

HYMAN MONTAGU 1844-1895

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PART 2: DEVELOPMENT OF THE COLLECTION FROM 1889 ONWARDS

Montagu's purchase of the Brice collection persuaded him, as the catalogue introduction previously referred to records, that "the field for acquiring English coins, not already in his collection, was now growing very limited, and that if he continued to carry out this pursuit he must turn his attention to other branches". One decision that he took, sparked by the acquisition from the Spink firm in 1889 of a beautiful stater of Croton¹ (subsequently lot 73 in the sale of Montagu's Greek coins, Sotheby 23-28 March 1896, 816 lots), was to put together a collection in the Greek series. This he quickly built up, beginning with purchases in the London auction rooms and from British coin dealers, but soon buying from further afield. The introduction to the auction catalogue of the first portion of his Greek collection mentions Montagu as making "frequent visits to the Continent", which "placed him in correspondence with the foreign dealers" and suggests that "there was scarcely one of any standing over the whole width and breadth of Europe and in Asia Minor with whom he had not transactions at one time or another".

The most important of these transactions was his purchase in 1893 of the entirety of the stock of Greek coins held by the veteran Parisian coin dealer Henri Hoffmann (1823-1897). As no coins in the two auction catalogues in which Montagu's Greek coins were offered after his death are assigned Hoffmann provenances, it is for a Greek specialist to work out which of the coins in Montagu's collection may have been from this source, but there is no reason to doubt the essential validity of a statement in the introduction to the first of the two catalogues concerned that this was "a splendid acquisition, as it contained a very large number of very fine and exceedingly interesting coins". This and other purchases had combined by the time of Montagu's death to make his collection strong in many of the high spots of the Greek series, if not quite as all-embracing as it would have been if he had lived longer².

Montagu also decided at about this time that he should begin to put together a comprehensive collection of Roman and Byzantine gold coins. Although he also possessed holdings of Roman silver and copper coins, the primary element in his cabinets devoted to Roman coins was his gold series, where comprehensiveness was in principle rather easier to achieve than was the case with his Greek collection, and the sale catalogue of the auction of these held after his death in Paris, 20-28 April

¹ The purchase of this coin, and the fact that it was the first Greek coin acquired by Montagu, is explicitly recorded in the introduction to the Sotheby auction catalogue in which his Greek coins were offered. Leonard Forrer adds the detail that the coin was sold to Montagu by the Spink firm (L.Forrer, 'Numismatic reminiscences of the last sixty years', *BNJ* 73, 2003, 191-6, at p.194).

² See H.Montagu, 'On some unpublished and rare Greek coins in my collection', *NC* 3rd series vol.12, 1892, 22-39, for 29 of Montagu's major acquisitions in the Greek series prior to his transaction with Hoffmann.

1896, with Maurice Delestre as *commissaire-priseur* and the Rollin and Feuardent firm as *experts*, and realising a total of 363,004 French francs (equivalent at that time to a little over £15,000), ran to as many as 1291 lots. Of these, lots 1-1033 were gold *aurei*, spanning the whole period from the last century of the Roman Republic to the fall of the Western Roman Empire, while lots 1034-1291 were gold coins struck for Eastern Roman Emperors and for their Byzantine successors between the late fourth century and the early years of the fourteenth century.

This was the largest collection of Roman and Byzantine gold coins brought together up to that time by any private collector. A fair number of the coins had previously been in the well-known collections formed by the French collectors the Vicomte de Ponton d'Amécourt and the Vicomte de Quélen³, but these collections had been dispersed at auctions in Paris respectively held in April 1887 and in May 1888, before there is any evidence for Montagu making a significant specialist collection in this area, and most of Montagu's coins from these sources were doubtless hoovered up by him at a later date from the French coin dealers who had purchased the coins in question at these sales. It should be said that the catalogue of Montagu's Roman coins prepared by Rollin and Feuardent is uninformative on the provenance front, other than for coins which had been in the Ponton d'Amécourt collection, and here again it is for a specialist in the Roman series to work out the past histories of the coins for which no provenance is recorded⁴.

