

The Blue Blanket

By: Bro. Ian P. Watson, P.M.

Bro. Watson is a member of the Lodge of Journeymen Masons No. 8 Lodge Elgin and Bruce No. 1077 Southern California Lodge of Research He also authored the 4-93 STB 'Lodge of Journeyman Masons #8'

The 'Blue Blanket' is a Scottish Craft banner of great antiquity about which several books and articles have been written. Most, if not all, of those histories (including my own lodge history) contain many inaccuracies due to the fact that the main reference used has been Alexander Pennecuik's history of "The Blue Blanket". Unfortunately, several Masonic encyclopedias have also used this as a source for reference.

The story of the 'Blue Blanket' has become almost a myth in Edinburgh. The true story of the 'Blue Blanket' is so interesting it is not necessary to embellish it with fiction.

The 'Blue Blanket' is not mentioned by any historian prior to 1482 but Pennecuik states that it is "highly probable" that the origin of the 'Blue Blanket' dates back to the first Crusade (1096-1099).

The story goes that a number of Scottish craftsmen rallied to the Christian cause and as a sign of recognition they carried with them a banner which they hoped to plant on the walls of Jerusalem. This banner was supposed to carry the inscription "In thy good pleasure build thou the walls of Jerusalem" from Psalm 51.

The banner, at this time, was reputedly called 'The Banner of the Holy Ghost' and those who served under it 'The Knights of the Holy Ghost'.

In his book Pennecuik quotes some vague French references. He also writes about Pope Urban II and King William I of Scotland as contemporaries which they could not possibly have been – the former died in 1099 while the latter was born in 1143. It is possible that he has mistaken King William II of England for King William I of Scotland. In addition he states that on their return from the Crusade "they...dedicated this Banner...to St. Eloi in St. Giles' Church in Edinburgh". The chapel of St. Eloi (patron saint of the Hammermen of Edinburgh), situated in St. Giles' Church, was not built until several centuries later – about the beginning of the 15th century.

The most likely date of the origin of the 'Blue Blanket' was in 1482. King James III of Scotland appointed several commoner friends to positions of title and trust. Among those friends was one Robert Cochrane on whom he conferred the titles of 'The Earl of Mar' and 'Secretary of State'. Cochrane was already the King's Master Mason and was, possibly, the architect of the Great Hall in Stirling Castle.

These elevations in rank incensed the nobility since they were of the opinion that no man of such low birth should ever be given a title – no matter how much he deserved it. In July 1482 King James III assembled his army on the Burgh Muir – at that time a large expanse of countryside outside of Edinburgh but now an area within the city boundary. When the army reached Lauder – a small town south of Edinburgh – the nobles (led by Archibald Douglas, Earl of Angus) rebelled and seized Cochrane and several others. They hanged Cochrane and the others at Lauder Bridge and, thereafter, imprisoned the King in Edinburgh Castle. The King was held under the supervision of two of his uncles – the Earl of Athol and the Earl of Buchan.

The country was in great turmoil and was in conflict with the English who were looking for recompense over the payment of the dowry of the King of England's (Edward IV) daughter, Lady Cecily. The English had marched an army of 10,000 men, led by the Duke of Gloucester (later King Richard I) and were camped on the Burgh Muir.

The Queen sought help from Provost William Bertraham. The Provost and the community took to repay the dowry which amounted to the sum of 6,000 marks (the merk was an ancient form of money in Scotland). This act stopped the threat of attack by the English.

Bertraham then rallied the craftsmen who approached the steward of the castle and the King was set free. King James III rewarded the city with many honours. The list of privileges and honours was called the 'Golden Charter'.

The craftsmen were given a banner by the King which the Queen, personally, inscribed with a Saltire (St. Andrew's Cross), a thistle, an imperial crown and a hammer as well as the following words: "Fear God and honour ye King with a long Lyffe and prosperous reign and we shall ever pray to be faithful for ye defence of his sacred Majesty's royal person till death". The King decreed that the banner should be called the 'Standard of the Crafts Within the Burgh'. This banner was one of the first to use the thistle as a symbol of Scotland.

