

Defenders of honor or
shoot-on-sight vigilantes?
Even in 19th-century
America, it was hard to tell

BY ROSS DRAKE

Duel!

THE STORY, AS PARSON WEEMS TELLS IT, is that in 1754 a strapping young militia officer named George Washington argued with a smaller man, one William Payne, who made up for the disparity in size by knocking Washington down with a stick. It was the kind of affront that, among a certain class of Virginia gentlemen, almost invariably called for a duel. That must have been what Payne was expecting when Washington summoned him to a tavern the following day. Instead, he found the colonel at a table with a decanter of wine and two glasses. Washington apologized for the quarrel, and the two men shook hands.

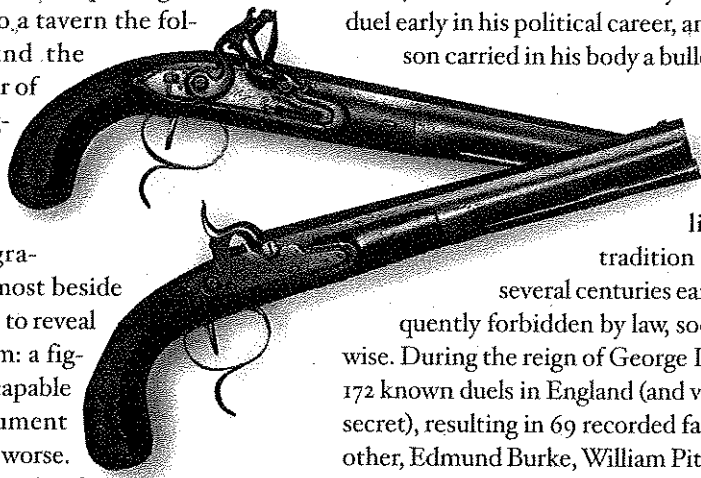
Whether or not this actually happened—and some biographers believe that it did—is almost beside the point. Weems' intention was to reveal Washington as he imagined him: a figure of profound self-assurance capable of keeping an overheated argument from turning into something far worse. At a time in America when the code of the duel was becoming a law unto itself, such restraint was not always apparent. Alexander Hamilton was the most celebrated casualty of the dueling ethic, having lost his life in an 1804 feud with Aaron Burr on the fields of Weehawken, New Jersey, but there were many more who paid the ulti-

mate price—congressmen, newspaper editors, a signer of the Declaration of Independence (the otherwise obscure Button Gwinnett, famous largely for being named Button Gwinnett), two U.S. senators (Armistead T. Mason of Virginia and David C. Broderick of California) and, in 1820, the rising naval star Stephen Decatur. To his lasting embarrassment, Abraham Lincoln barely escaped being drawn into a duel early in his political career, and President Andrew Jackson carried in his body a bullet from one duel and some

shot from a gunfight that followed another.

Not that private dueling was a peculiarly American vice. The

tradition had taken hold in Europe several centuries earlier, and though it was frequently forbidden by law, social mores dictated otherwise. During the reign of George III (1760-1820), there were 172 known duels in England (and very likely many more kept secret), resulting in 69 recorded fatalities. At one time or another, Edmund Burke, William Pitt the younger and Richard Brinsley Sheridan all took the field, and Samuel Johnson defended the practice, which he found as logical as war between nations: "A man may shoot the man who invades his character," he once told biographer James Boswell, "as he may shoot him who attempts to break into his house." As late as 1829 the Duke of Wellington, then England's prime minister, felt com-

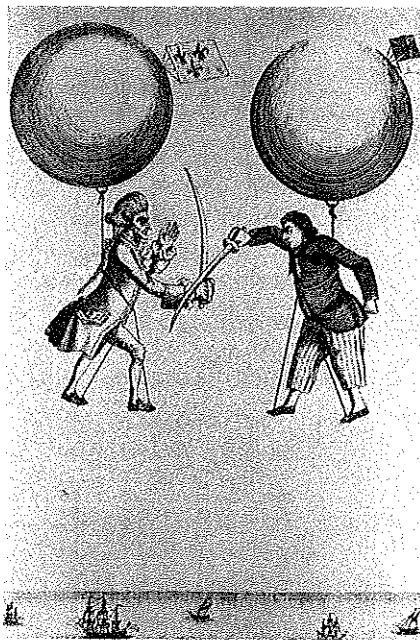


Dueling was accepted in Europe (right, illustrations from a c. 1789 British dueling manual) before it spread to the New World. The .544-caliber pistols (above) were employed with fatal consequences in America's most notorious face-off: 1804's Burr vs. Hamilton.

pelled to challenge the Earl of Winchelsea, who had accused him of softness toward Catholics.

