

SELF-DEFENCE

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A WARRIOR



Larger than Life

A PROFILE OF
GEORGE CANNING

**White Lotus
Kung Fu**

FEATURING SIFU
DOUGLAS LIM WONG

**Fighting with
a Fan**

AN UNUSUAL BUT
DEADLY WEAPON

EXCLUSIVE
**The Way of
The Warrior**
HOW THE BBC
SERIES WAS
MADE

白蓮宗



'Larger than Life'

Dublin: a cold Autumn morning.

Twenty Karateka limbered up. The atmosphere was charged with expectancy.

A door opened, eyes turned and in walked the one and only George Canning.

I was taken by surprise. Instead of being dressed in his usual training gear he was wearing the criss-cross stitched jacket and wide pleated trousers of the Kendoka.

"The first lesson of the martial arts in self defence," he rapped, sounding not unlike his guide and mentor, Meiji Suzuki, "is never to under estimate your opponent. A concealed weapon is dangerous."

He paused but continued walking. The swish of his pleated trousers filled the room.

"Tell me," he addressed the class generally. "How many weapons do you think I have on my person?" He solicited wild guesswork and got it.

"Six," shouted one. "Twenty," another. Someone else cracked a joke and everyone laughed. I relaxed into my position of observer, made notes and listened.

George, a Mugendo Black Belt 6th Dan and Head of the Irish Karate Federation had invited me to the Republic of Ireland, (in Gaelic, Eire) to attend a weekend course he had organised for his instructors. They included Liam Fogarty (Waterford), Des O'Connell (Mount Mellick), Gerry McShane (Belfast), Michael Coyne (Donegal), Gary Slater (Sligo) and from England Dave Hunt (Surrey) and Ron Grey (Cleveland).

"You are all wrong," admonished George when their enthusiasm for guesswork had subsided. "Watch . . ." From about his person he produced ten knives of varying size and weight and proceeded to demonstrate a practical use for each.

"A knife is silent and deadly. This one should be used like a sword cutting the body as often and as much as possible . . ."

"This knife should be balanced with the heel of the handle in the palm of the hand and it should be punched upwards into your opponent's body . . ."

"The way knife techniques are shown in martial art magazines where the guy actually gets close enough to his attacker to take his knife away is rubbish. No way. No way would it work . . ."

My ears pricked. Was this a dig? Before the course I remembered having seen George reading a past issue of *Self Defence International* and pausing at one of my articles where knife techniques were shown in the photo-strips.

"Very few people can take a knife off a man. Even experts – men who practice every day make mistakes and get cut. Believe me. And no-one every says 'I'm going to stab you.' They use their advantage. They won't let you see the knife until it is too late . . ."

"But if you are lucky enough to see that knife. And I mean lucky. Then get as much distance as you can between the knife and you. Don't play around. If you're wearing a coat. Take it off and wrap it around your hand. Use it as a shield . . ."

I asked George later why he chose such a theatrical way to open his course.

"I always like to surprise people. Today I showed my instructors a way in which they could open their own weapons course. Imagine you have a group of people together who are strangers to each other. Beginning with the unexpected gets them thinking, talking and on their toes."

True to form, the following morning George tried a completely different approach. This time as his instructors loosened up George wandered in wearing a colourful smoking jacket and proceeded to do a mickey-take of those people who somehow manage to instruct by sitting in a chair at the front of the class.

"You do this," he mimicked. His instructors joined in the fun and one of them pushed him through the pack as he threw a variety of punches and kicks from his chair. Obliging, a couple of them fell to the floor in affected agony.

George started to run courses for his instructors at the beginning of 1983 to ensure their standard of tuition remained high and that they were fully aware of any change in his way of thinking.

A profile of George Canning A Mugendo Black Belt 6th Dan and Head of The Irish Karate Federation by John Temple

"I had to do this. I saw them develop a terrible lot of bad habits in their techniques. Habits they didn't notice themselves. I'm trying to eliminate all of these things with these courses."

"I explain teaching methods and tell them how to look after their students. I show them how not to make mistakes in front of a class and I also show them how to make lessons interesting so that students look forward to training. That's important. Students must enjoy training."

Another of the points I picked up on from his introduction to the course was his rather startling announcement – which produced not a ripple of surprise from his instructors – that from that day forward he was no longer a Chief Instructor but a Master of Mugendo.

