The History of Physical Culture in Ireland
Conor Heffernan

The History of Physical Culture in Ireland
Physical culture is broadly understood as a late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century phenomenon concerned with purposeful exercise. Despite its study in other parts of Europe, Asia and North America, its emergence in Ireland has not previously received thorough academic attention. In addressing this gap, this book examines the rise of physical culture in Ireland in the late nineteenth-century and traces its development across the following four decades. In doing so, the reasons behind Ireland’s fascination with physical culture are discussed. Like other European nations, Ireland’s physical culture movement was the result of decades of change in transport, leisure, politics and consumption. In effect, this was an Irish manifestation of a much larger global phenomenon and this was reflected in Irishmen’s and women’s continued consumption of British and American physical culture goods and ideas. Throughout the forty years covered, physical culture systems were used for a variety of purposes by a variety of groups. For educators, it was cast in terms of academic success and ‘correct’ development. For the state, it became a means of establishing distinct and autonomous identities, while for individuals, physical culture exercises came to be understood both as a means of diversion and a means of challenging, or conforming to, desirable societal identities.

What does the study of Irish physical culture contribute to Irish historiography and the study of physical culture more generally? In the first instance, the research highlights the depth and diversity of physical culture in Ireland, an interest often alluded to in existing historical works
but never fully expanded upon. Secondly, the examination of physical culture in military, educational and recreational fields highlights previously understudied aspects within these areas of research. Finally, the history of physical culture in Ireland is located within the wider context of Irish history, and accordingly, the book offers a contribution to that history, noticeably in respect of war, health, gender and the role of the state.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work would not have been possible without the generosity and funding by the Irish Research Council’s Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship, Universities Ireland’s History Bursary, the North American Society for Sport History’s Travel Grant and University College Dublin (UCD)’s Lord Edward FitzGerald Memorial Fund. Through these bodies, I was able to conduct research in Great Britain, the United States and Ireland in addition to presenting at numerous conferences.

In addition, this work benefitted from the patience and kindness exhibited by archivists and librarians towards my often-confused requests. Their bemusement was no doubt shared by the countless individuals who have indulged my ramblings since beginning this research. Friends made from working groups and conferences, on both sides of the Atlantic, have proved a steady source of support during research. Those already working in the field of physical culture, including Professor Patricia Vertinsky, Professor Charlotte MacDonald, Dr. Joan Tumblety, David Chapman, Randy Roach and Dr. Keith Rathbone, displayed a great deal of academic generosity, as did sport historians Dr. Dave Day, Margaret Roberts and Dr. Nicholas Piercey. I am particularly indebted to those working at the Stark Center at the University of Texas namely, Cindy Slater, Ryan Blake, Geoff Schmalz, Christy Toms, Dr. John Fair, Dr. Kim Beckwith, Dr. Thomas Hunt and Dr. Tolga Ozyurtcu. Aside from my Ph.D. advisor, Dr. Paul Rouse, Professor Jan Todd and the late Dr. Terry Todd have inspired and improved my work at several turns. As in so many other physical culture dissertations, their contribution here deserves mention.
Advice, friendship and good humour were found at several turns in universities, conferences, workshops, gyms and through co-authors. Thanks then to Conor Curran, Aishwarya Ramachandran, Nevada Cooke, Philip Chipman, Scott Hamilton, Phillipa Levine, Brad Love, Sophie Lalande, Sean Donnelly, Tim Ellis, Lisa Taylor, Amanda Callan-Spenn, Raf Nicholson, Matt McDowell, Aidan Beatty, Geoff Levett, Dill Porter, Gary James, Patrick Bernhard, Jacqueline Hayden, Samantha Oldfield, Cormac Moore, Mike Cronin, Tom Hunt, Liam O’Callaghan, Matthew O’Brien, Julien Clenet, Helena Byrne, Maeve O’Riordan, Conor Murray, Katie Liston, Shane Browne, Krystal Carmichael, Anne Dolan, Aoife Cranney Walsh, Eimear Farrell, Joseph Quinn, Nick English, David Tao, David Gentle, Pearse Reynolds, Michael Murphy, James Grannell, Zeljka Doljanin, Leanne Waters, Marisol Corbitt, Audrey McNamara, Katie Mishler, David McKinney, Niamh Kelly, Susannah Riordan, David Kerr, Ellen Murphy, Victoria Felkar, Rob Lake, Simon Eaves, Alec Hurley, Ryan Murtha, Andrew Hao, Tanya Jones, Lucy Harvard and Lesley Steinitz. To those who I have forgotten, please forgive a scattered mind! Thanks, or blame, must also be given to training partners and coaches from numerous gyms and groups including, but not limited to, Petter, Karl, Tracy, Darren and Eoin from Phoenix Performance Centre. In particular, Petter and Karl’s many stories about physical culturists from the past planted a seed in a then budding mind. Members of the Fitness League proved gracious and kind in their suggestions and histories. More importantly they invited me into an amazing community of individuals. Finally, Rocky, Patsy, Mick and the men from Hercules Gymnasium gave advice and jokes in good measure.

