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Reconsidering Antebellum Exercise: German Gymnastics and Women

Modern sport historians have generally dated the first wave of interest in women's exercise to the birth of the gender-specific calisthenics movement of the 1830s. However, in the 1820s there were several exercise pundits who recommended that women participate in exercises remarkably similar in nature and degree of difficulty to those men did in German-style gymnastics. Furthermore, the arguments made to bolster women's participation in this earlier exercise movement tended to transcend ideas of female submissiveness. Advocates of women's gymnastics in the 1820s unlike their calisthenics counterparts in the next decade, viewed women's physical potential from a much more egalitarian perspective.

This paper focuses on the contributions of two leading European exercise experts: Phokion H. Clias and J. A. Beaujeu. Clias (1782-1854) moved to London in 1822 as Superintendent of Physical Training for the Royal Military and Naval Academies in England. He also opened a public gymnasium in London. In a country imbued with neo-classical idealism, Clias' unusually muscular physique contributed to his ability to sell gymnastics to the British public. By 1823, Clias reportedly had no less than fourteen hundred pupils, approximately four hundred of them were women; by 1826, the total number of Clias' pupils had grown to over two thousand. In 1829, he published the first of his two books on women's exercise.

J. A. Beaujeu and his wife are the most interesting-and least well-known—figures of the 1820s women's gymnastics movement. Beaujeu opened a gymnasium in Dublin in 1824, offering women's classes on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. He also supervised the physical training at the Royal Hibernian Military School, a co-educational institution for children of soldiers, where he introduced two hundred girls to gymnastics. In 1828, Beaujeu published *A Treatise on Gymnastic Exercises, or Calisthenics for the Use of Young Ladies*, a book with a startlingly vigorous exercise program. Women don't need lessons in refinement, argued Beaujeu: "Let us tear the rising generation from our voluptuous habits, from the effeminacy or our degenerate manners, that we may, thereby, produce 'souls of fire in iron hearts.'" In 1841, Madame Beaujeu opened a school for gymnastics in Boston, Massachusetts. Horace Mann heartily recommended it, noting in the *Common School Journal* that it had 170 pupils.

Clias and Beaujeu were not alone in their advocacy of German-style gymnastics for women. German ex-patriate Franz Lieber argued for vigorous exercise for women, as did the author of an anonymous French text, *Calisthenie ou Gymnastics des Jeunes Filles*, published in 1828. The Philadelphia-based *Journal of Health* gave the book a glowing review, noting that, although women were smaller and weaker in some ways than men,

“we ought not to grant them the privilege which some of their own number and certain mawkish sentimentalists would claim for them of being such frail and tender beings, as to be little better than interesting invalids.” And, of course, American schoolmaster John Fowle also tried gymnastics with his students.

This paper was inspired by the discovery of Beaujeu’s book at Springfield College.



Jerry Eggert, retired PSU history professor, one of our guides at Curtin Village.