"From this day on my brother, Joe takes over as Chief Instructor for Ireland. The word instructor doesn't attract me anymore. I don't feel like one. I find I've become a teacher. A master . . ."

"And how," I asked, "did that affect Messrs Suzuki and Meji, Co-Presidents of Mugendo International of which, George is the General Secretary?"

They became Grand Masters," said George. "They deserve it. Meiji Suzuki and Petar Meji should go down in history as great men. I'm the one who forced them to take their 8th Dan's. Mugendo is the first truly European martial art for Europeans. Meiji Suzuki may be Japanese but to me he is European in his outlook

and that is what counts. It is what he thinks and how he sees things."

Mugendo, which is about two-and-a-half years old was devised by the combined efforts of Meiji Suzuki, Petar Meji, George Canning and Joe Jahol and more may be read of Messrs Suzuki and Meji in Volume One, Number Two of *Self Defence International* in the article, "Mugendo: An Unlimited Way".

"You know I was the one to introduce Meiji Suzuki and Petar Meji to each other. They were both over at one of my tournaments here in Dublin. I was very impressed with Petar Meji's hands. He was very fast. Later Meiji and I went over to Yugoslavia to train with Petar and together we decided to start Mugendo."

Originally a Wado Ryu man the Irish-born George Canning started training in 1968 with the Japanese instructor, Peter Suzuki. "I was working a one-man taxi business in Dublin. I was out of condition physically. I was putting on weight and I wanted to get fit again. I'd always been active and had seen something of the martial arts when I was in the British Army."

He served with the Royal Engineers (1959-1965) and had spent time boxing, learning unarmed combat techniques, Judo and Ju-Jitsu.

"I put many hours into establishing Wado Ryu Karate in Ireland. As a Green Belt I ran clubs for Peter Suzuki who in turn worked for Tatsuo Suzuki's organization. In the mid-seventies there was a big split amongst the Japanese instructors."

"Peter Suzuki and some of the others left Tatsuo. They didn't like the way he ran things but it didn't bother me. I stayed with Tatsuo. I had no argument with the man. He was the one to award me my Black Belt and I compliment the man for it."

George represented Tatsuo Suzuki's interests in Ireland for about three-and-a-half years until some political infighting caused him to rethink his position and he decided to leave to help form the Irish Karate Federation with his friend, Brendan Kelly.

"To be fair Brendan already had the IKF but I was in at the beginning. We built it into a bigger organization. I wanted to give people a better deal. A better chance of making something of themselves."

Today, George is President of the IKF and has a full-time club on the crossroads of Phibsborough Road and the North Circular Road, Dublin. You cannot miss it. It occupies the top two stories of a three storey building and the legend "IRISH ACADEMY OF MARTIAL ARTS" is plastered in large gold letters on many of the windows.

"I've had my own place since 1978. It was a great day forward when I took it over. If I could have more of the building I would because I could fill it with students. We are that busy at the moment. I am already going ahead with plans to improve the place next year."

Presently he estimates the IKF to have around three thousand members but expects that number to increase now he has established clubs on mainland Britain.

"I've divided England, Scotland and Wales into two and made Ron Gray, a

Black Belt 3rd Dan and a bronze medal winner in the 1983 Full Contact World Championships Chief Instructor for the North and Dave Hunt, also a Black Belt 3rd Dan Chief Instructor for the South."

Did he ever worry with having instructors so far away from his home base that they would eventually leave him, as he had left Wado-Ryu?

"No," he smiled. "Why should they? If you don't give people power, how do you know how they'll use it when they have it? Give a man power and you'll find out what he's like. I can give it and take it away any time I like. My instructors know that."

"But you know, John even to this day I've never had a renegade Black Belt. I teach them everything. Flying kicks. Jumping spinning kicks. Everything. I tell them to go and look at other clubs. I'm not afraid. They'll never leave me."

George has already established clubs in Northern Ireland and is proud of his

association with its people. I wondered had he ever been drawn into the conflict between the Roman Catholics and Protestants of the North?

"No. I never have. I first went up the North in 1972. A chap called George McBride invited me. At that time the

"I always like to surprise people."

troubles were really bad but that didn't stop me. The people there are very happy with us and that is on both sides of the fence.

