

Figure 1. Illustration of an English pistol duel dating to 1826. The gentleman at the back is obviously terrified and is being propped up by his second.



Figure 2. A holster pistol exhibiting transitional dueller characteristics. Isaac Bissell, famous mostly for his simple pistols in the Scottish style that he made on contract for highland regiments, operated on King Street in Birmingham from 1776-1783 and is perhaps the maker of this pistol. It is mounted in an alloy meant to imitate silver (probably tutenag) and the lock has been made faster by virtue of a roller that rides on the end of the mainspring.

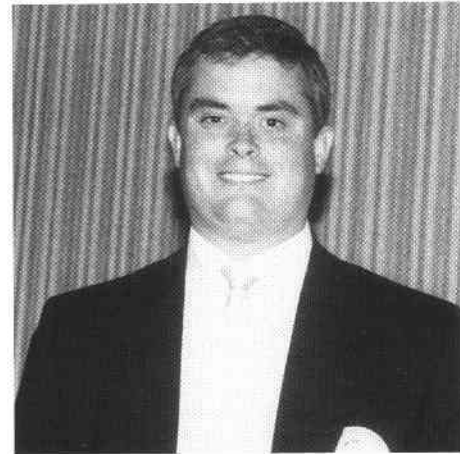
A Brief History of English Pistol Dueling as it Applies to Gun Collectors

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While many collectors with an interest in the flintlock era own at least one or two dueling pistols, most of us have paid little attention to the duel itself and the social conditions that surrounded this most peculiar institution. Students of the Western gunfight have long complained that the classic “shootout,” as it is portrayed in popular novels, movies and television, bears little resemblance to the gunfight as it actually existed in history. This situation also applies to the duel, which suffers under the same myths and misunderstandings. My hope is to provide collectors with a better understanding of why their pistols were built, how they were used, and what this tells us about the features of their construction.

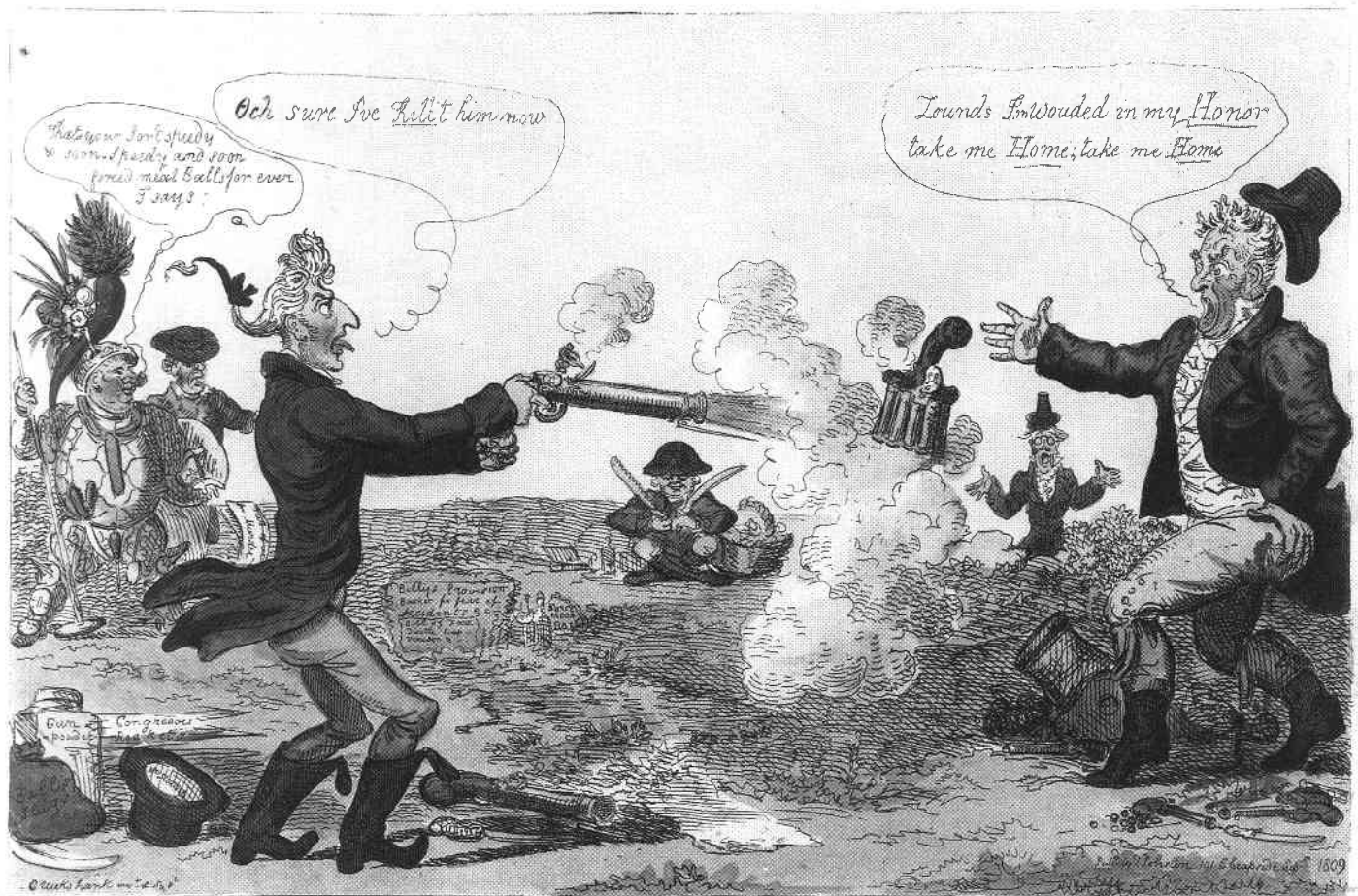
Given the length of this paper, it has been necessary to limit the topic to pistol dueling in England. I have chosen the pistol over the sword for the simple reason that more collectors own pistols. Those with an interest in sword dueling are referred to an old but excellent book, *The English Master of Arms from the Twelfth to the Twentieth Century* by J.D. Aylward (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1956). I have chosen the English because they made most of the best pistols and because the pistol duel, as an institution, reached its most refined point in that nation. As for France and the rest of the Continent, I will defer to Mark Twain who commented: “Much as the modern French duel is ridiculed by certain smart people, it is in reality one of the most dangerous institutions of our day. Since it is always fought in the open air, the combatants are nearly sure to catch cold” (*Essay on Duelling*).

While many of the comments made below could easily apply to Ireland or North America, it should be understood that Americans and Irishmen were well known for their “anything goes” approach. Perhaps because fencing was not widely practiced in these areas, local duelists made early experiments with rifles, sabers, broadswords and knives, as well as pistols. It was even common to fight on horseback. One notable Irish horseback duel, dating from 1760, pitted Colonel Jonah Barrington against his neighbor, Mr. Gilbert. These two gentlemen were impressively armed, each with two holster pistols (charged with ball and swan-drops), a broadsword and a dirk. One hundred



yards of a raceway on the Green of Maryborough were marked off for the event, which was witnessed by a large crowd. After much firing and slashing, Col. Barrington “closed upon his adversary, stabbed his horse several times, and, with his dagger at his enemy’s throat, was proclaimed the victor.”¹ Such encounters, while no doubt exciting, were regarded as barbaric by most Englishmen and are a separate subject from the strictly governed combats that will be described here.

Since the pistol duel evolved directly from dueling with the sword, some background information may be in order. Many historians have contended or once contended that the roots of the English duel lie in the ancient practice of “trial by combat,” which dates, in England, to the times of the Norman conquest or possibly earlier. Be this as it may, the more modern practice of dueling with swords can be traced directly to fashions in France and Italy that seem to have crossed the channel some time during the reign of Elizabeth I, as part and parcel of the “Code of Duel” or rules that surrounded such affairs.² The key difference between trial by combat and the duel is that the more ancient method depended upon divine intervention to decide the fate of the combatants. In other words, God was called upon to perform an individualized miracle, awarding victory in arms to the deserving party. The duel, on the other hand, was the product of a much less superstitious age.³



Killing no Murder, or a New Ministerial way of Settling the affairs of the Nation!!

