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Book Review of *Kendo: Culture of the Sword*, by  
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Alexander Bennett, a well-known kendo practitioner and New Zealand expat living in Japan, has produced an engaging survey of kendo from its putative origins in medieval Japan to the present. These two biographical details are not meant as introductory filler; from the prologue to the final chapter the author's project is not simply an academic study but a personal journey, "reassessing why I had embarked on this journey in the first place and why I persist in trekking down this intangible, eternal path to self-perfection (p. 237)."

Like many surveys with a long temporal scope, this book is not argument driven but a presentation of how kendo changed over time. The author offers many smaller, insightful arguments that connect his subject to other historiographical issues familiar to scholars of Japan; kendo as: a device for "taming" of the samurai, an invented tradition in the Meiji period, a vehicle for nationalism and militarism during Japan's modern wars, a object for post-war rehabilitation, democratization, and internationalization. The book has something for everyone. For the casual reader and martial arts enthusiast (the book is priced for this market unlike the publisher's specialist monographs which are almost double the price), this work acts as a highly readable and intelligent survey of early modern and modern Japanese history through the lens of kendo. There are also extensive translations of rules, mission statements, mandates, speeches and the like. I cannot imagine that anyone will attempt an historical kendo survey for the general audience that will so thoroughly cover the major issues in kendo history. For those with an academic interest in the topic, each chapter is better than the last--analytically the strongest chapters occur in the latter half of the book as the chronology moves into the modern period and

closer to the author's own involvement at the very highest levels of the kendo world in Japan and abroad.

The first two chapters cover the late medieval and early modern periods. The author summarizes historical context as it relates to the samurai, for example, the Friday, Farris, and Ikegami "rise of the samurai" debate. And those who have read martial art historical works such as Hurst's *Armed Martial Arts of Japan*, Friday's *Legacies of the Sword*, and the late John Rogers often-cited dissertation, "The Development of the Military Profession in Tokugawa Japan" will be familiar with the historical personages, sword "styles" (*ryūha*), and general narrative of martial art history. The central argument of the two opening chapters is that swordsmanship originated as an "art of killing" and became an "art of living" as it shifted from a skill set used in combat to an art form that adopted the vocabulary, institutions, and pedagogy found in other cultural arts like Noh, tea ceremony, et cetera. In so doing, the author demonstrates how swordsmanship was part of what Norbert Elias famously termed the "civilizing process." Citing Elias, Bennett argues that the civilizing process began during the Muromachi period as samurai created cultural practices that would not embarrass them while living among the Kyoto nobility. This accelerated during the Tokugawa period when swordsmanship, the author argues convincingly, became integral to what Ikegami defined as samurai "taming."

Chapters three and four trace swordsmanship's popularity in the early modern period, through its fall after the Meiji Restoration and revival during Japan's modern wars.

Swordsmanship reached peak sportification in the first half of the mid-nineteenth century but suddenly dropped in popularity during the Meiji "civilization and enlightenment" boom when much of samurai culture was depicted as archaic and undesirable. Kept alive as a carnivalesque

exhibition by a small group of martial artists, kendo gradually began to find supporters among people who felt that kendo, and martial arts more generally, would be beneficial in education. Although initial efforts to introduce martial arts into education were unsuccessful, for reasons fully explored in Denis Gainty's recent work,<sup>1</sup> the samurai legacy, and kendo with it, were resuscitated during Japan's modern wars. Bennett argues that kendo experienced a "de-civilization" as kendo reverted to an art of violence. It became a vehicle for propagating ultranationalism and was meant to be effective in combat if the need arose.

Therefore, it might be no surprise that kendo needed rehabilitation after the Asia Pacific War given its close association to the military. But even after kendo was "re-civilized," emptied of all association with the emperor, nationalism, and bushido, those values were reinserted after the Occupation ended. The last two chapters cover those shifts in kendo and analyze how the tensions between kendo as a sport and kendo as an activity for character development and instilling national pride were complicated by kendo's internationalization. The author's own involvement at the forefront of global kendo provides us with a wonderful lens into this tension.

