

The stick is king: The Shillelagh Bata or the rediscovery of a living Irish martial tradition

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Abstract: *This article is a research in the methods, history and culture of the Irish martial art of shillelagh bata. This martial tradition has been transmitted from father to son for several generations and seems to have roots in the very early history of Ireland. This research was conducted during the summer of 2007 in Ireland where some people engaged in the preservation of traditions related to the Irish stick were interviewed. This represents not only an important historical treasure for Ireland but also for North America, where this style was imported by Irish immigrants and is still practiced by some of their descendants. It is even more important to recognize its importance now that it is facing extinction in the land which has produced it.*

Acknowledgments: I wish to thank my friend and brother in law, Émile Boudreault who accompanied me during this trip around the emerald island, William Keally and his family for his precious information and their fantastic hospitality. And especially John, for accepting us and taking the time to teach us the art of his forefathers. I also want to thank everyone who is working to preserve this tradition and helping to deconstruct the stereotypes surrounding it. And at last everyone we met during this trip that helped to make it an unforgettable experience.

As long as you will be standing, you will find a stick to support yourself.

-Breton adage

The stick maker

This trip began in the summer of 2007, with Emile Boudreault. Firstly to explore Ireland and my Irish roots and also to learn one of the very few living martial arts heritage of Europe: The *Shillelagh bata* or Irish stick. Arriving in Ireland we were already faced with a problem: we didn't have any shillelagh with us. And after a couple of days in Dublin, it became evident that finding a descent one was going to be a tough job. Most people knew what a *shillelagh* was (even pronounced with our strange mixture of accents), but we either got three reactions when we started to talk about it with strangers: a) What's a *shillelagh*?

b) You sure you want to buy this barbaric tool? c) Oh my, that's interesting, I didn't know there was such a martial art here, wish I could learn it! (This was the rarest reaction though). Some tourist shops were stuffed with what we soon nicknamed *the presidential stick*: a very cheap copy of the shillelagh given to President Kennedy, Reagan and Clinton during their visit in Ireland. These sticks were not made from blackthorn and are mass produced to roughly the same specifications, but were the only thing that came close to the real thing. Most sticks sold to tourist are made of hawthorn, a wood which looks quite close to blackthorn, but which doesn't have the necessary qualities to make it a weapon. So we decided to search for a more authentic source, and so we found the location of a stick maker in the village of Shillelagh itself; William Keally. Shillelagh is a very small village located in the heart of the Wicklow Mountains. The trip to get there deserves an article of its own, so we'll be short on the details. Most historical parts in this chapter were provided by Mr. Keally, who is planning on releasing a book about this subject.



This village was, until the 19th century, reputed for its great oak forest, one of the most famous of Europe. The head of those trees served to feed a nearby forge, the shillelagh forge, and the rest was exported everywhere notably to construct the roof of the Westminster abbey in London, several boats of the British navy in the 16th century and some buildings of Trinity college in Dublin. Today this forest has nearly disappeared, replaced by fields, and only a handful of centuries old oak trees still grow in Tomnafinnoge's wood. It is today a national park, for it contains one of the oldest oak forests of it's kind in Europe. The barony of Shillelagh was controlled by 1635 by the Fitzwilliam family until it was sold in the 1970's.

William Keally, originally an electronic technician, now holds a very charming bed and breakfast in the village and a shop in which he produces and sells traditional *shillelagh* sticks. This trade was transmitted hereditarily from his father and his father in law, but it was only when people started to come to Shillelagh looking for authentic Irish sticks that he began producing them very seriously. In the old days, most people in rural areas knew how to make a blackthorn stick, but some turned to the service of reputed stick makers. Making a stick is a long exercise; first one must choose the right bush for the job. Blackthorn (*Prunus Spinosa*) is



a very common plant in Ireland, but not all are suitable for making a *bata*. The trunk is the key piece, the knob being the root of the tree. Sometimes this knob was filled with lead, to create a loaded stick with more punching power. Several species could be used to make a stick like oak, ash, holly or apple tree. But the preferred one, chosen for having the best lightness vs. resistance ratio of all woods was blackthorn. It can be found around fields and pastures, making a natural barrier (beasts, and people, avoid this tree because of its spikes which can produce a virulent swelling reaction in a wound. They are sometimes left on the stick and can measure more than 2 inches long, protecting the stick against grabs from an opponent. Those spikes can easily impale the hand, as William himself has experienced, for they are very stiff. Bark will be kept on the stick to protect it and the knob will be sanded to give it a rounded shape. Balance is also an important factor to consider.

