A REVIEW OF THE TRANSITION FROM MEDIÆVAL TO MODERN FLAGS

by David Lister

Books on the history of flags are in general disappointing. There are in fact remarkably few of them for few scholars have thought the subject worthy of study. There are countless books on heraldry but even then the history of the subject of flags has been generally neglected and heraldist have usually been content with the brief passing reference to banners, standards and pennons with no attempt to study their place in the history of civilisation. Among students of flags there is a remarkable pre-possession with national flags to the exclusion of all others and we have detailed monographs on the history of the Union Jack, Old Glory and the French Tricolour repeated *ad nauseam*. We have penetrating research into the flags flown by obscure nationalist rebels in remote corners of the 19th Century and catalogue after catalogue of the "Flags of All Nations". This research is valuable in itself and I do not denigrate it but it is no substitute for the study of the historical development of the different types of flag and the function which each fulfilled in the practical ceremonial and inspirational lives of our forebears. Few indeed are the scholars who have viewed in relation to one another the military naval and ceremonial flags of the succeeding ages.

This paper then is a plea for historical scholarship. I have taken as my subject the transition from mediæval to modern flags as an illustration but I do not claim to treat the matter in anything but a superficial manner taking my material from such secondary sources as I have come across. First I propose to review some of the historical factors which have had a profound effect upon flags and their development during the period.

The Middle Ages have conventionally been taken to end in the year 1492 with the discovery of America, the culmination of a century of European probing into the geographical unknown. In itself the discovery was only a symptom of the new attitudes and outlooks which were bubbling up in European minds during the 15th Century. The discovery of America itself contributed immeasurably to the new outlook, but there were many other factors. Geographically Byzantium fell to the Turks in 1453 so closing the eastern trading routes and sounding the death knell of the prosperity of Venice. In 1492 the Moors were finally expelled from Spain and the Spaniards were able to turn their attention to naval exploration. In England in 1485 Henry Tudor seized power and ended the debilitating Wars of the Roses with their divisive bastard feudalism. England too could look out to sea. Apart from Calais which remained British until 1558, the French expelled the British from France in 1453, She could now think upon herself as a Unity: a base for expansion.

Two inventions or rather importations from the East, one peaceful and one war-like were of immeasurable significance. Printing was introduced by Gutenberg in about 1450, The pen may be mightier than the sword but the sword found an ally in gunpowder which was introduced into the West in the 14th Century. The face of warfare was changed. Fortified castles and siege warfare became obsolete. Armour-encased heavy cavalry became an anachronism. As the efficiency of muskets improved infantry armed with pikes, swords, longbows and crossbows found no place in the armies of Europe. Gunpowder brought about a complete revolution in military strategy tactics and organisation, and an equal revolution was brought about at sea.

These were not the only changes. In the realm of ideas the whole period was dominated by the developments which we retrospectively name "the Renaissance". The date of its commencement is a matter of individual definition of choice, but its highest point was in the 15th Century Italy and during the 16th Century the new learning and new artistic styles flowed over northern Europe. Reformation and counter-reformation, bringing with them new religious wars introduced yet more turmoil to the ideas and life of the 16th Century.

Political organisation of such importance for the development of flags was no less the subject of change. Feudalism had been declining throughout the mediæval period. In the 15th and 16th Centuries centralised authority inevitably tending towards despotism became dominant in France, in Spain and even in England. In Italy the city republics gave way to tyrannies exemplified by those of the Sforzas and Medicis. Nevertheless the most significant political concept was that of nationalism, It is difficult to step back into the minds of our predecessors because our own views are too much coloured by what was to them the unknown future. When we look back upon the dark ages we see a flux of national groups, where they themselves still accepted the reality of the unity of Europe under the Roman Empire, declined, no doubt, from its past glories but still a real if nostalgic concept. In the Middle Ages we again see large and small nations in a state of seemingly perpetual rivalry and conflict. We are, however, imposing our modern concepts upon a previous age, for the concept of the nation was hardly yet born. A stranger might come from a distant land, he might speak a strange language; more significantly he owed allegiance to a different feudal lord. But he was still a member of one single Christendom. What he was not, was a subject of a foreign nationality. Unfortunately "Nationality" is a term which has a multiplicity of different meanings. For present purposes I shall define it as the concept of a group of inhabitants of a particular area, large or small. who have a sense of corporate identity and who give their allegiance to that community as a whole, The idea of nationality becomes clearer when it is contrasted with that of feudalism where the emphasis is not so much upon the community as upon the allegiance which an individual bears to his superior lord as an individual. The distinction becomes blurred in national monarchies where in theory the allegiance is to an individual monarch but where in practice the monarch is the representative of the whole community. In consequence the concept of nationality takes on a sharper focus under republican forms of government.