Closer to home, UCD provided several pillars of support be it the CHOMI workshops, the UCD Writing Center, the members of my Doctoral Studies Panel or Kate, Sarah and Emma in the History Office. I was incredibly fortunate to have the input and advice of Catherine Cox, William Mulligan, Conor Mulvagh and Lindsey Earner-Byrne at various stages of the research. Diarmaid Ferriter and Richard Holt were similarly generous in their comments and critiques. Despite the warnings from others, I never felt alone doing my research. Thanks must also be given to my former Ph.D. advisor Dr. Paul Rouse. Paul’s kind words and encouragement, often interspersed with a demand to improve, meant that the research was an ongoing process of historical enquiry rather than a Sisyphean labour. Paul’s input on writing, research and publication was always simple, direct and effective. Without his confidence in the work,
the present book would have been a rather poorer thing. Likewise, Emily Russell, Joseph Johnson and those at Palgrave Macmillan showed confidence in the work, which I have hopefully, in some way, justified.

I finally wish to thank those closest to me, namely Susan, Mary and Paul. Since we moved in together, Susan has entertained research trips to unexotic places, late-night writing sessions and my incessant need to ask her opinion. Throughout it all, she has proven a source of understanding and of inspiration. The ever growing Carney clan have, likewise, always provided support and jokes in equal measure. Finally, to my parents, Mary and Paul, thank you for all the support and encouragement which fuelled this work.
CONTENTS

1 Introduction 1

2 Combating the ‘Evils of Civilisation’: Recreational Physical Culture in Pre-Independence Ireland 17

3 ‘With This Atmosphere of Unrest and Sinister Rumours…’: Military Physical Culture in Pre-Independence Ireland 53

4 ‘The Production and Maintenance of Health in Body and Mind’: Educational Physical Culture in Pre-Independence Ireland 91

5 ‘Physical Culture Is Good for Body and Soul’: Recreational Physical Culture in Interwar Ireland 127

6 ‘Embracing the Whole Gambit of Physical Exercise’: Interwar Military Physical Culture 169

7 ‘In Ireland the Subject of Physical Training Had Perhaps, Been Neglected’: Interwar Physical Culture in Schools 205
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>8</th>
<th>Conclusion: ‘Physical Culture Is Nation’s Need’</th>
<th>241</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Index</td>
<td>277</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABBREVIATIONS

ACA     Alexandra College Archives
BBC     British Broadcasting Corporation
BMH     Bureau of Military History
CPLA    Croke Park Library and Archive
GAA     Gaelic Athletic Association
GAD     Guinness Archives Dublin
ICA     Irish Citizen Army
IFS     Irish Free State
IPP     Irish Parliamentary Party
IRA     Irish Republican Army
NAI     National Archives of Ireland
NAK     National Archives, Kew
NLI     National Library of Ireland
PRONI   Public Records Office of Northern Ireland
RIC     Royal Irish Constabulary
RUC     Royal Ulster Constabulary
UVF     Ulster Volunteer Force
YMCA    Young Men’s Christian Association
# List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Fig. 2.1 | Martin Willis, a Sandow customer from the early 1900s.  
| Fig. 2.2 | Mac Millan, an Athlete, Gymnast and Acrobat.  
| Fig. 3.1 | 1905 postcard Depicting Military Gymnastics at the Curragh, Co. Kildare |
| Fig. 3.2 | Ulster volunteer force 1914 drilling demonstration at Limavady. |
| Fig. 4.1 | Unidentified school in the west of Ireland c. 1909 |
| Fig. 5.1 | 1938 Broom Advertisement.  
(Lionel Strongfort Institute, *Lionel Strongfort Course*, 1931) |
| Fig. 6.1 | ‘Precision marching from RUC physical culture team.’  
(*Northern Whig*, 3 Jun., 1936) |
| Fig. 7.1 | Physical education class, Harold’s cross dublin |
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

‘There is no department in life in which Physical Culture does not bear a part.’

