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Contents

Contents	i
President's Report	ii
Managing Editor's Letter	iii
Peter Lane South Australian WWI soldiers' 'forget-me-not' pennies	1
Talia Knowles Expansion, bribery and an unpublished tetradrachm of Alexander I	16
Max Everest-Phillips An Oz at Oxford: Australia rowing into World War II	25
Jean-Albert Chevillon and Pere Pau Ripollès The Greek Far West: an exceptional adaptation of a design from Asia Minor with bull and lion foreparts	41
Michael Hermes, Peter Lane, Nenad Lonic, Ian McIntosh The discovery of an eighteenth century Chinese cash coin on Elcho Island, Northern Territory	47
Matthew Ellams, Emily Morgan, Clare Rowan, Bradley Waters Experiencing the Republican Empire: a numismatic perspective	55
Barrie M Newman Allan J Olson Pty Ltd: medal and badge makers of Adelaide (1966 to present)	68
Kenneth Sheedy Sicilian accessions for ACANS: Akragas, Messana, Syracuse and Katane	80
Frank Robinson, Monica de Knecht Obituary: Leonard Terence Pepperell	90
Ray Jewell and Paul Simon Memorial Award Recipients	93

An Oz at Oxford: Australia rowing into World War II

Max Everest-Phillips

Abstract:

*This article describes an Art Deco medal presented on the French Riviera in 1938 for Oxbridge rowing, which was dominated at the time by the Australian coach Steve Fairbairn. The recipient was another Australian, Richard Hillary, who subsequently served in the RAF as a Spitfire pilot during the Battle of Britain. Suffering terrible burns from being shot down in 1940, Hillary wrote *The Last Enemy*, a classic account of the struggle against Nazi Germany. He returned to military service, but was killed in 1943, leaving this medal embodying the spirit of Australia's 'doomed youth' on the eve of World War II.*

Introduction

The Oxbridge rowing medal (Fig. 1) is an important item in the history of the sport. Presented for a race at the fashionable seaside resort of Cannes on the French Riviera, the plaque commemorates the first occasion that the boat clubs of Oxford and Cambridge Universities raced out at sea rather than on a river. It is also a memento of only the second time that the varsity crews had ever rowed abroad and, other than at the Boat Race itself, in the same event.

Furthermore the medal's Art Deco style evokes the inter-war era of rowing dominated by the Australian coach and author, Steve Fairbairn. Dating from the spring of 1938, the collector's piece was issued in the last full year of peace in Europe before the outbreak of World War II. Less than eighteen months later, its



Figure 1: The 1938 French 50 × 82mm enameled aluminium plaque awarded to each member of the Oxford and Cambridge University crews: © the Treves Collection, Sidmouth, Devon UK, with permission from the Curator.

Australian recipient Richard Hillary had enrolled in the RAF and served as a Spitfire pilot during the early months of the Battle of Britain. After suffering terrible burns when shot down in 1940, he wrote one of the classic accounts of the struggle against Nazi Germany. Returning to military service after pioneering skin graft treatment, he was killed in 1943. This medal therefore embodies the spirit of the nation's 'doomed youth' on the eve of war and, by its association with the author of *The Last Enemy*, is an important artefact in Australian history.

Oxford Rowing between the Wars

In the film *A Yank at Oxford* of 1938, an American student at the ancient university is heartedly disliked for his stereotypical brashness. However, he wins over his contemporaries when, after accidentally joining his college's rowing club, he ends up coxing the university boat crew to victory over Cambridge in the annual boat race. The film's popularity owed much to the topicality of the storyline. For, during more than a decade before the film's appearance, Oxford rowing had become the university's latest 'lost cause'. Only in 1937 had the Dark Blues finally managed to secure their first win since 1923 in the boat race. With a decisive victory by three lengths over the 4 mile 374 yard course, Oxford had at last put an end to the embarrassment of the longest period of continuous defeat in the history of the world's oldest and most famous rowing competition (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: London Transport poster of 1938.