"Protestants and Catholics have been brought together in my class who would never have met elsewhere. I haven't a

clue what religion my people are. I don't ask and I don't care to know. I won't have religion or politics in my organisation. We are the only organization not to play the National Anthem at our tournaments."

George, himself a Roman Catholic stressed he had no deeply religious convictions but was glad to have "a religion which forgives me everything" and a belief, highlighted during a dinner conversation that "Him up there is playing with us. He's put us here. We're talking. He knows about us. What we'll say and he's laughing at us..." inferring life is predestined and that we are but playthings in the hands of God.

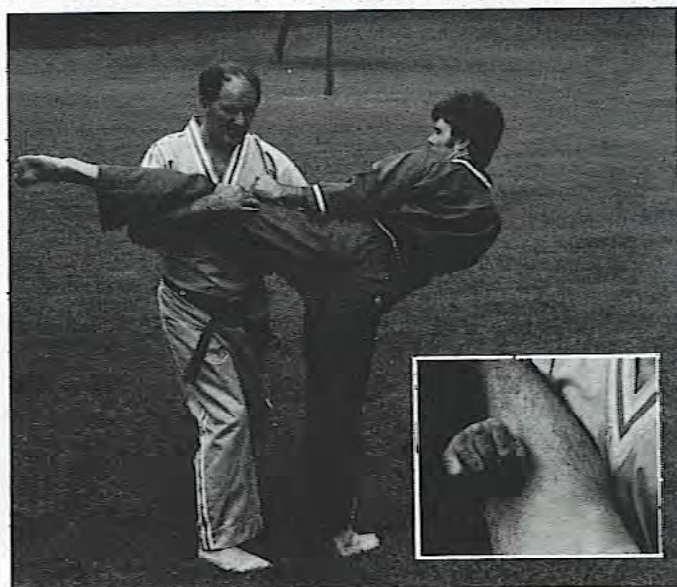
Either way, it cannot be all that easy to bring a divided youth together in a land which had become a headline for atrocity.

But to return to the early days of building the IKF and the criticism that he was all too ready to give grades away to

Technique 1. Counter to an Attacking Move



George blocks roundhouse kick to face ...



... and moves in hooking right arm around leg to stop its return, simultaneously ...



... positioning knuckle of right thumb over point on leg and thumb of left hand into waist



He then applies pressure on both points to send shock through body's nervous system

keep people in his organization.

"Yes," he said. "It's true. I did give grades away but I never gave one away to anyone who did not show potential as a martial artist. I gave grades away to encourage students. To make them work. I believed in them."

Slowly but surely the IKF grew but George said he always remembered never to neglect his own standard of training and to this end he turned to his old friend, Walter Seaton.

"Walter taught me a lot. He is one of the best. He also taught me how to referee. I used to referee for the European Karate Union. But at that time I still wanted a Japanese instructor to teach myself and my students. Don't ask me why. I asked Tom Hibbert to help. He is the one to have brought over all the original Japanese instructors to Great Britain. He knows anybody who is anybody in the martial arts and it was through

him that I met Meiji Suzuki."

Other Japanese he approached fought shy when George explained he wanted an instructor who would also be willing to go to Northern Ireland. But not Meiji Suzuki.

"I phoned Meiji and told him I'd pay him one hundred pounds if he came and

"Give a man power and you'll find out what he's like."

all he said was, "Okay, no problem." He wasn't frightened of coming," George recalled and then in his, by now familiar way of over-stating to the point of flamboyance went on to describe his meeting with Meiji Suzuki.

"The first time I met him I thought he

was arrogant. Very arrogant. Very, very arrogant. Completely arrogant but when I saw him train I was impressed. His speed. Balance. Agility. Everything was so natural. So powerful. He was unbeatable. Completely unbeatable.

"To me it was like seeing a miracle. I'd seen a lot of tough martial artists. Guys from all over England but when I saw Meiji Suzuki my mouth was wide open. I was completely transfixed."

So much so, it seems that when the brusque, Meiji Suzuki told George his Karate was in fact rubbish, he agreed.

"I thought about it and he was right. Meiji gave me a series of exercises to do and I worked at them. The next time we met Meiji was very impressed with my standard. Anyway, Meiji and I struck up a great friendship. He's a hard man and has a terrifically high standard of Karate."

Make no mistake about it George's involvement with Meiji Suzuki is total; his

Technique 1. continued



George inhales and uses hip to lift and turn his opponent until his head points towards the floor



Then he drops his opponent...



