

beliefs

inspiration
conflicts



emblems of ireland



Badge from the anti-home rule Convention of 1892.
Courtesy of Ballymoney Museum.



Tourism Poster.
Courtesy of Coleraine Museum.

emblems of ireland

**Everywhere we look we see emblems
- pictures which immediately conjure
connections and understandings.**

Certain emblems are repeated over and over in a wide range of contexts. Some crop up in situations where you might not expect them.

The perception of emblems is not fixed. Associations change. The early twentieth century was a time when ideas were changing and the earlier significance of certain emblems became blurred.

This leaflet contains a few of the better and lesser known facts about these familiar images.



The Harp

Hecataeus of Miletus, the oldest known Greek historian (around 500BC), describes the Celts of Ireland as "singing songs in praise of Apollo, and playing melodiously on the harp".

The harp has been perceived as the central instrument of ancient Irish culture.

"The Four Winds of Eirinn".
Courtesy of J & J Gamble.

the harp



The Image of the Harp

Harps come in many shapes and sizes. The most familiar form of the Irish harp is based on the so called "Brian Boru's Harp".

The story is that Brian Boru's son gave it to the Pope as a penance. The Pope gave it to King Henry VIII and it came back in Ireland when Henry gave it to the Earl of Clanrickarde.

However the harp was probably made in the 15th century, 400 years after Brian Boru. It was almost certainly made in Scotland.

The Brian Boru Harp is currently in Trinity College Dublin.
Public Domain.

The Red Hand on the Harp

Alternative versions of the harp's early history are uncertain, but, at one time, it bore a badge which includes a Red Hand of Ulster emblem. This suggests that at some point it belonged to the O'Neill clan of Ulster.

Image of the badge formerly on the Brian Boru Harp.
Public Domain.



the harp

The British Harp

The harp has been an emblem of Ireland since at least the 13th century. It was adopted as a symbol of British rule in Ireland when Henry VIII declared himself king of Ireland.

Whatever his role in the history of the Brian Boru Harp, Henry VIII was the first to use the harp on Irish coinage.

The harp appeared on a groat issued around 1534 with the letters H for Henry and A for Anne Boleyn, who was yet to lose her head. He changed the initial for Jane Seymour and Katherine Howard, providing an easy way to date these rare coins, if you should come across one in your change. After these three he, perhaps wisely, stuck with HR.



Illustrations from an Essay towards an Historical
account of Irish Coins by James Simon, 1749.

The harp continued to figure in the symbolism of British presence in Ireland.

As early as 1603 the symbol appears on the British Royal Standard merged with the figure of a lady to form the Maid of Erin Harp. She remains on the royal flag to this day.



The Royal Standard since 1837.
Public Domain.



The harp, surmounted by the crown, was the symbol of the Royal Irish Constabulary and subsequently the Royal Ulster Constabulary until the RUC was re-named in 2001.

The harp still has a place in the current PSNI badge, amongst a host of emblems, though, curiously, not the Red Hand.

Royal Irish Constabulary badge.
Courtesy of Mid-Antrim Museums Service.

the harp

Denis O'Hampsey and the Downhill Harp

Denis O'Hampsey (also known as Denis Hempson) was born near Garvagh, but came to live at Magilligan. He had the rare distinction of having lived through an entire century – he was born in 1697 and died in 1807 at the age of 110.

O'Hampsey was one of the foremost harpers of the day. He was a contemporary of O'Caralan, but he thought O'Caralan's style was far too "modern".

Aged 18, O'Hampsey was presented, by one of the local gentry, with a splendid harp which came to be known as the Downhill Harp.



Painting of the Downhill Harp by Rory O'Loughlin.
Courtesy of Rory O'Loughlin.



Belfast Harp Festival 1792/1903

At the time of the inception of the United Irishmen, Belfast Presbyterians were keen to embrace Irish culture.

A major show piece was the Belfast Harp Festival of 1792. This featured ten harpers, including Denis O'Hampsey. The harp festival was revived on 1903 as part of the Gaelic Revival.

Irish Harp Festival Programme 1903.
Courtesy of Ballycastle Museum.

the harp



The Irish Harp

In 1922, the harp was accepted as the national symbol of Ireland by the Irish Free State and pictured on the Great Seal of the Irish Free State. The harp continues to be used on Irish coinage to this day

Presidential Seal of the Irish Republic.
Public Domain.



The Maid of Erin

Irish myths and legends were a huge source of material for writers of the Gaelic Revival. The tales of Cuchulain and Finn MacCool were retold by writers including Lady Gregory, Eleanor Hull, W.B. Yeats and J.M. Synge.

The Maid of Erin, symbolising the spirit of Ireland, appears in a variety of guises.

She appears on several monuments commemorating the 1798 rebellion and other Irish conflicts.

DESERTMARTIN A.O.H. Div. 30
Painted by John Jordan of Cookstown.
Courtesy of John O'Kane.

maid of erin

She is often portrayed in a sadder light, as Mother Ireland weeping for her children.

