

Reading Log #8

Cecilia Morgan describes what a duel would have been like during the 17th to 19th centuries in “In Search of the Phantom Misnamed Honour’: Duelling in Upper Canada”. A duel was meant to be an honourable way to settle a conflict between two middle to upper class men. During the French regime swords were used during these fights and later society switched almost exclusively to pistols after the conquest. A quarter of duels resulted in serious injury or death, and a lot of the men that participated were lawyers and some judges as well, a lot of them being prominent historical figures. This would suggest that it wasn’t just vigilantes or low class citizens participating in these activities because they thought that they were above the law, duels were supplementary to the law. These duels would often take place in secret secluded locations because they were technically illegal, and if anyone did in fact sustain injury or death you could be convicted for murder under a jury of your peers although penalties for the crime were irregularly enforced.

The problem with this barbaric practice was that it pressured men to use physical violence instead of working out their issues intellectually, they were made to feel that their masculinity would be compromised if they refused a dual. This is evident in Charles Baby’s case, “he ran the risk of being physically attacked in public, possibly without warning, in a manner intended to shame him and strip him of his gentlemanly status”(Morgan, p.550). This

proved to be unbeneficial in the case of Lyon and Wilson, referenced in “Pistols at Six O’Clock” by Stephen R. Brown. Wilson reportedly trying reaching a reconciliation repeatedly with Lyon before he agreed to a duel with him. Lyon believed that this was the only way to regain his honour and if he hadn’t held onto this belief he may have never lost his life so young. Lyon’s adversary that he’d brought along with him as a second had revealed that “for Lyon reconciliation was impossible”(Brown, p.4), if dueling was all about an honourable resolution, then why did Lyon think that it was necessary to carry out the fight if he didn’t believe that the issue could be resolved if not to harm Wilson? Although women couldn’t participate in the fights themselves they still had a huge impact on duels. They were often the center of the duel as a love interest conflict and a man could reject a duel on the account of defending familial honour in order to protect his wife and or children.

The cases examined in these two journals are good examples of why violence is almost always the inferior option. Morgan shows that using intellect to solve your problems results in a better outcome than physical violence, “A Good Lesson for Duellists' recounted the happy tale of two men who concluded their dispute by refusing to fight, shaking hands, and becoming good friends” (p. 559). Lyon, a young man had lost his life over a petty conflict with a colleague that could have been completely avoided if deadly force hadn’t been used, and throughout history there are countless people that had lost their lives unnecessarily in these duels and it’s important to bring these atrocities to light, because although dueling was banned in Canada during the 19th century, some modern countries still have the death penalty in place so it is very important to learn from past mistakes and evolve as a society.