

Eacersall, D. (2015). Myths, legends and history: Constructing Identity in the reconstruction and reinvention of Western martial pursuits. The Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Early Modern Studies 10<sup>th</sup> Biennial International Conference, 14-18 July, University of Queensland, Brisbane.

## **Myths, Legends and History: Constructing Identity in the Reconstruction and Reinvention of Western Martial Pursuits**

Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Early Modern Studies conference presentation by Douglas C. Eacersall (University of Southern Queensland).

### **Abstract:**

Due to advances in military technology and changing social attitudes and conditions, at various points in history a number of traditional Western martial pursuits have fallen out of embodied practice. Many however, have remained in the Western consciousness in the form of myths, legends and historical writings. Since the early 1970s, groups of medieval enthusiasts have sought to revive and reconstruct these lost arts. This paper seeks to examine the ways in which these myths, legends and historical writings have been used in this re-construction and the significance this has had for practitioners, especially in terms of the construction of identities in response to their modern needs.

**Keywords:** Historical European Martial Arts; Western Martial Arts; Medieval Studies; Sports History; identity; youth; adolescence; masculinity

### **Presentation:**

There is a long tradition of a fascination with the medieval in the popular imagination. One better-known example of this was the Eglinton Tournament held in Scotland in 1838 by the Earl of Eglinton. This event was inspired in part by the Romantic Movement of the time which had been influenced by works such as Bishop Thomas Percy's, *Reliques of Ancient*

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English Poetry and Sir Walter Scott's, Ivanhoe. In the Knight and the Umbrella, Ian

Anstruther explains that through this tournament the Earl of Eglinton sought the "ordered, feudal life and the thrilling combats of his fighting ancestors". In attempting to recreate a medieval tournament the Earl attempted to revive one of the most iconic Western Martial Arts (WMA) - jousting. Of course for some jousting may not be readily associated with the term martial arts. For many in western society the words martial arts are synonymous with Asia – it brings to mind Eastern martial arts, such as karate or kungfu but of course other cultures also had their own fighting systems or martial arts and this included Western or European cultures.

There were times when trident glanced off shield and gladius sword delivered a counter blow as two gladiators, a retiarius and a murmillo faced off against each other in the arena or when a Viking axe delivered a crushing blow to a Saxon shield. There were times when mounted knights faced off against each other with couched lance. These pictures are not medieval Europe nor are they ancient Rome but the early 1970s at a Fete in Sydney.

The participants in these martial encounters are members of the Ancient and Medieval Martial Arts Society (AMMAS). Around this time similar scenes but solely of the Viking variety are being produced by the Viking Society of Australasia (Viking Society) on the verge of Canning Street, in the Melbourne suburb of Carlton. The formation of these two groups was the beginning of the first sparks of the main re-invention and revival of certain Western Martial Arts and Western Martial Pursuits in Australia. This is a revival that has continued up until the present day.

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In his seminal work, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, David Lowenthal describes how any desire to recreate or return to the past is usually undertaken to fulfil needs in the present.<sup>1</sup> I have already addressed, most notably at the Australian Historical Association conference last year, the use of notions of the western warrior by these societies, during their formation in the 1970s, in order to promote western masculinity and western cultural heritage identities as a reaction to the social pressures of the time including the rise of feminism and the increasing prevalence of Asian culture within the Australian outlook. This paper will examine the embodiment of these notions from the past and the associated construction of modern identities but with a focus on the second generation of young men within the movement during the mid to late 1970s and the 1980s.

It is interesting to note that the activities of the clubs were not originally focused on the most recently lost western martial traditions in Australian history such as broadsword or singlestick, which were still practiced up until the early 1900s, nor on modern sports boxing or fencing but on the much earlier ancient as well as medieval periods. This was because the notions of the western warrior and his fighting arts, which participants sought to draw on, were more strongly associated with these periods and were readily available in the narratives, myths and legends still found within popular culture and western history. Although many of these notions of the medieval and ancient warrior share common elements, given the focus of this conference this paper will concentrate on the medieval.

