

The Official 1927 Canadian Diamond Jubilee Medals

By Barrie Renwick, FRCNA, FCNRS

For our 60th Anniversary celebration of Confederation, the Government of Canada created The Diamond Jubilee Committee to plan and oversee all festivities in this 1927 event. One of many projects given that Committee was government's wish to have three different medals made, with copies selectively given in two groups at different social levels: First a large commemorative medal, a counterpart to the 1867 Confederation Medal; this 1927 version for parliamentarians, officials and dignitaries; second, a small bronze medal with images of Queen Victoria and of King George V on its obverse, and the Shield of Canada wreathed in maple leaves on its reverse, a souvenir for each of the nation's schoolchildren; and third, a slightly larger medal of like design to award school pupils as winners in Education Essay Events held during the Jubilee.

The Committee delegated the medal project to its sub-entity—National Committee, instructing: designs to be by Canadian artists; the making of these medals to be done in the Ottawa Branch of the Royal Mint and, all metals used having been produced in Canada. These were heartfelt patriotic directives, but they were flawed: No one involved knew the nuances of medallic art; and sadly there were no trained medallists in Canada; and further—that the Royal Mint's authority would dominate. None the less, National Committee surged ahead.

Time was short for having medals ready by the 60th anniversary date, so after National's inquiries to our art community, three artists chosen were briefed, then asked to submit designs to the Committee for the large commemorative medal. The Committee had its own vision to guide the designs of the dies for both of the children's medals.

Part 1 – The Commemorative early pattern



Photo by David Secord

Alfred Laliberté of Montreal, a Quebec educator and noted sculptor of bronze figures, had his design for the large medal picked by the Committee. He was asked for a “finished model for the engraver.” His model arrived at the Ottawa Mint February 28, 1927, and as tools and dies for the branch were made in London, it went forward to the Royal Mint via our High Commissioner travelling to his post. Ottawa Branch Mint Deputy Master John H. Campbell’s letter, 2 March 1927, told Royal Mint London’s Deputy Master & Comptroller, Sir Robert Johnson that Ottawa had sent Laliberté’s model for the Mint Advisory Committee to approve its design, and Campbell asked about work details so Ottawa Mint could prepare to make these medals.

Campbell’s letter following this shipment also added, for the Advisory Committee, that the obverse portraits of the three sovereigns were copied from coins, and the Armorial bearings of Canada were those proclaimed in 1921. In his opinion the model “would require some, perhaps considerable working over” to improve quality, and National Committee expected such changes to be recommended. The Advisory Committee meeting notes of 30 March 1927 say Laliberté’s model, firstly, has to be improved so that dies can be made. That work was done for the Royal Mint by medallist Carter Preston. The Royal Mint Museum has the resultant tools for this medal’s dies and a pair of trial strikes, a bronze and a lead.¹ These examples tally with what Campbell’s letter described, and they were in issue-stage appearance when viewed by the Advisory Committee.

A subsequent report from the Advisory Committee to Sir Robert Johnson at RM London includes a brief comment on Laliberté’s medal that says, in its view “the medal . . . should represent . . . an idea of unity, instead of continuing to emphasize the Provincial look² . . . by crowding the medal with a number of figures as he has.” Later, Johnson himself comments, on page 10 of his 1927 Annual Report, that from this recommendation, National Committee wisely decided: “To postpone the issue of the Medal for a year, and start afresh from the beginning.”

Part 2 – The official Commemorative Medals

The 1927 Confederation Jubilee Medal

National Committee chose Canadian Charles William Jefferys RCA, artist and educator, to distil its ideas into an acceptable design for the large medal. Jefferys combined the Committee’s thoughts that reflected the Mint Advisory’s opinions; he supplemented these with references to Canada’s founding nations, Great Britain and France, by proposing the obverse die to be a British design chosen by the Royal Mint London—George V’s effigy, and the reverse die—National’s ideas rendered by a French artist—to be a French design by Monnaie de Paris. Jefferys then travelled to Paris, selected the artist and arranged with the Paris Mint for the reverse die and its delivery to London for shipment with the Royal Mint’s obverse.

¹ In Canada an example of each existed separately: The lead version was lot 45 in Torex Auction 6, February 26, 1988; the bronze, lot 1139 in Torex Auction 10, October 28, 1988. Three decades later, the bronze was displayed at the 2019 Calgary RCNA Convention.

² Repeating the theme of the 1867 medal’s reverse.

