

Kevin Harrington: A Sense of Flags in Northern Ireland after the Accord

Introduction

I had submitted a lecture "Who Let the Bears On?" But for technical reasons this was not possible to deliver. I shall speak instead on my "Observations of Flag Use Today in Northern Ireland". On to the way via Romania and Italy to this Congress in Berlin I stopped in Northern Ireland. There is the home of my mother, she called it 'the Old Country'. I was not able to visit Ireland for 50 years, due to the troubles between the Loyalists and the Nationalists there. I was there in 1960 and now that the road map to peace and to powersharing is in place I ventured to see my mother's family, my relatives. In July I was there and they remembered me. I soon got sense of the status of flags today in this region of turmoil, where flag use could have meant life or death. What followed there will be anecdotal and somewhat charged with emotion yet with some depth of research.

Some background

It was in the summer of 1953 that the flags of the North Ireland Government first flew officially - the cross of St. George, with, in the centre a six-pointed star bearing 'the red hand of Ulster', the legendary red hand, surmounted by the royal crown (Figure 1). This is the flag of Ulster as it commonly is called. I researched clippings from the Belfast newspapers of 1953 when I visited the library of the capital to find reactions to the flag by reading letters to the editor. One Ulster Soldier, as he called himself, commented that the process of finding the flag of Northern Ireland has taken over 30 years. And that the flag had been absent in July celebrations in that year. He doubted that the flag would ever be in



extensive use. Others including the Bishop of Down objected to the fact, that the flag used was the cross of St. George and not the red saltire of St. Patrick. Another reader criticised the bishop for not knowing, that the design of the flag came directly from the coat of arms, granted in 1924 when partition of Ireland occurred.

The Protestant majority, who long opposed Home Rule for Ireland, sought to maintain the British connection in all its manifestations. It often saw 'Popery' defined as subjection to the Roman Catholic Church - as the enemy. The Protestants displayed the Union Flag of Great Britain in all its activities, social and political, and especially to celebrate Orangeman's Day on the 12th of July, the victory of William of Orange, the Dutch Protestant over the Stuart and Catholic claimant to the British throne. This victory, the Battle of the Boyne (river) in 1690, has been commemorated ever since. The powerful Orange Order with marches, banners and music brought out its supporters in a sea of bunting - red, white and blue. This often amounted to outright intimidation of the Catholic minority in the North - whose attempt to rally around the Irish Republican tricolour were foiled by the banning of that flag in the 1970s. (By the way I should mention that the Orange Order had been quite active in Canada, Australia and elsewhere. The first time I saw an Orange ensign was in Melbourne.)

My experience

So with the return of self-government and power sharing between the two groups, how have flags fared? I arranged to be in Northern Ireland for the week of the Orange Celebration on July 8 to 15 2007, my cousin (Ms Catherine Grimley) escorted me within Belfast and we also drove through the counties of Antrim and Down.

We found to *her* great surprise - in the notorious thoroughfares such as Shankill and East Belfast particularly where sectarian violence had prevailed over the past forty years - that the bunting displayed, the number of flags was quite reduced, quite subdued. Flag-topped triumphal arches were not to be found except in the smaller and 'blacker' towns of Portadown ('black' is a Catholic reference to inimical Protestants) and Glenarm. There were Union Jacks and Northern

Ireland flags in clusters and smaller triumphal arches but the side streets, the residential roads, showed few flags. My cousin said that is a remarkable change from over the last years. However we saw in construction a great number of towers made from accumulated automobile tires, wood pallets and old furniture. On the evening of 11 July the towers were completed. From the safety of my hotel-room window – I had been advised not to go out – I had a full view of the east of Belfast and much of the centre of the city. Soon clouds of smoke drifted across the dusky sky and I saw soaring flames followed by sky-blasting fireworks. Elsewhere not far from Belfast at Ballycraigy the tower constructed consisted of 10,000 tires, well reported by the media. What they did not report was that there was a flag planted firmly at the peak of this tower. It was the Republican tricolour, still called ‘the green-white-gold’ by the Catholics. On this flag in large letters K-A-T was stamped, a letter on each color panel, this was to me a grim and grisly message. It is a short form of ‘Kill-All-Teaghs’. Teagh (or Teague) is a local word for Roman Catholics. (In Canada we would say Micks.) I suddenly shuddered realizing that I could be one of the Teaghs to be killed.

