

# Lower-Middle-Class Masculinity and the Young Men's Christian Association, 1844-1880

GEOFF SPURR\*

*This article examines how old and new theological strains within nineteenth century Evangelicalism were adopted by British YMCAs to cater to the distinct wants and needs of their members in the decades immediately after their founding in 1844. YMCAs sought to address their members' lower middle class educational, fraternal, and overall masculine requirements through the careful adoption of agencies of intellectual development. These programmes intersected with both Evangelical theology and the earthly self-improving aspirations of young commercial men. Although scholarship has devoted most of its attention to the British YMCA's development of physical recreations in the nineteenth century, gymnasiums and athletic clubs did not become commonplace until the end of the century. Their acceptance within YMCA circles was facilitated by the success of these earlier YMCA programs that continued to provide opportunities for lower middle class masculine maturation until well into the twentieth century.*

*Cet article analyse comment les YMCA britanniques ont adapté les courants établis et les nouvelles tendances au sein du mouvement évangélique afin de répondre aux attentes et besoins variés de leurs membres au cours des décennies suivant leur fondation en 1844. Les YMCA ont cherché à répondre aux besoins de leurs membres de la classe moyenne inférieure en matière de scolarisation, de fraternisation et d'affirmation de la masculinité en adoptant des programmes favorisant le développement intellectuel, programmes en phase à la fois avec la théologie évangélique et les aspirations mélioratives des jeunes employés d'affaires. Les chercheurs se sont jusqu'ici surtout intéressés à l'essor des programmes d'activité physique au sein des YMCA britanniques au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, mais il faut noter que les gymnases et clubs athlétiques ne sont pas devenus courants avant la fin du siècle. Leur acceptation au sein des YMCA a justement été facilitée par le succès de ces précédents programmes qui ont offert des occasions de croissance aux jeunes hommes de la classe moyenne inférieure jusque tard au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle.*

\* Geoff Spurr is an Associate Professor at the Brantford campus of Wilfrid Laurier University. The author would like to thank Bettina Bradbury and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

DURING London's winter and spring of 1843-1844, small groups of young, recently converted drapers' assistants began holding evening prayer meetings and Bible classes in their bedrooms above the shops in which they toiled during the day. At one of these meetings, held on June 6, 1844, a dozen young men from the drapers' shops of George Hitchcock and W. D. Owen convened in the bedroom of George Williams, an assistant at Hitchcock's, to form the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). This new brotherhood was to provide a venue of mutual assistance in which the converted could work together "to spread the Redeemer's Kingdom amongst those by whom they are surrounded" in the city's shops, warehouses, and offices.<sup>1</sup> The YMCA's early-Victorian Christian Evangelical founders envisaged it as a missionary institute that would respond to their own specific lower-middle-class social and masculine demands. Young lower-middle-class male shop assistants and, particularly, clerks were the overwhelming majority of YMCA members and subscribers in its early years as it grew in London, formed branches in the provinces, and expanded overseas. The particular versions of manliness articulated, the appeal of this association to such men, and the changing ways in which its leaders responded to the demands of young middle-class men between 1844 and 1880 are the subject of this article.

The YMCA's founders and early officials were initially suspect of any earthly pursuits that could potentially hinder communion with their saviour. However, tension soon developed between that view and one promoting a more inclusive and engaged Evangelicalism. The longstanding Evangelical emphasis on the central role of the individual in his own conversion experience and salvation was maintained, but over time some members of the Evangelical clergy connected to the YMCA suggested that both worldly engagement and fraternal associationalism were necessary for salvation and the fostering of proper manliness.<sup>2</sup> "Manliness" was different from "masculinity," which represented the totality of the qualities, characteristics, roles, and experiences that formed and defined the male gender. Manliness included the culturally defined codes of conduct and behaviour that derived from a man's internal intellectual, temperamental, and sentimental attitudes and beliefs. Although masculinity was often defined by the internal codes of manliness, it was primarily shaped by external characteristics, such as one's material, occupational, educational, and physical standing in relation to other men. These other men included those exercising the hegemonic masculinity of the middle class but, just as significantly, also all men's class peers. The shift in belief in YMCA circles that manliness should be fostered and a lower-middle-class masculinity nurtured paved the way for the establishment of YMCAs as earthly oriented sites. They became locales where lower-middle-class, largely bachelor, male Evangelicals and subscribers could develop and demonstrate both

1 Cited in Clyde Binfield, *George Williams and the Y.M.C.A.* (London: Heinemann, 1973), p. 119.

2 On the importance of the conversion experience to British Evangelicals, see D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History From the 1870s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 2-10.

their spirituality and a distinct form of masculinity through individual, fraternal, and intellectual “agencies.”<sup>3</sup>

Scant attention has been paid to how, during its early history, the YMCA was influenced by, or catered to, the aspirations of Evangelical men of the lower middle class, particularly the wishes of young commercial men for non-physical leisure and masculine development.<sup>4</sup> Scholars of the YMCA have focused almost exclusively on the period after 1880 through examinations of the growth of the physical recreational programmes that are today identified with the YMCA in the public mind.<sup>5</sup> They have paid little attention to the gender and class issues that played central roles in the YMCA's earlier adoption of non-physical recreational agencies that encouraged spiritual and intellectual growth and commercial skills.<sup>6</sup> This neglect is unsurprising, as historians of masculinity have devoted much of their attention to the external qualities of Victorian masculinity displayed within middle- and upper-class cultural texts, associational activity, and competitive games. The remainder of their concern has primarily addressed how “manhood,” the state of mature adult masculinity, was nurtured in school and then fostered and displayed through home, work, and associational life.<sup>7</sup> This overall emphasis on the masculinity of British middle-class and, to a lesser extent, upper-class

- 3 The term “agencies” was the word most often employed within British YMCAs in the nineteenth century to describe the activities and programmes that they offered to their members and associates. These included both religious agencies, such as prayer meetings and Bible classes, and secular agencies, such as reading rooms, education classes, and gymnasiums. It was eventually agreed that all such “agencies” worked to further the YMCA's Evangelical mission. In this article “agencies” should not be confused with modern sociological or philosophical definitions pertaining to the ability of individuals or groups to engage in unrestricted and positive action.
- 4 This is the one glaring omission by Dominic Erdozain in his account of the YMCA's gradual inclusion of secular recreational activities. He focuses almost exclusively on the influence that the physical education movement and “Muscular Christianity” had on Evangelical theology. See Dominic Erdozain, *The Problem of Pleasure: Sport, Recreation and the Crisis of Victorian Religion* (Woodridge: Boydell Press, 2010).
- 5 See William J. Baker, “To Pray or to Play? The YMCA Question in the United Kingdom and the United States, 1850-1900,” *International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 11, no. 1 (April 1994), pp. 42-62; Neal Garnham, “Both Praying and Playing: ‘Muscular Christianity’ and the YMCA in North-East County Durham,” *Journal of Social History*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2001), pp. 397-407.
- 6 Exceptions to this can be found in Christopher P. Hosgood, “Negotiating Lower-Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain: The Leicester Young Men's Christian Association, 1870-1914,” *Canadian Journal of History*, vol. 37, no. 2 (August 2002), pp. 253-273; Geoffrey D. Spurr, “The London YMCA: A Haven of Masculine Self-Improvement and Socialization for the Late-Victorian and Edwardian Cleric,” *Canadian Journal of History*, vol. 37, no. 2 (August 2002), pp. 275-301.
- 7 For examinations of the cultural and literary influences on Victorian manliness, see David Newsome, *Godliness and Good Learning* (London: J. Murray, 1961); Norman Vance, *The Sinews of the Spirit: The Ideal of Christian Manliness in Victorian Literature and Religious Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Donald E. Hall, ed., *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Andrew Bradstock, Sean Gill, Anne Hogan, and Sue Morgan, eds., *Masculinity and Spirituality in Victorian Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000). For scholarship on the cultivation of manliness in middle- and upper-class educational institutions, see Paul Deslandes, *Oxbridge Men: British Masculinity and the Undergraduate Experience, 1850-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, *The Old School Tie: The Phenomenon of the English Public School* (New York: Viking Press, 1977); J. R. de S. Honey, *Tom Brown's Universe: The Development of the Victorian Public School* (London: Millington, 1977). For studies of the relationship between masculinity and domesticity, see John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

men has largely hidden the importance that many Victorians placed on interior qualities of masculine growth, such as mental culture, that became an important element of Evangelical manliness among the lower middle class. Overall, this focus has served to obscure an understanding of how subordinate masculinities were developed and demonstrated.

In offering a location for lower-middle-class masculine maturation and associationalism, the YMCA was operating in relation to what R. W. Connell has defined as the “hegemonic masculinity” of the socially, culturally, economically, and politically leading members of the Victorian middle classes. The middle classes included captains of industry earning tens or hundreds of thousands of pounds a year who sent their sons to public schools; professional men, such as doctors and lawyers, earning £1,000 a year who sent their sons to first-grade grammar or, perhaps, public schools; and clerks, earning as much as £500 to as little as £80 a year, relying on either second-grade grammar or charity schools for their sons’ education. The YMCA elaborated an alternative masculine model that responded to the work aspirations and residential situations of the young, largely unmarried, members of this last middle-class grouping.<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of this article, “bourgeois masculinity” will refer to the hegemonic masculinity created and expounded upon by the dominant members of the middle class to distinguish it from a broader middle-class masculinity that also included subordinate masculinities outside, and within, the middle classes—particularly the masculinity developed by young men of the lower middle class. Bourgeois masculinity was reinforced culturally through such literature as the muscular Christian novels of Thomas Hughes and Charles Kingsley, fraternally through the reformed public schools, universities, and gentlemen’s clubs attended by the upper ranks of the middle classes, and socially through the renewed emphasis on male patriarchy within the domestic sphere. It informed men on how to be a man, requiring “all other men,” despite the diversity of their own class needs and experiences, “to position themselves in relation to it.”<sup>9</sup>

Initial research on Victorian masculinity focused almost exclusively on nineteenth-century discourses concerning “manliness.” The ideology of manliness, with its contention that correct masculine behaviour was determined by proper character, was interpreted as central to the emerging middle-class masculine norm.<sup>10</sup> However, an analysis of the inclusive nature of the central tenants of the new bourgeois discourses concerning manliness reveals the emergence of a set of proper manly codes of conduct and behaviour that could be potentially exercised by social groupings that also included Evangelicals of the lower middle class. The

8 For the development and refinement of this theory, see R. W. Connell, *Which Way is Up? Essays on Sex, Class and Culture* (Sydney: Unwin Hyman, 1983), pp. 27-32 and 58-72; *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 76-78; and “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender and Society*, vol. 19, no. 6 (December 2005), pp. 829-859.

