

# COVEY RISE®

APRIL-MAY 2020





# THE NAME LIVES ON

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A century later, the name of John Moses Browning is still at the forefront of European gunmaking.

STORY BY MARCUS JANSSEN

There are few American gunmaking names more widely recognized than that of Browning. Its founder, John Moses Browning, was an engineering genius who designed his first firearm at the age of 13 before going on to patent 128 designs in the United States over almost half a century, many of which are still in use today. And yet, almost all guns bearing the Browning name can be traced back to Belgium. The deeper you delve into the history of Browning Arms, the more confounding things seem to become—up to a point.

But this confusion stems from one simple fact: Although the Browning company was founded in 1878 in the United States to market the sporting firearm designs of its eponymous founder, John Browning, his designs tended to be leased out to other gunmakers, including the great and burgeoning American firms of the time, the likes of Winchester, Colt, and Remington. Indeed, John Browning was the brains behind several of the most iconic and best-selling designs by Winchester and Colt, particularly in the area of autoloading firearms, and it can be argued that neither firm would be what they are today without Browning.

But despite his significant contributions to the success of the great American firms of the day, it is in fact a European company with which Browning's name is most directly affiliated. In 1897, almost 20 years after Browning Arms was founded, the board of Fabrique Nationale (FN)—a company founded in 1889 in Herstal, Belgium, to manufacture Mauser Model 89 rifles for the Belgian army—sent sales manager Hart O. Berg to the United States on a fact-finding mission into the advances that had been made in bicycle manufacturing.

While in the States, Berg met two arms manufacturers, John Browning and his brother Matthew. John, whose ingenuity and creative spirit had earned him a reputation as one of the most innovative minds in the American gunmaking industry, had just taken out a patent for a 7.65-mm blowback-operated automatic pistol, which Berg immediately took an interest in. Browning duly offered FN the manufacturing license for the pistol, which was presented to the board in June of 1897. The contract was signed in July.

Thereafter, the FN directors wasted no time in obtaining the rights to manufacture most of Browning's new firearms and components. But it was in 1907 that, at FN's request, John granted the right to use his surname as a trademark. He never gave the same permission to any of the large American companies that had commercialized his first inventions.

In the years that followed, the popularity of firearms developed by Browning and manufactured by FN would continue to increase, both in Europe and America. The sales figures provide convincing proof of this, especially with regard to pistols. From 1899 to 1906, 250,000 pistols were sold. In 1908, the total reached 500,000, and in July 1912, the one-millionth pistol was assembled in Herstal, Belgium.

Of course, the first World War changed everything. Germany

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PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF BROWNING ARMS COMPANY



requisitioned much of FN's factory machinery and equipment, and production of Browning firearms ground to a complete halt.

But shortly after the war, John Browning returned to Herstal where, in collaboration with staff from FN, he resumed his research and inventions with vigor. Among these were a .22 rifle and a hunting shotgun with superimposed barrels. The latter was in the prototype stage, having been designed three years earlier, but ultimately, it was destined to become the world-renowned B25 Superposed shotgun that is still in production today, with almost 400,000 produced in Belgium over a 45-year period up to the mid-1970s. Almost  $\frac{2}{3}$  of these guns were destined for the North American market.

But before John Browning was happy to launch his new B25 Superposed, he wanted to improve its operation and adapt it—as far as the techniques of the time would allow—so that it could be mass-produced at a competitive price. Sadly, he was still perfecting it in 1926 when he died in his office at FN.

The completion of the B25 then fell to John's son, Val Allen Browning, who finally launched the B25 in 1931, having acquired a number of further patents, including one for the gun's single-trigger mechanism. Thanks to the combined efforts of father and son, as well as the technicians and gunmakers of Herstal, the Browning B25 Superposed went on to become a 20th-Century benchmark in the manufacturing of

shotguns and is still regarded as one of the strongest and most reliable shotgun actions of all time.

John Browning's early ventures of single-shot, pump, lever-action and semiautomatic shotguns and rifles had a somewhat "agricultural" look and feel about them. However, look and feel are not everything. A tool has to work, and all of the Browning designs did that.

Once production was moved to FN in Belgium, there was a noticeable aesthetic improvement of the finished products of his designs. Indeed, it could be argued that the B25 Superposed could not have become what it was without some European influence. And it owes more than a nod to British gun design.

