

*For My Grandfather  
Who Started It All*



**Wayne Victor Venters**  
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# Gun Craft

## *The Art & Craft of Fine Guns and Gunmakers in the 21st Century*

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## Foreword

About 25 years ago, gunmaker John Wilkes remarked to me that traditional gunmaking is a 19th Century craft struggling to survive in the Space Age. Looking around his little shop at 79 Beak Street in the Soho section of London, I could not see much evidence of Space Age intrusion. It reminded me more of some image out of Dickens. The tiny front shop was stacked nearly to the ceiling with well-worn gun cases of oak and leather, with perhaps three or four newly completed guns on display. Through a doorway beyond lay an even tinier business office and a narrow stairway leading to the workshops above.

There again, two rooms, fitted with workbenches that were mostly cluttered with hand tools. The atmosphere was redolent with the smells of gun oil, linseed and fresh walnut shavings. Wads of tow, some fluffy and some blackly soaked with oil and solvent, lay scattered about. All told, it was about as traditional a shop as one could find in London. Even then, the more high-tech makers worked in digs tidy as operating rooms. Times change.

John Wilkes, Gun and Riflemaker, no longer occupies No. 79. Having no sons to whom they could pass the business, the Wilkes brothers, John and Tom, closed it some years ago—ending a tradition that began in 1830 and ultimately made Wilkes the oldest London gunmaker still owned by the founding family. I don't know what the building houses now, probably some trendy boutique. And I don't really want to know, as I prefer to remember it the way it once was.

But as Hamlet says, "The past is prologue." Having what I hope is a reasonably good grasp of what came before, I can't help wondering what the future will be.

My long-time friend Vic Venters has wondered this as well. The book you're about to read is the result of his curiosity, his boundless enthusiasm for finely built guns, and his admiration of the craftsmen who create them. It also derives from his hard-headed practical ap-

proach, free of the breathless gushing that too often taints the writing on this subject. Whether his topic is historical or technical, you'll find no sappy fantasizing here, just lucid thinking expressed in clear, cleanly crafted language.

You will find it neither dry nor pedantic. Vic's love of fine guns comes through at every turn. A writer of long experience and great skill, he achieves the balance between thought and feeling to which all of us who ply the word trade should aspire.

When we get it right, as Vic has done, the readers will be the prime beneficiaries. So, this is your book. I trust you'll enjoy it as much as I have.

—*Michael McIntosh*

## Acknowledgements

My grandfather was a bird hunter born and bred—the bird hunted being bobwhite quail. He kept a passel of dogs kenneled out back—setters and pointers and the occasional “drop”—and in a cedar-lined closet off the screened-in back porch was a rack of guns and shelves stacked with ammo and old hunting equipment. The closet was large enough for me to crawl into when I was a kid, and in it I could spend hours messing around with guns and gear and dreaming of the day I’d be old enough to take them afield.

Like many Southerners of his generation, my grandfather had switched from a double to an autoloader in the years following the Second World War. But he kept his side-by-sides—a couple of Field Grade L.C. Smiths, one a 12, the other a 20. My Dad grew up shooting the latter, mostly at squirrels, because he found the tightly choked Elsie less than an ideal bird gun.

To the eyes of a youngster, however, the Elsie had few flaws and, accompanied by my Granddad, I used it to shoot my first wood duck and woodcock in the lowlands of coastal North Carolina. I did miss my first quail with it, so it must have had a quirk or two—but his stewardship and that old gun, worn silver from use, stoked a passion in me that in a real sense has resulted in the book in your hands. To my Granddad, then, I owe the first round of thanks.

Ralph Stuart, *Shooting Sportsman’s* Editor in Chief, hired me back in 1996—which meant a move to Maine, a state teeming with grouse and woodcock, to write about guns. It was a dream job come true. It was Ralph who cajoled me into compiling, revising and updating the articles that make up the chapters in *Gun Craft*. Not only has it been a privilege to work with Ralph—and designer Lynda Mills—over the past decade and a half, but I also have appreciated being given the editorial freedom to tackle subjects divorced from commercially dictated interests of advertising. In an era of media increasingly being driven by the latter, I cannot emphasize how important this has been.

In the writing trade, fellow *Shooting Sportsman* editors Ed Carroll, David Trevallion, Silvio Calabi, Bruce Buck, Clair Kofoed, Chris Batha and Steven Dodd Hughes always have been generous in sharing their expertise. Michael McIntosh, the dean of America's fine-gun writers, has many times offered useful counsel, and Douglas Tate has likewise provided much valuable advice and informed perspectives on British gunmaking. John Ian Gregson has played perfect host (and de facto taxi-driver) on my many visits to the UK gun trade. British gun photographer David Grant likewise has been a great host, and he took many of the photos that illustrate this work. Elena Micheli-Lambo and her husband, Stephen, were invaluable with contacts and translations in the Italian trade. Engineer/writer Don Amos has rescued me from any number of technical flubs. *Blue Book* author S.P. Fjestad generously shared photos proprietary to his publishing company.

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—VicVenters