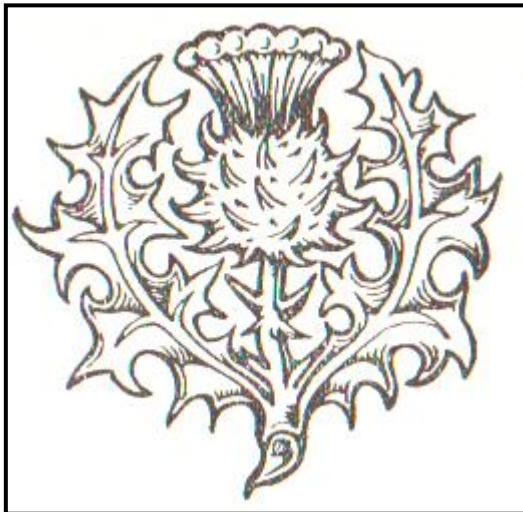


EXTRACTS FROM
SCOTTISH SYMBOLS
ROYAL, NATIONAL, & ECCLESIASTICAL
THEIR HISTORY AND HERALDIC
SIGNIFICANCE

BY WILLIAM M'MILLAN

CHAPTER VI



THE THISTLE

Hail! Emblem proud to Scotland long endeared,
Begirt with threat'ning points which never failed,
When England's sons her thorn-couched spear upreared,
Thou shook'st thy bearded head and still prevailed.
Kennedy.

Every one knows the thistle and its association with our native land, but it cannot be said that any particular species is entitled to the exclusive name of the Scottish Thistle. It is true that the common Cotton Thistle

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(*onopordon acanthium*) is given that title by many gardeners and botanists, but this species is rarely found in Scotland, if indeed it is a native of our country at all.

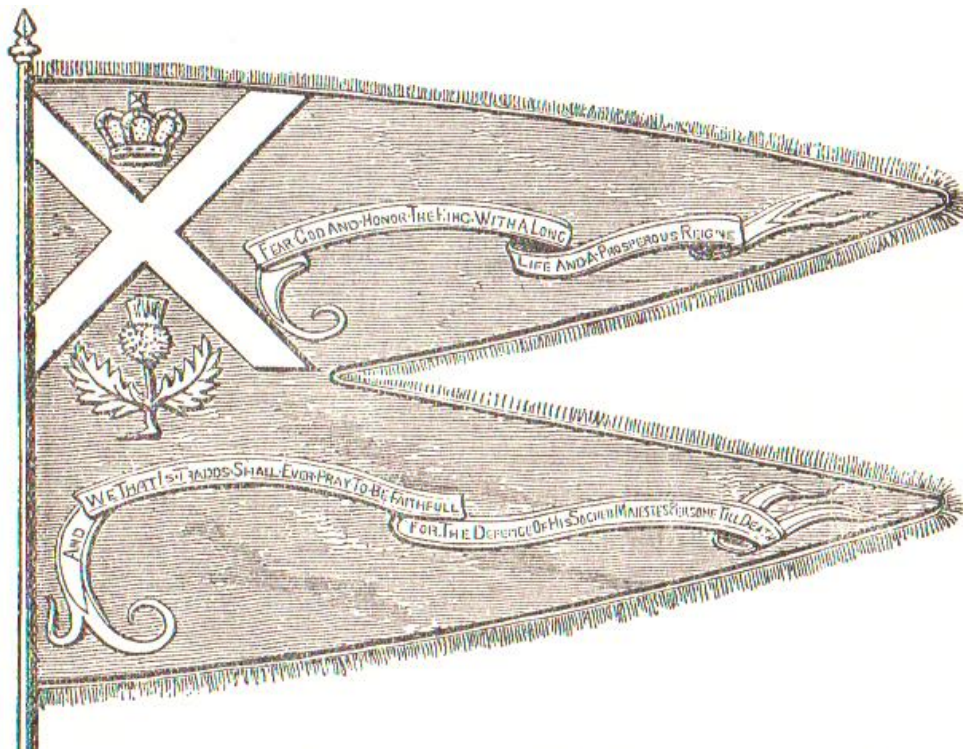
The Musk Thistle resembles the emblem as generally portrayed, but it is always found in bunches and it lacks the sturdiness which we associate with our national badge. The Milk Thistle, again, is very rare in Scotland, being found only in a few localities. One of those places is the Rock of Dumbarton, where it is said to have been planted by Mary, Queen of Scots. The Carline or Golden Thistle (*Carlina Vulgaris*) is sometimes spoken of as the “Royal Scottish Thistle”. This plant is said by some of our earlier writers to have gotten its name from Charlemagne, who was crowned King of the Holy Roman Empire on Christmas Day, 800 A.D. It is said that on one occasion when his army was being destroyed by plague, an angel appeared to him and showed him that the root of this plant could cure his men of their trouble. Linnaeus, the great Swedish botanist, tells a similar story about the Emperor Charles V, who lived from 1500 A.D. to 1558 A.D. It used to be freely asserted by the early Scottish Heraldic Writers that the fleurs-de-lis and the double treasure on our royal banner were grants from Charlemagne. Perhaps it was through these stories that the Carline Thistle was considered to be the