In France, dueling had an even stronger hold, but by the 19th century, duels there were seldom fatal, since most involved swordplay, and drawing blood usually sufficed to give honor its due. (Perhaps as a way of relieving ennui, the French weren't averse to pushing the envelope in matters of form. In 1808, two Frenchmen fought in balloons over Paris; one was shot down and killed with his second. Thirty-five years later, two others tried to settle their differences by skulling each other with billiard balls.)

In the United States, dueling's heyday began at around the time of the Revolution and lasted the better part of a century. The custom's true home was the antebellum South. Duels, after all, were fought in defense of what the law would not defend—a gentleman's sense of personal honor—and nowhere were gentlemen more exquisitely sensitive on that point than in the future Confederacy. As self-styled aristocrats, and frequently slaveholders, they enjoyed what one Southern writer describes as a "habit of command" and an expectation of deference. To the touchiest among them, virtually any annoyance could be construed as grounds for a meeting at gunpoint, and though laws against dueling were passed in several Southern



Although dueling etiquette had been codified for centuries, combatants still tested the limits of form. Adversaries slung piles of dung, beaned each other with billiard balls and, as suggested in this 18th-century engraving, fought while suspended by balloons.

states, the statutes were ineffective. Arrests were infrequent; judges and juries were loath to convict.

In New England, on the other hand, dueling was viewed as a cultural throwback, and no stigma was attached to rejecting it. Despite the furious sectional acrimony that preceded the Civil War, Southern congressmen tended to duel each other, not their Northern antagonists, who could not be relied upon to rise to a challenge. Consequently, when South Carolina congressman Preston Brooks was offended by Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner's verbal assault on the congressman's uncle, he resorted to caning Sumner insensible on the floor of the Senate. His constituents understood. Though Brooks was reviled in the North, he was lionized in much of the South, where he was presented with a ceremonial cane inscribed "Hit Him Again." (Brooks said he had used a cane rather than a horsewhip because he was afraid Sumner might wrestle the whip away from him, in which case Brooks would have had to kill him. He didn't say how.)

