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nation or future eating*

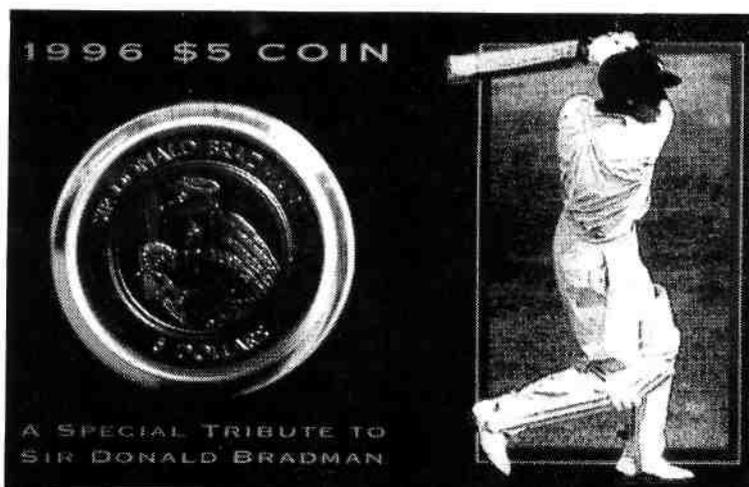
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# NUMISMATIC ICONOGRAPHY: CREATING A NATION OR FUTURE EATING?

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Did you know that there is an Australian one dollar coin containing one ounce of 0.999 fine silver? It features a Kookaburra seated on an old wooden fence which fades off into the distance. It has a privy mark of the Vienna Cathedral of St. Stephen - an Austrian (not Australian) landmark opened in 1147 AD and recently extended and restored. It can be yours for only \$65 - limit of 5000.

The very existence of such an item has sparked my interest in the behaviour of both producers and collectors, particularly in the last quarter of this century in Australia, and what and why we, as collecting institutions, might be doing about it.

In part too, I have been motivated to write this short paper by the management of a colleague's museum where it was recently decided that a greater effort must be made to collect twentieth-century numismatics. My colleague and I agreed, off the top of our heads, that this seemed a poor allocation of re-sources.

The strange thing is that we would both agree equally off the top of our heads that in both monetary and coinage terms, the twentieth century has been fabulous. I have therefore been forced to ask myself why we would question his management's directive. As a corollary we might consider what

indeed we might collect with some hope of being useful to our museums' future audiences.

### **Australian Numismatic Background**

The Commonwealth of Australia came into existence with this century. We produced our first commemorative coin in 1927 to celebrate the opening of the national Parliament in Canberra; a second commemoration on the coinage occurred a mere eight years later to mark and help pay for the celebration of the Melbourne Centenary. After that we had a break until the fiftieth anniversary of the formation of the Commonwealth.

Three commemorative issues, one of which was non-circulating legal tender (meaning it cost more than its face value), in fifty years. This year, so far, I have had across my desk advertisements for some 41 new different non-circulating legal tender Australian coins (excluding the variations in packaging made available) and one new circulating commemorative through my pocket. 42 new 1998 coins before we even get to those regularly issued for circulation purposes.

This pattern, the first fifty years of the century being a continuation and gradual movement away from the nineteenth century coinage ideals, and the second half highlighted by a plethora of numismatic product, is not a uniquely Australian experience. It reflects the fact that this has been a century filled with change, particularly in public understanding and acceptance of the fundamental nature of money and the associated requirements of the symbols for money, but also in governmental attitude to the uses of its coinage.

The century opened with much of the world using gold and silver coins and most nations promising to pay for their paper money with gold. Unless something dramatic happens, it will close with money represented by the position of invisible switches in bank computers, copper, nickel and cheaper alloys for coins and paper and plastic notes promising to pay by changing the position of those bank computer switches.

In a century which has offered so many important numismatic events: after 2,500 years of having a role, we saw perhaps the last circulating gold coins; at much the same time, the debasement and eventual disappearance of silver coins; hyper-inflation, emergency issues, war issues; the advent of plastic credit cards; the formation and break up of nations and economic communities on a grand scale; and even the aforementioned mushrooming of special issues. One might imagine that museum numismatics should be in its element, collecting and illustrating these, some of the most significant historical and economic events of this twentieth century.

But some of us are not filled with the expected enthusiasm. I have already used a word which I feel lets numismatic curators down for the twentieth century: illustration. We might collect to record and illustrate but illustration does not represent the intellectual role of numismatics - and it is the intellectual experience that we as professionals get worked up about: Research, largely based on numismatic primary materials, leading to new knowledge.

Illustration has its function, and it can be very important, it is part of

the hook which we use in an exhibition to attract the attention of our audiences.

A school teacher might introduce an image of a coin featuring a portrait of Cleopatra part way through a course on Roman Egypt, perhaps after showing one of the old Cleopatra movies. It can inspire, it can begin the journey to recognition of the differing values of different source materials - movies verse primary sources. For us too, the role of illustration is usually to draw a person into deeper thought or understanding. This is a special concern today, when museums exist in a competitive environment; where visual illustration is increasingly provided to people with ease through new and often spectacular non-museum techniques which require no effort on the part of the viewer yet reward that viewer with a short term sense of satisfaction.

