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The Gunning Of America: Business And The Making Of American Gun Culture



Synopsis

Americans have always loved guns. This special bond was forged during the American Revolution and sanctified by the Second Amendment. It is because of this exceptional relationship that American civilians are more heavily armed than the citizens of any other nation. Or so weâ™re told. In *The Gunning of America*, historian Pamela Haag overturns this conventional wisdom. American gun culture, she argues, developed not because the gun was exceptional, but precisely because it was not: guns proliferated in America because throughout most of the nationâ™s history, they were perceived as an unexceptional commodity, no different than buttons or typewriters. Focusing on the history of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company, one of the most iconic arms manufacturers in America, Haag challenges many basic assumptions of how and when America became a gun culture. Under the leadership of Oliver Winchester and his heirs, the company used aggressive, sometimes ingenious sales and marketing techniques to create new markets for their product. Guns have never “sold themselvesâ™; rather, through advertising and innovative distribution campaigns, the gun industry did. Through the meticulous examination of gun industry archives, Haag challenges the myth of a primal bond between Americans and their firearms. Over the course of its 150 year history, the Winchester Repeating Arms Company sold over 8 million guns. But Oliver Winchester—a shirtmaker in his previous career—had no apparent qualms about a life spent arming America. His daughter-in-law Sarah Winchester was a different story. Legend holds that Sarah was haunted by what she considered a vast blood fortune, and became convinced that the ghosts of rifle victims were haunting her. She channeled much of her inheritance, and her conflicted conscience, into a monstrous estate now known as the Winchester Mystery House, where she sought refuge from this ever-expanding army of phantoms. In this provocative and deeply-researched work of narrative history, Haag fundamentally revises the history of arms in America, and in so doing explodes the clichÃ©s that have created and sustained our lethal gun culture.

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Customer Reviews

This review was published in The Weekly Standard August 1, 2016 Pamela Haag calls gun makers "merchants of death." And America's love affair with guns, she says, didn't really start until the late 1800s, when the "merchants of death" convinced Americans that they wanted guns. She describes how gun makers were innovators in advertising, using promotional materials to lure Americans into buying firearms, even deploying skilled marksmen and trick-shot artists to show off the guns. Haag's story centers around the Winchester family, famous for its rifles, and she focuses on two members of the family: Oliver Winchester, who started the company, and Sarah Winchester, his daughter-in-law, who was supposedly haunted by her family's "blood fortune" and experienced an "enormous, haunting debt of guilt." The Gunning of America, however, is an advocacy book, not a history book, and Haag carefully selects her facts and gives readers a biased presentation of history. She tells us, for example, that Winchester gun sales soared from 9,800 in 1875 to 292,400 in 1914. But 1914 makes for a convenient end-year: The First World War had begun in July, and Winchester increased production to provide guns for the British and Canadian armies. (In 1875, the company was only selling two types of rifles.) Total gun sales did increase over that period; but a lot of that came from cheaper guns, many produced in Europe—a fact that doesn't fit Haag's story of easily duped buyers. Indeed, little evidence is provided that Sarah Winchester actually disliked guns. Yet if she really hated guns so much, there's a lot she could have done to prevent their sale. Oliver Winchester died in 1880, Sarah's husband William died in 1881, and by then, Sarah owned 50 percent of the stock in the Winchester Repeating Arms Company. Until her death in 1922, over 40 years when gun sales were exploding, Sarah could have done anything she wanted with Winchester Repeating Arms. So if she really hated guns, why didn't she sell her stock or move the company away from gun manufacturing? Haag fails to note that Sarah Winchester ended up controlling half the company stock; all she tells us is that Sarah owned 7.8 percent of Winchester stock while her father-in-law was still alive. Sarah Winchester did struggle with depression, and Haag attributes this to guilt largely

caused by being in the business of making and selling guns. But it is equally possible that Sarah was depressed because she suffered numerous stillbirths and her only child to survive birth would live for just one month. One fact not mentioned by Haag is that, until Sarah's death at age 82, she kept various items that she had bought for her expected children. Haag also tries to revive two claims made by the disgraced historian Michael A. Bellesiles. In *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* (2000), Bellesiles asserted that probate records showed gun ownership was rare in pre-Civil War America, arguing that the gun industrialist . . . was crucial to the development of the commercial market. But Professor Bellesiles had falsified his probate data and, as a result, Alfred A. Knopf stopped publishing the book and an investigation commissioned by his university concluded he had committed fraud. Haag also selectively references probate records from the pre-revolutionary era to argue that guns were not commonly owned in early America. According to the numbers she reports, there was an estimated low in Massachusetts of 37 percent of wills mentioning guns to a high of 62 percent in the South. But she ignores other studies that show higher rates, as well as the fact that these records provide only a partial account of gun ownership. She also mentions current gun-ownership rates, claiming that they have been falling in recent decades, according to the General Social Survey and Pew Research Center. But surveys by Gallup, ABC News/Washington Post, and CNN have found no decline. Haag offers no explanation for picking only the two surveys that support her thesis, nor does she mention concerns that these surveys systematically miss gun owners. Let us assume, however, that Haag is correct that gun ownership has recently fallen. Is this because gun makers have lost their marketing prowess? No answer is provided, and her treatment of current gun-control debates is filled with errors. She claims that the 2005 Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act prohibits civil liability actions against gun manufacturers, distributors, or dealers for damages caused by their products. But that is false: Gun makers can be sued if they fail to do background checks or sell to someone who doesn't pass the check or if any reasonable conclusion can be drawn that the buyer intended to commit a crime. The best history books grapple with opposing evidence and alternative explanations, arguing why one interpretation makes more sense than another. But in *The Gunning of America*, Pamela Haag simply ignores inconvenient facts.

