

Gifts of arms from the province of Guipuzcoa to Fernando VII

James D. Lavin*

In the aftermath of Wellington's victory at Vitoria and Joseph Bonaparte's departure from Spain, Fernando VII was released from French custody on 7 March 1814. Three weeks later he crossed the border on his return to Spain. Almost exactly six years earlier the industrialist D. Ignacio María de Ibarzábal, head of the four armsmaking guilds of Eibar, and at that time, twice mayor, presented 14.000 reales to the city government for the manufacture of a gift of a shotgun and a pair of pistols to the newly crowned Fernando VII. The purpose of the gift was to heighten the king's awareness of the excellence of Eibarese gunmakers. Ibarzabal's plans were thwarted by his own death in March 1808, but they would otherwise have come to naught following Fernando's departure for France in April 1808 and his subsequent abdication.

The project, abandoned during the six-year interim of the Peninsular War, was abruptly revived in June of 1814. In this euphoric period, while Fernando was still «el Deseado», the *Diputación* of the town of Eibar elected to proceed with the gift. The town decided that the king should be given a garniture consisting of a shotgun and two pistols, «the best that could be made of their kind». They were, however, to be made in Placencia.

Perhaps here it should be pointed out that the arms industry centered in Eibar, Guipuzcoa, was a closely knit network of interdependent family factories. As Jovellanos aptly described in his *Diario* in 1791, these extended to Placencia, Ermua, Elgoibar, and Mondragón. Thus, it was logical in 1814 that the *Diputación* seek the advice of D. Manuel Silvestre de Mendiola of Placencia as to whom they should award the contract. Mendiola was a barrelmaker who in 1805 had served a term as mayor of Eibar; later he had

(*) Dr., Williamsburg, Virginia (USA).

been a captain in the 3rd Placencia Company against the French. Mendiola was eloquent in his praise of the Eibar gunmaker Juan Esteban de Bustindui, «a master without peer in Europe». He further suggested that he handle the negotiations himself since Bustindui was «somewhat lazy and moreover he usually has many orders» and might need his enthusiasm stirred.

On 7 July Mendiola wrote to the *Diputación* to say that he had contracted Bustindui to make pieces «such as never seen before», and that price was to be no consideration. By 21 August the barrels had been forged, Bustindui's son-in-law Alberdi forged and decorated the mounts, and in February 1815 the pistols and shotgun were delivered to the *Diputación*. A scarce eight months passed between their contracting and completion. Their cost of 17.000 reales exceeded Ibarzabal's pre-war gift by 3.000 reales.

More than two months after the decision to make the garniture for Fernando VII, the Province decided to send the king a further gift, the complete arms for the Royal Bodyguard. These were to be manufactured at the Royal Factory of Placencia. This generosity was accepted in a Royal Order of 25 September 1814. Among the hundreds of pieces comprising the gift were five pairs of pistols for the king and four officers of the Guard. Specifically, these were a pair for the king as Colonel of his Guard, another for the Captain Commander, one for the Supernumerary Captain, and two pairs for the Aides. The barrels were made by the same Juan Esteban de Bustindui, the locks by Juan Andrés de Mendizabal of Placencia, and the mounts by Mariano de Vergara, Chief Inspector of the Placencia factory. The Duke of Alagón conveyed the king's thanks to the Province on 4 July 1816.

For the next three decades, the disposition of these arms is unknown. Normally, the shotgun would have been maintained for hunting in the Real Armería, the accompanying pistols would have been kept in the carriage house. The king's Bodyguard pistols may have been with the other four pairs in the officers' guardroom.

The next concrete reference to any of these firearms appears in the 1849 catalog of the Real Armería. Their owner, Fernando VII had died at only forty-nine in 1833, leaving as his heir, his daughter, the three-year-old Isabel II. In 1846, at sixteen, Isabel married her cousin, D. Francisco de Asis, Duke of Cádiz. Almost immediately the new king consort took as his project the reorganization of the Real Armería, left a shambles after the French occupation. In its first catalog, that of 1849, the gift garniture reappears, after a fashion.

One must understand the total disorder in which the Armería was left after the French departure. In 1811 Joseph Bonaparte had held a great ball in the main hall of the old Armería designed by Herrera in the sixteenth century; for its accommodation, all of the armors and hundreds of other objects were placed in storage. If we are to believe contemporary accounts, it was a storage from which many objects never had been removed, but simply allowed to rot as victims of a leaky roof. Added to this was the disastrous fire of 1838 that seems to have covered the disappearance of a multitude of pieces.

Technically, only the gift shotgun would have been affected, and this by the fire which occurred five years after the king's death. Whatever the disarray of the Real Armeria, the king's hunting arms seemed to have been maintained there under the supervision of the Chief Armorer, D. Blas Zuloaga, and his son and aide, Eusebio. Thus, when Francisco de Asis began his project of reorganization, the two armorers were the logical choice to do much of the identification of pieces and to supervise their cleaning and restoration.