During the previous thirteen years, students and alumni of the ancient university had become increasingly resigned to, or irritated by being asked by relatives, tourists and press reporters: "Why can't Oxford win the Boat Race?" Investigations revealed that conditions on the Isis for the sport had become increasingly inadequate. While the number of students there who had taken up rowing had actually increased, their sporting facilities had become seriously antiquated. The barges which still lined the river at Oxford did not supply the support which the modern boathouses at Cambridge provided. Furthermore the short stretch of usable river at Oxford was insufficient for the increasingly strenuous training needed to win the race. Apparently wallowing in a slew of aimless despondency, the Oxford University Boat Club (OUBC) had also to overcome another problem – the sport itself was undergoing radical transformation originating from the Antipodes via the River Cam.¹

1 On the development of the sport, see H. Cleaver. 1957. *A History of Rowing*. London.



Figure 3: 60mm silvered Pinches' Head of the River race medal commemorates the event's founder. Both the medal and the plaque of Fairbairn on the Milepost memorial along the Boat Race course on the Surrey bank of the Thames in London, are derived from the bust of Fairbairn by George Drinkwater.²

An Oz at Cambridge: Steve Fairbairn and the Rowing Revolution

After the Oxford win of 1937, at the 90th boat race the following year, Cambridge carried their boat out first from the boathouses on the Thames. This, according to the event's tradition, was the signal that, for the first time in thirteen years, the Light Blues were the challengers in the race. Oxford won again. Symbolically Steve Fairbairn (Fig. 3), the Cambridge coach and the most famous name in the history of rowing, missed the boat race for the first time in fifty-seven years. Suffering from terminal cancer, he had nevertheless insisted on listening to the wireless coverage of the event, in what was also the first year it was televised (Fig. 4).³

Steve Fairbairn died six weeks later. Born in Australia, he started rowing while at Geelong Grammar School, then studied at Cambridge and rowed in the university's crew in the Boat Races of 1882, 1883, 1886 and 1887. As coach at Jesus College in Cambridge during the 1920s, he single-handedly revolutionised rowing, sinking the sport's orthodox techniques and modernising its equipment. He realised the importance of using the leg muscles



Figure 4: the 1938 Oxford crew after winning the race, carry their boat into the boathouse with a BBC camera filming the event.

2 George Drinkwater wrote *The Boat Race (1829–1939)*. He had rowed for Oxford in 1902, and 1903. He died in an air raid during World War II.

3 The BBC commentator John Snagge, who had started covering the event in 1932, continued to present the boat race on radio and television until 1980.

to maximum effect during the stroke, and so fitted into his boats longer slides for the rowers' seats. That alteration enabled the concurrent deployment of legs, back and arms at the catch, and allowed a powerful coordinated follow-through of the blade. The result was to create a natural movement and flowing style that delivered a stronger stroke while making rowing more rhythmic and enjoyable.⁴

Cannes

Defenders of the 'English Orthodox' style using 'body swing' and a hard drawn 'finish' to every stroke, criticised both his technical improvements and the alleged inelegance of 'Fairbairnist' rowing. As a result of the international publicity surrounding the "Jesus Controversy" and the OUBC win of 1937, interest around the world in Oxbridge rowing was high.⁵ In 1938 the Mayor of Cannes, keen to promote the town's self-proclaimed image as "*La ville des sports élégants*" (Fig. 5), invited the Oxford and Cambridge crews to travel down immediately after the boat race to the famous holiday resort, to row again on the bay.⁶

The event followed the success in France the previous year of the first ever overseas participation in the same event by the Oxbridge crews. That was a similar initiative, staged in Paris on the River Seine on 3 April 1937 (some ten days after the Boat Race on the Thames on 24 March) (Fig. 6).

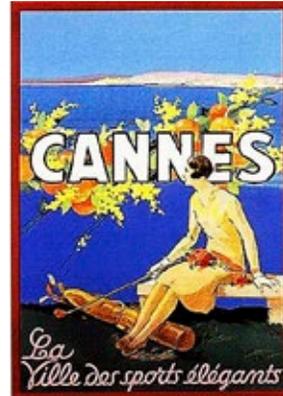


Figure 5: 1930 poster designed by Georges Goursat (1863-1934).



Figure 6: the Oxford and Cambridge crews arrive together at Le Bourget Airport, April 1937.

4 C. Dodd. 1983. *The Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race*. London; on Fairbairn, see footnotes 23 and 24.

