

**The Gallant Pander:**  
An Introduction to Donald McBane's *The Expert Sword-Man's  
Companion*

*for Dr. Jonquil Bevan's Course on  
17th Century Self-Awareness*

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This book is in three sections: "The Expert Sword-Man's Companion or the True Art of Self-Defence with An Account of the Authors LIFE, and his Transactions during the Wars with France. To which is Annexed, The Art of Gunnerie."<sup>1</sup> The first and third sections are fascinating to any fencer or gunner, but perhaps of limited interest to the general reader. I shall focus my essay on the "Account of the Authors LIFE", which is a larger-than-life picaresque tale of battles, duels, wine, women and song. The book was published in Glasgow in 1728 and has never been reissued. It is therefore hard to come by and may be found in the National Library of Scotland (NLS 1540 (39)). The age of the text makes it hard for someone inexperienced in the ways of eighteenth-century printers to be accurate to the letter, or to make any comment on syntax, spelling or other idiosyncracies of style. I will therefore focus on McBane's stories, his narratorial point of view, what he may have to offer the historian of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and point out some of the difficulties in establishing the authorship of the text.

The book has been mentioned and quoted from by a few historians of the sword, but has never been studied as a literary text. This is a shame, because it is a cracking good read and opens up many avenues of inquiry. I have found two secondary sources that make use of McBane's work, J. D. Aylward's *The English Master of Arms from the Twelfth to the Twentieth Century* (1956) and Captain Alfred Hutton's *The Sword and the Centuries* (1901). The former is perhaps the most useful, in that it has a more textual focus and a more critical outlook, while the latter merely reproduces anecdotes from the text and briefly summarises the flavour of the work. Aylward, however, is regrettably unreliable in points of detail: he states that Ben Jonson's thumb was branded with the letter M (54), for example, though we know it was the letter T for Tyburn Hill, the site of the scaffold on which he would have hanged. When quoting from McBane he is often even more off the mark. In fact he gives the impression of a man quoting from memory some while after reading the book. For example, he states that McBane is "the son of a crofter" (161), though McBane never actually informs us directly of his father's profession. Aylward also states that after McBane's first duel (which he lost) the victor "pledged (McBane's borrowed sword) with the sutler for spirits"(162). The text has it differently: the victor "carried away my sword and Pauned it in the Canteen for Two Gallons of Ale". Even one of Aylward's

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<sup>1</sup> From the title page. When transcribing from the text I have copied the spelling and capitalisation, but overlooked font and italics. This is partly due to a reluctance to spend too much time on work that is incidental to my interest in this text, and partly because that is what Aylward has done.

direct quotations (as opposed to paraphrase), "our tough customer was 'hit in the head, trepanned and a silver plate put on'" (166) is woefully inaccurate: the text reads: "I recovered of the Wound in my Head, I have a piece of Silver in it". I could find no mention of "trepanning" anywhere in the text. Aylward also has McBane "unhorsing" (165) a French officer, who, according to McBane, voluntarily got down, to "ease Nature"; and the subsequently commandeered horse was not, as Aylward would have it, sold to McBane's officer, but to some unnamed person. The list of Aylward's inconsistencies with the text does not end here, but the above examples serve to illustrate the problems involved when using his work.

Two reasons present themselves for Aylward's errors: either he was sloppy enough to rely on memory rather than trek back to the British Museum Library (the most likely location in London for such a rare book), or there is a different version, corrupt or original to that available to me, which Aylward used in good faith. This latter is less likely when one considers that Hutton makes no such mistakes, and in all probability they were acquainted with the same artifact. Aylward actually takes pains to point out that the book is "extremely rare"(169), which he does not do for any other text used in his book, which contains many references to books and papers unavailable in Scotland. However, Hutton is known to have possessed perhaps the largest private library on the subject of swords and swordsmanship in the world - it is not inconceivable that he would have a copy, and that Aylward's reputation may be salvaged. When using Aylward's text I accept his general statements and take his opinions into account, but never rely on his grasp of detail or his use of the text.

