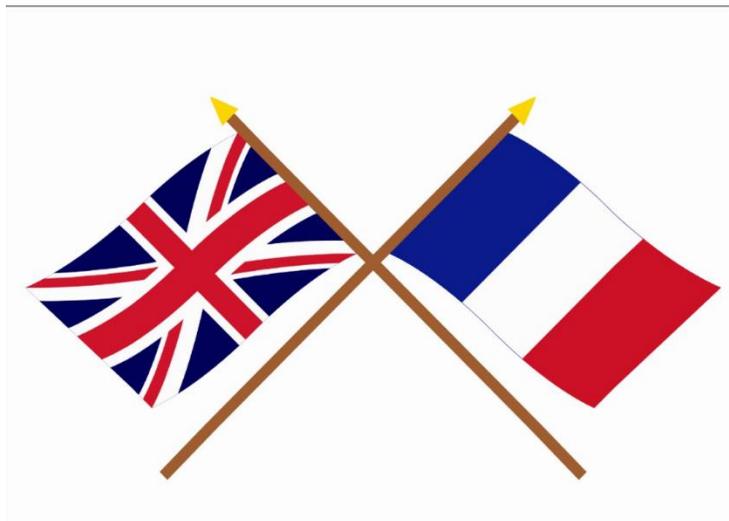


California State University Channel Islands

CREATING NATIONAL SYMBOLOLOGY

The Evolution of the Flags of the United Kingdom and France



Christopher MacMahon
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When Captain Samuel Wallis of the HMS *Dolphin* came ashore in Tahiti on June 26, 1767, he erected a wooden pole on top of which flew a red pennant representing the British ensign.¹ By planting his flag Captain Wallis was completing the now common ritualization of claiming the island in the name of King George III and Great Britain. The process had long been the preferred means for claiming *terra nullius* (void land) by the British during the Age of Discovery. Unlike their Iberian counterparts who depended upon papal bulls to solidify claims over “uninhabited” lands, the British sought a more permanent means by which to not only claim, but retain ownership of new lands on the far side of the world.²

The act of planting one’s flag has become synonymous with claims of sovereignty and imperial conquest. Indeed various methods for claiming sovereignty were utilized by European explorers throughout the period, but it is only the act of planting a flag that dominates the collective memories of modern society. In order to answer why this association became so unique, one must turn to the flag itself. How was it that a simple piece of colored fabric could come to represent the might of empires? More precisely, how was it that a flag became tantamount to a collective people as a nation? This essay will seek to answer this question by examining the creation of the British Flag of Union and the French *tricolore*. Through such exploration, one will find that the flag evolves in close association with the blossoming nationalist philosophy.

¹ Greg Denning, “Possessing Tahiti,” *Archaeology in Oceania* 21, no. 1 (April 1986), 105. Accessed November 5, 2015 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40386717>.

² Robert J. Miller, *Discovering Indigenous Lands: The Doctrine of Discovery in the English Colonies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 21-22. Accessed via Google Books November 11, 2015 https://books.google.com/books?id=GtnJiZiJsDIC&pg=PA21&lpg=PA21&dq=example+of+english+planting+the+flag+on+a+new+territory&source=bl&ots=U2EeJEM1z4&sig=QyW-c3pptVKiVz3DC8HqUxL0BsM&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CckQ6AEwAzgKahUKEwii_fmdo_rIAhVEz2MKHSymA-k#v=onepage&q=example%20of%20english%20planting%20the%20flag%20on%20a%20new%20territory&f=false.

The flag is by no stretch a modern form of symbolism. Historical records show evidence of flags dating back to the earliest civilizations. The Book of Numbers describes how the Israelites camped “each man by his own camp, and each man by his own standard, according to their armies,”³ and evidence from the reign of Ramses II records each section of the ancient Egyptian army as having carried its own unique identifying banner with it onto the battlefield.⁴ This mirrors the 2,500 year old teachings of Sun Tzu who encouraged leaders to utilize flags and banners as a means to effectively organize battlefield maneuvers.⁵ Indeed it is the very use of standards by military units that historians believe the flag was introduced to Western Europe. As the Roman legions conquered the dominions of Gaul and Britannia they carried before them a *signum*: a cross-piece attached to the head of a lance from which hung a *vexillum* (Figure 1).⁶ The *vexillum* was comprised of a piece of colored fabric – most commonly red or purple – bearing identifying markings, affixed to the corners of the cross-beam, and hung in a loose vertical fashion.⁷ While one can see the early beginnings of flags being representative of a collective or group identity, they would largely be relegated to battlefields representing the heraldry of lords, knights, and their retainers throughout the Middle Ages.