9 Connell, “Hegemonic Masculinity,” p. 832.

10 Martin Francis, “The Domestication of the Male? Recent Research on Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century British Masculinity,” *Historical Journal*, vol. 45, no. 3 (2002), pp. 637-652. For studies on “manliness,” see Newsome, *Godliness and Good Learning*; Vance, *The Sinews of the Spirit*; Hall, ed., *Muscular Christianity*.

ascendancy of bourgeois masculinity and its corresponding transformation of what it meant to be manly made it no longer exclusive to the aristocracy, landed gentry, and military heroes. Martial links to manliness withered as time distanced Britain from her eighteenth-century and Napoleonic Wars with France. The previous manliness exercised by the genteel elites, with an emphasis on politeness, was now viewed as false and effete.<sup>11</sup> Bourgeois ideals of manliness transformed it into something far more democratic and potentially accessible for those lower-middle-class men able to pursue rigorous programmes of self-improvement. Manliness was now associated far more with a man's interior character, his moral excellence, which was reflected in his industriousness, self-discipline, independence, and devotion to civic duty.<sup>12</sup> The idea that manliness stemmed directly from a man's internal nature corresponded well to the Evangelical emphasis on personal salvation. At the same time, the outward behaviour displayed as a result of true manliness, such as self-control and untiring vigorousness, was necessary for the young Evangelical's battles for salvation within himself and in the sinful outside world. Evangelicals judged men by their character, "the inner resources of heart and mind transformed by God's saving grace," reflected in a man's actions within all of Britain's private and public spheres.<sup>13</sup> The individual, although engaged in mutual assistance in associations such as the YMCA, was ultimately responsible for his own salvation.

Despite their utility in assisting in an understanding of the masculine inclusiveness of Victorian manliness, these initial examinations of manliness largely employed cultural approaches that explored the normative representations of masculinity contained within their ascendant Victorian bourgeois cultural codes and institutions. Little attention was paid to either the social processes and experiences involved in the construction of this hegemonic masculinity or the means by which it exerted its influence on gender relations between men and women, middle-class and non-middle-class men, and, especially, between the divisions within the expansive and varied middle class itself.<sup>14</sup> John Tosh's work in the 1990s, particularly his examinations of the roles played by bourgeois men within the domestic sphere, was at the forefront of a push into broader examinations of Victorian masculinity and its experiential realities.<sup>15</sup> Departing

11 Vance, *The Sinews of the Spirit*, pp. 1-2.

12 John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Longman, 2005), p. 34.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 74. For historiographical analyses of the cultural shift in masculinity from an emphasis on politeness to that of sincerity and sensibility, see Karen Harvey, "The History of Masculinity, 1650-1800," *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2 (April 2005), pp. 296-311; Michèle Cohen, "'Manners' Make the Man," *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2 (April 2005), pp. 312-329.

14 For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Karen Harvey and Alexandra Shepard, "What Have Historians Done with Masculinity? Reflections on Five Centuries of British History, circa 1500-1950," *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2 (April 2005), pp. 274-280.

15 John Tosh, "Domesticity and Manliness in the Victorian Middle Class" in Michael Roper and John Tosh, eds., *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 44-73; "What Should Historians Do with Masculinity? Reflections on Nineteenth-Century Britain," *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 38 (1994), pp. 179-202; "From Keighley to St-Denis: Separation and Intimacy in Victorian Bourgeois Marriage," *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 40 (Autumn 1995), pp. 193-206; "The Old Adam and the New Man: Emerging Themes in the History of English Masculinities" in Tim Hitchcock and Michèle Cohen, eds., *English Masculinities, 1660-1800* (London: Longman, 1999), pp. 217-238; and A

from a focus solely on discourse concerning manliness, Tosh turned his gaze to the patriarchal role of middle-class males within the home's social and operational truths, highlighting the fragility of the supposed absolute familial authority of bourgeois masculinity. Historians have now begun exploring the different expressions of masculinity among homosexual men and within the cultures of male beauty, aesthetics, and physical recreation.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, recent studies of the working classes have revealed the ways divergent masculinities were elaborated in different work and urban contexts.<sup>17</sup> Overall, these studies have explored the ways in which masculinities are produced both discursively and socially within the interconnections of home and work, individual and family, gender and class, and private and public. Madeleine Hurd's examinations of working-class masculinity and its operation within the public sphere have been particularly illuminating. She has explored how the working classes developed their own agency advancing masculine forms, particularly associational activities that were sometimes complemented by, but were often independent of and sometimes in conflict with, bourgeois masculinity. In some cases working-class moral certitude stemmed directly from comparisons of its virtuous masculinity with the decadent masculine forms of the bourgeoisie.<sup>18</sup> Hurd's work is instructive when considering the hitherto under-explored masculinity of the lower middle class, especially that of young men.<sup>19</sup> With few locales in which to construct positive adult experiences, associational life was of utmost importance to their masculine development. This importance was amplified over the course of the Victorian era as leisure hours increased while associations such as the YMCA began to provide not only sites of fraternalism, but also programmes to facilitate lower-middle-class masculine development in other facets of life. Through an examination of the YMCA's important associational role, we gain insight concerning the culturally and socially complex natures of subordinate masculinities that expressed their distinctiveness within the gravitational pull of bourgeois masculinity.

Subordinate groups often developed codes of manliness that varied "significantly from those at the top."<sup>20</sup> Many members of the clergy connected

---

*Man's Place.*

- 16 See Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Sean Brady, *Masculinity and Male Homosexuality in Britain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); H. G. Cocks, "Secrets, Crimes and Diseases, 1800-1914" in Matt Cook *et al.*, eds., *A Gay History of Britain* (Oxford: Greenwood, 2007); Paul Deslandes, "The Male Body, Beauty and Aesthetics in Modern British Culture," *History Compass*, vol. 8, no. 10 (October 2010), pp. 1191-1208.
- 17 See Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Madeleine Hurd, "Class, Masculinity, Manners, and Mores: Public Space and Public Sphere in Nineteenth-Century Europe," *Social Science History*, vol. 24, no. 1 (Spring 2010), pp. 75-110.
- 18 Hurd, "Class, Masculinity, Manners, and Mores," pp. 99-101.
- 19 Notable exceptions are James Hammerton's examinations of the often tenuous relationship between masculinity and marriage in the late-Victorian and Edwardian eras. See James Hammerton, *Cruelty and Companionship: Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Married Life* (New York: Routledge, 1992); "Victorian Marriage and the Law of Matrimonial Cruelty," *Victorian Studies*, vol. 33, no. 2 (Winter 1990), pp. 269-292; and "Poosterism or Partnership? Marriage and Masculine Identity in the Lower Middle Class, 1870-1920," *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 38, no. 3 (July 1999), pp. 291-321.
- 20 John Tosh, "Hegemonic Masculinity and the History of Gender" in Stefan Dudnink, Karen Hagemann, and John Tosh, eds., *Masculinities in Politics and War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 49;



to the YMCA, for example, contended that lower-middle-class Evangelicals who exercised true godliness had the ability to be far manlier than their employers. Meanwhile, YMCA officials, members, and churchmen socially contested and refitted masculine requirements to meet the changing social and economic realities facing lower-middle-class men. For young clerks and shop assistants, a homosocial association such as the YMCA was one of the few locations where their manliness and overall masculinity could be developed and demonstrated. Because of their youth, bachelorhood, servile occupations, and precarious material positions, they were unable to exercise manhood in the other two arenas where males of all social classes typically did—home and work.<sup>21</sup> They did not possess the ability to exercise male patriarchy and authority as householders, nor did they have the financial and occupational independence of many other middle-class men. Nor could they claim the artisan's skill or the labourer's physical strength as a basis to establish their masculinity identity. This was the context of the YMCA's construction of their particular versions of lower-middle-class manliness and masculinity.

### **Impetus Behind the Founding of the YMCA**

Although the earthly material requirements of young men soon became an important feature of YMCA work, they were only tangentially responsible for the YMCA's inception. The primary impetus stemmed from the Evangelical leisure and social concerns of its founders, who attempted to address these concerns through an organization of Evangelical fraternalism. They were influenced by early-Victorian concerns regarding male leisure and unrespectable behaviour that, although largely stemming from within Evangelicalism, were witnessed on a broader societal scale in such reform activity as the temperance, Sabbath, and prevention of cruelty to animals movements.<sup>22</sup> The young men who founded the YMCA, and to whom the YMCA was geared, were unmarried, usually lived in their work premises, and were often new to the city. Hence they were cut off from the comforts and influences of family and local church, the two places, Mike Huggins suggests, where social pressures were strongest for respectable compliance. As men at this stage of their life cycle, in an urban context and a male occupational grouping, they were considered especially susceptible to engaging in unmanly activities that would lead to eternal damnation.<sup>23</sup> The YMCA was adamantly opposed to the inclusion of activities that promoted the three pillars of unrespectable conduct—sex, gambling, and alcohol—and would remain so throughout the nineteenth century. However, even secular rational recreational activities were initially viewed by the YMCA's founders as, at best, potential distractions from the spiritual work of the YMCA and, at worst, a threat to the

---

and *Manliness and Masculinities*, pp. 30-32.

