

ARMS, TRINITY COLLEGE AND THE UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN

I

Recent historians of the College, perhaps wisely, have not chosen to say very much about the arms of the College and the University: McDowell and Webb evidently did not see it as part of the brief of their 'academic history' and John Luce restricts himself to a single colour picture. This is of the programme card for the tercentenary celebrations: the arms of the College are at the top right, the arms of the University to the left.¹ It is perhaps significant that he chose to reproduce this because it was around 1892 that the main consideration of the arms was concentrated.

Predictably, the frontispiece to the celebratory volume which was produced – *The Book of Trinity College Dublin 1591-1891* (Belfast, 1892) – showed a portrait of Elizabeth I, but preceding it came two pages on the 'Arms of Trinity College'. One is a full page illustration, in correct armorial colours, and on the previous page is an heraldic description:

'Azure, a Bible closed, clasps to the dexter, between in chief, a lion passant and on the sinister a harp, all or; in base a castle, with two domed towers each surmounted by a flag flotant to the sides of the shield, argent'.

The committee which organized the book gave a rationale for this. They explain that 'No official entry of the arms of Trinity College Dublin, is to be found in the Office of Arms', but this may be accounted for by the loss of some of the records 'in the troublous times of James I'. In printing the arms as they are, they argue that 'the emblazonry is in conformity with the seal of 1612' and with the arms as they are engraved on the College plate of the seventeenth century, and 'on College certificates from 1733' and 'the stamps impressed on the covers' of some books.² Clearly, a considerable amount of research had been undertaken to provide a justification for what they did.

They make this argument because they are conscious that they are providing alternative arms to those which had been in use earlier. They say that 'In a memorandum book, not dated, but supposed to be from the earliest part of the 17th century, there is the following entry' and they print a six-line Latin poem:

¹ See *Trinity College Dublin: The First 400 Years* (Trinity College Dublin Press, 1992), plate 12.

² See *The Book of Trinity College Dublin 1591-1891* no editor (Belfast, 1892), pre-frontispiece pages.

‘HEXASTICON PRAE FORIBUS COLLEGII

Tristis Ierna, diu latitans, caput extulit umbris:

Pulsa en barbaries, vis fera, furta, dolus.

Cum dedit iste Leo pacem, Lyra dulcis opemque,

Arx ignita locum, fit liber atque Domus,

Alma Domus miseris, pupillis sedula nutrix

Queis honor aut virtus aut pia Musa placet.

This may be translated as follows:

SIX LINES FOR THE GATE OF THE COLLEGE

Unhappy Ireland, for a long time lying hidden, has brought its head out of the shadows: behold savagery driven away, wild violence, deceit, guile. When this lion brought peace, and the sweet harp support, the flaming castle gave a place and the book became a home, a cherishing home for the unfortunate, a caring nurse for its pupils to whom honour or virtue or the love of letters is pleasing’.

Quite what the phrase ‘pia Musa’ signifies is not clear: among the Muses Polyhymnia, the muse of sacred song, is the most obvious referent, but quite why is in no way obvious. It has been suggested to me that ‘pia’ may be ‘a Christianised/Humanist epithet for the source of poetic inspiration’ and that the phrase may connote ‘the love of letters’ and I have adopted this elegant solution.³ In one of the chapters of the 1892 volume J.P. Mahaffy casts doubts on the early date of the poem, pointing out that there is no ‘distinct or dated evidence for *fired towers*, adopted in the 17th century by the City...earlier than the time of Charles II’.⁴ It would be interesting to locate this ‘memorandum book’, if it still exists, so as to get a bit closer to this poem.

A.C. Fox-Davies, one of the most expert writers on the subject, says that heraldry has been termed ‘the shorthand of history’⁵ and there is something of this that these two closely related coats of arms communicate and which the poem seeks to articulate. At the centre of these arms is a book – a Bible evidently – a common enough device within the armorials of academic institutions. Fox-Davies again: ‘Books are frequently made use of...such charges occur in the arms of both the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and in many other university and collegiate achievements’.⁶ Quite possibly the use of the book or Bible was to signify the presence of an institution of learning but also to imply the sense that Trinity aspired to be an equivalent in Ireland to the two English universities, because England and Ireland are present in symbolic form in the rest of the armorials: the ‘lion passant’ is part of the English arms and the harp, originally of Leinster, is the symbol of Ireland. The castle with flaming towers is part of the arms of Dublin: this is the ‘locum’ [place] of the poem which gave habitation to the College. At the tercentenary celebrations the Lord Mayor of Dublin recalled the city’s gift of the site three hundred years earlier and said ‘the City has flung around you her hospitable arms, and

³ My thanks to Anna Chahoud for this suggestion.

