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## Nineteenth Century French Military Sabre : Sport, Duel and War Fencing

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**Abstract** – Numerous treaties and methods regarding fencing are known today, either written by experts, veterans of sword-masters, or by the ministry or war and its branches: the schools of Joinville and Saumur. Some are destined to horse riders, others to officers. Each of these methods has its own particularities and, due to the abundance of treaties, discerning the qualities, the flaws, and the overall interest of a specific method can seem complicated. An attempt is made below to answer: why were the methods of French saber in the nineteenth century conceived and Why were they made this way, and what connection do they share with the French military world. These texts are compared and analyzed to uncover their function regarding the Army. From this analysis, three types of fencing will emerge, sometimes opposite, sometimes complementary; war fencing: conceived to be applicable on the battlefield – duel fencing (that was less official but still popular in nineteenth century France) – and finally, recreational fencing, most often taking the form of a sport.

**Keywords** – sabre fencing; French military fencing; nineteenth century

### I. INTRODUCTION

Treaties, essays and rulesets on sabre written in French are numerous and diverse, whether they concern “sabre fencing”, “espadon” or “contrepoinTE”. About twenty of these documents have been listed to this day, covering a period ranging from the early Nineteenth century to the 1930’s<sup>1</sup>. Among the oldest treaties are those of J. De St Martin<sup>2</sup>, the later works of Alexandre Muller or Valville<sup>3</sup>, many official documents from the

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<sup>1</sup> There are certainly many others to be found.

<sup>2</sup> St Martin, J. de, *L’Art de faire ses armes réduit à ses vrais principes*, Vienne, Jeanne Schrämbel, 1804.

<sup>3</sup> Müller, Alexandre, *Théorie sur l’escrime à cheval pour se défendre*, Cordier, Paris, 1816; Valville, Alexandre, *Traité sur la Contre-pointe*, St Petersburg, chez Charles Kray, 1817.

Ministry of War and the Ministry of Marine and Colonies<sup>4</sup>, and more recent writings like the works of André & Alessandri or Romuald Brunet<sup>5</sup>...

Many have already been digitized, either by official French organisations like the BNF (National Library of France) via the program *Gallica*, or by some components of the French HEMA world<sup>6</sup>. This abundance of sources on French sabre drives researchers of the HEMA sphere and lovers of sabre fencing into analyzing what they say, how they evolve, and in what contexts they were created.

Having worked for some time on Nineteenth century French military fencing in its most iconic form, that is bayonet fencing<sup>7</sup>, I naturally started investigating military sabre fencing, and by extension, the whole tradition of French and Francophone sabre fencing in this period. Thus, I rapidly became familiar with treaties on sabre and their inherent problems, which appear to be relatively similar to those of bayonet fencing, at least concerning military sabre. Incidentally, the period during which those treaties have been published is almost identical. Indeed, the history of French sabre fencing, or technically of its teaching and publication, started with the French Revolution and the following military campaigns, those of the First Republic and of Napoleon. Compared to a weapon like the Scottish broadsword, that thrived in the late seventeenth century and was used in contexts fairly like those of French sabre, the golden age of the latter occurred relatively late. It is necessary to bear in mind that the deep social changes occasioned by the Revolution had strong repercussions on French military organization, on the Army in general, and of course on war fencing.

Contrary to what one might think, these changes do not concern sabres replacing small-swords, but a shift in the perception of bladed weapons used for war, at a time when sabres became predominant on the battlefield. Sabres have a long history in France, as attested by Captain Bottet, author of several monographs on the use of bladed weapons in the French Army<sup>8</sup>. Bottet marked the arrival of sabres in France during the Thirty Years

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<sup>4</sup> For example: Ministère de la Guerre, *Ordonnance sur l'exercice et les évolutions de la cavalerie du 6 décembre 1829*, Anselin, Paris, 1830, p. 213; Ministère de la Marine et des Colonies, *Manuel pour l'enseignement de la gymnastique et de l'escrime*, J. Dumaine, Paris, 1875, p. 229.

<sup>5</sup> Brunet, Romuald, *Traité d'escrime, Pointe et contrepointe*, Rouveyre & Blond, Paris, 1884; André, Émile et Alessandri, A., *L'escrime du sabre à cheval*, E. Flammarion, Paris, 1899.

<sup>6</sup> The following groups have all scanned and shared treaties on sabre fencing: The French HEMA Federation (FFAMHE) as part of the "PALAS" project, the Burgundian association De Taille et d'Estoc and the Swiss association GAFSchola based in Fribourg.

<sup>7</sup> Which occasioned the publication of a study dedicated to bayonet in 2016: Garry, Julien, *La baïonnette, histoire d'une escrime de guerre*, L'œil d'or, Paris, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Bottet, Maurice, *L'arme blanche de guerre française au XVIII<sup>e</sup>*, Decoupman, St Laurent le Minier, 2015 (first publication in 1910). Bottet, Maurice, *Monographies de l'arme blanche (1789 – 1870) et de l'arme à feu portative (1718 – 1900) des armées françaises de terre et de mer*, Haussmann, Paris, 1859.

War (1618-1648), and indicated that they had been imported from Germany by the cavalry<sup>9</sup>.

Here is how Bottet describes the perception of bladed weapons before the Revolution:

“Moreover, (the bladed weapon) is hard to define, rulesets are often too vague regarding it. During the eighteenth century, it was considered more as a tool than a proper weapon.<sup>10</sup>”

Indeed, during the Old Regime, small-sword was the only weapon that implied the teaching of fencing, which tends to explain the profusion of treaties on sword fencing destined to officers and soldiers, and the lack of texts concerning sabres<sup>11</sup>. French fencing was, at the time, a “science of small-sword”, and publication regarding this weapon were numerous<sup>12</sup>.

It is noticeable that sabre is not mentioned in the definition of “fencing” in the *Encyclopedia* by Diderot and d’Alembert:

“FENCING, s. f. The art of defending oneself or to use a sword to harm an enemy, and preserving oneself.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Op. Cit. *L’arme blanche de guerre française au XVIII<sup>e</sup>*, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> “De plus, elle est particulièrement difficile à définir, tant les règlements sont peu explicites à son endroit; tout le cours du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, elle est considérée comme faisant bien plus partie de l’équipement que de l’armement [...]” Op. Cit. *L’arme blanche de guerre française au XVIII<sup>e</sup>*, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> One of the most famous fencing treaties written for the Army in the eighteenth century was written by Jacques François Girard in 1740, with a second edition in 1755. Girard, Pierre Jacques François, *Traité des armes, dédié au Roy*, La Hate, Pierre de Hondt, 1740; Girard, Pierre Jacques François, *L’académie de l’homme d’épée, ou la science parfaite des exercices offensif et défensif*, La Hate, Van Duren, 1755.

<sup>12</sup> Exhaustive lists of sources can be consulted via the French HEMA Federation Wiki page.

(URL: [http://www.ffamhe.fr/wiki/Cat%C3%A9gorie:%C3%89p%C3%A9\\_de\\_cour](http://www.ffamhe.fr/wiki/Cat%C3%A9gorie:%C3%89p%C3%A9_de_cour)), and the forum of the Schola Gladiatoria. (URL : <http://www.fioredeiliberi.org/phpBB3/viewforum.php?f=21&sid=97379a442429613d9e906f29c1abc9f4>).

<sup>13</sup>“ESCRIME, s. f. L’art de se défendre ou de se servir de l’épée pour blesser son ennemi, & se garantir soi-même de ses coups.” Diderot, Denis and le Rond d’Alembert, Jean, *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, Briasson-David-Le Breton-Durand, Paris, 1751-1772, 1751 (Tome 5, p. 949-951).

While the Encyclopedia gives much room to fencing, as the definition is a full source (written by Domenico Angelo<sup>14</sup>), it is very limited and vague regarding sabre, even though it had been used for decades.

“SABRE or SIMITAR, s. m. (*milit. Art.*), sort of sharp and very wide sword, with a strong a heavy blade, thick at the back and curved up to the point. This word comes from *sabel*, which bears a similar meaning in German, or from *slavon*, *sabla*, sort of sabre. The Turks are very handy with a sabre, which is the weapon they usually wear at their belt. Some say they can cut a man in half with a single cut of their *sabre*.”<sup>15</sup>

It appears that this weapon was not highly considered, and that it was most often relegated to the status of curiosity.

However, military authors became interested in this weapon as it gained more and more popularity in the army, extending beyond the limits of cavalry to replace small-swords on the belts of officers. Of course, this replacement was not instantaneous, and though it is supposed to have started in 1789, it was not complete at the end of Napoleon’s campaigns in 1815. At the same time, sabres became first class weapons aboard ships, were it at the belt of officers or of sailors of the Military Marine. Since 1783, French weapon manufactures produced a standard model of boarding sabre (also called a cutlass). In 1811, the Ministry of War released a new model of sabre for its crews: the boarding sabre model 1811. These sailor’s weapons were often shorter than usual sabres, with a large basket, and were called “cuillères à pot”<sup>16</sup>.