The first catalog of the the newly refurbished Armory was ready in time for its public opening in 1849. A search for the 1814 gift garniture in this catalog shows two gifts from Guipuzcoa listed separately. The first is a pair of pistols, numbers 2177 and 2183, with gold inlaid barrels described as being inscribed: «BY THE PROVINCE OF GUIPUZCOA / COLONEL OF THE GUARD OF MY ROYAL PERSON» (POR LA PROVINCIA DE GUIPUZCOA / CORONEL DE LA GUARDIA DE MI REAL PERSONA), which will be seen to be a misreading. They are, of course, the king's pistols, one of the five pairs of officers' Guard pistols made in Placencia and delivered in 1816. Item 2179 is described as «A shotgun manufactured in Eibar by Juan Esteban Bustindui... It was a gift from the Province of Guipuzcoa to Fernando VII». There is no inscription to this effect on the gun, but the Chief Armorer, Blas Zuloaga, had been born in Eibar in 1782, and although he was living in Madrid at the time of the Peninsular War, he maintained close contact with his family in the North. He was certainly personally acquainted with Bustindui and Alberdi, and he was probably well aware of the circumstances of the 1814 gift. In 1815, prior to his transfer to the Real Armería, Blas had been appointed Armorer to the Royal Bodyguard. In this capacity he would have received the 1816 gift including the five pairs of Guards' pistols. While the catalog descriptions of the gift arms are brief-and careless, there is logically no attempt to associate the two items. In spite of its limitations, the 1849 catalog was, on the whole, a marvel of research, given that it was built upon essentially nothing. However, in the period of Romanticism when interest in arms was limited to the medieval, simply out-of-date firearms were frequently dismissed as inconsequential.

Juan Crooke, the Count Widower of Valencia de Don Juan, who was himself a latter-day product of this mentality, became Keeper of the Real Armería in the late nineteenth century, and was responsible for its second, and largest, catalog, issued in 1898. His reorganization begot a new numbering system, and we now find the king's Guard pistols 2177 and 2183 renumbered K.235 and K.236. Their description corresponds to that of the 1849 catalog, but their barrel inscription is now transcribed as COLONEL OF THE GUARD OF MY ROYAL PERSON / JUAN ESTEBAN BUSTINDUI (CORONEL DE LA GUARDA (sic) DE MI REAL PERSONA / JUAN ESTEBAN BUSTINDUI); we find that it is on plaques on the stock that the inscription appears: «Given to D. Fernando VII by the Province of Guipuzcoa» (Regaladas a D. Fernando VII por la Prouincia de Guipuza). Neither the 1849 catalog nor

this one mentions the lock inscription on both pistols: MENDIZABAL EN PLAZENCIA. A parenthetical note in the entry refers us to K.166.

K.166 is a shotgun «richly worked» («ricamente labrada») with Juan Esteban Bustindui's gold mark struck in its barrel breech; «the lock and the buttplate bear the name ALBERDI». This is, in fact a misstatement. The shotgun K.166 has the name BUSTINDUI in gold capitals inlaid along the lower center of the lockplate. ALBERDI, also in gold, is found on the triggerguard bow and buttplate. Valencia concludes his description with the observation that the shotgun «Was a gift made by the province of Guipuzcoa to king Fernando VII, together with the pistols K.235 and K.236», thus wrongly uniting the two items for almost a century to come.

Only an arms enthusiast scrupulously reading Gregorio de Mujica's somewhat obscure, but wonderfully detailed 1910 *Monoqrafía histórica de la Villa de Eibar*, might have found the discrepancy between that author's description of the two gifts, taken from original sources, and Valencia's combined garniture in the Real Armer;a. However, the loss and substitution would be merely a curiosity had not both pistols of Eibar's 1814 gift not recently and separately surfaced far from Spain.

The shotgun, currently K.166, is a shadow of its former self. It has survived two fires, that of 1838, and a more disastrous one in 1884; one or the other resulted in heavy scorching of its stock, to which subsequent cleanings and restoration have removed the sharpness of its moldings, carving, and checkering. Nevertheless, it is easily recognizable for what it is; Bustindui's gold signature is on the lock, his gold stamp on the barrel. Alberdi's gold signature crosses the triggerguard bow. Bustindui, influenced by current Napoleonic fashion, created what is probably the gun's most impressive feature, a spiral of golden stars against the blue background of the forward two thirds of the barrel.

In the collection of the late Clay P. Bedford of Arizona was a pistol identical in every respect, to the slightest decorative detail, to the shotgun K.166. Its principal difference consisted in its excellent condition; its carving and checkering are sharp and precise, its chiselling and engraving unblemished by rust and cleaning. Only the loss of a tiny silver escutcheon surrounding a barrel key mars its perfection. Since its owner's recent death, the pistol's location remains uncertain.

Now the pair to Bedford's pistol has surfaced in a private collection in England. It is in perfect condition and, obviously, is identical in all respects to its counterpart. While it may be impossible ever to bring the garniture together again, it is satisfying to know that its pieces, although separated, have survived.

By finally being recognized, they resolve the problem of the unusual marriage of the Bodyguard pistols with the shotgun from the 1814 garniture. Their excellent condition shows us how splendid the latter was prior to suffering from fire and mistreatment.