Reading Log 8

From the mid 17th-century to the early 19th-century, duelling in Canada was an acceptable way, depending on the circumstances, to defend one’s honour. Honour, as described in the Clonmel Code of duelling (Morgan 535), honour could be a woman’s chastity, a man’s professionalism, or his social or economic standing. However, these reasons for duelling could also be used as motives to decline a duel. As observed in the duel between Lyon and Wilson, it was due to Wilson’s belief that his social standing would suffer if he did not challenge Lyon, a man born into a well-off family, to a duel. Since Wilson was born into a lower-class family and had managed to climb the social ladder, he felt he was compelled to defend not only his honour, but Elizabeth Hughes’ as well. After duelling with Lyon, Wilson was arrested and charged with murder, but was found not guilty due to his defense of his actions.

When a gentleman was challenged to a duel, it was expected that he would accept the challenge. However, men of the lower-middle class, as well as men that weren’t of the same race as their challenger were not permitted to duel. As discussed by Morgan, it was the, “responsibility of certain men to defend their reputations with a public display of physical courage…” (Morgan 531) That is to say, if a man was not of high social standing, he was in no position to be defending his honour, or that of others. In addition to barring men of a lower social standing and a different race from duelling, women were not allowed to duel either, regardless of their race or social class. Although it was never plainly stated, duelling was used to keep women dependent on men to defend their status in society.

As time passed, duelling became less accepted as a method of settling arguments, and was made illegal in the early 19th-century. Of the duels that occurred after the act became illegal, many of them were tried in the court of law. Doing so was another method of discouraging the use of duelling as means to settle arguments and restore honour, as nearly a quarter of the duels that took place after being banned were fatal. Again, the duel between Wilson and Lyon comes to mind, as it occurred after duelling was outlawed. The act of outlawing duelling made these meeting nothing more than meaningless acts of violence, that only lead to injury, death, or a sentence.