

The International Commission for Orders of Chivalry (I.C.O.C.)

by
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Reference has already been made in another paper published on Caltrap's Corner to the International Commission for Orders of Chivalry and the author's role in it. As this private, non-official body had, at least at the outset, some credibility, it is fitting to look at it more closely.

The Commission, as its "Register of Orders of Chivalry" states, was established at the Fifth International Congress of Genealogy and Heraldry held in Stockholm in 1960. Its membership was made up of prestigious and knowledgeable individuals and it was chaired by the internationally-known heraldist and pundit on Scottish and European nobiliary law, Lt. Col. Robert Gayre of Gayre and Nigg. The idea for the establishment of the Commission was Gayre's and he had the support of the late Baron Alessandro Monti della Corte, a member of the Collegio Araldico of Rome, Vice President of the Heraldic Council of the Corpo della Nobiltà Italiana and Chancellor of the Order of Sts. Maurice and St. Lazarus.(1)

It was at about this time that Gayre was appointed Commissioner-General of the English Tongue of the Order of St. Lazarus which was at the time the object of the hostile attention of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta and those close to it. Many viewed Gayre's creation of the Commission as a ploy to justify the existence of the Order of St. Lazarus, a view borne out by the appearance of that order in the Commission's Register as a "semi-independent" one along with such bodies as the Spanish military orders, the Teutonic, the various Johanniters and the British Order of St. John. It is not clear how Gayre managed to convince his distinguished colleagues to back him initially, especially as the Third International Congress of Genealogy and Heraldry in Madrid in 1955 had condemned the Order of St. Lazarus of which Gayre was a high official and assiduous promoter. Inclusion of St. Lazarus in the Register resulted in a number of members quitting the Commission. Their places were taken by individuals who were members of the Order of St. Lazarus and loyal to Gayre.

The effect of the resignations from the Commission was negligible as the Register was published with a list of its original members, including the departed illustrious names, and with St. Lazarus among the approved orders. The implication the unsuspecting reader was likely to draw was that all the original members agreed that the Order of St. Lazarus was no different than any of the other semi-independent orders listed. Since there was a long period of time before a new edition of the Register in which the prestigious names did not appear, the Commission enjoyed a certain authority for a number of years.

Gayre, now supported by a loyal following on the Commission, set criteria for the acceptance of orders that were arbitrary and ignored the different historical development of honors systems in different countries. For instance, he had the Commission endorse the proposition that, *"Every independent State has the right to create its own orders or decorations of merit and lay down, at will, their particular rules. But it must be made clear that only the higher degrees of these modern state orders can be deemed of knightly rank, (author's Italics) provided they are conferred by the Crown or by some pro tempore ruler of some traditional State."*

Gayre gave no reason for imposing this criterion which was in effect an attempt to impose the structure of the Order of the British Empire on those of the rest of the world. (2) By so doing, he reversed a very different but perfectly logical position he had taken in his "The Heraldry of the Knights of St. John" in which he had attacked the British system stating, in effect when referring to the Venerable Order of St. John, that the British Order had unfortunately broken away from the international character which had always been that of the Order till 1871. "This

is reflected also in many other aspects of its organisation which are of British rather than ancient international usage. For instance, (by its Royal Charter of 1926) it has arranged its ranks in the same way as the Royal Victorian Order and the Order of the British Empire, by the quite illogical system which makes a commander's rank lower than a knight's, instead of by the ancient usage (still general in continental orders of knighthood) of making the commander's the higher rank as it most certainly ought to be." (3) Gayre also had the Commission unnecessarily take a stand on a long-standing controversy between rival factions among French royalists. The French royal orders of the Holy Spirit, Saint Michael and Saint Louis were properly listed under the House of France but the head of this house was given as H.R.H Prince Henri, Count of Paris, the heir to Louis Philippe, the last reigning French king. Henri, however, is from the cadet Orleans branch of the House of France. The senior line of the Bourbon family became extinct in France with the death of the Count of Chambord in 1883. Seniority in the family passed to the Spanish Bourbons with the senior agnatic representative of the House of Bourbon currently a Spanish prince, Luis, son of the deceased Duke of Cádiz and, for his French followers, Duke of Anjou. His position as French pretender is disputed on political and historical grounds.