- 21 John Tosh, "Masculinities in an Industrializing Society: Britain, 1800-1914," *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2 (2005), pp. 332-335.
- 22 Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England* (London: Routledge, 1978); Hugh Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1980), pp. 17-19.
- 23 Mike J. Huggins, "More Sinful Pleasures? Leisure, Respectability and the Male Middle Classes in Victorian England," *Journal of Social History*, vol. 33, no. 3 (Spring 2000), pp. 589-595.

salvation of the young men whom the YMCA had been founded to protect. As men who had recently undergone deeply personal and emotional Evangelical conversion experiences, the YMCA's founders were obsessed with avoiding any activity that could cause their souls to stray from their spiritual focus to concerns of the world and the flesh. Such thinking undoubtedly stemmed from the intellectual immaturity of the young founders and was reinforced by the continued influence of older Evangelical theological positions. A prime example of the latter, in Henry Venn's popular 1763 classic, *Complete Duty of Man*, emphasized the "transcendent glories" of the afterlife over any attempt to improve the condition of man in his present life. Many Evangelicals thus believed that any social gathering not specifically designed for "prayer and experience" was either "carnal" or "unacceptably-pleasure seeking."<sup>24</sup> Early nineteenth century influences, such as in the published lectures of the American revivalist congregational minister Charles Granderson Finney, who urged young men to follow his example and shun all amusements in order to maintain their souls in a continual state of revival, continued to reinforce these beliefs.<sup>25</sup>

The 1843-1844 diary entries of two of the YMCA founders, George Williams and Edward Valantine, record that the little free time they had outside of work was largely spent seeking out spiritual communion with their saviour in one of London's Evangelical (primarily congregational) chapels. They also included several accounts of their anguish in being tortured by "unholy desires and sinful passions" after engaging in non-religious leisure activities.<sup>26</sup> The 1840s witnessed the emergence of many middle-class sponsored "rational recreational" institutions to provide the public with safe and respectable leisure options.<sup>27</sup> Some, such as public libraries, art galleries, parks, and museums, enabled the new inclusion of men of all social classes within the bourgeois public sphere of respectable leisure. While such venues could foster the intellectual maturation of young men by nourishing them with knowledge and culture, many men associated with the early YMCA believed that these venues also had the potential to interfere with spirituality through un-chaperoned exposures to un-Christian or Romanist influences. Williams and Valantine found little that was outright sinful in their visits to Quinton Hogg's Polytechnic Institute, art galleries, and museums, yet they feared that the intellectual merit of these rational recreations was greatly outweighed by their great tendency "to deaden the spiritual life of the soul."<sup>28</sup> These young founders, with rudimentary formal educational experiences, had conditioned themselves to be fearful of anything that would detract from their newly taken spiritual quest. Moreover, the constant sin and vice they witnessed in

24 Vance, *The Sinews of the Spirit*, pp. 32-33.

25 Henry Venn, *The Complete Duty of Man* (London: J. Simpson, 1811; first published 1763); Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (New York: Leavitt, Lord and Co., 1835), *Sermons on Important Subjects* (New York: John S. Taylor, 1836), and *Lectures to Professing Christians, 1836-1837* (New York: John S. Taylor, 1837).

26 Binfield, *George Williams*, pp. 84-85.

27 See Bailey, *Leisure and Class*; Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution*; James Walvin, *Leisure and Society* (London: Longman, 1978).

28 Binfield, *George Williams*, pp. 88-89.



London confirmed their need to be ever vigilant in protecting their souls and those of their fellow young Evangelicals from further corruptions.

The overlapping of leisure, salvation, and masculine concerns in the early YMCA was witnessed in the involvement of many of the YMCA's founders and early supporters, including Williams, Valentine, Hitchcock, and Owens in the Metropolitan Drapers' Association in the 1840s.<sup>29</sup> This secular association sought to limit the work hours of young men who spent 15 to 17 hours a day at work, "without a moment for mental or spiritual culture," with only an hour or two of leisure time before the bedroom doors above the shop were locked. It later evolved into the Early Closing Movement.<sup>30</sup> It promoted the earlier closing of shops, particularly on Saturdays, to provide young commercial men with more time to engage in manly self-improving activities that, in turn, would allow the Sabbath to remain sacred. Those who belonged to both the YMCA and the Metropolitan Drapers' Movement saw the YMCA as the ideal site for young men to spend time previously spent either being over-worked or in the company of ungodly men.<sup>31</sup> The founders believed they could counter the city's dangerous influences by creating a Christian brotherhood where young men would gather together in weekly prayer meetings. The YMCA would lead them to salvation through "the Library of useful knowledge, rather than to cards and billiards, the cigar divan and concert-room, the theatre, and the seducing and polluting retreat."<sup>32</sup>

### The Early Years

The founding of the YMCA in 1844 formalized the missionary work of the young drapers' assistants who had previously been bringing converts to their bedrooms for prayer meetings. This missionary work remained the official primary objective of the YMCA in Britain for over a century. In its first couple of years, bi-weekly prayer meetings and Bible classes held in a small set of rooms in Sergeant's Inn and distribution of Evangelical tracts among fellow commercial men were the primary agencies employed by the London YMCA in its work. These religious programmes, established by what became known throughout British YMCAs as either the "parent" or "mother" association, soon became to be viewed as the minimum requisites of a YMCA's work. The London YMCA's missionary work and influence expanded rapidly. Within a year a branch was established in West London. By 1846 there were additional branches in the London boroughs of Pimlico, Islington, and Southwark. After visits by deputies from London to the provinces, branches were formed in Manchester, Liverpool, Taunton, Exeter, and Leeds. Within ten years there were seven branches in London and 40 in the provinces.<sup>33</sup>

29 George John Stevenson, ed., *Historical Records of the Young Men's Christian Association: From 1844 to 1884* (London: S. W. Partridge, 1884), pp. 12-15; Binfield, *George Williams*, p. 156.

30 Stevenson, ed., *Historical Records*, pp. 9 and 13.

31 University of Birmingham Archives [hereafter UBA], YMCA Archive, B7/No. 29, William Edwyn Shipton, "The Young Men's Christian Association in London: Its History, Methods, and Development," pp. 5-6.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 8-11 and 18-19.

Initially, meetings were held in rented or borrowed rooms. By the end of the 1840s YMCA officials came to believe that permanent homes were necessary if the men were to be kept away from temptations and were to develop the manly faculties with which God had provided them. In 1849 the London YMCA moved into larger accommodations in the former home of the Whittington Club in Gresham Street.<sup>34</sup> It purchased its first building in Aldersgate Street in 1854. The move to Gresham Street created a “House for Young Men” that offered YMCA members a daily locale for the conduct of YMCA religious activity and a place for fraternalism and intellectual development facilitated through the establishment of a reading room and library.<sup>35</sup> The prospect of moving to a building with non-religious agencies had produced anxiety among some members who “expressed fear that the undertaking might materially affect the present spiritual bearing and nature of the society’s operations.” This ongoing tension was resolved after considerable discussion over several months and a special prayer meeting that sought divine guidance over the issue. Eventually, all agreed that, through careful monitoring of what took place within these rooms, “all might be subordinated to the more complete and effectual development of the present aim of the society.”<sup>36</sup>

It would be several decades before YMCA rooms provided anything comparable to the creature comforts found within a gentleman’s club. Still, these rooms did offer a lower-middle-class variant responding to some of the same masculine demands.<sup>37</sup> YMCA rooms were not only important centres for spiritual development and fraternal association, but also places of privacy and intimacy where the young lower-middle-class man, devoid of the sanctuary of domesticity, could quietly read or simply relax after his long hours of work. Here, it was claimed, young men would be “aided in the attainment of higher knowledge both in things spiritual and temporal ... where, withdrawn from the temptations of ungodly society, they might spend their evenings in suitable companionship, or in the pursuit of useful information.”<sup>38</sup> The London YMCA also made the important decision to open its rooms not only to members, but also, for the purpose of attracting new members, to young men who exhibited “proper character” but had not yet provided evidence of their conversion to Christ as the YMCA rules of membership insisted.<sup>39</sup> Both members and non-members paid a yearly subscription fee of one guinea for the use of its rooms.<sup>40</sup> Over the next few years several of the newly formed provincial associations followed suit, opening their own reading rooms and libraries, bringing numerous young men into “the spiritual influence of the Association, who could not otherwise have been reached.”<sup>41</sup>

34 UBA, YMCA Archive, London Central YMCA Minutes [hereafter LCYM], A24, November 1848 – November 1855, April 30, 1849.

35 LCYM, December 18, 1848.

36 LCYM, February 25, 1849 and April 2, 1849.

37 For an examination of the comforts provided by gentleman’s clubs for London’s élites, see Amy Milne-Smith, *London Clubland: A Cultural History of Gender and Class in Late Victorian Britain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

38 Shipton, “The Young Men’s Christian Association in London,” p. 14.

39 LCYM, April 16, 1849.

40 LCYM, June 25, 1849.

41 Shipton, “The Young Men’s Christian Association in London,” p. 315.

In the 1850s and 1860s the important role played by reading rooms and libraries in the YMCA's missionary effort was widely recognized. They had been extremely successful, "year after year, in attracting young men to YMCA meetings, in bringing them under the religious influence of members, in protecting them from evil, and in ministering to their highest welfare."<sup>42</sup> The Manchester YMCA noted in 1852 that opening much larger and more comfortable furnished rooms and a more expansive library had enabled it to cast a wider net, increasing the number of its subscribers from 200 to 600 in less than a year.<sup>43</sup> In 1863 the Leeds Association attributed its rooms with providing a proper leisure site of manly social experiences for young commercial men while protecting them from hours "wasted in the pursuit of unsatisfying pleasures."<sup>44</sup> The Dublin Association noted that their "spacious and central" rooms provided an intellectual club-like atmosphere, offering "a comfortable resting-place after the business of the day."<sup>45</sup> Here, according to the Windsor YMCA, "young men would come and spend a pleasant and profitable hour freed from evil company."<sup>46</sup> The general consensus evolved that reading rooms and libraries were important agencies for larger urban associations, where young men were seen to face a far greater number of moral dangers within the public sphere than those in smaller centres and were therefore more in need of a safe and religious leisure option.

An 1867 tabulation of the agencies employed by YMCAs indicates that YMCA reading rooms and libraries had become significant features in Britain's cities. Of the 145 YMCAs that submitted information, 39 were operating reading rooms while 50 had libraries, almost all in larger urban centres with at least 100 members.<sup>47</sup> By the late 1850s and 1860s YMCAs in larger centres generally had the financial resources to make their rooms attractive to young men. In 1867 the Newcastle Association reported, "Considerable expense had been entailed by our attempting to make our rooms more comfortable and attractive, so as in some measure to counteract the enticing effect of the gilded saloons, where the emissaries of Satan are so busily at work."<sup>48</sup> However, even small or young YMCAs could still provide a venue, however austere, of mutual support and intimate fraternalism. When the Hereford YMCA was established in 1863, it initially only had access to a room over a vestry. However, its General Committee, through consultation with its members, immediately decided that this room would be open for young men to convene for two hours every evening and its tables supplied with religious periodicals.<sup>49</sup> As suggested by the Jersey Association, even the humblest of YMCAs could provide

42 *The Quarterly Messenger of the Young Men's Christian Associations*, January 1865, p. 132.

