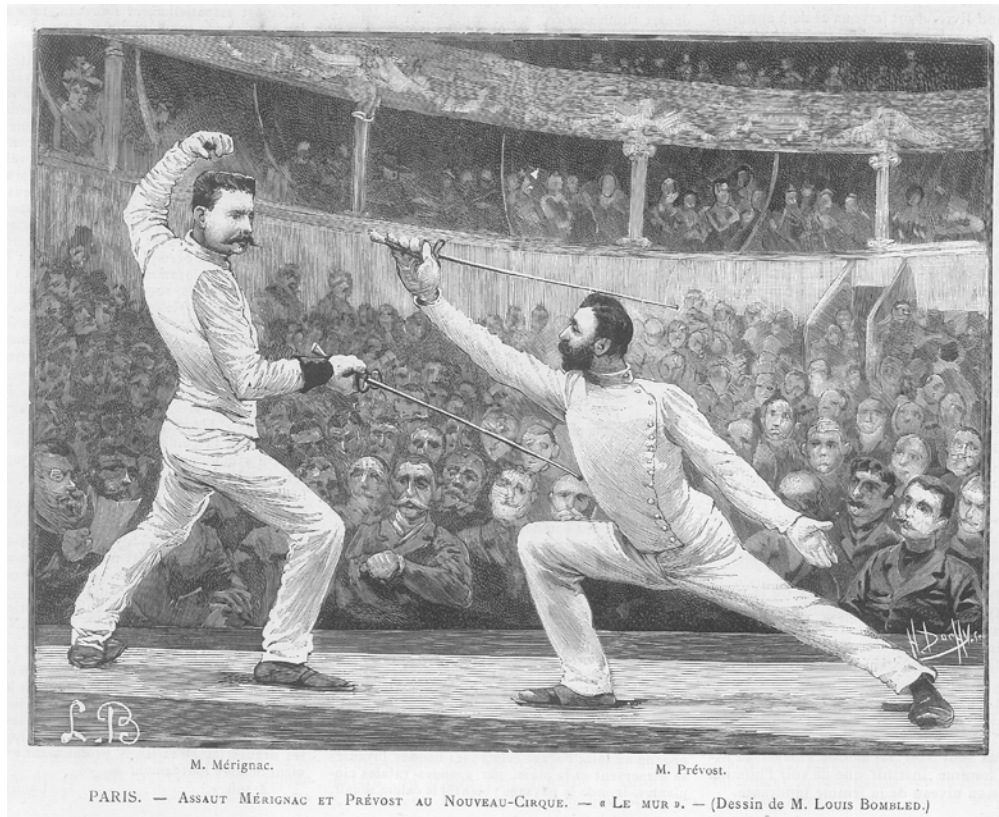


The Grand Assault

Notes On Its History



Most people view warfare and its grim accoutrements with horror and distaste, and excessive bloodlust and aggressiveness are generally viewed as negatives in most cultures. Simultaneously, many cultural traditions throughout history have exhibited a seemingly paradoxical fascination for the fighting arts and have honored those who have attained proficiency in the skills of combat. Literary sources such as *The Iliad*, *Beowulf*, and *The Song of Roland* clearly reflect the reverence that the authors' societies held for bravery in their warrior class – not to mention more modern pieces such as *The Lord of the Rings* or *Rob Roy*. Given the mass appreciation for well-honed reflexes and combative prowess as well as the notion that fighting is indeed fun – especially when there are no lives at stake – martial demonstrations and contests are a common theme. From bronze-age Crete we have frescoes depicting boxing and wrestling; later on we have evidence of war dancers and Olympic wrestlers in Classical Greece. From Rome, of course, we have the gladiatorial combats, from medieval Europe we see Knights in tournaments and jousts. In nineteenth century Europe, we see the grand assault of arms: large, sometimes exorbitant contests and demonstrations of swordplay as it was practiced in France and Italy, in which fencing masters and amateurs played out their skill before some of the most esteemed personages of the time.

