The Boke of St. Albans

A modern rendition
of a medieval treatise
on heraldry

as reprinted in
Inquiries Into the Origin and
Science of Heraldry in England
by
James Dallaway
1793

Modern English Rendition
by
David B. Appleton
INTRODUCTION

The Bokys of Haukyng and Huntyng; and also of coot-armuris, more popularly known as The Boke of St. Albans, published in 1486, is a book of three treatises written to guide “gentill men and honest persones” in the arts necessary to an English gentleman; hawking, hunting, and, important to our purposes here, heraldry. (A second edition published ten years later added another treatise on fishing with an angle.) The author is generally believed to be Dame Juliana Berners, daughter of Sir James Berners and sister of Richard, Lord Berners, and one of the earliest women writers in English. Tradition makes her the prioress of Sopwell nunnery in Hertfordshire.

The text herein is taken from James Dallaway’s Inquiries Into the Origin and Science of Heraldry in England, published in 1793. In the Appendix, Dallaway includes the two parts of the heraldry portion of the Boke of St. Albans, though without the illustrations found in the original. The first portion, the Liber Armorum or “Book of Arms”, is an exposition on the ancient origins of coat armor and related topics; the second, the blasying of armys, is a more practical discussion of the lines of division and charges used in heraldry and how to blazon them in Latin, French, and English.

It is a seminal work in several respects. It was the first book published in Hertfordshire, England, just ten years after the introduction of the printing press to England by Caxton. It is the earliest example of color printing in England. It is the earliest treatise on heraldry written in English. Though it was clearly derived from (or from the same source as) Nicholas Upton’s De re Militari, written in Latin about 1441 (St. Albans uses most of the same illustrations of crosses, lines of division, charges, etc., and in the same order as Upton’s work, in many cases not even differing by tincture), it also had an undeniable influence upon other and later works in the field. It may have influenced The Deidis of armorie: a heraldic treatise and bestiary, written in Scotland after 1494 by R. Andersoun, Andersoun’s essay on heraldry being “very similar” to that found in St. Albans. Sir John Ferne’s The Blazon of Gentrie, published a hundred years later in 1586, borrows heavily from the Boke of St. Albans, even to the point of using terms which are found nowhere else.

The purpose of this modern English rendering of the heraldry portions of the Boke of St. Albans is two-fold: (1) to make the text of this pioneering work more readily available to the modern reader; and (2) to try to make it more understandable to that same reader. Copies of the original are rare and expensive; the 1881 and 1901 facsimile editions are challenging to find at best. Even a copy of Dallaway can be difficult to acquire and will cost several hundreds of dollars, well beyond the book-buying budgets of most enthusiasts. Additionally, the text was written in an English even further removed from modern English than the Elizabethan English which many, having read Shakespeare in school, admit to having trouble understanding.

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1 http://www.hertfordshire-genealogy.co.uk/data/topics/t024-spelling.htm
2 http://www.stephen-stratford.co.uk/stalbans.htm; http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/gb-herts.html#stalb
3 See, e.g., http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/medieval/mss/holkham/misc/031.htm
4 http://www.manuscripts.org.uk/queens/MS.161.htm
Here in this book following is determined the lineage of coat-armor: and how gentlemen shall be known from non-gentlemen, and how bondage began, first in angels and after succeeded in mankind, as it is shown in process both in the children of Adam and also of Noah. And how Noah divided the world in three parts to his three sons. Also there is shown the four colors in arms figured by the four orders of angels. And it is shown by the foresaid colors which are worthy and which are royal; and of royalties, which are noble and which excellent. And there are here the virtues of chivalry and many other notable and famous things to the pleasure of noble persons shall be shown as the works following witness, that whosoever likes to see them and read them, which were too long now to rehearse; and after these notable things aforesaid, follows the blazoning of all manner of arms in Latin, French, and English.

Incipit Liber Armorum

Being in worthines arms for to beere by the royall blode in ordynanace all nobill and gentil men fro the hyeft degre to the laweft, in thys booke fhall be fhowed, and to difcover gentilnefs from ungentilnes. Infomuch that all gentilnes cummys of God of hevyn, at hevyn I will begin, where were v orderis of aungelis, and now ftande but iv, in cote armoris of knawlege encrowned ful hye with precious ftones, where Lucifer with myliony’s of aungelis owt of hevyn fell unto hell and odyr places, and ben holdyn ther in bonage, and all were erected in hevyn of gentill nature. A bond man or a churl wyll fay all we be cummyn of Adam, fo Lucifer with his cumpayny may fay all we be cummyn of hevyn. Adam the begynnyng of mankynd was as a ftocke unsprayed2 and unflourished,3 and in the braunches is knowledge wiche is rotun and wich is grene.

