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Art and Athletics:

The Work of R. Tait McKenzie

The year of the XXI Olympiad in Montreal is an appropriate time to highlight the lives of those Canadians who have made significant contributions to the Olympic movement. One all too quickly assumes that this would entail a review of the careers of certain heroes of sport or a resumé of the diet, training, competitions and victories of champions like Karen Magnussen and Nancy Greene. Yet capturing the human form at the height of its beauty and power in a work of art has always been integral to the Olympic ideal and Canadian R. Tait McKenzie, through his sculpture of athletic figures, has contributed uniquely to this.

The ability of the artist to recreate the beauty of the athlete in action goes back in recorded history as far as the Egyptians of 3000 B.C. who represented the grips and holds of their wrestlers with outstanding clarity and completeness. Masterpieces of athletic sculpture such as the Charioteer, the Discobolus, the Doryphoros, the Apoxyomenos marked the progress of Greek art from Homeric to Roman times.[1] In the modern era, the image of the twentieth-century athlete has been preserved through the artistic genius of R. Tait McKenzie. It is the intent of this author to offer a brief biographical sketch of McKenzie and to develop the background for his contributions associated with the Olympic Movement.

I

McKenzie was born of Scottish parents on May 26, 1867 in Almonte, Ontario. Records at Almonte High School indicate that he was a robust boy who enjoyed success in all athletic events. After graduating from high school, McKenzie spent a year at the Collegiate Insti-

tute in Ottawa and then entered McGill University in 1885 at age eighteen. He received his B.A. in 1889 and three years later he secured his degree in medicine.

From the time he entered the university, he was an active participant in track, football and gymnastics. In track and field he held the Canadian intercollegiate high jump title. During September 1890, while still engaged in the study of medicine, he was appointed instructor in gymnastics to succeed Dr. James Naismith. (Naismith moved on to Massachusetts and invented the game of basketball in 1891. Ten years later, McKenzie himself formed the first university basketball team in Canada.)

After graduation, McKenzie began a demanding and varied medical career. He practised at the Montreal General Hospital and also lectured in the Department of Anatomy, Faculty of Medicine, McGill University (1894-1904). He held the position of house physician to Lord Aberdeen, then Governor General of Canada. In addition to this, McKenzie was appointed hospital surgeon to the Beaver Line steamships which plied from Montreal to Liverpool. It was during this time that Tait McKenzie became the Medical Director of Physical Training. Such an appointment was the first of its kind in Canada.[2]

Busy as he was in his medical career, McKenzie's major interests lay elsewhere. He was strongly convinced of the necessity of physical activity as a part of all school curricula and deeply concerned about the lack of leadership necessary to implement this idea. He cherished the dream that schools would give the students a balanced life which included athletics conducted in a scientific way. At this time, medical doctors with professional interests were promoting university programs of physical education in both Canada and the United States. Such programs included the use of anthropometric measurements of all students to serve as a basis of prescribing exercise or athletic training to suit the needs of each individual student. Toward this end, McKenzie made repeated efforts to establish a department of physical education at McGill. He was given a sympathetic ear by Principal Sir William Peterson, but the monies needed for such a program were just not available. McKenzie was not destined to play a waiting game with the McGill officials and, when the opportunity arose, he was off to join the faculty at the University of Pennsylvania.

> . . . and I remember very well in 1904, when I had to make a decision as to whether I should go on with anatomy, because at the time I was Lecturer in Anatomy at McGill, or whether I should go into physical education and accept a very flattering offer. . . . It seemed to me that the great minds that had reaped so thoroughly the field

> of anatomy left nothing further for us but a few gleanings, while the field of physical education was before us with practically no workers, or very few, and it was for that reason that I accepted the chair at the University of Pennsylvania.[3]

He accepted the position of professor and Director of Physical Education with full authority to develop his own plans and ideals. It was an exciting time for university athleticism in the United States and McKenzie made the most of it during his thirty-four year association with the University of Pennsylvania. He used his talents to develop a progressive program of physical education which had medical practice and physical education administration as its foundation.

> The policy of this department may then be said to contain something of the hospital clinic, a great deal of classroom and laboratory, and a little of the arena.[4]

Three years after his appointment to Pennsylvania, he met young Ethel O'Neil, a gifted musician and one of the foremost poets of her day. Their courtship was a swift one, culminating in marriage on August 18, 1907. Ethel's talents provided a complement to those of Tait; a poem of hers would often accompany one of his artistic works.

McKenzie's career at Pennsylvania was interrupted in 1915 when he and his wife sailed for England. World War I had broken out and he felt compelled to offer his services to the British war effort. Working on the staff of Sir Alfred Keough, Director of Medical Services, War Office, McKenzie combined his skills as a physical educator and surgeon. He designed a scheme for rehabilitating men who needed surgical and/or medical help, or just plain exercise in order to get them back to a level where they might be of use to themselves and their country. McKenzie supervised the establishment of several such rehabilitation centers in England where well-trained staff and new electrical and hydro-therapeutic equipment were used to implement his scheme in an efficient and innovative way.

