

## On My First Walking Stick

On reaching the age of seventy I finally accepted my doctor's advice and purchased a walking stick to use on any of the longer journeys I might want to make. It was not difficult to find a stick as all the local pharmacies carried selections that were usually hidden in a corner well away from the shelves of vitamins and toothpaste. What surprised me was that even before I had purchased a stick there was something about them that I found unsettling. Most had a strictly utilitarian look, a consequence of their severe practicality. All were capable of having their length adjusted using a row of holes drilled into the shaft. Each adjustment to the length of the stick was held in place by a peg attached to the stick by a lightweight chain. Some of the sticks had a covering of black paint but most had no such covering and so made no effort to disguise their metallic nature. The sticks were always finished off with a black, rubber ferrule. In retrospect, I suspect that the stick I chose was one that displayed fewer of these signs of usefulness. The stick I eventually bought was one where the mechanism for adjusting its length was almost completely hidden. There was no system of pegs and chain and the whole stick was painted black so covering the metallic manufacture of the shaft. I want to explore the unease that steadily grew between the stick and my body. What happened when indifferent practicality encroached upon the world of flesh and pain?

The first meeting between body and stick was one that resembled a handshake. This meeting appeared to promise nothing more than benign co-operation. The carrier (wearer?) of the stick anticipated a life of stress free walking whilst the stick approached the meeting with the promise of skilfully engineered safety. The first of these 'handshakes' might suggest that stick and body were joined in a harmony that

depended on each element being innately compatible with the other. With the completion of the handshake both parties come away with bodies intact and their integrity preserved. But this is not the case with the stick and body we have here. Because of their profound material differences many things can, and do, interfere with their harmonious joining. Not least of these displacements is the imaginary presentation of stick and body, the former an object of dangerous, unyielding metal whilst the fleshly nature of the body can sustain a wound. Some intimation of this discordance was surely the source of the unease I had felt on my first encounter with the walking sticks for sale in the pharmacy.

It would be remiss of me not to mention some of the social influences that disturb the easy adoption of a stick. It may insinuate itself into one's identity either by making visible one's frailty and poor health, or by ruining any attempt to appear younger than we are. These social restraints are different to the kinds of unease being discussed here where there is a disturbance (or collision) caused by the shadow of the walking stick as it makes contact with the field of the imaginary body.

The slightly sinister aspect of the walking sticks for sale became clearer following an incident that occurred when I had started to regularly use a stick. Among the more satisfying uses of the stick was that one could lean on the handle while sitting down. On this occasion the shaft and rubber ferrule of the stick were resting against my right foot. As I glanced down, the stick seemed to have been transformed into a prosthetic foot and leg and then rapidly into a bloody stump. In an instance it was as if the gap between stick and leg had collapsed allowing an unsettling transfer to take place between metal and flesh, flesh and metal. The emotions engendered by this exchange, fear and disgust, were not just fright at the material replacement of the organic by the inorganic, it was a sense that the entry of this harsh regime of the

practical had established a beachhead for an attack on the very humanity of the carrier. There are, of course, many benign aspects to using a walking stick. Contemporary stick use is largely a response to orthopaedic difficulties, however despite the initial figure of the handshake and its suggestion of fruitful co-operation, what I have described here is an exchange where each side of the bargain tries to incorporate aspects of its opposite number into their vastly different worlds.

Historical walking sticks, that is sticks that were an essential part of a gentleman's dress, were not thought of as mainly utilitarian articles nor were they essential aids to walking. They were always accompanied by a choreographed set of flamboyant movements that propelled the stick and its carrier into a realm that was always more than just an aid to safe walking. The stick, and its repertoire of decorative movements, had been tamed into an article subservient to the wishes of the body of its owner. This stick lineage was solely masculine and has never been available to women, although there are examples of female stick use in cinema when a character (female) cross-dresses. Compare the way the historical stick was used to supplement a range of expressive bodily movements to the strictly limited set of moves available today where the stick rarely strays far from the leg being supported. It can be deployed when navigating a flight of stairs but has to be returned to the default position next to the leg as quickly as possible. All the movements made by the stick are 'useful' ones and so are in tune with the sticks utilitarian nature. Decoration was an essential part of historical sticks and like a great deal of 'ornament' was present as a way of securing the object being decorated with a 'higher' place than that of unadorned practicality.

The unease that exists between a stick and a body can surely never be fully resolved. After a few months experience with a walking stick one can recognise in one's fellow stick carriers the degree to which either the body or the walking stick had gained the

upper hand. The submissive carriers often seem to have given up the search for ways to resist the threat that the stick had towards the physical integrity of their bodies. The submissiveness of these wearers is manifest in bodies where stick and body are completely united within the imperatives of practicality. At the far end of the spectrum of stick-carrying lie those who exhibit stick antagonism. They will take every opportunity to dispense with their walking sticks and their resistance to adopting the correct gait demanded by the walking stick can be seen in the ways in which their stick handling is often clumsy. Sticks are often dropped and their carriers exhibit little of the smooth control that results from an eagerness to ‘please’ the stick. The pinnacle of stick antagonism is in the collapsible walking stick. By deploying a small amount of force it can be made to disappear. What better way of demonstrating one’s autonomy from the order of the stick.

#### Postscript

After a few months of frustration using my stick I decided to re-educate the way I walked. Eventually, I was able to leave the stick behind along with all the umbrellas and spare sticks that congregated near the front door. Whilst I no longer had this metallic thing intruding into my life, I must have absorbed the laws of stick use. The movements of metal had displaced those of bone, muscle and tendon. When a few months later I again had to use a walking stick my body and the stick slipped together easily and I had become once again a functioning unit. However, the stick did not have a complete victory. Amongst the complex of forces at work when body and stick are in motion I found that they had ‘tolerated’ my characteristic lean towards the right as I walked.