

Scots wha hae... bonnie symbols!



by Gordon
Craigie

OUR NATIONAL symbols are important. They are expressions or manifestations of our culture, folklore, history and traditions and help to promote a sense of belonging and togetherness. These symbols allow us to connect with our past and support us into our future. They represent our heritage and our aspirations. And, being o independent mind, we Scots hae some belters!

While other countries may favour eagles or lions to symbolise their strength and power, Scotland has as its national animal... the unicorn. This legendary creature is said to have been chosen to represent the Scots' desire to fight for their sovereignty and remain unconquered. An 1816 book on heraldry notes that the unicorn "is remarkable for his strength, but more for his great and haughty mind, who would rather die than be brought to subjection". Since James I, King of Scots, adopted the fabled beast as a royal symbol in the 15th century, we've used the image of the unicorn on coins, mercat crosses, and coats of arms. Other claimed attributes of the unicorn are purity, innocence and power, and when all of this is wrapped up with a mystical ability to promote healing... weel, thon unicorn's really no bad at aw! In present-day Scotland we can celebrate all things unicorn each year on April 9th, officially designated as Scotland's National Unicorn Day.

Another much loved symbol of Scotland is our national flower, the thistle, yet it's considered by many to be a weed! The thistle has been identified with Scotland since the 13th century and, although it is definitely real, it is the subject of many legends just like the unicorn. Apparently, when some bare-footed Viking invaders were attempting to launch a sneak attack on some sleeping clansmen their stealthy progress was disturbed by the prickly thistles causing them to loudly yelp! This woke up the

The thistle started to appear on coins in the 15th century and also became incorporated into Scotland's coat of arms shortly thereafter

Scots who subsequently won the ensuing Battle of Largs, thus prompting the immediate adoption of the thistle as a national emblem. As with most legends, alternative explanations are available but what we do know is that, like the unicorn, the thistle started to appear on coins in the 15th century and also became incorporated into Scotland's coat of arms shortly thereafter.

But the most obvious identifier of national pride is surely a country's flag, and what an uplifting sight it is to see thousands of Saltires, interspersed with Lion Rampants, flying proudly proclaiming all that is good about Scotland. Aye, we Scots are certainly fortunate to have two bonnie flags to identify with. Whether seen at a pro-independence march, a packed Hampden or Murrayfield, or atop the Empire State Building in New York City during the Tartan Week celebrations, the Saltire and Lion Rampant are instantly recognisable worldwide as symbols of Scotland.

In the April issue, *iScot* explored in some detail the official position on the Lion Rampant which, although steeped in history and readily identifiable with Scotland, is technically restricted to use by royalty, and those and such-as-those designated by royalty. Not that we seem to feel too constrained by that, judging by the images featured! No such restrictions apply to the Saltire as the Court of the Lord Lyon, the body responsible for monitoring heraldry and flags in Scotland, confirms that the Saltire "is the correct flag for all Scots or Scottish corporate bodies to fly to demonstrate their loyalty and their Scottish nationality".

But how did the Saltire come about? Well, history is tricky enough at the best of times, being written by the victors and all that, but when interspersed with myth and legend it gets even trickier. There does seem to be a general consensus however around the Saltire being adopted as the national flag of Scotland in 832 AD at the Battle of Athelstaneford. Indeed, that East Lothian village is now home to the National Flag Heritage Centre which celebrates the history of the Saltire.

The legend is that, when an army of Picts and Scots led by King Angus found themselves surrounded by Angles and Saxons, Angus prayed to Saint Andrew asking for help in the battle to come the next day. When the two sides faced up in the morning Angus saw that the clouds had formed a diagonal white cross against the azure background. Taking this as a sign of Saint Andrew's support, Andrew having been crucified on a diagonal cross, Angus resolved to adopt him as the patron saint of Alba should they be victorious. Against all the odds Angus's troops did indeed win and so Alba, later Scotland, adopted both Saint Andrew and his cross, the Saltire. History, myth, legend, or just a good story?





Credit Complexli Shutterstock



Credit Complexli Shutterstock



Glasgow Green May 2018
Credit Rab McDonald



Glasgow Green May 2018
Credit Rab McDonald

The vagaries of history also lead to conflicting views on whether our Saltire or the Dannebrog, the national flag of Denmark, is actually the oldest flag in the world. The *Guinness Book of World Records* awards that accolade to the Danes, arguing that the Dannebrog is the "oldest continually used flag". The book acknowledges "there is no prescribed definition of what constitutes 'continuous' use" but goes on to claim evidence that the Dannebrog was "certainly in use in the 1370s", before being formally adopted in 1625. Despite King Angus envisioning the Saltire in 832, the contention is that there is "no evidence" that the Saltire has always been a white cross on a blue background. Some sources have argued that the Saltire had variously been a white cross on a black, red or green background before finally settling on blue sometime in the 15th century. Since even the 'experts' don't have a precise definition then why can't we lay claim to our Saltire being the world's oldest flag?

Anyway, once that blue background had been confirmed it seems there was less certainty about the precise shade of blue. Some 600 years later the Scottish Government finally got around to standardising the colour, and in 2003 they adopted Pantone 300 as the designated background. The explanation for the darker shades often seen previously, and incorporated into the first Union flag in 1606, may lie in the particular properties of the dyes that were available at the time and their suitability for prolonged exposure to both sunlight and maritime conditions. Who knows, but there is no doubt that the azure colour of Pantone 300 is more representative of the blue-sky legend than those darker variants.

Flags are a serious business, as we in Scotland observed

back in January this year when some ill-informed mischief making by a few political nonentities, aided and abetted by predictably less than scrupulous gutter press reporting, caused a stooshie by complaining about 'that Nicola Sturgeon' replacing the Union flag on official buildings with the Lion Rampant. The story was patently untrue, yet it does beg the question as to why it was even potentially noteworthy and, apparently, so criminally wrong, that a country would want to fly one of its own national flags? Maybe this is what the British Nationalists keep decrying as 'Scottish Exceptionalism'? Other countries don't appear to share this reticence when it comes to displays of national pride. Witness how many Star-Spangled Banners you'll see in ordinary American gardens, or Maple Leafs fluttering proudly in Canada. And, closer to home, French and Italian houses aren't shy in displaying their respective *tricolore* either, and the Danes legally won't allow anything but the Dannebrog to be flown.

It's interesting to note that there's a degree of logic behind the design of most flags. The French flag has three equal stripes of blue, white and red representing the traditional colours of its capital city, Paris, alongside the 'ancient French colour' of white. An alternative explanation for the colours associates them with the revolutionary motto of *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*. Inspired by the French model, the Italian version of the *tricolore* has green, white and red stripes which are sometimes interpreted as representing the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, though they probably owe more to the ancient colours of the city of Milan. Our diagonal white cross on an azure background? Gifted tae us, in a vision!

But, here's tae us, wha's like us? There is something both fitting and comforting about our national flag being based on that vision. Just as we have a national animal, the unicorn, that is mythical and a national flower, the thistle, that others may consider a weed, this demonstrates the strengths of the Scottish nation in being prepared to think differently and to go our own way. As a people we are both dreamers and visionaries; think of our poets, writers and inventors. And our characters can be prickly as well as beautiful, an important quality when up against bigger opponents and competitors. We are well served by the Unicorn, the Thistle, the Lion Rampant and the Saltire, most definitely inspiring symbols for 'those o independent mind'!

Our diagonal white cross on an azure background? Gifted tae us, in a vision!

Bronze unicorn on the Mercat Cross, Inverness

