

IN THE FIELD

DECEMBER 2024

By Sir Johnny Scott Bt.

DUELLING

Lot 495 in Holt's December auction is the cased pair of flintlock duelling pistols made by Wogdon in 1795, complete with flask, turnscrew and bullet mould, which by tradition were used in the famous duel between Lt. Alexander Munro of the Royal Horse Guards (Blue) and his brother-in-law, Lt. Colonel David Fawcett of the 55th Regiment, in July 1843. Almost everything about this duel in which Colonel Fawcett lost his life, is extraordinary, bordering on the quixotic.

Lt. Munro was born on 27th April 1803, in Tain, Ross and Cromarty, the son of a soldier commissioned from the ranks for bravery at the storming of Seringapatam in 1799. His ambition to obtain an officer's commission in the army was hindered by limited funds and he was only able to purchase one at the rank of ensign (for £450) in the 78th Regiment of Foot, by 1831. He subsequently transferred, again by purchase, to the administrative role of Cornet Adjutant in the Royal Horse Guards. It was whilst he was with the 78th Foot that he acquired the Wogdon pistols, probably second hand, proudly having his name and regiment engraved on the case. This in itself is slightly strange, since by the 1830's, percussion had become the accepted system for igniting firearm powder charges and flintlock ignition was pretty well obsolete, particularly among serving officers in the army, but one assumes these were the best he could afford at the time.

Munro and Fawcett had married sisters and whilst Fawcett was in China during the first Opium War, Munro was tasked with overseeing the sale of a property belonging to Fawcett, who was invalided home in 1843 after contracting yellow fever. On the afternoon of the 30th June Munro was invited to tea at Fawcett's address in Sloane Street to report on the outcome of the sale, confidently expecting thanks and congratulations. Instead, he was accused of mishandling Fawcett's affairs and roundly abused, not only in the presence of his sister-in-law and children, but worse, thrown out of the house in front of the servants. Apoplectic with fury, Munro immediately sent Fawcett a challenge to a duel by pistols the following morning, which was promptly accepted.

The two set about trying to find people prepared to act as their seconds and enable the dual to go ahead. This was no easy matter; sending and accepting a challenge to a duel among officers was not officially banned under Articles of War until 1844, but at the start of the Peninsular Campaign, the Duke of Wellington made it abundantly clear that there was no place in his army for duellists. Not only that, but Queen Victoria was on the throne and the riotous, boozy days of the Regency, when duels were fought at the drop of a hat, were now distinctly frowned upon. Anyone involved in a duel, either



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Sir Johnny (as he is better known) is an author, natural historian, broadcaster, columnist, countryside campaigner, artisan snuff manufacturer and retired hill farmer.

He wrote and co-presented the BBC2 series *Clarissa and the Countryman* with Clarissa Dickson Wright. He writes for a variety of magazines and periodicals on field sports, food, farming, travel, history and rural affairs.

A lifetime devotee of the countryside and its sports, he is currently:

- Joint Master, The North Pennine Hunt
- Regional Director, Vote OK.
- President, The Gamekeepers Welfare Trust.
- President, The Tay Valley Wildfowlers Association.
- President, The Newcastle Wildfowlers Association.
- President, The Association of Working Lurchers / Longdogs.
- Centenary Patron and Honorary Life Member, British Association for Shooting and Conservation.
- Patron, The Sporting Lucas Terrier Association.
- Patron, The Wildlife Ark Trust.
- Patron, The National Organisation of Beaters and Pickers Up.
- Board member, The European Squirrel Initiative.

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as combatants or seconds, could expect be turfed out of society and would bring an end to any military career.

With difficulty, Fawcett managed to persuade a Lt. Cuddy of the 55th, who had travelled back from China with him, to act as his second and Munro found a Lt. Grant, to act as his. It was then a matter of finding a surgeon to attend and time was running out, as the duel was arranged for six o'clock in the fields opposite the Brecknock Arms in Camden, then on the outskirts of London. In his evidence at Munro's trial for murder in 1847, George Gulliver, regimental surgeon to the Royal Horse Guards, describes being woken at 5 am on July 1st, by a frantic Munro, pleading with him to attend the duel. With considerable reluctance he agreed on the understanding, that Munro would happily accept an apology and there was no deadly intent. With this assurance, the two set off by coach to Camden, arriving just before six o'clock.

Shortly afterwards, Fawcett and Cuddy arrived, followed by Grant, and everyone proceeded into the field, with Grant carrying Munro's case of pistols. Each second loaded one of the pistols, fourteen paces were marked out, Munro and Fawcett took their places at either end, turning sideways to face each other. Grant gave the agreed signal to proceed: "Gentlemen are you ready? Fire!" Munro fired first, hitting his brother-in-law under the right arm pit, shattering his ribs and puncturing the lungs. He is reputed to have cried; "Did you see that? He had me covered. He intended to shoot me." To which Fawcett gasped: "No I did not. I never intended to fire".

The injured man was carried first to the Brecknock Arms, where he was refused entry and then to the Camden Arms, dying two days later. Munro fled to Belgium where, with his commission cancelled for being absent without leave, he lived in considerable penury. Four years later he returned to face justice and was tried for murder at the Old Bailey, but public support came down in his favour and remarkably, although found guilty, he was only sentenced to a year in prison. On his release, he was able to re-purchase a commission in the army, becoming Barracks Master at various postings in Ireland and Canada, dying in 1867.

Before passing to Holt's, these historic pistols have been carefully preserved by the family for the last 181 years - if only they could talk!



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