

## THE VAN DE VELDES

by J. H. Schuilenga

History is thrilling in each epoch. But for those to whom only a certain aspect is of interest, a particular period can be of importance. The vexillologist and more particularly he who is interested in the use of seaflags etc. will find much to his taste in the 17th and 18th century. When this period started, "the flag" had already come to a certain point of development. As a distinguishing mark, a symbol of authority and . . . a means of communication, it was hoisted on ships, which - having nothing but the wind as a motive power - eventually developed into the fast ocean-going craft, a wonder of efficiency and power. As a symbol and means of expression and as a distinguishing mark the flag was subject to certain rules, which more than in former centuries played their important role. As part of a regulated and internationally accepted system of communication, the flag reached its optimum state of development not before the end of the 19th century.

The great sailor nations were England, with the biggest naval force, well matched by "the Dutch" (this being the common name for the people of the 7 United Provinces) and France, and to a lesser extent, Spain and Portugal. Early in 1600 the union between England, Scotland and Ireland took place, finding its expression in a new royal standard and in the (first) Union Flag, bearing the Crosses of St. George and of St. Andrew, which, with the exception of the Cromwell period, would fly from the mastheads of the British men of war during two centuries. Besides there were the red, white and blue Ensigns, the flag with the harp and cross at the time of the Commonwealth, the numerous pendants and code flags.

The famous grouping of the English fleet into three squadrons was introduced and with it appeared the no less famous Admirals of the Red, the White and the Blue and their seconds and thirds in command, forming together the 9 Flag Officers.

Don't be afraid, my esteemed audience, that I am going to give to you a full account of everything connected with the showing and bearing of the flag, nor the rich variety of flags, pendants, jacks and standards, which the seagoing nations showed in the course of time. Therefore I won't dwell upon England's history of flags, nor of any of the other seafaring nations. Those of you who want to dig deeper into this matter, can find literature which will inform yourselves far better

than I can do in half an hour. To mention one work: Siegel's DIE FLAGGE, written in 1912 with all the German "Gründlichkeit". Just take it and your wife and heif will have an easy-going household for the rest of their and your happy life, because you will not bother them anymore.

My modest contribution to the Second Vexillological Congress will be of another kind. The now-present tracer of the how and why of seaflags and all that, will find his literature, indeed. But what he needs is more than the written word alone. He will meet with the painting; the drawing and print, the only means of our ancestors to reproduce things visual.

The painter of the landscape, the still life, the portrait holds that he is well acquainted with the art of painting. But the maker of the seascape and particularly the one who occupies himself with maritime activities and naval operations has to have a daring, unundauntedness which is comparable to those of the fire eaters, and the remarkable gift to fix in his mind what is dashing past in a moment, explodes and gets lost in a whirl of powder smoke spraying of waves and fluttering canvas. He - at least if he is sea painter par sang - moves with and between the fleets in his little galliot, placed at his disposal by his commissioners. He is what the war correspondent, much more to the war photographer, is today: he is at and in the battle. Letting go by, and with a slight movement of the head evading the passing cannon-balls, he handles his sketchbook and pencil. Much later, returned to the quietness of his studio, with the memories in his head and hand and having completed the various interviews with his brothers-in-arms and experts, he will compose the various elements into a brilliant work. The reproduction of details, the accuracy and beauty of drawing are often marvellous. No doubt: the painter also knows the ins and outs of shipbuilding. Not only that: navigation and tactics too.

All this strikes the contemplator and impresses him, makes him stand silent, however noisy the picture itself may be. It is this circumstance which gives the vexillologist the confidence - and here is the justification of my turn in the program - that one can reply upon the exactness of the representation of flags and pendants too. But let me warn you not to take this as a general rule. There is a painting by one George Chambers, who painted about 1830 with the help of indications of the late Samuel Scott, the capture of Porto Bello, which took place in 1739. On the picture you see that the British ships fly the Union Flag of the period after 1801, the one Mr. Chambers knew in his day, but which did not exist in 1739.

Of the big battles in the history of sailing, a number were witnessed by remarkable figures in the art of marine painting. Experts in the history of painting will assure you that especially under the Dutch painters three generations are to be

distinguished. In the first, one finds Vroom and Willearts, and later Porcellis and Dē Vlieger as their successors. Van de Capelle and the Van de Velde are the third generation. Each of them had his specific field, his personal art of representation, each of them putting in his composition a bit of himself in his relation to the sea and its attributes.

Now, out of his small circle I will push forward two men, who perhaps more than any others have depicted for us the ship and all that is annexed to shipping in the past, William van de Velde the Elder and William van de Velde the Younger. I have the honour to present these distinguished figures to the circle of vexillologists, who owe part of their knowledge to them. They cover the period from about 1640 till 1700. Hundreds of their paintings, drawings and sketches are to be found in the museums all over the world, both maritime subjects and general ones. Both father and son had the sea as a common object of interest, but their manner of expression is different; their artistic views are in contrast to each other.

William the Elder's technique is a remarkable one; rather than being a painter he was the "marine draughtsman", who used pen and ink more than brush and paint. He was most definitely not the romantic idealist, but much more the exact documentalist, the maker of the "pen painting". As a basis he fixed a layer of white oil paint on the canvas, which needed a drying time of 2 to 3 months to form the hard surface in which the drawing was scraped with a sharp needle. It was the layer of varnish, fixed over it later on, which got the brown-yellowish colour in the course of time, so characteristic of the pictures of the elder William. While the father was lacking a bit in a sense of romanticism, his son had it in an ample measure. Full of sentiment and picturesque qualities is his oeuvre, but... marked by the same professional knowledge. His paintings are scenes of colour and life. More than 600 of them are to be found in the museum next to countless sketches.

With regard to these painters there is a salient peculiarity. Living in the period of the big sea battles in the Anglo-Dutch wars, both father and son had the opportunity to follow the actions on both sides. In 1672 they took up their residence at Greenwich, entering His Majesty Charles II's service. The elder William followed the 3rd War partly on the English and partly on the Dutch side. So his paintings are different in so far as some of them show the British fleet attacking the Dutch and some let us look on the opposite side. You have to be careful interpreting them...

Well, the only purpose I had in mind was to confront you with a certain source out of which you can draw some stuff to quench your vexillological thirst. The slides I showed you may supplement my short exposition. Perhaps you turn away because the sea in any form makes you seasick, but it is also possible that after this meeting you cannot get away from it any more!