

DR FRANK MITCHELL

My Father first expressed an interest in coins when he was just four years old. He matriculated in 1936 and, following his late father's example, studied medicine at the University of Cape Town. After graduating he immediately donned a military uniform and, after a rushed wedding to his teenage sweetheart, my mother Betty Sinclair, in May 1942, he went up north as Regimental Medical Officer with Prince Alfred's Guard, serving in Italy with the 6th South African Armoured Division. He returned home in 1946 and after further medical studies joined the Divisional Council of the Cape, rendering public health services to the diverse cross section of the population of Greater Cape Town. As head of department and Medical Officer of Health for the Combined Health Scheme of Greater Cape Town, he followed with distinction his father's career as the first Secretary of Health for the young Union of South Africa.

He soon joined the fledgling South African Numismatic Society in 1947 and, as Editor, initiated the circulation of an informative monthly newsletter, expanding this to a more detailed Numismatic Journal 20 years later. His passion for numismatics knew no bounds and he set about building a collection of Kruger coins, speaking and writing widely on every aspect of his hobby. Such was his influence that soon he became the most well-known name on the South African numismatic scene. He was elected President of this very active society on numerous occasions and the collection of ZAR coins now offered for sale was displayed at the highly acclaimed Second Numismatic Convention held under the auspices of the society in Cape Town in January 1964. For several years my Father wrote a fortnightly article under the pseudonym Numismatikus for the Afrikaans Daily newspaper Die Burger.

In writing his introduction to numismatics he recalled: 'My final downfall came when an old family friend showed me his collection. I listened spellbound as he introduced me to his coin portrait gallery. He allowed me to hold a Macedonian tetradrachm of Alexander the Great while he told me of his incredible exploits. My hand trembled as I studied the fine portrait of Alexander in his lion's-head head-dress. Two and a quarter thousand years ago he died – though only 33, the conqueror of most of the known world. Suddenly, as I studied the coin, the truth dawned – I was holding history in my hand! That surely is the key to the fascination of numismatics. Every little piece of metal which is a coin has a story to tell. Each is a link in the chain of human history, starting from that far-off day in about 700 BC when a king in Lydia in Asia Minor first had the bright idea of stamping his royal seal on a little chunk of silver. As civilisations waxed and waned, many of mankind's most gifted artists have bequeathed to us and posterity tiny sculptures in enduring metal, works of art which mirror the culture of their time, portraits of men and women whose influence have moulded the course of history. Where else but in numismatics can one contain twenty six centuries of art, of culture and of history, all in one cabinet?'

His interest in coins covered the full range of South African coins, from the numerous and varied trade coins which circulated at The Cape of Storms from the time the first European adventurers set foot on the tip of Africa, to the change from silver to nickel in our domestic coinage in the mid 1960s. He led a delegation of three society numismatists, including his great friend Mac Day and J.P. Roux, a former Director of the South African mint, in discussions with the Select Committee into Decimalization and a new coinage for South Africa and, fostering an alliance with the Chamber of Mines, he was the main driver in persuading the authorities to agree to the striking of both the Krugerrand gold bullion coin as well as the fine Silver R1 coin with its springbuck, which had been intended for the new 10 cent coin. Coert Steynberg's excellent portrayal of the springbok, originally depicted on the first crown of the Union series, issued to celebrate the royal visit in 1947, was retained for the Krugerrand. The collection of the so-called Transitional Patterns, which he subsequently assembled, was placed in the care of the Africana Museum, now known as Museum Africa, more than 40 years ago. His contribution to the Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa on the history of the country's coins gives a full and fascinating account of the wide variety of trade coins of the Early Cape to the domestic coinage of the Union introduced in 1923.

Perhaps his most rewarding numismatic experience was his close involvement with the recovery of a large number of coins from the shipwreck of the *Fame*, a British East Indiaman lost at Green Point in Cape Town in 1822. Similar finds followed, with considerable quantities of coins being recovered from the wrecks of the *Meeresteijn* (1702), and later, the *Reigersdal* (1747). His detailed and authoritative treatises on the coins from the wrecks of the *Fame* and the *Meeresteijn* were published in the *Journal of the Society*. Such was his leadership in this field that he was elected as the inaugural President of the Historical Wreck Society. His numismatic essay, 'A Foundation Stone "Hoard" het

Nuwe Kerk, Cape Town, 1833', published by the Society in 1986, bears testimony to his internationally acclaimed status as the doyen of South African numismatics. The names recorded in his numismatic Visitor's Book to the family home, 'Morningside', in Rondebosch, are a veritable Who's Who of South Africa's leading numismatists of his era. Amongst the many names are those of the well-American collector Richard Ford (for whom years later he wrote the sale preview when his South African collection was sold) and from London names such as Peter Seaby, David Spink, Douglas Liddell, Margaret Amstell and Lawrence Brown. In the early days of his collecting he struck up a great friendship with Edward Joslin who, like himself, had served in World War II. On occasion my Dad would recall the time when, as a young collector, he pondered over the expense of a purchase of a special coin. Edward Joslin, on not receiving a timorous reply promptly, on his own initiative, sent the coin out to South Africa on approval. His small parcel crossed my Dad's letter of regret while in the post. Now more than 60 years that very special silver coin, the so-called OFS 'Vrystaat' Kroon, is once again offered for sale.

My father never shirked his social responsibilities. Throughout his life he was a leader in the field of public health and ever mindful of the special needs of the disadvantaged communities surrounding Cape Town under his care. In the early 1950s, when public opinion hesitated in the need for polio immunization, he made a very public display of immunizing his own four children! He served a term as President of the Western Cape branch of the South African Medical Association and was a long-serving member of the executive committee of the South African National Tuberculosis Association (SANTA). He was a dedicated and active member of the Rotary Club of Cape Town and was one of the first South Africans to be accorded the honour of being elected as a Paul Harris Fellow.

Above all my father was a family man. A loving husband, a wonderful father and a very proud grandfather to thirteen grandchildren whom he adored.

Rob K. Mitchell

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