



## **Curatorial Concerns: how two British scholar curators reacted to German medallic propaganda produced during the First World War**

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In this age of instant digital communication it is hard to believe that barely 100 years ago the staid 'commemorative medal'[\[1\]](#) could have had any immediate and meaningful bearing on what people thought and felt about their roles as observers or participants in the First World War. Nonetheless, in addition to the production and distribution of propaganda through film, photographs, posters and printed matter, the persuasive power of the commemorative medal was also very seriously taken into account by all the major belligerent nations. Indeed, the medal has always been a vitally important medium through which history has been channelled; and the story of medallic art, from its origins in Renaissance Italy, has ever been entwined with the devilish arts of 'propaganda'. The medal by its combination of imagery and mottos ('slogans?', 'texts, or 'legends?') has proved, like coinage, a near perfect medium for durable, hand-held expressions of power and authority, as well as political comment and satire.

### **Sir Arthur Evans (1851-1941)**

On 25 June 1916, over three weeks after the apparently indecisive Battle of Jutland, the famous scholar and archaeologist, President of the British Numismatic Society and former Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum[\[2\]](#), Sir Arthur Evans, wrote a letter to his young ward, James Candy, informing him, in the breeziest of tones, that he was organizing a competition for the best model of a medal to celebrate the outcome of that recent and most ambiguous naval conflict:

??I am offering two prizes for design for a medal in honour of the Sea Victory off the Horn Reef ' so that it may be better claimed as a British Victory ' the Germans are sure to strike medals to claim it as theirs! I have had some funny designs sent to me by school-boys ' let me see one of yours.?[\[3\]](#)

### **German commemorative medals**

Sir Arthur's reference to German medal production is important as he had been deeply impressed by a supremely energetic approach taken by medallists in that country, to use the medals to boost home morale (and raise funds for a variety of wartime causes in the process), influence neutral opinion as regards German war aims and conduct, and to create a unique record of the war. Indeed, this creative keenness was observed to a fault in one early instance - the production, during the opening weeks' fighting, of a piece which, based on optimistic expectations (and the historical precedent of 1871) boldly anticipated the German Army's occupation of Paris, an eventuality which did not occur and the medal had to be rapidly suppressed after the Allied victory at the Battle of the Marne in September 1914.[\[4\]](#)

The scale and variety of German medal production during the war was staggering; it has been estimated that near 600 discrete designs had been produced by mid 1917<sup>[5]</sup>. Production had been immediate following the outbreak of hostilities in August 1914; conventional commemorative pieces celebrated the justice of the German cause and strength and unity of the Central Powers. Medallions, of political personalities, contemporary and historical, and military leaders, proliferated, some rendered in a style of 'heroic realism?', which suited well the monumental features of the 'saviour' Hindenburg, brought out of retirement to defeat the Russians in East Prussia. More controversially, attempts were made to depict Germany as being unfairly encircled and at war with the world ' in which national symbolism was employed ' the German Eagle beset from the east by the Russian Bear, and from the west, by the Gallic Cock and British Lion (or Bulldog, and, more rarely, a Unicorn). The 'war on two fronts' ' an initial and purely temporary state of affairs as postulated by the Schlieffen Plan ' created an opportunity for Germany to exploit its situation as a victim of a deliberately contrived and long-planned Allied encirclement. By the end of 1915, a large and well-established body of German medals existed, which included pieces celebrating German technological prowess, in armaments and the machinery of war, military and naval successes (often minor and obscure ones), the early exploits of Zeppelins, and the first air 'aces'.

But the role of the commemorative medal in the overt propaganda war was significantly enhanced earlier that year, in the wake of the Munich-based medallist, Karl Goetz's now notorious '*Lusitania Medal*'. This personal and privately produced response to the sinking of the British liner by a German U-boat on 7 May 1915, condemned the Cunard Company for its decision to allow the liner to carry munitions as well as civilian passengers, after clear German warnings that the vessel would be regarded as a legitimate target. The medal, which first saw light in August 1915, immediately provoked much Allied disapproval.<sup>[6]</sup> Rough cast in iron and utilising disquieting imagery and satirical text, it set a tone for a series of German medals which were in singular contrast to those of the other warring nations. Responding to the growing casualty figures and appallingly destructive scale of the conflict, a number of German medallists abandoned the conventions of heroic realism and decorous allegory in favour of imagery more relevant to the horrors daily witnessed. This included repurposing the Medieval 'Dance of Death' motif, and the macabre skeletal figure of 'Death' was variously depicted mercilessly laying waste a powerless mankind on land and sea and gloating over his handiwork. Some artists (like Goetz) pleaded the national cause in which crowded imagery and ironic texts were key. Others, viewing the conflict as a universal tragedy, proffered compassionate glimpses of war's consequences - the 'sorrow and the pity' as experienced by soldiers and civilians, employing expressionist imagery the better to convey the intensity of their feelings.<sup>[7]</sup> Rough cast iron was the chosen medium and ironic texts complemented many designs. As such they were in utter contrast to the refined and exaggerated romanticism displayed by the contemporary die-struck bronze and silver French, Belgian, Austro-Hungarian and British medals.