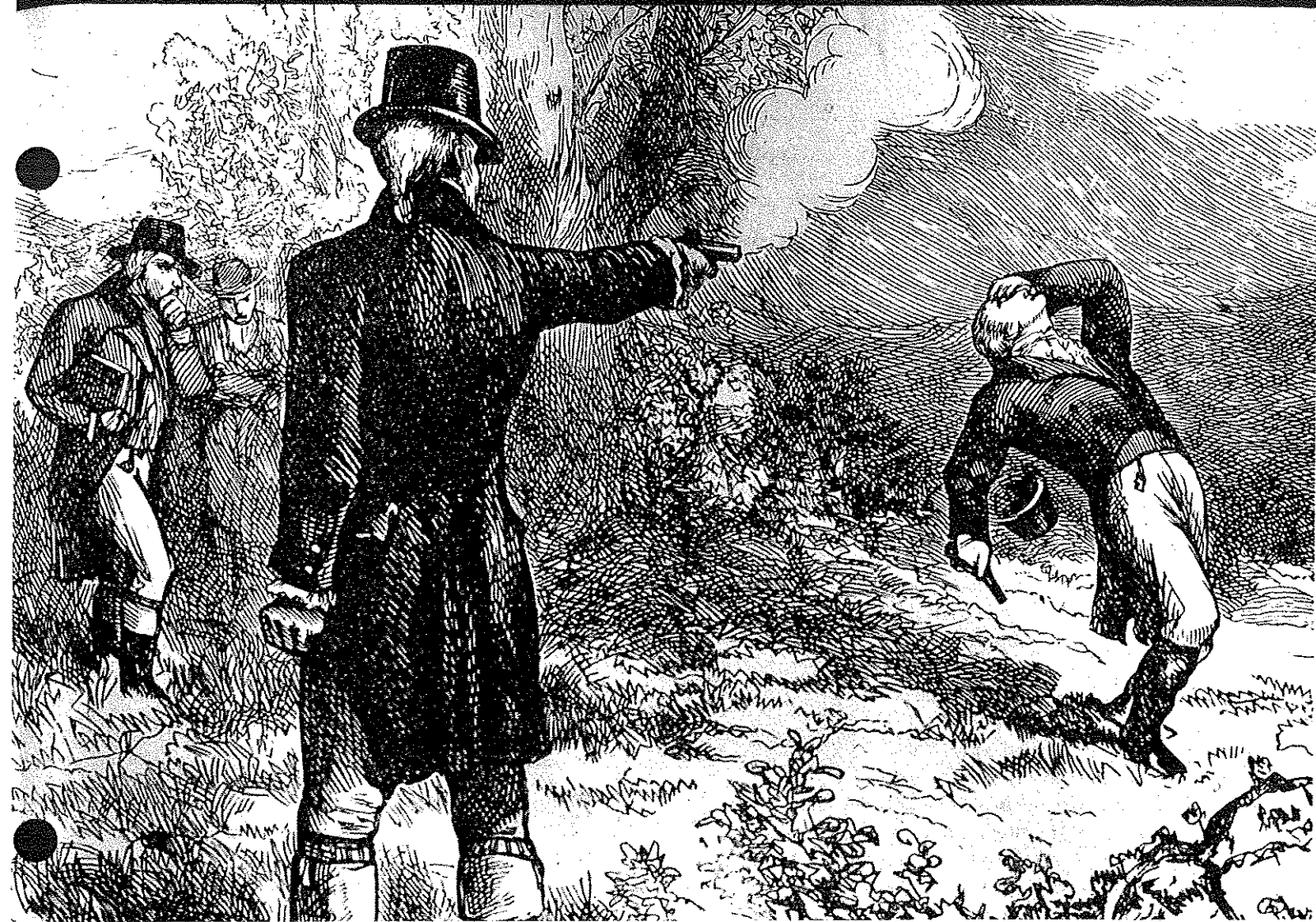
ROSS DRAKE is a former editor at *People* magazine who now writes from Connecticut. This is his first article for *SMITHSONIAN*.

Curiously, many who took part in the duel professed to disdain it. Sam Houston opposed it, but as a Tennessee congressman, shot Gen. William White in the groin. Henry Clay opposed it, but put a bullet through Virginia senator John Randolph's coat (Randolph being in it at the time) after the senator impugned his integrity as secretary of state and called him some colorful names. Hamilton opposed dueling, but met Aaron Burr on the same ground in New Jersey where Hamilton's eldest son, Philip, had died in a duel not long before. (Maintaining philosophical consistency, Hamilton intended to hold his fire, a common breach of strict dueling etiquette that, sadly, Burr didn't emulate.) Lincoln, too, objected to the practice, but got as far as a dueling ground in Missouri before third parties intervened to keep the Great Emancipator from emancipating a future Civil War general.

So why did such rational men choose combat over apology or simple forbearance? Perhaps because they saw no alternative. Hamilton, at least, was explicit. "The ability to be in future useful," he wrote, "... in those crises of our public affairs which seem likely to happen ... imposed on me (as I thought) a peculiar necessity not to decline the call." And Lincoln, though dismayed to be called to account for pricking the vanity of a political rival,

couldn't bring himself to extend his regrets. Pride obviously had something to do with this, but pride compounded by the imperatives of a dueling society. For a man who wanted a political future, walking away from a challenge may not have seemed a plausible option.

