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The Empire strikes back: the coin, medal and stamp designs of Bertram Mackennal

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The 'Bertram Mackennal' exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney and the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (2007–8), provided the first serious opportunity in 75 years to appraise this artist's achievements.¹ Postcolonial, multicultural and republican-leaning Australia responded with surprising warmth to an academic and imperial Australian-English artist. Yet in an otherwise admirable exhibition, the designer of coins, medals and stamps came a distant second to the sculptor. No colonial or dominion coinage was displayed, and just one half-crown 'Seahorse' stamp was featured. Why is art history so unresponsive to numismatics and philately? Bertram Mackennal, Percy Metcalfe, Eric Gill and Edmund Dulac are significant names in twentieth-century British art. There is as much intellectual and aesthetic validity in their coin and stamp designs as there is in Gill's typography and Mackennal's Symbolist sculptures. Yet after many years of research involving the interface of sculpture, medals and coinage, this author encounters ignorant indifference from fellow art historians (and warm support from numismatists). Is it their intimate scale that prevents coins, medals and stamps from being considered 'art'? Perhaps; but this does not explain why

Pisanello's Renaissance medals qualify, whereas Metcalfe's Art Deco counterparts do not. Does age or rarity lend an aura to the former? Walter Benjamin famously argued that a sense of aura in an object comes from its uniqueness, which is fatally compromised by mechanized reproduction. While he applies this thesis to film and photography², familiarity probably breeds greater contempt for coins and stamps, with 100 million 'Seahorses' alone having been printed.

This paper examines Mackennal's medals, coins and stamps, with contextual references to his sculpture. A close inter-relationship emerges between them, with both coinage and medal effigies used at the Royal Mint as a basis for their counterparts in stamps. Regrettably there is sparse archival or indeed published material relating to the coinage, but a plethora about the stamps. Publications on the latter include John Easton's classic *British Postage Stamp Design*, the sober but sensible fourth volume of *The Postage Stamps of Great Britain* by K M Beaumont and J B M Stanton, and recently, Bryan Kearsley's exhaustive *Discovering Seahorses: George V High Values*.³

Medals

One hundred years ago, Mackennal was arguably not just Britain's but the



Figure 1. Olympic Games Prize Medal, 1908, 33mm (silver).

Empire's leading sculptor. His Rodin-influenced *The Earth and The Elements* was purchased for the national (later Tate Gallery) collection in 1907; this success was repeated with *Diana Wounded* in 1908. At precisely this time Mackennal the coin, medal and stamp designer also emerged. He went on to provide our conception of the likeness of George V, King and Emperor, one that held good for 25 years. The effigy is convincing and dignified, unashamedly conservative, yet admirably suited to this dull, punctilious monarch, kingly yet kindly, simple yet shrewd, who personified national and imperial pride. Perhaps, as Easton notes, philatelists and numismatists themselves underrate Mackennal. He calls Mackennal 'the William Wyon of the reign', comparing him with the creator of the Penny Black and the Young Head coinage effigy of Queen Victoria.⁴ Medals provided greater scope for Mackennal's inventiveness than stamps and coins. But though he undertook several prestigious commissions like the Olympic Games medals (1908) and the official Coronation medal (1911), these too are underrated. The exceptions in this area are the high-value George V stamps, the coveted and avidly collected 'Seahorses'.

Mackennal's two medals for the Fourth Olympiad (1908) were commissioned by the British Olympic Association Council. One is a prize medal (Fig. 1), distributed to administrators and athletes, while the other is commemorative (Fig. 2). Both were admired at the 1908 Royal Academy and Franco-British exhibitions. The *Daily Telegraph* announced: 'One side of each medal is distinctively British in character, and will be used for the Olympiad of 1908 alone; the other side, in each, being of general and permanent interest, will provide the standard medal for all Olympic meetings in the future, wherever they are held.'⁵ Nationalistic pressures from future host nations dictated otherwise, but the practice nevertheless applied to the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm, while the commemorative medal's quadriga obverse reappeared for the 1948 Olympics in London.

