

# The Masters of Defense ca. 1530 to 1617

---

## 1 – THE MASTERS OF DEFENSE ca. 1530-1617

Conference presentation for the Tenth Annual Symposium on Historical European  
Swordsmanship.

Massachusetts Center for Interdisciplinary Renaissance Studies

University of Massachusetts Amherst

26 April 2014

Walter G. Green III, Ph.D.  
Maitre d' Armes AAI  
Maitre d'Armes Historique USFCA

Note: Text is keyed to the slides used in the presentation.

## 2 – OBJECTIVE

This study started as an examination of Sloane Manuscript 2530 to determine which weapons the English Masters of Defence considered to be core weapons in their practice during the Renaissance. I have a specific interest in this because I teach historical fencing, and believe that my teaching should mirror as closely as possible the sword skills taught by Masters of the time.

However, in examining Manuscript 2530, I realized that it is also a gold mine of information about the professional world of the English Masters. As a Fencing Master who trains modern competitive athletes, I have a long standing interest in the history of the Masters who are my professional predecessors. After a year of work on the manuscript's contents, I am impressed by both the complexity of their world and the challenges that understanding it present to the researcher.

My objective today is to share some of the preliminary conclusions of my study. I do claim the privilege of reporting what is idiosyncratically interesting to me in the hopes that it will be interesting to you. I again will stress that this is a preliminary look at these subjects, and that a more detailed coverage will be published this year as a book.

I will cover:

The sources I used

Some interesting characteristics of the population of professional teachers of swordplay

The key professional experience of these men – the prize – what we would call a professional examination for each level

The weapons used that form a core of their practice

# The Masters of Defense ca. 1530 to 1617

---

And the rank structure and progression in rank

I should note that my interpretation of the data in Manuscript 2530 is shaped by my 40 plus years of teaching swordplay, by my training and experience as a candidate taking modern Moniteur, Prevot, and Maitre examinations in the United States and Germany, by serving as a head examiner for over 50 coaching practical examinations, and by my experience in designing and managing professional certification programs in emergency management and health care.

I therefore approached this study from the perspective, not of a social historian, but rather of that of a reasonably experienced fencing master, with academic expertise in organizational development and behavior, and with over 40 years of interest in the history of swordplay.

### 3 – THE SOURCES

The key document in any examination of the Renaissance English Masters of Defence is Sloane Manuscript 2530. However, it is not the only document. Two royal warrants, one of Henry VIII and the other of James I, establish the authority of the Masters of Defence to control the certification of professional teachers of defence, and provide lists of the Masters and Provosts charged with that authority. Three English authors of the period, George Silver (*Paradoxes of Defence*), G. H. (*The Private Schoole of Defence*), and George Swetnam (*The Schoole of the Noble and Worthy Science of Defence*) pay respect to the Masters and make it clear that they are expert professionals in a field too often populated by charlatans. Silver and G. H. were not fencing Masters, and take pains to identify their status as Gentlemen. Swetnam writes as though the Masters are his professional colleagues, and Aylward identifies him as a Master, although he does not appear in MS. 2530.

As a side note G. H. is not further named in his monograph. A near contemporary reference in an archery text identifies him a G. Hales, a family name of gentry and yeomanry found in Norfolk and Sussex. His name is commonly cited in modern sources as George Hale, although I have been unable to identify the source of that interpretation.

I have found J. D. Aylward's 1956 volume, *The English Master of Arms*, to be very useful in understanding the Masters of Defence in the overall context of the development of professional teachers of swordplay in England.

A variety of other sources discuss the Masters of Defence. However, their work is either derivative, focused on applications other than fencing, or in one case confounded by significant error.

### 4 – MS. 2530

Sloane MS. 2530 is a partial record of the proceedings of the English Company of Masters of Defence, a proto-guild centered in London and certainly active from the 1530s to 1616 CE. I have used Herbert Berry's transcription of the manuscript as the basis for my research, and I believe it to be a thorough and workmanlike piece of scholarship. Given the writing hand of the day, it is certainly far better than I could have done. Berry is primarily a scholar of drama and

## The Masters of Defense ca. 1530 to 1617

---

playhouses, but he has done an excellent job of constructing a partial time line of the Masters. His book is difficult to find and expensive when you do find it, but it is one of the two volumes that I consider critical to understand the development of English fencing masters in this period.

The manuscript itself is a collection of 46 folio leaves, bound together at some time prior to its donation to the British Museum in 1754 by bequest of Sir Hans Sloane. The Sloane manuscripts along with the Cotton and Harleian collections formed the original library of the Museum. Those familiar with the work of Paul Wagner and Brandon Heslop and Benjamin Bradak on Medieval English Long Sword technique will be aware that both the Cotton and Harleian collections also include significant sword resources.

MS. 2530 was written by 12 different hands, possibly representing 11 or 12 individuals. Berry believes that the manuscript was originally written largely by a single individual, and that others added to it somewhat randomly. I agree with Berry that this is not an original document, but rather a copy compiling the contents of other documents, and that it may not be contemporary, possibly being compiled after 1590. Early entries describe prizes that clearly happened before 1540, but dates including the year do not start to appear until 1568 with consistent dating across all three ranks starting around 1578. In earlier entries there is a significant lack of detail; prizes fenced in the 1570s and 1580s are more richly described.

And there are gaps in the record. Berry suggests that prize entries are lacking in the 20 year period from 1558 to 1578. There are also shorter gaps which may signal missing records or may represent lulls in organizational activity.

As I mentioned Berry made an excellent attempt to develop a timeline of the various individuals. I have not completely validated that timeline in my research, simply because of the difficulty of understanding the relationships between who played what prize with and against whom in what order. Berry's analysis was hampered by not accessing the information available in the warrant of 1540. However, I suspect that my effort will largely confirm Berry's.

### **5 – WHAT IS MISSING**

There are some obvious holes in the types of data in MS. 2530, and these holes may support the contention that this is a copied document. Alternately they may simply reflect information that no one thought to write down because everyone already understood it or that was considered perishable.

There are no membership records in the sense of a roster – these partially exist for the Marxbruder, and would seem to have been an important tool in notifying members of prizes. Also missing is any record of death or retirement.

