

Strong, Beautiful and Modern

National Fitness in Britain, New Zealand,
Australia and Canada, 1935–1960

Charlotte Macdonald



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Contents

Preface and Acknowledgements	7
Introduction	10
1 Movement is Life: National Fitness in England and Scotland	35
2 Leisure and Democracy: Physical Welfare as the People's Entitlement in New Zealand	70
3 Education or Health? National Fitness in New South Wales and Across Australia	99
4 Fitness for War and a Changed World: National Fitness in Canada	127
5 Healthy Bodies, States and Modernity: A Twentieth-Century Dilemma	151
Abbreviations	179
List of Illustrations	180
Endnotes	181
Bibliography	211
Index	231

Preface and Acknowledgements

To identify the precise origins of this project would be to invent a history. The questions I have been pursuing have remained consistent but the answers have proved elusive and the archives dispersed. Throughout, the underlying research pulse has been insistent, driven by a curiosity sparked by provocation as much as by discovery. That provocation has come in various guises, all of them derived from the paradoxical position sport and physical pursuits occupy in modern culture. Ubiquitous, contentious, at times weighted with symbolism (at others delightfully purposeless), sport and physical pursuits largely inhabit a zone outside critical thinking. Whether that is explained by a lingering hierarchy that rates mind over body; or by a distinction drawn between things that endure over those which are ephemeral and popular, or simply a matter of aesthetics, it remains a central feature of modern life. Otherwise predictable conversations amongst those sharing common interests, spaces, political and social views can falter when the subject of sport and physical pursuits come up – branching either into spirited engagement or falling away into silence. It remains what I have come to call the missing binary: a divider cutting across the familiar lines of class, ethnicity, generation, centre and periphery, public and private. There are ways in which it adheres to contours of gender, but even here, there is not a neat correspondence.

Within the world of historical research it is particularly puzzling. More than half a century's work in a historical canvas massively expanded by an interest in telling a history of ordinary people and events, as well as a history of elites and exceptional moments, has paid slight attention to the history of sport, people at play or leisure in general. These things have not been completely ignored, but they occupy much less space in historians' interests than they do in the pasts they seek to understand. **Sample Material © 2013 UBC Press**

These knots have sat in my mind for some time. Three things turned them from abstract reflection to active research, though it has taken me awhile to realise their significance. The earliest was W. H. (Bill) Oliver's encouraging interest in the central project of social history (in which sport had a place), and in which the local was no more nor less important to historical argument, than was the evidence from afar. In discussions around a seminar table a long time ago, and in debates with my fellow students that continued, heatedly, beyond that realm, lie some of the important foundations of this work. I think it was at that time that I first read C. L. R. James' *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), a work of continuing inspiration. New Zealand's painful engagement with sporting politics through the 1960s–80s controversies over sporting contacts with South Africa provided the second stimulus. Connections that deserved revisiting were prompted by one of Winifred Davin's stories. Southland-born but living in Oxford in the late 1940s, Winnie recalled Dylan and Caitlin Thomas as house guests appearing garbed in New Zealand rugby jerseys in lieu of pyjamas.

Strong, Beautiful and Modern is, inevitably, a product of the tensions generated by the enigmas of sport and fitness in contemporary society. Many of those who have assisted with this project share an interest in these provocations; others remain mystified by the conversations they generate. All contributions have been valuable, and I would like to acknowledge them here.

For all manner of generosity extended to me over the years engaged in writing this book – practical, intellectual and convivial – I would like to thank the following institutions and individuals: Victoria University of Wellington has provided a place for historical work, both in the company of students, and of colleagues. Students in my HIST 235 Terrible Wonder of Modernity, HIST 427 Empire and Desire courses, and those undertaking postgraduate degrees, have taught me much. Financial support from the School of History, Philosophy, Political Science and International Relations under head Ken Perszyk; the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences under Dean Deborah Willis and Deputy Dean Sekhar Bandyopadhyay; and the University Research Committee convened by Neil Quigley, has been vital to seeing the project through. I received warm hospitality while on periods of research leave at the Women's Research and Resources Centre at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, under director Paula Bourne, and at the International Centre for the Study of the History of Sport at De Montfort University, Leicester, under director Wray Vamplew.

