**New Zealand’s National Flags**

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It is often asserted that the first New Zealand flag was that of the so-called United Tribes of New Zealand, adopted by the Māori tribes of the Bay of Islands in 1834. **ILLUSTRATION** However, *The Sydney Morning Herald* of Monday 22 August 1831 reported as follows:

Captain McDonnell of the Sir George Murray hoists the New Zealand colours at the mast-head; they are the English St George ensign, the ground of one quarter being blue, and having a halfmoon at its centre. This we believe is the first time these colours have ever been exhibited.

Here is one interpretation of that description. **ILLUSTRATION**

Because the *Sir George Murray* had been built in New Zealand (well before it became a British colony), it was not eligible for registration as a British ship and indeed was seized for a time in Sydney in 1830 for sailing without proof of its nationality. This incident was almost certainly the reason for McDonnell to design his flag. Just two days after the report about the flag, the New South Wales Department of Customs on 24 August 1831 issued a document giving authority for the barque *Sir George Murray* to trade between Sydney and New Zealand.

Thomas McDonnell was born in Co. Antrim, Ireland, in 1788, and, after a career as a lieutenant in the Royal Navy and a ship’s captain for the East India Company, was a significant figure in trade between Sydney and the Hokianga, Northland. From 1835 to 1837 he held the official status of Additional British Resident for the Hokianga district. He built up a considerable estate and business interests at Horeke, Hokianga, but he was disputatious and litigious and by 1858 his empire had collapsed. He retired to Auckland, where he died in 1864.

As far as I know, no contemporary illustration of his flag has survived, and I am not convinced that the so-called halfmoon on the flag is as depicted here. I think it is more likely that it was an heraldic crescent as shown on the arms of Portsmouth and on a McDonnell coat of arms. **ILLUSTRATION**

There appear to have been continuing problems with the recognition of New Zealand vessels, prompting the creation of the United Tribes flag, adopted in 1834 and given approval by the Colonial Office in London. The flag was one of three options designed by the missionary Henry Williams, who had been a lieutenant in the Royal Navy, which were offered to the Bay of Islands chiefs by James Busby, the British Resident. It had previously been used on Church Missionary Society ships and was really a modified White Ensign. There are a few variants of the flag – some versions have black edges to the St George’s cross in the top left quadrant **ILLUSTRATION**, and some have no edging at all, and sometimes the stars have either five or six points. It remained is use in Victorian times as an unofficial New Zealand flag **ILLUSTRATION** (New Zealand Natives rugby team of 1889) and is still seen from time to time as a flag representing Māori sovereignty or independence, especially in Northland.

After New Zealand became part of New South Wales in 1840 and a separate colony in 1841, the Union Jack became the flag used to proclaim official authority.

One of the chief practical uses of flags is to identify ships. The Colonial Naval Defence Act of 1865 ruled that all ships owned by a colonial government had to fly the British Blue Ensign with the badge of the colony on it. New Zealand didn’t have a badge defined, so in 1867 the colonial government decided on this rather unimaginative flag (‘NZ’ in bottom right corner). **ILLUSTRATION**

‘NZ’ was replaced with the Southern Cross in 1869 – four red stars with white borders. **ILLUSTRATION** The Colonial Office had asked the Governor, Sir George Bowen, for a new design and Bowen in turn asked naval lieutenant Albert Hastings Markham – who eventually rose to be Admiral Sir Albert Markham KCB – to produce the flag we still use today.

Markham **ILLUSTRATION** was reportedly often moody, irritable and defensive. He had a strong sense of duty as a naval officer, which compelled him to serve with a strict adherence to rules and established practices. He did not smoke, allowing that a gentleman might have an occasional cigar, but believing that cigarettes were for effeminate weaklings and that a black pipe ruined mind and body. He did not drink and disapproved of those who did. Curiously, he found it difficult to socialise with other officers.

The flag was initially intended to be used only on Government ships but soon came to be treated as a more general flag for New Zealand.

There was also a signalling flag adopted in 1899 for naval purposes.

 **ILLUSTRATION**

The 1869 flag was proposed as New Zealand’s official flag for all purposes in the New Zealand Ensign Bill in 1900. The British Admiralty objected to the use of the flag on land but the bill was eventually given the royal assent by King Edward VII on 24 March 1902 and the Governor’s proclamation of that assent was gazetted on 12 June 1902. Today is the anniversary of that.

A variant of the flag, a New Zealand red ensign, was approved in 1903 for use by merchant vessels, and other versions and related flags have since been created for the Navy, Air Force, Police, and other official uses. Here are some of them. **ILLUSTRATION**

New Zealand changed from a colony to a dominion in 1907 and can be said to have achieved full independence in 1947 with the adoption of the Statute of Westminster. However, we continued to use what is essentially a colonial flag and the Flags, Emblems, and Names Protection Act 1981 affirmed the New Zealand Ensign, renamed the New Zealand Flag, as “the symbol of the Realm, Government, and people of New Zealand” and as “the national flag of New Zealand”.

You will recall that John Key spent $27 million trying to change the flag to this **ILLUSTRATION** in 2015 and 2016. My view is that his preferred design is flawed in combining a plant badge with an essentially geometrical badge – Scotland doesn’t use a thistle on its saltire flag and England doesn’t have a rose on its St George’s cross flag.

The flag panel toured the country asking local gatherings what our flag should symbolise. The idea that a national flag needs to be deeply symbolic is baseless. If anyone here can tell me what truly useful information the flags of the United States, Austria, France, and Germany tell us about those countries I will send you a prize of a chocolate fish. The chairman of the panel also told me that they were not interested in the designs of subsidiary flags – for the Navy and Police and so on – which seemed to me to undercut the rationale for trying to change the main flag.

Our current flag is the oldest flag in the Commonwealth after the Union Jack and amongst the oldest in continuous use worldwide. I don’t want to see another wasteful exercise in trying to replace it, but would not object if it was changed to this **ILLUSTRATION** or this **ILLUSTRATION** (with a more cheerful shade of blue and in more compact proportions than we currently use). And if we did change, I think there should be a full suite of subsidiary flags sorted out at the same time. Here are some possible examples. **ILLUSTRATION** And we don’t need to limit ourselves to just one national flag. Especially for sporting purposes, we could have an alternative informal flag **ILLUSTRATION** and little pennons that are easier to wave at sporting events than rectangular flags.

National symbols need to be taken seriously, but not too seriously. I am pleased that in this country we don’t have flags in every school classroom with daily pledges of allegiance. And it takes the wind out of protestors’ sails if no-one gets too agitated about a defaced or burning flag.

Our flag isn’t necessarily ideal but at least it is properly defined in law – unlike the silver fern and kiwi which have never been officially defined as national symbols. That could have been something for John Key to fix at minimal cost.