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The Smithsonian Numismatic Cabinet: Friends in a Strange Place

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America's Attic

The national museum of the United States of America is called the Smithsonian Institution. Among those who frequent and love the place, it is commonly known by a cosier appellation: 'America's Attic'. There is a perverse sense of pride here, a hint of the muddle and confusion one associates with all attics, public or private, large or small. And the sheer extent of the museum and the labyrinthine passageways which one must travel from one collection to another gave rise to a story that still persists: most of those who work here originally came as visitors, could not find their way out again and opted to remain – on salary.

Every attic has dusty corners, unexpected places about which little is known, or remembered. The numismatic cabinet at the Smithsonian Institution is not yet numbered among such locales, but is on closer terms with them than some of us would care to admit. It is understaffed and underfunded, but nonetheless remains one of the largest and most valuable collections in the entire museum and one of the greatest numismatic collections in the world. It contains many thousands of coins, tokens, medals, and notes – monies of all kinds from all countries, from ancient times to the present. Of possible interest to the readers of this publication is the fact that it embraces coins, tokens, and currency from Australia and New Zealand. The Australasian contingent of our cabinet is not large, but it does, I believe, contain some items of significance,

objects you will recognize as *friends in a strange place*.

How did we get all this material, Australasian included? What are we doing with it? And what are the prospects for this particular corner of 'America's Attic'?

Our collection was founded on the kindness of friends and strangers in early years and augmented by transfers from other government agencies in later ones. The Smithsonian itself was made possible by a bequest from James Smithson, about whom more in a moment. But the numismatic cabinet of the Smithsonian Institution actually predates the rest of the museum by some thirty years. This situation is analogous to the hypothesis that stars exist which are older than the universe itself. That hypothesis is absurd of course, but our situation really happened.

The Smithsonian's numismatic cabinet began its career in 1816, when an entity calling itself the Columbian Institute for the Promotion of Arts and Sciences opened its doors in the national capital. It received a federal charter in 1818 and spent the next two decades busily accumulating all manner of curiosities, including medals and coins. The Columbian Institute's charter ran for a period of twenty years, and when it expired its membership and collections were transferred to a new organization, the National Institute for the Promotion of Science, or simply, the National Institute.

In spite of the prestige of the museum which housed it during these formative years, the numismatic collection was not

huge. By the middle of the 1840s (that is, after three decades or so of collecting) what would one day become the nation's numismatic cabinet still numbered barely one hundred coins of the United States, about twice that number of ancient Greek and Roman ones, a few hundred pieces of paper currency, and two thousand or so European copper and silver coins from the Middle Ages onward. There were also two hundred medals. Three-quarters of these were foreign rather than American; the remainder of the cabinet probably held the same proportion of foreign items. As we shall see, this is in marked contrast to the present distribution of materials.

Enter James Smithson, a wealthy and somewhat eccentric (eccentric rather than crazy: after all, he *was* wealthy) scientist and a gifted chemist and mineralogist. Born in Paris in 1765, he spent most of his life on the Continent. He died in Genoa, Italy, in the summer of 1829, leaving a sizable fortune. He never visited the United States; yet he bequeathed his estate to the new country so that it might establish an institution for the 'increase and diffusion of knowledge among men'. Why this capricious generosity?

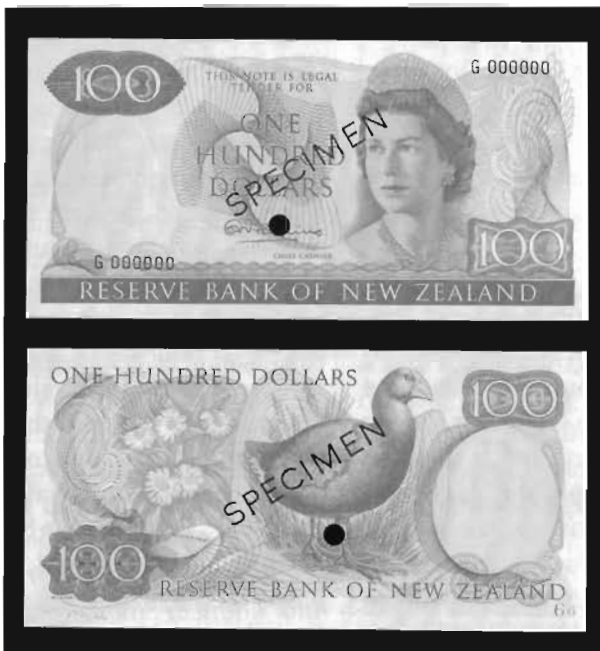
Caprice had nothing to do with it. Smithson was the illegitimate son of Britain's Duke of Northumberland and had always felt slighted and shunned by the rigid British aristocracy which judged him by the circumstances of his birth rather than the magnitude of his accomplishments. He believed America was a more generous country, which would accept him for what he had achieved, regardless of his parentage. When he came to die, this childless, lonely man had already decided who would receive his fortune, and how it would be employed.