This is a book about muscle, health and fitness. It is also a book about nationalism, transnationalism, education, sport, recreation, gender and medicine. What connects these areas is the human body. What drives them is physical culture. As a term, physical culture is almost entirely absent from our modern vernacular. Over a century ago, it was used as a term and as a lifestyle—describing one’s self as a physical culturist was a declaration of commitment to a lifestyle defined by health and fitness.¹ Physical culture is still, however, part of Irish life, and certainly of Irish anxieties. Definitions of physical culture will be attempted in the following pages but, as will become clear, there was no one unifying experience. There were multiple efforts occurring simultaneously. A far easier task is to highlight the practices that were classed as physical culture. Depending on the group, and on the motivation, physical culture meant exercising in a gymnasium, performing military drill, physical education classes or gentle exercise at home. One particularly misguided writer from the late nineteenth-century

---

claimed that all the physical culture needed for women was housework. There was no one clear way and it was this confusion which enhanced its malleability. For purists of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, physical culture was a practice distinct from sport and but one which promised to transform an individual’s social, sexual or political life.

Evident of this was the fictional character of Leopold Bloom who, during the course of his *Ulysses*, revealed himself to be a lapsed, although interested, physical culturist. His motivations for doing so stemmed not from an innate love of exercising but an anxiety surrounding his sexual prowess and career prospects. Sport has often been discussed with reference to play, spontaneity and some sort of atavistic desire to compete. Physical culture and its practices—weight training, callisthenics and so on—have rarely been described as admirably. It has, more commonly, been cast in utilitarian terms. Simply put, it is described as a systematic and effective means of shaping the body. Evident in Greco-Roman times, if not earlier, physical culture practices have seldom been defined by spontaneity and, depending on one’s instructor, enjoyment.

Done in the gymnasium, the home or military barracks, physical culture was often defined by structure, rigidity and planning. When Irishmen and women engaged in exercises, they did so with some form of plan. This is not to discount the fun had but rather to emphasise that this kind of activity was, and is, nearly always done with clear and defined motives. It was for this reason that Jan Todd conceptualised physical culture as ‘purposive exercise’, something done to obtain an obvious physiological end. Where such a practice has long captured the attention of military minds, and certainly more so from the early nineteenth-century, it was not until the late nineteenth-century that physical culture became a much more popular concern. The opening decades of the twentieth-century saw

---


a much greater, and unquestioning, acceptance of the idea that individuals must exercise.  

Distinct from sport, physical culture, or rather its activities, are still a point of concern in Ireland. In 2019, Healthy Ireland, an inter-departmental group created in the Republic of Ireland six years previously, claimed that only 46% of adult Irishmen and women achieved the minimum amount of exercise needed to maintain healthy lifestyles. A 2018 all-Island survey reported that only 13% of all schoolchildren reached the minimum targets needed for health. The failure of both groups to meet targets set by the World Health Organization presented a paradox for those involved in healthcare. Gym memberships in the Republic and Northern Ireland have grown consistently since 2015, with roughly 10% of the population estimated to be a gym member. At the same time, large sections of the population appear to be becoming increasingly unhealthy.

Likewise sport holds a central part in Irish life. Gaelic games, soccer and rugby attract millions of Irish eyes every weekend while stadiums, clubs and pitches are littered throughout the island. The disconcerting fact remains that Irish adults and Irish children appear to be less active and more akin to spectators than participants. In both regions, state agencies have attempted to increase the population’s activity. Politicians speak of the need for physical activity, schools have reformed their physical education practices, men and women attend gyms to sculpt their bodies while group exercise classes can be found every night of the week in parish halls and gymnasiums. The need for physical fitness and health is an issue of both political and personal importance. This is not a new phenomenon, however, far from it.

In the late nineteenth-century, Irishmen and women likewise exhibited an intense interest in their health and appearance. At the same moment, educators and policy makers began to discuss what measures, if any, could be taken to improve the nation’s fitness. This was not a peripheral or ephemeral concern, but something which continued for the next several decades. What united these concerns and the debates they encouraged was the term physical culture. In one of the first studies of physical culture in

---

10 Deloitte and Europe Active, European Health and Fitness Report
Britain, Michael Anton Budd described physical culture as an ‘ideological and commercial cultivation of the body’.\textsuperscript{12} This definition has largely stood the test of time. In the Irish context, physical culture meant everything from group exercise classes to military training. For the period chosen for this book, that is, the late nineteenth-century to 1939, physical culture practices were found in classrooms, gymnasiums, military barracks, open fields and, in at least one case, a popular café. In Ireland, this desire to exercise was not a neutral or banal thing. It traversed military, political, social and gender histories. Conceptions of ideal health, strong masculinity and vibrant femininity were projected onto the body. Fears of racial decline, ill health and military defeat drove people into the gymnasium, community centre or classroom.

