

Two Irish Flags: A Comparative Analysis

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The island of Ireland is a paradoxical place. The city of Dublin, the capital of the Republic of Ireland, lies at the same latitude as Moscow. However, a driver going down-country towards Limerick or Cork might notice palm trees around Bantry Bay. The southwestern counties catch the Gulf Stream and the climate there is subtropical. (Donegal, the northernmost county, is not part of Northern Ireland but actually belongs instead to the Republic.) The Emerald Isle represents a very old country but two very young nations—one with two flags: the green flag with the gold harp and the tricolor of the Republic, that are a colorful illustration of that contrast.

The gold harp on the green field is the oldest flag of nationalism in Ireland. The charge originated in the Royal Irish Harp of Tara and that emblem, on a blue field, appears in the Canadian coat of arms. The English monarch Henry VIII, declaring himself king of Ireland in 1541, added a crown over the harp, and the Royal Ulster Constabulary in Northern Ireland used that same design on badges until 2001. From ancient times, throughout Christendom harps symbolized royalty, alluding to the biblical King David who as a boy played his harp for Saul. In Ireland the harp's strings are silver on official flags, as Irish harp strings were traditionally made of wire. The naval jack uses a green field and the presidential flag has a blue background. Blue was the original color associated with St. Patrick and actually has a much older history in Irish culture than does green. The harp on the flag is modeled on the so-called Brian Boru harp

displayed in the Old Library at Trinity College, Dublin (Brian Boru, an Irish warrior who defeated Viking invaders in the 10th century, came the closest to being king of the entire island).

A long-standing theme in the relationship between the North Atlantic islands has been that Ireland was always too distant culturally for England to understand, but too close geographically for England to ignore. The consequence, starting with the English King Henry II, has been an 800-year record of occupation and resistance. In recent centuries, an effective way for the Irish population to resist the English was to adhere steadfastly to the Church of Rome. Catholicism became a public political statement as well as an expression of private conviction.

Although the green harp flag actually started out as blue, during the Insurrection of 1798 the reform movement known as the United Irishmen chose the current color and illegally removed the crown over the harp as an expres-



sion of their struggle for an Ireland independent of British oversight. The shade of green, however, was not the vivid grass green of today, but rather a dark olive shade thought to be the fusion of the traditional blue with the orange of the Northern Protestants. It became the rallying flag for advocates of home rule, especially those in Ulster seeking relief from the harsh economic conditions imposed by the loyalist establishment throughout that province. Even today, green is still closely associated with the Catholic constituency among the Irish populace. A political song used by the Loyal Orange Institution, a fraternal organization modeled on the Freemasons, says:

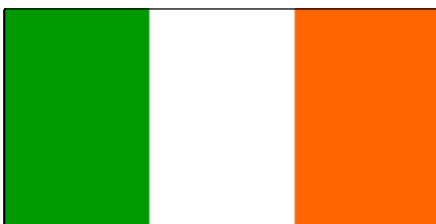
*“In memory of William we hoisted his flag
And soon the bright Orange put down the Green Rag.”*

Even without knowing who William is, the lyrics show the listener the polarization between the “orange” and “green”, which is a good starting point to examine the background of the second of the two Irish flags, the tricolor.

By the middle of the 17th century, the end of the wars of religion in Europe (fought between Catholics and Protestants) had given a final negative answer to the question of whether or not Christendom would reunite. By the 1680s a growing consensus in England held that the reigning monarch should be a Protestant. But King James II, a fervent Catholic, had produced a male heir who could possibly start a line of Catholic rulers. Parliament intervened decisively and invited King James's Protestant daughter Mary and her Protestant husband William to cross the Channel and ascend the throne of England to reign jointly as king and queen. In the Glorious Revolution of 1688, King James escaped to France when his army deserted him.

