

Pascal Brioiist, Hervé Drévilion et Pierre Serna — *Croiser le fer : violence et culture de l'épée dans la France moderne (XVI<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 2002, 249 p.

Like the fencers and duellists they study, these three authors aimed for flair, and they have succeeded well, for this elegant, stylish book has panache worthy of Cyrano de Bergerac. To set the record straight at the outset, it must be said that this engrossing book is no social history. As an historian of early modern Italian society, a habitu  of sanguinary judicial archives with their graphic long tales of brawls, I for one am acutely aware of everything it lacks. First of all, we can barely see the duels themselves. For this lack, it is unfair to chide the authors, for duelling, almost always banned and therefore often coyly hidden, must be devilishly hard to document. As a consequence, the fights and the fighters, with their words exchanged, their ceremonies and gestures, and the actions and reactions of the onlookers and of the folk who then picked up the limbs and pieces, are all missing from the tale, as are the subsequent wider reactions, rippling across market, square, tavern, and salon. This book thus offers no historical anthropology of French duelling — neither a cultural anthropology that gives a close reading of the practice itself as expressive activity, nor a political economy of duels as instrumental moves in larger exchanges between adversaries or as ploys that served to build alliances or draw hostile boundaries. Moreover, we lack a second social science: there is no historical sociology of the practice, no systematic close account of who fought whom, no narrative of its shifting social locus. Duelling, rather, is a given, a raw fact, harsh and dangerous, almost a constant against which the authors lay the chronicle of its dialogue with high culture.

What we have here, then, is a cultural history, less of duelling and fencing acts than of duelling and fencing talk and duelling and fencing theory and, finally, of duelling's — but not fencing's — politics and law. The work has the noble virtues of French history in the new Parisian mode — a fine eye for the subtle ironies of text, for double meanings and refined perplexities. It has as well the habitual vices of the genre — history often risks slipping its moorings to the facts, as if to drift off onto a boundless sea of language.

One more cavil, and then I at last will praise the book. Though duelling arose in Italy and then swept most of Europe, in scope this book is trenchantly French. So we cannot easily lay duelling's efflorescence, persistence, and late decline against patterns elsewhere, in Germany or Russia, for instance, or in the New World, where it also flourished. That restriction is less of a problem in that this book's subject is less action than conversation, and the discussions it chronicles stayed largely inside French borders.

As to the study's virtues, note first the ambitious scope. The book surveys two practices, cognate but separate — fencing and duelling. The first was a sport, prestigious, public, and anodyne; the second, though ludic in its rules, was real fighting, also honourable, but clandestine and deadly. The authors survey the rise and blooming of fencing. They trace the personnel who taught it, their organization, their ambiguous social position, their struggles for income and respectability. The book

also lays out the evolution of the manuals, always products of their age, with their Renaissance pursuit of secret blows, their Cartesian moments of geometric abstraction, their eighteenth-century theories of sense and feeling, and, throughout, their lasting debates between science and esprit. The entire literature portrayed itself as preparation for a sport and tiptoed bashfully around its second use, as schooling for real combat. For duelling, the authors trace the evolution of the practice, with its roots in medieval trial by combat and in the idealized battles of the champions of romance. They lay out the notion of the point of honour, the insult that only blood could settle. The book then follows the long tale of campaigns by kings and courts to quell these private battles, almost all in vain. Rather, it argues, the whole march of French history kept renewing the urge to fight: the Wars of Religion, the noble factions of the 1630s, the Fronde, the late-seventeenth-century rise of a professional army, the disorders of the eighteenth-century regency, the political ardour of the Revolution, the militarized empire of Napoleon, the resentments of the Restoration, the nostalgia of an industrializing nation, the rivalries of the nineteenth-century press all kindled the urge to stab or shoot for honour. Only the horrors of the trenches quenched the taste for rivals' blood. Duelling, then, as the book portrays it, was more or less a constant; it is the evolving gloss, with all its perplexing contradictions, that fills the pages.

