



Charles Donaldson was born in Lerwick in the Shetlands; his father was a painter/ photographer. His mother died when Charles was only one, and so he lived with his father and his father's parents. His father died, however, when Charles was fifteen, and after earning his living for some years as a butcher, Charles Donaldson left the Shetlands and went to Glasgow where he was followed by his sweetheart, Mary, and they married in Blythewood Square in April 1892. He was 26, and she was 22, and the following year they had a daughter, Mabel, and Charles became a professional wrestler.

How this came about is unknown, but he embarked on a career as travelling wrestler, exhibiting in halls and theatres around Britain, in a mixture of show-business, circus, and sport. The first sight we have of him in this new guise is in 1893, when he featured in a *Wrestling and Weight-Lifting Exhibition* in the Temperance Hall in Kirkwall. It was a commercial venture which he shared with Gunner Nicol, known as *The Scottish Sandow*. Already, Donaldson was immersing himself in the world of the strong men. A year later we see him wrestling in *Hengler's Circus* in Liverpool in a £100 match which was described as "The catch-as-catch-can Championship of the World". He fought Tom McInerney, described as the *American Champion*, and Donaldson was described as "champion wrestler of Scotland", though this led to some newspaper correspondence asking where he had acquired such a title. McInerney was said to have had superior muscle development and won the first two falls in 14½mins and 16mins. Donaldson fought with great pluck and agility and the crowd were said to have appreciated his "cleverness" and gave him a "hearty cheer". "The Scotchman's style is wonderfully neat and agile", wrote one newspaper, but another described him as "a total stranger to Liverpool, and only know by repute." Such was the lot of the itinerant professional sporting showman.

Six weeks later he was in Dundee fighting for £75 and the *Mixed Wrestling Championship of Scotland*, (Scottish Style - Græco Roman Style - Catch-as-Catch-Can). His opponent was George Ross of Philadelphia. The contest was held at the *Britannia Theatre of Varieties* and was spread over six nights. The match ended in a draw (5 falls each) when both men refused to fight again.

In March 1895 he was back home in Glasgow wrestling 'Lancashire style' for £50 against Tom Clayton in the *Britannia Music Hall* in the Trongate; with an added purse of £20 to the winner. They shared the billing with three singers, two comedians, a dancer, a mime-artist, a pair of 'variety artists' and a 'Punch and Judy entertainment'. There was a limit to how long he could expect to draw a crowd even in what was now his home town and the nature of his business was that he had to travel, and three months later (July 1895) we get a glimpse of him at the *Alhambra Theatre of Varieties* in Leicester Square, London. He was part of a *Grand Wrestling Tournament* that began every evening at 10.30, following *A Day Out* which had begun at 8.00, and *Ali Baba*, which began at 8.55; the tournament included George Steadman, Charles Green, Tom Cannon, the 'Imperial Turkish Wrestlers' - Memisch, Mehmet, and Ismail, Joe Carrol (Ireland), G.M. Ross (America), Leon Masson (Paris), Paul Belling (Germany), Trillat le Savoyard (France), Nicola Petroff (Bulgaria), and Antonio Pierri - the Terrible Greek.

Donaldson was now living and working among the international men of muscle but, alas, he was not one of them; nevertheless, he learned a lot from being with them; and one thing he learned was that he was not big enough or strong enough to make a living as a wrestler among such men; he was out of his league.

Charles Donaldson was a relatively small man, standing 5ft 8inches (1.73m), and weighing 11st 6lbs. (160lbs/72.6kg); all the others were much bigger men. For example, Tom Cannon fluctuated between 15½ and 17 stone (217lbs/98.4kg, and 238lbs/107.9kg) and George Steadman was 18½ stone (259lbs/117.5kg). Donaldson had been hired as a novelty to join the show after it had been running at the *Alhambra* for several weeks, in the hope that his speed and agility would be a draw. How would he fare against much bigger and stronger men? Would he attract the Scots who lived in London to go and see him? It was not, however, a success - he was the last to join the troupe and the first to leave. He had lifted weights and done all he could to develop his physique and put on muscle, but he had to recognise that, skilful and quick as he might be, he would never compete against the men of muscle - a good big 'un always beats a good little 'un.

