

The 1910 Union of South Africa national flag competition

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ABSTRACT: In the years immediately preceding the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, many initiatives were undertaken to promote the concept of 'loyal Union,' or the idea of a united South Africa loyal to Britain. These initiatives explored various means of 'inventing' a new South African national public identity and sentiment. A magazine titled *The State* was published for four years by members of Lord Milner's 'Kindergarten' in order to pursue these ends. At one stage *The State* ran a 'Union Flag Competition' to encourage designs for a flag for the new political entity. Articles published in *The State* to support this competition included a discussion of 'How Australia Got Her Flag,' and a fanciful account of the world-history of flags. This paper then describes the results of the Union Flag competition, for which the imperial architect Sir Herbert Baker served as one of the judges, and concludes with comments on the velleity of national sentiment in a newly constructed 'nation' state such as the Union of South Africa in the aftermath of the South African War, and in the light of such legislation as the 1913 Natives Land Act.

1 Introduction

This paper is a small part of a much larger project, a description of the public cultural initiatives that were undertaken in the years immediately before and after 1910 in order to propagate a sense of national identity for the newly constituted Union of South Africa. These initiatives were, at the time, largely conducted by social groupings that understood the new Union to be an integral part of the British Empire; thus the kind of identity envisaged for the new state

was both national and imperial.

There are some striking parallels (and of course even greater differences) between the fashioning of the old New South Africa in 1910 and the New South Africa of 1994. The concepts of 'reconstruction' and 'reconciliation' were, as at present, stock political vocabulary; and in order to inaugurate the 1910 Union, a nationwide programme of propaganda and festivities was undertaken which is paralleled by the national pageantry that surrounded the 1994 elections.

'Reconciliation' meant then, of course, the 'reconciling' of English and Dutch-speaking South Africans, the two dominant 'races,' as they were then thought of, in the aftermath of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902. In the years leading up to Union black South Africans were almost totally excluded from the political stage. 'Reconstruction' meant the British High Commissioner Viscount Milner's programme of rebuilding war-ravaged farms, establishing municipal government, and repairing national assets, such as railways.

However, notwithstanding the very strong emphasis given, in public discourses, to the idea of reconciliation between Boer and Briton, it is evident that the dominant identity envisaged for the new state, and the dominant set of allegiances to be espoused in ritual form during the Union celebrations, were English-speaking, imperial, loyalist, rather than Dutch or Afrikaans-speaking. The first Prime Minister, General Louis Botha, knew that in order to secure his political position he would have to depend on retaining the vote of English-speaking South Africans, and his policy of conciliation became inflected on public occasions with an obvious bias towards their interests.

It seems, as Harry Saker [2] suggests, to have been this underlying concern about political and cultural division that caused Botha to delay indefinitely the matter of designing a national flag that would patently reflect the histories and allegiances of both the English- and the Dutch-speaking South African people. Nonetheless it was imperative for the Union to have a national flag, and as we know the new Union government adapted the British Naval Ensign, adding the new coat-of-arms of the Union on the field of this flag, in time for the state visit of the Duke of Connaught who sailed to Cape Town to inaugurate the first Union parliament in October 1910. This 'Flag of United South Africa' remained the official national flag until the next version was adopted in 1927; yet as Saker indicates it was largely ignored by the populace, the English-speakers still rallying to the Union Jack, and the more nationalist of Dutch- or Afrikaans-speakers maintaining the use of the flags of the old Republics.

It is not so well known, though, that there was in fact a public competition for an original and 'typically South African' national flag in 1909. This paper discusses that competition and the context in which it occurred.

2 The Union flag competition

The Union Flag Competition was conducted by a magazine called *The State*, which ran from 1909 to 1911, with the express purpose of propagandising the idea of Union. It was the brainchild of two members of Lord Milner's 'kindergarten,' the team of young men he recruited from Oxford to assist in the post-war reconstruction programme. [1] These two were Lionel Curtis and Philip Kerr (Lord Lothian), both of whom went on after having worked for a 'United South Africa,' to pursue on a world-wide platform the diminishing ideal of a 'United Empire.' Their Cape Town-based magazine *The State* (initially financed by the mining magnate Sir Abe Bailey) is in fact the direct forerunner of the *Round Table*, their subsequent Commonwealth journal.

