

WHAT EXACTLY IS A KNIGHT?

What exactly is a knight? Throughout European civilisation, knights have had the same essence: a warrior characterised by his virtuous disposition. We see this from the legendary Achaeans of *The Iliad* to present day orders of chivalry like the Order of Bath. Though some knights have been stand alone heroes, many often grouped together to form bands and orders. To mind may come the Knights Templar, Teutonic Knights and the Order of St. Thomas of Canterbury. And yet, in earlier days still — such as classical Athens, Republic Rome or Kautilya's India — knighthood went one step further: forming the virtuously praiseworthy social class (such at the *equites* or *kshatriyas*) duly expected to undertake those martial duties of state during those unfriendly times. Indeed, as late as the eighteenth century in France, knighthood played a crucial part in the feudal hierarchy of the early modern European experience. In more recent times, knighthood has shifted from its militant warrior character to one of general national praise; very much akin to the adult version of a gold star sticker. We see this with the Legion d'Honneur, Order of the British Empire and the Order of St. Andrew the Apostle First Called across the spectrum of old Christendom. But is this all that is left to knighthood: legally and ethically? I submit otherwise. By taking our time to look at the facts as they currently stand, we shall come to see that knighthood is not some trivial accolade to add to one's wall but remains to be at least a profession or better yet an enduring and effective social class which, whilst still, in short are leaders of war, realise that whilst the nature of warfare has shifted from sabres to silver tongues so too must the fighters and protectors in these ever shifting wars adapt their weapons to suit their times. For where there is war, there will be a knight. By applying the natural, cannon and common laws to the three modern distinctions of knighthood — state, religious and in common — we shall come to learn that knighthood remains to be a warrior, or band of warriors, characterised by virtuous disposition fighting the evil of its day. Let us begin with the state.

It is a great pity that many mistakenly believe state knighthoods are the only form of knighthood remaining. By state knighthood we mean a knighthood awarded by the state, typically its sovereign, to a person of some distinction within a particular field of national life. In England, for instance, most are grouped into orders — such as that of the Garter, of Bath and of St. Michael and St. George — though it is not uncommon for sole bachelor knights to come about at times as well. Until recently, as before, many of these knighthoods came about through martial endeavour (with most general and admirals having this accolade beside their rank). In recent times, though, we have seen a shift from the military to any form of public achievement: from the cinema dames to the sports field knights. Naturally, the aim here it so distinguish certain subjects. But is knighthood the appropriate forum? Traditionally, and as will be borne out later on, knighthood, like the courage behind it, was not imposed, like fear, from external factors but a choice. A voluntary, hard thought, hard tried for vocation which, of course, had many rights like socage from tenants but had several duties like 30 days knight service per year. Indeed, many of these sporting, cinematic and artistic achievements are highly worthy of praise. But changing a name to fit an idea is far from an effective solution. It would be like advertising a kitchen knife as a tactical bayonet. Though it has the capacity, it is far from its purpose. After all, in times of conflict — by hand or by mouth — who would you prefer at your side or as your champion: a trained fighter of a walking trophy? That is not to say that many of those within such orders fail to meet the true nature of knighthood. Many are splendid advocates for common causes and highly deserve such prise and the vocation of

knighthood. Though turning to our collected histories, this is exactly what knighthood is: a vocation. Therefore, these state knighthoods ought to reform themselves on this line — or at least have the sovereign appoint those more fitting to be warriors — to such orders or bachelor states. By so doing, knighthood will keep its authentic dignity as the service that it truly is and help shift that to serving the wider needs of society over timid accolades to flaunt one's vanity. For such prizes, we require an alternative accolade, but not knighthood.

Turning from state knighthoods to religious ones, this is a growing and developing area of public life which merits our attentions. By religious orders we speak of bands of knights who serve the faith through an order. In the Roman Catholic Church, many such orders still exist and have done since the eleventh century: such as the Order of the Holy Sepulchre and the Knights Hospitaller. Though, in more recent times, we have seen the refoundation of several praiseworthy orders such as the Knights Templar, Knights of St. Lazarus and the Knights of St. Thomas of Canterbury. Secular prejudice has found it convenient merely to name these as charities, voluntary associations or clubs. And yet, by looking into the essence of these orders, they more accurately fulfil the criteria of knighthood than any state order has done at this present time. These orders are voluntary to join; at least loosely follow the Augustinian Rule of a Rule of monastic life in their operations; spend much of their time fighting the false ideologies of our times as well as acts of corporal mercy such as donations to those in material need. This more accurately fulfils what knighthood is; aligning more to the Mediaeval — and indeed Greco-Roman tradition — of knighthood than state orders could dream of. Some naturally use monastic titles such as *Brother* or *Sister*, and rightly so for monastic inspired orders. Others have opted for the conventional *Dame* and, for some queer reason the French *Chevalier* for men. Why ever so? *Sir* is no title of honour. It is a professional descriptor: much like *Doctor* or *Professor* or *Commodore*. Indeed, the common law agrees as such: with no court of honour case against it hitherto, and where the law is silent men must assume they are free and encouraged to do as they please. In this case, if convention over monasticism is to be followed, or interchanged, I submit and I urge such knights to avoid fear of false judgement and fearlessly use the title *Sir* before their names if they truly believe in their vocation — just as we call a priest *Father* — and to use it to better themselves and their societies around them through the equestrian orders to which they belong. After all, fear is the death of tradition. And the death of tradition marks the end of civilisation.

From state and religious orders, we now turn to knights in common. What exactly is a knight in common? In short, any knight can make a knight. A knight needs not the permission of his king or parliament nor that of the Church or its orders to invest him. This remains the common law to this day. In this way, this is further proof that knighthood is a vocation rather than an ornament. For a knight to make a knight, it would be right and healthy to assume a degree of technical competence must be taught to the training esquire under his wing. To learn the art of war in its many guises: from riding to swordplay to verbal jousting to etiquette and courtly manners. Very much akin to an apprentice like those of the Skinners or Goldsmiths livery companies in the City, knighthood, being the technical vocation that it is, requires a time of apprenticeship; a esquire to learn his trade before becoming a master, or knight, of his craft. Of course, in our modern world, applying this model to full time practice is a hard task. But like going to Mass, frequent and little doses in the art of war are as useful to any society in its self expression and preservation as every other trade in practice. Knighthood is simply the professional mechanism Europe has developed for this as the bar is for those training to be barristers. Therefore, keeping in mind the enduring vitality of this institution, I firmly encourage all those interested in the art of war to revive this noble tradition, tailor it to modern ears and safeguard this vital and honourable tradition of European civilisation.

Knighthood is a vocation not an accolade. In recent decades, the essence of knighthood has been mutilated in a panicked hope to keep this old institution alive by modern means. And yet, as with all ages, the happiness of society depends on the strength and virtue of its warriors. Of course, professional civilian armies will always have a role to play in defending the realm. But when it comes to the material and moral struggles at home and overseas, upright warriors leading by hand and by tongue are the only means to guarantee the safety of our traditions and our civilisation. This is why I urge all with faithful hearts in these desolate times to join an order, found an order or uphold the traditions of knighthood in common to ensure the corrupt evils of our times may be tamed and tethered from causing further harm: to man, to family, to country.