

## Vexillology and the future: two suggestions for our future development

M.A. Faul

**ABSTRACT:** This paper refers to suggestions made by myself at the 14th congress in Barcelona, and by Dr. Whitney Smith at the 12th Congress in San Francisco. They concern the preservation of collections of vexillological interest and the promotion of research into hitherto unknown vexillological sources.

As vexillologists we are interested in the designs of new flags, national, international, regional and other. We follow variations appearing in Afghanistan, the Comoros and Central Asia. We applaud the restoration of ancient English county flags. We seek to research the geographic, cultural and historic origins of flags. It may be understandable that, in dealing with this mass of material, we may lose sight of the future. What is less understandable is that we may also lose sight of the past. In so doing we not only do a disservice to vexillology, to which we all profess devotion, but we are also in danger of missing the very sources which will help our research and failing also to preserve what we might well, with a little extra effort, be able to save.

Between 1992 and 1994, three members of the Flag Institute died, one of them a founder member. The collections of all three were lost. Our efforts to establish what had become of them were either ignored or brushed aside. Whatever happened to them, they were lost to us and to vexillology. No doubt all three collections contained items common to many collections, books, copies of documents and pictures. No doubt also there were items which would not have been found elsewhere. These gems of individual research exist in every

collection, and in many cases are unique to that single collection. In 1990 I found that my own collection, very modest at the time, contained items which were of interest to the Flag Institute archives. Later, other items were found in my collection which did not exist even in the mighty resources of the Flag Research Center. It cannot be stressed too strongly that every private collection may contain such material. At the 12th Congress in San Francisco, Dr Smith made a similar point, that when such a collection was lost, the research which had been achieved by the individual concerned was lost forever. The Flag Institute alone has lost three such collections.

At this point I wish to renew a plea which I made at the 14th Congress in Barcelona. That plea is that vexillologists everywhere make sure that in their wills their collections are left either to a named vexillologist who will appreciate the material, or else to a recognised vexillological association. If that is done, the relatives of the deceased will pass on the collection, rather than burning it, throwing it out with the rubbish, or leaving it to moulder away, unwanted, in a cupboard.

In this respect there have been some positive developments. Earlier this year the Flag Institute lost three other members through death. One willed his collection to the Royal Naval Association. This is not a specifically vexillological body, but at least the collection was preserved. The son of the second presented his late father's collection to the Flag Institute. Here again a collection was saved. The third member was our late colleague. Paul Dechaix, whom many of us recall as an active participant in several congresses. On writing to express the Flag Institute's condolences, I suggested to his widow that his collection be offered to the French Association.

Some time ago, the Flag Institute offered to its members a Vexidonor Form. On the form a member could will his or her collection to an association of the individual's choice, or to a vexillological friend. Alas, very few took the opportunity to will their material to the Flag Institute. We can only hope that other associations have profited from this suggestion. Certainly, every effort should be made to preserve such collections. Once lost, they can never be recovered.

In San Francisco, Dr Smith referred to Flagplan 2011. The date was chosen as the 50th anniversary of the original publication of the Flag Bulletin. In this plan, he mentioned several possibilities and projects for the future, including an International Centre of Vexillology.

One of the suggestions was that vexillologists, or potential vexillologists, would attend at the Centre and then go home to prepare inventories of the vexillological resources of their home countries. In some cases this would be a mammoth task, beyond the capabilities of an individual. One need only think of the material available in the United States to see this. Nevertheless, while such a task may be too much for an individual, it is not an impossibility as a combined effort. In this case we should perhaps bear in mind the 18th century definition of insurance: "Thus the loss falls not heavily upon the one, but rather

lightly upon the many." Substitute the word "task" for "loss" and it is clear that such a survey is a practical suggestion, though it will not be easy.

