

Heraldry

By Dónal Thompson



The Thompson Coat of Arms

You're in the middle of a battlefield in the Middle Ages. There are dead bodies everywhere. Arrows rain down on you. You can't read and everyone is a little bit too busy to stop and chat. How do you know who is your enemy and who is your friend?

That problem was solved by heraldry - the art of military symbols. Everyone can recognise a strong design and so the armies of the past identified themselves with what I suppose were proto-logos.

When recognising symbols was not a question of life or death, as in tournaments, the symbols became more intricate or even esoteric. In modern times people who understand heraldry are seen as experts. This is a bit silly really when you think that the whole purpose of heraldry was to be simple.

Many English pub names come from heraldry. When a knight and his entourage frequented a tavern they would leave their shields outside, displaying their heraldic symbols to passers-by. Thus, pubs are still called "The

Rose and Crown", "The Crown and Anchor" etcera.

Over the years as the armies became identified with the aristocracy, having a heraldic shield or a "coat of arms" was considered a sign of gentility. The same thing pathetically happens today with clothes labels such as the Lacoste alligator or Tommy Hilfiger squares.

Heraldry did not just appear in 12th century Europe. The Japanese had their monsho system and some North American tribes had their totem systems.

Some national flags are heraldic. Some are not. The French flag is just an arrangement of colours but the Union Flag (of the United Kingdom) is a heraldic cocktail of the crosses of St. George, St. Andrew and St. Patrick. The US flag is semi-heraldic as its components appear to come from the coat of arms of George Washington, the first President of the US.

Many coats of arms are accompanied by a motto. A motto is a word or phrase that, I imagine, sums up the aspirations of the those who 'bear the arms'. My school had a coat of arms and its motto was "Fidelitor et Fortitor" (*Faith and Strength*). The English monarch has, ironically, a French motto - "Dieu et Mon Droit" (*God and My Right*).

One of my favourite mottoes is from the Sackville coat of arms. It advises "Aut nunquam tentes, aut perface" which translates as Yoda's advice to Luke Skywalker in "Star Wars" (*Do or do not. There is no try*).

Modern day heraldry is a plaything for the vain and insecure who write to the London College of Arms to see if there is a Kobayashi or Gelbfish coat of arms. For the rest of us, the original simplicity of heraldry has become the MacDonalds 'M' and the Nike 'swoosh'. "O tempora! O Mores!" you might say.