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particular species of thistle associate with Scotland. When we begin to enquire as to the time when the thistle was adopted as such, we find that it does not appear to possess the antiquity which has sometimes been claimed for it. One story takes us back to the very early days of the country's history and alleges that the thistle was the badge of the Celtic Kings. There is a legend which ascribes its adoption to a King who was being attacked by the Danes. They were creeping close to an encampment of the Celts in the hope of surprising it, when suddenly one of them put his bare foot on a thistle. He at once cried out and so the camp was alarmed and the Danes were utterly defeated. The same story is sometimes told as having happened at the Battle of Largs and sometimes in the time of King Robert the Bruce when he was being attacked by the English. There seems little doubt that from a fairly early period the various Clans in our land have adopted some plant or other as their badge: the Macdonalds took the Bell Heath; the Macgregors the Pine; the Macmillans the Holly; the Stewarts the Oak and so on. The thistle may have been adopted as the united badge of them all. The national badge is really the Wayside Thistle, which grows in all sorts of places and whose "spearis and pykis", to quote Dunbar, were emblems of the courage and strength which the Scots have always possessed. It has

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been suggested that the leaves which decorate the throne of Edward Balliol on his great seal may be thistle leaves. The earliest undoubted use of the thistle as a national badge must be put in the reign of James III. In an inventory of the effects of that sovereign, who died in 1488 – or rather of those belonging to his wife, who died in 1481, for the item in question is said to have been “gottin in the quenis kist” – we find the following entry:



“Item a covering of variand purpir tartan browdin with thrissillis and a unicorne.”

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King James III and his wife, Queen Margaret, are said to have given the famous “Blue Blanket” to the Incorporated Trades of Edinburgh. In addition to the St. Andrew Cross already noted, this flag which is said to have been embroidered by the Queen herself, bears the thistle surmounted by a crown. A portrait of Queen Margaret, painted c. 1484, is now in Holyrood and on the hanging behind her are depicted floreated and leaved thistles interspersed with thistle heads. In the year 1474, or thereby, James III issued coins referred to in the Act of Parliament regarding them as “new alloyed Groats” and these bore thistles on the reverse being termed on that account "Thistle Head Groats". These coins were for long referred to the time of James V, but are now ascribed to his grandfather.

It was in the reign of James IV that William Dunbar wrote the well known poem, “The Thrissel and the Rose” on the affiancing in 1503 of King James IV with Princess Margaret of England - an alliance which was to lead to the Union of the Crown a hundred years later. In this poem, Dunbar pictures Nature calling on the flowers of the field to come and receive her gifts.

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“Then callit she all the flowers that grew on field,
Discerning all their fashions and efferis (qualities)
Upon the awful THISSEL she beheld;
And saw him keepit with a bunch of spears,
Considering him so able for he weirs (wars),
A radiant crown of rubies she him gave,
And said, ‘in field go forth and fend the lave (rest.)’”

“This”, says Pinkerton, “is the first authentic appearance of the thistle as a Scottish badge”. One, however, is inclined to think that it must have been well known before this, otherwise its mention in the poem would not have conveyed the meaning it was meant to.*

An account of Princess Margaret’s coming to Scotland, written by Somerset Herald, has been preserved to our day and from it we learn that when the company entered into Edinburgh, they passed through a gate on which was set a unicorn holding a thistle (Chardon) and a rose intertwined. Also that the thistle and rose were to be seen in the great chamber of the Palace in which the company was entertained. It was during the reign of this monarch that the Banqueting Hall in Edinburgh Castle was restored and on quite a number of the corbels there, the thistle and rose are to be seen. There is also a lavish use of the thistle in the

* The Rose as the badge of England may be said to date from the Wars of the Roses, *circa* 1455-1471, when the two great parties in that country adopted it for their badge - the Yorkist Rose being white and the Lancastrian red.