This intriguing analysis of the role of firearms in the history of American culture hinges upon the premise that the major American gun manufacturers (principally Winchester, Colt, and Remington) created the market for increasingly lethal firearms, just as other American manufacturers created markets for sewing machines, refrigerators, and other massed-produced consumer goods. Quoting

from factory correspondence, invoices, patent applications, and other documents from corporate archives, the author contends that firearms were initially "unexceptional commodities" of an emerging industry that came to be fueled by "federal government capital, patronage, [and] guaranteed markets"--especially warring European nations, which became anchor points in "the international arena" in which "the American gun business first survived." Citing the iconic "One of One Thousand" Winchester 1973 lever-action rifle as an example of gun-industry fiction, the author quotes from a 1936 letter written to a customer by Winchester executive Edwin Pugsley, who scorned "the mystery and hokum" not only of the "One of One Thousand" rifle but of the gun industry itself. Underscoring the "unexceptional commodity" of firearms, Pugsley wrote that "a part of a billet of steel might be made into a gun part and another part of the same billet into a mowing machine, and the part which went into the gun barrel would have no more mythical properties than its brother in the mowing machine." At its best, this new book sets aside the continuing debate over gun rights in America by focusing on gun manufacturers and their role in creating, promoting, and continually reshaping a mythology about the relationship between Americans and their firearms. Unfortunately, however, both the contents and the narrative structure of the book are marred by the author's over-reliance on anecdotal and third-hand sources, and by amateurish gaffes that she or her editor should have caught and corrected. To cite one of the more embarrassing of these gaffes, the author spends several pages highlighting the role of Theodore Roosevelt in promoting the "manliness" of hunting and shooting, and of firearms overall. But rather than quoting directly from Roosevelt's numerous articles and books, the author instead refers to a T.R. biographer whom she identifies as "Desmond Morris." Considering that the biographer to whom she is referring, Edmund (not "Desmond") Morris, won a Pulitzer Prize for the first of his three internationally-known books on Roosevelt, any author or editor with normal eyesight and access to a search engine would have caught this blatant error. Overall, with the exception of the factory data and correspondence which the author has researched and brought to light, this book is topically interesting and is a useful addition to the cultural history of an important American industry. The book is flawed, however, by a meandering narrative--especially the author's digression into the spiritualism of Sarah Winchester, and her conjecture that the bizarre California mansion built by the emotionally unstable widow of the Winchester founder was prompted by her guilt about the lives that were taken by Winchester rifles. Both the Winchester mansion (popularly called the "Winchester Mystery House") and the life of Sarah Winchester have been the subjects of authoritative articles and biographies, most notably Mary Jo Ignoffo's 2010 book, "Captive of the Labyrinth: Sarah L. Winchester, Heiress to the Rifle Fortune." That too is well-documented, an attribute which is too often absent in "The Gunning of

America."

This book is the greatest work of fiction since Charles Dickens. But since it's presented as "fact", it rates as utterly useless, unless you happen to have a table with a short leg that needs propping.

In this well-researched work, Haag demythologizes American gun culture. Arguments about guns, she observes, have for such a long time focused on questions of gun ownership and gun regulation, and often these debates have obscured the gun industry. In telling the story of the Winchester Corporation, Haag challenges us to consider the ways in which the gunmakers' drive for profit is fueling gun culture (and even gun violence) today. "One answer to the question, 'Why do Americans love guns?'," she writes, "is, simply, that we were invited to do so by those who made and sold them at the moment when their products had shed much of their more practical, utilitarian value" (xviii). Haag is not anti-gun, but she challenges us to consider the history of how we have become so ardently pro-gun. This history, she maintains, illuminates new ways of addressing the problem of gun violence in our nation, ways that are more focused on accountability for the gun industry rather than on gun ownership. Profit is a powerful force that will defend its own interests at an enormous cost. *THE GUNNING OF AMERICA* challenges us to consider the ways that profit has fueled our American desire for guns, and how regulation of the gun industry must be a vital part of the process of addressing the overwhelming gun violence of our day.

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