

A GUIDE TO THE STUDY OF HERALDRY

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A Guide to the Study of Heraldry by J. A. Montagu

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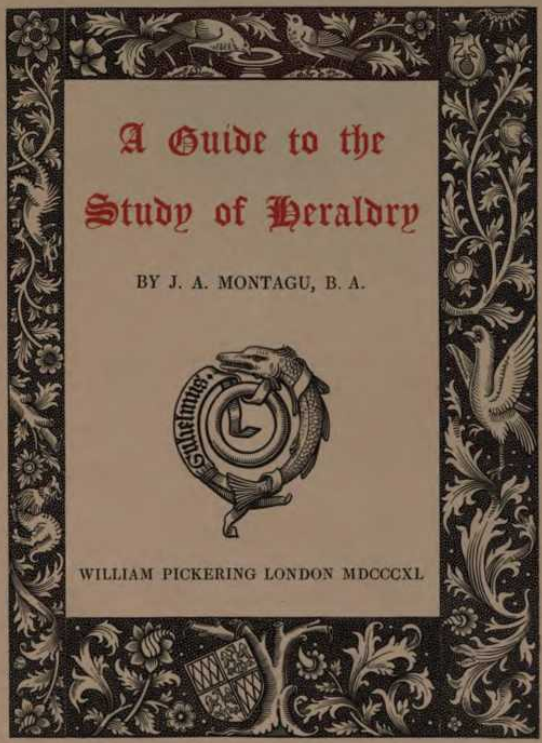
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BY J. A. MONTAGU, B. A.




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A Guide to the Study of Heraldry.

ITHIN the last twenty years there have been published some of the very best works that have ever appeared, connected with the subject of Heraldry, and its kindred science genealogy. Rolls of arms of undoubted authenticity, accompanied by notes devoid of those flights of imagination with which the old annotators were wont to lard their works upon these subjects; treatises upon particular branches of the science, and many excellent works on the peerage and different ranks, and some genealogies of the best kind have appeared. From this we might be led to believe that a revival of the ancient taste in these matters had taken place, yet I am inclined to think that this supply, so good too of its kind, falls far short of that upon most other subjects, which the increased demand for information has created. Yet it were a pity that a science so cherished by our forefathers, and so useful to the historian, the architect, and the lawyer, should be so neglected, and I might even say despised, in this utilitarian age. That it does not merit this utter contempt will surely appear from the number of talented men

who have devoted themselves to, and have written upon the subject. Truly enough does the Chevalier de Courcelles remark : —“ Il n'y a peut-être pas de science en apparence plus frivole, et sur laquelle on ait tant et si gravement écrit, que celle du Blazon.”

That it has had a great influence upon the manners and customs of the people amongst whom it has been in use, will hardly be denied by those who are acquainted with the histories of France and England. It was a part of the great feudal system of Europe, than which, for the time in which it was instituted, nothing could be more beautiful. Heraldry was the outward sign of that spirit of chivalry whose humanizing influence conduced so rapidly to the extinction of the last traces of barbarism, and which had such a beneficial effect upon the warfare of the time. Amongst our ancestors, little given to study of any kind, a knowledge of heraldry was considered indispensable. It was the index to a lengthened chronicle of doughty deeds. The escutcheon of a Mortimer or a Bohun was to their eyes, as the blast of a trumpet to their ears; stirring them up to deeds of chevisance and fame. If then the good deeds of our ancestors, both in war and peace (of which heraldry is in many instances the record) are still to hold an honoured place in our remembrance, then ought we not to contemn a science which they honoured, and considered of so much importance. [See Appendix A.]

When the worthy possessor of some fine old manor sees a tree which was planted in the time, and by the hand perhaps, of the founder of his house and name, and which had grown with the growth, and flourished with the prosperity of his family; when

he sees this tree now but feebly vegetating and shattered in constitution, yet still beautiful in its old age, and reverend in its antiquity, will he not fence it about, bind up its shattered trunk, and relieve with props the weight of its pendent limbs, and perhaps with fostering care, rear up around it some scions of its stock, to shelter it in its still older age from the rude attacks of winter. So should he who honours his house and name cherish and foster the fine old heraldic tree, which was planted and flourished and bore fruit in the good old days that are gone.

