

Reading or Interpreting the ‘meanings’ of the NSW Coat of Arms.

The various elements of a coat of arms are often ascribed conventional meanings, such as silver for purity, or a lion for nobility or blue for loyalty. The original bearer of a Coat of Arms may have had some symbolism in mind, although there is no reason to suppose that this symbolism would remain constant across the generations. Generally it is difficult to say what a Coat of Arms "means", especially a personal Coat of Arms, unless (as is often the case) it incorporates a pun on the bearer's name. The symbolism in Corporate Arms, such as the NSW State Arms, is more likely to have visually obvious meanings or a record of historical interpretations.

In the case of the NSW Coat of Arms granted in 1906, we have the explanatory notes published by the designer of the Arms, NSW Government Printer William Gullick in *The New South Wales Coat of Arms, With Notes on the Earlier Seals* (Government Printer, Sydney 1907) and his later *The Seals of New South Wales* (Government Printer, Sydney 1914). Gullick began with a statement of the symbolic value of the Arms:

“Being now thus granted and assigned by the King ... our Arms become symbolic registers and honourable records of those by whom they are borne, and emblems of distinction to be prized and guarded jealously.” (1907: 9)

Gullicks Interpretation of 1907

The oldest element in the design of the Coat of Arms is the red St. George's Cross on the shield. George of Lydda was a 3rd century Palestinian Christian and Tribune in the Emperor's Guard who, after freeing his slaves and giving away his property, pleaded with the Emperor to halt the persecution of the Christians. For this he was tortured and beheaded, and passed into European legend as the epitome of sacrifice and courage on behalf of the oppressed, a martyr-soldier whose emblem is a cross. A cult of St. George developed in the Middle East, and was taken to England by Richard the Lionheart in the 13th century, where the symbolic red cross on a white field became a national and naval emblem.

The red cross on a white field was also adopted as the NSW badge in 1869, and represented the naval traditions of Captain Cook and the early colonial governors who all served in the Royal Navy (the British naval ensign being a red cross of St George in a white field, later with a Union Jack in the canton). Gullick states that the inclusion of the cross on the State shield was also a pun on the name of the Premier's electorate in 1906: St George, from which Captain Cook's Landing Place could be seen.

The badge was revised in 1876 with the addition of the golden lion and the golden stars. **The lion** passant guardant (running forward, while looking at the viewer) is taken from the Arms of England (which has three such lions on a red field). The single lion was intended to be understood as the 'Lion of the South' - the vigorous offspring of the old world.

The stars illustrate the southern cross (an allusion reinforced by being placed on each arm of the St George's cross), which was a guide for all mariners in the southern hemisphere. It appeared on all earlier versions of locally-designed Australian arms, usually as blue-edged white or silver stars on white cross on a blue field, but in keeping with the naval origins of the

NSW badge this was considered too difficult to see on the blue naval ensign used by the colonial authorities, and so the golden stars on a red cross against a white background was adopted.

Gullick was able to bring these traditions of naval and local heraldry together by placing a white cross on a blue field, then voiding (or partially filling) the white cross with the red cross of St George, and the golden Southern Cross and the Lion of the South.

Within the quarters, or four compartments between each arm of the voided cross, Gullick placed two charges diagonally opposite each other: a golden fleece with a red band (the 'hanging sheep') and a garb (the wheatsheaf). Each of these charges contains several layers of allusion.

For Gullick the **golden fleece** was "an emblem of a great achievement of Australia in the peaceful arts". It first appeared in Australian heraldry as an element of the Great Seal of NSW in 1856. The design, however, dates back to 1429 when the Duke of Burgundy established the Order of the Golden Fleece in Flanders, which remains one of the oldest orders of knighthood still surviving. The fleece was chosen by the Duke on two counts: it represented the woollen industries of Flanders, and it alluded to the heroic quest of Jason and the Argonauts in ancient Greek legend, as befitting a knightly order. Knights of the Order wore a golden fleece pendant hanging from a broad red ribbon. In time, the Order came to be commanded by the King of Spain who presented a flock of merino sheep to King George III. Descendants from this royal flock were sent to Cape Town, from which some of the stock were then brought to NSW to establish the Australian wool industry. Thus the golden fleece represents a number of allusions - to the Australian wool industry than began in NSW, to its origins in the royal flocks of the kings of Britain and Spain, to the creation of industrial wool processing in 15th century Flanders and Holland, and to the classical mythologies of the Argonauts and their quest. It also, noted Gullick, made reference to a popular image of NSW as the 'Land of the Golden Fleece', a double-handed reference to the wool and gold resources upon which was based the wealth of NSW. For these reasons it was made the 'primary charge' on the shield (the upper left quarter being of the highest status).

