

FLAGSCAPES – A NATURAL APPROACH TO VEXILLOLOGY

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Vexillology Ireland : Brateolaíocht Éirean

This paper attempts to diversify the meaning of flags and takes a natural approach to vexillology. It examines the relationship between man and nature and the connection between flags and landscapes, hence the title 'Flagscapes'. It explores the relationship between nationalism, nature, art and flags throughout history, especially the Romantic period and looks at the role played by landscapes in the development of national identities and consequently flags. Flags as we all know are a conscious celebration of ideas and values, but it is argued that they are also an unconscious celebration of nature. Therefore flags can be seen to be a celebration of nature within us as well as around us.

One of the most fundamental needs that humans have is the need for a sense of identity and belonging. A strong feature of this is the human attachment to landscapes. Despite this, most of us take our local landscapes for granted and do not realize how much they define who we are. Indeed, our national identities would lose much of their meaning were it not for the mystery and romance of a particular landscape tradition.

Most European national identities emerged during the Romantic period from the late 18th to the late 19th century. During this time local landscapes began to be celebrated for not only their beauty but also the significance and symbolism that they provided to the local people. Indeed, Romanticism was the celebration of everything local - landscapes, language, history, stories, customs and flags that were appearing more and more. Between 1785 and 1883, at least 25 modern European national flags were either first designed, used or adopted (see map below). The development of nationalism and landscapes during this period is evidence of the close relationship between nature and national identity. Indeed, many historians regard this time as the 'nationalization of nature'. To put it simply, Romanticism was the era when our countryside became our country, a period when landscapes and national identities became synonymous.



Flags devised, or adopted in Europe, 1785-1883

This connection between 'country' and 'countryside' can be seen in certain languages such as Ukrainian, French, Spanish and German. The Ukrainian word for country *країна* (*kraïna*) is cognate with the word for landscape *краєвид* (*kraïevyd*). The same applies to the French words *pays* and *paysage*, the Spanish words *pais* and *paisaje* and the German words *Land* and *Landschaft*.



English: *Country*
Ukrainian: *країна (Kraïna)*
French: *Pays*
Spanish: *Pais*
German: *Land*



English: *Countryside*
Ukrainian: *Краєвид (Krayevid)*
French: *Paysage*
Spanish: *Paisaje*
German: *Landschaft*

Since the Romantic period, both landscapes and flags have played a significant role in encouraging a sense of pride amongst the local people as they provide a real and tangible sense of identity. Perhaps the best example of this is the Ukrainian national flag which depicts ‘blue skies over golden wheat fields’ and reflects the boundless Ukrainian steppe or fertile plains that form most of the national landscape.

The ‘*chernozem*’ of central Ukraine is one the most fertile soils in the world and comprises about two-thirds of the country’s area. Ukraine has long been considered ‘the breadbasket of Europe’ and has been a major grain exporter to the world. The modern Ukrainian flag was first flown over the town hall in the western Ukrainian town of Lviv in 1848, when it was known by its German name of Lemberg and part of the Austrian Empire.

The Ukrainian national writers of the time romanticized the Ukrainian landscape and gave it greater significance to the Ukrainian people. One such was Taras Shevchenko, a Romantic poet considered the founder of the modern Ukrainian language.¹ In his most famous poem *Заповіт (Zapovit)* or *Testament*, written in 1845, he wrote:

*When I die, then make my grave,
High on an ancient mound,
In my own beloved Ukraine,
In steppeland without bound:
Whence one may see wide-skirted wheatland.*

Historically, the Cossacks have roamed the Ukrainian steppes and along with the landscape, Shevchenko promoted the Cossacks as a national symbol. It is only fitting that the Ukrainian colours are believed in some way to have originated from them.

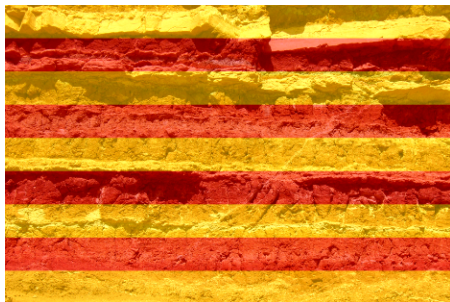
Apart from language, the human imagination also reveals our inextricable connection to the landscape. In his book *Landscape and Memory*, English historian Simon Schama took a radically new approach to history and explored the history of Western Culture through landscapes and the symbolism and identity that they have provided us. He looked into collectively inherited landscape myths to reveal how they have shaped not only our perception of the land around us but also ourselves. He argued that: “Landscape is a work of the mind, its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock”.² In other words, the concept of ‘landscape’ is equally natural as it is man-made.

