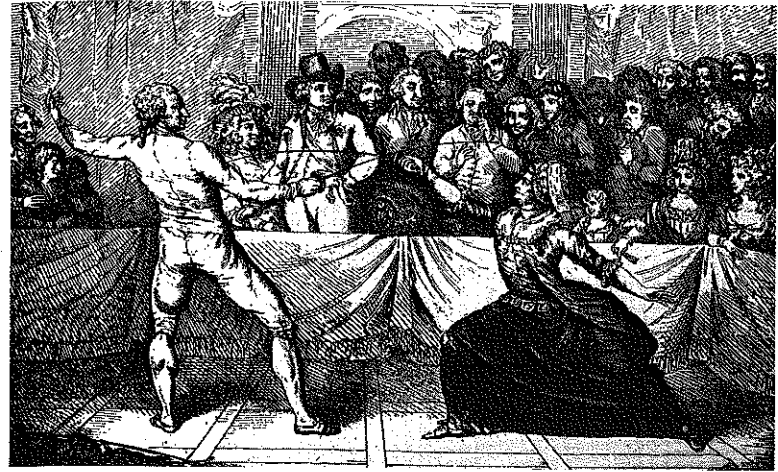


Gentlemen's Blood

A HISTORY OF DUELING
FROM SWORDS AT DAWN
TO PISTOLS AT DUSK

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II. THE IDEA OF HONOR

KNIGHTS AND CHIVALRY faded out. The old orders of knighthood and chevaliers stayed firmly in place, as prestigious men's clubs tend to do, but the original point of the knight had been as a fighting unit, a kind of mounted tank, impregnable in heavy metal, on a big strong horse, lumbering and clanking onto the field of battle peering through a slit in his helmet and poking his lance at enemies similarly encumbered. The idea was to push the enemy off his horse, since once unhorsed he lay helpless as an overturned turtle, ripe to be captured and held for ransom.

Henry V's nimble archers at Agincourt beat them easily. Joan of Arc was particularly outspoken on the subject; she said her heavenly messengers had told her that artillery was the wave of the future and knights in armor just slowed everything down.

Gradually they hung up their lances and breastplates to rust in a shed. By the time Cervantes published *Don Quixote* in 1605, the foolish knight-errant was an affectionate joke from the past. Knights turned into gentlemen.

Gentlemen, being unemployed by definition, needed an emotional outlet, a bit of excitement, and some way to measure themselves against their peers now that tournaments were gone. Besides, as the feudal powers of the landowners shriveled under stronger centralized monarchies, a gentleman needed to shore up his status and prove he still mattered, he was still privileged, he still carried a sword. He stopped jousting for glory and started dueling for honor.

John Selden, in 1610, wrote that "truth, honor, freedome and curtesie being as incidents to perfit chivalry upon the lye given, fame impeached, body wronged, or curtesie taxed, a custom hath bin among the French, English, Burguignons, Italians, Almans and the Northern people . . . to seek revenge of their wrongs on the body of their accuser and that by private combat *seul a seul*, without judicial lists appointed them." Duels swept Europe.

In France alone, in just the twenty-one years of Henri IV's reign, 1589 to 1610, perhaps ten thousand gentlemen died for their honor. Populations were smaller then, and the aristocracy smaller still, and honor must have made a serious dent in their numbers; the Chevalier d'Andrieux had killed seventy-two gentlemen in duels before his thirtieth birthday. Henri himself was proud of his spirited nobles, but his minister persuaded him to outlaw duels as disrespect to the king, punishable by death. Since everyone went right on dueling, the king had to keep

issuing pardons; some seven thousand of them, or almost one a day.

The theater was flourishing all over Europe, and scarcely a drama was complete without its duel. Shakespeare lavished them on comedies as well. In France, of the first half of the seventeenth century, Voltaire wrote that "practically every person was inspired by the passion for dueling," including the clergy, and this "gothic barbarism" became "a part of the national character." (Maybe this was sour grapes. He himself in 1726 challenged the powerful Chevalier Rohan-Chabot, who scorned to meet him and had him thrown in the Bastille instead. Voltaire was furious.)

