

# UNDERSTANDING VICTORIAN CULTURES OF VIOLENCE: THE UTILITY OF EXPERIMENTAL ARCHAEOLOGY AND PRACTICAL HERMENEUTICS

Liam Hannan

University of Manchester

Violence is a phenomenon which it is notoriously difficult to study. Home Office statistical records of criminal violence only go back as far as 1857, but even these are problematic. Changing definitions of assault, the acceptable use of force and what it meant to be a victim all skew these measures.<sup>1</sup> Further complications derive from the possibility that political economy – or a tight restriction on the budget for prosecution – artificially deflated criminal statistics for much of the period between 1850 and 1920.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, there is the qualitative problem inherent in relying upon criminal statistics and court reports. Serious acts of violence are relatively over-reported and lower level violence goes under-reported. This skews the evidence available and leaves a blind spot hovering over those everyday acts of violence which supported social structures but were not worthy of judicial attention. Other sources for Victorian violence are no less problematic. Newspaper reports likewise tend towards the sensational; over-reporting those incidents of serious violence and playing upon moral panics. The final source in traditional scholarship is the contemporary literary corpus, which records social attitudes towards violence. This has only recently started to be explored as it relates to the lived experience of violence but has the potential to open up a new qualitative approach that I hope to expand and build on.<sup>3</sup>

Four substantive studies in this area in recent years have all run into the same problem when approaching violence: the loss of aesthetic, and therefore epistemic, content in reducing what is an embodied praxis to a written account. Weiner, in *Men of Blood*, examines criminal violence, particularly that of men against women, which he argues came

---

<sup>1</sup> Barry Godfrey & Paul Lawrence (eds.), *Crime and Justice 1750-1950* (London: Willan Publishing, 2005) p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> Howard Taylor, 'Rationing Crime: The political Economy of Criminal Statistics since the 1850's', *Economic History Review*, LI, 3 (1998), pp. 569-590. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1468-0289.00105>

<sup>3</sup> See Emelyne Godfrey, *Masculinity, Crime and Self-Defence in Victorian Literature* (Chippenham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) & Emelyne Godfrey, *Femininity, Crime and Self-Defence in Victorian Literature: From Dagger Fans to Suffragettes* (Chippenham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

to be more stigmatised than intra-male violence by the end of the Victorian period.<sup>4</sup> Drawing heavily on court records and newspaper reports he paints a picture of a generally declining tolerance of violence becoming particularly sensitive to the plight of those considered to be 'vulnerable', such as women and children.<sup>5</sup> Whilst making an invaluable contribution to historiography, *Men of Blood* perpetuates modern liberal notions that violence is inherently problematic and more properly represents a study of judicial responses to violence than the cultures of violence themselves.

Emsley takes a slightly different approach in *Hard Men*, setting historic violent acts in a broader social and political context.<sup>6</sup> However, his source materials remain largely unchanged. Relying on court and press records to augment what is otherwise a social history of the gradual liminalisation of violence again puts the violence in the title in second place to the social history which constitutes the heart of the narrative. Godfrey attempts to overcome some of the loss of ethical content by referring to literature, such as Phineas Finn and Sherlock Holmes, to redress the balance and recover a sense of subjectivity.<sup>7</sup> Her work addresses an imbalance in a scholarship over reliant on judicial attitudes, however the use of fictitious texts means that the source material is the work of contemporary *imaginings* of violence rather than contemporary scholarship of it, which still leaves a substantive epistemic gap.

J. Carter Wood is more inventive still; using Hermeneutics and Cultural Anthropology to investigate violence he goes further towards recovering the ritual side of cultural violences, and offers a nuanced exploration of the resilience of these cultures in the face of what has been termed a "Civilising Offensive".<sup>8</sup> His work goes a long way to establishing historical scholarship which engages with lived cultures of violence. However it

---

<sup>4</sup> Martin Weiner, *Men of Blood: Violence, Manliness, and Criminal Justice in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) p. 75.

<sup>5</sup> Weiner, *Men of Blood*, pp 289-291.

<sup>6</sup> Clive Emsley, *Hard Men: Violence in England since 1750* (Lancaster: Hambledon & London, 2005) pp. 12-13.

<sup>7</sup> 'Ethical' is Used here in the slightly archaic sense of having a cultural *ethos*, as opposed to the narrower moral sense; Godfrey, *Masculinity, Crime and Self-Defence in Victorian Literature*, pp. 77-83, 128-135.

<sup>8</sup> J. Carter Wood, *Violence and Crime in Nineteenth Century England; The Shadow of our Refinement* (Bodmin: Routledge, 2004) pp. 3-7; Wood, *Violence and Crime in Nineteenth Century England*, pp. 120-127.

lacks engagement contemporary experts on the subject, and still displays the over-reliance on 'official' sources evident in Weiner and Emsley.

This paper outlines a proposal to build upon the existing literature through the study of and practical experimentation in Victorian self-defence techniques and strategies. It analyses six techniques from the Victorian fighting style, 'Bartitsu', and uses these as examples to suggest the ways in which a practical engagement both with the concerns of self-defence practitioners and in their combative methods can augment our understanding of historical violence. It makes the claim that through this experimental archaeology, it might be possible to develop a hermeneutics of violence and thus read violent acts, or more properly the epistemic fields which determine their praxis, through analysing biotechnologies of violence as historical source material.

### **Resurgence in HEMA and Potential New Sources**

The internet has accelerated a revival in Historic European Martial Arts by allowing the digitisation and dissemination of combative manuals and textbooks. These resources have, up until now, been used mostly by martial artists or re-enactors looking to revive lost combat arts and have, as such, been regarded mostly as a hobbyists tool. Furthermore, there is a paucity of such sources in official archives and repositories, reinforcing suspicions that they are not properly 'academic'.<sup>9</sup> However, by applying practical hermeneutics to such manuals as are available they may become a significant qualitative resource for researching cultures of violence. Self-Defence manuals are not simply another type of evidence of an extant phenomenon, they are evidence of an entirely different approach to that phenomenon – one which is under-explored in historiography. Court records, and the newspaper reports that are based on them record an approach to violence which seeks to taxonomise and chastise in pursuit of social order, whilst manuals record a more positive approach which aims to empower the individual towards using violence to achieve a definite end, ensuring personal safety and survival, apprehending a suspected criminal and so forth. They are, in other words, a scholarly breakdown of the phenomenon of violence, detailing contemporary

---

<sup>9</sup> For example, a recent search of the British National Archives turned up only one police instructional manual from the period, subsequent research confirmed that such handbooks were in frequent production and circulation, but just have a habit of not being archived. Amateur enthusiasts, however, have digitised and made freely available hundreds, if not thousands, of historically important martial arts texts. These are, however, uncatalogued, uncategorised, and appear to lack any central repository.

styles of attack and what would have been considered socially acceptable responses in that context.