Plaque showing 'Erin mourning her dead heroes'
by Mrs. Vanston by Irish Art Companions.
Courtesy of Ballycastle Museum.



Some time in the sixteenth century she appears to have 'morphed' into a musical instrument and has often appeared since as the Maid of Erin Harp.

Maid of Erin Harp on an education medal awarded to Anna McCandless in 1888.
Courtesy of Coleraine Museum.

The Red Hand

The story of the Red Hand is well known. Two competitors are having a boat race. Whoever lays their hand on the shore wins the contest. The one lagging behind hacks off his hand and flings it on to the shore and wins the contest.

Exactly who was racing who is not so clear. Exactly where they were varies from story to story, but the prize is usually the kingship of Ireland (or some part of it).

The O'Neills have long claimed it was an ancestor of theirs and have used the emblem on their family crest.



Digital image by John Hamilton.



Ó Néill

O'Neill crests.
Public Domain.

the
red hand



Ulster Banner.
Public Domain.



Ulster Flag.
Public Domain.

The Norman, Walter de Burgh, combined the Norman red cross with the red hand on a golden background to create the Flag of Ulster in the thirteenth century.

In 1953 the Ulster Banner was created with a white background and the addition of a crown and a star with six points, representing the six counties.

The Red Hand was a battle emblem for the O'Neill clan. It was certainly displayed by Hugh O'Neill in the Nine Years War of the 1590s against the British forces of Queen Elizabeth I.



Hugh O'Neill.
Public Domain.

the red hand



It is no surprise that the Mid-Antrim UVF Battalion adorned their slouch hats with a red hand.

**Irish Citizen's Army Hat courtesy of Art & Industry Division,
National Museum of Ireland, Collins Barracks, Dublin.**

However, the Irish Citizen's Army, which took part in the Easter Rising, wore similar hats also featuring the red hand. While the red hand has featured in trade union imagery and might have been seen as a socialist symbol, the ICA, whose leadership included Jack White from Broughshane, must have been aware of the Ulster connection. Clearly, at that time it was not regarded as an exclusively Unionist emblem.



**Irish Citizen's Army courtesy of
Mid Antrim Museum Service.**



The Red Hand remains an important emblem in the sporting world. It is featured in the badge of Tyrone GAA.

Courtesy of Tyrone GAA.

the red hand

In the twentieth century the Red Hand became increasingly identified with the unionist side of Irish politics.



Political pamphlet.
Courtesy of Ballymoney Museum.



In 1972 an offshoot of the UVF in Belfast called itself the Red Hand Commandos. The trend emerged again in 1998 with the Red Hand Defenders.

Mural on the Shankill Road.
Courtesy of Dominic Bryan.

There is an on-going debate as to which plant actually is the “real” shamrock. The front runner is *Trifolium dubium*, also known Least Hops Clover, Small Hops Clover, Lesser Trefoil, Yellow Shamrock, Kleiner Klee, Lesser Yellow Trefoil, Small Hop Suckling Clover or even the Hop Clove. *Trifolium dubium* may or may not be the same species as *Trifolium minus*. A strong contender is *Trifolium repens*, the White Clover, but then botanists think they may be the same species! Also in the running are the Black Medick (*Medicago lupulina*), Birdsfoot Trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*), Alexanders (*Smyrnum olustrum*) and Wood Sorrel (*Oxalis acetosella*). We hope that clears things up.

shamrock



Shamrock Courtesy of Antiogar.



Mind you, if you can find a way to cultivate a four leafed clover you could be very lucky indeed!

The Oxford English Dictionary describes the symbolic use of the shamrock as “a late tradition” (first recorded in 1726). However the shamrock was certainly in use earlier.



The shamrock is said to have been the emblem of the Spring Equinox for the Druids in pre-Christian times.

Druid.
Public Domain.

shamrock



Most famously, Saint Patrick used the shamrock to demonstrate the concept of the Holy Trinity. The wearing of the shamrock became traditional on Saint Patrick's Day.

St Patrick's Day became a public holiday in Ireland in 1903. It was originally religious and pubs were not allowed to open on March 17 until the 1970s.

Saint Patrick.
Public Domain.

St Patrick's Day is increasingly enjoyed by Protestants as well as Catholics. It is not always a sober religious affair.

Saint Patrick's day.
Courtesy of J Hamilton.



Shamrocks, in many forms, are still in abundance.

William Drennan, a Presbyterian United Irishman, used the familiar idea of unity and diversity in the shamrock in this poem from the 1790s. (Incidentally he was the first person to use the expression “the Emerald Isle”.)

*Let my sons like the leaves of the shamrock unite,
A partition of sects from one footstalk of right,
Give each his full share of the earth and the sky,
Nor fatten the slave where the serpent would die.*



Ceremonial hat of the Deputy Lieutenant of Londonderry.
Courtesy of Coleraine Museum.

shamrock

The shamrock became a national badge of Ireland in 1801. It is a registered trademark of the Government of Ireland.

