The Last Heroine Left?

Exercising Freedom

Emmeline Pankhurst understood the value of sports for politics. After she was elected to the School Board for the City of Manchester in 1900, she promoted physical education for children in Board Schools, which she hoped would result in a fitter British nation. The suffrage campaign helped extend the notion of *mens sana in corpore sano* to women’s lives. On the one hand, suffragettes and their sympathizers worked hard to prove that women had the physical and mental stamina to qualify for a say in how their country was run. On the other hand, if suffragettes’ critics maintained that the qualifier for the vote was brawn, then suffragettes questioned men’s right to vote on precisely that basis as not all men were physically able, for instance, to defend their country. Caird wryly pointed out that polling booths should be ‘provided with an automatic boxing machine, at once testing and registering the force of the candidate’s biceps’.¹ The confrontation between Ann Veronica and Ramage in a locked hotel room embodies both tactics of argument.

Debates raged on the suitability of sports for middle-class women, and the impact of physical culture on their roles as mothers and wives. Some of the opinions expressed were based on ‘scientific’ arguments while others were the result of personal whim. What was also apparent was the way in which sports were enmeshed in discussions over political emancipation. Physical culture forms a backdrop against which Wells explores the struggle for women’s rights. For instance, in 1911, the sportswoman and suffragette, Rhoda Anstey, told a group of young female students that ‘women would probably get the vote and they must prepare themselves to exercise it properly’.²
Kathleen McCrone notes that Jane Austen’s Catherine Morland had a liking for cricket while Elizabeth Bennett was depicted taking long walks. However, by the middle of the century, bourgeois aspirations to gentility led to the prioritization of leisure over exercise and the creation of the lady who was not supposed to have the strength to exercise. Women were discouraged from exercise due to perceived health risks which were said to adversely affect a woman’s chance in the marriage market, but some critics responded by discussing the benefits of mild physical activity. Mid-Victorian journalists and medical experts did campaign for the right of women to exercise and highlighted, for example, the deleterious effect of too much needlework. The first female physician, Elizabeth Blackwell, wrote in praise of ‘bodies that can move in dignity, in grace, in airy lightness, or conscious strength, bodies erect and firm, energetic and active – bodies that are truly sovereign in their presence, the expressions of a sovereign nature’. Believing that degeneration could be prevented in England by educating mothers in healthy ways of life, Herbert Spencer’s *Essays on Education* (1857) advocated more vigorous forms of exercise for women. Spencer pointed out that if boys could become gentlemen despite participating in aggressive sports in public school, then women could also become ladies. Eliza Linton offered an interpretation on this view. In her article for *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, entitled ‘Modern Mannish Maidens’, she provided her own taxonomy of suitable sports for the late-Victorian woman based on the criteria that ‘no game or situation where girl or woman is seen in public should be such that from its nature she is liable to pose therein ungracefully, clumsily, or unbecomingly’. She recommended rowing, walking, riding side-saddle and golf for ‘young women in polite society’ who desired a slice of the physical culture in which their male counterparts were excelling.

Ann Veronica enjoys walking, tennis, badminton, hockey and Japanese martial arts. Nicola Beauman observes that Wells was ‘a realistic middle-class novelist who was well aware of the boundaries of propriety’. Within these boundaries, he argues that physical expression is crucial for women’s physical and personal development. Lady Palsworthy perceives her niece to be suitably shy and ladylike but has not seen her ‘running like the wind at hockey’ (*Ann Veronica*, p. 49). Freedom, not restriction, allows her to maintain her feminine composure and her ‘graceful figure’. Wells importantly links her capacity to defend herself to her skill as ‘an ardent hockey player’ (*Ann Veronica*, p. 200); she is a girl who can sustain hard knocks.

As McCrone says, ‘the transition from gentle callisthenics and crocodile walks to real physical education and competitive games was gradual