

EDITORIAL

THE DISHONOR OF DUELING

In 1712 two members of the House of Parliament in London — the Duke of Hamilton and Lord Mohun — had a disastrous encounter. These individuals had had a lawsuit pending for 11 years, and as a consequence were not the best of friends. While discussing their case with a legal court officer, the Duke of Hamilton commented that one of the case witnesses who was favorable to Lord Mohun had neither truth nor justice in him. Lord Mohun's reaction to this derogatory comment was to suggest that the witness had as much truth and justice as the Duke of Hamilton. The Duke made no reply to this quip, and in leaving he courteously saluted the Lord, and no one suspected the seriousness of the animosity. That evening a messenger from Lord Mohun twice tried to find the Duke to challenge him to a duel. The messenger finally found him in a tavern and delivered the message. The Duke accepted the challenge, and the encounter was set for two days later at 7 a.m. on Sunday, the 15th of November, in Hyde Park. As was the usual practice, assistants in the duel — called seconds — were appointed.

At the scheduled time the participants met in the part of the park called the Nursery and prepared for combat. When all was ready, the two leading opponents took up their swords and vigorously fought each other. Lord Mohun died on the spot, and the Duke of Hamilton died while his servants were carrying him away.¹ The argument was settled.

Dueling, which was much more popular in the past, appears to have been absent from the Greeks and Romans.² The latter may have contributed to the practice by their reverence for fights and tournaments which, according to Basnage,³ encouraged a hatred and vengeance unknown among the ancients. It started more as a judicial procedure than as a pursuit of personal vendettas. There was some feeling that justice would be vindicated through duel combat. Sometimes professional fighters were hired to settle both civic and criminal actions.

Duels of honor, which became popular in medieval times, had a different basis of action. As with the example given above, they concerned personal offenses and tended to be more private. There was some legal protection in private duels in that the survivors could claim self-defense as a valid cause for having killed their opponent. Duels did not always end in death, although too often they did. The practice among the nobility of wearing swords as everyday dress facilitated these kinds of encounters. The slightest pretext was used as an excuse for a duel of honor. The practice became

very popular in France and was common in Italy, Germany, Russia, England, and Ireland. It is reported that in Ireland as many as 23 duels were fought in a day⁴ and were so common that they were reported only when one or both of the combatants were killed. In France during the reign of Henry IV, more than 4,000 French “gentlemen” lost their lives in an eighteen-year period.⁵ During the reign of Louis XIII it is reported that the ordinary conversation in the morning was: “Do you know who fought yesterday?” and after dinner. “Do you know who fought this morning?” In a twenty-year period 8,000 pardons were issued for murders associated with duels.⁶ The nobility insisted on fighting over the most trivial issues, such as disputes at playing cards or dog fights, and hardly any were left who had not been involved in a duel as a primary or secondary participant.

The mentality associated with this fad is not complex, but it is difficult to appreciate. Personal honor, pride and revenge took precedence over other values including life itself. As Joseph Addison commented in *The Spectator*: “Death is not sufficient to deter men who make it their glory to despise it.”⁷ In some cases public receptions were scheduled after the duel with the loser having to pay the cost, and it was considered a great honor to die in a duel. One of the greatest gestures you could extend to a friend was to invite him to be your second, and seconds often fought and sometimes died. In the minds of too many, pride and revenge for alleged affronts took precedence over all other values.

This devastating practice did not meet with general approval, and many monarchs tried to suppress it, although some of them passively participated in it. In England, Francis Bacon perceived the difficulty of the problem. In his charge touching duels, he pointed out that “the roots of this offence is stubborn: For it despiseth death which is the utmost of punishments....”⁸ He proposed to attack those factors that led to dueling instead of the duel itself; however, the practice continued.

Many laws were passed against the practice, including death sentences in Poland, Munich, and Naples. The French monarchy was especially opposed, and many survivors of duels were executed under the reign of Louis XIV; however, dueling outlived the French monarchy.

In the United States the practice did not become popular until the beginning of the nineteenth century, when it spread very rapidly, especially in the South. Most large Southern towns had their dueling fields. Dueling was made more virtuous by a code of behavior that encouraged accepting an affront politely and shooting courteously. Thousands of Southerners died protecting what they believed to be their honor.⁹

In the meantime the practice began to lose its popularity and respect. Ridicule and embarrassing punishments for participants, such as hanging

their bodies after they had died in a duel, began to moderate the practice. Richard Steele¹⁰ in England quotes a report of a duel in the *Whitewall Evening Post* which betrays little admiration:

We hear, that an Experiment was last Night made, in Gresham-College Yard, of a new Method of Duelling, with Sword and Cane, instead of Sword and Pistol, between two eminent Physicians, who had been engag'd for some Time in a Paper-War. Both these Engagements were equally ridiculous, the former producing no Blood, and the latter no Argument.

The duel of honor is no longer fashionable and is virtually dead. The few exceptions appear to be some controlled or lighter forms of it, among German and English university students, as well as rare highly publicized and very safe encounters in France.

