

SOMERSET, A.J. – *Arms: The Culture and Credo of the Gun*. Windsor: Biblioasis, 2015. Pp. 342.

In the United States, the historical debate concerning gun culture and the propriety and efficacy of firearm regulation has been a minor front in the larger cultural, social, and legal war over the role of firearms in the American republic. This has often been a total war, with the result that some writers have marshalled strong rhetoric and selective evidence in order to make historical claims that support their view of how Americans should think about and regulate firearms. The war has resulted in at least one academic casualty: Michael Bellesiles resigned his tenured position at the Emory University after many errors became apparent in his book *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture*. The academic literature examining gun culture and firearm regulation in Canada, compared to the work in the United States, is small and, generally, less motivated by desire to shift public attitudes or shape policy. This is despite the fact that political debates in Canada over gun control have been fierce since the 1970s, particularly since the 1989 Montreal Massacre and the 1995 *Firearms Act*.

A.J. Somerset, in *Arms: The Culture and Credo of the Gun*, attempts to track and describe the development of extremism in the debate about firearms in both Canada and the United States. A former member of the Canadian military, Somerset acknowledges owning guns and enjoying target shooting and hunting. He positions himself, however, as a responsible firearms owner analyzing, and critiquing, extremists who offer what he deems to be unreasonable opinions. “I like guns,” he admits, but not “guns nuts.” (p. x)

Somerset tackles a wide range of topics, from the connection between guns and masculinity, the myth of the western gunslinger, mass shootings, the development of the National Rifle Association, the role of race in the American gun control debate, zombie movies, and the development of “stand your ground” legislation. Through most of the book, Somerset’s sights are set on the “gun nuts,” although he also suggests that, at times, people had rational reasons to arm themselves, such as when workers had to physically resist particularly oppressive employers backed by the state.

The book is not a work of history *per se* (or of any other particular discipline), though Somerset draws from historical sources and makes historical claims. Most of his assertions about history are drawn from existing academic literature, though tracking the sources of Somerset’s facts and interpretations is difficult as the book eschews traditional citations in favour of a bibliography that simply indicates the books and articles employed in each chapter. Only scholars very familiar with the existing literature will be able to accurately identify the sources for Somerset’s claims, facts, and quotations.

While the historical sections are mostly derived from existing literature, Somerset adds to our knowledge of several recent events. He employs, for example, original research in describing Justin Bourque’s murder of three RCMP officers in Moncton in 2014. It is the best description of the event available. He also offers a fascinating account of the actions of Bruce and Donna Montague,

who became celebrities within the extreme elements of the Canadian firearm community by, first, refusing to follow Canada's gun laws, then by fighting efforts to prosecute them for several firearms offences after police discovered a small arsenal in a vault in the couple's basement.

There is perhaps a tendency by authors examining debates over guns to highlight the most extreme rhetoric—the views of survivalists, the National Rifle Association, or mass murderers—because the statements of such people and groups can strike non-gun owners as nonsensical or amusing, albeit darkly funny. Somerset admits being drawn to “the weird stuff,” (p. xvi) and that his book is “about ideas that kill people, about the palimpsest of untruth, half-truth, and wishful fabrication that Americans have piled up to paper over their inconvenient truths.” (p. xvi) Somerset offers plenty of over-the-top quotations to catch the reader's attention and drive his arguments. Such extreme rhetoric is easy to mock, which Somerset often does, although how representative such views are of average gun owners is unclear. Certainly not all gun owners oppose all firearm regulations. For example, Canadian hunters were instrumental in the introduction of gun safety courses, motivated by the substantial number of hunting accidents in the 1960s and 1970s. Another problem of employing the entertaining quotation is that it takes time away from considering underlying historical motivations for the modern opposition to gun control, which deserve even more attention than they receive in *Arms*.

Members of the public unfamiliar with the gun control debates in Canada and the United States will, I suspect, find Somerset's book enlightening and, often, entertaining. Academic historians will take issue with Somerset's heavy reliance on secondary sources, lack of citations, and over-the-top rhetorical style. Future historians, however, will find *Arms* interesting as a primary source—as an effort by one gun owner to respond to changing attitudes towards firearms and government regulatory efforts by calling out what he deems ridiculous, even hysterical, claims. He is a soldier in the ongoing war against the “weird stuff” and “gun nuts,” though, in the end, he doubts his provocative work, or any other, will change many minds: “No one is listening. No one is ready to hear even that he is not prepared to listen. In the land of ranting deaf men, the man with tinnitus grows slowly hoarse.” (p. 317)

Blake Brown
Saint Mary's University

SWEENEY, Robert C.H. – *Why Did We Choose to Industrialize? Montreal, 1819-1849*. Montréal et Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015, 436 p.

Le plus récent ouvrage de l'historien Robert C.H. Sweeny a obtenu le prix Sir-John-A.-Macdonald de la Société historique du Canada en 2016, et le moins qu'on puisse dire est que cet honneur est bien mérité. *Why Did We Choose to*