The praxis of fighting is described by martial artists as a language.<sup>10</sup> Like any language it relies on a set of signifiers which relate knowledge and concepts between those who understand them. Court records are barefaced facts;

He struck me a very severe blow, which knocked me down—I did not lose my senses—I suffered pain for two days from a bruise on the chest; I am all right now.<sup>11</sup>

The example above is indicative of the type of information available to historians using court or newspaper sources. These records were created by non-experts in violence who were interested only in establishing facts relating to the legal code of the day. The types of question asked in these records are narrow, and the details shallow. The focus is on discerning whether an offence took place, and if so how it ought to be categorised. This is perhaps unsurprising since the intervention of the modern state was designed to discipline the violent offender, offering a pathology of aggressors rather than an artistry of aggression.<sup>12</sup> It does, however, impose severe limits on historians who rely on these sources to explore attitudes towards violence because the lack of detail hampers attempts to reconstruct any wider context.

Other sources are more useful for reconstructing violence. For example, Pierce Egan, a Regency boxing *aficionado*, has left a rich trove of textual resources in *Bell's Life, Boxiana*, and in his lectures.<sup>13</sup> He was, without a doubt, intimately familiar with violence. Yet even in his more colourful descriptions there still remain epistemic gaps. For a start, the encounters he reported were prize fights. Whilst there is good reason to believe that prize fights and street fights bore more resemblance to each other in the nineteenth century than

---

<sup>10</sup> Mark Law, *The Pyjama Game: A Journey into Judo* (London: Aurum, 2007) pp. 14-20.

<sup>11</sup> Testimony of James Reaoch at the Trial of Benjamin Doyle, 03/02/1890  
<<http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?id=t18900203-190&div=t18900203-190>>  
Old Bailey Online, [Date of Access 31/08/2015].

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London, Penguin, 1991) p. 285.

<sup>13</sup> Pierce Egan, *Boxiana, or: Sketches of Ancient and Modern Pugilism, from the days of the renowned Broughton and Slack to the Championship Cribb* (London: George Virtue, 1830) & Pierce Egan, *Every Gentleman's Manual: A Lecture on the art of Self Defence* (London: Flintoff, 1851).

their counterparts do today, the fights themselves would still have had obvious limitations.<sup>14</sup> Further, we are still reliant upon descriptions; and whilst 'a straight left' is a superior description to 'a blow', there is still a substantial loss of content in relying on written language to signify the violent event. This is not unlike trying to capture the essence of a painting through describing it.

Utilising manuals of self-defence brings us a step closer to capturing the ethos of violent acts. The scenarios presented do not present an actual incident, as court papers do, but rather an abstracted scenario stands in for multiple real incidents which are heavily influenced through public consciousness of personal safety.<sup>15</sup> Manuals tell us about the concerns of the contemporary persons regarding violence. This allows a different viewpoint from criminal statistics and newspapers, which might inflate more serious concerns. To put it simply, the scenarios martial artists were training for were most likely the major forms that violence took in their environment.

Key to understanding why Self-Defence manuals and their reconstruction are vital to recovering period violence is an understanding of what they are and represent. As instructive manuals, they are (generally) not fictive, as literature is, nor taxonomic, as in court records, sensationalist, as press accounts are want to be, nor dogmatic, as martial arts manuals can become. Self-defence manuals instead represent a specialist subgenre of scholarship that applies martial training to real world issues of violence. The scholars of violence, in most modern societies, are its Martial Artists.<sup>16</sup> They would tend to be the people with both enough experience of violence and enough criticality to approach the subject analytically.<sup>17</sup> These are the people who painstakingly analyse and catalogue threats, based on whatever data is available to them, and attempt to formulate a response. Usually that response is limited to their students, but the few practitioners who write things down leave an invaluable record behind for those who know how to decode it.

---

<sup>14</sup> Jem Mace, *Fifty Years a Fighter: Bare-Knuckle Champion of the World* (Cardiff: Peerless Press, 2014) pp. 43-48; Clive Emsley, *Hard Men: Violence in England since 1750* (Lancaster: Hambledon & London, 2005) pp. 40-41.

<sup>15</sup> See notes 21-25.

<sup>16</sup> Rory Miller, *Meditations on Violence: A Comparison of Martial Arts Training & Real World Violence* (Boston, YMAA Publishing, 2008) p. xiii.

<sup>17</sup> Gillian Russell – "Epistemic Viciousness in the Martial Arts" in *Martial Arts and Philosophy: Beating and Nothingness*, ed. By Graham Priest and Damon Young (Chicago: Open Court, 2010) pp. 129-144.

Rory Miller, for example, a Jiu-Jitsuka, corrections officer, and Corrections Emergency Response Team (CERT) trainer has used his experience in high security prisons and training in psychology to identify and model the main types of violent attacks civilians are likely to encounter in all male institutional environments.<sup>18</sup> He acknowledges the shortcoming in his model in referring to work done by R.J. Nash, who offers a similar study and modelling of gendered violence in a civilian context in *Condition Black; Assault in Progress*. Likewise, Darren Levine, a Krav Maga expert who trains law enforcement officers, bodyguards and US Military Personnel, demonstrates his American credentials by including in his books chapters on 'carjacking' (in the USA, there were approximately 34,000 carjackings annually from 1993-2002), dealing with Hand Grenades and I.E.D.s, and disarming an assailant wielding an M16 assault rifle.<sup>19</sup> These specificities represent scholarly specialisation in the practice of violence for a real world market. In other words the strategies these two martial artists advocate for self-defence is indicative both of their epistemic environment and their training methodology. By replicating the latter we can answer hopological questions and variables in order to infer cultural, social, and therefore historical information that would otherwise be lost.