The Shamrock is used as part of its logo by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.





The classic image of King William III at the battle of the Boyne was originally painted by Jan Wyck, a Dutch painter commissioned by William to paint scenes from the Irish campaign of 1690.

**King William landing at Brixham by Jan Wyck.
Public Domain.**

king billy's horse



**King William landing at the Battle of Namur.
Public Domain.**

Wyck painted William several times, usually on a white horse, but occasionally on a brown horse. The most familiar image is from a painting of William landing at Brixham.

It has been argued that the King would have been foolish to make himself a target by riding such a noticeable steed and would have chosen a brown horse.

If he did, it didn't work, as he was shot in the shoulder by an Irish marksman. He was heard to declare, "There is no harm done, but the bullet came quite close enough", though probably in Dutch.

**Orange Banner painted by Sam Hargy, Ballymoney.
Courtesy of William McGowan.**



The painter, Jan Wyck, probably wasn't at the battle. However, his image of King William on his white horse has been reproduced in a wide variety of contexts.

Nineteenth Century jug.
Courtesy of Coleraine Museum Collection.



king billy's horse



The significance of the white horse was to change a few years after William's death, when George I came to the English Throne.

He brought with him the white horse emblem of his native Lower Saxony.

The coat of arms of Lower Saxony.
Public Domain.

The Royal arms of Great Britain (1714-1801).
Public Domain.

The White Horse was added to the royal standard and became the standard image of a royal mount.





St Patrick, some time in the 5th century, drew a cross on top of a circular pagan symbol honouring the sun or perhaps the moon. He indicated his willingness to incorporate the old religion into the new and created the first Celtic cross. Another story tells that the distinctive shape came from a Christian cross decorated with a victor's wreath.

"St Patrick banishes the snakes..." banner painting by Robert Anderson of Coleraine for Glenullin A.O.H. Courtesy of John O'Kane.

celtic cross

The earliest stone crosses were probably simple etchings on a flat stone. Free standing "high crosses" were being erected by Irish monks as early as the 7th Century.

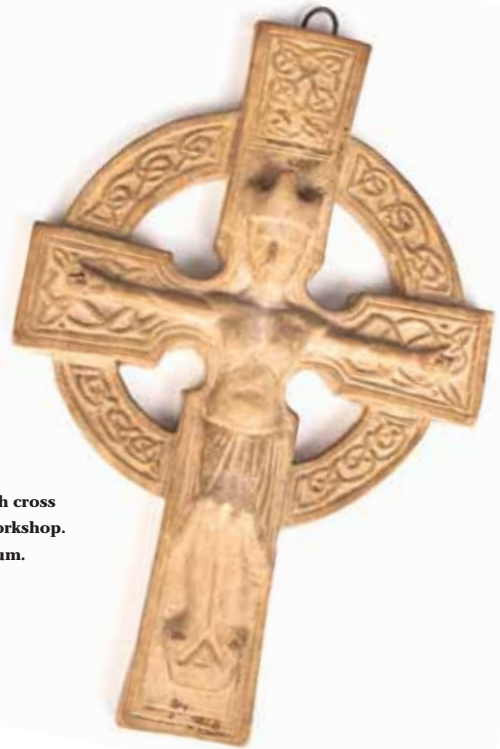
"Celtic" crosses appear from an early time in Scotland, Wales, Northumbria and Cornwall. The spread of the cross may be linked to the evangelical Irish Monks establishing churches in Scotland and far beyond.



Drawing of King Flann's Cross by Hugh Thomson from Fair Hills of Ireland by Stephen Gwynn, 1906. Courtesy of Coleraine Museum.

The crosses became more and more richly embellished with either Celtic knot work and abstract designs, biblical scenes or both.

Celtic crosses were used in both Roman Catholic and Anglican Church graveyards. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, at the time of the Gaelic Revival, they became more popular on Catholic graves and much less common in Protestant graveyards.



**Plaster replica of an early Irish cross
From the Home Industries Workshop.
Courtesy of Ballycastle Museum.**

celtic cross

The Presbyterian Cross

"Symbols of the World" describe this cross as the "PRESBYTERIAN CROSS". The "Presbyterian Cross", in this form, is recognized by organizations such as the United States Veterans Association as an official symbol for government headstones.

The American Presbyterian Church's current logo combines the Celtic cross with the burning bush familiar to Presbyterians in Ireland.

These examples suggest that Presbyterian emigrants in the 18th Century were entirely comfortable with this form of the cross.

Celtic Crosses are immensely popular today appearing in jewellery, on tee shirts, cards, mugs, postcards and tattoos.



**Presbyterian Cross.
Public Domain.**



**Logo of Presbyterian Church of America.
Public Domain.**



A project supported by the PEACE III Programme managed for the Special EU Programmes Body by the North East PEACE III Partnership.



European Union
European Regional
Development Fund
Investing in your future