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magnificent early sixteenth century screen and stall work in King's College Chapel, Aberdeen. It also appears on several old Scottish market crosses. The thistle appears as a mint mark on a coin of James IV, who also used the thistle as a badge and from his reign down to that of Queen Anne, there were always coins bearing the national emblem. James VI is said to have put it on some of his English coins much to the dislike of the people of that land.

After his succession to the English throne, James VI used a rather curious combination of the thistle and the rose as a badge. Each emblem was halved and a half of each placed together under the Imperial (or closed) Crown. On the Great Seal of Queen Anne, a thistle and a rose appear springing from one stem. On the Great Seal of Scotland, made after the Union of 1603, James VI is represented on horseback with the thistle placed on the forepart of the horse. All the sovereigns down to the time of Queen Anne placed a crowned thistle on their Scottish Seal. Queen Anne used the thistle, but dispensed with the crown thereon. Our emblem still has a place on the Great Seal of Scotland, but is conjoined with the rose and shamrock.

There is still preserved in Edinburgh, a flag known as the Aberach-Mackay Banner, which is said to date from the fifteenth century and to

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have been used by John Aberach as early as the Battle of Drum-na-Coup in 1433. The flag has been made by someone unacquainted with the principles of Heraldry, for the Lion Rampant, which is the principal charge, is so placed that it faces not the pole but the bottom of the flag. The lion is surrounded by fleurs-de-lis and thistles alternately - these being placed in much the same way as the fleurs-de-lis on the Royal Shield. The colours differ, however, from those of the King - the field being argent, and the charges azure. John Aberach, who is thought to have been the first possessor of this flag, was a great-grandson of Robert II of Scotland and this may account for the resemblance of the BRATACH BHAN as the banner is termed to the Royal Banner. The flag is certainly one of the oldest Clan flags in the country and if it be as old as tradition says, then on it we have very early evidence as to the use of the thistle as a Scottish emblem. It is rather interesting to note that Caithness, where this flag was preserved, was that part of the mainland of Scotland where Norse influence would be most strongly felt and this viewed in connection with the use of the thistle by Queen Margaret, who was a Norse Princess, leads one to think that perhaps the thistle as a badge, had originally some connection with Scandinavia. On the coloured drawing of the Royal Arms of Scotland, made in 1542 by Sir

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David Lyndsay, a large thistle *proper* appears underneath the shield. It also has a place on the woodcut of 1541. The thistle was a favourite device for the flags of the older Scottish regiments and it is borne on the accoutrements of those still serving, but on the colours of today, its place has been taken by the Union wreath which consists of thistles, roses, and shamrocks.

The colours of the Scots Foot Guards of 1662 bore the thistle. The guidon of the Regiment of Dragoons raised by Lord Cardross in 1689, shows a thistle on the canton. The colours carried by the old Scots Brigade on the Continent (while it served with the British arms there, was a Scots Brigade serving with Continental Governments in the eighteenth century), were for the King's colour the old Union Flag (1707-1801), with the thistle in the centre and/or the regimental colour, a green flag with the thistle in the centre and the motto: "Nemo me impune lacessit" above. The green of the flag was doubtless suggested by the colour of our national emblem. Nor was the use of the thistle confined to the King's forces, for among the standards of the Covenanters (which have come down to our day), there are two preserved at Lochgoin and Harthill respectively which show a thistle in addition to an open Bible. Another of a similar nature called the "Thrissils" banner, was exhibited at the

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Scottish Exhibition of 1911.

Thistles are not unusual in grants of augmentation of Scottish coats-of-arms in the post-mediæval period. Thus Murray, Earl of Annandale, bore upon his family coat-of-arms on a canton *argent* a thistle *vert* crowned *or*. The Earl of Leven and Melville carries in the first quarter of his shield *azure*, a thistle slipped proper with an imperial crown or an augmentation granted to Leslie, The Earl of Kintore and Ogilvie of Barnes. Both got a grant of the thistle in their arms for their share in preserving the Regalia of Scotland in 1651.