Once the stick is chosen, William lets it dry for a period of three years inside a special storage room. To speed up the process, sticks could be put in a special chimney, making them dry faster but also breaking many sticks in the process. It was done when the demand was high, but today a stick maker doesn't have the luxury of losing so many specimens. This process did leave a mark on the stick; its black tint comes from the soot of the chimney. It became a popular finish and now many sticks are covered in a special soot finish. Once the wood is properly dried, it is covered with a coat of varnish, to protect it from Ireland's impulsive climate, and is finally fitted with a ferrule. Many types of sticks exist, ranging from 9 to 6 foot long staffs to 1 or 2 foot long mallets. Each one had a distinctive name depending on the presence of a knob and ferrule as well as its size.



Drying the sticks

History

One of the hypotheses on the birth of the shillelagh comes directly from the prehistory of Ireland¹. The island was occupied before the arrival of the Celts around 500 B.C. (a date which is subject to debate), as early as 8000 B.C. The people living in those times were much smaller than those who succeeded them, as proven by several artifacts from the Bronze Age. Following the arrival of the Celts, they were driven to the center of the island. Many of their chiefs decided to follow the ways of the Celts, but some, united by the chief Ealach, refused and isolated themselves. They were known as Siol Eolaigh or followers



William the conqueror armed with a stick at Hastings.

of Ealach, a term which might have been the source of the word Shillelagh, as these people were often associated with the blackthorn sticks, which they would have used without removing the spikes. Their ability to disappear across the mazes created by the bushes of this plant, created myths around them and were soon nicknamed Leprechauns by the Norman occupants. They also had a reputation of being good shoe-makers and potters and so people would often leave their broken pots and shoes by their doors so they could be repaired by the small peoples. Their association with the blackthorn sticks also produced a lasting tradition. It was a belief that hanging a blackthorn branch outside your house would act as a lucky charm. This may be explained by the fact that the Leprechauns considered it as a weapon and lacking a sense of property like some Amerindian tribes, they would often steal objects. So people would hang blackthorn branches outside their house to indicate that the owner was armed with a *shillelagh* and knew how to use it.

The stick is one of, if not the oldest weapon of mankind. It was used by all layers of society and can be found on Egyptian hieroglyphs (Hurley, 2007), on Greco-Roman representations of Hercules and on the notorious tapestry of Bayeux, in the hands of William the conqueror himself. And as we've seen, the use of the blackthorn stick could go back to the foundations of Ireland's history. But it isn't before the 14th century that the term *shillelagh* is

¹ Again, most of this was taken from Mr. Keally, unless noted otherwise.

used as we know it today. It would actually come from Richard II (*Mounde, 1904*) king of England from 1377 to 1400 AD. In 1399, Richard would mount an expedition against the rebellious Irishmen of Leinster. This event was put under writing by the contemporary historian Jean Creton. Richard pursued across the plains of Imal and Glenmalure the chief Art Mor McMurrugh and his ally Domichadh Mac Brain Ruaidh O'Byrne. But rapidly the situation reversed, the Irish, much more familiar with the terrain and more mobile would make their enemies suffer a living hell. Richard would complain about the use of the sticks of Shillelagh against his men. Like guerrilla warfare, the Irish would attack and retreat quickly into the woods. The English survivors, strained and starving would rejoin the coast where supplies were waiting for them. This trip would be fatal for Richard II; his cousin Henry taking the opportunity of his absence and defeats to take power and have him imprisoned and assassinated on his return to England.