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Judith Smart and the publishers' anonymous readers offered highly constructive comments on the manuscript.

Librarians and archivists across the world have been unfailingly helpful, often ransacking sections of their collections for less orthodox items. For all kinds of other help I warmly acknowledge Meg Bailey, Rona Bailey (1914–2005), Rachel Barrowman, Michael Bassett, Barbara Brookes, Anna Brown, Hayley Brown, Amanda Beauchamp, Rebecca Burke, Yvette Butcher, Richard Cashman, the Ciochetto Family, Miriam Clark, Derek Clear, Hera Cook, Anna Davin and Henry Tillotson, Amy Davis, Gerry Dowse, Jane Fogden, Pennie Gapes, Nadia Gush, Susan Foley, Bruce Kidd, Manying Ip, Susie Johnston, Graham Langton, Susann Liebich, Noel Lynch (1924–2010), Jim McAloon, Malcolm McKinnon, arch-modernists Evelyn M. H. Macdonald/Mathieson (1918–2003) and G. Jim Macdonald (1921–1982), Judith McKoy, Owen Mann, Jill Matthews, Kate Murphy, Erik Olssen, Trevor Richards and Patti O'Neill, one-time members of both the Onslow Rowing Club and the anti-Rowing Club; Aislinn Ryan, Ben Schrader, Tim Shoebridge, Debbie Stowe, Rosemary Swindells and Noeline Thomson (1908–2001).

The publishing team at BWB, and in particular Ginny Sullivan, Jo Scully and Philip Rainer have seen the book through the press with care and exactitude. To Bridget Williams, whose publishing continues to go beyond the boundaries, a special thanks. Craig Cherrie has read and listened, and, most importantly, kept the mountains of Tongariro in sight.

CM, Wellington, 2011

Introduction

Facing the mantelpiece from which the radio voice spoke in warm and spritely tone, listeners tuning in to the BBC in December 1939 followed instructions to stand up, stretch tall, breathe in, bend slowly, rise up and relax. Repeat again. Now, raise the arms above the head, bend to the left and back to the centre. Bend to the right and back to the centre. And relax. Ten minutes of exercise at the beginning of the day – simple, regular, done at home or at work – the announcer promised, would make all the difference to feeling good and keeping healthy.¹

The BBC fitness programmes, small items in the daily schedule, were a novelty in 1939. Similar programmes were broadcast on New Zealand radio in 1939–40, scripted and presented by Noeline Thomson. In Sydney, listeners to the ABC heard the Canadian accent of Gordon Young guiding them through the ‘daily dozen’.² Across Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver and homes throughout Canada, the same set of stretch, bend and breathe exercises came down the wireless. All these broadcasts were part of national fitness campaigns launched across Britain and the ‘white Dominions’ between 1937 and 1943. Designed to persuade people that ‘exercise is good for you’, they represent a convergence in the history of states, bodies and modernity. To be strong, beautiful and modern became a collective as well as a personal endeavour.

Campaigns to encourage greater physical activity by men and women beyond their school years were the products of legislation passed in Britain in July 1937, New Zealand in November 1937, New South Wales (Australia) in 1938, the Commonwealth of Australia in 1941 and Canada in 1943.³ The legislation established schemes to raise public awareness, to distribute funds to existing sporting and recreation associations, to encourage local authorities to provide sports grounds and swimming pools, and to foster the professional development of physical education. Although the



National Fitness was the theme for the Lord Mayor's Parade through the streets of London in November 1937. The women were followed by a group of men in black tops and white trousers parading under two further banners carrying the words 'In work or play' 'Fitness Wins'. Topical Press Agency, Gamma Keystone Collection, Getty Images

formal names given to the programmes varied – Physical Training and Recreation in Britain, Physical Welfare and Recreation in New Zealand, National Fitness in Australia and Canada – the schemes were popularly referred to as ‘national fitness’ or, in New Zealand, ‘physical welfare’. Introduced by governments of the right and the left with widespread support across the political spectrum, the campaigns flared brightly but briefly. Attracting high-profile and sometimes glamorous endorsement, they foundered on the difficulty of reconciling state initiative with the freedom defined in voluntarism: the right of healthy adults to pursue fitness in games, sport and recreation at their own behest and for their own ends. In all but Australia, the campaigns lasted only a few years. However, their limited success served as a curtain-raiser for later and more sustained involvement by governments in promoting sport and physical exercise, towards the end of the twentieth century.