There are no completely failed prizes in the record – from my personal experience in sitting on panels for modern fencing coaches examinations we fail 10-15% of those who test.

We have the names of a very few of the Ancient Master, the corporate leadership equivalent to the Captains of the Marxbruder, but no real list.

## The Masters of Defense ca. 1530 to 1617

---

We don't know who judged whether a candidate passed or failed a prize – the obvious answer might be the people he played against, but that does not seem likely for Free Scholar or Provost prizes. Toward the end of the record we see a very small number of prizes in which the Masters present but not playing are mentioned. Do they form some type of evaluation panel?

What were the criteria for pass or fail? We see references to disorder, misdemeanor, not having one's games in order, and being struck down. Was this a "you will know it when you see it" judgment?

What the play of a prize consisted of. There is thin evidence that each candidate may have been expected to play two bouts or three bouts with each opponent. There is no mention of any such requirement in MS. 2530. And what did a game (the terminology of the Masters for a bout) consist of?

### **6 – THE ENVIRONMENT**

We cannot now determine why there are gaps in MS. 2530. However, the environment in which the document survived may offer clues.

Manuscripts in general exist in a challenging environment.

Plague and other diseases made lifespan in Renaissance London, and England as a whole, unpredictable. Gaps in the record may be as simple as that there was no one to keep a record, or that someone disposed of the dead Master's papers when cleaning out his house.

In 1633 a fire destroyed much of London Bridge and burned approximately 80 buildings along Thames Street. This was followed by the 1666 great fire which burned 13,000 structures within the boundaries of the old city walls. Any record that was not included with MS. 2530 may have burned.

The three phase English Civil War (1642-1651) created instability and may have impacted individual Masters (who by this time were no longer being created by a central organization), but the two World Wars brought air attack, bombing, and in the case of World War II mass destruction to London. Again MS. 2530 survived these, but other records, undiscovered by that time, may not have.

In addition to the direct challenges to the physical documents there are also challenges to the continuity of record keeping, challenges that we see to this day in volunteer organizations, in small businesses, and even larger organizations. When the individual maintaining the record died, retired, or quit the office, were those records recovered as a whole by the organization? After the Masters as an organization withered away, were they passed on for safekeeping in an organized way? Did anyone care about the extinct organization?

A practical example from today. I was fortunate enough that my parents gave me a small stock portfolio when I was born. However, I have been cursed by the fact that companies and transfer agents simply laugh at you when you try to determine valuation information for stocks purchased

## The Masters of Defense ca. 1530 to 1617

---

20 years ago, much less 67. And that is with modern record keeping for something in which the IRS has a strong interest.

Although additional parts of this record may be recovered at some time in the future, we are probably very lucky that so much did survive.

### **7 – ROYAL WARRANT OF 1540**

The second important primary source is the Warrant signed by King Henry VIII on 20 July 1540.

This warrant grants the Masters and Provosts authority to seek out unqualified teachers of fencing and use the criminal justice system of the day to force them to stop their activities. In effect it is what we would now know as a title and practice regulation. This issue was obviously not an insignificant one to professionals who made their living teaching, and it is a continuing theme throughout the history of fencing. The German Renaissance fencing guilds, the Marxbruder and the Federfechter, attempted to prevent false teachers from plying the trade. And it is a modern problem in amateur fencing the United States. In 1892 Louis Rondelle complained of unqualified instructors, and advocated a national training scheme. Even today anyone can call themselves a fencing coach, and take people's money, without any training in how to teach the sport or knowledge of the sports science basis for coaching.

The royal warrant gives us the names of 9 Masters and 11 Provosts. This is important because it establishes that there was an organization of fencing professionals prior to the warrant's date. This organization had established a way of evaluating candidates of sufficient maturity to have at least three certification levels – we know this because some of the individuals listed in the warrant also have descriptions of their prize playings for Free Scholar, Provost, and Master. And the text confirms the early use of oaths defining the student relationship to the Masters, a feature of craft guilds of the period.

Finally, by establishing early dates for the Masters and Provosts listed in the warrant, it allows us to move back the known dates for these individuals and broadens the time line of MS. 2530.

### **8 – WILLYAM HUNT**

To see how the relationship between the warrant and Ms. 2530 expands our knowledge of the timeline of the Masters, we can take the example of Master Willyam Hunt. MS. 2530 has the record of Hunt's Provosts prize, played with one Provost, a man known only as Hamcotts.

Hamcotts does not appear in the 1540 warrant. But Hunt is a Provost in that warrant.

This establishes that Hunt played the Provost prize before 1540 (specifically enough before to have been included in the warrant dated 20 July 1540).

And MS. 2530 establishes that Hamcotts was a Provost before Hunt. It seems unlikely that a junior Provost would be included in the list, and a more senior one excluded. Therefore it seems probable that Hamcotts was no longer active in 1540.

## The Masters of Defense ca. 1530 to 1617

---

This establishes a narrower date range than Berry, who says that the career of Hunt probably extended well back into the reign of Henry VIII, as well as placing Hamcotts on the timeline.

### 9 – ROYAL WARRANT OF 1605

The third important primary source is the Warrant signed by King James I on 6 July 1605.

This document, like the 1540 warrant, is intended to address competition to the Masters of Defence from unqualified teachers. The efforts of the Masters had apparently been insufficient to quell this practice in the long term. In 1540 a particular concern was to prevent individuals from studying with a Master and then deciding to become one by hanging out their own shingle without benefit of examination – that problem apparently continued.

The 1605 warrant lists 11 Masters. This is important to understanding the time line because it establishes that the Masters of Defence still were operating as a corporate body at this date, approximately 15 years after the last record in MS. 2530.

It is also important because it establishes that a large percentage of those listed had done at least part of their qualification work during the period of MS. 2530, 15 years or more before. Of the 11, 5 had been Masters in 1587 or before, 3 had been Provosts in 1585 or before, and 1 had been a Free Scholar with a Provosts license in 1590. Two redoubtable individuals (William Joyner and Edmund Darcy) had been Masters before 1568, having at least a 37 year career as Masters. Only 2 individuals (John Bradshaw and Thomas Valentyne) were not reflected in the MS. 2530 record, and therefore may have become Free Scholars, Provosts, and Masters subsequent to 1590.