How gentilmen fhall be knawyn from Churles, and how they firft began, and how Noe devydyd the world in iij parts to his iij sonnys.

How gentleman shall be known from churls and how the first began. And how Noah divided the world in three parts to his three sons.
Among other crosses one is found the which is called a corded cross, as here it is shown in this cross, the which is called a corded cross: for it is made of cords, the which certain cross I see but lately, in the arms of a noble man: who in very deed was some time a crafty-man, a roper as he himself said. And you shall say of him that bears these arms: He bears gules and a cross plain corded of silver.

Of a cross plain perforated.

There is another cross plain the which marvelously from the plain cross of St. George differs as here appears. Here it is to be marked that the opinion of some men saying is, that these arms are checkered arms, and this opinion is utterly to be reproved for arms may not be checkered but at the least in the number of four and in a greater number they may well be made, as afterward shall be shown. Therefore it is to be said: He bears sable and a cross perforated of silver.

Of a bezanted cross.

Over these crosses we have another cross the which I saw lately in the arms of a certain Januens as here it shows. And this is called a bezant cross for it is made all of bezants, and fych a cross may be made als fone with lytill cakys as with befantys and lytill caykys differ not bot in colore, ne the colore of the befant fhall be expreffid in blafyng of armys, for it nedis not to fay a befant of golde for ther be no befantis bot of golde, therfor it is to be fayd, latine fic. Ille portat vnam crucem calentatam in campo rubeo. Gallice fic. Il port de goulles vng cros befauntee. Anglice fic. He berith fable and a cros perfornatid.

Of a cross flory.
fadyr with fum lyttyl differans as here, to whom specially is geuyn a moon encrefyng, for that firft fon’ is in hoope of augmentacion and encreffyng of his patrimony, and thysh differans may be fum littill molet or a cros croflet or fych a like differans.

The fecunde broder fhall bere the hooll armys of his fader with iij labellis to the differans and in to the figne that he is the thride that beris thof armys. Alfo the thride broder if ther be any fhall bere iij labellis in tokyn that he is the fourth: that berith thos arms of whom the faderis the firft, the ayr is the fecunde, and the fecunde broder is ye thride: that beris thoos armys. And fo folowys that the thride broder fhall bere iij labellif as here it apperith in thys figure. And fo forth if ther be moo brether ye fhall encree powre154 labellys after the forme reherfit.

And the funnys of thoos fame brether fhall bere the fame labelis. And in cafe that the fecunde brother the wich berith iij labeles haue ij fonnys, certanly thelder foon of thos ij the wich is hayre to his fadyr fhall bere the hool armys of his fadyr: with alfo many labelys as his fadyr did, with a littyll differans as here it apperith in thys fcochon. And hys fecund brodyr fhall bere the hooll armys of hys fadyr with the fame labellis as his fadyr baare and no moo with a bordure as herein thys figure next folowyng it fhall be fhwyt, and as it is reherfit in the chapiture of borduris.

And iff ther be the thride brodyr then he fhall bere hys faderis armys with the same labellis and a bordure of another colowre to the differans of hys brothyr as it fhall be fhwyt in thys fcochon next fuyng.

And the chyldyr of thoos men fhall bere theyr differans not in theyr faderis armys, bot in borduris and dyuyfionys dyu’fe.

And like as the chylder of the fecunde brodyr beryng iij labellis ar dyuydyt and dyfferit: by theyr fignys and theyr borduris. So the chylder of whole arms of his father with some little difference as here, to whom specially is given a moon increasing, for that the first son is in hope of augmentation and increasing of his patrimony. And these differences may be some little mullet or a cross crosslet or such a like difference.

The second brother shall bear the whole arms of his father with three labels to the difference and in to the sign that he is the third that bears those arms. Also the third brother, if there be any, shall bear four labels in token that he is the fourth that bears those arms; of whom the father is the first, the heir is the second, and the second brother is the third, that bears those arms. And so follows that the third brother shall bear four labels, as here it appears in this figure. And so forth, if there are more brothers, you shall increase your labels after the form rehearsed.

And the sons of those same brothers shall bear the same labels. And in case that the second brother, the which bears three labels, have two sons, certainly the elder son of those two, the which is the heir to his father, shall bear the whole arms of his father, with also many labels as his father did, with a little difference as here it appears in this escutcheon. And his second brother shall bear the whole arms of his father with the same labels as his father bare and no more, with a border as here in this figure next following it shall be shown, and as it is rehearsed in the chapter of borders.

And if there is the third brother, then he shall bear his father's arms with the same labels and a border of another color to the difference of his brother as it shall be shown in this escutcheon next following.

And the children of those men shall bear their differences not in their father's arms, but in borders and divisions diverse.

And like as the children of the second brother bearing three labels are divided and differed by their signs and their borders, so the children of the