Strong, Beautiful and Modern tells the story of the national fitness campaigns as a movement spanning the ‘British world’ in the 1930s and 1940s. They were a product of the tumultuous uncertainty of the pre-World War II era. The history is discomfiting in its origins, significant in the dilemmas it exposes of the limits governments faced in urging people into sport and exercise, and interesting for what it reveals about ‘being modern’ in the mid-century decades. But if living in modern times meant being strong and beautiful, making better bodies was not just a project

of government: the political initiatives came on the crest of a contemporary wave. A key theme running through the book is the widespread and diverse ‘healthy body culture’ that was a novel feature of the 1930s.⁴ It was evident in the burgeoning popularity of sport, in fitness ‘fads’ and in the fashion for sports clothes and outdoor pursuits such as hiking. ‘Movement is Life’, the slogan of the immensely popular Women’s League of Health and Beauty, founded in 1930, captured the mood of the time. From many quarters – medical, educational, commercial and popular – came the message that it was possible, and desirable, to have a better body. And this was the way to a better life.

The schemes brought into existence by the national fitness legislation across all four countries between 1937 and 1943 encompassed a wide array of activities. They ranged from organised, competitive sport, played at levels from the local to national and international, to more participation-based recreation and outdoor pursuits. In urging people to be more active, the schemes were deliberately broad in scope, seeking to provide as wide a stimulus as possible to the greatest number of people. At this time the sharp distinctions that would later come to be made between elite sport and other levels of competition and activity did not exist. Much more significant at the time was the line drawn between professional and amateur sports.⁵

What it meant to have ‘a modern body’, the empire-wide character of the national fitness movement, and the difficult political questions of government in sport and fitness form the principal themes of *Strong, Beautiful and Modern*. The introduction sets those three themes in context, and signals what is elaborated in the chapters to follow. The particular histories of the schemes in Britain, New Zealand, Australia and Canada are explored in Chapters 1–4. The final chapter draws together the thematic strands, in a discussion of the connecting and comparative lines that emerge from the local histories.

Modern Bodies, Modern Times

In 1938 the British company HMV employed Hungarian Edit Mezey, the star of a newsreel item ‘A little slimming a day – keeps the avoirdupois away’, to make records providing instructions for exercises to be done at home. The company saw an opportunity in the massive popularity of the culture of the healthy body.⁶ So central had the pursuit of the ‘better body’ become by the 1930s that it seemed almost to define the modern condition. New norms in behaviour and appearance marked the post-World War I world so that it became unmistakably and irreversibly a different place from what had been before. Those novelties were everywhere visible – in the shortened skirts and bobbed hair of women, or the new habit of men smoking cigarettes and keeping their chins clean-shaven. The ever-expanding world of cinema soon added the wonder of the human voice to the delightful sight of bodies walking, running and leaping on screen. Highly successful commercial

promotion of soaps, creams, lotions and lipsticks democratised the pursuit of beauty.⁷ What was portrayed as new-found freedom for the body was celebrated in enthusiasm for ‘natural’ places and pursuits. Exercising with bare feet; exposing skin to fresh air and sunlight; walking, hiking, camping and cycling in the outdoors were all taken up with gusto. The suntanned hiker is a motif for the era some have termed ‘the long week-end’, a figure capturing both the outdoor body culture and a greater access to leisure for working people.⁸

In advertising, popular culture, education and medicine, the message that physical activity was the key to health and happiness was pervasive. In the 1930s it was also novel. Celebration of the active body was premised on the new notion that constant replenishment of the body’s powers was necessary to human health and functioning. It replaced an older understanding of the body as a closed system, born with a finite quantum of energy that was gradually expended over the course of a lifetime. Constraints on women’s physical activity, where vital energies were supposed to be saved for maternity, were fundamentally challenged by the modern approach. Female figures dancing, leaping and running – in actuality and in the iconography of the time – spoke strongly of the contemporary.⁹ Bodily freedom amplified the political emancipation achieved by British and North American women in winning the vote at the end of World War I (New Zealand and Australian women had won the vote in 1893 and 1902, respectively).