The Self-Defence manual gained in popularity from the 1880s, and roughly coincided with a turn in public opinion that moved away from the employment of lethal levels of force and the tolerance of an armed public.<sup>20</sup> The subject of these manuals was simple; how to repulse any attack using only those tools one might have to hand. They aim to show a gentleman that revolvers, or other 'life preserving' weapons, are not necessary to feel or be safe. They outline a series of techniques and strategies one might adopt in the face of aggression, giving clues as to the wider context of violence – particularly the types of violence which would not ordinarily come within the purview of officialdom.

---

<sup>18</sup> Miller– *Meditations on Violence*, pp. 52-54.

<sup>19</sup> Darren Levine & Ryan Hoover, *Black Belt Krav Maga: Elite Techniques of the World's Most Powerful Combat System* (Berkely: Ulysses Press, 2009) pp. 79-92; Patsy Klaus, *National Crime Victimization Survey, Carjacking, 1993-2002*, U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, July 2004; Levine & Hoover, *Black Belt Krav Maga*, pp 175-185; Levine & Whitman, *Complete Krav Maga: The Ultimate Guide to over 230 Self-Defense and Combativoe Techniques* (Berkely: Ulysses Press, 2007) pp. 290-291 & 320-333.

<sup>20</sup> Godfrey & Lawrence, *Crime & Justice*, pp.103-105; Godfrey, *Crime, Masculinity & Self Defence in Victorian Literature*, pp. 55-56.

Further to the text in these manuals, the use of graphic technical depictions (particularly photography from the 1890s onwards) to convey techniques captures the embodiment of violence in a way the written word never could. Technical subtleties in the manner of punching or throwing are preserved; these are clues as to how Victorians embodied violence waiting to be read, all that is required is an ability to 'speak' the correct 'language'.

Lastly, the use of experimental methodology allows us a method of testing the veracity of claims regarding violence. The study of violence (hopology) has always been an epistemically vicious process, fraught with concerns regarding veracity and factual accuracy.<sup>21</sup> This is doubly so when we rely on the veracity of eyewitnesses. By matching descriptions of violence against known techniques for both trained and untrained fighters for any given period, we can use historically inclined martial practice to apply the most basic test of veracity ('Is this actually possible?') to a high level of certainty and to give an indication of the probability of any given actual event having been recorded accurately<sup>22</sup>. Whilst this does not allow us to prove that any given event happened in the way it was recorded, it does allow for the possibility of disproving some, allowing us to open a cleavage between practice and representation that has heretofore been impossible.

I use both the terms 'experimental archaeology' and 'practical hermeneutics' to describe this method, in part because understanding historical violence through practising known scenarios, techniques, and using contemporary objects draws heavily upon experimental archaeological methods, but also because the ultimate aim is to read the language of period violence in such a way that we can learn more about power and social structures in that reading.

The exemplary focus in this essay is a series of articles that appeared in Pearson's Magazine between 1899 and 1901. These were written by E.W. Barton-Wright, a martial artist and self-defence practitioner and pioneer<sup>23</sup>. These differ from most HEMA sources insofar as they are not concerned with fighting on the battlefield or in a duel, but in defending oneself and one's property in an unprovoked attack on the streets. This paper

---

<sup>21</sup> Russel, *Epistemic Viciousness in the Martial Arts*, p. 130.

<sup>22</sup> This method allows practical enquiry into questions such as the efficacy of the Suffragette Bodyguard movement, Hannan, (forthcoming).

<sup>23</sup> Although Barton-Wright's articles were not the first texts dealing with self-defence, they mark an important watershed. They arrived at a time when the practice of self-defence was becoming divorced both from the carriage of lethal weapons and the newly emerging sport of boxing.

argues by means of demonstration that these sources, combined with an experimental archaeological method, can help to fill in the gaps in the statistical, literary and press records and provide a more accurate picture of 'real' violence in the Victorian period.

### **Bartitsu Self-Defence Scenarios**

Below are excerpts from E.W. Barton-Wright's articles 'The New Art of Self Defence', and 'elf-Defence with a Walking Stick'.<sup>24</sup> These excerpts have been selected for clarity on the points that this paper makes, however they remain broadly representative of the wider canon of Barton-Wright's work.

A: Suppose that an undesirable person should enter your rooms, and that you are anxious to remove him without delay. You find that persuasion and commands alike fail. It may be that he is a bigger man than yourself, and you may hesitate to propel him out the door by the common method. Should you adopt the following plan your visitor will give you no further trouble.<sup>25</sup>

B: Suppose the case that a ruffian is threatening one of your companions, you at this moment being behind the attacker.<sup>26</sup>

C: When a man seizes you by the lappets or your coat, he overlooks the fact that his face is left undefended. Your first movement will be therefore to strike him in the face with your right fist. This advice may seem unnecessary. It is not, however, so often followed, for the chances are that when the occasion arises to which it applies, you will follow the natural and instinctive desire to free yourself by placing your hands upon your opponent's arms, and pressing upon them, which is as feeble as it is an unavailing method of resistance.<sup>27</sup>

D: Suppose that you are suddenly and unexpectedly attacked from behind in some lonely spot, finding a strong pair of arms encircling your body, so that your own arms are pinioned to your sides. Your position might appear at first to be utterly

---

<sup>24</sup> E.W. Barton Wright, *The New Art of Self Defence* (Pearson's Magazine, 1901) ([Digitised by Marcus Rowland](http://www.sirwilliamhope.org/Library/Bartitsu/newart/new_art.htm)) <[http://www.sirwilliamhope.org/Library/Bartitsu/newart/new\\_art.htm](http://www.sirwilliamhope.org/Library/Bartitsu/newart/new_art.htm)> [Date of Access - 31/08/2015]; E.W. Barton Wright, *Self Defence With a Walking Stick* Pearson's (Magazine, 1901) [by E.W. Barton Wright \(Digitised by Marcus Rowland\)](http://www.sirwilliamhope.org/Library/Bartitsu/stick/stick.htm) <<http://www.sirwilliamhope.org/Library/Bartitsu/stick/stick.htm>> [Date of Access - 31/08/2015]

<sup>25</sup> Edward William Barton-Wright, *The Sherlock Holmes School of Self Defence: The Manly Art of Bartitsu as used against Professor Moriarty* (China: Ivy Press, 2011)– p. 19.