The rise of physical culture in Ireland represented a new concern with the ideological and material control of the body. The Irish body was reshaped by a confluence of medical innovations, scientific theories and national anxieties about gender. At the core of these worries was a simple premise, one simultaneously attractive and improbable; a physically fit body was a vehicle for broader social or political good. For educators, fit bodies were integral to educational advancement. For generals, strong soldiers were good soldiers whereas for the individual man or woman, a healthy body was presented as a foundation for a prosperous life. The purpose then, of this book, is twofold. First it tracks the rise of the Irish interest in physical culture, marking its influences and defining factors. Following this, the book explores, in three distinct fields (the military/police force, the classroom and the gymnasium), how far new anxieties about the body extended into Irish life. As will become clear, physical culture’s ideological value was rarely questioned in Ireland during this period. Where the limits of physical culture became evident was in material funding. This led to a reoccurring situation in which politicians and the public clamoured for improving physical culture while simultaneously lamenting the lack of money available. For those seeking to draw parallels with Ireland’s present health situation, the Island’s history makes for stark reading.

The Irish interest in physical culture has largely been dealt with in passing reference in broader historical works.\textsuperscript{13} A number of articles have been

\textsuperscript{12} Budd, \textit{The Sculpture Machine}, pp. x–xii.

\textsuperscript{13} Kershner, ‘The world’s strongest man: Joyce or Sandow?”; Rouse, ‘The sporting world and the human heart’.
published but little substantial work currently exists and certainly none which deals with the origins and transmutation of a global phenomenon in the Irish context.14 What then, does a study of physical culture have to contribute to our understanding of Irish history? Restricting the focus of this book to three key areas, namely education, recreation and the military/police, the multifaceted use of physical culture in Ireland becomes clear. At a basic level, the inclusion of physical culture in Irish schools spoke of a new turn in Irish childhood, one which sought to holistically develop mind and body. In recent years a number of works have emerged concerning the development of childhood and adolescence in Ireland as an ideological construct.15 This research has been dominated by issues of gender, nationalism, educational theory and social class.16 Sport has held a peripheral place within these histories with one or two notable exceptions.17 Similarly, work does exist on the development of physical education in Irish schools but this has tended to shy away from the ideological and material realities of such teaching.18 A several-decade study of physical culture, as found in schools and recreational clubs, speaks a great deal to the importance of children’s bodies for educators and politicians. Beginning in the late nineteenth-century, discourses concerning physical education in schools centred on the creation of strong and athletic bodies. The development of such bodies in schoolchildren would, it was hoped, ensure academic achievement while bulwarking the nation-state against future dangers.

Sport was used in this regard by some in the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) or, in the opening decade of the twentieth-century, groups like Na Fianna Éireann, but physical education in schools represented a systemic

attempt to reform the body.\textsuperscript{19} Possible efforts are made here to include the student experience. Politicians and educators may have spoken of holistic development and physiological principles, but schoolchildren often remembered the fun, or lack thereof, in their physical education classes. Funding was rarely enough as evidenced by stories of physical education classes being conducted on public roads, but a deep-seated belief existed in the transformative power of physical culture for children.

Underpinning the systems and conversations surrounding children’s physical culture across the decades chosen were developments in the military and the police force. After the Crimean War (1853–1856), the British military introduced a new training system which had great effects across the Empire. For the first time, the British military began using a systematic form of physical drill. Thus, in 1860, the military opened its first dedicated gymnasium in Aldershot alongside the establishment of the Royal Army Physical Training Corps.\textsuperscript{20} Owing to its military importance, the second British military gymnasium was established in the Curragh, Co. Kildare, in the late 1860s. From then on, military training and its broader influence was keenly felt in Ireland.\textsuperscript{21} This explains why early iterations of military training were found in Irish schools and even police depots.

Work on the military has tended to centre on the class, religious and political outlook of military members.\textsuperscript{22} The physical body of Irish troops, with one or two exceptions, has held a secondary position. Thankfully, the study of Irish masculinities has gone some way to challenge this position. Aidan Beatty, Sikata Banerjee and others have stressed the importance of healthy and strong troops during the War of Independence, 1919–1921.\textsuperscript{23}


\textsuperscript{21}Con Costello, A Most Delightful Station: The British Army on the Curragh of Kildare, Ireland, 1855–1922 (Cork, 1996), pp. 80–94.