It would take nearly a decade before Smithson's fortune came to America, and several more years before anything concrete was done with it. Relations between the United States and England were anything but cordial during the twenties and thirties of the nineteenth century, as president Andrew Jackson had based much of his career on twisting the British lion's tail. Indeed, the two nations came close to war in 1837-38, the very time when former Secretary of State Richard Rush was attempting to conclude the ticklish business of guiding the legacy through the British courts. But Rush's luck held, the courts proved cooperative, and Smithson's bequest was allowed to make its way across the Atlantic, arriving in New York at the end of August 1838.

The gift took the form of gold sovereigns, slightly more than a hundred thousand of them, many bearing the head of the new monarch, Queen Victoria. When they arrived in America, most of them were quickly melted down and turned into American five and ten dollar gold pieces. But two of the coins, both dated 1838, escaped the melting pot, and the Smithsonian still retains them. In my opinion they are the most precious relics in the entire numismatic collection. Their value does not lie in the fact that 1838 sovereigns are rarities *per se*. They're not; the Royal mint struck 2.7 million of them. But *these* coins have value because of the dream which inspired them, and because they are the sole survivors of a particular group which should have been recycled along with their fellows but were not – for reasons long forgotten. Every cabinet is based on such survival, accidental or intended; may the two Smithson sovereigns serve as an example for collections and collectibles everywhere.



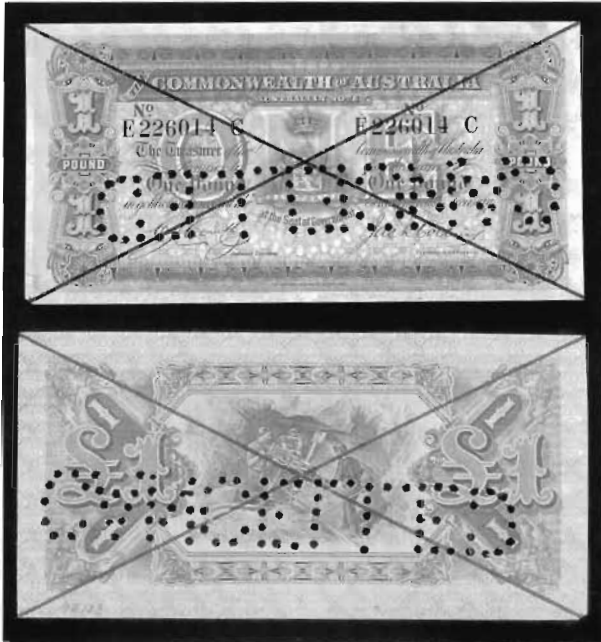
New Zealand 1947 fifty pounds note, OU 000000, signed TP Hanna, cancelled with perforated SPECIMEN.



New Zealand 1967 one hundred dollars note, G 000000, signed RN Fleming, cancelled with overprinted SPECIMEN, and with punched round hole below centre.



Australian Commonwealth ten pounds note, V3 076017, signed Sheehan/McFarlane, twice with perforated CANCELLED and cancelled with large black cross (fourth type cancellation on specimen notes of this signature series, after 1939).



Australian Commonwealth one pound note, E 226014 C, signed Cerutti/Collins, with perforated CANCELLED (first type cancellation) and cancelled with large black cross (fourth type). A 1923 note cancelled around 1940.

Once it had arrived, there ensued an eight-year debate about what to do with the bequest. What had Smithson intended? What would most benefit America? While an agricultural college and a national university were early favorites, it was finally decided to use the legacy to set up a national museum in the city of Washington. The formal founding took place on 10 August 1846. When the numismatic holdings of the National Institute were transferred to the new entity, a nation's coin collection had found a permanent home.

But it occupied a very small corner of that home for a very long time. The first Secretary of the new museum was a scientist named Joseph Henry, who held office until 1878. During his tenure and those of his immediate successors, the humanities enjoyed a distinctly subordinate position to the sciences. Early Secretaries made a convincing case that the latter held the greatest potential for the benefit of humankind and therefore fulfilled James Smithson's original objectives in a way the former never could. The inevitable result was that the numismatic and other humanities-based collections experienced slow growth for decades.