But the making of better bodies also points to the profound awareness amongst people during the 1920s and 1930s of the fragility of human life. World War I had demonstrated that the nineteenth-century achievement of industrial production could become the uniquely twentieth-century horror of industrial death, mutilation and destruction. The 1918 influenza pandemic reinforced a perception of the vulnerability of populations even in the so-called ‘advanced’ world. As Ana Carden-Coyne has recently argued, the interwar decades were powerfully consumed by the project of reconstructing bodies. The impetus was both remedial and regenerative – seeking to mend actually and symbolically the broken bodies of the war years, while also looking for new vitality. Health and fitness were central to this reconstruction.¹⁰ The idea that the body was malleable – that it could be reconstructed, made fit and made healthy – was true insofar as medical science was making such transformative miracles more possible than ever before. It also underpinned the wide array of attentions to which the body became subject in these years. The belief that social improvement could be facilitated through improving bodies was one that, from this point forth, became a major goal for states and for individuals.

There were, however, some darker aspects to these ideas, which in their extreme form surfaced as theories about ‘race purity’ and symbols of totalitarian power. These connections form part of the disquieting context for the early national fitness movements. But while these elements have understandably come



New Zealander Jack Lovelock shortly after winning the 1500 metre glamour race in the Olympic Stadium, Berlin, 6 August 1936. Lovelock ran a perfect race, keeping close in the first laps and sprinting out to a commanding lead and record-setting time of 3:47.8 minutes. *Berliner Illustrite Zeitung*, 1936, Ullstein A. G. Berlin, p.88

to dominate historical imagination of the period, the 1920s–1930s world of sports and body culture was much broader and more diverse. Sport and physical culture movements offered forms of political engagement for progressives as well as fascists in this period. In Britain, those who first argued for a national fitness scheme believed that the country risked ‘falling behind’ the model being set in continental Europe. Envious and admiring glances were cast toward the well-organised groups performing physical exercises and participating in feats of strength and skill on the Continent. In addition, the holiday schemes, playgrounds and cultural programmes providing mass leisure through Germany’s *Kraft durch Freude* (Strength through Joy) and Italy’s *Dopolavoro* (after-work) movements spoke of populations that were better provided-for, more successful and more vibrant than those in Britain. Competitive fixtures between British and empire sports representatives extended far beyond participation at the Olympic Games held in Berlin in August 1936. Officials, politicians and ordinary citizens from Britain and the Dominions visited Germany, and reported in complimentary terms on what they observed of sporting and recreation programmes.

Sport, fitness and dance movements, and leisure in many forms, provided places of mixing and exchange through these years of polarising politics and international tension.¹¹ It is a proximity that subsequently proved discomforting. National fitness in Britain and the Dominions was the product of a period in which the promotion of greater fitness and physical activity amongst adult populations was not the monopoly of any single political ideology or party. In this study an effort is made to see those years from the perspective of contemporaries who were unaware, even as they became increasingly apprehensive, of how events would unfold. The huge disjuncture that the events of 1939–45 cut through the midst of twentieth-century history make it extraordinarily difficult to see the 1930s, and especially the years 1936–39, except through the lens of the impending catastrophe.

Today, the phrase ‘national fitness’ inevitably raises the spectre of eugenics. The term itself draws on the common language of social improvement pervasive through many parts of the world in the first half of the twentieth century. As recent commentators have noted, eugenics was ‘not simply the sinister pro-Nazi precursor it looks like today’, but ‘rather, a broad church with confidence in its own scientific standing’.¹² The archives consulted for the current project yield little evidence of attempts to advance a specific eugenic agenda. Encouraging greater physical activity and levels of fitness among the existing adult population was the overriding goal. The focus was, in this sense, a limited one. Nowhere is there any indication of an attempt to distinguish ‘fit’ from ‘unfit’ portions of the population. Promoters of national fitness through physical exercise believed it was possible to improve physique, but there is no sign they sought to ‘improve’ national populations through the eugenic science of selective breeding. The shadow now carried by the

term provides another reason why the campaigns have fallen out of view. It might be fairly argued that the question remains open, on the basis that historians work within limits of evidence. Is it the silence that speaks?