The Romantic period was very important in the field of psychology. The German Arthur Schopenhauer was the first of the 19th century philosophers to study the unconscious. His ground-breaking work would inspire and influence such 20th century thinkers as Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung. Landscapes, flags and memory are inseparable parts of us as they form the centre of our personal and collective memories, or to use a Jungian term the ‘unconscious’. Both landscapes and flags represent the collective identity of a group and provide a visual and tangible basis for people’s beliefs and aspirations. They serve as symbols for people to recognize and unite under.

Romanticism represented what Jean Jacques Rousseau called a return ‘back to nature’. It was a period that brought back many landscape myths and restored certain memories that had become obscure during centuries

of Christianity. Dualistic beliefs originating in the Middle East and Platonic ideas led to a Christian orthodoxy holding the natural world of less value than a supposedly superior spiritual world, and away from primary awareness of Nature.

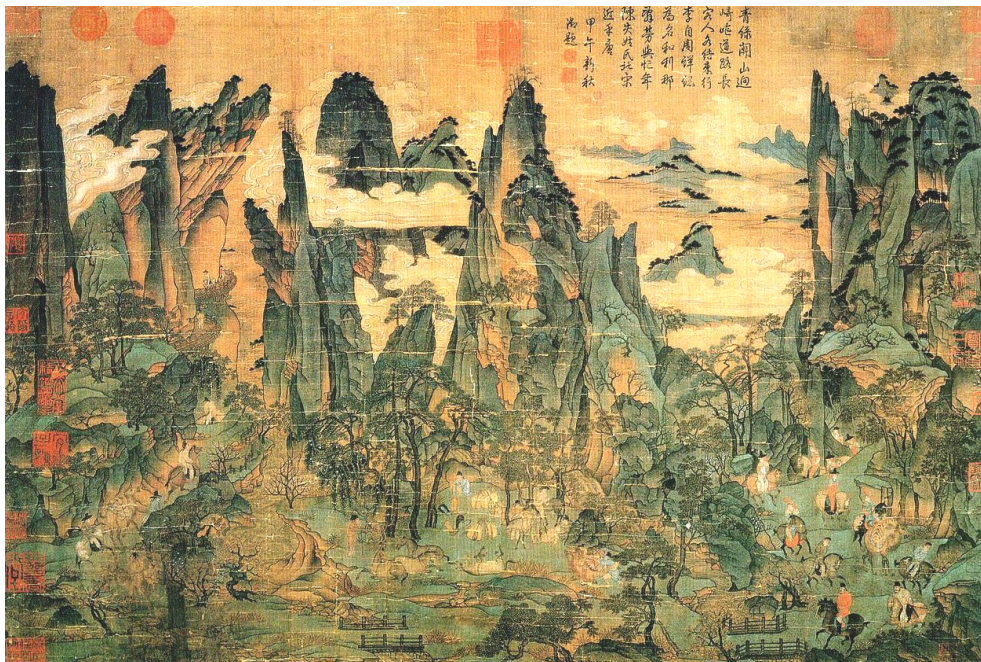
The old pagan religions of northern Europe had a healthy respect and high regard for the natural world. A number of ancient texts preserved many pre-Christian landscape myths, in particular the Irish *Dindsenchas*, which is ‘a kind of Dictionary of National Topography’. The name in Irish means ‘topography’, with *dind* meaning a ‘raised ground’ or ‘landmark’ and *senchas* referring to the lore of Irish places. The *Dindsenchas* is a collection of myths and legends, preserved in prose and poetry, that describe the origins of the names of both prominent man-made and natural features in Ireland.³



Flags in a way are topographical as they can act as graphic descriptions of local places. Therefore, they are part of our wider search for our cultural origins in the landscapes which surrounds us. In his book, Simon Schama also noted that “landscapes are culture before they are nature”,⁴ meaning that landscapes are cultural constructs which are projected onto nature by the human imagination. We perceive and create landscapes based on our shared collective beliefs, myths and ideologies. It is interesting to note that the word ‘culture’ comes from the Latin *colere* which means ‘to

cultivate’, as in a piece of land. For that reason, any form of culture can be seen as both physically and linguistically connected to nature, including our culture of flag use.

The history of flags can be traced to ancient China where they appeared much earlier than in Europe. The Chinese were the first to make flags out of cloth which they attached sideways to poles. These early flags were made of silk, which was invented in China more than 5,000 years ago. The earliest knowledge we have on the shape and function of Chinese flags dates to 1500 BC. The hierarchy of Chinese society at the time reflected the large range of flags that were used. Apart from clothing and flags, silk was also used for Chinese painting.



