

The Robust Woman and the Muscular Christian: Catharine Beecher , Thomas Higginson, and Their Vision of American Society, Health, and Physical Activities

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In the mid-nineteenth century, two articulate middle class social reformers, Catharine Esther Beecher and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, described the condition of the social, physical, and moral health of the American nation and citizenry. Beecher and Higginson each had a vision of how America ought to be with respect to social behavior, health, and morality. This paper compares Beecher's and Higginson's vision of the ideal American society and their conceptions and suggestions for health and physical activity which were important to that vision. In particular, this paper compares Beecher's conception of womanhood, "the cult of domesticity" and "of true womanhood" and Higginson's conception of manhood, "Muscular Christianity."

This paper also explores the influence of gender on Beecher's and Higginson's notions of health and physical activities in their writings. Beecher's and Higginson's prescriptions for health and physical exercise for Americans became linked with the issue of appropriate social behavior and sex roles for women and men in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Beecher's robust woman and Higginson's muscular Christian expressed the proper social behavior of women and men envisioned by their architects. Beecher intended to prepare women as cultural progenitors and social reproducers, while Higginson expected to have men develop as cultural opportunists and cultural partakers. In Beecher's thought, woman's physical exercise and physical stamina represented a constraining experience training women for their role in the home, where in Higginson's thought, man's physical exercise and physical stamina represented a liberating experience training men for their role in the world.