

Starting Strength

Father Figure or Phony? George Jowett, the ACWLA and the Milo Barbell Company, 1924-1927

by
John D. Fair

It is my belief that the present day official amateur lifting in Canada and the United States is the natural result of the efforts and accomplishments of George Jowett in regulating and promoting lifting and creating interest in progressive exercise.(1)

—Ottley Coulter, 1956

He is so notorious for drawing the long bow, that what he says is of little value and not to be relied on. He always told it to the advantage of George Fiusdale. Nothing he claimed was so. No titles. No Awards. No nothing.(2)

—Charles A. Smith, 1989

The most striking feature of the growing body of strength literature in the past decade has been the prevalence of biographical accounts. Glittering portraits abound of heroes from the past, satisfying the nostalgic cravings of “*Strength & Health Boys Grown Up*” and proving a rich heritage of role models for future generations of strength athletes.(3) Comparatively less attention has been focused on the great patriarchs of the iron game, the likes of which include George Windship, “Father” Bill Curtis, Professor Attila, Eugen Sandow, Bemarr Macfadden, Alan Calvert, George Jowett, Mark Berry, Bob Hoffman, Peary Rader, and the Weider brothers. Of these luminaries only Windship, Sandow, Macfadden, and Hoffman have been subjected to academic scrutiny.(4) That Jowett who (with Ottley Coulter and David Willoughby) institutionalized weightlifting as a sport in this country during the 1920s has not received greater recognition as a father-figure may seem curious. During his editorship of *Strength* magazine from 1924 to 1927, Jowett was clearly the most dominant figure in American weightlifting. But internal strife at the parent Milo Barbell Company led to his dismissal, the decline of his once vibrant American Continental Weight-Lifters Association, a sullyng of his reputation as a physical culturist and a legacy of doubts concerning his patriarchal status. An examination of contemporary sources, principally *Strength* and the Jowett-Coulter correspondence in the Todd-

Jowett, the ACWLA, and Milo Barbell 1924-1927

McLean collection, reveals that much of the confusion over Jowett's role as a founding father is rooted not so much in the realm of sport as in the vagaries of American business.

In the 1920s Philadelphia was the mecca for American weightlifting that York would later become. There Alan Calvert, inspired by Eugen Sandow's magnificent physique and strength feats, had founded the Milo Barbell Company in 1902 and started publishing *Strength* in 1914. After struggling for two decades to acquaint the public with barbell training and to sustain a living from it, he sold the enterprise to Daniel G. Redmond and Robert L. Hunter. The former, son of the treasurer of Fairmont Foundry, Milo's supplier of weights, revived the business which Calvert had virtually abandoned during the war years. Hunter soon sold his interest to Redmond, but he prepared the first issue of *Strength* (which had also ceased operations) in November 1919 and set the magazine on a prosperous course in the early twenties.(5) After finalizing the deal, Calvert explained to Coulter that he had "agreed never to reenter the Bar Bell business, so all my connection with the P.C. game is at an end."(6) But he did retain an association with the magazine over the next five years culminating in the publication in 1924 of his *Super Strength*, an inspiring and informative training guide that was marketed by Redmond.(7) Philadelphia thrived as a strength center from the presence of the venerable Herrmann's Gym as well as the Milo Barbell Company, and when Carl Easton Williams, formerly editor of Bernarr Macfadden's *Physical Culture*, arrived in late 1923 there was a dramatic transformation of *Strength*.(8) But Williams, mysteriously, stayed less than a year. It seemed fitting that Jowett, whose stature as a writer and promoter had been growing, should join Redmond's staff in September 1924, the impression being that he would complement Calvert's presence and help give the magazine a greater weightlifting orientation.(9)

While high hopes were expressed all round over the probable benefits of this association, anticipations likely exceeded reality. In an early letter to Coulter, Jowett provides a rare glimpse of routine life at weightlifting's first true capital.

I dictate & write articles, help write ads, & write leaflets, answer questions for 'The Mat' & Answer & Question Dept., & see all goes out in courses, & mark up all the courses of instruction.

It does not keep me awful busy, as I have three stenogs [to] dictate to & one for my complaints on shipments, others handle the rest.

Calvert does little but write & sell his books, just in a few mins. a day. . . I cannot say I like this city at all. It is too dead, & they call [it] the Quaker City alright, everybody seems to have forgotten how to smile.

Redmond will not allow a girl in the office with us as a worker, & it makes a lot of running around for me, taking stuff to them.

He does not approve of you saying Good morning to them, as he says it makes them go above their station, & makes one appear clubby with them. Can you imagine that.(10)

Despite the princely sum (at least \$75 per week) Jowett was earning at Milo, it is obvious that ennui had already set in. What he needed was more opportunities to tap his gifts of organization and imagination, lift him out of the humdrum of office routine, and fulfill the considerable needs of his expansive ego.

The ACWLA furnished just such an outlet, and company officials were quick to recognize that it brought an infusion of altruism to the otherwise commercial image of Milo. As Calvert noted in introducing the concept to *Strength* readers, "the standardization of lifting" was one of the "principal objects" of the organization Jowett had brought with him. But "don't get the idea that by joining, all you will do is to help along a worth movement for the association can do more for you than

Jowett, the ACWLA, and Milo Barbell 1924-1927

you can do for it.” Calvert predicted that Jowett, as president, was “going to be a much overworked man, but the ACWLA was “one of the greatest forward steps that has ever been taken by American athletes.”(11) Jowett was no less sanguine, and it seemed at last that his dream of a North American lifters organization that would rival the British Amateur Weight Lifters Association (BAWLA) was at last becoming a reality. “The Milo is paying for all the A.C.W.L.A. correspondence,” he explained to Coulter. “I told all of our true circumstances to Redmond & Calvert, & Redmond is willing to take the chance. I am in touch with the A.A.U. now to try & affiliate with them.”(12) But Jowett had no intention of relinquishing his paternal rights to any other governing body. His response from the AAU, he told Coulter, was

rather amusing, as they stated that they controlled weight lifting in the United States, and that the last meet they pulled off in California [conducted by Willoughby], was a successful issue. Can you beat that! I sure had a good laugh over their conceit. They claimed they would bring my letter to the attention of the board when they hold their annual meet next month in Atlantic City. Perhaps they will do something, but we should worry.(13)

For the moment, at least, the AAU had little interest in weightlifting. Thus for Jowett and his ACWLA, buttressed by Milo resources, the future seemed bright.

Within months Jowett instigated more activity than in the previous two years of his organization’s existence. On 11 December 1924, the ACWLA held its first “meeting” at Siegmund Klein’s gymnasium in New York City. Here Henry Steinborn performed a 340 pound clean and jerk, and Klein did a 225 pound continental press.(14) But what Jowett really wanted was to draw attention to Philadelphia (and himself) by reviving Calvert’s practice, begun at the old Milo headquarters on Olive Street, of holding exhibitions at regular intervals. “When any particularly good man came around” Jowett recalls, Calvert would “notify all the boys in and around Philadelphia and out of town enthusiasts.” Eventually, “quite a crowd mustered together. After the special events were over, they would engage in impromptu contests among themselves, and you can imagine what a good time they would have.” Now the Milo Barbell Company was opening a big and well equipped floor space for local ACWLA members at its new location on Palethorpe Street “where we expect to repeat the good old times, and continue the great work Mr. Calvert started.”(15) Jowett staked a further claim on iron game turf through his editorials and inspirational articles, often accompanied by flattering pictures of himself. And under the pseudonym of John Bradford, he edited the American Continental Weight Lifters’ Association Notes where he was able to engage in unrestrained selfpraise. Most of all, Jowett craved international recognition. Though British and European lifers were more advanced than their American counterparts, *Strength* readers were assured that records in the military press and two hand jerk would “stay with us a long time as no European ever equaled the feats of president Jowett as a middleweight.” Inasmuch as he “knows every angle and trick of every lift as each nation practices it” one would expect American weightlifting performances eventually to “reach and, we hope, surpass those of the foreign competitor.”(16)

Never did such high hopes seem more realizable than in Jowett’s portrayal of the ACWLA exhibition on 3 January 1925 in the Quaker City. It was “the best attended weight lifting contest we have ever seen,” he reported. “Members came from all parts of America” and “wrecked records galore.”(17) On this special night “everybody was happy and true sportsmanship prevailed. Never before was there such a number of weight lifting celebrities gathered together on one occasion.” In addition to “great old timers like Paulinetti, Otto Arco, and Teddy Mack,” there were “stars of the present day like Steinborn, Snyder, Weber, Smith and Gay, and the new generation of young strong men who are