Thus, horse riders, officers and sailors were the three groups to officially adopt the sabre. However, though the object was carried by soldiers, there was still no method, or system on how to use it. In the following pages we will demonstrate how this type of military fencing appeared and evolved in Nineteen Century France and beyond. The different actors who shaped it will be presented; sword-masters, veterans and public institutions. We will also analyze how this martial art came to outgrow its original framework: war

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<sup>14</sup> The article is illustrated with the following compilation: Diderot, Denis et le Rond d’Alembert, Jean, *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, Fabrique des armes, escrime : recueil de planches sur les sciences, les arts libéraux et les arts mécaniques, avec leur explication*, Briasson-David-Le Breton-Durand, Paris, 1751-1772.

<sup>15</sup> “SABRE, ou CIMETERRE, s. m. (*Art milit.*) espèce d’épée tranchante qui a beaucoup de largeur, & dont la lame est forte, pesante, épaisse par le dos, & terminée en arc vers la pointe. Ce mot vient de *sabel*, qui a la même signification en allemand, ou du mot *slavon*, *sabla*, espèce de sabre. Les Turcs se servent fort adroitement de cette arme, qui est celle qu’ils portent ordinairement à leur col. On dit qu’ils peuvent couper d’un seul coup de sabre un homme de part en part” Op. Cit. *L’Encyclopédie*, Tome 14, p. 469.

<sup>16</sup> The term comes from the French saying “fait en deux coups de cuillère à pot” that refers to a sort of ladle and translates into “in two shakes”. *L’arme blanche de guerre française au XVIII<sup>e</sup>*, p. 38-39.

fencing, to change into duel fencing, combat sport, and finally to join the category of Olympic fencings in the early years of the Twentieth Century.

Before we tackle the main issue, it seems important to clarify some elements of definition: the “sabre” as it is described today is “a bladed weapon with one single cutting edge, often curved, with a hilt, a cross guard and sometimes a counter-guard and a basket”. However, this contemporary definition does not correspond to the sabre used in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Therefore, in treatises such as this of St Martin<sup>17</sup> or Girard<sup>18</sup>, the term “espadon” is preferred, referring to a wider category of weapons such as forte-épées/broadswords and curved sabres, while ‘saber’ is specific to the cavalry. So, the sabre is not defined as a fixed and immutable object but by opposition to the lighter small sword, the blade of which is straight and thin, made for thrusting. The same definition by opposition is used in the nomenclature of “contre-pointe” used by Valville and Brunet<sup>19</sup>. “Contre-pointe” refers to a type of fencing opposed to “Pointe” that is small-sword fencing. Therefore, the term ‘contre-pointe’ covers more than sabre fencing, it implies all bladed weapons, sabres of all shapes or broadswords (sometimes called “palash” in Germany and in Eastern Europe.) On the other hand, some authors such as Durfort<sup>20</sup> made a distinction that is no longer relevant to us – the 1816 model (An XIII) with a straight blade, labeled nowadays as a “heavy-cavalry sabre”, was called a broadsword by Durfort. And though the term “contre-pointe” seems to be fairly consistent in its definition, comparing its various uses across time reveals quite a large variety of “contre-pointes”. Thus, it became easier to define “contre-pointe” by what it isn’t – a fencing method favoring thrusts with swords – than by what it is. The same imprecisions go for the term “espadon” we have previously used, as it sometimes refers to a type of weapon, and other times designate a fencing method that is either similar or opposed to the “contre-pointe”. In 1818, the Chevalier Chatelain wrote:

“We’ve talked about pointe, contre-pointe and espadon, without ever saying what type of weapon should be used for these techniques; is it a straight saber or a curved sabre?”<sup>21</sup> ”

The Chevalier informs us, without specifying their differences, that he knew of at least two different fencing styles with sabre, both opposite to sword-fencing (pointe).

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. J. de St Martin, p. 93.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. Pierre Jacques François Girard, 1740, p. 93.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. Alexandre Valville; Ibid. Romuald Brunet, p. 69.

<sup>20</sup> Durfort Armand-Celeste, *Instruction pour la cavalerie, sur le maniement le plus avantageux du sabre, publiée en 1796, par Schmidt ... Traduit de l'allemand, par un officier général, et précédée d'une dissertation sur l'antiquité de l'art de s'escrimer à cheval, par le traducteur*, Anselin, Paris, 1828, p. I à CCCXXXIIJ.

<sup>21</sup> Chatelain, René Théophile, *chevalier, Traité d'escrime à pied et à cheval*, Magimel, Anselin & Pochard, Paris, 1818, p. 77.

Given these pieces of evidence, it seems fair to state that there is probably as many kinds of “contre-pointe” and “espadon” as there are authors using them (even though some continuity of use can be sensed).

## II. A WEAPON FOR THE BATTLEFIELD

It is now clear to the reader that the sabre first appeared on French territory as a “weapon of war”. During the late eighteenth century, the cavalry, the marine, followed by the infantry and finally the officer corps, adopted the sabre. In his description of the weapon factory of Klingenthal<sup>22</sup>, Maurice Bottet indicated the number of sabre blades produced in the year 1789: 895 cavalry sabres, 1327 hussar sabres, 514 dragoon sabres, 4329 short infantry sabres and 236 marine sabres, along with several hundreds of other models destined to more specific army corps, and to officers<sup>23</sup>.

However, the sabre still lacked a clearly defined method or system of combat. Historians and Military History specialists William Serman and Jean Paul Bertaud gave a good view of the deep modifications made to the French military system after the Revolution, in their remarkable study: *Nouvelle histoire militaire de la France 1789-1919*<sup>24</sup>.

First and foremost; the nationalization of the French Army, that went from a protean, divided and regionalized entity to a united and rationalized system<sup>25</sup>. Measures undertaken by the successive governments that followed 1789, deeply modified the way knowledge was shared. According to the Serman and Bertaud; though the first military training camps appeared, oral transmission from veterans to new recruits was still the main way of learning<sup>26</sup>:

“Letters of recruits indicate that, though the handling of firearms is learned during the day, training continues in the barracks.”<sup>27</sup>

However, though training with weapons was still scarce until the end of Napoleon’s campaigns and depended on the knowledge of veterans, it did not stop some from proposing methods of sabre fencing to the French Army.

<sup>22</sup> In the eighteenth century, the manufacture of Klingenthal, in Alsace, were the center of bladed weapons production for the armies of the King, of the Republic and then of the Empire. see: Aubry, Bernard, *L'Histoire de la baïonnette à travers les siècles*, édition du Brevail, Brazey en plaine, 2014, p. 117. “La Manufacture d’armes de Klingenthal ou la Manufacture d’Alsace”.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. *L’arme blanche de guerre française au XVIII<sup>e</sup>*, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> Serman, William & Bertaud Jean-Paul, *Nouvelle histoire militaire de la France 1789-1919*, Fayard, Lille, 1998.

<sup>25</sup> Op. Cit. *Nouvelle histoire militaire de la France 1789-1919*, p 47-72.

<sup>26</sup> Op. Cit. *Nouvelle histoire militaire de la France 1789-1919*, p 84.

<sup>27</sup> « Les recrues témoignent dans leurs correspondances que, si elles apprennent le plus souvent le maniement des armes en marchant, elles reçoivent un complément de formation au bivouac.”

Cavalry was the first corps to benefit from a method.

### III. A SABRE FOR CAVALRYMEN

One of the first publication on sabre fencing on horseback was that of **J. De St Martin** (Vienna 1804)<sup>28</sup>. This volume deals, on one hand, with small sword fencing, and on the other hand with “l’art de l’espadaon”. It ends with two shorts chapters, respectively dedicated to boarding (p.46) and to duel (p.51) and is very original in many respects. For example, and though the text is written in French, it was not destined to the French army but to the soldiers of Austria, even though the techniques presented by St Martin were those he had learned, for sword-fencing at least, from a famous Parisian master of arms: Guillaume Danet<sup>29</sup>. At the time, St Martin was already an old man and presented this method as the result of his own experience.



Figure 1 St Martin

His method of sabre fencing is pragmatic and learned, guards and techniques are numerous and presented in a innovative way: for each technique on horseback, an equivalent on foot is described.

Some years later, a veteran of the Napoleonic campaigns published a work that stood out for its clarity of instruction. It was Alexandre Müller, and his *Théorie sur l’escrime à cheval*

<sup>28</sup> St Martin, J. de, *L’Art de faire ses armes réduit à ses vrais principes*, Vienne, Jeanne Schrämble, 1804.

<sup>29</sup> Op. Cit. de St Martin, p.10.



*pour se défendre*<sup>30</sup> (*Theory on how to defend on horseback with fencing*). The text is set up to look like the regulation manuals that circulated in the cavalry at the time.



Figure 2 Müller

His method is simple, and while St Martin wrote for cavalry officers, Müller aimed at teaching the soldiers, the men, and his work was directly destined to cavalry instructors.