What certainly impressed contemporaries was the vigour with which Montagu pursued his aim of putting together a comprehensive collection in this field. As W.C.Hazlitt put it :

Take the Roman gold of the late Mr.Hyman Montagu. That gentleman suddenly conceived it to be his mission to become master, not merely of all the really interesting coins in that metal and series; but it was peremptory that he should outdo every one else, and that he should be able to proclaim that he had every gold piece struck by every obscure and insignificant ruler down to the fall of the empire; and I believe that he was gratified. He could plead nothing for his project beyond its completeness; and that very feature was its weak point. Think how infinitely preferable it is to select the best; they are to be had at moderate prices; they appeal to every one, who has a fair degree of culture; and they occupy less room. The rarities are usually of poor work and fabric as well as of princes who reigned just long enough to stamp their names and effigies on a circular disc of gold. Mr Montagu, however, felt bound to draw a broad line of distinction between humbler aspirants and himself; and he erected this monument to his memory⁵.

³ Forrer, *op.cit.*, 2003, 194. In his posthumous article in *NC* (n.26, below) Montagu refers to a number of coins of his which had featured in the Ponton d'Amécourt sale, but of these just one is specifically described as having been "purchased" at the sale. It looks as if Montagu's meaningful acquisitions of Roman coins from coin auctions in Paris might have effectively commenced with purchases for him at the Du Chastel sale in May 1889.

⁴ For 139 of the highlights in Montagu's collection of Roman gold up to the reign of the Emperor Gallienus see H.Montagu, 'Rare and unpublished Roman gold coins in my collection', *NC* 3rd series vol.17, 1897, 35-89 (published posthumously from notes left by Montagu at his death). This supplies a number of provenances not noted in the Rollin and Feuardent auction catalogue.

⁵ Hazlitt, *Confessions of a Collector*, 320.

The latter part of these remarks reflect Hazlitt's personal take on the character of this part of Montagu's collection, and it is clear that Hazlitt, who collected coins with a keen eye for their condition and artistic appeal, did not properly appreciate the utility of collecting coins of poorer quality which happened to be of importance for scholarly numismatic research. It is also worth observing that Montagu came to the Roman coinage when he had already put together a virtually comprehensive collection in the British milled series, and he can hardly be blamed for setting himself the goal of putting together, over time, a similarly comprehensive collection of Roman gold.

The changing focus of Montagu's collecting aims led him in 1890 to take the decision to part with the entirety of his collection of milled coins of British monarchs from George I onwards⁶. On this occasion he did not consign them to the sale room, but sold them as a whole to the Spink firm, on the understanding that they would issue a printed catalogue in which every coin in the collection would be listed. This was duly done, and the resulting catalogue, personally compiled by Samuel Marshall Spink⁷, the dominant partner in the business, was issued by the Spink firm late in 1890 or early in 1891, under the title *Catalogue with numerous illustrations of a collection of milled English coins, dating from the reign of George I to that of her present Majesty and including patterns and proofs of that period in gold, silver, and bronze, &c.* The listing in the catalogue of the normal currency issues is basic, although accompanied by statements about their condition and by provenances for the rarer specimens, but the cataloguing of the patterns and proofs, of which Montagu had an unrivalled collection, is more detailed, and there are, unusually for the period, numerous photographic illustrations in the body of the text to direct readers' attention to the more interesting pieces.

The disposal of this part of Montagu's collection was followed in 1892 by his consignment of his collection of patterns and proofs in the British colonial series to the sale room (Sotheby, 3-4 May 1892, 333 lots, realising a total of £1226). This also was of unrivalled quality, but Montagu's decision to part with it followed on logically from his earlier decision to part with his patterns and proofs in the post-1714 British milled series proper⁸.

It would however be wrong to give the impression that Montagu's involvement with the British series more generally was to diminish after his purchase of William Brice's collection, for he had made very substantial purchases, bidding via Spink, at the sale by Sotheby's in 1888 of the splendid collection of Anglo-Saxon, English and related coins made by the Hon. Robert Marsham, and the provenances shown in the catalogues of the Sotheby auction sales in which his collection was offered after his death show that he had been filling significant gaps in his holdings of coins of Celtic,

⁶ The author of the introduction to the catalogue of the first British portion of the collection to be sold after Montagu's death accounts for this disposal on the grounds that "the later coins from George I to Victoria never possessed much charm for him", but this hardly squares with the formidable effort that Montagu must have put into the formation of his collection of milled coins of Britain's Hanoverian rulers, and it seems more probable that it was the serious demands on his bank balance after he had commenced collecting in the Greek and Roman series that led to this transaction with Spink.

