

Francis Edward Whelan (1848-1907) and the London Branch of the Rollin And Feuardent Firm

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The purpose of this note is to bring together in one convenient place what can be established about the career of Francis Edward Whelan (1848-1907), manager of the London branch of the Paris-based coin business Rollin and Feuardent, and for something over thirty years up to his death a major player in the London coin trade.

His father, Timothy Peter Whelan (c.1822-1863), known as Peter Whelan, had himself been a dealer in coins and antiquities from a succession of addresses in Holborn, Bloomsbury, Covent Garden and the Strand from the mid 1840s onwards.¹ His stay at each of these addresses was short, suggesting some inherent financial instability in his business model, but he was ambitious enough to have issued an advertising token dated 1848, promoting himself on the obverse as “Whelan dealer in ancient & modern coins medals & opposite British Museum, London”, while the reverse of the token offered “fine ancient Roman brass coins” for ‘1s. each’, as well as stating “Coins medals & purchased. Full value given”.²

As Hadrien Raimbach has recorded³, one of the legatees under the will of the well-known London coin dealer William Till (1782-1844) had been “Mr Timothy Peter Whelan of No.19, Chester Street, King’s Road, Chelsea”, to whom Till had bequeathed “the sum of nineteen pounds nineteen shillings”, i.e. 19 guineas. Till had bequeathed the same amount in his will to three other individuals, but of these only Whelan, aged about 18 when Till had his will drawn up in November 1840, seems at all likely to have been one of Till’s employees, and it seems extremely probable that Whelan had learned the coin trade as Till’s shop boy.

Francis Edward Whelan, Peter Whelan’s only son and elder child⁴, was baptised at Old St.Pancras Church on 3 July 1848. He would have been only 14 at the date of his father’s death in January 1863, and thus hardly old enough to have already entered the coin trade.⁵ There is no explicit evidence for the early years of his career, but an anecdote recounted by William Carew Hazlitt, writer, bibliophile and coin collector, places him as a boy in coin-dealing premises in the Haymarket⁶.

¹ For the outlines of Peter Whelan’s business career see the well-researched note by Baldwin Hamey, ‘Peter Whelan, coin dealer’, London Street Views, Suppl.08 Strand division, entry for 46 Strand (internet publication). Hamey’s remarks also incorporate some useful information about Francis Edward Whelan.

² See Hamey, loc.cit., for a good illustration of this.

³ H.Raimbach, ‘The testament of the London coin dealer William Till the younger (1782-1844)’, *Bulletin du Cercle d’Etudes Numismatiques* 55/2 (issue for May-August 2018), 10-14.

⁴ He had a younger sister, Alice Whelan, born in 1850.

⁵ His father Peter Whelan died 15 January 1863. Letters of administration of his estate were issued on 16 February 1863 to his widow Eliza (née Norris), Francis Edward Whelan’s mother, and his effects were assessed at a value of under £200.

⁶ W.C.Hazlitt, *The Hazlitts, Part the Second, A Narrative of the Later Fortunes of the Family*, Edinburgh, 1912, 268. The anecdote relates to Edward Wright Wigan (1823-1871), a wealthy and vigorous collector in the Greek and Roman series. In Hazlitt’s recounting of it, Francis Edward Whelan

The Haymarket address is significant, for it was at 27 Haymarket in the autumn or early winter of 1866 that Gaston-Louis Feuardent (1843-1893) set up the London branch of Rollin and Feuardent, the Parisian firm of dealers in coins and antiquities headed at that time by Claude-Camille Rollin (1813-1883) and by Félix-Bienaimé Feuardent (1819-1907). Gaston-Louis Feuardent was Félix-Bienaimé Feuardent's eldest surviving son, and thus a natural enough choice to head a newly established branch of the business that would both be able to tap into the requirements of British coin collectors, and profit from the range of coins from worldwide sources which at that date found their way to London rather than to Paris.

The date at which Rollin and Feuardent's London branch opened can be established within quite precise limits. The premises at 27 Haymarket had previously been occupied by another coin dealer, George Eastwood, who had died on 15 October 1866 and who must have been in business there either until his death or not long before his death, while Gaston-Louis Feuardent was already in business at the same address when he was elected a member of the Numismatic Society of London on 15 November 1866. The Rollin and Feuardent firm only remained at this address for four or five years after 1866, and if Francis Edward Whelan worked as a boy at the Haymarket premises, as the anecdote mentioned above would suggest, he would have entered Rollin and Feuardent's employment before the end of the 1860s, and perhaps indeed at the very start of the firm's London operations.

