

By Edwin Handcock



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FINGAL

In DEFENCE of *One's Honour*

In the Ireland of the 18th and mid 19th century, the landed gentry, and subsequently politicians of all shades, were ultra sensitive to any slight made against their character; "turn the other cheek" was not on their agenda. They placed a higher value on personal honour than upon their very lives and were ever ready and willing to fight a duel to the death in defence of it, a simple "puck-in-the gob" was no substitute for a ritualistic encounter at dawn, dressed in one's Sunday best. On the social scene a man bearing a few duelling scars, considered to be "badges of honour", was sure to be a big hit with the ladies. In the majority of cases neither party had a desire to actually kill his opponent, a good hit with no life lost was considered a satisfactory outcome.

Duelling was against the law of the land and the teaching of both the Protestant and Catholic Church, although Dean Jonathon Swift famously said "Duellists should be permitted to exterminate themselves", Oliver Cromwell described duellists as "Incarnate Devils", sounds a bit like the pot calling the kettle black. However if conducted between "gentlemen" and strictly in accordance with the accepted code of etiquette, even if one killed his opponent, there was little to be feared from a prosecution as the magistrates were all from the same social class as the combatants. It was very much a case of "birds of a feather stick



The "fifteen acres" in the Phoenix Park today, once a popular Dublin duelling location

together". However woe betide the man who disregarded the conventions of the time, as a certain Leitrim attorney learned to his rather gruesome demise.

In 1796, Robert Keon an attorney, publicly whipped a fellow gentleman named George Reynolds at the Leitrim Assizes, an act that led to the inevitable challenge which became known as the "Sheemore Duel". On Monday morning the 16th October Reynolds arrived at the agreed location on horseback, unarmed he dismounted and approached Keon intending to speak to him as he believed that the matter could be settled amicably. Suddenly and without warning, Keon raised a loaded pistol and shot Reynolds in the head killing him instantly. The duelling code had been flaunted, none of the preliminaries had been observed, this was no duel of honour- it was murder. Keon was subsequently tried and convicted of murder, but the Judge sentenced him to the death of a traitor and instructed that he be hung from the



A Friendly Brothers jewel. This belonged to the late Lt.Col. William Taylor

neck, disembowelled and quartered while still alive. The sentence was duly carried out. If a famous Dublin District Justice had lived in these times he would have been buried under a wave of challenges following his controversial remark concerning the skill of Leitrim people for telling lies, "Leitrim people regard perjury as an art".

Duelling had become so prolific in Ireland by the late 1700's that a group of gentlemen duelling aficionados met in Clonmel in 1777 and drew up a code of etiquette to regulate the practice, which became known as the "Clonmel Rules". They categorised the degrees of insult that warranted a duel and the appropriate response, emphasis was laid on the role of "seconds" and their responsibility for ensuring that the affair was conducted strictly in accordance with protocol. Seconds had to be of equal social rank as the principals and they were not to deliver a challenge at night (cooling off period). On the field of combat they had to measure the ground, load the pistols, hand them to the combatants and supervise the proceedings. The rules also



The duelling pistols of Daniel O'Connell

stipulated that a gentleman did not fight a duel outside his own social class, a misfire was the equivalent of a shot, and no party was permitted to bend a knee, no form of body armour was permitted and immaculate dress was deemed to be appropriate for the occasion.

Pistols became the preferred choice of weapon by the mid 18th century replacing swords. The usual form of duelling with pistols (British method) was standing facing one's opponent at an agreed distance, usually 10 to 12 paces. There was also the French method where the combatants stood back to back, walked away from each other, turned and fired at a given signal. Etiquette demanded that if one fired first and missed, then he must stand still to receive fire from the other party. Unfortunately for the duellists of the day, medical science was in its infancy with the skills of the surgeon's bordering on the barbaric, they had no appreciation of the necessity to sterilise either the instruments used to extract a pistol ball (bullet) or the wounds so inflicted. Unlike the cowboy movies where John Wayne or one of his contemporaries, sterilised a Bowie knife in the flames of the camp fire, dug out the bullet, produced a bottle of rot-gut whiskey, pulled out the cork with his teeth, took a swig and then poured a good sized dram into the wound. Hence the old saying for a habitual drunkard "he'd drink it off a sore leg".