⁷ This is recorded by Forrer, *op.cit.*, 194.

⁸ The sale also included (lots 31-58) Montagu's small but good collection of coins belonging to the Anglo-Hanoverian series.

Anglo-Saxon, Norman, Plantagenet⁹, Tudor and Stuart rulers right up to the winter of 1894/5¹⁰.

The growth of his collection in the English historical medal series and in the Greek series led to two final disposals. Montagu's duplicate medals were offered as a collection "commemorating the most interesting events in British history, from the sixteenth to the end of the eighteenth century" (Sotheby 8-9 May 1894, lots 1-246, sold as "the property of a gentleman"), and the sale gave Montagu the opportunity to offload a small number of unwanted coins from other areas of his collection (lots 247-275). The sale of duplicates from the Greek portion of Montagu's collection was a rather more significant affair (Sotheby, 11-13 December 1894, 458 lots, sold as "the property of a well-known collector" and realising a total of £1311). It is reasonable to conclude from the quantity of coins involved that he used the sale to dispose of those coins from Hoffmann's stock which he had necessarily had to purchase as part of the transaction with Hoffmann in 1893, but for which he had no compelling requirement.

Montagu and his family had been living since at least the beginning of the 1880s at 34 Queen's Gardens, London W2, a large terraced house in a fashionable square laid out in the middle years of the nineteenth century in the Bayswater district of Paddington. He and his wife had had three surviving sons and four daughters, a fourth son having died as an infant. It is noticeable that all the sons had given names that were of non-Jewish character, and although the two elder sons were sent to Clifton College, a public school of sufficiently progressive a character to have welcomed boarding pupils drawn from the Jewish community as early as 1878, the youngest son was to be sent to Rugby School, where no special arrangements were made for the reception of boys of Jewish faith. It was indeed remarked by contemporaries that as time had gone by Montagu had distanced himself rather more from his Jewish heritage, and a further indicator of Montagu's desire to conform to the life style of his non-Jewish social peers was the fact that at the time of his death he was having built for him a substantial country house at Bletchingley, Surrey. The house seems to have been still unfinished at the time of his death, and was demolished in the 1950s, but photographs of Old Quarry Hall, as the house was later known, show its distinctive late Victorian architectural style and the opulence of its internal furnishings.

His unexpected early death, at the age of 50, after an illness described as "short but severe", took place on 18 February 1895¹¹. By his will, dated 24 July 1893 and proved

⁹ Two of Montagu's final contributions to *NC* dealt with aspects of the Plantagenet series. These were 'The coinage of Edward V', *NC* 3rd series vol.15, 1895, 117-34, and 'Further notes concerning Bishop de Bury and the Durham coinage', *ibid.*, 301-15.

¹⁰ The introduction to the auction catalogue of the fifth and final portion of the English part of his collection refers to "Mr. Montagu's large purchase at Stockholm" of coins of the later Anglo-Saxon kings. Whether this was a purchase of duplicates from the Royal Swedish Coin Cabinet or a purchase from a coin dealer or at an auction sale has yet to be established, and Kenneth Jonsson has kindly told me that neither this transaction nor the better-known transaction or transactions by which Sir John Evans acquired similar coins from Stockholm are obviously evidenced in contemporary sources known to him.

¹¹ Montagu had taken the chair at a meeting of the Numismatic Society of London on 20 December 1894, exhibiting on that occasion a selection of gold coins of Queen Elizabeth I from his own cabinet, and he had also been present at the Society's meeting on 17 January 1895, at which he had made further exhibitions. His death three days before the Society's February meeting was thus completely unexpected, and the February meeting was adjourned after the passage of a resolution expressing "profound grief" at his premature death.

13 March 1895 at a value of £97,640¹², he bequeathed a number of small legacies to Jewish charitable organisations, £50 to the Numismatic Society of London¹³, and his set of gold strikings of forgeries of Roman coins by Becker to the Trustees of the British Museum.

