

The Requesto August 17th 1914
wattle day League

NATIONAL SYMBOLS.

Clock of History Put Back 500 Years.

In the course of an eloquent address at the "rally" of the S.A. branch of the Australian Wattle Day League on Saturday night, Prof. H. Darnley Naylor remarked:—The great Roman historian, Livy, tells us in his preface that he found comfort in writing because it distracted his attention from the evils of his own time, from the thoughts of murder, rapine, and civil war. So in these days when the clock of history has been put back 500 years, back into the horrors of medievalism, when all the triumphs of civilization have been wantonly trampled under foot by the insatiate nationalism of God's Regent in Germany; when all that Christianity counts for is thrust aside without pity or remorse; when the sacrifice of Calvary would seem to have been a pathetic failure, and God's children are still more pathetic—pathetic might-have-beens—in such days, I say, we too may try to distract our attention for a brief space from the evils of the time, and turn our thoughts to the past, to the origin of national symbols, to their use and abuse in bygone ages.

—The Capital Letter T.—

One of the oldest symbols in the world is that from ancient Egypt—the capital letter T, which stood to represent Eternity. How far it was associated with Egyptian nationality we do not know. Such symbols would seem to have had their use rather in times of peace, and they appear as a species of trademark on coins and tokens, suggesting community of commercial interest rather than pride in the extent of imperial power. This is true at least of Athens with her olive sprig and her owls, both associated with the goddess Athene, who watched over the fortunes of the city. Not until Roman times do we find a national symbol which, like the modern flag, suggests military conquest and military domination. The earliest symbol in the Roman army was a wisp of straw attached to a pole, which formed a rallying-point for the soldier in battle. In the straw we have, perhaps, an emblem of the husbandman. For the Romans, in their origin, at least, were a nation of farmers, and in this straw they would see a reminder of home, of the corn-field, and the thatched roof, of wife and children anxiously waiting the return of husband and father. But with conquest the simplicity of early symbolism passed away, and we begin to find standards bearing on the top the figures of the eagle, the royal bird of Romulus, of the wolf, the beast that suckled him and Remus, of the horse (an animal still new to the old world, and suggestive of the conservative, haughty landowner, who went to war on horseback while his humble clients tramped on foot). The first Roman flag was that borne in front of the cavalry, a plain piece of coloured cloth at the end of a gilt staff. We hear, too, in imperial times, of a military standard bearing the head of the reigning Emperor; for in earlier days of civilization the individual must have a concrete object upon which to focus his patriotism. He fights for Cesar, not for an abstraction. To die for liberty, equality, fraternity, is a more difficult achievement, and only members of a very advanced community can rise to such a conception. I well remember reading an article by a Russian writer in *The Nineteenth Century and After* at the time when Russia seemed to be on the eve of a revolution against the oppression of her aristocracy. This was seven years ago, and the writer said:—"No, Russia will not rise in revolution for a principle. She has not the education to make her do it;" and he reminded his readers how half a century before an abortive attempt was made to throw off the yoke. A certain Grand Duke, with advanced ideas, was leader of the movement. He desired that "Liberty" should be the rallying cry. "Useless," said his advisers. "The Russian peasant will not understand—unless, indeed, you say that 'Liberty is the name of your wife! For you and your wife they may rise, but not for Liberty as an abstraction.'" To return to Rome—not til

the days of Constantine, was any great change made. Then, however, the place of the Emperor's head was taken by the letters "Chr"—the first three letters of Christ's name; and, for the first time in history, it may be, men fought for an ideal rather than for a person, and the monstrous paradox appeared before the world of the Christ, the Prince of Peace, the conqueror by suffering, carried, in symbol, upon the battlefield, to witness all the horrors that stalk abroad when man reels back into the beast and is no more.

—"Attached to the End of a Stick."—

But, significantly enough, the modern flag has its source in the German people. It is they who gave us the Gonfanon or Battle (gund) flag (fano). * One has only to read Cesar again to find how war-loving these ancient Teutons were; how they despised peace because it made the young men effeminate. And they were right in ages when there was no other outlet for energy, courage, and self-sacrifice. And so it is they who have left us moderns the flag—the flag. I looked up "flag" in the dictionary. It stood defined as "a piece of cloth attached to the end of a staff." A piece of cloth attached to the end of a staff; no very complicated thing this; and yet what has such a piece of cloth meant for good and evil in the history of mankind.

—Not Blood but Liberty.—

The mischief of it all is this—that when we gaze upon the flag we think—at any rate the majority of us think only of war, of military and naval triumphs. For myself, when I gaze upon our flag, I prefer rather to dwell upon the noble results which have come of conquest—results which, however little appreciated at the moment, were still dimly described by the best part of the nation. And what do we think of? Surely of Tyranny suppressed, of Freedom set on firm foundations, of utmost Liberty for the individual, so far as it compatible with the safety of the State. These are the things for which our flag stands, and to retain these things for the world at large we must be prepared to make any sacrifice. And it is because these things are endangered now that Britain is justified in the stand which she has taken. But let us make no mistake.

—War, Vile and Horrible.—

War is still a vile and a horrible thing, and in our hearts at least we ought all to be wearing sackcloth and ashes at the thought that man has fallen so low again that we must be murdering one another to satisfy the vulgar ambitions of a few. But on our side we may fairly urge that this thing has been thrust upon us, and that we are out to put an end, if we can, to this disturbing of the peace of Europe and the hampering of human progress. There is for us a grim duty to be performed—a duty about which we should no more dream of boasting than should a Judge when he vindicates the law by sentencing some miserable wretch to the gallows. Still less should be desire that this grim duty may be prolonged. The other day I heard of a certain clergyman in this city who asserted that he could not bring himself to pray for peace yet. I presume that for him "Blessed are the peacemakers" is merely effeminate nonsense. His position, as far as I could make out, was that war brought us in touch with the realities of life. There indeed he was right. War does make us realize how near to the brute mankind still is, despite 2,000 years of professed Christianity. But with this clergyman's conclusion I cannot agree. "War," he said, "brings us in touch with the realities of life, and will therefore compel us to fall back upon the God whom we have despised." Does he mean that war, with its threatenings of imminent death, will drive us from sheer terror to grovel before a God of vengeance? If so, it is a species of religion which can only degrade mankind. But, if this clergyman meant to affirm, as Wordsworth does, that "carnage is God's daughter," then I can only reply that, if there is anything that tempts me to disbelieve in the existence of a beneficent Deity, it is the thought that beneath the blue skies of a European summer, when all nature is at its loveliest; when the crops are smiling in golden beauty, telling of God's kindness to his children; when the rivers flow through banks clothed with greenery, then—o temporal o mores!—men, made in God's image, are filling those skies with the reek of Hell, are staining those crops with the red of mutual slaughter, and are swelling those rivers with the life-blood of the poor and

the unknown. For them there is no tinsel and glory, and for those that love them naught save misery and tears. No, these things are not calculated to impel us to worship the only God worth the worshipping—the God of mercy and of love—Who, when the world wrings Him to the heart, can still say, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." So, as I look at this golden symbol—the wattle—I can only pray that it may ever nestle between the roses of England, and that it may ever be redolent of Sweet Peace, of Brotherhood, of Liberty, even if these have had to be won again at the price of the groaning and travailing of all that is best in human nature.

At the close of the address, which was delivered with intense earnestness, the speaker was rewarded with cordial and long-sustained applause.