Duelling in Ireland did not always conform to the norm as illustrated by an event which occurred in Queen's County, now Laois, in the year 1759, which was reminiscent of a medieval joust. Colonel Jonah Barrington of Cullenaghmore had a

disagreement with Squire Gilbert; a minor matter which grew horns with the passage of time, it was decided to resolve the issue with a duel. They agreed to fight on horseback, each armed with (a) a brace of holstered pistols, (b) a short broadsword and (c) a long bladed dagger known as a skeen. Each pistol was to be loaded with a combination of a single ball (bullet) and swan-drops. Swan-drops are known today as buckshot i.e. large lead pellets. The standard practice on such occasions was for the combatants to gallop towards and past each other firing or slashing on the move; pistols had to be used first.

This was to be no secretive rencontre in a secluded forest glade; it was fought on the Green in Maryborough, now Portlaoise, announced publically in advance, with a huge crowd in attendance, including Judges of the Assizes and the County Trumpeter.

The combatants galloped toward each other, both fired and missed, the second time Barrington was hit in the face with swan-drops which infuriated him. Swords were then drawn, Barrington received three cuts on, right arm, bridle arm and left hand, his hat was cut in



Matched pair of English duelling pistols



Duelling cartoon by Cruikshank

several places, but both men wore iron skull-caps beneath their hats. Gilbert had wounds on his thigh and side. Gilbert who was of a cooler disposition, was gaining the upper hand, Barrington in desperation turned his attention to Gilbert's horse, repeatedly thrusting his sword into the unfortunate beast, which eventually fell pinning Gilbert to the ground. Barrington leapt off his horse, threw away his broadsword, drew his skeen and put it to Gilbert's throat giving him half a minute to plead for his life or die. Gilbert said he would but only on the terms that without apology they should shake hands and be friends so that their families would not have to continue with animosity. They agreed and became friends, in fact, the next time that Barrington fought a duel, Gilbert was his Second.



Daniel O'Connell

Daniel O'Connell The Liberator was an accomplished orator, but his tendency to get carried away by the exuberance of his own verbosity resulted in him being challenged to numerous duels; fortunately most were concluded without injury to either party. On one famous occasion in the House of Commons in 1835,



Brownes Hotel & Bistro in Stephens Green, Dublin, which was the location of the General Grand Knot of the Friendly Brothers from 1886 to 1997. The Garda Ballistics Section once had the honour of dining here as guests while the Brethern were in possession

O'Connell addressed Lord Alvanley as a "Bloated buffoon, a liar, a disgrace to his species and heir-at-law to the thief who died upon the cross". Alvanley issued a challenge which was taken up by Morgan O'Connell on behalf of his father; although shots were fired there were no injuries.

In January 1815 O'Connell accused Dublin Corporation of opposing the cause of Catholic emancipation and described them as being "beggarly". John D'Esterre, a Protestant and Corporation member took personal umbrage at the remark. He demanded a written explanation, but was so incensed by the reply received that he attempted to horsewhip O'Connell outside the law courts in Dublin and challenged him to a duel. The duel

was fought on the 1st February in a field at Bishopscourt in Naas before a large crowd of armed supporters from both sides. D'Esterre fired and missed, the ball from O'Connell's shot struck D'Esterre in the thigh and despite the prompt attention of two surgeons who were present, he died two days later.

There was always a body of opinion opposed to the practice of duelling. The "Ancient and Benevolent Order of the Friendly Brothers of St. Patrick" was established in Ireland in the first half of the 18th century to combat duelling. Their branches were known as "Knots" which symbolised the "knot of friendship that joins its brethren together". They enjoyed strong support amongst the army and military branches were known as "marching knots". In 1750 there were 21 knots in Ireland with their "H.Q" known as the "General Grand Knot" being located in Athenry. Its members were expressly forbidden to decide quarrels with fellow Brethren by the "Barbarous practice of duelling, unknown to the politest and bravest nations". The Order still exists in Ireland today, with "knots" actively promoting friendship, loyalty and charity in addition to encouraging social virtues.

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