Only little Iceland escaped the great bloodletting, because long, long ago, according to tradition, two great and beloved poets, Gunnlang and Rafn, fought for the hand of Helga of the Golden Hair and killed each other. A mourning national assembly gathered and, stricken with grief, agreed there should be no more dueling forever, and there wasn't, a curiously peaceful note in the land of the pillaging Norsemen.

In Spain, the noble and restless were kept busy with far-away wars and colonies, while the homebodies made do with bullfighting, originally designed as a kind of honorable duel between gentleman and bull. (It was also said that Spaniards much preferred having their enemies assassinated instead of fighting them. Less risky.)

Everywhere else the clash of steel made the welkin ring. Honor was at stake. Honor seems to have migrated out of Italy originally, attached to a code of behavior called *scienza cavalleresca*. Italians considered it the motive force behind civilization: Drinking and

wenching aside, gentlemen behaved according to the code of their caste, and were seen to do so, and so set an example for a well-regulated citizenry. Italians saw the gentleman's code as a wall of order against chaos and his courtly duels as a civil hedge against barbarity. Without rules, all Europe might be like the Highlands of Scotland, where clans lived in a constant state of disorganized war, ambushing each other in groups, laying waste the neighborhood, killing as many as they could reach, and then carrying off the womenfolk and anything else portable, always for perfectly sound ancestral reasons. This took up most of a gentleman's time and made civil life impossible.

Blood was inevitable, but the duel would at least confine it to a couple of men and their seconds, constrained by regulations.

The Italians drew up the earliest dueling codes to protect and enforce honor; *Flos duellatorum* came out in 1410 and young gentlemen all over Europe studied its delicate ethical matters and the subtle new swordplay more suited to personal encounters than the slash-and-whack of battle. In 1550, Girolamo Muzio's *II duello* succeeded it and was even more popular. Italians opened fencing schools, attended by eager young gentlemen from all over, and sent fencing masters to the rest of Europe. By 1480, Germany had opened dueling schools called *Fechtschulen* that enjoyed the special protection of the emperor himself and established a tradition beloved by the military and university students well into the twentieth century – some say the twenty-first.

The notion of a gentleman defending his personal honor, the notion that obsessed the Western world for centuries and spilled many gallons of the bluest blood, now seems as remote as the

urge to throw virgins down volcanoes. Nobody now cherishes his personal honor or inspects that of others. Short of indictable felonies, nobody cares. We wouldn't know how to measure it; the concept has vanished. Military valor still lends some luster, though Vietnam cast a shadow on it, and large amounts of money command universal respect, but the word "honor" survives only in a few state documents yellowing under glass. Jefferson was fond of it.

Whatever honor was, only gentlemen had it. Only gentlemen needed to defend it, which made their lives more perilous than those of the lesser beings, who could shrug and laugh off an insult. If a lesser being sent a challenge to a gentleman, the gentleman also could shrug and laugh it off, or send some lackeys to beat the insolent fellow with cudgels.

"Gentleman" has today become a rather idle compliment rarely invoked. It even carries overtones of the sissy, quite the opposite of its old role. Now any upstart lad can spend a couple of days mastering gentlemanly requirements: use the accepted forms of address, hold the door open for a lady, remember to say "please" and "thank you" in social if not in business situations. Use your napkin, not the tablecloth. Don't bully the waiter. Don't wipe your nose on your sleeve. Once he's learned the rules, he's accepted as a gentleman with no questions asked, but in former times he'd be a scoundrel of the worst order. Aping his betters. Flying false colors.

Manners had nothing to do with it. You could be as rude, surly, and bad-tempered as you liked, beat your wife, rape your servants, strew illegitimate children far and wide, drink and gamble till the

cows came home, and let your bills pile up for decades till your tailor and vintner starved, but you were always a gentleman because you were born one, and so was your son. It came down through your family by way of inherited estates and ancient medieval fiefdoms and service to your king. Its privileges were many; its responsibilities were bloody.