The banner affectionately became known as the 'Blue Blanket' from its background color which reflects the background of the Scottish flag.

The Hammemmen of Edinburgh were the guardians of this craft banner. The Hammemmen Guild included the crafts of blacksmiths, goldsmiths, lorimers, saddlers, cutlers, bucklemakers, armourers amongst others. The Hammermen's seal included an effigy of Saint Eloi. According to the first charter of the Hammemmen each applicant for membership was examined by the Deacon and Masters of their respective craft to determine their worthiness.

In 1496 the Hammermen received a grant of the chapel of St. Eloi in St. Giles' Church and hung the 'Blue Blanket' there. They were to pay 40 shillings for the care and upkeep of the altar and its priest.

Any member found guilty of a breach of the laws of the charter was fined eight Scots shillings which went toward the support of the Corporation's altar of Saint Eloi in the Church of Saint Giles.

One of the worst defeats ever inflicted on a Scottish army happened during the summer of 1513. King James IV of Scotland declared war on England and, like James III, assembled his army on the Burgh Muir. It is probable that the army was 50,000 strong (although estimates as high as 100,000 have been suggested) with another 10,000 men joining it as it headed south into England.

According to tradition Provost Alexander Lauder of Blyth led the burghers and craftsmen out of the city by the West Bow (west town gate) to assemble, with the rest of the King's army, on the Burgh Muir. These craftsmen carried the 'Blue Blanket' with them to Flodden in the north of England.

The battle of Flodden was a disaster for the Scots. However, unlike many of the Scottish banners at Flodden the 'Blue Blanket' survived and was returned to Edinburgh.

King James VI (I of England) had cause to criticize the craftsmen's work. The craftsmen displayed the 'Blue Blanket' to remind him that he had no divine right to do so. King James VI wrote in his 'Basilikon Doron' or 'Book of Instruction' to his son, Prince Henry: "They think we should be content with their work, how bad and dear soever it may be; and if they be in anything controuled, up goeth the Blue Blanket".

The protestant faith had made the people of Edinburgh more aware of their rights and the lower classes of society became a formidable force.

The 'Blue Blanket' is held in the care of the Deacon Convener of Trades. During the mid 18th century the banner was displayed every time the Deacon Convener and his court sat in judgment in any craft dispute.

Over the centuries several 'Blue Blankets' have been made. The original banner was 10 feet 2 inches long by 6 feet 6 inches wide.

The Museum of Antiquities, Edinburgh, claim they have one of those 'Blue Blankets' but I believe it is a copy of the Lodge of Journeymen Masons banner since we have an identical one in our lodge rooms.

The only 'Blue Blanket' I know of is a 17th century replica in the Trades Maiden Hospital, Edinburgh. This is displayed in a beautifully carved frame which was presented by three members of the Lodge of Journeymen Masons No. 8 who emigrated to California in 1870.

The Lodge of Journeymen Masons holds the right to carry the 'Blue Blanket' since it is the oldest operative lodge in the City of Edinburgh. As all the Crafts were included in the Incorporation of Hammermen, which was responsible for the banner, it was fitting that the Blue Blanket be entrusted to the representatives of one of the constituent crafts.

The Lodge of Journeymen Masons No. 8 has carried the banner on four occasions at the laying of foundation stones:

1. The old Grand Lodge Hall on the 24th June 1858. On this occasion the Blue Blanket was presented, in the grounds of Holyrood Palace, to the Lodge of Journeymen Masons No. 8 by the Deacon Convener of Trades in the presence of four thousand Masons.
2. The Wallace Monument, Stirling on the 24th June 1861.
3. The new Royal Infirmary, Edinburgh on the 4th July 1867.
4. The Duke of Athol's Memorial Logieriat, Perthshire on the 10th August 1868.

The Blue Blanket is the motif displayed on the tie of The Lodge of Journeymen Masons No. 8 and holds a special place in the hearts of the brethren from that famous lodge.

STB - June 1994