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ROYAL TITLES AND AUSTRALIAN COINS: THE “DEFENDER OF THE FAITH” CONTROVERSY OF 1953

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Introduction

Collectors of the Australian pre-decimal coinage of Queen Elizabeth II are aware of two types of obverses — one without “F:D” signifying “Fidei Defensor” in the inscription (1953-1955) and one with the letters included (1955-1964). Little has been written on the origin of these types, or on the political and religious controversy that followed the introduction of the first type in 1953. The controversy and subsequent actions of the Government were reminiscent of similar events that occurred with the 1849 British “Godless” florin and the 1911 Canadian coinage. My own interest in this subject was sparked during the preparation of an information sheet for a special pre-decimal coin collection released in February 1986.

Brief Historical Background to “Defender of the Faith”

The Title originated in 1521 when King Henry VIII wrote a book *Defence of the Seven Sacraments* attacking Martin Luther and his ideas for reform of the Catholic Church. In recognition of this work, Henry was conferred with the Title “Fidei Defensor” (Defender of the Faith) by Pope Leo X. Within a few years however, Henry’s desire for a male heir and a divorce from his wife had resulted in open conflict with the Pope. During the 1530s the dispute worsened and Henry openly split from the Church in Rome. Following Henry’s excommunication from the Catholic Church by Pope Paul III in 1538, the Title was withdrawn. Restored by an Act of the British Parliament in 1543, the Title has now been assumed by all British monarchs since that time.

The *Coinage Act 1909* empowered the Governor-General and the Federal Executive Council to determine by Proclamation the “design for any Australian coin”. The first such Proclamation, dated 11th February 1910, determined that —
“The design on the obverse side of the coins shall be the head of His Majesty the King with the inscription:
‘EDWARDUS VII D:G : BRITT:OMN : REX F:D : IND:IMP’ ”

This inscription in Latin is translated as “Edward VII by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India”.¹ The first Australian coins with this inscription were the silver coins dated 1910 and struck at the Royal Mint, London. The coins of King George V issued between 1911 and 1936 contained a similar inscription, with “Edwardus VII” being replaced by “Georgius V”. Following the death of King George V in 1936 and the coronation of King George VI in 1937, new reverse designs were prepared and minor amendments made to the obverse inscription. From 1938 until 1947, the obverse lettering was “GEORGIUS VI D:G : BR:OMN : REX F:D : IND:IMP”.² Following the creation of the Indian republic and Pakistan in 1947, the obverse legend was further amended to eliminate “IND:IMP”. At the same time “F:D” was expanded to “FIDEI DEF”. King George VI died in February 1952 and was succeeded by Queen Elizabeth II. All Australian coins dated 1952 bear the portrait of King George VI.

1. Quoted in proclamation of the British *Royal and Parliamentary Titles Act 1927*, *London Gazette*, 13 May 1927, Page 3111.
2. “United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of” was amended to “Great Britain, Ireland and” by the *Royal and Parliamentary Titles Act 1927*.

November 1952: New Obverse Coin Designs are Announced

The obverse design for British coinage of Queen Elizabeth II was officially announced by Royal Proclamation on 25th November 1952. The chosen portrait by Mary Gillick OBE (1881-1965) had been recommended by the Royal Mint Advisory Committee, headed by the Duke of Edinburgh. At the time, it was reported that “it will be used on the United Kingdom coins for half-crowns downwards. Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Ceylon and Southern Rhodesia have adopted the same head for their coinage but inscriptions vary”.³ New reverse designs were to be prepared for British coins from sixpence to half-crown, with “FIDEI DEF” incorporated on the reverse. Accordingly, the approved obverse inscription on these British coins was to be “ELIZABETH II DEI GRATIA BRITT:OMN REGINA”. Australian newspaper reports of 26th November confirmed that the Gillick obverse design had been chosen for Australian coinage, together with the inscription “ELIZABETH II DEI GRA : BRITT:OMN : REGINA : F:D”.⁴ The Australian reverse designs were to be unchanged from those used during the reign of King George VI. The reports also indicated that coins would be placed in circulation by the time of the coronation in June 1953. Master dies were to be prepared in London and sent to the Melbourne



Branch of the Royal Mint.⁵ Any alteration to these plans would involve both the Federal Government and the Royal Mint in London.