43 UBA, YMCA Archive, Lancashire Division, Manchester YMCA (1852-1889), A27, "Sixth Annual Report of the Manchester YMCA, 1852," p. 8.

44 *The Quarterly Messenger*, April 1863, pp. 8-9.

45 *The Quarterly Messenger*, July 1866, p. 267

46 *The Quarterly Messenger*, February 1871, p. 612

47 UBA, YMCA Archive, E1, "Young Men's Christian Association: A List With Statistics, 1867."

48 *The Quarterly Messenger*, January 1867, p. 302.

49 UBA, YMCA Archive, Hereford YMCA, Minutes of Members Meetings and General Committee, D121, January 29, 1863.

a fraternal sanctuary where both the “spiritual and mental” improvement of young men could be developed.<sup>50</sup>

While intellectual self-development was being offered through books in YMCA libraries and periodicals in YMCA rooms, officials were careful to ensure that there were no worldly “amusements” or recreations considered harmful to the spirit or that might detract from the YMCA’s Evangelical agenda. Great care was taken in the selection of periodicals and books supplied in the reading rooms. In Bristol each new book had to meet the approval of the officers of its Central Committee, while in London a special committee of referees was constituted to judge the character of books proposed for its library.<sup>51</sup> Religious literature dominated the holdings of YMCA libraries, while novels were usually banned, as their sentimentality and sinful themes were considered incompatible with the acquisition of knowledge and the advancement of an earnest Christian spirit.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, activities viewed as safe and sober rational recreations by other self-improving associations, such as chess, were viewed as attention-diverting amusements and were strictly forbidden by most YMCAs until the late 1860s or early 1870s.<sup>53</sup> Young provincial YMCAs often deferred to the parental wisdom of the London YMCA concerning the introduction of recreations. When a number of members of the Jersey YMCA proposed the introduction of draughts and chess during its sixth year of operation in 1865, the London secretary George Shipton cautioned, “Young Men’s Christian Associations do not exist for the amusement, but for the spiritual and mental improvement of young men, and no effort can be made to extend the area of their objects without weakening the force of these central and fundamental principles.”<sup>54</sup>

Despite Shipton’s warning, a few YMCAs did offer secular rational recreations during this early period. Just as lower-middle-class members and subscribers were able to convince YMCAs to expand their intellectual agencies, some were successfully able to petition the more independently administered associations to provide respectable leisure options. In 1861 the Bristol YMCA granted the request of its members to include a chess set in its rooms without any controversy. A year later it even allowed some of its members and subscribers to make use of a room once a week for cricket club meetings.<sup>55</sup> Officials opposing such recreational activities believed that strict regulations were necessary if YMCAs were to maintain their missionary integrity and not devolve into some sort of quasi-religious Mechanics’ Institute. As T. H. Pengelly instructed delegates to the South-West District Conference of YMCAs in 1869:

50 *The Quarterly Messenger*, February 1869, p. 460.

51 LCYM, May 28, 1849.

52 For similar sentiments expressed in an Exeter Hall lecture, see Rev. John Aldis, “Works of Fiction” in *Lectures Delivered Before the Young Men’s Christian Association, 1846-1847* (London: J. Nisbet, 1875), pp. 165-188.

53 LCYM, January 2, September 4, and November 23, 1854.

54 *The Quarterly Messenger*, July 1865, p. 175.

55 UBA, YMCA Archive, Bristol YMCA, Minutes of Committee and Annual Meetings, D157, October 4, 1861 and June 13, 1862.

No objection we think ought to be urged against chess, cricket, or other similarly harmless means, which are often regarded as essential for the recreation of the brain and the development of the muscle, tending, no doubt, to produce mental and bodily health. But these should be left for personal arrangements, and are in no way connected with, or detrimental to the chief aim of our Association.<sup>56</sup>

The general shunning of recreations and the promotion of religious literature within YMCA reading rooms and libraries during its first decade fit with the conviction of most early leaders that young men required a safe locale for fraternal engagement, relaxation, and intellectual development. What set the YMCA apart from other associations and institutes for young men was that its rooms were to be entirely religious. As with the YMCA's Bible classes and prayer meetings, reading rooms and libraries were designed as places where converted members could mutually assist each other and potential members in their salvation and the development of a proper Christian character. However, many YMCA members and officials soon began contending that additional forms of knowledge were also necessary for a young Christian's manly development. Petitioners claimed that an intellectually focused liberal humanist knowledge would assist the young Evangelical with the development of the proper mental culture required to keep his soul strong and connected to God. There were also calls for the inclusion of programmes of utilitarian knowledge, including classes in specific commercially applicable subjects such as modern languages. Economic independence was almost impossible for the average white-collar worker without some form of intellectual self-improvement with occupational utility. Educational institutions such as Mechanics' Institutes and, by the mid-1850s, the London Working Men's College provided many important educational and social agencies to young commercial men, including education classes, fraternalism, and recreational activities in sober and carefully monitored venues. However, unlike the YMCA, both were established and sponsored by middle- and upper-class men whose educational philosophies were not always in line with the specific needs of the lower-middle-class Evangelicals.<sup>57</sup> Thus, within a few years of its foundation, the YMCA movement began to interrogate whether, and if so where, Christian Evangelical development intersected with proper manliness. It eventually found a middle ground between the secular utilitarian philosophies of the Mechanics' Institutes and the Broad Church and Oxbridge influences of the London Working Men's College by suggesting that, as the mind expanded through knowledge, the soul became more accepting of Christ and thus more open to salvation.

### **Evangelical Theology and Secular Agencies**

Scholars have devoted considerable attention to the supposed dichotomy between the other-worldliness of mid-nineteenth-century Evangelicals, such as that of leading YMCA officials, members, and patrons, and the Christian Socialism and

56 *The Quarterly Messenger*, November 1869, p. 499.

57 For general histories of these institutions, see J. F. C. Harrison, *Learning and Living, 1790-1960* (London: Routledge, 1961) and *A History of the Working Men's College, 1854-1954* (London: Routledge, 1954).

later muscular Christianity of men such as Hughes and Kingsley.<sup>58</sup> This apparent gap is largely a false dichotomy. Although YMCA men generally rejected the intense emphasis on competition held by devotees of muscular Christianity, they were swayed by a number of religious (both Anglican and non-conformist) and secular strains and influences at home and abroad calling for worldly engagement as they developed policies and agencies for their expanding movement. The pronounced spiritual concerns of the young men who founded the YMCA were typical of the recently converted, but were considerably tempered with time and increased exposure to alternative Evangelical beliefs and practices, such as those of William Wilberforce of their past, Thomas Binney of their present, and Lord Shaftesbury of their future, which called for recognition of man's earthly needs. The YMCA itself needed to be engaged if it was to meet the specific Evangelical and lower-middle-class concerns of its members and subscribers. It did this by creating a combination of religious, educational, and leisure agencies that were both cooperatively associational like the Working Men's College and individualistically self-improving like the Mechanics' Institutes. Clyde Binfield has rightfully suggested that the Evangelical belief in the sincerity of the converted, the most important of D. W. Bebbington's four aspects of Evangelicalism, enabled a climate of true fraternal and open discourse to develop within YMCAs over the question of the inclusion of new agencies.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, with no national or international governing structure and conforming only to the "London Rule" of membership that all members be converted men as a requirement for recognition as a YMCA, the British YMCA movement eventually allowed for considerable experimentation in programme development, particularly in larger YMCAs where the need for guidance from London was not as strong. This independent structure furthered the adoption of new and expanded agencies within British YMCAs.

The Evangelical tradition opposed to all earthly leisure pursuits did, however, remain strong and influential for several years, reinforced by such influences as Charles Granderson Finney, who undertook revivalist trips to Britain in 1849-1850 and 1858-1860 where he continued to stress the primacy of the individual's will in his salvation.<sup>60</sup> Theological positions such as Finney's bolstered the continued separation of other-worldly Evangelicals from those seeking greater worldly interaction and certainly separated them from Broad Church Anglicans. His contention that small prayer groups were extremely useful in nurturing intense and personal spiritual connections was widely accepted among all Evangelical groupings. These teachings had not only helped to inspire the young drapers at Hitchcock's and Owen's to begin their initial prayer meetings, but also continued to play an important role in facilitating the movement of other young Evangelicals towards the YMCA and its associationalism. The fierce and, occasionally, inflexible attitude towards change was displayed by a number of middle-class patrons and officials in London. The banker R. C. L. Bevan and the

58 See Erdozain, *The Problem of Pleasure*; Hall, *Muscular Christianity*; Bradstock et al., *Masculinity and Spirituality*.

59 Binfield, *George Williams*, p. 34; Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, pp. 2-17.

60 Binfield, *George Williams*, pp. 210-212.



recently converted Hitchcock were not as empathetic to the masculine needs of young commercial men as those officials who had emerged from a lower-middle-class background. The early Evangelical traditions that had drawn Hitchcock and Bevan to the YMCA as patrons from its origin until the 1860s were also evident in Hitchcock's role as treasurer of both the YMCA and the Early Closing Movement and Bevan's positions as treasurer of the Ragged School Union and chairman of the Central Committee of the London YMCA as well as one of its vice-presidents. As members of the Central Committee and the two largest contributors to the association until the 1860s, they had significant clout in opposing the introduction of secular agencies in YMCAs.

The greatest change among YMCA officials concerning the relationship between the religious and secular in YMCA programmes often came from those who were from the same lower-middle-class background as the majority of YMCA members. Williams, who generally urged caution in the adoption of secular YMCA agencies in the 1850s and early 1860s, gradually tempered his position over time. Although Williams ultimately married Hitchcock's daughter, became head of the business, returned to the established church in the 1860s, became president of the YMCA in the 1880s, and was eventually knighted, he had started life as a farmer's son in Devon. Originally apprenticed to a provincial draper, he, like so many young lower-middle-class men in the nineteenth century, had arrived in London with a desire to improve his position. Over the course of the century he displayed far more empathy to requests for change from YMCA members and subscribers than its original middle-class and upper-class patrons.