As with any survey of this size there are some gaps and oversimplifications. The short discussion of commoner participation in swordsmanship during the Tokugawa period reveals two problematic issues, an assertion that is demonstrably false and its accompanying theoretical articulation. The author argues that fencing was a "captivating divertissement for townsmen and farmers" while swordsmanship (*kenjutsu*) was the "exclusive cultural capital of warriors within their specific cultural field. (p. 87)." As evidence of samurai belittlement of commoner involvement in swordsmanship, he offers the fact that commoner sword teachers were not hired at the shogunate's official military academy, the Kōbusho (p. 82). However, as many studies

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<sup>1</sup> Denis Gainty, Martial arts and the body politic in Meiji Japan, (New York: Routledge, 2013).

have illustrated, commoner swordsmen were hired as sword teachers by daimyo throughout Japan in answer to the shogunate's call to reform the military. Commoner emphasis on freestyle fencing over a focus on prearranged form practice (*kata*) led one daimyo to fire the domain's samurai teacher of Yagyū Shinkage-ryū, a style widely practiced by daimyo and the Tokugawa clan, and hire a commoner who taught a more rough-tumble fencing style deemed more practical to re-martialize the samurai. Moreover, rural elite commoners used swordsmanship training to forge local defense groups to cope with growing disorder in the Kanto countryside. A greater issue is an incomplete articulation of Bourdieu's "cultural capital." The author is correct to cite Bourdieu and note that swordsmanship was a form of cultural capital dominated by samurai, but Bourdieu's cultural capital concept is paired with social capital. People who try to accrue social and cultural capital using their newfound wealth do so to navigate shifting class identities. In this case, commoner elites, many of them newly wealth entrepreneurs, practiced swordsmanship exactly because it was a form of cultural and social capital that allowed them to interact with samurai—nothing is simply play as such.

While the author's involvement in kendo benefits his study of contemporary kendo, I could not help but think that more scholarly distance would have improved upon the assertions made in the opening chapter. For readers of this review who do not participate in Japanese martial arts I should point out that there are at least three problems that affect martial art scholarship written by many practitioner-scholars, echoes of which are found in this monograph as well. First is the claim that the origin of Japanese martial arts as systematized practices originate in the Warring States period *at the latest*. This suggests that martial arts were primarily, if not entirely, about acquiring combat skills and thus martial arts today are a legacy of the "real" combat skills of the past. Second, for practitioners, the older the one's own style (*ryūha*), the

more cultural cache it has, thus the desire to locate the origins of such-and-such style back into the misty past. And three, many of the claims about origins and general teleological outline of martial arts history go largely unquestioned.

On the one hand, the author acknowledges this last issue, “it is difficult to identify organized schools of swordsmanship before the 14<sup>th</sup> century. What sources can be found are generally scant and open to conjecture. ...they were probably family affairs....” (p. 40). He also notes that much information about origins cannot be verified or were embellished by later practitioners, but then sometimes treats those claims as reliable. Like many other works on kendo or martial art history in Japanese and English, he suggests that swordsmanship “styles” (*ryūha*) trace their origins to either the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries, for which there is no contemporary evidence that I know of, and if there are, the author does not cite any.

The tension between the author’s suspicion about style origin stories and his assertion that swordsmanship predates the sixteenth century, arises from at least two issues. One, what does he mean by “swordsmanship?” Does it mean simply picking up a sword and swinging it around? If that’s the case, then one could make the overly broad argument that swordsmanship existed since the invention of swords. In fact, sometimes that is what the author suggests when he cites the *Tale of Heike* for evidence “of what appear to be distinctive styles of swordsmanship with specified techniques (p. 40).” But does giving a name to a technique indicate systemization or simply a name given to some random movement? Or a literary detail found in Chinese literature as well? But if by swordsmanship the author means some kind of systemization of teachings about swordsmanship, represented by the rise of “styles” during the seventeenth century, then there would have to be some evidence for this through texts that describe swordsmanship as such.

It seems to me that the fundamental problem in many martial art histories written in Japanese or English is this problematic issue of origins. Foucault, in his famous essay on Nietzsche, genealogy, and history describes the issue perfectly. History should teach us to question the “solemnities” of the origin, not believe in them.<sup>2</sup> Foucault’s attack on the search for origins, believed to be a time “free from the restraints of positive knowledge,” where “the truth of things corresponded to a truthful discourse,” and always “preceding the Fall” are points that the practitioner-scholar would do well to remember. We cannot have our Origin and history too.

Nonetheless, the author has provided the Japanese studies field and those with an interest in kendo with a thorough, engaging, and well written survey that will remain a classic for decades to come. He has certainly achieved his goal of providing a foundation for other kendo-related studies.

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in Paul Rabinow, ed., The Foucault Reader (New York: Pantheon books, 1984), pp. 76-100.