A 1507 sculpture on a Butler's family tomb, Ste-Canice's cathedral, Kilkenny Ireland

A song from the 18th century, *The Sprig of Shillelagh* is also known to have popularized the term and exported it through the Irish immigrations. This song talks about the presumed last great oak tree from the grand forest. The origin of the term is subject to debate, John Hurley assumes rather, that the name rather comes from two Gaelic words *sail* (mallet) and *éille* (strap) so *sail-éille* or shillelagh meaning a mallet with a strap, which was often fitted on some of those sticks (*Hurley, 2007*).

The Shillelagh continued to be used as a weapon aside axes, swords, spears and a whole panoply of weapons. But by the 17th century, a new phenomenon would be pivotal in its development as a martial art: the faction fights (*Hurley, 2007*). This is a very peculiar trait of Ireland's history that is not often talked about. It was a brawl in which two or more armed groups, or factions, fought in a friendly or hostile way, in a given place. Factions were composed of families or political groups. A fight could happen for diverse reasons, an insult (that could have originated many generations ago), a wedding, a funeral, a feast or just simply for fun (*Conley, 1995*). Sometimes, when a new mayor was elected, the partisans would form in factions to block up the way of the voting polls to the other factions. If they wanted to vote, they should then bring enough people to make their way to the polls. The shillelagh was often the weapon of choice, but a very diverse array of weaponry was also used, ranging from axes, knives, bill hooks, an occasional sword or rarely, guns. Women

would also be represented in those fights (Conley, 1995), most of the time wielding socks filled with rocks, the same thing used in medieval judiciary duels in Europe. Most of the time, it was prohibited to hit a woman with a stick.

Duel was also very popular. It was common for an individual seeking a fight to drag his coat behind him. If someone wanted to fight him he would only need to step on it, hence the expression *coat dragging* or seeking trouble. Another popular way of seeking a duel was to shout: *Who dares to say that the black of my eye is white?* Or any other question leading to an argument. The shillelagh also represented the passage to adulthood. Once a young man became an adult, he received his stick. Maybe this originated from Celtic traditions, in which the blackthorn is a sacred plant: being the first to bloom in spring, it is the symbol of a new season of abundance and hope.

It is also interesting to note the link between hurling and *shillelagh bata*. Hurling is a very old Gaelic sport, still very popular in Ireland, resembling La Crosse in which an axe-like stick is used, resembling a *shillelagh*. This sport was once used to train youngsters in the tactics of warfare and teamwork. It was not rare for people to be killed in such games (Conley, 1999), and faction fighters were often very close to hurling groups. The hurling stick was in fact used as a weapon in faction fights (Hurley, 2007).

Its use would go on until the 18th century when England will pass an interdiction against Irishmen owning weapons. Like many people of the past who were refrained from bearing arms, the Irish had the idea to disguise their weapon as an everyday tool, in this case a walking stick. Faction fights would thus continue, some being very bloody. The biggest reported was in 1834 at the St-John Baptist day in Ballyveigh strand in County Kerry. On one side the Coolens, on the other The Blacks and Mulvihills. About 3000 fighters were present, and once the dust settled, 200 people were dead. In the year of 1836 alone, about 100 faction fights occurred in Ireland. Irish immigrants also brought the tradition with them, and some faction fights are also known to have erupted in America, notably in the Five Points district in New-York city, events which inspired the movie gangs of New-York in 2002; as well as in Newfoundland. After the 1840's, faction fights began to decrease in number the last officially reported was in 1887 in Tipperary. However I did collect some testimonies of fights which took place after this date, and that even today some are fought between *Tinkers* groups (Irish gypsies), firearms being more common, but a spiked bill hook being a characteristic weapon.

The Maighistir Prionnsa

Before our departure, I contacted a practitioner of *shillelagh bata*, John², a resident of Northern Ireland. John was on holiday when we came to Ireland, but generously offered us his time while in Cork. We met him downtown where he brought us to an isolated parking lot to teach us what he knew, giving a particular atmosphere to the training.