5 See, for instance, Fig. 8.

6 This series in France between 1937 and 1939 was not the only time the varsity crews have rowed in international events; Cambridge, in Leander colours, had rowed for Britain in the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles. But the races in France do seem to be the only time the two university crews have rowed at the same event.

The 1937 regatta was sponsored by the *Fondation Foch* to commemorate the opening of its hospital,⁷ and, according to the inscription on the back of the commemorative plaque presented after the races to every member of the two crews, was also “Sous le patronage du journal *Le Journal* et de radio Luxembourg”⁸ (Fig. 7).



Figure 7: pewter 75 × 95mm plaque inscribed: “Oxford Cambridge / Fondation Foch / Match à L’Aviron / Paris 3 Avril 1937”: © the River & Rowing Museum, Henley-on-Thames, UK, with permission.

The “*Match à l’Aviron*” was organised in the following way: two French crews, selected by the Paris Rowing Federation to represent teams on the Seine and on the Marne, were to race each other. Then Oxford, as the winner of the university race, took on the winner of the race between the French crews, while Cambridge was matched against the losing side. The French sports’ authorities had originally wished to have a race between the English universities’ crews, but Oxford and Cambridge insisted that they raced against each other only once each year – at the Boat Race on the Thames. Some French newspapers nevertheless still misrepresented the event as the real Oxbridge boat race come to Paris, claiming that the ancient British universities had abandoned tradition by agreeing, in the spirit of the *Entente Cordiale*, to hold the race not on the Thames but on the Seine (Fig. 8).

The sponsors of the 1938 race at Cannes picked up the Parisian initiative but with a different intent, namely of encouraging foreign holidaymakers, nervous about the growing menace to the peace of Europe from Hitler, to travel to the French Riviera. The fixture proved a success.

7 The *Fondation franco-américaine du Mont Valérien*, known as the *Fondation Maréchal Foch*, was created after World War I to mark the reorganization of the American Red Cross and for the distribution of US donations in Europe to assist demobilised Allied ex-Servicemen.

8 “Under the sponsorship of the magazine *Le Journal* and of Radio Luxembourg”.

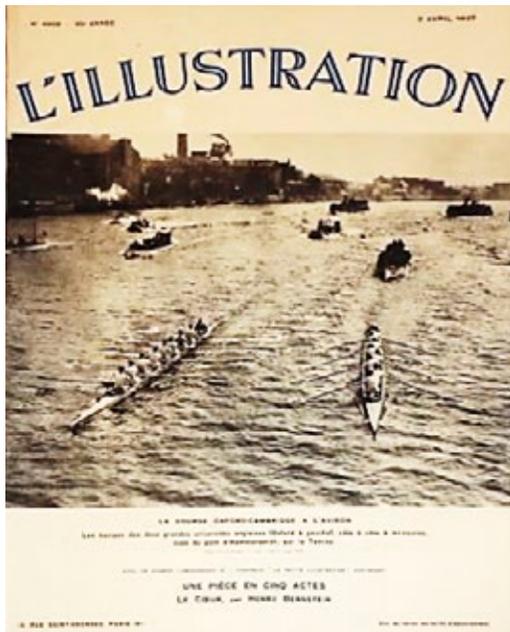


Figure 8: the 1937 Oxford and Cambridge boat race attracted considerable international attention.

The local newspapers covered the preparations and speculated on the outcomes of the races in considerable detail. As a result, large crowds of spectators turned out along the fashionable seafront, the Promenade de la Croisette. They included such leading names from international elite society as the King of Sweden, Gustav V, who interrupted his holiday at Nice to travel along the coast especially to watch the rowing.



Figure 9: The Cambridge crew win against the majestic backdrop of the seafront: Cannes, 1938.

the best gentlemanly tradition, apparently “without undue effort.” Oxford beat Lyons (for that club’s 1930s medal, see Fig. 10), and Cambridge defeated Toulouse, victories that confirmed once again the importance of ‘Fairbairnism’.