The 1605 warrant may reflect an aging population of Masters, and the small number of new individuals subsequent to 1590 would seem to indicate limited growth or replacement of those dying or retiring in their ranks. If the prize playing rates of the period 1582-1588 had continued there should have been 15 new Masters in the period 1590-1605. However, we see only 6 reflected in the warrant.

### 10 – SWETNAM'S EVIDENCE

George Swetnam's *The Schoole of the Noble and Worthy Science of Defence* includes a lengthy Preface to the Professors of the Noble Science of Defence. He references a number of Masters who do not appear in either MS. 2530 or the 1605 Warrant. The problem is that we have no way of knowing what the relationship of the 7 that appear only in his text is to the qualification process of the Masters of Defence. It is tempting to regard these as being from the old organization, and they may be last remnants of the Masters of the 1500s.

However, Swetnam does not specifically allude to the Masters of Defence as an organization or to its prize playing process. It seems likely that the organization had become moribund by the time of his book, and that suggests that we should take the names that only he reports with some modicum of caution.

## 11 – THE GUILD

In understanding the population of MS 2530, it is important to understand that this is a guild-like body. The Masters of Defence never achieved recognized guild status, as far as we can document today. However, their practices described in MS. 2530 are decidedly those of a craft guild.

There was a body of members – the Free Scholars, Provosts, and Masters.

There is a sworn relationship, with specific oaths for those who are promoted to Provosts and Masters.

There are clear requirements for promotion, and a merit based promotion mechanism, the playing of a prize.

There is a governance structure as a covenant between the Ancient Masters.

There is a reasonable level of integration both between peers and between Masters and their Provosts and Free Scholars.

The Royal Warrants provided clear authority to control competition.

There are enforcement mechanisms built into the governing documents.

And finally, as the corporate body of knowledgeable swordsmen, they control the revelation of the mysteries of fencing to their Scholars, at least prior to the printing of the first English language fencing textbooks.

When we look at what defines a modern profession, the only things not specifically addressed are higher education and a beneficent purpose. Even the beneficent purpose is implied in the content of the Provosts and Masters oaths.

## 12 – THE SWORN RELATIONSHIP

The sworn relationship, done on the cross of the sword, is important to understanding the development of the new Scholar to Master. It is a typical Guild relationship that in a craft guild binds the Apprentice to his Master. And in the Christian world of the day, the oath was considered an important obligation, and the breaking of an oath an offense against God.

New Scholars were sworn to a Master, and that Master served as their teacher, trainer, and sponsor through the process of development as a professional. New students enrolled by a Provost are sworn to the Provost's Master.

There is a financial component to all of this swearing. A Master was obligated to pay into a central fund administered by the Ancient Masters 2 pence for each student enrolled. A Provost was obligated to pay 2 pence to his Master and 2 pence to the most ancient of the Ancient Masters.



## The Masters of Defense ca. 1530 to 1617

---

Students could be discharged from their obligation to a Master in two ways – by completing the agreed upon course of study, a contractual arrangement that appears to have been applicable primarily to Scholars, or by death. A Free Scholar or Provost whose Master died chose a new Master from among the Ancient Masters and was sworn to him.

MS. 2530 has 8 recorded cases of a change in Master, of 35 entries that list the individual's Master, but in no case is the reason for the change noted. From a comparison of known dates active between the Masters and the prize dates, 5 of these may be deaths. Two are for unknown reasons which might range from personality conflicts or a desire for a different perspective in their training to something as simple as a change in residence or school location.

And one is just plain odd. In 1586 James Cranydge played his Provost prize under Master John Davel. Richard Tarlton was made a Master in 1587. Shortly thereafter James Cranydge played his prize for Master under Tarlton... and John Davel played against him. Did Cranydge jump Masters to affiliate with the noted comic Tarlton? Or did Davel really want to fence his student and made arrangements for Tarlton to sponsor Davel so he could? Was this a friendly game or was there bad blood involved? We will almost certainly never know.

### 13 – GREGORIE GRENE

One of the factors that I believe is important in studying professional populations is the degree of integration and cohesion present. There is what I will call a lateral component to this – the degree to which professionals interact with their peers. There is also a vertical component – the degree to which the current generation transmits the knowledge and practices of the profession from their predecessors to their descendants.

Gregorie Grene is a typical Master who apparently played his Masters prize during the period for which records are lost. He is one of my favorite Masters, as he sets the record for having his name spelled 8 ways in the manuscript. I think those who have puzzled over changes in the spelling of names in manuscripts can appreciate why I regard him as a favorite.

He had two masters to whom he was sworn that we know of: Willyam Muckelowe and Richard Donne. He played his Provost prize against 2 Provosts, one of the smaller prizes. However, he was one of the more productive Masters in terms of training students to the level of professional ranks with 1 Master, 4 Provosts, and 2 Free Scholars.

Much of the recorded interaction comes when we analyze the prizes in which he played as an opponent, not as a candidate. He played 9 candidates, all in Masters prizes. He played in conjunction with 46 other Masters against the candidates – of these, 19 were individuals he did not otherwise interact with in the record, and 10 were individuals he played with more than once. This included two individuals he played in conjunction with 4 times, Henry Naylor and John Goodwyn.

This results in 72 interactions with 32 individual professionals.



## The Masters of Defense ca. 1530 to 1617

---

I suggest that this indicates a fairly high degree of integration in the professional fencing community. Grene fences with and against a wide selection of individuals in different roles. For example, he plays with Izake Kennard as an opponent in his Provosts prize, against Kennard in Kennard's Masters prize, and in conjunction with him against 2 candidates for Master.

### 14 - LINEAGE

The issue of who trained who does not receive a lot of attention among modern fencers. However, early training by a single master has a significant impact on the fencer. I know from my experience, that the first Master I trained under, the great Giorgio Santelli, permanently shaped my understanding of how to fence the sabre. In the historical period there are clear examples in Germany (the Liechtenauer tradition) and in Italy (the Bolognese School) of how a Master's teaching is transmitted as a tradition to generations of students.

