

Excerpt: A Biography of Miyamoto Musashi from THE BOOK OF FIVE RINGS: A Practical Guide To Strategy by Miyamoto Musashi by Theresa M. Moore ©2018, all rights reserved.

Shinmen Musashi No Kami Fujiwara No Genshin, or Miyamoto Musashi as he is now known, was born in 1584 to a noble but somewhat middle-class family. "No Kami" means a noble person (samurai), while "Fujiwara" is the name of a noble family well known in Japan. His ancestors came from a branch of the Harima clan in Kyushu, the southern island of Japan. Hirada Shokan, his grandfather, was a retainer of Lord Shinmen Iga No Kami Sudeshige of Takeyama Castle.

His mother died shortly after he was born but he was raised by his stepmother and his notoriously harsh and distant father, who was an expert with the jitte, an iron truncheon with a tongue for catching blades. In this hard and ascetic environment Musashi was led to study Kendo as an outlet for his own violent nature.

He was quite tall and had facial scars from a childhood illness (measles or smallpox) that were hard to conceal. His lack of beauty, his violent life on the road and his innate paranoia at being caught unarmed in the bath conspired to make him live the life of an itinerant hobo, unkempt and unwashed most of the time, and made him a spectacle in noble circles. This in spite of the Japanese tradition of cleanliness which at the time was far beyond the grooming habits of Europeans of that period. However, he was also said to take showers under waterfalls like some Buddhist monks, so the description of his shabbiness may have been an exaggeration supplied by his growing list of both enemies and admirers.

When he was 13 years old Musashi was already a rebel without a cause [like Mugen in "Samurai Champloo"]. He challenged an experienced samurai named Arima Kihei to an organized duel, in which he killed his opponent. Having won by dint of his strength and his determination, Musashi was well on his way toward carving out a reputation for himself.

When he was 16 Musashi ran away from home and embarked on a long and celebrated career of traveling the countryside alone, with the single-minded ambition to improve his skills as a swordsman. He won several recorded duels as well as many we may not ever know of. One such celebrated duel was with a samurai named Tadashima Akiyama.

Musashi participated in the battle of Sekigahara and ended up on the losing side. Somehow he survived the battle in which 70,000 of his comrades in arms were slaughtered, and escaped a concerted manhunt for stragglers and wounded among the defeated army.

Sometime later, Musashi left Kyoto in 1605 to avenge an insult to his father made by the Yoshioka clan. The Yoshiokas had been fencing instructors to the Ashikaga house for generations. Munisai, Musashi's father, had been invited to Kyoto years before by the Shogun Ashikaga Yoshioka. The story is that Munisai fought three of the Yoshiokas, winning two out of three duels. But because he did not win the third they called him a coward.

Musashi challenged the head of the house, Yoshioka Seijiro, and broke his arm with a bokken [a short wooden stick]. Shamed by this, Seijiro cut off his topknot. His brother Denshichiro became incensed and challenged Musashi to a duel. Musashi promptly killed him with a blow to the head.

Enraged by the fate of his father and uncle, the young master of the house, Hanshichiro, challenged Musashi to a duel. Being a minor, the boy would have to be represented by a second, but he had 30 men surround the area armed with guns, arrows and swords, some hiding in a pine tree nearby. But Musashi had cleverly anticipated their plan and hid in the underbrush until the warriors were ready to give up; then sprang from his hiding place, cut the boy down and dispatched the rest, starting with the gunmen. Later, Musashi said that being the one among many made him fight with both swords; one to control the enemy's position and the other to kill with. This was the birth of his famous two-sword technique.

Later that year he visited the temple Hozoin in the south of Edo [Tokyo]. Here he fought with Oku Hozoin, a pupil of the Zen priest Hoin Inei, and won the duel. Musashi stayed on and studied his sword skills while receiving instruction and advice from the temple priests.

While he was there he was visited by a fighter named Muso Gonosuke, who challenged him to a duel while he was cutting wood to make a bow. Gonosuke was armed with a sword, and Musashi only a wand for a wooden sword, but when Gonosuke attacked Musashi stepped in and hit him smartly on the head. Thus humiliated, Gonosuke fled.