After the 1938 Boat Race on 2 April, both crews had flown down to Cannes to train for the different challenge of rowing on the Mediterranean. The course at Cannes was 1,300 metres along the coast, from Palm Beach to the Jetée Albert Edouard. Although this stretch lay in the shelter of the Lérins Islands, it was nevertheless out on the sea. This required heavier boats more suitable for waters far rougher than ever encountered in river rowing, and the use of shorter oars with wider blades. Both the Oxford and Cambridge crews therefore adopted the ‘American’ style of rowing, involving a powerful draw at the end of each stroke, that they found worked best on the choppy, rolling waves out at sea.

On 9 April, the first day of the event, the best crews in the South of France competed in knock-out heats to go through to the finals against the Oxbridge boats the following day – but to avoid the confusion of 1937, the media was more clearly briefed that the event was not a re-match of the Boat Race so the two British crews would not row against each other (Fig.9).

On 10 April, however, both British crews won easily, each by three lengths and, in



Figure 10: 48mm bronze rowing medal from the Lyon Rowing Club

The Mayor of Cannes presented the eight oarsmen and cox (and apparently also the reserves) of both Oxbridge boats with a medal for taking part in the event. The silvered uniface plaque from the *Comite Des Fetes et Sports* of the *Ville de Cannes* (in Futurist lettering, top and bottom) is a fine specimen of the innovative artistic style of its period (Fig. 1). Enamelled nautical flags and mast tops surround a port-hole view from out on the bay of the town's seafront dominated by its most famous landmark, the twin peaks of the casino at the Carlton Hotel. The coat of arms of the resort (a palm between two *fleurs-de-lis* on an azure field) appears below and, as the commemorative medal for the races, the plaque has been inscribed, suitably enamelled in blue, OXFORD – CAMBRIDGE / 9-10 AVRIL 1938. There is no maker's mark or designer's signature on the plaque, but its red leatherette presentation case is stamped DRAGO of Paris and Nice, and states the company to be manufacturers of *insignes pour sociétés*.⁹ The medallists Drago also minted pieces for the casino (Fig. 11).



Figure 11: the 22 × 15mm silvered and gilt Cannes Casino medals made by Drago from the 1930s to the 1950s.

⁹ Charles Edouard Drago, medallists, at 25 Rue Beranger in Paris and 39 Rue Gioffredo in Nice.

Rowing Medals of the 1930s

The 1938 Cannes Oxbridge boat race plaque appears to be one of the rarer commemorative medals in the history of rowing.¹⁰ The UK's (and the world's) finest collection of rowing memorabilia on public access, the River and Rowing Museum at Henley, for instance, does not have an example. But it does possess a Cannes medal awarded by *Le Comité Des Fêtes et Sports* of the *Ville de Cannes*. It is identical to the 1938 one in design, yet more simply inscribed *Cannes-Avril 1939*. An accompanying Lalique glass trophy carries a tablet inscribed *11-12 Avril 1939*. The plaque and trophy were evidently the prizes for the same event the following year (Figs. 12 and 13).¹¹



Figures 12 and 13: April 1939 Cannes 50 × 82mm enameled aluminium medal and Lalique glass trophy: © the River & Rowing Museum, Henley-on-Thames, UK, with permission.

Part of the fascination of these Art Deco rowing medals is that they evoke the inter-war years and the world of privileged youth (vividly portrayed in the comic novels penned by P.G. Wodehouse) increasingly overshadowed by the escalating Nazi threat to peace.¹²

10 This plaque is not in any major European or Australian national collection, including the Australian National Maritime Museum and the medal collection of the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris, nor in any specialist collection such as the River and Rowing Museum at Henley-on-Thames in England and the Musée National du Sport in Nice.

11 Museum catalogue accession numbers 2005.4.8 and 2005.4.26. They were donated by the family of Alan Burrough who had rowed for Cambridge three consecutive years from 1937-39 (private correspondence with the museum curator, Suzie Tilbury). His brother Paul Burrough rowed for Oxford in 1937-8. See also Burrough's obituary in the *Guardian*, 13 August 2002.

12 Including an institution straight out of the world of Jeeves, the Oxford University and College Servants' Rowing Club.