Figure 3. A print entitled "Killing no Murder, or a New Ministerial way of Settling the affairs of the Nation!!" This print depicts the September 21, 1809 duel between Lord Castlereagh (secretary of war) and Mr. Canning (secretary of the foreign office). Castlereagh was under the impression that Canning had tried to get him removed from office. They fired by signal at the distance of 10 yards. The first shot missed. When a second shot was taken, Canning was wounded in the left thigh; notice the "sawbones" doctor sitting in the center. A box at the bottom left is marked "Congreves Rockets."

Duelists chose combat because it was seen as a fair method to settle questions of honor in a private forum. In the days when the "Code of Duel" was established, there were no proper police and the law had yet to establish effective civil courts. Therefore, dueling was seen as the only way to deal with a bully, casanova or loudmouth. The threat of being challenged made it a dangerous matter to insult a lady, manhandle a weakling, seduce a schoolgirl or call a man a liar. In short, dueling was an institution that enforced the rules of society.

Dueling also had the advantage of being enforcement from within. The pride of the English upper classes was such that submitting their destiny and dignity to common law would have been intolerable. It is important to remember that duels could be fought only by gentlemen—dueling was a guarded privilege of high birth. John Dunlop, in his 1843 pamphlet *Anti-Duel*, captured this point when he stated that "the practice of dueling among the upper classes is one of the principal marks of honour that distinguishes the gentle-

man from the peasant! and that it is expressly kept up and maintained to ensure that refinement of manners which is to preserve an impenetrable barrier between them and the less aristocratic of the species."⁴

But unfortunately for the unskilled or weak swordsman, duels with rapiers or small swords were far from fair.⁵ Victory went to the more practiced combatant nearly every time regardless of who had suffered the affront. When duelists began to choose the pistol over the blade during the 1760s, this situation was partially corrected. Marksmanship required far less schooling and athletic skill than fencing.

Not that this transition made duels entirely fair; far from it for, as Admiral Austin said at a meeting of an anti-dueling society, "dueling is . . . an unfair mode of settling a quarrel, for one of the combatants, being an adept, could hit a shilling or snuff a candle, whereas his opponent might never have fired a pistol."⁶ And, as was argued by anti-dueling pamphleteer John Dunlop, accepting a chal-

lenge was “a nonsensical and puerile, and yet deliberate, permission by the injured party to receive quietly the shot of the aggressor over and above the injury already sustained. Quite contrary to the rules of equity, whether the injured party shall come off best off or not, is avowedly a matter of chance.”⁷ Yet despite these objections, pistols were certainly more equitable than swords and by 1780 had gained the almost exclusive favor of the English duelist, long before the sword had disappeared as an element of daily dress.

It should be understood that pistols did not replace swords overnight. Even though John Wilkes and Earl Talbot used large horse pistols in their 1763 encounter, swords were brought along in case they were needed. As late as 1777, Capt. Stoney and Rev. Bate fought with swords after having unsuccessfully discharged their pistols.

The procedure for dueling with pistols evolved directly from practices on the Continent and remained fairly consistent with the passing years. The comments made here are based upon a comprehensive examination of more than one hundred actual duels as they were described in the newspapers and magazines of their day. During historical times, dueling was treated almost as a sporting event, with the results of duels being reported in a regular column of the newspaper. Duels between prominent individuals were particularly intriguing to the general populace, who simply couldn't imagine anything more amusing or entertaining than a couple of rich guys blasting away at each other with lethal weapons. This fascination has left a rich legacy of reportage ranging from obscene cartoons to church ser-

mons. Other valuable sources are published “how-to” guides on dueling, some of which are listed in the bibliography.

All duels stemmed from an insult, either real or perceived. This affront could range from a casual slur to the seduction of a sister. The insulted party was required to issue the challenge; this was done by personally exchanging addresses with the cad in question, by having a comrade deliver a pithy verbal invitation, or by sending a “cartel.” A cartel was a formal note listing the grievance and giving simple information about who to contact in order to schedule an encounter. Always the most popular mode of challenge, cartels seem to have replaced all other methods by the 1830s. Many cartels survive in published works today, but while swordsmen had often tried to be witty (“Wounds of the flesh a surgeon's skill may heal/But wounded Honour's only cured with steel”), pistol duelists tended to be polite and down-to-business.

The delicate task of arranging a time and place for the encounter was left to trusted friends or associates referred to as “seconds.” The choice of weapons traditionally fell to the challenged party but pistols were really the only choice once swords had become unfashionable. The seconds also employed a doctor to be present and took care of other more personal details such as keeping their principal sober and ensuring that he didn't wear flannel underwear, which was notorious for causing infection if carried into the body with the ball.⁸

On the day of the meeting, the seconds would first make sure that there were no common people in the area to witness the event, which was after all a crime punishable by



Figure 4. Transitional dueller by Mears. This example shows the difficulty in telling the difference between early duellers and holster pistols, if we accept that there was one. There were a number of gunmakers in Birmingham and London named John Mears, but none of those listed in the standard sources seem to be early enough to correspond to this pair of flintlock pistols. The silver mounts bear what appears to be the London mark of Thomas Dealtry, who was active from the 1750s through the 1780s. The 62-caliber barrels are 8.25 inches long. This pair is interesting because of its light wood and silver mounts, which include a sideplate and grotesque mask of the type normally seen on Queen Ann style screw-barrel pistols.