You could be created an instant gentleman by the monarch, either quietly, for private favors done or money lent, or loudly, for valor in battle. Pumping up his troops before Agincourt, Shakespeare's Henry V said,

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he today that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile
This day shall gentle his condition.

Once gentled, he developed an honor. If someone said he was no gentleman, it required a challenge. He could lose respect by cowardice, but he lost gentleman's rank only by committing one of the offenses outlined in the code: perjury, burning his neighbor's crops, opening a shop. Once he'd lost rank, if he sent a gentleman a challenge, the gentleman wouldn't bother to answer. This was the ultimate insult.

Gentlemen were careful not to enter into duels with non-gentlemen because, if they lost or got killed, it stained the family honor backward and forward for generations.

In 1613, Lord Bruce and the earl of Dorset quarreled over a woman. In the course of their antagonism, Bruce allegedly slapped

the earl several times. The face was always sacred, as in the Oriental concept of losing face. A glove thrown in the face or simply flicked in the face's general direction was unforgivable, and even a finger snap in the face was incendiary. A slap was a challenge. Friends separated them, but Bruce promptly went off to France to learn to fence. Then they appointed a meeting place in Antwerp, safely out of England. (James I was fiercely against dueling, "a vaine that bleeds both incessantly and inwardly.")

Because their intentions were frankly murderous, they agreed to fight without seconds, with only their unarmed doctors as witnesses, lest the seconds join in and get butchered too, as seconds often did.

They wounded each other severely but, bleeding, pressed on until Dorset twice ran Bruce clear through his body. "Oh! I am slain," cried Bruce. Dorset pushed him down and asked if he wanted to plead for his life, but Bruce nobly scorned to.

Impressed, Dorset withheld the final stroke and let Bruce's doctor come attend to him. Then Dorset rested awhile in the arms of his own doctor. As he was gathering his strength, he wrote later, "I escaped a great danger, for my Lord's surgeon, when nobody dreamt of it, came full at me with my Lord's sword; and had not mine, with my sword, interposed himself, I had been slain by those base hands, although my Lord Bruce, weltering in his blood, and past all expectation of life, conformable to all his former carriage, which was undoubtedly noble, cried out: 'Rascal, hold thy hand!'"

A true gentleman, that Bruce. Dorset has killed him, but, dying, he cries out against being avenged by a doctor's base hands. A

doctor, a person who sells his services for money, was socially no better than a butcher who sells a leg of mutton. The noble earl of Dorset, unlike his opponent, would have died ignobly. His grandchildren would be embarrassed to mention him. (There might be a whispered echo of this in the American South in uncomfortably recent years: For a black man to kill a white man was an outrage as well as a crime and could lead to hideous retributions to expunge the desecration. A white man who killed a black one was a murderer, of course, but not a monster; he might even have given the deceased a bit of a boost socially. Nobody tried to lynch him.)

If a gentleman issued or accepted a challenge in proper form and fought like a gentleman, with a gentleman, then to be vanquished was no defeat. Certainly it was nobler than suffering the insult or refusing the fight. And to be killed in a duel by your equal was, if not exactly a pleasure, at least honorable. Your grandchildren could tell of it proudly.

Courage, not manners, was the hallmark of a gentleman. As the duel epidemic spread, courage came to mean a thin skin and an unruly temper, the thinner and more unruly, the more gentlemanly. A gentleman was proud of his temper and indulged and cherished it. There may have been, off in remote country estates, phlegmatic gentlemen landowners, waistcoats bulging with good claret and venison, who chuckled at insults, waved them away, and opened another bottle, but in the cities, the armies, and the universities, prickliness was a point of pride, as proud youths in tough neighborhoods are quick to avenge being "dissed." An easygoing temperament meant your blood was slow, and cold, and lowly.