There is little firm ground to stand on when studying this book. The author, unquestioned by either Aylward or Hutton, is far from a known quantity. McBane claims: "I was always Wild and wouldn't wait on the Schools (which I find is to my great Loss this Day)", yet managed to publish his *Companion*, complete with two verse introductions in English, and one in Latin. How was this possible? Did he employ a scribe? Was one of the "noble" witnesses of his last Prize (in which, according to himself and the poem written about him included in this volume, he trounced a much younger, very unpopular Irish champion by the name of Andrew O'Bryan, breaking his arm with a fauchion, "a weapon that no person can get any credit by" - yet the instrument of his crowning glory) so entranced by McBane that he patronised him to the point of having one of his secretaries take down dictation from the old soldier? Or was it, more likely given McBane's money-spinning talent, a

way of capitalising on the publicity of his most glorious success.<sup>2</sup> Or perhaps McBane is the pseudonym of another Sir William Hope (author of *The Compleat Fencing Master* and divers other fencing tracts), or the hero of a very early novel. It is easy to understand Aylward's acceptance of the protagonists' claim to veracity given that he is essentially interested in his method of swordplay, and Hutton's because he was very Victorian in his thinking, and engaged in a work that is a blend of history (when concerned with swords and methods of swordsmanship) and anecdote (when dealing with incidents involving their use). Neither is particularly interested in who 'McBane' really is, or how literally we may interpret his text. Enough that a really enjoyable book containing excellent stories and practical advice to the swordsman has been written. I can fully understand their points of view, but am caught up in the paradox that this book presents to the modern reader. This author is certainly dead, but his corpse defies autopsy.

The feel of the prose sections of this book would suggest that they were written by the same person. There is no doubt that the writer of the first section knew his subject intimately. There are also correspondences between the sections: in the first, for example he warns against people hiding pocket pistols in their hats - in the second, he recounts an adventure in which he fights a man, (the principals having been searched for concealed weapons) and is winning until the opponent suddenly draws a pistol from his hat, and opens fire. (McBane was lucky to escape with his life. His opponent didn't.) What are truly puzzling are the introductions to the book: a verse summary of the author's life, a poem "To the Scottish Hero" in praise of McBane for his prize-fight against Andrew O'Bryan, and seventeen lines in Latin, the last four of which are roughly translated for the reader, and highly cryptic:

Here liv'd of Old, two Marster Donald Banes,  
Mark'd with Seditious and Usurping Stains,  
Lo, now a Third wipes off this foul Disgrace,  
The Shield and Glory of our Ancient Race.

One possible solution to this trio of McBanes may lie in his family history. It is possible, and would make tracing him easier if it is so, that he was the son of a criminal, probably a traitor to his overlord who was in turn the son of a similar criminal. Or he may be referring to his own narrow escapes from the law, and be referring to McBane the murderer and McBane the whoremaster ("My bread-woners (the Lasses). . . were better to me than Six Milk Cows" (111)). However, it is hard to imagine McBane being apologetic for the way he lived, and he was certainly highly regarded by his commanding officers,

for when he left the army it was with a recommendation "for what he calls 'Chance Colledge', the soldier's cant name for Chelsea Hospital" (Aylward 166).

The rest of the Latin (kindly translated from my scruffy transcript by Dr. Jonquil Bevan) is essentially a pre-prize bulletin, strongly worded in McBane's favour, predicting how the "thrasonical" Andrew O'Bryan will be defeated by McBane's swordsmanship. The verse (again according to Dr. Bevan) conforms to no known classical metre, and there are many inaccuracies in the Latin. This would suggest that it was perhaps a translation taken down from dictation of a bill advertising the fight. If it had been written originally in Latin, anyone with the skill to write it would probably have automatically used a known metre. Also, the mistakes in spelling (so bad as to puzzle the translator) would suggest that the Latin scholar who conceived this verse did not actually see the script. I can imagine some student translating the prize bill at sight for the publisher to note down.

