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Opening Extract from...

Calories and Corsets

A history of dieting over 2000 years

Written by Louise Foxcroft

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1. Too many of us are labouring under the tyranny of a culturally prescribed body shape; where dieting is the norm and a skinny body the goal. Women such as the singer Beth Ditto are facing down the prejudice and the bullying and challenging today's ideas of what is beautiful. She has used her weight to promote her belief that 'such a personal thing as one's body should never be a reason for controversy, since every person is beautiful in their own way'. The story of beauty and the story of health have always been intertwined but the long and mean history of body-shaping and diets has distorted our view of both.

Introduction: ‘The Price of a Boyish Form’

FAT, PLUMP, STOUT, overweight, large, chubby, portly, flabby, paunchy, pot-bellied, beer-bellied, meaty, of ample proportions, heavyset, obese, corpulent, fleshy, gross, plus-sized, big-boned, tubby, roly-poly, well-upholstered, beefy, porky, blubbery, chunky, pudgy, podgy, bulky, substantial, voluminous, voluptuous, generous, lardy ... We’ve heard them all.

Fat is ‘bad’ and dieting is the new norm, but few people in recent decades have had what we might call a ‘normal’ relationship with food, one untouched by the constant barrage of diet news, fast foods and a food environment radically different from what it was even just a generation ago. If we look further back than that – centuries back – it becomes obvious that much of the dieting industry is fraudulent, yet still we follow the latest fad, hoping for some quick and easy weight-loss miracle because slimming down is hard, tedious work. Our attitudes to our bodies, and to fat and food, need to change.

Fad diets are little better than useless. They do the biggest business and arguably the greatest harm, and they have been around since long before your great-grandmother was eyeing up that fetching knitted knee-length number for her trip to Bognor

with a new beau. Dieters can initially lose 5 to 10 per cent of their weight on any number of fad diets, but the weight almost always comes back. A recent report by the American Psychological Association which looked at thirty-one diet studies found that, after two years of dieting, up to two-thirds of dieters weighed more than they did before they began their regimen. Sustained weight loss was found only in a small minority of the participants, while complete weight regain was found in the majority. Diets, they concluded, 'do not lead to sustained weight loss or health benefits for the majority of people'. And there is evidence that yo-yo dieting is something of a Faustian bargain: it can make the whole enterprise more difficult so that repeat dieters find they have to eat less and for longer to lose the same amount of weight. Recent evidence suggests that, even though the most important changes we can make to reduce our cancer risk (after giving up smoking) are to exercise and lose weight, repeated dieting is linked to cardiovascular disease, stroke, diabetes and a compromised immune system. The human cost of both obesity and yo-yo crash dieting is bad enough but there are huge economic costs too. We need to re-think our quest for unrealistic thinness through sometimes dangerous, expensive and misguided crash diets and pills, and return to a simple, sensible healthy approach to eating as first set out by the Greeks.

While I was writing this, and feeling a bit of a fraud because I've never seriously attempted a diet, I had a go at a low-carbohydrate plan to see how it would feel and whether I'd be able to stick it out. It was a strict regimen that I got from a best-selling diet book, and it proved to be much more of a trial than I'd imagined. I'm not by nature an obsessive person but from the minute I woke up each day I found myself thinking about food. I thought about what I could eat, when I could eat it, how much I could have and, particularly insidious, I cast sideways glances at friends and family to check on what everyone else was having.

I took to weighing myself – naked, before my first cup of coffee, and then clothed, and then late, after dinner at night, just so I could obtain the greatest range of numbers and ruminate on where I was in my diet and what it all meant (answer: very little, other than I lost half a pound, but all this weighing and obsessing proved a major distraction from the work that I should have been getting on with). What it did provide was a real insight into the way in which dieting can become obsessive and how any new diet that promises stress-free, painless and fast weight loss is instantly attractive. The repetitive and often unsatisfying experience of dieting can only be debunked by a long, hard look at its history, a process that could release us from the tyranny of fads and quick-fixes.

What can a look at centuries of dieting, gluttony, abstinence and artifice tell us about tried and tested (or used and abused) diets and regimens? Such a survey will range from the ideal Greek body to the celebration of plump flesh by medicine and the arts in times of dearth; from the industrialisation of society, which brought new foods, fashions and stigmas, to wartime scarcity and political constraints; from the rounded hour-glass figures of 1950s 'sweater girls' to the insubstantial and boyish Twiggy-type. From heroin chic, Kate Moss in her pants and the size zero debate, to the explosion of magazines and websites such as *Heat* and *TMZ*, the ideal woman has become smaller, skinnier and more sickly as real women have gained their independence and got bigger. Sifting through all the accumulated centuries of advice and instruction, science and psychology, insanity and innovation we will discover the often really wild truth about dieting. All the errors and attitudes, shapes and *Schadenfreude*, sense and nonsense of dieting will be laid bare and might even put to rest the notion that there is a magic dieting 'something' which stands out from all the fads and fashions, and which has THIS WORKS stamped all over it.