⁴ See *The Book of Trinity College* p. 11.

⁵ See *A Complete Guide to Heraldry* (Wordsworth Reference, 1996), p. vii.

⁶ See *A Complete Guide to Heraldry*, p. 299.

converted your outlying acres into a site, which, for extent and convenience is not equalled by any university site in the populous cities of Europe'.⁷ That this justifiable civic pride was reflected in the armorials, whether the towers of the castle are flagged or 'flammant', is entirely appropriate and has continued, quite properly, to be honoured.

But arms do not simply articulate history: they also suggest, in graphic form, a system of power relations and privileges. In the Trinity arms the flag on the dexter side of the shield bears a cross, that of St George of England, while that on the sinister side has the saltire of St Patrick. The positioning of armorials on a shield is significant: what appears on the dexter side has more importance, in this case the English lion and the cross of St George. In a book produced in 1994 by the Coimbra group of universities, of which Trinity is a member, the arms of the College are reproduced as they appear on the 1612 seal, with the towers flagged, but the accompanying text confuses the dexter and the sinister sides: '...on the sinister, a lion passant, on the dexter, a harp...' – which reverses, wrongly, the power relations embodied in the shield.⁸

But the seal of 1612, the earliest piece of evidence for the College arms, is itself problematical. William Macneile Dixon, who was a contributor to the 1892 volume, later wrote his own history of the College and comments on the arms of the College in an interesting appendix. He says of the harp: 'It should be noted that in the seal the harp is facing towards the sinister; but this is probably a mistake on the part of the seal cutter'.⁹ Whether he is right or not is not obvious to me, but the stringing of the harp looks odd. Then there is the single clasp for the book or Bible, whereas the 1892 armorials have two clasps: on the seal the clasp is open, but in the 1892 armorials the clasps are closed. Then there is the seemingly decorative feature on top of the shield which is described, again almost certainly wrongly, as 'mantling'. According to Charles Mackinnon of Dunakin, 'The mantling was a cloth cape worn from the back of the helmet to protect the metal from the hot rays of the sun...'¹⁰ and he follows the usual line that it probably developed during the crusades but that this essentially functional use was forgotten and that mantling became decorative and sometimes bore armorials. Fox-Davies is a bit more explicit, explaining that 'originally it was short, simply hanging from the apex of the helmet to the level of the shoulders, overlapping the textile tunic or 'coat of arms'...' Perhaps whoever designed or cut the 1612 seal was trying to represent the mantling which overlapped the arms as depicted on the tunic, but in terms of the shield, but this is doubtful: Fox-Davies retails the opinion of many writers on heraldry that mantling became something which provided 'an artistic opportunity for filling up unoccupied spaces in a heraldic design'.¹¹ This may be what is happening in the Trinity seal: there is decoration to each side of the shield and this so-called 'mantling' may simply be decoration to the top of the shield. Whatever is represented on the Trinity seal cannot be mantling: there is no helmet for it to protect, any more than there is a helmet to bear a 'crest'. But, like much of what is involved in this investigation, the 1612 seal is

⁷ Quoted by John Luce in *Trinity College Dublin: The First 400 Years* p. 112.

⁸ See *Charters of Foundation and Early Documents of the Universities of the Coimbra Group* (Groningen, 1994), p. 60.

⁹ See *College Histories: Trinity College Dublin* (London, 1902), p. 286.

¹⁰ See *Heraldry* (London and New York, 1975), p. 23.