In *The Three Musketeers*, the noble Aramis studies in the seminary for ten years to fulfill his dream of becoming an abbé, but a jealous officer insults him, and he quits the seminary and goes off to take fencing lessons daily for a year. Then he finds the officer, calls him out, and strikes him dead. "I am a gentleman born – my blood is warm," he explains.

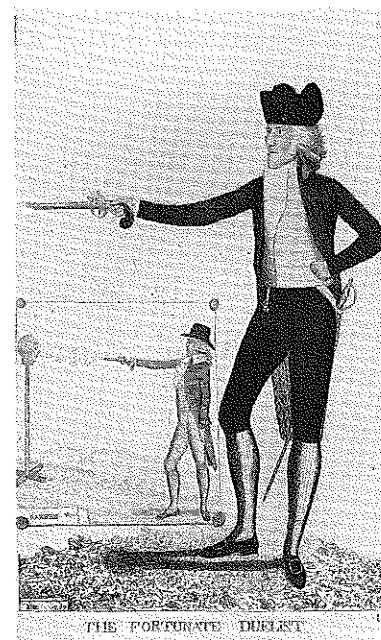
In *The Tempest*, Prospero threatens Ferdinand, son and heir to the king of Naples, and Ferdinand promptly draws his sword. Miranda cries, "O dear father, / Make not too rash a trial of him, for / He's gentle, and not fearful." By gentle, she doesn't mean he's kind to dogs and small children. She means he's well-bred, and therefore bad tempered, armed and dangerous. Not to be trifled with.

As its first definition of "gentle," the *Oxford English Dictionary*, both feet stubbornly planted in the past, gives "well-born, belonging to a family of position; originally used synonymously with *noble*, but afterwards distinguished from it, either as a wider term, or as designating a lower degree of rank. Also, in heraldic use: Having the rank or status of 'gentleman,' the distinguishing mark of which is the right to bear arms."

Gentlemen bore arms. In the Scottish Highlands, where nobody would think of leaving the house without a sword, or perhaps even sitting down to dinner without one, true gentlemen distinguished themselves from their lowlier neighbors by a feather in the bonnet as well – as in "a feather in his cap" – but elsewhere only gentlemen were entitled to the sword. Swords were the badge of a man who needed no help "beyond that of his heart, his sword, and his valor." The French called it "*la noblesse de l'épée*."

fight with swords. Magic swords, of course, but swords, not guns.

Deep in our hearts we still feel that honor requires a sword. However, in the practical world of the dueling ground, the prosaic pistol gradually took over.



V. BLAZING AWAY

PISTOLS WERE DEMOCRATIC. Anyone could own them. Anyone not blind or palsied could learn to shoot them. Burton insists that a good swordsman must start his lessons by age ten or twelve and practice daily with a fencing master; with pistols, you needed only the eighteenth-century equivalent of a beer can on a fence post. You needn't be rich, or athletic, or experienced, or gentry. Doctors, lawyers, politicians, and newspaper editors joined in. Dueling spread downward into the middle classes and outward into the colonies.

With pistols, even women could manage a duel without first having an educational affair, like La Maupin, with a fencing master. Most women's duels were prevented or aborted; in one, a thoughtful second stashed the loaded pistols in a mud puddle, wetting the powder so the guns misfired. Other scraps caused only modest injuries, and most of the women involved weren't to be taken seriously anyway. Women had no honor to defend except their reputation for chastity, and that was a man's business. A man's good name was at stake in their chastity, and a man defended it. Women who had to defend their own honor tended to be actresses or singers, or worse.

All the accounts are written by men, who cite these squabbles as evidence of women's silliness, spitefulness, jealousy, bad marksmanship, and poor sportsmanship.

In one that amused tout Paris, it seems the Duc de Richelieu, famous duelist and ladies' man, had arranged a rendezvous with each of two amours, the Comtesse de Polignac and the Marquise de Nesle, in one afternoon. He'd meant them to arrive two hours apart, but he left the matter to his secretary, who bungled it and scheduled both women for the same hour. They ran into each other. In a rage of jealousy, they agreed to meet with pistols in the Bois de Boulogne.