In 1996 I was able to visit Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe is a vexillologically young country. Its real flag history begins only in 1890. Even so, in little more than 100 years, it has produced an amazing variety of flags of many types. Papers were read on some of these flags in Zurich, and Richard Allport has written a book on the history of military flags in the country. My time for research was limited, but I did manage to visit all but one of the museums in the country, and to spend useful time in the National Archives. The one museum which I did not visit answered my queries very fully and courteously. The enquiries about civic flags were not answered as well as I would have liked, but in general far better than I would have expected in most other countries.

The result is that a more or less complete record now exists of the vexillological resources of the museums and National Archives of Zimbabwe. I say more or less, as additions may have been made to the collection since my visit. This record is available to any vexillological association or individual vexillologist free of charge, other than that of copying. The record includes research into documentation, augmenting my previous research in 1984. Unfortunately the record does not include illustrations.

During the research several interesting items emerged. One may wonder how an Imperial Russian flag found its way to Zimbabwe, and why? Whatever the reason, one did so, even if it was made of British Admiralty bunting. On many flag charts is shown a flag of Ireland, a British green ensign with the Harp of Leinster in the fly. Many people regard this flag as at best unofficial, and at worst totally non-existent. Official or not, it did exist, and there is an example in the Mutare Museum. What can one make of a description of a flag which reads: "One third black, two thirds khaki, with a maroon, shield-shaped badge and a white (?) shield in the centre and a crown (?) above. Colours have deteriorated beyond possibility of accurate definition"? Impossible to a museum curator it may have been, but many of you will have already deduced that it was a pre-1910 Portuguese naval ensign, as it proved to be upon examination. Most flag books describe the pre-1951 flag of the Governor of Southern Rhodesia as the British Union Flag, with a white disk in the centre, bearing the badge of the Colony, without the usual wreath. I did so at Zurich. When one was needed in 1947 for the Royal visit, none could be found. No such flag had ever flown at Government House. No order for such a flag had ever been made to a flag manufacturer. Whatever books say, it was a non-flag.

This was only part of the product of that research. It is probably fortunate that Zimbabwe has so short a flag history, or frustration would have resulted at the thought of what else I might have found. While I would think it likely that other people have commenced similar projects in other countries, I do not know of any having done so. As I remarked earlier, it would be impossible for a single person to undertake a complete vexillological survey of an entire country unless, like Zimbabwe, it has a comparatively brief flag history.

That said, there is no reason why an individual should not undertake a more limited survey. In those countries with a rich vexillological history, it might well be confined to a single province or state, even to a single city. If the person concerned has a specific interest within vexillology as a whole, a specialist survey would be of particular value. Those of us who had the privilege of being at the Warsaw Congress will recall the vast treasures of flags which were on show there. Apart from national flags, there were military flags, church flags, religious flags and banners, flags of sports clubs, railway companies, trade unions and craft guilds. Has any serious survey been carried out into house flags of shipping companies? How many museums have had their flag collections listed by vexillologists (rather than museum staff to whom they are just another bunch of items)? In how many municipal stores lie stocks of out-dated flags, useless to their owners because they are obsolete, mouldering away, when they are valuable items of vexillological history? I did not visit the Zimbabwean libraries, but one wonders how many libraries have collections of flag books and charts, given by the relatives of deceased vexillologists, even before the word was coined, lying on dusty shelves, unconsulted, unwanted, unused, wasted, when they could be of use not to others, but to us. Surely if nothing else provokes us into this research, our own self-interest should do so.

No one person could do it all. But if many of us each did what we could within our own field of interest, our own local library, our own local museums, our own town, our own region, the result for vexillology would be almost beyond belief. That is provided the information were to be made available to other vexillologists. There are stores of flags and flag information out there, hundreds of them, unknown, uncatalogued, undetected. With just a little effort from each of us, the task will fall not heavily upon the one, but rather lightly upon the many. These collections can be recovered, identified, opened to research by vexillologists. Zimbabwe has begun the process, which is now on the way. I appeal to you all to follow.

M A Faul

ADDRESS: 44 Middleton Road, Acomb, York YO23AS, England