
This splendid new book on the Royal Mint is both a landmark in the history of our subject and a substantial contribution to the economic and administrative history of mediaeval England and modern Britain. Christopher Challis has acted as its general editor, as well as writing the parts of the book that deal with the period 1464–1699 and with the Mint’s most recent history, and he must be allotted a large share of the credit for the completed volume; but he would himself be the first to acknowledge that he has been only one of a team of scholars, and it is as the collective achievement of Challis, Ian Stewart (now Lord Stewartby), Nicholas Mayhew, Graham Dyer and Peter Gaspar that it should take an honoured place on its readers’ bookshelves.

The terrain that such a volume should cover is necessarily vast, for it is over two millennia since coinage was first used and struck in Britain, and from the second quarter of the seventh century AD coin production and coin use have continued more or less without interruption. Since c. 760 the official nature of circulating coin has been marked by the fact that every coin has carried the name of a king, queen or other issuing authority; since c. 973 all coins of the same denomination struck contemporaneously have been of the same type, except where special circumstances have been involved; since 1279 coinage production has been carried out in centralised minting facilities under the supervision of crown-appointed Masters of the Mint; and since 1554 coinage production has in normal times been concentrated on a single site, until 1812 in the historic minting area within the walls of the Tower of London first occupied for this purpose in the thirteenth century, from 1812 to 1953 in a new purpose-built minting establishment on Tower Hill, and in recent years at Llantrisant, Lord Callaghan’s chosen site in the South Wales countryside north-west of Cardiff.

The authors have thus had to do justice not merely to a continuous history of coin production on the Tower, Tower Hill and Llantrisant sites since the thirteenth century, but also to a very extensive prehistory and to the history of parallel coinage operations on other sites up to 1554 (and occasionally thereafter). In discharging this task they have followed in the footsteps of the late Sir John Craig, whose book of 1953 on the same theme can now safely be jettisoned, and they have done so with a blend of scholarship and acumen that reveals how far numismatic history and its practitioners have advanced over the last forty years.

Each of the main sections of the book has required separate attributes from its author or authors, and here the selection of authors for periods seems to have worked especially well. To the history of the coinage from the earliest times to 1158, which in other hands might have remained as confused and amorphous as the raw material on which the historical narrative must be based, Lord Stewartby has brought an almost magical clarity and his remarkable gift for summarising the complexities of scholarly argument without either talking down to the reader or misrepresenting any essential point. Nicholas Mayhew has undertaken what is perhaps the most difficult part of the volume, that covering the period from the introduction of Henry II’s Cross and Crosslets type to the recoinage undertaken by Edward IV in 1464–5, where the narrative must proceed seamlessly from a date where evidence is fragmentary and individuals are simply names to a date where evidence is extensive and individuals real, grappling on the way with such complex matters as the relation between the mint and the exchange, the role of coinage in international trade, and a shifting and often very cosmopolitan Mint personnel; and he has managed this really very satisfactorily, steering the reader through or round various complexities of mediaeval administration and finance, and never claiming a greater finality for his conclusions than the evidence itself justifies.

In 1464 Christopher Challis takes over and his account of the coinage struck between then and 1699 comes with all the authority of a professional historian, backed up by his own long-standing familiarity with the documentary sources for the coinage of Tudor England, and by a fascination with the craft techniques of minting and assaying that admirably qualifies him to discuss the technical innovations of the period. He gives way in 1700 to the authorial partnership of Graham Dyer and Peter Gaspar, who have a similar interest in technical innovation, and whose measured treatment of Mint history over the last three centuries greatly benefits from the empathy which Dyer feels for the achievements of Mint employees of the past, and which enables him to present an altogether fairer picture of the operations of the eighteenth-century Mint than that offered by Craig. Challis returns for the last part of the book, dealing with the transference of coin production from Tower Hill to Llantrisant, and here he provides an extraordinarily dextrous finale as revelatory of his professional skills as anything that has gone before it.

This is not all that needs to be said, for any major historical work is necessarily a triumph of art over matter, and the reader must be assured of the soundness of the authors’ underlying judgments as well as of their powers of exposition and analysis. It is never easy to stand back sufficiently from the smooth flow of an author’s narrative to reach a verdict on the intrinsic merits of the argument he may be presenting, and quite impossible to do so in relation to the present book as a
whole, but the present reviewer is fortunate enough to know something both about the prehistory of the Mint and about its history between 1660 and 1812, and in these areas can test the relevant parts of the present book against his own opinions.