MS. 2530 covers a relatively short period of time, perhaps 60 years. And in this period there are significant gaps. However, William Joyner offers an example of how there is vertical integration by year as well as horizontal integration by interaction of each individual with his professional peers. Joyner is a Master by 1568, and remains active until at least 1605, as he is the first listed Master in the 1605 warrant. He has 6 students who are recorded as playing prizes, 2 Provosts and 4 Masters (Francis Calvert, Alexander Reyson, John Devell, and John Mathewes). In turn these 4 produced 2 Masters that we can identify, but we are hampered by the end of the records in 1590 in identifying if there were more.

Francis Calvert played his Masters prize in 1581, and trained one Master, Andrew Bello who played in 1585. There is no record of Bello's students, if any.

### 15 – HOW MANY WERE THERE?

Absent reliable dating information until at least the 1560s and given the lack of death or retirement dates, it is difficult to establish the number of professionals. However, there are a number of data points that may point to at least a partial answer.

The Warrant of 1540 lists 9 Masters and 11 Provosts. We do not know if this is a complete list, or if others were excluded for any of a number of reasons.

Two prize playings in 1587 and 1588 list the Masters present, as well as those who played against the candidates. A total of 13 Masters attended James Cranidge's prize; at the end of the day there were at least 14 Masters. And 12 Masters attended John Mathewes's prize, for a minimum of 13 Masters.

And the Warrant of 1605 lists 11 Masters, two of whom, William Joyner and John Mathewes, were Masters by 1568, with at least 37 years practicing their craft as a Master.

## The Masters of Defense ca. 1530 to 1617

---

### 16 – HOW MANY WERE THERE?

Based on the data from the sources I am reasonably confident that we can identify 61 Masters, 23 Provosts, and 15 Free Scholars in the period 1530-1617. This is probably close to the minimum number given gaps in the record.

When we look at one 6 year period, a period in which there were a goodly number of recorded prize playings, and in which we can identify a number of earlier Masters as still practicing, we have an approximate total of 17 Masters, 6 Provosts, and 5 Free Scholars as active.

These values are only approximate, as individuals may be missing from the record, there may be errors in dates, and undoubtedly there was some attrition due to death or retirement that is not revealed in the record.

When we look at Scholar prizes we see a reflection of the professional population to the student base. Free Scholars played against Scholars and other Free Scholars at two weapons, and the numbers of player is typically listed by weapon. This makes it difficult to arrive at an accurate total of how many individuals participated.

For example, in Edward Harvy's prize 14 scholars played at Two Handed Sword and 28 at Sword and Buckler. That could be 14 individuals in Two Handed Sword and a different 28 at Sword and Buckler for a total of 42. Or it might be that all 14 who played at Two Handed Sword also played at Sword and Buckler, along with 14 others for 28. Or any conceivable mix in between (the most likely scenario). Nonetheless this suggests that the number of Scholars at least willing to play with a candidate was equal to the number of Masters, Provosts, and Free Scholars at a minimum.

### 17 – HOW MANY WERE THERE

Based on the data I also feel comfortable suggesting that any given time the population of professionals was probably approximately 30 Masters, Provosts, and Free Scholars. There undoubtedly were periods where there were more, and probably some when there were fewer. Discovery of additional evidence might change this number somewhat, but probably not more than by a third.

There are some implications to the upside down pyramid in the ranks from the standpoint of the profession. One would normally expect more Free Scholars than Provosts and more Provosts than Masters. For example, to use a modern example, the United States Fencing Coaches Association recognizes 55 Masters, 67 Prevots, and 144 Moniteurs.

A high percentage of Free Scholars make their way through Provost to Master. This may indicate that individuals willing to become Free Scholars were driven by motivations sufficient to sustain them through what was a physically challenging experience.

It may indicate that perseverance counted – there are no records of completely failed prize playings that disqualified a candidate permanently – the failures noted in the record were all

## The Masters of Defense ca. 1530 to 1617

---

made up by new prizes, by entreaties, by agreement. This suggests that the prize playings may have had as much a rite of passage function as that of a skills examination.

Or it may be that the organization ran an excellent program with effective training that got candidates through the complete pipeline.

The warrants of 1540 and 1605 suggest that there may have been some diversion of individuals who were willing to strike out on their own, hanging out a shingle indicating that they had skills and were willing to teach. The warrants specifically mention that some of these individuals had forsaken their oaths to Masters, indicating that they had been in the recognized training system. The records in MS. 2530 do not seem to substantiate that this was in the professional ranks, as there is not sufficient wastage from the Free Scholar ranks to account for any but isolated cases. Such diversion most likely occurred in the Scholar student body.

The numbers also indicate that the average school must have had a Master with no supporting staff. This may have been a simple choice of economic reality. A staff reduces the profits in what was almost certainly not an overwhelmingly lucrative business.

### **18 - FAMILIES**

Today it is becoming less common for sons or brothers to follow fathers into the same business, if for no other reason than that there are more choices of education, greater social mobility, and greater physical mobility. However, in this period having a kinsman in a trade must have provided a means of entry, and having a son who wanted to be fencer surely provided an assistant. We know of three familial relationships among those certified by the Masters: John Evans father and son, Richard Smith father and son, and John Goodwin (1579) and Batholmow Goodinge (1590) father and son.

There are also a number of cases that may be father-son, brothers, or a larger family:

Peter and Richard Beste, both Masters in the 1540 warrant

Four Greens 1540s through 1570s

Edward and Robert Harvey Free Scholars in the 1570-80s

John and William Mathewes 1580s

William and George Muckelowe 1560s-1580s

John and Thomas Norris, Provosts on the 1580s

### **19 – SOCIAL STATUS**

Fencing Masters in the 1200s and 1300s could best be categorized in the view of decent people as being vagabonds, borderline petty criminals, and the type of persons who led young people into bad ways. At various times the city fathers of London undertook the suppression of fencing

## The Masters of Defense ca. 1530 to 1617

---

schools as public nuisances. The first English fencer specifically identified as a Master (as opposed to a pugil) we know of by name, Roger le Skirmisour, we know because of his arrest in 1310 for keeping a school in which he taught fencing. This view extended into the 1500s, with earlier legal prescriptions against fencing, fencers, and fencing masters continuing in place, even in the context of the privileges granted by the Royal warrant of 1540. It plays out in the obstructions that London officials routinely placed in the way of the prize playings of the Masters of Defence.

