



# ADMIRAL HESSELBERG’S BOOK OF FLAGS – AN INTRODUCTION

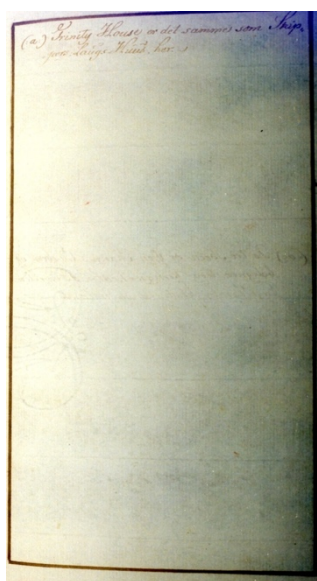
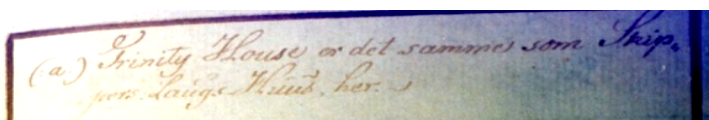
**Jan Henrik Munksgaard FF**  
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## INTRODUCTION

The so-called Admiral Hesselberg’s *Book of Flags* is kept in The Maritime Museum of Denmark’s collections in Helsingør, just north of Copenhagen, registered number 1965:0373. It was bought at Rosenkilde & Bagge, an antique shop in Copenhagen, in 1964. Before that, the book had been in ownership of the Hesselberg family.

The book is a hand-drawn manuscript, 13 x 21.5 cm. It contains 249 flags and pennants from around the world in 22 pages. The book is structured so that comments and drawings of the related flags are on facing pages. On each page of flags, you will find 12 flags, arranged on a grid of four lines, three flags on each line. All flags are drawn with the mast to the right. The country, city or area each flag represents is written below it.

Admiral Hesselberg’s book of flags has never been published. Neither has it been presented in a vexillological forum. I wish to do so today.



Annotation page – this one with the label, “Trinity House” with associated image of ensign.



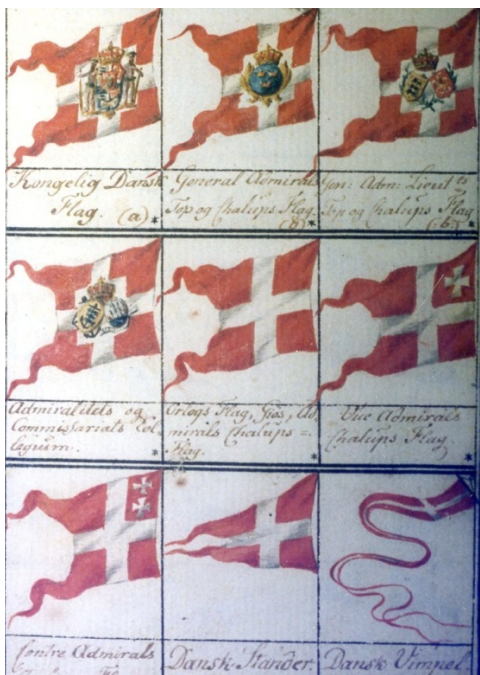
Typical page layout of 12 flags

Trinity House is one of those strange parts of the British state which are to all intents part of the state machinery, but not part of the government. It is responsible for Lighthouses and lights in England and Wales and has a full range of flags, including a red ensign, a jack, a Master's flag and a Deputy Master's flag .... *Graham Bartram, FOTW 15 November 2000*



Image of ensigns for Ireland and English East India Company

### HOW OLD IS THE FLAG BOOK?



Several of the written comments in the book date from the late 1700s and early 1800s. 1803 is the last year mentioned in the book. This date is given in connection with a new flag made for the Danish East India Company. The book must have been finished after this year, and therefore *terminus post quem*. Meanwhile, the Danish flag that is presented in the book was used until 1808 and so year is the book's *terminus ante quem*. Hesselberg's book of flags must therefore have been completed between 1803 and 1808, perhaps closer to 1803 than 1808.