... using his own knee to push opponent away



The fall

loyalty unquestionable. I asked: with the rise of Mugendo, for which he was working so hard what was to become of the IKF?

"It will probably be phased out," he replied. "Although there are people in my Association who are against it on principle. They don't want us to lose our identity. But I don't mind. They are narrow in their outlook. I'm looking for something bigger, with Mugendo we have something good."

"As a system it will never fail because it trains the natural instincts of the body. If attacked the natural instincts take over and protect but that's not the case with traditional Karate. It's rigid. The movements are unnatural. Did you know that traditional Karateka cannot punch properly."

I had heard the same thing from Meiji Suzuki and Petar Mejić. "Surely not," I retorted, "some traditional Karateka

spend hours developing powerful punches."

"That's right," agreed George all too readily. I had fallen into a trap: he had wanted me to say as much. "They have the power, if they can catch you. They use the hip well but they don't use the body. They don't flow. They don't know how to hook their punches or move properly."

"That's why boxers laugh at us. The traditional man can't punch if he hasn't had any boxing experience. They can't help it. They have rigid movement. The only things a traditional man has that are good are the back fist and spinning back fist..."

Was that all? It is all very well being outspoken but George Canning, Meiji Suzuki, Petar Mejić and company know that to survive as future martial art instructors they have got to work tremendously hard to ensure Mugendo is so superior to anything else that no-one

will dare to criticize them in return. It is a tremendous incentive. Doubly so because many of them in the past made a passable living out of teaching traditional Karate.

"I can take guys who have never fought in their lives and make champions of them," continued George. "At this moment I have a student who never knew he had a powerful right hand until I told him. He is a natural fighter. I can take a man of any age and make him good. I have a man of fifty-four in my dojo and he's excellent."

He listed those amongst his students he considered to be potential champions. His own son, George Jnr (17 yrs), figured strongly - "He'll be a World Champion," said Dad - along with his nephew, Anthony Canning (19 yrs), Gerry Kidd (21 yrs), Liam Fogarty (25 yrs), Marguerit Hillard (21 yrs) and Geraldine Leggett (19 yrs).

Technique 2. How to slow a heavy man down



Heavy man punches to face. George ducks...



... goes under arm and punches opponent just below his floating rib



George then moves through...



... and turns...

"I train their minds," explained George. "I encourage talent when I see it. I fight all my Full Contact fighters to see what they can do. I watch their attitudes and see how they take punishment. I look for cleverness, fighting instinct and aggression. If I fight them and I don't feel these things then they can't fight. I know what I'm looking for."

"But how did he encourage this talent? Did he have special training routines?"

"No. My exercises and training routes are no different to those taught in many other dojos. I train my students to go out and survive on their own. I make them into individuals so that they can stand up for themselves in life. I command, rather than demand, respect."

Furthermore he said he did not believe in bag work for developing the power and fluidity of movement which is the professional fighter's mark as he moves in to demolish his opponent and neither did

he agree with building a fighter up physically and mentally for a competition.

"It's psychological nonsense," said George. "I put guys straight from the dojo into the ring and they knock people out. There's been no preparation and no ring practice. They train with me. I tell them they are fighting next week and they fight. No-one teaches like me."

No-one indeed. We seemed to be straying somewhat from the impression Messers Suzuki and Meijic had been careful to promote regarding Mugendo's scientific approach to the martial arts...

"What I do is build on that kind of fitness everyone has but not many people use. It's the fitness of the mind to control the body. When a fighter is under pressure it doesn't matter how big or strong his opponent is he can win if he can use his opponent's power against him."

The question remained unanswered.

How did he achieve this level of competence?

"I suppose," he paused momentarily, hesitant to put breath to his words. "I take my fighters apart and then put them together again. I see that their foundation is good and that they have talent and I rebuild from there. Even Meiji Suzuki says I'm the better teacher."

He was talking about confidence, of impressing his own inimitable style and character into his students to strengthen their resolve. It was a technique taught him by the British Army.

"I give my students the best I can. I make them work but most of all I give them the credit they deserve. I never tell a student he's bad. I tell him he is very bad. That's important, so when a student is good I can tell him he's very good. Praise encourages people to work."

