The Guns of John Moses Browning: The Remarkable Story of the Inventor Whose Firearms Changed the World

(Nathan Gorenstein)

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Some men have minds that are simply not like those of others, but far better, on a different plane entirely. Such men are vanishingly rare, and appear to be even rarer, because their unique talents are often lost to mankind, when they are not recognized by or not applicable to the society in which they are born. John Moses Browning, who lived from 1855 to 1926, was fortunate in that his peerless spatial-mechanical talent, specifically for the manufacture of firearms, coincided with the right time for his talents to achieve their full potential. A substantial majority of all today's firearms rely on his insights; I cannot think of another field in which one man has dominated the entire modern era—and whose work shows no signs of fading in importance.

I know a fair bit about guns, both their workings and their manufacture (it pays to be so educated in these days of future chaos), and so I was pleased that the author of this biography of Browning, Nathan Gorenstein, did not dumb his book down. He more than adequately explains the specifics of Browning's crucial inventions, without turning the book into a technical manual. Maybe a few more drawings would have been nice, but the prose is sleekly written, and a glossary is provided for those new to the topic, so the book hits a sweet spot for most readers. Of course, this book did not get a review in the *New York Times,* which mostly shills books for Commies and trannies, both of which are wholly absent here. Still, it is refreshing that a mainstream press will still publish a book that does not once bow in the direction of any modern hysterics about guns.

I think that like sharks, guns have now become largely perfected for their evolutionary niche. Yes, worthwhile tweaks and variations are made here and there, and accessories of various kinds frequently come to market, some staying for the long term, others not. New materials (such as the polymer frames of Glocks or attachment systems for AR-platform accessories) and new rounds arrive on the scene. But these are all merely icing on the top of the long-established basic mechanics

of guns. That our military is always announcing some new small arms weapons system, and then abandoning the effort a few years later, after spending a few tens of millions of dollars, suggests this will remain true. Five hundred years from now, assuming we are not all breaking animal bones with stones to get at the marrow, we'll probably still use recognizable guns—just as Sean Connery does in the movie *Outland,* set in a mining colony on Jupiter's moon Io. And Browning's designs will still probably be the ones we use.

Browning was born to a Mormon patriarch of the old school, who had moved west with the forced Mormon migration out of Illinois and was married to three women, simultaneously, creating a tangled family tree. In his adulthood, Browning himself seems to have been an indifferent Mormon—he drank, at least while traveling, and once, only once, proposed plural marriage to his wife, who in returned implicitly threatened to kill him. He grew up in, and kept as his home base his whole life, Ogden, Utah, which changed from a sleepy frontier town to a boomtown when the railroad arrived in 1869. With the railroad came links to the outside world, and most importantly, different people bearing different firearms.

As with many men of that time, before college was foolishly pushed as a universal, Browning's formal schooling was minimal, and by his early teens he was working full-time in his father's shop, which combined general metalworking and gun repair. His father was an unfocused, messy man, however, who also pursued other failed entrepreneurial ventures and did not maintain an orderly shop, nor offer much direction to his son. In some ways, this chaos helped the young Browning, who with his brothers and half-brothers could always find repair projects and scrap metal with which to experiment, and who quickly learned the essentials of metalworking by doing. He gravitated to analyzing how guns worked; at this point in the nineteenth century, a great number of very different, mostly very imperfect, gun designs were on the market, and many ended up as repair projects in his father's shop, brought by those traveling along the railroad.

But Browning didn't want to spend his life doing random odd jobs. He wanted a way to use his mechanical talent, which he felt keenly, to do great things. He subscribed to *Scientific American* (as my brother and I did as children, learning quite a bit—though you can learn nothing

today from the far-left agitprop magazine that now goes under that name), absorbing its lists of inventions and the latest patents. What he decided to invent was a new type of single-shot breechloading rifle, superseding the relatively primitive Sharps. He combined what had required many operations on earlier rifles into far fewer, simplifying the mechanism, and making it more robust and more affordable. This rifle, patented in 1879, when Browning was twenty-four, became known as the Winchester Model 1885.