Sir Arthur Evans' particular interest in German medals, a fascination, fuelled by his seeing a display of these works in mid-June 1916<sup>[8]</sup>, was directly related to his appreciation of its value for propaganda purposes. His Jutland medal competition was inspired in part to influence domestic and world opinion in connection with the momentous naval battle which the Germans called 'Skaggeak' and the British (only after considerable dithering) the Battle of Jutland - with a view to scotching the notion that it was nothing more than a costly draw and redefining it for neutral and as yet unformed opinion, as an outright British victory.<sup>[9]</sup>

His advocacy of the medal as a propaganda tool (though Britain was in fact to produce far fewer medals than Germany) was to receive indirect support the following year via a scholarly and controversial publication, compiled exactly one hundred years ago, by the foremost expert on coins and medals in the land ' the highly respected Keeper of the Department of Coins and Medals Department at the British Museum, George Francis Hill. Hill, who was eventually appointed Director and Principal Librarian of the British Museum in 1931 and

knighted in 1933, had in fact had been the brains behind the display of German medals that had so inspired Sir Arthur in the first place.[10]

### **George Francis Hill (1867-1948)**

Published in 1917, G F Hill's '*The Commemorative Medal in the Service of Germany*' constituted a succinct chronicle of wartime German medallic production, and a highly charged critique of the role of these medals in '*the battle for hearts and minds*'. In it he acknowledged, historically, a clear role for the medal in the propaganda process. But his hearty disapproval of the German '*appeal to the lower passions*?[11] combined with clear pronouncements - based on deeply felt personal convictions about the medallic ideal - on the poor quality of German medal design and finish, represented nothing less than a concerted attempt to subvert and diminish the enemy propaganda campaign. At the same time, it was clear that Hill sought to gain some sort of understanding of the 'perverse' thinking that lay behind it.

By the time of its issue, the 50-year old Hill and his Department had not spared the ravages of war: two former members of staff had been wounded on active service and the day to day curatorial operations were subject to considerable upheaval and wearing inconvenience.[12] Hill was in no mood for dispassionate assessment. His book, part polemic, part catalogue, is riddled with severe and sometimes derisory comments directed at the medals themselves and their originators. Applying his highly developed aesthetic sensibilities and formidable learning, Hill argued the case for German creative impoverishment. He did not admire the German medals: the workmanship was poor, the designs ill-conceived;[13] the messages obscure and untrue. But it was the work of the German satirists[14] - especially Karl Goetz and Walther Eberbach - which was singled out for particular censure. For Hill the great crime was '*the taste for the gruesome*?; a preference for the grotesque and crudity of expression and finish as a deliberate rejection of the Renaissance ideals of forms and fine modelling. So saying it is just possible to discern within Hill's lively censure the slightest trace of an anxiety that, despite, the German medals' obvious moral, technical and aesthetic inferiority, the anti-Allied messages they bore may still have had the power to turn a neutral head or two.

Ironically, it is precisely the qualities of the German satirical medals that did not impress Hill - their crude vitality, energy, expressiveness, and sometimes extraordinary imagery - that have beguiled subsequent generations. The artist Paul Nash visited the Imperial War Museum in August 1931 to see its collection as research for an article, and they merited inclusion in the IWM's medal display case in 1938. Much later, in the early 1980s, examples of German satirical medals on display in the British Museum inspired the medallist and sculptor Michael Sandle to employ equally disturbing imagery in his '*Belgrano Medal*' (1986).[15] This fiercely angry response to the torpedoing of the Argentinian cruiser in the South Atlantic in May 1982, at the outset of the Falklands Conflict, owes far more to the work of Karl Goetz and Walther Eberbach than to the high ideals of medallic art established by the Renaissance artist Antonio Pisanello (c.1395 - c.1455) so admired by Hill.

