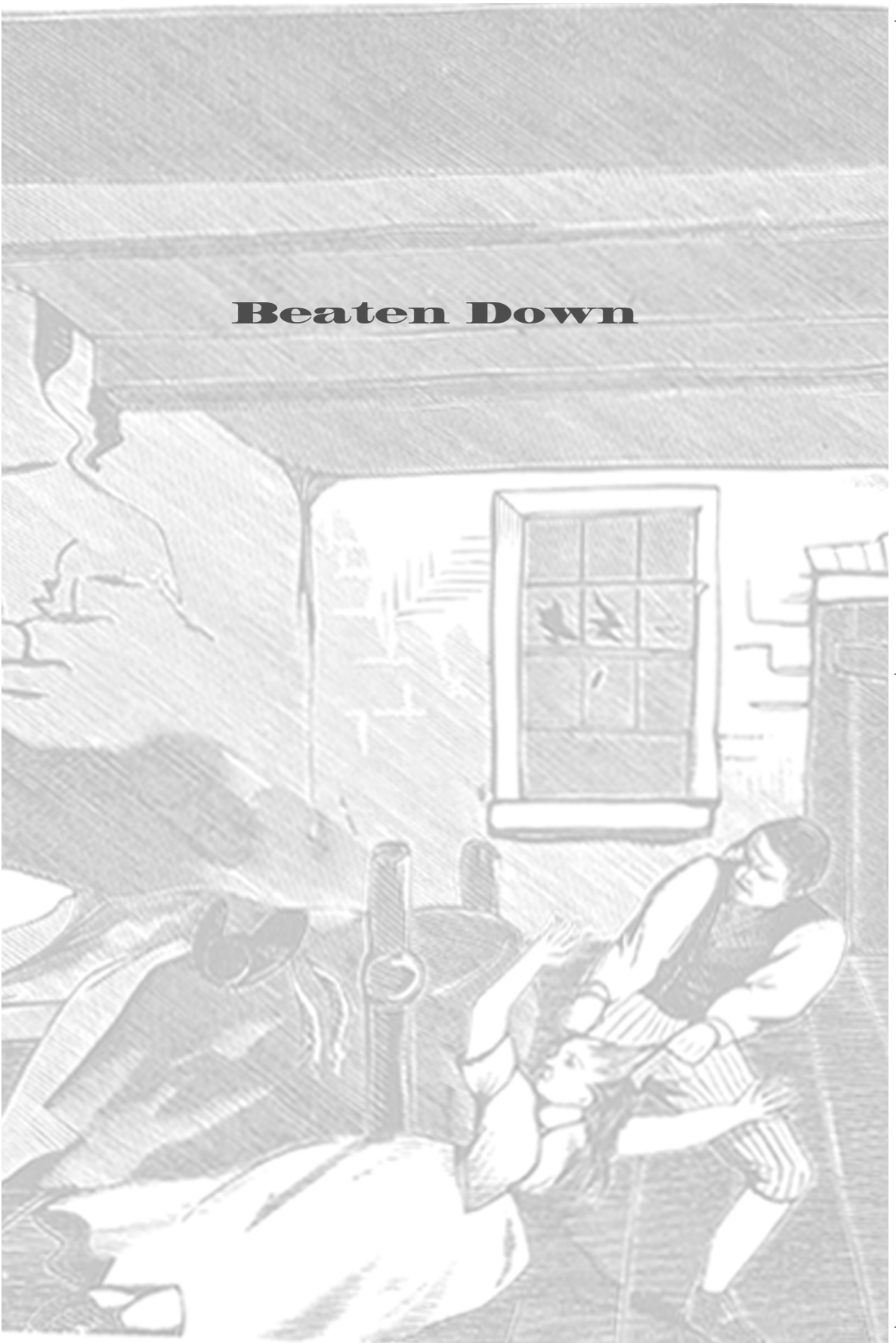
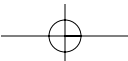
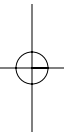


Beaten Down





INTRODUCTION

EVERY OTHER FRIDAY, one by one, we filed forward, bent over, and took our medicine: one or more “hacks” from a wooden paddle. It was the late 1960s at Lewis and Clark Consolidated, and the students who had been bad were suffering for it. Our teachers, paying homage to a cultural revolution that had filtered down even to rural Clatsop County, Oregon, called these events “happenings.”

