

AMERICAN RIFLE: AN INTERVIEW WITH ALEXANDER ROSE

Conducted by Donald A. Yerxa

WE ASKED ALEXANDER ROSE, AUTHOR OF *AMERICAN Rifle: A Biography* (Delta/Random House, 2008), to continue the discussion, begun in the November 2009 issue, of firearms in the American historical context. In addition to *American Rifle*, named a *Book of the Year* by the Economist, Rose has written *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring* (Ban-

tam, 2006) and *Kings in the North: The House of Percy in British History, 1066-1489* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003). He has written for the *English Historical Review*, *20th Century British History*, *the TLS*, *the New York Observer*, *Studies in Intelligence*, *the Washington Post*, *the New Republic*, *Invention & Technology*, *the National Interest*, and other publications.

Donald A. Yerxa: What are you attempting to do with this book?

Alexander Rose: Well, from the get-go, I was determined to avoid the pitfalls and traps inherent in the “gun-book genre.” There are two basic types of books about guns. First, you have the technical sort. These are extraordinarily detailed descriptions—manuals would be a better word—of a particular form or make of gun. Full of facts, they consequently lack reflection or historical context and are intended for collectors and specialists. Second, you have the analytical format, which is long on, say, the place of guns in the masculine culture of the 19th-century Western frontier, but short on technical knowledge. To their authors, a gun is just a gun, not a muzzle loader, percussion-cap, rim-fire, smooth-bore, rolling block, or any of the other endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful populating what I call the mid-19th century’s Big Bang in weapons technology. This is why you often find howlers in such books—conflating a bullet with a cartridge, for instance, or getting confused between a Sharps and a Spencer rifle—much to the very loud disgust of the people who write the technical sort of books. To them, getting these kinds of details wrong is like claiming that Apple Macs run on Windows.

A deeper flaw of the latter type of writing, however, is that the authors often can’t free themselves from the concerns and attitudes of the present. They interpret guns through the prism of their personal politics and their view of the Second Amendment. I wanted to avoid all this. *American Rifle* does not mention the Second Amendment, nor does it allow politics to intrude, and yet it strives to get the technical aspects right. It tells a story, one encompassing culture, economics, technology, and military history, of how America made the rifle and how the rifle made America from the colonial era

onward.

Yerxa: What prompted you to write it?

Rose: It began with a long proposal to the publisher for a book focusing on the combat experiences of American soldiers. In it, I made an admittedly asinine remark along the lines of “every soldier carried a rifle,” only for the publisher to propose that I write a short book on the history of the rifle before submitting the magnificent magnum opus that will one day be *American Soldier: Four Battles and the Experience of Combat* (or *The Great Red God*, I still haven’t settled on a title).

What was originally intended to be a six-month project turned into a two-year slog as I discovered

that there was much more to the history of rifles than either the publisher or I had expected. The publisher wanted 60,000 words; I submitted 120,000, so we compromised at 150,000.

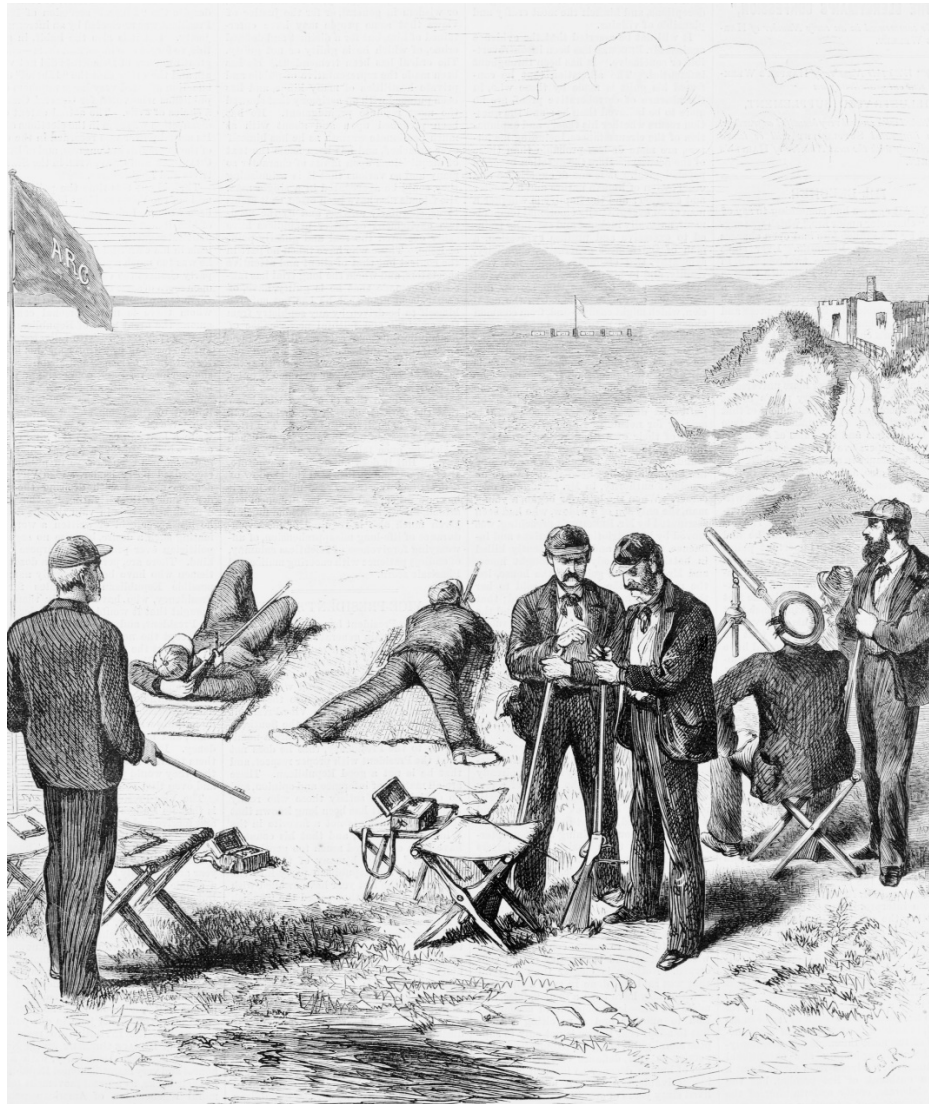
Yerxa: What is a rifle? How is it different from other firearms, especially the musket?