The Chinese philosophy of Taoism emphasizes harmony with the natural world, and has had a tremendous influence on the Chinese view of nature. Perhaps in more than any other culture, nature has played an inseparable role in Chinese art. Unlike in Europe, landscapes in China have always been considered the highest form of painting: as early as the latter part of the Tang Dynasty (618–906 AD), landscape painting

became an independent genre. The work entitled 'Minghuang's Journey to Shu' by Li Zhaodao is a great example of this period and depicts a landscape painted with ink and colour on silk. (shown above)

The Chinese name for landscape is made up of two characters: *shan shui* (山水), which literally translates as *mountain-water*. In comparison, the English word 'landscape' derives from the Dutch *landschap* which originally meant 'a tract of land'. In the 16th century, the word took on one of its modern meanings which is 'a branch of art dealing with the representation of natural scenery'. It is no surprise that this meaning came from the Dutch as they were the first in Europe to make landscape painting a separate genre. It is interesting to note that the word 'flag' also came into its modern meaning around this time.

In 1572, around the same time that Dutch landscape painting took off, the original orange-white-blue Dutch tricolour, the *Prinsenvlag* or Prince's flag, began to be used. This was the first modern flag as it was composed of simple stripes rather than heraldic devices. The revolutionary flag was reflective of the revolutionary movement towards the abolition of the (Spanish) monarchy and consequently the rejection of the heraldic system of identification. The Uniting Provinces of the Netherlands adopted a republican form of government in which elected assembly of the constituent states held sovereignty.

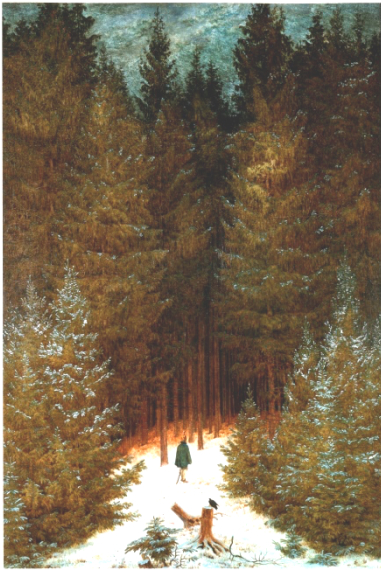
Landscape painting became popular in the 17th century during the Golden Age of the Dutch Republic when Dutch trade, science, military and art were among the most praised in Europe. This prosperous period gave rise to a Dutch middle class, increasingly interested in secular art for their homes. Before, landscapes served as a mere background for religious scenes, but the Dutch secularized landscape painting and made 'natural scenery' the central theme of the painting. The Dutch became increasingly proud of their local scenery and their achievements, and landscape painting celebrated this local and national pride. Jan van Goyen was one of the leading pioneers of realistic landscape painting in the country. After the 80 Years' War against Hapsburg Spain, the Dutch Republic was officially recognized by Madrid in 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia. Landscape became the most common genre of painting, overtaking historic, religious and mythological scenes.



In *Landscape and Memory*, Schama details the degree that nature plays in creating national identities. He compared the symbol of the forest for different nationalities, for example the Germans, who gave special significance to the *Urwald* or primeval forest. The most important forest myth in German history was created from the account by Tacitus of the battle near Osnabruck in 9 AD in which a coalition of German tribes led by Arminius (Hermann) annihilated three entire Roman legions.

This forest myth took particular form during the Romantic era, firstly through the work of poet and writer Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock who wrote a dramatic trilogy in honour of Hermann. In 1898, six years after the death of Klopstock, during the Napoleonic occupation of the German lands, the German dramatist Heinrich von Kleist wrote the patriotic play *Die Hermannsschlacht*.

The double defeat at Jena and Auerstedt and the continued German resistance against Napoleon served not only to entrench the Hermann myth, but also the forest. As Schama notes “Religion and patriotism, antiquity and the future—all came together in the Teutonic romance of the woods”.⁵ In 1814, the renowned German Romantic artist Casper David Friedrich painted arguably the most iconic painting of the Napoleonic occupation—*The Chasseur in the Forest*, which depicts a *chasseur*, or French soldier, standing alone, surrounded by a dark looming forest symbolising the German *Volk*.

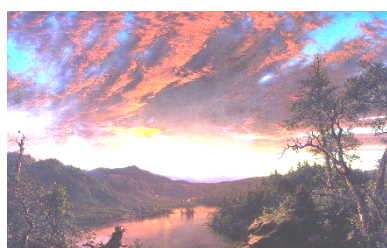


The Germans were not alone in using the forests to develop a sense of national identity. Adam Mickiewicz, also of the Romantic period, and considered Poland’s national poet, saw the Polish and Lithuanian forests not only as the countries’ past but also their future. For him, and for many Poles and Lithuanians, the forests represented freedom from Russian and Prussian oppression, and served as a beacon of hope for a return to independence of their partitioned country.