Mackennal's designs were noted for their 'singularly Greek' qualities, but they equally attest to his experience in Paris, where the medal and plaque enjoyed a fin-de-siècle renaissance. His bronze reliefs of the 1890s, including one of Sarah Bernhardt, reveal him at his most splendidly Symbolist and Parisian.⁶ Mackennal deftly made the leap from relief



Figure 2. Olympic Games Commemorative Medal, 1908, 50mm.

sculpture to the medal. He followed the Parisian idiom of all-over decorative richness, without sacrificing coherence of design. In the prize medal the universal Olympian ideal is answered by a patriotic British one. The obverse portrays two female allegorical figures holding a wreath, about to crown a nude male athlete. No such practice operated in antiquity, but the concept proved persuasive and pervasive, with variants used for official medals until 1932. On the reverse, Mackennal's decoratively splendid St George and the Dragon echoes statuette counterparts by contemporaries such as George Frampton and Gilbert Bayes.

Mackennal's commemorative medal obverse follows ancient precedent more closely. Its conventional but convincing quadriga motif reflects awareness of ancient Syracusan coinage. Mackennal's sculptor father, John Simpson Mackennal, earlier depicted a tririga theme in an architectural relief, while on an infinitely greater scale, Bertram's later bronze group, *Phoebus Driving the Horses of the Sun* for Australia House, London (1912–24) should be noted. The reverse, depicting a winged figure of Fame, is

Mackennal's prettiest Olympic medal design. The fluttering arabesque drapery reflects responsiveness to art nouveau. However, he never allowed exuberant decoration to overwhelm his creations, nor did he wilfully distort his figures. He probably agreed with his sculptor friend Alfred Gilbert, who exclaimed: 'L'Art Nouveau, forsooth! Absolute nonsense! It belongs to the young lady's seminary and the "duffer's" paradise.'

Three other medals require discussion here. The Lawrence medal commemorates Sir Trevor Lawrence's presidency of the Royal Horticultural Society (Fig. 3). On the obverse, female and male figures seated astride a symmetrically placed apple-tree hold a banner. The design resembles Frampton's earlier University of Glasgow David Logan memorial medal.⁸ The reverse is also symmetrical, with a semi-nude female holding a long-stemmed rose in rapt contemplation. Closely related to it is the uniface prize medal inscribed 'Polytechnic School of Photography Annual Medal Exhibition'. Naked Truth is revealed to a putto-like figure operating the draped camera. Classical tradition and modern technology work compatibly,



Figure 3. Royal Horticultural Society: The Lawrence Medal, 1909, 51mm (gold).

indeed charmingly. The medal commemorating the Union of South Africa (Fig. 4) was presented to individuals involved in the establishment of the Union and the inauguration of the legislature. The reverse depicts Mercury forging a chain on an anvil; the sun shines brilliantly behind. Four linked nameplates denote the hitherto separate colonies. The medal compares interestingly with *The Awakening of Australian Art* by fellow Australian, Dora Ohlfesen. Its sunrays also convey optimism, but the geometric simplicity is more Art Deco-like in character.⁹

Coins and Coronations

The South Africa medal obverse, dating from August 1910, is the earliest example of Mackennal's bareheaded effigy of George V. Through his secretary, Sir Arthur Bigge, the King told Mackennal 'how delighted he is with your design of his effigy for the African medal. His Majesty would be very glad if you could execute a bust of him.'¹⁰ Their association lasted until Mackennal's death in October 1931. Its documentation is sparse, partly because the King expected, and received, discretion from Mackennal, and also

because George V's diaries are relatively terse, compared, say, to those of Queen Victoria. The relationship originated in a recommendation from an unnamed equerry who had admired a recent exhibition at Mackennal's studio. Mackennal later recalled: 'When I was presented to the King he greeted me with a pleasant smile and explained to me that, on his accession to the throne, it became necessary for new coinage to be struck at the Royal Mint bearing a portrait of himself. "I have heard from an authority in whom I place the fullest confidence", continued the King, "that your work is of the highest artistic merit, and I propose to entrust you with the commission of modelling the portrait head from which the die will be made for all British coins that are to be struck during my reign."' (Figs 5–7). Modest about his impeccable appearance, he stated: 'I'm conscious that I'm not what one would call a particularly handsome man, but I become full of vague apprehension when I think of the kind of portrait that some of the sculptors whose work I have seen might produce. I know I can trust you to make the best of me, and not the worst.'¹¹ He added humorously: 'Mind you give me a good big



Figure 4. Union of South Africa Medal, 1910, 37mm (silver).