Not many of us feared these women. Our physical education teacher was much more imposing. He administered his infrequent punishments with a bat, behind closed doors—though the sound of hard plastic on taut buttocks resonated across our small gymnasium. The highly public happenings were, by contrast, something of a spectacle, a peculiar blend of sixties trendiness and old-fashioned discipline, tintured, I now think, by sadism. The pain inflicted was more apt to be emotional than physical. One of my most vivid images from elementary school is of my classmates snickering as Mrs. Gramson daintily returned my ubiquitous packet of tissues after paddling me, thereby implying that I had acted the coward and put them in my back pocket to cushion the blow.

Other writers from Clatsop County have occasionally described unremarkable acts of violence. In the 1960s and 1970s Sam Churchill recorded his memories of growing up in an early-twentieth-century logging camp. Churchill depicted a community that was generous but rough, one in which violence flared repeatedly but seldom with results that seemed consequential. A crude but big-hearted neighbor woman beat her obstreperous boys. The loggers routinely used their free time to fight each other. Churchill’s mother, who hailed from New England, never accepted the community’s ready use of physical force. Her son recorded an instance in which she separated two combative men and demanded to know why they were fighting.

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“My God, Mrs. Churchill,” blurted one of them after an awkward pause, “do we have to have a reason?”¹

Other accounts of violence lay folded tightly in filing cabinets crammed in the basement of the county courthouse in Astoria. Charlotte Smith, the daughter of a prominent Clatsop Native woman and a white father, filed three divorce suits against successive spouses, and in each she described sundry acts of cruelty. Sylvester Ingalls, whom she had married in 1864, would not make a fire for her when she was sick with menstrual cramps, had farted in bed and then held the covers over her head, had not sufficiently provided for her, and “swears at me all the time.” He had also committed adultery. Three years after this suit, in 1874, Charlotte married Charles Dodge. Just two weeks after the wedding he “got mad & cursed me & threatened to leave me.” He had “treated me roughly all the time” and had hit and pushed her, at least once because she had tried to keep him from whipping her boy from the first marriage. They divorced in 1879. Charlotte wed Henry Brallier a year later and divorced him in 1892. This third suit’s documentation is relatively sketchy, although Charlotte cited an instance in which Henry had hit her with his fist and a fire steel.²

Is this the stuff of history? Not according to most historians. Emma Gene Miller’s history of Clatsop County devotes considerable space to schools and lumbering without treating violence. She thinks it noteworthy that Charlotte Smith once gave a little girl some material for a dress, but she has nothing to say about her four marriages. Nor have more scholarly accounts of North American history much troubled themselves with prosaic acts of interpersonal violence. Historians of violence have largely concerned themselves with collective deeds easily categorized as political, such as riots, strikes, and vigilante movements, although growing numbers are paying attention to homicides. When Kenneth McNaught criticizes historians for overlooking violence in Canada and calls for an approach that is more sensitive to local history, he is not referring to wife beating, rape, or child abuse. When Carlos Schwantes remarks that labor strife seldom turned violent in British Columbia, he cites the absence of riots and gun battles like the handful that erupted in Washington, not whether miners and loggers routinely brawled in saloons and bunkhouses. A child being turned over his parent’s knee, a pair of inebriated men squaring off, a husband slapping his wife: these events are deemed historically inconsequential, a sort of white noise that has, like

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the poor, been with us always, humming quietly during and between explosive acts of violence.³

Yet the very pervasiveness of intimate violence makes it worthy of concerted historical examination. The fact that automobile accidents are apt to yield only one or two fatalities does not mean that safety experts concern themselves only with airline crashes, events nearly as rare as they are catastrophic. By the same token, the average North American has been and is much more likely to be injured or even killed by a parent, spouse, or friend than by a member of a vigilante or terrorist group. Events like the Oklahoma City bombing are so spectacular and episodic that they mask the steady drumbeat of blows that suffuse many people's lives. If historians are concerned with violence, should we not study its most common forms?

Many social scientists certainly do so. Criminologists, sociologists, and psychologists take prosaic acts of interpersonal violence much more seriously than historians do. The topic is addressed in innumerable books and by several journals, including *Violence and Victims* and *Victimology*. As these titles indicate, such scholars, like Sam Churchill's mother, approach violence as a problem. They associate it with deviance and are primarily concerned with measuring, predicting, and preventing it.