When discussing the appeal of reconstructing ancient and medieval warriors and their fighting arts many participants mentioned interest in history, literature such as Lord of the Rings and Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (the death of Arthur), wargaming, role-playing, and

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<sup>1</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

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movies and television shows, such as *Ivanhoe*, *Robin Hood*, and *Star Wars* as well as the romantic ideals associated with these forms of popular culture, as strong motivators for their involvement. A swordsman explained: “I think it just pulls into that romantic ideal. We were all raised with Knights and chivalry and armour, swords are the weapons of the hero and scholar type thing. Let’s face it we grew up with *Star Wars* we all wanted to be... Luke or Darth Vader with our light sabre” (A swordsman). Richard Robinson, member of AMMAS and founder of the New England Medieval Arts Society, was quoted as saying: “I blame it on probably being read fairy stories by my big sisters when I was little I think it all comes back to fairytales and being raised on romance really great when you study Middle English Malory then you read about the knighties doing great deedies...” These types of history and popular culture consist of and are built on the historical narrative, myths, legends and a set of empowering ideals that symbolise the warrior within western culture.<sup>2</sup> Studies in medievalism examining popular culture have identified several powerful themes that constitute the significance of the warrior. These are the heroic warrior as fighter, the quest for adventure, the warrior coming of age, the unlikely hero and the mentor and apprentice. Studies in wargaming and in role-playing games have identified similar themes and these themes are also present within the narratives that constitute both academic and popular history.

The appeal of the western warrior and associated myths found in the forms of popular culture and history just discussed were also evident in the activities of the societies engaged in re-

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<sup>2</sup> Popular notions of the medieval western warrior are not necessarily based on careful consideration of particular periods of medieval culture but are constructed through various lenses and an amalgam of interpretations from earlier periods. This means that many of the symbols and conceptualisations of the medieval which modern people have acquired, have been influenced through the ages by multiple interpretations and inventions within both academic and popular history as well as popular culture. Throughout these myriad interpretations there are certain trends or myths that can be identified... which give meaning to the concept of the warrior identity in western consciousness.

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enacted combat. The main difference for these societies was that they sought to increase the intensity of their experience by more fully embodying the western warrior. This involved using the armour and weapons to enact the actual warrior fighting techniques in competitive formats. The societies also sought to stress the importance that their activities were based in history rather than in fantasy or in popular culture.

There is evidence that the embodiment of these myths and associated notions of the western warrior taken from history were important in the construction of identities in response to particular social issues of the time.<sup>3</sup> These include aspects of socialisation which incorporated the concept of the warrior coming of age through participating in activities the clubs thought no longer available due to modernisation – and the concept of the unlikely hero in that this was accessible to individuals who may not have had access to or were not interested in more mainstream avenues of socialisation.

It is evident that some of the members of the first generation viewed their activities as a space in which males and this included the second generation of participants could be socialised in ways seen as no longer readily available in modern society. They explained that the fighting provided modern youth with physical challenges that youth of the time were denied due to the sanitisation caused by modernisation.<sup>4</sup> This usually revolved around the notions of the warrior and the pursuit of excitement and the release of aggression as this quote from AMMAS founder David Robinson shows, “when you look at today’s society with a lot of senseless violence that happens, these glassings in pubs and assaults on the streets and gangs

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<sup>3</sup> For the first generation of participants, the founding fathers, the ideal of the heroic warrior as fighter was used in order to re-inforce the perceived ideals of traditional western masculinity in response to the rise of movements such as feminism and gay rights and the increasing importance of Asia in the Australian outlook. While this continues to be evident throughout the movement there are also instances where other notions of the warrior can be used to further understand the history of these groups as spheres for the formation and expression of identity.

<sup>4</sup> David Robinson, interview by Douglas Eacersall, August 21, 2013.