In a historic coincidence, the name of the dynastic house of William III was also the name of a color. William, the Dutch prince of Orange, became William, the king of England, and he defeated his father-in-law at the Battle of the Boyne River in Ulster two years later. The orange bar in the flag of the Republic memorializes the Irish Protestants who began their control of the island starting in July of 1690. The Loyal Orange Institution, founded a century later, celebrates July 12th with an annual parade in major cities such as Belfast, flying large banners depicting William III on horseback as well as smaller orange flags with the cross of St. George in the canton, the patron saint of England. At its inception the Orange Order was dedicated energetically to opposing "the fatal errors and doctrines of the Church of Rome", and to shoring up a broad-based support for the Ascendancy, which generally meant superior economic advantages for Protestants. Thus an Orangeman could not be Roman Catholic or ever have been married to one. Here again the antagonism between the orange and the green comes to the fore.

The Irish nationalist Thomas Meagher was primarily responsible for



the current format of the today's tricolor. In 1848, as a member of the Young Ireland movement, he returned from a visit with revolutionaries in Paris, and inspired by the French tricolor, he presented a

new flag to his patriotic companions in his native Waterford. The Irish version was orange, white, and green—with the orange bar at the staff. The symbolism of the olive green had largely been forgotten, so orange had to be specifically restored to the revolutionary flag. Meagher proclaimed “The white in the center signifies a lasting truce between the ‘Orange’ and the ‘Green’ and I trust that beneath its folds the hands of the Irish Protestant and the Irish Catholic may be clasped in heroic brotherhood.” Meagher eventually emigrated to the United States and became governor of the Montana territory. A county in that state is named for him.

The tricolor underwent a period of disuse throughout the remainder of the 19th century; the arrangement of the bars occasionally changed and yellow sometimes being substituted for orange. The new flag was a symbol of rebellion for which its partisans could be criminalized. Meagher himself was convicted and deported to Tasmania following his participation in a failed uprising during the Potato Famine. As a result the tricolor was rarely seen in the form that Meagher had used and the green harp flag remained predominant until the eve of the 1916 Easter Sunday Rising against English rule. Both flags flew over Dublin’s General Post Office during the fighting. The tricolor was adopted by the Irish Parliament in 1919, due in part to the growing influence of the political wing of the Irish Republican Army known as Sinn Féin (we ourselves), and is still known by some as the “Sinn Féin flag”. Throughout the country the revolutionary standard was acclaimed as a symbol of independence and re-affirmed as its flag in 1937 in Article 7 of the Constitution of Ireland which states: “The national flag is the tricolor of green, white, and orange.”

The Irish tricolor is an excellent illustration of flags as the shorthand of history. The three vertical bars concisely recapitulate the last 300 years of Ireland’s past and at a glance they provide the essentials for understanding current events there.

The comparison of the graphic components of these flags relies for the most part on two sources, *Good Flag, Bad Flag: How to Design a Great Flag*, the NAVA guide to flag design by Ted Kaye, and Peter Orenski’s pamphlet for his Connecticut town’s flag project *A Flag for New Milford*.

Together they list the critical considerations for comparing these two designs: simplicity, symbolism, color, attractiveness, and distinctiveness.

It might be easy to overlook how sensible the harp flag is: a green flag for a green place. The background color is descriptive of the physical features of Ireland and fits well with one of the serious functions of flags—to communicate identity. Whose green flag is that? It’s the flag of the Emerald Isle.

Flags as cultural artifacts tend to succeed on the basis of how well their design elements approximate universal human experience. For example, the reference to general human anatomy is obvious in the skull-and-crossbones pirate flag. The Jolly Roger and the green harp flag actually share several important design characteristics: they both have one color and one metal with a light charge centered on a darker background. The harp flag would pass the “black and white test” (reproducibility in grayscale); the pirate flag IS the “black and white test”. Both have such classic designs



that they have outlived their centuries but not their utility: the emblem on the first flag continues to appear on bottles of poison all over the world and the less fearsome emblem on the second flag continues to appear on bottles of beer all over the world.

One thing that they do not share is a median. While the Jolly Roger has rough vertical symmetry, the gold harp cannot be divided into equal halves. The harp’s asymmetry makes it distinctive at a distance. But like the Jolly Roger, its design elements are definitive and very effective. Up close this flag is pretty, in fact it is literally lyrical. The harp comes from an ancient family of stringed instruments that includes the lyre. From far away the charge looks like a light-colored, lopsided blotch on a dark field that cannot be confused with anything symmetrical like a star or a cross or a disc. It telegraphs identity, making it a splendid sea-going flag; William Crampton’s *The Complete Guide to Flags* relates how the green harp flag was “revived” for that use in 1947 as the naval jack.