There is an interesting contrast between the interest in military readiness of the population to provide a general levy in the case of war and the view of swordplay. The yeomanry (a class above the peasantry or knaves) was encouraged to practice archery as a military skill into the 1600s, by which time the bow was clearly obsolescent as a battlefield weapon. And yet the teaching of swordplay was viewed with considerable disfavor. There are two possible explanations. Certainly there was a feeling that specifically learning to fence gave one an unfair advantage in a fight, and thus that fencing was an art of subtlety (translate dishonest deceit, not the sort of thing an honest person would do). But the difference may well be in the potential for swordplay as a component of public disorder when combined with groups of young men from fencing schools brawling with their swords and bucklers in the streets.

In the 1300s and 1400s, much as the case with the Marxbruder and Federfechter, fencing masters had to have a trade. In a broad sense this was a result of the Medieval order of Edward III that all freemen were required to have a lawful mystery – in other words to be members at some rank of a chartered craft or trade guild. Being a member of a guild established the Fencing Master as a more responsible member of society. With guild membership came proficiency in a trade and a source of income allowing the Master to also teach swordplay. In the 1500s we still see vestiges of this in the names of some of the Masters: William Thompson alias Glover, and John Evans alias Gerkinmaker, are examples.

However, the reality was that there was an actual need for professional swordsmen in three functions recognized by the upper classes of society as useful.

First, as pugils, or professional champions willing to risk their lives for clients in wager by battle of both civil and criminal cases.

Second, to prepare principals for combat under the same conditions. In the 1450s Philip Treher, fishmonger, and John Cotton, wiredrawer, were prominent enough fencing masters to be employed in these duties by the courts.

Third, to teach fencing to the sons of the nobility – Swetnam, for example, appears to have been hired in the early 1600s to teach fencing to Prince Henry and a French Master may have been employed to teach him the use of the pike.

Nonetheless in the time of the Masters of Defence, fencing masters were lower class. We see that in the title pages of both George Silver and G. H., who clearly declare themselves to be gentlemen. Neither, although they obviously studied fencing in depth, would have condescended

## The Masters of Defense ca. 1530 to 1617

---

to become a fencing master. Today everyone is a gentleman. Then it was a specific social class of upper middle to lower upper class rank, distinguished by eligibility to bear a coat of arms, an eligibility that to this day is rigorously controlled by the College of Arms and the Garter and Lord Lyon Kings of Arms.

In spite of the class difference, the Masters of Defense played challenges and prizes before Kings and Queens. Thomas Weaver was made a Master by King Edward VI and Robert Edmonds played his Masters prize before Philip and Mary. Challenges were played before Henry VIII, Edward VI, Philip and Mary, and Elizabeth. And in 1604 and again in 1616 King James presided over prizes played by King Christian IV of Denmark.

### **20 – THEIR END**

MS. 2530 does not indicate the death of any of the Free Scholars, Provosts, or Masters. This is an interesting omission in a membership based organization, as is the absence of any membership rolls. However, Joseph Swetnam does list the causes of death of a number of Masters of his time, some of whom appear to certainly have been members of the Masters of Defence.

John Turner, mentioned in the Warrant of 1605, was assassinated after putting out the eye of Robert Crichton, Baron Sanquhar. Turner had a reputation for eye hits, having extinguished vision on a reported 2 or 3 other cases.

John Devell, mentioned in MS. 2530, was murdered by Henry Adlington who may have been a scholar of his.

Richard Caro died of the French disease. Swetnam commented that even though he had a complete new set of clothes no one would tolerate him in their house because his body was rotten and stunk.

Furlong drank a pint of Aqua Vitae in one draught. For those not familiar with Aqua Vitae, it is concentrated distilled wine.

Westcoat hung himself in a wood because of some unkindness by his daughter.

Old Carter of Worcester wasted away from a lingering disease.

Interestingly, none of the deaths involved actual fencing activity in the school or in prizes. If this is a representative sample, it differs from the German experience where death in the fechtschule did occur with enough frequency that a legal principle evolved that such deaths were murder but not to be punished because they occurred in the prize fight context.

### **21 – THE PRIZE**

MS. 2530 provides some of the components of how a prize was played.

## The Masters of Defense ca. 1530 to 1617

---

It was a public trial of skill, held in large venues ranging from market areas to the sanctuary of a church and eventually in facilities that became playhouses.

Theoretically the candidate was expected to play against all comers who already held the rank:

Free Scholar candidates played against Scholars (usually many, often as many as 20 in one weapon and 10 in the second) and Free Scholars (typically 1 or 2)

Provost candidates played against Provosts and Free Scholars with a Provost license (1 to 8)

Master candidates played against Masters (2 to 8)

Although the candidate was expected to play in the number of weapons negotiated with the Ancient Masters, not all opponents would play with all weapons, although this does occur in almost every case of Provosts and Masters.

Occasionally a prize was split into two days, either because of the large number of players, or in a few cases due to failure of part of the prize.

We know the order of players – the youngest goes first, whether this means chronologically youngest or most junior in date of qualification is not specified.

We do not know the number of bouts (the correct term is games) the candidate played with each opponent. Some have suggested that two or three games were required. This does not appear in MS. 2530.

But we do find the following:

“whosoever doth play agaynste ye prizer, and doth strike his blowe and close withall so that the prizer cannot strike his blowe after agayne, shall Wynn no game for anny Veneye so geven although it should break the Prizers head”

This suggests that the candidate had a right to an afterblow unhindered by closing. And it suggests that a condition of winning for the opponent is the broken head, which survived in English country games Single Stick play as one inch of blood showing as late as the early 1950s. Notice that I said “a condition,” there may be others that were widely understood but not stated.