Although the Lithuanian and Polish flags were adopted in 1918 and 1919 respectively, the Polish colours themselves were officially adopted during the Romantic period. The Lithuanian colours came only with independence after the 1917 October Revolution. Schama argues that “not all cultures embrace nature and landscape myths with equal ardour, and those that do, go through periods of greater and lesser enthusiasm”.⁶ This may explain why not all cultures have embraced “landscape” flags to equal degree and why such flags are more prevalent in some countries than others.



The country that embraces flags more than any is arguably the United States. The Stars and Stripes can be seen everywhere: in front of people’s houses, above government buildings, on shops, on private cars, licence plates, even clothes. Americans are so passionate about their national flag that they even sing about it in their national anthem. No other country comes close to the level of veneration that Americans give their flag. The relationship between man and nature has always been at the heart of US history, even if its expression has varied.



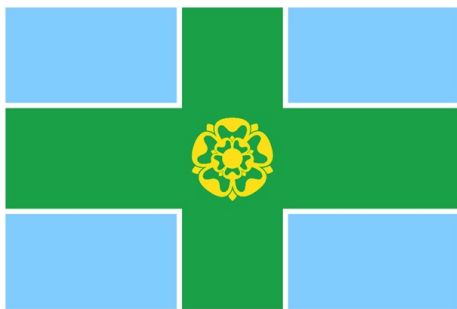
Twilight in the Wilderness, painting by Frederic Edwin Church (1860)

The United States was founded on Enlightenment ideas which saw the natural world as something inherently knowable and controllable. The belief was that if a wild animal could be tamed, then so could wild Mother Nature. John Locke, one of the leading thinkers of the Enlightenment, strongly influenced the establishment of the United States and the development of its founding principles. He considered it intolerable that the “wild woods and uncultivated waste of America be left to Nature, without any improvement, tillage and husbandry”.⁷ Locke encapsulated the Enlightenment idea that nature is an object to be studied and dominated. The renowned American writer and naturalist Henry David Thoreau thought otherwise and believed that “in wildness is the preservation of the world”.⁸ The work *Twilight in the Wilderness* by the American Romantic painter Frederic Edwin Church perhaps best encapsulates this notion of wildness and wilderness.

Today, Nature inspires us and moves us as much as it did our pagan ancestors. The ancient landscape myths have not disappeared; they have merely taken different form. During the English Romantic period, writers such as Coleridge, Wordsworth, Blake, Byron and Austen all wrote about the beauty of the English countryside and nature as a whole.

Some would argue that Romanticism was not a period but a mind-set that is still present for most of us today, including our flags. Designed and adopted as recently as 2006, the flag of the English county of Derbyshire expresses perfectly that famous line from Jane Austen:

*It was a sweet view—sweet to the eye and the mind English verdure, English culture, English comfort, seen under a sun bright, without being oppressive.*⁹



CONCLUSION

Rather than trying to create any concrete connection between flags, landscapes and nature, the theme of *Flagscapes* attempts to show the mysticism and Romanticism in their relationship. Flags and their meanings exist in a realm that can never be properly defined or explained. The only thing certain is that flags provide us with an experience of being alive—they capture our cultural, historical and natural essence that resonates with our innermost being and reality. Flags will always be more.



Romantic Themes

- Mysticism**
- Nationalism**
- Nature**
- Women**
- Landscapes**
- Flags**

END NOTES

- 1 Luckyj, George S.N. (1971) *Between Gogol and Sevchenko*, Fink, v.8, p.160
- 2 Schama, Simon. (1995) *Landscape and Memory*. Harper Collins: London, p.7
- 3 Stout, Geraldine. (2002) *Newgrange and the Bend of the Boyne*, Cork U Press, p64
- 4 Schama, Simon. (1995) *Landscape and Memory*. Harper Collins: London, p.61
- 5 Schama, Simon. (1995) *Landscape and Memory*. Harper Collins: London, p.107
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Locke, John. (1689) *Two Treatises of Government*, Hollis Edition, p.133
- 8 Thoreau, Henry, D. (1862) 'Walking' *Atlantic Monthly*, v. 9, no. 56
- 9 Austen, Jane. (2009) *Emma*. Wild Jot Press: New York

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BIOGRAPHICAL



Stan Zamyatin has been interested in flags for a very long time and began collecting them while studying architecture in Dublin in 2008. He began to work professionally with flags in 2013 when he joined the Genealogical Society of Ireland (GSI) to help them organize **Bratacha 2013** - Ireland's first ever festival of flags and emblems. During the festival he was the honorary curator of a flag exhibition at the Maritime Museum and gave a lecture on vexillology. Since then he has been appointed the Chief Executive Officer of Vexillology Ireland, a branch of GSI and has represented the society and Ireland at the Rotterdam Congress in 2013 and Cieszyn Conference in 2014. He has travelled to over fifty countries in five continents and speaks five languages. His interest in travel, languages, history, psychology, art and the environment all combine in his passion for flags and vexillology. He is also known as Stan Zamyatin Moore.

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