

The Gentle Art of Walking with a Stick alas is Lost!

Budget Paper by Robert Smith
The Literary Club April 1983.

The gentle interplay between man and his walking stick is best described by W. J. Burtcher in his mini-classic "The Romance behind Walking Canes" written in 1945.¹

" Carried in the right hand the tip of the cane, holding up its share of the weight of the body, touches the ground simultaneously with the left foot; carried in the left hand with the right footbut when carried for amusement while on a leisurely stroll or prolonged hike the manipulation is different. The walker entertains himself by lazily swinging the cane back and forth like a pendulum that, though in irregular tempo, still marks time with the rhythmic movement of the feet. The tip of the cane now contacts the ground at intervals of every second, third or fourth step. Now and then the walker may break the monotony of this operation by twirling the stick or by tapping pebbles, lamp posts or fence pickets with it. Or he may sweep aside a piece of paper or light object or as with a scythe chip away the top of a weed along his path "

Walking sticks are hardly ever used these days in this pleasurable way. There was a time when the hall-stand at the Literary Club would be filled with canes on a Monday evening. Now alas; the use of the cane is restricted almost entirely to the very aged or to those with walking problems.

Once symbol of gentility
Adding grace and style and dignity
The wristy swing gave confidence and pride
And character and spring to manly stride
Now used only in senility
An emblem of fragility

Because of the automobile and our abandonment of leisure walking, the cane, once playing so important a role in our social lives, is fast disappearing.

Early man once grasped a stick
And changed the world with this trick
His upper limb he'd made longer
Swipes and blows became much stronger
All his foes he soon subdued
Stick in hand respect imbued
Monarch's sceptres this explains
Once were used as beating canes
Caliph's sticks without a word
Inspired more fear than a sword
But sticks used by us for walking
'Tis of these that we're now talking
Let's turn back our history pages

Reviewing sticks through the ages
In Bible times those sticks were staves
Held by their middle made by slaves
Thus Moses grasped one in his hand
When fleeing to the Promised Land
God spoke to him "Raise your stick
The Red Sea parts - go through - quick!"
Later when they had run dry
With n'er a cloud in desert sky
Again the Lord used Moses stock
"Bring water forth - strike yonder rock"

In King David's [time](#)² the following unforgettable lines were penned.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of
death I fear no evil;
for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff
they comfort me"

A stick, note, is at the core
of King David's [metaphor](#).

Bamboo, belonging to the reed family of canes, because of its lightness, rigidity and [straightness](#) has always been popular as the material for walking sticks and gave the generic name cane to sticks regardless of the materials used. The hollow stem of such a bamboo stick in the sixth century [A.D.](#) played a vital role in transforming the world silk trade.³

The Emperor [Justinian](#) had moved the seat of his empire to Constantinople where, envious of the enormous success of Persian carpet weaving, he set up his own looms in his palace. He tried unsuccessfully to divert the flow of silk from the China-Persia route so he persuaded two Persian monks who had lived in China to return there, risking death by torture, and smuggle out silkworm larvae in the hollow of their bamboo walking sticks. These few hardy silkworms are said to have been [the](#) beginning of all the silkworm varieties that stocked and supplied Europe with much of its silk until the nineteenth century.

During the Renaissance period sticks became very, beautiful. Holbein's

magnificent portrait of Henry VIII shows that appearance-conscious monarch holding a stately cane, topped by a crown held by bejewelled fingers and all in keeping with his highly ornate regal costume. It was also one of the earliest gadget canes described, containing within its shaft "perfume, twitchers, compasses, a foot rule, a knife, a file and a whetstone"⁴

Sticks reached their peak of elegance in the French courts of the Louis'. They were now tall and slender made of exotic woods, inlaid with ivory and precious stones. The ornate head was held delicately with a lace handkerchief and the cane swung slowly and gracefully in an arc away from the body by the extended arm as the walker proceeded on his stately way. A decorated metal band or ferrule hid the join between the head and shaft giving the stick balance and the finial or end tipped with metal, bone or horn, clicked on the gravel pathways of Versailles or on the marble foyer of the Paris Opera as their aristocratic owners promenaded.

Costumes and sticks were made to match and gentlemen built up their collection of canes much as men do today with ties. Voltaire boasted a collection of seventy-five such canes. His somewhat lesser known contemporary Jean-Jacques Rousseau had a mere forty. Ladies also carried canes, some made as parasols with the handle maybe concealing a vial of perfume or a folded lorgnette.

Some sticks were greatly prized by their owners. Benjamin Franklin had a particularly fine specimen of which he was very proud. In his will dated April 17, 1788 he wrote,

"My fine crab-tree walking stick, with a gold head curiously wrought in the form of the cap of liberty I give to my friend and friend of mankind, General Washington. If it were a sceptre he has merited it, and would become it."