The 1938 medal was issued during that fateful period between the *Anschluss* (Hitler's annexation of his native Austria) in March, and the Munich Conference at the end of September. In these months Australia's unwavering support for the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's policy of Appeasement strengthened his pursuit of "peace in our time" with Nazi Germany.¹³

The stylistic elegance of the Cannes medals characterises the revival during the inter-war years, in French medallic art. This was marked by creativity in technique and design, as well as the embrace of Futurism.¹⁴

It contrasts with the traditionalism of medallic art in Britain and the British Empire which often resulted in uninspired products during the first half of the 20th century (Fig. 14).¹⁵

The contrast of the Cannes plaque with the rowing medals from the same era produced under the dictatorship in Hitler's Germany is also notable. The designs produced under the Nazi regime were, in the main, little better than their British equivalents (Fig. 16), and sporting medals were often used for overt political purposes (Figs. 15 and 17).¹⁶



Figure 14: 40mm silvered OUBC commemorative medal awarded for participating in the trials for selection of the university crew, undated c.1930s, unchanged since before World War I.



Figure 15: rowing medals as political propaganda: 92mm Bronze medal 16-17 June 1934 (without signature) for the Berlin Regatta Club (not to scale).

13 See C. Waters. 2011. *Australia and Appeasement: Imperial Foreign Policy and the Origins of World War II*. London; on the medallic history of Appeasement and events of 1938, see M. Everest-Phillips. 2013. *Neville Chamberlain and the Art of Appeasement*. London.

14 N. Maier. 2010. *French Medallic Art, 1870-1940*. Paris.

15 C. Eimer. 1989. *An Introduction to Commemorative Medals*. London, and John Pinches: *A Catalogue Of Works Struck By The Company From 1840- 1969*: London, *passim*, including the Henley Royal Regatta items (pp. 54-5), and, in particular, as an example of strikingly similar appearance and lettering as indicative of lack of originality, compare Fairbairn's profile (p.53) with the almost identical one of Sir Arthur Keith (p. 149), and both to the Maharaja of Jodhpur in the Pinches 1945 medal – see p.364 of R. Puddester. 2002. *Medals of British India*. London.

16 See D. Brown. 2014. *The Boys In The Boat: an epic journey to the heart of Hitler's Berlin*. London, on the US rowing team's victory at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. An almost identical medal was issued with the date 3 June 1934. See also R. Colbert & W. Hyder. *Medallic Portraits of Adolf Hitler*. Token and Medal Society, California. C-41-45, 55, 65-70, 74, 77-9, 82-3, 87-90, 92, 95-7.



Figure 16: 95mm Meissen porcelain medal of 1937 for the Berlin International Rowing Regatta (not to scale).



Figure 17: 1936 German rowing medal produced by the DRL (Deutscher Reichsbund für Leibesübungen, Nazi Germany's national sports governing body).



Figure 18: 20 × 35mm enamel badge (made by Alberti of Milan) of the August 1938 (Year XVI of the Fascist Era) 45th National Rowing Competition on Lake Como. (not to scale)



Figure 19: Mussolini with his son Romano and a lifeguard, rowing at Riccione, Italy, 1932

In contrast, the vibrancy in Mussolini's Italy in both rowing and medallic artistry during the 1930s is striking (Fig. 18).¹⁷ At the 1932 Olympics at Los Angeles, the Italian crew in the eights had upset general expectations by securing a surprise victory in the opening round, with the fastest time of any nation. In the finals they took silver, the Americans winning gold by two-tenths of a second; in 1936, at the Berlin Olympics, Italy again came second to the USA in the eights. Rowing in fascist Italy was a political concern. International triumph in team sports was held up as proof of the superiority of *il Duce's* governance. Mussolini claimed the harmony, discipline, order, and stamina needed for success in rowing represented his ambition for society as a whole.¹⁸

17 On the contemporary rowing medals of Fascist Italy, see: G. Casolari. 2008. *Le Medaglie Sportive*. Rimini.

18 1933 speech to the rowing club of the University of Catania.

However, the regimented medals issued for the sport by the Fascist Party (Fig. 20) highlight the creative tension in Mussolini's Italy between tradition and totalitarianism that had no parallel in the Third Reich.¹⁹



Figure 20: the obverses of two 35mm bronze rowing medals issued by sports associations linked to Mussolini's National Fascist Party.

These convey the regime's approach to sport as training for war readiness and as an 'opiate of the masses,' distracting the younger and naturally more rebellious elements of the community from thinking too much about internal political conditions and lack of employment opportunities.