As for the discussion itself, the three authors offer up an erudite and entertaining account. There is an excellent section on the *Encyclopédie*, with all its contradictions, article by article. The discussion of the attitudes of left and right in 1790 and 1791 is also fascinating: was duelling, as royalists claimed, one more *Droit de l'homme* or, as the republicans sustained, was the integrity of the citizen's body the real human right? At the end is a wry meditation on the rise after 1840 of the cape-and-sword novel, in which the hero, usually a provincial disfavoured in both origin and countenance, fights his doughty way to a lady's love and royal favour, thanks to his good arm and generous great heart. It was a nostalgic, even a reactionary literature pairing underdog and privilege that caught the fancy of uprooted workers from the country drawn citywards by the new industries.

Not everything in the book is discourse. It has its empirical side. The authors do try hard to find their way to a practice difficult to see directly, for first-hand accounts are scarce. There is a quite fascinating section on corpses in the eighteenth-century Paris morgue. The authors map the wounds on bodies, reported by careful surgeons. The authors argue that the distribution of cuts argues that many anonymous unfortunates fished up from the Seine or picked from streets and yards must have died in duels, for the right arm and the right sides of both head and chest were the more often pierced. The pattern certainly suggests, if not a duel for honour, at least armed resistance; a right-handed swordsman would lead with that side and take more hits there. The surgeons also estimated the victims' ages; the numbers fall off only after age 40. Another empiricist inquiry follows the work of courts. The authors survey military tribunals to trace the rhythm of homicides among the troops. They graph the rise and fall of duelling cases before the *Parlement de Paris*. They map the trials of eighteenth-century sword fights heard by the *maréchaux de France*; most of these were westerly, and on the borders. They trace the ages of sword victims in cases before the Châtelet; these

peak in the late twenties, but fall off steeply, again, only after age 40.

At the centre of this book's argument is a puzzle. Execrated by philosophers, excoriated by divines and legists, deplored by moralists, scorned by social theorists, banned by solemn decrees without number, duelling still flourished. Why? The point of honour, they answer. But, I think, that pat formula may beg the question, for it treats honour as a constant, as a force. Honour was more a rhetoric and a "practice" — as Bourdieu would call it — and a handy alibi for baser deeds than an iron law of conduct. It was, in fact, less potent than a code; a man could, and often did, find ways to duck a challenge. I suspect that, to dig out the secret cause for both the persistence and all the varieties of this sanguinary habit, and its still unexplored distribution in social space and time, the authors of this fine intellectual history should turn for help to us, their allies, the social historians.

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Patrick Brode — *Courted and Abandoned: Seduction in Canadian Law*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press for The Osgoode Society for Canadian Legal History, 2002. Pp. xi, 252.

This survey of the civil actions arising from seduction and related "heartbalm torts" in Canada ranges from an 1824 seduction case that caught the attention of William Lyon Mackenzie (p. 3), through the Brownlee scandal of the 1930s (pp. 149–173), to the debates spawned by *R v. Ewanchuk* in 1999 (pp. 201–203). Along the way Patrick Brode covers terrain that will be familiar to social historians from works by Constance Backhouse, Rosemary Cloombe, Karen Dubinsky, and Carolyn Strange. In contrast to these standard feminist interpretations, his approach in attempting to "interpret these trials in the context of their times" (p. x) can best be describe as lawyerly.

In hoping to offer "rare glimpses into the daily lives of early Canadians" (p. x), Brode is laying claim to a common rationale for a case-based approach. He states these cases "cannot be dismissed as the occasional moral lapses of the past or condemned as imposing patriarchal systems, but should be seen as indicators of how Canadians, over time, have accepted or denied sexuality" (p. x). Above all, Brode cautions against imposing "modern political judgements on an earlier period" or failing to evaluate seduction cases "by objectively viewing the lives of men and women caught up in the vagaries of the law" (p. 207). Such formulations beg the questions concerning upon what Brode roots his claim to objectivity or what he takes to be apolitical interpretations. The distinctions between how lawyers read cases and how social scientists approach the same materials to illuminate broader social themes or to put faces to theory are substantial.

The organization of the cases often exhibits tensions between an assumed teleology of precedents and the "inherent inertia of law" (p. 51). The persistence, through to the 1940s, of the judge-made rule that placed proprietary rights of a father to his