The military’s fetishisation of strong bodies, which began in the mid-nineteenth-century, held considerable sway in Ireland for several decades.²⁴ Throughout the period studied, one finds a bleeding out of military conceptions of health and fitness into Irish society. For some, this meant the inclusion of military officers in schools, while for others, it meant mandatory drilling practices found in military or paramilitary groups. Among officers, control and development of the body was thought to have a clear conversion to the battlefield and was taken as representative of the nation’s strength. For historians, a study in this regard elevates the body as a lightening road for nationalist and patriotic discourses.

Operating on the nexus between institutional physical cultures and the military barracks was the world of recreational physical culture. Sport historians and historians of recreation in Ireland have only recently begun to move away from popular sports like Gaelic Football, soccer and rugby.²⁵ A study of physical culture highlights the vibrancy of recreational cultures, at times completely, independent from sport. Arguably more democratic in the kind of facilities and training systems available to Irishmen and women, recreational physical culture was still bounded by its own strictures. The most obvious boundaries on recreational physical culture were geographical. Echoing findings found in regional studies of Irish history, it is clear that some counties were better equipped than others when it came to physical culture.²⁶ In the late nineteenth-century, Ireland’s most advanced, some would say only, industrial city was Belfast which, unsurprisingly, was praised for the gymnasiums and classes found there. Moving into the twentieth-century, other cities and towns developed facilities, but as late as 1939, it was clear that rural Ireland and the west of Ireland were areas at times bereft of formal physical culture.

Equally influential was the issue of social and economic class. From the ‘birth’ of physical culture in the late nineteenth-century, a clear disparity existed between the kinds of exercise available for the working and middle classes. Focused on the English context, and done as a backdrop to a biography of Eugen Sandow, David Chapman cited the distinction between working- and middle-class physical culture.27 Associated more with brute strength and immorality, working-class physical culture, as defined by Chapman, was more concerned with recreational weightlifting and associational drill. Middle- and upper-class physical culture was characterised by newly furnished gymnasiums, esoteric systems and a promise of self-fulfilment. In line with other European countries from this period, Irish physical culture was driven largely by an urban middle class interested in physical and mental betterment. Where working-class children and adults were often subjected, involuntarily, to physical culture through religious organisations or factory gymnasiums, wealthier classes could choose from a variety of systems and locations.

Recreational physical culture was equally important when it came to the kinds of masculinities and femininities attached to the pursuit. In 2019, a much-needed handbook on Irish masculinity argued that despite the vibrancy of research on femininity in Ireland, more work was needed on masculinity.28 Physical culture, in other contexts, has been linked to broader issues of gender.29 Given the centrality of the body in ideas of what it means to be a man or woman, studying the training of the body provides a new means of enquiry in Irish history. Still in their infancy, studies of gender in Irish history have, for the most part, been defined by an interest in monolithic studies of masculinity or femininity. What is meant by this is that such works tend to focus on nationalist, sporting or leisure identities.30 These studies have advanced our understandings of the

mechanisms and boundaries of gender in Ireland but are in danger of erasing historical nuance in favour of tight narrative.

This point was brought to the fore by Ben Griffin whose critique of ‘hegemonic masculinity’, the theoretical construct advanced by R.W. Connell, offered a new means of approaching gender.\(^{31}\) Where Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity distinguishes between an overarching archetype of masculinity from which other subgroups are measured, Griffin instead advanced the idea of ‘communication communities’. Similar, in a sense to Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’, such groups are conceptualised in a recognition of the ‘variegated and uneven dissemination of particular sets of cultural norms’.\(^{32}\) Communication communities allow for nuance when dealing with gender as they recognise the multiple spaces and groups one claims membership of. Such communities do not discard ideas of hegemony, and, indeed, take account of the class and social structures which underpin gender identities.\(^{33}\) Griffin conceptualised the study of historical masculinities using a four-fold set of processes. This begins with a process of ‘cultural contestation’ wherein certain forms of masculinity are ‘celebrated’ thereby leading to ‘patterns of subordination, complicity, [and] marginalisation’ in a communication community.\(^{34}\) Next, there is the process whereby access to the mechanisms which allow men to identify themselves with these celebrated masculinities is unequally distributed within that communication community. This in turn leads to the process by which the performance of a particular masculinity is accorded recognition by others. Finally, the individual is positioned in the community in relation to sets of institutional practices, rewards and sanctions.\(^{35}\) A form of masculinity, or indeed femininity, that is highly prized in one community may take a subordinate role in another. Issues of class, education, geography and religion explain, in part, such disparities.