So on the wet day of the Parade(s) the dour men in black suits marched solemnly by, before each group a bearer of the Lodge banner. In one case a huge portrait of the alleged IRA victim Admiral or Sea Lord Lord Louis Mountbatten, now their hero. Then marching bands, cars and vans draped with flags, a great variety of them, mostly however displaying the Ulster flag, numerous booths did considerable business in the sale of flags - all sizes, and many designs - pins, CDs, aprons and scarves. I bought many to show you. My search for the KAT flag was in vain. I was looked at rather quizzically when I asked to obtain a KAT-flag. (Taiwan has not heard of it yet, I suppose). I saw even the homeless with begging cups



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on the streets who wore bowlers illustrated with the Red Hand of Ulster. So I went up to them to ask whether I could photograph them. They turned out to be Poles!



(Figure 3) the Union Jack, a crown, a scene from the battle of Boyne and King Billy, It seems that often Protestants do not know what to call themselves in Northern Ireland. They may try to avoid the word “Irish”, though some like to, they cannot say Northern Irish, because that is the same thing with a compass point. Others want to be called Ulstermen, Ulsterwomen or in this particular case Ulster Scots (Figure 4), since many of their ancestors originated from Scotland in the times of the plantation. So the Scot’s saltire is commonly seen. Then there is the original flag of the Orange Order. The plain one I saw in Melbourne, here has been defaced by a large image of King Billy and the years point to the Battle of the Boyne (Figure 5).



Some of the flags I picked up there will be held by volunteer assistant Markus Schmöger. An unofficial, widely used, widely displayed on houses, is the Union Jack with King Billy (Figure 2), that means King William. Any flag with the cross of St. George may appear with devices in each corner -

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The purple-blue star on the cross of St. George does appear on an orange field as the Order's flag. Everywhere in Belfast you see sports teams flags. I did pick up the Celtic League banner in a little sports shop. The Celtic flag is not seen on the Orangeman's Day parade, it is the Rangers' flag. The Flag of the Apprentice Boys of Derry, or Londonderry if you wish, with 'No surrender' as an additional motto is quite interesting. Note that Londonderry has an unusual coat of arms with the skeleton and the black tower. There, the Apprentice Boys held off King James's assault on Derry and their bravery has been celebrated ever since in the Protestant cause. I understand that Derry now has a Catholic majority, what with the arrival of Portuguese and Polish in large numbers in Northern Ireland; probably the balance will one day, soon, be turned.



Conclusions:

The summer of 2007 saw a major reduction - according to my local correspondents, my cousins - in the display and use of flags. The Ulster flag was seen more often than the Union flag, by my own account, 5 : 1, that surprised me. I had the feeling that Northern Ireland could go eventually the way that the emblem suggest, i. e. become a country of its own and the Catholics do not want that to occur. There is still a practice of burning flags and the use of inflammatory language. It would seem to me, and of course I am biased, that the litter of beer cans and liquor bottles and the crunching of glass under my feet, despite the posting of signs indicating an 'alcohol-free' area, showed up as 'low life'. I was



surprised by the number of toys and playthings bearing British and Orange emblems given to children and quite actively used by children, a sort of indoctrination.

Not one tricolour flag was seen in public, which would be too provocative. A good move is that now they are integrating schools in Northern Ireland so that Protestant and Catholic children could attend the same school. The media in its reports played down the sectarian differences and commented on the emergence of a festival called the Orange Fest. They want to turn this annual series of events into a celebration that attracts tourists to Northern Ireland without tasting sour. I also saw that flag-based and other wall-paintings had disappeared, e.g. like the famous murals. I was not able to take photographs. Fortunately they have been collected and displayed on the Internet.

So those are my observations during my trip over here and from my base Irish-Canadian heart.



About the author



Kevin Harrington, B.A., M.A.(T.); born in 1934; writer, teacher, librarian, poet ; studies at the University of Toronto B.A. 1957, M.A.(T.). Publisher and editor of vexillological publications; President of the Canadian Flag Association and editor of "Flagscan" since 1986; Consultant in Vexillology, Heraldry & Onomastics; Member of NAVA; Fellow of the FIAV, 2007.

His interest in flags dates back to childhood, by age of 12 he borrowed all flag books (Campbell and Evans, Gordon, Wheeler-Holohan) from the local public library and begun a series of water-colour pictures of flags. He delighted in discovering flags - such as the black and white flag in a Time Magazine article on a trial of Breton separatists, or

finding in Toronto Library - a magazine, The Flag Bulletin.

Publications: Sweden's Story in over 450 Flags, 2005; Flags from Sea to Sea, 2001; and articles in The Flag Bulletin, Raven, NAVA News, Flagscan, Flagsam, Pavillonnerie, Ar Baniel.

Address of the author:

Kevin Harrington
50 Heathfield Dr.,
Toronto ON, M1M 3B1
CANADA
e-mail: kevin.harrington@sympatico.ca