Origins

Like the gladiatorial combats and jousts that preceded them, the Grand Assaults were a symptom of particular socio-historical forces; as such, it is difficult to duplicate them today. During the time of the grand assaults, fencing stood as a highly popular pastime of Europe's elite classes. In Italy and France, the privilege of carrying a sword had belonged largely to

the nobility. The seventeenth-century fencing master François Dancie even notes, with some distaste, that the only way one can distinguish between a gentleman and the newer class of wealthy merchant is through the wearing of a sword.¹ Accordingly, the nobles learned the proper usage of these weapons from skilled fencing masters who were, in turn given high social status so that gentlemen would not have to demean themselves by learning their art from a working proletariat. Beginning with the reign of Louis XIV, fencing masters could even earn a title of nobility themselves. In the first part of the 1800's the fashion of daily sword-wear died off (possibly as a side effect of the French Revolution), but with the continuing threat of the duel and the increasing popularity of fencing as an art form, it maintained its popularity among the upper classes.

Even prior to Louis XIV's mandate, there is clear evidence that competitions in swordsmanship were popular in many parts of Europe. In Tudor England, for example, candidates for the title of "Maister of Defence" had to go through a sort of final examination known as the prize fight, in which they would pit their skill against other swordsmen in a public forum – often an inn. After the Company of Maisters dissolved in the mid-1700's, professional combatants such as the famous James Figg continued to stage fights for a paying audience in a manner somewhat similar to that of professional boxing matches today. Whereas these pursuits typically attracted a more proletarian interest in England, swordsmanship contests on the continent maintained a more aristocratic bent. In one such example in 1611, the Flemish-born and Spanish-trained fencing master known as Girard Thibault is known to have participated in and won a fencing contest in Rotterdam. The Dutch masters were so impressed by his fencing style (which they had never witnessed before) that they invited him to teach in the Netherlands.²

Domenico and Henry Angelo, a father and son who popularized French methods of fence in London during the late eighteenth century, were also involved in fencing exhibitions. Domenico, having come to London in pursuit of an amour named "Peg" Worthington, was prodded by his aristocratic friends to open a fencing school after he trounced one Dr. Keys – "reputed the most expert fencer in Ireland" – in a public trial of skill in 1760. At the match were present "many ladies of rank and fashion, as well as noblemen and gentlemen" – a typical aristocratic crowd for a fencing event, although perhaps more than Angelo had expected.³

Fencing contests in the Angelos' time appear to have consisted largely of public challenges and demonstrations, though tournament-style competition was not uncommon. In his *Reminiscences* (which are generally more concerned with social recollections than fencing), Henry Angelo recalls several instances of public challenges, most notably that between two fencers named LeBrun and Lapière at his fencing school on Haymarket Street. We are told little beyond the fact that LeBrun won twelve touches to one.⁴ The Angelos also sponsored numerous public exhibitions, the most famous of which featured the Chevalier de Saint George and the Chevalier d'Eon – both close friends of the Angelo family and two of the most highly lauded fencers of the time. In 1787 the Prince of Wales himself witnessed one of these demonstrations, which was immortalized in an etching by the artist Thomas Rowlandson. Henry also mentions an Irish organization called the Knights of Tara, which held an annual meeting of amateurs, with a "diamond-cut sword" as the grand prize. True to the later Grand Assault style, "this exhibition was always honored with the presence of the lord-lieutenant and ladies, and concluded with a ball in the evening."⁵

In France, evidence for fencing competitions in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century is somewhat scarcer. Given the aristocratic history and ties of fencing, the French Revolution did a great deal to upset public exhibitions and competitions in Paris; the revolutionaries, for example disbanded the company of *Maistres en fait d'armes de Paris* (True Masters of Arms of Paris) and revoked the privileges of the *Academie d'Armes*. The

1 Dancie, F. *L'espée de combat*. 1617

2 Verwey, Herman de la Fontaine. *Gerard Thibault and his Academie de l'Espée*.

3 Angelo, H. *The Reminiscences of Henry Angelo*, Vol. I. New York: Benjamin Blom, 1969. p. 76.

4 Angelo, H. *The Reminiscences of Henry Angelo*, Vol. II. New York: Benjamin Blom 1969. p. 261.

5 Angelo, H. *Reminiscences* Vol. II, p. 228.

latter organization did not re-form until 1886, and the former was never revived.⁶ Yet despite its lower profile during this transition, fencing remained a popular and important pastime – so much so that Napoleon mandated that all military recruits be taught the usage of the foil.⁷ Under such famous masters as Jean-Louis Michel and Augustin Grisier, fencing's popularity increased as it spread to non-aristocratic people who had never been exposed to it before.

