

A Tool of History, A Weapon for the Present

By Stephen F. Baker

History of the Cane

The word “cane” comes from historical reference when the shafts of most canes were constructed of rattans or bamboo which became the mostly widely used material to make walking sticks, evolving later into the generic name for the product. Ancient man’s first cane was a tree branch, used to stabilize himself while walking and climbing, and also as a tool for self-defense. In ancient Egypt everyone from royalty to peasants used a cane. Now displayed in museums worldwide, these sticks and staffs were often carved and decorated elaborately. Their shape and form dictated whether the owner was a shepherd, soldier, dignitary, priest, Pharaoh, or even a god. It was thought that a walking stick placed next to the mummy in a coffin would help the deceased on his travels after death and resurrection. King Tutankhamen had no less than 132 sticks buried with him.

It was during the 16th century that the walking stick was widely accepted as an accessory of elegance and social prominence among the aristocracy. Special etiquette dictated the use of the cane during this period, though walking sticks were not allowed in the presence of the king. In fact, whoever “wore” a cane in the presence of the Czar of Russia was beheaded! Catherine the Great was known to make use of this law on her cross-country treks and hunting trips.

Western European males in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries “wore” decorative canes as fashion accessories. Along with this fashion of carrying sticks came the attendant rules of etiquette. It was considered an extreme violation of manners to carry a walking stick under one's arm, to brandish it in the air, to drag it on the ground or to lean on it while standing. A 1702 issue of the “Tatler” reported that it was necessary for London gentlemen to “procure licenses for the privilege of carrying canes, and to abide by certain rules or risk loss of that privilege.”

Ceremonial staffs were used by many aboriginal cultures of Canada, often carried as a symbol of the office and status of chief. These were also referred to as “speaker’s staffs”, since they were held by an individual speaking on behalf of the leader. Historical photographs reveal staffs used in other ways. In 1865, Governor Frederick Seymour ordered malacca staffs from British India with cast-silver heads for the purpose of “presenting a staff of office to each friendly tribe.” In fact, a series of photographs discovered in the Provincial Archives shows three men, identified as Interior Salish tribe members, wearing fringed, leather coats, as one man holds a “Seymour” staff.

Further south in the United States, the pure and modest appearance of canes reflected the conservatism that Americans embraced following the outbreak of the War for Independence. National pride caused the eagle to remain extremely popular on the walking stick through the mid-19th century. The custom of presenting sticks endured as a symbol of individual respect and admiration. General Washington received one of Benjamin Franklin's canes constructed of crab-tree wood with a gold head in the form of a cap of liberty.

The late 19th century, found the fashionable American gentleman in possession of several canes for different occasions and social events. Victorian walking sticks were a part of the "correct" attire of the elegantly dressed chap, who would change a cane as often as he changed his clothes. Shops specializing in walking sticks began to flourish as canes were being designed by such world-renowned artists as Tiffany in America, Faberge in Russia, Thomas Brigg & Sons of England, Magasin Antoine of Paris, and the Meyers family in Hamburg and Berlin. During the 20th century, the cane lost its popularity among the well-dressed, and came to be used by those whose age or health required them, but are still fancied by hikers and climbers.

The Cane in Martial Arts

The cane has been used as a "martial" tool since ancient times. Korean monks sometimes carried the cane during their travels to serve them in several different ways; it was used to help maintain their balance climbing hills and over rough terrain, and it was also used to help the monks defend themselves from bandits and wild animals during their travels throughout the country. Plus, if their temple was attacked, the cane could quickly become a defensive weapon.

A group of young warriors called the Hwa Rang (flowering youths) from the Korean Kingdom of Silla, were instructed in the use of the cane by these same monks, including the famous Won Kang. They were taught several different forms of defense as part of Buldo mu do (Buddhist martial arts): kwan jyel sul (joint manipulation), hyel do sul (striking vital points of the body), and ji pang e sul (cane techniques). Included in their specialized training, the hwa rang were educated in the application of techniques using the cane for striking, throwing, controlling, and the application of kwan jyel defenses. They also carried the cane as a sign of their social position and status.

Several centuries later in Japan, Uchida Ryogoro (1837-1921) was a menkyo in Shindo Muso ryu who taught Nakayama Hakudo. While in Tokyo he invented sutekki-jutsu as a way to popularize Jodo by introducing jo-like self-defense with a western walking stick, which was a big rage in early 1900 Japan. The weapon itself is, of course, basically Western - the cane, imported during the Meiji era - but all or most of the techniques for handling it are adaptations of moves for other Japanese weapons

By this time, as noted above, Europe was embracing the cane in its many forms, and realizing the potency of this rather innocuous looking device. Take for example "La Canne de Combat" or Fighting Stick, which is a French " Martial Art " sometimes called "fencing with wood stick".

More evidence comes from these paragraphs taken from one of the more noted periodicals of the time:

"The Walking-Stick as a Means of Self-Defence," by Pierre Vigny, *Health and Strength*, July 1903

"With the cane all inferiority disappears, and I assert most emphatically from my long and practical experience that a man armed with a cane, and who has learnt how to use it, does not fear a bigger and stronger man, though similarly armed. I will say even more: if he perfectly understands how to use his stick as a weapon of defence, he can hold his own against several adversaries for whoever is hit by this weapon, which acquires an enormous force in its swinging motions, does not return to the attack again, therefore the cane is the most perfect weapon for self-defence; but in order to make it so, it must possess the necessary qualities, which, expressed in one word, is solidity.

Using the stick as a means of self-defence in the street, one can not only fight one man equally well armed, but also several men at the same time equally well armed as one's self, for the stick is made to pass through every possible direction around you with a marvellous rapidity, thus protecting every part of one's body; and at the same time acquires enormous force by its rapid swinging movements for delivering a blow, which no one can possibly stand against."

With such an august history, it is no wonder that the cane has been "re-discovered" as a self-defense tool for the new millennium. And on the forefront of this "awakening" is Grand Master Mark Shuey Sr., owner of Cane Masters. GM Shuey has become well known on the major tournament circuits as the "cane man", where he has been able to accumulate 18 world and national titles in the Masters Weapons divisions using the cane, while at the same time showing how devastating and practical this simple yet legal self-defense tool can be. As a result, GM Shuey is being sought to teach seminars across the country as well as in Europe and Canada. His efficient system of instruction has taken such a strong foothold in the martial arts community that he has formed the Cane Masters International Association in order to facilitate the training of students of the cane. Make no mistake, the cane is back!