Jowett, the ACWLA, and Milo Barbell 1924-1927

destined to go a long way in the manly sport of weight lifting.” A demonstration of classical posing by Sieg Klein, then in his prime, was followed by some one-hand balancing and then attempts to establish weightlifting records in various classes. Officiating were Roy Smith of New York City, Arthur Gay of Rochester, and Jowett who, as referee, prior to each lift, explained the ACWLA rules to the audience. In the feature event of the evening Klein bested Robert Snyder of Hagerstown, Maryland, in a three-lift bout. Then Steinborn, of whom Jowett had predicted at least one world record, faltered badly in the one hand snatch and two hand clean. The show concluded with a posing contest between two New Yorkers named Davis and Levine. In light of the competitive spirit and American records that were set, Jowett expressed confidence that “those who have spent years exploiting [sic] the merits of the ‘iron game’ are at last going to realize their dreams, and see weight lifting made a national sport.”(18)

By no means the least important aspect of this new found recognition was the potential it afforded for international prestige. Admittedly only one attempt was made at Philadelphia to surpass a British record, an unsuccessful 175 pound military press by lightweight Marquis Losey of Jersey City. But Jowett promulgated the notion that “overseas nations who said that America would never be a weightlifting nation are rubbing their eyes in astonishment.”(19) Striving also for personal recognition, Jowett (as Bradford) likened his role to the foremost spirit in the creation of BAWLA two decades earlier. “W. A. Pullum is to British lifters what George F. Jowett is to Americans. ‘Nuff sed!’”(20)

Never could enough be said about his own organizational talent, however, to satisfy Jowett. Ensuing months witnessed a flurry of ACWLA activity not only in Philadelphia but in Jersey City where Losey and William Mills had formed a Jowett Athletic Association. An exhibition held at the latter on February 21 served as an opportunity for Jowett to show that he practiced what he preached. Despite a shoulder injury from wrestling which had forced his retirement three years earlier, he right hand military pressed 115 pounds. John Bradford described how “this come-back dazzled the boys, and they felt greatly honored to think the man after whom they named their club had performed this wonderful feat in their presence..George F. is sure a big favorite with the Jersey boys.” Then in Philadelphia on March 7 he presided over a strength fest which included tumbling, wrestling, and some record setting performances by middleweight Frank Dennis of Birdsboro, Pennsylvania. But he was most proud of the dual international matches he had arranged between leading American and German lifters. “Many thought Mr. Jowett was wrong in making these matches, but we in the game, know he is never wrong.” Obviously Jowett was pleased that the Americans won under strict application of ACWLA rules, but he took even greater delight in describing his own importance to the iron game.

As the leader of the strongman movement Mr. Jowett stands foremost in our sight. There is no lifter in the country who does not owe something to him. The weight lifting public owes him all, and the body culturists the world over, owe him much for his successful investigation and enlightened teachings.(21)

At an April 4 outing Jowett seized on further opportunities to display his lifting prowess. The significance of the pressing movements he performed was cast into relief by constant references to his ailing shoulder and relative lack of preparation. But it was in the one hand swing that Jowett rose to heroic proportions. He first attempted 162 1/2 pounds.

But in lowering to the ground, he allowed it to strike the platform too heavily, which badly buckled the bar. Unfortunately there was not another swing bar, but nothing loth the veteran increased the weight on the same bar by 10 pounds. At the first try, the crooked bar twisted in his hand and foiled him, but quickly analyzing the trouble, he corrected it by a greater back pull. Then throwing all his

Jowett, the ACWLA, and Milo Barbell 1924-1927

power behind the effort. he heaved the bar and with beautiful timing he applied his 'body thrust' and stood erect with 172 1/2 pounds. The crowd went wild, tickled to death to see the old favorite come back and preserve for his followers and the A.C.W.L.A. his former world's records with a still higher poundage . . . One could readily understand why Mr. Jowett has risen to be a master 'iron man' and hailed as the cleverest lifter in the world.

Noble sentiments, but immortality still seemed beyond his reach. Further confirmation of his patriarchal status was sought by relating how Jowett's admirers, after the exhibition, "bid for the bent swing bar"—much as if it were a religious relic!(22)

On May 2 Jowett provided his followers with a glimpse of another side of his extraordinary athletic talents by staging a wrestling exhibition with Einer Johanson, alleged to be the world's heavyweight champion, from Sweden. It was a "comparison of opposites," observed Bradford, "Johanson tall beautifully formed, in the pink of condition, a lithe opponent of formidable appearance, and George F. Jowett, short and powerfully constructed, with a heavy tapering body that almost dwarfed his big arms and legs." Again superlatives hardly sufficed to describe the latter's wrestling skill. "The Swede was thrown on his back with a standing arm roll and outside leg stroke, but he quickly spun out and countered with a head-lock, which was broken by a powerful neck and kick-out. Two masters of the grappling game, they writhed and twisted like huge snakes. Johanson was like lightening, but the great strength of the president was too much for the clever Swede." In contrast to Jowett's prodigious feats of strength was the lackluster performance of a future father of sport in the ensuing weightlifting competition. Heavyweight Robert Hoffman, though city champion of York and an outstanding canoeist, provided little challenge for Baltimore's Albert Manger whom Jowett predicted would become "one of our most brilliant heavies." In fatherly fashion. Jowett boasted of the many prodigies he was grooming for national and international glory. "Whenever a likely product is heard of Mr. Jowett goes after him, and with the wealth of information that he possesses, loses no time in developing his abilities . . . When the right man is behind, ready to teach a willing person, the rest is easy, and nobody has ever found our president anything but eager to do all he can to put the boys on the road to success."(23) Culminating his efforts to raise American standards to international levels, Jowett published his *Rules, Regulations and Records of Weight Lifting*, first advertised in the August 1925 issue of *Strength*. Its ulterior purpose was to provide a historical record of the accomplishments of the ACWLA founder "who has indelibly inscribed his own name on the world's honor roll by his mighty achievements, known to the world as the 'Iron Man's' best friend.(24) Having thus committed his name and records to perpetuity, Jowett decided that he could safely rest on his laurels. "I have no intention of going back to the Wrestling game, or lifting," he declared to Coulter on June 3. "I am positively through with it all, for my shoulder certainly goes up on me afterwards."(25)

Although Jowett did not discontinue all exhibition work, he increasingly directed his efforts to projecting his organization beyond the northeast corridor. In the previous winter, shows were held in Connecticut, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Michigan, Georgia, and California. With *Strength* as his mouthpiece, Jowett perceived himself as being in the center of a revival that was not only sweeping the United States but extending to "the far comers of the world."(26) In line with this broad thrust were the dual tourneys conducted in the late spring in Philadelphia by Jowett and in Los Angeles by Al Treloar and Ben Price. Easterners—Mark Berry, Robert Snyder, and Frank Dennis—won the three lighter divisions while westerners—Marion Betty, David Willoughby, and William Burns—carried the heavier weight classes. "This is the first time that lifting has ever been decided in this manner," remarked Bradford. "It is another tribute to our President's genius, making it possible for all who desire to gather at their nearest center and compete."(27) Aside from a meet in mid-July in

Jowett, the ACWLA, and Milo Barbell 1924-1927

which Jowett wrist-wrestled Canadian strongman Arthur Giroux to a draw, there was relatively little activity in the summer. On September 4 Jowett presided over the first ACWLA national convention with such notables as Teddy Mack, Mark Berry, Bob Hoffman, Sieg Klein, Harry Paschall, Anton Matysek, Roy Smith, and Arnold Schiemann in attendance. They decided that the five ACWLA lifts for 1926 would be the bent press, the one hand swing, the left hand snatch, the two hands continental jerk, and the two hands anyhow. A secondary list included the three modern Olympic lifts—press, snatch, and clean & jerk. Only the former would be contested for national titles, while the latter would be employed in lesser meets. In other business, the board of directors approved the appointment of Jowett as “life-long president” and granted him virtual dictatorial power to dismiss any officer deemed to be “not helping the cause.” Coulter and Willoughby remained as vice presidents and John Bradford (also Jowett!) secretary. In the lifting that followed more records were set, all of which Jowett dutifully listed in his official record book. He took even greater delight in reporting records that were being set at meets across the country, all seemingly inspired by the interest he had generated. “Every event shows that our boys are stepping higher up the ladder of weight lifting fame. With it goes the American Status which a few years ago was nil, and now is the race for world’s supremacy.”(28)

What is most evident in Jowett’s regular reports of ACWLA activities from fall 1925 to spring 1926 is a lessening of egotistical bombast and a greater emphasis on the accomplishments of others he wished to enlist to his cause. When Warren Lincoln Travis of Brooklyn appeared at his October 10th show, Jowett deferred to him as “the one connecting link between the days of Louis Cyr and the revival of heavy athletics in our own time.” Likewise John Y. Smith of Boston, at 59, stepped out of the past on January 9 to smash records in every class with one handed deadlifts of more than 400 pounds.(29) These venerable figures added credibility to Jowett’s fledgling movement. But his most impressive catch was the 5'2", 220 pound German wonder Karl Moerke, conqueror of Karl Swoboda and Henry Steinborn. At the December show Moerke commenced by lifting a 165 pound barbell about a foot off the floor with his right hand. He paused, observed Bradford.