As in England, fencing demonstrations seem to have consisted of organized contests and public challenges. We do have a text on the preparation of rules for a concours d'escrime (fencing contest) that was held in 1790 in Marseille,⁸ and there are numerous anecdotes of exhibitions that involved famous masters such as the above-mentioned Jean-Louis, St. George, and Eon. Another such figure is that of Louis-Justin Lafaugère -- a military master who took part in many foil demonstrations, including one in 1816 against the Comte de Bondy, who had issued a public challenge. The bout took place "in the ballroom of an elegant house on the Quai d'Orsay," with numerous eager spectators to witness Lafaugère's victory.⁹ This elaborate type of setting is typical of early fencing contests, and was eventually epitomized in the grand assaults.

Grand Assaults and "The Golden Age of Fencing"

The grand assault proper developed in the late 1860's and early 1870's in tune with the economic and historical forces that gave birth to France's gilded age, *La Belle Epoque*. According to Robert Milton, the sports column writer for the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, this was "a time when everything is made grand – Grand Review or Grand Minister [*author's note*: the Grand Opera is another example]. It is thus that we announce the Grand Assault."¹⁰ If Milton's tone is any indicator, this 1882 event may have been the first usage of the term in such a manner, but we do know regardless that fencing contests and exhibitions had begun to expand considerably in their scope by the late 1860's, when the famous master Louis Merignac exhibited his skill against three fencers named Heidenbrunze, de Tours, and Gaspard in the Paris Exposition.¹¹

With increased prosperity came an increased interest in fencing. The attendance at fencing exhibitions rose dramatically, with hundreds and occasionally thousands of spectators standing by to watch the feats of martial prowess. The assaults became important social events, frequented by the brightest stars of both French and International society. The American publication *Harper's Weekly* reports one such event, which had 700 attendees -- admirals, generals, journalists, artists, authors, noblemen, the entire cabinet, and even the President of France himself.¹² *Le Figaro* lists a number of Grand Assaults with such eminent observers as General Ney, the Duke d'Elchingen, and the Viscount de Langle, not to mention the *dames elegantes* and other enthusiasts.¹³

The above-mentioned *Harper's* article also notes that this particular series of exhibitions took place in a concert room of the President's residence at the *Elysees*. This is certainly no rarity, as the grand assaults are defined by their glamorous venues in addition to their illustrious crowds and participants. The fencing critic Adolphe Tavernier mentions several assaults taking place at the *Cirque D'Hiver* and the *Grand Hotel*, as well as at the house of the prince A. de Chimay.¹⁴ The former two places hosted a number of assaults throughout the 1880's and 1890's alongside *Le Grand Cirque*, which hosted the 1882 event that Milton discussed above. Not only did these venues provide the elegance suited to such an event, but they also

6 Wackermann, P.C. *Histoire des Maitres d'Armes*. Paris, 2002. p. 36, 90, 100.

7 Wackermann 40.

8 Seignon, ?, *Projet de l'Établissement d'un Prix pour un Concours d'Escrime, Dans la Ville de Marseille*. Marseille: P.A. Favet, 1790.

9 Gaugler, W.M. *The History of Fencing*. Bangor, Maine: Laureate Press 1998. p. 109.

10 *Le Figaro*. Jan 12, 1882.

11 Tavernier, A. *Amateurs et Salles D'Armes de Paris*. Paris, 1885. p. 135.

12 *Harper's Weekly*. May 11, 1895.

13 *Le Figaro*. March 22, 1880.