The tone of the middle section suggested to Aylward that the *Companion* is "possibly the most ingenuous autobiography in the English language" (162). McBane certainly mixes in a fair helping of incidents embarrassing to himself with those that would impress the credulous. For example, he candidly admits that he took to his heels during his first battle, and even ran thirty miles before stopping. He readily admits to being frightened (for example "I was afraid to venture on my Governour, he being a Bold old Soldier" (80)), and to mismanaging his funds ("I got plenty of Money, but made bad use of it"(113)). He also, on occasion, does not embellish a tale when he could: when he was involved in capturing a "Wild Man" in the woods, he admits that he does not know what happened to the creature after capture. The description is fantastic enough: a man over seven feet tall, with nails as long as knives, and covered in hair. But the way he drops the subject, one which could have furnished him with many anecdotes, suggests that he is either truthful in terms of incidents or wanting to give that impression. The latter course is unlikely given that the tone is constantly unliterary and remarkably unselfconscious. One never gets the impression that McBane is actually writing, creating an artifact, using language for clever ends. He seems always to be merely recounting his experiences over a pint of ale.

Yet this apparently frank narrator would have us believe some truly fantastic stories: eighteen foot leaps, duels successfully fought against eight opponents in quick succession, a private soldier making four pounds a week

in 1706 from running gambling and whoring establishments while between battles, and at the battle between Blenheim and Bavaria in which the French general Tallard was captured, our hero was "Four Times shot with Ball in several parts of my Body, and Five Times stobed with a Bayonet", and left among the dead. While there he was plundered of his clothes and when protested was clubbed with the butt of a gun, by the "Dutch of our Army". Then the "Ground took Fire, I crept up on a Dead Man untill the Fire was past me". While awaiting rescue he slaked his thirst with "several handfulls of the Dead Mens Blood I lay beside" (120). Yet he survived, though he fought his next duel on crutches, against a man with a lame arm! And at Namuire (which sounds suspiciously like the Scottish for 'no more') he had been shot three times and stabbed six (85), from which he "soon Recovered" (86). All in all he was wounded twenty seven times, not counting the incident in which he was blown up by his own grenade, which killed several bystanders but merely removed most of his skin.

So, we are presented with a narrator that is willing to exaggerate and embellish his own exploits, but apparently does not invent incidents. This is in keeping with the overall impression one gets from the text as a whole: McBane is not a truly imaginative man, nor is he sophisticated enough to reinvent himself. The incident in Ireland, in which a lass is persuaded to marry one of McBane's companions, and told to repeat what the priest says, and does so literally, is recounted in a single sentence, peppered with commas. McBane goes on about this incident at some length, beyond what is necessary for anyone to actually get the joke, and he does so with no subtlety. Had he been writing for effect he would certainly have told it differently.

The verse summary of the autobiography, entitled "The Author to the Reader", starts with the lines "THRICE Sprightly Reader, it is BANE requires,/ That this his Labours lighten your Desires". This is language of a kind that is not encountered anywhere else in the text. Not only does McBane ignore the fact of the reader's existence everywhere else, but never again do we hear such adjectives as "Sprightly", let alone "THRICE Sprightly". Nor are such liberties taken with words as to excise portions for the sake of wit. In fact, this poem is so unlike McBane that I am sure he did not write it. Yet it is headed from "The Author". This allows of two explanations. Either it was written by the transcriber of McBane's verbal text, or it was written by someone else who did not mind (or did not find out until too late) his work



being attributed to someone else. Or I am wrong, and Donald McBane did actually write the lot.