Following the decline of the idea of the unity of Christendom the first manifestations of nationality were in the republican city states of Northern Italy about the 12th Century, where jealous rivalry with other states crystallised the sense of distinct entities by which we may describe as nations. By the 15th Century the inhabitants of larger territories looked upon themselves. not only as being geographically, but as also being nationally separate. Such nations were France, Spain, Portugal, England and Scotland. Aspirations towards liberty were a catalyst for nationalism in Switzerland and the Netherlands., In Germany, however, the continuing concept of the Holy Roman Empire with its feudal structure delayed the actuality of a single German nationality until the 19th Century.

This then is the background against which flags evolved and changed in the 15th, 16th and 17th Centuries and these were some of the influences which brought new flags into being. Let us look at some of the developments.

Before we can consider the transition to modern flags it is first necessary to consider the flags in use in the Middle Ages. Their forms were not nearly so straight-forward as one would suppose from cursory reading of most books on heraldry and flags which repeatedly stress that mediæval flags consisted of the banner. pennon and standard. There is no question that these three flags were very important but the whole of the period was one of development and change and they were not the only flags. In trying to reconstruct the flags of a past age, there are three interrelated problems. First, what were the forms of the flags. their shapes, manner of fixing and their size? Secondly, what names were applied to the different kinds of flag? In this connection it is important to remember that the same name might be given to entirely different flags and that different flags might bear the same name, Both the flags themselves and the names applied to them were susceptible to change over a period of time. Thirdly, one must ask how a flag was used, did it fly from a fixed pole, or was it carried in battle, who used it?

Our evidence of old flags comes from the comparatively few original flags surviving, from paintings and illuminated manuscripts and from literary sources. Unfortunately pictures of flags are rarely linked with written inscriptions and one must be most careful in matching a particular kind of flag to the name found in written sources. Neither painters nor authors, especially in the Middle Ages, were interested in recording flags for posterity and one comes to suspect that some of the writers were more interesting in propounding their own pet theories, as for instance, about the size of flags, than in setting down a record of actual practice.

It is generally accepted that the banner and the pennon were both derived from the gonfanon, the war cloth, which was originally a flag fixed laterally to the staff. The gonfanon was in origin a lance flag, but already in the Bayeaux Tapestry some are larger and more ornate than others. It was natural for size to be indicative of the rank of the bearer. Hence in the 13th Century, after the development of that system of personal devices which we term armoury or heraldry, the larger flag, the banner, was the privilege of the barons and greater knights while other knights carried pennons, The significant point about the banner and the pennon is that they were per-

sonal flags: they identified not a military unit, but the baron or the knight as an individuals This was the heyday of the feudal host and the essence of feudalism was its personal allegiances, so that a baron's or knights followers rallied to him personally.

Unfortunately there has not yet been any adequate study of flags in relation to early mediæval warfare and military organisation. It must be borne in mind that the barons, knights and esquires formed a force of cavalry whereas they were not the only troops in the field. Clearly banners and pennons had little application the only to the common foot soldiers, the archers and pikemen. We are not in a position to pronounce with any confidence upon the employment of flags by these lesser forces. We do know, however, that banners and pennons were not the only flags employed by mediæval armies. The English army continued to use the dragon in the form of a sleeve filled out by the wind until the 15th Century and there are also frequent references to banners of Saints. Although heraldry developed into an ordered system we must not assume that there was any rigid system in the use of flags by mediæval armies.

The period of feudalism in its classical form was brief. In England Knight-Service was being, commuted for money payment as early as the 13th Century. The amateurish feudal levy was never an efficient instrument and was gradually replaced by a professional troupe. In England the pre-Conquest Militia - the theoretical liability of all citizens for limited military service was made the vehicle of a rough and ready form of conscription, the army being led by professional military leaders, later to be known as captains. In parts of the continent, especially Italy, a blatantly mercenary army was normal, A necessary consequence was that armies became more efficiently organised upon a unity basis instead of as ad hoc groups following a feudal lord.

It is against this background that we see the development of new flags in the later Middle Ages. The Standard and the Guidon are widely known by name. but less is known about their precise forms and still less about their employment in war. The Standard from its name is generally assumed to have been a flag which stood in a fixed position, presumably to indicate a headquarters. Tudor writers go into great detail about the size of standards to be carried by emperors, kings, barons and other ranks and about the method of placing the cross of St. George or other national flag in the hoist, but this tells us nothing of the original and actual use of the flag. Other countries certainly did not follow the same rules of design and extant standards bear no relation to the theoretical sizes.