In those first days, the nation's numismatic cabinet reposed in the Smithsonian Castle – the whimsical, faux-medieval sandstone building designed by James Renwick and completed in 1855. The coins and medals shared the building with stuffed birds, mineral specimens, antiquities of various sorts – and Joseph Henry and his family, who had their quarters in the East Wing. The Henrys occupied this space until 1878, while the coin collection remained in the Castle a few years longer. In 1880, a dynamic individual named George Brown Goode (who happened to be an enthusiastic coin collector)

became Assistant Secretary and was placed in charge of a brand new museum in process of construction. This museum became known as the Arts and Industries Building and it opened its doors in 1881. The numismatic collection soon made the trek from its original venue to the new Arts and Industries museum and remained there for the next eight decades. When the National Museum of American History was completed in 1964, the cabinet was moved once again, this time to its present location.

Regardless of where it was housed, the numismatic cabinet could have been easily overlooked during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth. Few were aware that the United States even *had* a numismatic collection – and I suspect that this ignorance would have extended to Smithsonian employees as well as members of the general public. Meanwhile things were bubbling along elsewhere, and events would soon produce the greatest coup in the fledgling cabinet's career.

There was a second public entity collecting coins, rather more successfully than we were. This was the United States Mint in Philadelphia, whose accumulation had begun as a by-product of its work. Mints exist to coin money, for which they need metal. Metal can come from mines, but also from other people's coins. Prior to 1849, America essentially lacked native sources of precious metal, which forced the nation's mint to call in the coins of other countries and turn them into American ones.

As it did so, a couple of its employees, Jacob Eckfeldt and William Du Bois, began looking at what was coming in for assaying, melting, and re-coining. They began holding back some of the more interesting specimens, and by the closing years of the

1830s the Mint Collection was coming into existence. We shall never know whether it was they who set aside the two Victorian sovereigns, but they are the prime suspects.

By the early 1920s, they and their successors had created a cabinet containing more than twenty thousand pieces, ranging from ancient times to the present, embracing coins from the Americas, Europe, Africa, and Australia. The Port Philip pieces and the Adelaide pound illustrated elsewhere all came from the Mint Collection. Rarities and common coins alike, all were the result of the discernment and collecting passion of a couple of denizens of the early United States Mint.

Between 1923 and 1928 this splendid collection became part of the Smithsonian cabinet. The transfer came about because of a distinctly odd series of events, none of which originated at the Smithsonian Institution. The curator of the United States Mint Collection was a gifted scholar named T. Louis Comparette, who died suddenly in the summer of 1922, leaving the Mint cabinet rudderless at a critical time. A few months later a robbery took place at the Mint – not at the main branch in Philadelphia but at the subordinate facility in Denver. Treasury Secretary Andrew W. Mellon (in the United States, the Mint is directly subordinate to the Treasury) became deeply alarmed and took a crucial step to avoid further unpleasantness. He closed all three facilities to the public: Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Denver. This led to the final logical step. Since the Philadelphia Mint was now off-limits to visitors (and lacked a curator anyway), why not transfer the Mint's numismatic holdings to another federal entity which was open to the public and did have a curator? Why not transfer everything to

the Smithsonian Institution?

An agreement was reached and the contents of the Mint Collection made their journey to the federal capital in several batches. While the Mint was shipping this collection to Washington it continued acquiring other material, making it difficult if not impossible to determine the exact identity and extent of everything involved in the transfer. The best figure we have been able to come up with is around twenty-three thousand coins, tokens and medals. Their arrival doubled the size of the Smithsonian Numismatic Collection. They also gave that collection its most valuable pieces – both the rarities which impressed the public, and the ordinary coins in depth which impressed the researchers. Henceforward, the Smithsonian cabinet had at least the potential of becoming a world-class numismatic site.

Our collection has tended to see periods of furious growth, alternating with times of relative inactivity, even stagnation. The 1920s are a good example of the first phenomenon, while the following thirty years typify the second. The collection stood at around fifty thousand objects in 1928. By 1958 it had grown by fifteen thousand more. At first glance this seems impressive; but it averaged out to five hundred new pieces per year – and this cabinet supposedly represented the numismatic patrimony of an entire *nation*, and arguably the world's wealthiest nation at that. A private museum in New York, that of the American Numismatic Society, had several times as many objects, and its annual rate of growth was far higher than ours. Clearly the Smithsonian Institution's numismatic collection had a long way to go before the American people would have the cabinet they deserved.