My personal view is that the number of games becomes wildly excessive in the Scholars prize if games were fenced more than once against each opponent. Inflicting 30 broken heads or successfully preventing yourself from a broken head, with all the preliminary actions to weaken the opponent and set up the blow is a test of endurance. In other applications with a single bloody hit ending the bout, we see references to the importance of weakening the opponent: English country single stick, the German academical duel or mensur, and Kevin Maurer’s translation of Meyer’s 1560 fechtbuch. Doing this 60 or 90 times seems almost impossible. I am fairly sure that we see that in surviving accounts of fechtschules in Germany, and even 1700s

## The Masters of Defense ca. 1530 to 1617

---

prize fights in England did not approach this level. I tend more toward the view of one game per opponent.

Finally the prize is a logistical challenge – the candidate has to obtain permission from the city authorities, arrange a venue, advertise with handbills, send out notices to all potential players of the appropriate rank, arrange to pay for their travel if they are coming from a distance, etc.

### **22 – NUMBERS PLAYED**

MS. 2530 records 95 prizes. Accepting that we can only approximately date many of these events, the high year in the record appears to be 1582, with 2 Scholar, 6 Provost, and 1 Master prizes.

One of the interesting values that the record allows us to track is the number of times an individual played as an opponent in prizes. A substantial number of individuals do not appear in the record as playing in a prize after they successfully completed their own. However, for those who did, the range of prizes is from 1 to 11. Some of these are obviously Free Scholars practicing for the Provost prize, and Provosts practicing for Master. A substantial number of Masters did play regularly against candidates in Masters prizes – in one case in 8 prizes (Gregorie Grene). And those playing prizes do include individuals who are reflected in the record as having agreed with the Masters for their current rank. This is another argument that “agreed” is not a free pass – no one who lacked the skills would reasonably be willing to step up on the stage and be humiliated by a candidate.

### **23 – WHERE PLAYED**

The vast majority of prizes were played in the greater London area. A substantial number of these were played at venues within the old city walls – we see this in references to within a specific gate: “within Bishopsgate” or Newgate or Aldgate.

In addition to prizes played in London, a number are played outside London, but still within travelling distance, including in Bedford, Brentwood, Canterbury, Chelmsford, Chichester, Ipswich, Lewes, and Oxford. Locations outside London must have posed some significant logistical problems in obtaining adequate numbers of individuals to play against the candidate, especially as the candidate was expected to meet a portion of the expenses of those travelling more than 20 miles.

### **24 – TARLTON AND AGREEMENT**

It has become an article of faith that John Tarlton, a famous comic actor and groom to Queen Elizabeth, was made a Master of Defence in 1587 as a political appointment. In the process the term “did agree with the Masters” has become a signal that the individual was given the rank without merit or that he paid some inducement to the Masters for it. I believe this represents a significant error in interpreting the record.



## The Masters of Defense ca. 1530 to 1617

---

First, I would like to look at Tarlton – he was sponsored by Henry Naylor. A more unlikely sponsor for a no-skill political appointment is hard to find. Naylor was a fighter. In 1571 he famously appeared as a champion willing to defend the interests of his employer with his body in the last wager of battle to settle a civil trial in England. When the other side’s principal failed to appear Naylor encouraged their champion to fight a bout for the amusement of the assembled crowd and the members of the court – the champion declined, but Naylor was commended by the Chief Justice for his fighting spirit. Naylor qualified in the lost period of the 1550s and 1560s so we do not have a full record of his prize playing. However, he played in at least 5 Masters prizes as well as his own Master, Provost, and Free Scholar prizes. Given the normal practice of the time, he probably played in at least 4 more at the Provost and Free Scholar ranks and as a Scholar. It is difficult to imagine someone who appears to have reveled in combat supporting anyone who could not live up to the expectations of the profession.

Tarlton also appears to have been active in the affairs of the Masters. He attended two Prize playings prior to his death in 1588 and it is possible that he was involved in determination of pass or fail. In addition Tarlton served as the Master of James Cranidge when Cranidge played his Masters prize.

But the “agreed” or “allowed” terminology is much wider in its use with the Masters agreeing with candidates in all three ranks.

It covers cases where a prize failure was involved: John Devell, for example, was allowed a Provost by the goodwill of the Masters when he failed the prize due to disorder. He played a Scholars prize and a Masters prize, and played in 8 other prizes.

It appears in cases where the individual agreed with the Masters and then played the prize agreed to. This is the case with John Goodwen and William Hearne. This usage is in line with the actual wording of the requirements that a candidate had to propose to play a prize and then receive the agreement of his Master and of the Ancient Masters.

And it appears in 11 cases where the only notation is that the candidate agreed with the Masters and was allowed the new rank. There are two possible reasons that I can identify for this in the context of a guild. First, the candidate may have been well known and well respected as a fencer to the degree that the Masters did not feel a public test was necessary.

Second, this may reflect that the person making the entry in the record simply did not have the details of the prize. This is particularly likely given that Berry identifies 11 different writers who wrote the manuscript and that some, if not most, of it is likely a copy taken from other documents.

### **25 – THE BREADTH OF THE CHALLENGE**

Today fencers fence with no more than 3 weapons, foil, epee, and sabre, and most specialize in a single weapon. In the 1800s and early 1900s, the list included broadsword, single stick, and

bayonet. However, in the Middle Ages and Renaissance the list included a bewildering selection of both swords and polearms.

Swetnam remarks that to be a Master you must be able to use all weapons. And all weapons are a lot. He lists the weapons that have been played in challenges in England in his experience:

8 swords and swords with adjuncts

7 rapiers and rapiers with adjuncts

3 other edged weapons

8 polearms

And 5 specific combinations of weapons against other combinations. A total of 31 options to master.

However, Swetnam gives the Master an out when he says “an expert Master of Defence can out of one kind of weapon make many.” In other words, there is a big list but that list becomes a lot simpler when you consider that there are common technical and tactical approaches shared by many of the weapons, and if you know how to fight with one you can easily adapt to another. This is not unlike the relationships we find in Meyer where common terminology and common approaches bridge different weapons.

So given this plethora of weapons, how did the Masters determine what to test, and what does that tell us?

