

Pistols at Dawn: The Duel

An excerpt from "The Gun Book for Girls" by Silvio Calabi, Steve Helsley, and Roger Sanger
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A photograph, dated October 23, 1909, from New York City entitled "Duelling with wax bullets." It would be interesting to know whether the target was a mannequin or another shooter protected and armed the same way. Such "bloodless dueling" was included in the 1906 Olympic Games, in Athens. The George Grantham Bain Collection

For centuries a dispute between gentlemen that went beyond some mild name-calling could turn into a formal fight to the death. Being accused of cheating at cards, for example, or of cowardice was often enough to spark a challenge. So was paying too much attention to another man's wife, or even just a strong difference of political opinions. Personal honor was at stake!

The man who felt himself insulted would "demand satisfaction." The point was not necessarily to kill his adversary but to show a willingness to put his life on the line to stand up for his integrity or beliefs. Not to issue a challenge, or to decline one, meant that a man didn't truly believe in the rightness of his position.

(This had its roots in the ancient cus-

tom of trial by ordeal. If someone accused of a crime could survive a fight or being dunked into a pond, God was obviously on his or her side and she was innocent. This was before everyone had a lawyer. Women, by the way, virtually never duelled; they were too sensible.)

In Britain and America the era of the pistol duel was about 1770 to 1870. Gentlemen owned pairs of special pistols that were beautifully made and balanced and perfectly matched. When it was time to fight, the duelists' supporters, called seconds, carefully supervised the loading of the pistols "charged smooth and single"—that is, just one ball in a smoothbore, or unrifled, barrel. Each combatant chose one of his own pistols; the other was left with the second.

Holding the guns down by their legs or up in the air, the duelists took their places. The challenger usually chose the distance, which might be very close if the insult was especially serious; the seconds normally decided when or at what signal their gentlemen could fire.

A confident, expert marksman might wait for his trembling opponent to shoot first and miss, and then take aim and . . . after making his target wait long, agonizing seconds, deliberately kill him. A cruel man might aim for the stomach, to cause a wound that led to a slow and painful death. A more humane one might just wing his enemy in the shoulder or leg, to make a point without resorting to murder. A doctor was often standing by.

If both men missed, accidentally or on purpose (duelists sometimes "deployed," just fired into the ground), the seconds would ask if they wished to take up their other pistols and continue. Often the answer was no; just by showing up, both men had proved their courage and honor was satisfied. Or they might in fact have another round. If it went as far as three sets of misses, though, the seconds usually would call everything off. This was getting ridiculous!

The seconds—each duelist had one and sometimes two—didn't just stand by. Their job was to see that no one cheated, and to get involved if necessary, so they were armed too. If one duelist tried to fire before the signal, his opponent's second would shout a warning or even shoot the cheater. There are stories of rigged duels where one side had a man with a rifle hidden in the bushes nearby, to fire at the same instant, and of seconds who opened fire on each other.

Dueling pistols were single-barrel muzzleloaders with flint or percussion locks. Since the owner's life might depend on every shot fired, these guns were made with the greatest care. Calibers were usually 32 or 36 bore (.526" or .506"), and the barrels were typically eight to 10 inches long. The powder and ball were critical too. No detail was too small to overlook. The code of honor required dueling pistols to be smoothbores, but the benefits of rifling to accuracy were too real to be ignored. Some gunmakers offered "scratch rifling"—bore grooves that were so faint that they could have been caused by over-eager cleaning. This might be missed by the seconds, who inspected



ABOVE: Many gentlemen owned pairs of perfectly matched and custom-made dueling pistols like these, built by William and John Rigby in Dublin, Ireland, in 1828. The bores were supposed to be smooth, but some gunmakers hid rifling in them in order to make the pistols more accurate—and deadly. Thomas Hager

and loaded the pistols in the field, often under dawn light. Other makers hid their rifling down in the bores, so the muzzles remained smooth.

Many politicians, military officers, authors, painters, musicians, businessmen and titled aristocrats fought duels, some many times. The more prominent you were, the more likely it was that you'd be "called out." The most famous duel in American history took place on July 11, 1804, in New Jersey, between Gen. Alexander Hamilton and Col. Aaron Burr.

It was a true grudge match, the result of years of bad feelings between the two men. As you may know, Burr fatally wounded Hamilton. What you may have forgotten is that Burr was then the Vice-President of the United States and later started the company that became the Chase Manhattan Bank; and Hamilton had been Secretary of the US Treasury.

Dueling took place all over the world and often with weapons other than pistols. It was usually illegal, but the law was rarely enforced until the 20th Century. Still, duels often took place in out-of-the-way corners and at dawn, for secrecy. Is-

lands in rivers between states or countries were popular dueling sites because they were difficult to get to and there might be confusion over which law applied.

Dueling died out late in the 19th Century, but our fascination with it did not. The "sport" even made one appearance at the Olympics, in 1906 in Athens. The competitors shot at dummies dressed like gentlemen with targets on their chests, not at each other. Before that there was a school in Paris that taught dueling skills by dressing its students in heavy coats and wire-mesh or glass masks and letting them shoot wax bullets at each other. This "bloodless dueling" reportedly spread as far as New York City, but it didn't last long.

To this day Her Britannic Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Monarch of the United Kingdom, has an official champion to stand up for her, should she ever be challenged on the field of honor. He is Lt. Col. John Lindley Marmion Dymoke, Lord of the Manor of Scrivelsby, in Lincolnshire, England. He has never been put to the test. Not yet, anyway . . .



ABOVE: Eugene Onegin and Vladimir Lensky's duel in the snow, painted by Ilya Repin. This is a famous scene from Alexander Pushkin's classic Russian novel *Eugene Onegin*, published in the 1820s. Duelists continued to meet on "the field of honor" for almost another century.

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