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and all this sort of thing there is a reason, several reasons, but one of them is there is no more real physical challenges for modern youth. Back in even the 1800s a lively... young lad can go off to Africa and carve out a kingdom for himself... there were challenges for him, there was unexplored territory, there were wars... but now, by and large, there is no sort of outlets for the warrior instinct or the aggro or what have you”.<sup>5</sup>

Brian Poke, founder of the Viking Society also spoke in relation to the socialisation of young boys by “warrior father figures” and the development of the clubs in that the instruction in the making of weapons and armour and the training in martial arts from “a 6 foot 3 bearded muscled up 25 year old who hits people, who is very macho, and who treats them in the way they want to be treated” was very appealing to “a testosterone filled 17 year old”.<sup>6</sup>

Whilst there are still positive elements to this type of macho socialisation it is also evident that during the 1970s and 1980s the societies viewed their activities as a means for youth to ‘come of age’ and to develop particular types of masculinities through not just ‘hitting people’ and the embodiment of force but also through the embodiment of warrior skills and confidence building competencies.

The Spearman from the Viking Society expressed the benefits of challenges in providing men and boys with the means to test and prove themselves in masculine ways that enabled them to “feel good in their skin”.<sup>7</sup> He explained that,

Until you are tested you don’t know, and in a critical society you might believe bad things of myself [sic] that is dangerous for a boy he needs to be tested. He needs to

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<sup>5</sup> David Robinson, interview by Douglas Eacersall, August 21, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Brian Poke, interview by Douglas Eacersall, November 24, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with spearman, interview by Douglas Eacersall, August 13, 2013.

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prove himself. It is very good for him and he even enjoys it when his competencies arrive.<sup>8</sup>

This coming of age through the development of competencies is also evident in the AMMAS club documents from the 1980s which record the grading of combatants and their associated competencies.

Many men and especially young men had very positive experiences within the clubs, which provided a sporting and martial outlet in which males could be socialised in particular ways. Many of these positive benefits can also be found in mainstream sports and physical activities. Due to adolescent males' lack of access to expressions of masculinity through more adult means (wealth or fatherhood), Whitson discusses the socialisation of younger males through the development of embodied force and skill experienced in physical pursuits.<sup>9</sup> He points out that this "explains boys' embarrassment at weakness or lack of coordination as well as the energy they invest... in cults of physicality and martial arts, and especially in sport".<sup>10</sup> The main point of difference in relation to the combat activities of the clubs was that participants did not choose to pursue these aims in mainstream sports or mainstream martial arts.

Many of the second generation of participants interviewed expressed a lack of interest in mainstream Australian sports and even for those that had links to mainstream sports many expressed that 'sword fighting' and related pursuits had become the main focus of their physical activities. For example, Mark Koens from AMMAS explained that: I was never a

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with spearman, interview by Douglas Eacersall, August 13, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> David Whitson, "Sport in the Social Construction of Masculinity," in *Sport, Men, and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Michael A. Messner and Donald F. Sabo (Human Kinetic Publishers: Champaign, IL, 1990), 23.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

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fan of organised sport [53:14] but I organised my own sport with a lot of my mates and it was just as strict I don't know I grew up in a family that was not really into sport. Peter MacKinnon had a similar view: [there were] plenty of lads who went through the movement who probably could be classified as nerdy types and they are not the sort who [are] necessarily playing sport on the weekend and you know aren't particularly physical in terms of their interests and hobbies and things. Justin Holland related that although he had played many competitive sports as a child and in his teenage years, such as cricket and rugby league, as soon as he discovered medievalism "it quickly became the sole focus of [his] sporting activities."