At first Browning and his brothers manufactured the gun in their simple machine shop, making a few hundred copies. But then the Winchester Repeating Arms Company, based in Connecticut, seeking improved designs and realizing what Browning had made had market potential, sent a representative in 1883 to investigate Browning. Winchester quickly bought the patent, and started making the guns in 1885 (hence the designation). This set the pattern for the future—Browning would design in Utah, and produce prototypes with his brothers, which would be manufactured in quantity, and marketed, by industrial concerns with the necessary production capacity back east, mostly Winchester, but also later Colt. And because many different guns were offered on the American market, the mere fact that Browning's guns almost always sold far better than others showed his genius.

The strategy paid off for Winchester, and for Browning. It is worth noting the importance of patents in this saga. Browning became rich, and that was only possible because of the patent system. While modern patents are heavily manipulated and skewed towards those who already have wealth and influence, and a great many bogus patents are used to retard, rather than speed, technological progress, in earlier times patents were an essential mechanism to protect inventors. This was recognized in the Constitution, but I suppose it's just another sign of the decay of the republic that patents, and even more copyright, have mostly become ways for the rich and powerful to enrich themselves at the expense of the common man.

In 1884, Browning traveled east with his brother and delivered what would become the Model 1886—the classic lever gun, a multi-shot, repeating rifle, the basic form of which is instantly recognizable even today. While, as with the Model 1885, the 1886 embodied some elements of earlier guns, it made significant advances, and was far more robust

than previous offerings, therefore capable of firing more powerful rounds (especially needed as smokeless powder replaced black powder). Both guns quickly became best-sellers, and were widely lauded by the (then far more manly) press, as well as by prominent hunters such as Theodore Roosevelt. The fame of the 1886 rifle, in particular, was helped by its use in two notable 1892 events: the Johnson County War, between cattle ranchers and homesteaders (the subject of the infamous movie flop *Heaven's Gate*) and the destruction of the Dalton gang in Kansas, trapped as they tried to rob two banks, and slaughtered by townsmen armed with the rifles.

Browning kept his nose to the gun-making grindstone. From 1887 to 1889, however, he toiled as a Mormon missionary in Georgia. He wasn't a teenager; he was thirty-two, and his fourth child had just been born. But then as now, Mormons were expected to pursue missionary work, and so he did. It was more dangerous at that time, too, given animosity toward Mormons, in particular for their polygamous ways. Still, Browning kept designing guns even while doing missionary work—he was very keen not to waste time that could be spent exercising his talents, and for his entire life felt that he had gotten started too late on his life's work, wasting his early years on unproductive activity. During this time, for example, he designed, and Winchester quickly brought out, a pump-action .22, the Model 1890. More than two million of these guns were produced over the next few decades; they were extensively used in recreational shooting galleries, such as the ones Disneyland used to have, until the late 1950s, in better days gone by.

Unlike most men, and even most geniuses, whose intellectual productivity peaks early and who very rarely produce anything earthshattering after the age of forty, Browning's fertile mind kept producing new ideas at basically the same rate, or even at an accelerated rate, throughout his life. In 1889, he designed the first gas-powered repeating gun, which bled gas from one round's firing to reset the action for the next shot. This principle is the basis of nearly all repeating rifles today (though not of most handguns). He did this in service of making a machine gun, and he offered the gun to Colt, because Winchester, focused on hunting and recreational guns, had no interest in a machine gun, which was obviously a military weapon. Browning aimed to compete with the successful Maxim gun, which operated via harnessing recoil, not

gas, and was less reliable than Browning's gun. When he demonstrated his prototype, Colt executives were very impressed—but there was no market for the gun in America, given that America was fighting no wars in which a machine gun might be useful, and anyway the gun lacked a cooling mechanism, limiting its usefulness because it could only fire a few hundred rounds before having to cool down. Browning decided to keep refining the design on his own.

While he came up with new ideas, he kept improving his old ones, for example developing an improved lever-action repeater (the Model 1894) and refining his early shotgun designs. Then he also added pistols to his repertoire, inventing the slide-and-tilting-barrel, locked breech, action that is the basis of essentially all modern automatics. When Colt told him the company was uninterested in compact, lower-powered pistols (such as .32 and .25 caliber), Browning took his sleek designs for those to the Belgian weapons maker known as FN (for "Fabrique National"), which still exists today. The resulting pistols produced by FN were wildly popular all over Europe; the French started referring to any small pistol as "le browning." Military buyers didn't think much of them, but average citizens bought them by the millions.