Müller's objective was clear: in 1811, the Ministry of War had published the first official method of war fencing for the army, a text on the handling of the lance<sup>31</sup>, that was then integrated to the regulation manuals of the cavalry in 1813<sup>32</sup>. Müller hoped that his work would know the same fate and would become the official method for the cavalry. Though it did not reach this goal, it was successful and republished in 1828.

A year later the Chevalier Chatelain published his substantial study *Guide des officiers de cavalerie*<sup>33</sup> in which he developed his vision of fencing on horseback. The *Traité d'escrime* included at the end of his work is mainly a treaty of small sword on foot, destined to soldiers and officers. Chatelain's point of view is perfectly synthesized in the following lines:

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<sup>30</sup> Müller, Alexandre, *Théorie sur l'escrime à cheval pour se défendre*, Cordier, Paris, 1816.

<sup>31</sup> Ministère de la Guerre, *Règlement portant instruction sur les manœuvres et l'exercice de la lance*, Magimel, Paris, 1811.

<sup>32</sup> Ministère de la guerre, *Ordonnance provisoire sur l'exercice et les manœuvres de la cavalerie, rédigée par ordre du ministre de la guerre, du 1er vendémiaire an XIII. 2e édition. Suivie de l'instruction du 24 septembre 1811, sur l'exercice et les manœuvres de la lance*, Magimel, Paris, 1813.

<sup>33</sup> Chatelain, René Théophile, chevalier, *Le guide des officiers de cavalerie*, Magimel Anselin & Pochard, Paris, 1817.

“The principles of fencing on foot can be transposed to fencing on horseback. All the movements of small sword fencing, feints and parries, can be done, though the sabre in the rider’s hand weights three times as much as a small sword. It is thus necessary to acquaint him with a weapon that weighs the same than the one he will have to use on the battlefield.<sup>34</sup>”

The rest of his work is a literary dissertation on the history of horse-riders fighting in close combat and on the ways to adapt small-sword fencing to sabre fencing on horseback. The main interest of this study resides in the fact that it was written by an excellent horse rider, who was very aware of the problems of fighting on horseback, as a student and as a teacher.

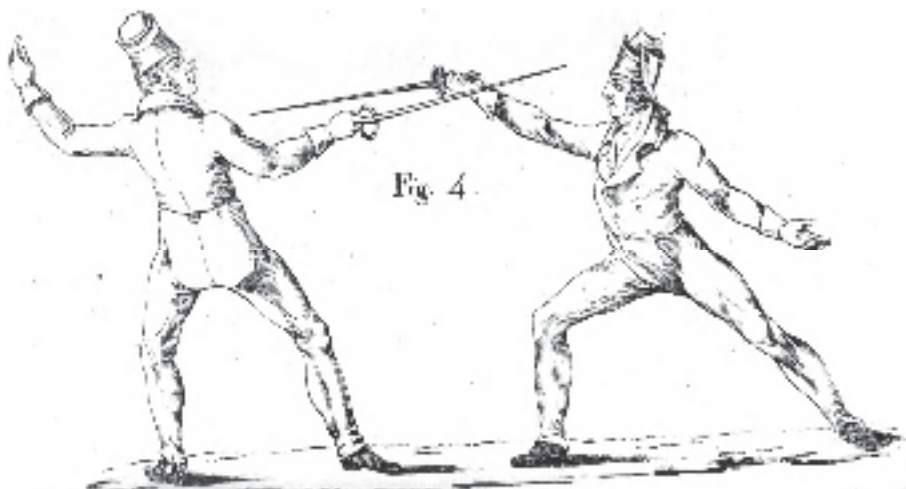


Figure 3 Chatelain.

In 1829<sup>35</sup>, following these publications, the Ministry of War rapidly decided to include an official fencing method to the editions of the cavalry rulesets, as Müller wished. It seems that this method originated from the newly created National Cavalry School of Saumur that published, in 1828, a ruleset very similar to this of the Ministry.

Throughout the nineteenth century and until the early years of the twentieth century, this method became the most popular, being extensively taught, and evolving with every

<sup>34</sup> “Les principes de l’escrime à pied peuvent se mettre en pratique à cheval. On peut faire tous les mouvements de l’épée, les feintes et les parades; mais le cavalier à un sabre qui pèse trois fois autant qu’une épée. Il convient donc de l’accoutumer insensiblement à manier une arme qui ait le même poids que celle avec laquelle il doit combattre.” Op. Cit. *Le guide des officiers de cavalerie*, p. 76.

<sup>35</sup> Ministère de la Guerre, *Ordonnance sur l’exercice et les évolutions de la cavalerie du 6 décembre 1829*, Anselin, Paris, 1830, p. 213.

republication of the cavalry rulesets. The editions of 1873<sup>36</sup>, 1882<sup>37</sup> or 1911<sup>38</sup>, to name but a few, all vary from the original in some respects.

Similarly to bayonet fencing, the existence of an official method did not stop specialists from proposing their own versions of sabre-fencing on horseback, either to improve or to replace the Ministry's text. M. Ivanowski<sup>39</sup>, polish veteran of the Napoleonic campaigns, is a good example, as he advised the French cavalry on using curved sabres, and the appropriate fencing methods, in the polish style. Count Durfort<sup>40</sup>, on the other hand, chose to translate a German method of fencing on horseback, written by a man named Schmitt, to complete the knowledge of military instructors.

In a different way, captain Dutilh<sup>41</sup>, instructor of the 1st regiment of Dragoons, wrote a global study on cavalry that can be compared to the chevalier Chatelain's work. He included an augmented version of the "official" fencing method, justifying it in this way:

"This preliminary instruction teaches our men to know the offensive and defensive potential of their weapon, but once they are left to themselves they can make no clever or appropriate use of this instruction. We must admit that this lack is due, firstly, to the approximations of the movements described in the fourth lesson, and secondly to the inclination of sword masters to value only small sword playing at the expense of sabre fencing<sup>42</sup>"

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<sup>36</sup> Ministère de la Guerre, *Règlement provisoire sur les exercices de la cavalerie*, J. Dumaine, Paris, 1873.

<sup>37</sup> Ministère de la Guerre, *Décret du 31 mai 1882 portant Règlement sur les Exercices de la Cavalerie*, C. Lavauzelle, Paris, 1882.

<sup>38</sup> Ministère de la guerre, *Décret portant règlement sur les exercices et les manœuvres de la cavalerie*, Berger-Levrault, Paris, 1911.

<sup>39</sup> Ivanowski, *Nouveau système d'escrime pour la cavalerie, fondé sur l'emploi d'un nouveau sabre inventé par M. Ivanowski*, Poussielgue, Paris, 1834.

<sup>40</sup> Durfort, Armand-Celeste comte de, *Instruction pour la cavalerie, sur le maniement le plus avantageux du sabre, publiée en 1796, par Schmidt ... Traduit de l'allemand, par un officier général, et précédée d'une dissertation sur l'antiquité de l'art de s'escrimer à cheval, par le traducteur*, Anselin, Paris, 1828.

<sup>41</sup> Dutilh, Mathieu François, *Gymnastique équestre. Méthode progressive applicable au dressage du cheval de troupe, d'officier et d'amateur, suivie d'un essai sur l'escrime du sabre*, A. Bastien, Toul, 1864.

<sup>42</sup> "Au moyen de cette instruction préliminaire, nos hommes apprennent à connaître les ressources de leur arme pour l'attaque et pour la défense, mais, abandonnés à eux-mêmes, ils ne savent en faire aucune application judicieuse et opportune. Cette lacune provient, il faut bien le croire, de l'insuffisance des mouvements composés de la quatrième leçon, et en second lieu de ce que les maîtres d'armes, presque tous voués au jeu de l'épée, n'attachent qu'une importance très-secondaire à l'escrime du sabre." Op. Cit. Dutilh, p. 107-108.

In the same vein, though more than thirty years later, **captain Alessandri**, former sword master of the Republican Guard published his own enhanced version of the ruleset<sup>43</sup>. This was done with the help of the famous sports journalist and specialist of martial arts Emile André.

Up until the complete rewriting of military rulesets during the Second World War, and the withdrawal of sabre lessons from the cavalry methods, sabre fencing on horseback has polarized the specialist's attention. However, the applications for sabre were still numerous.

#### IV. A SABRE FOR OFFICERS

In the years that followed the Revolution, French officers of all corps were equipped with a wide variety of weapons. Small swords, broadswords, sabres curved or straight, standardized or personal blades, making the generalization of officer's weapons a complicated task. More so as, in a given army or even in a given regiment, officers and non-commissioned officers did not necessarily have the same weaponry. The scholarly work of Jean Lhoste and his colleagues, that were aimed at weapon collectors, attempted at giving an inventory, or at least a summary of how diverse was the officers' equipment. *Les sabres portés par l'armée française*<sup>44</sup>, provides an overview of all categories of weapon that fall under the term "sabre", and *Arme blanches, symbolisme, inscriptions, marquages, fourbisseurs, manufactures*<sup>45</sup>, tackles the other weapons used by soldiers and officers. These studies, all obvious archeological interests set aside, highlight the symbolic and affective predominance of bladed weapons in the officers' corps. It is also noticeable that at a time when former titles of chivalry were forbidden (after 1791) and the Legion d'Honneur had not been invented by Napoleon, a deserving soldier or officer would see his heroic actions rewarded with an "honorary" sword or sabre, often engraved with the soldier's name and sometimes with the nature of his feat<sup>46</sup>.

