

# A Tangled Web:

## Ideas, Images, Symbols

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# The Rechabite Emblem, Rituals and Ceremonies

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## The Rechabite Emblem, Rituals and Ceremonies

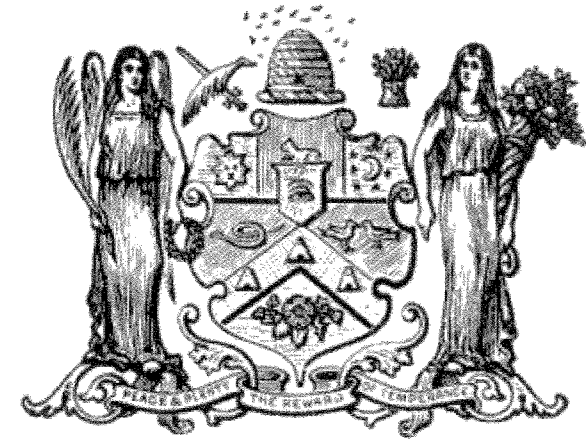


Fig. 1 The Rechabite Emblem

And I set before the sons of the house of the Rechabites pots full of wine, and cups, and I said unto them, Drink ye wine. But they said, We will drink no wine: for Jonadab the son of Rechab our father commanded us saying. Ye shall drink no wine, neither ye, nor your sons for ever.

Jeremiah 35:5-6

Ideas, images and symbols intertwine in any society we care to examine. Nowadays, they have free passage on the world's cultural and commercial highways. Globalization has ensured that certain symbols and imagery in the late twentieth century are recognised worldwide. Whoever is unable to associate a brand name and slogan with the symbol shown below, for example, does not share the contemporary Western culture.



The Nike "swoosh"

The campaign advertisements of companies like Nike are able to reach a global market, thus enabling people of vastly different local cultures to simultaneously feel part of Western culture. The masterful simplicity of a quasi-universally recognisable symbol for correctness and positiveness was surely a stroke of marketing genius on Carolyn Davidson's part. The slogan "Just Do It" commands us, simply, to act, (using the right Nike product for the job, of course).<sup>1</sup> The Nike swoosh is illustrative of a certain kind of symbol, the kind that, after profound implantation in a culture, is subliminally, and cynically used for commercial profit.

However, symbols do not have to be so simplistic in order to be effective – in order for the intended ideas to be successfully associated with them. The Founding Fathers of America put their heads together in 1776 and, after trial and error, in 1782 decided on the unique combination of symbols and mottoes for both sides of the Great Seal which conveyed their vision of America.

The ideas the creators wanted to convey about their new nation included a preference for peace (the American bald eagle, the noblest of birds, which rises above everything, looks to the left, to the olive branch and not to the right, the thirteen arrows symbolising warfare). The majestic

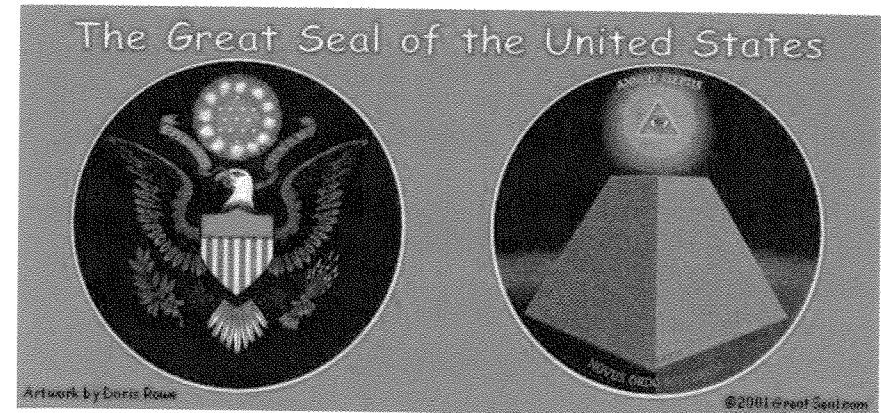


Fig. 2 The Great Seal of the United States of America

eagle and the stars and stripes have come to represent America today, and are universally recognised. In the eighteenth century, the complex symbolism incorporated in the Great Seal portrayed ideas which would have been easily recognisable to a contemporary populace. However, I doubt whether many of today's citizens of Uncle Sam, (another powerful symbol in itself), could so readily decipher the ideas underpinning the different symbols. Symbolism is culture- and time-bound.