But the pendulum now swung the other

way, and our collection entered its greatest period of sustained growth. In 1958 it contained 64,000 pieces; twenty-five years later it contained nearly a million. As in the 1920s, a number of fairly odd events came together to create this dramatic increase. The federal laws regarding gifts to museums were extremely favorable to donors from the 1950s to the early 1980s, virtually guaranteeing major tax credits for major gifts. Also two curators came to the museum in the late 1950s, Dr. Vladimir Clain-Stefanelli and his wife Elvira, both of whom were superbly equipped to encourage and handle such donations. They had previously worked for a number of numismatic dealers (most notably the Stacks) and proved to be the most persuasive representatives that this or any other cabinet could desire.

Not everything they did was in the long-term best interests of the collection. They concentrated on attracting rarities and apparently chose to ignore the fact that in numismatics (as in other areas of research) results often depend on having large amounts of common material with which to work (if museums focus too much on the acquisition of impressive one-of-a-kind pieces, they are in danger of promoting showmanship at the expense of scholarship). The Clain-Stefanellis inevitably created enemies in the process of building the collection because of the pace at which they were moving. Rifts exist in the American numismatic fabric to this day, most notably between the Smithsonian's numismatic cabinet and that of the American Numismatic Society. Each collection has its adherents (and having served as curator of both, I have frequently found myself in the middle).

All that said, their accomplishments must still inspire admiration. Let me tick off

merely a few of the more notable ones. They acquired thousands of emergency currency notes, *notgeld* from Germany, Austria, and elsewhere in Middle Europe. They steered the Mikhailovich Collection to this cabinet, giving us the finest Russian assemblage outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg. They persuaded Congress to bend the rules so that we could acquire the fabulous J. K. Lilly Collection of gold coins of the world – more than six thousand pieces. They arranged for the transfer of ‘certified proofs’ (essays of virtually everything ever produced by this country's Bureau of Engraving and Printing from 1862 onward) to this museum – over three hundred thousand objects and still counting. Here, at least, and in the Mikhailovich Russian material, there is tremendous potential for research, potential which is now being exploited by a growing cadre of enthusiasts.

Most of these acquisitions took place in the 1960s and 70s. Since the early 1980s we have largely concentrated on managing what we have, rather than searching for more. We are very short-handed, and while we would be unlikely to turn down a worthwhile donation (without a purchase budget, donations or transfers are the only options open to us), we would be hard-put to deal with a gift if it consisted of more than a few dozen objects.

There has been a major exception to this quieter state of affairs and it took place on my watch. In February 1998, we finally acquired a group of Confederate notes via transfer from the National Archives – a project that had been in the works for forty years. The extent of the transfer was somewhat larger than we had anticipated.

I've written about it elsewhere at some length¹, so I'll just summarize here. The

notes took the form of a hoard formed by the Confederate Treasury during the closing days of the American Civil War. The South was printing an increasing amount of currency to pay for an increasingly costly war, but while it had no real choice in the matter, its leaders felt rather guilty about it and tried to restrain currency production as best they could. When they determined to issue a new series of notes at the beginning of 1864, they set up a process of calling in old notes in exchange for new – three new notes for two old ones of the same denomination. The earlier notes were duly called in, cancelled, warehoused and eventually carried north as booty by the triumphant Union Army, in the spring of 1865 (by which time, of course, these notes had absolutely no monetary value!).

The hoard reposed at the War Department for several decades, time enough for the rarer members of the accumulation to grow legs and wander away. It eventually passed to the Treasury, where the same thing happened. In the 1930s it was acquired by the National Archives and in 1957-58 by the Smithsonian - which didn't take delivery for another four decades, however. We might never have taken delivery, were it not for the actions of an enterprising member of the Archives staff, who stole better pieces from the hoard and had the effrontery to peddle them at local numismatic shows! He was eventually unmasked and sacked, and the Smithsonian concluded that perhaps it was time to come over and get its property.

This it did in February 1998. What a surprise lay in store for us! Several generations of thieves might have stolen a good deal, but they had left behind much more – more than anyone had anticipated. Our transfer agreement with the National Archives speci-

fied 125 boxes of currency notes. When the boxes arrived, it immediately became clear that the Paper Repository of the Republic, either through ineptitude or by design, had underestimated the extent of what it was releasing. Instead of a thousand notes per box (the quantity we had been led to anticipate), there were *five* thousand per box, perhaps even more. We had become the bemused possessors of six hundred and fifty thousand (or thereabouts) pieces of Confederate currency, the largest single accession in Smithsonian Numismatic Collection history.