The duc himself attended and left a delighted account of it: "The two ladies, dressed in riding habit, gave a preliminary curtsy and then exchanged pistol shots. People came running up when they saw Madame de Nesle fall to the ground, with blood flowing over her bosom. But on examination, it was found that the blood was coming from a scratch on her shoulder, the bullet having only

grazed Madame de Nesle's skin . . ." When onlookers asked her "if the lover in question was worth fighting for, 'Yes, yes,' said the wounded lady, 'he is worthy of having even finer blood shed for him . . . He is the most charming nobleman at court, and I am prepared to shed all my blood for him, down to the last drop.'"

That's the charming nobleman's own version. In a different account, when the ladies met, the comtesse said, "Fire first, and mind you don't miss me; don't you think I'm going to try to miss you!" The marquise fired and missed. The comtesse fired and shot away a piece of the marquise's ear, not bad shooting for a comtesse. This version doesn't mention shedding any last drop of blood. Perhaps the duc added it for literary reasons.

In America, in 1817, an amused newspaper in Georgia reported a more pragmatic encounter: "Last week a point of honor was decided between two ladies near the South Carolina line, the cause of the quarrel being the usual one – love. The object of the rival affections of these fair champions was present on the field as the mutual arbiter in the dreadful combat, and he had the grief of beholding one of the suitors for his favor fall dangerously wounded before his eyes. The whole business was managed with all the decorum and inflexibility usually practiced on such occasions, and the conqueror was immediately married to the innocent second, conformably to the previous conditions of the duel."

Americans are results oriented; we like a practical return on our investments. The record doesn't show whether the loser died of her dangerous wounds, or if the newlyweds lived happily ever after.

Other women fought over masculine matters like precedence and insults but never really put their backs into it. There are no

recorded fatalities. Women were respectable objects for duels, but as players they were always a bit of a joke, like a monkey riding a bicycle.

As the duel spread into new territory and the pistol opened it to new players, the old notion of a gentleman defending his honor got more complicated. Some of the new duelists were obviously not gentlemen in the traditional sense. Many of them worked for a living. Many were Americans, who by European definition couldn't possibly be gentlemen. If only certified gentry had an honor at all, what did these people think they were defending?

The idea of honor fragmented until it was hard to tell from workaday credibility. Editors fought duels to defend their editorial opinions. Doctors fought duels to determine whose medical procedures were right and whose were wrong. Judges fought duels to prove that their decisions were justified. The upwardly mobile middle class fought duels to look more aristocratic.

After the American Revolution, notions of democracy took tentative hold all over, and elections were more frequent, more hotly contested, and more interesting to the general public, sparking many a challenge among partisans. In a monarchy, everyone in court circles fights for position and favor, and sometimes interior factions do battle, but at least the fights were limited by upper-class interests; in a democracy, everyone's got a horse in the race.

In Ireland in particular, politics and duels became inseparable. The friends and families of rival candidates fought each other and, once elected, legislators regularly challenged each other in Parliament and then trooped out back to settle the matter properly,

under strict protocol. Politicians everywhere fought to prove they were men of conviction who ought to be elected and then fought politicians of other parties to prove their parties were best; they wrote nasty things about each other in newspapers and defended their words with bullets.

Alexander Hamilton, explaining why he'd accepted the duel with Aaron Burr, wrote, "The ability to be in future useful, whether in resisting mischief or effecting good . . . would probably be inseparable from a conformity with public prejudice in this particular." A pompous way of saying that the country wouldn't pay any attention to a sniveling coward who'd refused a duel. He was willing to die rather than lose his political influence, and he did.

Democratized, the duel lost some of its traditional punctilio. The rules made official in Ireland in 1777 were specific to gunfighting, but some people hardly bothered to follow them. Some people took creative liberties with the ancient rite.