On the other hand, many officials were not so much driven by worldly or otherworldly concerns, but by the ongoing desire to preserve the Evangelical integrity of the association. This was best represented in the individual who had the greatest overall influence on YMCAs in Britain during its first three decades, George Shipton. Educated in the London Orphan Asylum, Shipton entered the workforce at 13 as a shop assistant and was later employed as a clerk. He joined the YMCA within a couple of years of its founding and in 1851 at age 25 was made secretary of the London Association—a position he held until 1879.<sup>61</sup> Despite his lower-middle-class occupation and sympathy with the earthly necessities of young commercial men, Shipton's experiences in the parent association and his hundreds of advisory trips to provincial associations impressed upon him the dangers involved in YMCA activity shifting too heavily in favour of the secular. Provincial associations usually deferred to Shipton's advice and expertise and regularly called on him to settle issues among their members. His authority was aided by the support offered by the parent association to declining YMCAs through provincial reorganizing and revitalizing efforts in which eminent patrons such as Shaftesbury and Williams regularly provided their assistance in local fundraising campaigns.

This continued fear of corruption was countered by the growing number of Evangelical clergymen in London who encouraged young Evangelicals also to

61 *The City of London Association News*, April 1890, pp. 115-116.

embark on paths of rigorous earthly self-improvement. In the early years the Evangelical with the greatest theological influence on the YMCA was undoubtedly the parson of the Congregational Weigh House Church, Thomas Binney. In the 1840s members of this church included YMCA founders Williams, Valantine, Matthew Henry Hodder, and Samuel Habershon, as well as the patrons Hitchcock and Samuel Morley.<sup>62</sup> Binney, like most non-conformist parsons of his day, was a self-made man. He had started his working life as a typesetter before accepting his true spiritual calling. He clearly recognized the masculine needs of young lower-middle-class men and frequently stressed the importance of worldly involvement in his sermons, lectures, and books, calling on young men to succeed in both the world of the spirit and that of the earth through an unassuming and sincere religiosity.<sup>63</sup> Although Binney's contention that young men did not need to obsess continually over their salvation and could engage in earthly forms of manly development might have raised doubts within some of the overly earnest YMCA founders, it was an influential current within early-Victorian Evangelicalism. This Evangelical current was later carried forth into the late-Victorian era by preachers such as Charles Spurgeon, who "insisted that Christian living must come to terms with the world, spiritualizing rather than shunning the secular," and, in example, by laymen such as Shaftesbury.<sup>64</sup> In contrast to the ascetic and otherworldly Papists, Tractarians, and older generations of Evangelicals with their Manichean contempt for the physical world, Binney argued that young men needed to engage actively with the world, seek out its knowledge and harness it as they exalted their saviour by improving their own condition and that of all men.<sup>65</sup> This principle of mutual improvement was designated as one of the official aims of the YMCA at the end of 1844, including both "the improvement of the spiritual and mental condition of young men"—combining to foster what many YMCA connected officials and clergy referred to as a proper "mental culture" out of which proper manliness could develop.<sup>66</sup>

### The Exeter Hall Lectures

To fulfil the YMCA's principle of mutual improvement for its members and draw in potential new members and converts, the London YMCA sponsored a lecture series in the winter of 1845-1846. These became an annual occurrence for over two decades and became known as the Exeter Hall Lectures because, beginning in 1848-1849, they were delivered at this centre of the London Evangelical world. They were the first official attempt by the YMCA to reach out to young men through a non-religious programme. Delivered by leading members of the British Evangelical clergy and laity on scientific, historical, commercial, and religious

62 Binfield, *George Williams*, p. 34. Although a generous patron and supporter of the YMCA, Morley was not involved in policy-making to the degree that other important middle-class men such as Hitchcock and Bevan were.

63 Thomas Binney, *Is It Possible To Make the Best of Both Worlds? A Book For Young Men* (London: J. Nisbet, 1853), pp. 120-121.

64 Vance, *The Sinews of the Spirit*, p. 33.

65 Binney, *Is It Possible To Make the Best of Both Worlds?*, p. 113.

66 Stevenson, *Historical Records of the Young Men's Christian Association*, pp. 32-34.

topics, they highlighted the openness of YMCA officials to a wide array of Evangelical positions. In the 1850s most YMCAs in large cities launched their own lecture series, often arranging for the same lecturers who had presented in London. As Diarmid Finnegan has noted, YMCA officials promoting lectures recognized the intellectual needs of young commercial men. For these men with insufficient time to read, lectures would promote the development of a mental culture.<sup>67</sup> Spiritual and intellectual development, civic duty, diligence, and self-control were common lecture themes, marking a clear departure from the initial otherworldly obsessions of the YMCA's founders.

Many speakers argued that a broad liberal education was a necessity for the converted Christian and a sign of manliness. Exeter Hall was a symbol of upwardly mobile Evangelicalism, and many of the lecturers, including William Brock, Samuel Waddy, and Hugh Stowell Brown, were, like Binney, self-made men from lower-middle-class backgrounds. They were well aware of the importance of a directed programme of knowledge for young men of Britain's commercial class. The Methodist preacher Joseph Beaumont began his 1847 lecture on "The Acquisition of Knowledge" by informing young men that, although in earlier and less democratic times knowledge had been the monopoly of the few, every individual and every mind had the ability to acquire it. Knowledge was necessary for individual salvation because the minds of uneducated men were "crushed with prejudices, stored with errors, peculiarly open to the influence of impure thoughts and to the slavery of grovelling passions."<sup>68</sup> Cultivating knowledge would not only sharpen the mind, but also provide a man with the mental vigour to partake in the constant battle for his salvation. By cultivating his intellect, the young man could bring glory to God by drawing attention to God's most significant creation, but he could also take an important step in becoming a man. Beaumont claimed that this set the converted and independent Evangelical apart from the unmanly Romanist prohibited from exercising freedom of thought and judgment.<sup>69</sup>

Developing sound interior qualities through a programme of intellectual development gave a man the resources for his daily struggles within the world. As the Reverend George Fisk informed his audience in 1852, Christian character was formed through action, experience, and engagement, not through the example of effeminate asceticism. "The true Christian is a wrestler and must strive; he is a warrior and must fight, he is a traveller and must press forward."<sup>70</sup> Many lectures were devoted to studies of men presented as embodying the characteristics of true Christian heroes. The Baptist Reverend William Brock's lectures on the Biblical heroes of Daniel and St. Paul were provided as examples of the types of independent manliness young men should aspire to achieve. Both men faced persecution for their religious beliefs, but through exercising great moral courage

67 Diarmid A. Finnegan, "Exeter-Hall Science and Evangelical Rhetoric in Mid-Victorian Britain," *Journal of Victorian Culture*, vol. 16, no. 1 (April 2011), pp. 56-59.

68 Rev. Dr. Beaumont, "The Acquisition of Knowledge" in *Lectures Delivered Before the Young Men's Christian Association, 1847-48* (London: J. Nisbet, 1849), pp. 129-131 and 162-163.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 167.

70 Rev. George Fisk, "The Christian Character, in its Connexion with Secular Pursuits" in *Lectures Delivered Before the Young Men's Christian Association, 1851-1852* (London: J. Nisbet, 1852), pp. 367-369.

they remained ever diligent in their religious and civic duties to themselves, their God, and their fellow man.<sup>71</sup> Brock argued that the age required young men whose sound interior qualities enabled them to exercise a masculine integrity that would assist them in furthering the Evangelical missionary cause in the correction of society's ills. It was not enough for the Christian to be sympathetic to missionary work, philanthropic causes, or reform campaigns against societal sins and vices. One had to conduct oneself with an "enlightened individuality." Godly young men needed to render personal service both to their church and to the world through good works in order to "make good things better and wrong things right."<sup>72</sup>

One area in which the Exeter Hall lecturers asserted that young YMCA men could make "wrong things right" was in their commercial lives, where it was suggested that dishonesty and immoralities were often practised. Young Evangelicals could demonstrate correct manliness, not only to their fellow lower-middle-class workers, but also to their middle-class employers, by engaging in knowledgeable, industrious, and, most importantly, honest commercial business. While Fisk reaffirmed in his 1847-1848 lecture on the "Moral Influences of the Commercial Spirit of the Day" that the progress of commerce and the progress of the mind were closely related, his listeners were also warned that commerce could easily become debased and corrupted by the earthliness of man. Within the bourgeois commercial spirit of the mid-nineteenth century Fisk witnessed an obsession with progress and competition. This obsession, he suggested, filled men's minds with earthly considerations and detracted them from a focus on scripture and God.<sup>73</sup> As the Reverend Samuel Waddy pointed out in his 1852-1853 lecture, commerce also threatened an individual's sincerity. While sincerity was an important indicator of Victorian bourgeois manliness, it was seldom practised by men of business.<sup>74</sup> Dishonesty in commerce was described as commonplace, through the deceptive uses of inferior materials, imperfect workmanship, or the adulteration of food. The young commercial men of the YMCA were particularly susceptible to becoming conspirators in this insincerity. Meanwhile, their lives of long hours and drudgery, forced upon them in the name of progress, made it extremely difficult for them to stay on a path devoted to God's purpose and word. The YMCA could play an important role in bringing young men's attention back to God and assist them in acquiring the character and habits that would not only help to advance commerce, but, more importantly, ensure the strength and discipline to combat the evils that often presented themselves in the modern world of business. The manly character that the YMCA helped to furnish would allow

71 Rev. William Brock, "The Apostle Paul" in *Twelve Lectures Delivered Before the Young Men's Christian Association, 1849-1850* (London: J. Nisbet, 1850), pp. 387-326, and "Daniel a Model for Young Men" in *Twelve Lectures Delivered Before the Young Men's Christian Association, 1850-1851* (London: J. Nisbet, 1851), pp. 339-385.

72 Rev. William Brock, "Young Men for the Age" in *Lectures Delivered Before the Young Men's Christian Association, 1852-1853* (London: J. Nisbet, 1853), pp. 471-479 and 492-503.

73 George Fisk, "The Moral Influence of the Commercial Spirit of the Day" in *Lectures Delivered Before the Young Men's Christian Association, 1847-48*, pp. 271-273.

74 Rev. Samuel D. Waddy, "Sincerity, in its Relation to Human Actions, and to Matters of Religious Belief" in *Lectures Delivered Before the Young Men's Christian Association, 1852-1853*, pp. 291-292.

sincere young men to reach far greater heights than dishonest ones of both their own class and that of their employers.