Thus, in regards to the central role played by sabre in the culture of French officers, and the profusion of texts on mounted sabre fencing, the lack of written proof on sabre fencing on foot seems surprising. Indeed, the Ministry of War did not consider the question of this specific type of sabre fencing before the second half of the 1870's.

Of course, some authors tackled the subject. We already mentioned de St Martin who studied small-sword fencing, mounted sabre fencing and sabre fencing on foot in the same volume. However, his work was aimed at horse riders and cavalry officers in the

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<sup>43</sup> Alessandri, A. & André, Émile, *L'escrime du sabre à cheval*, E. Flammarion, Paris, 1899.

<sup>44</sup> Lhoste, Jean et Resek, Patrick, *Les sabres portés par l'armée française*, Portail, La Tour du Pin, 2001.

<sup>45</sup> Lhoste, Jean et Buignes, Jean-Jacques, *Arme blanches, symbolisme, inscriptions, marquages, fourbisseurs, manufactures (deuxième édition)*, Portail, La Tour du Pin, 1999.

<sup>46</sup> Op. Cit. *Arme blanches, symbolisme, inscriptions, marquages, fourbisseurs, manufactures (deuxième édition)*, p. 126.

first place, as demonstrated by the construction of his *Art de l'espadaon*<sup>47</sup>. Every technique is thus described as performed on horseback and then on foot. The training of officers fighting on foot is only indirect.

**The chevalier Châtelain**, previously mentioned, completely neglected sabre on foot, and only provided a lesson of small-sword fighting. He explained that an officer with a bladed weapon in hand only needs to master small sword fencing in order to be efficient with a sabre.

Consequently, while cavalry officers had enough texts to work upon, officers on foot, on the other hand, were not so lucky. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that works addressing the question of sabre fencing on foot started to appear. Romuald Brunet, a fencer whose interest for military martial arts was great<sup>48</sup>, published one of the first volumes treating of sabre fencing on foot<sup>49</sup>. However, Brunet did not only write for officers; according to him the practice of fencing would benefit to the whole youth of the country:

“Our goal with the publication of this *Traité d’Escrime* is none other than taking part in the Great Work of the military education of the French youth. It is our belief that this is the only way to ensure the independence and greatness of our homeland.<sup>50</sup>”

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. *L’Art de faire ses armes réduit à ses vrais principes*, p. 93.

<sup>48</sup> He published a series of articles presenting military fencing between 1884-1885, with the help of famous illustrator Eugène Chaperon: Chaperon, Eugène et Brunet, Romuald “La science des armes dans la cavalerie”, *Les cahiers d’enseignements illustrés*, tome 49, 51, 52, 53, 54 et 55, éd. L.Baschet, Gillot, Paris, 1884.

<sup>49</sup> Brunet, Romuald, *Traité d’escrime. Pointe et contre-pointe*, E. Rouveyre & G. Blond, Paris, 1884.

<sup>50</sup> “En publiant aujourd’hui ce *Traité d’Escrime*, nous n’avons d’autre but que de travailler à la grande œuvre de l’éducation militaire de la jeunesse française, seul moyen, selon nous, d’assurer l’indépendance et la grandeur de la Patrie”

Op. Cit. Romuald Brunet, p. 9.

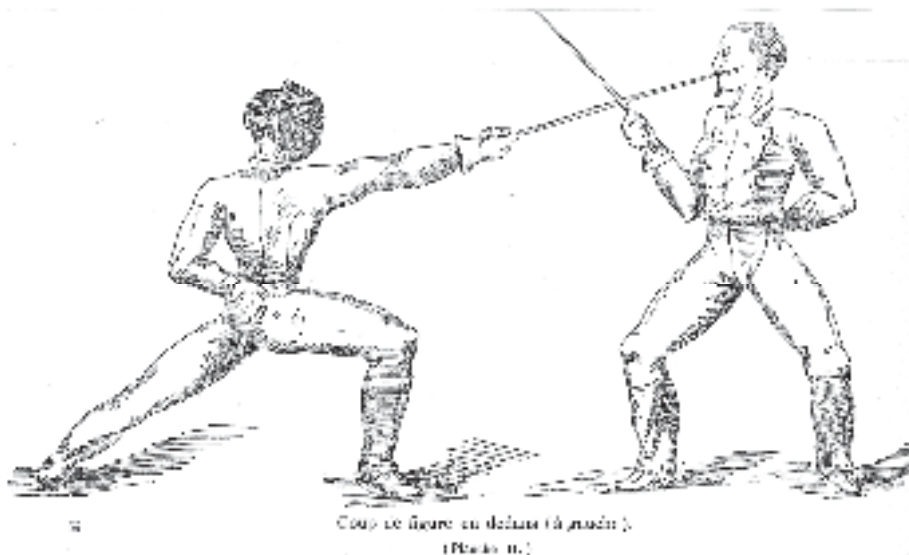


Figure 4 Romuald Brunet

Apart from Romuald Brunet, there was no other French author that researched the topic of sabre fencing on foot. An attempt at regularizing this type of fencing was made by the School of Joinville, the pre-eminent place of military training for fencing and military gymnastics (we will develop on that point further in this study), but it was mainly intended for French mariners. It was only in 1877 that the Ministry of War published a fencing ruleset (on small sword and sabre) for the army officers<sup>51</sup>.

This regulation, which finally made official the instruction of officers, starts with the following preamble:

“The teaching of fencing is compulsory, free and part of the daily schedule of every company, squadron or battery. In each barracks, a specific *salle d’arme* is devoted to officers who must train there regularly and daily to give an example and as a taste of fencing to the troops. (memorandum of the Ministry, May 7, 1875)”<sup>52</sup>.

<sup>51</sup> Ministère de la Guerre, *Manuel d’escrime approuvé par M. le Ministre de la Guerre le 18 mai 1877*, Baudoin, Paris, 1892 (pour l’édition consultée).

<sup>52</sup> “L’enseignement de l’escrime est obligatoire et gratuit et réglé au tableau du service journalier par compagnie, escadron ou batterie. Dans chaque casernement, une salle d’armes spéciale est affectée aux officiers qui doivent s’y livrer à des exercices réguliers et journaliers pour donner aux troupes l’exemple du goût de l’escrime (circulaire ministérielle du 7 mai 1875)”

Op. Cit. *Manuel d’escrime approuvé par M. le Ministre de la Guerre le 18 mai 1877*, p. 5.

The words are clear, fencing was made compulsory for officers in 1875, and the details of their training were fixed two years later. In this case however, the term “fencing” is used in the general meaning, implying that the activity of fencing was compulsory, not sabre fencing. Its teaching still depended on the will of officers and on the abilities of instructors...

The question is: Why did sabre fencing on foot seem so ignored in France before 1875, while fencing on horseback already had its own ministerial rulesets fifty years prior? Several elements of response can be provided.

First and foremost, as shown by the Chevalier Châtelain or the previously mentioned Captain Dulith, military sword masters were mainly specialists of small sword fencing. It is possible that Châtelain's point of view – that a good preparation to sword fencing was enough for a sabreur – was the dominant view of sword master, if not of officers themselves. It must be said that the teaching of small sword fencing was accessible and widespread, for example the School of Joinville which since the middle of the 1850's, trained sword masters who were able to teach to regiments. Before that, the system of training of new military sword master was internal to regiments. Besides, since the late eighteenth century, most regiments had their own *salle d'arme* where officers could exercise and exercise their men<sup>53</sup>.

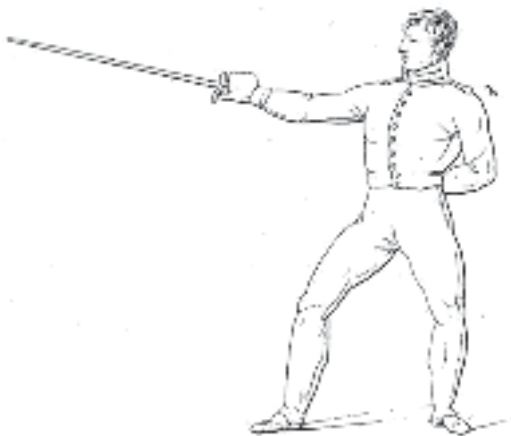


Figure 5 Valville

Secondly, several texts on sabre in French were published in other countries like Switzerland or Russia with, for example, the works of Joseph Tinguely, Jean Sieverbrück or Alexandre Valville<sup>54</sup>. The officer corps, often composed of men with higher education,

<sup>53</sup> Dérue, François Jules, *L'escrime dans l'armée*, Quantin, Paris, 1888, p. 17 – 18.