As to the prehistory, Lord Stewartby’s eighty-two pages on the period from c.600 to 1158 offer the first respectable modern summary of the history of coinage in Britain over the period as a whole (that by Grierson and Blackburn in Medieval European Coinage, vol.1 (1986), takes the reader only as far as the early tenth century). It has been embarrassing for the status of our subject that there should have been no recent generally acceptable narrative survey of this kind, and in this light Stewartby’s is a notable achievement. Some of its distinguishing features have been foreshadowed in its author’s own earlier writings, but it is nonetheless pleasing to be able to appreciate in the context of the present volume the real utility of the system of consecutive numbering for coin types between c. 973 and 1100 set out by him in our Journal as long ago as 1976 but not since generally adopted. Stewartby also executes a well-judged withdrawal from the absolute certainties about the dating of coin types over the same timespan so deeply felt and so obstinately insisted on by the late Michael Dolley, and the whole of his remarks about the workings of the renovatio system after 973 seem wisely phrased. On most other points of difficulty or current controversy his judgment is similarly sound, although he makes one rather surprising suggestion that Burgred of Mercia might have had moneymen at Rochester; the suggestion is surprising because although there is certainly an arguable case that Burgred’s predecessor Berhtwulf had moneymen there, Stewartby himself accepts that Berhtwulf’s moneymen Tatel operated at London, and the evidence of the Dorking hoard seems decisive that up to the early 860s Burgred’s coinage was solely a London-produced one by this moneymen Tatel and a colleague Dudecill, ruling out any Berhtwulf/Burgred continuity at Rochester. Stewartby’s thesis, which is, in any case, hardly supported by any homogeneity of style between Burgred’s coins and West Saxon ones, thus involves the acquisition by Burgred of coining rights outside his own kingdom in the 860s which he had not possessed in the 850s. Stewartby concludes his section of the book with general remarks on moneymen and on the technology of minting. Here the remarks on the status of moneymen place before a British readership a body of interesting evidence previously marshalled in full only in the Revue Numismatique, and although the present reviewer is still doubtful about the detailed fabric of Stewartby’s argument (the need to compress his evidence within reasonable bounds has unwittingly produced a rather W.J. Andrew-ish sentence about moneymen of Offa towards the foot of p. 71), Stewartby’s discussion is on any view of value in drawing our attention to previously unnoticed potential evidence for moneymen’s careers.

The other part of the volume on which this reviewer feels qualified to comment comprises contributions of approximately equal length by Challis on the coinage of 1660–1699 and by Dyer and Gaspar on the coinage of 1700–1812. This area of Mint history is not an easy one to treat, for the past historiography of the subject has concentrated on a number of high spots such as the introduction of Charles II’s milled coinage, the ‘Great Recoinage’ of 1696–8, and Sir Isaac Newton’s tenure of office at the Mint. The authors have thus had the task of looking afresh at these well-known themes while simultaneously endeavouring to deal more satisfactorily than Craig with the period as a whole. Their handling of the surviving documentary evidence is not quite uniform — Challis relying on a broader spread of sources than Dyer and Gaspar, Dyer and Gaspar making more thorough use than Challis of the Mint’s own surviving records — but they have produced between them a much more truthful picture of the Mint in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries than we have ever previously possessed. Beyond that, there are particular points in their narratives where what they have to say represents a substantial advance on anything previously available. Challis’s ten masterful pages on the mechanism of the mint under Charles II and his excellent review of the halfpenny and farthing coinages struck between 1672 and 1725 are especially commendable, as are the pages in which Dyer and Gaspar deal accurately and dispassionately with the thirty years of Mint history between the commissioning of an independent report on it from the Birmingham businessman Samuel Garbett and the completion of the move to the new Tower Hill site. Here and there there are weaker passages (Challis’s treatment of the ‘Great Recoinage’ is somewhat brief and bloodless, while Dyer and Gaspar’s commendable wish to downplay the importance of Newton’s personal contribution as Master of the Mint leads them not merely to downplay but almost to write out of Mint history his three probably perfectly competent successors), and there are a few minor points of detail that need attention, but none of this should detract from what is an almost wholly satisfactory achievement.

