

‘The Gunning of America’ takes aim at the role of guns in our history



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By **Matthew Price** GLOBE CORRESPONDENT APRIL 15, 2016

In her remarkable new book, “The Gunning of America,” historian Pamela Haag undercuts much of the charged rhetoric about the importance of firearms in the nation’s culture and history with a richly sourced, empirical look at the 19th century origins of the gun business and the men who made it.

Taking a deep dive into the records of the Winchester Repeating Arms Co., the New Haven, Conn., industrial behemoth that produced the iconic Winchester rifle (Teddy Roosevelt’s favorite weapon), and the equally iconic Colt in nearby Hartford, Haag conjures up the cutthroat corporate world that established the gun in American life. With dazzling swirls of statistics — she draws on a vast array of material — Haag shows that guns became a central totem because of the hustling entrepreneurial zeal of figures like Oliver Winchester and Samuel Colt, who created a market, stoked demand, and made a mint in the process.

Against the popularized notion that guns were central to the making of America, Haag offers a powerful counter-narrative. In the Colonial period and through the nation’s early years, gunsmiths made not only firearms in their workshops, but any number of “ordinary, needful domestic objects and tools that artisans could produce.”

For Winchester, who was born in Boston in 1810, the gun was just another consumer good to be flogged on the market, little different than a corset, hairpin, or the men's shirts he sold before he entered the business. (He harbored no especial love for guns as objects; he had never even fired one before he started making rifles in the late 1850s.)

In a series of packed chapters — the balance sheet and sales figure are real protagonists of this tale — that zing with memorable phrases and arresting formulations, Haag traces the rise of Winchester and turns up much that is unexpected. (She also pursues a less successful narrative line involving his eccentric, widowed daughter-in-law who was haunted by grief and guilt over the family “blood fortune.”)

One key theme is the vexed relationship between arms manufacturers and the government. For instance during the Civil War, the Ordnance Department shunned Winchester's repeating rifle for more cumbersome and primitive muzzle loaders — the quick-firing feature was considered wasteful.

It was a decisive moment for Winchester, one that turned him toward exploiting the civilian market. But other governments were keen to do business with him. As Haag notes, American gun makers were partly kept aloft by strong foreign demand. Salesmen fanned out across Asia, the Middle East, and South America. Bellicose European empires proved eager customers. In 1870, for example, Winchester scored a huge deal with the Ottoman Empire for some 20,000 weapons, which would ravage Russian troops in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78. Turkish soldiers armed with repeating Winchester 66s — the “hero rifle” — were formidable foes. The weapon's renown spread, even into the hinterlands of North Africa, where Arab tribesmen sought them out from secondhand dealers.

The “Gunning of America” abounds with ironies. The gun as an essential component of the image of the rugged individualists who settling this country turns out to be mostly fantasy, concocted in corporate boardrooms. The “Wild West,” Haag argues,

was actually a function of the industrialized East. The legendary Winchester was machine tooled to 1/1,000 of an inch and fashioned from interchangeable parts; “a mass-produced, mass-marketed object was to become an enduring idiom of American individualism.” The popular media played its part as well, with dime novelists embellishing the legends of gun-toting Wild Bill Hickok and Buffalo Bill.

Interestingly, gun sales boomed as America became less rural and more urbanized. Winchester sold 9,800 rifles in 1875; in 1914, its sales figures were 292,400. “With less practical utility, the gun became — and to some extent had to become — an object with emotional value,” Haag writes. “One answer to the question ‘Why do Americans love guns?’ 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.”

One book will not settle the long-running gun debate, but Haag has powerfully reframed the issue as one rooted in dollars and sense, not the Second Amendment and inalienable rights. In a brief section at the book’s end, she weighs in on contemporary debates, arguing that we should look at guns as a business and put the onus on makers, not owners. She also endorses smart-gun technology and the same kind of consumer regulations that “apply to almost every other commodity.” Her recommendations are a touch cursory and anticlimactic. Her historical sense, however, is brilliantly on display in these pages.

THE GUNNING OF AMERICAN:

Business and the Making of Gun Culture

By Pamela Haag

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