Lord Torphichen has our national badge in his arms for rather a different reason. With his family arms of Douglas and Sandilands, he quarters in the first and fourth *argent* on a chief *azure* an imperial crown *or* in base a thistle *vert* flowered *gules*. This is stated by Stodart, *Scottish Arms*, to be the official coat of the provincial of the Knights of Malta - the dignity held by the first Lord Torphichen, or rather of St. John of Torphichen. The Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, afterwards called the Knights of Malta, were introduced into Scotland by David I in 1153 and had many possessions conferred upon them in every county on the mainland of Scotland, with the possible exception of Argyll. Sir James Sandilands was the last to be invested with the title, power, and

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jurisdiction of the Lord St. John of Jerusalem in Scotland. This took place in 1538 on the death of Sir Walter Lindsay. In 1562, he resigned the property he held on behalf of the Order into the hands of Queen Mary and in 1563, on payment of 10,000 crowns and an annual rent of 500 merks, she granted to him the estates of the Order, erecting the same into the temporal Lordship of Torphichen. It would be interesting to know at what point in the Order's history the crown and thistle became part of the ensign of its provincial.

The Royal Burgh of Newburgh uses as its coat-of-arms *azure*, a thistle slipped and leaved ensigned with the imperial crown, all *proper* in base a cross couped *argent*. The Royal Burgh of Sanquhar uses a thistle proper for its crest. The thistle slipped and leaved and ensigned with the imperial crown is to be seen on the seal of the Commissariat of Kirkcudbright. The badge of Nova Scotia has a silver salmon on a blue fess between three thistles *proper*.

When in 1535 James V remodeled the sceptre, which his father had received from Pope Alexander VI, about forty years before, he had ten thistles engraved on the lower portion of the rod as well as two rows of Fleurs-de-lis. The old exchequer mace, which dates from the beginning of the seventeenth century, has also the thistle upon it. This mace is now

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used by the Lord President of the Court of Session, and once a year is carried before the Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. The head of this mace is bowl-shaped and surmounted by the imperial crown, while the four compartments into which the bowl is divided are decorated respectively with a thistle, a rose, a fleur-de-lis, and a harp, while at the foot of the bowl is an ornament composed of four thistles. The foot of the rod is also bell-shaped, and is chased with thistles and roses. The maces used by the Court of Session and the iron one of the High Court of Justiciary are also ornamented with thistles.

On the mace of the House of Commons, which dates from the time of the Merry Monarch, having been made to take the place of “that bauble” removed by Cromwell, the thistle appears round the top on the long handle and on the base. It is also to be seen in the mace in the House of Lords.

Our national emblem appears on the insignia of the Order of the Bath, being placed in the position of honour (the dexter side) of the chain of the Order, while on the badge it is on the sinister side.

The thistle has a prominent place on the epaulets etc., of the Lord Lieutenants and Deputy Lieutenants in Scotland. It also appears on the

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accoutrements of our Scottish regiments with the Scots guards wearing it as a collar badge. The youngest of our Scottish Universities, Edinburgh, places it upon its coat-of-arms. On the badge of the “Conservator of the Scottish Privileges in the Netherlands”, which is oval-shaped except at the top where it is formed as a crown, there is a shield charged with a thistle, while on a garter round the edge appears the motto “Nemo me impune lacessit.” Attached by a ring is a smaller shield bearing the figure of St. Andrew. This office existed in 1444, if not earlier. The last Conservator was appointed in 1827 long after all need for his services had passed away. The intercourse between Scotland and the Low Countries was in evidence in the days of David I and William the Lion. Mary, daughter of James I, married a son of the Lord of Campvere and this made the intercourse even closer. The Conservator was latterly stationed at Campvere and the Scottish church of that town still remains on the Roll of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

The thistle has a place on the seal of the “Court of the Lord Lyon of Scotland”. The Duke of Argyll, as Hereditary Master of the King’s Household (an office instituted by King James I), places behind his arms a baton gules powdered with thistles of gold, ensigned on the top with an imperial crown whereon is set the royal crest of the kingdom. It is also

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standard mark for all gold and silver stamped at Edinburgh.

It is, however, an interesting fact that our National Bard only mentions it four times in his poems, while he refers to the rose no less than forty-three times. His best known lines on the national emblem are:

“The rough bur-thistle spreading wide
Among the bearded beer,
I turned my weeder-clips aside
And spared the symbol dear.”



END