This sort of work is very important, but it can also be misleading. The characterization of violence as a uniquely harmful act, the automatic conflation of violence with pathology, can distort, obscure, and mislead. Much of the voluminous work produced by Murray Straus and Richard Gelles, probably our most influential students of domestic violence, is burdened by this assumption. At the heart of their analysis is a "conflict tactics scale" that classifies violent acts by type (slap versus kick, for example) with no consideration of the principals' size, strength, or status, let alone an assessment of the broader social context in which such blows are administered. Hence the scale would indicate that my stint as a day-care provider, when I regularly absorbed the cuffs and blows of enraged toddlers, was far more harrowing than a childhood during which I continually expected, but never received, a thrashing from my father.⁴

Anthropologists more often succeed at linking particular violent acts to larger social and cultural patterns. In *Hunting Humans: The Rise of the Modern Multiple Murderer*, for example, Elliott Leyton argues that his subjects represent "the logical extension of many of the central themes in their

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culture—of worldly ambition, of success and failure, and of manly avenging violence.”⁵ Leyton is concerned not simply with the number and personal characteristics of serial and mass killers, but with what his subjects are attempting to accomplish through their horrible acts and how these goals relate to ones shared by the rest of us. Nigel Rapport’s *Talking Violence: An Anthropological Interpretation of Conversation in the City* considers less dramatic behavior. He argues that people’s remarks about violence “testify to the complex drama of their own lives” and serve to “reflect upon community, about those who share one’s definition of proper behaviour and the rules of its description, and those who do not.”⁶ A number of other social scientists have used the topic of violence as a point of departure for broader concerns. Emanuel Marx argues that beleaguered residents of an Israeli town use violent assaults as “appeals” to demonstrate and elicit recognition of their desperation, to “communicate things which ordinarily are not clearly stated, and sharply bring home familiar truths which had been half ignored.”⁷ From serial killers like Ted Bundy to young men arguing over whose hometown has the toughest bars, violence is related to complex questions of identity, status, and power.

Interpersonal violence can be like Clifford Geertz’s Balinese cockfight: more important for what it signifies than for what it constitutes. To be sure, the three scenarios that open this book can simply be interpreted as abusive or unnecessary acts of violence. Most of us can agree that schoolchildren and wives ought not to be hit and that grown men should find nonviolent means of amusement. But to assert this is to leave much unsaid and unexamined. The pupils at my school and Charlotte Smith were struck for very particular reasons: we disobeyed or challenged people who considered themselves our superiors. The violence we suffered therefore emerged from a hierarchical relationship, a relationship that usually maintained itself without recourse to physical blows. Indeed, Smith accused her first husband of abuse that did not include violence. Violence, furthermore, has often erupted from above or below when a husband’s or teacher’s authority was least, not most, secure. Its appearance, as Linda Gordon has pointed out, commonly denotes resistance as well as dominance.⁸ The Clatsop County loggers’ violence is still more difficult to contain in conventional moral categories. The loggers were peers, their violence consensual and, to Mrs. Churchill’s bemusement, apparently

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without purpose. But, as we shall see, such fights commonly served both to determine a pecking order within a male society of equals and to set the members of that society apart from their purported inferiors: children, people of color, and of course women.

Acts of interpersonal violence almost always constitute an attempt by one or both participants to exercise power. I define power as the ability to control one's own life and the lives of others. An infant has very little power and must depend upon the whims and judgements of others even to eat or move. A wealthy corporate head, on the other hand, lives more or less as he (or occasionally she) pleases and can throw thousands of other people out of work with the stroke of a pen. Power, then, has to do with both the extent to which others can impose their wills on us and the extent to which we can impose our will on them. A person's power can vary considerably from place to place and relationship to relationship. A man may enjoy little of it at work and a great deal of it at home.

How are power and violence associated? At first glance, that relationship seems clear enough: dominant people use violence to control subordinates. But, as we have already seen, social arrangements are never this simple. Even the most marginalized and oppressed people possess at least a modicum of power; as any reflective parent or administrator will attest to, no one can fully control another's actions. Violence, furthermore, is a relatively crude and sometimes costly means of exercising dominance. It often invites legal sanctions and disrespect. Violence is therefore frequently abjured by those with the most power and employed by those who lack other coercive tools, such as status or money. These people may use violence as an act of protest. Such protests can be direct, as when a student or worker hits an overbearing teacher or superior. But they are often indirect, as when a pair of unemployed and uneducated men square off in a bar to demonstrate their mettle.