In 1808, M. de Grandpree and M. le Pique quarreled over an actress who was supposed to be the former's mistress but got caught in a compromising position with the latter. Because, they said, they had "elevated minds," they agreed to fight an elevated duel. From a field next to the Tuileries, they rose up in a pair of hot-air balloons, each with a second and a supply of blunderbusses, since pistols wouldn't have been up to the job. A great crowd gathered to watch what they thought was a balloon race.

The wind stood fair from the north-northwest. The balloonists managed to stay within roughly eighty yards of each other, and when they'd risen to about twenty-five hundred feet, M. le Pique fired and missed. M. de Grandpree fired back, apparently not at

his opponent but at the more obvious target, his balloon. It dropped like a stone and smashed the duelist and his second to pieces on the housetops.

Triumphant, the victor soared majestically off into the sky, descending unhurt some twenty miles away.

For the more traditional, the standard dueling pistols were usually about .50 caliber, handsomely engraved and housed in their own velvet-lined mahogany box with their own cleaning rods and accessories. Though they never took on the glamorous shine of a fine sword, they were a distinguished feature of any gentleman's haberdashery and handed down from father to son, preferably with stories attached.

Rifling in the barrel, the grooves that spun the ball for greater range, was used in muskets but considered pretty unsporting in dueling pistols. Lord Cardigan, in 1840, was frowned on socially because his guns used both rifling and a hair trigger when he wounded Captain Tuckett, who was using the good old basic model.

Up until the 1830s, hair triggers enjoyed a vogue; they needed only the most tentative touch. A man who, through nerves or inexperience, touched too soon would shoot a tree, or his own foot, depending on whether he used a falling or a rising aim. For the less ham-handed, the hair trigger was faster and more accurate, but after various accidents – occasionally seconds or bystanders were felled – it lapsed into disrepute.

Accuracy improved as gunsmiths worked overtime to supply the dueling trade. In America, Alexander McClung, known as

"The Black Knight of the South," set a new record in 1834 by fatally shooting his man in the mouth with his first shot from a percussion pistol at over a hundred feet. (It was in his blood, of course. Those transplanted Scots were dangerous.)

The more usual distance was twelve paces, a pace being generally considered as sixty inches, adding up to twenty yards.

In *The Art of Duelling*, A Traveler gets down to specifics. The gentleman, he says, should "stand with the right and left shoulder in a line with the object he wishes to hit; his head bent to the right and his eyes fixed on the object. His feet should be almost close together; his left arm hanging down and his right holding the pistol with the muzzle pointing to the ground close at his feet; he should keep his shoulders well back and his stomach drawn in, then stamping his feet twice or thrice on the ground to feel he stands firmly, let him raise his right arm steadily, bending it at the elbow, and drawing the pistol into a line with the object, bring that part of the arm between the shoulder and the elbow close to the side – throw the muscles strongly and let it cover the breast as much as possible."

He should choose a target on his target, such as a coat button, focus on it, and "bring the head straight, keeping the eyes turned as much to the right as possible and the pistol directed steadily towards the small object that has been noticed; be cool, collected, and firm, and think of nothing but placing the ball on the proper spot; when the word is given, pull the trigger carefully and endeavour to avoid moving a muscle in the arm or hand – move only the forefinger, and that with just sufficient force to discharge the pistol."

Most important, I suppose, was trying not to watch the man twenty yards away, who has read the same book, going through

exactly the same motions, drawing in his stomach, stamping his feet, and focusing hard on *your* second coat button.

The combatants could stand on their marks and wait for the word "Fire!" or a dropped handkerchief, or they might stand back to back, as they do in so many old engravings, walk away from each other, and then, at the signal, wheel and fire. This didn't encourage careful marksmanship, but maybe that was the point: They could fire, miss, and forget about it.