National fitness finds a place within Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska's recent *Managing the Body: Beauty, Health and Fitness in Britain 1880–1939* (2010), and Caroline Daley's *Leisure and Pleasure: Reshaping and Revealing the New Zealand Body 1900–1960* (2003). Both works feature the fitness schemes as notable episodes in national histories of ideas and government-initiated policies around the body. For Zweiniger-Bargielowska, Britain's physical training and recreation initiative serves as the end point in a history charting the transformation from late Victorian anxieties over urban degeneration, the state of the nation and empire, and the effects of such decline on masculinity, to the modern mass phenomena of the 1920s–30s where femininity was to the fore. In Daley's discussion, New Zealand's physical welfare scheme is a 'state experiment' in a story tracing the impact of physical culture and recreation from Eugen Sandow's 1903 visit through the dynamics of restriction and emancipation, concealment and uncovering, in a society often characterised in this period as one of provincial puritanism. Together with Carden-Coyne's *Reconstructing the Body: Classicism, Modernism, and the First World War* (2009), a comparative and interdisciplinary study of England, the United States and Australia, these works provide a rich account of the contest of ideas and circumstances in which the 'modern body' came to be imagined, treated, described, regulated and also, indeed, enjoyed.

These three studies form part of a much larger field. Thinking about 'the body' has proved a lively area of interest for scholars in recent years. While topics, questions and approach vary hugely, an underlying thread is the idea that human bodies are made as much as they are born. Historical, cultural and political circumstances, in other words, have a direct bearing on people's physical lives, both individually and collectively. While early work in the field had a tendency to concentrate either on the ways in which bodies were regulated or idealised (Bryan Turner's *Regulating Bodies*, and Kenneth Dutton's *The Perfectible Body* point to these directions), later work has produced more multi-dimensional accounts of changing meanings, uses and forms of the human body.¹³

Nonetheless, there remains some tension between 'the body' as a conceptual object of critique and analysis, and the unique, variable and ever-changing forms of living bodies. In part, this is a response to an earlier presumption that the human body, as a biological entity, lay beyond the realm of explanation afforded by history, politics or culture. A critical insistence has been important but has, perhaps, left 'the body' at some distance from a fuller historical explanation and imagining – an evocation of historical actors as living breathing people. Admittedly, this can be difficult given the limits and partiality of the archival traces.

In *Strong, Beautiful and Modern* some attempt has been made to address these tensions, or at least to acknowledge the difficulties they pose. While the book focuses on ‘the body’ as the subject of government attention through the national fitness schemes, the history is framed by wider questions. The dominant view may be offered by archives created and maintained by states, but other vantage points can be found – in contemporary advertising, entertainment, radio broadcasting (commercial and public), photographs and personal papers. These offer a fuller sense of what it was to be active, to enjoy physical exertion, to run onto a field, to plunge into the cool water of pool or river, to feel sun on bare skin, to sweat and shiver. The young women who appear on the front cover, photographed by John Pascoe as they pause in their training as physical welfare officers, and those from the Waipawa workplace team who posed formally for their group portrait (page 19), may offer more vivid evidence than the formal written record.

The discussion also pays attention to those for whom sport, exercise and fitness were matters of indifference, hostility or even dread. Many failed to heed injunctions to get up and begin the day with ‘the daily dozen’; some were prevented by illness, disability or age. For significant parts of the population the unceasing and expanding stream of sports reporting in newspapers, radio and newsreel was a matter of boredom, banality or incomprehension. Within the world of radio broadcasting, too, there were sharply differing views as to the pros and cons of sports and fitness as subjects to put ‘to air’, the BBC adopting a particularly vehement stance. Some of these voices, less enamoured of the fit body enterprise, will also feature in the chapters that follow.