In his 1928 Annual Report, Deputy Campbell, Ottawa, remarked that though London had warned the possibility of a problem-free technical outcome of the joint-mints' work was unlikely, National Committee's reaction had been serenely optimistic; still, his own trust in Jefferys' having chosen renowned French medallist Raymond Delamarre, and for having made good arrangements with the Paris Mint, had given Campbell faith that delays had now ended; but fate intervened. When the dies had arrived in Ottawa in July 1928, an unforeseen urgent demand for coins erupted, overwhelming the Ottawa Mint, bumping medal production to a release well beyond the extended 1928 anniversary date, and nearly to the year's end. Happily these recognized medals' eventual arrival managed to overcome the disappointments of long waiting recipients.



The medal (BHM 4214) is 76 mm in diameter. In *The Canadian Numismatic Journal*, July • August 2021 “Canada’s Diamond Jubilee Medal” B. Renwick provides us this description:

The obverse shows the official portrait of George V, by Bertram Mackennel, with the legend “Confederation Canada.” The reverse by Raymond Delamarre has a full-height female personification of Canada clad in a classical Ionic chiton, with a diaphanous stole over her left arm and it wafting as a circle, behind. She stands barefoot and facing, on a plinth dated 1867–1927; she’s in front of a map of Canada, with her arms spread to express Canada’s Motto in the legend above, while she looks east to the nation’s capital her hair billows in a breeze. Behind the plinth are sprays with heads of a cereal-grain, left, and maple leaves, right, symbols of the nation’s abundance. In the lower fields, names of Canada’s early explorers: east – Cartier; Champlain; and west – Cook; Vancouver. The design is in Art Deco, the style emerging at the time. The medals were struck in Ottawa.³ Six were made in gold, 125 in silver and 600 in tombac; the numbers six and six hundred allude to the years of nationhood. Each medal was in a fitted case and with a description card.

³ Johnson’s London letter 29 October 1928 to Campbell, says Delamarre was presented “one of the trial copies that were struck here.”

The 1927 Schoolchildren Medal



Campbell at Ottawa in his progress-report to London, 2 March 1927, ends it with a reminder, that for the Schoolchildren Medal, his “idea” is London will provide working dies. Evidently London thinks otherwise because dies for National’s simple design of the schoolchildren medal might be inexpensively made for the mint by an Ottawa business. In Campbell’s subsequent report, 29 April 1927 with details of the medal’s design, he mentions that of the dies he’d ordered from an Ottawa maker—he had to cancel that work as unsatisfactory, retrieve the dies, have Mr. H.S. Low, a mint employee with engraving experience rework them, and “I think . . . they will pass muster.”

On 9 September 1927 Campbell’s progress report says over two million souvenir medals were struck, but time lost to die-work delay required striking them as coins rather than as medals and forgoing the planned toning. He notes that to meet the medals’ distribution date “*girls* were employed evenings to do packing.” With evident pride he adds, in capital letters, “one SCHOOL CHILDREN’S CONFEDERATION bronze medal [enclosed].”

The medal (Ch251) is 26 mm in diameter. Campbell’s description: “The obverse [has] the superimposed profiles of Queen Victoria (in her youth) and King George V, with the words ‘Confederation Canada’ and the dates 1867 and 1927, and on the reverse the arms of Canada and the motto, surmounted by the Crown and enclosed in a wreath of maple. The thickness is twice that of the old cent.” The Royal Mint Report 1927 mentions “2,152,892 medals, each one-inch diameter, were struck in coinage bronze,” a total weight of 53,282 pounds. For the work, master dies produced 39 obverse and 75 reverse dies. Punches were created to produce a clasp, but the Committee abandoned the need for an attachment on medals.

The 1927 Education Medal

Deputy Campbell’s mention of the Schoolchildren Medal in his April 1927 progress report continues on with information about the Education Medal for which he was authorized to source dies. His subsequent reports tell London that Roden Bros., Toronto, cut the dies and produced the blanks used by the Mint to strike 81 medals in .750 fine gold, 600 in fine silver and 2000 in coinage bronze. Campbell’s 16 July 1927 report mentions that work is completed. An example medal for London was included with the Schoolchildren Medal sent 9 September.



The medal is 36 mm in diameter. The obverse has the conjoined monarchs' portraits, from the smaller medal, in an annulus with the word "Confederation" above and "Canada" below. On the annulus at horizontal mid-points, left and right, small beaver-mounted plaques dated respectively 1867 and 1927. The reverse has the design from the smaller medal but slightly modified.

The Commemorative Medal and London's quandary

When Royal Mint employees began preparing for the 1927 medal's obverse die, anxiety bubbled up because the Mint's official "coinage" die tool of George V's crowned effigy, designed for smaller diameter pieces, had to have its shoulder area extended downward to fill space on this larger work. That revision would be time consuming, and its artist, Sir Bertram Mackennal, was far from complete on a project unable to be delayed. Mackennal and George V were close personal friends; the Monarch had insisted Mackennal's work be used. The King defended his friend's intent to redouble his effort to make the date now looming for the obverse master die. Wary mint administrators fretted.

