

Bosie's Gun.

By John Campbell

Part III.

Lord Alfred And His Westley Richards Return To The Field.

Each of us is a far more complex creature than anyone knows. We all have demons. And we all have exorcists. If we are fortunate, our demons lose to God's graces most of the time.

But through all the travails of his life, and amidst all of the demons that haunted Lord Alfred Douglas, Bosie maintained a reverent affection for the field and shooting sports. I like to believe it was a retreat of natural peace and beauty for him in a world that tortured his psyche in other ways.

Boise's little 20 Ga. Westley Richards is only one proof of this. And, my imagination often wonders where this special gun has been, and what history it may have overheard.

Through the research assistance of present-day American playwright Anthony

Wynn, author of "Bernard and Bosie: A Most Unlikely Friendship," I can at least offer solid evidence of Bosie's love of hunting.

This may have stemmed from his early adulation of his father. In the biography, *Bosie*, by Douglas Murray, it is revealed that while he attended Winchester College, one of Lord Alfred's favorite pastimes "was to go to the house library and read through the bound set of old numbers of *The Field*."

From his biography, this quote:

"...I am equally fond of sport. If I had my life to live again I might even go more for sport and less for literature."

Another passage from his biography:

"...At about the same time, I began to get fond of shooting again, and at the time when Oscar Wilde died [1900], I was in the Highlands of Scotland where I had taken a

small winter shooting.” With Westley Richards’ records noting that the 20 Ga. centerpiece of this tale was sold to Lord Alfred in 1899, it’s quite likely that this elegant little gun was central to such a shooting excursion.

A few years later, in 1902-03, Bosie was hunting again while he moved with his wife and son Raymond at Lake farm. These days may well have included a recorded trip to the Hebridean island of Colonsay. This from the 1963 biography of Bosie by Rupert Croft-Cooke:

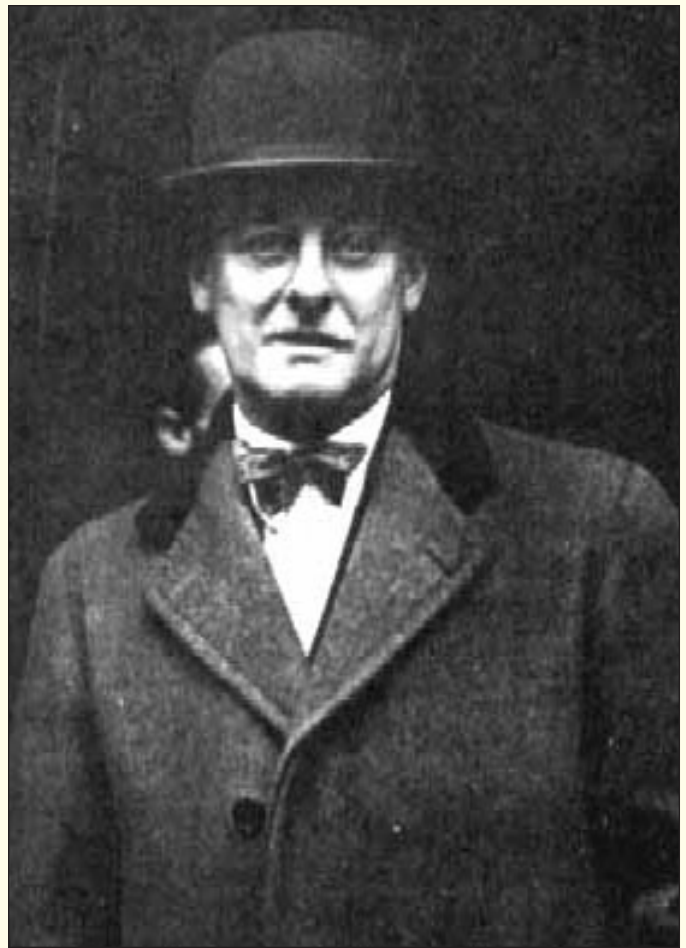
“Reaching Liverpool in January (1902), he went straight to Colonsay, which his brother Percy had taken for a year. The island was beautiful, some twelve to fourteen thousand acres in area, with a charming house and -- a rarity in those often treeless islands -- plenty of coverts for pheasants.

“Bosie and his brother spent their time shooting. The bag was an all-round one, for there was a grouse-moor of a kind, and a vast number of partridges, duck and snipe.” There was also a hard frost on the mainland that year which did not reach the islands and it “sent in swarms of woodcock.” In five days, Bosie remembered proudly, he and an Argyllshire laird called Graham shot 147 woodcock.”