Then, like lightening, he snatched the weight to arms’ length overhead without allowing it to touch the floor. Five times he repeated this in succession, without lowering the bell further than the waist. His dips were perfect, and hardly believable for a man of such stature. Snatching it five times, he finished by pushing it to arms’ length twice in a style that was nearer to a One Arm Military than a One Arm Push. Satisfied with this succession of warming-up movements, as he called them, he deposited the bell on the floor and snapped to attention in the old time military style. . .Without further hesitation he grabbed a 220 pound bar bell and Military Pressed it three times with great ease. This was followed by a Two Hands Jerk of 330 pounds which he jerked from the shoulders thrice, with no difficulty.(30)

Moerke’s 330 was five pounds more than Steinborn had earlier struggled to negotiate only once. So much did these splendid performances add to the luster of Jowett’s organization that it no longer seemed necessary to dwell so much on his own personal feats of strength.

Further signs of real progress were evident in the many reports of exhibitions and meets which streamed into *Strength* offices from across the country. Jowett responded by conjuring up various organizational ploys. Conscious of the “vast number of lifters in the country now controlled by the A.C.W.L.A. and lack of official referees,” he instituted a national referees test which would not only standardize records verification but provide a means for “educating each person in knowing what is right and . . . wrong in lifting.” Response to this appeal for greater regulation was gratifying, showing that there was a cadre of responsible leaders emerging throughout the country who were willing to support

Jowett, the ACWLA, and Milo Barbell 1924-1927

Jowett's groundbreaking efforts. Especially singled out for praise was Mark Berry who was "every bit as strict as President Jowett." Uniform standards and strict judging thus infused meaning to the many records that were being set but as always, Jowett was the ultimate arbiter of perfection. Certificates with an official gold seal, designed by Willoughby, provided further incentives to prospective record holders. They "make a beautiful picture to adorn a den wall, and become a lasting testimony to the lifter's qualification," argued Bradford. Status was also recognized through an "order of degrees" whereby members received jeweled insets for their lapel buttons according to their level of mastery in physical culture and weightlifting. Red signified the first order, green an intermediate level, and blue the highest. The object of this hierarchy which "at first sight announces the degree of order from one brother to another" was to instill pride and encourage "the study of health and the body."(31) At the same time Jowett was constantly devising gimmicks to capture new prospects. Membership cards, cups, pins, pennants, medals, and trophies were offered as tangible inducements to the average weight trainee to join the fraternity of strong men. In the March 1926 issue of *Strength*, ACWLA prospects were given four possible membership options, including such inducements as a Jowett swing bar and gauntlet, a cambered bar, a year's subscription to the magazine, and Jowett's book on rules and records. High-mindedness effectively concealed any pitch for money. "Most organizations are business institutions," protested Bradford, "absorbing the big membership fees in high salaried officers, or making a big bank balance . . . The A.C.W.L.A. rises above all mercenary projects. It is vitally interested in its members on pure altruistic principles, because we are governed by an ideal. 'The perfect body.'"(32)

Concurrently, however, these high-blown ideals were being undercut from an unexpected quarter. The man who had conceived the Milo organization and laid the initial basis for weight training and organized lifting in the United States experienced a change of heart by the mid 1920s. That something was not quite right must have been evident to Jowett soon after his arrival in Philadelphia as Alan Calvert became increasingly remote, did virtually no work for Milo, and grew infatuated by the more natural system of physical training developed by Edwin Checkley. Bob Jones, the hand balancer from Pine Bluff, Arkansas, who became a mainstay at Milo, explains that

Calvert unquestionably was a sincere physical culturist, although actually ashamed of his 'engaging in trade' in such a lowly capacity. He came from a very prominent Main Line family and generally represented around town that he was a business man or a broker. . . Redmond was no physical culturist and his interest was solely that of a commercially minded man. He was wise enough to retain Calvert as 'front' and the business was so legitimate and so productive of results that it went ahead by leaps and bounds. Later SUPER STRENGTH was written and from subsequent experiences with Redmond, I am inclined to think that he had a verbal agreement with Calvert of a more or less vague sort, which he later tried to convert more favorably to himself. At any rate, I understand that this was the last straw and I actually believe that Calvert was so disgusted and perhaps jealous with the great success Redmond had made when he himself had failed—yet he had been sincere, while Redmond was but a few jumps ahead of Charlatanism—and the situation to me seems to have had pretty much a 'sour grapes' complexion.(33)

Denial of royalties were understandable grounds for bitterness, but another view of Calvert's defection comes from Ray Van Cleef. In the early twenties, he explains, there were many "newcomers" who "had such unbounded enthusiasm that it was difficult to restrain them to adhering to a rational application of weight lifting. Some became extremists. Such individuals greatly concerned and discouraged Calvert for he felt that he was responsible for the origin of their active participation in this

Jowett, the ACWLA, and Milo Barbell 1924-1927

then relatively new form of training.“(34) Whatever *arriere pensee* he harbored for Redmond, Calvert’s pique was outwardly directed against Jowett in two booklets he published soon after leaving Milo.

The first, entitled *Natural Strength versus “Made” Strength*, undercut Jowett on philosophical grounds. Calvert argued that extraordinary feats of strength were often just “feats of skill” or “merely illusions of strength.” Professional strongmen (like Jowett) had scant interest in true lifting or bodybuilding. “All they wanted to talk about was ‘tricks’ which ‘would knock the audience dead.’” Calvert felt that he was “no longer justified in recommending a system in which I had lost faith.” What especially troubled him was the lifters’ tendency for overexertion which allegedly could lead to rupture, broken blood vessels, heart strain, or simply a wastage of muscle from loss of recuperative powers. He believed that naturally acquired strength was far more preferable to “made” strength. Indeed “the public, which worships strength, prefers to see **real** strength, and not knack: has more respect for the man who can load one thousand pounds into a wheelbarrow, and then push that barrow up hill, than for another man who can ‘put up’ a 200 lb. dumb-bell with one hand.” He insisted that “the way to get strong is to train for build, and organic vigor; rather than just for showy muscles.(35) Thus Calvert fostered the debate that would be waged in succeeding decades between contending father-figures over strength and shape. “Train for strength and shape will follow” was inherited by Hoffman from Jowett, whereas a lineage extending from Calvert through Klein to Weider argued the opposite. Notwithstanding the supercharged egos that fed the flames of iron game feuds in later decades, the philosophical bases for discord were laid by Calvert in these early years.

In *Confidential Information on Lifting and Lifters*, Calvert is more explicit in his reproach of heavy lifting and Jowett. After exposing some of the “tricks” employed by Eugen Sandow and other strongmen, he harshly condemned the use of weights, the unscrupulous methods of promoters, and the fetish for setting records. Although Calvert had staged the earliest exhibitions in Philadelphia, he no longer attended them. But others, known for their “judgment and honesty,” told him how

half-grown boys are being urged to outdo each other at such body-racking stunts as the dead-weight lift, where the compression of the abdomen is terribly dangerous. That a man was cheered-on to make a record in the ‘wrestler’s bridge’ lift—in which the violent contraction of the neck muscles impedes the return of the blood from the head. That in that particular case, the popping eyes and engorged blood vessels in the lifter’s temples made my informant fear his instant death. I sincerely hope that such things do not take place. If such is the policy of the promoters, it is not just a mistake; it is a crime.