The Lincoln affair, in fact, affords a case study in how these matters were resolved—or were not. The trouble began when Lincoln, then a Whig representative in the Illinois legislature, wrote a series of satirical letters under the pseudonym Rebecca, in which he made scathing fun of State Auditor James Shields, a Democrat. The letters were published in a newspaper, and when Shields sent him a note demanding a retraction, Lincoln objected to both the note's belligerent tone and its assumption that he had written more of them than he had. (In fact, Mary Todd, not yet Lincoln's wife, is believed to have written one of the letters with a friend.) Then, when Shields asked for a retraction of the letters he *knew* Lincoln had written, Lincoln refused to do so unless Shields withdrew his original note. It was a lawyerly response, typical of the verbal fencing that often preceded a duel, with each side seeking the moral high ground. Natu-



On July 11, 1804, U.S. vice president Aaron Burr mortally wounded his political rival, Alexander Hamilton, in Weehawken, New Jersey. Burr believed that shooting Hamilton would enhance his reputation, but the act branded him as a murderer and a villain.

rally, it led to a stalemate. By the time Lincoln agreed to a carefully qualified apology provided that first note was withdrawn—in effect asking Shields to apologize for demanding an apology—Shields wasn't buying. When Lincoln, as the challenged party, wrote out his terms for the duel, hopes for an accommodation seemed ended.

The terms themselves were highly unusual. Shields was a military man; Lincoln was not. Lincoln had the choice of weapons, and instead of pistols chose clumsy cavalry broadswords, which both men were to wield while standing on a narrow plank with limited room for retreat. The advantage would obviously be Lincoln's; he was the taller man, with memorably long arms. "To tell you the truth," he told a friend later, "I did not want to kill Shields, and felt sure that I could disarm him . . . ; and, furthermore, I didn't want the damned fellow to kill me, which I rather think he would have done if we had selected pistols."

Fortunately, perhaps for both men, and almost certainly for one of them, each had friends who were determined to keep them from killing each other. Before Shields arrived at the dueling spot, their seconds, according to Lincoln biog-

rapher Douglas L. Wilson, proposed that the dispute be submitted to a group of fair-minded gentlemen—an arbitration panel of sorts. Though that idea didn't fly, Shields' seconds soon agreed not to stick at the sticking point. They withdrew their man's first note on their own, clearing the way for a settlement. Shields went on to become a United States senator and a brigadier general in the Union Army; Lincoln went on to be Lincoln. Years later, when the matter was brought up to the president, he was adamant. "I do not deny it," he told an Army officer who had referred to the incident, "but if you desire my friendship, you will never mention it again."

If Lincoln was less than nostalgic about his moment on the field of honor, others saw dueling as a salutary alternative to simply gunning a man down in the street, a popular but déclassé undertaking that might mark a man as uncouth. Like so many public rituals of the day, dueling was, in concept at least, an attempt to bring order to a dangerously loose-knit society. The Englishman Andrew Steinmetz, writing about dueling in 1868, called America "the country where life is cheaper than anywhere else." Advocates of the duel would have said that life would have been even cheaper with-

out it. Of course, the attitudes dueling was meant to control weren't always controllable. When Gen. Nathanael Greene, a Rhode Islander living in Georgia after the Revolution, was challenged by Capt. James Gunn of Savannah regarding his censure of Gunn during the war, Greene declined to accept. But feeling the honor of the Army might be at stake, he submitted the matter to George Washington. Washington, who had no use for dueling, replied that Greene would have been foolish to take up the challenge, since an officer couldn't perform as an officer if he had to worry constantly about offending subordinates. Indifferent to such logic, Gunn threatened to attack Greene on sight. Greene mooted the threat by dying peacefully the following year.