The B25's fixed sliding fore-end—one of the iconic and distinguishing features of the B25—can be traced back to the Ellis and Wilkinson patent of 1877. The cocking link between the fore-end and cocking bar is loosely based upon W.W. Greener's patent of 1880, and the cocking bar itself is adapted from Bentley and Baker's patent of 1883.

Browning was able to combine these designs into a compact

#### **BROWNING'S LATEST**

The B15 (Grade E pictured at left) carries Browning's torch forward almost a century after the debut of the popular B25.



over-and-under gun. The barrels—the only parts of the design that require a great deal of input from a skilled craftsman—still use the classic under-lumps of the standard side-by-side design. The forward edges of the split-rear lump draw up against the forward faces of the deep slots in the underside of the strong, heavier-than-necessary action. This feature, combined with a full-width locking bolt held in place by the whole of the standing breech and its thick side walls, gives the design immense strength. Indeed, it is one of the strongest gun designs ever.

By making the two tangs at the rear of the action rigid—by screwing them together and using a stock bolt to secure the action to the stock—a firm, unmoving platform was given to the very simple, much-copied inertia single trigger. The use of coil springs—in place of English or European leaf springs for the main ejector or sear and trigger springs—resulted in huge cost savings combined with a spring that will work even if broken.

The one downside to the design is that the over-slung sears, while utilizing the given space in the action, actually give poor and draggy trigger pulls that cannot be improved to the quality of a best gun.

The stock bolt allows for pre-machined stocks to be easily fitted with limited input of a skilled gunstocker, thus keeping costs down. With FN's machining capabilities, Browning made his design as machine-friendly as possible, meaning all the handwork involved was focused on minimal fitting and finishing.

This can be seen in the early B25s that are lumpy, heavy, boxy, and frankly agricultural. After John Browning's death, his son Val improved the single trigger and, along with the artisans at FN, restyled and reshaped the barrels, fore-end, and action, using much more skilled handwork from Herstal's craftsmen until the B25 reached its aesthetic zenith in the 1970s.

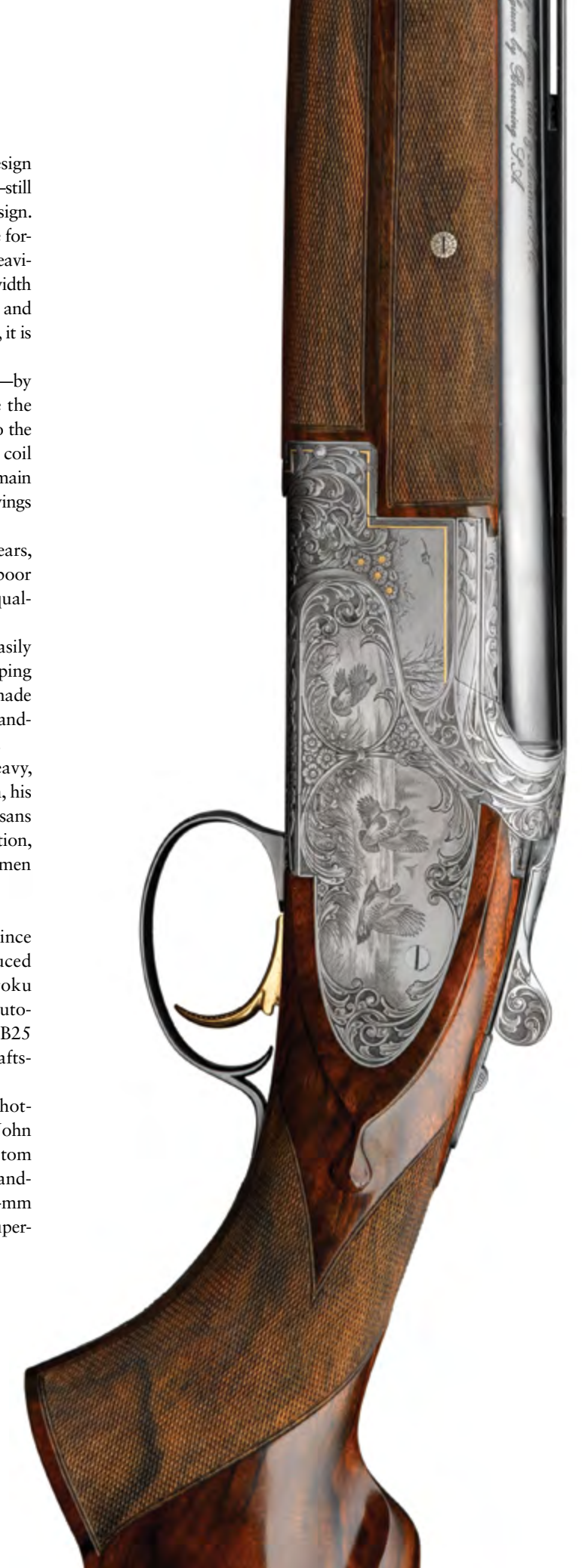
While FN—which had owned Browning outright since 1977—shifted the production of all mass-produced Browning guns and rifles to Japan (Browning and Miroku over-and-under shotguns) and Portugal (Browning semiautomatic shotguns and bolt-action rifles) in the 1970s, the B25 Superposed is still made in Liège, Belgium, by master craftsmen, with each one made to order.