The following year (1896), back in Glasgow and having learned that he needed other means to keep his family (another daughter was born that year), Charles Donaldson applied for and was granted a licence to run *The American Bar* on Ardgowan Street, on the South-Side of Glasgow. He had learned on his travels the importance of advertising, and the power of newspapers, and wrote to the newspapers giving them material about

himself, to promote the links between his career as a wrestler, his roots in the Shetlands, and his new role as a publican. Having retired from the wrestling arena, "he is delighted", so the text said, "to meet any devotees of whatever branch of athletics, and all may depend upon a hearty reception and an intelligent chat with Charley Donaldson." It was a well-equipped bar, with a hall, and rooms, decorated with photographs of the leading athletes of the day - most of which he had taken himself, for he had decided that he needed more than one string to his bow and had also set himself up as a photographer, following in his father's footsteps. He had started his photography some time before and had taken his camera with him to London and taken photographs of some of his colleagues at the *Alhambra*.

To complete his reinvention, he referred to himself as "Charley Donaldson, Butcher Boy", though there is no evidence that he was ever a butcher in Glasgow, but 'Charley' was more informal, and a 'butcher's boy' made him seem slightly different, and stressed his youthfulness. Youthfulness, even boyishness, seems to have been one of his qualities he wanted to promote, and he must have looked younger than his years. When he was nearly 31 he was described as "a very young man", which seems something of an exaggeration. But the labels that were attached to men at this time were not meant to be accurate descriptions. They were part of the late Victorian method of image building. For example, in 1893, G.M. Ross was promoted in Dundee as being from Philadelphia, and in 1896 the *Alhambra* promoted him as an "America"; but he wasn't, he was from Lairg in northern Scotland, and although he had competed in America for eight years, he had returned (permanently) to Britain more than six years earlier. Tom McInerney, whom Donaldson had wrestled at Liverpool, was described then as "American Champion", but he, too, wasn't American. He was Irish. In 1901 he was even promoted as "Tom McInerney of England". Who you were and where you came from were manipulated by promoters for their own purposes. It is in this light that we have to interpret Charles Donaldson's titles of "Champion wrestler of Scotland" and his fight for the "Championship of the world"; but how good was he? To date I have not been able to trace any wrestling-bout that he won, but it could be that he was magnificent in defeat. Wrestling is, of course, an unmeasurable sport in any objective sense but, sadly, it is impossible to know how good almost *any* of the heavy athletes of his era were. If we take the great Donald Dinnie as an example, we don't even know how good *he* was! We know, of course, that he was very successful very often, defeating many adversaries in an extensive range of events, causing some to consider him the greatest athlete that ever lived, and yet, as Charles Donaldson pointed out in 1901,

“Donald Dinnie has no records according to sporting annals, ... [because] ... the exact weight of the missiles used, the state of the ground, or even how the measurements were taken cannot be proved. This regrettable state of matters exists through the want of precaution of the judges at games in not having the missiles [missiles] weighed in presence of reliable witnesses, and proper records kept of all notable performances.”

Tantalisingly, the actual standards that throwers and jumpers achieved in this era, is just beyond our reach, and so are the standards reached by the wrestlers and boxers.

Charles Donaldson didn't give up wrestling altogether though; he was still drawn to their world, and he would remain fascinated by the big, strong men all his life. In 1897, he wrestled Gideon Perrie of Canada at the *Wellington Palace* on Commercial Road, Glasgow, for the so-called catch-as-catch-can championship of Scotland, and £50. Perrie was said to have weighed over 200lbs (14st 4lbs/90.7kg) and was described as “an enormously big fellow”, and he won easily taking only a little over 3 and 5 minutes to secure two falls. It was the same old story - Donaldson was not big enough or strong enough. Much as he wanted to be part of their world, Charles Donaldson had to acknowledge that he could not match the big, strong, men he admired, and he finally retired from competition - he was thirty-one, and turned his attention to officiating and administrative roles.