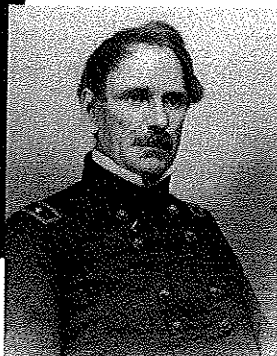
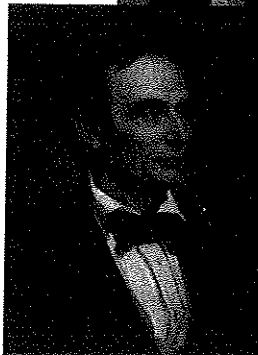
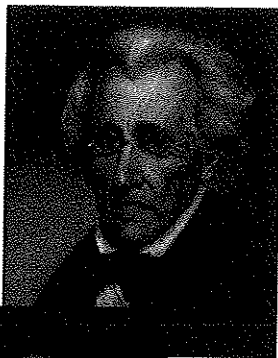
Even more than Captain Gunn, Andrew Jackson was an excitable sort with a famously loose rein on his temper. A survivor—barely—of several duels, he nearly got himself killed following a meeting in which he was merely a second, and in which one of the participants, Jesse Benton, had the misfortune to be shot in the buttocks. Benton was furious, and so was his brother, future U.S. senator Thomas Hart Benton, who denounced Jackson for his handling of the affair. Not one to take denunciation placidly, Jackson threatened to horsewhip Thomas and went to a Nashville hotel to

duel with a cousin—McClung behaved like a character out of Gothic fiction, dressing from time to time in a flowing cape, giving overripe oratory and morbid poetry, and terrifying many of his fellow Mississippians with his penchant for intimidation and violence.

A crack shot with a pistol, he preferred provoking a challenge to giving one, in order to have his choice of weapons. Legend has it that after shooting Vicksburg's John Menifee to death in a duel, the Black Knight of the South, as McClung was known, killed six other Menifees who rose in turn to defend the family honor. All of this reportedly generated a certain romantic excitement among women of his acquaintance. Wrote one: "I loved him madly while with him, but feared him when

away from him; for he was a man of fitful, uncertain moods and given to periods of the deepest melancholy. At such times he would mount his horse, Rob Roy, wild and untamable as himself, and dash to the cemetery, where he would throw himself down on a convenient grave and stare like a madman into the sky. . . ."

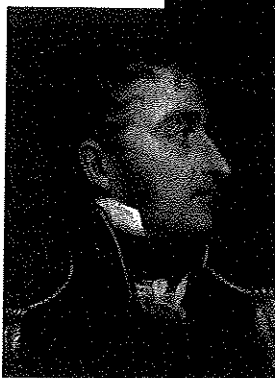
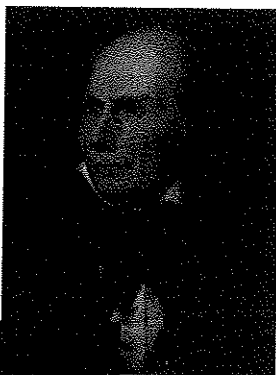
(The woman refused his proposal of marriage; he didn't seem the domestic type.) Expelled from the Navy as a young man, after threatening the



Challengers and the challenged crossed social and party lines. Some of the better known included, from top: Andrew Jackson (c. 1840), Abraham Lincoln (c. 1860), politician James Shields (c. 1865), Henry Clay (c. 1842) and naval hero Stephen Decatur (c. 1814).

do it. When Thomas reached for what Jackson supposed was his pistol, Jackson drew his, whereupon the irate Jesse burst through a door and shot Jackson in the shoulder. Falling, Jackson fired at Thomas and missed. Thomas returned the favor, and Jesse moved to finish off Jackson. At this point, several other men rushed into the room, Jesse was pinned to the floor and stabbed (though saved from a fatal skewering by a coat button), a friend of Jackson's fired at Thomas, and Thomas, in hasty retreat, fell backward down a flight of stairs. Thus ended the Battle of the City Hotel.