V. I don't want to be mistaken for any of the other Georges.'¹² When this became public, *The Times* greeted Mackennal as 'the first Overseas Briton ever called upon to design the English coinage', while *The Globe* welcomed the appointment of 'a British subject in His Majesty's dominions beyond the seas.'¹³

In insisting that all coins bore Mackennal's design, the King kept his word. His biographer, Kenneth Rose, states that 'having made a decision, he hated change.'¹⁴ In 1923 the forceful Deputy Master of the Royal Mint, Robert Johnson, tried to get Mackennal's effigy modified and persuaded the artist to lower the Mint's plaster relief. While Johnson praised Mackennal's 'fine piece of work, as well as an admirable likeness' to the King's face, he also compiled a report on its perceived deficiencies.¹⁵ The royal response to Johnson was chilly. Sir Frederick Ponsonby, the King's secretary, told Johnson that his employer 'did not mean to have the present head altered in any way.'¹⁶ It was left alone. Late in the reign, when the effigy was complemented by more modern reverse designs, notably Metcalfe's 1935 Art Deco Jubilee Crown, the effect looks uncomfortable. This evidently did not bother the King.

Mackennal designed some half-dozen effigies of George V, although the Mint's in-house engravers, particularly J A C Harrison, had input in several of these. Most familiar is the bareheaded coinage portrait. A closely related but larger finer detailed counterpart was used for official medals, ranging from the Royal Society of Arts (1910) to the British War Medal (1919) and the 1912 one penny and twopence-halfpenny stamps, discussed below. For the dominions and colonies with separate coinage, a crowned bust portraying the King in robes of state was adopted. A similar format, but with changes in regalia, was designed for the official Coronation medal (Fig. 8). Effigies of George V in uniform were used for the King's Medal for the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth and the Royal Military College, Sandhurst.

As stated earlier, documentation of the coinage is patchy. Mackennal relied on portrait photographs by W & D Downey for the South Africa medal, but to progress with the coinage, he needed sittings from the King, together with profile photographs. The sittings took place in August 1910. There are tantalising references in November indicating Mackennal's dissatisfaction; not only was the relief too high



Figure 5. English shilling, 1911.



Figure 6. Royal Society of Arts Medal, 1910, 55mm (bronze).



Figure 7. Australian florin, 1927.

but the lettering was 'not good.'¹⁷ Reading between the lines, we detect Mackennal's decisive professionalism; he is perhaps comparable to fellow sculptor Thomas Brock, designer of the successful 1893 Queen Victoria coinage effigy. Were the problems resolved? This is uncertain but within weeks, in January 1911, the coinage was announced by proclamation and put into circulation.

The Times anticipated its conservatism even before release: 'There will be little or no alteration in the Georgian coins which are now being prepared ... except that the portrait of the King is substituted for that of King Edward and turned, in accordance with custom, in the opposite direction ...'.¹⁸ Stylistic continuities between the effigies of Edward VII by G W de Saulles and George V are obvious. The *Daily Graphic's* earlier speculation that 'Mr Mackennal will make the head upon the coins a little more decorative, and there is ample opportunity for him to suggest King George's sailor profession' proved unfounded.¹⁹ The most

judicious summary came much later from Easton who calls the effigy 'a perfectly straightforward piece of work'.²⁰ When Johnson attempted his changes, the sculptor, Derwent Wood, told him that Mackennal's effigy was 'too much like a *reduced* sculpture & not enough like a coin head. [It] is carried out with far too many little unnecessary planes in the modelling. The next one should be bigger in style.'²¹ However, Sir Aston Webb, President of the Royal Academy, 'agreed with His Majesty in keeping the design and that personally he thought it could not be improved upon.'²²