### THE COMPILER

Admiral Gabriel Hesselberg (1789-1877) was a Danish - Norwegian naval officer who later became a Rear-Admiral in the Norwegian Navy (Denmark and Norway were united at the time). The book is named after him because it had been in his, and later his family's, possession until 1964. The



family story has it that young Hesselberg himself drew the flags in the book. Hesselberg was born in 1789 and was only between 13 and 18 when the book was illustrated. At this time, he was a navy cadet. The book might be a cadet work of Gabriel Hesselberg, but this is highly uncertain.

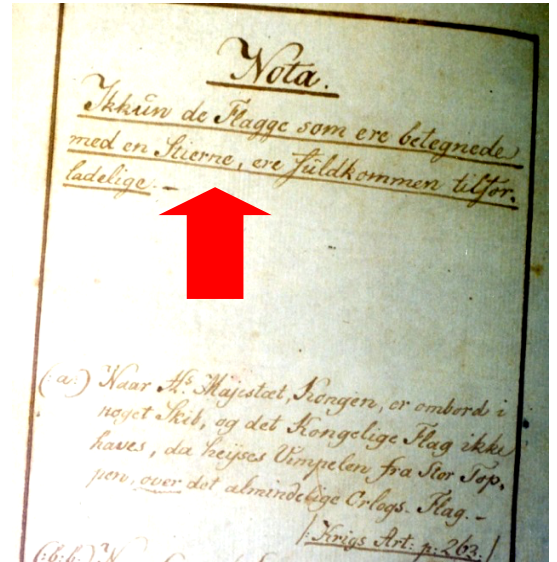
The author of the flag book had artistic skill. The illustrations are of quality in line and colour. Several comments on individual flags in the book suggest that the artist had been associated with the Danish-Norwegian navy. One comment reads "used by one Tripolitanian Ambassadeur who was onboard the frigate *Thetis*, anno 1796", and we know that a Danish naval squadron, among them *Thetis* under the command of Captain Lorentz Fisker, was located in the Mediterranean at this time, with Danish and Tripolitanian officers and authorities in direct contact. Captain Fisker was later Hesselberg's superior and writes about him that he "is a rare and handsome young man and an exceptionally reliable Officer". If Hesselberg is the artist/author of the flag book it is possible that he had first-hand sources from Captain Fisker for the Tripolitanian flags in the years 1796-97. However, due to his youth, I still doubt that the illustrator could possibly be Gabriel Hesselberg.

**IS THE BOOK RELIABLE?**

To draw a flag correctly you need to be a skilled illustrator. It must have been especially hard 200 years ago when communication, at all levels, was more complicated than today. It would be naive to think that all the flags presented in the Admiral Hesselberg book of flags are exemplary or flawless in character. Presumably, many of them false. Maybe some of them are erroneous.

Hesselberg's booklet of flags is exciting today; it is because the author/illustrator is very aware of the flags' identity. The book begins with a cautionary note: "Only the flags that are designated with a star [met en stjerne in the bottom right corner] are perfectly reliable" (right). Of the 249 flags presented, 69 do not have a star. This means that the author has included some flags and pennants that he cannot vouch for absolutely. Presumably these are from older flag books that he has not seen himself or that have not been confirmed by trustworthy sources.

To re-assure readers about the credibility of some flags, he writes comments such as: "This Flag flew over the fortress of Tripolis in 1796." And another: "These were used in 1797", and a third, this flag is "presumably anno 1802", and a fourth, around the Philippine Company's coat of arms is written: "Real [Royal] Compania de Filipinas."



With such clear and precise attention to his subjects, the author gives the impression of close connection with naval officers sailing around the world on Danish-Norwegian naval vessels. His knowledge of signal flags and other flags suggests that this book provides better information about flags than usually the case over two hundred years ago. On the other hand, some flags shown were already obsolete in 1805. Despite the assignation of a star, a totally spurious example is New England's blue ensign with a globe in the sub-canton. So, we see that the book was not up-to-date in every sense.

**PRESENTATION**

Of the 249 flags presented, 203 are European. From the Americas, 6 flags are all from the United States.

There are none from South or Central America. There are 20 flags from North Africa, and 1 from West Africa (Cape Verde). 17 flags represent Asia, some without a star - which means that the author is not sure if the flags are reliable. Among these, 3 are from today's Indonesia (Batavia and Bantam). China is represented with 4 flags and Japan with 1. Australia is not mentioned in Hesselberg's Book of Flags.



