Silk and Steel: Women at Arms

R.L. Wilson

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Silk and Steel: Women at Arms is the first comprehensive presentation on the subject of women and firearms. No object has had a greater impact on world history over the past 650 years than the firearm, and a surprising number of women have been keen on the subject: as shooters, hunters, collectors, engravers, and even gunmakers.

From Queen Elizabeth I through her descendant Queen Elizabeth II, the numbers of aristocratic female arms enthusiasts, particularly shooters, have been impressive. Among those regal personages: Russia's Empresses Elizabeth and Catherine the Great, France's Marie Antoinette, and Great Britain's Duchess of Devonshire. In the New World, Thomas Jefferson's matched pair of Queen Anne–style flintlock pistols were made by London gunmaker Mary Dealtry. Pioneer American women took bold steps to defend home and hearth, and their courage earned them the right to vote in Western states, where hardiness and self-reliance were taken for granted. As Jefferson himself admonished: "[The gun gives] boldness, enterprise, and independence to the mind." Many women were comfortable with firearms in early America, and among the world's most famous women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was Annie Oakley—"Little Sure Shot."

Turning back the clock to the time of Joan of Arc, R. L. Wilson shows how women have played a vital role in armed conflicts. For many centuries, women went to war—sometimes in the guise of men—without their comrades knowing that they were present. Increasingly, in our own era, there are female fighter pilots and cadets at West Point and at all the U.S. service academies. The 2001–2002 war in Afghanistan saw Northern Alliance women trained to fire AK-47s, some even shooting their Taliban tormentors.

Expanding on a long tradition, in the post–World War II period, millions of women and girls gravitated to sport shooting, including trap, skeet, and sporting clays, rifle and pistol target competitions, and the harvesting of game birds and even the dangerous big game of Africa. As evidenced in the writings of Ernest Hemingway, Robert Ruark, and Isak Dinesen, big game hunting in Africa was a favorite pursuit of many society women from Europe and the United States.

Following the publication of this book, the Rosenbruch Wildlife Heritage Museum will mount a traveling exhibition exploring the theme of women and firearms. Firearms, clothing, and accessories will be accompanied by paintings, photographs, drawings, and prints, as well as numerous other artifacts, to depict and document a captivating subject never before examined in such depth.

Silk and Steel joins the author's series on the history of firearms, which commenced in 1979 with *The Colt Heritage* and continued through such later titles as *Colt: An American Legend, Winchester: An American Legend, The Peacemakers, Steel Canvas, Ruger & His Guns, Buffalo Bill's Wild West* (with Greg Martin), and *The World of Beretta.*

Silk and Steel includes more than three hundred color plates, with spectacular new collages by Peter Beard. The bibliography lists myriad works of reference, some centuries old, and is accompanied by a detailed index.

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