Figure 1.
Roman Signum

³ Numbers 1:52

⁴ Paul T. Nicholson and Ian Shaw, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 293. Accessed via Google Books November 6, 2015
<https://books.google.com/books?id=Vj7A9jJrZP0C&pg=PA293&lpg=PA293&dq=ancient+use+of+flags&source=bl&ots=zt02siuFDr&sig=9e5sKW7Q0uR5gX-454yQ92S6cCE&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CBwQ6AEwADgKahUKEwiv8yi0PzIAhVD22MKHfnzBxU#v=onepage&q=ancient%20use%20of%20flags&f=false>

⁵ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* 7:26.

⁶ *Vexillum of the Legio XIII Germania*, accessed November 6, 2015
http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/images/i/it_leg13.gif

⁷ William Gordon Perrin, *British Flags, Their Early History, and Their Development at Sea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 7-8.

To track the evolution of the flag as a national device, we must turn our attention toward the British Isle, for here one is able to clearly follow the trends toward a representational symbol. In both England and Scotland, the trend toward a common device is closely associated with each country's adopted patron saint. In Scotland this manifested itself as the cross of St. Andrew, whilst the English chose the cross of St. George.

In Scotland, the timeline is fairly easy to follow. In 736, Óengus mac Fergusso⁸ established himself on the throne, defeating his competitors, and bringing much of the Pictish territory under common rule.⁹ Legend has it that prior to the battle that would bring Dál Riata under his dominion, Óengus prayed for the victory of his smaller force. In the midst of the battle there appeared clouds in the otherwise blue sky which formed themselves into the diagonal cross of St. Andrew.¹⁰ Óengus attributed his victories to the saint, and founded a church in the burgh of St. Andrew's which included several relics of the martyr. Óengus would also proclaim St. Andrew his country's patron saint.¹¹

While it is likely that St. Andrew's cross was likely used as a national symbol earlier, the first definitive example one can document appears in 1385. In its preparations with the Kingdom of France for a combined invasion of England, the Scottish Parliament decreed "that all men, French and Scots, have a sign in the front and at the back, namely, a white cross of St. Andrew and [if] his jacket or jerkin is white, he shall wear the said white cross on a piece of black cloth, round or square."¹² It is important to note here that the background color was not blue, but only

⁸ I have chosen to use the old Irish form. The name also appears as Angus mac Fergus or Angus son of Fergus.

⁹ Perrin, 47. Early Scottish history can be difficult to piece together as the records from the period were pillaged by Edward I and later lost. Perrin references the Irish and Pictish Annals to establish his timeframe for the events

¹⁰ Graham Bartram, "The Story of Scotland's Flags," *Proceedings of the XIX International Congress of Vexillology* (2009), 167-168. Accessed November 6, 2015 <http://www.flaginstitute.org/pdfs/Proceedings.pdf>.

¹¹ Perrin, 47. Bartram, 168.

¹² Original: "que tout homme, Francois et Escot, ait un signe devant et derrere cest assavoir une croiz blanche Saint Andrieu et se son jacque soit blanc ou sa cote blanche il portera la dicte croiz blanche en une piece de drap noir

specified as black if upon a white background. Any base color would suffice, it was the symbol of the white cross which was of greater importance. Indeed the color of the field seems to remain immaterial throughout the various reigns leading up to the Act of Union.¹³ While blue became the more popular and more common use, the only consistency was the use of a white St. Andrew's cross (see Figure 3).¹⁴

In England, the adoption of a patron saint and common symbol is more difficult to trace. Throughout much of the early English history, there appears to be no overwhelming preference toward a given saint. Rather, early symbology and heraldry was more reflective of the nation's pagan roots with many noble and royal flags incorporating dragons. Though King Æthelstan would march under the banner of St. Maurice in 927, it was not until the Norman Conquest that Christian iconography began to appear in English flags. Three saints contended for the favor of the English: St. Edmund, St. Edward, and St. George. Of these three, St. Edward (Edward the Confessor) held the prominent position, although no official recognition had been made.¹⁵

It was not until the time of the crusades that St. George would gain favor among the English. St. George was popular among the warriors who ventured abroad, and they brought his favor with them once they had returned home. It is during the reign of Edward I we find the cross utilized as a national symbol when Edward decreed that the king's foot soldiers would wear the

ronde ou quarree." General Council Records, Legislation: ordinance made in council concerning the French army, June 17, 1385, Records of the Parliaments of Scotland. Accessed November 6, 2015
http://www.rps.ac.uk/search.php?a=fcf&fn=robertii_trans&id=1352&t=trans.