Our knowledge about the standard is deficient, but we know still less about the guidon. It is repeatedly stated that the name comes from the French *"Guide Homme"*, but this sounds far too much like popular etymology, Perrin quotes a reference to flags known as "gittons" flown at sea as early as 1423 and I suspect that we may have to look further for the origin of the name. We know little about the form of the mediæval guidon. but in size it appears to be midway between a pennon and a standard. Col, Gayre may well be right when he suggests that the so called "Percy Pennons" were really guidons. They had a Saint George's Cross in the hoist, a striped or party field and simple badges. In fact they resembled small standards without the bends carry-

ing the motto which English standards usually bore. Unfortunately I have nowhere found any reliable statement of how a guidon was used. Some modern writers suggests that it was carried by a leader of cavalry, others that it was the flag of light skirmishing horsemen, but all this is merely conjecture. Certainly, by the 17th Century the guidon was one of the flags carried by units of cavalry, usually the light cavalry, but this is no indication of the situation in the 15th Century.

The significant point about the standard and the guidon was that whereas the banner and the pennon bore the arms of the bearer, the standard and guidon bore his badges. The arms were personal to the owner, but the badge was a device adopted for the retainers or followers of a baron or knight and it may be looked upon as the earliest form of military uniform. This may give a clue to the purpose of the standard and guidon. While the banner and pennon were personal flags, the standard and guidon were flags of the unit indicating its position and serving as a rallying point for the troops. This theory gains some measure of support from the fact that the introduction of the standard and guidon coincided with the replacement of the loose feudal levy by more professionally organised units.

Col. Gayre suggests that there was a whole range of sizes of flags of this kind, from the large-sized standard flying from a fixed pole to mark the headquarters, through smaller portable standards used in the actual fighting to the guidon carried by the leaders of smaller units. Nevertheless, much research will be needed to establish this theory.

During the 15th Century there is increasing evidence for a separate range of flags used by the infantry. Writers speak of "ensigns" and later of "colours" and we begin to see square flags made up of strips appearing in contemporary illustrations. We have already discussed the standard which usually had a parti-coloured or striped fly usually of the livery colours. If the Percy Pennons were really guidons. then the same was true of the guidon. It is possible that the striped flags have developed from this tendency and upon them also the stripes may represent livery colours.

The fact that the term "colours" supplanted "ensign" as the name for infantry flags in the 16th Century is an indication of one of their characteristics. Why then were these flags introduced in addition to standards and guidons? The evidence does not permit us to be sure but it has been suggested that while the barons and knights of gentle birth who possessed arms continued to lead the cavalry, the professional captains who led the modern organised units of infantry were non-armigerous and lacked heraldic devices to place upon their flags. Consequently they chose geometric forms like stripes. As late as the mid-17th Century infantry colours were still, in theory, the flags of the captains who lead the companies and this is certainly a very attractive suggestion.

The striped flags are also seen at sea and it is useful to consider the parallel development during the Middle Ages of naval flags* Whereas in recent centuries sea flags have had an inde-

pendent history separate from military flags. in the earlier Middle Ages there was not the same distinction. So far as we can see from the contemporary paintings flags were not used at sea to any great extent and the typical maritime flag was a decorative streamer at the mast-head. Naval warfare was merely an extension of land fighting (without the horses, giving rise to the erection on ships of the fore-castle and aft-castle to give the soldiers the advantage of higher vantage points. When therefore the baron and knights ventured to sea they took with them their pennons and banners, occasionally making the sale of the ship one huge banner. So we see paintings of glorious displays of shipboard heraldry culminating in the 16th Century with vessels like the Great Harry displaying what could only have been a most impracticable array of flags, This, however, was the ceremonial use of flags and paralleled the extravagant use of flags in the tournament. Real life was more prosaic.