Regardless of authorship, there is no reason to doubt the date of publication, and this book has a great deal to offer the student of the period, from details of dress derived from the illustrations to the fencing manual section, to insight into the customs of duelling among the lower classes. Aylward remarks that McBane "is, perhaps, the only known master of arms who strips his art of the cloak of etiquette and punctilio, approaching it as a simple fighting man advising fighting men with a similar absence of inhibitions" (167). This is true: there is none of the codification of conduct in the *Companion* as there is in, for example, Vincentio Saviolo's *His Practice* (London 1595), or any of the Angelo dynasty publications<sup>2</sup>. Although McBane does not advise the reader of the correct modes of behaviour, and thus paint a picture of the elaborate "punctilio" of the upper classes, he does offer good advice to the common man, and tell us what duelling, and other social customs, among members of his class were like.

Regarding the use of language, this text may give us an idea of how people of McBane's time and class spoke; many conversations are reproduced apparently verbatim. Naturally one cannot expect them to be accurate in terms of what was really said on the occasion, but McBane probably recounted the conversations in a way that would have sounded right had those words been said. He makes no apparent attempt to dress up the language, there are no high-flung discourses in beautifully constructed prose. Of course, there is no such thing as an unembellished text, but here I believe that the embellishment lies entirely in the content, not the form of the words. This is one of the advantages of studying a non-literary text: there is no poetry disguising the past from the historian.

That is not to say that this text is barren ground for the literary critic: it is as vulnerable as any to the dissecting scalpel of the structuralist, or the critical apparatus of the disciple of any literary theory. It is, however, decidedly unselfconscious, in that the writer seems never to be aware of the fact that he is writing (perhaps because it was actually taken down from dictation). Without background knowledge and critical scaffolding that I do not at present have, the book eludes all but the most superficial critique as a

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<sup>2</sup> The Angelo school dominated swordsmanship between the seventeenth century and the end of the nineteenth century. The Angelos (Domenico, son Harry, grandson Henry, and great grandson Henry Charles) taught, among others, H.R.H the Duke of York, the actor Charles Kean, and they were even employed to teach the Royal Navy how to use their sabres. The principle writer among them was Harry, who published *The School of Arms* (London 1787) and other less specific works. (Aylward pp207-221)



literary text. I shall therefore resist the temptation to indulge myself in explaining why it is so much fun to read, and concentrate on the more concrete aspects of the text.

Details of dress, military practice, military law, and even medicine of the period may be straightforwardly derived from this remarkable book. Naturally, owing to the unsubstantiated status of the work, these inferences may not yet be considered authoritative, but crossreferenced with other evidence may serve to build up a clearer picture of the past. For example, the many illustrations to the first part of the book, though fairly crude engravings, offer some idea of attire (as well as the techniques they are designed to show). Also, what McBane has to say about hats and coats is interesting. Your hat may, according to McBane serve as a buckler (a small shield held by one strap in the fist and used to deflect (not block) incoming attacks, and to attack (serving the same function as a knuckle-duster)). That suggests that the hats he expects his reader to wear were very sturdy, and probably lined with steel. These hats must also be large enough to conceal a pistol in the crown.<sup>3</sup> One may also note that trousers in McBane's day did not have pockets, but coats did, for he warns that when about to fight with "a Ruffin or a Stranger" be sure to make him remove his coat before engaging, because he may have dust ~~or~~ earth in his pockets to throw in your face. If trousers had pockets, this warning would be unnecessary, for any "Ruffin" worth the name would expect the call to take off his coat, and keep the dust in his trouser pockets. Of course, this sort of thing would be inconceivable among gentlemen, but McBane's intended audience is not the fops and dandies that dominated *l'affair d'honneur* but the man who relied on his sword and his wits to survive and prosper.