For the purposes of this book, Griffin’s framework provides an ideal frame of reference. It acknowledges that the dominant social group is not


\(^{33}\) Griffin, ‘Hegemonic Masculinity as a Historical Problem’, pp. 377–400.

\(^{34}\) Ibid.

\(^{35}\) Ibid, p. 379.
that which fully embody normative ideals, but rather those who can ‘plausibly present themselves as doing so’ within their communities. Put another way, it is impossible to achieve an abstract ideal entirely but it is possible to engage in behaviours associated with it. Furthermore, Griffin’s framework affords a greater place to the body than Connell’s previous discussions of hegemonic masculinity. Where Connell discussed the muscular body as an emblem or marker of traditionally privileged forms of masculinity, Griffin stresses the agency of the body within certain communities. Bodies acted as a constraint or a facilitator to certain communities and were, in turn, shaped by the norms and values of communities. In this regard, Griffin was greatly influenced by Pierre Bourdieu’s study of habitus which, in the case of the body, refers to both the subtle and explicit ways in which a body conforms to group standards. In the case of an Irish physical culturist, one learned to move the body in a certain way during exercise. The movement involved in completing an exercise in the gymnasium was an explicit ‘habitus’ learned by the body for those desirous of joining a gymnasium-based community. More subtle bodily movements were found in the efforts of individuals to change one’s posture, breathing technique or walking gait.

Potentially innumerable, communities vary depending on their geographical space, education, occupation, religion and friend group. Such groups are influenced by the broader cultural, political and social milieu—in fact they sustain it—but the influences these factors have vary depending on the group. Although a somewhat chaotic abstraction, there is little neatness in the idea of potentially thousands of groups coexisting simultaneously; the idea of such groups holds truer to reality than other frameworks. In the course of his or her day, a person interested in physical culture could occupy the realm of work, play, prayer, sexual relations,

40 An alternative approach to Griffin in this regard is Tony Coles, ‘Negotiating the Field of Masculinity’, Men and Masculinities, 12:1 (2009), pp. 30–44.
relaxation, politics, literature, theatre, home life and so on. Put simply, people moved through different groups, each with their own hierarchies and principles, constantly. Studying communication communities allows us to understand a hegemonic ideal—in this case the athletic body—but also the ‘frequency’ at which it was found. The ideal of the muscular or athletic frame held considerable sway in Ireland during the period studied but not all ascribed to the ideals and activities as intensely as others. The goal of the present work is to study those contexts wherein this interest was at its highest, while also taking account of the varying motives attached to it.

Similarities exist between groups but space is given to individual difference within these pages. Turning to Irish physical culture, the disparities in Eugen Sandow’s consumer base illustrate the importance of such differences. In 1905, Private R. Baxton, then stationed in Kildare, wrote to Sandow’s *Magazine of Physical Culture*, about his physical transformation. Submitting photographs of his half-naked physique, Baxton proudly spoke of his physical transformation, which he felt reflected the body needed by soldiers. Furthering this point, Baxton asked Sandow to ‘use this’ [the photograph] in whatever way he saw fit. Two years later in 1907, Herbert Grace, a young Dublin assistant in a hardware store, wrote to the same magazine. Admitting shame with his physique, which had failed to ‘combat evils and keep in form’, Grace expressed commitment to the idea that a strong, muscular body was necessary for men seeking to improve their lot. Baxton and Grace shared the same cultural outlet in Sandow’s magazine. Both professed a belief in the muscular body and how it related to their sense of masculinity but differed in their belief of acceptable masculine behaviour. For Grace, a muscular and lean body, the kind of body he desired, would help him advance socially and, he implied, sexually. Baxton, on the other hand, linked his physique to military prowess and soldierly conduct.

The two agreed on the relationship between muscularity and masculinity but differed in their understanding of what it entailed. Simply put, they operated in different communication communities. Grace and Baxton serve as two examples of a much larger phenomenon. This book will not

41The previously discussed Leopold Bloom is a useful, albeit fictional, example. Brandon Kershner, ‘The world’s strongest man: Joyce or Sandow?’ pp. 667–693.