<sup>26</sup> Barton-Wright, *The Sherlock Holmes School of Self-Defence* – p. 104.

<sup>27</sup> Barton-Wright, *The Sherlock Holmes School of Self-Defence*, p. 42.



helpless . . . <sup>28</sup>

E: I may state that I have repeatedly been attacked during a long residence in Portugal by men with a knife or a six foot quarter staff, and have in all cases succeeded in disabling my adversary without being hurt myself.<sup>29</sup>

We see here three things. Firstly, the array of scenarios is significantly wider than would typically appear in either court or newspapers, representing a fuller spectrum of physical violence than would traditionally be accessible. Whilst being attacked with a knife was probably cause for official involvement, threatening words amongst peers was de facto likely to be left to its own resolution, even if it could in theory be dealt with officially.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, in scenarios A, B, and C, the defendant is encouraged to escalate the level of violence swiftly' going on the offensive places him in the role of attacker. Finally, even in life-threatening scenarios, such as scenario E, one is expected to stop short of the use of lethal force.

It may be readily observed that the selected scenarios are technical, as opposed to taxonomic, descriptions of violent acts. As such they record three things which are missing from court and newspaper records: detailed descriptions and imagery of the types of violence contemporaries might expect to encounter, strategies for repulsing said violence, and clues to the epistemic context of violence outside of a judicial setting. The instructional texts which accompany them provide further ornament. Let us take, as an example, the instructions which follow scenario B above:

Seize the man by the collar of his coat from behind, and place your foot upon his knee. Pull with your hand, and press with your foot, and he will be at once deposited upon his back!

Without releasing your hold upon his collar, pass your right hand around his neck, so that you can bring your forearm across his throat. Then, seizing the right lappet of his coat with your left hand to prevent the coat from moving, you bear down with all your weight across his wind-pipe with your right arm, and so render him powerless to resist, and – if need be – throttle him!<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Barton-Wright, *The Sherlock Holmes School of Self-Defence*, p. 24.

<sup>29</sup> Barton-Wright, *The Sherlock Holmes School of Self-Defence*, p. 110.

<sup>30</sup> Weiner, *Men of Blood*, p. 75.

<sup>31</sup> Barton-Wright, *The Sherlock Holmes School of Self-Defence*, p. 104.

The strangling Technique being described here is *okuri eri jime*.

It is interesting to note that in competition Judo, a variation of this move exists which is colloquially

Besides the technical details, there are also social considerations. The Bartitsuka is being encouraged to disregard the convention of a 'fair fight', which was in vogue with his father's generation and instead use means that are decidedly gentler but less imbued with a code of honour.<sup>32</sup> Namely he is encouraged to attack another man from behind, giving him no opportunity for resistance and, if necessary, to throttle him into unconsciousness, albeit in a scientific manner. This is in stark contrast to the notions of manly fair play being espoused by contemporaries influenced by muscular Christianity, and represents the development of a fissure between fighting for sport (as boxing with gloves would become) and fighting for other ends.

This departure from the norm may suggest two things: firstly, fear, and secondly experience. There is no doubt that following the advice above a Bartitsuka could easily overcome a man, but the writing does not read fancifully. It reads as though the writer knows violence intimately, and has experience of using it. In other words, this is how violence was, as opposed to how it was perceived by writers. This may be the reason for the element of fear in the writing. If one has to subdue a dangerous person one should be a little afraid – they may have a friend or a weapon that could radically alter the situation. They may, given the chance, prove to be better at fighting than you are. This element of fear could also accurately be termed caution or respect. However I think fear best captures the significance of the social dynamic. Whoever one is fighting cannot be trusted to act like a gentlemen, and therefore one is excused from certain types of gentlemanly conduct when acting to restore order.

There is here the stirring of a tension in the use of force that remains unresolved. In certain circumstances one might use overwhelming force in order to prevent the need for an even more escalated response in the future. Yet the decision as to when to escalate the use of force rapidly and decisively remains a controversial one. The application of a potentially fatal chokehold may be considered quite disproportionate to the mere act of 'threatening', particularly amongst those who have only limited experience in the matter.<sup>33</sup> That there is

---

referred to as the "British Strangle". Popularised by the Judoka Neil Adams, the only difference between Adams application and Barton Wrights is that Adams applies the technique with a forward roll – being unable to stomp his opponent's leg.

Jimmy Pedro, *Judo Techniques & Tactics* (Pudsey: Human Kinetics, 2001) pp. 127-128.

<sup>32</sup> Pierce Egan, - *A Lecture on the art of Self Defence*, p. 32.

<sup>33</sup> As recently as 2014, the unfortunate death of Eric Garner at the hands of a New York police officer brought attention to the debate on the use of "chokeholds" as an enforcement tactic.

no attempt here to justify the decision suggests both that this publication is intended towards a specialised audience (that is one which is not too squeamish regarding the use of force) and that there was little feeling such a reaction needed justified. The mere fact that the threatener was a 'ruffian' and the Bartitsuka a 'gentleman' was enough to establish a basis for using force to restore a tacitly agreed moral and social order. Of course, being a gentleman the Bartitsuka would use his skills only to secure dominant posture and convince the ruffian either to amend his ways or vacate the vicinity. He would never seek to throttle said ruffian, unless it 'need be'.

### **Bartitsu Self Defence Combatives**

Let us now look at the techniques and strategies a Bartitsuka was encouraged to employ whilst defending himself.