The Coronation on 22 June 1911 was commemorated by Mackennal's official medal. The greater scale of the medal and its mode of production better suited his gifts than the coinage effigy. His portraits of George V and Queen Mary convey the magnificence of the occasion as well as their personal dignity, while the arts and crafts-style lettering harmonises with the design. Queen Mary's upright regal bearing is convincingly rendered, and the



Figure 8. Coronation Medal, 1911, 55mm (bronze).

romantic feminine touch of the single rose stem laid before her nicely complements the laurel wreath beside her husband's portrait.

'What awful stamps'

On Coronation Day new halfpenny and one penny stamps were also released (Fig. 9). While a satisfactory coinage design produces little reaction, a bad one causes an outcry. The same applies to stamps. Archival and journalistic coverage of the first Georgian stamps is accordingly vast. The problems with the stamps were twofold. Firstly, the Government's decision to transfer the printing contract from de la Rue to Harrison and Sons proved injudicious, given the latter's inexperience in the field. Secondly, we can blame the King's desire, shared by Postmaster-General Herbert Samuel, for 'new look' stamps, the first radical design changes since 1887. Somewhat daringly, George V favoured what heraldry deems a 'proper' portrait, allowing greater informal naturalism than a profile. Downey's three-quarter-face photograph of the King in

admiral's uniform provided the template. A similar format had been adopted for recent Canadian and Niger Coast stamps with respectable results. Better engraving and printing might have brought success.

From the outset, Samuel wanted to get the design right, consulting the critic, M.H. Spielmann, together with the artists Sir Edward Poynter and George Clausen. Poynter favoured 'a portrait painter ... not a sculptor' and Clausen agreed.²³ Clausen also suggested approaching engraver members of the Art Workers' Guild for frame designs. This was taken up and, following a limited competition, George Eve's designs were selected. However, these did not fully satisfy the King, who suggested in August 1910 that 'Mr Mackennal might be asked to make a design.'²⁴ Mackennal was initially reluctant as he was preoccupied with the coinage and medal commissions. Given his status, he refused to compete with little-known engravers and demanded the prohibitive fee of 150 guineas, which was eventually reduced to 100 guineas after negotiations with Samuel.



Figure 9. Halfpenny and One Penny 'Downey Head' stamps, 1911.

Mackennal's designs for the high value *Seahorses* were accepted after slight modifications. However, the lower values proved more problematic, with three sets successively rejected by the King who by November 1910 was 'getting quite in despair about the Stamps'²⁵, and so was Mackennal, who told Samuel: 'Most of my time had to go on the coins ... I cannot quite satisfy myself with the design.' Referring to the Mint's engravings of his stamps, he complained: 'This stamp has been so altered from my first conception that it is no longer my design.'²⁶ The Mint's deputy master, William Ellison-Macartney, in turn wrote: 'There are so many cooks at this job that it is sometimes difficult to find out the precise stage that has been reached.'²⁷ From the three-way correspondence between the artist, the Court and the Mint, it is nevertheless evident that the halfpenny and one penny stamps were stumbling towards something like their eventual form by late 1910. Mackennal struggled to incorporate the British lion into the one penny; it was 'impossible to render ... in an artistic manner' in so small a space.²⁸ While Samuel insisted on the lion's inclusion, the King warned against the oak wreath looking as if it was coming out of the

unfortunate creature's head. Mackennal banished the lion in early December, but it came roaring back three weeks later: 'I am enclosing for Your Majesty's approval an improved design for the lion stamp which has the approval of the Postmaster General ... I think it greatly in advance of any of the lion designs which I have the honour to submit to Your Majesty.' Mackennal concluded: 'The Postmaster General proposes to use the following designs: first the lion stamp second the dolphin.'²⁹ These were approved the following day, 22 December 1910.