Like many social scientists, reformers are often tone-deaf about how interpersonal violence relates to power and dominance. Expressions of concern over violence can serve to point out the abuses of powerful people, such as parents and husbands. But they can also obscure larger patterns of dominance. Indeed "moral panics" focused on violence commonly divert public attention from social inequalities and inequities to less discomforting explanations of social and cultural strain. Focusing on violence as a social problem enables

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powerful people to define social ills and assign blame for them, leaving unquestioned their own privileges and abuses.⁹

Dominance does not necessarily require the use of physical force. Michel Foucault shows how criminal justice shifted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from the work of literally tearing apart and torturing the bodies of wrongdoers to a program that instead fastened onto their minds. The new system appeared much more humane. Criminals were now rehabilitated, not punished. The state aspired to change their thoughts, not abuse their flesh. But this new system was both more ambitious and more subtle. “Power,” as Foucault put it, now acted “while concealing itself.”¹⁰ The state had become skilled at imposing its will on others and at disguising that coercive act.

This book suggests that a similar process transpired on the micropolitical level, within communities and families. Powerful mid-nineteenth-century men of the north Pacific slope (British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon) were not shy about using fists, whips, or switches to validate their social position. High status entailed the right or even obligation to hit others. Today, on the whole, it does not. Refusing to use violence has become a mark of masculine social distinction—a choice that typically disturbs the status quo not one whit. Like Foucault’s prison administrators, powerful men’s renunciation of violence more often obscures than undermines existing patterns of dominance and control.

Interpersonal violence should therefore not be studied as an end unto itself. It is inextricably bound up in larger cultural processes and moral problems, and its causes and significance cannot be understood aside from social relations of power. That is the thesis of this book.

The word “violence” has become highly elastic. Some lament the violence of poverty, others the violence of abortion. I have adopted a relatively narrow and literal definition: for the purposes of this study, violence is a deliberate physical act, typically a blow, that causes direct physical pain to another person.¹¹ This book focuses on interpersonal acts of physical force: violence within families and schools, between relatives, friends, and acquaintances. It will say little about warfare or sports or other types of collective, organized violence, such as riots, lynchings, vigilante movements, or struggles between labor and management. I am concerned with micropolitical acts of violence, particularly violence between people who knew each other well.

This is cultural as well as social history. I am interested in how people have

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practiced and talked about violence. Which acts have various groups of people condoned or condemned? What sort of violence has been identified by political leaders as a social problem, a crime warranting or requiring the intervention of the state? Answering these questions reveals that talking about violence has also constituted an act of power, an attempt to expand the influence of one's own group at the expense of others.

Since I am primarily interested in exploring the relationship between power and interpersonal violence, this book is not an orthodox history in its organization or its methodology. Its geographic boundaries are clear enough: the land that today constitutes the states of Washington and Oregon and the province of British Columbia. It also progresses chronologically, from pre-contact Native societies to the present. But this is not primarily a regional or comparative study, nor an attempt to render an exhaustive history. It uses various locales and successive periods not to offer a complete history of violence in parts of the United States and Canada but rather as a vehicle for exploring the manifold and complex relations between violence and power. Change over time and distinctions of nationality have, to be sure, affected both the nature of interpersonal violence and its relationship to power. But I am more interested in using time and place to explore the nuances of that relationship than in simply focusing on the history of violent acts. This book may therefore be more properly understood as historical anthropology or historical sociology, in which the past is used as an analytical tool, than as a traditional history concerned primarily with charting and explaining change.

The book's chapters reflect this goal. They address not simply change over time, but different aspects of interpersonal violence and its relationship to power. The first illustrates how the colonization of Native people transformed the political nature and significance of their violence. The next examines how violent acts among settlers constituted both dominance and resistance. Chapter three shows how these patterns of dominance and resistance persisted into the 1890s, even as social relations became less contested and interpersonal violence more rare. The following chapter examines how the region's urban newspapers vacillated over whether to treat marginalized people's violence as potent or impotent in the twentieth century's first decade. Chapter five treats the 1920s, a decade during which public celebrations of masculine physical contests waxed while men's actual practice of violence increasingly occurred not among or before peers, but in private, against children and wives.