When Musashi left the temple to continue his path of enlightenment he passed through Izumo Province and stopped there to ask Lord Matsudaira's permission to fight with his strongest Kendo expert. He was matched with a man who used an 8 foot long hexagonal wooden pole. Musashi faced him armed with two wooden swords. The contest was held in the house's library garden, where Musashi chased the man up the two wooden steps and thrust at his face, throwing him off balance, then hit him in both arms. Intrigued, Lord Matsudaira asked Musashi to fight him. Musashi drove him up the steps and broke his sword with the "Fire and Stones" cut. The lord conceded the duel and asked Musashi to stay on as his teacher.

Sometime later Musashi fought with Shishido Baikin, a master of the sickle and chain, who wrapped his ball and chain around his opponent's sword and then stabbed him with the sickle while his enemy tried to disentangle himself. This did not work with Musashi, who promptly dropped his katana [long sword], pulled out his wakizashi [short sword] and stabbed Baikin with it. Baikin's followers were shocked and angry but Musashi chased them away with an impressive show of force.

Musashi's most famous duel was in the 17th year of Keicho [1612], when he was in Ogura in Bunzen Province. There he fought with Sasaki Kojiro, a retainer of Lord Hosokawa Tadaoki. Kojiro had developed a fighting technique called Tsubame-gaeshi [swallow counter], inspired by the motion of a swallow's tail in flight. Musashi applied to Lord Tadaoki for permission to fight Kojiro. The lord granted his request and arranged for the fight to take place at 8 o'clock the next morning on an island a few miles from Ogura.

To prepare, Musashi left his lodging that night and moved to the house of an acquaintance, inspiring a rumor that Musashi was so in awe of Kojiro's technique that he fled for his life. At 8 o'clock a prompter was sent to Musashi to wake him and meet the officials assembled on the island. He got up and went straight down to the shore. As he was rowed across to the island Musashi fashioned a paper string to tie back the sleeves of his kimono and cut a wooden sword from the spare oar, then wrapped a towel around his head. He laid back to rest. Once the boat reached the shore Musashi leapt from the boat brandishing the wooden sword and rushed through the surf toward his opponent.

Kojiro drew his katana but Musashi declared, "you have no more need of that" as he rushed forward with his oar sword held to one side. Thus forced into making the first cut, Kojiro managed to cut the towel from Musashi's head but was not prepared for the upward thrust that knocked his blade aside. Musashi followed through and brought the oar down on Kojiro's head, killing him instantly.

After that Musashi stopped using steel swords in duels. He was invincible, and from then on practiced Kendo as a way to achieve perfect understanding of himself. By the age of 29 Musashi had over 60 contests under his belt, and won them all. The earliest accounts appear in Niten Ki or "Two Heavens Chronicle", a record compiled by his students a generation after his death.

In 1614 and again in 1615 he participated in warfare during the Tokugawa ascension. Ieyasu Tokugawa laid siege to Osaka Castle where the Ashikaga clan maintained their stronghold and were fomenting an insurrection against the emperor. [It was this battle upon which James Clavell based his blockbuster novel Shogun]

When he was 50 Musashi settled into the life of the wanderer and devoted his study to perfecting his skill as a swordsman. According to his own writing, he came to understand strategy as a Way or discipline in 1634. Like many other men of the sword, Musashi was an avowed bachelor and never took a wife. He willed his worldly goods to a street kid he met in Dewa named Iori, whom he adopted and took to live with him in Ogura on Kyushu Island. Iori distinguished himself by fighting against the Christians in the Shimawara uprising in 1638 as a captain of the army for Ogasawara Tadazane, when Musashi was about 55.

After six years in Ogura, Musashi was invited to stay with Hosokawa Tadatoshi, the lord of Kumamoto Castle, as a guest. There he spent his time teaching and painting. In 1643 he left his royal patron and retired from there to climb Mount Iwato and live a life of seclusion in a cave called "Reigendo".

After he wrote the Book of Five Rings he became quite ill and his pupils and followers transported him back to civilization for hospice care. In a few months he was dead, and was returned to his hometown as cremated remains to be placed in the family tomb in Miyamoto.

Miyamoto Musashi is known as kensei [sword saint]. "Gorin No Sho" heads every Kendo bibliography. It is unique in that it touches on the strategy of both single combat and battlefield combat in exactly the same way. Instead of establishing a standard dojo he simply redoubled his efforts to study Kendo and the principles of strategy in the quest

for meaning and self-understanding. Despite his cruel headstrong temperament and violent past he remained ever a humble and honest spirit throughout his life.