14 Tavernier 137, 138.

had the capacity to hold the large audiences that these events often drew. Assaults could last for an evening – usually ending at midnight on these occasions -- or for as long as three days. If laden with social accoutrements beyond fencing and conversation, a *grand assaut d'escrime* could become a *gala d'escrime*, accompanied by dances and even, in some cases, by “admirably served buffets.”¹⁵

Fencing exhibitions, therefore, were not only important for the fencers themselves, but were also a major component of Parisian social life; missing an important assault or *gala d'escrime* would mean that a person had missed out on social opportunities. Given the vast interest in fencing, it is not surprising that modern fencing historians generally regard this time period as the “golden age” of the art. Newspaper articles not only advertised events and reported on results, they offered detailed descriptions of individual matches for those who had missed the events, as well as offering criticism of the fencers themselves. Tavernier’s 1885 book, *Amateurs et Salles d’Armes de Paris* served as a *Who’s Who* of Parisian circles, offering biographies and descriptions of the dashing figures and their schools so that the public could keep track. It was, in essence, the nineteenth-century French equivalent of baseball cards or *Sports Illustrated* magazine.

These events were radically different from today’s fencing competitions. More often than not, they were organized more as exhibitions or prize fights than competitions *per se*. Poster and newspaper advertisements before the assaults gave a pre-determined list of the encounters; for the most part each participant would fence only once, although exceptions did occur in the larger events. Thus the objective of each fencer was generally not only to win the assault, but also to make a good showing in his (or occasionally her) encounter. Maître Gerard Six notes that these events were often as much for show as for victory, as a well-fenced and elegant bout at a grand assault acted as a personal advertisement for those masters participating.¹⁶ It is also worth noting that decorum and manners were considered of the utmost importance in these *galas d'escrime*. *Le Figaro* reports of a sabre bout between one Casella and Lantieri: “[they were] excessively courteous... where each hit was announced without hesitation by the two champions.”¹⁷

Unlike modern competitions, the weapons practiced at the individual assaults varied a good deal depending on participants, tastes, objectives, etc. Foil, of course acted as a mainstay and could be seen in almost every event. Sabre, too, was commonly demonstrated, and oftentimes capped off the events.¹⁸ The 1882 Grand Assault, which lasted three days, stands as an unusual case in that it seems to have consisted only of bouts at the newly developed *épée de combat* (dueling sword) and sabre; if any foil bouts did take place, the paper neglected to mention it.¹⁹ *Epée* events became more common as time went on and the weapon became more popular. In 1897, *Le Figaro* sponsored an international *épée* contest, which was won by Maître Anthime Spinnewyn (as he makes sure to mention in his treatise on the weapon).²⁰ In contrast to modern events, which are limited to foil, *épée*, and sabre, the Grand Assaults also took advantage of the knowledge of other types of fence to create more dramatic demonstrations. Backsword and broadsword (heavier cutting weapons) contests featured regularly, as did bouts at singlestick -- a practice weapon for the backsword, and favorite of Theodore Roosevelt. *The New York Times* reports a grand assault at the *Cirque D’Été* in 1895, in which “shield, sword, rapier, two-handed sword, cutlass, and bayonet” were all used “[to exhibit] the various ways in which two men have cut each other’s throats at different epochs in history,” and in which the famous renaissance duel between Jarnac and La Chastaignerie was recreated.²¹ The English fencers Egerton Castle and Alfred Hutton gave exhibitions of longsword, rapier and dagger, and sidesword (amongst others) at the grand

15 *Le Figaro*. March 22, 1880.

16 Personal communication.

17 *Le Figaro*. Jan 16, 1882.

18 *Le Figaro*. Jan. 12, 1882, AND

de Maupassant, G. *Le Bel Ami*. Paris: Garnier, 1988

19 *Le Figaro*. Jan 16, 1882.

