

## Babes with Blades

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The sword as a weapon in personal disputes or in the grander scheme of battle is largely a thing of the past. It has moved into the realm of theatrical or sport fencing. These fields are dominated by men but the sword now has its place in the heart of many fair damsels who undertake to learn the art of fencing. These ladies when reading about the history of fencing, which is in large part the history of disputes of one kind or another, will find, to their dismay, few references to women who were adept at swordplay.

In all fairness, it must be admitted that taking up the sword has always been more common among men than women and cries of foul play in the representation of women who wielded the noble weapon in history should not be unduly loud. However, there have been more women who took part in shaping their world with a sword than you usually hear about and in the interest of making the picture of the sword's history a little less unbalanced in favor of the male, let me enlighten you about some babes with blades.

Everyone knows about that saucy little Maid of Orleans, Joan of Arc. Inspired by the Lord, she led the French army into battle, freed Orleans from the English, allowing Charles to be crowned king, and got her home town and a neighboring town off the hook for tax bills for centuries as her only fiscal reward. She did all of this even without the aid of the breakfast of champions.

Now, let's talk about some others who, like Miss Joan, used their swords to and left their marks on the pages of history.

In the ninth century, a sassy Saxon by the name of Aethelfled left her daughter home with the nanny, acquired a trusty blade and went off a-warring with her husband Ethelred. New disputes rose up on just about a daily basis on the English isle at that time, so Aethelfled did not lack for skirmishes to entertain her and fill her leisure time.

After Ethelred died, the Mrs. managed to wrangle the Mercians of central England into a cozy little band and became known as "The Lady of the Mercians." She got her Mercian followers, along with goodly numbers of Picts, Scots, and other assorted folk to help her in rolling over the Danes, with whom she had had less than a pleasant association. By the

time she was near her half-century mark, the lady was recognized as ruler of the Mercians and the Danes.

Unfortunately, she did not enjoy a long time as the reigning high mucky-muck of the two peoples as she got the bad end of a mace in a battle and did not recover. Still she'd had a good time while it lasted and played her part in the history of England.

During Elizabeth I's reign as sovereign of England in the sixteenth century, piracy had a sort of legitimacy. They called it "privateering" and Bess turned a blind eye toward it until faced with the exploits of the Vice Admiral of Cornwall's wife, Lady Killigrew.

It appears that Lady Killigrew simply had too much time on her hands and a yen for excitement. The Killigrew family business was privateering and this bored beauty decided that she might as well follow her destiny and join in the work. After tagging along on a couple of jobs, she pulled one of her own.

On a balmy spring night in 1582, this daring lass, cutlass and pistol in hand, led the charge on a German ship at Falmouth Harbor on the southern coast of Cornwall. The ship was a real prize, it's cargo containing barrels full of silver coin.

Sad to say for Lady K., her success was not to last. She'd been too visible and Queen E's damage control team made sure she was brought to trial and given the hanging sentence due for piracy. In the end, she escaped the hangman's noose by a last minute decree from Elizabeth. Instead, she spent a very long, damp, dirty time in jail.

In 1600, if you wanted to send your teenage daughter away from home to get her out of your hair, a nunnery was just the

place to send her and that's what Catalina de Erauso's parents did. Rather than be forced to spend her life in the pursuit of piety, Cat took it on the lam. She chopped off her girlish tresses, put on men's clothing and set about adventuring. She had inborn talents for shooting and swordplay which served her well during the three years she roamed around Spain before she managed to come up with passage money for a trip to the New World.

During the next twenty years, she served as a second lieutenant in the army, and occasionally held a regular guy's job. However, she made her day's pay most often as a soldier of fortune. In her off time, she did a fair bit of brawling and gambling too.

Although she got into some nasty scrapes, her luck was better than many and she avoided being hanged twice. After one particularly hairy episode, she received sanctuary from a bishop. She confided to the bishop that despite her adventurous life, she had remained a virgin. This impressed him and others so much that it was deemed to make up for all of her past sins, including eight murders, one of which was the mistaken killing of one of her own siblings.

She was a celebrity when she returned to Spain and she was able to charm the king into giving her a pension and passage back to the New World. She visited the Pope and was given dispensation to wear male clothing. At last sight, she was a mule driver in Mexico, using the name Antonio de Erauso.

These are just a few females who were not content to sit back and let the boys have all the fun. For more tales of adventurous women, you might want to hie thee hence to a library and look up Vicki Leon's books UPPITY WOMEN OF ANCIENT TIMES and UPPITY WOMEN OF MEDIEVAL TIMES.