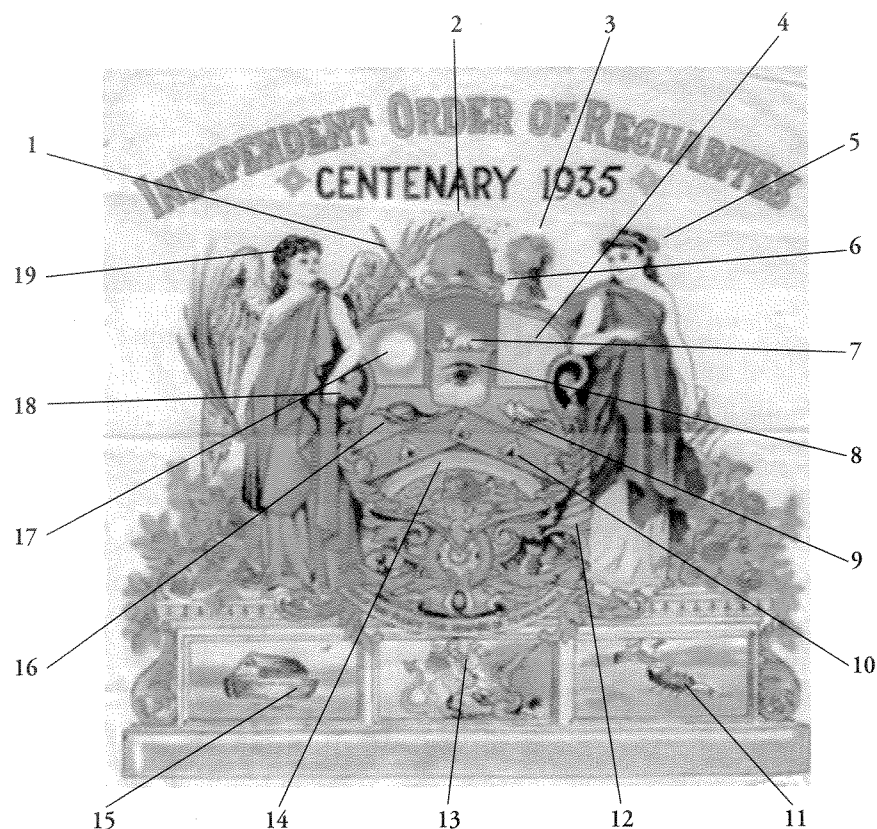
Gusfield notes that: "It is in symbols, rituals and ceremonies that societies reflexively perceive themselves" (Gusfield 39). I would add: societies *or sections of them*. For example, the extremist ideas of a particular teetotal friendly society called the Independent Order of Rechabites (IOR) are reinforced by the society's symbolic emblem, rituals and ceremonies. The members of this total abstinence society were united by well-defined concepts and ideas which were easily identifiable in the emblem of the Order,<sup>2</sup> created in 1835, the elements of which will be briefly described.

<sup>1</sup> Graphic art student Ms Davidson introduced the 'swoosh' to Nike's founders in 1971, 17 years before the slogan 'Just Do It' was adopted. The Nike brand name is derived from the name of the Greek god of victory.

<sup>2</sup> At the Second Movable Conference, Liverpool, 1837, the Committee's Report stated "That lectures on the various symbols in the arms and upon the object of Rechabitism be delivered in our Tents" (Campbell 69).

## The Emblem

### PEACE AND PLENTY THE REWARDS OF TEMPERANCE



1 sword & olive branch	8 eye	14 rainbow
2 bee hive	9 doves	15 Ark of the Covenant
3 wheat sheaf	10 tents	16 serpent
4 moon & 7 stars	11 life boat	17 sun
5 Angel of Plenty	12 cornucopia / horn of plenty	18 rose, thistle, shamrock & leek
6 twisted cord	13 St. George & the dragon	19 Angel of Peace
7 lamb		