### **26 – THE WEAPONS**

The instructions for the various prizes establish the set of weapons to be used for prizes at each level:

Scholars play their prize for Free Scholar with 2 weapons – Long Sword and Back Sword

Free Scholars play the Provost prize with 3 weapons – Back Sword, Two Handed Sword, and Staff

Provosts play the Master prize with 5 weapons – Back Sword, Two Handed Sword, Bastard Sword, Rapier and Dagger, and Pike

Evidence suggests these prize instructions are fairly late – perhaps after 1578.

### **27 – WHAT WAS ACTUALLY PLAYED**

There is wide variation from the official requirements in the record of the actual prizes. Some 34 Scholars played at 2 weapons, 3 at 3 weapons, and 3 at 1 weapon. Only 10 of 34 scholars playing with 2 weapons actually used the mandated set of Long Sword and Back Sword.

## The Masters of Defense ca. 1530 to 1617

---

None of the Free Scholars playing for Provost used the mandated set – 22 fenced at 3 weapons, 1 at 4, 4 at 2, and 2 at 1.

None of the Provosts fenced their Master prize with 5 weapons, but there is an interesting variation in the distribution. Before 1580 6 Provosts play with 3 weapons and 3 with 4 weapons. But after 1580 all 9 Provosts play with 4 weapons.

### **28 – WHAT WAS ACTUALLY PLAYED II**

The weapons actually played in prizes include 6 of the 7 mandated ones, omit the Pike, and add the Sword and Buckler, Sword and Dagger, and Dagger by itself.

The variations from the official program are probably a result of the negotiation process that scheduled the prize. Each Master and his students may have had favorite weapons, and been allowed to play with them. And in some cases, prize players may have been limited by the economics of having the more expensive weapons. More than once in judicial duels we see references to the cost of equipment being a factor exploited by one participant in the duel. The much less well to do candidate or his Master may have also been constrained in producing the full range for the prize.

### **29 - RAPIERS**

There is a general view that the English Masters did not fence with the rapier – that the Italian wave of the late 1500s brought the rapier to England. This is demonstrably false.

There are reports of the rapier in the United Kingdom as early as 1505, and at his death in 1547 Henry VIII owned 7 rapiers.

The Masters fenced single rapier, rapier and dagger, rapier and cloak, and rapier and target in challenges before Edward VI in the period 1547-1553 and Elizabeth in 1561. The participating Masters were confident enough of their skill to offer to fight all who wished to play, including both Englishmen and foreigners. This suggests that Willyam Pascal, Robert Grene, and William Browne specifically were on the leading edge of rapier use in England.

The first documented prize with rapier and dagger occurs in 1578, two years after Rocco Bonetti opened his school. However, there are gaps in the records of prizes played from 1568 to 1578 and the rapier may have appeared earlier. Given the relative infrequency of prizes, individual preferences, and the negotiation process with the Ancient Masters, this suggests that the incorporation of the rapier was in process prior to the arrival of the first Italians. After 1578 the rapier is commonly played in Masters prizes.

As a side note, when we look at the chronology of Sword and Buckler, the truly English weapon the Masters were supposedly loath to give up for the Rapier, we can document that it is not the earliest weapon.

The Sword and Buckler starts to be played in prizes in approximately 1560, long after the Long Sword, Back Sword, Staff, etc. and after the first challenges in which Masters played with the Rapier.

### **30 – TWO HANDED SWIRDS**

One of the minor mysteries of the record is what large sword was actually used in prizes. Two are mentioned: the Two Handed Sword and the Long Sword. Obviously both Long Swords and the very large man-sized Two Handed Swords are in fact held and used predominantly with two hands (although both have one handed applications). This suggests that possibly the weapon used throughout was the Long Sword.

This is supported by the absence of a prize in which the candidate fought with both a Long Sword and a Two Handed Sword. A large sword was clearly used, and almost every prize specifies one or the other. However, the Long Sword is the most frequent choice.

I am of the opinion that there were actually two weapons. Arguing in favor of this is that the entries alternate randomly between the two terms. Other entries in the manuscript are very precise and very consistent in their terminology. For example, there are no Broadwords, only Backwords. There is no reason for the individuals creating the manuscript to vary the terminology.

Given that fencing masters were supposed to be a conservative lot, and that masters in other countries may have retained the two handed sword as a training weapon after it was generally obsolete (something they certainly did with the Long Sword) supposing that two large weapons were in use does not seem unreasonable. However, an equally good case can be made for one.

### **31 – THE CORE WEAPONS**

The frequency of prizes played and the number of prize players both serve as indicators of the popularity of the weapons candidates played with in the prizes. This results in a core of 5 weapons: the Long Sword, Sword and Buckler, Back Sword, Staff, and Two Handed Sword. The Rapier and Dagger was clearly increasing in importance with regular inclusion in prizes post 1580 at the Master level, although it was not yet played in Provost and Scholar prizes.

These six weapons form a core that allows today's practitioner of historical fencing to understand the skill set of the English Masters of Defence. It is an interesting set with considerable differences in the handling characteristics of the individual weapons that drive significant differences in how they are fenced.

### **32 – RANK STRUCTURE**

The Masters of Defence adopted a three rank structure very similar to that of other craft guilds. The Free Scholar is an approximation of the guild Apprentice, the Provost of the Journeyman, and the Master of the Guild Master. Instead of producing a Masterwork for the judgment of the

## The Masters of Defense ca. 1530 to 1617

---

other craft guild masters, the fencing Master produced a masterful performance of arms for the practical judgment of the other fencing Masters.

Set time periods were established for promotion from one rank to another. A Free Scholar could not propose to fight a Provost prize until 7 years after his Scholars prize. Similarly a Provost had to wait 7 years to play a Masters prize. The adoption of a 7 year standard may reflect several themes:

It is possible that the Masters felt that it would take the average student that long to gain the necessary skills and experience to play at the next level.

It is possible that 7 was adopted because it has specific religious connotations in Christianity, specifically in the time of tribulation.

Or it is possible that 7 was adopted to control how rapidly individuals could progress to manage the number of Masters to ensure that the number of people teaching did not undercut the profitability of each individual's practice.

