Mr. Gatling’s Terrible Marvel

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Editor’s Introduction

It is easy to forget what a cultural sensation technology can produce – and perhaps no instance was greater than that of the Gatling gun.

In her outstanding 2006 book, *Mr. Gatling’s Terrible Marvel*, author Julia Keller gives a detailed and lucid account of Richard Gatling and his quest to create a true machine gun — and the unintended consequences his invention had for modern man. Anyone who has read Winston Churchill’s account of the Battle of Omdurman will not forget the horrific, at first lopsided battles made possible by this invention.

In this excerpt, the author introduces her broad topic. She is a journalist by trade and writes scholarly prose that is clear and concise – a rare combination. Even in this brief passage, we can see the ease with which she portrays how a weapon can embody an entire set of ideas; she makes an epic story seem simple.

You can certainly see echoes of Mr. Gatling’s marvel in the uneasy relationship between technology and warfare that we struggle with today.

Mr. Gatling’s Terrible Marvel

By Julia Keller

*They showed us the new battery gun on wheels – the Gatling gun, or rather, it is a cluster of six to ten savage tubes that carry great conical pellets of lead, with unerring accuracy, a distance of two and a half miles. It feeds itself with cartridges, and you work it with a crank like a hand organ; you can fire it faster*
than four men can count. When fired rapidly, the reports blend together like the clattering of a watchman’s rattle. It can be discharged four hundred times a minute! I liked it very much.

— Mark Twain (1868)

Did Richard Jordan Gatlin know he had changed the world? Was there a moment when it became clear to him?

Others had tried to create what he created. They tried for centuries. They failed. Their inventions blew up, or were wildly inaccurate, or jammed too easily. His, however, did the trick. It functioned beautifully, and for the first time in history, death was automatic. Death could be reliably doled out in sweeps and clusters, in reeling multiples, instead of one by one. Hence a world that had been moving steadily toward an enlightened recognition of the significance of even a single life, progressing toward a thoughtful and humane acknowledgement of the uniqueness of the individual, suddenly was forced to contend with the appalling opposite, with an ugly new truth: People could be erased with the simple pivot of a gun barrel, with the calculated fury of a devastating weapon. Death was mechanized. Human beings were interchangeable, just as were the parts in other new machines, machines that functioned in humming lockstep as part of the brightly efficient new manufacturing techniques that increasingly defined the age.

Civilization thus was irrevocably altered. Nothing – neither warfare nor diplomacy nor science nor business nor technology nor literature nor art nor theology – would ever be the same. Could Richard Gatling, no matter what his motives were, have had any idea what he had unleashed on the world?

Ah, you say, but if he hadn’t done it, then someone else would have invented the first successful machine gun. Isn’t that right? By the middle of the nineteenth century, the world was surely ready for such a weapon. It was poised to leave behind the arcane intimacy of old-fashioned ways of battle, of flashing knives and clumsy muskets, of enemies falling together in a death-grip that mimicked a lovers’ embrace. It was prepared for war to become a detached and distant anonymity, of slaughter on a vast scale. Someone else would have invented an effective machine gun – there were many men who hoped to do just that – but Gatling did it first. As Robert Oppenheimer wrote of Albert Einstein, “The discovery of quanta would surely have come one way or another, but he discovered them.”

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Lethal weapons complicate American’s conception of itself. Long before domestic gun control became a contentious issue in presidential politics, American citizens were already arguing about the use of military force:
When is it appropriate to go to war? Does might make right? The debate over armaments and ethics has long been so intense, so spirited, that the fascinating business and cultural history of firearms, and their central place in the American system of manufacture in the early nineteenth century, is often overlooked. It is surely true that to possess a gun is “to hold a piece of death in your hands,” in the starkly resonant phrase of contemporary crime writer George Pelecanos. It is not, however, the only truth worth knowing about guns.

You could kill without looking your opponent in the eye. You could kill without even knowing how many people you had killed.

Guns were among the first fruits of the Industrial Revolution in the United States, among the first commercial products to benefit from the amazing new concept known as the interchangeability of parts. Yet when historians and cultural commentators discuss the nineteenth century, they readily tick off familiar categories such as transportation and communication. They rhapsodize about railroads and steamships and telegraphs – and often neglect to mention one of the chief elements of that crucial century, which is a gun.

Not just any gun. The Gatling gun.

Most people know what a Gatling gun is. They know what it looks like and how the original version operated: the bundled barrels, the hand crank. Yet Richard Gatling himself remains trapped in the shadows. Famous in his own time, he is largely forgotten in ours. That relative obscurity, measured against the size of Gatling’s achievement, is compelling evidence of the odd, murky status of armaments in American life. To this day, a slang term for a firearm is a “gat.” His invention is a household name – “Gatling gun” still is a common metaphor for anything that comes swiftly, unchecked, pell-mell – but the man who created it is scarcely common at all. The popular television show Gilmore Girls, with its witty, fast-talking characters, sometimes is described as featuring “Gatling-gun dialogue.” Yet when people are asked about the origin of the gun’s name, they tend to shrug and look around and finally speculate that … well … okay, maybe it was invented in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. (That city is named for a storekeeper named Radford Gatlin – with no “g” at the end – who lived there briefly in the 1850s and has no connection to Richard Gatling’s North Carolina family or to the Gatling gun). The existence of Richard Jordan Gatling – a key inventive figure of his time, at one point in American history as famous as a Henry Ford or a Bill Gates were and are in their times – is unknown to most of his countrymen or countrywomen. He is a bit of a black hole in history, the same history his gun has utterly transformed.

