

# The Indian Club Exercise

Elizabeth Fee and  
Theodore M. Brown

## INDIAN CLUB SWINGING

became widely popular as a form of physical exercise after the Civil War. This image comes from S. D. Kehoe's book *The Indian Club Exercise* (1866); the practice of club swinging was said to produce the ideal, lean male body, exercising both mind and body. Indian clubs were so named because the soldiers of the British army in India had adopted and adapted a native exercise and brought it back to England in the middle decades of the 19th century.<sup>1</sup> In the United States, baseball teams soon practiced with the clubs, as did the crew teams of Harvard and Yale.

Indian clubs, along with other forms of rhythmic gymnastic exercises, were associated with "muscular Christianity," a social gospel that affirmed the importance of physical fitness for mental and moral improvement. Proper physical exercise built bodily strength and, with it, character and righteousness—shaping young men for God's work, and for the nation's.<sup>2</sup>

Gymnastic exercises—ideally, ones that exercised all the muscles in a balanced fashion and combined all ranges of motion—were said to counteract the

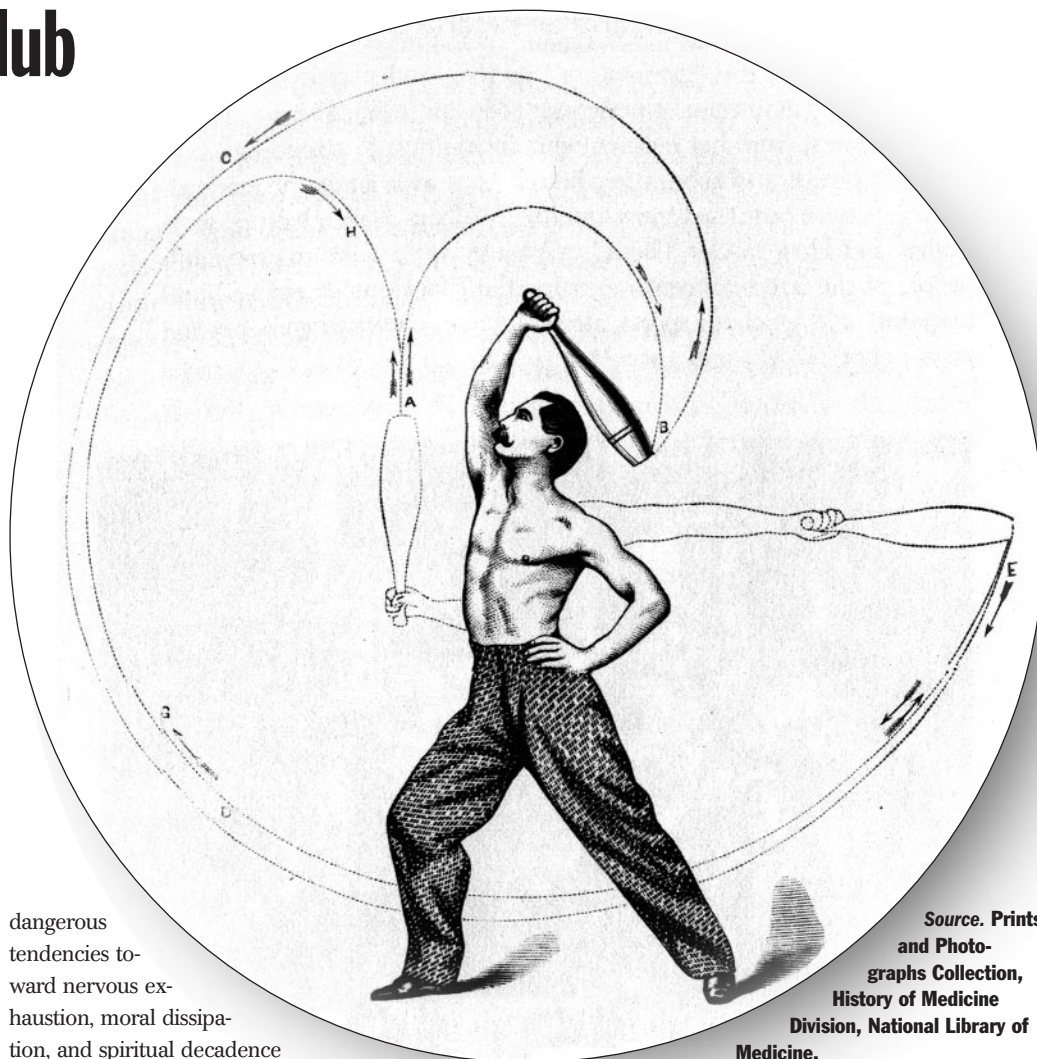
dangerous tendencies toward nervous exhaustion, moral dissipation, and spiritual decadence associated with modern life in the big cities. Moses Coit Tyler, who would become the first professor of history in the United States, explained (in the words of the fictional Judge Fairplay of Brawnville): "It is as truly a man's moral duty to have a good digestion, and sweet breath, and strong arms, and stalwart legs, and an erect bearing, as it is to read his Bible, or say his prayers, or love his neighbor as himself."<sup>3</sup>

In 1861, Amherst College was the first to introduce physical culture and gymnastics—including exercises with Indian clubs—as a required subject at the collegiate level.<sup>4</sup> Physical exercise came to be regarded as a mark of manli-

ness and a religious and patriotic duty. By 1901, 270 colleges offered physical education, 300 city school systems required physical exercises, 500 Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) gymnasiums had 80 000 members, and more than 100 gymnasiums were associated with athletic clubs, military bases, and other institutions. ■

### About the Authors

Elizabeth Fee is with the History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Md. Theodore M. Brown is with the Departments of History and of Community and Preventive Medicine at the University of Rochester, NY.



Source. Prints and Photographs Collection, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Elizabeth Fee, PhD, Building 38, Room 1E21, 8600 Rockville Pike, Bethesda, MD 20894 (e-mail: elizabeth\_fee@nlm.nih.gov).

### References

1. Green H. *Fit for America: Health, Fitness, Sport, and American Society*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books; 1986:191.
2. Whorton JC. *Crusaders for Fitness: The History of American Health Reformers*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 1982:271.
3. Tyler MC. *The Brawnville Papers*. Boston, Mass: Fields, Osgood; 1869: 163. Cited by: Whorton JC. *Crusaders for Fitness: The History of American Health Reformers*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 1982:281.
4. Allen N. Physical culture in Amherst College. *Am J Public Health*. 2003;93:720–722.