In August 1898, he judged the wrestling at the Partick Police Sports, and in 1899 he was stake-holder and referee for a match at Motherwell Town Hall. A few months later he was referee at the “programme of Highland games and sports” that marked the opening of the *Kilmarnock Agricultural Show and Recreation Grounds*; *Athlos* readers might also be interested to know that William McCombie Smith, author of *The Athletes and Athletic Sports of Scotland*, was the piping and dancing judge.

It was shortly after this that Charles Donaldson began his series of articles for the *Glasgow Evening Times* on the big Scottish throwers and lifters who had competed in the various Highland Games in Scotland over the previous fifty years, which he later re-published as *Men of Muscle - and The Highland Games of Scotland*. It is an invaluable source of information gathered from the “several secretaries of Highland Games” whom he had approached for information, and from the “many gentlemen in different parts of Scotland who have come voluntarily forward with facts” But, valuable as it is, Charles Donaldson had never had any direct involvement with the Highland Games,

apart from knowing some of the athletes who competed in the Highland Games who were also wrestlers - either from wrestling against them, or sharing the bill with them, and the policeman-athletes he knew from officiating at their sports. There is no evidence, however, that Charles Donaldson ever competed in any Highland Games. *Men of Muscle*, is something of a hodgepodge, with Donaldson bringing together history and biography of Highland Games athletes, but also including a biography of Tom Cannon who never appeared in any Highland Games, and also an instructional chapter on weight-lifting that he acknowledges was "foreign to the Highland Games".

The book is full of Donaldson's personal admiration for these big, strong men, but a strange mood of nostalgic romanticism runs through it, a mood almost of longing, perhaps an expression of Donaldson's thwarted desire to be one of the athletes he writes about. He was an outsider who had wanted to be an insider, and there is an almost palpable sense of loss running through the book. *Men of Muscle* is an important book because of the details found in it, such as the details of every throw in every round of a hammer throwing competition at Luss in 1896, this is very rare, and because of the detailed description of the men that Donaldson knew, their looks, and even their personalities and their outlook on life. The gaps in the book can almost be forgiven, but the absence of dates is often frustrating, as are the omissions that Donaldson hoped to get around to in the second volume that never appeared,

His publisher was *Carter & Pratt*, of Glasgow who specialised in Glasgow subjects. They printed material for the Glasgow School of Art, Glasgow University, and the Royal Philosophical Society of Glasgow, but this had its disadvantages for Donaldson, for they did not have a significant presence in the UK as a whole. It bears all the hallmarks of a self-published work, with *Carter & Pratt* organising the mechanics of printing and binding, etc., for Donaldson. Although the book was comprised of items already published in the *Glasgow Evening Times*, they did not print it, and seem to have wanted no part in it, though Michael Graham, the editor, did give his permission, for which Donaldson was so grateful that he dedicated the book to him.

The book was financed, at least in part, by advertisements - three whole-page, and two half-page advertisements at the end of the book, which was quite common in the books of the time; less common were the four whole-page advertisements embedded in the book itself. Two in particular are very unusual. Pages 122 and 125 are whole-page advertisements for M'Clinton's Soap, and on p.128, Donaldson wrote a 12-line eulogy on McClinton's soap,

its manufacture, and its uses; a very early example of product placement, but one which, sadly, tends to undermine the objectivity of other parts of his text. Donaldson seems to have arranged for the advertising, as well as having written the text and arranged for the publication. He also took seven of the photographs. His style was to take a portrait-shot with the athlete stripped for his event, with arms folded, and looking into the far distance to his right (there is only one exception to that in which the athlete looks straight ahead). Photographs are an important part of the book. There are 34 of them, mostly portraits, and in many cases they are the only images that have survived of these athletes, and some date from the earliest days of photography. Donaldson says that the photograph of William Stewart was taken "fifty years ago", i.e. 1851, which makes it one of the earliest photographs of an athlete. There is also an advertisement for a photographic studio in Glasgow that had special terms for "professionals and athletes". But *Men of Muscle* was not a success; it received very few reviews, and although Donaldson wrote that he hoped to write a second book on the same topic, if he did, it was never published.