The State (which, after Union was achieved, was taken over by the Randlord Sir Lionel Phillips of the Corner House mining group) is a remarkable archive of cultural initiatives intended for the establishing of a nationwide sense of South African cultural identity. It contains essays by the likes of C.J. Langenhoven on the 'language question,' stories by (among many others) Sir Percy Fitzpatrick and the young Sarah Gertrude Millin, debates concerning the establishment of South African nature reserves, a University, art galleries, and so forth. Historians, architects, and connoisseurs write about early 'Cape Dutch' culture, homesteads, interiors, and antiquities, joining in the trend for 'Cape Revival' architecture and taste.

Perhaps the most striking emphasis is on architecture, with Herbert Baker writing on the 'Architectural Needs of South Africa,' and his protege J.M. Solomon writing on Baker, the 'Architect of the Union Buildings.' Again, Baker's partner Francis Masey produced a long and valuable series on old Cape buildings and their histories. This particular emphasis had the dual virtues of a discourse concerning establishment, foundations, and building, emblematic of the founding of a new nation, and a discourse that, in paying tribute to Afrikaner Dutch heritage, promoted reconciliation between English and Afrikaans.

There were also competitions in *The State*, literary, photographic, and the Union Flag Competition. The organiser of the photographic competition and the flag competition was Lancelot Ussher, a Johannesburg industrialist and an avid amateur photographer. He provided scenic illustrations for a number of books of topographical and general interest which were intended to propagandise to tourists and prospective immigrants the virtues of the new 'dominion.'

The Union Flag competition was announced in the December 1909 issue of *The State*. By this time the South Africa Act had been passed in the British Parliament, establishing the Union as a self-governing nation-state within the British empire, along the constitutional lines that had been established during the two-year deliberations of the National Convention. The deadline for entries to the competition was set as 31 March 1910, two months in advance of the appointed date for the official establishment of the Union. Entrants were asked to submit colour sketches no less than six inches by three inches in size; and a

prize of £10 (later increased to £25) was offered for the winning design.

In the same issue of *The State* Lancelot Ussher wrote an article titled 'How Australia Got Her Flag.' Australia had been given a federal constitution in 1901, as had Canada in 1867; and these had frequently been promoted as models for the new South Africa. B.K. Long, the principal editor of *The State*, had for instance compiled a book in 1908 on behalf of the Closer Union Society titled 'The Framework of Union - A Comparison of some Union Constitutions, with a sketch of the Development of Union in Canada, Australia and Germany; and the text of the Constitutions of the United States, Canada, Germany, Switzerland and Australia.'

In his article on the Australian flag Lancelot Ussher described how the *Melbourne Herald*, in 1900, offered a £10 prize in a local competition for a Federal flag, and how this became transformed into a national quest. The Australian edition of the *Review of Reviews* printed the *Herald's* winning design on its cover and offered a further prize of £50, the judges being the premiers of the six Australian colonies. They received 5,000 entries within two months; then the new Federal government took note and launched a competition of its own, formally gazetted, with a prize of £75. The *Review of Reviews* handed over all the entries it had received and doubled the government's prize money. 'Then for a space,' writes Lancelot Ussher, 'all Australia talked, dreamt and drew flags.' 30,000 designs were entered, 'not to mention the countless thousands which bulged the wastepaper baskets of a continent.' A public exhibition was held in the Melbourne Exhibition Buildings, taking up three large galleries.

Opinion established that any winning flag must include at least the Union Jack and the Southern Cross, as well as 'some symbol of the union of the six states.' Says Ussher,

... the judges first eliminated those designs which would have served for kindergarten object-lessons, decorations for a Chinese pagoda, or patterns for cheap linoleum. This process left thousands containing the essential features; but a very large percentage of the competitors had made originality their chief end and had cheerfully disregarded the elementary rules of blazonry and heraldry in the arrangement of their symbols. The Union Jack appeared at each corner in turn, strayed into the middle of the field by itself, or - horror of horrors! - was deliberately chopped up into bits and distributed in scraps. Now and then it appeared with fearful and wonderful trimmings, fantastic frames and fancy borders, or looked out from behind a festive kangaroo or a gay emu.