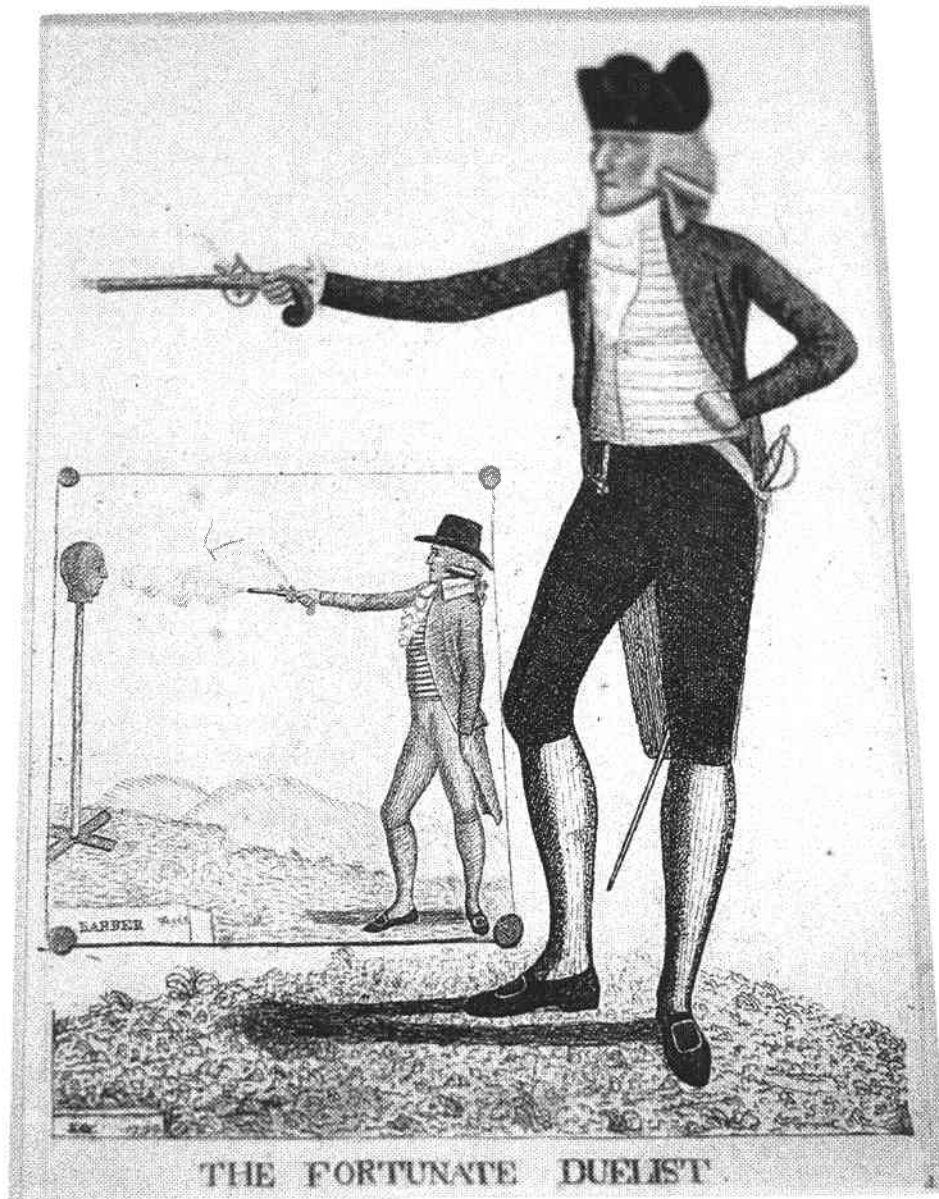


Figure 5. "The Fortunate Duelist," an 1842 illustration of a duel between James McCraw est and Sir George Ramsay. This duel arose following a dispute between their servants outside of a theatre. Note the inset detail showing practice with a head-shaped target.

death for all parties present. They were also under a serious moral obligation to make every effort to stop the fighting. It was a common 19th century observation that more duelists were killed by their seconds than by their opponents, either through these gentlemen being too emotionally involved to find a peaceful resolution or by their failing to charge the pistols properly.

Concerning the pistols themselves, one point must be driven home at once. From the earliest days of pistol dueling, when holster pistols were used, duelists almost never shared weapons from the same set. The myth of duelists choosing pistols from the same box is entirely a creation of the movie industry. English pistols had been sold in pairs since the 17th century and each man attend-

ed the duel equipped with two identical pistols of his own. English gentlemen were fanatical about the accuracy and quick ignition of their dueling pistols. They shopped very carefully to get the best pair available and practiced with them regularly. The thought that these men would then share such an advantage with their adversaries, or desire to borrow a pistol with which they were not familiar, is patently ridiculous.

A careful examination of the details behind an exhaustive selection of English duels has revealed very few exceptions to this rule, and these almost always involve particularly unusual circumstances, such as a conflict arising between two passengers on a journey. Other examples are true oddities. For instance, there was one encounter

where the adversaries each thought the other had been practicing too much with his own pistols and the seconds were sent out to purchase a fresh pair at a nearby gun shop. While a duelist in need might be tempted to request a pistol from his opponent's pair, this would have been highly embarrassing. Gentlemen of adult age were assumed to own a pair of dueling pistols. Admitting that you did not have pistols would also have been admitting in some small way (and to your enemy, no less) that you were not quite a gentleman. Asking a close friend or a relative was a much more palatable option and was quite common practice among men of gentle birth but limited means. The only example I could find of a duelist actually asking to use a pistol from his opponent's pair resulted in a haughty refusal.⁹

During loading, the seconds would keep a close eye on each other so that no foul play could take place. Great care was taken with the priming because a misfire or flash in the pan was considered a full shot and could cost a duelist his life. Another more subtle duty of the seconds was to stay out of eyesight of the antagonists while loading the pistols. As was properly noted by Billy Egan, an Irish barrister and duelist, "it's bad enough to take the dose without being by at the mixing up."¹⁰

With the pistols properly charged, the principals were placed at a fixed distance apart in such a way that neither man would be disadvantaged by sun or background. While movies often show the principals pacing off the distance themselves, back to back, this does not appear to have been common practice. Although 12 paces was considered standard, distances occasionally varied but typically were between 8 and 15 paces. This decision was usually left to the discretion of the seconds rather than the duelists themselves,

who might be encouraged to propose "slugs in a sawpit" out of bravado.¹¹ Some gentlemen were less reckless, however, as is evidenced by an encounter involving two young cadets on their passage to India

[T]hey next spoke of distance, the doctor proposing six paces! upon which both violently protested . . . one of them saying he understood thirty yards to be the usual space . . . After much argument and discussion, it was resolved that twelve paces should be the distance. This the parties concerned pronounced absolute butchery. They, nevertheless, were obliged to yield [but] insisted that the fourth mate, who had much longer legs than the deputy surgeon, should measure the space.¹²

As may be imagined, prudent duelists were sure to stand sideways in order to provide a more difficult target for their opponent. A humorous sidelight on this practice comes from the November 19, 1779 encounter between politician Charles James Fox and a Mr. Adam in which Fox (a man of notorious obesity), after having been warned by Mr. Fitzgerald (his second) to "stand sideways . . . as much as you can" retorted "Why so? I am as thick one way as the other."¹³ Other common precautions were to cover your chest with your free arm and to point your pistol from a low position with your elbow entirely bent and your upper arm tight to your body. The whole idea was to put as much flesh between the bullet and your vital organs as possible.

In most English duels, gentlemen fired upon each other simultaneously. However, for a time it was also common for them to take aimed shots by turn—a practice much in vogue during the 1780s. Sometimes the injured/insulted party was allowed the first shot; on other occasions this was decided by coin toss. Fire by turn fell



Figure 6. A light and easy-pointing example by Robert Wogdon, one of the most prolific dueller makers. Its .54-caliber barrel measures just 8.75 inches in length. Robert Wogdon operated under his own name from 1764 until 1795, when he entered into a partnership with John Barton.

from favor because it was thought unfair for one party to be allowed to kill the other without ever having been fired upon himself.

There were two basic variations used for simultaneous fire, one being generally earlier than the other. In the first approach, the pistol began at a rest position pointing either toward the sky or, more typically, toward the ground. When the signal to fire was given, the pistol was either dropped or raised into the target area. The technique was similar to hunting ducks. The trigger was pulled as soon as the target (head or foot) began to come into sight, with a long follow-through up or down the length of the body. This would allow a quick discharge without the need to stop and take sight.

The claimed virtue of this system was that it did not allow deliberate aim and gave less of an advantage to the more accomplished marksman. However, by the turn of the century it had become common to fire simultaneously but by a method that allowed closer aim. The combatants would start with their pistols pointed at the ground and upon the

question "ready?" would raise their pistols to aim. After each man had confirmed that he was indeed "ready," a handkerchief would be dropped and they would fire. This last method was perhaps the most popular of the three mentioned, especially from the 1790s onward.

It is interesting that dueling pistol styles changed considerably over time, starting with a relatively light, natural pointing pistol and evolving to a heavy-barreled pistol that shoots much like a modern target weapon.¹⁴ Pistol makers also experimented with stock forms, such as the "saw handle grip," which seem incompatible with getting off a quick shot. There could be a relationship at work here between pistol styles and modes of firing. The pistols certainly seem to have been intended more and more for aimed firing as the years progressed, and it may be the case that a new type of pistol was required for a new type of combat.

If one or both parties were wounded, the doctors would be called in and the affair was usually, but not always,



Figure 7. William Pitt vs. George Tierney, May 21, 1798. The duel was fought over a nasty expression by Pitt during a debate in the House of Commons. They fought at 12 paces and fired simultaneously, without effect. When they proceeded to a second shot, Pitt fired into the air and the seconds interfered to end the affair. Tierney is depicted here as a French Revolutionary because of his comparatively radical politics. Notice that they each carry a pair of pistols.