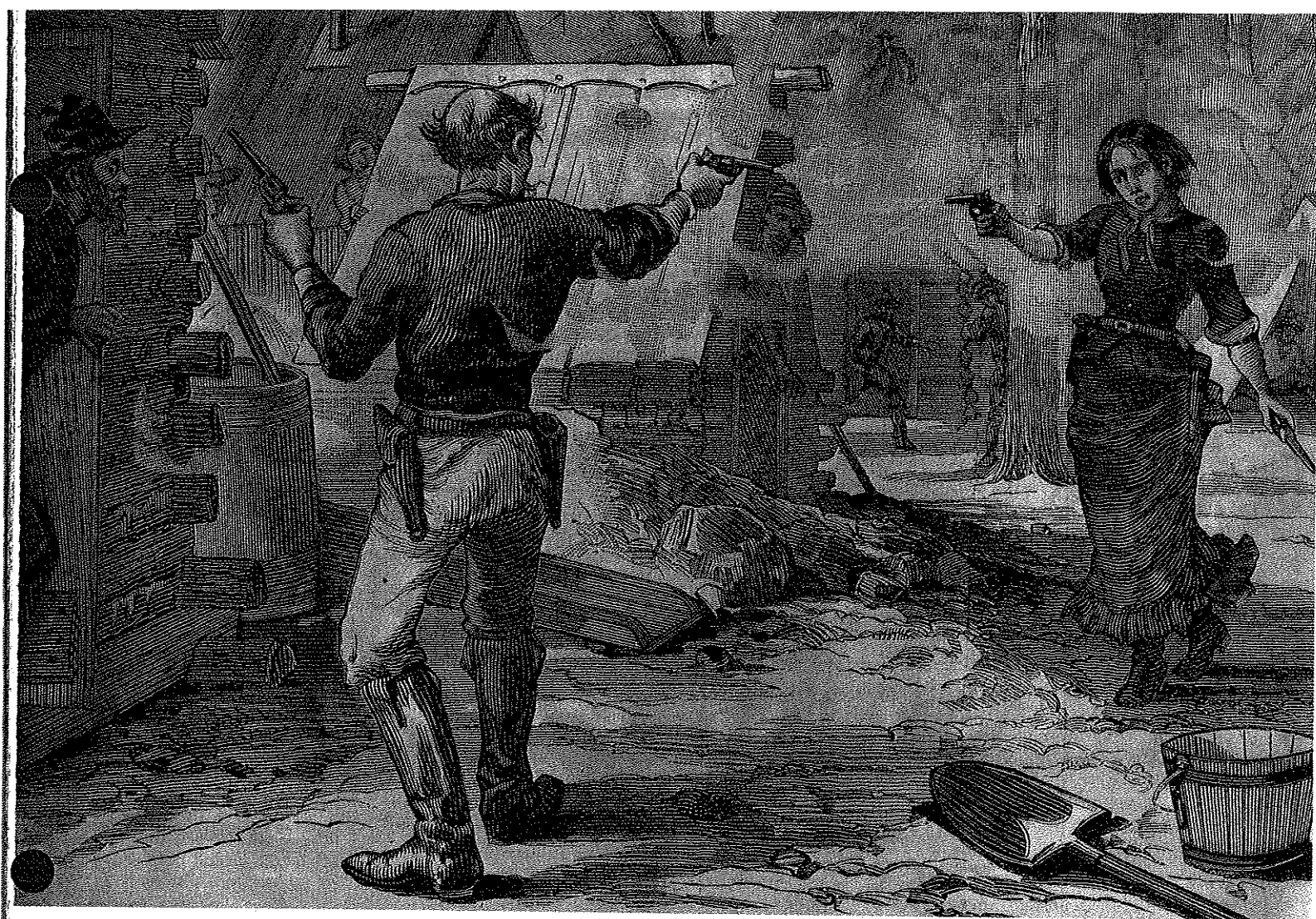
It was just this sort of thing that the code of the duel was meant to prevent, and sometimes it may have actually done so. But frequently it merely served as a scrim giving cover to murderers. One of the South's most notorious duelists was a hard-drinking homicidal miscreant named Alexander Keith McClung. A nephew of Chief Justice John Marshall—though likely not his favorite nephew, after engaging in a



lives of various shipmates, McClung later served, incredibly, as a U.S. marshal and fought with distinction in the Mexican War. In 1855, he brought his drama to an end, shooting himself in a Jackson hotel. He left behind a final poem, "Invocation to Death."