It is perhaps time to take another look at these remarkable German 'documents' with a view to, not only appreciating their qualities, but in order to gain a better understanding of their means of production, distribution and overall effectiveness in the propaganda campaigns of the First World War.

### -----REFERENCES-----

- '*The Commemorative Medal in the Service of Germany*', G F Hill, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1917 (price sixpence!) Also: <https://archive.org/details/cu31924024893806>
- '*A Guide to the Exhibition of Historical Medals in the British Museum*', G C Brooke & G F Hill, British Museum, London, 1924, pp.129-140

- *The Dance of Death. Medallion Art of the First World War?*, Mark Jones, British Museum, London, 1979
- *Behind German Lines?*, Thomas Hockenhull, British Museum Magazine, Spring 2014, pp.32-33
- Web sources:<http://www.1914.org/news/british-museum-looks-at-the-other-side-of-the-medal-in-new-first-world-war-exhibition/>
- Lusitania medal story links :<http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/how-a-german-medallion-became-a-british-propaganda-tool>  
<http://blog.britishmuseum.org/the-sinking-of-the-lusitania-medals-as-war-propaganda/>

----- NOTES -----

[1] These are 'Hand-held works of art' (*Behind German Lines?*, Thomas Hockenhull, British Museum Magazine, Spring 2014, p.32) and constitute a category quite different to officially produced and awarded military medals awarded for gallantry and service.

[2] He was also, during the war years a Trustee of the British Museum.

[3] Private letter from Sir Arthur Evans to James Candy; held by him and shown to the author in 1987.

[4] See 'EINZUG D. DEUTSCHEN TRUPPEN IN PARIS?', copy held by the IWM, ref EPH 10155.  
<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30105231>

[5] *The Commemorative Medal in the Service of Germany?*, G F Hill, British Museum, London, 1917, p.3

[6] It subsequently inspired a sophisticated British anti-German propaganda campaign in which Goetz's medal was presented a distasteful national celebration of the deaths of innocent civilians in a deliberately pre-planned attack. See: <http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/how-a-german-medallion-became-a-british-propaganda-tool> and <http://blog.britishmuseum.org/the-sinking-of-the-lusitania-medals-as-war-propaganda>

[7] *Behind German Lines?*, Thomas Hockenhull, British Museum Magazine, Spring 2014, pp 32-33; *The Dance of Death. Medallion Art of the First World War?*, Mark Jones, British Museum, London, 1979. Also: <http://www.1914.org/news/british-museum-looks-at-the-other-side-of-the-medal-in-new-first-world-war-exhibition/>;

[8] At the meeting of the Royal Numismatic Society on 15 June 1916

[9] In addition to his aim of disputing German claims for victory Sir Arthur had a secondary motive for sponsoring the competition, and that was to stimulate a revival in quality medallic workmanship, as the means for creating the very best medium for effectively communicating the Allied cause. *An Enterprise Directed Northward: some medallic tributes to the Battle of Jutland?*, P Dutton, 'The Medal?', No 11, Summer 1987, pp 46-53

[10] In the region of 500 German medals were displayed to members of the Royal Numismatic Society at their meeting on the 15 June 1916.

[11] *The Commemorative Medal in the Service of Germany?*, G F Hill, 1917, p.9  
<https://archive.org/details/cu31924024893806>

[12] *An Autobiographical Fragment: Sir George Hill?*, The Medal, Issue No 12, Spring/February 1988, pp.37-48

[13] There were minor exceptions ' Hill conceded that Karl Goetz's memorial to *'The Three Counts von Spee'* (all lost at the Battle of the Falkland Islands ' December 1914) possessed praiseworthy elements: 'Gtz's (sic) conception of the German Eagle flying over a waste of waters to lay a laurel branch upon their ocean grave?is one with which every citizen of a sea-going nation will sympathise.' *'The Commemorative Medal in the Service of Germany?'*, p.29

[14] Karl Goetz (1875-1950) by reason, of his creative prodigality, is the best known of these. Other important German contributors to the satirical medal tradition in the First World War included: Walther Eberbach (1866-1943), who created his own series of 'Totentanz' (Dance of Death) pieces; Hans Lindl (1885-?); Ludwig Gies (1877-1966) and Arnold Zadikow (1884-1943).

[15] <http://www.bams.org.uk/product/belgrano-medal-a-medal-of-dishonour/>

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