky argues, persuasively, that female physicians were also involved in placing limits on the behavior of women. Rejecting the opinion that women physicians operated from different ideological and professional standards, Vertinsky contends that, “Many female physicians, rather than pressing to further women’s intellectual capacity and amplify the parameters of female physical capabilities, emphasized their special qualities of female nurturance and support for maternal values.”(13)

Vertinsky’s analytic writing is at its best in her biographical study of the uses Charlotte Perkins Gilman made of strenuous exercise in her bid for intellectual and personal independence. While it is understandable that the great-niece of Catharine Beecher might take the matter of exercise seriously, Gilman apparently trained at times in her life with a dedication modern observers might label obsessive. “It is apparent that a careful early training in physical culture lasts a life-time,” Gilman wrote in her autobiography, “in this line of improvement I was highly ambitious . . . and absolutely vain of my physical strength and ability.” Throughout her adolescence, Gilman trained in gymnastics, lifted weights, and ran. “I could vault and leap, go up a knotted rope, walk on my hands . . . kick as high as my head and revel in the flying rings.” William Blaikie’s *How to Get Strong and How to Stay So* was, she wrote, “her bedside Bible, her Atalanta guidebook for the coming race.” At age 21 she boasted of never tiring and being strong as a horse, “I could easily have been an acrobat, having good nervous coordination, strength, courage and excellent blancing power.” (206) Vertinsky demonstrates how Gilman, throughout her life, escaped to exercise whenever her personal relationships became difficult. Following her acceptance of Charles Walter Stetson’s marriage proposal, for instance, Gilman lost herself in exercise, in the hope that it would alleviate her increasingly depressed mood. Later, as the marriage deteriorated, Gilman wrote in her diary that returning to the gym made her “happy to the point of idiocy.” (210)

Vertinsky’s use of Gilman’s personal papers adds an important dimension to *The Eternally Wounded Woman*. Gilman’s writings reveal how important physical activity was to some nineteenth-century women; and her personal papers and published fiction—such as the justly famous “The Yellow Wallpaper,” her chilling short story about the “rest cure”—demonstrate how physically devastating and intellectually confining the medical community’s pronouncements regarding reproduction, appropriate behavior and exercise could be for a woman.

Ultimately, however, no book is perfect. For one thing, *The Eternally*

Wounded Woman could use a stronger sense of narrative. The chapters and sections—though obviously related—remain somehow discrete, reminding us that at least four of the chapters are based on previously published articles. Another problem is Vertinsky's narrow focus. Although she explains in the Introduction that her research model is basically one-dimensional, representing only the social reality of white, middle and upper class Eastern Seaboard women, she could have produced a more significant book had she also examined other women, ones who listened to experts and physicians with less restrictive attitudes about women and exercise. There were many such women and free-thinking "experts" who disagreed with the ones Vertinsky chose. These other women and other experts, however, do not fit her research model. As Vertinsky makes abundantly plain, her book is an examination of the most popular, mainstream medical writers and the audience at whom they aimed their books and articles. Working class women and rural women were considered strong and robust; physicians did not generally aim their warnings at the working classes. On the contrary, it was the very health and vigor of working class women which made the late nineteenth-century Anglo-American community fearful that it was losing hegemony. As Vertinsky admits in her introduction, "The world of nineteenth and early twentieth-century sport and exercise for predominantly non-leisured women requires a book of its own." (16)

While that book waits to be written, scholars of women's sport should be glad that there is, at last, a first-rate book which explores in considerable depth the patriarchal ideology which has attempted to control women's lives by setting the limits for women's sport and exercise.

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