

1 Island, 2 Flag Trends a vexillological travel log

by Alain Raullet



Last June 2012, I got the opportunity to travel to Ireland. As a Breton, I am feeling sorry not to have gone before!

This opportunity was a kind of pilgrimage to visit and understand the places where the many saints of Brittany came from, through the different places where St Patrick patron of Ireland had sanctuaries.

At the time our group arrived in Ireland, the island was raising flags for three reasons: Political, Religious and Sports:

- the 60-year or diamond jubilee of the Queen Elisabeth II;
- the 50th International Eucharistic Congress at Dublin;
- the participation of Eire in the EURO football competition, held in Ukraine and Poland.

On the first day, Saturday evening, after landing at Dublin Airport, I was given free time to discover O'Connell street and surroundings: the heart of the 1916 Dublin insurrection. So you can imagine me as a kid taking pictures of any kind I could get, including of flags and banners of course. I couldn't avoid the most interesting historical flag, that is of course The Post flag, but those Swiss fashion hanging flags of Dublin city along the bridges over the river Liffey are very nice too, not to say surprising to find such a display in Ireland.

The following day, Sunday, the group went through many places in Dublin, mainly religious ones. At the same time it was the final day of the Eucharistic Congress. What a good opportunity for me to watch emblems here and there:

- military and regimental flags hanging in St Patrick's Cathedral;
- religious banners in St Mary's Pro-Cathedral;
- an unknown replica of a banner-of-arms in the cellar of Christchurch Abbey;
- not to mention all the Irish tricolour flags hanging at any window, just to support the national football team.



On day 3, Monday, we went on a bus trip, a week long anticlockwise tour of the island. Our first stop to reach was Armagh, the archiepiscopal city of the whole of Ireland. After leaving Dublin via the north exit, a few miles after Dundalk, at a motorway exit to Armagh, suddenly something changed: in a very small village on the road Union Jacks were raised in every lamp pole and I got a kind of revelation and realised we had just "passed" the border. Of course, due to European rules, it's no





more a same kind of border as between the USA and Mexico, for example, to prevent immigration. There I got my revelation, and the idea of this paper you are now reading: same people, same place, but different ways of thinking, though close to each other.

You, as I, with regard to Ireland instinctively think of the tricolour to symbolize it; we are all mistaken. The reality can best be illustrated with the “flag” to the left. It is just a drawing and doesn’t exist; it is just an illustration for my lecture. Northern Ireland is British mainly, and then Irish.

From then on all along the places we visited or went through, I kept that difference in mind. A difference that can physically be seen through waving flags; I would say it is a kind of battle of flags!

If we go on a tour with those two trends of flag display in mind, our first example is Armagh where the two cathedrals, close to each other are showing two opposite displays of flags, banners and other symbols. With regard to the Anglican Cathedral flags are regimental and inside the church, while with regard to the Catholic Cathedral flags are local, religious and outside of the church.



When later in Belfast: Sainte-Anne’s cathedral is Anglican; so flags are regimental, and inside again; moreover I discovered cushions there for every seat; those cushions are specifically decorated to determine which persons may sit there, and nobody else.

That makes us remember that Queen Elisabeth II is also Head of the Anglican Church, and so the society ranking of people is the same whatever the use of the building is: as a church, palace, school, etc. It is the same at St Patrick’s in Dublin, but the day before I was not aware of that specific detail. When in a Catholic Church, there is no such a distinction; everybody is sitting wherever they want.



Before leaving Belfast, stopping at Queens College, I found the University flag at half mast. Then coming inside the building, I of course did ask the reason why. Nobody could answer me; back on the street, I realised the flag was no more on the mast at the top of the building; therefore I guess, the first time I saw the flag, it was may be blocked during its display. I didn’t see an equivalent flag at Trinity College in Dublin. And in the suburbs, instead of football fans flags, there were a lot of jubilee fans!



The following day around noon we reached Bushmills, famous for Irish whiskey they say, a few miles beyond Giant’s Causeway; this is a very small village flagging the Queen’s jubilee of course with that flag at the shop. And surprise, inside that everything-to-sell shop I found flags to buy; I could have bought many of them, but my



purse was not big enough. The interesting thing is most of these flags are political, nationalist and Northern Irish proud.

Then in the afternoon, we reached Derry, or Londonderry, whatever is your point of view (Irish or British, Catholic or Anglican). I have been very lucky to be the witness of a very vexillologically interesting situation: teenagers painting the pavement stones and walls, in order to decorate with British Colours and words the ceremonial route to commemorate the battle between the Catholic King James and the Protestant King William (who had deposed James in 1688) – across the River Boyne near Drogheda on the east coast of Ireland. The battle, won by William, was a turning point in James' unsuccessful attempt to regain the crown and ultimately helped ensure the continuation of Protestant ascendancy in Ireland. The battle took place on 1 July 1690 in the Julian calendar at that time. This was equivalent to 11 July in the Gregorian calendar, although today its commemoration is held on 12 July. You will better understand the picture shown below when I tell you that the kids are Orange loyalists, and the street is inside the Catholic borough called Bogside; in English, a bog-trotter is a colloquial word for Irish.