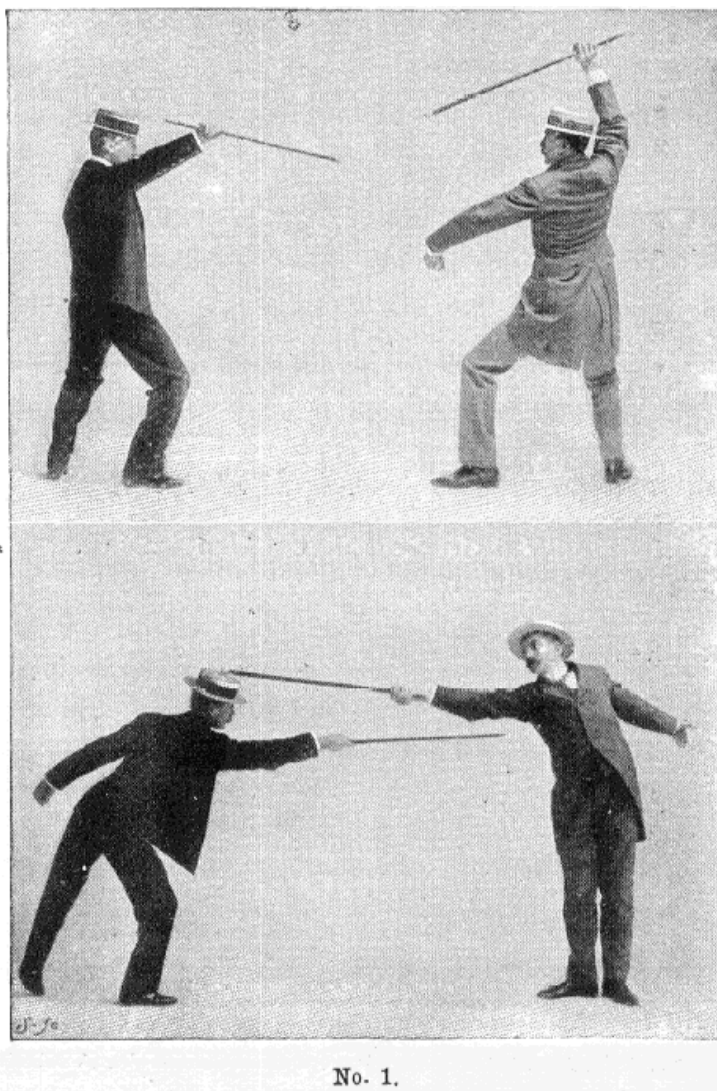


Figure 1. The Guard by Distance

Figure 1 shows a manoeuvre called the “guard by distance”. Immediately it should be obvious that the gentleman on the right has decided to use his walking cane as an improvised weapon in order to defend himself. The manner in which he does so offers several additional pieces of information. Note how he assumes a high rear guard. Quite the opposite of a fencer, who would seek to position his weapon in between himself and his opponent, the Bartitsuka prefers to keep his weapon back.<sup>34</sup> In the first instance this is to help deliver powerful swings from the whole body and increase his hitting power, but it also offers protection to his hand. Lacking a crossguard and a cutting edge, a cane is a weapon susceptible to counter attack.

From the use of this defensive position as standard in the canon, we can safely assume that the imagined opponent of a Bartitsuka might wield a bludgeon or cudgel, but seldom a knife or a gun.<sup>35</sup> The circular movement by which this manoeuvre is executed relies on the attacker making a circular motion, as with a bludgeon, for success – a linear attack (as with a knife, or indeed a small sword) could barrel through – and the choice to guard with the weapon back suggests a fighting distance (*Ma-ai*) of around 6ft, altogether too far for the use of a knife to be practicable.<sup>36</sup>

Further, if the Bartitsuka was expecting to face a knife-fighter, it would make more sense to position his weapon between himself and the attacker to create distance. Using a high rear guard the Bartitsuka invites a particular strike which he hopes to use to his advantage. This particular strike could not be given by a knife wielding assailant, who

---

<sup>34</sup> The addition of the Japanese Suffix “ka” indicates a student of Bartitsu. Wherever possible, I shall present technical details of combative techniques with their Japanese names in an attempt to produce uniform descriptions across fighting styles, and also to make my reading of these techniques transparent to a non-specialist audience. The use of Japanese terms not only removes a certain level of ambiguity in the English system of naming but means that these interpretations can be checked against *Kodokan*, *Aikido*, and *Shotokan* textbooks and techniques.

<sup>35</sup> Knives were considered un-English, and pistols were becoming unfashionable (on the way to illegal) when these articles were originally published  
Wood, *Violence and Crime in Nineteenth-Century England*, p. 92.  
Egan, *Boxiana*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>36</sup> For reference; a *Ma-ai* of around 6ft is common to fighting systems like Karate & Aikido, and looks likely to have been preferred by bareknuckle boxers. 6 ft is around the length of two arms, meaning your opponent must cover ground in order to attack you. Modern sports like Boxing & Judo tend to have a *Ma-ai* of around 3ft, or the length of one arm.

would not have sufficient range. Should the knife fighter be able to close to a range at which his weapon is effective, the proposed method of striking him with the cane would not work.<sup>37</sup>

A further consideration would be that a high guard is an awkward position to parry from. The real strength of the position lies in deception; it invites a particular attack by leaving a deliberate weakness in the guard. Knowing this, a Bartitsuka can be ready to respond with footwork, *tai-sabaki*, and counter strikes. It is, essentially, a position designed for counter offense – which tells us that the Bartitsuka was not expected to initiate a violent encounter, but to take charge of one should it occur.