The King was evidently 'much pleased' with proofs in April 1911. But when the actual 'Downey Head' stamps appeared two months later, they spoiled any post-Coronation euphoria. He exclaimed: 'Make me look like a stuffed monkey, don't they?'³⁰ Ponsonby told Sir Matthew Nathan, Secretary to the General Post Office: 'His Majesty, who ... has always taken a great interest in Philately, had looked forward to producing a Stamp that would rank as one of the finest in Europe, but although infinite trouble was taken over the design the result can hardly be considered satisfactory. This new stamp, much to the King's regret, has been received with loud abuse in the United Kingdom and ... by contempt abroad.'³¹ Nathan ruefully replied: 'Mr Samuel is himself keenly disappointed especially that the stamps as printed—particularly the penny one—should be so markedly inferior to the proofs ...'³²

Mackennal himself lamented to Ellison-Macartney: 'What awful stamps. I have to suffer for all. I think the lion one ought to be withdrawn. It was not my idea as I think you know nor the King's'.³³ His

suffering surely intensified upon seeing *The Times* editorial, ‘The New Stamps: A Disappointing Design’, which stated: ‘Although the difficulties of combining art with utility in the limited area that the postage stamp affords must be recognised, it can scarcely be said that Mr Bertram Mackennal has excelled himself in the new stamps ...’. The one penny design was ‘overcrowded with detail and the general appearance is weak and indistinct’, though the halfpenny was considered somewhat better. The editorial concluded: ‘It is somewhat strange that the country which produced the first and ... most artistic postage stamp ever issued should have since proved itself incapable of putting forward a design of merit.’³⁴ Demands were made in Parliament for immediate replacements.

The problem lay less with artistic deficiencies than with what Easton calls ‘the muzziness with which inexpert engraving and poor printing have endowed the ... design’. The head is particularly weak and ‘becomes the least defined, and therefore the least conspicuous, part of the design.’³⁵ Mackennal was probably comforted by a partial retraction in *The Times*: ‘In view of the criticisms which have been passed upon the new penny and halfpenny postage stamps it ought to be stated that the head of the King ... is not the work of Mr. Bertram Mackennal. Although the design of the stamps has been generally attributed to Mr. Mackennal, he is responsible only for the frame in which the King’s head is inserted. The King’s head has been reproduced from a photograph.’³⁶

Underrated replacements

A new set of stamps, from the halfpenny to the threepence, was released in October 1912, followed by the fourpence to one shilling in early 1913 (Fig. 10). Not one but three different head designs were used. All were based on Mackennal’s prototypes and were carefully conceived to match their frames and avert any repetition of the *Downey Head* disaster. A die based on Mackennal’s coinage effigy was used for the new halfpenny, threepence, twopence, threepence and fourpence. The portrait on the one penny and twopence halfpenny was based on a plaster cast of Mackennal’s design for the medal effigy, a larger head than the coinage. Easton considers it ‘a much closer likeness ... not only were the forehead and hair improved, but the question of shading was taken far more seriously.’³⁷ For the fivepence to one shilling the so-called ‘Improved Medal Head’ was used. At the suggestion of Eve, who designed the corresponding frames, the size of the engraved head was reduced so that its width was 47.4% of the total width of the stamp design.

In the frames, Mackennal’s lion was humanely put down; however, his flamboyant halfpenny dolphin was retained and also used for the three halfpence. Of Mackennal’s frame for the penny and twopence halfpenny, Easton is somewhat damning: ‘the crown is so puny as to be negligible, and the streamers attached to it even make it foolish.’³⁸ Mackennal’s frame for the threepence and fourpence was more successful. The crown is medium-sized and the oval



Figure 10. Halfpenny, one penny, fourpence, sevenpence and ninepence 'Profile Head' stamps, 1912–13.