"I get my students to relax and understand their bodies. I compliment

Technique 2. continued



... grabbing at the back of opponent's neck – in line with jaw bone – with left hand and pressing the thumb of his right hand into opponent's body just above the hip bone



George applies pressure pushing opponent's body forward and pulling his head backwards



Opponent falls



End of technique

them on what they do. I show them their mistakes. I explain where they've gone wrong. I'm a very patient man. I can spend an hour improving someone. I will not let that student out of my dojo until he has improved. I do what very few people do. I work with my students."

He does too. I watched him spar with some of his Black Belt instructors. He wanted them to be more relaxed when they fought and to prove his point he stripped to the waist to show how his body worked.

"One or two of you are still too tense across the shoulders. You're waiting for that one big punch. You're tiring yourselves with tension. You've got to relax because when you're relaxed you have more movement in your body and also a lot more power. Watch me."

George fought them. It was a continuous bout of stinging kicks and punches but care was taken that no-one

got injured. There was none of the heavy-stuff that breaks the opponent's will and empties the club for the next two months. It was important they enjoyed sparring.

George has a tremendous reserve of stamina. He never stopped and many of his instructors, average age twenty-five,

**"I command,
rather than demand
respect."**

faded away long before he had even broken into a sweat.

"I'm in my second youth. Look at me, I'm forty-five years old. Can you believe it?" - Quite honestly, no - "I'd have stopped training years ago if I'd have been training in a traditional system. I'd

have stiffened up. Being fit means never showing you're tired. You mustn't show any reaction when you're being hit. Your body must be used to being hit."

He is also amazingly, and considering his heavy build, deceptively supple. He is always stretching, working his body into tortuous positions. Once, during the course while explaining how to deliver a high side kick he rolled up his trousers - to point out which muscles did the actual work - and then held his leg out, in quite a high side kick position for one minute, seventeen seconds.

"Meiji gave me exercises to improve my stretching. I've only been stretching for about four years. I always lead my students stretching, I do everything they do. I normally stretch three or four times a day. It depends on how busy I am."

In conversation, George's instructor grades referred to him as a father figure. One young man put it this way. "We do

Technique 3. How to use an opponent's weight against himself



Ready stance



Opponent attacks with punch to head. George ducks and moves in punching to opponent's lower ribs to stun him



Then he grabs hold of opponent ...



... and lifts ...

everything for him because he does everything for us. He's the Godfather you know."

The "Godfather" was a name given him by a martial arts writer some years ago. It is a name George rather likes and he is apt to refer to his students as "my girls" or "my lads".

"There is a lot of talent in my organization. A lot of talent. People come miles to train with me because of my reputation. I'm larger than life. I give people what they want. I make them happy. I respect them. They respect me."

One man to have earned George's respect is Hock Aun Teh of the Scottish Taekwondo Association because of his ability both as a martial artist and a business man.

"Hock Aun Teh came to visit me in Ireland. He was very impressed with my standard. He said he'd never seen such a high standard as mine in Karate. He also

advised me on how to run my business and since I took his advice I've been very successful."

Mr Teh also took time to take one of George's classes and spar with some of his students.

"That man is an incredible martial

"I encourage talent when I see it."

artist," George enthused. "He's very fast. My students didn't see him coming. But he never hurt one of them. I've seen all the best Taekwondo masters in the British Isles and they don't rate next to him."

But before his tongue ran away with him completely and he made his com-

mendation sound more like an advertisement for Taekwondo than for the gentlemanly Mr Teh, George was quick to add, "Hock Aun Teh shouldn't be doing Taekwondo. He's beyond Taekwondo. The way he talks. The way he moves. His attitude is good. He's so open minded. With others they are Taekwondo and that's it but it's not that way with Hock Aun Teh. I can't help respecting the man."

More of Hock Aun Teh in the next issue of *Self Defence International*. Even as I write this article plans are being made for my visit to Glasgow to interview the man.

"Hock Aun Teh also sparred with some of my girls when he was over here," commented George, "and he was very impressed with their standard. In my dojo a girl must stand equal to a man. I don't make excuses."

"Women are very intelligent people and are very critical of the things they do."

Technique 3. continued



... then drops opponent so that he falls onto his neck



The fall



The fall continued



End of technique

A woman has far more mental power than a man. She is more relaxed. She accepts techniques better and is generally hard to impress."

