

GUNS: PISTOL DUELLING IN NEW ZEALAND
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By 1842 "Challenges and Postings" were common in Auckland and Wellington. A notice would be posted in a public place inferring that the opponent was a coward if he did not accept a challenge to a duel.

At six o'clock one morning in Auckland, Captain Best of the 80th regiment and a Land - jobber named Cormack met at the duelling ground each bringing a pair of pistols; but their seconds could not agree on which pair should be used and after half an hour the contestants without firing a shot walked off never to meet again as duellists.

In Wellington the outspoken superintendent Dr Isaac Featherston fought a pistol duel with Colonel William Wakefield, neither was injured.

A pistol duel was fought in Bowen Street cemetery, Wellington on 26th February 1844 over a legal difference between two prominent Lawyers Mr W. V. Brewer and Mr Ross, previously Attorney General of Van Diemens Land. Mr Brewer was shot in the groin from which he died a few days later. An account of the affair was published in the newspaper. The Coroner's jury verdict "Died from a gunshot wound by whom inflicted there was no evidence to prove".

The dining room of Barrett's Hotel then the social centre of Wellington was the night time venue of a pistol duel between a self opinionated young school master colonist who had made himself unpopular through his behaviour towards a woman, for which he was challenged to a duel.

Curtains drawn the two men standing at each end of a long table, on the signal the school master took a wild aim, fired and promptly collapsed on regaining his senses he saw his prostrate opponent whose red - splattered face was almost unrecognisable.

To keep him from being caught by the Police, the schoolmaster was hidden by friends of his opponent in the Wadestown bush where he learned the worst, his opponent had died.

He was then smuggled on board a Sydney - bound ship. Years later the school master walking in the strand London came face to face with his opponent, he learned the whole affair had been a hoax to get the school master out of New Zealand. His pistol had been loaded with red currant jelly.

By the mid 1830s English duelling rules had changed, becoming much more refined, Pistols could be rifled, flintlock or percussion, and fitted with sights. Combatants stood a pre-determined distance apart - generally ten, twelve or fourteen paces; their seconds eight paces from the line of fire, equi-distant from the combatants; two surgeons and any friends were two paces behind the seconds. Servants and other onlookers stood in a line farther back.

Duellists took careful aim at each other. In some cases the first shot was the prerogative of the challenger but generally, following the word 'ready' and the duellists' acknowledgement 'all ready' firing took place on the drop of a handkerchief.

If either duellist wished to admit being in the wrong he would "delope" (discharge his pistol harmlessly in the air) upon which the duel was immediately terminated by the seconds.

If a duellist was only slightly injured but fell to the ground it was considered a 'Poor Show'.

A flash in the pan is always counted as a shot. (In a flintlock the priming powder is ignited but the main charge does not go off).

It was very fashionable for English gentry to possess at least one cased pair of duellers. This gave English gunsmiths the opportunity to develop and refine their art.

In 1836 an English mentor gave the following advice to those likely to be called upon to fight duels with single shot percussion pistols:

'First of all construct a range fifteen to twenty yards and where a strong wall or rising ground will check the progress of the shot. For a target fix up a round piece of iron three feet in diameter and an inch in thickness and blacken it over - procure a box of white wafers and stick two dozen upon it in three rows - pick them off one after the other - never hesitate more than two or three seconds; for unless a man fires quickly he can never fire well. I should advise a young practitioner to get up and pick off five or six dozen wafers in this way every morning before breakfast and in three months, if a clever fellow, he will become a quite au fait - until a man can cull twelve wafers at fourteen yards in six minutes, loading the pistol himself between each discharge, I do not consider him a proficient in pistol practice.'

In 1843 the anti-duelling association was formed in Britain. In 1844 Queen Victoria and her government decreed, "Any officer who issued a challenge, took part in a duel, knew of a duel and did nothing to stop it would, if found guilty be court-martialled etc."

Duelling for civilians had always been illegal. so every effort was made to conceal the identity of the duellists for fear of retribution.

With duelling outlawed in Britain and her Empire, saloon and indoor target pistol shooting became a popular pastime in the pubs, much as darts is today.