With the aid of volunteers specifically selected for their high pain threshold, we are making good headway through the hoard, and finding precious indications of how currency functioned in the wartime South – indications which are precious because so few other records have survived. But beyond an obvious abundance of Confederate money, what other strengths do we have? What can the Smithsonian's Numismatic Collection offer the casual collector and the advanced researcher?

I have already hinted at a few of our strengths, some of which are also reflected in our exhibit here at the museum. The Lilly gold receives prominent billing – perhaps a bit too prominent, it apparently being assumed that all the gold coins in the world, arranged by date, row after row, would have an impressive rather than a soporific effect. The same might be said of the Mikhailovich materials, although here at least there is a variation in metals and a slightly greater historical impact. The stories in our exhibit area include the development of western coinage from ancient to early modern times, the rise of United States coinage and currency (an area which needs updating but is



New Zealand penny token pattern issued by Lipman Levy (A.323). The obverse is muled with a die bearing the portrait of the Duke of Wellington.



Australian Kangaroo Office 1853 gold half-ounce pattern..



Australian Kangaroo Office 1853 gold two-ounce pattern.

interesting nonetheless) and traditional exchange media (where no story is told, but the material is displayed in an interesting fashion)².

Our areas of greatest depth are the ‘certified proofs’ of United States federal currency and the Confederate hoard mentioned above. These have received some exposure in the guise of temporary exhibits, carried to collector shows at a number of venues. They have never received prominent billing here, though, nor are they likely to if current museum-wide plans go forward. Under these plans, our Hall of Money and Medals would be dismantled and its place taken by new exhibits deemed more relevant to twenty-first-century America.

Before speaking of our problems and prospects in these new and difficult times, allow me to continue with my description of the cabinet upon which any response to the current situation must be based. Our collection of early coinage is generally good, and portions of it are excellent. The strongest single component is the ‘Greek Imperial’ series – local issues of the Greek-speaking portions of the Roman Empire. Our assemblage here is world-class and is attracting a growing number of scholars. The coinage of the Tetrarchy is among several other areas that also have some depth, but our Byzantine and medieval cabinets are weak, especially the former. The modern holdings (including European) are fairly good, while parts of the Islamic and Far Eastern coinages are superb, again attracting outside researchers.

As you might expect, the United States cabinet is very good, but its Latin American counterpart (except for gold coinage, courtesy of the Lilly bequest) is far inferior to the holdings of the American Numismatic

Society. Our collections of medals and tokens are generally unexceptional.

I have worked in or with three numismatic cabinets in the United States and several in Europe. The Smithsonian Numismatic Collection is the only one where coinage takes second place to currency. This was the case even prior to the accession of the enormous National Archives Confederate hoard; but that event made the ratio positively lopsided in favor of paper money. I estimate that we have around half a million coins, tokens, and medals, but over a million pieces of paper of one sort or another. Much of this assemblage consists of *notgeld*-for-tourists from the early days of the Weimar Republic, material of dubious or limited value for anyone save members of the immediate family. But much more consists of material truly valuable for historical research. The Confederate hoard brings us very close to the crisis days of the wartime South; the ‘certified proofs’ of national banknotes give us an entree into the small-town America of a century ago. The revolutionary and siege materials from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries give us glimpses into the human spirit and the nature of endurance, which we might otherwise lack. The paper currency collection, then, is a major resource and is finally receiving the attention it deserves.

Australasian Friends

Which leads to the Australasian component of the Smithsonian Numismatic Collection. This component of our cabinet is not large, but it is interesting and contains some objects I hope you will enjoy seeing. Paper currency is at its heart.

We begin with several pieces of scrip from

Tasmania from the 1820s. I have been unable to secure much information on them³, but they are denominated in shillings and pence and are the sort of small-change notes one might expect in a frontier region devoid of coinage. We have a sixpenny note from 1826 (redated from 1825) and two notes for a shilling from 1823 and 1824. They suggest interesting parallels with currency that circulated in America at about the same time and represent what is probably a universal response to monetary shortage in modern times. I shall be very pleased to hear from anyone with more information about these or any other members of the series.