The freedom apparently enjoyed by the private soldier of this period would be unrecognisable to the modern squaddie, who may frequent the brothels and gaming houses, but is unlikely to run one while on active service. In addition, the novice soldier's pay is not given to be managed to his sergeant (the occasion of McBane's first, unsuccessful, duel). This sergeant is permitted to carry a sword because "he Claimed to be some Sort of Gentleman". This would suggest that the carrying of the sword is restricted to gentlemen. However the number of fights fought with a sword of some

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<sup>3</sup>Firearms in this period were either (in chronological order of invention) matchlocks, flintlocks or wheellocks, which were heavy and at least six inches long (percussion caps were not invented (or at least perfected and in practical use) until John Alexander Forsyth's impractical but important development of the use of fulminate of mercury as a detonator (his system was patented in 1807) led to Joseph Manton's invention of pellet or pill lock, patented in 1816.) (This is derived from Frederick Wilkinson's *Antique Firearms* (1969))

description between men of humble birth suggests that the only claim to gentleness required is the money to buy a sword. McBane's first two fights were fought with swords borrowed from "Commerrads" (the first time with the owner's permission, the second "whether he would or no"). There is never any suggestion of the right to carry a sword being conferred upon one from outside<sup>4</sup> The bewildering variety of weapons and their uses dealt with in the first section of this book would suggest that not all McBane's fights were conducted with the sword: one should bear in mind though that he fought in all thirty seven prize fights after leaving the army, which were fought using whichever weapons the organiser thought the crowd would most enjoy. Any swordman of McBane's experience would be able to adapt the principles of defence to practically any non-explosive weapon.

Medical historians may be interested by the reported treatment of McBane's many wounds. He goes into detail only twice: after being blown up by a grenade, and when he mentions that a plate of silver was put into his head. The latter incident makes one wonder where the money came from for the treatment, who in 1706 would have the ability to perform such an operation successfully, why a private would receive such expert medical care, and why McBane didn't die of the concussion or infection. One suspects the intervention of Mrs McBane, who saved his life in the grenade incident. (Mrs McBane presents a problem. There appear to have been two, though what happened to the first is not told). The former experience is related in some depth, both the highly amusing build-up to the accident, that has our hero leaving a successfully ransacked city ("Luke") with his pockets full of gold, meeting a group of grenadiers, and picking up the faulty grenade to throw back at the city seemingly for fun. He is rejected by the army surgeon as incurable, and taken by his wife to a "cloyster" of English monks (what they are doing on the Continent is not made clear), where he is immersed in a "Tub" of Oyl" for "Twenty Days", fed on milk and oil with his mouth prised open with the blade of a knife, and "they Killed two young Dogs, and plyed their Lights warm to my Eyes". This bizarre treatment was apparently successful, as this occurred in 1702, twenty four years before McBane's eventual retirement from the martial arts.

Only one further question remains to be asked - how is it that a book of such diverse interest has been overlooked for so long? I could find no

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<sup>4</sup> This was very much the case in, for example, Spain, where to wear a sword without that honour being formally conferred was illegal, and that law strongly enforced: for an idea of the gravity of that ceremony, albeit from a century earlier see Lope de Vega's play *Peribáñez y el Comendador de Ocana* (act three, lines 2214 to 2309, Tamesis Texts 1980)).

reference to it in any of the books in the biography section of the Edinburgh University library, nor indeed anywhere outside the works of Aylward and Hutton. In an essay of this scope, I am unable to fully explore any one of the questions raised by my initial readings of this text. However I hope I have demonstrated the value of this text to the critic, the historian, and the general reader. The next stage is perhaps to find out more about McBane: did he really exist? Given the public nature of his second career, establishing that should be feasible, though even a complete lack of contemporary mentions of McBane will not prove that he didn't exist. Unfortunately, neither Aylward nor Hutton use any corroborating evidence when using the *Companion*. Then comes the daunting task of verifying the internal evidence in the text, to establish the author's identity more clearly, and checking up on the details he presents, to determine as far as possible what is and isn't fiction. Hopefully, the dedicated researcher that takes this on will never lose the sense of joyful optimism that characterised McBane's approach to life, and shake off the recalcitrant librarian or unhelpful historian with the same carefree shrug as McBane shook off the occasional bullet.

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