¹¹ See *A Complete Guide to Heraldry*, p. 383.

not available for closer scrutiny: 'the present whereabouts of the original is unknown'.¹²

In his treatment of the subject, Macneile Dixon points out that there is 'no record' of an original grant of arms but assumes there must have been one which is now lost, that the seal is faulty, and that there is a 'rude memorandum' sketch of the College's arms in the records of the Ulster Office. He also says that 'In Ulster's Office is also preserved a book, dating 1720-30, containing a 'tricking' of the coat and bearing the title "The Arms of ye Colledg of Dublin". This eighteenth-century volume was compiled from older records, now destroyed'. One of the themes of this paper, perhaps the 'sub-theme', which is inadvertently but inexorably emerging, is that of the loss of evidence, the loss of documents or material witness, to the history of the College.

Macneile Dixon does, however, have access to a 'certificate' granted in 1901 which establishes formally the arms of the College, which he transcribes in full. It is issued by Sir Arthur Edward Vicars C.V.O. Ulster King of Arms and Principal Herald of All Ireland and it defines the arms in a more developed, though very similar way, to the description in the 1892 volume. But there are differences: most obviously, there is more material on the flags.

'Azure, a Bible closed, clasps to the dexter, between, in chief, in the dexter a lion passant, on the sinister a harp, all or, and in base a castle with the towers domed, each surmounted by a banner flotant from the sides argent, the dexter flag charged with a cross, the sinister with a saltire gules'.

But there are other differences from the arms set out in 1892: the Bible has two clasps, but in the arms replicated from the document by Macneile Dixon they are open and not closed. Again, the dexter side of the harp in the 1892 arms featured a shapely winged figure of a lady, evidently an attempt at personification, but the Ulster King of Arms preferred a more sober and functional representation of the heraldic instrument. These arms, he writes, 'do of right belong and appertain, as appears from the Records of my Office, unto the Provost, Fellows and Scholars of the College of the Holy and Undivided Trinity of Queen Elizabeth, near Dublin, and their successors, for ever according to the laws of Arms'. He then signs it. Macneile Dixon, who is a scrupulous scholar and who strikes me as being pretty adept at heraldry, tries, helpfully, to explain the colour of the 'field' of the College shield – 'azure'. 'The College colour is royal blue, the old national colour of Ireland. Green is not the true Irish colour, but a comparatively late innovation dating from about 1798, and without authority'.¹³ The description of the arms of the College, according to the Ulster King of Arms, is what now appears, with a few slight errors, in the College Calendar and the representation as set out in this document is that now used by the College.

All this is of real value, but it is not very explicit in terms of reference: what is 'the eighteenth-century volume' which incorporated the earlier, now destroyed (the 'sub-theme' again) records on which the Ulster King of Arms relies? I have no reason to doubt the accuracy of Macneile Dixon's transcription of the certificate of 1901, but

¹² See *Charters of Foundation and Early Documents of the Universities of the Coimbra Group* p. 60.

¹³ See *College Histories: Trinity College Dublin*, pp. 287-88.

I have not seen it: it conforms formally to the existing grant of arms for the University, for which see the next paragraph. But maybe the College no longer possesses the document.

What does exist, however, among the archives of the College, in its splendid pristine condition and in its original leather box, is the grant of arms to the University of Dublin of 1862.¹⁴ On a parchment document the then Ulster King of Arms, Sir John Bernard Burke, responds to a request:

‘...application has been made to me by the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor of The University of Dublin setting forth that the said university is empowered by its foundation Charter to have and use a Common Seal but it does not appear that any Arms have been assigned to it as an University and requesting that I would grant confirm and ratify unto the Chancellor Vice Chancellor and Senate of the said University such arms as may be proper for that learned Body to use and bear...’

Here the distinction between the College and the University of Dublin emerges starkly: those who want these arms are the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor and Senate, not the Provost, Fellows and Scholars who were the recipients of the later certificate. The Ulster King of Arms then sets out the armorials proper to the University of Dublin, which are articulated in a very different way from that of the arms of the College: the shield is quartered and the ‘lion passant’ has disappeared; the fiery towers of the city of Dublin arms, and of the Latin poem, are present probably because they were part of the arms of the College before 1862. The first and fourth quarters are in the azure of Ireland. The book, no longer a Bible, is opened. This is what is granted:

‘Quarterly Azure and Ermine, in the first quarter a Book open proper, bound gules, clasped Or; and in the fourth quarter a Castle and two towers Argent, flammant proper: over all in the centre point the Harp of Ireland ensigned with the Royal Crown.’