We have seen the term "ensign" used first for the new infantry flags, some of which were striped. The term was not new and being a development of the Latin "insignis" had throughout the Middle Ages been used of flags in general. In the 16th Century we read about ships carrying "ensigns" and we see occasional pictures of ships carrying striped flags. The parallel is close and as Perrin suggests it seems reasonable to suppose that just as the striped ensigns were used on land to distinguish individual companies and their captains, so, at sea, the ensigns were used to distinguish individual ships. A reference to flags provided for ships of the East India Company 1601 refers to 12 streamers. two flags and one Auncient. The Auncient was clearly considered to be something different from an ordinary flag. The spelling, "Auncient" was used in the 16th Century as the name for the soldier who carried the flag, so that it very much seems that the military term had been carried over into maritime usage to designate flags resembling the military ones, It is perhaps worthy of note that one of the Tudor ensigns of which we have a record, is of white and green stripes with a cross of St. George in the canton. While and green were the Tudor livery colours and this adds support for the theory that striped ensigns may on occasions have employed livery colours.

So far I have not referred to national flags although I have referred to the fact that the concept of nationality was only slowly beginning to develop in the Middle Ages. Perrin gives the best exposition of the origin of national flags and traces them back to the mediæval Italian republics where they served as a focus of national identity in the absence of monarchy. He traces their use at sea by the vessels of the maritime republics of Venice, Genoa and Pisa.

From the Mediterranean the custom of flying flags to identify the port of origin appears to have spread northwards so that we find flags representing the ports of the low countries, of the Cinque Ports and of the Hanseatic League. Whereas in Italy, however, the individual ports were separate states, the northern ports rarely formed separate entities and the idea of using the flag to indicate nationality was weakened. As late as the 18th Century books and charts of flags continued to illustrate flags representing not only nations but also ports.

The history of the national flags of each nation forms a separate study but by way of illustration

I will outline the development of the national flag of England.

I have already referred to the use of flags of saints in warfare at a time when banners and pennons were in full display. In origin they were no more than an invocation of the protection of the particular saint and the emblems of several saints may be carried at the same time as at the Battle of the Standard in the 1138 when the flags of St. Peter, St. John of Beverley and St. Wilfred of Ripon were displayed.

Saint George was adopted as the sole patron saint of England about 1275 apparently by Edward I and the first reference to the Red Cross of St. George which Perrin was able to trace was in 1277 when a role of accounts relating to the Welsh wars refers to the manufacture of pennoncels and bracers of the arms of St. George. The bracers were the leather protection worn by the archers on their left arms and Perrin suggests that the Cross of St. George was worn by those not entitled to arms of their own and who did not wear the badge or livery of their feudal lord. It was therefore used as a badge for troops directly employed by the Crown,

From then on St. George's Cross gradually became more prominent and although nominally the attributed arms of a patron saint the red cross became a convenient badge of distinction for English troops. We have seen how it appeared in the chief of English standards and guidons. It was also used in combination with the striped ensigns, at sea being placed in the canton. However, two flags with the Cross of St. George and the stripes placed side by side can be seen in an engraving of the siege of Boulogne in 1544. By the end of the 16th Century the Cross of St. George was the distinguishing mark of English ships whether or not they flew the flag of their port or a striped ensign in addition. Then in 1606 the union of the crowns of England and Scotland lead to combination of the crosses of St. George and St. Andrew to form the first Union Jack, a flag which in course of time was to become, by popular consent, a truly national flag.

The trend towards a national flag in England was a gradual one. It began as the symbol of a patron saint, becoming in turn a royal badge and a useful form of uniform in the field. The popular sentiments which are essential to the creation of a national flag developed only slowly; by 1600 the process was far from complete and even today the Union Jack does not have legal status as a national flag. The same slow and uneven development was apparent in other nations, France under the *Ancien Régime* used a wide variety of flags and can scarcely be said to have had a national flag until the Revolution. On the other hand. in Holland and Switzerland where there was increased compulsion towards a national consciousness, flags which can be recognised as "national" came into being much earlier.

The development of British maritime flags following the Union in 1603 illustrates the slowness with which the concept of a national flag developed. The first Union Jack was proclaimed in 1606 and for a time it was intended for use by Royal and private ships alike. Records do not show the extent of its use but the indications are that it was not flown extensively by merchant men. Then by another proclamation of 1634 the Union Jack was reserved for Royal ships where

it soon became restricted to use as a small Jack in the bows of the vessel or as a mast-head flag when the admiral of the fleet was at sea. Even at sea the Union Jack was eclipsed by the red. white and blue ensigns.

We have seen how in the 16th Century ships began to use a distinguishing flags named an ensign. In the 17th Century the fleet was divided into van, main and rear squadrons which were distinguished by white, red and blue flags respectively, The ships of the respective admirals flew red, white and blue flags at the mast-head and the individual ships of each squadron flew ensigns of the appropriate colour. Until 1707 these ensigns bore the Cross of St. George in the canton and it was only on the union of the parliaments of England and Scotland in 1707 that the Union Jack took the place of St. George in the canton. When in 1634 the Union Jack was restricted to the Royal Navy merchant ships were ordered to fly the red ensign. the senior of the three ensigns. Royal Naval ships continued to use all three ensigns until 1864 when the organisation of the fleet into squadrons was finally abandoned and the White Ensign (the junior of the three) was designated as the normal ensign for warships.