The dangers of football, Calvert warned parents, were mild compared to the life-threatening injuries attendant upon lifting heavy weights. Furthermore the harmful effects of lifting were not always immediately evident—“after five, ten, or even fifteen years, the heart goes wrong; wears out before it should wear out.(36) Virtually all the myths that exercise scientists have spent most of the twentieth century refuting were perpetrated by this father of sport.(37)

In the final portion of this tract Calvert not only rejects what he had recently written in *Super Strength* (denying that he even owned a copy), but he attacked the concept of “scientific lifting” that Jowett was projecting to the public.(38) Though his arguments were novel in the 1920s, he opposed such well accepted techniques as employing barbells with revolving sleeves, dipping in the snatch and bending the body in the one arm press. The bent press was the object of special condemnation by Calvert for providing endless possibilities for “chicanery.” All of these heresies could be traced back to the English lifting tradition on which Jowett’s ACWLA was largely based.(39) “On the European continent, the home of lifting, they absolutely bar the bent-press as a lift,” Calvert noted. “They

Jowett, the ACWLA, and Milo Barbell 1924-1927

consider it a trick, a gymnastic feat, and deny reputation to the lifter whose sole stock in trade it is.” In England “the bent-press is something wonderful.” He thought the English were “intensely insular when it comes to athletics . . . Their record books are studded with ‘world’s records’ in lifts that no other country practices to any extent.” It seemed a pity to him that

the American Association has apparently swallowed the English school of lifting hook, line and sinker. It really is a pity. I see less merit in the English style than in any other national style of lifting.

I note that the Americans are copying the English in their idolization of Saxon. Perhaps that is not extraordinary, since the lifting situation in America is now controlled by a Briton. I have been reading a ‘record book’ published by the American Association. I got quite a kick out of it. I noticed, for one thing, the statement that I had requested the author [Jowett] to form the association. That was news to me. My recollection is that time after time I was urged to sponsor such an association and always declined; that it was suggested to me ‘that of course I would be president.’ and I declined again. In fact, I wrote an article for their magazine, mentioning the formation of the association and plainly stating that I was not connected with it.

Not content to slam merely the organization, Calvert questioned the sanity of those involved in it. “I tell you, from the depth of my convictions, that training with weights is wrong. It puts muscle on the upper body—big muscles—sometimes huge muscles; but unless great caution is observed it saps a man’s vitality.” He also argued that such exercise leads to premature aging and possibly even insanity, and he claimed that “four well known ‘muscle men’ were now safely confined to insane asylums.”

Each and every one of them literally went crazy in their effort to cover their bodies with huge muscles; it was not just the effect of their physical overwork, but what is apparently a peculiar mental condition resultant upon the diverting of physical energy, and the anti-aphrodisiacal effect of excessive exercise and cultivation of the muscles on and around the upper extremities.

The first symptom (as I observed it) is an access [sic] of megalomania (excessive egotism), of conceit carried to a disgusting degree. The poor fellows become enamored of their own muscular development, display their muscles to every one they meet, talk of nothing else, and soon get into a mental state where they are convinced that they are the most remarkable of men (simply on account of their muscles): and insist on every one else believing the same thing; and from that to actual mania—insanity—seems to be only a step.(40)

That this parting zinger was aimed at Jowett is evident from its focus on the egomania that so much characterized his ebullient promotional style. Equally obvious is Calvert’s “sour grapes” at being relegated to a lesser role in the development of the iron game.

Not surprisingly, Jowett was bewildered by this seemingly unprovoked assault from the person whose footsteps he had supposedly been following since arriving at Milo. “For some reason or other,” he told Coulter in April 1926, “Calvert has taken a bitter hatred to the weight lifting game, and me in particular, to such an extent that he is circulating propaganda, making allusions to myself and without any scruples as to the truth. It seems this was going on long before I knew anything about it.”(41) From his detached perspective Coulter brought enlightenment. He rightly suspected that Calvert was “bitter towards Redmond because of business matters and I suppose any dislike to you, if such be the case, is the outgrowth of your association with Redmond in reaping the profits.”(42) Jowett agreed that “there would be no use knocking Redmond as no one knows him, so he has to knock me,” but he was deeply hurt and even paranoid over this personal affront. He believed that Calvert had spies writing to

Jowett, the ACWLA, and Milo Barbell 1924-1927

him and attending his exhibitions in order to secure material that could be used for misrepresentations. Yet Jowett insisted that he had never been less than honest and forthright. At his April show he

threw out a challenge that anything I had done I will do again, and anybody who was there and wanted to come up and try my stuff, was welcome to come and I would beat any man in an all round contest with our methods against others, but they backed out.

The funny part of it is, when he [Calvert] was here, he use to tell me what a bum Checkley was, and his method was no good, he was simply carrying it on to help Checkley's son or daughter. Honestly Ottley, I have found him to be the most consummate liar. Where at one time, up to just recently, I had always admired him and spoken well of him even when he was leading this campaign against me, but now I have nothing but contempt for him.

Jowett was confident that his adversary was “cutting his own throat” and that it was he who “must have gone crazy.”(43)

Soon Jowett recovered his stride with the publication of his *Key to Might and Muscle*, touted to *Strength* readers as even surpassing *Super Strength* as the best treatment on the development of the human body.(44) He portrayed himself not only as “the outstanding practical authority on barbells” but as a kindly mentor to all current strength athletes.(45) Commenting on the Klein-Matysek showdown at his May exhibition, Jowett attributed the former's victory to the “touch of a master hand behind it.” Klein supposedly expressed his “gratitude for all Mr. Jowett has been to him in acquiring his weight lifting honor and fame.” Jowett predicted that his charge would eventually perform a 275 pound clean & jerk. Further evidence of his predictive powers was cited during the visit to America of Tromp Van Diggelen, who had guided the great Herman Goerner to fame. Hearing that the latter had recently one hand deadlifted 727 pounds, Jowett (as John Bradford) reminded readers that in a 1925 article, “Can I Name the World's Strongest Man?” he had selected Goerner. “When it comes to estimating strength and physical ability our president does not go wrong.” Like Van Diggelen, who was “associated with the best men in the world . . . if any one can bring out the best of a man George F. Jowett can. No man in this country ever developed as many stars as he has.” Now, Jowett reminded ACWLA members, this font of wisdom was available permanently for everyone. “If you have a friend who wants a little encouragement, show him your copy of our president's new book *The Key to Might and Muscle*. That will land him when all other methods have failed.”(46)

Self-promotion reached an even higher pitch when Jowett negotiated sponsorship of a weightlifting championship between “three of the largest sport bodies in the country”—the ACWLA, the AAU, and the Sesqui-Centennial sports committee—at Philadelphia's municipal stadium in August 1926. It was to be held outdoors in conjunction with a track and field competition, thus making it “possible for our lifters to perform before the largest athletic turn-out ever brought together in one place in this country.” Thus Jowett could say that “the sport of weight lifting is more definitely established as a recognized sport at the present time, than it ever has been.” For what appeared to be a sure success, he took full credit. “I do not believe that any man ever worked for his sport as our president has worked for the sport of weight lifting. You might say that, single handed, he did it all.”(47) Additionally Jowett was planning to hold the 1926 national championships (including state championships) in September and a “national open” in November where he would donate a “magnificent belt” to be worn by the overall winner during the succeeding year. By such means he hoped ultimately to make inroads with the AAU. Further to enhance his stature within that organization he heaped praise on the chairman of its weightlifting committee, Colonel Charles Dieges. At the extravaganza recognizing the nation's 150th birthday, wrote Bradford, “the eyes of the A.A.U. will be upon us, and the showing our boys

Jowett, the ACWLA, and Milo Barbell 1924-1927

make is what is going to impress the A.A.U. committee. . . to do more of this sort of thing in the future.”(48)

Unfortunately Jowett had not anticipated the possible problems of an outdoor venue. The day broke perfect on August 21 and remained that way until about noon when clouds set in, and it commenced to rain. It poured so hard all day that the other events were canceled. The weightlifting was contested, but for Jowett the results were less than heartening. “Under such adverse conditions it is only to be expected that the lifting was not of a high order, for, although under cover, we were exposed to the wind and dampness that swept through the porticos like an Arctic blast. The boys were cold, and it was hard for them to pep up.”(49) Other meets in the ACWLA fall schedule fared little better. Jowett showed little enthusiasm over the conduct of the national championships, in which only nine states participated, and the national open meet in November had to be canceled for lack of entries. Some progress was made towards AAU affiliation, but monthly shows for October and December were poorly attended and uninspiring. Jowett did at least receive some consolation, underscoring his paternal role, when he was presented at the Sesqui-Centennial Exposition with a “beautiful loving cup” inscribed with words of “appreciation from the boys.”(50)

