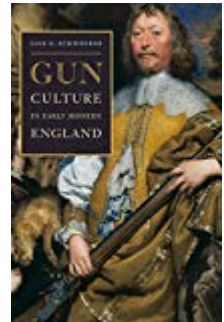


Lois G. Schwoerer. *Gun Culture in Early Modern England*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016. 272 pp. \$39.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-3859-2.



Reviewed by Jennine Hurl-Eamon

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

“Gun culture” is a familiar term in modern society, but it is almost never applied to the past. With this book, Lois G. Schwoerer has effectively added it to the early modern historian’s lexicon. *Gun Culture in Early Modern England* seamlessly blends technological, economic, and social history in demonstrating the growing familiarity of gunpowder, artillery, and handguns in Tudor and Stuart society. Schwoerer also demonstrates the flaws in Joyce Lee Malcolm’s argument in *To Keep and Bear Arms* (1994) that the Second Amendment of the American Constitution emerged directly from Article VII of the 1689 Bill of Rights. Schwoerer’s penultimate chapter is a systematic analysis of the debates surrounding Article VII, both during and after its implementation. Never, she argues, did English gun culture advocate for a universal right to bear arms; it was always very closely tied to status and privilege.

The book also distinguishes English gun culture from its Continental counterpart. Henry VIII played a vital role in establishing the gun industry in England. Concerns over the excessive reliance

on foreign markets—teamed with England’s need for firearms to fight both internal and external enemies—led to the monarch’s desire to exert more control over their production and distribution. Schwoerer devotes several chapters to an exploration of the way in which the manufacture of firearms grew in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It became established in London, bringing European artisans to the capital and changing the city’s ethnic composition. *Gun Culture* also charts a competition for the revenues from this profitable enterprise, both in the guilds that fought for manufacturing control, and in the monarchy’s ability to limit the use of firearms by granting expensive licenses to a privileged few.

Despite attempts to keep guns from the hands of the vast majority of poor and middling people, this weaponry became embedded in the lives and landscape of early modern England’s men, women, and children. Schwoerer unearths evidence in a vast array of print, manuscript, and object sources to show how deeply the gun had penetrated society after Henry VIII’s initial efforts. From

examples, such as the use of gun imagery in shop signs in seventeenth-century London to the growing prevalence of accidental deaths caused by explosions or shots, Schwoerer shows how firearm technology affected daily life. The king's desire to have his soldiers armed with gunpowder weapons led to the decline of the crossbow. Though initially seen as less sporting, firearms quickly became admired for their destructive power. The growing tide of military men trained in their use brought this knowledge back to their hometowns on disbandment. *Gun Culture* traces grassroots resistance to elite control over guns in many places. Article 10 of the Pontefract Articles specifically protested the restrictive gun laws, but the longstanding practices of poaching and the appearance of guns in other crimes and accidents over the period present the strongest evidence of the use of firearms among the common people.

Gun Culture shows aristocratic men to be the primary consumers, but firearms touched the lives of their wives and children as well. While archery remained a more "feminine" pastime in England (in contrast to the Continent), guns found their way into women's hands by the seventeenth century. Traces can be found in purchase records, in accounts of gun accidents, and even in the inclusion of gunpowder-laden centerpieces in early modern recipe books. Wealthy children played with toy guns and had their portraits painted with firearms, showing that parents believed in the sporting benefits of guns as well as its defensive power. Canon flanking the entrances to aristocratic homes was considered a sign of wealth and strength, and gifts of highly ornamented handguns helped to forge diplomatic or social alliances. While there can be no doubt that the destructive potential of gunpowder fueled its adoption by England's armies and elite as a way to maintain their control, Schwoerer demonstrates the breadth of gun culture. It clearly went far beyond the battlefield. The playfulness with which firearm technology was viewed at all levels of society at this time was particularly evident in 1650,

when a ship chandler had stored twenty-seven barrels of gunpowder in his shop without any precautions. A stray spark caused an explosion that razed several homes and devastated most of the neighborhood.

Though Schwoerer notes that the military played a role in gun culture, it is her emphasis on civilian's interaction with firearms that gives the book its breadth and value. Schwoerer concludes by expressing the "hope" that her work "will attract the attention of historians of Early Modern England" (p. 176). The book promises to open new fields of inquiry and shows the value of a multifaceted approach to exploring this important commodity.

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