

# To carry off the palm

Medals, museums and mysteries

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As the proud custodian of the most important collection of agricultural medals and badges in the country, the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW (RAS) has been honoured to assist the Australian Museum with the recent loan of a medal designed by renowned 19th century scientific artist Helena Scott.

The Museum's current exhibition, *Beauty from Nature: the art of the Scott sisters*, celebrates the work of Helena and that of her equally talented sister, Harriet. Though perhaps best known as the producers of the first Australian Christmas cards, the Scott sisters were entomological and botanical artists of the first order and their exquisite illustrations enhanced the publications of the colony's best natural history scientists.

The medal on display was commissioned by the Yass Pastoral and Agricultural Association and was struck at the Sydney Mint c1872. Helena Scott's design features a superbly detailed wreath of native flowers on the obverse side, while on the other the legend 'PALMAM QUI MERUIT FERAT' is boldly emblazoned – Let him who deserves it carry off the palm. While a

palm frond alone may have sufficed as symbol of triumph in ancient Rome, in the district of Yass a more substantial token was required, and the award, measuring 70mm in diameter, was produced in silver as well as bronze.

Within its collection of over 3,000 medals and badges, the RAS Heritage Centre holds several fine examples of the Scott designed medal. They are part of an extraordinary collection of 19th century agricultural medals awarded to the Ramsay family, three-quarters of which have come to the RAS Heritage Centre. The whereabouts of the remaining quarter is a mystery.

The oldest medals in the Ramsay collection are dated 1842 and were issued to Dr David Ramsay by the Australian Floral and Horticultural Society at a time when the Agricultural Society of NSW (later to become the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW) was not operational.

David Ramsay first visited Australia in 1820 as a ship's surgeon aboard the *Surry*. Seizing on a commercial opportunity, he ditched his medical career and returned to set up a merchant house with the *Surry's* captain, Thomas Raine.

He further enhanced his material prospects by marrying the daughter of the wealthy emancipist entrepreneur, Simeon Lord. As a wedding present Lord gave the happy couple a 480 acre estate named Dobroyd and it was there, only six miles from Sydney in what is now the Haberfield area, that Ramsay grew the pineapples, apples and grapes which won him the horticultural medals. Wonderfully ornate, the medals are the work of one Australia's finest silversmith's, JJ Cohen.

One of Ramsay's sons, James, continued in his father's footsteps and went on to win the Yass medal Helena Scott designed. James also exhibited with the Agricultural Society of NSW, winning medals for stock and other farm produce including cereals and 'roots'. Those medals bear the same design that appears on the standard prize medals of today. The *Illustrated Sydney News* was full of praise for the new gongs when they were first awarded in 1870, carefully explaining the design's significance to readers: *The central figure is intended to allegorise the Agricultural Society of New South Wales, whose torch is shedding light on the various*

Below: The design of the 1870 medallion



## Oldest and newest

During the first few years of the Society's existence, competition winners were given prizes of cash and plate, but ready cash, especially in the hands of the lower orders, was a huge temptation and the boisterousness of celebrations became increasingly alarming. In 1825 it was thus resolved that masters and servants alike would receive medals of silver or gold in differing sizes. The oldest Society medal to have come down to the RAS Heritage Centre, however, is the Jamison Medal, which was won by James Jamison in 1827

for a champion blood stallion named Bennelong.

The Councillors' Retirement Medal is the latest to have been struck and was presented for the first time in 2009 to retiring Councillors Mr Peter Watt and The Hon LDS Waddy. It features the RAS coat of arms inside a wreath of produce on the obverse side, while on the reverse side the councillor's name is engraved under a montage of architectural icons representing the Prince Alfred Park, Moore Park and Sydney Showground.

**Left:** The silver medal awarded to Dr Ramsay in 1842 for his collection of apples. It was awarded by the Australian Floral and Horticultural Society



## The man behind the medals



Les Carlisle is the man behind the RAS Heritage Centre's collection of agricultural numismatics, and what's more, he's the nicest bloke you'd care to meet.

Numismatics?

Numis-what? Medals, badges, coins and the collection and study thereof.

As the author of several books and the recipient of multiple numismatic fellowships and awards, including a distinguished service award from the Powerhouse Museum and an Order of Australia, Les' credentials in the field are impeccable. The RAS Heritage Centre has been privileged to have him as an expert consultant for over thirty years and during that time he's helped build the collection into the best in the country. He's facilitated acquisitions but he's also been hands on, preparing each piece for cataloguing and correct storage as it has come in.

When just a boy, Les got hooked on medals after winning several at school. His special interest has always been Australian agricultural medals and his great project is to compile a photographic record with a corresponding description for every one ever issued. Since medals commonly bear additional information which doesn't appear anywhere else in the record books – about breeds or the names of stud animals, for example – they're a valuable and irreplaceable factual resource.

It's the thrill of the hunt which appeals the most and Les' research has taken him to many fascinating corners of Australia. Of course he'd love to sight the missing Ramsay medals but he's also trying to track down examples of the TS Mort medals and the elusive Brisbane Medal.

While Les is always keen to encourage folks with significant medals to consider donating them to the RAS Heritage Centre through the Tax Incentives for the Arts Scheme, for him the most important issue is to document items so they don't become inadvertently lost to history. To that end he's always happy to give confidential appraisals, and advice on correct storage and care.

As both a numismatics scholar and a gentleman, Les Carlisle is the go-to man, the man behind the medals.

*inventions and industries of the four colonies, and holding in her hand a wreath of laurel to the most successful in the race towards progression. On each side of the principal figure are placed two smaller figures emblematical of New South Wales, with its grapes; South Australia as a grain reaper; Victoria as a shepherd; and Queensland with a stem of sugar-cane. In the panels of the base are various devices representing the fine arts, agriculture, and manufactures.*

While bronze versions of the medal were handed out more generally, relatively few silver medals were awarded annually and so were especially esteemed by their winners. Our man, James Ramsay, was good enough to win numerous during the 1870s.

**T**he mystery of the Ramsay collection and the missing medals begins with James' death, when the collection was divided equally between his four surviving sons and passed down the generations. Two portions, found under a pile of old newspapers in a cupboard, were acquired by the RAS Heritage Centre and then shortly after, in 1995, another quarter portion came to light. The RAS jumped

at the chance to reunite the collection, liaising with owner Phillipa Byatt who generously donated the medals under the Tax Incentives for the Arts Scheme.

But as to the remaining medals – no one knows where they are. The RAS Heritage Centre's consulting expert, Les Carlisle, grows wistful contemplating the lost treasures. "It would be just so good to know where they are, to see them, to know about their condition," he says. He hasn't given up hope that this premier collection within the RAS Heritage Centre's collection might someday be complete, but even just to see them all exhibited together, "Now that would really be something."

In the meantime, visitors to the Australian Museum in Sydney can enjoy viewing one of the unique pieces in the RAS Ramsay collection – Helena Scott's Yass medal. Waratahs, Christmas bush, and Sturt's desert pea are entwined in her design. Not a palm in sight to carry off, but instead, a handsome winner's wreath of our very own national flowers.

*'Beauty from Nature: the art of the Scott sisters' is on display at the Australian Museum, Sydney, until 27 November 2011. ■*



**Above:** Helena Scott's medallion design, commissioned in 1872