<sup>54</sup> Tinguely, Joseph, *Manuel d'escrime à la Contre-pointe composé pour officier de toutes armes*, Cailles, Payerne, 1856.

to whom reading was accessible, was more likely to read and to learn from texts less easy to find.

Finally, there is a high probability that one or several strong traditions of sabre fencing existed but were only transmitted orally, as it has been the case for bayonet fencing and sabre fencing on horseback.

Oral transmission, hardly understandable without direct testimony, seems to have been the only form of teaching for the noncommissioned officers and some regiments of infantry (such as Napoleon's grenadiers) that practiced fencing with short sabres. The reason is that these models of sabres, such as the *briquet*<sup>55</sup>, could hardly be used according to the principles of small sword fencing, in which thrust is a central point, due to their short length and the width of their blades.

Those short sabres were also used by mariners who benefited from an official instruction that will be analyzed thereafter.

## V. A SABRE FOR MARINERS

French specialists of military bladed weapons like captain Bottet or Jean Lhoste describe precisely the models of sabres used by the marine infantry (meaning by the soldiers, not by officers). Though hilts can vary, depending on the type of handle, shape of the basket or number of branches, the blades are consistent: very wide at the base, with a length between 23" and 27". In comparison, an infantry officer's sabre would range between 31" and 35"<sup>56</sup>.

So, as the length of the weapon differs, the type of fencing differs also. As we mentioned previously, sabre fencing on foot was influenced by *l'escrime de pointe* (thrust fencing) derived from small sword fencing; a type of fencing that loses its efficiency with a blade that is 7" shorter. Some authors took notice of that fact and tried to adapt their techniques to this specificity. Here again, de St Martin took the lead by adding a short chapter devoted to the specific scenario of boarding to his *Art de l'espadon*<sup>57</sup>. He indicated that the way the sabre is held must be different, that the guard changes, and that thrusting, though still recommended, must be coupled with *moulinets* and other cutting movements. However, and despite some interesting advice that reveals the author's experience, the chapter is very short and does not contain an actual method.

Nevertheless, it is, to our knowledge, the only French volume dedicated to on board fighting with a sabre (and other bladed weapons). Yet another series of publications by

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Valville, Alexandre, *Traité sur la Contre-pointe*, Charles Kray, St Petersburg, 1817.

Sieverbrück, Jean, *Manuel pour l'étude des règles de l'escrime au fleuret et à l'espadon*, Tanera, Paris, 1860.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, *Les sabres portés par l'armée française*, p. 234 – 238.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. *L'arme blanche de guerre française au XVIII<sup>e</sup>*, p. 38 - 39.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. *L'Art de faire ses armes réduit à ses vrais principes*, p. 46.



the Ministry of War contains a lesson on sabre destined to sailors. The first of these texts is dated from 1859<sup>58</sup>, and aims at instructing the marine fusiliers. The other takes elements of physical training from the first and takes the form of a gymnastics manual<sup>59</sup>. Despite their differences, these two texts contain the same fencing method, probably established by the specialists of Joinville le Pont who oversaw the writing of the army's physical education rulesets.

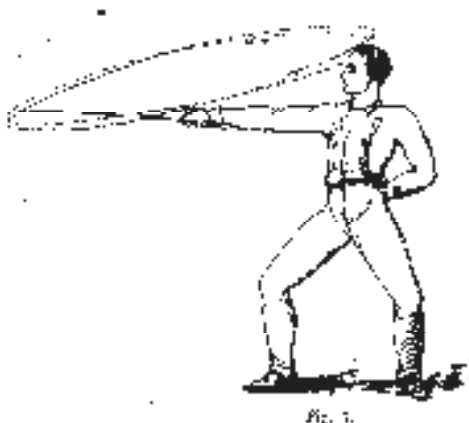


Image 7 1875

It is important to detail that even though these texts were technically aimed at sailors, or more specifically to their instructors, the techniques of sabre fencing they contain are not applicable in the context of a real boarding. They are academic, destined to be practiced with training sabres the length of which is closer to cavalry sabres or infantry sabres. This type of fencing resembles what Romuald Brunet described a few years later as “contre-pointe”. The logic of these techniques is similar to what Brunet and our other authors formulated: instead of being a preparation for actual combat on board, sailors have to learn an academic fencing mastered by instructors. This method of fencing is much more profitable to officers equipped with appropriate sabres than to sailors themselves.

There again, we might think that informal oral transmission existed to complete, or to replace official instruction.

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<sup>58</sup> Ministère de la Marine et des Colonies, *Manuel du Marin Fusilier publié par ordre de son excellence le Ministre secrétaire d'état de la Marine*, Librairie Militaire, Paris, 1859.

<sup>59</sup> Ministère de la Marine et des Colonies, *Manuel pour l'enseignement de la gymnastique et de l'escrime*, J. Dumaine, Paris, 1875.

## VI. A PRIVILEGE OF CAVALRYMEN

As we have now demonstrated, the practice of mounted sabre was the most studied in France, and the most commonly studied to French soldiers. Once the notable exception of J; de St Martin is set aside, sabre fencing on foot for infantrymen, sailors and officers only benefited from indirect systemisation.

This phenomenon can be explained by the following: systemisation, sharing and universal instruction of war fencing in France, whether it be bayonet fencing, lance fencing or sabre fencing, though considered necessary since the eighteenth century, only started in the first half of the nineteenth century. The first French fencing methods included in the rulesets dated from 1811 for lance, 1828 for sabre and 1845 for bayonet<sup>60</sup>. Yet, while the efficiency of bayonets and cavalry weapons were not questioned, boarding techniques were progressively abandoned, and so were the infantry regiments only equipped with sabres like the grenadiers. Thus, the decision of instructors not to focus on the handling of a weapon that was destined to disappear.

Concerning officers, the main idea in the nineteenth century was to leave everything to the instruction of small sword fencing, potentially supplemented with the reading of individual sources.

Finally, we could not put an end to this specific study of sabre fencing methods without tackling the debate that shook the different parts of the French circles: is *pointe* more lethal than cutting? As early as the first years of the eighteenth century, this debate became central in strategic discussions, even though no official method was produced. Marechal Guibert, one of Napoleon's favorite authors<sup>61</sup>, already mentioned it in 1805:

“As our army is finally equipped with two edged swords, I would advise that they exercise in pointing rather than in cutting. This first way of fighting is infinitely more lethal and favors skill and bravery. Pointing efficiently requires visibility and implies that the soldier be uncovered and aiming precisely. As they have learned to only use cutting, the natural inclination of cavalrymen is to parry and protect until their blades fall, by chance and clumsily, on the first opponent passing by. This type of defence is weak and lazy for the blows will surely be blocked by helmets and epaulettes or will only cause minor wounds if aimed at other parts of the body.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, *La baïonnette, histoire d'une escrime de guerre*, p. 29.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. *Nouvelle histoire militaire de la France 1789-1919*, p 165.

<sup>62</sup> “En conseillant enfin pour notre cavalerie l'épée à deux tranchants, je recommanderai, comme un point important, de l'exercer à pointer plutôt qu'à tailler. Cette première manière de combattre, infiniment plus meurtrière que l'autre, est favorable à l'adresse et à la valeur. Il faut, pour pointer, se découvrir et choisir la place où l'on veut frapper. Le mouvement naturel des cavaliers, qu'on accoutume à ne se servir que de la taille, est au contraire de se mettre en parade, de se couvrir contre

Guibert crystalized, in a short paragraph, the debate of a century: supporters of the *pointe* saw it as more lethal and more efficient, while supporters of cutting criticized its lack of precision. Therefore, in their works, most authors of the period took some time to position themselves in this debate; Alexandre Muller for one supported the *pointe*, while Ivanowski defended cutting...

In the end, the camp of *pointe* appeared to be the strongest, and Guibert's recommendations were partly followed, which explains why, since 1812, some cavalry regiments were equipped with special sabres that had no cutting edge and shaped like broadswords to render cutting inefficient<sup>63</sup>.

In his study on wounds caused by bladed weapons in Napoleon's army, Bert Geveart also concludes that the lethal potential of thrusting (*pointe*) is superior to cutting<sup>64</sup>.

To conclude, though military sabre fencing was inherently made for the battlefield, its applications outgrew the frame of military context, in order to embrace other traditions, and other techniques.

## VII. A WEAPON FOR SPORT AND DUEL

So far, we have seen that nineteenth century military sabre was diverse, and generated studies of various quality that were published and shared. Yet, with or without written record, the traditions were taught. Fencing was a mandatory part of cavalry exercises and it was highly recommended to officers of all corps. Thus, fencing was part of military culture and everyday life, barracks were also a training place for soldiers and officers, horsemen would train with sabres and lances, and practice the various martial-arts that they learned. For example, in his *Cahiers d'enseignement illustrés*<sup>65</sup>, Romuald Brunet described the use of long-stick, cane, foil fencing, and French boxing.