In the winter of 1916-1917, in compliance with university regulations, McKenzie returned to Philadelphia. During the following spring he was transferred to Canada to inspect the programs and equipment of hospitals engaged in rehabilitation work. His book, *Reclaiming the Maimed,* which contained details of appliances and treatments, was adopted as an official manual by the Army and Navy and circulated to all service hospitals. He continued to design and install corrective apparatus in military hospitals in England, Canada and the United States until the end of the war.[5]

At this time he returned to his post at the University and remained there until 1931. In addition to his efforts in developing

physical education, he also found time to preside over or contribute to several learned societies in a number of different fields. These included the American Physical Education Association, the Society of Directors of Physical Education in Colleges, the Philadelphia College of Physicians, the American Academy of Physical Education, the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts, the National Sculpture Society, the Royal Canadian Institute, the Authors Club of the Athenaeum and others.

McKenzie's distinguished medical career alone merits praise and recognition, but the artistic dimension of his contribution is at least of equal importance. Indeed, McKenzie's genius is mainly recognized through his sculpting of over two hundred athletic figures and war memorials. His sculpture is significant in that it carries on the ancient Greek tradition of portraying the beauty of vigorous youth in athletic movement.

II

A great part of McKenzie's life was spent watching (with a keen and scientific eye and much personal sympathy) the exertions of young men in training. He passed many hours observing a varied procession of men in the nude, combining an artist's eye-view with newly-discovered anthropometric measurement.

> At heart McKenzie is a thinker before he is an artist, a scientist before a sculptor, yet beauty for him is not a thing apart from life, but organically one with humanity. He has a classical mind. Beauty for him is the human form in perfect health seen in graceful movement.[6]

Interestingly enough, McKenzie had no formal training in art and his earliest works in the media of water color and charcoal were produced while on vacation. The merging of the sensitive hand of the surgeon with the equally sensitive but more subtle fingers of the sculptor came about while he was attempting to solve a physiological problem. His duties as Director of Physical Training at McGill and his inquiring mind often led him to the cinder track to study the problem of fatigue in the athlete. This interest resulted in an article published in the *Journal of Anatomy and Physiology* entitled, "The Facial Expressions of Violent Effort, Breathlessness and Fatigue."

To illustrate his thesis, he used his newly-tried art of modelling. The result was a series of four masks in a crude form which, after repeated refinement and development, were cast in bronze and accepted as scientifically displaying the facial reactions of violent

fatigue. They depict effort, breathlessness, fatigue and exhaustion. Copies of the masks are on display at the Royal College of Surgeons in London, the Anatomical Department at Cambridge and the Medical Museum at McGill University.

In the article "Some Studies in the Sculpture of Athletes," McKenzie noted that since the inception of the modern Olympic games, many of the European stadiums have been decorated with portrait statues depicting famous athletes.

> In America the artistic side of the great athletic revival has been comparatively neglected. . . . The recording of our athletics has been left to the sports columns of the daily newspapers and the snapshots of the Sunday newspapers for the most part. . . . Here is a vital phase of our modern life that cries for interpretation preferably in plastic form. The sportsman needs the artist, for if the technique and beauty of our present sports are to be preserved for the future it must be by him alone.[7]

Inspired by this idea and encouraged by his success with the masks, McKenzie attempted a figure in the round. The proportions of this first figure, "The Sprinter" (Figure 1), were supplied by anthropometric measurements. Thus art and scientific method joined to create a model of the average sprinter.

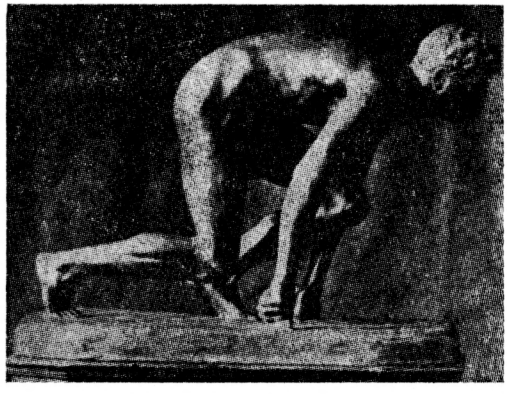

Figure 1 — *The Sprinter*

"The Sprinter" was a departure from the ancient Greek ideal of the athlete with an overdeveloped musculature. In the classic age, the ideal man was one who was prepared for the realities of war and hand to hand combat. This partially explains why so many of the early Greek athletic figures are shown with unbelievably bulging muscles. McKenzie however, attempted to capture, not only the strength, but also the beauty and vigor of athletic movement. In

developing his modern day sprinter, he enlisted four McGill students, Percival Molson, John D. Morrow, L. Howard and Frederick J. Tees, to act as models. One of the student models, F. J. Tees, recalled the experience of posing for McKenzie:

> My task was comparatively easy. It consisted of leaning over the back of a chair while he worked on the shoulders, arms and hands. The others had a much more difficult time in keeping the crouched position, but with the help of stools and cushions they managed. Twice we arrived to discover the small figure had collapsed, but, nothing daunted, he began anew and finally triumphed.[8]

The figure of the sprinter, molded by the scientist artist, at once achieved success. Completed in Montreal in 1902, it was shown that same year at the Society of American Artists' exhibition at New York; in 1903 at the Royal Academy in London; in 1904 at the Paris Salon. Casts were bought for the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge as well as for many other private collections.[9] "The Sprinter" was reproduced in 1905 for Canada's Olympic stamp series, appropriately linking this great Canadian artist with the Olympic movement.

