

The Lion, Britannia and Medals

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The title of course being an attempt to synchronise with "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" by C.S.Lewis, but I'm in no way inferring Britannia is a witch (although some subjugated nations may disagree). That said I do wonder how many of us keep our medals in a wardrobe (until insurance costs dictated otherwise?)

Colour lithograph by Thomas Packer (1824-1896)





Britannia

The Roman geographical name for the British Isles that also evolved to the personification of Britain.

“Britannia first appeared on coins back in the Roman era. In the second century AD, Emperor Hadrian introduced a number of coins that depicted a female figure who personified Britain and featured the label ‘BRITANNIA’. When the Romans left Britain in the early 400s, Britannia vanished from coins and wasn’t to appear again for several centuries. In fact, it wasn’t until Elizabeth I’s reign in the 1600s that Britannia started to play a part in national life once more”

<https://www.royalmint.com/stories/collect/britannia-on-british-coins/>



The Lion

The Lion was native to Britain many millennia ago and went extinct. It is thought a few were brought to Britain by the Romans for display. Since the 12th century lions have appeared on the arms of every English (and British) monarch and when Britannia reappeared in the 1600s, she and the lion became a regular pair.

<https://www.historyextra.com/period/medieval/three-lions-england-football-shirt-history-why-king-henry-i/>

But it's not just a “medallic” question why a lion? It is not a British nor a European animal.



King Henry I (12th century) arms were a single golden lion, rampant (rearing on its hind legs) on a red field. He married Adeliza of Louvain. Her father also used a lion, and so Henry adapted his own arms to include two.

Skipping a generation brings us to Henry II, who married Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1152. Her family crest featured a lion as well. It took their son, Richard the Lionheart to unite the three lions of his forebears into the national symbol it is today.



The rest of this presentation is an exploration of Britannia and Lion as depicted on various British medals – it is not intended to be a complete catalogue, but rather those of particular interest.

READY!

The Deccan medal (MYB 73)



The first medallic appearance of Britannia I can find. The medal was issued by the Honourable East India Company in 1784 for the 1778-1784 campaigns in western India and Gujerat.

Seringapatam Medal (MYB 79)



Awarded by the Governor-General of India to all British and Indian soldiers (led by Wellington) who participated in the British victory in the Battle of Seringapatam in 1799.

Culmination of the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War resulting in the death, in battle, of Tipu Sultan ("the Tiger of Mysore") and Mysore becoming a princely state within British India.

Why was this scene chosen?



“Tippoo's Tiger” – the V&A Museums most popular exhibit. It was one of a number of large caricature images commissioned by Tipu showing European, often specifically British, figures being attacked by tigers. Tipu had long used the tiger as his emblem.

So clearly, on the Seringapatam Medal, the tiger symbolises Tipu getting his just desserts from the British lion.

Burma Medal (MYB 91)



The Burmese elephant
kneels in Submission
before the British lion.

Army Gold Medal (MYB 97) and Military General Service Medal (MYB 98)



Army Gold Medal and Cross both designed by Thomas Wyon (1795-1851) who was the official chief engraver at the Royal Mint from 1828 until his death.



The Victoria Cross (MYB 24)



*The Warrant Instituting the Victoria Cross
Public Record Office WO 98 / 1*

Firstly:

It is ordained that the distinction shall be styled and designated the "Victoria Cross" and shall consist of a Maltese Cross of Bronze with Our Royal Crest in the centre and underneath which an Escroll bearing this inscription "For Valour"

No mention of the Lion there, but apparently Queen Victoria had taken a great interest in the award and the design of the Cross. When the first drawings were submitted to her, she selected one closely modelled on an existing campaign medal, the Army Gold Cross, which has the Lion at its centre.

Baltic Medal (MYB 118)



Whilst Britannia got to appear on the Baltic medal it would be Victory who appeared on the Crimean medal

India Mutiny Medal (MYB 121)



Together in India
1857 –1858.

Military General Service Medal (MYB 98)



No Britannia here – this is Queen Victoria bestowing the victors laurels on the Duke of Wellington. However the Lion makes a cameo appearance at her feet.

India Mutiny Medal 1858 (MYB 121)



Britannia makes her first appearance on a medal associated with India. The Army of India Medal 104, Sutlej Medal 113 and India General Service Medal 117 had all depicted the winged goddess of Victory. The Lion also reappearing since Seringapatam medal.