Ussher describes a few of the more egregious entries:

... an Australian wheel on the lines of the famous Manx one, the hub composed of six clenched fists; but the six brawny arms were not over graceful. Half a dozen boomerangs hurtling across an azure field; a

unique six-tailed kangaroo; a six-tailed comet with every tail of a different colour blazed on a flag which would have made a splendid circus poster; native bears and paddy-melons hobnobbing with cockatoos and kangaroos, whilst a bower-bird and a duck-billed platypus filled in the intervening spaces.

In the end five flags were chosen and the prize money divided among their designers. Ussher describes the accompanying illustration as follows:

One is a flag made of silk on which a map of Australia is outlined in ribbon, surrounded by paintings of the leek, rose, thistle and shamrock, while photographs of mail boats are pasted on at the four extremes. Another has a yet greater variety of adornment: first we have a laughing jackass set opposite a polar bear seated on top of the South Pole; a flag-wagging kangaroo rides on a sun with golden wings; and two conventional emus race southwards, leaving the stars and stripes behind.

'And so,' Ussher concludes, 'Australia evolved the flag which floats proudly over her united states today; and we wonder if we shall find a more suitable embodiment of our own national history and sentiment. If 30,000 South Africans forward their ideas as entries in *The State* Flag Competition, surely one of them will be able to tell his children how he gave the Union her flag.'

In February 1910 Lancelot Ussher produced another warming-up article in *The State*, titled 'The Union Flag,' in which he rather fancifully traced the history of flags 'in every tribe and nation, since time immemorial,' citing the symbols of the gods in ancient Egypt, the use in the east of a blacksmith's leather apron, a horse-tail, or a whisp of hay as a rallying point; the use of identifying banners in the age of chivalry, Admiral Tromp's legendary broom and the whip-lash pennant supposed to be the English retort to this Dutch boast; the 'standard of empire - the Union Jack' that 'calls forth the loving service and patriotism of the wanderer across the sub-Arctic snows of Canada, and is welcomed and honoured in the remotest townships in the Australian bush.' Ussher cites Shackleton at the South Pole, and the soldiers at Isandlwana: 'the memory of those brave men lying on the banks of the Tugela with the flag which they had died to save still firmly gripped between them, would reconcile the sternest of former foes to join hands with the nation that could make such men.' And further on Ussher says:

In South Africa we look to have a flag of our own which will proclaim to the nations of the world the birth of yet another strong dominion of the world's mightiest empire. It ought to symbolise, as Carlyle said, "the divine right of duty, of heroic daring, of freedom and right." The Empire flag does all that, but we want something more. Our Union flag ought to convey some idea of our individuality, something distinctively and unmistakably South African.

Happily the Dutch and English colours are the same - red, white and blue; and why should not the green of the vierkleur be artistically added, so that each of us would see in it not only his flag but our flag!

The English and Dutch have ever been grim fighters, and the fusion of two brave races should be marked by a flag worthy of their united love and devotion. To be the designer of such a flag - the emblem of the Union of South Africa - is no mean ambition.

The results of the Union Flag Competition were announced in *The State* in September 1910, one month before the brother of King Edward VII, the Duke of Connaught and Strathearn, was to arrive to inaugurate the first Union Parliament.

Over 250 entries were received. For judges, the editor enlisted the services of two British naval officers stationed at Simon's Town, Admiral Sir George Egerton and Captain Philip Dumas - and 'Mr Herbert Baker FRIBA, the well-known architect, of Johannesburg; and one of the acknowledged authorities on heraldry in South Africa; and Mr Edward Roworth, the Cape Town artist.' Roworth had gained distinction for painting in 1909 a massive group portrait of the delegates to the National Convention that met in 1908 and 1909 to discuss the details of the Union constitution.

'Egerton, Dumas and Roworth agreed in awarding the prize to a Cape Town man, Mr W. Spivey Woodhead of Holmfirth, Sea Point,' whose entry 'excelled in originality' and 'contained an equal recognition of all the Provinces of the Union and marked the year of Union indelibly. On general principles . . . it satisfied all the requisites for a national flag.'

