

## ICON OF THE MONTH

In visual terms, an icon, like a word, is a unit of sense: the eye takes it in at a glance and the brain swallows it whole. You do not need to deconstruct or digest it to absorb its meaning.

The Union Jack (as it is wrongly known – a jack is a smallish flag flown by ships) is one such. It is geometrically complicated – not even the Ministry of Defence, it seems, is sure which way up it goes – and yet it must be one of the most unmistakable flags in the world.

Compared with the tricolours and plain crosses that the rest of Europe goes under, it is, if not sophisticated exactly, certainly *interesting*. So like the British.

But what does the icon mean? It no longer makes an overt political or cultural statement, like the Stars and Stripes or the Irish or French tricolours. The fact that it is so much less visible in our towns and cities than its equivalents on the Continent is due perhaps to its identification with an empire of which the British are now taught to be a little ashamed.

The Union Jack is not an object of veneration, as some flags are. We're not sure how we would react if someone set fire to it. After all, we see it more often degraded on cheap underwear or tacky plastic souvenirs than billowing vigorously in the wind.

The empire now is all but gone, and Britain itself, as a political and cultural entity, is coming apart. What the Union Jack now conveys is a mix of emotions and associations, semi-detached from

any reality. The love one feels for a small, sometimes small-minded island home in a grown-up, cosmopolitan world. The slightly uneasy pride in the fact that that island once dominated the globe. A degree of embarrassment, maybe, at the pomp and pretension that old ascendancy still encourages.

Perhaps that ambivalence explains why supporters of England's sports teams have lately preferred the cross of



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### No 7: The Union Jack

St George, whose Crusader boldness is uncomplicated by thoughts of Britain's decline or references to England's insubordinate neighbours. (Of course, it's easier, too, to paint on your face.)

It is not only the English who are deserting the British flag. For many Scots, Welsh and Irish it symbolises less a union than a yoke. The impression of simplicity, solidity and even necessity

it projects is something of an illusion.

In fact, as soon as you begin to deconstruct the flag, you discover that its content is more complex and more contentious than you might suppose. What it expresses is not the values of a modern nation-state so much as the *realpolitik* of a less fastidious past.

Wales, being a medieval conquest of the English crown, is not represented at all, whereas St Andrew's saltire dominates the flag disproportionately. The anomalies will be very apparent if the five million people of Scotland secede from the United Kingdom. The red, white and blue will then be reduced to the red and white, and the absence of a dragon will be all the more conspicuous. (So, too, would be the fact that the flag is made up entirely of Christian symbols.)

Or would we retain it unaltered – reluctant to tamper with a 'tradition' which earlier generations so cheerfully invented and reinvented to order?

Worse still, would some trendy consultancy be asked to design a new flag that fairly represented the nations of our state and the things we believe in? But if we started again from scratch, what symbols could we agree on, to express what common values? Indeed, who do we understand 'ourselves' to be?

For the moment, for most of us, the Union Jack – as stirring and as bogus, as rhetorical and as tough as the Brigade of Guards on parade – seems, at least, reassuringly safe. **Huw Spanner**