Around the edge of the shield is the legend ‘Senatus Universitatis Dubliniensis’. The power relations here are articulated not by the sides of the shield, the dexter and the sinister, but by the fact that the ‘Royal Crown’ is ‘ensigned’, that is, set above the harp of Ireland. This, with one minor spelling mistake which is easy to correct, is what appears in the College Calendar and these are the arms which are used in relation to University business.

II

Some of the implications of this brief and incomplete history seem to me to be as follows.

1. What are granted formally and described in the correct language of heraldry to the College and the University are ‘arms’ which are depicted on a shield: there is no mention of a ‘crest’ or ‘mantling’ or a ‘badge’.

¹⁴ TCD MUN/D/3311a.

2. Some care has been taken in devising these armorials, which are related but distinct.

The formal arms of the College are surrounded by the legend ‘Coll. Sanctae individuae Trinitatis Reg Elizabet juxta Dublin’ and they are devised in line with the religious origins of the College: there is a Bible and the cross of St George and the saltire of St Patrick on the domed towers of the castle.

The arms of the University of Dublin, which are surrounded by the legend ‘Senatus Universitatis Dubliniensis’, are essentially secular: there is no Bible but an opened book, and there are no flags, bearing the cross and saltire associated with saints, on the flaming towers. These armorials are all about Trinity as an institution of learning in the city of Dublin.

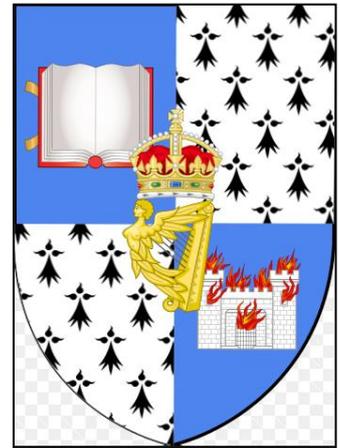
3. Armorials such as these are devised so as to apply to one single and unique person or his or her family or one single and unique institution: they are carefully devised in graphic and verbal terms so as to be uniquely applicable. It is further to the point that the arms and the legend are consonant and that the associations of a person or an institution are fitting. Normally the arms and the legend would mutually reinforce each other in terms of identity: so the issue of note paper and envelopes which bear the legend THE UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN which is accompanied by the arms of Trinity College is faulty, as is the designation on the College website of the College seal as the ‘seal of the university’.
4. Personally, I see no reason to disagree with James I’s wise and capacious view that Trinity ‘is called a College and considered to be a University’.¹⁵ I have represented the College and the University since 1980 and have never had a difficulty in terms of its recognition. I do, however, have some sympathy with the Provost’s concerns about the recognisability of his title. Since I have been Pro-Chancellor I have frequently met with the designation of ‘Vice-Chancellor’ and have had to explain the difference. It is interesting though not reassuring that in 1862 there was an officer of the university who was called ‘Vice Chancellor’.
5. If, however, the College goes ahead with the plan to ‘re-brand’ itself it seems to me that the details and the status of the arms of the College and the University have to be respected: these are formally granted and are not to be played with fast and loose. It is particularly important to preserve the integrity and distinctiveness of the College and University parchments, which provide our verbal and visual authority to make awards, and the distinction between them should be clearly signalled on College and University websites.
6. Arms and armorials are tricky subjects, partly because the technical language and syntax that are used are so arcane (it is basically medieval French) and I offer these observations to prevent the College from making mistakes – which, as the preceding pages have demonstrated, is all too easy to do. The discourse of heraldry and arms is difficult (perhaps designedly so), but those who, like the College and the University, benefit from the awards of arms have to come to terms with it.

¹⁵ Quoted by John Luce in *Trinity College Dublin: The First 400 Years*, p. 4.

7. There are mistakes in the descriptions of the arms of the College and the University in the Calendar, but they are slight and easy enough to correct.
8. What has disturbed me most in this brief investigation, however, is the loss of so many of the relevant records. A longer search may turn up something more than I have been given, but the need to write something quickly has prevented this.¹⁶

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¹⁶ My thanks, as always, to the staff of the Manuscripts and Archives Department of the Old Library who have supplied me with documents and generously put their considerable expertise at my disposal.