The Royal Style and Titles Act 1953

In December 1952, the Australian Prime Minister (Mr Menzies) attended a Commonwealth Economic Conference in London. At a meeting attended by Mr Menzies and representatives from other Commonwealth countries, it was decided that a new form of Royal Title was needed to reflect the special position of the Sovereign as Head of the Commonwealth and to correct the reference to Ireland. Accordingly it was agreed that each country should use a form of Royal Title appropriate to its own circumstances, but that it “retains a substantial element which is common to all”. Subsequently, the *Royal Style and Titles Act 1953* was passed by the Australian Parliament and proclaimed on 7th May 1953. The Schedule of this Act specifies the Royal Title for Australia as —

“Elizabeth the Second, by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom, Australia and Her Other Realms and Territories Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith”.⁶

One effect of this change to the Royal Title was that “BRITT:OMN” was no longer required as part of the coinage inscription.

February 1953: The Australian Obverse Design is Revised

A letter from the Commonwealth Treasury to the Melbourne Mint on 16th December stated that in the light of the London decision on the Royal Title, there may be need to be an “alteration in the inscription to which we had agreed”. This letter went on to state that the Australian High Commissioner’s Office in London

3. *The Times*, 26 November 1952, Page 5. All these countries, except Southern Rhodesia, were involved in the Royal Titles decision of December 1952.

4. This was also planned to be the obverse inscription for British halfpennies, pennies and threepences.

5. Until 1972, the Melbourne Mint was operated as a branch of the Royal Mint, London.

6. This was identical to that specified in the British *Royal Titles Act 1953*, except that “Australia” was replaced by “of Great Britain and Northern Ireland”.

7. Literally meaning “Of All The Britains”.

had been cabled for further information. The efforts of the High Commissioner were summarised later in a letter from the Royal Mint in London to the Melbourne Mint as follows: "About the middle of December, however, I had an inquiry from the Office of the High Commissioner for Australia here about the possibility of changing the inscription to conform with recent decisions about the Royal Style and Title. Ultimately, we were instructed by the High Commissioner to have a new inscription prepared, and this was approved by the High Commissioner on the 9th February".⁸ Apparently the inscription approved by the High Commissioner was that planned for use on British nickel coins from 1954 onwards — the "BRITT:OMN" had been removed, but there was also no reference to "F:D".⁹ In February 1953 the Australian High Commissioner in London was the Hon. Sir Thomas White, KBE, DFC, VD, a member of the House of Representatives from 1929 to 1951 and a Minister for Air and Civil Aviation in the Menzies Government from 1949 to 1951. A senior official of the Melbourne Mint made the following observation some years later: "The explanation for the omission of F:D from the obverse appears to be as follows. The UK coinage brought out in 1953 (had) new reverse designs to coincide with the use of Queen Elizabeth obverse. On these coins the FID:DEF appeared on the reverse designs, and consequently was omitted from the obverse — copies of which came to Australia. Here they were used with old reverse designs".¹⁰ The revised inscription to be used on Australian coins, "ELIZABETH II DEI GRATIA REGINA", was officially announced in the *Commonwealth Gazette* on 7th May 1953. Meanwhile, master dies had been received at the Melbourne Mint and the minting of florins was well under way.



May: The Controversy Commences

On 30th April 1953, a month before Australian coins appeared with the Queen's portrait, the Commonwealth Government gazetted a new Table of Precedence for use on official occasions during the 1954 Royal Tour. One of the amendments to the previous table of August 1947 was to give precedence to leaders of the main churches based on "seniority". This caused an immediate outcry from Anglican Church leaders because it supposedly gave Cardinal Gilroy, the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, precedence over Dr. Mowll, the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney.¹¹ The *Sydney Morning Herald* published five letters on this subject between the 13th and 16th May, and featured with an editorial on 16th May. One of the letters, from R. R. Adams of Roseville, commented that "the Anglican Faith is the Queen's own religion . . . by virtue of her inheritance as Defender of the Faith. To relegate her religion to a subordinate place at celebrations held in her honour would surely be a direct and flagrant slight to Her Majesty".¹² This letter initiated even more correspondence, concentrating now on the Title and its origins. Two letters were from Dr L. Rumble, described as "a former Anglican who is now a Catholic priest".¹³ And one "who conduct(s) an excellent syndicated feature on faith and morals in the Roman