The stick with 1400 other noteworthy specimens is now in the collection in the Smithsonian Institution.

Since the sixteenth century sticks have been favorite hiding places for weapons, particularly swords. At the press of a button or the flick of a switch the blade shot out from the end of the shaft. One of the most beautiful examples of sword-canes is to be seen in the Wallace Collection in London. The shaft contains both a beautifully etched steel blade and a minute wheel-lock pistol attached alongside.

During the last century a flood of gadget sticks flowed onto the market. Six hundred and thirty were patented in England alone and five hundred in the United States. Firearms ranged from pistols to small cannon. The words cannon and cane are derived from the same Greek root, *Kanon*, meaning hollow reed, rod or rule; hence the canons of the church.

The most audacious of the gun-sticks was the cheroot-cane used by river-boat gamblers. When a game was not going too well this discharged a mini-cannon ball by touching the handle with the lighted end of a cheroot, allowing the loser to make his getaway during the ensuing confusion.

In Victorian times a walking stick signified leisure class status. The economist, *Thorstein Veblen* in his major work "The Theory of the Leisure Class" wrote at the turn of the century.⁵

"The walking stick serves the purpose of an advertisement that the bearer's hands are employed otherwise than in useful effort

Those Victorian tradesmen were inveterate snobs
Concealing in walking sticks tools of their jobs
Like corn-merchant bin-prodders seeking stones and nails
Or railway measuring rods gauging width of rails
Seeking lard in butter-vats long-bladed rammers
Piano tuners hiding little piano hammers
Sticks hid wine-vault sample tasting dipping-rods
Some snapped open wide as photographer's tripods

As well as tools of trade sticks stored many gadgets. The list is unending.

Smoking pipes and liquor flasks, fishing rods and whips
Telescopes and billiard cues, rolled up maps for trips

Candlesticks and microscopes, violins and fans
Spectacles and cigarettes and snuff in little cans
The oddest of them all by far including knives for skewers
Was a handle-hidden gold spittoon for tobacco chewers.

Walking is a complex biological balancing act to which a hand-held stick brings added stability. Hence its value in old age when we tend to lose our balancing skills and instead shuffle along with both feet kept on the ground instead of one on the ground and the other in the air as in normal walking.

When used as an aid in lameness, sticks act entirely as a weight-bearing third leg. Then they are held with handle pressed firmly into the upper leg on the affected side thus relieving the weight of the body from the bad leg and transferring it to the stick.

A recent study of walking sticks at the Sherwood Hospital in Nottingham England shows surprisingly that all is not well with the quality of sticks used by the aged.

Doctors Sainsbury and Mulley of the Department of Health Care of the Elderly at the hospital studied 60 sequential patients with a mean age of 77.5 years, who were using among them a total of 62 walking sticks. These good doctors enquired as to why they were using sticks, where the sticks were obtained, whether a therapist had measured them for it and if they had fallen when using it. The stick length was measured, the type of handle noted and the ferrule inspected. Note English and American experts differ on the use of the word ferrule which in this case referred to the tip of the stick and not the metal band on the shaft. Neither the Oxford nor Webster dictionaries are entirely clear on the subject.

Forty-seven of the 62 sticks were of the incorrect length, mostly too long; only 14 of the patients had been measured. The doctors recommend that measurement is done best from the distal wrist crease to the ground with the patient standing erect in shoes with the arm hanging loosely at the side. Of the 24 patients who had fallen, 18 had sticks of incorrect length. Twenty-six sticks had other dangerous features; 23 had badly worn or loose ferrules, 12 were excessively flexible and one even had a splintered shaft. Over half

of the sticks had been obtained from relatives or friends or obtained casually from a variety of stores. Very few had been obtained from medical or other health equipment centers. Obviously more care is needed in providing sticks for the elderly.⁶

So if a stick you should desire
Maybe your gait this does require
Make sure its solid safe and sound
Correctly measured wrist to ground
Its handle easy to the grip
A ferrule firm that will not slip
Reflecting always taste and style
In perfect balance all the while
Stick walking with vitality
Adds flavor to life's quality
Go striding with a walking cane!
Revive that gentle art again!

Reference:

¹ [Burtcher W.3.](#) "The Romance behind Walking Canes", 1945, [Darrance & Co.](#), Philadelphia, Chap. 1.

² 23rd Psalm, Old Testament.

³ Encyclopedia [Britannica](#), 1964, Vol. 20, p. 662.

⁴ [Stein K.](#) "Canes and Walking Sticks", 1974, Chap. 9, p. 125.

⁵ [Veblen T.](#) "The Theory of the Leisure Class", 1900, Chap. 20.

⁶ [Sainsburg R., Mulley G.P.](#) "Walking Sticks Used by the Elderly", [Br. Med.](#) 3. 284:1751, 1982.