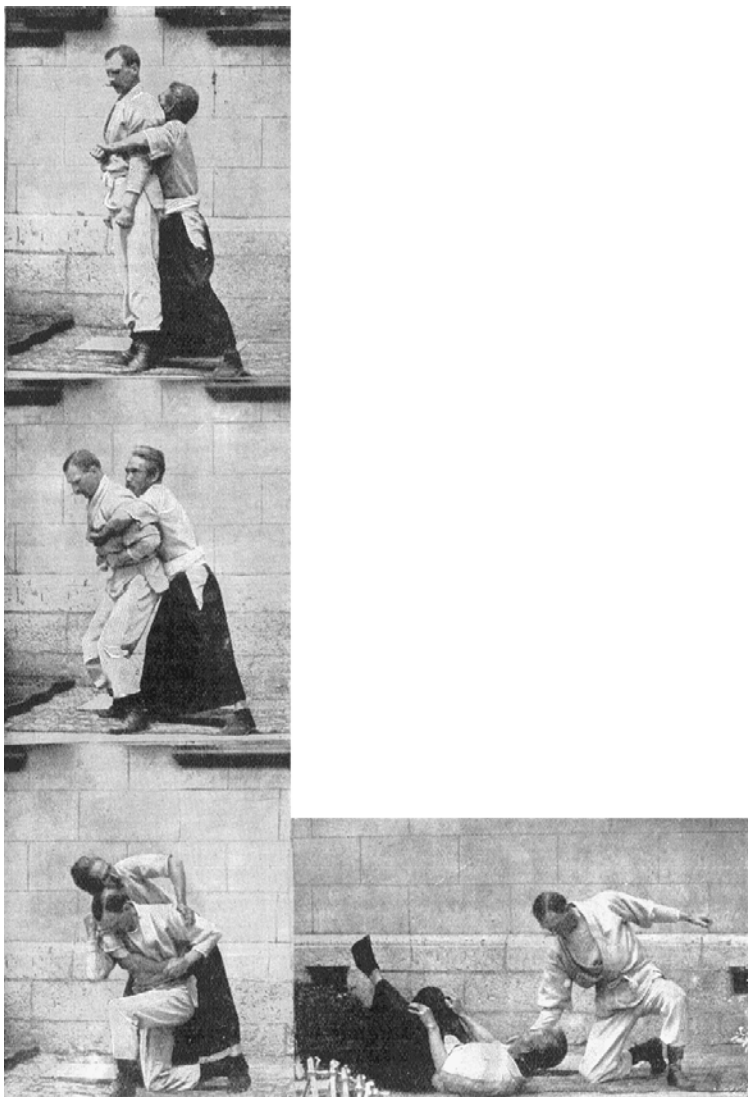


Figure 2. Drop Knee Seoi Nage

---

<sup>37</sup> The power of the swing is in the weighted end of the cane, should the opponent be close enough to be struck by the shaft, the blow would be largely harmless.

Figure 2, which accompanies excerpt D, above, is a variant of a throw known as *Ippon Seoi Nage*. The throw itself is common to several combat systems, both eastern and European, however the unique presentation of dropping to one knee gives us several clues as to the expectations of violence in Victorian England.

Firstly, the position of the partners makes clear that this is not a scenario of mutually agreed upon combat. Although they became rarer later in the century acts of mutually agreed violence should not be thought of as uncommon.<sup>38</sup> They served a dual purpose of shaping space and providing identity, particularly amongst the working classes.<sup>39</sup> In fact, it was not until 1845 that such consensually violent encounters could even be counted as assault.<sup>40</sup> It was a landmark ruling that violence was a public disorder – even if both parties were content to participate.

Traditionally, treatises and textbooks would show two persons “squaring off” and ready to engage in combat. However the dominant position of the attacker above immediately suggests an uneven and unwelcome fight. Additionally, the choice of pinioning the arms suggests robbery as a motive. This would make sense, since notions of ‘self-defence’ had largely been crafted in the media panic sparked by the 1862 garrotting and robbery of a member of parliament, Hugh Pilkington.<sup>41</sup> What is also implied is the presence of others. The attack shown achieves virtually nothing on its own; it requires at least one other party to be present in order to assault or rob the victim.

This helps to explain the choice of technique. This is the only point in the Bartitsu canon where a leverage based throw is applied; all the other throws shown tend to favour joint or limb manipulation. There is another method demonstrated which accords with the more general principle, however it takes longer to execute, and it leaves the Bartitsuka in an awkward position to face a group attack.

The use of a *Seoi Nage*, however, not only disengages the original attacker quickly, it also turns him into a missile as he flies through the air, and a shield as he lands on the

---

<sup>38</sup> Emsley, *Hard Men*, pp. 40-41,

Robert Shoemaker, *Male honour and the decline of public violence in eighteenth-century London*, *Social History*, 2001, Vol.26(2), pp. 190-208. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03071020110041352>

<sup>39</sup> Wood, *Violence and Crime in Nineteenth Century England*, p. 137.

<sup>40</sup> Jack Anderson, ‘Pugilistic Prosecutions: Prize Fighting and the Courts in nineteenth Century Britain’, *The Sports Historian*, 21:2 (2001), 35-53, p. 42. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17460260109447881>

<sup>41</sup> Godfrey, *Masculinity, Crime and Self-Defence in Victorian Literature*, p. 84.

ground. It may reasonably be assumed the accomplice would be facing the Bartitsuka, while the attacker pinions his arms from behind. Employing this throw positions both assailants in front of the defender, and potentially injures or stuns both of them, giving the Bartitsuka both time and opportunity to escape.