20 Spinnewyn, A., & Manoury. *L’escrime a l’epée*. Paris: 1898.

21 *The New York Times*. May 5, 1895.

assaults in which they participated in the 1890's; other British exhibitions included such events as mounted combat with sword and lance and assaults at quarterstaff.²² Women did not usually participate in the grand assaults, although they were able to occasionally show off their considerable skill at the foils in these events. The French author Guy de Maupassant gives a fictional account of a grand assault in which the spectators are so moved by the beauty of a bout between two young women that they pay no attention to the sabre bout that follows it.²³

The New Seed: Grand Assaults Across The Pond

La Belle Epoque in France coincided with the end of Reconstruction and the birth of The Gilded Age in the United States. This was a period of prosperity for the Americans just as it was for the French, and well-to-do Americans began to fall in love all over again with things European. For decades Americans had largely tended to ignore fencing with the exception of the Louisiana Creoles, who were well-known for their love of dueling and who also were known to host their own Grand Assaults; in 1840, for example a competition was held in New Orleans in which the masters of the day actively excluded the famous duelist and teacher Jose "Pepe" Llulla, purportedly out of jealousy at his success. As fencing began to decline in New Orleans some thirty years later, fencing became a fad almost overnight in the country's other major metropolitan areas.²⁴ Prior to the mid-1870's it is an immense challenge to find any mention of the discipline in American newspapers; after 1880, the papers almost abound with fencing news. As Ken Mondschein has pointed out in his article "The Other Wild West", the papers which did focus on fencing tended to be those which catered to a more monetarily-endowed crowd, with Harper's Weekly and the New York Tribune leading the way.²⁵

By the mid-1890's New York had two successful clubs and Boston had one; the era of New World Grand Assaults had begun. The earliest of these events took place in 1876, when the French immigrant Master Regis Senac fenced against Colonel T. H. Monstery "for the championship of the United States and Spanish America" at Tammany Hall. Although the title itself was of questionable value (given the dearth of fencing in the western hemisphere at the time), the event did have most of the qualifications of a true grand assault: a large crowd, a predetermined match-up, and an illustrious location. After having lost the foil event and having won the sabre event, Monstery defaulted, and Senac was declared winner on the understanding that Monstery would challenge Senac again.²⁶ Apparently the second contest never materialized, but Senac fenced for the "Championship of the Americas" at least three more times, finally losing to a Frenchman named Louis Treuchet after having defeated Errico Casella (possibly the same Casella mentioned above) and Albert Vaughn. All of these contests were fenced at Tammany Hall with the exception of Senac vs. Casella, which was fenced at Cosmopolitan Hall.²⁷ Senac hosted and participated in a number of other demonstrations throughout the 1880's and 1890's, at one point even fencing against three opponents at once.²⁸

In 1895, Boston enjoyed a true *gala d'escrime* at Papant's Hall, where the Boston Fencing Club invited the best fencers to an event so filled with spectators that the only open space was the fencing strip itself. This particular assault featured broadsword and singlestick, much to the delight of the spectators who had never witnessed such an event before. The commentator for *Harper's Weekly* notes that "The example of Boston may be profitably imitated by the rest of the country. There is no healthier sport than fencing."²⁹

22 Wolf, T. "A Grand Assault-at-Arms." *Journal of Manly Arts*, 2001.

23 Maupassant.

24 *The New York Times*. May 2, 1897.

25 Mondschein, K. "The Other Wild West." *Hammerterz Forum*.

26 *The New York Times*. April 11, 1876.

27 Mondschein 2, AND

28 *The New York Times*. April 6, 1884.

The New York Times. March 4, 1887.

29 Harper's Weekly. March 26, 1895.

In 1893 and 1894 there passed a whirlwind of fencing assaults such as New York had never encountered before. In November, December, and January, the three great Italian masters Eugenio Pini, Agesilao Greco, and Carlo Pessina made a stopover to demonstrate their tremendous skills to the people of the New World. The stay began with a *gala d'escrime* at The Fencer's Club (which is still in existence in New York), where the visiting French military master L. Vauthier faced off against M. Jacoby, the former instructor at The Fencer's Club. In addition to foil, there were demonstrations of broadsword, dueling sword, and even "Japanese singlesticks" (i.e., kendo practiced with *shinai*) by Shilo Sacaze of Nagasaki. Amongst the attendees that night was none other than Mark Twain.³⁰ Although they were present, the three Italians did not fence in this event. They did participate in a grand assault three weeks later at the Lyceum Opera House, where a horde of Italian immigrants was so enthusiastic that – in the words of the reporter – they reminded one of "a mob of raving lunatics" or a "theatre riot." In a venue so packed that there wasn't even standing room available, the Italians faced off against such worthies as M. Gouspy and Louis Senac (the son of Regis). The crowd grew so boisterous at one point that Pini, "his countrymen's idol," had to admonish them during the bout with the statement that "true Italians should always be courteous to a worthy adversary."³¹ Greco managed to defeat the young Senac handily, despite having been wounded on the head in a mounted broadsword tournament at Madison Square Garden only days before!