British maritime flags may be said to have developed spontaneously and with no regard to logical order. There appear to have been no continuity with mediæval maritime flag and no conscious regard for the concept of a national as opposed to a royal flag.

We find the same slow approach to a national flag in the development of military flags in the later 16th and 17th Centuries. It was during this period that a scientific warfare can be said to have developed with intensive study of tactics and of military organisation. The company under the command of a captain became the basic unit of military strength and during the 16th century companies began to be grouped together to form regiments under the command a colonel. The colonel came to be assisted by a lieutenant colonel and by a sergeant-major whose title was later shortened to the modern "major". In England the standing army was not established until 1660, over a century after standing armies were established in several countries on the continent. However, the development of military colours in England is a good example of the way military flags developed in the modern armies. Until 1707 the flags remained nominally the flags of the officers and not of the units they commanded. Consequently in the infantry forces the colonel, lieutenant-colonel and major (who each had a company of his own) and the captains of other companies each had an ensign or colour. Our earliest record is the flags carried by the "trained bands" during the Civil war and each regiment was designated by ensigns of a different colour. Upon the ensigns the different officers were distinguished by varying numbers of symbols according to their rank. With the formation of a standing army in 1660 colonel's flag was of a plain colour, lieutenant colonel's flag was of a plain colour with St. George's cross in the canton, the major's flag was similar to the lieutenant-colonels with an heraldic "pile wavy" issuing from the lower corner of the canton. The captain's colour bore a St. George's cross in the canton and also a number of symbols according to rank.

By 1707 the number of colours for each regiment was reduced to three. one of the flags be-

ing of a plain colour and the other being a Union Jack or "Great Union" as it was known in the army. In 1747 the number of colours per battalion was reduced too and this remained custom to the present day (the rules for the regiments of guards remained somewhat different). It is interesting to note that the regulations of 1747 relating to colours specifically forbad colonels to put their arms crests devices or liveries upon the regimental colours, an indication that there was still a strong tendency for flags to remain personal ones.

This tendency was even stronger in the flags of the cavalry regiments. At the Restoration the cavalry used flags named "standards" and "guidons". These cavalry standards differed from the mediæval standards in being square but resembled them in bearing badges, either those of the king or of the colonel as their main charges. The guidons were similar except that they were rounded and forked at the fly but considerably shorter than the mediæval guidons. Towards the end of the 17th Century standards were carried by the heavy horse and guidons by the light horse but as late as 1684 some regiments carried both standards and guidons.

Apart from their shape the modern standards and guidons, bearing heraldic badges, ape not very far removed from the mediæval flags and it is tempting to suggest that the reason lay in the fact that the old armigerous families of noble blood continued to predominant in the organisation of the cavalry. Private badges continued to be used upon the cavalry flags until they were abolished in 1743. From this time it can be said that the older tendency of military flags to be the personal flags of the officers was finally brought to an end and the flag became the symbol of the regiment. The history of British military flags is only an example of the widely divergent ways in which military flags developed in the European standing armies. It would be wrong to generalise but the trends were the same. Flags became symbols not of the individual or of the nation but of the regiment and in many instances as in England the tradition of two colours per foot regiment became the custom.

Flags serve both practical and ceremonial purposes and we have seen how between the 15th and 17th Centuries flags for practical use were changed radically to meet the needs of new navies and armies. But flags also serve ceremonial purposes and the new flags did not entirely oust the old ones. The banner of the sovereign continued to be flown as the "royal standard" and on ceremonial occasion both on land and at sea, flags continued to provide an exceedingly rich display. Nevertheless with the lack of the original motive of clear recognition in warfare the art of heraldry declined and lost much of its vitality. Banners, pennons, standards and guidons continued to be carried at the funerals of the gentry and nobility but often in a sadly debased form. For instance the guidon sometimes became a semicircular flag bearing the patrinomial arms of the deceased, instead of his badge.

In this survey I have tried to show some of the ways in which flags changed as the Middle Ages gave way to modern times and I have tried to show how flags were affected by the dominant forces of each age. Much research is needed before the history of flags can be presented in convincing detail. The opportunities and challenges of research are unlimited. ☐