These Tasmanian small-change notes stand as isolated members of our currency cabinet. For the next Australian notes, we shall have to go forward nearly a century, to the second issue of Commonwealth treasury notes. But the stretch is worth the effort, as we have a complete set of these, ranging from ten shillings to one hundred pounds (mostly specimens, but including some circulating notes), dating from 1918. We also have a complete specimen set of the 1923-25 issue of the Commonwealth Bank of Australia and one of the half-sovereign notes from the 1927 printing, both varieties of the ten-shilling issue of 1933-34, and some, but not all, of the early notes of George VI. Our collection of Australian specimen notes embraces present-day issues as well. We also have complete sets of specimen notes of New Zealand – the pre-decimal issues of 1940 and the decimal ones of 1967 – but virtually no circulating notes from either those or subsequent printings (paradoxically, it seems to be far easier for museums to obtain specimen notes and related rarities than ordinary circulating pieces).

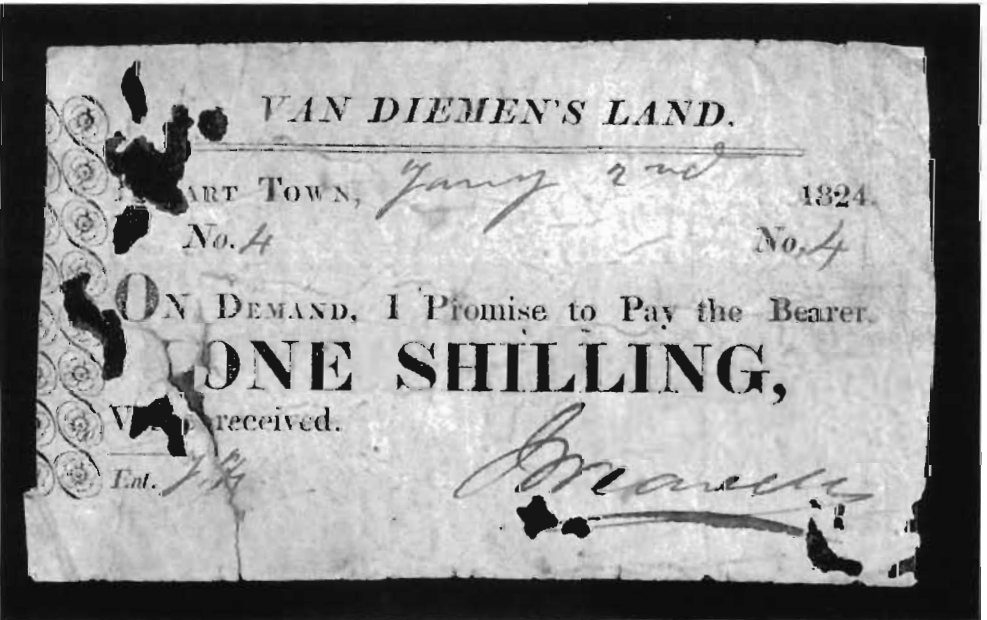
These rarities in paper currency are joined by rare coins. As mentioned earlier, we have two of the Port Phillip pieces, one of the half-ounces, and one of the twos. We also have a run of Adelaide pounds – about twenty of them, but all of the more common variety. We have one of the excessively rare plain-edge proof Sydney sovereigns of 1857, as well as two circulating rarities from the same mint, a sovereign of 1855 and another of 1860. And we have a virtually complete run of circulating sovereigns from Sydney, Melbourne, and Perth (after 1900), extending up to the end of the First World War. We have little normal coinage after that point, either for Australia or New Zealand.

What we *do* have in both cases are tokens: as with the Hobart scrip, they will tell us much about the formative years of both countries, provided we know how to listen to them. The collection is rather more complete for Australia than it is for New Zealand - two hundred or so pieces from the first, two dozen or so from the second. At least one of the Australian pieces was struck locally – an 1852 halfpenny of Peek & Campbell, whose weak center suggests that the colonial coiner needed more motive force than was available to him – but most were ordered from Great Britain. Copper tokens predominate, although we have one in silver, a diminutive 1860 threepence of Hogarth, Erichsen & Company of Sydney. And we have several pieces from Annand, Smith & Company – not excessively rare pieces, but tokens of particular interest to this researcher.

Typically, I came across Annand, Smith & Co while working on something else, my book on the Boulton family and the Soho Mint. The Soho Mint did business near Birmingham, England between the late 1780s



Van Diemen's Land 1823 one shilling currency note of John Weavell (Renniks 20.edn, p138).



Van Diemen's Land 1824 one shilling currency note of John Weavell (Renniks 20.edn, p138).



British George III 1806 copper penny, bearing the SOHO mint mark on the reverse.