42‘Notes of the Week’, *Physical Culture*, 16 March (1905), p. 271.

discuss a singular type of masculinity or femininity. Such an attempt would prove exhaustive and, ultimately, futile. Instead, the book examines the institutions, expressions and strategies used to negotiate gender identities. These communities were disparate in comparison but shared a belief in the ideological meaning of the body. Physical culture, and its practices, often related to a hyper-realised sense of masculine or feminine identity. Here gender will be studied, not as a monolithic construct, but as an ever evolving and negotiated process, one at times lacking in studies of Irish gender.44

Physical culture was a global phenomenon, one which spread from Laos to the United States and many countries in between.45 Physical culturists consumed much of the same literature, used the same equipment, spoke of the same icons and used the same language. This point was true for the individual exercisers as well as the military officer or educationalist seeking to reform the bodies in their care. Physical culture cannot be counted as the first global fitness trend—that arguably cared during the mid-nineteenth-century—but it can be depicted as the first transformative trend, one which swept across bodies, institutions and buildings. Previous work on physical culture has stressed its ideological value and allure for policymakers and gym goers. For British exercisers during the same period, physical culture was a means of stemming the tide against physical degeneracy, of reforming the female form, protecting schoolchildren and building muscular physiques.46 In interwar France, physical culture was tied in with the regeneration of the French body politic as expressed in its male citizens.47 Likewise in Germany, physical culture practices were used in everything from holistic medical practice to the gymnastic systems promoted by the Nazi regime.48 This is to say nothing of physical culture’s martial, religious and social importance in the United States, Asia or Russia.49

46 Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Managing the Body*.
47 Tumblety, *Remaking the Male Body*.
What marks the Irish case study as exceptional within these histories was the porous, and fractured, nature of Irish society. Ireland is almost entirely distinguishable from previous studies owing to its distinct political history.\textsuperscript{50} The partition of Ireland into Northern Ireland, still connected to Great Britain, and an Irish Free State in 1921, created a situation in which two governments enacted dramatically different physical culture systems and policies. In the past, work has tended to focus on physical culture in a single nation. Aside from Charlotte MacDonald’s comparative work, few scholars have compared and contrasted political and recreational physical culture in two states.\textsuperscript{51} Discounting, momentarily, the contentious political history of Ireland prior to partition, the sundering of Ireland in 1921 offers a ready-made and revealing comparison. A study of physical culture in Ireland tells a great about then about state physical culture.

Ireland’s secondary position in global politics further marks its uniqueness. Unlike the German, British or French case, where domestic physical culture industries flourished, Irish physical culturists relied on foreign materials. That Ireland relied primarily on outside sources of physical culture, that it had a lacklustre domestic industry and that groups were anxious to mimic foreign efforts, highlights the global reach of physical culture. Work has already begun in this vein in Asia, but little has been done in the European context.\textsuperscript{52} That Irishmen and women wrote to British, French or American physical culture magazines, tells much about Ireland’s reliance on the global economy. It is equally correct to see it as an example of how global products, ideas and markets, came to be localised in the Irish context.

Given the institutional physical cultures found in the military and classroom, not to mention the recreational physical cultures found in the gymnasium and social club, it would be incorrect to understand physical culture as a minority interest. Problems arose with its provision, and certainly at times, in its implementation, but its existence could not be denied. Physical culture in Ireland uniquely reflected Irish interests in nationalism, health and even militarism, while simultaneously offering a global outlet for Irish exercisers to interact with, and appropriate, broader global identities and practices. As varied as the systems and exercises were, the need to control the body was rarely questioned.

\textsuperscript{50} Banerjee, \textit{Muscular Nationalism}.
\textsuperscript{51} Macdonald, \textit{Strong, Beautiful and Modern}.
\textsuperscript{52} Creak, \textit{Embodied Nation}.
STRUCTURE

Tracing the Irish interest in physical culture from the mid to late nineteenth-century to the eve of the Second World War, this book examines three key areas of Irish life, the military/police, the school and the recreational gymnasium. It was here where physical culture’s impact was keenly felt and indeed within these circles, where physical culture’s importance or need was rarely questioned. Chapters 1–3 examine physical culture in military, educational and recreational settings from the late nineteenth-century to the end of the Irish War of Independence in 1921. The cessation of Ireland’s conflict with Great Britain is taken as a natural juncture. Post-1921, Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State diverged in their use and understanding of physical culture. Chapters 4–6 discuss physical culture in two interconnected, but politically different, Irelands.

