

FLAGS ON A 200 YEARS OLD PAINTED TRAY

Casimir de Rahm

It may seem curious to you that a Swiss, living in the middle of Europe, speaks about flags at sea. In fact, this is a story of a kind of puzzle concerning flags and heraldry, on a background of French Revolution.

We have at home an old painted tray representing a naval engagement. It was inherited from an old aunt who pretended it was showing the battle of Trafalgar.

A short look at the tray had convinced me that it was not Trafalgar but I had too much respect to argue with the dear old aunt and, when she left this world, we got the tray.

It was coming from ancestors who emigrated from Switzerland to London during the eighteenth century to deal with some import-export business.

I was puzzled by that battle ... The ship in the middle of the picture is obviously flying an English flag, with the St George cross and the white saltire of St Andrew but, apparently, the thin red saltire of St Patrick was missing. This was meaning that the battle had happened before the Act of Union on the first of January 1801, when St Patrick's cross was added to the former Union Flag of 1707.

As Trafalgar occurred in 1805, "our" battle had no connection with Nelson's victory.

Some of the other ships are flying long naval pennants, impossible to identify in the smoke and the ship on the left flies a sort of white and yellow flag with some figure on it. Was it a mermaid or some mythological representation ? This was the problem.

The painting was probably showing an English victory, as painters prefer to represent victories of their own countries ...

The English man of war is in the middle of the picture, at the place of honour and flies at the main mast the blue flag of an English squadron.

The opponents are shown in a rather sad situation: the one on the right is burning and the other on the left seems to fly the flag at half staff as if it would surrender.

The old tray was saved from damage of time because it was considered as too precious to be utilised to serve teas and it was hanging on the wall of the dining room as a picture.

We did the the same when we inherited it and as I had abandoned the idea of ever explaining the story of that battle, the tray became part of our landscape: I nearly forgot all about it.

Let us forget it too for a moment and pass to another subject...

We were asked, a friend of mine and myself, to put some order in a collection of wax seals of the last century, belonging to the Historic Museum of our City.

The interesting part of the job was naturally the identification of heraldic seals. Many of them wore a traditional helmet over the shield, but we discovered also hats instead of helmets and this was the beginning of an amusing research for hats in Swiss heraldry.

This fashion started already toward the end of the 18th century, but suddenly increased under the influence of the French Revolution. Anyhow, my attention was drawn to hats in San Francisco, two years ago, during the Congress of Vexillology.

On a certain evening, at the Congress, a big sale was organised: posters, flags and books were on display, and I went ... just to have a look, when I saw a book *Flags at Sea*, sold by Mr John Hall of the British delegation.

I started to run through it rapidly and stopped at the sight of a lady holding a hat on a pole! A hat! I bought the book without looking further on and went with my prey to our room: the precious book was written by Timothy Wilson, who worked in the National Maritime Museum of Greenwich and I realised that the lady with the hat was belonging to a flag of the Batavian Republic, a result of the conquest of Holland by the French Revolution which pretended to liberate the country and created a satellite state in 1795.

Three years later, Switzerland was also conquered, or "liberated" if you prefer, and hats, scarcely used before, began to appear very often as "Liberty hats".

It was a curious idea to take such a symbol. By chance the French papers are actually full of comments about the Revolution and this story of hats comes probably from the first meeting of the so called "Etats Generaux" (5th May 1789). It was a parliament ordered by the king to study the tragic situation of the finances of the Kingdom. The three Orders were assembled for the first time since 1614: the Church, the Nobility and the Commons.

On the opening day, the King took off his hat to greet the Assembly and put it on again. The representatives of the Church put on their bonnets, the nobles their hats with white feathers and the commoners dared, for the first time in history, to put on their hats, like the King and the nobles.

If we consider the very strict protocol of the French court at this time, this simple gesture had a huge significance. It was reported in the papers, in France and abroad, as a sign of equality and the beginning of Liberty. The hat became a symbol.

In Switzerland, we had already our hero of Liberty: the famous William Tell who, according to the legend, refused to salute the hat of the Austrian ruler - the local sheriff - and people made a complete mix up between the hat of Liberty and the hat of the wicked Austrian. Then, William Tell - with or without hat - was put everywhere, on coats of arms, on seals, on money and later on sign-boards of pubs and hotels.

The image of this symbol was turning in my head after the Congress, and when I went back home, I compared the tray with the picture in the book: there was no doubt, the form I took for a mermaid was obviously the French Liberty imposed on the Batavian Republic.

The old Dutch flag had been maintained. Only the upper corner was added and the traditional bold lion on the arms of the United Provinces was reduced to a tamed lion at the feet of the Liberty.

This gave us two dates to situate the battle: the Batavian Republic after 1795 and the English flag before 1800. Furthermore, the book was showing another picture of a dark blue flag with the same Liberty neatly painted. It was the command flag of the Dutch Vice-admiral de Winter, at the Battle of Camperdown 1797.