People could be erased with the simple pivot of a gun barrel.

That is because in America, guns are never just guns. Guns are singular. The nation’s ambivalence about weaponry surely is complicit in the long habit of overlooking the Gatling
gun as a cultural symbol, as a superb lens through which to look back at the nineteenth century, and it surely accounts for a good part of Richard Gatling’s obscurity. The intensity of that ambivalence is unique to the United States because of its extraordinary nature of what the nation likes think it represents: triumph not through superiority of arms, but through superiority of ideas. And peace-loving people are reluctant to acknowledge the signal importance – to history, to politics, to business, to philosophy, to culture – of instruments of death. Americans are uncomfortable with the notion of granting guns such pride of place.

The national ambivalence over armed might can be traced back to the beginnings of the republic. In the early 1800s, when the British navy was attacking American ships and seemed to be spoiling for a fight, President Jefferson hesitated to resort to a military response – but not because he was afraid his country might lose. He was afraid it might win. And that, in turn, would pump up the power of the central government, to which Jefferson was philosophically opposed. “War, which every other nation in history had looked upon as the first duty of a state, was in America a subject for dread, not so much because of possible defeat as of possible success,” was how Henry Adams phrased it in his history of the early United States.

When it comes to guns, America has a historical blind spot. Its citizens revere the still-life image of a gaunt, moody Abraham Lincoln agonizing over the seesawing fortunes of the Civil War. But they block out the reality of the vigorous, energized Lincoln on one of his frequent excursions to the Washington Navy Yard to test yet another new gun. Lincoln was vitally interested in weapons, especially experimental ones. An inventor himself—Lincoln is the only American president to hold a patent, having been issued Patent No. 6,469 in 1849 for an inflatable tube that could be rigged to the bottom of steamboats to help haul them over sandbars – he was fascinated by the application of technology of armaments. Few Americans, though, can readily or comfortably envision a lively, gun-toting Lincoln. They are far more at home with the portrait of the thoughtful statesman, of the lean-cheeked orator intoning “Fourscore” with solemn gravity.

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The Gatling gun changed everything. It was the world’s first machine gun that actually worked – as opposed to the many whose designs looked dandy on paper but which never could be made to operate safely and reliably. It was a pivot point not only because of the innovative craftsmanship and brutal efficiency, which in its original 1862 incarnation sent some two hundred shots per minute crashing out of six barrels, but also because of how that efficiency changed humanity’s concept of itself. For the first time in history, you could kill an enemy en masse. At a time when the idea of the individual was rising to unprecedented cultural prominence, the machine gun shoved that individual right back down into the undifferentiated murk, back into a bloody blur, back into nothing but “the sickle shape of the fallen” after “the machine gun had raked in an arc,” as Sebastian Barry so vividly describes World War I casualties in his novel A Long Long Way.
Lethal weapons complicate America’s conception of itself.

Killing no longer meant a one-on-one contest. You could kill without looking your opponent in the eye. You could kill without even knowing how many people you had killed. The Industrial Revolution had changed manufacturing from a matter of craftsmanship by individual artisans to a matter of the assembly-line labor of anonymous factory workers, and then the Gatling gun and its deadly spawn – such as the AK-47 – came along and turned the heretofore intensely personal work of armed combat into the impersonal work of machines.

Perversely, these new possibilities for mechanized destruction, enabled by the Gatling gun, arose at a time when the cultural world gave every indication of moving in the opposite direction: away from the mass, away from the smear of sameness, and toward a realization of the intrinsic value and unique contribution of each individual. More than three million men died in the Napoleonic Wars, their bodies “shoveled into mass graves” and “their remains even re-used as agricultural fertilizer.” But by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, nations began to individualize their war dead in monuments that listed row after row after row of specific names. After World War I, “the Western European belligerents quickly established that all dead soldiers of whatever rank would be buried in special cemeteries.”1 The Romantic movement in literature, which blossomed across the nineteenth century in a variety of genres and guises, helped inculcate the fixation on individual selves. But could such an idea also have arisen to some degree to counter just those dehumanizing effects of the offensive weaponry? When people realized how meaningless a single life could be – and nothing brought the point home more swiftly and definitively than the sight of a Gatling gun, its perfect circle of slender barrels gleaming smartly in the fresh dawn of a world newly besotted by technology – they found themselves anxiously groping for another kind of idea. They yearned to believe that individuals do matter; that discrete lives do possess a kind of poetry and significance belied by the fact that they can be rinsed away with one casual swipe of a Gatling gun. A terrible paradox was born.

Notes


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After graduating from Marshall University, Julia Keller headed north to Columbus, Ohio, where she worked for the local newspaper and earned a doctoral degree in English Literature at Ohio State
University. Then it was on to Chicago. In 2005, she won the Pulitzer Prize for a three-part series in the Chicago Tribune about a deadly tornado that struck a small town in Illinois. She spent a year at Harvard as a Nieman Fellow and broke up her newspaper career from time to time to teach at places such as Princeton, Notre Dame, and the University of Chicago.

Her most recent book is Bone on Bone, a crime novel published in 2018 by Minotaur Books.