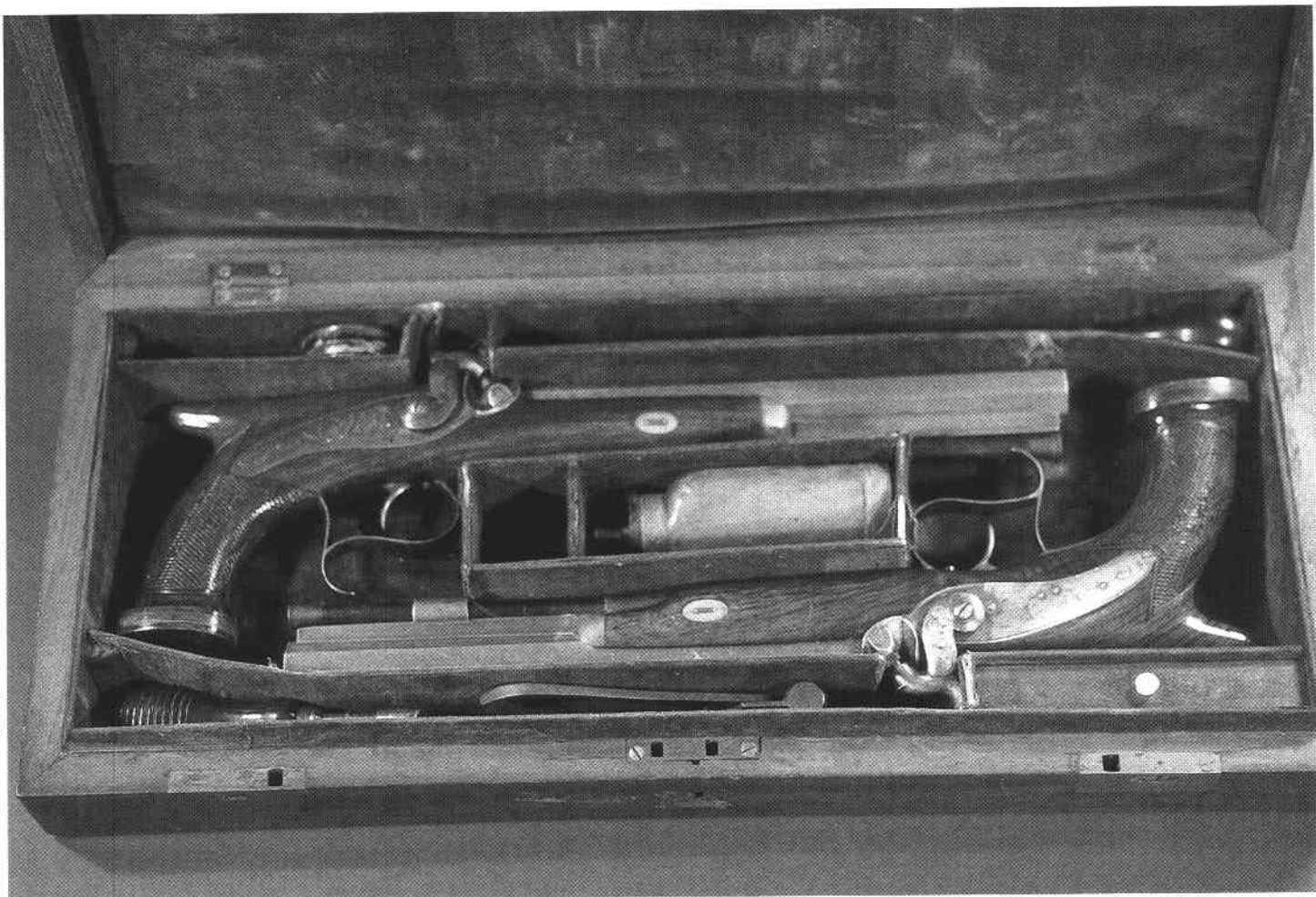


Figure 8. A pair of cased, saw-handled percussion duellers by the most famous of Birmingham gunmakers, Westley Richards. They have adjustable triggers and 54-caliber barrels that are 9.5 inches long with dove-tailed front sights. The brass bound case is marked on the top "J.L. to N.P.B." This pair of pistols dates from the period 1840–1859 and is marked "W. Richards London" on the barrel tops, which may imply that they were sold at Richards' New Bond St., London, retail shop.

settled at that point. In particularly serious duels the firing would continue. Whether or not someone was hit, the duel usually ceased after two shots, a convenient number since each man was equipped with two pistols. In exceptional cases, six or more shots each were exchanged, but this was considered bad taste as well as poor marksmanship. Since the seconds were in charge of the proceedings, all rules were open to modification.

Why did duelists risk their lives in this way? Honor, a key part of the explanation, is defined by *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* as "good name or public esteem: REPUTATION." This definition, though short, captures the essence of the duel.¹⁵ In the highly publicized world of the English gentry and aristocracy, reputation was a fragile thing indeed; and when a man's career and social position depended so thoroughly upon his reputation, it was only natural that he be extremely protective of it. In English society, where rudeness had traditionally been employed to reinforce a sense of rank, it is easy to see how an offense could be magnified in importance,

especially by a young man unsure of his place in the world. Tied into this concept of honor was the intense fear of being thought afraid. It was commonly understood that "to suffer under the imputation of cowardice is worse than being buried alive."¹⁶

Indeed, society was harsh in its treatment of men who refused challenges. Such gentlemen would be ostracized, would receive no invitations to parties, hunts or other gatherings, were open to public ridicule, and would have little chance of being allowed to court a girl of good family. Furthermore, they were branded as cowards in the newspapers and magazines. For example, when a Mr. Blackney made an offensive remark about a Mr. Vigors but refused to meet him on the field of honor, the *London Times* published a statement by Vigors that read, "Mr. Blackney . . . has made use of language towards me which required either the fullest apology or the only other alternative which a gentleman can offer, and Mr. Blackney having refused to do either, I am compelled with great regret to state publicly, that I consider his conduct in this instance to have been deficient in gentleman-



The DUEL between WEB and SHAM-PETER or MOST HORRIBLY FRIGHTENED!! Scene, Coombe Wood. May 1821
Published May 1821, by J. Fairbairn, Broadview, Ludgate Hill.

Figure 9. This depiction of a duel between Viscount Petersham and Thomas Webster Wedderburne makes fun of the fear involved in these contests. The blunderbuss is marked "Egg's Hair Trigger." Petersham, shown hiding behind a tree at right, is taking smelling salts. Webster, at left, has been indulging in "restorative cordials." A cannon at back is marked "to be used if necessary." The duel, dating to April 21, 1821, was fought over the spreading of rumors and ended after two shots with no one hurt.

ly feeling and in courage."¹⁷ Many young men, initially refusing to fight, later changed their minds due to the advice of friends, slander of enemies and scorn of young ladies.¹⁸

One example was Viscount Powerscourt, the 24-year-old Conservative M.P. from Bath who was known to oppose duels on moral grounds yet who fought in one when challenged. The archdeacon and clergy of Bath, taken aback by what was to their minds an unfortunate weakening of will in an otherwise virtuous and kind young man, questioned him about it in an open letter to a prominent newspaper. Powerscourt's answer gives a powerful insight into the spirit of the times

The law of public opinion—the most influential of the laws of men, and too often more so than the law of god—consigns a young man who, when either challenged or publicly insulted, shrinks from a duel, to that scorn and contempt which the imputation of cowardice entails; and I confess that I have been deficient in that exalted moral courage which, in this instance, could alone have enabled me to despite the scoffs of the world and the sneers of my associates. Personal

resentment, I trust, had no influence on my conduct; but I felt, from the opinion of many whom I consulted, that if I had acted otherwise on that occasion than I did, I must have been placed in this predicament. I do not, however, urge this either to justify the practice or to vindicate myself from an act which, I candidly confess, my judgement and conscience must condemn.¹⁹

