



## CONGRESS EVENT

Speech: Graeme Johanson  
Lecturer, Department of Information Services  
Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, launching  
**Vexillology: A 25th Anniversary  
History and a Bibliography of Flag Literature,**  
by Ralph GC and Charles E Bartlett

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At the age of 7, a school project involved drawing national flags and colouring them in with pencils - white stars caused special difficulty, because the paper was white! The yellow Muslim crescent moons were the most exciting, but the teacher discouraged too great an interest in Arab affairs at that time.

In 1954 Queen Elizabeth II, the first British monarch to visit Australia, paraded through the centre of Melbourne in her open-topped Rolls Royce. Graeme, aged 8, was lined up behind a gigantic barrier to wave his cloth Union Jack attached to a wooden meat skewer. The tip of the miniature flag saw more of the Queen than the waver!

By the time he was 11, Graeme's appreciation of British monarchs became a little jaded. "The Queen Mother" visited Melbourne, and thousands of primary school students, including Graeme, practiced dancing and banner-waving for weeks in advance of her arrival. On a sunny day the children paraded and waved and sang on the turf at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, doing their display, in front of an unobservable Queen Mother hidden comfortably somewhere in the members' stand. To Graeme's chagrin, the Melbourne Herald reported that night that the Queen Mother wished the children had sang a little louder so that she could have heard them better!

I feel a sense of excitement, as I did 30 years ago, when the "flag monitor" at my primary school was taken ill, and I was asked by my headmaster to replace him and to release the Australian flag in front of 900 students waiting obediently to salute it.

I ask your forbearance while we dwell for a few minutes on the significance of this handsome volume, **Vexillology: A 25th Anniversary History and a Bibliography of Flag Literature**, before we salute it together this afternoon.

There is an old English proverb, used by seafarers which goes: *The flag protects the cargo*

I invite you to reflect on the cargo of knowledge encapsulated in this book, protected by two keen students of flags, Ralph and Charles Bartlett, and supported by you all, vexillologists from around the world.

I class myself a dilettante among connoisseurs at this gathering but I welcome the opportunity to honour the authors for their dedicated labours, fine scholarship and keen enthusiasm to share their work

Having witnessed their writing and publishing efforts over many months, with limited financial resources, it is a pleasure to see the results of their extensive research, their methodical analysis and conscientious compilation.

This book, **Vexillology**, is not written in technical jargon - a windfall to a novice like me - and it highlights at least 3 important functions of vexillology in our world, as I see it, that:

- [ ] the study of flags is a serious discipline, while remaining accessible to all parties involved in the production and use of flags - manufacturers, artists, designers, collectors, students and hobbyists.
- [ ] the message of vexillology is international, not parochial, with an underlying aim of world understanding (the book acknowledges the help of 49 people from 22 countries) and that
- [ ] the social, political, psychological, historical and artistic significance of flags and vexillology cannot be avoided by anyone, whether vexillologist or not.

I beg your indulgence while I enlarge on this last point - the pervasive influence of flags, and hence this volume, for 4 minutes.

The Flag Society of Australia is proud to hold this anniversary Congress in the southern hemisphere for the first time.

There is an Australian slang expression, *Flying the Australian Flag*, which refers to someone's shirt tails hanging out over the back of their trousers. This expression *Flying the Australian Flag*, suggests that Australians can laugh at themselves, at their casual dress and manner. But it is also projects a cultural image of a hard worker flying into the job at hand, in a country that many Australians traditionally see as "the land of opportunity".

There is another example of interesting slang, apparently British, where the image of the flag has permeated our linguistic culture. The term *Flag unfurled* is rhyming slang to mean a man or woman of the world. This usage it seems to me, fits very neatly with your international interest in the study of flags and Ralph and Charles' desire to spread their word.

To the causal observer, vexillology may appear an esoteric science, but we needn't go far to see immediate evidence of the influence of flags in our everyday lives. I am not telling you anything new when I note that traffic lights, the bane of every motorist's existence, have a direct lineage to railway signal lights, and before them, to coloured flags. Many facets of modern technology and modern life can be traced back to flags. The allusions of advertising are pervasive.

Flags are, we all know, symbolic forms of communication and regulation, no less than our ethical values, laws, business principles, and in-built habits of behaviour. The symbolism of flags Ralph and Charles have explored at length, as no doubt all of you have, in your own areas of interest. Symbols are a rich field of study, a field made easier to absorb through this book with its illustrations, colour reproductions, photos appendices and index. To me this publication itself symbolises the values which vexillologists hold dear.

In the famous **Book of the Knowledge of all the Kingdoms, Lands And Lordships that are in the World**, of about 1350, the itinerant author described the Tibetan people for the first time to Europeans. He writes

*They are men of clear understandings and good memories, learned in the sciences, and live according to law.*

In my opinion that assessment should be applied to Ralph and Charles Bartlett today. The medieval author attributed the Tibetans' "clear understandings and good memories" to the pleasant climate in Tibet. I think there is more to it than climate, in the case of Ralph and Charles!

The author of 1350 goes on to say

*... for this reason they deserve honour more than any others.*

I wholeheartedly agree and hereby declare this book unfurled.