Much has been written about the implications of duels. Some, such as Jonathan Swift, suggested that there was no harm in rogues and fools shooting each other¹¹; others labeled it as wild-animal behavior, murder, or suicide. The moral implications of trifling with one's life or the unwillingness to admit a mistake were emphasized by others. Probably the greatest moral challenge came from the concept of forgiveness. Jesus Christ had urged forgiveness of enemies and doing good to those who hate us.¹² This attitude was a sharp indictment of the folly of dueling. Steele¹³ also pointed out the importance of motives:

To Forbear Vengeance, for Fear of the Person who does You an Injury, is poor and base; but to suppress Resentment, for the Sake of Virtue, and conquering a strong Impulse to revenge, because a Man knows it is his Duty so to do, is heroick.

The contrast between a dueller's standard of heroism and Steele's definition of heroism engenders profound thought. It indicates both how easily our thinking can become warped and our need for a firm value system.

Unfortunately, the "science of quarrelling"¹⁴ is still in robust health. Intellectual dueling has some of the same characteristics as the old duel of honor. Sometimes our intellectual battles betray an insatiable zeal to destroy an individual or an idea. These duels usually transcend balanced thinking and careful scholarship. Steele, in commenting on the now-unpopular duel of honor, in *The Tatler* states: "There is not learning or much reading shown therein."¹⁵ This accusation likewise applies to many contemporary "intellectual" duels.

The study of origins is particularly vulnerable to intellectual duels, because of the more subjective nature of interpretations of the past as compared to the present. The past is more difficult to test scientifically,

because it is not directly testable. This point is well illustrated by the book *Great Geological Controversies*.¹⁶ All of the controversies considered in this volume deal with conflicting interpretations about the past. Controversies over different ideas of origins also tend to develop because of the all-inclusive implications of the conclusions. Belief or disbelief in a Creator profoundly affects some of life's most meaningful questions such as duty and purpose. These questions usually have emotional implications.

In intellectual pursuits, the scientific process may scorn value judgments such as personal concern and forgiveness, but the history of science shows that much intellectual energy has been wasted in dueling opponents instead of analyzing data. Too often scientific controversies concern themselves with personal opinions under the guise of intellectual pursuits. Too often we witness the hasty use of our verbal hatchets to make sure the "enemy" is wounded or dead. Recently I have noted two examples.¹⁷

In what is arguably the best science journal of the world, a geologist criticized some creationists for not knowing their Bible or their logic. In his example he argued that if a wildebeest fell off Noah's ark, no wildebeest would exist today, because of the lack of a mate for reproduction. Unfortunately, it was the geologist who did not know that the wildebeest is a clean animal and that in the biblical account of the flood, seven of each kind of clean animal was preserved. In a second case, another geologist rightly accused a writer of omitting a section of the geologic column in his interpretation. In the same paragraph, the geologist himself made the same kind of error by omitting a geologic formation that lay between two others. This would not be so significant if this were not in an aggressive publication that repeatedly emphasized how one should know his science before writing about it.

Intellectual duels usually create embarrassment. Sometimes as is the case in the above examples the participants are so uninformed that they literally "kill" themselves.

In study and the search for truth, there is ample room for calm reflection and exchange of ideas with an understanding attitude. This kind of activity should be much sought after. On the other hand, intellectual duels can be just as unreasonable as the so-called "duel of honor." They should be shunned like the plague.

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ENDNOTES

1. As reported in: Mackay C. (1841) 1932. *Extraordinary popular delusions and the madness of crowds*. NY: The Noonday Press, p 681.
2. Bataillard PC. 1829. *Du Duel*. Paris, p 14.
3. Basnage M. 1740. *Dissertation historique, sur les Duels*. Basel: Jean Christ, p 4.
4. Mackay, p 686 (Note 1).
5. *Ibid.*, p 666.
6. *Ibid.*, p 668.
7. Addison J. [no date]. *The Spectator*, Vol. II. NY: Hurst & Co., p 210.
8. Bacon F. 1614. *The charge of Sir Francis Bacon Knight, his Majesties Attourney generall, touching Duells*. London: Robert Wilson, p 18.
9. Kane HT. 1951. *Gentlemen, swords and pistols*. NY: William Morrow & Co., p x.
10. Steele R. 1719. *The antidote in a letter to the free-thinker, No. 2*. In: Blanchard R, editor. 1967. *Tracts and Pamphlets by Richard Steele*. NY: Octagon Books, Inc., p 513.
11. As reported in Mackay, p 679 (Note 1).
12. Matthew 5:44.
13. Steele, p 515-516 (Note 10).
14. Steele R. [no date]. *Duels and duellists further considered*. In: Gibbs L, editor. 1953. *Sir Richard Steele: The Tatler*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, p 40.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Hallam A. 1983. *Great geological controversies*. NY: Oxford University Press.
17. I shall spare the offenders published identification.