Gullick has less to say of **the garb**, or wheatsheaf. It is an emblem of agriculture, deriving in Australia from the first wheat and grain crops planted on the shores of Sydney Harbour, emblematic "of our successful initiation and development of that peaceful art" said Gullick. It also commemorates the achievement of the emancipist James Ruse (and other emancipists) who laboured to establish agriculture in NSW and "plant a yeomanry on the soil". The garb was also used as a charge on locally-designed heraldry from the 1820s, and in 1853 a medal was struck to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Tasmania and the cessation of transportation, which featured a Coat of Arms charged with a garb and a golden fleece.

The rising sun crest was taken from the crest used on the earliest of locally-designed coats of arms in NSW, and consistently since then. It also alludes to a "Rise and Shine" motto that was prevalent in the early colonial period, and perpetuates a later term of endearment for NSW as "Sunny New South Wales". Gullick also recalled the mid-19th century poetry of William Wentworth who wrote in praise of Australia as the successor in the south to Britain:

"May all thy glories, in another sphere,
Relume and shine more brightly still than here!"

The lion and kangaroo supporters were explained by Gullick in some detail. **The Lion** (holding the dexter, or right-hand side, of the shield from the point of view of a person holding the shield) was not a "merely Norman-English reference". Gullick stressed that the people of NSW had

sprung from all the parent stocks of Britain - the Welsh, Irish and Scots as well as the English. The people of NSW were not English, but British-Australian, a fusion that was only possible in a new country like Australia. He again quoted Wentworth's poetry:

"May this, thy last-born daughter, then arise,
To glad thy heart, and greet thy parent eyes;
And Australasia float, with flag unfurled,
A new Britannia in another world!"

Thus the lion rampant guardant (standing up, looking confidently at the viewer) was not of the Old World, but a mythological heraldic beast that only existed in the imagination of a 'new Australasia'.

The kangaroo (holding the sinister, or left-hand side, of the shield from the view of a person holding the shield) is emblematic of Australia. Gullick considered that NSW, as the 'mother state', has the strongest claim of any state to use the kangaroo in its heraldry. He also states that an earlier version of the Arms had the kangaroo and emu supporters used in much locally-derived heraldry. However, the emu was visually very similar to the ostrich used as a supporter on the Cape Colony Arms (in South Africa), and the Arms of a former Governor of NSW, and therefore to use them in the NSW Arms would have been perceived as being of a "secondary nature". Gullick therefore, through the two supporters, was able to allude to the geographical place 'Australia', and to the multi-national origins of the new 'Australians' evolving in the place.

The motto is written in Latin and reads "Orta recens quam pura nites", which translates into English as "Newly risen, how brightly you shine". It was first devised by Dr. Badham, Dean of Arts at Sydney University in the 1870s, and was chosen by Gullick as the NSW motto for being "representative of our rising position in the rank of nations". He stated, "we are but as yesterday inscribed on the roll of nations, and may sincerely hope that most of our history has yet to be written".

In summary, the interpretations or readings of the NSW Coat of Arms, as stated by its designer William Gullick, make the Arms an optimistic representation of a new society, neither colonial nor English but British-Australian, located not in the old world of the north but the new world of the sunny southern hemisphere, aware of its ancient mythical and maritime roots but looking forward to the future, shining with confidence, possessing a wealth based upon mining, pastoralism and agriculture, a new country rising to take its rightful place in the empire and the world.

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