One final point that needs to be made concerns the Royal Mint’s own attitude to its history. Although the Mint authorities have at most times recognised the cachet which the Mint’s title and long history brings to its manufacturing operations and products, their attitude to the history of coinage in Britain in general and to the actual history of their own department in particular has scarcely been consistent, veering from total unconcern to what must regretfully be characterised as absurd triumphalism, as evidenced in their decision to hold 1100th anniversary celebrations (of what?) in 1986, and in their quaint decision in 1982 to adopt a coat-of-arms which a wiser previous management had evidently had cold feet about as far back as the 1560s. We may reasonably assume that the publication of the present volume will put the Mint’s own knowledge of its history on a sounder footing, but it is important that the Mint management should recognise that scholarship has a continuing part to play in elucidating the Mint’s history and achievements, and should give consistent future encouragement to such studies.

H.E. PAGAN
Coins and Medals of the English Civil War, By EDWARD BESLY. B.A. Seaby in association with the National Museum of Wales, 1990 121pp., 147 figs., 4 maps, 11 colour plates.

‘TUESDAY 3 of January, there came into Oxford and to the court, diverse cartes, to the number of 12 or more, loaded with prince Rupert's gooddes, and with the mint from Shrewsbury, and with some good store of silver ore to be melted into silver and coyned into money: one Mr Bushell beings the cheife dealer therein: the mint was set up in New Iyne...’ So recorded Anthony Wood in his diary in 1643. This must be one of only a very few contemporary notices of the civil war mints to escape mention in this admirable book. It is packed with detail, and is extremely attractively presented with a host of well chosen illustrations, not merely of the coins produced at this time, but also with much supporting material about mint personnel, the collection of bullion, and the course of the war.

The English coinage, normally so dependably regular, became unusually complex and varied during the reign of Charles I. For the civil war divided the country and its coinage, which was then struck at a series of provincial royalist mints in addition to the Tower mint in Parliamentary hands. But it is the royalist mints which dominate this book, attention being concentrated on mint history, rather than on numismatic detail. Nevertheless, a full range of mints, denominations and types is illustrated, and there is informed discussion of those issues still of uncertain attribution. However, Besly is the first to point out that the royalist mints which figure so largely in this book, and have consistently captured the attention and imagination of numismatists, actually only account for a tiny proportion of the currency of the time. Turning to the same author's English Civil War Coin Hoards, we can see at a glance that it was the dull old Tower mint which dominated the coinage of Charles I.

This is often a problem for numismatists. The most interesting issues in terms of numismatic detail are seldom the really important ones historically. The rarity which so excites us is often a guarantee of economic insignificance. The siege-pieces of the civil war may provide an interesting footnote, or an antiquarian illustration, but it was the millions of pounds of silver mined in Spanish-America and minted at the Tower which made up the sinews of war. And of course this was also a problem for Charles I. Although he also used Tower coinage, as well as the issues of his own royalist mints, it was shortage of money which got Charles into the war, and which played a large part in his defeat. That being so, it never fails to surprise me that Charles I did not turn to debasement to extricate himself from financial difficulties. Yet Charles was never a pragmatist, and the coinage was part of the crown's sacred trust. Perhaps it was the same idealism which kept sterling fine which also took Charles to the block.

N.J. MAYHEW


HAVING read George Boon's interesting review of the first two volumes of this work in BNJ, volume 58 and, then attempting to look at volume three from a reviewer's point of view, I came to the conclusion that perhaps the greatest achievements of the whole project must be the fact that by the time this extensive work is finished collectors and dealers alike will be able to study this impressive reference collection of seventeenth-century tokens (which unfortunately at the same time will be broken up) in reference form. What makes this all the more impressive is that by buying from the major collections of their time the Norwebs managed to put together a collection of tokens, which, due to the extreme rarity of so many, and the vast wealth of the collectors themselves, would be almost impossible to recreate now.

The benefit to the student today is obvious. In the past century some comprehensive work has been carried out by the likes of Boyne and Williamson and more recently Dickinson, as well as many others. However, it is only with these volumes, by photographing each token, that the public at large has been able to get a clear picture of the whole series. Before this, with a few county exceptions (and Wales) the seventeenth-century token series had largely been groups of listings with a few photographs of the most photogenic and unusual types.

Boon is full of praise for the quality of the photography in volume II. For my part I must record my disappointment with much of the photography in volume III. I was recently checking the Kent section for a rare die variety only to find that when I put a magnifying glass on the plate the whole image seemed to disappear in a mass of dots. For a subject like this clear photographs are in many ways the most vital ingredient. That said, as a dealer in this field, I have generally found quality and scarcity rarely go hand in hand.