The firm's next address was 61 Great Russell Street, London WC1, to where it had migrated by December 1871, remaining there until 1888. Although this remained Gaston-Louis Feuardent's address in the Numismatic Society of London's list of members throughout this period⁷, he had in fact emigrated to the United States in 1876, setting up a further branch of the Rollin and Feuardent business in New York. Why he should have done so is obscure, and may remain so, since the archives of the Rollin and Feuardent firm, latterly Feuardent Frères, have disappeared.⁸ He was to remain in the USA from then onwards, dying in New York in the summer of 1893, and an obituary notice of him by Alfred Trumble, printed in Trumble's periodical *The Collector*⁹, recording that Feuardent "had been out of active business for some years before he died", also describes him as "personally an honourable and amiable gentleman, nervous and excitable, but full of spirit and energy". It may well be that the character traits that Trumble identifies played some part in the trajectory of his career¹⁰, and it is certainly strange that he never returned to France, where in the normal order of things he might have expected to assume a prominent role in the family business.

is represented as remembering a coin-purchasing transaction between his father and Wigan, but he would scarcely have been old enough to have been present on such an occasion, and the anecdote is explicitly set in the Haymarket, where Peter Whelan was never in business. It seems likely that Hazlitt misunderstood or misremembered whatever Francis Edward Whelan had told him.

⁷ His eventual resignation from the Numismatic Society of London was announced at the Society's AGM in 1889.

⁸ J.Lafaurie, 'La Revue Numismatique à 150 ans', RN 1986, 8-50 (at p.34).

⁹ A.Trumble (ed), *The Collector*, vol.iv, no.10 (issue for 1 July 1893).

¹⁰ When in New York he got himself involved in a well-publicised controversy with Luigi Palma di Cesnola, Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, over the extent of the restorations which had been carried out to objects discovered by Palma di Cesnola in excavations on Cyprus, and this proved personally damaging to both of them. On a more positive note, Feuardent served as Curator of Archaeology for the American Numismatic Society between 1885 and 1888.

Gaston-Louis Feuardent was not replaced as head of the firm's London branch either by his younger brother Léon-Félix Feuardent (1849-1931) or by Charles Rollin (1843-1906), the last member of the Rollin family dynasty to be associated with the Paris firm. That would have left Francis Edward Whelan in control at 61 Great Russell Street, although the ownership of the premises was to remain in the names of the senior partners in the Paris firm, and it was to be some time yet before Whelan emerged into the light of day as a member of the Numismatic Society of London¹¹.

The 1881 Census shows that Whelan, described in it as “numismatist”, was living at 61 Great Russell Street, with his wife Emma, who he had married in 1874, and a female domestic servant. He and his wife seem not to have had children, and there is no evidence from this or from subsequent censuses that he had junior coin trade employees living on the premises either at Great Russell Street or at the firm's subsequent addresses in Bloomsbury Street. All the evidence in fact points to the Rollin and Feuardent's firm's London presence after 1876 having been a one-man operation wholly run by Whelan, and those of us who today turn the pages of named copies of late nineteenth century coin auction catalogues and note purchases at them by “Rollin” must visualise Whelan sitting through long hours at auction sales and picking off lot after lot on behalf of his Parisian employers¹².

It is apparent that as time passed Whelan won the trust of a wide range of British collectors, and a high point in his career seems to have been that he, as the representative of the Rollin and Feuardent firm, acted as the British Museum's buying agent at the sales in 1895-6 of the great collection made by Hyman Montagu. It is a matter for regret that little was recorded about him by contemporaries, and it is tantalising that Leonard Forrer, in his ‘Numismatic Reminiscences of the Last Sixty Years’, delivered as a talk to the British Numismatic Society on 28 April 1948, states that “I could tell many tales” about Whelan, but does not actually do so¹³. Forrer does however record in the same talk that a contemporary London dealer, William Talbot Ready (1857-1914), “confined himself then [in 1890], as Whelan, to classical coins”, and a specialisation by Whelan in the Greek and Roman series would have been not unnatural, given that his Parisian employers would not themselves have been much interested in the coinages of the British Isles.

The gap is partially filled by the published recollections of William Carew Hazlitt, from whose *The Confessions of a Collector*, 1897, two passages may be quoted.

The first reads :

¹¹ He was elected to membership of the Society on 15 February 1883.

¹² The present writer possesses a copy of the 1889 Sotheby catalogue of the collection of the Dorset antiquary Charles Warne, in which an individual who must have been sitting through the sale recorded the names of the purchasers of each lot in pencil, giving “Whelan” as the purchaser of lots which in officially priced and named copies of the catalogue would have been recorded as having been knocked down to “Rollin”.

¹³ Forrer's talk, circulated in typescript at the time, was eventually published in the centenary volume of the British Numismatic Society, *BNJ* 73, 2003, 191-6. The reference to Whelan is at p.193, where Forrer refers to Whelan as ‘Peter’ Whelan, suggesting that Whelan was known to his contemporaries by the nickname ‘Peter’ in memory of his father.

With Mr Whelan himself my intercourse, spreading over many years, has been most regular, as it has been most agreeable and instructive. He was born in the business, and has been largely employed by the British Museum and by the auctioneers as an expert. He of course attended some of the country sales, and his experience could not fail to be singular. I called on his return from Staffordshire. He had been unlucky on a visit to the same neighbourhood; all the world was there, and heavy prices ruled. Undaunted, he made a second attempt, and got an extraordinary haul of *cinque cento* bronze medals, which went for about 30s each. The auctioneer knew nothing about them, and Whelan drew up an *extempore* catalogue, by which they were sold – mainly to him. His principals [the Paris-based partners in Rollin and Feuardent] struck me at first, I confess, as rather *laissez aller* folks; but while they do not disdain petty traffic, their profits chiefly arise from transactions, where there is a nabobish margin of £1500 or £2000¹⁴.