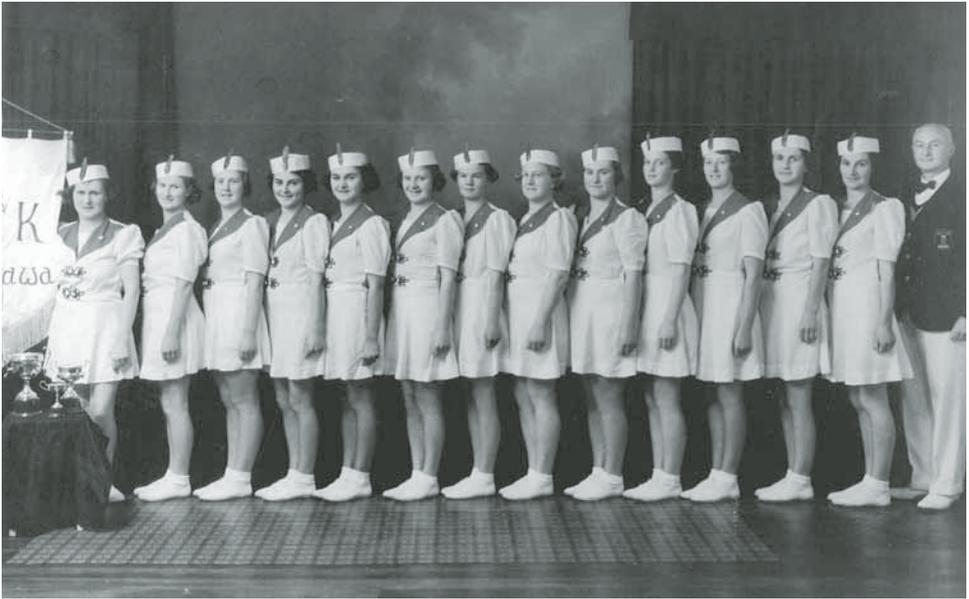
Understanding the contrary nature of attempts to make bodies modern takes us to the broader context of modernity. A sense of living in times that were new and different, at once exciting and frightening, gave contemporaries their identity as ‘modern’. They felt and spoke of themselves as living in a world in sharp contrast to that of their parents, let alone of their grandparents. Dressing in a short black skirt to perform in Hyde Park with the Women’s League of Health and Beauty before a watching public and movie cameras, for example, was to be modern. Physically fit and active young women such as the members of the League were highly conspicuous forms of the new modernity.

Marshall Berman’s classic elaboration of modernity in *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (1982) presents it as a maelstrom: a time and state of being simultaneously alive to wonder and terror, excitement and monotony, hope and despair.¹⁴ Berman identifies the period from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s as one of profound and constant change: technological, social, political. For others the interwar decades represent the epitome of modernity, when the aesthetic currents of modernism in architecture, design, typography and art make ‘the modern’ most manifest. Whether the temporal boundaries are drawn broadly or more narrowly,

the period is characterised by rapid innovation, advancing technology, a shift from production to consumption, urbanism and, above all, constant novelty. The pace and rate of change, the speed and exhilaration of modern life, the revolutions in material life linked to those in politics and culture, the much-vaunted and decried ‘death’ of religion – all coexist with shadowier features. On the dark side lie the alienation and anonymity of city living, the capacity of speed to numb rather than thrill, the power of technology to destroy as well as to create. The diverse meanings of modernity, and its symbolic moments, radiate from these common points – as described by the work of writers such as Christopher Wilk, Martin Daunton and Bernhard Rieger, Jill Julius Matthews, Roger Griffin, Becky Conekin, Frank Mort and Chris Waters.¹⁵ Modernity remains one of those concepts that are constantly recognised and regularly debated, but always elude neat capture.