For politicians, the call to honor was even stronger because, as noted sociologist Julian Pitt-Rivers once reasoned, "honor and leadership imply one another . . . courage is the *sine qua non* of honor, and cowardice always its converse . . . the affront placed honor in jeopardy, a state of threatened desecration from which it could only be saved by the demand for satisfaction. By showing his readiness to fight a man restored his honor to a state of grace."²⁰ According to this logic, it would have been politically infeasible for a politician to overlook an insult or refuse a challenge seriously offered—unless the challenger were of vastly inferior rank. To ignore the demand for satisfaction or the affront of an upstart was a calculated snub

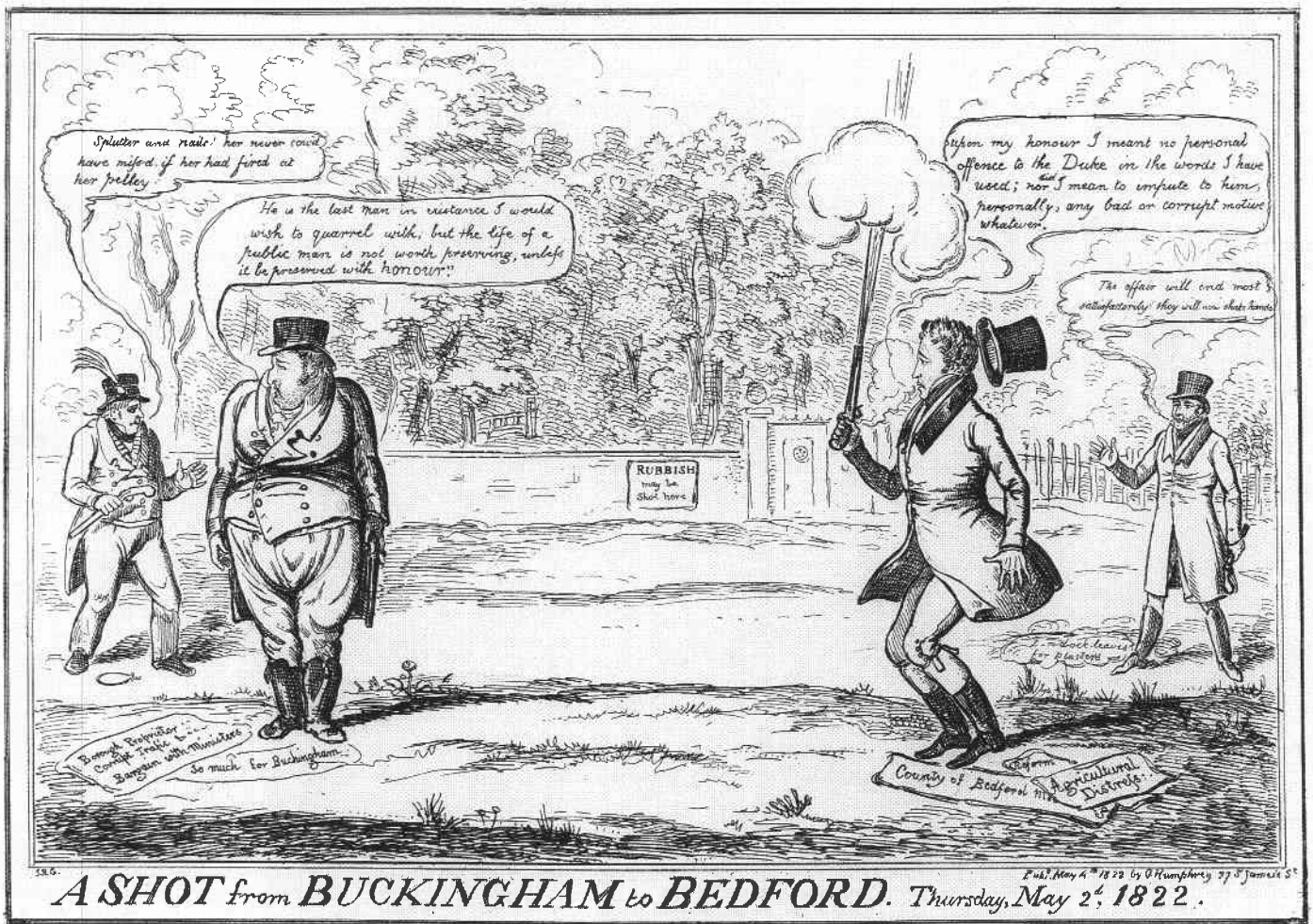


Figure 10. Duel in Hyde Park between the Duke of Bedford and the Duke of Buckingham, spring of 1822. Bedford had accused Buckingham of corruption in the form of giving high offices to his financial supporters. They fired simultaneously from twelve paces at a verbal command, with no effect. Buckingham noticed that Bedford had fired into the air and chose to end the matter there.

that assumed one's precedence over the other; this would be seen as an act of arrogance, not of cowardice. Another exception was when the challenged party held a public position of such vital importance that his death would prove a disaster to the nation (i.e. a prime minister during war). However, the records are full of contests between high-ranking office holders who were fully willing to fight, placing vanity above responsibility even in times of crisis. The last decade of the 18th century was particularly notorious in this regard.

Political duels, while fairly common, rarely ended in bloodshed; the point was to preserve reputation in the face of public scrutiny, not to kill one another—except in rare cases of extreme personal malevolence. The physical outcome of the duel was of little importance as far as honor and society were concerned and it was quite common for combatants to fire into the air rather than at their opponents. The most important goal of such duelists was to conduct themselves with dignity and courage no matter where the lead landed. It wasn't necessary for anyone to be hit; the

willingness to expose one's self to death, not the outcome, was what mattered.

Another profession familiar to the field of honor was the military. This proclivity was driven by the intense regimental pride of the day, which demanded that every affront to the regiment be answered. Officers who refused to defend their regiment's honor with pistols at dawn were obviously cowards and unfit for soldiering. Indeed, an article of the Mutiny Act was interpreted in such a way that officers could be cashiered if proven to have refused a challenge.²¹ Because of their familiarity with weapons and death and their bellicose nature and recklessness (not to mention habitual drunkenness), duels between junior officers were the most fatal of all types. Such duels regularly ended in the death of both parties. Whereas in civilian duels the seconds were duty-bound to prevent bloodshed, a military duelist's seconds were often more concerned that the regiment's or ship's reputation for bravery be upheld, and this may be a contributing factor to the frequent fatalities resulting from this type of duel.



Figure 11. A cased pair of flintlock duelling pistols, c. 1810, by Thomas Manton, ex. Keith Neal collection and shown in plate 164 of *The Mantons: Gunmakers*. Marked "London" on the lockplates, they were probably manufactured in 1817. They feature French-style cocks and removable breeches marked "T. Manton/PATENT" in a poinçon. The barrels are marked on the underside with the serial number 10. Firearms by this maker are exceptionally rare; Neal & Back were able to catalog only nine examples (including just two sets of duellers) in their book and supplement.

Given the mortal danger involved, it may perplex the modern reader, despite the arguments about honor and reputation given above, that the duel enjoyed such prominence in 18th and early 19th century English society. However, it must be remembered that duels did not always result in death, especially if the combatants were not soldiers. According to *The Art of Duelling*, a highly popular "how-to" book on affairs of honor authored by the anonymous "A Traveller" in 1836, the chances of death in a duel were only 1 in 14 and the chances of being wounded 1 in 6. In fact, the odds were much worse. An article in the *London Times* estimated that there had been about 200 duels, 86 deaths and 120 wounds for the period between the beginning of George III's reign and Victoria's coronation.²² This works out to 22% dead and 30% wounded—much more than "A Traveller" claims. However, 200 duels for that 77-year span is an impossibly small number, only about 2.6 per year. What may be more reliable is another newspaper writer's claim that there were 14 deaths in the 33 Irish duels during 1790, which results in a very similar 21% chance of death for each participant.²³ My own

research also indicates a mortality rate in this very same range. So although a duel was a serious affair, the four out of five chances of survival may have been such that young men, often blindly confident of their immortality, found them favorable.