Though the dueling code was, at best, a fanciful alternative to true law and order, there were those who believed it indispensable, not only as a brake on shoot-on-sight justice but as a way of enforcing good manners. New Englanders may have prided themselves on treating an insult as only an insult, but to the South's dueling gentry, such indifference betrayed a lack of good breeding. John Lyde Wilson, a former governor of South Carolina who was the foremost codifier of dueling rules in America, thought it downright unnatural. A high-minded gentleman

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Affairs of honor during 19th-century America were usually the province of Southern males of a certain class. Though rare, there are also several recorded cases of female duelists (above, a c. 1886 resolution of a domestic dispute in Red Ledge, Idaho).

who believed the primary role of a second was to keep duels from happening, as he had done on many occasions, he also believed that dueling would persist “as long as a manly independence and a lofty personal pride, in all that dignifies and ennoble the human character, shall continue to exist.”

Hoping to give the exercise the dignity he felt sure it deserved, he composed eight brief chapters of rules governing everything from the need to keep one’s composure in the face of an insult (“If the insult be in public . . . never resent it there”) to ranking various offenses in order of precedence (“When blows are given in the first instance and returned, and the person first striking be badly beaten or otherwise, the party first struck is to make the demand [for a duel or apology], for blows do not satisfy a blow”) to the rights of a man being challenged (“You may refuse to receive a note from a minor. . . , [a man] that has been publicly disgraced without resenting it. . . , a man in his dotage [or] a lunatic”).

Formal dueling, by and large, was an indulgence of the South’s upper classes, who saw themselves as above the law—or at least some of the laws—that governed their social inferiors. It would have been unrealistic to expect them to be

bound by the letter of Wilson’s rules or anyone else’s, and of course they were not. If the rules specified smoothbore pistols, which could be mercifully inaccurate at the prescribed distance of 30 to 60 feet, duelists might choose rifles or shotguns or bowie knives, or confront each other, suicidally, nearly muzzle to muzzle. If Wilson was emphatic that the contest should end at first blood (“no second is excusable who permits a wounded friend to fight”), contestants might keep on fighting, often to the point where regret was no longer an option. And if seconds were obliged to be peacemakers, they sometimes behaved more like promoters.

But if bending the rules made dueling even bloodier than it had to be, strict adherence could be risky too. Some would-be duelists discovered that even the code’s formal preliminaries might set in motion an irreversible chain of events. When, in 1838, Col. James Watson Webb, a thuggish Whig newspaper editor, felt himself abused in Congress by Representative Jonathan Cilley, a Maine Democrat, he dispatched Representative William Graves of Kentucky to deliver his demand for an apology. When Cilley declined to accept Webb’s note, Graves, following what one Whig diarist



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described as "the ridiculous code of honor which governs these gentlemen," felt obliged to challenge Cilley himself. Subsequently, the two congressmen, who bore each other not the slightest ill will, adjourned to a field in Maryland to blast away at each other with rifles at a distance of 80 to 100 yards. After each exchange of shots, negotiations were conducted with a view to calling the whole thing off, but no acceptable common ground could be found, though the issues still at stake seemed appallingly trivial. Graves' third shot struck Cilley and killed him.

Though President Van Buren attended Cilley's funeral, the Supreme Court refused to be present as a body, as a protest against dueling, and Graves and his second, Representative Henry Wise of Virginia, were censured by the House of Representatives. On the whole, though, outrage seemed to play out along party lines, with Whigs less dismayed by the carnage than Democrats. Congressman Wise, who had insisted the shooting continue, over the protests of Cilley's second, was particularly defiant. "Let Puritans shudder as they may," he cried to his Congressional colleagues. "I belong to the class of Cavaliers, not to the Roundheads."

Ultimately, the problem with dueling was the obvious one. Whatever rationale its advocates offered for it, and however they tried to refine it, it still remained a capricious waste of too many lives. This was especially true in the Navy, where boredom, drink and a mix of spirited young men in close quarters on shipboard produced a host of petty irritations ending in gunfire. Between 1798 and the Civil War, the Navy lost two-thirds as many officers to dueling as it did to more than 60 years of combat at sea. Many of those killed and maimed were teenage mid-

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shipmen and barely older junior officers, casualties of their own reckless judgment and, on at least one occasion, the by-the-book priggishness of some of their shipmates.