The Mint had John Langford Jones' George V effigy in reserve, so RM's Johnson asked the King's Equerry, Frederick Ponsonby, to suggest His Majesty accept it in case of default. Ponsonby writes to Johnson, "The King will not hear of Jones' design . . . he thought he made that clear to you." With that and mounting worry, Johnson arranged for an artful option—if crucial: a cloned-effigy of George V by Percy Metcalfe (after Mackennal), a thought-to-be near-perfect copy of Mackennal's original but extended to fill space, and for it he had his Monarch's tacit consent and the Advisory Committee's memo: "Metcalfe's [submitted] model, though open to criticism, had many points in its favour . . . in the special circumstances [it] should be adopted for the Canadian Medal." It might have worked: It wasn't needed. Johnson held his breath and his backstop, but Bertram beat the deadline.

An Overview – The Twists and Turns

From planning to presentation, producing the commemorative medals relied on good oversight; sufficient time allotted; coordination of entities involved, enduring the era's slowness of communication exchanges; and depending on the distant groups and individuals involved. Missteps, oversights and shortcomings occasionally troubled those in Canada who had the greatest responsibilities but least authority over those beyond our shores. That it all came together was an accomplishment—one that those in Canada never knew nearly foundered because of the intransigence of King George V and the working pace of his sculptor friend.

Canada's 1927 Confederation medal project was an undertaking with inherent complexities. It comprised *planning* by a government committee; *design* by independent artists; *production* staged at three separate mint facilities, each in a country distant beyond the others' shores. This together with the influence of a reigning Monarch and communication limitations of the era made administration vulnerable to timing and oversights, and dependent on cooperation.

Project timing interruptions and planning missteps had already moved the distribution date for the large medal ahead by one year. By late April 1928 Mackennel's inability to provide the needed modification of His Majesty's effigy had Sir Robert Johnson worried because the Mint's obverse die had yet to be made, and shipping it for Ottawa's June deadline would consume a week of the time remaining. The revised effigy by Mackennel was also intended to be used on military medals, but the urgency of RM's commitment to Canada needed a backstop if the artist wasn't timely. The King had already refused a substitute work he disliked by another artist.

Now as time dwindled and with Johnson poised to use Metcalfe's revision of Mackennel's earlier work, it's evident Sir Bertram came through. Close examination of the effigy on the 1927 Confederation Medal convincingly shows Mackennel chose not to modify the Mint's "coinage" effigy but rather to revise his model for the King's 1911 Official Coronation Medal.

We will never know Sir Bertram's thinking when he made this 1927 effigy of his King and friend. But over 15 years had passed since his earlier Coronation Medal effigy of Geo V; perhaps Mackennel felt that as the King had by now earned the admiration of his subjects, this new effigy should be softened, like it is, to emphasize the man and mute the regal trappings that before had spelled power. Mackennel's newer effigy was *the* counterpart for the 1867 issue. Canada would now have its medal. Its year-late distribution was acceptable; recipients knew to expect its delay.

Afterword

The Mint File correspondence about the (coinage) effigy of Geo V needing modification for the Canadian project suggests the Mint overlooked Mackennel's 1911 Coronation version. In correspondence and Mint Reports of London and Ottawa, references to the effigy used on the Confederation medal are ambiguous about whether it's Mackennel's or Metcalfe's work; if

Metcalfe's—was it original work or just a modification of Mackennel's? Although Metcalfe's version went unused until after Mackennel died, in 1931, any altered original artwork is controversial.

To settle the uncertainty about which artist's work is the effigy of Geo V on the 1927 Commemorative Medal—and about whether the Metcalfe (reserve) effigy of Geo V was Metcalfe's own original copy or his alteration of Mackennel's original—photographic studies were made. With a photo of the original work sized, positioned and overlaid precisely on a photo of the new work the result shows clearly whether the basic outline of the new-work image corresponds exactly with the original source, or whether it differs because it's an entirely independent copy.

The photo technology resolves the Mint-record ambiguity of the time. For the 1927 Commemorative, it's clearly Mackennel's original work as made for the 1911 Coronation Medal but extended and absent coronation regalia, so the entry on page 127 in the Royal Canadian Mint's book, *Striking Impressions* misidentifies the artist. For Metcalfe's work used later for our 1935 silver dollar, the overlay shows Metcalfe used Mackennel's original "coinage" effigy. He extended it as required and modified some areas, such as the crown, hair-texture and uniform.

Photos by Bernard and Rufiange



Sources

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Royal Mint London File: RM 82245 MINT-20-1081 – from this file, copies of 22 pages of internal domestic and foreign letters, reports, and ephemera containing information associated with the 1927 Canadian Diamond Jubilee Medals project.

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