

Muscular Christianity, by Clifford Putney

reviewed by [David Harrington Watt](#) in the [July 31, 2002](#) issue

The goals of the Social Gospel movement, the ideas of men such as G. Stanley Hall and Theodore Roosevelt, Christians' attitudes toward World War I, the development of institutions such as the Federal Council of Churches, the Boy Scouts and the Young Men's Christian Association—these are the sorts of topics Clifford Putney covers. They are, of course, ones that historians of American religion and culture have examined time and again.

What sets this book apart is its focus on the connections between sports, manhood and religion, connections it traces with dexterity and diligence. Putney demonstrates the degree to which the history of the "Protestant mainstream" between 1880 and 1920 was shaped by the pervasive fear that men in the church were too bookish, too flabby and too effeminate to be used by God to transform the world. The Protestant churches, it was widely (though not universally) believed, had to become places where big strapping men would be comfortable and where sissies were pushed to the sidelines.

Muscular Christianity is not an overtly polemic book, and its author (a historian who teaches at Bentley College) often seems to lean over backwards to be fair to American Protestants. But Putney does highlight the hubristic, misogynic and xenophobic aspects of Protestant efforts to muscularize Christianity. He documents some of the stupid and dangerous pitfalls into which self-conscious attempts to accommodate the Christian tradition to Victorian gender norms could lead.