The Commission also committed itself to one side in a similar controversy over who heads the House of Bourbon-Two Sicilies and therefore the chivalric orders conferred by the former ruling dynasty in southern Italy. In both cases there was no need for the Commission to commit itself when it could have simply stated that controversies existed between cousins over who was the legitimate pretender.

Following the publication of the Register, the Commission was deluged by requests for recognition by various "chivalric" bodies, each more apocryphal than the next. The Commission conscientiously examined and turned down all of these petitioners. It was as if Gayre were saying, "Now that we're on board pull up the ladder". This would soon change. One of the orders which claimed to be descended from the former Russian Grand Priory of the Order of Malta and which had seceded from the group with headquarters in Shickshinny PA, had its European Grand Priory on the Island of Malta. It tried, for many years, to obtain recognition from the Commission as a bonafide Order of St. John. Its Grand Prior, a professor of French at the University of Malta, became friendly with Gayre, who was then living in the tiny Mediterranean country. For years the Professor tried to convince Gayre that his order should be included in the Register along with the other would-be orders of St. John. Gayre who was well-informed about the frequent fragmentation among the neo-Russian orders was at first adamant but eventually weakened. He told his Maltese friend that his order would win recognition as an authentic order by the Commission if it could find a reigning or former reigning monarch who agreed to become its fons honorum.

It did not take the professor long to find such a person. He was King Peter II of Yugoslavia who agreed to grant the Order his protection. Unfortunately, such protection was not enough to satisfy the Commission, especially as the historical "Russian connection" claimed by the Order was highly controversial and not established. Gayre recounted in *The Knightly Twilight* how on a visit to New York he met King Peter's legal adviser and pressed the latter to have the King proclaim the Order a Royal Yugoslav one which Peter did on 11 September 1970. This, as I have pointed out in another paper, outraged the Russian emigrés who were running the order. While they who had brought Peter into it to give a touch of royal glamor to a questionable operation, they wished to retain its Russian character and their day to day control over it.(4)

By this time the Commission bore little semblance to the original body. It was now made up entirely of members of the Order of St. Lazarus who were loyal to the Chairman and for the sake of convenience it met once every two years at the same time as the Grand Magistral

meeting of that Order for the purpose of turning down the applications for recognition received from various outlandish organizations.

In 1983, while a member of the Commission, I was asked by Gayre, who was Chairman, to become its Secretary General. Though pleased to be considered for the appointment, I had no illusions about the task. If the body was to regain credibility a thorough housecleaning would be necessary. I said I would accept only if I were given carte blanche and allowed to make the changes I considered to be essential. Gayre agreed and I was elected unanimously by the members present at a meeting held in Washington, D.C. in July 1984.

The first item on the agenda was the consideration of a number of applications for recognition which were, as usual, turned down. Next, Major Patrick O'Kelly de Conejera, a member of the Commission who was very close to the Chairman, presented a paper urging recognition of a body called the Niadh Nask, headed by an Irish gentleman, the McCarthy Mor who had put forward a claim to the headship of the Irish House of Munster which had reigned many centuries ago.

The body was described as "an order of Gaelic nobility" and "a dynastic and military order of non-chivalric knighthood". The presentation failed to impress me, mainly because I found the notion of a "Gaelic nobility" as it was presented to be historically unconvincing. The Niadh Nask did not fall within the usual categories of chivalric orders nor meet the Commission's criteria for noble corporations.

Still, I did not want to get off to a bad start with the Chairman and I therefore suggested that a new category be established for "nobiliary associations" with criteria less stringent than those defined for "noble corporations" (5) and that the Niadh Nask be put into the new category. I now regret having made such a proposal which rather than assisting in clarifying matters of nobiliary authenticity resulted in muddying the waters. The McCarthy Mor, of course, would have other feelings. He became Vice-President of the Commission, which had been reactivated largely due to his endeavors, following the death of Gayre in February 1996.