Today, all handcrafted and hand-finished Browning shotguns, rifles, and pistols are manufactured as part of the “John M. Browning Collection”—known as The Browning Custom Shop until 2016—which includes the CCS range of over-and-under double rifles, the legendary Browning Hi Power 9-mm pistol, and, of course, the B25 range of over-and-under Super-

#### **B25 WINDSOR >**

From the unique fore-end to the strong, reliable action, it is unmistakable that the iconic Browning B25 was engineered with European influence.

#### **< JOHN MOSES BROWNING**



posed shotguns, as well as the most recent addition to the collection, the B15 Beauchamp over-and-under shotgun.

In the hands of master craftsmen, a modern made-to-order B25 begins its journey in the barrel workshop where two high-quality steel bars are successively hot-forged to increase their strength, before each one is individually drilled and hammered. Using the traditional demibloc method—the machining of each individual barrel from one solid piece of steel before brazing them together—provides outstanding strength and durability.

The side and top ribs are then soldered and brazed to the barrels before the barrelmaker then bores out the chambers and reams out the chokes.

Striking off is the process in which the braze residue from the top and side ribs are removed by hand, as well as any unevenness to the outer profile of the barrel as a result of machining. The barrels are then smoothed off using planes specially designed by the craftsmen themselves, leaving a perfectly smooth and flawless finish.

Although B25 action frames are now precision-engineered using CAD/CAM and CNC processes, the action frame, barrels, and fore-end iron are all hand-finished the old way, using chisels, files, and emery paper. The ancient art of smoke-lamp fitting is then used to ensure the locking of the action parts is perfectly even, smooth, and firm, before each pre-machined walnut stock and fore-end is then hand-fitted to the action, checkered, and finished.

The polishing of the parts that will be engraved is then done manually with super-fine emery paper. The Liège area of Belgium has a longstanding reputation for producing some of the finest engravers in the world. As far back as the 16th Century, engravers such as Jean Varin, Jean Valdor, Corombelle, and the Demarteau brothers were already chiseling their reputations into the courts of the French kings. Today, the technique remains unchanged, and Liège is still associated with some of the finest examples of this extraordinary art form.

Of course, like anything that requires such intricate craftsmanship, B25 shotguns come at a price. Ranging from £13,600 (\$18,000) to £50,000 (\$65,000), and with only 40 to 50 made per year, the B25 is simply out of reach for the majority of sportsmen and sportswomen. This is exactly why Browning created the B15 Beauchamp and launched it as part of the John M. Browning Collection in 2015.

Conceived by the team at the Browning Custom Shop in Liège—subsequently rebranded as the John M. Browning Collection—the B15 Beauchamp is something of a cross between a fully custom-made B25 and a mass-produced B725—Browning's newest mass-produced over-and-under, which, along with the B525, is manufactured in the Miroku factory in Japan.

#### **B15 GRADE B >**

The Browning B15 enhances the legacy of the B25 by the design and precision-engineering of Fabrique Nationale.



*Despite the B15 sharing more features with its mass-produced Japanese counterparts than a true B25, one cannot help but appreciate the stamp of the master Belgian craftsmen.*



Although it is built on the relatively new low-profile B725 action, which is mass-produced, the B15 is assembled, stocked, smoke-lamp fitted, engraved, color-case-hardened, and finished in Liège by Browning's master craftsmen. The barrels are back-bored, proofed for steel shot, and fitted with Browning's latest Invector DS multi-chokes. Starting at a fraction under £10,000 (\$13,000), it sits between the Heritage Hunter—Browning's top-end, mass-produced gun, which retails at around £6,000 (\$7,825)—and the B25.