Olympics, World War, and the Decline of Grand Assaults

Two bells struck the death-knell of the grand assaults. The first of these was the first Olympic Games in 1896, in which fencing was one of the four initial events. With the Olympics, international competition grew increasingly important, and fencing contests became more and more organized toward the goal of victory over the entire field of competitors, rather than a demonstration of skill. The tournament-style format, in which fencers are eliminated one-by-one until there is only one left standing (so to speak) became the norm in the new *Federation Internationale d'Escrime* (F.I.E.), as evidenced in issues of the French fencing magazine *Escrime et le tir* in the 1920's. With only foil, épée, and sabre left as "official" fencing weapons, such disciplines as broadsword and singlestick fell into increasing disuse. Given the severe politico-economic disruption of the two world wars – not to mention the myriad of fencers who met their deaths as a result of these wars – people had fewer resources to devote to the extravagant *galas d'escrime*. Fencing competitions, in effect, became singular in focus as all of the glamour of the galas was eliminated. The widespread adoption of electrical scoring in the middle of the twentieth century also began to alter the rules and the fencing itself, so that it became more difficult for non-initiates to understand and appreciate the phrases of a fencing bout. Thus fencing lost what few spectators it had retained by the end of the century.

The last of the grand assaults – not in name, but in spirit – was among the most famous fencing matches in the history of the discipline: that between the French champion Lucien Gaudin and his Italian counterpart Aldo Nadi in 1922. A result of a public challenge rather than a tournament or competition, the event took place before a sold-out crowd of thousands. Gaudin stood as the official victor at the end, though of course proponents of French and Italian styles argue to this day about who "really" won. The importance of this match was deemed so great that the French government awarded Gaudin the Legion of Honor for his victory. Nadi himself continued to draw tremendous audiences at demonstrations, fencing before a capacity crowd at New York's Plaza Hotel in 1935. Such events became increasingly rare, and although Nadi was one of the first of the new generation of "sport fencers," one could also argue that he was one of the last carriers of the flashiness and romanticism of the grand assaults – thus he could draw the huge crowds that he did. When Nadi died, much of that magnetism died with him.

The appeal of combat exhibitions and demonstrations of skill did not die out with the grand assaults. It lingers on in the fans of televised sporting events such as football, boxing, wrestling, sumo, or rugby, all of which have a mass appeal similar to that which the assaults

³⁰ *The New York Times*. Nov. 21, 1893.

³¹ *The New York Times*. Dec. 12, 1893.

enjoyed a little more than a century ago. Yet although fencing is seldom viewed as a "spectator sport" today, it may be premature to ascribe the grand assaults as a curiosity of a dim past. The Association for Historical Fencing (AHF), founded in order to preserve and encourage fencing as it was practiced in the nineteenth century and before, is fighting to raise public awareness of the discipline and has begun an initiative to revive the grand assault tradition. In July 2003, the AHF held its first annual Grand Assault of Arms at the City Center in New York. This tremendously successful event drew fencers from across the country to compete in foil, épée, sabre, and singlestick. As with the grand assaults of old, it advertised and drew public attendance. In addition to the competitions, the event offered demonstrations of older weapons such as French small sword and Italian rapier – the dueling weapons that were the ancestors of the fencing implements we know today. Each year, it is hoped that the scope of this event will increase until it has all the glamour of the galas of old.

With growing interest in fencing and a rapidly expanding movement of fencers interested in preserving and resurrecting older styles, weapons, and techniques, the grand assault of a thousand spectators may linger only one or two bends up the road.

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