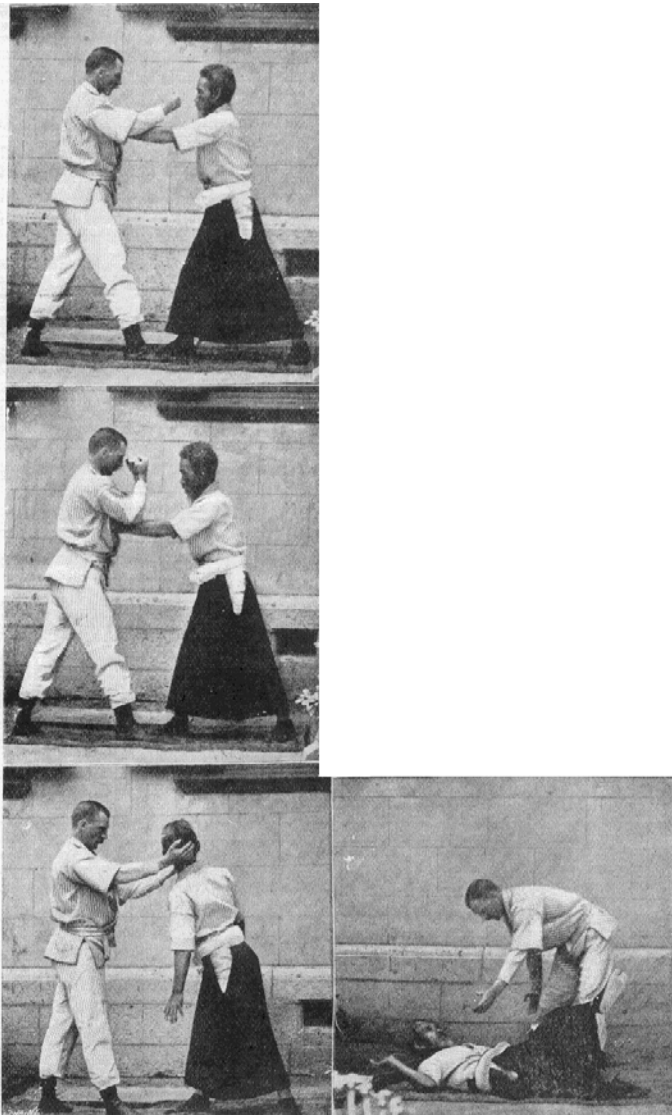


Figure 3. Standing Frontal Neck Crank Takedown

Further, the choice of dropping the knee to execute the throw suggests something about the expected build of the combatants. The biomechanics of this throw require the thrower to have a lower centre of gravity than the person being thrown; in other words, they must get their hips lower. Dropping to the knee suggests not only that the Bartitsuka is likely to be taller than his opponent, but may also anticipate the need to create a substantial

amount of momentum in order to execute the throw – indicating that despite being smaller, the attacker is likely more powerful.<sup>42</sup>

All of this, combined, points towards a larger picture of violence. Not only did the middle class gentleman fear being attacked, he was in particular afraid of getting mugged by a group of (presumably) working class men.

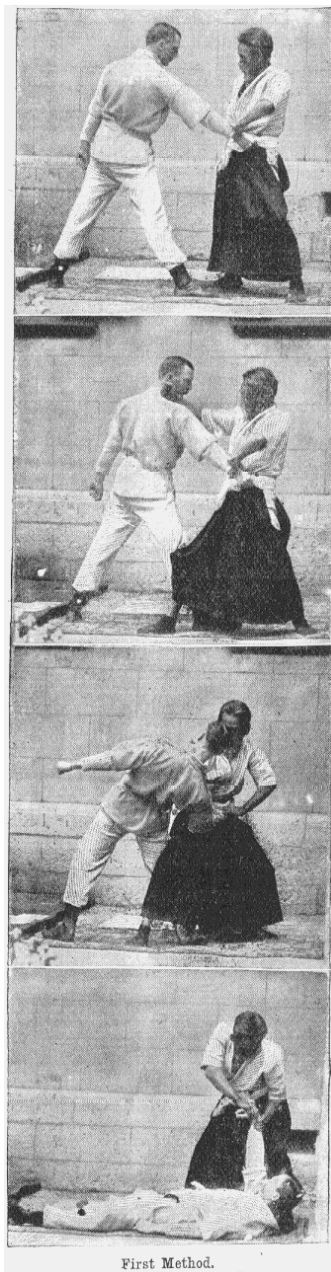


Figure 4. Uraken & O-Uchi-Gari variant

---

<sup>42</sup> Certain working class Victorian men would have been enormously physically strong because of the physical nature of their work. Due to a combination of better nutrition and lighter work, middle class men could expect to be taller yet relatively weaker.



Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the main type of grappling prevalent in the Bartitsu system of Self-Defence, a style I shall refer to as 'peg-grappling'. The essence of the system is to control an extremity, such as the limb or the head, and use the anatomical weaknesses of this 'peg' to control or overcome one's attacker. This should be contrasted to 'trunk-grappling' systems such as Judo or Wrestling, where achieving control of your opponent's 'trunk' or torso is critical to achieving throws. This preference for 'peg' over 'trunk' grappling again suggests an anticipation of a stronger, probably shorter, opponent. Possible evidence of an underlying feeling of insecurity harboured by the middle classes. It also preserves a *Ma-ai* of around 6ft. This engagement distance is preferred in combat styles that emphasise controlling one's immediate environment. The suggestion here is that even after one has dealt with one's attacker, the threat has not necessarily dissipated.



Figure 5. Defense against a group attack

This appears, then, to be one of the earliest European civilian combat manuals to address the threat of multiple opponents. Figure 5 is a demonstration of how a Bartitsuka might use a cane against a group of attackers, and whilst it is the only pictorial evidence of this fear, the fighting distance, style of fighting, and techniques chosen all point to it being a consideration in designing this system of self-defence for gentlemen.