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Pennemi, et de laisser de temps en temps au hasard et gauchement tomber leurs sabres sur l'homme qui se présente à eux : genre de défense mou, inactif, dont tous les coups s'amortiront sur les casques et sur les épaulettes de mes cavaliers, et qui dirigés ailleurs, ne feront ordinairement que des blessures légères." Guibert, Jacques Antoine Hyppolyte, *Œuvres militaires de Guibert publiées par sa veuve*, tome premier. Magimel, Paris, 1805, p. 376.

<sup>63</sup> Il s'agit du modèle 1812, repris en 1854, qui équipa les régiments de cavalerie de ligne et de dragons.

Ibid. *Les sabres portés par l'armée française*, p. 436.

<sup>64</sup> Gevaert Bert, "The use of the sabre in the army of Napoleon», *Acta Periodica Duellatorum*, tome 4, issue 1, Budapest, De Gruyter Open, 2016, p. 103.

<sup>65</sup> Chaperon, Eugène et Brunet, Romuald "La science des armes dans la cavalerie", *Les cahiers d'enseignements illustrés*, tome 49, 51, 52, 53,54 et 55, éd. L.Baschet, Gillot, Paris, 1884.



Picture 8 *cabiers boxe*

Parallel to the rise of the sabre, the distrust of officers started to grow, as they started to see in this new weapon and its applications a form of illegality. During the course of the Nineteenth century, sabre actually became – and historians who studied the question of duels in France<sup>66</sup> are well aware of this fact – one of the most popular weapons used by the military in the context of dueling; a forbidden practice that was nonetheless widespread and fairly tolerated, including during the First Empire.

From this point on, the teaching of sabre fencing gained a whole new context for its practitioners. It was no longer linked to martial effectiveness on the battlefield but had become a tool for victory, or at least of survival, in duels.

## VIII. SOLDIERS AND DUEL

Historians of the duel and chroniclers of this practice who published extensively at the end of the Nineteenth century all agree on the fact that in France, between the Revolution and 1914, no social group resorted to dueling more than the military class. François Guillet even qualified it as “a soldiers’ disease”<sup>67</sup>. This specialist located the spread of duel in the army at the end of the Ancient Regime, but added that its circulation was due to

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<sup>66</sup> Nous pouvons citer les auteurs suivants, consultés pour cette étude: Guillet, François, *La mort en face, histoire du duel de la Révolution à nos jours*, Flammarion, Paris, 2008; Jeanneney, Jean Noël, *Le duel, une passion française, 1789-1914*, Seuil, Paris, 2004; Nye, Robert, *Masculinity and male codes of Honor in Modern France*, University of California Press, Bekerley, 1998.

<sup>67</sup> “mal militaire” Op. Cit. François Guillet, p. 179.

the conscription, and the creation of an army of citizens. For the citizen who had discovered dueling during his military service would potentially keep it in mind and bring it home with him. Guillet's hypothesis partly revolves on the evolution of duels from a strict military context to the context of civil life. He also analyzed the social role of duels in the army. Outgrowing its status of common practice, dueling became (particularly during the First Empire) a way for the young recruits to prove their courage and their membership to the army corps.

In 1918, one of the last authors of a French "*code de duel*", George Breittmayer, published a manual in which fencing with a bayonet, the soldier's weapon *par excellence*, becomes possible in a duel<sup>68</sup>.

For men of the troop, everything is an excuse for a duel: a wrong look, a glass spilled, a song poorly executed<sup>69</sup>... There are even traces of some absurd situations, often linked with alcohol, that would sound comic if they were not so tragic. The following article is about a *Chassepot bayonet-sabre*<sup>70</sup> duel between a young infantryman and one of his friends in august of 1893.

#### "A duel on bicycles

Last Friday in the evening, a bicycle ride was organized by a group of your people.

Instead of following the programmed path, they stopped at several wine dispensers and ended up quarrelling; a fight even started between Charles Abbadie and Pierre Varlet, both shop employees, on rue du Sentier. The two friends decided that a duel was in order, but as none of them had foils to fight with, Abbadie proposed to used bayonet-sabres from his own collection.

The duel was supposed to be performed on the bicycles, and the inebriated group marched on to boulevard Ney. Four witnesses were appointed, and the duel started. Suddenly, Abbady took a fall and brought the witnesses and his opponent with him. Varlet fell in such a way that the point of a bayonet-sabre pierced him in the right flank.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Breittmayer, George, *Code de l'honneur et du duel*, Devambez, Paris, 1918, p. 75.

<sup>69</sup> Op. Cit. François Guillet, p. 188.

<sup>70</sup> A model of bayonet made with the short-curved blade of a yatagan sabre.

<sup>71</sup> "Un duel à bicyclette: Un groupe de jeunes gens organisaient vendredi soir, une partie de bicyclette aux environs de Paris. Au lieu de suivre le programme convenu, ils s'arrêtèrent chez divers marchands de vin et finirent par se quereller fortement; des coups furent mêmes échangés entre les deux plus âgés, Charles Abbadie et Pierre Varlet, employés de commerce, rue du Sentier. Les amis décidèrent que la discussion ne pouvait se terminer que l'Épée à la main; mais comme aucun des deux n'avait de fleurets, Abbadie proposa de se servir de sabres-baïonnette dont sa panoplie ferait

This inebriated occurrence of a duel on bicycles reveals three things: 1. reasons for duels are often futile, 2. dueling was deeply rooted in soldiers' culture, 3. it is via these events related by the press that duels entered the civil world.

But as much as soldiers loved duels, officers loved them even more. Weather forged by their experience on the battlefield or freshly out of the officer's school, all high-ranking members of the army had an opinion on duels, making it a controversial topic that united officers as much as it divided them. For a man who would refuse a duel would become a coward, and would consequently be closer to the enemy than a man who accepted to hurt a friend willingly. The first-time young soldiers would use their blades for real was not on the battlefield but in schools like St Cyr or Polytechnique.

One of the most famous quarrels between officers that implied duels is certainly the one that opposed general Francois Fournier-Sarlovèze and general Pierre Dupont de l'Étang. Both were officers in Napoleon's army and fought over nineteen years. The occurrences of their duels were so numerous that the two men established their own code duello, a version of which has been put down on paper by Emile Colombey:

“Article 1: Should Mr. Dupont and Mr. Fournier find themselves within ninety miles from one another, they would meet halfway with swords in hands.

Article 2: Should one of the two contracting parts be impeded by his service, the one free to move should cross the entire distance to reconcile the service duties and the rules of this treaty.

Article 3: Military obligations set aside, no excuse will be considered valid.

Article 4: As this treaty was established in good faith, the conditions set hereby cannot be departed from.<sup>72</sup>“

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les frais. Il fut convenu que l'on se battrait en selle, et, au matin, la bande, de plus en plus joyeuse, se dirigeait vers le boulevard Ney. Quatre témoins furent désignés. Le combat commença. Tout à coups, Abbadie fit une chute qui entraîna celle des témoins et de l'adversaire. Ce dernier tomba si malheureusement que la pointe du sabre-baïonnette lui pénétra dans le flanc droit” *Le Matin* : derniers télégrammes de la nuit, N°4554 du 17/08/1896, p. 3.

<sup>72</sup> “Article 1er. Chaque fois que MM. Dupont et Fournier se trouveront à trente lieues de distance l'un de l'autre, ils franchiront chacun la moitié du chemin pour se rencontrer l'épée à la main; Article 2. Si l'un des deux contractants se trouve empêché par son service, celui qui sera libre devra parcourir la distance entière, afin de concilier les devoirs du service et les exigences du présent traité;

Article 3. Aucune excuse autre que celles résultant des obligations militaires ne sera admise;

Article 4. Le traité étant fait de bonne foi, il ne pourra être dérogé aux conditions arrêtées du consentement des parties.” Colombey, Émile, *Histoire anecdotique du duel dans tous les temps et dans tous les pays*, Michel Levy frères, Paris, 1860, p. 106 – 111.

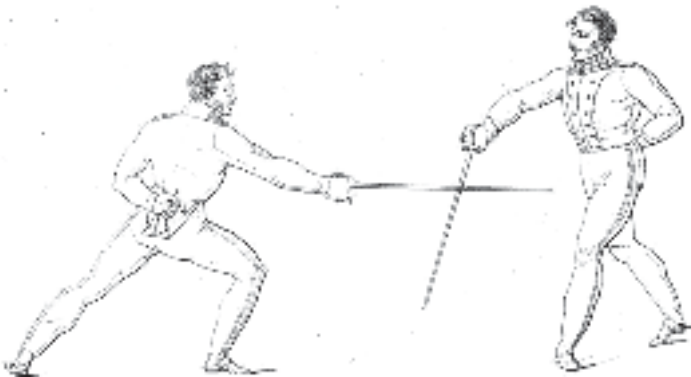
Emile Colombey's romanticized story inspired Joseph Conrad's in writing his novel *The Duel* in 1908, as well as Ridley Scott for his movie "The Duellists" in 1977.