Given that physical culture, as a popular phenomenon, was driven by new trends in recreation, Chap. 1 begins with a discussion of recreational physical culture from the late nineteenth-century to 1922. Largely a middle-class and male preserve, at least initially, this brand of physical culture was characterised by fears of physical degeneration, mental sluggishness and a desire to return to nature. Opening with a discussion of famed physical culturist Eugen Sandow, whose trips to Ireland in the 1890s illustrate physical culture’s rapid growth, the chapter discusses the variety of individuals and groups, who took to physical culture to improve their bodies and, it was assumed, their lives.

Deeply connected with, and informing, recreational physical cultures were developments in the military during this period. Martial physical culture was an incredibly confused affair and it is this complexity scrutinised in Chap. 2. From the late nineteenth-century to the War of Independence, martial physical culture referred to those actions taken by the British military, those taken by paramilitary groups in the lead up to, and during, the Great War as well as those undertaken during the War of Independence. Each of these groups adapted, appropriated and adopted physical culture systems for their own ends.

Where they shared in physical practices they differed in their motives. Responding to recreational and military physical cultures, Chap. 3 explores educational physical culture. As was the case in the post-independence period, educational physical culture was a topic of intense interest and debate among politicians and educators but one which suffered from a lack of funding. Despite this fact, low-cost efforts were pursued, at times
vigorously, and helped normalise physical culture in the classroom both practically and ideologically.

Educational and military physical culture grew in importance during the interwar period. So too did recreational physical culture, studied in Chap. 4. Where recreational pursuits drove physical culture in the years prior to the Great War, the interwar period was more reactive to broader institutional physical cultures. Educational and military debates influenced a recreational sector struggling to recover from nearly a decade of conflict. It is unsurprising that gymnasiums closed during the Great War and struggled to remain open during the War of Independence and Civil War. What is surprising was the vibrancy brought to physical culture in Northern Ireland and the Free State when peace returned. This included race Olympiads, co-operative gymnasiums, new outlets for women’s exercise and a focus on physical degeneration. What distinguished interwar physical culture also was, in part, a much more explicit promotion of male sexuality. Individuals in the pre-war period spoke of vigour and vitality. Those in the interwar period unabashedly claimed that women found muscular men sexually attractive. The impact this had, in both states, was found during the 1930s with the rise of pseudo-fascist groups, ‘perfect men’ competitions and a small acceptance of nudism.

That Northern Ireland and the Free State exhibited shared and differing conceptions of recreational physical culture is clear. This situation was replicated in the military physical cultures studied in Chap. 5. Still under the remit of Great Britain, Northern Ireland became the seat of British military power in Ireland in the early 1920s. Operating in a time of temporary peace, military physical culture was no less important. This point was reiterated in the Free State. Largely unchanged in the decade following the War of Independence, the Irish military adopted a new system of Sokol physical culture from Czecho-Slovakia in 1934. Within five years of its implementation, Sokol was found in schools, recreational clubs, public demonstrations and physical training monographs. Sokol’s growth highlighted once more, the broader appeal of military physical culture in Irish society.

Reflecting the growing institutional importance of physical culture, Chap. 6 continues this focus on educational physical culture, this time from 1921 to 1939. Now focusing on Northern Ireland and the Free State, Chap. 6 centres on both states’ efforts to popularise educational physical culture under trying circumstances. Still encouraged by a pre-war conviction that strong students ensured state prosperity and educational
achievement, the two governments instituted a series of new measures. In Northern Ireland, educational physical culture was problematised by sectarian concerns. In the Free State, the need for fiscal solvency hampered the spread of physical culture in classes. Where funding wavered, interest did not.

Speaking in the mid-1930s on his series with Radio Athlone, Captain John F. Lucy told Irish listeners:

The people of this country have the tradition of being of good stock and physique. Compared with other countries, we can, to my own knowledge, produce a very high percentage of men and women who are potentially physically fit.

At the same time, we neglect physical culture more than any other nation. There has been no great national drive to preserve it, as in Germany, Italy and the middle European countries. This is an incalculable loss to our country.

The nation that is physically fit is buoyant, cheerful, daring and successful. If the physique of the nation is bad or neglected the people tend to be gloomy, lazy and intolerant.53

In one passage, Lucy encapsulated the essence of Irish physical culture. It was routinely recognised as important and worthwhile, but at the same time, it was seen as neglected and in need of support. The contradictory and confused nature of Irish physical culture, which was predicated on the control of the body, was as apparent to those at the time as it is to the twenty-first-century reader.

---