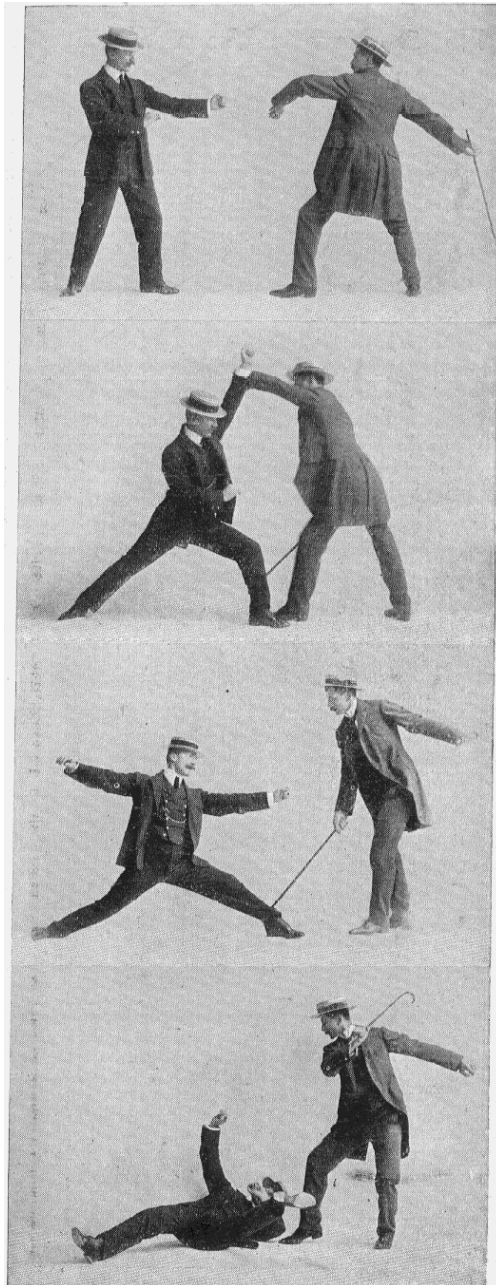


Figure 6. Defense against a Boxer

Figures 5 and 6 both make use of the walking stick as a weapon, one against a group of attackers and the other against an expertly trained pugilist. Neither of these appears attractive propositions, and the odds would almost certainly be said to be against the gentleman who encountered them. This is why he is encouraged to use his wits and, more importantly, his accessories. Carrying and using a walking stick for self-defence is far from a new idea, however Barton-Wright has moved away from the quarter-staff and cudgel play and developed the idea to apply to those smaller sticks which middle class gentlemen regularly carried. In particular, the intellectual superiority of the Bartitsu is shown against the figure of the boxer, who is out-thought rather than out-fought, and finds himself deposited on the ground 'where you can apply the stick when and how you please'.<sup>43</sup>

Figure 5 indicates a similarly high degree of self-possession and technical acumen, along with a certain amount of 'fighting dirty'. In a stressful situation, such as an ambush, the natural reaction is to launch swinging attacks. The Bartitsu in figure 5 resists this temptation, instead responding by 'bayoneting' his attackers. Given limited room in the press to swing his stick, this counterintuitive stratagem is more likely to result in his success. He is shown targeting vulnerable points on his opponent's anatomy. Firstly the solar plexus, secondly the throat, and finally the groin. Interestingly, whilst the image suggests a thrust to the stomach, the text '... seeing another man . . . with his legs slightly apart, you make a dive with your stick between his legs, and upset him', indicates otherwise.<sup>44</sup> It may be possible that the blow in the image is aimed significantly higher in order not to offend the delicate sensibilities of the public, who would consider such means underhand regardless of the circumstances.

## Conclusion

Having looked at a small selection of techniques from one manual, we have already greatly enriched our understanding of the fears of violence harboured by middle class Victorians. We have found corroborative evidence of a fear of group attacks, and particularly attacks by working class males who would not be expected to engage in a fair fight. We have also learned something of the restraint which gentlemen were expected to show.

Emelyne Godfrey has identified this trend in the negative, showing that gentlemen were less likely to carry weapons as the 19<sup>th</sup> century went on, but it is only by studying the

---

<sup>43</sup> Barton-Wright, *The Sherlock Holmes School of Self-Defence*, p. 62.

<sup>44</sup> Tony Wolfe (ed.), *The Bartitsu Compendium, Volume 1: History and Canonical Syllabus* (Raleigh: Lulu 2005) p. 239.

violence these gentlemen practised we can learn what they chose to replace these weapons with. In short; by bringing to life the tools they used to fight we gain a unique insight into the dangers they faced, both real and imagined.

This insight breathes life into the analysis of criminal and court records carried out by Martin Wiener and Clive Emsley, and it allows us a glimpse of the violence 'on the streets'. It extends the restorative work of Wood and Godfrey by moving beyond cultural sources and into embodied practices. This allows us to point to a cleavage between different kinds of violence. Firstly as an interpersonal, abusive, phenomenon (as it is in the case of something like domestic abuse), which is more likely to be recorded in the courts or literature, but secondly as a depersonalised threat, which constructs the identity of public spaces. This second kind of violence is the more intangible to historians, partly because much of it is based in fear, and partly because much of it leaves no record. By bringing these combat methods to life we understand the fears and dangers faced by gentlemen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a way no other sources could allow us to, and we can begin to ask questions about how this shaped their relation to the construction of public spaces, public policies, and public order.

The methods illustrated above are still in their infancy, and are far from perfect. Acknowledging that fact, it is still possible to see the surprising levels of detail it is possible to glean from an informed reading of these sources. By analysing slight changes in body posture, variations in technical presentation, and the use of instructional scenarios, we have been able to develop a reading of these techniques that not only corroborates extant historical sources, but adds significant depth to our understanding of these sources.

What remains to be seen is whether this idea can be applied across a range of self-defence methodologies, and whether there can be found any historical evidence to support some of the more controversial interpretations offered above. For example, do bareknuckle pugilism, police baton tactics and Jiu-Jitsu all offer a similar insight into a specific set or subset of self-defence principles and goals? If so, what are these goals, and in what circumstances and to whom do they apply? Is there sufficient evidence to support the idea, outlined above, that self-defence at the turn of the century was developing in contradistinction, if not downright contradiction, to notions of sportsmanship and fair play? These questions still remain to be answered. However, by learning how to make best use of the forgotten sources belonging to cultures of violence we can at least begin to ask them in a meaningful way, and start working our way towards systematic answers.

**Biographical note: [liamhannan@gmail.com](mailto:liamhannan@gmail.com)**

Liam Hannan is pursuing his PhD in History at the University of Manchester, examining relationships between cultures of violence and governmentality at the turn of the twentieth century. He is interested in experiential histories and is looking for ways to develop Hoplological practice to inform more traditional academic research in the field. Liam holds both an MA and an MLitt from the University of Dundee (where he was awarded the Carlaw-Martin Scholarship for research into 19<sup>th</sup> Century Prison Architecture), and has substantial experience researching and developing Martial Arts and Self-Defence material . This is his first academic paper on the subject.

Article copyright: © 2016 Liam Hannan. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)



To cite this article: Hannan, L. (2016). Understanding Victorian cultures of violence: the utility of experimental archaeology and practical hermeneutics. *Postgraduate perspectives on the past*. 2(1), 3-24. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5920/ppp.2016.212>