The second passage comes from later in Hazlitt's book :

I was brought into contact with the English representative of the Paris firm of Rollin & Feuardent in a perfectly accidental way. I had detected in a forthcoming sale at Sotheby's, among a heap of miscellanies in a bag, a well-preserved *double* in piedfort of Henry III of France. I pointed it out to Lincoln [the coin dealer, Frederick William Lincoln]; but he missed it, and Mr Whelan was the acquirer. It was destined for a client, and I did not secure it; but the matter made Mr Whelan and I acquainted, and we have been very pleasantly so ever since. His father was in the same line of business before him, and knew Edward Wigan and other men of that generation. I have already observed that the Agency in Bloomsbury [the Rollin and Feuardent firm] is the resort of well-nigh all the most eminent hunters, not only for coins and medals, but for antiquities of every description.

It is not that I am able to speak of myself as a conspicuous figure in the circle that frequents this spot, or as an appreciable element in the large mercantile transactions, that are conducted here and at headquarters. But I am indulgently tolerated, and now and then I find a trifle or two to my liking. Mr Whelan stands in due awe of my excruciating and almost outrageous passion for *state*, and looks upon me (with much good nature) as a most difficult party to please and fit. He is fully aware, how narrow my means are, and seldom tenders me, except as a compliment or for numismatic purposes, his grander *bijoux*¹⁵.

Hazlitt goes on to mention at this point in his book a number of coin transactions in which he and Whelan were involved, and records that he owed "to my excellent acquaintance [Whelan] my introduction to Lord Grantley, who I first met under his roof".

¹⁴ W.C. Hazlitt, *The Confessions of a Collector*, 1897, 221. An immediately preceding paragraph describes Whelan's role in inducing Hyman Montagu to make one of his biggest purchases, the acquisition for £7000 of the entirety of the coin collection formed by Samuel Addington. Hazlitt also mentions at this reference that Canon William Greenwell (1820-1918), a widely respected archaeologist and a notable collector of Greek coins, was "very intimate with Mr Whelan, and stayed with him, when in town".

¹⁵ Hazlitt, *op.cit.*, 267-8.

Whelan and the Rollin and Feuardent firm moved after 1888 to nearby Bloomsbury Street, London WC1, initially to premises at 19 Bloomsbury Street (1889-95), and then to premises at 6 Bloomsbury Street (1895-1907). He was to continue to manage the firm until his death on 21 August 1907. His will was proved on 20 September 1907, his effects being valued at the relatively small amount of £1508 4s 2d. It may be thought that the size of his estate was poor reward for long years of service to the Rollin and Feuardent firm, but he had clearly never possessed any financial stake in it, and it might be that he was content to live off whatever salary he was paid in return for the major role and status within the coin trade that his position with Rollin and Feuardent brought him.

His death took place at a moment of flux in the history of the Parisian end of the business, for Charles Rollin had died on 13 September 1906, and Félix-Bienaimé Feuardent, the patriarch of the firm, was to die on 11 August 1907. By December 1911 the business had been reconstituted as Feuardent Frères, under the ownership of Félix-Bienaimé Feuardent's three grandsons, Antoine, Georges and Robert. This would seem to have bypassed their father, Léon-Félix Feuardent (1849-1931), scarcely young enough to have retired from business life at this point in time, and it may or may not be relevant that the late Jean Lafaurie completely overlooked the existence of Léon-Félix Feuardent in his summary of the role of the Rollin and Feuardent firm as publishers of the periodical *Revue Numismatique*¹⁶.

Nonetheless the Rollin and Feuardent firm moved quickly to replace Whelan as their London representative by William Talbot Ready, who, as we have already seen, shared the same specialist interest in the Greek and Roman series as Whelan had had. William Talbot Ready had long been in business at 55 Rathbone Place, London W1, but the 1908 membership list of what was now the Royal Numismatic Society shows him at 6 Bloomsbury Street, the Rollin and Feuardent firm's address. He moved in 1909 to 66 Great Russell Street, and this turned out to be Rollin and Feuardent's final London premises. The departure of Rollin and Feuardent from the London numismatic scene, after nearly half a century there, followed on from William Talbot Ready's death on 14 January 1914, but, for all we know, permanent closure of the firm's London branch may not then have been intended, and it may be that it was the outbreak of the 1914-1918 war that was the decisive factor.



¹⁶ J.Lafaurie, *op.cit.*, p.49. Lafaurie believed that the three Feuardent brothers who reconstituted the business in 1911 were the sons of Félix-Bienaimé Feuardent. They were in fact the children of Léon-Félix Feuardent and his wife Marie Rosalie, a daughter of the celebrated French painter Jean-François Millet (who had been a very close friend of the Feuardent family). John Spring has made the same error about the Feuardent brothers' parentage (J.Spring, *Ancient Coin Auction Catalogues 1880-1980*, 61).