I saw two of his female Black Belt instructors, Marguerit Hillard and Geraldine Leggett spar with equally graded male students and indeed no quarter was asked for or given. George is quite naturally proud of their proficiency and indeed take ladies' martial art training very seriously indeed.

"I persuaded Marguerit and Geraldine to run Ladies' Self Defence courses for me and have been very pleased with the response. I find women listen to other women better than they would a man. They have a different outlook on life and in this day and age it is important they at least have a knowledge of self defence."

George had arranged for Marguerit and Geraldine to invite some of their ladies to meet me to explain why they trained. They came from different parts of Dublin and looked to be in their twenties or early thirties.

Geraldine outlined their case.

"Today there are no knights in shining armour. It's a hard world out there and at least if women train with us they'll be able to put up a fight. I don't believe or expect they will be able to take anyone on. It's not possible..."

Marguerit cut in.

"No. It's not. We tell our ladies to talk their way out of it if they can. They've not got to bother with being too polite or worry about the consequences of hitting back. They won't lose as much in a court case as if they were mugged or raped. If they defended themselves they'd still have their self respect and that's important."

Funnily enough both girls sounded very much like George in conversation. But were their reasons for training pure sensation or fact? I threw it open to the others.

Generally the consensus of opinion was that their lives had changed over the

past two years. No-one knew why but each said they felt wary about going out alone.

They told of high unemployment, the Provisional IRA, child glue sniffers, vagrants and above all they told of Dublin being the heroin capital of Europe and of a youth corrupted by addiction. Crime was on the increase and they saw no end to it.

"You're never safe," said one. "I've seen it happen. On Sherif Street they hang around in pairs. They're after money to buy drugs. They wait for someone they can pick on. Sometimes it's a man; mostly it's a woman. One attracts their victim's attention. The other attacks from behind."

**"When reality knocks
on your door,
you know you've
got to do
something."**

A very pretty girl named Rita Cole gave me what must be my line of 1983 when she explained what made her want to learn how to defend herself. "When reality knocks on your door," she said, "You know you've got to do something."

People's environment and attitude towards life affects the way they train. I am not saying Dublin is any worse than any other major city but I am saying you cannot divorce martial art training from the reality of everyday life. It is life. Ask George Canning's girls.

"Let's hope they never have to use their knowledge," said George when I told him of my discussion. "But it is time women realized that there are certain things open to them and other things that are not."

"They must never allow themselves to get into a position where they are likely to be attacked. In other words. Be careful who you associate with, never accept lifts from strangers and don't go where there's going to be trouble."

In passing George also mentioned he believed the Karateka of communist Russia would soon emerge as a strong force within the martial art world.

"The Russians have the best system there is and that is to destroy. I don't care what anyone says. They research everything and have all the answers." - He started to laugh. - "The only thing they don't have is the common sense to go with it. If they had that they would be incredible people. They don't know how to enjoy life."

And that is something you could never say about George Canning. Everything about him really is larger than life. From the rings he wears on each of his fingers - "Everyone a present, John," - to his outrageous clowning and inimitable personality he is a one man entertainment.

He is renowned and quite rightly so as a fabulous host. From the moment he met me at the airport in the 1961 Silver Bentley he lovingly calls his "Rolls", he treated me like a celebrity. He was a man who met every request with, "Of course, no problem..." and nothing ever was.

He treats his students the way he sees them and the way he sees them is often the way they become. "Look at that man's kicks. Can you believe it? He's thirty-five years old," he said, his eyebrows raised in a pantomime of disbelief. "He is so fast. He's a champion..."

George has a rare gift of making people feel important. There is a freshness in his approach that wipes away the cobwebs of years of repetitive instruction. You do not know where the man is coming from or what he will do next.

The instructors who attended his course left for home charged with an enthusiasm not only for the martial arts but for life.

George Canning had given them their greatest gift: a belief in themselves.

If you want to know anything more about George Canning, his clubs or courses he intends to run please contact:-

For the North of Britain:

Ron Gray,
18 Braemor Road,
Billingham,
Stockton on Tees,
Cleveland.
Tel: 0642-556002.

And for the South:

Dave Hunt,
58 Villers Road,
Kingston-upon-Thames,
Surrey.
Tel: 01-546 8717.

Or George himself at:

The Irish Academy of Martial Arts,
360A North Circular Road,
Doyle's Corner,
Philbsboro,
Dublin.
Tel: 0001 302233.