Despite the B15 sharing more features with its mass-produced Japanese counterparts than a true B25, one cannot help but appreciate the stamp of the master Belgian craftsmen. For the B15, like its more aristocratic half brother, is undeniably a thing of beauty. I shot with one several seasons ago, and almost every time that I removed it from its slip before each drive, a fellow Gun, beater, or picker-up would comment on its aesthetics and unmistakable resemblance to the B25. It has a faux three-piece fore-end that mimics the unique design of the gun on which it is based.

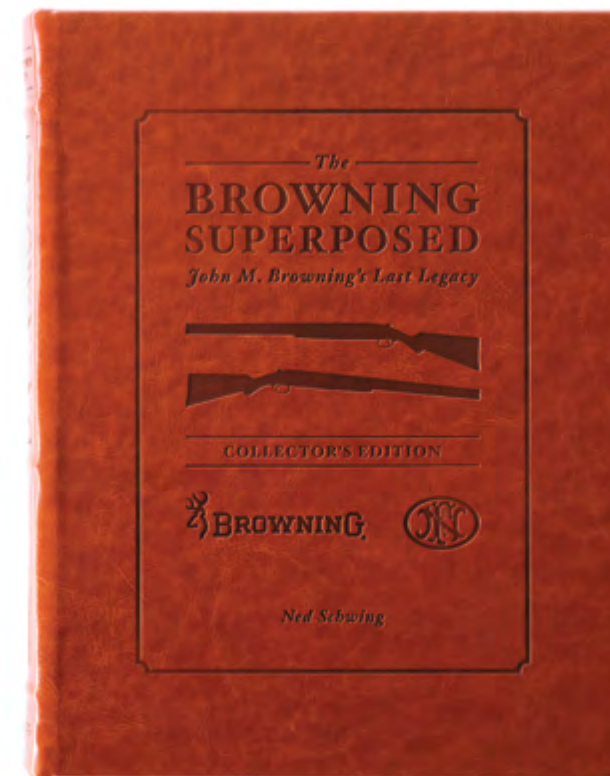
In Britain in the age of the commercial and extreme pheasant shoots, many of the great game shots of the modern era recognize and appreciate the genius behind Browning's designs

and opt to shoot with B25s, B2Gs, and even their mass-produced Japanese counterparts, for they are inherently strong and reliable and, as a result, cope well with modern heavy loads designed to bring down stratospheric pheasants and partridges.

Despite the challenges faced by Browning Arms over the years and the firm's somewhat complex and convoluted history, John Moses Browning would surely be proud to know that some of the finest sporting shotguns produced in Europe today still bear his name and that, almost 100 years since his death, his legacy is still very much alive and well. 🦋

#### JOHN M. BROWNING COLLECTION

Maintaining the Browning legacy, shotgun collectors can purchase current, made-to-order B25s (above)—products of time-honored, hand-craftsmanship, and modern technology. The B15 (right) was introduced in 2015 in four grades that give buyers choices for engraving and wood quality.



### THE BROWNING SUPERPOSED

JOHN M. BROWNING'S LAST LEGACY  
COLLECTOR'S EDITION

By Ned Schwing

Twenty-four years ago, the history of Browning from 1926 to 1995, and the men who made it, was told by firearms historian Ned Schwing in the book *The Browning Superposed: John M. Browning's Last Legacy*. In Spring 2020, a limited number of this amazing work will be released as a beautifully crafted Collector's Edition with an introduction by Browning Superposed shotgun collector Jim Hendricks, and a new chapter dedicated to the modern-day Browning company by Marcus Janssen.

This limited-edition book will feature a branded leather cover, premium-grade paper, stunning design, and over 650 photographs that visually walk you through the history of the Browning Superposed shotgun. The book was commissioned by Gordy & Sons Outfitters and published and designed by Covey Rise, LLC.

Available for preorder through Gordy & Sons Outfitters in Houston, Texas, at [gordyandsons.com](http://gordyandsons.com), or by calling the store at +1 (713)-333-3474.

“Every issue is entertaining, informative, and thought provoking. I encourage any upland enthusiast and conservationist to give it a read. It hits all the marks: hunting, gear, wine, whisky(ey), cigars, food, travel, wildlife, and on and on. I love this magazine.” —ALDEN S., *COVEY RISE* READER



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