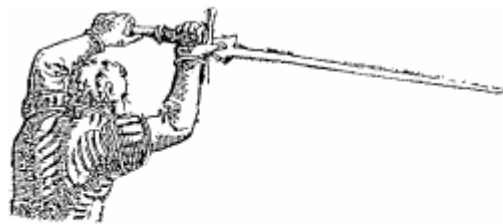
John is one of the few people left who still practices *shillelagh bata* in Ireland. In fact, there are, to his knowledge, only three to four people left who still practice their style. Most of them are not willing to teach it to strangers, and so we were not able to contact them. His family is a very old one, coming from noble Norman descent and living in Scotland where they had lands, until some members immigrated to Ireland. John learned this art from his father, who in turn learned it from his father. John can presently retrace the art with certainty to his great-grandfather, nicknamed *Ticklyboot*, a famous fighter known for his mastery of *shillelagh bata*, like his son. The style is transmitted through pre-arranged forms and drills only. Free-fighting was not used because of the high risk of injury and the development of bad habits. Forms are solo or paired and are taught much like boxing, the individual training freely under the eye of his teacher. They are often practiced at a very slow speed to develop proper coordination and understanding of the movements involved. Some inherent principles are not necessarily apparent at first sight, just like some *kata* from classical Japanese schools. The *pell*, a long beam or tree, is used to develop endurance and power.

The style does not have a precise type of stick. The blackthorn being very unpredictable in its growth, and not being reworked, it is practically impossible to get two sticks of the same characteristics. It usually measured up to 4 feet in length, but today the more discreet 3 feet long version is preferred. So, as long as a stick has the correct length, is of good quality and sturdiness, it can be used. The one-handed grip is like the one encountered in many depictions like the one in Walker's book (*Walker, 1840*). The stick is held as to make sure that the ferule goes past the elbow by about an inch, at this part will

² John's family name will be omitted due to his request.

protect the forearm and can be used to strike. The thumb is held much like in classical saber fencing, pointing up; this is primarily to avoid a breaking of the thumb or hand, should the stick be grabbed by an adversary. The stick is held next to the head, the ferrule pointing straight forward or down. The other arm is held across the body, the hand touching the opposing bicep. It actually seems to replace a targe and is used much in the same manner, but obviously with much less movement. This is to protect the solar plexus, a vital target; like barring in classical pugilism. The feet again follow the pattern of Walker, with the knees bent to keep the weight down on both feet.

A two-handed grip is also practiced. The stick is taken by its lower extremity, both thumbs up, like a common longsword grip, and gyratory movements are made to intensify the power.



**A plate from Meyer's treatise from 1570.
The grip is the same as in cleathad.**

Hurley refers to this style as *cleathad* (Hurley 2007). This permits an advantage in reach and power, but not in speed and does not permit a large array of techniques like the one-handed grip. It is then preferred against an adversary armed with a short weapon, knife or bare-handed. The upper section can also be grabbed with the free upper-arm to use the knob to intensify the power of an elbow strike, or like a bayonet by grabbing the knob and striking with the ferrule.

A particularity of the style is the footwork. The feet always move by crossing each other. This way the buttocks are protected and kicks to the opponent's legs are easily done. This method of stepping probably comes from Irish traditional dancing like it was practiced before the arrival of French dance masters, who greatly influenced dancing as we know it today, with the upper body very stiff and upright. The older style of dancing (*sean nos*) is still practiced in Connemara where it originates and uses the upper body a lot more. It is also important to note that neither foot is preferred as a leading one, both instead continually alternating as it is important to never stop moving. Most striking and defending is done with a triangular step to get out of line. Footwork is then the object of many forms, mostly solo.

Hits are given on various targets of the body, the extremities being a priority, like the hands, elbows, head, knees, but also many other less accessible parts like the sternum, ribs, genitals, heart, kidneys, clavicles, nose, teeth, eyes, spine, and the inside of the legs. You can

strike from a variety of angles, including thrusts that can easily cause death if correctly aligned. The ferrule is also used in close combat in a type of stabbing motion. It is a strike that is very dangerous and very hard to parry, and can even cause cuts if the ferrule is sharpened. It can also be used to block and trap, but the upper part is generally preferred. Blocks and strikes are done in ricochet; the stick rarely comes into a bind, as a variety of vicious strikes can be used from this position. The stick can also be used in a half-sword manner of grip, which is more akin to the Japanese grip, the hand being rested on the back instead of grabbing it, either to block or to hit like an elbow strike. It can also be used like a bayonet, the hand on the knob and thrusting with the ferrule.