The painting of the whole battle was given on the opposite page and it was exactly the arrangement of fleets as given on the tray. It was then easy to reconstruct the whole story: in 1796, France was intending to land in Ireland to attack England in the rear. The Dutch fleet was foreseen for the transport and 15,000 men assembled on the Isle of Texel. But the English fleet was patrolling in the channel. For about two years it was a deadly game of hide and seek, until the British could intercept the Dutch fleet on the west coast of Holland in the offing of Alkmaar, (Kamperduinen in Dutch or Camperdown in English). There were 16 men of war on each side, but the British could cut the Dutch line and their superior artillery secured the victory. The Vice-admiral, de Winter was killed.

The picture of Thomas Whitcomb represents the beginning of the action. In the middle, Vice-admiral Duncan has hoisted the red and white signal "Engage the enemy". The Dutch on the left has got some severe shots and begins to burn. On the left, Vice-admiral de Winter flies his blue flag on the main mast which is already broken, but the Dutch flag is still high on the stern.

Then I wrote to the National Maritime Museum of Greenwich and I had the pleasure to receive another representation of the event: an aquatint by Robert Dodd showing a slightly different aspect of the battle.

Unfortunately, they have no color reproduction, but this picture has certainly been copied by the artist who decorated the tray. It shows exactly the same details.

The tray after Robert Dodd's aquatint shows the next phase: the brand on the right cannot be mastered and the crew is abandoning the wreck. On the left, the Dutch flag has been lowered in sign of surrendering. The English signal "Engage the enemy" has been lowered in order to reserve the possibility of giving further orders.

The winner, Vice-Admiral Duncan, received the title of Viscount of Camperdown. The announcement of this victory was heard with great relief and "incredibly enthusiastic", as written in the report of the time and artists made pictures of it. Television was not there, but the painters were so acquainted, that 200 years later, you can nearly participate in the action.

My simple conclusion is that, once more, we see that heraldry and vexillology are of important help to history: they offer the possibility to identify Kings as well as artifacts such as a modest tea tray ...

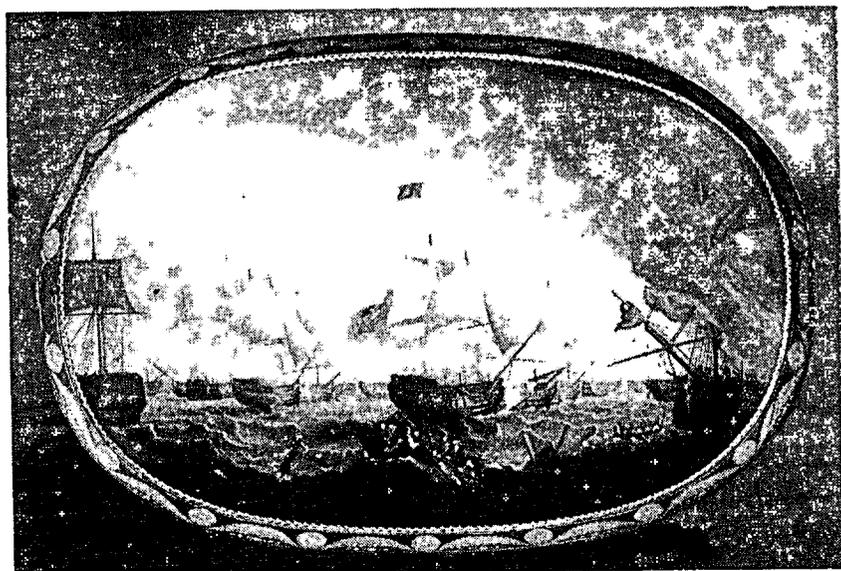
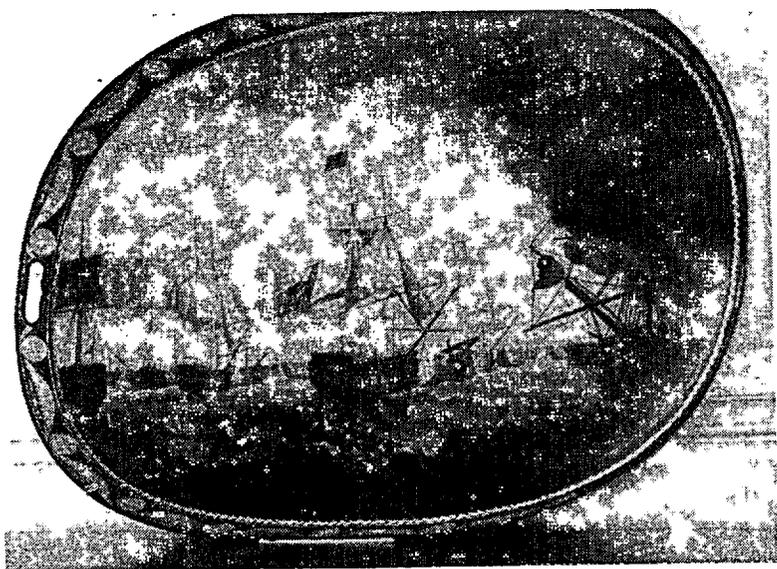




Fig. 13. Ex-libris Fischer 1773



Fig. 9. Ex-libris Falkeisen



Selection from slides illustrating
Casimir de Rahm's presentation