It remained for his executors to unwind the very substantial coin collection that he had accumulated by the time of his death. As mentioned above, his collection of Roman gold was consigned for sale in Paris, doubtless reflecting the perceived strength of the market there for high-grade Roman material, but the rest of Montagu's coins were offered at Sotheby's in London in a series of sales which took place over a two-year period between November 1895 and November 1897. Most of these have been referred to separately at an earlier point in these remarks, but readers may find it convenient to have all of them listed in summary here :

English, part I, 18-23 November 1895, 857 lots (realising £4221)
Greek, part I, 23-28 March 1896, 816 lots (realising £8954)
English, part II, 11-16 May 1896, 857 lots (realising £5660)
English, part III, 13-19 November 1896, 988 lots (realising £8783)
Greek, part II (including Roman silver and copper¹⁴), 764 lots, 15-19 March 1897 (realising £2831)
British Commemorative Medals, 24-29 May 1897, 862 lots (realising £5232)
English, part IV (including Irish, Scottish¹⁵, and Anglo-Gallic), 15-17 July 1897, 373 lots (realising £1812)
English, part V, 16-20 November 1897, 737 lots (realising £2125)

This series of catalogues, compiled with some efficiency by Herbert Appold Grueber of the British Museum (see n.6 above), are notable for their accompanying photographic plates, more numerous than those which had previously accompanied the catalogues of any collection of this scale, and they serve as Montagu's most lasting memorial¹⁶.

Montagu's widow survived him until 1937. Of his three surviving sons, all of whom qualified as solicitors, the youngest, Richard Headley Montagu, was killed in 1917 while serving as an officer in the Hampshire Regiment on the Western front, without having married. The two remaining sons, Edward Henry Montagu (1873-1955) and John Harvie Montagu (1874-1949), seem likewise to have died unmarried. It should be noted that John Harvie Montagu may well have inherited some of his father's

¹² The value of Montagu's estate was resworn in October 1896 at £101,188.

¹³ The legacy to the Numismatic Society of London may seem a small one, but the present writer thinks it very likely that this was the first bequest made to the Society by one of its members.

¹⁴ Lots 1-475 in this sale comprised the remaining portion of Montagu's Greek collection, while lots 476-691 offered his relatively minor collection of Roman silver and copper. The remaining part of the sale offered coin cabinets (lots 692-4) and Montagu's reference books on Greek and Roman coins (lots 695-764)

¹⁵ The Scottish series was small and only comprised coins struck after 1603.

¹⁶ The introduction to the first of the auction sales held after his death refers to "Mr. Montagu's own notes ... written by him on the cards placed beneath the coins", but when the present writer, in conjunction with Dr Robin Eaglen and Peter Mitchell, were preparing our note on 'Coin tickets in the British hammered series', *BNJ* 71, 2001, 136-157, we could locate no coin tickets written by Montagu. It seems likely that purchasers at the sales of Montagu's coins held in 1895-7 were not supplied with the tickets that Montagu had written for them.

intellect, for he is recorded as having been an expert player of the game of bridge, serving for nineteen years as Secretary of the Portland Club, based in London's West End and reputed to be the oldest surviving club for card players in the world¹⁷.

It was however Ronald Montagu Simon (1901-1971), the son of Montagu's daughter Florence, who was the only known descendant of Hyman Montagu to take up coin collecting, even if in what was probably a minor way. Ronald Simon was elected a member of the British Numismatic Society on 30 November 1915, when still a schoolboy, and remained a member of the Society until his resignation from it in October 1931. He had served on the Society's Council for the years 1923 to 1926, and it was doubtless due to the fact that he was Hyman Montagu's grandson that he was elected to the Society's Council before he had attained his twenty-second birthday. It is also worth recording here that it was via Ronald Simon that at some date in the 1950s the coins that had been passed as false in the successive Montagu sales held in 1895-7 resurfaced, enabling the British Museum to take some or all of them permanently off the market by adding them to their forgery cabinet.

¹⁷ None of Montagu's daughters embarked upon a career, but three of them married, and two of Montagu's sons-in-law, Solomon J. Solomon (1860-1927), portrait painter and Royal Academician, and Sir Benjamin Hansford (1863-1954), stockbroker and Territorial Army officer, were well-known figures in British public life.