Otherwise support was eroding for Jowett and his organization from a critical quarter, and he should have seen the handwriting on the wall. For at least the previous six months, Milo had been less than pleased with the ACWLA as a business proposition. Concern is evident in successive “association notes” over lagging membership rolls. “Recently new members have not been as plentiful as we would like to see them,” Bradford wrote in the September 1926 issue of *Strength*. “How many people did you impress this season when you were on your vacation, or on the beach, with the A.C.W.L.A.?” he queried in October. “Boys, we must never ease up. Now, more than ever we need cooperation in order to get more members to put this organization over.”(51) After the disappointment of the Sesqui-Centennial affair, a new note of urgency set in. It became increasingly evident to the parent company that the ACWLA, instead of being a boon for business, was proving to be a liability. Admitting that it was “only thorough the generosity of others [Milo Barbell] that we have been able to keep our expenses paid up,” estimated to be “thousands of dollars” for 1926, Jowett announced plans to set the ACWLA on a separate business footing. Henceforth dues would be reduced from \$4.00 to \$2.00, effective 1 January 1927. Members would still be entitled to all the previous privileges, including card, lapel button, and Jowett’s book on rules and records. Not included would be the \$2.50 subscription to *Strength* or the cost of various other diplomas, medals, and entry fees to ACWLA functions. Jowett rationalized that “we are giving all the same chance now and are running a bigger chance to lose more money. What we have to rely upon now is a greater membership to give us a balance side.” In subsequent advertisements he tried to convince ACWLA prospects that membership was being dropped by \$2.00 when, in fact, it was being increased by at least 50 cents. “Now, boys please put your shoulder to the wheel and help make this Association what we all want it to be.”(52) Despite Jowett’s dubious claim that ACWLA membership had once reached the thousands, the critical perception of “the powers that be” was that it had never pulled its own weight. It seems more likely that the ACWLA appealed to little more than the relatively small number of weight trainees who entered competition. and the removal of the subscription to *Strength*, Jowett’s propaganda organ, could only have lessened its appeal to the public. Now the message, in stark contrast to his strident remarks only a few months earlier, was that “our president cannot do it all.” Further evidence of the demise of Jowett’s organization within the corporate structure can be seen in the decision to remove the ACWLA headquarters and exhibition site from the Milo building to the Philadelphia Academy of Physical Training at the outset of 1927.(53)

Jowett, the ACWLA, and Milo Barbell 1924-1927

Less evident but no less critical to Jowett's fall from grace were some organizational decisions he had taken at the Sesqui-Centennial meet. As general supervisor of appeals and decisions, he overturned a ruling by Mark Berry, the referee on platform two, who wanted to allow ties in two of the classes. Jowett stated that "no ties are permissible in competitions of any kind. The man exhibiting the best style, or making the nearest efforts to success, must be given precedence." Especially since no specific rules could be cited to support this decision, it appeared as arbitrariness against an upstart who coveted Jowett's status in the iron game. Further possible bias against Berry was evident at a meeting of the ACWLA Board of Directors during the 1926 national championships. Jowett stressed that there was "no place for slackers" in the organization and that "no man should accept a post, no matter how much he likes the game, unless he is willing to work for it." He forthwith removed the ambitious Berry from the Board and gave him the honorific title of "president's representative," perhaps sensing that he would better be able to keep a rein on him in this subordinate role.(54)

Only gradually did Jowett realize that he was riding for a fall. His latest book, *The Strongest Man That Ever Lived*, an account of the life of Louis Cyr, was offered to *Strength* readers for \$2.50 in early 1927, and the frequent repetition of his name gave the impression that he and his organization were the soul and body of American weightlifting.(55) But uneasiness is evident in his correspondence with Coulter. Jealousy was the "biggest trouble" at Milo, he reported in February.

MacMahon is so jealous and Miss Kosyk is worse that they keep it going hell upon earth and make it bad for me. You never know when you are going to be here for they are always firing. Honestly Ott you are better off not here, for he is apt to get dissatisfied at the least thing and fire you

Redmond is terribly queer. He never gave me a penny for the books I wrote though he promised me, and I worked night and day on them. In fact I was tied up ever since last April and that's the thanks. . . He promised me a spending allowance for the shows because I told him it cost me more than I could afford to entertain the boys when they came, but I never got a penny. He is terribly ungrateful, but what can I do. I just have to take and let it go. It is a good job and I must hang on to it.(56)

A month later Jowett received news of his dismissal "without a moments warning" and of his replacement by Mark Berry. He blamed it on the machinations of Miss Kosyk. "Accidentally I know too much," he told Coulter. "I certainly was never happy here. I understand also that Berry double crossed me to get my job for less money." He claimed that "Redmond used me like he did Williams & Calvert & others . . . I feel awful bad over it."(57) Coulter seemed no less stunned, not comprehending how Berry, who lacked Jowett's standing, could possibly sustain the reputation of the ACWLA. Furthermore Berry was hardly in any condition to teach by personal example. "Can we take the association to another magazine or has *Strength* obtained too tenacious a hold?"(58)

A struggle for rights over the ACWLA proved unnecessary as Berry, somewhat awkwardly, started his own organization, the Association of Bar-Bell Men. He promoted it in Jowett's old "Association Notes" under the pen name of Mike Drummond. In the July 1927 issue Drummond explained that Jowett was no longer connected with *Strength*, "and when he went the Association went with him at his own request." Understanding the financial problems that plagued the ACWLA, Berry's ABBM was designed to appeal more broadly to the lucrative bodybuilding and general health clientele. "We believe that the A.C.W.L.A., although a very worthy movement, has been limited in its possibilities by the fact that it was primarily interested in weight-lifting." The new association, on the other hand, was "interested chiefly in encouraging the cultivation of a well-developed body, manly strength, and all health-promoting exercises with bar bells, dumb-bells, and related apparatus." Yet

Jowett, the ACWLA, and Milo Barbell 1924-1927

such was Berry's enthusiasm for weightlifting and commitment to the concepts originated by Jowett, that he kept virtually all of Jowett's incentives and gimcracks. He also retained a Board of Control, official referees, and the desire to stage lifting contests. To attract prospects, ABBM membership and a year's subscription to *Strength* were now made available at the bargain price of \$2.75.(59) To stamp the imprimatur of tradition on this new order, a list of American records in all lifts was published in successive issues. To allay any confusion, Berry assured readers that the ABBM "has no connection with any other Association and will henceforth conduct all Official Lifting in America."(60)

These resolute measures effectively destroyed the ACWLA and were a serious setback to Jowett's physical culturist aspirations. "Redmond is doing all he can against me," he told Coulter. "He stopped my mail and has practically ruined the A.C.W.L.A."(61) Most seriously Redmond, as he had done with Calvert's *Super Strength*, denied Jowett any share of the profits from the books he had written. Many years later Bob Jones reckoned that the reason for Redmond's draconian measures was almost solely financial. Berry, through Jowett's paternalistic influence, had gotten a job at the company

probably making \$25 or \$30 per week. Redmond never was a man to hire and pay for talent. I understand that Jowett wrote under both his own name and a pen name and that some of his pen name articles went to considerable length telling what a great guy Jowett was. Redmond was quick to realize the value of this and also the fact that he could repeat the same stunt with an unknown person. So between the scrap over Jowett's two books and his desire to save himself about \$50 per week salary, he supplanted Jowett with Berry at perhaps \$35 or \$40 per week. I do know definitely that at no time did Berry make over \$50 per week and I know also that his various book writings and articles were included as a part of his regular job and salary.

Like Jowett, Berry could continue to project Milo's image to the public as America's strength capital; unlike his predecessor, he became "a wonderful 'yes man.'"(62) Real power at *Strength*, noted in a small print insert in the November 1927 issue, lay in the hands of D. G. Redmond, as publisher and editor, and O. H. Kosky, managing editor and business manager.(63)

Jowett was understandably bitter over his dismissal and vowed to get revenge. He told Coulter that he had engaged the services of "the cleverest lawyer in the city" to sue Redmond for "\$17000 damages for overtime, books & other things. As long as he is trimmed I don't care if I get a penny."(64) He also vented his anger on Berry who "thinks he is a big man holding my job. I imagine he is a sucker enough to try it for 35.00 a week when he knew I got 80.00. But he has not any brains, like MacMahon, he is a copier. But I am out to show them & I hope, ruin them."(65) Why Jowett failed to mount any serious reprisal is veiled in mystery, but a scenario of possible blackmail can be gleaned from related bits of surviving evidence. When he took up residence in Philadelphia Jowett left his ailing wife Bessie and daughter Phyllis in Canada. Contrary to his boss's admonition about fraternizing with the girls in the office, he developed a close friendship with a secretary named Irene Kosky, likely the daughter of Milo's business manager. Charles Smith relates that Jowett was having an affair with a secretary, "Iris or some such" and that "Redmond used this as an excuse to ease Jowett out" and bring Berry in for less pay.(66) Phyllis Jowett never suspected that her father was disloyal. but she confirms that Irene Kosky insisted on leaving Milo with him. She remained Jowett's secretary for many years in his other physical culture endeavors, and "he was very good to her family later on."(67) Whether Jowett's relationship with Irene was sexual remains unclear, but he did make himself vulnerable to the pitfalls of office politics—hence the curious references to the machinations of Miss Kosyk in his letters to Coulter. Redmond was thus able to act with impunity, knowing that any questions raised concerning Jowett's dismissal could lead to far more damaging insinuations concerning his personal

Jowett, the ACWLA, and Milo Barbell 1924-1927

conduct. Neither as a husband nor as a father-figure to his “boys” in the iron game could he afford the taint of scandal. Not surprisingly, Jowett made a clean break from Milo.