The rest of the body is also put to good use. Of course the fist, but also hand slaps shoulders, elbows or kicks (which can be jump-kicks, called jig kicks). The style also uses some holds and pressure points, but grappling is, to a certain extent, shunned, as the accent is put on mobility and stability and to always be ready for another opponent. However everything is permitted and some might describe this style as dirty fighting. Be it eye-gouging, pulling, scratching, biting, and stepping on the other person's foot to hinder his retreat; nothing is ignored to stay alive. Some implements were therefore created to protect the user against such perils, like stuffed armguards and hats. The latter's rim could be garnished with razor blades, like collars. The stick itself could also be modified with hooks on the knob or nails on the shaft to prevent someone from grabbing it.

One of the goals of training is to develop a peripheral awareness, much like the principle of *zanshin* in Japanese arts. Eyes and attention are not put on a single object, but one must be aware of his surroundings. Thus it is said to not look directly into the eyes of your opponent, or he would be able to "steal your soul". Other more esoteric exercises also seek to develop some kind of a sixth sense, alerting oneself of hostile intentions. These aspects were surely judged important in the chaotic action of a faction fight.

Combat is divided in three distinct concepts: *Stomping, bluffing and feinting*.

Stomping is the first thing to be done prior to engagement. It is a warm-up exercise for the legs as well as the brain, in which the individual begins to stomp the ground with vigor while at the same time shouting insults and intimidating the opponent. This would get the blood flowing through the legs, as well as grounding them. It would also psychologically

prepare one to combat while frightening the enemy. Afterward the guard is taken by lowering oneself considerably to grab the stick by its correct spot.

Then comes the *bluffing*. While approaching the enemy, one does not stop moving, be it the legs, arms... or tongue (wasn't it said about the Irish that they were the best speakers since the Greeks?). Depending on the result that is sought, one would try to scare or to invite the adversary into attacking. The talking would also ensure that the fighter always breathes correctly, and moving would prevent the fighter from becoming stiff. Shouts akin to the Japanese concept of *kiai* are also used during attacks. The concept of feinting is, as its name suggests, simulating attacks to know the intention of the adversary or to force him to react prematurely. Finally, some powerful blows are used to finish a downed enemy, with very large and theatrical moves akin to dancing.

Common parents?

Some parallels can be drawn with other weapons. As Hurley suggests, the shillelagh was once a training tool for other weapons such as the axe. Gerald of Whales made some comments on the practice of axe fighting in his 1188 book *Topography of Ireland*, they are few but all seem to point in the direction of being parallel with the Ramsey method of stick fighting. The translation by Joyce (Joyce, 1913) goes as this:



Illustration from Gerald of Whales' book depicting Irish axe fighting.

They make use of but one hand to the axe when they strike and extend one thumb along the handle to guide the blow: from which neither the crested helmet can defend the head, nor the iron folds of the armor the rest of the body. From whence it has happened even in our times, that the whole thigh of a soldier, though cased in well-tempered armor, hath been lopped off by a single blow of the axe, the whole limb falling on one side of the horse, and the expiring body on the other.

He also comments later on that they carry an axe as they would a walking stick (or a shillelagh for that matter), always at hand. It is interesting to note that in other translations such as the one from Thomas Wright (Wright, 2000), no mention is made of the thumb but that the axe is held above the head, like the typical one handed guard of the bata. He also says that this weapon was brought to them by the Norwegians and the Danes. It is quite probable that the period of Vikings invasions and settlements period from 825 to 1014 had a big influence on these people, considering the impact they had on technology, vocabulary, cultural and political domains.

It is then possible that the Irish simply replaced their axes with shillelagh when the English banned weapon carrying in Ireland, or simply took off the heads from their hafts. Tests have yet to be done to see if the techniques would be applicable to axe and shield, but it is more than a probability. The two handed style, also referred to as *cleathad* (Hurley, 2007) could also have many things in common with the long sword.