Rose: In the simplest possible terms, a rifle is rifled and a musket is not. The inside of the barrel is grooved, helically, in order to impart spin to the bullet as it hurtles from the chamber toward the muzzle. Spin in turn promotes projectile stability, enabling the bullet to fly truer, farther, and straighter. (I’ll spare you the details here, but in the book I discuss what is euphemistically called “wound ballistics,” a subject omitted from other gun books owing either to queasiness or a reluctance to elaborate on what it is exactly that bullets do to flesh.) A muzzle-loading musket, on the other hand, is smooth-bored, enabling the shooter to roll a lead ball down the tube and fire it quickly. A rifle bullet needs to grip the grooving and so is harder to push down than a musket ball,

which of course takes more time. On the plus side, for a variety of reasons, the rifle is a more accurate weapon than a musket, though the latter can be charged and fired more often. On the minus, a rifle requires a great deal more skill and practice to be wielded effectively, whereas a musket can be used with a minimum of training. A rifle, in short, is best for marksmanship; a musket, for volume of fire.

I’m referring to 18th- and 19th-century distinctions. Today, every gun, apart from some shotguns, which are intended for use at short-range, is a rifle. How that came to be is covered in the book. It wasn’t a predetermined outcome.

Yerxa: Did the prominence of the rifle in 19th-century America make for significant cultural



The American Rifle Club at an international competition, Dollymount Range, Ireland. From *Harper's Weekly*, July 17, 1875. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZ62-134454].

differences between America and Europe?

Rose: It's easy to romanticize these differences, but in the early days, firearms were restricted in Europe. They were reserved for use on the battlefield and the hunting field. Except in certain mountainous parts of Austria, Switzerland, and what would become Germany, where heavy, stubby rifles were first developed, hunters tended to be baronial in outlook and background. In America, once you left the eastern cities and headed west, where all sorts of unpleasanties awaited, you needed a weapon. Buying a gun from a Pennsylvanian—probably German—gunsmith was a requirement. There is a long tradition of gun ownership in America. The practical need to own a gun eventually melded with Jacksonian ideology, the result being that the rifle became widely identified with liberty and later, as the exemplification of specifically American virtues. I hope you won't understand that as any kind of political or politicized statement. You can debate the extent of gun ownership, the importance of militia service, and the validity of the identification of firearms and freedom, but at the time the equation of guns with liberty was a self-evident truth for a significant number of people.

Yerxa: Would you summarize briefly the roles the rifle played in the American Revolution, War of 1812, and the Civil War?

Rose: Until the Civil War, the rifle did not play a major military role. During the Revolution and War of 1812 the muzzle-loading, smooth-bore musket remained the standard shoulder arm. For one brief shining moment in 1775, however, companies of rifle-armed frontiersmen stunned the nascent Continental Army and the British in Boston with their marksmanship and feral reputation. But George Washington—who was an early-adopter when it came to the rifle, having purchased a few for his own use as early as the French and Indian War—found them uncontrollable. Whereas Thomas Jefferson and other romantics believed riflemen (like militiamen) showed the proper revolutionary spirit and all that, Continental officers preferred a functioning European-style army based on discipline and uniformity, which required automaton-like musketeers trained to line and wheel and fire in volleys.