In 1857 Reverend Hugh Stowell Brown, a Liverpool Baptist preacher, delivered a lecture on "Manliness" that provided a distillation of the ideas and themes on manliness expressed in many of the Exeter Hall lectures. Brown laid out a new lower-middle-class masculine script for young men to follow. He declared that "a great revolution must take place in many people's notions of manliness."<sup>75</sup> He argued that virtue and manliness were "equivalent terms" and that godliness, being all virtues such as truthfulness, temperance, benevolence, and fortitude "harmoniously combined," was an essential condition of manliness. For Evangelicals preaching disengagement, Brown argued that it was right for men to celebrate god's greatest creation, man, by exercising his body and to mind to their fullest potential. Yet achievement in these areas alone did not make an individual manly. The ideal of manliness was best seen exemplified in the godliness of Jesus Christ, particularly in his confronting of ungodly practices and behaviours. In an age when there was "far stronger faith in the gospel of Mammon than in the gospel of Jesus Christ," Brown argued that young lower-middle-class men had a responsibility to confront ungodly practices at work, where their manliness would be most greatly tested.

Your Christian men of business have a noble work before you.... The shop, the warehouse, the office, the market, are the very places in which you can most effectually demonstrate the manliness of the Christian character. By your sterling integrity, by your moderation in prosperity, by your patience under adversity, by your victory over self, you will preach the most eloquent, the most convincing, the most masterly of all sermons, and compel the scoffer to admit that your Christianity tends to make you, in the highest sense of expression, manly.<sup>76</sup>

At work young commercial men could demonstrate this version of manliness and, in doing so, could expose the ungodly nature of the competitive attributes associated with bourgeois masculinity in Fisk's and Waddy's lectures. This script did not, however, necessarily mean that they were to neglect the qualities of hard work and success shared by Evangelicals and the middle class.

Manly character was best witnessed in individual industriousness rather than through business success. This theme appeared often in the Exeter Hall lectures and was linked to the young man's development of his knowledge and inner character. Brock presented Daniel as the paragon of the industrious man—"no idling, no loitering, no sauntering, no putting off tomorrow what could be done today."<sup>77</sup> This industriousness, however, did not make Daniel worldly, but actually drew him closer to God—earnestness in business and earnestness in religion went hand in hand. In his lecture on "The Instincts of Industry" delivered in 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition, Samuel Martin reasoned that the earth had been

75 Hugh Stowell Brown, "Manliness" in *Lectures Delivered Before the Young Men's Christian Association in Exeter Hall, 1857-58* (London: J. Nisbet, 1858), pp. 34-35.

76 *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

77 Brock, "Daniel a Model for Young Men," p. 356.

filled with raw materials by God so that man would use his divinely bestowed intellectual resources to discover their uses and “Subdue the Earth”—for his own and mankind’s improvement.<sup>78</sup> Industry was thus a man’s moral duty and a signifier of his manly individualism. The young men of the YMCA were reminded by Martin that God was with them at all times, not just on Sundays or when they prayed, and that they were celebrating God and carrying out his will when they employed industry in their daily lives of work.

The men who delivered these lectures had directly experienced the same lower-middle-class frustrations and needs, authenticating the applicability of this message for their young listeners. As the organizing committee of the lecturers regularly noted, they were specifically geared to the audience of shop assistants and clerks whose educational needs in the mid-nineteenth century were being largely neglected by educationalists.<sup>79</sup> The receptivity of lower-middle-class men to the lectures and to the masculine self-improving messages was confirmed by their enormous popularity over a 20-year period. More than 3,000 young men regularly flocked to listen to some, if not all, of the dozen lectures delivered each year. The related themes of intellectual, moral, and material advancement spoke directly to their specific religious and material circumstances. These lecturers confirmed that, as active agents of Christ who exercised manly qualities of intellectual improvement, hard work, and diligence, YMCA men could be successful both as Christians and as men of commerce. Furthermore, they could themselves be models of proper manliness in areas where many middle-class commercial men fell short, by staying true to both their God and their fellow man by exercising virtue and sincerity in all of their affairs. Young men were exhorted to pursue knowledge and ideas for their own salvation and benefit, but also so they could actively work to assist their fellow man or, at the very least, assist their YMCA brothers.

### **The Introduction of Education Classes**

In the 1850s and 1860s YMCAs were actively engaged in furthering both the mental culture and worldly occupational self-improvement demands of their young men, while taking great care to ensure that nothing too corrupting or carnal penetrated the sanctuary from the modern world that YMCA rooms were designed to provide. YMCA leaders regularly allowed members to form new clubs that encouraged manly intellectual growth, as in 1851 when London officials agreed to a request by members wanting to form a discussion club, or a decade later when the Hereford YMCA conceded the same right.<sup>80</sup> During these years many YMCAs, outside of their religious agencies, operated in a manner similar to a

78 Rev. Samuel Martin, “The Instincts of Industry” in *Twelve Lectures Delivered Before the Young Men’s Christian Association, 1850-1851*, p. 428.

79 *Lectures Delivered Before the Young Men’s Christian Association, 1847-1848*, pp. vii-viii; *Lectures Delivered Before the Young Men’s Christian Association, 1855-1856* (London: J. Nisbet, 1856), pp. iii-x; *Lectures Delivered Before the Young Men’s Christian Association, 1860-1861* (London: J. Nisbet, 1878), pp. iii-v.

80 UBA, YMCA Archive, London Central Committee Minutes [hereafter LCCM], Vol. 1, March 31, 1851; and Hereford YMCA, Minutes of Members Meetings and General Committee, D121, September 25, 1863.



literary society in the secular agencies offered. The appeals of members and subscribers led many YMCAs to form literary clubs where the essays of their members were read, literary works analysed, and discussions held on a wide array of religious, literary, and scientific subjects. Regular weekly lectures given by either members or friends of local associations, like the yearly public lecture series run by numerous associations, did a great deal to further the intellectual curiosity of young YMCA men.

Running education classes, however, was the YMCA's most important and lasting step in the promotion of intellectual attainment. Classes were inaugurated in the London YMCA in 1849 in its Gresham Street buildings, and by 1858 education classes were being run in 19 of the 84 YMCAs of Great Britain. In London and Bristol it was noted that great care was taken to ensure that men of a "sound Christian character" taught these classes.<sup>81</sup> Over the next two decades many subjects aimed to assist young men in their study of the Bible and their religious development, including the Hebrew and Greek languages, the Greek Testament, and scripture. More frequent, however, were classes on subjects of a liberal humanist nature such as English, natural philosophy, English history, discussion, and Latin or subjects having direct commercial application such as arithmetic, geometry, writing, French, German, shorthand, and bookkeeping.<sup>82</sup> As financial, commercial, and public service institutions grew and matured in Britain as it entered its late-industrial era, employers were increasingly demanding a higher level of general education and specific office and commercial skills such as bookkeeping, shorthand, and languages. Young clerks and shop assistants, who in an earlier era could have obtained a permanent position with an elementary or limited secondary education, now required additional education if they were to be successful in securing a stable position and rising within the world of the warehouse, shop, or office and ultimately to exercise a positive masculinity of independence through work—a cornerstone of true manhood for all social classes. This financial independence would enable them to marry and maintain a home, other key components of complete Victorian manhood. YMCAs generally responded favourably to applications from their members and subscribers for new classes that met the young men's intellectual or occupational wants or requirements, as when the London YMCA was asked to offer classes in English grammar, elocution, and drawing.<sup>83</sup>

As early as the first national conference of YMCAs held in Leeds in 1858, most British YMCA leaders insisted that educational classes complemented their missionary goals by extending the reach of the YMCA. They viewed classes as a natural offshoot of their Evangelical quest for scriptural knowledge and manly intellectual development. Those completely opposed to educational programmes represented a small minority. The Anglican Reverend T. H. Tarlton addressed

81 LCYM, October 26, 1849; UBA, YMCA Archive, Bristol YMCA, Minutes of Committee and Annual Meetings, D157, October 26, 1860 and October 3, 1862.

82 LCYM, April 1, 1850 and June 21, 1852; LCCM, Vol. 1, December 4, 1856; UBA, YMCA Archive, A1, 39; E24, Vol. 1, "Report of the First Conference of the Young Men's Christian Associations, 1858," p. 66; Bristol YMCA, Minutes of Committee and Annual Meetings, D157, October 4, 1861 and October 3, 1862.

83 LCYM, March 31, 1851 and July 12, 1855; LCCM, Vol. 1, September 6, 1860.

the tension between these two views in his opening address to the conference. He reminded delegates to be ever vigilant in preserving the spiritual work of the YMCA. Reading rooms, libraries, and educational classes could be offered to young men if there was a specific need, but he maintained that there was nothing “characteristically Christian” in such agencies.<sup>84</sup> Tarlton had undoubtedly moved to get the first word on the issue, knowing that William Osburn of the Leeds YMCA was prepared to argue in favour of educational classes later in the conference. In his paper entitled “On Class Education: How Far is it a Legitimate Agency of YMCAs?” Osburn acknowledged that Mechanics’ Institutes offered many of the same classes as YMCAs. He stressed that young men had neither the time nor the money to belong to both institutions. Therefore, if the knowledge necessary for young men to advance was only offered in secular institutions, their spiritual lives would be threatened. Meanwhile, if the YMCA told young men that they could only focus on religion within the YMCA, it would be “both unkind and injudicious” to their ability to succeed in their occupations and, therefore, to their full masculine development.<sup>85</sup> According to Osburn, the Leeds YMCA was looking to build the complete Christian young man by nourishing not only his religious needs, but also the occupational necessities of the class of young men who were its members. As he observed: “The young men who join our Leeds Institute ... are, for the most part, clerks, shop-assistants, warehousemen, and mechanics. The position in life of every individual belonging to these classes makes it important to him that he should be acquainted with the branches of knowledge required for his calling. His bread, in fact, depends upon it.”<sup>86</sup>

Most of the delegates supported the views expressed by Osburn. C. J. Tawse of Edinburgh and C. Swallow of Manchester predicted that educational classes would assist members who had already found Christ as well as bring other young men under the influence of the associations and attract them to their Bible and prayer meetings.<sup>87</sup> R. Smith of Londonderry agreed, noting that in his YMCA membership had risen over the previous few years in proportion to the increase in its educational facilities. Countering the argument that educational classes caused YMCA members to lose their religious focus, C. S. Spence of Leeds remarked that, in the Leeds YMCA, the young men most diligent in their pursuit of secular knowledge tended to be the most zealous in their Christian work, both in the association and in society at large.<sup>88</sup>

Despite this enthusiasm for educational classes, some opposition and caution persisted. At the 1859 national conference Shipton conceded that, while secular agencies such as educational classes might “have their value in so far as they tend to confer personal and social advantages, and to the amelioration of sorrow and suffering,” they could not “effect moral or spiritual transformation” without the individual first accepting and immersing himself in the “Word of God.”<sup>89</sup>

84 “Report of the First Conference of the Young Men’s Christian Associations, 1858,” p. 11.