He soon landed on his feet as physical director at the Breitbart Institute of Physical Culture in New York City. Then he founded the Jowett Institute of Physical Culture where (with Coulter’s assistance) he published a series of *Man Power* booklets. When these instructional guides did not catch on, he pursued various other schemes with International Correspondence Schools which included the possibility of instigating another official organ and exclusive affiliation with the AAU for his now defunct ACWLA.(68) But Jowett was not successful in securing a rival mouthpiece, and Redmond and Berry had no intention of allowing him to regain control of American weightlifting through the AAU. In a preemptive move they secured a statement from its secretary, published in the December 1927 issue of *Strength*, that the AAU was not allied with Jowett’s organization.(69) Coulter lamented the falling fortunes of his pal, not fully comprehending how it could happen that the founder of the association and originator of regulated weightlifting in America could have been brought so low. He surmised that Berry was merely being set up, and “in the end he will walk the plank along with the rest.” He could “not understand the policy of letting good men go one after the other. Calvert with a reputation without equal at that time. Williams a man with considerable editorial experience and yourself and to think a man like Berry is substituted in place of illustrious predecessors.”(70) Nevertheless Jowett survived and eventually seemed capable even of leaving the past behind. “As far as I know Redmond and I have buried the hatchet.” he concluded in May 1930.(71)

Redmond, however, was by no means finished with Jowett. Angered by the advertising claims (and perhaps the success) of Jowett’s mail order institute in 1933, Redmond launched a devastating editorial attack on his character. It first questioned the legitimacy of the medals he claimed to have won while ACWLA president. But the most damaging revelations came from another father-figure, W. A. Pullum, whom Jowett had formerly held in high regard. In a 1927 letter to Berry, Pullum claimed that Jowett, as his American agent, had tried to cheat him out of money on the sale of his equipment to no less a personage than David Willoughby. Then Jowett allegedly plagiarized an article Pullum had written on Arthur Saxon and published it in *Strength*. “It was one of the most bare faced ‘lifts’ that I had ever seen; there was not even the faintest semblance of disguise.” Similarly the fundamental ideas behind some of Pullum’s “appliances and accessories began to be boasted as creations of Jowett’s own brain.” Most galling to Pullum was the discreditable system of rules and records created by Jowett. It was

a moral certainly (indeed, a physical certainty) that he never performed the lifts credited to him . . . Comments on these lifts is a matter of common occurrence in this country. . . It was only yesterday that I had a very well known American down in the Camberwell Weight-Lifting Club. . . [who] told me quite a few things about the way some of the lifting had been conducted in the states under Jowett’s direction. Twenty years ago people were doing similar things over here. . . In weight lifting matters, America sadly needs some expert and kindly instruction.(72)

It seemed an ironical turn of fate that the man and tradition on which Jowett had based his movement for regulation and honesty in lifting, like Calvert, should so viciously be turned against him.

Damaging testimony from such an impeccable authority as Pullum enabled Redmond to question with confidence the validity of Jowett’s lifting records. It was commonly known

among the more experienced bar bell men of this country and Canada that such record claims are ‘phoney.’ At least, we have never heard nor seen printed the name of a single individual who

Jowett, the ACWLA, and Milo Barbell 1924-1927

witnessed the records said to have been performed in Canada. Obviously, at that time there existed no official lifting body to witness or pass upon the correctness of the performances. If, indeed, ever they did take place it is furthermore a matter of common knowledge that of the three or so 'records' which were made in our building here in Philadelphia, not a single weight was placed on the scales, nor is there any evidence of the lifter having himself stepped on the scales.

Further proof of Jowett's phoniness, according to Redmond, was his appropriation of such iron game notables as Herman Goerner, Jim Londos, Frank Dennis, Robert Snyder, Harry Paschall, Emmet Faris, and Albert Manger as Jowett Institute pupils, when most of them had cut their teeth on Milo barbells and methods. Faris resented these misrepresentations, assuring Berry that "Jowett is up to his old stuff talking about himself. Most of all the old timers know him and his million records made in Canada—I have heard lots about Jowett and I think him a big fake." Claims that he had known Sandow and the Saxons were cited as simply more evidence of Jowett's influence peddling. The French magazine, *La Culture Physique*, revealed that Jowett was too young to have known Sandow, and Pullum insisted that "he did not know personally the Saxon Trio from Adam." Redmond concluded that "the misrepresentation is so bared-faced that we at last feel impelled to place all these facts before the public in this manner."⁽⁷³⁾ However damaging this screed must have been to Jowett's already flawed public persona, one suspects that it was motivated largely by underlying commercial designs and carried out, again, without fear of retribution.

Posterity has remained sharply divided over Jowett's relative worth. "No one ever saw Jowett make the lifts he claimed." was the view of Sieg Klein. Despite Jowett's self-adopted label of "Young Hackenschmidt" and much vaunted connections with other greats from the past. George Hackenschmidt told Klein the "he never saw him—did not even know who he was!"⁽⁷⁴⁾ John Valentine, an early ACWLA competitor, told Coulter that he

always had serious doubts as to his integrity. This is based on personal experience and certain evidence from such high-principled persons as W. A. Pullum, etc. I do not believe for one moment he ever achieved anything worthwhile in the realm of weightlifting. Nor has anyone met anyone of impartial authority to testify he'd actually observed Jowett perform any worthwhile feat—let alone the Records he claimed in his plagiarized ACWLA handbook.⁽⁷⁵⁾

Perhaps the fairest assessment of Jowett as an iron game icon comes from the man who, after exchanging hundreds of letters with Jowett over a half century, could finally speak with candor after Jowett's death in 1969. Ottley Coutler recognized him as "a man of considerable natural strength," but he had "more interest in getting ahead financially than he did in establishing any unquestionable records." When they trained together in Pittsburgh for a short period in the early twenties, he had seen Jowett perform an easy one arm military press with 100 pounds and a two arm military press with 212. Still doubts remained about his integrity, and Coulter was "somewhat astonished" when Jowett's book on rules and records appeared in 1925 by how many records were held by George F. Jowett.

Personally, I would have to agree that he appeared to have a very good understanding of how the lifts should be performed, although I doubt that he had ever trained on most of them, let alone establishing any records with them. He appeared to be able to convince the portion of the physical culture public that was interested in weight training that he was not only an authority but was THE AUTHORITY on weight training. . . I would believe that many of the lifts claimed by him in the ACWLA booklet would have been possible to him with a reasonable amount of training—but why bother with training when it could be accomplished much quicker. His natural powerful build should have enabled him to do more than there appears to be any proof that he actually did do. I

Jowett, the ACWLA, and Milo Barbell 1924-1927

assume that he realized that also and consequently believed that the weightlifting public would also believe it for the same reason.(76)

Unlike others, Coulter never called Jowett a liar outright, but such testimony hardly constitutes strong support for his honesty and forthrightness. “As for Jowett,” reckoned Bob Jones, “my feeling toward him is that he is vastly more to be criticized for his past conduct than Hoffman—and I feel also that the general public has the same opinion that I hold for him.”(77)