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The final chapter compares the very different ways in which two marginal ethnic groups, people of Japanese and African descent, encountered and practiced violence during the twentieth century's first half. The epilogue addresses the recent explosion of concern around many types of interpersonal violence.

The north Pacific slope is a good place to conduct a multifaceted history of violence. Its major geographic features—its coastline, mountain ranges, and most of the Columbia River—run north to south, across an international boundary. The Chinook peoples of the lower Columbia River shared more in common with the Haida of the Queen Charlotte Islands far to the north than they did with the Nez Perce or Cayuse of the Columbia Plateau, just as modern residents of Vancouver have arguably more closely resembled residents of Seattle than residents of Fort St. John, in British Columbia's northeastern quarter. This is not to say that nationality has never trumped geography on the north Pacific slope. But its victories were hard won, at least in the nineteenth century. British Columbia has in many respects more closely resembled the U.S. West than Washington and particularly Oregon have: it developed very rapidly, around mining, and attracted many footloose young male adventurers while Willamette Valley farmers were creating and maintaining highly stable communities. Society north of the border was therefore decidedly more masculine, mobile, and ethnically diverse than it was in Oregon or Washington. Physical and cultural geography inverted British and American ideals of order and individualism and made it difficult for authoritarian British Columbia officials to impose their vision of a peaceful and orderly society on their volatile charges. That despite these difficulties British Columbians soon became less violent than their more settled counterparts to the south suggests that cultural ideals could mitigate demography.¹²

The north Pacific slope has seemed like a relatively peaceful place. British Columbians soon indulged in the Canadian habit of contrasting their orderly, peace-loving society to that south of the line. Although Oregon and particularly Washington had some vigilante movements and lynchings, their histories have been much more tranquil than most parts of the West. Yet the province and two states offer abundant and divergent historical sources describing violence. Many fur traders and ethnographers described Native peoples. Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia have ample reposi-

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ries of newspapers dating from at least the 1850s and some very useful oral history collections and autobiographies. Vancouver and Portland have extensive arrest records for much of their history. British Columbia has very strong criminal court records and many published reminiscences. Oregon and to a lesser extent Washington have detailed accounts from divorce suits.

Each type of source offers particular pitfalls and possibilities. Newspaper accounts are perhaps the most tempting; a few days' work in most any period will produce a stack of easily digested renditions of violent encounters. These accounts can easily mislead, however. They are a collection of violent acts deemed newsworthy by their editors, not a trustworthy sample of all violent acts actually committed. Hence when Roger McGrath asserts that, aside from prostitutes, women of two western U.S. mining towns "suffered little from crime or violence" and that "young toughs" committed "no violent crimes," what he has actually established is that newspapers and the court systems seldom noted such acts.¹³ Arrest records, like newspapers, are more useful for assessing how community leaders perceived and punished violence than for tracing actual levels of violence, for the vast majority of assaults have always gone unrecorded. Inasmuch as a dead body usually generated legal notice and newspaper stories, homicide statistics are much more accurate.¹⁴ I use them to indicate the level of extreme violence in particular places and times. More useful still have been qualitative accounts by participants in violent acts. Some of these accounts are from autobiographies, reminiscences, or oral histories. Reliable and detailed descriptions of criminal acts can be found in court documents, particularly the preliminary hearings for assaults and homicides that occurred within a few days of an altercation. To be sure, witnesses tailored their testimony to fit their desires. But their statements nonetheless convey a great deal about social and legal expectations of violent behavior, and the use of witnesses by complainants and defendants alike provides a check against bias. These legal materials, generated by a wide variety of people, offer detailed depictions of violent acts seldom recorded elsewhere.

As I have already argued, these accounts are important not simply because they describe acts of violence that historians have neglected, acts that have harmed and humiliated most North Americans. They also suggest and detail other neglected and pernicious aspects of our collective past: the shifting but

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stubborn lines of power and authority that have divided colonized from colonizer, person of color from person of privilege, working man from gentleman, wife from husband, child from adult, son and daughter from mother and father.

Interpersonal violence has been and is a pressing social problem. But it has occurred alongside still larger problems that it has often obscured: social inequalities and injustices that have both shaped and transcended the blows that have punctuated and diminished the lives of so many of us.