To return to the present, to twentieth century Australian numismatics, we might ask if there exists an untapped future numismatic research potential, or if numismatics can provide illustrations which will draw people into a deeper understanding of our era.

For the study of the twentieth century, I remain to be convinced that economics and monetary theory are where numismatic research will have its main impact. There are too many other good and readily applicable primary sources for historians to work with. Further, even if these do not survive, while the changes have been reflected in the coinages, there has been such a dramatic change in the role of coinage in the monetary economy of the nation, that today's coins offer only a tiny view of economic events.

Nor can I see collecting plastic cards as all that informative. I doubt that either economic or political historians will be interested in twentieth century numismatics as a serious research tool for a very long time.

Another group of historians however, may be helped by our collecting, those employing the coins as pictorial representations of official thinking. Here we return to my interest in government and collector behaviour, and my title.

There are a group of interrelated attitudes to coinage that may come to be of interest, they are the official attitudes to:

- national representation,
- national commemoration, and
- marketable design for the collecting public

They are both a visual and material cultural representation, dare I suggest, of the growth of economic rationalism. In addition they may have a traditional museum role for the future, as representation of otherwise poorly recorded events - the decision making processes which brought them into existence; poorly recorded because they were seen by the decision makers as short term and of only internal interest, indeed seen even as trade secrets.

But, here may lie some reason for collection of the plethora of current non-circulating legal tender issues. Not just the coins, of course, but also the related packaging and promotional materials.

An extraordinary thing about these 25 years of non-circulating coin issues is that they have evolved driven by marketing

forces. For a brief time the forces of collector demand led, but soon after those of marketing, promotion calling upon the history of collecting to generate made to order collectibles with historically valid characteristics to recommend their future potential, took the lead.

The entire thing began quite reasonably in Australia with decimal changeover in 1966. The immanent withdrawal of the old coins caused large numbers of people to take up collecting and led the minting authorities to produce special packages to mark the important event of the new decimal coins. There was a simple set of uncirculated working strikes of each denomination and a special polished field / matte relief or proof set in a plush case. The next year the mint went back to its real work and ignored the clamour of collectors for more. There had been sound reasons for special issues marking the first of a new issue of coins, but this was not at that time the work of a major mint.

Elsewhere in the Pacific, the nation of Tonga was taking full advantage of the collector market, starting with a special gold issue for Queen Salote in 1962 and soon branching out into other rare metal issues such as palladium (un-issued sets were even stamped to mark some new event the next year).

There is a recent natural history book called the "Future Eaters" by a curator from New South Wales, Tim Flannery. Derived from Jerrard Diamond, it postulates that the arrival of new people in an area, where they do not have an established niche and where the animals do not recognise them as predators, will lead to over exploitation of the new food

resources (eating of their future), human population explosion, collapse often to extinction of the food resource, and a collapse of the human population even to extinction.

This is effectively what happened to Tonga in collecting market terms. In the 1960s they discovered the hard currency available through selling to foreign collectors. In the mid 60s to the early 70s they exploited this market both with coins and stamps, the collectors lost interest and the market collapsed. Very few collect Tonga today, as a collecting area it is almost extinct.

Australia began to take the same path in the late 70s and early 80s. Australia Post had followed the rest of the philatelic world after 1950 into regular special issue production. Now the two mints and the Reserve Bank joined in; every niche was eventually tried as new young middle managers sought to achieve returns on the government investment in plant and machinery to match those of private industry. The change was brought about by numerous factors including the growth of economic rationalism, the boom of the 80s, incorrect estimates and investments in minting and printing plant, new managers hired to achieve satisfactory economic returns on government assets.

What did they try? Almost any topic that suggested a market: sport, historical figures and events; landmarks, floral emblems and endangered species; marketing devices that could be used to promote to collectors; off-metal strikes, piedfords, beautiful cases, different edges, different mint marks, privy marks; certificates of

authenticity, small mintage, purity of metal, guarantee of weight, guarantee of minimum drop in value-to face; art medals marketed through museum exhibition; sequential and matching serial numbers on notes; also special coloured inks, uncut blocks and uncut sheets. Anything and everything that had an established market record among collectors. And at first the new managers succeeded. After all they had a naive prey, a prey who did not at first recognise a new predator, late twentieth century marketeers camouflaged as early twentieth century conservative government monetary authorities.

The study of coins has its principle intellectual role when other primary sources are limited. It is too early to make sense of the series of events I have alluded to, but the coins,

medals, notes, advertisements as well as the product packaging do suggest economic "Future Eaters" at work. The products provide images drawn from a keen analysis of late twentieth century community wants. They are useful now and may prove more useful as time progresses. They may not offer insights through traditional numismatic research techniques, but they do provide information that may not survive anywhere else in the historical record about our strange era. They may even provide new insights - perhaps into the extinction after two thousand years of the *genus* "Coin Collector", wiped out by over exploitation and replacement of habitat by new exotic pastimes.