From a personal point of view I was very pleased to see such a wonderful group for Hertfordshire. The exceptional nature of this group, combined with their impressive provenance leading from Sir John Evans to Longman to Nott and then finally to the Norwebs, seems to have been confirmed by the number of this group which was taken by the British Museum when the group was split up. Moreover, as my wife comes from the Isle of Wight I have always kept a close eye out for the two tokens for Niton. Following Michael Dickinson's notes in his book, and the absence of either type in Norweb, it seems I must now conclude that they do not, in fact, exist. I had also hoped that the collection may include an example of the token for Thomas Mayle of Brading. Sadly this was not to be. The last example Baldwin's bought about 1940 cost 10 shillings.
Overall the work so far appears to me to place the seventeenth-century token field in a very good light, giving attention to a series which has so often been regarded as the poor relation of numismatics. With all this attention perhaps the collectors will follow.

TIMOTHY MILLETT


This is close to the ideal catalogue. Not only does it contain the information needed to enhance appreciation, on several levels, of the British Museum exhibition it accompanies, but it will remain an indispensable addition to the literature on British medals. At the same time the follies of so many exhibition catalogues published today are avoided. It is not a coffee table book disguised as a catalogue. Yet the modest format should gull no one into overlooking Philip Attwood’s nice fusion of scholarship and aesthetic perception.

The period covered begins in the 1880s when Alphonse Legros, who was primarily an artist, revivified the art of the medal in Great Britain by bringing to it the sensibilities that had come to a head in the École de Paris. At that moment it could not have been suspected what would occur less than forty years later. However in 1918, in contrast with Legros’ small editions, over one million examples of the splendid plaque by Edward Carter Preston, issued along with the award medals of those killed in the Great War, were presented to their next of kin. That is the token of what happened in the intervening years.

A comparison between Carter Preston’s plaque and the dreary, usually small, commemorative medals still being issued in vast numbers in 1881, when Legros turned to medal making, suggests a fact that is only now again coming to be recognised. In Britain the years 1880–1918, covered by this catalogue, were a high spot for the art of the medal. If the Great War memorial plaque owes much to the traditions of the classical and the neo-classical, it must be remembered that in 1918 that was by no means the only trend. The year previously Sydney Carlile, a medallist today almost completely forgotten, produced his ‘Battle of Jutland’ medal: it and other pieces by him point to the abstract and near abstract medals which are a feature of the second half of the twentieth century.

Today the cast medal is, as Attwood points out and seems to strive for, a token of what happened in the intervening years. The ‘reverse of a medal, were all things they appreciated. Today such qualities are alarmingly often forgotten. Attwood in his choice of medals and in the way he has written about them achieves two ends. He clarifies understanding of an under appreciated period in the history of the medal, and helps to define what constitutes a good medal. In the last decade of the twentieth century we may smile at the symbolism employed by George Frampton in his medal commemorating the return of the City of London Volunteers from the Boer War. However we should note that even in a crowded design the medallist is aware of both the potential and the limitations of his art. Nearly a century later medalists, and those who influence them, need to remember the importance of these things. Attwood will encourage them to do so.

TERENCE MULLALY


In the Round: Contemporary Art Medals of the World is the catalogue of an exhibition held at the British Museum in autumn 1992 to coincide with the 23rd congress of FIDEM (Fédération Internationale de la Médaille). The publication is especially welcome since the exhibition ran for less than two months, but like all good exhibition catalogues, the book stands as an important work in its own right, documenting the current activity in an art form dating back to the sixteenth century, yet speaking now with a clear voice on contemporary issues. It is also astonishingly good value, providing almost three hundred pages of text and illustrations for less than £10.

Thirty-three countries from four continents are represented. Entries for each country except two (Chile and Korea) begin with a short introduction outlining the present state of their medallic art. This is followed by catalogue entries and illustrations of the medals. As the exhibition contained over 1100 items it would have been impossible to illustrate everything, but a generous selection does reflect the challenging variety of images and ideas. Written by national representatives, the
introductions are disarminglhy honest. Some, like those for Britain and Germany, are able to give positive statements of growth and development; many others report lack of activity, the depressing effects of economic recession, and the stagnation required by medalists working with limited hopes of reward or recognition. Thus the small number of medals submitted by Denmark is bluntly explained by the decline in public interest. Fortunately, such an inexorably bleak view is rare: a more common complaint is the continuing struggle by medalists to defy the constraints of imposed categorization. In his introduction to the French medals, Claude Arthur Bertrand writes with admirable tolerance of those who still worry about medals that might really be sculptures in thin disguise, while Dora de Pedery-Hunt articulates clearly the dilemma in Canada (and elsewhere) of authorities who cannot decide if medals belong with crafts or fine arts, and so leave them nowhere. As she rightly says, this simply should not be an issue. The need to define, label, and delimn is of course a persistent human desire, and can have its uses, but applied to art it says a great deal about an individual viewer’s need for control, and very little about the artist’s purpose. What matters here is power of expression and design, and those with open minds will find much of that quality in In the Round.