As sabre was the weapon most commonly used by soldiers, it also was the usual weapon used for duels. Small sword, however, was at least as popular though mainly used by officers.

Among the methods afore mentioned, some were specifically destined to officers. Tinguely and Valville are two good examples. Compared to De St Martin, whose desire to improve the fencing methods of the cavalry is clear, their interest in war fencing is hardly visible. This could be explained by their will to deliver "complex" fencing techniques, while usual military fencing methods are straight to the point. Valville, just like Châtelain, focused on the opposition between a soldier on foot versus another soldier on foot. Because their techniques revolves around sequences of attacks / parry / counterattacks, they are not easily adaptable to war fencing that must, by definition, kill as quickly as possible to avoid getting swarmed by enemies.

However, Châtelain and Valville's methods, while they do not correspond to the needs of war fencing, are more than gymnastic exercises (in comparison to Joinville's exercises), and some movements are meant for the battlefield. For example, here is Valville's description of his "coup de cuisse" (cut to the thigh):

"Coups de cuisse are only good as counters or feints. They are done by sliding the blade along the opponent's sabre and cutting vertically downwards. The wound has to be deep enough to put the enemy out of combat.<sup>73</sup>"



*Pic 9 coup de cuisse*

<sup>73</sup> "Les coups de cuisse ne sont bons qu'en riposte, ou comme feinte; ils se forment en filant le long du sabre de l'adversaire et venant, couper sa cuisse de haut en bas, car il faut que la blessure soit profonde pour pouvoir mettre son ennemi hors de combat." Ibid. Alexandre Valville, p. 8.

This movement actually causes a “deep wound” that puts the opponent “out of action”. The vocabulary used is not that of gymnastic practice but of real combat, certainly in the context of duels.

Châtelain was more ambiguous on the matter. Though he insisted on the necessity to train soldiers in order to improve the general level of the army, most of his techniques, as previously mentioned, are hardly valid in a context other than a duel. Moreover, his insistence on describing small sword techniques, that would not be used on the battlefield, prove that a real combat with small swords is considered.

“Some men, having no experience of bladed weapons whatsoever, find themselves engaged in serious business while being completely unaware of the danger they are in. They tend, once they grab their blade, to loom on their opponent with boldness that comes from anger, hastily and repeatedly striking with all their strength.”<sup>74</sup>

We can assume from this extract that the “serious affair” that is mentioned is not of a military nature but refers to a duel.

Thus, these texts are not only fencing treaties but also methods specifically elaborated *for* the duel.

The tales of French duels have become material for research as much as the actual events they refer to. This is how, by the end of the nineteenth century in France, fencing lovers, sword masters and players alike, started publishing works on stories and anecdotes about duels. Emile Colombey was only one of many; Arsène Vigeant<sup>75</sup>, Gabriel Letainturier-Fradin<sup>76</sup>, Adolphe Tavernier<sup>77</sup> and many more published novels on duelists, fencers and their stories.

Going even further, the group known as “La Société d’Encouragement de l’Escrime” (the Fencing Promotion Society), the first attempt to federate French fencers, was created to reconnect with ancient fencing methods via the reenactment of famous duels. As mentioned by Chris Slee in his work<sup>78</sup>, this society lead by Adolphe Corthey established a prototype, an ancestor of what would come to be modern HEMA.

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<sup>74</sup> “On rencontre quelquefois des hommes qui, n’ayant aucune expérience des armes, s’engagent dans une affaire sérieuse sans en prévoir le danger, et, sur le terrain, fondent sur leur adversaire avec une témérité qui vient quelquefois de la colère, et lui portent avec précipitation des coups redoublés, en tenant le bras raccourci.” Ibid. Chatelain, p. 63.

<sup>75</sup> Vigeant, Arsène, *La bibliographie de l’escrime ancienne et moderne*, Motteroz, Paris, 1882.

<sup>76</sup> Letainturier-Fradin, Gabriel, *Les joueurs d’épée à travers les siècles*, Flammarion, Paris, 1904.

<sup>77</sup> Tavernier, Adolphe, *L’art du duel*, Marpon & Flammarion, Paris, 1884.

<sup>78</sup> Slee Chris, Adolphe Corthey: a French 19TH Century HEMA Pioneer, blog Hroarr, <http://hroarr.com/adolphe-corthey-a-french-19th-century-hema-pioneer/>



In conclusion, dueling, formerly a practice inherent to the army, out grew it at the end of the nineteenth century to become a social phenomenon.

## **IX. A SABRE TO PROMOTE LIFE IN THE BARRACKS.**

As we have previously mentioned, sabres were not always associated to the military. They were, along with small swords, seen at the belt of officers, before progressively becoming the most symbolic bladed weapon at the end of the nineteenth century.

That symbolic role is mostly visible in visual representations of the French army, representations that touches the military as well as the civilians. There are all sorts of them, from press engravings to illustrations in soldiers' memoirs, and many more. Among these different visual media, one is worthy of a attention, one that did not require social or cultural privilege to be accessible. This popular medium that was part of everyday life in the nineteenth century and displayed sabres as a symbolic artifact is: advertising postcards.

Numerous examples can be found, that we can divide in several categories. The first one, certainly the most important in terms of quantity, regroups the postcards depicting scenes of everyday life in the barracks. It seems that sabre fencing was representative of the daily life of soldiers and cavalrymen.



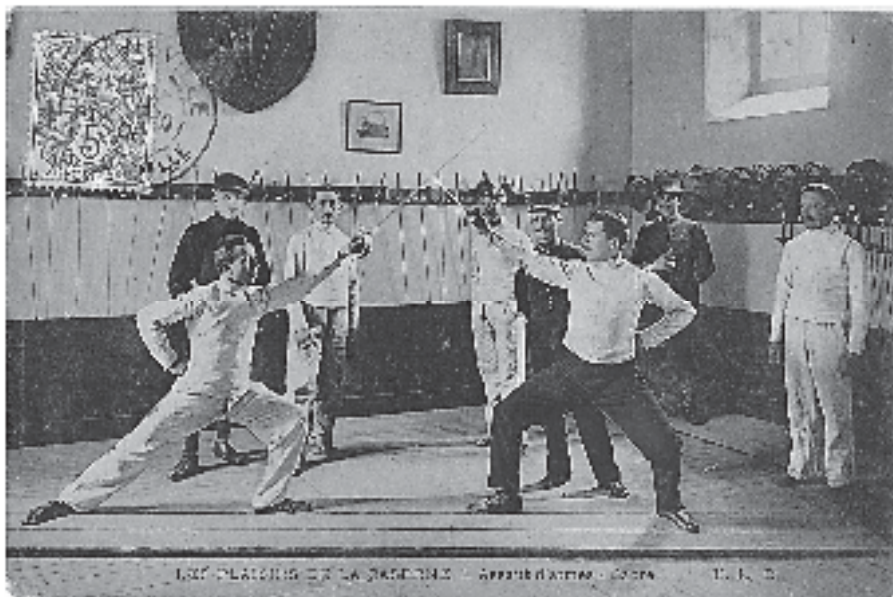
*Figure 10 Card for the chocolate brand “Chocolat du Planteur”, show soldiers training with sabres, on foot*



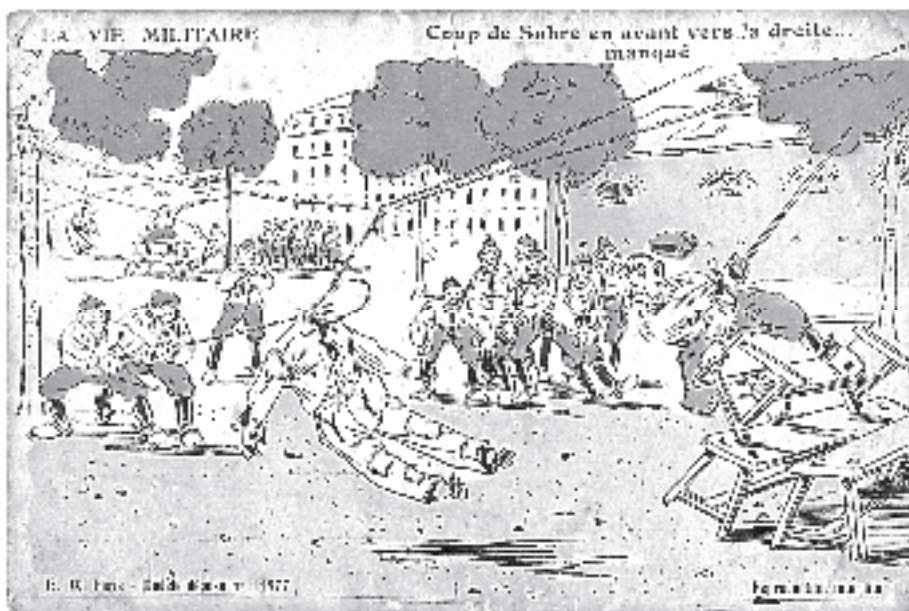
Figure 11 Card for the chocolate brand “Chocolat du Planteur”, show soldiers training with sabres, on mechanical horses.