The subject of mortality rates in duels is of particular interest to pistol collectors since so many of the features we look for are related to ensuring the owner's survival. For instance, it was commonly suggested that dueling pistols have no shiny parts, such as silver mounts, which might provide a sighting point for the opponent.²⁴ Countless inventions, proudly advertised on barrel tops and trade labels, claimed to make dueling pistols faster and more accurate. The tools found in pistol cases were often designed to deliver powder to the breech without it touching the walls of the barrel. Loading methods, precision bullet molding, flint designs and strength of powder charges were all hotly debated topics. Much attention was paid to hair triggers, set triggers and adjustable triggers. A number of pistols were equipped with hidden rifling, which was against the commonly accepted rules. All of these features were used to con-

vince the customer that he was buying the best pistol by the best maker and that he was almost guaranteed to hit his target every time without a misfire.

The amusing truth, however, is that while misfires were a legitimate concern, accuracy certainly was not. Dueling distance was shockingly close. To get an idea of what it was like to take part in a pistol duel, stand five or six paces back from a full-length mirror and aim a good pistol at your image.²⁵ You will find that you present a frighteningly easy target. It would be nearly impossible to miss, even for an exceptionally poor marksman. Cool nerves, not accurate pistols, were the key to winning a duel, and any pistol with a quick, reliable ignition would have served perfectly. Like many modern men shopping for sports cars, dueling pistol customers seem to have been very happy to pay for features and performance that far exceeded real-life requirements.

When the last duel was fought on English soil circa 1852, a powerful and long-standing social tradition had been obliterated from aristocratic life. The duelist at the close of the 18th century must have been quite confident that his art would successfully transcend the next one hundred years; but half a century later the duel would be considered, with no little romanticism in some quarters, as something from a bygone age. No longer did men stand and fire at Wimbledon shortly before dawn, the only witnesses a few friends and a doctor. Pistols for two and coffee for one just wasn't what polite people had for breakfast anymore. But what was it that caused this seemingly invulnerable ritual to disappear in such a startlingly short period of time?

The impetus behind the decline of the duel as a gentleman's solution during the 1830-1840s has been the sub-

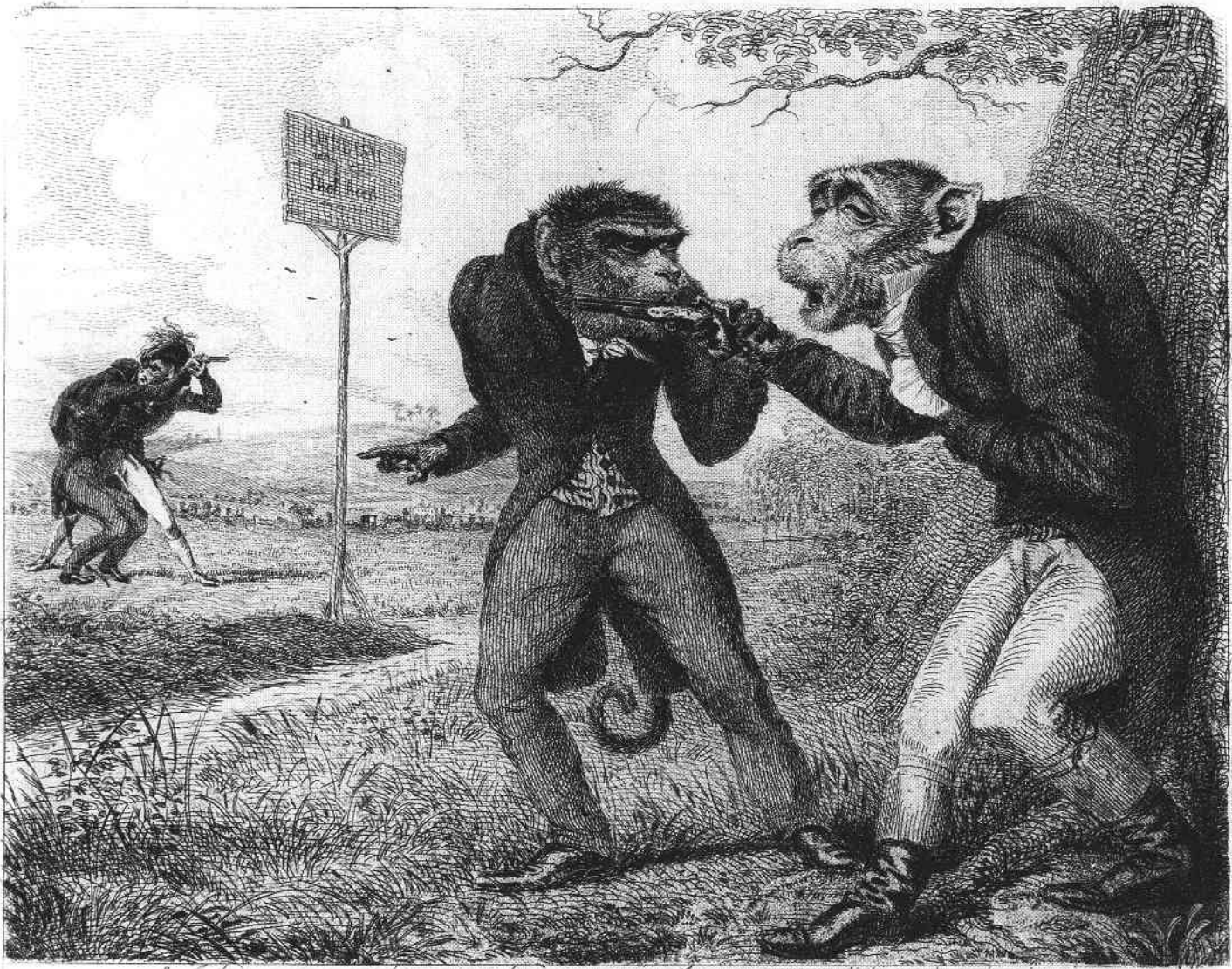
ject of much speculation among scholars. Many of the commonly offered answers (opposition from the religious sector, the illegality of dueling, the unfairness of dueling) seem incomplete because these conditions were not new and indeed had existed throughout the age of the duel. Anti-dueling crusaders and anti-dueling societies had been active at least back to the 1750s, decrying the duel as "clearly unnatural," "wicked, absurd, pernicious in its pretenses, and . . . dreadful in its final issue," "a barbarous institution," "the resource of the weak-minded, the vain, and vindictive, or the cowardly" and "the prevalence of fashion, not only over laws, but over sense, reason, [and] equity."²⁶ There is even a twenty-eight page book in the British Museum Library, dating to 1680, entitled *Honour: Honour's preservation without blood: or, A sober advice to duellists. Being a compendius tract of the most exquisite nature to appease the sudden fits of fury, which English-spirits have of late been too much subject to . . .* Written by a well-wisher of peace and honour (printed by Phillip Brooksby, London).

Illegality and harsh penalties failed as deterrents because juries almost never convicted men of murder resulting from a duel. The usual verdict was either manslaughter, which was punishable by a small fine, or acquittal. Although English law held that "a duel, where one is killed, is a capital offence in all who take part . . . without the least regard to what are termed the rules of honour,"²⁷ legal apologists for the ritual claimed that "though the acquittal may trench on the rigid rules of the law, yet the verdict will be lovely in the sight both of God and man."²⁸

It was commonly understood that "the law is a mere dead letter; for what with the unwillingness of prosecu-



Figure 12. One of a pair of cased patchlock duellers, serial number 6756, by Samuel Nock. The detachable strikers are removed for recharging by lifting a thin lever on the side of the hammer, a system popularized by Joseph Manton. Extra strikers are supplied in a tin canister. The engraving on the lockplates is of the highest quality but is so delicate and understated that it is hard to see without holding the pistols up to the light. The 52-caliber, 10-inch barrels are marked on top "Samuel Nock Regent Circus" and have gold poincons at the breech. Nock did business at this address from 1823 until his death in 1851.