The figure on the green flag is a harp attributed to a warrior king. More revealing is what it is not. It's not the sword of Brian Boru, which would symbolize force, and it's not the crown, which would symbolize power. The choice of a musical instrument as a central emblem seems to suggest something aesthetic or convivial about the Irish character generally and musicality is one of the pre-eminent national traits. Irish tenors are proverbial and it's hard to conceive of a jig as anything but Irish. Who would rally 'round a flag with a harp on it? Apparently a people who love to sing and dance. In his *The World Encyclopedia of Flags*, Alfred Znamierowski quotes Henry Ward Beecher: "A thoughtful mind when it sees a nation's flag, sees not the flag only, but the nation itself; and whatever may be its symbols, its insignia, [the beholder] reads chiefly in the flag the government, the principles, the truths, the history which belongs to the nation that sets it forth." Much of the venerable culture of Ireland's people is implicit in the green harp flag.

The emblem of the harp has a major drawback in that it is curvilinear and in the presidential version or the naval jack the flag uses three colors, which make it more complex and more costly to manufacture.

The tricolor flag identifies Ireland as a modern nation—like France, Italy, or Belgium—and also as a member of the European community. The uniqueness of the orange tribar underscores the uniqueness of the Irish as being the first among the Celtic peoples in Europe (including the Welsh, the Scots, the Manx, the Bretons, and the Cornish) to achieve their own independent political state. Also, the colors and the design format are emphatically unlike the Union Jack, containing nothing horizontal or diagonal, and they give no hint that Ireland was ever an English dependency. The graphic elements accentuate the difference and separation between the Republic and the Commonwealth of Nations from which it withdrew in the late 1940s.


As the national flag of Ireland the tricolor wins the honor and allegiance of the Irish people. However, as a vexillograph, it is problematic. It represents a series of limitations imposed by historical circumstances that unfortunately prevent it from being a great flag from a design perspective. Orange is a second-tier choice for a flag color; in heraldry orange is techni-

cally a “stain”, not a color. It is not precise and ranges from tawny or tan to true orange. Even today there is confusion about whether the Irish tricolor is green, white, and orange or green, white, and gold. Ironically, the color orange in the Dutch flag was eventually replaced with red, being more visible at sea.

The orange bar on the fly end makes the Irish national flag difficult to distinguish from the Italian flag, which has a red bar in the same position. A faded red bar on a weather-beaten Italian flag would be hard to distinguish from the orange bar on the Irish one; as a result the tricolor of Ireland is less distinctive. And yet, as the livery color of William III was orange, in order to be representative the bar needs to be that color. The proportions of the flag are very different from its Italian look-alike but as a rule observers are more likely to recognize the colors in a flag and to be less familiar with the specific aspect ratio. Ironically, the original arrangement with orange bar next to the staff would have made the flag more distinctive, as there are no other European national flags with a green bar at the fly. Even worldwide there are few such flags; most of them are African.

Tribars have the advantage of more economical mass production and in the case of the Irish national flag, the center bar is simplified by the fact that it can never have an emblem. From the beginning it stood for peace as a flag of truce, which is always a plain white piece of cloth. Vertical bars, however, make it difficult to see the colors of the bars farther from the hoist when the flag hangs limp without wind. But the choice of the tribar for the model flag that Meagher took home from France was a reflection of the revolutionary spirit in Western Europe during the 1840s rather than a functional choice.

In conclusion, for all practical purposes the Republic of Ireland has two flags for the world, one to stand in front of the United Nations building and one to dress its ships at sea. In important ways they are each other's opposites. The descriptive green harp flag is indigenous and traditional and recalls the cultural, geophysical country with its congeniality and ancient faith. On the other hand, the prescriptive tricolor is imported and constitutionally legislated and represents the politics and society of a modern nation with its hopes for future reconciliation. Like the old ste-

reoscope pictures of long ago, these two Irish flags make a pair of images which, combined, provide depth to our view of a vital Celtic heritage. 

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