¹³ Perrin, 48-50.

¹⁴ Figure 3. Flag of Scotland, Accessed November 6, 2015

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_Scotland#/media/File:Flag_of_Scotland.svg

¹⁵ Perrin, 32-35



Figure 2.
St. Andrew's Cross of Scotland

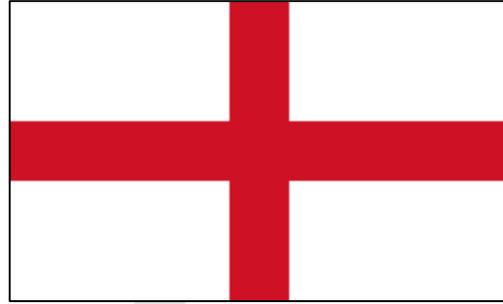


Figure 3.
St. George's Cross of England

cross as an identifying emblem in place of the king's coat of arms.¹⁶ Unlike in Scotland, the use of the cross of St. George seems to be rather uniform in its appearance in England: a red cross upon a white field (Figure 3).¹⁷ While the use of the cross first appeared on the battlefield, its use as a common national symbol gained prominence on the sea where the emblem was utilized on pennants and later flags for English vessels. Like Scotland, however, the flag was simply an identifier in common usage, and never officially adopted by the crown.¹⁸

Ultimately it would be the Stuart succession that would lead to the official adoption of both crosses as well as an official national flag representing the peoples of Britain. James I arrived in London having already been crowned James VI of Scotland. While officially the kingdoms of England and Scotland remained separate, they were now joined together under the joint monarchy of James. Recognizing this connection, James undertook actions which would view his subjects not as separate, but as one kingdom of Great Britain.

As an island nation, much of the kingdom's economy depended upon maritime trade both at home and abroad. As previously mentioned, national identity was closely tied to the sea and

¹⁶ Perrin, 38-39.

¹⁷ Figure 3. Flag of England, Accessed November 6, 2015
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_England#/media/File:Flag_of_England.svg.

¹⁸ Perrin, 45-46.

the flags flown aboard one's ship to identify its nation of origin. Perhaps one of James' greatest contributions toward unification was a proclamation creating a joint flag of union. Issued in 1606, James recognized that "some difference hath arisen between our Subjects of north and south Britaine [traveling] the Seas, about the bearing of their flagges." In order to avoid "such contentions hereafter," James decreed "That from henceforth all our Subjects of this Isle and Kingdome of Great Britaine, and the members thereof, shall beare in their Maine-toppe the Red Crosse, commonly called S. Georges Crosse, and the White Crosse commonly called S. Andrews Crosse, joined together."¹⁹ While the creation of the flag of Great Britain (Figure 4)²⁰ may be viewed as a trivial matter, implementing this policy provided a tangible object which citizens could turn to in the formation of a common collective identity.²¹

As national philosophy evolved, so too did the monarchy's approach to the use of the Flag of Union. Under the reign of Charles I, Britain began to expand its naval power. As the Royal Navy grew, Charles thought it important to differentiate naval vessels from those of merchantmen. Consequently he issued a proclamation in 1634 asserting "none of our Subjects... shall from henceforth presume to carry the Union Flagge in the Maine toppe, or any other part of

¹⁹ James I, *Whereas some difference hath arisen betweene our subiects of south and north Britaine trauayling by seas, about the bearing of their flagges*, London, 1606 accessed via Early English Books Online September 28, 2015 http://gateway.proquest.com.summit.csuci.edu:2048/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:187159.

²⁰ Figure 5. Union Flag of Great Britain accessed November 6, 2015

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Union_Jack#/media/File:Union_flag_1606_%28Kings_Colors%29.svg.

²¹ The relationship between objects and collective consciousness addressed in Emile Durkheim, Karen Fields, trans., *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 29 quoted in Robert Shanafelt, "The Nature of Flag Power: How Flags Entail Dominance, Subordination, and Social Solidarity," *Politics and the Life Sciences* 27, no. 2 (September 2008), 13.