Perhaps it was no surprise, then, that Gavrilo Princip used one of Browning's .380 ACP pistols (a round itself also invented by Browning) in 1914 to assassinate the Archduke Franz Ferdinand. High-profile crimes, and yellow journalism, led in the early twentieth century to occasional efforts at gun control in the United States, in a few big Eastern cities, aimed at such easily-concealed weapons (never aimed at heavier weapons). In a way, therefore, American gun control was an unintended result of the success of Browning's guns, which resulted in, if not an actual increase in crime, the perception of an increase in crime in urban areas. State-level, much less federal-level, gun control would have been regarded as insane at that time, of course. Before the modern era, gun control was wholly antithetical to the American ethos, and the only widespread gun grabbing any government engaged in was attempts by the Democrats to keep guns out the hands of black people in the southern states. Given that our gangster government has long massively expanded gun control, this era of government modesty seems like the distant past now. Yet, given that now we're in the era where you can easily print guns, including Browning's designs, it seems like

we're coming full circle on the ability of citizens to maintain needed weapons. Let's hope so.

Not done yet, Browning invented, in 1911, the M1911 pistol, the iconic .45 caliber handgun carried by the American military until the 1990s, which included many very important advances, such as in the trigger mechanism, and was used in World War I, including by Alvin York in his once-famous encounter. He returned to machine guns, in 1917 inventing the M1919 machine gun, an air-cooled gun extensively used by the United States military for the entire twentieth century, and still used by some countries today. He invented the BAR, the Browning Automatic Rifle, a hand-held, hard-hitting, 20-round-magazine-fed machine gun that saw extensive use in World War II (and the M240 gun today in use, a belt-fed gun, is very similar to the BAR). And, finally, before he dropped dead in his Belgian office of a heart attack in 1926, at age seventy-one, he finished most of the work on the M2, the instantly-recognizable .50 caliber machine gun still in use all over the world today.

What explains Browning's genius? According to Gorenstein, who documents his claim, Browning was preternaturally able at mental spatial manipulation. He could create visible mechanical objects in his mind, iteratively manipulate, in an interactive fashion, variations of them mentally, and then reduce the best designs to metal directly, rather than by first creating drawings. Of course, raw intelligence, focus, and a relentless work ethic enabled this talent to come to fruition; it's not enough to have talent if one is simply a dreamer, or an idiot savant. This ability to think in images, rather than words, seems to be frequent among those with extreme gifts—for example, both Albert Einstein and John von Neumann suggested that their mental processes revolved around images, rather than words, even though mechanical inventions were not their specific talent. In these days of computer-driven everything, I don't know if spatial manipulation is still as useful a specific talent in invention, but at this time, it was the key to a great deal of human advancement, and it certainly is one marker of outlier mental abilities useful to mankind.

Oddly, it does not appear that the massive increase in population in modern times, in organized, stratified societies such as ours where talent is very likely to be recognized and nurtured, has increased our number of geniuses. You would think that if the percentage is constant over

time, we'd have more today. I suppose it's hard to measure how many geniuses we have, but I can't think of any prominent modern geniuses, who really stand out from the herd. Nearly everyone celebrated today as a genius in supposedly talent-based fields is a moron whose "genius" is a lie (Anthony Fauci) or has accomplished only tasks of negative social value (Mark Zuckerberg). Probably this is both because recognizing, advancing, and rewarding genius is perceived by our elites as racist and sexist, for obvious reasons, and because advanced technology, being very complex, is necessarily the product of many men working together, in a way that was not true in Browning's day. Likely our geniuses are toiling unnoticed within larger projects, or are using their talents in obscure fields like higher mathematics. Or, also likely, a great many are wasting their talents in worthless, yet personally remunerative, fields, such as finance and law, where we have perhaps fifty times as many people working, mostly grossly overpaid, as a well-run society would have. Too bad.

Unlike many other famous men, Browning did not believe his success made his opinion relevant on matters outside his competency. He gave no interviews and he did not care what people thought of him, at least outside his family. He did subscribe, at least to some degree, to the common delusion of military inventors of the past, that improved killing machines would make wars less likely. At the same time he was a strong American patriot, when America was something worth being patriotic about, eager to assist the American military in meeting its needs (while being adequately compensated). When he died, he was honored by the nation and his family, and nobody had a bad word to say about him, or if anyone did, he kept it to himself. The world is very different now, but this is an educational book, for both children and adults, both about guns and about how a well-run society approaches and encourages technological advances.