**Right and above:** Six Danish flags, including those enlarged; of the Danish East India Company and of and Danish Trading Co.



**Left:** Swedish Command flags and pennants.

The blue flag used between 1761-1813 by the Swedish Coast Guard, especially off the Finnish coast and in the Baltic.

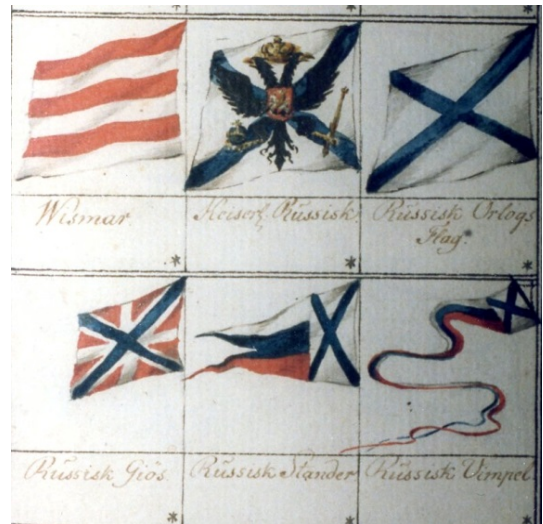


**Above:** A painting 1806 of the *King Assinthe* of Arendal, Norway, at Marseilles bound for St Thomas in the Virgin Islands, then a Danish colony, flying the blue Danish/Norwegian ensign used between 1798-1842. Letters IL (seen in reverse) refer to the owner, Isaac Leth. (The Danish Trading flag is also shown).

Among the European flags, it is not surprising that Denmark and Sweden are represented with many flags in a Danish flag book. Denmark has 15, Sweden 19. Most Danish and Swedish flags are well-known royal flags or various types of naval and command flags and pennants. A few are less known – one, a blue flag with the Dannebrog in the canton, is the Danish West Indian flag, which corresponds to today's United States Virgin Islands. Most Swedish flags are military flags that were important to identify for Danish officers. Among others we can note also the Swedish East India Company's flag.

Russia is represented with 9 flags. Many of these are now again in use after the collapse of USSR in 1991. Examples include the red jack with St. Andrew's cross and the white Russian ensign with blue St. Andrew's cross.

The Netherlands is represented by 4 of the six flags at left - a merchant flag, jack, pennant and standard, all with Batavian Republic symbols. Hesselberg's book says that these flags were recognized in 1795.



Prussia and other German regions are represented with 26 flags.



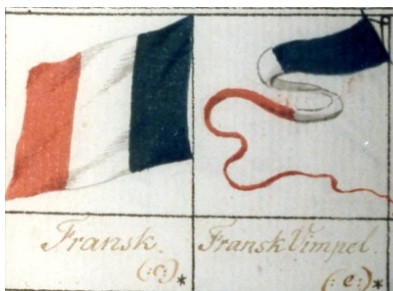
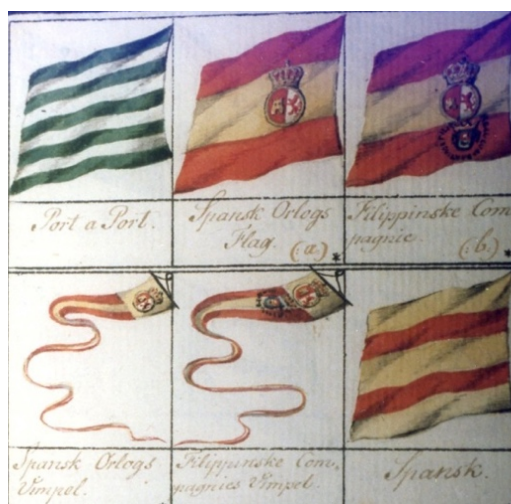
Flags illustrating the (Baltic/Hanseatic) cities of Königsberg, Stettin, Danzig, Lübeck, Rostock, Hamburg and Bremen are depicted by multiple flags and pennants. On the 4 flags of Danzig, the book says; "Notwithstanding that Danzig has come under Prussian domination, the city's very special flag is allowed". It is interesting that Königsberg has two flags, as often depicted in other books of flags and flag charts, but has no star despite the city's proximity to Denmark and local waters that Danish naval and merchant ships often traversed.