My intention here is chiefly to point out to those who may have time and inclination to take up the subject, what authors they may consult with advantage, what authorities for the bearing of arms may be relied upon, and what are the absurdities and errors which they must avoid. It is from the mass of absurdities which have been written upon heraldry that the science has been brought into such disrepute; for purified of these, heraldry may put forth as strong a claim to rank as a science, as any subject, if classification and system be criteria.

Keeping in view my principal object of being as it were a finger post to heraldry, I shall endeavour, as far as I am able, to give a slight sketch of the origin and progress of the science.

The necessity of distinguishing the individual in the joust, the tournament, and the *melée* of the battle, was no doubt the origin of the assumption of many particular personal bearings. This custom with regard to heraldic devices, properly so called, and formed according to the principles of the science as it has come down to us, is not of very great antiquity, certainly not older than the Conquest. We have indeed instances of shields painted with figurative designs, being borne by particular individuals in

very early times. I may refer the reader to the *Ἔπη ἐπὶ θηβας* of Æschylus, where he will find several instances of this kind. In Virgil, Ovid, Xenophon, Euripides also will be found expressions which have given rise to the notion that heraldry is as old as the time of Adam. Indeed a German author, and our Morgan, in his *Sphere of Gentry*, have not hesitated in giving the arms of Adam himself, together with those of Noah, Joshua, David, and other right noble gentlemen of equal antiquity. Another author, in order to give a stamp of authority to the armorial bearings of some worthies of the tribe of Judah, has not hesitated to blazon them in good Norman French. But none of these are what we properly understand by heraldic bearings; that is, bearings connected with heraldry as a science, and hereditary. There have, however, been a few exceptions to this; of the devices of kingdoms and cities of early times which still remain as the arms of those kingdoms, &c. As instances I may mention the White Horse of Saxony, the S. P. Q. R. of the city of Rome¹, and the bearings of the towns of Nismes, Augsburg, and Sulmo; but these devices, which are found on coins and medals, were never there borne upon a shield, and were only retained as the heraldic bearings of those towns after the introduction of heraldry².

The fleur-de-lys of France too is certainly of great antiquity,

¹ Senatus Populusque Romanus.

² The arms of Nismes are "Un palmier auquel est lié un crocodile, avec les lettres 'Col. Nem.'" (pro Colonia Nemausensis). Of Augsburg, "Une pomme de pin sur un chapiteau de colonne." Of Sulmo, or Sulmone, in Italy, the letters S. M. P. E. from the first four words of the lines of Ovid:—

Sulmo mihi patria est gelidis uberrimus undis
Millia qui novies distat ab urbe, decim.

but not used as an heraldic bearing before the time of Louis the Seventh³. I must, however, be permitted to doubt the fact of its having been the direct gift of Heaven, as some authors have stated. A gift from such a quarter would hardly have been suffered to experience the treatment it has undergone of late years. In a pedestrian tour in search of heraldry, through part of Normandy, undertaken a few years ago, I could find but few remains of heraldry which had withstood the shock of the two revolutions. Wherever a time-honoured relic lay within the reach of destruction it had been defaced. High on a buttress or on the dripstone of an arch might occasionally be seen the worn insignia of some by-gone name or proud abbey, whose walls are now in ruins, and here and there on the walls of a dismantled castle might be traced the faded colouring of what had once been the splendid decorations of its hospitable halls; rich in the escutcheons of many a princely fief, and the bearings of many a name renowned in history and song⁴.



Tile from Caen.

Although I have above, according to general opinion, called the device of France the lily, yet it is a question by no means

³ See "Traité des Armes de France," par M. de St. Marthe, and "Traité des Monnaies," par M. le Blanc. Louis Seventh born 1120, died 1180.

⁴ On the walls of a dungeon of the chateau of Tankarville, on the Seine, these arms are rudely carved.