Figure 12 Two Dragoon officers training together.



*Figure 13 A scene of casual sabre fencing during leisure time,  
le Plaisir de la caserne (leisure in the barracks)*



*Figure 14 Some cards even presented fencing in a lighter tone.*



The second group covers postcards that show cavalry charges and officers with sabres. Battle scenes were always structured on the same format, with horsemen charging and impaling their opponents, or officers, sabres held forth, leading a group of infantrymen to battle while their enemies ran or died before them. The interest lies in the fact that in the represented scenes, bladed weapons still played a central role, even in the late nineteenth century.



*Figure 15 The advertising for the brand “Kabiline” even shows an officer performing a cut in the center of the picture.*

Moreover, these visual standards persisted even after bladed weapons, and particularly cavalry weapons, stopped being used on the battlefield. The following post card dated from 1915 depicts a scene that cannot have happened, showing cavalrymen as they would have appeared a century before.



Figure 16 Cavalrymen on a card dated 1915

Finally, the third category is broader than the other two, and only alludes to the military theme. Sabres however, are very present in these representations. This card, an advertisement for the shopping gallery “Au Bon Marché” dated from 1880, shows two children playing soldiers. With only a hat and a sabre, the image of the officer is represented without ambiguity.



Figure 17 Advertisement for the shopping gallery “Au Bon Marché” dated from 1880

In this last post card showing two children, a sabre, the only visible military artifact, is enough to symbolize the theme of the picture: “La Guerre” (The War)

Eventually, in the popular imagery of the late nineteenth century, War can be reduced to a single representative element: the sabre. It shows all the symbolic and cultural importance of this weapons at a time when, ironically, the days of bladed weapons were numbered.



Figure 18 Sabre as symbol of war (La Guerre)

## X. THE CANE: WHEN TRAINING BECAME A SPORT

Gradually, via imagery and the tales of soldiers returning home, sabre fencing started spreading outside the military world. As we have seen before with Romuald Brunet for example, military preparation was not the only goal of this practice. Some authors, on the other hand, even tackle methods that are not aimed at the military. This is the case in Augustin Cabot's 1888 *Attaque et défense sur le terrain*<sup>79</sup>, a treaty entirely written for the practice of civil duel. Though Cabot himself had had a career as a soldier, his fencing was not destined to his peers.

Yet, as indicated by Brunet, sabre training was often done with a wooden simulator<sup>80</sup> that was no more than a simple wooden cane. For while members of the cavalry were provided with steel weapons and simulators, it was much more simple and cheap for soldiers and amateurs to use simple wooden sticks. Brunet commented that it is profitable for a

<sup>79</sup> Cabot, Augustin, *Attaque et défense sur le terrain*, Westhauser, Paris, 1888.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. Romuald Brunet, p.72.

student to start practicing with a cane and to move to steel simulators when sparring (his point of view is debatable).

The school of Joinville shared this idea, as indicated in their 1875 ruleset. In this method, all students are supposed to train with canes.

However, this simulator often induces pedagogical biases and technical approximations. Some parries are, for example, done with the tip of the blade. Yet what is valid with a cane is not necessarily valid with a sabre, and many techniques (the parries in particular) of the 1875 method are not technically possible if the weapon used is not a cane.

That problem was already known in England, where single-stick was used for a long time to practice broad-sword and sabre. However, despite its historical value, this technique was also criticized in England. Here is the point of view of Richard Francis Burton on the matter in 1876:

“Finally, I would note the mistake of « loose practice » with the single stick instead of the sabre; it probably arose from a mistaken economy in saving swords and paddings. Single stick is a different weapon, a cane or light cudgel with a basket-hilt covering the back of the hand, like the imperfect guard of the Highland Claymore; it is straight, not curved, and, as the rod has no edges, so in practice every blow equally represents a cut.<sup>81</sup>”

But beyond the inherent problems of the simulator listed by Burton, another risk appeared, that was already present in the 1875 method of Joinville. Indeed, by dint of working only with canes and conceiving methods only for the use of wooden simulators, the martial art is altered.

The school of Joinville put an end to the debate by adding cane exercises to its gymnastic ruleset. It is necessary to state that Joinville’s first publication of a gymnastic manual in 1877<sup>82</sup>, did not contain a fully-fledged cane lesson, but only evoked it subtly after the detailed exercises of boxing and long-stick. This leaves us assuming that, as with the lesson on cane and this on sabre written two years before, instructors of the school had all they needed to practice. Moreover, the attacks with the single-stick were called “brisés”, “enlevés” and “moulinets”, just like in the method of sabre of 1875.

These names are still used in the method of cane used nowadays in France, as validated by the French Federation of Savate and French kickboxing.

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<sup>81</sup> Burton, Richard F., *A New System of Sword Exercise for Infantry*, William Clowes & sons, Londres, 1876, p. 16.

<sup>82</sup> Ministère de la guerre, *Manuel de gymnastique*, Baudoin, paris, 1877, p. 226 -227.

Thus the relationship between sabre fencing and cane fencing is undeniable, the second having evolved from being an exercise of the first to an independent martial art thanks to the School of Joinville.

## **XI. CONCLUSION**

In the end, “sabre” is an apparently simple term that hides a rich complexity. To be studied efficiently, a source on French military sabre must be contextualized. First of all, it is necessary to identify its audience, in this case cavalrymen are the most prevalent category, as they use different types of sabres on horseback. Then come the officers, on foot or mounted, and finally the mariners, the outcasts of the theory, with their boarding sabres

Once the audience of the source has been identified, the next step is to find out the origins of the type of fencing studied. There again, as we have seen above, three different types emerge: fencing for the battlefield, based on experience – small-sword fencing transposed to sabre fencing – and fencing traditions from across the borders, mainly from Poland.

And thirdly, the practical use of the source is to be identified. Indeed, war fencing, meaning the concrete use of a bladed weapon on the battlefield, is not the only objective of sabre fencing, though it is still central to the cavalry notably. Other users of sabres, officers for instance, make a different use of this weapon, and this needs to be considered.

Therefore, the sabre, the archetypal weapon of the military, found its way very easily into the tradition of dueling. Soldiers, sabres and duels form a triangle so important that sword-masters have based this treaty on this relationship.

Moreover, the practice of sabre was perceived as an interesting physical activity that developed the various qualities that were required from a soldier. This type of sabre fencing, not intended to be used on the field, became an excellent combat sport for the barracks, keeping cavalrymen, officers, sailors, and all members of other corps who were familiar with different weapons, exercised and ready. The interest for this specific fencing, as a sport, was conceived in the classes of Joinville le Pont, center of training for soldiers, but also and it is central: in civil life, especially at the end of the nineteenth century. The differentiation between the military practices of sabre fencing and the gymnastic practice became so important that they ended up diverging from each other. A fully-fledged sport emerged from this derived practice that only involved wooden weapons, and the cane stopped being a sabre simulator to become, well, a cane, with its own possibilities.

It is possible to draw, as we have previously stated, interesting parallels between the evolution of sabre and this of bayonet fencing, a weapon also conceived for war. Their



major difference being that while the bayonet remained as it was meant to be<sup>83</sup>, the sabre, due to the diversity of its users, became a what we could call a universal weapon, present in various cultures and traditions. The domains of use for sabres multiplied, from warfare to dueling to sport, and the civilian world welcomed it with open arms as an equal of small-sword in Parisians *salles d'armes* all over mainland France.

With the joining of the School of Joinville and the *Société d'Encouragement de l'Escrime* at the end of the nineteenth century, foreshadowing what would one day become a federation of fencers, the boundary between military and civil fencing became more and more porous. Thus, with the 1908 ruleset<sup>84</sup>, edited by the specialists of Joinville, supported by the *Société d'Encouragement de l'Escrime*, and aiming at unifying French fencing, sabre became an official weapon in fencing rooms, along with foil and small-sword. The principles of this ruleset are still respected today in fencing rooms. Modern sabre fencing, descending from the sports branch of military sabre fencing, is inherently related to the School of Joinville.

This is why the researcher and practitioner of HEMA must be aware of the context of the sources they study, who it was written for, its origins and its objectives, whether it be war, sport, or duel.

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<sup>83</sup> Except a treaty published at the end of the war, in 1918, by George Breittmayer, introducing the possibility for a soldier to perform a duel with a bayonet. However, this initiative had little impact and never became popular.

<sup>84</sup> Ministère de la guerre, *Règlement d'escrime (fleuret - épée - sabre) approuvé par le ministre de la guerre le 6 mars 1908*, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1908.

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