*It has a strange quick jar upon the ear,
That cocking of a pistol when you know*

*A moment more will bring the sight to bear
Upon your person.*

Published Dec. 1. 1827. by Moon, Beys, & Graves, 6, Pall Mall. a Paris chez Pierre Ennard, Boulevard des Halles.

Figure 13. An 1827 print depicting duelists as animals. The caption reads: “It has a strange quick jar upon the ear, that cocking of a pistol when you know a moment more will bring the sight to bear upon your person.” The sign at the rear reads “Rubbish May be Shot Here.”

tors—the connivance, first of the police-officers, then of judges—the feelings of juries, and the corresponding feelings in the place of last resort . . . the law [is not] executed upon any person for being engaged in a duel, fought in what is called a fair manner.”²⁹ Rare convictions for murder can be traced, with only one known exception (Major Alexander Campbell, hanged in 1807), to the jury or judge deciding that the duel was improperly conducted. “The jurors virtually recognize[d] the laws of honour; and, if these ha[d] been fulfilled, pronounce[d] acquittal.”³⁰

The most notorious acquittal was that of the Earl of Cardigan, who was brought up on charges following a duel with Capt. Harvey G.P. Tuckett on Sept. 12, 1840. When tried by his peers in the House of Lords, no serious attempt was made to convict him. In what the London *Times* called a “disgraceful and demoralising spectacle,” all witnesses

declined to testify after being reminded (amid riotous laughter) of their right not to incriminate themselves. This protection was used by so many witnesses that the prosecution was unable to ascertain even the most rudimentary details, such as Tuckett’s middle name (even though Tuckett himself was present at the trial). A detailed contemporary description of this farcical incident can be found on pages 361–428 of J.G. Millingen’s *The History of Duelling*, Volume II (Richard Bentley, London, 1841). Given the atmosphere, it is clear why a contemporary observer would doubt “that the law has ever prevented a single duel from taking place.”³¹

This paradox in the legal system was a rallying point for anti-dueling sentiment. Statements such as “I hope from the bottom of my heart the day is not far distant when the man who slays another in a duel shall atone the

same as in all other cases of murder," "fighting a duel is a breach of the peace . . . let it be so classed and so punished" and "let justice be really blind in all such cases, her sword descending upon noble and ignoble of station alike" are commonly encountered in the periodical literature of the 1830s and 1840s.

Such critics were also quick to point out the effect such lawlessness and arrogance would have on society as a whole. These sentiments were summed up by Viscount Lifford at a meeting of a society to suppress dueling when he stressed that "it is incumbent upon the higher class of society to pay obedience to the law [which made duels illegal], for those below them regard their conduct with jealous scrutiny." Referring to his experience as a magistrate, Lifford recalled many cases where "the lower classes . . . justify their conduct by referring to breaches of the law committed by those above them."³²

It is interesting that while criminal penalties were rarely imposed upon duelists, a law enacted during 1836 allowed mothers to sue men who killed their sons in duels.³³ Some authors, when explaining why duelists chose to fight rather than sue in the developing civil court system—which was fully equipped to deal with all nature of libel suits, adultery and so on—have claimed that a gentleman would not trust the courts because they "obliged him to place his jeopardized honor in the hands of others" and because a trial would bring publicity to an already embarrassing affront.³⁴ But recent research indicates otherwise, at least during the pistol dueling era. According to historian Suzan Staves in her article "Money for Honor: Damages for Criminal Conversation" (*Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, Vol. 11), the aristocracy made heavy use of the civil courts in cases of adultery—the most humiliating of all offences.

Staves documents that damages awarded for adultery as early as 1790 ranged from 1,000 to 20,000 pounds sterling; the latter amount arose from a case between Robert Rochfort, Baron Bellfield (later Earl of Belvedere), and his younger brother. It is revealing that aristocrats expected and received higher damages than normal people because their honor was considered more valuable. However, the availability of retribution through the courts did not always prevent a duel. For example, Edward Law, Baron Ellenborough, brought the Prince von Schwarzenberg to court for criminal conversation (adultery) in 1830 and received a handsome settlement of £25,000. However, as this was not enough to satisfy the Baron's honor, a duel was fought as well.³⁵

A more formidable force driving the decline of the duel was Queen Victoria's well-known contempt for the ritual. On March 11, 1844, she wrote in her journal: "After

luncheon saw Sir Robert Peel. Amongst other things we talked of the law, or arrangement, restricting as far as possible duels in the Army, by repealing an article of the Mutiny Act, which cashiered officers for not redeeming their honour by duel." The new rule that resulted from this meeting actually reversed the spirit of the old article: "Every officer who shall give or send a challenge, or who . . . being privy to an intention to fight a duel, shall not take active measures to prevent such duel . . . shall be liable, if convicted before a general court-martial, to be cashiered."³⁶

Perhaps the most persistent foe of the duel was religion. Anti-dueling tracts stun the secular palate of modern readers with their ubiquitous use of the word "God"; nearly every sentence contains two or more references to the Divine Being. While most of these efforts stick to fire and brimstone, others offer more obscure philosophical arguments (for instance, *A full Inquiry into Suicide* by Charles Moore, rector of Cuxton, which has an addenda "Two Treatises on Duelling & Gambling," proposing the reclassification of both dueling and gambling as forms of "self-murder").

Adding new vigor to this perennial crusade was the powerful Evangelical movement led by William Wilberforce. Evangelicalism was a 60-year trend in the Church of England, straddling the 18th and 19th centuries, which placed great value upon individual salvation and good works in society. What Evangelicals desired most was to avoid vice and vanity in all their forms—a genuine change of behavior was required. This movement revolutionized British society in a way that is hard to imagine today and, as one might suppose, its followers disapproved of dueling.³⁷

According to the *Edinburgh Review* (LXXV, p. 445) the evangelicals categorized dueling as an outright sin, repudiating "any other relationship than that of co-existence between the meek and forgiving spirit of Christianity, and [that] proud anti-social practice." Wilberforce himself denounced it as "a deliberate preference of the favor of man, before the approbation of God."³⁸ Evangelicalism was the driving moral force that finally peaked in the decades following the death of George IV, shifting the concept of what made a perfect gentleman from the outward displays of hauteur and grandeur typical of the Regency to inward qualities of temperance and duty more characteristic of Victorian times.

The famous philosopher Thomas Hobbes had predicted, circa 1651, that the "the duel . . . always will be Honourable . . . till some time as there shall be Honour ordained for them that refuse, and Ignominy for them that make the Challenge"³⁹ and indeed this is what happened. Whereas society had previously shunned men who shied from the field of honor, by the 1840s it was possible to refuse combat and actually be praised for overcoming

“that moral cowardice—the fear of being thought afraid.”⁴⁰ Modern men “of distinguished station or character” were actually called upon to do their “duty to society [and] set an example of magnanimous reliance on the protection of the laws of [their] country.”⁴¹ As soon as it was possible to say “no” and still appear in society, keep your position and win the heart of your girl, dueling could no longer flourish.

When the end came for dueling in England, it was quite sudden. Each man who refused a challenge made it easier for the next until it was quite possible to laugh off a suggestion to fight without social penalty. We see evidence of this change of attitude in 1843 when the *Times* praised the wit of the late essayist William Cobbett who, “when challenged to fight, recommended the challenger to draw Cobbett in chalk upon a door, and if he succeeded in hitting it, to send him instant word, in order that he might have an opportunity to acknowledge that, had the true Cobbett been there, he, in all probability, would have been hit too. But hit or not hit, the bullets could have no effect whatever, he maintained, on the original cause of quarrel.”⁴² It was at this point that the frequency of duels truly dropped off since few sane men really wanted to be shot at—and once fear of public disgrace was removed, it became increasingly unlikely that both parties in a dispute would prefer to settle the issue in such a dangerous manner.