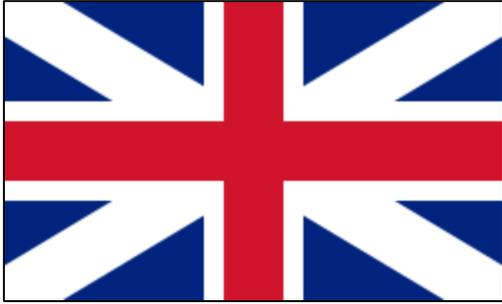


Figure 4.
Union Flag of Great Britain



Figure 5.
Union Flag of the United Kingdom

their Ships.” The right to fly the flag, Charles continued, would be “reserved as an Ornament proper for Our owne Ships, and Ships in Our immediate Service and pay, and none other.”²² Such distinction made clear that the ensign was to be flown only by government vessels. The restriction also clearly indicates an emerging nationalist philosophy. The use of the royal “our” indicates that Charles was referencing ships of His government, rather than personal ships. One can therefore observe that the use of the British flag aboard these vessels is clearly meant to identify those ships as representatives of the British government rather than of forces of Charles himself as would have been common under the feudal system. The distinction between government and civil vessel was so profound that Charles’ restrictions remain in place to this day.²³

It would not be until 1707 that the kingdoms of England and Scotland would be formally united as the Kingdom of Great Britain. The Acts of Union declared “the Crosses of St Andrew and St George be conjoined in such manner as Her Majesty shall think fit and used in all Flags

²² Charles I, *A proclamation appointing the Flags, As well for Our Nauiie Royall, as for the Ships of Our Subjects of South and North Britaine*, London, 1634 accessed via Early English Books Online September 28, 2015 http://gateway.proquest.com.summit.csuci.edu:2048/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:185754.

²³ British law requires civilian vessel to fly the red ensign, a crimson field with the union flag in the upper left corner. Only government vessels may fly the Union Flag. Merchant Shipping Act of 1995, The National Archives of the United Kingdom, accessed November 11, 2015 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1995/21/section/2>.

Banners Standards and Ensigns both at Sea and Land.”²⁴ Nearly identical language was utilized one hundred years later in the Union with Ireland Act.²⁵ Here the flag would see its final transformation into the Union Flag (Figure 5) with the addition of the red diagonals of St. Patrick’s Cross.²⁶ In both instances, it is important to note that the government recognized the necessity for the creation of a national ensign, and set the parameters therein.

If the creation of the Union Flag can be viewed as a steady progression of government recognition and legislative initiatives as national ideals took hold, then the events toward the adoption of the French national flag—known as the *tricolore*—are equally as reflective of the tumultuous times in which it arose. Unlike their neighbors across the Channel, the national flag of France had long been tied to the House of Bourbon’s traditional coat of arms. The flag consisted simply of a white background adorned with golden fleur-de-lis (Figure 6).²⁷ There was no greater representation of the French people as a collective. In the decades preceding the events of 1789, the monarchy *was* France, or as Dale Clifford categorizes it, “a sovereign redefined as ‘the nation.’”²⁸

In the summer of 1789, that all began to change. As citizens began to arm themselves and took to the streets, power began to shift away from the monarchy and arrive ever increasingly into the hands of the citizenry. However, as Lynn Hunt clearly states, “the exercise of power

²⁴ Union with England Act 1707, The National Archives of the United Kingdom, accessed November 11, 2015 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/aosp/1707/7/section/I>.

²⁵ Union with Ireland Act 1800, The National Archives of the United Kingdom, accessed November 11, 2015 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/apgb/Geo3/39-40/67/part/1>.

²⁶ Figure 5. The Union Flag, accessed November 6, 2015 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Union_Jack#/media/File:Flag_of_the_United_Kingdom.svg.

²⁷ Figure 6. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Pavillon_royal_de_France.svg.

²⁸ Dale L. Clifford, “Can the Uniform Make the Citizen? Paris, 1789-1791,” *Eighteenth Century Studies* 34, no. 3 (Spring 2001), 367. Accessed November 5, 2015 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30053984>.