The Irish chronicler Daniel O'Connell describes a row in which one man has knocked another down and satisfaction is demanded: "Then they fought, fired a shot each, came home safe and arm-in-arm together, got tipsy in company with each other, went together to the ball and danced till morning." Perhaps a more wholesome resolution than brooding about the matter for years, or generations. In Chekhov's story "The Duel," neither man is wounded; they shake hands and both have been personally transformed by the encounter into better, kinder, and more virtuous men.

There were always those who questioned the morality of dueling, but for those who didn't, shooting at someone had a simplicity, a stark clarity, that seemed to settle matters more firmly and much faster than argument and recrimination. The smell of gunpowder, like the blood in a sword fight, cleared the air.

The English had fetched the idea of the duel to Ireland, and the Irish national temperament pounced on it like a duck on a june bug, at least according to the English, who wrote many scolding articles about the bestial and uncontrolled citizens of the emerald isle and how they themselves, the English, had "corrected many of our own unstable and more excitable habits," a statement not borne out by

statistics. Actually, dueling had a shorter life in Ireland than in other western European countries, only about three hundred years, but while it flourished it flourished with gusto and a high fatality rate. One Thomas Macnamara of County Clare fought thirty duels before his twenty-fourth birthday.

The choice of weapons was settled before each duel, and many a citizen used guns or swords with equal aplomb, but a man who had never studied fencing, facing a master swordsman, had the option of choosing pistols. Guns quickly gained the ascendancy: In the first half of the eighteenth century, over half the Irish duels were fought with swords, fifteen percent with swords and pistols, and just over a quarter with pistols alone; in the second half of the century, over three-quarters used pistols alone.

Trying to establish what the fighting was about, James Kelly in "*This Damn'd Thing Called Honour*" catalogs the causes of the Irish duels actually recorded between 1716 and 1790. He finds that insults accounted for ninety-three, politics and elections seventy-two, women twenty-one, "legal matters" fourteen, drinking eleven, "playhouse" ten, gambling and jostling four each, religion two, and one listed as a "feud." The bulk of the rest were vaguely attributed to "a quarrel" or "some words." Of course most of them never got into the records at all. Participants didn't usually report them to the record keepers, though with people of any importance the newspapers found out anyway.

Frowned on by law and Church, dueling was never well documented. For details of actual fights, we're usually dependent on the accounts of the seconds, if they survived, who were by definition

close friends of the principals and may have suppressed or burnished the facts. Mortality rates are hard to come by too, since you might stagger victorious from the field, recorded as surviving, and die weeks or months later from your wounds.

Without basic sterilization, doctors excavating your flesh for a pistol ball were far more likely to kill you than if they'd left the thing alone. If you were hit in the arm or leg, the doctor sawed off the offended limb and you died of gangrene. A torso shot could cause the bowels to discharge copiously and involuntarily; in one recorded Canadian case, at this point the victor and both the seconds fled the island and left the poor man to wallow bleeding in the mess.

In a sampling of three hundred and six Irish duels fought in the nineteen years between 1771 and 1790, mostly with pistols, Kelly reports sixty-five instant deaths, sixteen mortal wounds, ninety-four with one man injured and twenty-four with both. Out of the sampling, only ninety-eight, or less than a third, ended bloodlessly. Another study concludes that in England the death rate was one in fourteen, and in Ireland one in four.

Being always more tribal than feudal, Ireland was more egalitarian than western Europe. Brewers, merchants, foot soldiers, and goldsmiths fought as enthusiastically as lords, with equally gentle treatment from juries in the cases that went to court; when a landowner's duel found its way to court, it was impossible to get up a jury at all, since the citizens were all his relatives, his tenants, or his employees. The usual verdict, when a trial was held, was "manslaughter in self-defense," which meant innocent, and if the rules of the duello had been followed, the judge might simply

declare that the defendant had conducted himself in a manner "becoming a man of honour."