In 1984, the Commission accepted my suggestion and the Niadh Nask became the first, and to my knowledge, the only body to be placed into the new class. Later the name was to be changed to "Other Nobiliary Bodies" and such entities as "The Standing Council of Irish Chiefs and Chieftains" (revived in 1991), "The Standing Council of Scottish Chiefs", and the "Royal Company of Archers" were to be added to it. The Niadh Nask has now spread to the United States and is recruiting eligible individuals willing to pay \$850.00 for admission and is planning some Irish cultural activities. About a third of the membership is drawn from members of the Order of St Lazarus.

As to restoring credibility to the Commission, my first move was to send a detailed project outlining the changes I was proposing to each member of the Commission with a YES or NO for them to check after each item. The most important proposed change was to withdraw the Commission's recognition of the Malta-based Yugoslav Order of St. John until such time as there was only one such body claiming to Yugoslav royal high protection(6) instead of the several which continued to claim that privilege. This proposal, along with the several other measures, was overwhelmingly approved by ten out twelve members of the Commission including Gayre. There could have been no clearer mandate and I was delighted to see that I had such wide support. Shortly thereafter, I wrote a letter to the Chancellor of the Yugoslav Order informing him as diplomatically as possible of the Commission's decision. He did not receive the news well and forthwith protested to the Chairman, who then wrote me to say that I had gone too far. Personally very fond of the Chairman, I had by then acquired considerable knowledge of Gayre and his ways, his reaction came as no surprise and I resigned as secretary general.

Gayre subsequently picked a successor but the latter, as a result of financial "setbacks," disappeared from the scene as indeed did the Commission which entered a state of suspended

animation. Gayre remained President until his death in February 1996. In the previous month the Commission, now heavily Irish in composition, was reanimated and issued a new edition of its Register Now under the Vice-Presidency of the McCarthy Mor, Head of the Niadh Nask, it has Major Patrick O'Kelly de Conejera as Secretary General.

The membership of the revived Commission and the kind of bodies which it has recognized indicate that while it has taken on renewed life, it has become no more credible as an arbiter of chivalric and nobiliary authenticity than the body with which I was briefly associated. On the other hand I must concede that it has made an attempt to treat the question of disputed headships of certain orders of chivalry more equitably than heretofore but I cannot understand why it persists in endorsing a notably contentious order of St. John for entirely specious reasons.

It is to be regretted that there is no reputable international body of experts in history, nobiliary law, and orders of chivalry, albeit without official status, and without vested interests, willing to set out criteria for the recognition of orders as reputable. The absence of such a body amidst a multitude of bogus chivalric and nobiliary outfits is evidence of the abandonment of respect for historical elements previously held to convey significant moral and social values. A sign of the times!

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NOTES

- (1) Not to be confused with the Military and Hospitaller Order of St. Lazarus of Jerusalem.
- (2) The lowest grade in the Order of the British Empire is that of Member, followed by Officer, Commander, Knight and Knight Grand Cross. European orders of merit patterned after the Legion of Honor are structured differently. They start with the lowest rank of Knight, followed by Officer, Commander, Grand Officer and Knight Grand Cross. Gayre appeared to be attempting to impose the OBE's system on all the others, which caused resentment among holders in the grade of Knight of continental orders.
- (3) The Heraldry of the Knights of St. John, R. Gayre of Gayre and Nigg, Allahabad, India, 1956. See page 40.
- (4) We have in our possession a copy of the decree signed by King Peter bestowing the title "Royal Yugoslavian Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem, Knights Hospitaller".
- (5) The Commission's criterion for qualification as a "nobiliary corporation" is a charter or some form of statute from the Sovereign at some time in the past; their insignia should be officially recognized in some form or other and/or be permitted to be worn on uniform, and that strict nobiliary proof of degree of nobility be required of postulants. Basis for qualification as "nobiliary association" is virtually the same as for the "nobiliary corporation" except that official government recognition is not required and nobiliary requirements are more flexible.
- (6) It was shortly after these events occurred that Crown Prince Alexander decided to withdraw the Yugoslav Crown's protection granted by his father King Peter II and declare the SMOM and those affiliated with it to be the only Orders of St. John recognized by the Crown.