Fig. 3 The Rechabite Emblem<sup>3</sup>

1. Bee hive: bees represent hard work. In heraldry, bees usually appear in groups and symbolise a sense of order as well as diligence.
2. Wheat sheaf: the wheat sheaf represents goodness and plenty, the reward of honest work. It is the basic food stuff which cannot be anything but the gift of the gods.
3. Moon & 7 stars: they indicate that we must be the reflectors of the light of temperance truth. The seven stars remind us of the seven churches mentioned in the book of Revelation and may signify that Rechabiteism is for all churches and is not confined to a particular section of religious people. Seven is the perfect number and suggests that we must aim at perfection even though we may not attain it.
4. Angel of Plenty: she is next to a horn of plenty, full of fruits and flowers, signifying that Temperance will bring good things.
5. Twisted cord: this represents strength and unity. We must be united if we are to defeat this great enemy strong drink.
6. Lamb: the lamb represents sacrifice, in particular, *self-sacrifice*. To get the most out of life we must be willing to both deny ourselves and to do good to others.
7. (All-seeing) eye: we must be watchful and sober. God is watching.
8. Doves: they have symbolised gentleness, peace and love since ancient times.
9. Tents: Rechabite branches are called tents. The Biblical passage from Jeremiah 35: 5-6, quoted at the beginning of this paper, suggested the name 'Rechabite' for the teetotal society, and as the Sons of Rechab dwelt in tents, the choice of the 'tent' as the basic unit of each society was an obvious one.
10. Life boat: this connotes rescue – the Rechabites will rescue drinkers from their peril.
11. Cornucopia/horn of plenty: this is the reward of temperance.
12. St George & the dragon: the patron saint of England represents the fight against evil.
13. Rainbow: the symbol of the covenant. God made a covenant with the ancient Rechabites. The covenant is the promise given by one person to one or more people, i.e. the promise not to drink alcohol.
14. Ark of the Covenant: this represents security.
15. Serpent: the serpent reminds us of the biblical words of Solomon concerning wine. It "bites like a serpent and stings like an adder." The serpent is also a symbol of wisdom – it would be wise to avoid strong drink.
16. Sun: this represents God. The light and heat, of which the sun is the source, symbolises Truth and Love. For the Rechabites, the truth about strong drink

<sup>3</sup> I wish to thank William Turnbull of the Rechabite Society (now Healthy Investment), and Rex Madin PHCR, for their help with the interpretation of the symbols of the Rechabite emblem.

must be made known.

17. Rose, thistle, shamrock & leek: these are the four floral emblems representing the countries of the United Kingdom.
18. Angel of Peace: she holds an olive branch, the universal symbol of peace.
19. Sword & olive branch: the olive branch is the emblem of peace, while the sword stands for justice. For the Rechabites, their cause is a just one. They are not going to put the sword down until they have driven the robber strong drink from the land.

The main idea behind the Rechabite emblem is reflected in the motto: "Peace and Plenty the Rewards of Temperance." The idea that spiritual and material gain is a natural product of temperance underpins the whole Rechabite ethos. The individual symbols, juxtaposed on a heraldic shield, transmit a positive message of success through individual effort, supported by God. There are Christian references (the eye and Ark of the Covenant), and also patriotic national symbols (St George, the rose, thistle, shamrock and leek). The former is not surprising, for the creator of both the emblem and the ritual, Rev. Joseph Thompson, was a church minister, albeit of a relatively obscure sect called the Cowherdites.<sup>4</sup> There are some similarities with Masonic symbols (especially the all-seeing eye, which appears in a triangle in many lodges, over the Master's chair). Some members would undoubtedly have been members of both societies. Indeed, the symbolic eye was present in ALL friendly society logos. This demonstrates the tangled web of ideas, symbols and imagery that intertwined, and intertwines, in different organisations of a voluntary self help or philanthropic nature.

Through identification with the symbolic emblem of their organisation, Rechabites received support and encouragement. However, they stressed a negative image of drink itself. In this respect they were no different from the other thousands of teetotallers active in the nineteenth century. The effect of an exaggerated emphasis on the dangers of taking "the first sip," for example, and the demonization of strong drink in any form or taken for any reason whatsoever, were powerful reinforcers, ensuring a certain code of

<sup>4</sup> They abstained from all animal flesh and all intoxicating drinks.

conduct among members of the society. (It is not clear how successful this ploy was in actually converting people to teetotalism). The picture below, taken from a nineteenth-century temperance journal, is illustrative of this point. The title is self-explanatory. "Death Unmasked" shows a bottle of liquor in its "true" colours – death. On revelation the imbibers are shocked, but will they heed the message?