It did not help either that rifles, with their long, slender barrels, could not accommodate bayonets. Bayonets allowed muskets to transform from a projectile weapon into the equivalent of a medieval pike, an instrument that could be used in hand-to-hand fighting. This versatility was of critical importance to tacticians because to them a battle's initial shots were merely the prelude to the final, decisive clash of arms at close quarters. A gun that could be used solely for shooting was just half a weapon.

Things were not much different during the War of 1812, though Andrew Jackson's victory over the

British at New Orleans popularized the spirit and pluck of the Kentucky riflemen, which Jackson later exploited politically. Of course, at New Orleans American artillery inflicted significantly greater casualties than did rifles, but the legend in this case was too good not to print.

At the beginning of the Civil War the traditional muzzle-loading musket still ruled the roost—testament to the longevity and enduring relevance



A 1915 World War I poster. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZC4-10960].

of old technology—though in the 1850s the army had finally added rifling to the bore, thereby creating a hybrid “rifle-musket.” The only real change over the past few centuries had been a shift from a flintlock firing system to what's known as percussion caps. Children's cap guns, the ones with the paper roll studded with explosive dots, are descended from this mid-19th-century innovation, except then they used metallic caps or metal strips. Before the war, the Ordnance Department was slowly converting its stocks of flintlock rifle-muskets to percussion even as such businessmen (I divide America's gun makers into showmen, salesmen, and mechanics) as Colt, Winchester, and Smith and Wesson were forging ahead with breech loaders, metallic cartridges, and rapid-firing repeaters, which could be preloaded with a dozen or so rounds.

By 1865, despite this fermentation, the standard Union weapon was the stolid, .58-caliber Springfield rifle, a good enough weapon for the average soldier to handle and relatively cheap and easy to produce in mass quantities. There is a common misappre-

hension among gun writers (and historians, too, I guess) that anyone who stood in the way of “self-evident” progress was some sort of Blimpish stick-in-the-mud pining to fight the last war. With the benefit of hindsight, it is obvious to us, of course, that such technological enhancements as breech-loading, cylindro-conoidal bullets, rifling, magazines, metallic center-fire cartridges, smokeless powder, and so forth were the inevitable way forward. What I found most interesting, however, were the arguments *against* technological innovation.

Despite the claims of “technology teleology,” there were often very sound reasons for keeping the old and bypassing the new. James Ripley, Lincoln's Ordnance chief, has been insulted time and time again for ignoring Winchester's repeater, the futuristic forerunner of one of the guns that won the West. How could he have been so blind? What we need to remember is that in 1861 Ripley was charged with supplying an army that recognized as “official” ordnance no fewer than seventy-nine models of rifles, muskets, and rifle-muskets, twenty-three models of carbines and musketoons, and nineteen models of pistols. The logistics were insuperable. Before one battle, a general horrified Ripley by demanding eleven different calibers of ammunition for his troops. The first order of business, therefore, was to churn out millions of standard, simple, affordable rifles that used standard, simple, affordable bullets, not to indulge in technological speculation.

The lesson here is that armies simply cannot switch to the newest—or even the deadliest—technology, particularly when it invariably costs more and has not yet been proven in battle. On a grander level, the complexity of new technology requires retraining on a huge scale and a reevaluation of existing doctrine, as well as demands that factories refit and ramp up production of the upgraded models. Institutional internal politics, at the same time, often demand caution. Officials always have to consider whether the replacement is really going to be worth the time, political capital, and money expended; sometimes, it's better to stick with what you know—because it just *works*.

Yerxa: What impact did the rifle have on the rise of American industry?

Rose: A massive, tectonic one. In the early 19th century the rifle manufacturer John Hall, a rather cranky Yankee from Maine, almost single-handedly made possible mass production based on interchangeability of parts. We're so accustomed to buying identical objects made in factories that we forget what a revolutionary step it was to leap from individual craftwork to a rudimentary production line. Working for decades at Harpers Ferry Armory, Hall was among the first to build machines to make machines, machines that were identical in every way. Until Hall came along, every single piece of a gun from the screws to the barrel was handmade by a

gunsmith and no two guns (even made by the same person) were exactly alike. Consequently, there were no uniform standards of manufacture or performance, even with military-grade weapons.

Hall was determined to change all that. Ironically, while he eventually succeeded in producing a marvelous breech-loading rifle that astounded all who fired it, the project was shuttered. By the time Hall had achieved what he set out to do, others had advanced along similar lines. He was, fortunately, allowed a posthumous last laugh in that his children—the modern-minded mechanics and managers of his Rifle Works—went forth into the world, multiplying and prospering. In their vast diaspora they applied the teachings of their high priest to every sector of industrial enterprise throughout an expanding country.