A convenient way to study the decline of dueling is to trace the number of duels reported in the London *Times*; in order to avoid anomalies created by wartime, military duels have not been included. While in the 1790s there were as many as 23 encounters recorded per year, that number dropped to fewer than 10 during the height of the Napoleonic conflicts. The duel enjoyed a post-Waterloo revival with as many as 16 per year reported until 1840, when a sharp and steady decline began. For the decade 1844–1853, the annual average number of duels reported per year fell below two.

During this period of decline, it is noteworthy that dueling pistols began to take on the features of target pistols, perhaps to provide a practical use for an expensive purchase that would probably never be fired in earnest. These late pistols have smaller bores, an almost Germanic profile and exotic features such as peep sights. The Purdy style of dueling pistol is particularly representative of this final period and it is doubtful that one was ever used for its advertised purpose.

The *Times* lists no duels fought on English soil by Englishmen after the year 1852. But even as the duel passed into the history books, its romance lingered. There is a timeless simplicity in the duel—a poetic sacrifice to an intangible concept, honor—that inspires awe and fascina-

tion to this day. It is this aura of romance and danger that gives dueling pistols a special place among collectible firearms. The pistols, like the combat for which they were intended, incorporate a purity of design and clarity of purpose that demand attention.

NOTES

1. *All the Year Round*, May 10, 1862, quoted by Steinmetz, Andrew, *The Romance of Duelling in all Times & Countries* (two volumes). London: Chapman and Hall, 1868. Vol. I, p. 306. Another colorful dueling format used in Ireland during this era was the “quartette” which, as the name implies, involved two men on each side, fighting as a team.

2. This foreign origin for the “Code of Duel” was often targeted by its critics. The great English philosopher and author Francis Bacon charged that “the duel from its great frequency is now become an unbridled evil . . . private revenge is one of the greatest evils of society; that the private duel is a defiance of all law, and a setting up in its stead the supremacy of some trifling French and Italian pamphlets, which have thought fit to establish certain maxims, which they are pleased to call ‘points of honour’” (*Works*, Vol. IV).

3. For a full discussion of the difference between duels and trial by combat see *Moral and Literary Dissertations*, Thomas Percival, M.D., W. Eyres, London, 1789; and *Monthly Review*, Vol. XVII, series 2, 1795, pp. 246–251. An unrelated but interesting article in an earlier issue of *Monthly Review* (Vol. 42, 1770, pp. 468–472) noted that ancient canons for Burgundy were quite democratic about who could fight a duel. Folks under the rank of burghess had just as much of a right to fight as their social betters, but were only allowed to use sticks.

4. Dunlop, John Esp. *Anti-Duel; or a plan for The Abrogation of Duelling*. London: Houlstron & Stoneman, 1843.

5. Nor was the sword duel nearly as institutionalized as the pistol duel. Since gentlemen carried swords as a part of their daily dress, the time period between a challenge and combat was often short. Rather than a drawn-out ritual like the pistol duel, the sword duel was often more along the lines of a violent, drunken brawl with edged weapons and had much less in common with modern fencing that one might suppose.

6. *London Times*, 5 August 1843, 6f.

7. John Dunlop in his 1843 pamphlet *Anti-Duel*.

8. Indeed, some doctors insisted upon fighting in the nude.

9. King vs. Fitzgerald, 1797.

10. Steinmetz, Vol. II, p. 200.

11. *The British Code of Duel: A Reference to the Laws of Honour and The Character of Gentlemen*. Knight and Lacy, London, 1824

12. *The Prodigal Rake; Memoirs of William Hickey*. E.P. Dutton & Co., New York, 1962, p. 112.

13. Truman, Major Ben. C., *The Field of Honor*. New York: Fords, Howard & Hulbert, 1884, p. 554.

14. For an examination of pistol styles as they changed over the decades, refer to Keith R. Dill, *London Gunmakers and the English Duelling Pistol, 1770–1830*. Bloomfield, Ontario: Museum Restoration Service, 1995.

15. Perhaps Shakespeare’s definition is also worth noting, “What is honor? A word. What is in that word honor? What is that honor? Air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died a Wednesday.” (1 Henry IV, v.1, 133–136).

16. *The Gentleman’s Library*, p. 90, quoted in J.C.D. Clark, “The Social Theory of Elite Hegemony,” *English Society*, Cambridge, England, 1985.

17. *Times*, 6 November 1834, 2d, including a slanted commentary by the editor concerning the insult suffered by Vigors.

18. Ladies could be remarkably bloodthirsty in promoting combat. A poem by Mrs. Francis Dallor (printed on a single sheet by W. Harding, London, 1832, from the Special Collections Library, College of William & Mary) depicts her impression of the proper attitude for a youth about to defend his honor:

"And does he live who called me so?/And shall he not my vengeance know,/Who dares to stigmatise my fame,/And brand me with a Coward's name?/Oh, no! for I could never brook/Again from him that scornful look;/Those taunting words I could not bear,/Whose sounds still vibrate in my ear./Coward! he must that word recall,/Or He or I to-morrow fall./'Tis true, he promis'd he would yield/Me satisfaction on the field;/I know he said it to deride,/and only meant to hurt my pride./But shall I then forbear to go?/The laws of Honor answer, no!" Easy enough for her to say! From the male combatant's point of view, the whole event must have been amazingly frightening.

19. London *Times*, 22 May, 1834, 5f.
20. *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, pp. 505-508.
21. For a recollection of such a case in the British Navy see "Duels and Duelists" by T.B. Thorpe, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, August 1868, p. 407.
22. London *Times*, 18 March 1844, 6c.
23. London *Times*, 4 January 1791, 2c.
24. Cloth-covered buttons on the duelist's clothing were also encouraged for the same reason.
25. Mirrors double the perception of distance, so you must cut the distance in half in order to achieve the correct effect.
26. A selection from various pamphlets and press reports, 1754-1843.
27. George, John. "A Treatise on the Offence of Libel, with a Disquisition on the Right, Benefit, and proper Boundaries of Political Discussion." *Edinburgh Review*, Vol. XXII, 1813, p. 74.
28. *Blackwoods Magazine*, Vol. LXVIII, p. 721.
29. *Edinburgh Review*, Vol. XXII, p. 74.
30. *The British Code of Duel*, p. 5.
31. Millingen, J.G. "The History of Duelling," *Edinburgh Review*, Vol. LXXV, 1842, p. 445.
- 32 London *Times*, 5 August 1843, 6f.
- 33 London *Times*, 4 July 1836, 5c.
- 34 See Pitt-Rivers, p. 507.
- 35 Cocayne, George Edward. *The Complete Peerage*. London: The St. Catherine Press, 1921. Vol. 5, p. 53.
- 36 Thimm, Carl A. *A Complete Bibliography of Fencing & Duelling*. rpt. 1896, New York; Benjamin Bloom, Inc., 1968, p. 441.
- 37 Pulling in harness with the Evangelicals was the temperance movement. This well organized and popular cause successfully infiltrated all levels of society. Duelling was considered an equally intemperate practice as drinking by the movement's highly vocal supporters.
- 38 Andrew, Donna. "The Code of Honor and its critics: the opposition to duelling in England, 1700-1850," *Social History*, Vol. 5, Vol. 3, pp. 433-444.
- 39 *Leviathan*, Part I, "Of Man." Hazell Watson & Viney Limited, pp. 156-157)
- 40 *Blackwoods Magazine*, LXVIII, p. 714.
- 41 *Blackwoods Magazine*, LXVIII, p. 715.
- 42 London *Times*, 15 July 1843, 7f.

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