In 1800, Lt. Stephen Decatur, who was to die in a celebrated duel 20 years later, laughingly called his friend Lieutenant Somers a fool. When several of his fellow officers shunned Somers for not being suitably resentful, Somers explained that Decatur had been joking. No matter. If Somers didn't challenge, he would be branded a coward and his life made unbearable. Still refusing to fight his friend Decatur, Somers instead challenged each of the officers, to be fought one after another. Not until he had wounded one of them, and been so seriously wounded himself that he had to fire his last shot from a sitting position, would those challenged acknowledge his courage.

The utter pointlessness of such encounters became, in time, an insult to public opinion, which by the Civil War had become increasingly impatient with affairs of honor that ended in killing. Even in dueling's heyday, reluctant warriors were known to express reservations about their involvement by shooting into the air or, after receiving fire, not returning it. Occasionally they chose their weapons—howitzers, sledgehammers, forkfuls of pig dung—for their very absurdity, as a way of making a duel seem ridiculous. Others, demonstrating a “manly independence” that John Lyde Wilson might have admired, felt secure enough in their own reputations to turn down a fight. It may not have been difficult, in 1816, for New Englander Daniel Webster to refuse John Randolph's challenge, or for a figure as unassailable as Stonewall Jackson, then teaching at the Virginia Military Institute, to order court-martialed a cadet who challenged him over a supposed insult during a lecture. But it must have been a different matter for native Virginian Winfield Scott, a future commanding general of the Army, to turn down a challenge from Andrew

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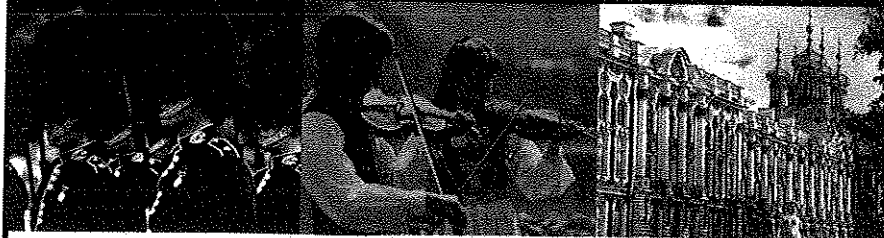
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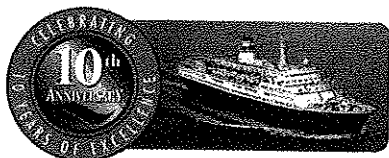
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Jackson after the War of 1812. (Jackson could call him whatever he chose, said Scott, but he should wait until the next war to find out if Scott were truly a coward.) And it had to be riskier still for Louisville editor George Prentice to rebuke a challenger by declaring, "I do not have the least desire to kill you. . . and I am not conscious of having done anything to entitle you to kill me. I do not want your blood upon my hands, and I do not want my own on anybody's. . . I am not so cowardly as to stand in dread of any imputation on my courage."

If he did not stand in such dread, others did, since the consequences of being publicly posted as a coward could ruin a man. Yet even in dueling's heartland south of the Mason-Dixon line, the duel had always had its opponents. Anti-dueling societies, though ineffectual, existed throughout the South at one time, and Thomas Jefferson once tried in vain to introduce in Virginia legislation as strict — though surely not so imaginative — as that in colonial Massachusetts, where the survivor of a fatal duel was to be executed, have a stake driven through his body, and be buried without a coffin.

But time was on the side of the critics. By the end of the Civil War, the code of honor had lost much of its force, possibly because the country had seen enough bloodshed to last several lifetimes. Dueling was, after all, an expression of caste — the ruling gentry deigned to fight only its social near-equals — and the caste whose conceits it had spoken to had been fatally injured by the disastrous war it had chosen. Violence thrived; murder was alive and well. But for those who survived to lead the New South, dying for chivalry's sake no longer appealed. Even among old dueling warriors, the ritual came to seem like something antique. Looking back on life's foolishness, one South Carolina general, seriously wounded in a duel in his youth, was asked to recall the occasion. "Well I never did clearly understand what it was about," he replied, "but you know it was a time when all gentlemen fought." ○