

Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture. By Michael L. Bellesiles. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000. Pp. 444. Appendices, notes, index. \$30.00.)

Many Americans have long assumed that they are heirs to the traditions of colonial and Revolutionary riflemen. They believe that most early American males owned their own weapons and were excellent marksmen because they hunted game and engaged in militia and regular army warfare. In *Arming America*, Michael L. Bellesiles turns this notion on its head. The idea that American "arms ownership has always been nearly universal" and that "American liberty was won and maintained" by a well-armed citizenry is, Bellesiles states, a national "myth" (pp. 9, 12). This myth has been spread by inaccurate historians and seized upon by the National Rifle Association and other progun activists to support their (purportedly) misguided advocacy of the Second Amendment's right to bear arms.

Bellesiles has examined "Legal, probate, military, and business records, travel accounts, personal letters, fiction, hunting magazines, legislation, and the guns themselves" (p. 14), and concludes that "America's gun culture is an invented tradition" (p. 13). Colonial and early national Americans owned surprisingly few weapons and assigned little importance to them in their daily lives. Gunsmiths were few and far between, and existing weapons were unreliable and in disrepair. Militiamen were either ill-armed or unarmed. Thus, there was no "heavily armed American public" (p. 9) in the colonial and early national periods. America's true "gun culture" emerged after the Civil War, not before it, according to Bellesiles. Only then did both Union and Confederate veterans return home with the hundreds of thousands of weapons their governments (and the industrial revolution) provided them.

Bellesiles's work evinces the narrative power and methodological weakness of a historian who has settled on his thesis before conducting his research. As his critics have shown, Bellesiles methodically exaggerates and manipulates the evidence. Other specialists counter that records show many more colonial and Revolutionary guns and gunsmiths than Bellesiles has counted and that many, but not all, militia muster records verify abundant or ample arms. Critics conclude that, contrary to Bellesiles's assertion, many early Americans undoubtedly killed game with guns on a daily basis in order to feed themselves. Bellesiles ignores hundreds of accounts written by early European travelers who were surprised and appalled (as their descendants are today) at the extent of American weaponry. Although Bellesiles's sampling of 1,100 wills in government probate courts reveals his hard work and ingenious method, those wills are nevertheless sparse, unrepresentative (only propertied classes filed them), and do not enumerate items such as weapons that were given away or sold by the decedent's family at the time of death. In his list of scholars

who have supposedly spread the myth that early Americans had lots of guns, Bellesiles pays short shrift to Edmund S. Morgan, author of *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975). Bellesiles should think more deeply about how many guns it took to subjugate millions of human beings for two hundred and fifty years.

Eighty years ago, Van Wyck Brooks called for American historians to portray “a useable past.” His call has certainly produced masterpieces like Morgan’s book. Unfortunately, it has also produced Michael Bellesiles’s tale of Americans without weapons. While *Arming America* tells us a good deal about academic culture in the year 2000, it teaches little about colonial and early national American history and cultures.

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Black Prisoners and Their World, Alabama, 1865–1900. By Mary Ellen Curtin. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000. Pp. xi, 261. Maps, illustrations, notes, index. Clothbound, \$59.50; paperbound, \$19.50.)

The notorious convict-lease system buttressed the repressive racial order of the post-Civil War South. Vital to the construction of the “New South,” the lease achieved the multiple purposes of social and economic control of African Americans, tax relief for white property holders, cash revenue for local governments, and cheap labor for industrial capitalists. This was certainly the case in the state of Alabama, where state and county officials rented prisoners to major mining companies. Mary Ellen Curtin’s crisply paced and readable work, *Black Prisoners and Their World*, argues that Alabama had one of the most profitable, and brutal, prison systems in the nation during the late nineteenth century.

Curtin draws on the field of black history to expand scholars’ perceptions of those who fell captive to this system of forced labor for profit. Most studies of the subject ignore the agency of black prisoners, emphasizing instead the leasing system’s economic functions and the activities of administrators. In contrast, the author draws on correspondence from prisoners and their families to help portray black lives before, during, and after incarceration. This challenges assumptions of absolute white hegemony over black inmates, though it does not make the workings of the lease system any less nightmarish.

As the author elaborates, most Alabama inmates were part of a new generation of former slaves who had believed the promises of Reconstruction-era Republicanism. In many cases, their “crimes” had to do only with exercising their political rights and economic independence. This self-assertive spirit did not die, even after white