Yerxa: A major theme of your book is the long-standing tension between advocates of marksmanship and those who emphasized high-volume fire. Could you summarize this tension and what was at stake not only in rifle design but also military doctrine?

Rose: Brian McAllister Linn recently wrote a very fine book explaining how the interplay between three basic schools of thought has shaped American military doctrine over the centuries. We must have been working almost contemporaneously, for I emphasize the predominance of two, which I call the progressive and the diehard, pertaining specifically to the evolution of the rifle. Essentially, progressives—who are not necessarily *politically* progressive—focus on humanizing war by making it cleaner, safer, and more rational, and diehards—who are not necessarily conservatives—believe that war is naturally brutal, bloody, and chaotic.

Soldiers in the 19th century who advocated the adoption of single-shot rifles were progressive in that they thought battles could be made less murderous and more controllable by means of self-disciplined experts targeting officers from afar. They were attacked by diehards who wanted more repeaters, more volume of fire, to annihilate the enemy at close range. This controversy came to a head during the Indian Wars. Custer's vanquished 7th was armed with Springfield's finest single-shots, which didn't do a whole lot of good in the swirling melee of Little Bighorn. It continues today in the form of the debate between those who want to fight the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan using drones, snipers, and pinpoint air strikes, and those who want more boots on the ground.

Yerxa: What role has the National Rifle Association played in the history of the American rifle since the Civil War?

Rose: The NRA, founded in the early 1870s as a reaction against the wanton bloodletting of the Civil War, was the leading progressive organization,



Jean Yocum, George Washington University, winner of the Women's Individual Intercollegiate Rifle Championship, April 6, 1939. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-DIG-hec-26436].

hence the deliberate use of "Rifle" in its name rather than "Gun" or "Firearms." It was responsible for popularizing that creed within the army, so much so that by the turn of the century the U.S. military was, shot for shot, the most lethal force on Earth. To this day, interestingly, it continues to emphasize the importance of marksmanship in building the American character. At the time of its foundation, just as interestingly, it was regarded by Southerners and Westerners as a kind of effete, elitist, eastern gentleman's club.

Yerxa: In these pages we have frequently explored the issue of good history writing and the standing of independent historians. What is your sense of these matters?

Rose: Much hinges on how you define "good history writing." In one sense, there is good writing *style*, i.e., readable, sparkling, erudite, amusing, ironic, insightful, and wise. And in another, there is good writing *skill*, i.e., writing based on a trained and cautious use of historical resources and the employment of sound historical methods. Both style and skill are rather tricky to master, and success comes only from hard application and long experience.

I was fortunate to receive a modicum of academic training by persuading the University of

Cambridge to award me a doctorate before drifting into journalism, specifically editorial writing at a couple of national newspapers in Britain and Canada. Nothing better inculcates the art of essay writing than having to produce 750 learned but supple words in two hours on anything from local Sri Lankan politics to the elevation of a new Arch-

bishop of Canterbury. Additionally, having your prose hacked away at and insulted by a grizzled copy editor who thinks you're a pampered twit is a marvelous tonic to any tendency toward meaningless jargon and pompous impenetrability.

The problem is that many academic historians possess skill in abundance but are somewhat deficient in style. This can be partly rectified by learning from such masters of exposition, clarity, and elegance as Macaulay, Gibbon, Parkman, Hugh Trevor-Roper, and Joseph Ellis. I don't want to sound like some sort of port-swilling Young Fogey, but thinking hard about how the greats wrote their history should certainly be part of the curriculum. In your issue discussing this subject a few years ago ["Practicing History Without A License: A Forum," (March/April 2008)], someone mentioned that there were courses in history writing these days. I wish they had been

around when I was an undergraduate. To my mind, the key thing is that easy reading means hard writing. You've got to saw and sand, hone and polish your sentences so that anyone can read them just once and get the idea.

Nonacademic historians sometimes have the opposite problem. They're longer on style but shorter on skill. Because they haven't been through the doctoral grinder, nor been expected to know the archives and the historiographical debates, their work can be poorly and thinly referenced, unskeptical, derivative, sentimental, pious, anachronistic, or sensationalized.

I'm not one to criticize academics for writing on narrow subjects, addressing papers to a small clique of specialists, or for not deigning to publish for a popular audience. There are certainly some topics that are important but perhaps not overly interesting. For my own work, I'm indebted to a lot of very obscure minutiae appearing in a multitude of still more arcane journals. My job, as I see it, is to translate and amalgamate this research into a coherent narrative while not talking down to readers. Serious independent work and academic endeavor are not, or should not be, autonomous.