85 *Ibid.*, pp. 67-69.

86 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

87 *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

88 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

89 UBA, YMCA Archive, E24, Vol. 1, “Report of the Conference of British Young Men’s Christian

Mr. Bowker of the London West Branch pointed out that the Bible class and prayer meetings still needed to be “the axes on which all their machinery for saving souls should turn.”<sup>90</sup> Mr. Hull of London's North West Branch expressed dismay that the cross was not enough to attract young men to the YMCA, asking where “were the Elocution Classes of St. Paul held?”<sup>91</sup> In 1860 Hitchcock, then the treasurer of the London Central YMCA, caused a temporary crisis when he expressed his concern that the work of the association in its Aldersgate Street headquarters was becoming “carnal and secular” through the inclusion of social and educational agencies that hindered religious progress.<sup>92</sup>

Although a handful of YMCA men remained steadfast in their opposition, by the late 1850s and early 1860s the majority of members and officials considered that properly conducted educational classes were a necessity for lower-middle-class Evangelical males. The London YMCA supported educational classes as of the utmost necessity both for the development of its members' masculinity and for a vibrant commercial society. In 1863 *The Quarterly Messenger* suggested, “These are not times in which it is safe to leave any class without appropriate provision of its education, least of all that class which must furnish to this great commercial community the merchants and traders of the coming time.”<sup>93</sup> In the mid-1860s many associations began to introduce educational offerings for the first time or re-orientated existing ones to meet more directly the commercial educational needs of their members and subscribers. For example, in an effort to attract more subscribers to its library and reading rooms, the Central London YMCA dropped all fees for its educational classes for subscribers to these rooms.<sup>94</sup> In 1866 the Liverpool YMCA also waived fees for subscribers to its rooms and began offering classes in shorthand and bookkeeping that were of a direct commercial application. In 1867, Ronald McDougall, who started and ran the first educational classes at the Liverpool YMCA, went so far as to compare the experience gained by YMCA members in his classes with the masculine social and cultural development achieved by the young aristocrats of the eighteenth-century Grand Tour. Mr. Grindley pointed out that the YMCA had three objects: “the religious, the social and the intellectual welfare of young men.”<sup>95</sup> All three were necessary for fostering YMCA missionary work and for the occupational and complete manly development of the young commercial man.

### Acceptance of Rational and Physical Recreational Agencies

If by the end of the 1860s secular educational agencies were widely accepted as necessary for the self-improvement of members and subscribers, the inclusion

---

Associations, 1859,” pp. 22-23.

90 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

91 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

92 Hitchcock was soon placated by the assertion of the London YMCA Central Committee that it was always acting with the sole purpose of bringing young men into a closer communion with God. See LCCM, Vol. 1, January 26 and February 23, 1860, pp. 208-218.

93 *The Quarterly Messenger*, April 1863, pp. 5-6.

94 LCCM, Vol. 1, June 28 and July 12, 1860.

95 *The Quarterly Messenger*, October 1867 and January 1868, pp. 365-366.

of rational and, especially, physical recreational activities, in contrast, was an issue of even greater debate and discord well into the 1870s. Although this era witnessed the exaltation within bourgeois culture of muscular Christian virtues, YMCA leaders were largely reluctant to embrace and adopt programmes that would develop both health and manliness. Part of this reluctance was based upon the concern that athletics and the cult of games increasingly promoted by the muscular Christian disciples of Kingsley and Hughes were motivated more by a desire to improve the martial and competitive health of the nation than to bring men closer to salvation.<sup>96</sup> Yet the appeal of muscular Christianity was part of a broader increase in the popularity of sports and athletics among all classes of British males and was increasingly associated with masculine development.<sup>97</sup> Members and subscribers either began appealing to YMCAs for the inclusion of these activities within the scope of their agencies or joining external clubs and institutes where they already existed.<sup>98</sup>

British YMCAs began to devote attention to the question of whether or not physical recreations, or even rational ones such as chess, were within the scope of the YMCA's work and aims in the late 1850s. As in the case of educational classes, recreations were a topic of debate at the first national YMCA conference in 1858. Dr. J. H. Gladstone, president of the conference, read a paper entitled "On Recreation: The Duty of Young Men's Christian Associations Respecting It."<sup>99</sup> Gladstone's paper was designed to establish the subject as a topic of consideration and was not intended to establish a uniform policy on the subject of recreations. The paper and the responses it evoked reflected the ambivalence regarding recreations shared by many YMCA leaders. Some viewed activities considered compatible with a young man's personal religious quest, such as the outdoor activities of walking and rambling, as positive. Many other activities were viewed as bringing young men into contact with the sinful activities and unrespectable individuals from which the YMCA had been designed to steer them. Relaxation

96 The first recognized use of the phrase "muscular Christianity" was in a review of Kingsley's novel *Two Years Ago* in February 1857; see "Two Years Ago," *Edinburgh Review*, vol. 4 (February 21, 1857), p. 176. When *Tom Brown's School Days* was published two months later, reviewers in the *Times*, *Edinburgh Review*, and *Literary Gazette* all commented on the striking resemblance of the themes contained within the writings of both authors, with the *Times* using the label of "muscular Christianity" to brand both of their beliefs. See George J. Worth, "Of Muscles and Manliness: Some Reflections on Thomas Hughes" in James R. Kincaid and Albert J. Kuhn, eds., *Victorian Literature and Society* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984), pp. 302-303.

97 For studies on the Victorian obsession with health, recreation, and games as components of masculinity, see Bruce Haley, *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978); Roberta J. Park, "Biological Thought, Athletics and the Formation of a 'Man of Character': 1830-1900" in J. A. Mangan and James Walvin, eds., *Manliness and Morality* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), pp. 7-34; Michael Anton Budd, *The Sculpture Machine: Physical Culture and Body Politics in the Age of Empire* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Patrick F. McDevitt, *May the Best Man Win: Sport, Masculinity, and Nationalism in Great Britain and the Empire, 1880-1935* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Mike Huggins, *The Victorians and Sport* (London: Continuum, 2007).

98 See, for example, UBA, YMCA Archive, Bristol YMCA, Minutes of Committee and Annual Meetings, D157, October 26, 1860, October 4, 1861, September 25, 1863, and August 14, 1868; Hereford YMCA, Minutes of Members Meetings and General Committee, D121, September 25, 1863, September 7, 1871, and August 27, 1877.

99 "Report of the First Conference of the Young Men's Christian Associations, 1858," pp. 33-45.

as an end in itself, theatres, smoking, billiards, and any game that could lead to betting, which included most sports, were to be avoided at all costs. As in the case of educational classes, many YMCA officials maintained that the adoption of recreational activities could prevent young men from seeking such activities in institutions of an immoral nature. Still, the majority of delegates contended that there was much to be feared about specific recreations and the potential of others to detract from a young man's spiritual quest.<sup>100</sup> For these YMCA men, physical or rational recreations, no matter how potentially beneficial to a young man's health or mental culture, could easily become corrupted and devolve into sinful amusements that would "offend the consciences of weak brethren."<sup>101</sup>

Not until well into the 1860s did British YMCAs begin accepting the inclusion of limited rational recreational activities. In 1865 the Central London YMCA finally ended its ban on novels within its library, and even then avoided novels of a "sentimental" temperament. There was considerable discussion before the works of Dickens were allowed.<sup>102</sup> Cerebral games such as chess were still viewed with such a degree of suspicion by Bevan that in 1865 he resigned his position as chairman of the Central London YMCA over what he viewed as the YMCA's departure from the true devotional work of the association. One of the reasons he gave was the introduction of a chess column in *The Quarterly Messenger*, published by the London association.<sup>103</sup> Chess eventually became the first game allowed within the London YMCA. Its Committee granted approval to the formation of a Chess Club in 1869. During the 1860s a number of other YMCAs founded chess clubs and introduced chessboards into their rooms.<sup>104</sup> It was not until the mid-1870s, however, that rational recreations such as chess and draughts were widely accepted and became common features in YMCAs across Britain.<sup>105</sup>

The YMCA's stance on physical recreations during this era was expressed in an 1864 article in *The Quarterly Messenger*. It was willing to accept the growing importance placed on a healthy body by middle-class commentators, asserting, "A man has received life and health in sacred trust from God... He owes it to himself and society ... to cultivate health and vigour by all suitable means." It was not, however, willing to accept the competitive elements of the growing games ethos, fearing it would induce the dangerously unspiritual emotions of vanity and pride in young men and jealousy in their opponents. Physical activity was important to masculine bodily development, but it could not interfere with the work of young men or YMCAs in the nurturing of minds and spirits.<sup>106</sup> When William Warden of Edinburgh suggested at the national British conference of YMCAs later in 1864 that recreations could be included within YMCA work as an inducement to young

100 *Ibid.*

101 "Report of the Conference of Delegates from British and Foreign Young Men's Christian Associations, 1862," p. 41.

102 LCCM, Vol. 1, May 22, 1865.

103 The other major issue was that Bevan believed that the London YMCA's plan to include topics of a secular nature in its yearly lecture series was too significant a departure from the calling of the association. See LCCM, Vol. 1, September 18 and October 16, 1865.

104 "Young Men's Christian Association: A List With Statistics, 1867."