Great Britain has 30 different flags illustrated. Many of these of course have the Union Jack in the canton (as changed in 1801). Most are familiar and appear in many flag books. There are red ensigns, blue ensigns, Admiral's flags, Customs flags, the Trinity House flag, and flags of the East India and Guinea Companies.



One of the flags is solid red with gold lettering, "For the Protestant Religion and the Liberty of England". The commentary says that "This Flag recently flew on Admiral Howe's flagship, *Queen Charlotte*, when war with Spain was threatened." Another unusual flag shown is that of Newcastle (on-Tyne).

Spain has 5 different flags and pennants depicted. The commentary says about the ensign: "The Spanish Flag was earlier white with the coat of arms, but was at the conclusion of peace with Algiers in 1786 changed to these colours



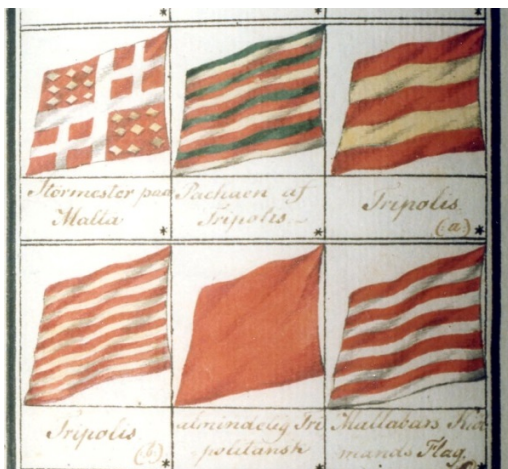
A comment on **FRANCE'S** new revolutionary flag and pennant reads: "This Flag was recognized in 1793" and for the pennant: "The blue is 1/5, the white 1/5 and the red part is 3/5 of the whole length of the pennant."

In the book there are five flags from the United States. They all have either fifteen stars, fifteen stripes or both. The comment on US commercial and naval ensign reads: "In the beginning, 1782, 1783, the American Flag had only 13 stars and stripes, but since more and more provinces joined the Union, the number of stars and stripes increased."

All are given a star denoting accuracy – as they were when Hesselberg produced his booklet: for the stripes from 1774 to 1814 and for the stars between 1795 and 1818.



As for the North African States, Tunis and Tripolis [Tripoli] are both well represented. As mentioned earlier, a Danish naval squadron was stationed in the Mediterranean between 1796 and 1801 and the flags were illustrated on site. There is reason to believe that these are correct - though the Grand Master of Malta Banner (left, top line) is that of Emmanuel de Rohan (1775-97). Even so, the many detailed flags can be a very good source for the Barbary Coast flags in the years before and after 1800.



Several flags are from areas around the Indian Ocean. Denmark had several small colonies in India. Danish merchant ships and naval vessels sailed regularly in these waters, and with information from such personnel, there is reason to believe that the flags described as "Tippo Saib's ensign" [Tippu Sultan, or Tipu Sahab], below left, and "the Maratha flag and pennant" (below centre and right) are correct. All three illustrations bear a star and the comments state that the flags were used in 1797. Tippu Sultan (1750-1799) was the ruler of the Kingdom of Mysore, in the south-western part of India, (modern Karnataka). The Maratha Empire to the north [Maharashtra state today] was constantly at war with Mysore. Both were at war with British forces.



## CONCLUSION

Admiral Hesselberg's book certainly raises many interesting questions and vexillological issues. In my opinion the book is so interesting that it should be printed and made available to a wider readership.



## BIOGRAPHICAL

Prior to his retirement in 2010 Jan Henrik Munksgaard was the Director of the Vest-Agder County Museum in southern Norway from 1985.

He has published over a dozen publications, books and articles on heraldry and vexillology and also in other fields: building history, archaeology, ethnology, and folk art. He co-authored *Seals, Weapons and Flags* in 2006, published in 2006 by the Vest-Agder County Museum. Jan Henrik was made a Fellow of FIAV at ICV 24 in 2011

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