The tribal structure lent itself to hereditary duels, in which men fought because their fathers had fought, like the Hatfields and McCoys of Appalachia. "Duels" was often a courtesy title for mayhem. At the other end from these blind, inherited brawls was the cold, premeditated duel: If you were sure of your aim and had a disputed legacy to lands or titles, you could go find your rival, insult him, and, in the ensuing duel, take him out of the running. This worked with elections as well: Killing the other candidate was faster than stumping for votes. One man who owed another enormous sums of money challenged his creditor to a duel, hoping to kill him and cancel the debt. He went on to fight twelve more duels, mostly over his debts, and was ultimately hanged for assassinating another famous duelist.

In the army, fights could be about anything or nothing, and since the combatants were better trained and more persistent than civilians, more of them died. The Irish army officers were interwoven with the society; they came from all the noble families and formed a combustible mix of royalist Catholics and Cromwellian Protestants, spiced with outlanders from Scotland and continental Europe. When they were temporarily laid off from actual warfare, fights were easy to pick, and often more than the usual two people got into them. One fracas, in 1667, pitted Lord Brabazon, Captain Fitzgerald, and Ensign Slaughter against Captain Savage, Lieutenant Bridges, and Ensign Lloyd. (A duel in which Slaughter and Savage faced each other should have sparked at least one sermon or play, but apparently nobody noticed.) Slaughter was

killed and everyone else was wounded, and Brabazon, as the ranking participant, got a royal pardon. The record doesn't say what it was all about. Perhaps nothing.

The Irish carried their tempers with them when they left the country. The Irish peers in Parliament had to defend their country's honor against rude jokes by English peers. In 1666, in the House of Lords, the duke of Buckingham told Lord Ossory, the duke of Ormond's son, that anyone who opposed a bill against importing Irish cattle into England must have "an Irish interest or an Irish understanding." This, as Samuel Pepys observed at the time, was a mortal insult: When the English called you Irish, it wasn't a compliment.

Ossory challenged Buckingham, who cleverly showed up at the wrong field, then accused Ossory of not showing up and ratted on him to the House of Lords, which, exasperated, sentenced them both to three days in the Tower. (We think of prisoners in the Tower as languishing for decades gnawing on rats and waiting to get murdered by wicked uncles, but apparently it had comfortable quarters for brief visits from unruly noblemen.) Ossory, a prickly type, was undeterred and went on to fight again.

And the English went on insulting the Irish. The earl of Orrery, who was condemned to go live in Ireland, wrote home calling the natives "bears and tygers" and drunk too. One Samuel Madden wrote that in Ireland it was legally safer to kill a man than to steal a sheep or a cow.

After 1750, cheered by economic recovery and prosperity, more Irishmen took up dueling as a kind of national sport, and bakers, hairdressers, engravers, and clockmakers got into the records.

Newspapers wrote exciting accounts of important duels and their readers were riveted. Almost no cases were prosecuted.

At the same time, as sputtering but simple pistols replaced the wicked but complicated sword, the death rate, formerly around seventy percent, dropped slightly. Encouraged, the populace took up arms in every coffeehouse and tavern. In Dublin, Lucas's coffeehouse, next to Dublin Castle, was the center of excitement, and few customers came in searching for a peaceful cup of coffee. They fought in the yard out back, which was so cramped that even the clumsiest marksman found his mark.

Honor was prickly and combustible. A gentleman's letter published in the *Freeman's Journal* said that he would far rather see his son dead than find out he'd declined a challenge. "My honour," proclaimed the lord chancellor of Lifford, "is dearer to me than my life." Irish Attorney General John Scott wrote, "There are cases where it may be, and when it is prudent for a man to fight a duel – cases of persevering malignity, cases of injured honour, cases of a wounded spirit, and a wounded spirit who can bear?"

Honor was insidious. One man was dishonored by a thrown snowball; he fought and killed the thrower. A man who'd been passed over for a promotion or failed to secure a job for a relative considered himself dishonored, and might challenge the high official in charge. The high official would have to take him on, a job-related risk. If the official had been debating whether or not to give the man the job he wanted, the possibility of a challenge might help him decide.

Military men were still more likely to get hurt than civilians; in Dublin, two lawyers fought and between them fired forty shots