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Andrew C. McKeveitt begins *Gun Country: Gun Capitalism, Culture, and Control in Cold War America* with some telling statistics. In 1945, the United States had a population of 140 million people who owned 45 million firearms. By 2020, there were 350 million Americans owning an eye-popping 450 million guns. Shooting deaths now seem commonplace, while massacres, though they generate headlines, rarely result in preventative measures being enacted into law. Nations with similar political cultures, such as the United Kingdom and Australia, have responded to mass shootings with disarmament laws that went mostly unchallenged. In the United States such steps are unthinkable given the current composition of the Congress, the recent decisions of the Supreme Court, and the sheer quantity of weapons.

McKeveitt's *Gun Country* offers an insightful explanation for the proliferation of firearms in the United States and the failure of efforts at gun control. McKeveitt shows through archival research that when the Second World War ended, many countries were awash with firearms. US arms dealers purchased surplus military rifles and pistols by the hundreds of thousands and shipped them back home, where regulations were light and demand was high. Popularly used models included British Enfields, German Mausers, and Italian Carcanos, all of which sold for cut-rate prices in gun shops and by mail order. These weapons became the entry-level rifles of American men, especially veterans, who felt confined in the spreading suburbs and who yearned to get outdoors and shoot things. Domestic arms manufacturers hoped that as commitment to shooting deepened, Americans would turn to higher quality domestic firearms. Domestic unrest during the 1960s and 1970s persuaded some citizens and leaders to explore the links between street violence and cheap armaments, such as the so-called Saturday Night Special handguns carried by muggers. Early efforts at gun control met with push-
back from a nascent gun rights movement, which translated the Cold War’s uncompromising us-versus-them rhetoric to the continued and untrammeled possession of their newly acquired weapons. Gun control advocates lost legislative battles over rights, licensing, and registration, while gun manufacturers persuaded a saturated market to upgrade to better weapons. The gun control movement missed opportunities to fight fire with fire and develop its own convincing marketing campaigns.

McKevitt draws on evidence from university archives, presidential papers, and periodical literature to thoroughly illustrate his argument and to develop the characters in his story. The book begins with the 1992 killing of a Japanese exchange student, Yoshi Hattori, who knocked on the wrong door and was shot to death by a surly Baton Rouge butcher defending his “castle” with a .44 Magnum revolver. McKevitt details the outcry in Japan, which has strict laws about firearms possession. To the astonishment of Hattori’s family and friends, a Louisiana jury found the butcher “not guilty” of manslaughter. We meet Sam Cummings, the understated arms dealer who made a fortune importing surplus European weapons to the United States. A better-known character, Lee Harvey Oswald, bought one of those discount weapons, a Mannlicher-Carcano rifle, and used it to kill President John F. Kennedy. Oswald also killed a police officer with a cheap imported revolver. The outcry inspired Senator Thomas Dodd of Connecticut, a former prosecutor at Nuremberg, to take on the gun industry, with limited success. We also meet Laura Fermi, the widow of the nuclear physicist, Enrico Fermi, who devoted her time and resources to organizing the early gun control movement, and the hard-edged Harlon Carter, who took over as leader of the National Rifle Association in 1977, engaged the power of direct marketing, and pushed his organization to its famously uncompromising stance. This is but a sampling of the characters in Gun Country. McKevitt has a talent for using archival materials to develop the human side of this story, making this book appropriate for scholarly and general audiences alike.

Like most excellent books, this one raises questions that will need to be followed up by future scholars. In Gun Country, McKevitt dates the heaviest proliferation of firearms to the period after the Second World War. McKevitt makes only brief reference to The Gunning of America: Business and the Making of American Gun Culture, Pamela Haag’s 2016 history of Winchester, which makes an argument for the ubiquity of firearms in the US after the Civil War. I wished that McKevitt had done more to explain how Haag’s evidence might or might not line up with his own study. And then there is evidence about an earlier time period. Both McKevitt and Haag make the claim that firearms were not particularly widespread in the eighteenth century, a core element of the beliefs of the gun rights movement that was first questioned by Michael Bellesiles in his 2000 book, Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture. At the end of his book, Bellesiles suggests that there was an uptick in US firearms ownership in the early nineteenth century. Some of that book’s evidence has since been called into question—but certainly not all of it—and it may be time for others to have a second look at the full sweep of firearms history in the United States. It will fall to future scholars to make a definitive study of when, and how, rates of ownership were lower and higher in US history. Another area for future development has to do with the overlap between the early gun rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the nascent conservative movement of the same period. McKevitt’s eighth chapter, “The Cold War’s Second Amendment,” does well to put the intransigence of the early gun rights movement into the context of backlash against civil rights, women’s rights, and anti-communism. The chapter distills that context to its core essence. That is enough for readers of this study, but I hope that another scholar will see the
need for deeper exploration through archival and oral research.

*Gun Country* is a classic work of history, informed by wide-ranging research and written in an approachable manner. It will be essential reading for historians of modern US politics and culture. It can only be hoped that such an impressive book will raise the quality of US debates about firearms.

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