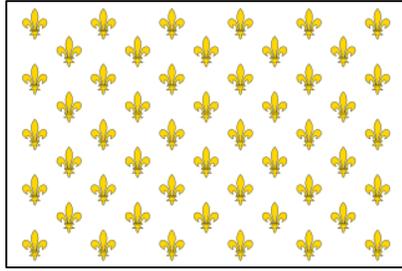


Figure 6.
Bourbon Standard

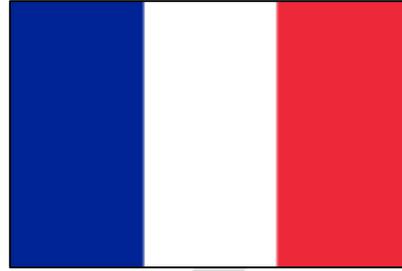


Figure 7.
French *Tricolore*

always requires symbolic practices.” Yet because the revolution was spontaneous, the revolutionaries “had no banners... they invented their symbols as they went along.”²⁹ Chief among these symbols of revolution was the tricolor cockade.

The tricolor cockade emerged early in the very heart of the revolution: Paris. Here, location is key as Paris plays an important role in how one arrives at the three colors represented in the *tricolore*. Red and blue were the customary city colors dating back to the Middle Ages. The colors comprise the two primary colors of the city’s coat of arms, and were chosen by the early revolutionaries to represent themselves as Parisians. White was added as a nod to the monarchy, and thus incorporating *all* French people into one symbol whilst proclaiming one unified France.³⁰

It is important to note that at this early stage, the cockade was just one of many symbols that had quickly been pressed into the service of the French people in their revolution, but of these, only the cockade would become fully entwined with the new national identity. This transformation, Jennifer Heuer argues, can be traced largely to the role that the cockade played in

²⁹ Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 54.

³⁰ Jennifer Heuer, “Hats off for the Nation! Women, Servants, Soldiers, and the ‘Sign of the French,’” *French History* 16, no. 1 (2002), 30. Accessed November 5, 2011 <http://fh.oxfordjournals.org.summit.csuci.edu:2048/content/16/1/28.full.pdf+html>.

the *ancien régime*. Hats and wigs were often used as social identifiers, and the use of cockades had long symbolized military service. By adopting the cockade, revolutionaries were simultaneously showing that all citizens were of equal status and prepared to take up arms to protect their rights. Thus, “the men and women of the French Revolution... turned the tricolor into a sign of patriotism and commitment.”³¹

As Lafayette would later state, the revolution that July was indeed for the national sovereignty, “the tricolored standard throwing down the standard of legitimacy.”³² When legislators of the new republic began debate in 1798 over whom was permitted to wear the cockade it was largely argued that the “national cockade belonged to all Frenchmen.”³³ Such strong opinions of the cockade representing the people would ultimately lead to the tricolors being integrated into the national flag of the French Republic. In October 1790 the National Constituent Assembly adopted a resolution officially creating the tricolor flag as the national flag of France. Four years later, the National Assembly reversed the order of the colors from red, white, blue to their present day blue, white red.

Both France and the United Kingdom owe their flags to nationalism, but the manner at which they arrived at the final product could not be any different. In Britain, the move toward a national identity was a top down approach undertaken by the monarchy throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Indeed the very concept of a nation-state was one which the monarchy was quick to recognize and adapt to in its policies. In Britain the creation of a national flag was not a representation of the people, but rather a representation of the national government. In contrast the adoption of the French *tricolore* had its origin within the barricades

³¹ Heuer, 30-31.

³² Bernard Serrans, *Memoirs of General Lafayette and of the French Revolution of 1830* (London: 1833), 250, Harvard Collections, accessed November 11, 2015 <https://archive.org/details/memoirsgenerall02unkngoog>.

³³ Heuer, 29.

and every day citizens who rose up in the revolution. The revolutionaries took one of the enduring symbols of the revolution which they believed embodied not only the ideals for which the revolution had been fought, but moreover the very men and women of France itself. When combined with the nationalistic ideologies that became prevalent during the Age of Revolution, flags begin to take on a life of their own. No longer were they a simple identifier of nobility, but the embodiment of a collective presence of an entire society. When the explorer planted his flag on *terra nullius* he was not just claiming the land for his sovereign, but for the nation and his fellow countrymen. As comedian Eddie Izzard would jest, “Do you have a flag? No? Well if you don’t have a flag you can’t have a country.”³⁴

³⁴ *Eddie Izzard: Dress to Kill*, directed by Peter Richardson (Ella Communications, 1999), accessed November 12, 2015 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cIE7BOhIL7I>.

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