Figure 2

The Plunger

After completing "The Sprinter" in 1902 and "The Athlete" in 1903, McKenzie acquired enough confidence to enter a new phase of his sculpting. He now relied completely on observation and impression and eliminated the use of anthropometric measurements.

"The Plunger" (Figure 2), is classified with "Flying Sphere," "The Javelin Cast," "The Ice Bird" and "The Pole Jumper" according to what Christopher Hussey terms the "sculptural moment."

> In athletic sculpture the artist is under the additional obligation of choosing a moment that is technically as well as aesthetically significant. It is here that McKenzie's intimacy with the technique of athletics is of such value to his art. It enables him to select from any given action the psychological moment that summarizes in its poise the whole movement.[10]

"The Plunger" (1925) was modelled after Miffen Armstrong, the U.S. inter-collegiate diving champion. Statues of "The Plunger" in bronze may be seen in the Women's Athletic Building at the University of Toronto, the University Club of Boston and the University of Pennsylvania.[11] This statue has also been selected as one of McKenzie's works to be reproduced for the Canadian stamp collection honoring the advent of the XXI Olympiad.

One of McKenzie's greatest triumphs was "The Olympic Shield" (Figure 3).

> The shield is in fact the apotheosis of the athletic ideal, an epitome of the track and field sports of the modern Olympic games.[12]

After four years in the making, it earned him the Olympic Art Award at the X Olympiad at Los Angeles in 1932. A replica of the original was accepted by the *Kokusai Bunko Shinkokai* (the Society for International Relations) for the Olympics in Japan and the work may be regarded as a kind of reference dictionary for future generations wishing to study the technique of the twentieth-century athlete in action. The complexity of this work of art merits close inspection.

The spirit of Olympia, helmeted and garbed in archaic drapery, is shown in the center. She brings together two representations of the modern olympic revival. The two athletes shake hands in token of the friendly spirit in which athletic competition should be conducted. Encircling the hub are panels depicting field events: throwing the hammer, casting the javelin, pole vault, high jump, putting the shot, scaling the discus. Below is a group of hurdlers in full flight.

Four small octagonal panels break the continuity of this larger

Figure 3 — *The Olympic Shield*

circle. These depict an athlete crouching for the standing high jump, one in mid-jump and two more preparing for competition. The band of lettering below the field events reads: *Mens Fervida in Corpore Hacertoso* (an eager mind in a lithe body) and below are the words: *fortius* (stronger), *altius* (higher), *citius* (swifter). Above and below the four small octagonal panels are the qualities cultivated by athletic competition: *celeritas* (speed), *agilitas* (agility), *fortitude* (courage), *aeguitas* (fair play). Surrounding the lettered and enriched burden is a frieze of runners. There are nearly one hundred figures in the frieze, showing every phase of the stride, as well as the starting position and the finish of the race.[13]

Figure 4

The Joy of Effort

McKenzie's most famous work in relief was "The Joy of Effort" (Figure 4). The plaque of the three hurdlers has generally been acknowledged as one of his most inspired works of art. It was first exhibited at the Olympic Games in Stockholm in 1912 when it was presented to Sweden by the American Committee and set up in the wall of the stadium. The King of Sweden conferred a medal on the sculptor in recognition of his contribution to athletic sculpture.

Numerous other figures, medallions and memorials followed these internationally-acclaimed sculptures. Although Dr. McKenzie retired from his office at the University of Pennsylvania in 1931, he continued to lead an active sculpting life until his death on April 28, 1938.

As Canada prepares to host the XXI Olympiad, the works of Dr. R. Tait McKenzie, an outstanding Canadian contributor to several professional fields, may be warmly and proudly remembered.

III

For those interested in further study of the "Father of Physical Education in Canada," the writer suggests a trip to the Mill of Kintail, just north of Almonte, Ontario. This rustic museum is set amongst red and white pines on the Indian River and contains over one hundred of McKenzie's sculptures, many of which are originals. A cordial curator will give an impressive summary of McKenzie's life, illustrated by films and documents. The Mill, built in 1830 and known by the villagers as "Baird's Mill," was purchased by Dr. McKenzie in 1931. He and Mrs. McKenzie enjoyed several summers there. In 1958 it was declared an historic site by the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board of Ontario.[14] It is presently open for visitors from May until October and provides an interesting journey into history to appreciate further the relationship between art and the athlete.

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