Continuing with the trip, the road became suddenly Tricolour again with a new kind of bicolour flags: either horizontal, vertical or checkered, not to say sometimes both vertical and checkered. We just crossed the border again without realizing it clearly, but flags were there as standing sentinels.



The next day, the good pilgrims we were couldn't miss Knock, the Marial sanctuary, in the county of Mayo. There in front of the cathedral, I saw a wide range of foreign flags and heraldry, including John Paul II's coat-of-arms to remember his visit there in 1979 to commemorate the centenary of the apparition of the Virgin Mary there. Among the range of "Catholic" European countries' flags, I found an unexpected one, especially in Ireland. Do you recognize it in the picture? Yes, you're right: it's Gibraltar. Why? Just because that southern European territory, still British, is mainly Catholic, same as for Malta, its flag being the neighbour flag of Gibraltar, now independent from the UK. Sometimes, there are places where you are making discoveries that are true surprises. Who would have told me before: "Oh you are going to Ireland? Great, it is a nice place to encounter Gibraltar and Malta flags!!!"

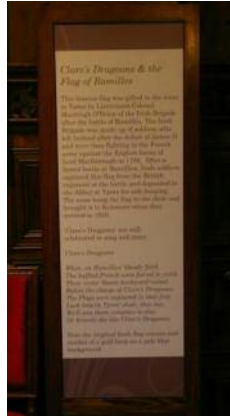




Still in County Mayo, on Thursday we were in Westport in the morning, not far from the famous pilgrimage mountain of Croagh Patrick. There I was able to find and buy a county flag with some difficulties; while looking for it and walking in the streets of this charming little city, I got the surprise to see a Brittany flag at a pub; unfortunately, I don't know the reason for its presence as we were early in the day, and a pub is of course not open at that time.

Then, the road to reach Cork by the end of the week was flowered all along with all these county flags, which are not actually official, but very popular as they are the GAA jersey colours of Gaelic football and Hurling county teams. GAA stands for Gaelic Athletic Association and is the board regulating Gaelic sports in Ireland (including Northern Ireland). That is why, I guess, there are so many variants from the GAA formal guide. You can find horizontal stripes, vertical stripes, and checkered flags; it is a total but pleasant anarchy!





Ending this flag trip, this short review of flag observations, I present to you a nice exception: Kylemore Abbey, in Connemara. Since 1920, it is a Benedictine Nuns' Abbey; they settled there coming from Ypres, Belgium, after World War I, and brought with them this flag that they already had in safe deposit since 1706; this is the only example I found during my week trip of a military flag inside a catholic building. Please note that this symbolic emblem, called the flag of Ramillies, has a story that brings it back to Ireland.

Therefore to epitomize my short week, discovering flags all over Ireland, we can find two different main trends of raising and presenting flags:

Where	Republican	Loyalist
Church	Rare few banners Outside	Regimental banners Inside
Street	Irish tricolour Irish counties	Union Jack No counties
Private	Irish tricolour Irish counties	Union Jack Royal symbols
For sale	Not so easy	No real problem

This feud between Anglican and Catholic, or Irish and British, or Rulers and Locals, this feud aged some 423 years old is not yet finished. And when John Paul Lederach states that 10 years of peace is solving only one year of conflicts, there is a lot to do, hoping not a simple stone thrown over the 99 remaining barriers in Belfast (for example) could restart the whole process. Just have in mind what happened at the start of this year when Belfast city council decided to fly the Union Jack only on Royal birthdays such as for the Duchess of Cambridge (January 13th 2013).



I have a dream. Let's hope together that:

Children stop copying bad habits from adults! And the feud may hopefully end!
the Vexillological Society of Ireland may witness a rebirth as the Flag Patrimony over there is huge, marvellous, various and interesting to make us discover whether it concerns Republican or Royal Ireland.

Military such as 97th anniversary of 1916 Irish rebellion (pictures are from Irish Defence Forces Veterans Association)

Counties and cities ; as another good example I got the opportunity to observe in the centre of Galway the flags raised of the 14 founding families of this west bank city.

Bratachà 2013 is a kind of flag festival that was held around May 9th, Europe Day;

Bratachà means "flag" in the Gaelic language

Whatever is our point of view, one island is enough, and we have some examples of this:

Gaelic football of course; please note that the final match is called the "All Ireland Championship". This is the only event when Northern Irish people are supporting their teams and then using GAA county flags, especially from Tyrone County (a very good team, I have been told)

Rugby too has a unified team for Ireland, and their main symbol is not the Tricolour, but the Shamrock

On the contrary, this is not the case for Association football (I mean soccer): two Irelands, two teams, two symbols.

And for Olympic Games, Northern Ireland athletes are under the British Olympic Committee.

Why not use Humour too, such as this flag I received some time ago, through e-mail? It's a UK Irish tricoloured flag. May be its meaning in the suburbs of London can be "We, the Irish in the UK"!





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