The medals are of course the stars of this production and their range is remarkable, from a tender classical portrait of the artist’s wife (Italy, no. 20), to the geometric precision of five pivotal aluminum bars, offered as a prize medal by the Dutch Society of Clinical Neurology (Netherlands, no. 46). There is much beauty, affection, and humour: anyone susceptible to collecting should pay attention to ‘Medal Lover’ (Great Britain, no. 4) and the desperate possessiveness with which the collector clings to the desired object! It is also a pleasure to discover scattered, recurring images; for example, the expressiveness of hands, rather than faces, for portraiture, or the elemental symbolism of water. But there is also pain, sharply felt in medals crying out for the sorrows of the world. The mixed blessings of political change are exposed in medals like ‘Deutschland 89/90’ in which prison bars on one side become the hopeful symbol of the opened Brandenburg Gate on the other (Germany, no. 55); and the contemptuous ‘Happiness from the West’, in which the beneficent West is chocking Eastern Europe with a glut of bananas (Germany, no. 73). The human price for such political and economic bargaining is shown in a Spanish medal of a Slav refugee, slumped with exhaustion on a bench at Ellis Island (Spain, no. 33). As might be expected, protection of the environment is another popular and topical concern. Many artists offer beautiful images of animals and plants, allowing the natural world to speak for itself: for instance, a marvellous spiky porcupine (Poland, no. 56), or a lone heron on the St Lawrence River, creating a sense of space and sky far transcending the literal scale of the medal (Canada, no. 27). Other medals comment explicitly on man’s role in preserving or destroying his world. In a medal aptly called ‘The choice is ours’, Ron Dutton uses horizontal division to contrast the abundance of life on land and sea, with the decay generated by man’s debris (Great Britain, no. 12). Raising the odds yet further, Nicola Moss offers a graphic picture of capitalist greed gorging on native peoples and their land in America (Great Britain, no. 46).

For both political and environmental causes, medals focus on extremes of liberation and condemnation, beauty and desecration, or if you like, heaven and hell. This last, fundamental, dichotomy was indeed a specific theme for which artists were invited to submit material. Their responses reveal another contrast between heaven and hell as external worlds or inner experience. Examples of the former depict geographical places inhabited by the blessed or damned, often with traditional attributes of souring light and space in heaven, and ugly overcrowding in hell. Others see heaven and hell as opposing states of individual reality, an introspective view touchingly expressed by Mireille Lefrançois’ enigmatic human face which may be seen as serene or suffering, according to the viewer’s mood (France, no. 32). This contrast between external and internal worlds is in fact a thread running throughout the book, for pieces commemorating world events and famous lives sit beside deeply personal medals of beloved friends, dreams and memories. Sometimes, however, the political and the personal coincide: an Israeli medal in memory of the concentration camps of World War II carries the images of six children – representing the six million people who died – designed by a man who was in Auschwitz as a child (Israel, no. 9). The cruel electrified wire stretching to infinity on the other side of the medal will be unpleasantly recognisable to anyone who has visited Auschwitz; what these images mean for anyone who has survived captivity in the camps is beyond imagination for the rest of us.

Medallists contributing to the exhibition were given the opportunity to write short descriptions of their work and the particular pieces submitted. Where such information was provided, it has been published. Given that not every medal could be illustrated, there are inevitably frustrations: obscure images with ambiguous titles, and even more tantalising, appealing descriptions of medals not pictured. Still, such information as there is provides insight into the meaning of symbolic pieces, and welcome identification of representational designs of places or people which may not be well-known outside their own countries. And perhaps it is no bad thing that not every medal is explained; many address profound issues and are clearly meant to provoke a response; if we are forced to think about what these medals mean it is surely no more than they deserve.

At the very least, In the Round is a major survey of contemporary medall art throughout the world. But it is much more than that. Full of public dramas and private lives, it is an eclectic, dynamic chronicle of the human condition in the late twentieth century. This is therefore not just a specialist catalogue for medal collectors and art historians, but a book for anyone with visual imagination, and curiosity about the world in which they live.

VIRGINIA H. HEWITT