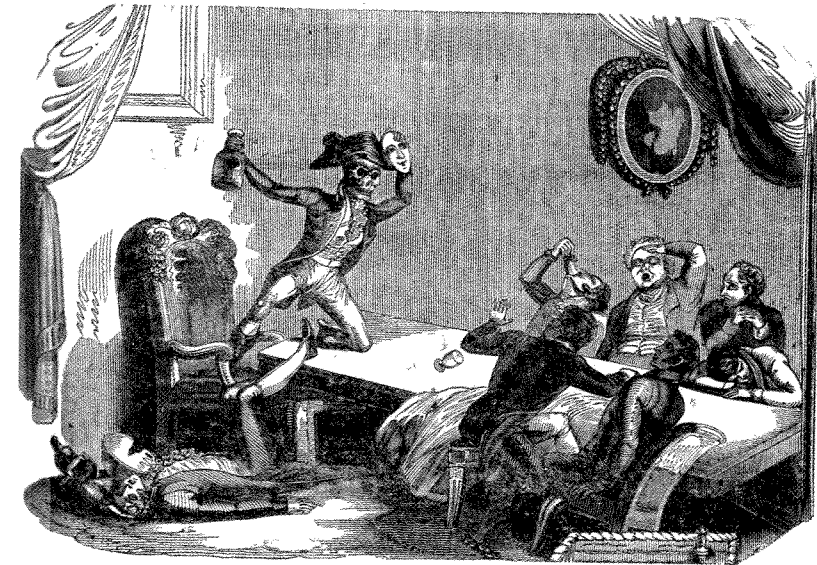


Fig. 4 "Death Unmasked"

Supplement to *The Preston Temperance Advocate*, July 1836, front page.

### Ritual and Ceremonies

Rituals and ceremonies were an important part of the Rechabite experience, although they were certainly not unique to this friendly society. Initiation was particularly important, and every new member had to participate. It had two aims; to bond the newcomer to his tent through a shared experience, and to reinforce the serious intention behind the society – mutual benefit. There are strong parallels with freemasonry, and indeed the Rechabite ceremonies may have arisen by imitation, when freemason members brought their practices with them into friendly societies.

An extract from the First Rechabite "Making" Book is shown below.

MAKING PART FOR THE C.R. [Chief Ruler]

(...) (The C.R. taking a Brother by the hand, shall say):

This union of our hands is a type of that union of the heart which ought to subsist between us and every brother belonging to this honourable Order, for, when mankind are only externally united together, we often find that "trifles light as air" frequently separate man from man and cause them to become the direct enemies of each other; but when mankind are united in heart and in life, nothing on earth can separate them – nothing but death; nay, not even that can dissolve the friendship that is cemented between them. (...)

I shall now acquaint you with a few signs and tokens peculiar to our Order. We have some others which will be made known to you after you have been initiated the proper time.

PASSWORD,

ENTER, SIGN, – RAPS AT THE DOOR.

SIGNIFICATION.

PASSWORD, COUNTERSIGN,

SIGNIFICATION

(Worthy Levite, introduce our Brother to our most worthy Past Chief Ruler)  
(Campbell 15)

Rituals and ceremonies also had a public face. The procession (see fig. 5 below) served to both reinforce the fraternal, common bonds of members and also to show the community their pride and strength. Before feasts, meetings, funerals and more joyful celebrations, members of a tent would march through the streets. As well as regalia, a giant marching banner was a common feature. To celebrate Queen Victoria's accession to the throne, Rechabites marched in Castletown, Isle of Man:

At 11 o'clock, the members of the Independent Order of Rechabites (who celebrated their anniversary on this occasion), with the children of the various Sunday-schools of the town and neighbourhood to the number of about 1,000, assembled at the green, and walked in procession, accompanied by the Rechabite Band, to St. Mary's Church. The Rechabites, two and two, with their band of music, and two splendid banners: one bearing a representation

of the prophet Jeremiah and the sons of Rechab, reverse, the Arms of the Order, supported by Peace and Plenty. The other bore the Temperance Arms; reverse, John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness, supported by Temperance and Justice. The flags were painted by Messrs Smith, of Castletown, and by our own countryman Mr C. Hudson, of this town [Douglas]. They were very much admired, and reflected credit upon the artists.

The Rechabites retired to the Tent, at the Schoolhouse [probably the Primitive Methodist], where a plentiful supply of tea, buns, and beef, was provided; after partaking of it, the band and a few of the members again walked through some of the streets. A public temperance meeting was held in the market-place, where great attention was given to the addresses delivered.