Detail of reverse above showing SOHO mint mark at bottom right of Britannia's shield.



Detail of reverse below showing the area bottom right of Britannia's shield, without the Soho mint mark.



Australian penny token issued by Annand Smith & Co (A.17). The SOHO mintmark is absent on the reverse.

and 1850. It had once been the most advanced organization of its kind in the world, supplying copper coins and tokens and manual and steam-powered mints to customers in Great Britain, Brazil, Denmark, Russia, Mexico, Sumatra, India, etc., etc. But it had fallen on difficult times by the middle 1840s, and the young man who then inherited it had no interest in reviving the family concern. He determined to sell the mint, and the sale was under active consideration as the decade drew to a close.

Enter Annand, Smith & Company. This enterprising firm of 'family grocers' needed penny tokens for small change and contacted friends in Wolverhampton, England, who in turn contacted the Soho Mint a few miles down the road. The venerable coining facility was caught off-guard, as the concern was already in the process of being wound up. But someone there was still game, and that part of the machinery which had not been crated for sale swung into action, albeit a bit creakily. A simple obverse die was hastily prepared and married to one of the leftover reverse dies which Soho had created for British regal copper coinage in 1806. About 15,000 copper penny tokens were struck and remitted to Wolverhampton in May 1849. The people there liked what they saw, sent the pieces on to Australia (in wooden kegs), and then asked Soho for more. The latter kept one press running, and struck thirty thousand more pennies, half in the early autumn of 1849, the remainder at the beginning of 1850. These were the last pieces the Soho Mint ever struck; its machinery was auctioned off three months later. But here was a neat circularity at work: the founder of the Soho Mint, Matthew Boulton, had struck his first copper tokens just as the first Europeans were

arriving on Australia's shores. And now the grandson of the founder, Matthew Piers Watt Boulton, had struck the last of them for a flourishing firm in the new colony.

Illustrated are an Annand, Smith & Company penny token and a British penny. The regal coin has the name of the mint proudly emblazoned to the immediate right of the shield; on the token, this has been effaced, either by Soho itself or by Ralph Heaton & Sons who bought the mint – and continued to make tokens for the grocers. In time, a simple H&S was substituted for SOHO, marking the definitive passing of an era.

Although the New Zealand portion of our token collection is far less extensive than the Australian, the pennies issued in Auckland, Christchurch, and other New Zealand cities and towns were prepared by the same people in the old country and shipped half-way around the world to serve the same purposes in the new. Our collection may not be extensive, but it does contain one token lacking in most cabinets: a curious mule, combining an advertisement for a haberdasher in Wellington with a portrait and reference to the Iron Duke. It was struck using an obverse die prepared in 1818, whose fields now show the ravages of time.

Curatorial Challenges

Thus the Numismatic Collection of the Smithsonian Institution. You now know something of its strengths and weaknesses.

What about its prospects? They are not as promising as they were sixteen years ago, the time I came to work here. The cabinet shares problems suffered by all collections and museums across the globe: shrinking expenditures by the state combined with increased visitation by the public – a public

which, unfortunately, is less well-educated about history than it was in previous years, a public whose idea of a ‘museum experience’ sometimes resembles a sojourn in a genteel Disneyland. But some of our problems are more distinctly our own: the ever-tense relationship between the museum and members of the American Congress, and a dramatic shrinkage in our workforce, combined with a dramatic expansion in our perceived responsibilities.

When I arrived here in 1986, we had eleven employees in what was a stand-alone entity, the National Numismatic Collection. We had an executive director, two full-time curators (I was the second), three museum specialists⁴, two museum technicians and no fewer than three secretaries. In 2002 we have one curator, two museum specialists, a temporary employee who handles library and some accession matters, and a part-time secretary. And we have been subsumed into a new museum organization, the Division of Information Technology & Society whose other departments are Computer Science, Graphic Arts, Photographic History, and Modern Physics and Electricity⁵.

The numismatic component of the new Division now embraces four-and-a-half employees rather than eleven. In fairness, we probably had more people than we needed in 1986 – at least, we’re getting more work done now than we did then. But the size of the numismatic staff *does* present difficulties: when everybody’s here, we are just about able to cover all of our responsibilities without too many obvious lapses, but when one person is absent, the place may very well come to a halt.

Nonetheless, we do what we can. I want to keep the people we have, so I am encouraging our museum specialists to get ad-

vanced degrees and thereby qualify for curatorial positions. They are responding with enthusiasm, and internal morale, at least, remains fairly high. But the numbers problem is always with us and we have had to respond to staff diminutions in new and ingenious ways. We have, in fact, had to learn to work smarter to get any work done at all.