Herbert Baker, however, disagreed with this choice, regarding the comet as an 'ephemeral thing' and 'thus a bad emblem for a Union which all hope will be a lasting one.' Baker preferred a design that used the symbol of an anchor as emblematic of Union. In his report he said that an anchor 'connects us with our sea origin; it is the emblem of the oldest Colony, from which South Africa grew; and it is in itself a happy and beautiful symbol.' As an alternative to an anchor, Baker suggested 'a coat of arms quartering single emblems of the various states, rather than uniting the present arms of the Provinces,' 'though he himself,' writes Ussher, 'preferred a chain of four links in which a fifth link might be inserted upon the inclusion of Rhodesia in the Union.' The two naval officers pointed out that an anchor on a flag 'denoted a dockyard,' which ruled out Baker's first choice; and the judges concluded that a coat of arms would be too complicated and expensive to reproduce. They decided by majority vote in favour of Halley's comet, the Admiral and the Captain also singling out the design with a four-pointed star on the field of the ensign.

The judges reported that while 'immense ingenuity' was displayed in many cases, in almost every one of these it was 'misplaced ingenuity.'

Some competitors [writes Ussher] took strange liberties with the Union

Jack. But the great difficulty of all the competitors as of the judges themselves was to decide upon a suitable emblem. The Southern Cross - the obvious emblem - had already been used for the national flag of the Commonwealth of Australia. The anchor, the chain, the diamond, and the plough were all used by various competitors. Others selected typical birds or animals, such as the ostrich, the elephant, and the springbok. (One had a) most ingenious combination of emblems - a chain of four links, a broken sword, and a plough. Another was distinguished by a map of South Africa, with the motto of Union in English and Dutch.

The most ingenious of all, however, was an explanation of a design, in terms of 'an allegorical application of an old problem,' which, as Ussher says, is worth quoting in full:

The problem of the old farmer who had a square piece of land and divided three-quarters of it amongst his four sons in such a way that they had each a piece of similar area and shape has been taken as the basis of this design. This is how he did it:

Let it be supposed that the name of the old farmer is John Bull and those of his sons Cape Colony, Natal, Transvaal, and the Orange Free State.

The sons were an unruly lot and quarrelled not only with their father and among themselves, but also with the men they found on the land.

On attaining their years of discretion the futility of continuing this sort of life became apparent, and they decided to settle down peacefully under the guidance and support of their father. They have several younger brothers and as they come of age they are also, with the father's permission, to settle down with them.

In the design the coat of arms in the right hand top corner represents England. It will be seen that a white, black and red square forms one of the divisions in the above sketch, the white being symbolical of the Europeans in South Africa, the black of the natives, and the red of war.

Provision is made in the design by which any of the territories not joining the Union at the outset, and deciding to do so at a later date, may be represented thereon by, it is suggested (as being in keeping with the general effect), a horizontal black stripe being added to the flag when the territory becomes a Province under the Union.

In the design submitted it has been assumed that three additional provinces have been added.

Herbert Baker's concern over the ephemeral nature of the comet was borne out in a curious twist: 'Mr Woodhead, the winner of the Union Flag Competition, died of heart-failure the very afternoon on which the announcement of

his having won the prize was made.' The spirit of Union itself proved to be ephemeral. Among the first legislation by the new Union government was the notorious 1913 Natives Land Act, which dispossessed black South Africans from their own patrimony; and a year later with the onset of the First World War came the Afrikaner Rebellion against Louis Botha's pro-imperial government.

3 Conclusion

To conclude, the obvious point might be made that national symbols as expression of national sentiment are at one and the same time objects of the most deliberate 'invention' and objects of powerfully invested emotions and values. Until South Africa could arrive at a constitutional settlement that would accommodate all its citizens there could be no truly united sense of public symbolism, heritage, or history. The moment of Union in 1910 was a moment of deep compromise between ill-fated loyalty to Britain and the satisfaction of the marred aspirations of the Boer communities, and the results of this compromise put paid - until 1994 - to the political and social integration of South Africa's black population.

References

- [1] Nimocks, W., *Milner's Young Men: The 'Kindergarten' in Edwardian Imperial Affairs*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1970
- [2] Saker, H., *The South African Flag Controversy, 1925-1928*, Oxford University Press, 1980
- [3] *The State*, Monthly magazine, Cape Town and Johannesburg, 1909-1911

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