"Mona's Herald," 1838 <[www.isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook/history/socs/rech\\_his.htm](http://www.isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook/history/socs/rech_his.htm)>).

Not everyone thought public processions a good idea, however. The following Isle of Man newspaper extract of 1837, although sympathetic to the Rechabite cause, is particularly critical of the "revolting spectacle" of parading women.

"All the world's a stage.  
And all the men and women merely players."

The truth of the above lines of our immortal Bard, are every day more and more confirmed, for scarcely has one silly pageant passed from our view, but another, if possible still sillier, is ready to supply its place, and the rival candidates for absurd distinction, jostle each other on the stage for precedence. We were led into this train of thinking by the motley exhibition of Tuesday last. With the nature of *tee-totalism* no one can find fault, we feel favourably disposed towards it, from the great and obvious benefit it has conferred on society, being mainly instrumental in removing from it many vile and revolting scenes of self-debasement and self-sacrifice; – good indeed must be that institution or society, let it be Rechabite Tee-total, Temperance, or what it may, which has the power to arrest the steps of man on the downward path to perdition, and that too at a time when all other stay has lost its power and efficacy.

This could all be accomplished, and men, however vile; could return to that line of duty they had so recklessly left, without all this parade of flags, stars,



gilt sparrows, inverted wine glasses, scarfs, medals, rosettes and such masonic or *odd fellow-looking* trumpery, without having recourse to

“The thundering drum,  
Or the vile squeaking of the wry-neck’d fife,”

and filling our peaceable old town with all the tumult and noise of a general election; but even admitting the utility of the procession, as regards the males, we know not a more ridiculous, nay, revolting spectacle than that of the rosy checked daughters of our Isle — against whom it would be foul and wrong even to breathe a suspicion injurious to their virtues — to see them parading our streets and forming a conspicuous part in the procession, and courting observation, — the retiring from which is women’s greatest charm, and allowing the world to judge that their practices must have been the most abandoned, to justify each a humiliation, in which

“They roughen to the sense,  
And all the winning softness of the sex is lost.”

(*Manx Liberal*, 29 July 1837)



Fig. 5 A Friendly Society Procession

An important part of ritual and ceremony was the Rechabite regalia.

Richardson Campbell wrote of the Rechabite sash:

White is an emblem of purity for the Rechabites. The white sash, therefore, is to teach you that your life must be pure and free from immoral blemishes, and I trust that while you wear the robe of purity you will keep yourself unspotted from the world. (Campbell 15).

Regalia served to distinguish members from one another, each official had his/her own distinctive marker, and also to show a common bond. It was a source of pride for members.

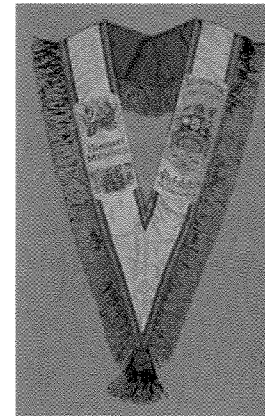


Fig. 6 Rechabite Sash



Rechabite Sash – Honorary Member

Each official of the Rechabites had a ritualistic and a practical function. Some of the evocative names for officials of the IOR, with modern equivalents, are shown below. Their functions are self-evident.

HCR High Chief Ruler (President)	HDR High Deputy Ruler (Vice President)
CR Chief Ruler (Branch Chairman)	PCR Past Chief Ruler (Past Branch Chairman)
DCR Deputy Chief Ruler (Branch Vice Chairman)	CS Corresponding Secretary (Clerk)
SS Sick Steward (Sick Visitor)	TS Tent Steward (Assistant at Meetings)
IG Inside Guardian (Inside Doorkeeper)	OG Outside Guardian (Outside Doorkeeper)

Rechabite nomenclature and rituals, as seen in the use of official titles, passwords, and initiation ceremonies, were important because they provided the membership of each Tent with a distinctive means of identity that differentiated them both from other friendly/teetotal society members and from ordinary citizens; by holding to the teetotal pledge, keeping to the ceremonies, and with the mutual support of the other members, they strove to improve their life and that of others.



We are surrounded by a tangled web of ideas, images and symbols. The Independent Order of Rechabites is just one example of how individuals, through combination, can use these elements to their own and to society's advantage.

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