An Oz at Oxford

So while creative design in rowing medals flourished during the 1930s in some countries of Western Europe,²⁰ the example of the Cannes plaque (Fig. 1) is more than just another miniature masterpiece of Art Deco. It is also an artefact of importance because of the connection of this specimen of the medal to Richard Hillary (Figs. 21 and 22).²¹ His autobiography *The Last Enemy* is now recognised as embodying the spirit of his generation and regarded as one of the more important literary works in English about the early days of World War II.²²

19 See E. Michaud. 2004. *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*. Stanford University Press, pp. 90-109.

20 Perhaps the finest Art Deco rowing medals came not from Europe but from South America. Founded in 1874 in Uruguay, the Montevideo Rowing Club on the River Plate flourished in the 1930s, not least thanks to Guillermo R. Douglas, who was continental champion and took Bronze in sculling at the 1932 Olympics, the first medal for South America in the history of Olympic rowing. The Club's medals of the era are inspired and original. By comparison, British and Australian rowing medals remained traditional and dull.

21 Biographical studies include Arthur Koestler's 'The Birth of a Myth', in *Horizon* (April 1943); Eric Linklater's 'Richard Hillary', in *The Art of Adventure* (1947), 73-98; Sebastian Faulks's *The Fatal Englishman: three short lives* (1996); and David Ross's *Richard Hillary: The Definitive Biography of a Battle of Britain Fighter Pilot and Author of 'The Last Enemy'* (2004). Micky Burn's *Mary and Richard* (1988) published love letters between Hillary and Mary Booker.

22 P. Bixby. 2011. British Culture at Mid-Century: Wartime Writing. *Studies in the Novel* 43, 2, p. 259 describes the book as "the signal text of intermodernism". An annual lecture in Hillary's honour, held at the English Literature Faculty of Oxford University, has been delivered by such luminaries as Ian McEwan, Philip Pullman, Julian Barnes and Tom Stoppard.



Figure 21: Portrait of Richard Hillary by Eric Kennington, 1942. Copyright National Portrait Gallery, London, with permission.



Figure 22: Hillary in RAF uniform during WWII.

Hillary was born in Sydney and studied in England. His book details his time at Trinity College in Oxford and, in explaining the lead up to the outbreak of war in September 1939, describes the Oxford crew's visit to Cannes in April 1939 and to Bad Ems in the summer of 1938. As the secretary of the Oxford University Boat Club and reserve for the boat, he fortunately left a particularly full description of both experiences. He wrote vividly and with quiet humour, including of the novelty of rowing on the French Riviera:

Café society was there in force; there were fireworks, banquets at Juan-les-Pins, battles of flowers at Nice, and a general air of all being for the best in the best of all possible worlds. We stayed at the Carlton, bathed at Eden Rock and spent most of the night in the Casino. We gave a dinner for the Mayor which ended with Frank [Waldron, No. 6 in the Oxford Crew] and the guest of honour rolled together in the tablecloth singing quite unintelligible ditties, much to the surprise of the more sober diners. We emerged from some night club at seven o'clock on the morning of our departure with a bare half-hour left to catch our plane. Over the doorway a Union Jack and a Tricolor embraced each other in a rather tired entente cordiale. Frank seized the Tricolor and waved it gaily above his head. At that moment the smallest Frenchman I've ever seen rushed after us and clutched hold of Frank's retreating coat-tails. 'Mais, non, non, non!' he screeched. 'Mais, oui, oui, oui, my little man,' said Frank, and, disengaging himself, he belaboured the fellow over the head with the emblem of his Fatherland and cantered off down the road, to appear twenty minutes later on the airport, a sponge bag in one hand and the Tricolor still firmly clasped in the other.²³

²³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 22-3.

As the illustrated 1938 Cannes piece was Hillary's own plaque, it seems that he had accompanied the Oxford crew to the French Riviera in 1938, as he did again in 1939.²⁴ In 1938 this was doubtless on account of his friendship with Frank Waldron, with whom he had previously been at school at Shrewsbury. Waldron rowed at Number 6 in the Oxford boat in both years, and rowed with Richard in the Trinity College 1st VIII in both 1938 and 1939.