In the process of promotion permissions were required. Candidates for Free Scholar were first required to fence a trial with at least 6 opponents at 2 weapons to prove that they were ready for the prize. At all levels the candidate had to ask the permission of his Master to attempt the prize. The candidate and the Master then went to the Ancient Masters and proposed the prize. When the Ancient Masters agreed, the prize was scheduled and the logistics part of the problem kicked in, notifying, arranging facilities, advertising the prize, etc.

The reality is that the time limits were widely disregarded, and prize intervals of from 5 days to 8 years can be documented. A median of approximately 2 years 3-4 months seems to be typical.

Why the short intervals? Again we do not know. However, there are some explanations that make sense.

In a period of disease, specifically plague but also smallpox, cholera, etc., waiting 14 years is a long and perhaps unachievable time.

Or, it is possible that students simply progressed faster than the original timeline expected. Individuals who decided to commit to being more than a Scholar probably did so with a fair amount of experience in a society in which weapons were commonly carried as practical and necessary tools. In addition, they were more likely than not to enjoy the use of weapons and combat.

It could also be that there was a need for more professionals than the limited number of Masters could fill, both to meet public demand and to also perform the duties of the organization. For example, putting 4 to 8 Masters out to fence a Master candidate in a prize requires Masters willing to do so. Some Masters clearly enjoyed this role, and it is not unusual to see a new Master fence in a number of prizes immediately after he becomes a Master. This actually

parallels some of the forces working in modern fencing, except with pressures from national Olympic committees to produce more fencing coaches to meet growth needs in the sport.

### **33 – PROVOST LICENSES AND USHERS**

One of the references occasionally seen in period documents is to Usher. MS 2530 clearly defines this position as an addition to the range of practice of Free Scholars.

The Usher serves as a deputy to the Master or Provost of the school, doing certain administrative tasks such as enrolling new scholars.

Appointment of Ushers is a significant step. The individual had to be known to two other Masters as able and honest, and the appointment had to have the consent of two other Masters besides the Master to whom the Free Scholar was sworn. This means as a practical matter that the individual had to be a senior Free Scholar with some years experience, and probably he had to have been observed by other Masters playing in Scholars prizes.

Possibly the most significant feature of being an Usher is the Provost license. The exact limits of this license is not stated in the manuscript. However, it includes playing in Provost prizes as opponents for those testing for the rank of Provost. This suggests that the license was given to those who were competent swordsmen in multiple weapons and who were well along toward being able to play their own Provosts prize. William Mathews progressed from Provosts license to Master in 4 years and John Mathews in 2 years. John Devell appeared under a Provosts license and 5 days later played his own Provost prize.

MS. 2530 provides sufficient date information for only two Free Scholar holders of Provost Licenses, so any estimate of what experience was required is open to question. However, we know that both of these individuals, John Devell and John Norres, had 2 years and 3 and 9 months respectively between their Scholars prize and appearing in a prize with a Provost license.

### **34 – IS SCHOLAR A RANK?**

This leads to an examination of the title “Scholar.” This has been treated as a rank by some modern organizations that study historical fencing. The record suggests this is actually a title for any enrolled student in a fencing school, as opposed to a professional rank. Several factors argue for this interpretation:

First, no Scholar is mentioned by name in the manuscript. Generally references to players in Prizes do not refer to Scholars, even by rank without names, only by reference as “thear played with him xiiij at the two handed sworde at xxviiij at sworde and buckler.” Free Scholars are mentioned by name and their activities specifically recorded.

Second, the number of Scholars recorded playing in Prizes against those testing for promotion to be Free Scholars is disproportionately large in comparison to the numbers of Masters, Provosts, and Free Scholars reflected in the overall record.

## The Masters of Defense ca. 1530 to 1617

---

Third, no specific instructions or duties are mentioned in the manuscript for Scholars, as opposed to those of the higher ranks.

Fourth, in Prize Playings for Free Scholar, Scholars do not appear to be required to fence with more than one weapon.

Fifth, Scholars enrolling to study at a fencing school swear an oath to and make contractual financial obligations with the Master of the school alone. The first level at which regulation from the Masters of Defense appears is for Free Scholars.

Sixth, the Masters specifically admit Scholars to become Free Scholars after successful playing of a Prize. There is no reference to any similar admission for fencers to become Scholars.

Seventh, and I hate to quote an Italian about contemporary English fencing, Saviolo uses the term Scholar for students learning to fence with no reference to this being also a step in professional qualification. This is consistent with Swetnam's and G.H.'s use of the term and the tenor of the language in MS. 2530 regarding the obligations of Masters and Provosts in teaching Scholars.

### **35 – TO DO**

Any research raises questions that can fuel further research. This study has been no different.

I intend to finish my work on the timeline of the known professional teachers, and I intend to extend the social network mapping I mentioned in this presentation. Both are important to understanding the population at any given time.

However, there are questions for which I cannot further develop answers:

Is the Two Handed Sword the man-sized two hander of Italian, German, and Spanish fencing?  
Or is it the Long Sword?

What is late English Long Sword play like – is it what Wagner, Heslop, and Bradak describe?  
Or does it evolve into more complex play with some techniques more suited to the prize fight environment as does Meyer?

What does early English Rapier play look like?

Many of the questions about the period of activity by teachers could be at least partly addressed by detailed searches in Parish records, a real test of endurance. Similarly, parish records might reveal familial relationships between many of these practitioners.

Finally, who were the unqualified teachers mentioned in the warrants of 1540 and 1605? Because the unqualified are not recorded in consolidated records, we generally only have the guild's assessment of their practice – for example, Germany also has a significant body of play masters and elbow fencers that we know very little about.



### 36 – A PAST LIFE MOMENT

I would like to close with one of those strange moments that researchers sometimes encounter in the historical record. On line 25 of folio 9 appears an entry regarding the making of Walter Grene a Provost during the time period before dates were generally entered in the record ... I will let you decide if this is a past life revelation. If so, at least I come by my interest in this topic honestly.

If anyone would like a copy of this presentation, please give me your business card or e-mail address after the questions, and I will be happy to send you a copy. The same offer extends to my fairly detailed look at the specific weapons played in prizes. Please remember that these are preliminary reports of research, and that I may discover additional information and/or change my interpretations when this is incorporated in a book later this year.