portrait frame is raised towards the centre with the values inscribed on two well-proportioned tablets. Easton notes that 'clearly Great Britain had discovered a great designer of heads in Mackennal; it remained to find somebody who could devise a better setting for them.'³⁹ This was the role of Eve, who designed two further frames for the fivepence to eightpence and ninepence to one shilling respectively. Eve's engraving and lettering complement those of Mackennal as a sculptor. Easton enthuses: 'for the first time we have the joint efforts of two good craftsmen, each working in his own sphere.' Unfortunately, the results were overlooked because 'the public, who had the lower [Downey Head] values ever before them, had abandoned hope and interest.'⁴⁰

The Seahorses

By contrast, the half-crown, five shillings, ten shillings and one pound *Seahorses* were instant classics (Fig. 11). But if we anticipate the philatelist King's delight in a design that so dynamically celebrated his nation's rule of the waves, then we are disappointed. He devoted far greater attention to the commonly used lower values. Samuel, however, was immediately impressed by Mackennal's

original drawing of September 1910, and told Bigge 'this would I think make a fine stamp for the higher values.'⁴¹ The King responded cautiously: 'the sketch for the 5/- value which is so strongly commended by Mr Samuel for the higher value stamps might be accepted', subject to amendments. He noted the design's relationship with the Britannia motif of the 1892 and 1897 Barbados issues, but judiciously observed that this 'probably would not form an objection in the present case.'⁴²

Mackennal probably explored many possible sources for his designs. Bryan Kearsley identifies such precedents as John Flaxman's illustration *Neptune Rising from the Sea* and William Dyce's *Neptune Resigning to Britannia the Empire of the Sea*.⁴³ Mackennal's own vigorous quadriga design for the Olympic Games commemorative medal was another influence. Kearsley also argues that the iconography of Britannia and her seahorses relates to German threats to Britain's naval supremacy. Few cared more passionately about this than the King himself, whose grasp of detail was admired by politicians. But there is no evidence that Mackennal shared his interests. Artists are more concerned with art, and in Mackennal's case with good



Figure 11. The 'Seahorses' stamps, 1913.

design, than with the arms race. Thus any political 'Zeitgeist' thesis remains conjectural, if intriguing.

The *Seahorse* design makes for a passionate, even sexy, postage stamp. Britannia is 'a militant, bare-armed goddess who would have won rounds of applause at any Empire pageant' as she thrusts forth her trident.⁴⁴ The flowing drapery, boiling waves and energetic horses work in convincing emotional and visual harmony. The King's portrait is set in a laurel-wreathed frame. The juxtaposition of its static formality and the lively main composition is surprisingly effective. Much of the design's technical success is probably attributable to the Mint's J A C Harrison, 'unquestionably one of the great ... engravers of the last century.'⁴⁵

Conclusion

Mackennal's career did not suffer as a consequence of the *Downey Head* designs. Within weeks of their issue, he and Edwin Lutyens were invited by the King Edward VII Memorial Committee to submit designs for a monument in Green Park, London. No competition was even mooted. The eventual equestrian statue, located not in Green Park but on Waterloo Place (1921), is representative of the large-scale sculpture that dominates Mackennal's later career. His medal effigies of George V were, however, used for a host of World War I decorations, culminating with the British War Medal (1919). A war plaque (1918), inscribed 'He died for freedom and honour', was probably an unadopted alternative to Carter Preston's World War I Memorial Plaque, an outstanding example

of ‘Deco’ classicism. In comparison, the Mackennal looks old-fashioned and awkward, with the horse uncomfortably monopolising the surface area.

Two other late works require mention. Medallions rather than medals, they are the robustly realistic bronze portrait of Edward VII (1922) in Shadwell, London, and one in marble of his widow, Queen Alexandra (1930–1), in St Alban’s Church, Copenhagen. The latter was one of Mackennal’s final sculptures, and during its making, he spent several wintry days as a houseguest at Sandringham. The last entry in George V’s diary to mention Mackennal reads: ‘12 October 1931 In afternoon May & I ... went to see Mackennal’s medallion of dear Mama (which is not very good alas), he I regret to say died suddenly on Saturday.’⁴⁶ This was a terse but poignant valedictory, not just to a friend but to an era in sculpture, and indeed in coin, medal and stamp design.

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