After his publication of *Men of Muscle*, Charles Donaldson continued his association with wrestling, and continued as licensee of the *American Bar*. In 1903 he took the entries for a *Great International Wrestling Tournament* at Waverley Market in Edinburgh, and he refereed catch-as-can-can matches at the *Gaiety Theatre* in Glasgow in 1907, and at the *Palace Theatre*, Glasgow in 1910. In 1913, however, he broke new ground and was witness to the Articles of Agreement and the stake-holder for a boxing match between two Scottish boxers whom history has largely forgotten; but it signalled the beginning of a new life for Charles Donaldson - among the boxers. He became landlord of *The New Coffin Bar* at 88, Whitevale St, in the Dennistoun district of Glasgow and which, though small, became a shrine for boxers; Jack Johnson visited him there in 1915, wearing £20,000 of diamonds. In 1919 he was stake-holder for a bantam-weight fight between Davie Willox of Glasgow and Pat McAdam of Airdree, for £100 a side, appointed by "an English sporting paper".



In the 1920s the area around the *New Coffin* bar was becoming run-down, and in 1926 Charles Donaldson applied for a licence to sell wines and spirits in another part of Glasgow. To almost everyone's surprise his application was turned down (one of only two to be refused out of 29 applications) and then the city decided on an improvement scheme on Whitevale Street, and he lost his licence there too. To earn a living he turned to boxing journalism and became boxing editor of the *Glasgow Evening Times*; and, in January 1927, in that capacity he telephoned New York to enquire about Elky Clark who was in New York to fight Fidel LaBarba for the World Flyweight Championship. Elky Clark was a Glaswegian and Fidel LaBarba was a New Yorker; Charles Harvey was looking after Clark's interests in New York. These were the days when a trans-Atlantic telephone call was news, and Charles Donaldson made it at 3am Glasgow time. *The New York Evening Times* reported it like this -

Tingle-tingle.

And then:

"Are you there, Mr Harvey? This is Donaldson of the *Evening Times* of Glasgow. Just what do you think are Clark's chances of defeating LaBarba Friday Night?"

"Kindly tell the British public," Harvey replied, "to get ready for the first Scotchman to win a world's championship, as Elky Clark will surely win the title Friday night. Sincere congratulations upon your commendable enterprise and initiative in being the first newspaper to actually talk boxing across the ocean."

Elky Clark, however, lost in 12 rounds having already gone down five times and with an eye so badly damaged that he never fought again.

The following year (1928) Charles Donaldson ventured into publishing again, this time writing a boxing history, *From Figg to Tunney*, published by Kirkwood & Co., another Glasgow publishing house; but it was a very small print run and it was poorly received and rarely, if at all, reviewed, and is now almost impossible to find.

It is at this point, when Charles Donaldson was 63, that he disappears from view. No further details of his activities, or his life have been found, nor any records of his death but, by 1935 when his wife Mary died, she was described as a widow.

For all the commercial failings of *Men of Muscle*, it remains, however, the monument by which Charles Donaldson will be remembered. *Men of Muscle* is a sporting gem; a book inspired by the heavy athletes of his day, and written by a man who knew and admired them; and written too, from the perspective of a man outside of the great Victorian amateur movement that had swept the country over the previous generation. There is no other sporting book quite like *Men of Muscle* but it was only by understanding a little about the man who wrote it that I was able to understand the sense of sadness behind it, and appreciate the mass of detail he gives. This is a homage to a sporting world that Charles Donaldson would have liked to be a part of, but which he knew was slipping away, even as he described it.

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