8. Letter from Royal Mint to Deputy Master, Melbourne Branch of Royal Mint on 25 February 1953 (Int. Ref. 9456/52).
 9. Further research would be necessary to confirm that the omission of "F:D" was unintentional.
 10. Files of Melbourne Mint — File Number 44/4, Document Number 356/59 dated 25 November 1959.
 11. Statement of Bishop W. A. Hillard, Coadjutor of the Church of England reported in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 May 1953, Page 4.
 12. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 May 1953, Page 2.
 13. Quoted in *Catholic Tribune*, 14 May 1953, Page 5.

Catholic press”.¹⁴ Dr Rumble was to play a prominent role in the coinage debate later in 1953. Meanwhile, a report on 27th May announced that new florin pieces would be issued on Monday 1st June and that “the head of the Queen will replace that of King George VI but otherwise the design is unchanged”.¹⁵

June-August: The Release of New Coinage

The coronation of Queen Elizabeth II took place on 2nd June, and newspapers of that day announced that Australian banks had recently released thousands of the new florins. A press report, headed “Letters ‘F:D’ Will Not Appear on the Florin”, appeared in the *Melbourne Age* on 27th June and stated that the Commonwealth Treasury had decided to omit the letters “merely to simplify the inscription”. The report also noted that protests had already been received by the Government on the omission.¹⁶ The controversy of the previous month concerning the Title of “Defender of the Faith” soon erupted again. Much comment was made by Dr Rumble in his syndicated features. His view was that since Australia officially professed no particular form of religion, then the title was inappropriate to Australia. He contended that while the Anglican Church was the established Church in England, this was not the case in Australia. The main opposition to the Title from a Catholic point of view, according to Dr Rumble, was that the one conferred by the British Parliament in 1543 was no substitute for the Papal Title of 1521. He concluded: “the Government authorities must have seen fit to omit the title from Australian Queen Elizabeth coinage, and they must have believed that they had good reason for doing so from a constitutional point of view”.¹⁷ Similar views were put forward by Father E. J.

Storman in *The Record*, the official Western Australian Catholic newspaper. Predictably, these views led to speculation that the Government had made the decision to obtain political support from Catholics.

September: The first Question in Parliament

On 16th September in the House of Representatives, Mr Turnbull (Country Party, Mallee) asked the Prime Minister: “In directing a question to the Prime Minister, I explain that there is some concern in my electorate regarding the deletion of the initials “‘F:D’”, meaning ‘Defender of the Faith’, from the inscription on the new Australian coinage. Will the right honourable gentleman explain the reason for that deletion?” The Prime Minister, Mr Menzies, replied: “The expression ‘Defender of the Faith’ is, of course, contained in the Royal Style and Titles approved by this Parliament, and so there is no question of altering the Royal Style and Titles which, in the case of Australia, is as follows: ‘Elizabeth the Second, by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom, Australia and Her Other Realms and Territories Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith’. No alteration has been made there, but, as other countries involved have discovered, considerations of space must apply, when a coin is designed. The inscription contains two initial letters “‘D:G’” meaning “‘By the Grace of God’”, but the initials “‘F:D’” are not included. The non-inclusion of these initials is not peculiar to Australian coinage.¹⁸ It does not for a moment involve any abandonment of any element of the Royal Style and Title. When, however, we are dealing with a conventional structure like a coin there are, as I have

14. Quoted in *The Anglican*, 9 October 1953, Page 1.

15. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 May 1953, Page 4.

16. As for example, the United Protestant’s Association and the Rev Alan Walker of the Methodist Church Mission (reported in the *Melbourne Sun*, 29 June 1953).

17. *Tribune*, 27 August 1953, Page 7.

18. Except for Great Britain and Australia, “Defender of the Faith” has been specified on the coinage of few British Commonwealth countries.

already said, considerations of space.¹⁹ After all, we could hardly reduce everything in the inscriptions to a mere series of initial letters that might turn out to be meaningless. The amount of lettering on the coins has, therefore, been reduced.”