Defeating Göring's Oarsmen

After the success of the expedition to Cannes in April 1938, Hillary and some other members of the OUBC looked farther afield and asked the German Government to be allowed to row there. The Nazi regime replied that the Führer would be delighted and would even pay their expenses. So the crew set off in July 1938 for Bad Ems to row in the Hermann Göring Prize race which, as Hillary nicely notes in an aside, had "originally been the Kaiser Fours, and the gallant General had taken them over."

Unable to bring their own boat, the Oxford students had to borrow one that proved to be leaky and low in the water. They had no time to get used to it before the arrival of the five German crews. Serious-looking and elegantly turned-out, in best Nazi fashion they regarded the lackadaisical Oxford oarsmen with contempt, as representative of a decadent race. Any German crew rowing in England would train properly and would win. Germany would draw its own conclusions from the impending British defeat. Indeed the Oxford boat even arrived late at the start, which was to be in the usual manner, the starter asking 'Are you ready?' If no crew objected, he would then fire a gun for the race to begin. When the 'Are you ready?' was called, however, there was a flurry of oars and the German crews were already well ahead before the Oxford boat realised they should start. The crowds of supporters for the German crews yelled encouragement while the dispirited Oxford oarsmen rowed in silence and, at the bridge that marked the half-way mark, were several lengths behind:

But it was at that moment that somebody spat on us. It was a tactical error. Sammy Stockton, who was stroking the boat, took us up the next half of the course as though pursued by all the fiends in hell and we won the race by two-fifths of a second. General [sic] Goering had to surrender his cup and we took it back with us to England. It was a gold shell-case mounted with the German eagle and disgraced our rooms in Oxford for nearly a year until we could stand it no longer and sent it back through the German Embassy. I always regret that we didn't put it to the use which its shape suggested.²⁵

²⁴ But to avoid repetition in his narrative he conflated the 1938 and 1939 Cannes trips.

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 24-5; and Ross *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17 for 1939, although he confuses Cannes 1939 where Hillary was the reserve for the Oxford University Boat Club and therefore did not row, and the Göring Race at Bad Ems where Hillary participated as a member of the crew.

Forty Years On...

Hillary served with great bravery in the RAF and was killed in 1943. After his death, this Cannes plaque was acquired by his editor and biographer, Lovat Dickinson of Macmillan of London, that published *The Last Enemy*.²⁶ Dickinson had first met the author in 1941 after Hillary, having been shot down and horribly burned, had written his book while undergoing extensive plastic surgery by the New Zealander, Sir Archibald McIndoe. When Hillary rejoined the RAF but was shot down for a second time and killed, Dickinson decided to write a tribute. Dickinson had therefore interviewed the author's parents, Colonel Michael and Mrs Edwyna Hillary in the course of researching his eulogy *Richard Hillary: a biography* (1950). As a result, in the late 1970s Dickinson had been given the plaque by Hillary's father's second wife, Christina.

Richard Hillary is nowadays recognised as a World War II hero as well as a significant writer (Fig. 23),²⁷ but his poignant conclusion was that, for both rowing and fighting against Nazi Germany, preparations had been woefully haphazard:

*Looking back, this race was really a surprisingly accurate pointer to the course of the war. We were quite untrained, lacked any form of organization and were really quite hopelessly casual.*²⁸

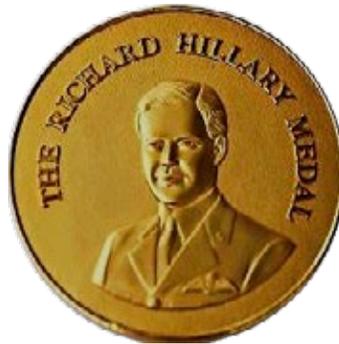


Figure 23: the 45mm bronzed Richard Hillary Essay Medal, awarded in his honour to the winner of a young people's writing competition by Shrewsbury School, England where Hillary studied before Oxford.

This apparent judgement on the policy of Appeasement suggests that Oxford's rowing successes were perhaps not a triumph for "Fairbairnism" as a philosophy, just the result of more efficient techniques.²⁹ Yet the races of 1938, symbolically the year of Steve Fairbairn's death, showed how much that charismatic personality and his four books on the sport, replete with pithy aphorisms, had influenced rowing.³⁰ Fittingly, the same year

26 It was acquired in the 1980s by the distinguished antiques dealer and curio collector Tom Crispin, a Board member at that time of the British Antique Dealers Association, 1991 winner of the CINOVA Prize for his magisterial book *The English Windsor Chair*, and my first employer.