During this period, Bosie may also have had his sporting interests widened by his father-in-law, Colonel Custance, a veteran of the Boer War. Although Col. Custance was an avid shooter, he was also a skilled fisherman:

“Custance, who was a masterly fisherman and had a splendid trout stream, taught Bosie to fish. Up to the time of his marriage, Bosie had never fished and now began to love it as much as shooting.”

Yet more from the Bosie biography:



Lord Alfred Douglas in his later years, probably in the late 1920s or early ‘30s.

“Beyond a little snipe and duck shooting up in the Caithness-shire, which was the nearest I could get during the [First World] war to the snipe bogs of the Orkney Islands, where I have a standing invitation to go and shoot with my old and valued friend Mr. Regan, I did nothing but read and take long walks, with an occasional ride at Newmarket or elsewhere.”

There is one poetic example of Bosie’s interconnection with the hunt. This appears in his 1928 book of Collected Poems. The poem was written in 1908 or 1909 and is entitled “Beauty And The Hunter.” I present it to you here, with copyright acknowledgment to the Estate of Lord Alfred Douglas.



Colonsay island is essentially part of the Hebrides group. It is mostly rolling moor with few trees and a mild climate.

Where lurks the shining quarry, swift
and shy,
Immune, elusive, unsubstantial
In what dim forests of the soul, where
call
No birds, and no beasts creep (the
hunter's cry
Wounds the deep darkness, and the low
winds sigh
Through avenues of trees whose faint
leaves fall
Down to the velvet ground, and like a
pall
The violet shadows cover all the sky).

With what gold nets, what silver-paint-
ed spears
May we surprise her, what slim flutes
inspire
With breath of what serene enchanted
air



Wash we our star-ward gazing eyes
with tears,
Till on their pools (drawn by our white
desire)
She bend and look, and leave her
image there.

Bosie may have dreamed the form of
this poem as he pondered the mystic dimen-
sions of hunting or waited for a driven
grouse, his 20 Gauge Westley Richards crad-
dled in his arm.

Today, I use this same gun as often as I
can. The short 26" barrels with their 1/2 and
3/4 chokes are ideal for the close grouse
cover of Michigan's north woods. And for
open field shooting, the 28" barrels with 1/2
and 3/4 choking are the perfect choice for
pheasant and chukar. These same tubes also
serve well for sporting clays... a venue
where Bosie's gun gets its most frequent use,

In fact, I took this Westley to the 2004 Vintage Cup in New York and shot the 20 Ga. smallbore event with it. When I was “on,” it was on. But it seemed that I wasn’t on often enough to qualify for a trophy. No matter. I was a winner in another way. I strolled by Kirk Merrington’s booth in one of the vendor tents and decided to ask him if he’d mind evaluating the fit of my little 20’s short barrels, which had seemed a teeny bit loose from the onset.

“Why, you could drive a double-decker bus through there!” he said. “This needs tightening, no question. It will only get worse with use.”

Even though I had no idea that this was Lord Alfred's un at the time, I did know that it was a very worthy Westley Richards, and deserved skilled attention. What’s more, how often would it be possible for me to discuss the gun’s needs personally with Kirk Merrington? We immediately made a short list of needed work that included a long overdue strip-and-clean.

Fortunately, Kirk said the 28” barrels fit well, were in good shape and simply needed refinishing because of the bare metal patch on the left tube. Therefore, I left Vintagers with only one set of barrels and a very empty trunk case. Merrington had the rest.

While Kirk worked on his portion of the job, I had the 28” barrels re-browned. A few months later, everything came back



Lord Alfred was an avid reader of this esteemed pub.

together. Both sets of barrels fit tight as a bank vault, the disgraced barrel browning had been restored, and my trunk case was delightfully heavy again.

Inspired, I tried the 20 Ga. Westley Richards at clays, pheasant, quail and chukar. And every time I got properly ahead of things and didn’t stop my swing, the target exploded. In pitch dust or feathers. Needless to say, Bosie’s Westley Richards is a gun that I fully intend to keep. Not only because it fits and functions perfectly, but because of its heritage. This is an “old gun,” and old guns can connect us in an almost supernatural way to the people and history they were a part of. We become confidants to personalities and witnesses to events that we would otherwise have never known or understood before.

Then somehow, as we are drawn into this wormhole to the past, we become part of it by extension. A portion of the history and human drama is entrusted to our care and understanding for a time. Then we must pass it on. Hopefully to an appreciative heir.

So, every time I look at or pick up Westley Richards 20 Ga. No. 13598, I recall it’s guarded secrets. Of Lord Alfred Douglas, Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Winston Churchill, and days afield that offered respite in the tumultuous life of a man whom I would never have known otherwise.

Perhaps that is why this little gun spoke to me so clearly from the dealer’s table. It was history, asking to be heard. •