Douglas Mudd handles our ancient coinage series as well as being our photographer. He is also our resident Webmaster, putting images on the World Wide Web, writing and editing scripts (and is in fact in hot pursuit of an advanced degree in American history and new media and information technology). He is helping us to reach the public in innovative and dynamic ways. James Hughes, our other museum specialist, has become a real expert in federal currency and regularly takes exhibits of ‘certified proofs’ to local and national numismatic shows, thereby bringing our name and our cabinet to the attention of thousands of hobbyists. I write a good deal and I also serve as president of ICOMON, the International Committee of Money and Banking Museums. Everyone does what he can.

But there is still more to do than the few of us on salary can manage; and volunteers play a crucial role in bridging the gap between what we *can* do and what *might* be done. As I write, we have seven dedicated amateurs and scholars, most of them retired from salaried employment, who come to the cabinet on a regular basis (and some of them every day) to work in areas where staff time and expertise are lacking. We have one person who works on decorations, another who is preparing the Mikhailovich Collection for publication, a third who works every Friday on the mountain of Confederate currency in the National Archives Hoard, a



Australian Commonwealth pre-1945 one hundred pounds note, Z 582017, signed Cerutti/Collins, cancelled with overprinted SPECIMEN (fifth type cancellation used for QE II issues; the note would thus have been received by the Smithsonian after 1953).

fourth who catalogues German *notgeld*, and three others who work in American federal currency, particularly ‘certified proofs’. And most of these generous souls can be pressed into service to answer telephone inquiries, admit people into the outer office, and perform other crucial functions when our secretary is performing the other half of her duties elsewhere in the Division. Our volunteers merit all the praise I can give them and more.

What of our future? While I would like to report that we shall be expanding our staff (and our publications and services to the public), I must candidly say that with much work and good luck we shall probably be able to hold our own, and no more. Perhaps the times are against large numismatic displays in American museums; they are certainly against them in *this* museum, which has apparently decided that popular culture, the more comforting the better, will receive preference over displays which actually *instruct* – which actually teach about other peoples, places, and times. So we are slated to lose the display area we have and are not likely to receive another in return. Nor are our objects likely to find homes in other exhibits at this museum, exhibits which follow wide temporal or spatial patterns, wherein representative coins or notes might serve an important educational purpose (in the case of the Nineteenth Century display which was mounted here some years ago, I persistently lobbied for just such a numismatic presence, but got absolutely nowhere.). All this being true, we have shifted gears. We are now fairly far along in talks with the International Monetary Fund, whose Visitor Center may soon be home to a new display, selected and scripted by ourselves. We intend to mount other exhibits in the years to come, both medium-length displays at the IMF and similar venues, and short-term displays of the sort we have been presenting at numismatic trade shows for more than a decade. These are not

ideal approaches, but they are far preferable to the alternatives.

I have hopes of finding the funding to hire more staff, but I am not particularly sanguine here either. What I can more realistically hope is that our museum specialists will achieve curatorial rank, which will at least give us a somewhat larger say in museum-wide affairs. I also hope to find all of us giving more lectures and creating more publications, bringing the glories of this enormous collection to a widening segment of the public. These prospects are exciting, even if we have to find unorthodox ways of bringing them to fruition. No one ever said that museum work would be easy; and as we continue to struggle forward, we shall at least have the realization that we are keeping faith with a long-dead visionary, who wanted to spend his fortune ‘for the increase & diffusion of knowledge among men’. It is a comforting realization, well worth our time and toil.

References

1. See ‘New Light on the Confederacy: The National Archives Hoard’, *Revue Belge de Numismatique*, CXLVI (2000), 175-188.
2. One of my long-term goals is to publish a sylloge of our excellent holdings in this area, which deserve greater recognition than they have heretofore received.
3. Mick Vort-Ronald of Kadina, South Australia, has kindly supplied me with some welcome information about this type of local emergency currency, for which I thank him.
4. A designation unique to the Smithsonian Institution, as far as I know. Museum specialists have all or virtually all of the responsibilities and work-loads of curators, but lacking Ph.D.’s, they ordinarily cannot advance to curatorial rank - with resulting problems in morale, as you might expect.
5. There was a museum-wide reorganization in 1994, and I have always suspected that IT&S was created from all of the leftover bits which didn’t fit anywhere else. The reorganization hasn’t helped morale either.