In 1953, three years before I was born, Simone de Beauvoir wrote, 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.' As I grew up in tandem with feminism I absorbed the idea that feminist theory begins with the body, that everything has been written on the body: all the inequalities, the prejudices, the rights and wrongs. Not only is your body inescapable, but what society says about it is, too, and what we regard as 'nature' is, in fact, socially constructed. Our perception of our bodies changes over time and each period and every culture has had its own obsession with a particular body shape, with appearance, with what is seen as beautiful or ugly. Add to this the fact that as we age our bodies change shape, and the notion of attractiveness becomes evermore nuanced. Desirable body shapes are culturally specific and prejudice is heaped upon those whose bodies differ; and this norm, this marker of beauty and belonging, has continually altered. Modern feminism, operating now in the interests of both women and men, is of course still trying to remove these prejudices, to liberate us all from convention.

When I was ten years old, in 1966, at a family party an uncle remarked on how I was growing and serenaded me with a medley of Maurice Chevalier songs. He began with 'Every little breeze seems to whisper "Louise", Birds in the trees ...' and moved on, creepily crooning in his mock Gallic accent, to 'Thank Heaven for little girls (they grow up in the most delightful way)'. Then he asked what I wanted to be when I grew up. Happily occupying his warm worsted lap and enveloped in the powerful, pungent smell of men – of whisky and tobacco and Brylcreem – I cocked my head, swung my pigtails, and answered, 'Miss World.' That seemed to me then to be the epitome of female achievement. I already knew that all the female characters in the British children's television programmes of the time were passive, silent

or fixed to the spot: Louby Lou, Little Weed and the Wooden Top mother and daughter. By contrast the Miss World contestants were visible: they spoke (after a fashion), and they were out there getting a lot of attention. They had grown-up 'ideal' female bodies, but they acted and stood like girls: coquettish, showing off but disguising it by holding their heads to one side, apparently ever so malleable, demure in their fitted swimsuits and white high heels. They were catching men. I could already identify with them, with the way that they were obviously one thing pretending to be another; their real selves camouflaged in order to succeed in a skewed world. It was clear, even to a child, that you needed to look the part, and in the early 1960s that part involved big pointy breasts, a nipped-in waist and round hips. Their 'vital statistics' were all-important, with 36, 24, 36 the preferred incantation. So as a young girl I already believed that beauty could be measured and worked for, and the rewards were many. When I grew up I would work on my body so that I, too, could sit on more men's laps and bask.

Then in 1970, when I turned fourteen, the Miss World competition was brought to a chaotic halt by a band of noisy feminists. The presenter that year, Bob Hope, was taken aback by flying tomatoes, flour bombs, ink, and angry shouts of 'cattle market'. Bob's conclusion was that the protesters he faced must have been 'on some kind of dope'. Ha! Watching it all on television, I can't tell you how exciting, indeed how joyously radical it was to see and hear the women chanting, 'We're not beautiful, we're not ugly, we're angry.' That year, too, the Equal Pay Act was passed in Britain, three years after David Steel's Abortion Act. In America in 1971, the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC) was founded by Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan and Bella Abzug, and in 1972 the Equal Rights Amendment was passed by the Senate

at much the same time that *Ms.* magazine was launched. I no longer saw any need to be sugar and spice, I had a boyfriend, twenty-four to my sixteen, who thought me worryingly 'precocious', and by the time the Sex Discrimination Act was passed in 1975 I was nineteen, in London, on the Pill, with no make-up, no bra, no knickers, no razor, *Spare Rib* under my arm, my sisters by my side – and feminist to the bone.

Yet, as I became a young woman in the midst of feminism's second wave, we were all still labouring under the tyranny of a prescribed body shape. Many of us refused to succumb, but I look back now knowing that it was easy enough to do so then, for we were young and therefore, almost by definition, beautiful. Thirty-odd years ago, in my early twenties, I had two babies. I got BIG. When I gained three stone, only seven pounds or so of which was baby, my doctor gave me a sternly paternal lecture on how much fat I was putting on. He told me, with great confidence, in fact, that I 'would blow up like a barrage balloon' and that I'd struggle to lose the weight if I insisted on breastfeeding. No more narrow hips and concave belly, he said. Instead, it seemed as though I might actually turn into a woman – shock horror – which was most certainly not the desired eternal-girl shape, even amongst provincial GPs.

This noxious attitude goaded me enough to waddle out and buy Susie Orbach's newly published book, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*. Fat and sex, she wrote in 1978, are equally central in the lives of women, and:

in the United States 50 per cent of women were estimated to be overweight. Every women's magazine has a diet column. Diet doctors and clinics flourish. The names of diet foods are now part of our general vocabulary. Physical fitness and beauty are every woman's goals. While this preoccupation with fat and food has become so common that we tend to

take it for granted, being fat, feeling fat and the compulsion to overeat are, in fact, serious and painful experiences for the women involved.

