

Re-Creation Through Recreation:
Physical Activity and Regeneration in Atlantic
Canada and Northeastern United States,
1860-1910

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In Victorian Atlantic Canada and the Northeastern United States many people believed that both standards of health and society were degenerating. While individual and social deterioration were spiralling, however, Victorians took comfort that there was a chance for regeneration. Physical perfection would be encouraged through exercise programmes and through athletic games. First, the individual body would be re-created; then, society. And it all would be achieved through specific forms of recreation: exercise programs and athletic events.

For Victorians individual regeneration meant social improvement. This concept of regeneration often has been discussed in the national context or in a more spiritual context. Ramsey Cook, for example, has explored the religious and intellectual connotations of regeneration in Canada. Similarly, Robert Nye has

discussed the concept of degeneration at a national level. But the problem of degeneracy went beyond national boundaries and beyond moral and intellectual development. For many Victorians, degeneracy on the individual level and on the social level could only be countered by re-creation through recreation. For this paper specific individual activities will be considered, such as dancing, gymnastics, and pedestrianism. Similar ideas, however, were expressed about team sports, especially but not exclusively for females.

In recent years leisure and sports historians have broadened their examination to explore the relationship between recreation and society. At times, this approach has meant an in-depth consideration of one sport and how it is a reflection of broader social change. Other works have added analytical sophistication and improved historiographical techniques, with class and gender analysis playing a predominate role in enhancing understanding of the past. Nevertheless, recreations of all types did not easily conform to arbitrary class or gender divisions, much less to historians' expectations. Middle-class and working-class men and women often participated in the same activity although not always at the same time, or on the same field, or for the same reasons. What was common to all potential athletes was that they were at once cajoled by reformers into re-creating their bodies through recreation, and condemned or cautioned for their participation.

This paper examines some of the inherent contradictions of individual recreations that surfaced in the last half of the 19th century, and the changes in reformers' hopes and aspirations as increasing numbers of people flocked to gymnasiums, to tracks and to playing fields. Where at mid-century hope had been expressed that recreation would allow the re-creation of both bodies and society, by the early 20th century that dream was modified. After all, if exercise and sport could build and re-create the body, they also carried the seeds for potential decline. Just as the regenerating effects of good health could rebound onto society as a whole, so could the degeneration.

By the turn of the century the concerns about the debilitating effects of exercise became paramount. While the benefits were still stressed, more and more often attempts would be made to regulate the activity, for example, through monitoring by physicians or through new scientific recreation and measurements. The most fitness specialists could hope for was to strengthen and protect female reproductive organs, to avoid excessive competition and professionalization, and to uplift working-class and immigrant men and women. As the fear of physical and social degeneracy grew, the potential benefits of physical activity lessened. The notion of re-creating the body and society through recreation would be lost in the early 20th century.