



CRESCENT MOONS AND AUSSIE WOAD

HUMANITY WRAP

By Roger Beaumont

A visitor who hails from Norfolk (a county so flat you could fax it), and has been out of work for a long spell with a "socially sustained" back injury, spoke for some time about being in Bangkok for the 21st time. He'd stopped-over in Dubai. "A place where shopping malls go on holiday," he noted. Was he glad to be back? "I'm delighted to be anywhere," he said, "Except Pakistan and the past." His view of the current government? "I am opposed to everything going on in Thailand at the moment except its Thainess. I mean it's so Thai, all you can do is smile. On other days, I see it differently." How differently? "The majority of the ruling elite are so corrupt, they should be gassed like badgers." He then asked: "How can this be a free country, if it can't be criticised by its own citizens? Dissension, once a virtue, has become a liability. Facts are twisted to suit the fiction. The prime minister has changed and perfected the political game. My own opinion is that the PM is better at describing his conclusions than he is at reaching them. Transparency? Ha, that's a soap for window cleaners."

So, Iraq has a new flag. A pale blue slice of moon set on a white background. Think doves, peace, before it's too late. Flags were originally markers, "colours" to rally troops lost in the confusion of the battlefield, and later used to designate the lands and cities over which a king's writ held sway. For centuries they were iconic symbols, emblematic of patron saints, mercantile interests or national history. England chose St George, a saint rescued from right-wing extremism by football, his banner now greased on a thousand supporters' faces. Colours matter too. And blue is the universal favourite. Communists had a passion for red, Muslims prefer any

combination of the sacred colours red, green, black and white, and the old maxim that blue and green should never be seen largely holds true. Politics is never far away.

The Greeks were furious at Macedonia's claim to the many-pointed star. The best retort was that of Gromyko to the Turks' objection that Soviet Armenia's flag pictured Mount Ararat, in Turkey: "So what? Your flag has a crescent. Do you claim the moon?"

Let us hope that no one else now lays claim to the Euphrates. But then, what does Iraq's new flag have on it? A crescent moon.

Andrew Martin, a specialist author on Scots film accents, said that Mel Gibson as William Wallace "sounded like a Melbourne traffic warden, chewing on a mouthful of woad".

Andrew Motion, the UK poet laureate, is apparently having problems finding a suitable rhyme for Camilla as he prepares some stanzas to mark the possible announcement of the marriage of Mrs Parker Bowles to the Prince of Wales. Perhaps he could use the following:
The wedding of Charles and Camilla
Took place off the coast of Manila
The ushers were gay
The Queen stayed away
And the best man was a horse named
Godzilla

The goodwill of Thai taxi drivers has been featured in the letters page recently. And for good reason. Years ago in Morocco, I hired a taxi to drive me as far south as I could travel, to a village 190 miles south of Tan-Tan. After some hours driving, the owner of the cab got out and handed me the keys, saying he would go no further. I asked how to get to the village. He pointed down a dusty track into the distance. "Take this

road," he said. "And on Tuesday turn left." Months later I finally reached Nigeria. On leaving Port Harcourt, after a few miles the taxi driver crossed the central reservation on to the other carriageway, driving into the oncoming traffic. When I started screaming, he said: "Calm down silly Brit. The road surface is much better on this side mon."

June in Oxford means the splash and thunk of university students celebrating the end of exams by jumping from bridges into the River Cherwell, baring their buttocks or pelting each other with eggs. However, due to complaints by the local police the university has now finalised a code of conduct. They must not "throw or spray any foods or fluids, eg champagne, flour, shaving foam, silly string and, especially, pigs blood or dead fish". What miserable killjoys.

The students at my red brick university were intermittently rebellious, staging a sit-in in the dean's office and various other embarrassing stunts. These included a performance entitled "Violence in Society" in which an artist shot a live budgerigar with an air pistol; having then been assaulted by an angry audience member, the artist discharged the rest of his ammunition into the crowd, which smashed the doors down in its haste to get out.

Again the police arrived, prompting the students to declare the event "a total success". Ah, such sweet mayhem memories.

Olympics: Last week a handful of Albanian labourers eating sandwiches in the shade of a tree were philosophical about the Herculean task they face. "It will be finished . . . by 2006," said one, while another was more philosophical: "It will be ready, but it will not be complete." Maybe a shot of Aristotle is timely: "If things do not turn out as we wish, we should wish for them as they turn out."