Contrasts between city and country living were, in many ways, more important to a sense of living in modern times than was the matter of being a resident in Australia, Canada, New Zealand or Britain. Urban living was central to modernity in its material and imagined forms. Living in cities, listening to jazz, walking on footpaths and pavements rather than fields and tracks, conveyed what it was to be modern. Dance halls and picture palaces were the quintessential places where Matthews tells us the ‘romance of modernity’ came to life for Sydneysiders. That story is not unique. In cities and metropolises throughout the world in the early decades of the twentieth century, from London to Toronto to Buenos Aires to Sydney to Wellington, the same was true.¹⁶ The city was exciting and welcoming, but also a source of anxiety and even danger. In the national fitness story, cities were depicted, at times, as sources of energy enlivening physical exercise. But they were also imagined in contrary tones as places that constrained and inhibited freedom of body and mind. Ways to offset the ills of city living – whether in urban parks and playgrounds, or in access to countryside and open spaces for walking, hiking, camping, swimming and cycling – were a major focus of many national fitness programmes. For Australians the space of ‘the bush’ took on particular significance in the continuing national fitness story of the 1950s and 1960s.

If the outer world was made new by the conditions of modernity, so too was the inner world. A new language of ‘the self’ came into popular currency from increasingly influential ‘sciences of the mind’.¹⁷ Anthony Giddens defines self-identity as the central problem of modernity in his *Modernity and Self-identity* (1991).¹⁸ Compared with societies in which status, function and daily practice are ascribed (and therefore provide identity), in modern societies, he argues, the task of establishing identity becomes the job of the individual. ‘What to do? How to act? Who to be?’ become questions answered in behaviour and words. New languages of self, along with new experiences of embodiment, were part of what it was to be modern by the 1920s and 1930s. Discussion of the ‘modern self’ has largely been



Workers at the Williams & Kettle stock and station agents competed as an interhouse sports team in the late 1930s. From the provincial town of Waipawa (New Zealand) they travelled to Napier and to Wellington to compete with other workplace teams. Left to right: Jean Milne (Captain), Mrs Turner, Pat McQilkan, Barbara Pederson, Claire Hawke, Hazel Hutt, P. Logan, Vida Knobloch, May Harris, Joyce Bishop, Barbara Moore, Mrs Mary McIntosh, Mrs Ivy Dick, Cyril Woods (coach). Central Hawke's Bay Settlers Museum, Waipawa

pursued in terms other than those concerning the body – through, for example, biography and autobiography, writing, the popularisation of psychological ideas, the place of education in instilling a ‘social selfhood’. Here, however, it is here connected to the popularity of sports and physical activity.¹⁹ This orientation is in keeping with the strong contemporary idea that described physical activity as the vital key to ‘a healthy mind and human happiness’.²⁰

An Empire-wide Movement

Telling the history of national fitness as an empire-wide movement acknowledges the reach of empire well into the mid-twentieth century alongside current historical questioning of the concept of empire in relation to the ‘British world’ (as Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are sometimes collectively described).²¹ The national fitness campaigns comprised a strand in interwar imperial relations, specifically those tight bonds between Britain and what was termed by most contemporaries, with pride, ‘the Dominions’. When the newly crowned King George VI launched the national fitness publicity campaign at London’s Guildhall in February 1938, his speech was broadcast on the national service and widely reported across the Dominions.²² While each country acted independently, the

close links are apparent at all levels. Through sport and recreation, cultural ties of empire were being reinforced even at a time when (it is often argued) political and constitutional ties were holding less firmly.²³ *Strong, Beautiful and Modern* contends that national fitness movements inaugurated in Britain and the Dominions between 1937 and 1943 were part of a connected whole, one that can be fully understood only by reference to its empire-wide frame.

Connections between the histories set out in Chapters 1–4 abound: in people who travelled from one place to another, in the frequent reference to events from one to the other, in the exchange of ideas, and in the circulation of correspondence and information at both official and informal levels. Professional networks – including the powerful arms of the British Medical Association, educational and university links, sporting and youth organisations – and popular movements such as the Women’s League of Health and Beauty all saw the wider British world as their ‘natural’ sphere of operation. Most crucially, there was a common understanding of what the ‘British tradition of games’ meant, shared in tangible and symbolic terms.