Not much has changed, has it? During the last century our preoccupation with losing weight has increased, even becoming, according to some psychiatrists, a national neurosis. We have a common aversion to fat – an aesthetic distaste, not to be confused with concerns over obesity and health, though the two are often conflated – and we have a multimillion-pound slimming industry to go with it. Our culture has an endless array of celebrities for us to gawp at: archetypal silent, skinny, schoolgirl-women and waif-boys, eminently enviable and emulated by all groups and ages. They are constantly reported to be on weight-loss diets or to be eating ‘healthily’ (and, we’re reassured, the steak and chips eaten at the press lunch is the ultra-thin star’s genuine everyday diet). The present glut of self-loathing, shame and pointless misery of trying and failing to be the ideal creature of our society’s desire needs re-thinking. We must rebel against the futility of the present Western beauty norm by exploring and exposing the long and dirty history of body-shaping and dieting so that we can make the crucial shift away from this slavery towards a diet that is healthy both physiologically and psychologically. Dieting is a process on which one embarks laden with emotion, often in an attitude of self-flagellation, and the whole enterprise is salted with the potential for failure.

Yet we all diet sometimes and most of us are adept at the self-delusion which is, let’s be honest, necessary for embarking on a fast, and perhaps excessive, weight-loss regimen. The process is like being in love, it provokes the same feelings: an unforgiving and complex mix of the physical sensations and mental tortures of wanting. There you are, dieting, yearning for something. Food is the immediate desire, and thinness the more remote but

possibly achievable goal; you are desperate for two things that are out of immediate reach. You dwell obsessively on the object of your love, running over and over it in your mind, discussing it endlessly with others, worrying at it and fantasising about it. It's a sensation not unlike romantic love: it's appetite, perhaps an unquenchable one, a ravenous one. It's not just your body, of course, but your mind too – and that's the bit that really needs to change. We are a culture in pursuit of the perfect diet and the perfect body, and there are a lot of unhappy and insecure people around to prove it.

In fact, a recent survey of 5,000 people found that more than 60 per cent of women in relationships feel decidedly uncomfortable eating in front of their partners. Up to 40 per cent of women feel like they are always dieting or are constantly concerned about their weight; 25 per cent of them thought about food every thirty minutes but just 10 per cent thought about sex as often (men are said to think about sex much more frequently, with 36 per cent fantasising every half an hour). Some women were also concerned with dieting when eating out, choosing low calorie foods in restaurants instead of what they really wanted, and many admitted eating junk food in secret and then lying about it. Lies and insecurities are the bread and butter of much of the popular dieting and body-shape commentary and advice. What are we to make, for example, of the ecstatic coverage of the Duchess of Cambridge's pre-wedding diet and her dramatic dress-size drop? This is especially troubling given how often we've been told that Princess Diana's bulimia began in the lead up to her wedding. Must women have no scary female flesh at all? Is even a little fat so unacceptable? Kate Middleton's mother, we are told, dropped two dress sizes on the Dukan diet and recent research has argued that daughters mimic their mother's dieting and eating habits, and that a mother's dieting history is her daughter's dieting future.

With as many as one-third of all men and women in the Western world thought to be overweight and, unsurprisingly, twice that number believing themselves to be so, the diet industry is sitting pretty. In America alone, an astonishing \$40 billion a year is spent on slimming and there truly is something for everyone. You can try the Cabbage Soup diet, or the Grapefruit diet, the Three-day diet, the One-day diet, the Scarsdale diet, the Zone diet, the South Beach diet, the F-Plan diet, the GI diet, the Atkins, the Dukan, the MacDougall Plan, the Prism, the Pritikin, the Hay, the Hollywood, the Russian Air Force diet, the Better Sex diet, the Blood Type diet, the Açai Berry diet, the Hallelujah diet, caveman diets, detoxifying diets, hypno-diets, negative calorie, food-combining diets, the magic-bullet diets, even eating naked in front of the mirror ... We are bombarded via technology, too, from the self-improvement vinyl record series of the 1960s, such as Edward L. Baron's 'Reduce Through Listening' which 'helps you develop a dislike for fattening foods', to the iPhone apps of today. Always in your pocket, your iPhone can keep track of your food intake and calorie consumption. You can whip it out whenever a morsel of food threatens you or you feel like scoffing something inappropriate. You can set yourself goals, record your every bite, diligently follow your own progress and see how much weight you're losing or gaining, get instant internet help and tie-ins with proprietary diet regimens, some free, some not, and be swamped by advertising. There are apps that can scan product bar codes and automatically download the calorie count into a daily planner. You can check on yourself in the most obsessive way. We are, it seems, caught in panic-diet mode, trying anything, feeling the pressure from all sides and the misery on the inside.

Fat people have always provoked embarrassment, and even bullying, both individually and commercially, but successful weight loss has to begin with a personal decision. And who ever