

## AUTHOR INTERVIEW

### CHRISTOPHER THOMPSON *Author of Highland Martial Culture*

**Paladin Press:** Why should those who practice Highland martial arts have some knowledge of Highland martial culture as well? How does the culture affect the martial arts themselves?

**Christopher Thompson:** A lot of people around the world are fascinated with Scottish Highlanders. People are drawn to the historical Highland broadsword systems not so much because those systems are unique but because they would like to practice the weapons that the Highlanders used. Learning about how these weapons were perceived and used in the context of Highland society adds depth and interest to the practice of broadsword fencing. All martial arts are practiced within a particular cultural context, and this context often shapes the tactical approach used within that art.

For instance, in the Scottish Highlands, it was against the ethic of swordsmanship to kill your opponent in a private duel unless absolutely necessary. This explains the prevalence of attacks to the sword arm, which were intended to disable the opponent while sparing his life. By understanding the history and traditions that were once associated with these weapons, the broadsword fencer can appreciate the art on a deeper level.

**PP:** Exactly who were the Gaelic warrior class? What types of people made up this group?

**CT:** The Gaelic warrior class was the “daoine uaisle” or “people of pride,” often referred to as “Highland gentlemen” in English sources. The daoine uaisle were professional warriors, who made up the front ranks of the clan regiment in times of war and who were expected to do the brunt of the fighting on behalf of the clan chief. Highland gentlemen did not work the land or engage in manual labor, but were expected to spend their time fighting, hunting, and entertaining. They were made up of the close relatives of the chief and the representatives of important branch families within the clan.

**PP:** How were initiates trained to be warriors?

**CT:** Some of the more prominent chiefs maintained schools for the instruction of young warriors. The curriculum at such a school (or “taigh suntais” as they were called) included broadsword fencing, archery, swimming, and even dancing. Broadsword masters would also accept students on a private basis.

**PP:** Were Gaelic warriors guided by rationalism and materialism, or was there a more important spiritual component that sometimes gets forgotten in the weapons books?

**CT:** The rational materialism that is often associated with Western culture was not a prominent attitude in Gaelic society. On the other hand, most Gaels would not have thought of “spirituality” as a category separate from daily life. Rather, there was a

pervasive sense of the Otherworld as an ever-present force, and most Gaelic warriors would have had a strong belief in such things as charms and incantations that could stop a bullet or turn a blade aside or render a swordsman invincible.

The bardic class of professional poets also had certain teachings (such as the “three caulrons” concept described in the book) that we would now consider mystical, and there are hints in the oral tradition that similar concepts might have once been part of the teaching of swordsmanship.

**PP:** How did the Gaelic duel differ from the duels of Continental Europe?

**CT:** The duel in Continental Europe was often over matters of honor, but the Gaelic duel was usually a trial of skill, designed to prove who was the superior swordsman. As such, the Gaelic duel usually involved fewer hard feelings and fewer fatalities. Of course, there were exceptions!

**PP:** Poetry seemed to play a large role in Highland martial culture. What was its role, and how many of these ancient poems have survived?

**CT:** Poetry has always been central to Gaelic culture. The professional poets recorded the deeds of warriors in their songs, and as such they were highly respected and even feared, as a bardic satire could destroy a man’s reputation for centuries. Because traditional song is important in Gaelic culture to this day, a great deal of very old poetry has survived.

**PP:** You are the founder and president of the CATERAN Society. What is the CATERAN Society, and how can people get more information about it?

**CT:** The CATERAN Society is an organization devoted to the research and practice of Highland martial arts. Our website can be found at <http://www.cateransociety.com/>, and our e-mail discussion group is [cateran@yahogroups.com](mailto:cateran@yahogroups.com).

However, most of our activity these days is centered on the CATERAN Society Broadsword Academy Apprenticeship Program, where we are actively training a new generation of Highland broadsword instructors in our extensive curriculum. Information about this program can be found at <http://www.cateransociety.com/broadswordacademy.html>.

To request an official invitation to join the Apprenticeship Program, readers can contact me at [gilbride100@hotmail.com](mailto:gilbride100@hotmail.com).