27 See notes 21 and 22.

28 *Op. cit.*, p. 26; on the broader context of Australia's contribution to the RAF and Battle of Britain, see J. Watson: *Killer Caldwell: Australia's Greatest Fighter Pilot*. 2010.

29 See the introduction by Geoffrey Page to *The Complete Steve Fairbairn On Rowing* (1990).

30 *Rowing Notes of 1926; Slowly Forward: Daily Points for Oarsmen of 1929; Some Secrets of Successful Rowing, 1930; and Chats on Rowing of 1934*; as well as his autobiography *Fairbairn of Jesus* published in 1931.

also saw Australia achieve its first ever win in a major international rowing event, when the country's coxed four took the gold medal at the Empire Games in Sydney.

In the twenty-five years before 1914, Cambridge won only nine boat races. In the twenty years from the recommencement after World War I of the boat race in 1920 to its suspension with the outbreak of World War II, thanks largely to Fairbairn at Cambridge, Oxford won only three times. Even on the one occasion when the OUBC clearly had a stronger crew, it had scuppered its own chances when the president resigned following an argument with the coach. That occurred in 1930, the year Cambridge regained the overall lead in the competition, lost in 1863 (the race having started in 1829), and which it has held on to ever since.

The Oxford victory of 1938 owed much to their new coach, John 'Freddie' Page who, while coaching Oriel College, had adapted the "Jesus style" into Oxford college-level rowing. His son Geoffrey Page for many years did much to sustain rowing through his role between the 1960s and 1980s as the rowing correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*. At a time when rowing was unfashionable (long before the great Olympic triumphs of Sir Steve Redgrave and Matthew Pinsent,³¹ although nevertheless marked by the odd event commemorated in unusual medals) (Fig. 24), his writing provided the best national newspaper coverage of the sport in either the UK or Australia.³²

The extraordinary sporting achievements of Redgrave and Pinsent built on past successes in the history of rowing – including Richard Hillary's triumph over Hermann Göring. That event is now mainly remembered by collectors in search of that rarity of rowing memorabilia, the Cannes plaque of 1938. The appeal, however, of its *Art Deco* elegance lies less in the plaque's scarcity value than with the pathos it



Figure 24: the races between 1937 and 1939 in France are the only time the varsity crews have rowed in the same international events; however each crew has very occasionally ventured overseas—the OUBC visited Egypt in December 1972 to take part in the Nile International Rowing Festival at Luxor, and members of the crew received this 40mm commemorative medal: © the River & Rowing Museum, Henley-on-Thames, UK, with permission.

31 The President of the Oxford University Boat Club in 1993.

32 See Geoffrey Page's obituary in the *Daily Telegraph*, 2 April 2002; he also wrote the introduction to *The Complete Steve Fairbairn on Rowing* (1990). Geoffrey Page coached the author of this article forty years ago, at the University College School from its Boat Club at Richmond, London.

embodies. Moreover the example of that medal that had been owned by Hillary, by linking together the ‘Fairbairn Revolution’, Canberra’s support for Appeasement and the author of *The Last Enemy*, captures the complex intertwining of Australian art, sport, youth and politics on the eve of World War II.³³

About the author:

Max Everest-Phillips is the Director of the United Nations Development Programme’s Global Centre in Singapore for Public Service Excellence, which promotes expertise in governance, political economy and public administration to improve government around the world. He was previously Director of Governance at the Commonwealth Secretariat in London. His latest book *Neville Chamberlain and the Art of Appeasement* (2013), examines how medallists responded to the Munich Crisis of 1938 and the origins of World War II.

33 The 1938 Oxford crew is also of interest to collectors of memorabilia concerning the Dam Busters Raid, in which the No. 2 in the Oxford boat, Squadron Leader Henry Melvin “Dinghy” Young (20 May 1915-17 May 1943) took part: see A. Thorning. 2008. *The Dambuster who Cracked the Dam*. London.