October: *The Anglican Newspaper Enters the Debate*

During September, Anglican Diocesan Synods in Adelaide and Perth passed resolutions protesting on the deletion of “F:D” from the coinage.²⁰ On 9th October *The Anglican* devoted the whole of the front page to the controversy, publishing correspondence between the newspaper and Government leaders. The newspaper alleged that the omission of the Title had been made to gain political support for the Government from Catholics in Queensland and Western Australia. Published Government correspondence stated that the inscription had been amended for simplicity and that it had been approved by the Queen. One part of a letter from the Prime Minister read “I think you would be unwise to proceed on the assumption that in such matters, Her Majesty’s approval is a mere form”. Mr Menzies concluded: “The facts are quite clear. Moreover they do not admit of any sinister interpretation as you appear to infer”. However the damage had already been done. This was followed in succeeding weeks by letters to the editor in *The Anglican*, by resolutions of more Anglican synods and by the public intervention of Dr Mowll. A particularly vigorous campaign of opposition came from the Rt Rev W. H. Johnson, Anglican Bishop of Ballarat. These criticisms undoubtedly prompted Prime Minister Menzies to decide on the restoration of “F:D” to the 1954 Royal Visit commemorative florin, and later to the general coinage.

November: The Second Question in Parliament

A further question in Parliament was asked on 25th November, this time by Dr Evatt, Leader of the Opposition: “My question to the Treasurer concerns a matter about which I have received many representations. On the coins recently struck by this Government there has been an omission, for the first time in the history of Australia, of a vital portion of Her Majesty’s title, that is, “Defender of the Faith”. When the Prime Minister was asked a question about this matter some time ago by a Government supporter, the right honourable gentleman stated that there was no physical room on the coins for this title. Will the Treasurer say whether it is not a fact that for the first time in our history the words “By the Grace of God” have been engraved in full on our coins for the very purpose of preventing the words “Defender of the Faith” from being inserted in the usual way? If that is not so, will the Government, in accordance with a recent request by a meeting of bishops of the Church of England, ensure that that title, which is part of the Royal style and titles authorized by this Parliament, shall be restored”. The Treasurer, Sir Arthur Fadden replied: “The observations made by the right honourable gentleman will be considered, and a reply will be furnished to him”.

December: The Decision is Reversed

On 2nd December, the Government announced through the *Commonwealth Gazette* that the 1954 florin commemorating the visit of Queen Elizabeth II would have “F:D” incorporated in the obverse inscription. This decision had been made by Prime Minister Menzies as early as October.⁽²¹⁾ An editorial in the *Sydney Morning*

19. This statement was strongly criticised because of its apparent disregard of the actual inscriptions used on Australian coins between 1910 and 1952 (*The Anglican*, 30 October 1953; Dr Evatt, Question in Parliament, 25 November 1953).

20. *The Anglican*, 11 September 1953, Page 1.

21. Letter from Commonwealth Treasury to Melbourne Branch of Royal Mint dated 26 October 1953.

Herald on 24th December, entitled “A Comedy of Errors”, speculated “that some malevolent — and presumably Protestant — gremlin is haunting the Cabinet room at Canberra. Every one of their not very subtle attempts to woo the Roman Catholic vote this year has come to grief. They appointed Mr Paul McGuire, Ambassador to Eire — and the Irish Government would not have him. They fiddled with the Table of Precedence to give the Cardinal precedence over the Primate — and found it unpopular and unnecessary. Then they dropped the words Defender of the Faith off the Australian florin — and now they have had to put them back again.” *The Anglican*, in an editorial on 8th January 1954, postulated that “it may be hoped that the repercussions over the ‘graceless’ florin will not be forgotten by anyone who wishes to retain his place in Canberra.”



1954 to 1966: Restoration and Omission Again

Commencing in 1955, all Australian silver coins were struck with ‘F:D’ incorporated as part of the obverse inscription. Pennies and halfpennies were brought into line when first minted after 1955, in 1956 and 1959 respectively. However when decimal currency was introduced in February 1966 all Royal Titles were removed from the new coinage, except for the words “ELIZABETH II AUSTRALIA”. The absence of controversy at this time almost certainly resulted from a deeper community concern with the new system of currency, as well as a reduced debate on the roles of Church and state.

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