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Hist 1120

Nov. 13, 2018

Reading Log #8

Duelling in Canadian History

The act of duelling was a public display of masculine honour, and was a significant practice in Upper Canada.[[1]](#footnote-1) The duel was “falsely deemed honourable” to those who didn’t support the act, and although it was an “alternative to legal action”, it didn’t ensure one’s freedom from legal punishment.[[2]](#footnote-2) Cecilia Morgan and Stephen R. Brown enlighten us through their writings of historical accounts, and the motivations behind a duel in Upper Canada; the protection of a woman’s chastity, political and social-class reputation, and the patriarchal code of how a man should defend his honour.

Women’s chastity was the subject of the initiation of a duel, especially wives of men who had a reputation to protect.[[3]](#footnote-3) John White and John Small commenced a duel over the slandering of Small’s wife regarding her sexual immorality, which left white with injuries leading to death. There was a similar motive, and unfortunate result, behind the duel between Robert Lyon and John Wilson.[[4]](#footnote-4) Morgan and Brown recall these accounts to bring forth the importance of women’s actions in the patriarchy, and how their husbands were societally forced to defend their reputation.

Brown’s article covers the Lyon-Wilson duel, and discusses that by accepting, or initiating a duel, wasn’t necessarily out of anger, or the only option for justice; however, it allowed a man to keep, or climb the ladder in his career and social reputation.[[5]](#footnote-5) In colonial Upper Canada, Perth, Ontario was a community of sophistication, and “an aristocratic officers’ retreat”, which has significance in this particular duel.[[6]](#footnote-6) Wilson was an aspiring lawyer within this community, and when he was embarrassed by Lyon regarding his love for Elizabeth, he felt the need to initiate a duel solely for the purpose of “maintaining his dignity and respect” for his promising career.[[7]](#footnote-7) Brown’s article enlightens the significance of social reputation in Upper Canada, a colonial, and growing country, which in many cases, lead to a duel.

The patriarch can be deemed responsible for the initiation of duels because of the masculine “code” of defending his honour as a husband or father.[[8]](#footnote-8) However, the patriarchal code in Upper Canada was “reshaping” as women’s strengths were becoming to be recognized, which lead to greater oppositions of the duels.[[9]](#footnote-9) Many men and women were turning their focuses to the significance of their home lives, which the duels indicated possibly leaving a family and a wife without a husband or father, and was over all an unnecessary circumstance.[[10]](#footnote-10)

By examining the duel, it “provides us with examples of the ways in which competing nations of masculine honour and virtue were shaped, contested, and reshaped in the colonial context of Upper Canadian society.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Morgan and Brown bring forth historical records in proving how, and why colonial Upper Canada supported, and eventually opposed the duel.

1. Cecilia Morgan, “In Search of the Phantom Misnamed Honour’: Duelling in Upper Canada”, *The Canadian Historical Review* 76, no.4 (Dec. 1995): 531. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid.,* 538, 546. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid.,* 536-537. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Stephen R. Brown, “Pistols at Six O’clock”, *Beaver* 79, no. 4 (Aug./Sept. 1999): 1-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid.,* 1-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid.,* 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Morgan, 531. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid*., 533-534. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid.,* 533, 562. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid.,* 531*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)