Richard Robinson commented on the socialisation aspects of the clubs in relation to confidence building for both teenagers and adults created by "playing with knives... safely". He also explained the benefits of this for the socialisation of individuals that may not have had access to, or were not interested in, mainstream physical pursuits, as the activities of the clubs tended to incorporate scholarly pursuits such as story-telling with physical combat. And so, with the symbols of the male hero and coming of age there is also another aspect to consider – that of the unlikely hero. For a number of youth the activities of these clubs lay outside of the arena of mainstream sport. The clubs created an environment where participants' bookish pursuits and associated romantic notions, not as easily expressed through mainstream Australian sports, could be achieved through their embodiment in masculine physical pursuits, such as re-enacted medieval combat. In this way the nature of re-enactment and re-enacted combat created a sphere in which the unlikely (bookish) hero could become the (warrior) hero. This support for both the scholarly and the physical and their inter-dependence within the movement is evident in the symbol used for the second warrior conference held in 1983 and in subsequent conferences. This symbol includes three joined

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arms, each holding respectively a hammer – to represent the blacksmithing skills encouraged by the societies, a sword to represent the combat and a quill pen to indicate scholarly activity.

Some described this lack of interest in mainstream sport as a disenfranchisement with mainstream Australian institutions and associated stereotypes.<sup>11</sup> In this way the activities of the clubs allowed some a sphere in which to be socialised with like-minded people and express aspects of masculinity not as readily available to them through mainstream sport or other activities.

A reenactor from 1066, when discussing the experiences of their children in the re-enacted combat explained this as follows:

*The eldest felt very out of it because he was... teased and bullied at school because he is quite a sensitive boy and I think it gave him a sense of this is who I am. I am a really good fighter... I think it gave him a little bit of power I suppose that he had never had before because he was being bullied at school and he was never good at sport and I guess that's how a lot of kids boys in particular you have to be good at sport and the eldest was shocking at sport and the younger was half, I suppose he was poor not shocking, he didn't have the bullying things that my elder son had and I think it just gave them a sense of self.*

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<sup>11</sup> Disenfranchisement with sport – the clubs activities – reconstructing the past and associated combat provided a system of social support for the construction and expression of alternative identities. Koens: yes and Australia is a society that you know really goes for sport in an incredible way and I am a teacher and kids asked me all day at this time of year who are you going for so and I say well I'm not going for anyone I don't follow teams I can't help you yes and I do think there is that element with with use that general term re-enactment, living history community whatever you want to branch it mediaeval martial arts where there is that I think a bit of this disenfranchisement with society and they don't fit all those norms you know... you mention sporting stuff before and Australia's need to affiliate with sport and I think those people who were disenfranchised this is their opportunity to be with like-minded people and share similar values and ideas [both fighting and other stuff].

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Peter McKinnon, from AMMAS, also expressed the identity building nature of his activities outside of the sphere of mainstream sport, “never having been one for organised sport it’s the nearest thing I have ever done as a sport I am a bit of a nerd certainly was as a kid and this is something that really you know there is a degree of it’s macho or there is a certain testosterone. It is definitely a boy thing or a man thing doing the combats... I think it helped with my confidence and self-esteem.”

He went on to explain the relationship between reading about combat in books and the actual realities of physical combats that involved “bashing the shit out of each other”:

*There was suddenly a degree of reality there, the physicality. It is all very well reading that stuff in books or doing things in your imagination or even playing Dungeons & Dragons and doing combats and doing things in your imagination. It’s quite another to then actually be able to handle a weapon and wear armour and you know and then as I used to say we make weapons and armour and then we go and bash each other up, bash the shit out of each other... without trying to hurt each other.*

In this way the fighting within the clubs allowed for the expression of scholarly interests and the notions of the western warrior in more physical and socially empowering ways than could be experienced through only reading or playing role-playing games. The clubs’ activities allowed participants to physically embody powerful symbols of the western warrior and his fighting arts and to experience the associated mythic narratives of the heroic warrior coming of age and the unlikely hero in ways that were important for the construction of modern identities. This involved the socialisation of young males in ways no longer thought available

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due to modernisation and the creation of a sphere in which participants could still express empowering hypermasculine physicality outside of the realm of mainstream sport.

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