

Mottoes in Latin

I recently came across a book by L. G. Pine entitled “A Dictionary of Mottoes” (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983). It is a comprehensive list of the mottoes adopted by families or by corporate bodies, mostly in Britain, and the main thing which struck me was the popularity of Latin mottoes. Even recently established bodies have opted for Latin in preference to English, and it is a fascinating exercise trying to think why a particular motto was chosen and what might be its provenance.

It is hardly surprising that Eton College, founded in 1440, should have a Latin motto, and one moreover which is a plea that it might keep going - “Floreat Etona”. Perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised to find that other less venerable foundations have similar ambitions - “Floreat Swansea”, “Floreat Septem Quercus” (Sevenoaks), “Floreat Actona” (London Borough of Acton).

Other cities, towns, and local councils have adopted Latin mottoes, although some of these mottoes may have been lost along with their owners in the Local Government reorganisations which have taken place since 1983. I have not had the time or resources to check which have vanished. One survivor, lost and then recovered later, is Rutland, the smallest English county and proud of the fact, boasting of having “Multum in parvo” (Much in a small space).

Broadstairs U.D.C. was clearly proud of its status as a popular seaside resort, with its motto “Stella maris” (Star of the sea). Wisbech R.D.C. appears to have valued highly the archaeological finds made within its boundaries, “Thesaurus in agro” (Treasures in the field). Bedlington U.D.C. in Northumberland, a coal-mining area in the past, chose “De profundis” (From the depths), while Oadby D.C. in Leicestershire adopted for no clear reason “I pede fausto” (Go with propitious step), lifted from one of Horace’s *Epistolæ*.

Even establishments supplying things as mundane as clean water went classical. “Nil sine aqua” (Nothing without water) was the constant reminder of the South Staffordshire Waterworks Company, while “E rupe erumpet aqua” (Water shall gush forth from the rock) was the promised undertaking of the Grimsby, Cleethorpes and District Water Board.

The Royal Flying Corps and after it the Royal Air Force adopted the well-known “Per Ardua ad Astra”, perhaps from an early Latin tag “Ad Astra per Aspera” but it turns out that most R.A.F. squadrons also adopted Latin mottoes as they were formed. The No. 1 Elementary Flying School, engaged in *ab initio* flying training, not surprisingly has “Ab initio” as its motto; others have “Quam celerrime ad astra” (As quickly as possible to the stars - 27 [Bomber] Squadron, perhaps scorning the difficulties alluded to in the parent body’s motto), “In medias res” (Into the thick of things - 258 Squadron), “In nobis vinculum” (We form a chain - No. 84 Group Communication Squadron). Some choices seem quite arbitrary “In loco parentis” (200 Squadron), “Silenter in medias res” (177 Squadron), “Carpe diem” (576 Squadron), “Cave canem” (49 Squadron), while other mottoes are invested with a significance reflecting the duties of their bearers: “Videnda” (Things to be seen - R.A.F. Joint School of Photographic Interpretation), “Hic et Ubique” (201 Reconnaissance Squadron), “Praemunitus praemonitus” (Forewarned is forearmed - R.A.F. Intelligence School), and “Ars est celare artem” (Art lies in concealing art - perhaps with reference to encoding by the R.A.F. Central Signals Establishment). And not to be upstaged, the

Central Band of the R.A.F. went into Latin also with “Aere Invicti” - “invincible with the brass.”

Back in the civilian world, some choices of motto are slightly puzzling. It is clear why Birkbeck College with its large number of evening students should choose “In nocte consilium” (Counsel by night), but why did the Gas Council choose “In libertate consilium” (Counsel in liberty)? Any ideas?

Then again “Esse quam videri” (To be rather than to seem to be) which seems to fit the aims of the British Standards Institute, *per contra* seems to negate the function of the General Dental Council whose members constantly seek to make false dentures look like real. And what has “Rerum cognoscere causas” (To know the causes of things) to do with the Institute of Brewing, or “Via media exempli gratia” (A middle way for the sake of example) with the Building Surveyors Institute?

Other organisations have chosen mottoes with care and with an eye to what might be appropriate. “E duobus unum” (Two from one) faithfully represents the formation of the Corinthian Casuals Football Club in 1939 by the amalgamation of the separate Corinthians and Casuals Clubs, and the same motto is clearly most appropriate for the aims of the Welding Institute. But what about “Pro bono omnium” (For the good of all), the choice of Guinness Mahon Holdings, Ltd.? Is there an echo here of the slogan “My goodness, my Guinness”?

The Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors has “Est modus in rebus” (There is measure in all things); the Institute of Printing, Ltd. has “Imprimatur; while the Wimbledon and Putney Common Conservators in 1945 extended Martial’s “Rus in Urbe” to “Custodes ruris in urbe” (Guardians of the countryside in the town), and the County Borough of Solihull in 1948 reversed Martial to claim to be “Urbs in Rure”. Livy suggested that there is always something new coming out of Africa - “Ex Africa semper aliquid novi”, but no longer just out of Africa. “Semper Aliquid Novi” is the motto of the Commission for the New Towns.

Moorfields Eye Hospital has “Fiat lux” (Let there be light). The London Hospital, as does any other, throws open its doors to all who come. Terence’s “Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto” (I am a man: I count nothing human to be beyond my concern) expresses the catholicity of their intake.

The Trades Guilds boast ancient mottoes. “Ecce agnus Dei, qui tollit peccata mundi” (Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world) was chosen by the Tallow Chandlers Company in 1461. Could it be that the coming of the Lamb might be made easier to spot by the light of one of their candles? But what about “Decus et tutamen in armis” for the Feltnakers Company in 1604. Virgil’s “decus et tutamen” was a leather corslet. Were the feltnakers engaged in the armoury trade? A soft lining for a breast-plate?

Occasionally certain slight incongruities strike one as one reads through the motto dictionary. The Coldstream Guards surely have a right to claim to be “Nulli secundus”, but is there a hint of mockery in the choice of the same motto by the Lombard Banking Company? Or are the bankers serious? There is no copyright yet on mottoes.

Individuals or families are the major owners of mottoes, each choosing its motto with care. Some mottoes almost choose themselves. What else could the Beech family choose but “Sub tegmine fagi” (beneath the shelter of Virgil’s spreading beech)? The La Fontaine family just had to have “Fons et origo” while “Memento mei”

(Remember me) more or less imposed itself on the L'Estrange family. "Nemo me impune lacessit" (None shall muck me about without paying for it) is the threat both of the Order of the Thistle and of the Nettles family.

As for Clement Attlee who as Labour leader won a landslide victory in the 1945 General Election, what motto was available to the new Earl Attlee other than "Labor Omnia Vincit" - "Labour conquers all"?

Finally, and with apologies to the families concerned, a certain quiet enjoyment is to be had by contemplating the names of some of the bearers of the mottoes. Ancient and noble families they must be, but many of the names are unfamiliar to me, a commoner, and some are hard to credit. But there they are: Firth of the Flush (Semper fidelis), MacGillycuddy (Sursum corda), Campbell of Bleaton Hallett (In hoc signo vinces), Jackson of Putney Hill (Dum spiro spero), Chubb of Stonehenge (Saxis condite), and Mackenzie of Glen Muick (Sic itur ad astra). Who could fail to achieve the stars with *cognomina* like these?

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