The British Empire Games were staged first in the Canadian city of Hamilton, Ontario, in August 1930. Opening the Games the Governor-General, Lord Willingdon, remarked that the ‘greatness of the Empire is owing to the fact that every citizen has inborn in him the love of games and sports’.²⁴ Subsequent Empire Games were held in London in 1934 and Sydney in 1938. They signified both a new importance of links within the empire *and* a desire amongst ‘British’ peoples to declare a common set of values against those being promulgated by others. That distinction survives in the identification of the Commonwealth Games as the ‘Friendly Games’.²⁵ (The Commonwealth Games were originally called the British Empire Games, renamed as the British Empire and Commonwealth Games in 1954, the British Commonwealth Games in 1970, and the Commonwealth Games in 1978.)

In other games, the identification implies, friendship is less apparent. And to many in the British world, the increasingly global world of competitive sport, so richly portrayed in Barbara Keys’ *Globalizing Sport: National Rivalry and International Community in the 1930s* (2006), seemed to be endangering the true culture of sport. There were fears that the British ‘games ethic’ was being surpassed by a science of winning; rising stakes and a ruthless pursuit of victory was more important than ‘playing the game’. The Hollywood-produced Olympic Games held in Los Angeles in 1932 only reinforced such attitudes. Turning what had been a club-like festival dominated by elites into a global spectacle, the 1932 Games marked the beginning of the modern Olympics as a mass event.

It is relevant to note here that while the ‘British world’ and the United States shared much common ground in terms of sport, leisure and recreation, there were also important differences in this period. Sporting culture in the United States had developed along different tracks, both in regard to popular codes (baseball rather

than cricket, basketball rather than netball, American football rather than soccer or rugby union) and in its structures of playing and watching. By the 1920s and 1930s, a strong collegiate sports system co-existed with professional leagues and amateur associations. This tripartite sporting world was the product of a different political as well as cultural and economic system. The strong and politically dominant associational basis for sport and recreation in Britain fostered a culture of voluntarism. That ‘right to play the game’ was also a kind of underlying synonym for the freedom enjoyed under ‘British law’, and for a constitution that existed by way of a set of arrangements shaped by the evolution of conventions. In the United States, the traditions were very different. Freedom, in political terms, was defined in the republican forms of a written constitution and bill of rights.

Strong, Beautiful and Modern takes as its geographical scope the four ‘British’ domains that introduced legislative initiatives supporting sport and adult physical exercise between 1937 and 1943: the UK, New Zealand, Australia and Canada. South Africa sits at the edge of this discussion. Although there was some correspondence between officials in Pretoria, London and the Dominions’ capitals, as far as can be ascertained no legislative initiative to encourage sport and physical exercise among adults was ever taken in South Africa. The African Broadcasting Company was, however, an eager leader in coaxing listeners into daily exercise routines and broadcast early morning exercises each day.²⁶

The four countries at the centre of *Strong, Beautiful and Modern* allow an international exploration of the history of the body, providing a comparative context for existing local research. In particular, making a study of the empire-wide span of campaigns enables a fresh perspective to be brought to the appraisal of the success and failure of the schemes. Australia apart, the programmes set in motion by the Physical Training and Recreation, Physical Welfare and Recreation, and National Fitness Acts in Britain, New Zealand, Australia and Canada have generally been regarded as disappointing failures. (See studies by Justin Evans, Mariel Grant and Stephen Jones for England and Wales; Donald MacIntosh et al., Don Morrow et al., Barbara Schrodts and Bruce Kidd for Canada; and Hugh Buchanan, Janet Alexander and Caroline Daley for New Zealand.²⁷) Failure is seen in terms of national histories, with insufficient funding, too general and diverse goals, confused or confusing machinery, and a lack of professional leadership in each place. While this study does not offer a rehabilitative reinterpretation, it does explore the broader context for an assessment of effectiveness and achievements.

Empire has come back on to the historical agenda in recent years. That is part of the legacy of an imperial and colonial past that has demanded attention in each of these places. An era of national-history writing in New Zealand, Australia and Canada, important as this is, has not offered sufficient answers to the problems the empire created for history as it is lived and as it is told. How bonds of empire operated