Noted iron game authority Vic Boff, on the other hand, provides evidence supporting the validity of Jowett’s claims. The most extensive documentation is an unsigned letter addressed to F. W. Jefkins of the British Advertising Association in 1952 attesting to Jowett’s reputation as a strongman, wrestler, weightlifter, and physical culturist. Vividly recalling his many feats and honors, it applies the appellation of “father of American Weightlifting” to him and even alleges that Calvert called Jowett “the father of the modern Bodybuilding technique and the most scientific lifter and teacher in the world.” His legitimacy had supposedly received official blessing when the Jowett Institute was set up in 1927. “Mr. Jowett produced evidence to support his claims, such as medals, trophies, press clippings, magazine articles and write ups, diplomas and other documentary evidence attested to by athletic bodies, besides other endorsements” for the Federal Trade Commission. This account, however, like Martin Franklin’s hagiography several years earlier, betrays the hand of Jowett in its conception as well as an intent by his advertising agent, Roberts and Reimers, to secure for him a stake in the British physical culture market. “Hope you like it as represented for British eyes” reads a cover note on the copy sent to Jowett.(78) More convincing are recollections, from the 1980s, of his early strongman feats in Canada, and testimonials from Lew Dick, former secretary of the Metropolitan Association of the AAU, and Wilfred Diamond, former vice president of BAWLA. His record was “unimpeachable,” according to Dick, and Diamond vouched for “all his records being true in wrestling, weight lifting and for winning various Best Physique contests.”(79) The hardest evidence of Jowett’s weightlifting integrity comes from some newspaper reports of his world record 310 clean & jerk (at 154 bodyweight) at a 1919 Victoria Day gala in South Mountain, Ontario. Under official conditions, including tested scales and “authentic officials,” Jowett “stepped up to the weight, pulled it to his waist, then tossed [it] to the shoulders. One mighty heave and the enormous weight was tossed to arms’ length overhead and held there until referee Frank Miller passed the lift by counting one, two. . . it is a marvelous feat. One which all present recognized, and warmly applauded.”(80) Boff is quick to point out that this published evidence as well as regular reports in *Strength* of Jowett’s lifting prowess in the mid 1920s would have disallowed any chicanery. “Surely the officials and fellow lifters who were there and saw the lifts would have protested any distortions of the truth” in print. “Jowett could not have gotten away with it.”(81) Final vindication, ironically, comes from the late sage Charles Smith in a 1955 *Muscle Builder* sketch. Though it falls short of endorsing his record lifts, it recognizes an indebtedness to Jowett and salutes him as “The Father of American Weightlifting.”(82)

Father-figures abound in the early history of the iron game, and Jowett makes a strong bid for immortal recognition, As editor of *Strength* from 1924 to 1937, he propagated widely the gospel of developing manly strength through the use of barbells. Most importantly, he virtually realized his dream of organizing and unifying American weightlifting under a single body, the ACWLA, and infusing it with a standard set of rules and records. That he did not always live up to his own high ideals and grasped too eagerly for fame and fortune contributed to his undoing, but these failings should not detract from his otherwise creditable achievements. George Jowett introduced thousands of young Americans to the healthful benefits of resistance training and to the excitement of athletic competition—and for that he deserves a permanent place in weightlifting’s pantheon of heroes.

Jowett, the ACWLA, and Milo Barbell 1924-1927

Much of the confusion and controversy surrounding Jowett stems from his inability to sustain the body of myths he had created around himself in Philadelphia. An historical reconstruction of his life and times suggests strongly, in line with Coulter's judgment, that Jowett was both father-figure and fraud. Though highly visible to the public as the foremost authority on physical culture of the era. Jowett was ultimately answerable to a higher power whose interests were wholly commercial. Arguably the man who most shaped the course of American weightlifting in the 1920s is a shadowy interloper, virtually unheralded by historians, who had no real liking or loyalty for the sport. After seizing control of Milo Barbell Company after World War I, D. G. Redmond was able to raise and lower at will the fortunes of weightlifting's so-called fathers—Calvert, Jowett, and Berry—and to play the roles of kingmaker, or perhaps wicked step-father! Commercial considerations, fed by undercurrents of jealousy and innuendo, inspired successive assaults on Jowett's reputation by Calvert, Berry, and Pullum, but it was Redmond's behind the scenes influence that sealed his fate. These lessons were not lost on the next generation of iron game promoters. Jowett, who later helped launch the careers of both Hoffman and the Weiders, no doubt communicated to them, along with a goodly dose of zeal and promotional technique, many of the hard lessons he had learned at Milo.(83) Future fathers were in a position to learn from Jowett's bitter-sweet experience the precept that responsibility without power is a dangerous ploy and that weightlifting is not just a sport but a serious business pursuit.

John D. Fair is professor of history and chair of the Department of History and Geography at Georgia College & State University in Milledgeville, Georgia. He is the author of two books on modern British history. He has competed in more than fifty Olympic and powerlifting meets, coached several teams, taught weight-training classes, staged meets, been a national referee, served on the national weightlifting committee, and even judged a Mr. America contest.

[Starting Strength](#) : [Resources](#) : [Articles](#) : [Forums](#) : [Discuss This Article](#)

Notes:

(1) Coulter to Ben Weider, 17 December 1956, Todd-McLean Collection, The University of Texas at Austin. [Unless otherwise indicated, all correspondence cited in this article is from the Todd-McLean Collection.]

(2) Smith to the author. 26 July 1989, Author's Collection.

(3) See *Iron Game History* (especially articles by Al Thomas and Terry Todd); Osmo Kiiha's *Iron Master*, Vic Boff's *Newsletter*, David Webster's *Sons of Samson* (Irvine, Scotland: 1993). David Chapman's biographical sketches in *Ironman*, and Randall Strossen's *Milo*.

(4) See John Paul. "The Health Reformers: George Barker Windship and Boston's Strength Seekers." *Journal of Sport History* 10 (Winter 1983). 41-57; Jan Todd, "'Strength is Health': George Barker Windship and the First American Weight Training Boom." *Iron Game History* 3 (September 1993): 3-14; David Chapman, *Sandow the Magnificent: Eugen Sandow and the Beginnings of Bodybuilding* (Urbana and Chicago: 1994); William R. Hunt *Body Love, The Amazing Career of Bernarr Macfadden* (Bowling Green: 1989); Robert Ernst, *Weakness Is a Crime, The Life of Bernarr Macfadden* (Ithaca: 1991); and John D. Fair. "Bob Hoffman, The York Barbell Company, and the Golden Age of American Weightlifting. 1945-1960," *Journal of Sport History* 14(Summer 1987): 164-188.

(5) See Raymond Van Cleef. "Builder of Men, A Tribute to the Accomplishments of the Late Alan Calvert," *Your Physique* (December-January 1950): 10-12; Siegmund Klein to Osmo Kiiha, April 10, 1983, *The Iron Master* (August 1993): 28; City Directories of the United States. Philadelphia, 1927-28; and Bob Jones to Ottley Coulter, 26 July 1939.

