

The Sgian Dubh

By Jonas Ibsen, JI-Knives © 2002

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A Sgian Dubh is a small, Scottish knife that is often worn in the leg of the stocking when wearing a kilt. It is pronounced “Skian Duu”. There is a differentiation between the Sgian Dubh for everyday use, and the one for evening use and festive occasions. The latter is somewhat more decorated than the former.

There is some disagreement over the correct spelling and its meaning. Here are a couple of examples: Skeen Dhu, Skein Dubh, Skhian Dhu, Skean Dubh, and Sgian Dubh. Since I’ve learned a bit of Scottish Gaelic (differing from Irish Gaelic), I believe that the correct spelling must be “Sgian Dubh”. “Sgian” means knife, and “Dubh” means black, but the sense of the word can also be hidden or secret. So it’s a black and / or hidden knife. To find out how it acquired its name, we must look at its past history.

The origin of the Sgian Dubh has now sunk into oblivion. But the oldest ones we know of had a different kind of blade than the kind we see today, and a very simple handle and sheath. In the 18th and 19th centuries a “Sgian Achlais” is referred to for the first time in writing. The Skean Achlais had a blade of approximately 10-12 cm., and was kept hidden in the coat sleeve at the armpit. Bear in mind that it was at this time that the English had forbidden the Scots to carry weapons and bagpipes, and wear tartan kilts. Therefore, everything that could be perceived as a weapon was kept out of sight. But when entering a friend’s home, men had the custom of displaying all of their weapons in order to prove their peaceful intentions. That is probably why one’s knife was placed in the leg of the stocking where it was fully visible. That was a comfortable place to wear it, and at the same time it was easy to reach for when it was needed as an eating utensil.

Another theory is that the Sgian Dubh has developed from the small skinning knife that was part of a typical set of hunting- or Grallochknives (to pull the entrails out of a deer). Such a set usually consisted of a butcher’s knife with a blade of 25-30 cm, and a skinning knife with a blade of 8-10 cm.

There is also disagreement over the two theories of origin, but especially the Americans with their excessive sense of romanticized patriotic drama and use of arms, emphasize the former theory. I myself have trouble deciding, since I think that both theories are actually very likely. However, I believe that the most important use of the Sgian Dubh always has been as an article for everyday use.

The Sgian Dubh had its glory days at the end of the reign of Queen Victoria around the year 1900, and up until the end of the First World War. Many Sgian Dubhs are still buried where there were muddy trenches at that time, e.g. at Sommé and Verdun. At the end of Queen Victoria’s reign everything Scottish became the height of fashion. Therefore, every fashion conscious stuck-up so-and-so - and those who wished they were one - carried a Sgian Dubh. An example of such a Sgian Dubh, is the one made for The Prince of Whales in 1925, which was sold for £ 403.333 at an auction in 1987. It was, of course, excessively decorated with precious stones and metals. There are also

examples of Sgian Dubhs with blades made of pure silver, that can serve as nothing but nail cleaners.

Today many blades are made of a very poor quality of steel (read tin for steel). They are nearly as useless, and have a handle and “precious stones” made out of plastic. Sgian Dubhs are even made without blades, so that the handle and sheath are in one piece. This was also done 100 years ago, however. They were then given to children, who were not yet trusted with a sharp knife. With the Sgian Dubhs made today, a violent, insane person would have severe difficulties making a dent in soft butter.

The blades of the oldest Sgian Dubhs were almost like those of a miniature bowie knife, and the handles were round and without decorations. Since the 18th and 19th centuries the blades have been pointed, with a length of 7-10 cm.

However, a few Sgian Dubhs of high quality are still made by hand, but they cost at least 2-300\$. Normally the handles are made of ebony or African blackwood, the sheaths are leather, and smoke-coloured quartz or finer stones are let into the tip of the handle. Often the whole lot is practically wrapped in silver, and the blade is not handmade. Many Sgian Dubhs are totally ornate.

I originated the idea of making my own Sgian Dubhs because of my interest in playing the bagpipe. I needed a Sgian Dubh myself, but when I considered the selection, almost all of them were made of plastic and tin. A cheap herbal knife would be ashamed of the blades, which were honed so round on the edge, that they could practically be described as blunt instruments. So I decided to make one for myself. Since then I've made Sgian Dubhs for other members of the Pipe Band, too. I attempt to make simple Sgian Dubhs with both the handles and the sheaths made of wood or horn. Usually I use amber for the decorations (not artificial amber), and often I inlay a small magnet in the sheath.

If you take an interest in making Sgian Dubhs, I would be pleased to hear from you.

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