

The Cauldron

FOR ENGLAND AND ST.GEORGE!

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This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress, built by Nature for herself,
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands,
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, This England.

William Shakespeare – *Richard III*

On April 23rd (2006) this writer was surprised (and delighted) to receive a St George's Day card. While the Irish joyfully celebrate St Patrick's Day and the Welsh St David's Day the stiff upper-lipped English generally ignore the feast day of their own patron saint. Part of the reason is the current problem the insecure English have with their national identity and cultural heritage. Nationalist sentiments have been present in Wales and Ireland since at least the 19th century and in Scotland since the 18th century with the Jacobite rebellions. Recently with devolution they have now become part of mainstream politics and culture in those countries. Unfortunately in England nationalism today is only (mis)represented by right-wing extremists who wrap themselves in the Union Flag. Perhaps the time is ripe for St George to be reclaimed as a national icon that can be rallied around by everyone who loves this country, irrespective of their politics, race or religion.

But hold on a moment, you say, surely St George is a Christian figure? Why should readers of this magazine be interested in him? It is a good question and the answer is not simple. Firstly, of course, there is the slight problem that George is not even native to this land of ours. He was allegedly born in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) or Palestine in the 4th century CE and served in the Roman army. Also George was only adopted as the patron saint of England in the 15th century, although his feast day had been a public holiday for 200 years. In fact he replaced King Edward the Confessor as patron saint. The Turkish knight's influence seems to have been a result of his popularity among the crusaders returning from fighting in the Holy Land. It is said that English and Welsh archers first used his name as a rallying cry during our famous victory against the French at Agincourt.

The popular legend of St George describes how he saved a Libyan princess by capturing and then killing a dragon that was holding her hostage in a cave. This tale illustrates a classic theme of good conquering evil. It can be traced back to the Ancient Egyptian myth of Horus and Set or the biblical myth of the Battle

in Heaven between the archangels Michael and Lucifer. In fact Michael is often depicted in Christian iconography as a St George-type figure slaying the dragon (representing the Devil) with his lance. In July 2005 a mosaic floor dating from the 3rd century CE was unearthed in Syria depicting the Greek hero Bellerophon killing a chimera. He is shown wearing a Roman helmet, riding a winged Pegasus and thrusting a spear into the part lion, part goat, part serpent creature. Historians have compared this image to later depictions of St George slaying the dragon and have suggested that it provided a ready-made template. George was martyred by the Romans and it is claimed, like the Christ, he rose from the dead.

The knight therefore seems to have been closely linked with the eternal motif of death and rebirth and the battle between the forces of light and the powers of darkness. Symbolised by the seasonal change between summer and winter, this ancient motif forms the focus for the mythic cycle of the Wheel of the Year and the pagan drama of divine kingship and the sacrificed god. In the old mumming plays performed at midwinter during the Twelve Days of Yule, St George, dubbed 'the Turkish Knight', features prominently. He also appears in the famous Padstow May Day revels with the Old Obby Oss. On May 8th (coincidentally the feast day of St Michael) he can also be found in the Floral Dance at Helston in Cornwall alongside the dragon-slaying archangel and the English folk hero Robin Hood. At Mons in Belgium, the site of a First World War battle when it was claimed St George and St Michael were seen by British soldiers leading an army of angels towards the 'Hun' lines. Significantly George, in the Helston Floral Dance, is joined in a procession of fools by 'wild men' (woodwoses) covered in leaves and moss and hobby-horses. The event culminates at midday, when the sun is at its highest in the sky, as the man dressed as the saint rather un-sportingly shoots the dragon with a pistol!

Because of his important role in the Yuletide mumming plays, May Day revels and Morris dances of Merrie Old England, some folklorists have identified St George as a Christian version of the old Celtic sun god Belinus or Bel. In Babylonian mythology a god who shared this name slew a marine beast called Tiamat, just as George slew the dragon. The Turkish knight has also been variously linked with the Greek sun god Apollo, the Egyptian god Osiris, the Sufi saint Al Khidir or 'The Green One' of Islam, the Jack-in-the-Green or Green Man in English folklore and with the sacred oak tree in Indo-European mythology, which was the symbol of the divine king and the old god of the woods.

R.J. Stewart in his excellent book *Where is St George?* (Moonraker Press 1977) speculated that St. George's symbolic role in the Order of the Garter, England's premier order of chivalry, makes him a divine hero. As such he allegedly guards and inspires members of a chosen order of sacred kings or sacrificial victims. This bloodline, Stewart claims, was probably inherited from the distaff side and is hereditary in nature. Whether this theory is true or not, Stewart certainly believes that George had an important role in the Grail Mysteries and he connects him with both St Michael and King Arthur. As such the Turkish knight belongs to the mythical Matter of Britain and therefore, despite the fact he is a 'Johnny Foreigner,' to the very essence of our national soul.

Today there is an ongoing interest in St George and shops are beginning to stock cards celebrating his day. The English flag with the red cross of St George can be seen fluttering from church steeples in rural areas and English football fans supporting the national team have adopted it wholesale. For several years the government has been under pressure to introduce an extra public holiday, Trafalgar Day, celebrating Lord Nelson's famous victory over the French and Spanish fleets, Battle of Britain Day, marking when Britain was saved from German invasion by the brave few, or Waterloo Day, marking the Duke of Wellington's defeat of Napoleon are all worthy candidates. In January 2005 the new prime minister designate, Gordon Brown, tried to promote New Labour as the party of patriotism. He said that the Union Jack should be

reclaimed from the far-right and suggested a new public holiday called 'Britain Day'. On this day, he said, we could all join together as a nation to celebrate our common identity and values.

In November 2005 the new archbishop of York, the Ugandan-born Dr John Sentamu, launched an attack on multiculturalism. He said the English should show more pride in their own culture and as an example celebrate St George's Day properly. At the same time a publican in Norwich lost a court case to challenge a decision by local magistrates who had refused him a licence to open late on April 23rd because it was not a public holiday. Perhaps St George's Day should be made the new public holiday as after all the saint unites Christians, Muslims and pagans. In doing so we would restore some much needed pride in our national identity at a time when it is under attack from the dark forces of political correctness and modernity.

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