It is also puzzling to see that there isn't much connection between *bataireacht* with



other arts from Europe which are known to us today, namely France who had many contacts with the Irish, namely with the famous Jacobite *Wild Geese* regiments. Although French *canne* and *bâton* went through many recent changes and maybe no



Combattente castellano armato di canna

longer reflect older styles, pictorial evidence can be found throughout many French medieval manuscripts showing the use of sticks much like a shillelagh; often in conjunction with a shield (See plate 1). Two other details can also be gleaned from later sources. Girard in his book *traité des armes* (Girard, 1740) makes a quick mention of a style of fencing using the smallsword in conjunction with a cane gripped in the middle; unfortunately he does not show any techniques but compares it to the left hand dagger style. Alfred Hutton also talks about the great stick being taught in Italian and French armies in his time, he only shows two parries of the French style, one - the French head parry

- reminds of a parry used in John's method (see page 9 first paragraph). But interestingly, the style who looks the most like it is the Italian *bastone* in its various incarnations. The two handed part is reminiscent of the *Bastone siciliano*, or as it is known in its more sportive incarnation: *Liu bo*. The one handed grip is practically identical to some pictures from 1669 Venetian book *Guerra di canne* depicting the kinds of faction fights common on Venice's bridges at the time. This resemblance may be totally coincidental; after all there are many resemblances between oriental and occidental martial arts, even without any apparent exchange of ideas. A diffusionist outlook on things may try to see possible connections, as both countries had contact with Normans, and Ireland and Italy did have a great deal of contact since the Christianization of the Hibernian isle; but those two theories are hard to defend without solid historical facts, as a resemblance between two things does not equate a connection.

Fall and renaissance

One could rightly ask himself why he has never heard of shillelagh bata, and why such a popular art doesn't appear anywhere today, even in Ireland. Many reasons can explain the current state of the art. Shillelagh bata, like many martial traditions, came very close to becoming extinct. The dawn of factionism for the sake of the country's independence at the beginning of the XXth century played a major role. Faction fights were mostly over, and weapon law weren't the same anymore, so the use of the art became somewhat obsolete. The rampant racism and neo-Darwinism of Victorian times also helped to its demise. The Irish were represented in popular imagery as semi human beings, always violent and drunk, wielding a shillelagh at everyone for any reason. The new generations became tired of the stereotype and abandoned the tradition and its symbol, to the point that most people are ignorant that any martial tradition was ever linked to the shillelagh, or thought the shillelagh wasn't anything more than a Hollywood invention.

The styles were until then always taught in the family or clan, and many people even today refuse to teach it to strangers. But it is now going through a renaissance, with living traditions being brought back to light, like the Doyle family style being the first publicly taught in Toronto, and reconstructions being done out of the few surviving texts. It does create a problem though, as acknowledging living traditions as being genuine cannot be done solely

by the examination of texts or treatises, as most of the people who practiced such arts were illiterate and had no reason to put to writing their knowledge, as authors would have risked too much by being exposed as practicing an illegal fighting art. The rising popularity of the subject will probably, as is the case with most martial arts, bring out some false traditions and wild claims of lineages. The validity of the claims can then only be judged by a careful observation of the art itself, its links to historical texts or imagery and, the overall effectiveness of it. Much like any other stick art such as *bastone siciliano* or *Jogo do pau*, pure historical research cannot bring much light on the subject if it is not helped by a careful ethnological and hoplological study.



Glen Doyle in the typical posture of his family's style.

This shows that Europe, and the world, may still hold a great deal of nearly forgotten martial traditions that are only waiting to be rediscovered or else forgotten. The *travelers* or Ireland's gypsy population, are rumored to still practice some styles of stick fighting and other more exotic implements such as the sickle, and are well known for their tradition of bare knuckle boxing. With the rise of the Internet in more rural places, people may realize, for better or worse, that they hold knowledge from their parents far more ancient and precious than they first thought. For historians and anthropologists, it offers a rich and mostly unexplored spectrum of society. And to people attempting to reconstruct historical martial arts, it offers a glimpse of a living tradition that may offer clues to many unknown elements of their practice.

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