105 LCCM, Vol. 2, April 18, 1869.

106 *The Quarterly Messenger*, July 1864, pp. 91-94.

men to join, senior delegates were quick to point out the serious dangers involved in secular recreations and their threat to the association's work. Shipton argued that, although individual physical development was important to a young Christian, "competitive" physical recreational activities were to be viewed as "amusements." They were not a component of a young man's spiritual development, and it was "impossible to calculate" the degree to which "evil consequences" would result from their inclusion as agencies of YMCAs.<sup>107</sup>

While British YMCA officials were blocking attempts to include physical recreational activities within their associations in the mid-1860s, foreign YMCAs were beginning to embrace them. At the fourth international conference held in Elberfeld (Germany), delegates agreed with the resolution that "the strengthening of the body by means of gymnastic exercises, swimming, and the like" belonged alongside the religious duties of associations.<sup>108</sup> The first major renovations to accommodate physical activities in YMCAs occurred in the United States. In 1868 the YMCA of New York City began constructing a new \$300,000 building that included a gymnasium. Other American YMCAs soon followed the example of New York by building gymnasiums and adopting a wide variety of physical recreational activities.<sup>109</sup>

In England, however, Shipton continued to promote the view that, while it was fine for young men to build up their physical strength on their own, athletics and sports were solely connected to a man's base desires and needs. They would interfere with, and perhaps destroy, the true spiritual work of British YMCAs if allowed to run rampant within their associations.<sup>110</sup> Shipton and a handful of other British YMCA officials continued to express such sentiments at regional conferences in the early 1870s. Gradually, however, they accepted the parallels between the introduction of physical recreations in America and their own educational programmes. During the 1870s educational classes in British YMCAs were attracting more and more subscribers, many of whom became YMCA members and Evangelical converts. The introduction and continued expansion of this secular programme in England, as in America, had not destroyed the YMCA's devotional orientation. Rather, it enhanced its spiritual and self-improvement work. As almost all major YMCA officials in London and many in the provinces gravitated away from non-conformist houses of worship to Anglican Evangelical ones, they significantly tempered their attitudes towards the inclusion of non-religious programmes within YMCAs. As Binfield has noted, non-conformist Evangelicals tended to be far more rigid in their beliefs.<sup>111</sup> The religious solidity enjoyed and demonstrated by Evangelical Anglicans was witnessed in the life

107 UBA, YMCA Archive, E24, Vol. 1, "Report of the Conference of Representative from the Young Men's Christian Associations of Great Britain and Ireland, 1864," pp. 66-92.

108 *The Quarterly Messenger*, October 1865, pp. 191-198.

109 *The Quarterly Messenger*, October 1871, pp. 647-648; March 1872, pp. 730-731. For a discussion of the influence of athletics on American YMCA expansion, see Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 64-72.

110 *The Quarterly Messenger*, November 1869, p. 486.

111 Binfield, *George Williams*, pp. 32 and 205.



of Lord Shaftesbury. He was devoted to missionary work and to the protection of the Sabbath through involvement in the London City Mission, The Ragged School Union, and the Sunday School and Early Closing Movements. On several occasions in the 1860s he cautioned the YMCA over a potential loss of focus on its missionary work due to the weight of attention it was devoting to its educational classes.<sup>112</sup> Yet this concern over protecting the spiritual integrity of Evangelicalism did not prevent him from actively supporting the YMCA's educational classes or struggling against societal problems in his sanitary and chimney sweep reform campaigns. He frequently called on the YMCA to continue operating its programmes of manly development, noting that, in Britain's cities, "If the territory be not occupied by you, it will be occupied by the Papist and the Infidel."<sup>113</sup> Unsurprisingly, Shaftesbury later became a staunch supporter of the British YMCA's decision to undertake major programmes of gymnasium construction.

In the 1870s some of the YMCAs in larger centres began to consider seriously introduction of the physical recreational activities that had been such a success in America. By this time the local associations had matured into adulthood and were beginning to make their own decisions without first considering if they fit into the uniformity of YMCA agencies prescribed by London. Meanwhile, the great expansion in the number of clerks employed in Britain's financial, insurance, commercial, and public service sectors during the 1870s, which continued unabated until the Great War, created even greater pressures on YMCAs to cater to the demands of this class. Clerks had turned to YMCAs for education and were demanding an ever-increasing number of new social and recreational agencies. YMCAs responded by constructing new buildings, beginning in 1871 with the Birmingham YMCA's planning and fundraising for a new building at the cost of £7,000 that included a gymnasium.<sup>114</sup> In 1875 the new building opened and immediately witnessed a large increase in membership.<sup>115</sup> Within a couple of years new buildings with gymnasiums were erected in Dublin, Liverpool, and Manchester. In each case subscriptions and membership numbers increased greatly. This success changed the nature of the discourse in British YMCA circles regarding physical recreation, sports, and secular programmes in general. Even the parent YMCA in London began to look into the question of a larger building after Williams, now treasurer of the London YMCA, attended the opening of the Birmingham YMCA and reported on the advantages of attracting greater numbers of young men to their association of Christian brotherhood.<sup>116</sup> By the mid-1870s the linking of physical recreation to "amusements" of a potentially dangerous and sinful nature had almost entirely subsided within YMCA circles. In 1876 W. H. Newett of the Liverpool YMCA was free to declare without criticism that "[YMCA recreational activities] ... tended to make the youth a better man,

112 "Report of the Conference of British Young Men's Christian Associations, 1859," p. 24.

113 Cited in Binfield, *George Williams*, p. 275.

114 *The Quarterly Messenger*, April 1873, pp. 781-782.

115 *The Young Men's Magazine: A Monthly Record of Young Men's Christian Associations*, January 1, 1875, p. 30.

116 LCCM, Vol. 2, January 14, 1875.

physically, mentally, and spiritually.... He was made better physically by joining the swimming club, the rambling club, and their other lawful recreations, in that way doing his best to present to God a healthy mind in a healthy body."<sup>117</sup> The late 1870s and 1880s witnessed an explosion of YMCA growth as associations began introducing gymnasiums (68 British YMCAs had gymnasiums by the end of the decade) and unhesitatingly supported the formation of athletic clubs (110 British YMCAs had athletic clubs by 1889).<sup>118</sup> The definition of "dangerous amusements" within YMCA circles had narrowed to billiards, music halls, smoking, betting and card playing, or other activities considered morally corrupting.

Undoubtedly, bourgeois masculinity, with its public school emphasis on athleticism and games, helped to produce a masculine script applicable to all men in which engaging in gymnastics and sports was an important means of displaying manliness. Some men within the Evangelical movement had seen linkages between a healthy mind, healthy body, and, ultimately, healthy soul for decades. It was not the worldliness of physical activities themselves that had initially produced opposition to educational classes and sports and athletics, but the fear that such pursuits could detract from the primary spiritual mission of the YMCA. Only a small cadre of YMCA officials such as Bevan and Hitchcock had ever been vehemently opposed to the introduction of secular leisure agencies, and by 1865 Hitchcock had passed away and Bevan's role within the YMCA was diminishing. The decline of the London YMCA's influence in promoting uniform programmes, the concomitant independence of larger provincial associations, and the success of associations abroad and at home in attracting growing numbers of young men combined to further the adoption of physical recreational programmes. By the end of the decade even George Williams, who by this time was firmly identified as the official "founder" of the YMCA, threw his support behind the expansion of physical recreational activities while Shipton, who had spent years emphasizing an extremely cautious approach to the inclusion of secular agencies within YMCAs, retired as secretary, bringing an end to the British YMCA's heavily London-centric era.

### Conclusion

Young lower-middle-class men did not, indeed could not, conform to the masculine scripts of those above them on the British class ladder. They developed their own activities and institutions such as the YMCA to develop and exercise their manhood in ways that reflected their specific social and material needs. At mid-century few institutions existed for the young and often impoverished men of the lower middle class. The YMCA allowed for the cultural construction of a lower-middle-class masculinity that could be developed and demonstrated through peer support for, and recognition of, the converted Christian. Ultimately, YMCAs combined their religious functions in locales where young commercial men could meet, engage in fraternal association and mutual assistance, escape from the stresses and dangers of city life, and absorb themselves in the programmes of self-improvement that

117 *The Young Men's Magazine*, September 1, 1876, p. 142.

118 UBA, YMCA Archive, E21, Vol. 1, "Report of the National Council For 1888 and 1889," pp. 62-91.

promised to improve their occupational success and corresponding masculine development.

Historians of the YMCA have overestimated the influence of a middle-class inspired secularized muscular Christianity and athletics on the transformation of the YMCA into an association that provided for both the religious and worldly needs of its membership. Careful attention to its class dimensions shows that, during its first decade, YMCA officials began meeting the earthly leisure and self-improving demands of young lower-middle-class men by carefully adopting programmes of social and intellectual development such as lectures and libraries that intersected with Evangelical theology. In the 1850s and 1860s, British YMCA officials expanded these programmes to include many rational recreations such as educational classes and chess, though resistance to secular agencies, whether intellectual or recreational, continued through much of the period. By the 1860s and 1870s, almost all YMCA men were convinced that these programmes did not interfere with their spiritual work. They were viewed as important to the masculine development of young men and a key way of attracting new subscribers and converts. This acceptance served to pave the way for the adoption of far less spiritually based YMCA activities, such as allowing some novels in libraries and physical recreations, as the YMCA furthered its efforts to cater to the distinct social and material needs of its lower-middle-class members.

For decades the YMCA sought a balance between supporting the masculine requirements of young men of the lower middle class while protecting fragile souls from the corrupting influences understood to exist in many of the modern urban world's leisure options. It was founded as an alternative to such sinful and unrespectable activities, and great care was taken to ensure that its young men were not exposed to such contagions. Over time the YMCA combined Evangelical currents with responses to the demands of clerks and other young, single, lower-middle-class males to elaborate their particular version of masculinity. Manliness was linked to virtuous behaviour that, although emphasizing individual responsibility, also encouraged truthfulness and integrity in contrast to the overly competitive elements of bourgeois masculinity. The introduction of reading rooms and libraries and the gradual introduction of educational classes eventually convinced YMCA officials and patrons that the YMCA could meet the needs of its members in this regard while preserving its Evangelical integrity. YMCA leaders came to believe that respectable recreations would not corrupt the spiritual work of the YMCA and could be key to keeping young men away from sinful locales, such as music halls, betting halls, and drinking establishments. Gymnasiums and sports clubs responded to the growing interest in physical recreation, which by this time was widely understood as an activity in which manliness could be demonstrated by all classes. Such new agencies furthered the YMCA's desire to protect its members and increase its membership as it faced competition from other associational, leisure, and self-improvement options available to commercial men. The ever-growing number of members and of branches across England and beyond following expansion of its array of programmes in the 1870s and 1880s suggests that the attempt to appeal directly to lower-middle-class masculine wants

while remaining consistent with its Evangelical mission was successful. YMCAs provided a site where young men, mostly bachelors, working in servile occupations and precarious material positions, were able to develop and demonstrate their manliness. This associational life, rather than home or work, was key to their masculine development at this stage in their lives.