Jowett, the ACWLA, and Milo Barbell 1924-1927

- (6) Calvert to Coulter, 31 January 1919.
- (7) Alan Calvert, *Super Strength* (Philadelphia, 1924).
- (8) For some sense of Philadelphia's vibrance see Robert L. Jones, "Wm. J. Herrmann, Health Builder," *Strength & Health*, 15 (April 1947): 16-17, & 31- 33, and (May, 1947): 28,30-33.
- (9) For sympathetic portrayals of Jowett see George F. Jowett, "The Story of My Life," *Athletic World* (September 1924): 20-21 & 45; Martin Franklin. "The Life Story of George Jowett" *Your Physique* (September 1928): 13, & 37-39 (October 1948): 7,45-57, and (July 1949): 23 & 32-33, and Wayne Riley, "Inkerman's Herculean Blacksmith." *Winchester Press* 31 October 1984.
- (10) Jowett to Coulter, n. d. [September 1924].
- (11) Alan Calvert, "Enthusiasm Breeds Enthusiasm." *Strength* 9(Novetnber 1924): 32 & 89.
- (12) Jowett to Coulter, n.d. [October 1924].
- (13) Jowett to Coulter, 27 October 1924.
- (14) "With the Men of Iron." *Health and Life* 4(February 1925):71.
- (15) "The A.C.W.L.A. Will Hold Lifting Contests." *Strength* 9(November, 1924): 19. and John Bradford. "American Continental Weight Lifters' Association Notes," *Strength* 10 (January 1925): 43.
- (16) John Bradford, "American Continental Weight Lifters' Association Notes," *Strength* 9(December 1924): 39 and 10(January 1925): 10.
- (17) "Future Weight Lifting Contests," *Strength* 10(March 1925): 13, and "Special Limited Time Offer," *Strength* 10(February 1925): 10.
- (18) George F. Jowett "Strong Men of 1925." *Strength* 10(March 1925): 34- 37 & 79-80.
- (19) "Special Limited Time Offer," *Strength* 10(February 192.5): 10.
- (20) John Bradford "American Continental Weight Lifters' Association Notes," *Strength* (February 1925): 61. For a description of Pullum's role in the organization of British weightlifting, see David Webster, *The Iron Game, An Illustrated History of Weight-Lifting* (Irvine, Scotland: 1976), 65-69.
- (21) John Bradford, "American Continental Weight Lifters' Association Notes," *Strength* 10(May 1925): 40-41, 76 & 78.
- (22) John Bradford, "American Continental Weight Lifters' Association Notes," *Strength* 10(June 1925), 80.
- (23) John Bradford "American Continental Weight Lifters' Association Notes," *Strength* 10(July, 1925), 52-52 & 81.
- (24) See: "The World's Weight-Lifting Rules and Records," *Strength* (August 1925): 12, and George F. Jowett, *The Rules, Regulations and Records of Weight Lifting* (Philadelphia, 1925).
- (25) Jowett to Coulter, 3 June 1925.
- (26) See editorials in *Strength* 10(July & August, 1925). 17.
- (27) John Bradford, "American Continental Weight Lifters' Association Notes," *Strength* 10(July & August. 1925): 17.
- (28) John Bradford "American Continental Weight Lifters' Association Notes," *Strength* 10(December, 1925): 48-49 & 80. Jowett also sought, through Coulter, to have Redmond make him "legally the permanent President of the Association," but there is no indication that the wily businessman ever carried it out. See Coulter to Redmond, 24 July 1925, and Redmond to Coulter, 29 July 1925.
- (29) John Bradford, "American Continental Weight Lifters' Association," *Strength* 11(January 1926): 45, and (April 1926): 47.
- (30) John Bradford, "American Continental Weight Lifters' Association," *Strength* 11(March 1926): 50.
- (31) John Bradford, "American Continental Weight Lifters' Association," *Strength* 11(January 1926): 71, and (February 1926): 58 & 75.
- (32) "Make Your Own Selections from These Rare Offerings," *Strength* 11(March, 1926): 12.
- (33) Jones to Coulter, 26 July 1939.
- (34) Van Cleef, "Builder of Men." 12.

Jowett, the ACWLA, and Milo Barbell 1924-1927

(35) Alan Calvert, *An Article on Natural Strength versus 'Made' Strength Preceded by An Explanation of Why I Abandoned the Field of Heavy Exercise* [pamphlet] (Philadelphia: 1925). 4-5, 8, 10, 16 & 15.

(36) Alan Calvert, *Confidential Information on Lifting and Lifters* (Philadelphia: 1925), 2-6, 10-11.

(37) See, for instance. James C. Whorton, "Athlete's Heart," *The Medical Debate over Athleticism; 1870-1920*, "Roberta J. Park, "Physiologists, Physicians, and Physical Educators: Nineteenth-Century Biology and Exercise, Hygienic and Educative," and Pat Vertinsky, "Exercise. Physical Capability, and the Eternally Wounded Woman in Late Nineteenth-Century North America." in Jack Berryman and Roberta Park, eds. *Sport and Exercise Science, Essays in the History of Sports Medicine* (Urbana: 1992). 109-211.

(38) For instance, see John Bradford. "American Continental Weight Lifters' Association Notes," *Strength* 11(May 1926): 52.

(39) See John D. Fair, "George Jowett, Ottley Coulter, David Willoughby and the Organization of American Weightlifting, 1911-1924," *Iron Game History* 2(May 1993): 4-5.

(40) Calvert, *Confidential Information*, 18-19 & 22-23.

(41) Jowett to Coulter, 10 April 1926.

(42) Coulter to Jowett, 3 May 1926.

(43) Jowett to Coulter, 8 May 1926. Also see "Sports, Body Building and Weight Lifting," *Strength* 11 (June 1926). 21.

(44) George F. Jowett, "A Few Chapters from the Story of My Life." *Strength* 11(June 1926): 25, and *The Key to Might and Muscle* (Philadelphia: 1926).

(45) "The Key to Might and Muscle Opens," *Strength* 11(July 1926): 10.

(46) John Bradford. "American Continental Weight Lifters' Association Notes." *Strength* 11(July 1926): 44-45 & 77.

(47) John Bradford "American Continental Weight Lifters' Association Notes," *Strength* 11(August, 1926), 53.

(48) John Bradford, "American Continental Weight Lifters' Association Notes," *Strength* 11 (October 1926): 50, and "Strongmen of the World are Agreed," *Strength* 11(November 1926): 17.

(49) John Bradford, "American Continental Weight Lifters' Association Notes," *Strength* 11(November 1926): 49-51. In its reports of the festivities. the local newspaper was more upbeat. Despite the chilling rains, attendance in general was soaring, and the weightlifting exhibition featured record-setting performances by Art Levan and Harry Paschall. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 22 August 1926.

(50) John Bradford, "American Continental Weight Lifters' Association Notes," *Strength* 11(November 1926): 52 & 71 & (December 1926): 52-53; and *Strength* 12 (March 1927): 50, & (February 1927): 55.

(51) John Bradford. "American Continental Weight Lifters' Association Notes," *Strength* 11(September 1926): 54, and (October 1926): 66.

(52) John Bradford. "American Continental Weight Lifters' Association Notes," *Strength* 11(November 1926): 73, and "Go Over the Top With Us, Boys," *Strength* 11(December 1926): 14.

(53) John Bradford "American Continental Weight Lifters' Association Notes," *Strength* 11(December 1926): 54, and John Bradford, "American Continental Weight Lifters' Association Notes," *Strength* 12 (March 1927): 47.

(54) John Bradford, "American Continental Weight Lifters' Association Notes," *Strength* 11(November 1926): 72.

(55) George F. Jowett, *The Strongest Man That Ever Lived* (Philadelphia: 1926).

(56) Jowett to Coulter, 10 February 1927.

(57) *Ibid.*, 15 March 1927.

(58) Coulter to Jowett, 17 March 1927.

(59) Mike Drummond, "Association Notes," *Strength* 11(July 1926): 52-53 & 77-80, and "Bar Bell Users and Strength Enthusiasts," *Strength* 11(July 1926):12.

(60) The Association of Bar Bell Men." *Strength* 11(August 1927): 10.

(61) Jowett to Coulter, n. d. [June, 1927?].

Jowett, the ACWLA, and Milo Barbell 1924-1927

- (62) Jones to Coulter, 26 July 1929.
- (63) "Publisher's Statement," *Strength* 11(November 1927): 94
- (64) Jowett to Coulter, 26 n.d. [April 1927?].
- (65) Ibid., n. d. [June 1927].
- (66) Charles A. Smith to the author, 12 January 1990, Author's Collection.
- (67) Interview with Phyllis Jowett, 12 July 1994, Morrisburg, Ontario.
- (68) Jowett to Coulter, n. d. [July 1927?].
- (69) Mike Drummond, "Association Notes," *Strength* 11(December 1927): 50.
- (70) Coulter to Jowett, 23 June 1927.
- (71) Jowett to Coulter, 13 May 1930.
- (72) D. G. Redmond, "An Editorial, Advertising Methods of the Jowett Institute of Physical Culture, Inc.," *Strength* 17(February 1933): 37-38 & 49.
- (73) Ibid., 49-51.
- (74) Klein to Osmo Kiiha, 15 May 1982, and 10 April 1983, *The Iron Master* August 1993): 27-28. See also Jowett. "The Story of My Life." 20-21.
- (75) Valentine to Coulter, 6 November 1969.
- (76) Coutler to Valentine, 3 December 1969.
- (77) Jones to Coulter, 5 April 1947.
- (78) See letter to F. W. Jenkins, 1 August 1952, and Robert Power Reimers to the Investigation Department, British Advertising Association, 24 July 1952, Vic Boff Papers, Cape Coral, Florida.
- (79) See Riley, "Inkerman's Herculean Blacksmith," and letters from Lew Dick and Wilfred Diamond, 25 & 26 July 1952, Vic Boff Papers.
- (80) [*Mountain Herald?*] clippings in Vic Boff Papers, 24 May 1919.
- (81) Telephone interview with Vic Boff, 28 March 1994.
- (82) Charles A. Smith, "George F. Jowett," *Muscle Builder* (April 1955): 5.
- (83) Charles Smith once noted Redmond "was from the same mold as Hoffie and Weider but not as sharp." Smith to the author, 4 December 1987.

Copyright 2012 The Aasgaard Company. All Rights Reserved

This article was originally published in *Iron Game History* 3(5): 13-25, 1993. Reprinted with permission of John Fair.

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by copyright law.