South Africa Medal 1854 & 1879 (MYB 115 & 127)



By far the most controversial Lion. Exactly who is it and what is it doing?

It's actually not the British lion (and companion of Britannia) but rather an African lion.

The lion "is usually incorrectly described as 'stooping to drink', when in fact its 'couchant' pose was intended to convey submission. An Under-Secretary also expressed worry at the time that the 'lion doing penance will be taken for a British lion'."

British Battles and Medals, 7th Edition

So an African interloper has made it to a British medal – this would have big implications for another medal showing a lion.

British South Africa Company Medal 1896 (MYB 138)



When Cecil Rhodes suggested that a medal be given to those “young fellows who fought in the Matabele War” the initial reaction was to extend the existing South African Medal. There was much to/fro with comments expressing dissatisfaction with the design of that medal “the lion does not appear to be doing anything very definite – he might be dying or he might be gnawing a bone”. Chamberlains comments decided the matter “the lion is hackneyed .. I should invite them to put more piss and spirit in the animal”.

The 1893 Matabeleland Medal Roll, Don Forsyth, Roberts Publications

And so we have this British lion: rampant, roaring, defiant, trampling the Matabele shields and assegais despite being wounded.

East and Central Africa Medal (MYB 147)

Africa Service Medal (MYB 161)



Used from 1897-98 bar Uganda to 1956 bar Kenya.

The sun is said to be "rising in the background" (BM&M 7th Ed) but by 1956 it might better be said to be setting as the "winds of change" swept through Africa.

Queen's (and King's) South Africa Medal (MYB 150 & 152) and Queens Mediterranean Medal (MYB 151)



Britannia presumably wishing her troops well as they march inland from the coast before victory was secured. Originally dated 1899-1900 these dates had to be erased ("ghost dates") and then removed entirely as the war dragged on until 1902.

Ashanti Medal (MYB 160)



The British lion on a rock looking towards the rising sun on the left of the medal.

Natal Medal 1906 (MYB 163)



Britannia on right with Natal depicted as a woman holding a sword. Natal came from Natalia, a female name meaning Christmas Day, which was when, in 1497, Vasco da Gama "discovered" it.

Churchill described this medal as the "silver badge of shame".

Khedives Sudan Medal (MYB 165)



Issued by the Khedive of Sudan. The Lion with the "sun rising behind" (BBM&M 7th Ed). But which Lion is this – the British or the Khedives?. It was designed by Richard Garbe (1876-1957) a British sculptor but the medal was issued by the Khedive. The lion had long been a symbol of power and kingship in Egypt from the earliest of times.

Memorial Plaque 1919 (MYB 172)



Surely the most evocative and sombre depiction of Britannia and the Lion appearing together. In addition it would be there last appearance together.

The Lion appears twice – at the bottom, appearing to savage the Imperial Germany eagle, and the other in a typical pose with Britannia.

British Empire Medal (MYB 19)



Placed here as instituted in 1922 (although similar to the Medal of the Order the British Empire issued from 1917 – 1922 (MYB 17). The depiction of Britannia is the same as the Empire Gallantry Medal (MYB 18).

War Medal 1945 (MYB 186)



The Lion standing “wanton on the body of a double-headed dragon. The dragon's heads are those of an eagle and a dragon, to signify the principal occidental and oriental enemies during the Second World War”

This would be the last appearance of the Lion (with the Defence Medal where a lion and a lioness were present) – Britannia would continue, accompanied by sea horses, on the Naval General Service Medal (MYB 173) which was issued until 1962.



For the Korea Medal (MYB 195) Hercules appeared and then a nude male for the Vietnam Medal (MYB 200). Thereafter medals seem to have lost some of the richness of design.

Final thoughts

- Medallically Britannia has had a fair bit of competition from the winged goddess of Victory (Nike) and it's a close run thing as to who appears most. They appeared together twice.
- The Lion and Britannia would appear together 5 times. And Britannia would appear with Victory (MYB 93 & 96) and Natal (MYB 173).
- When it came to Naval medals the Seahorse would have the edge on the Lion.
- Both Britannia and the Lion seem to have faded from the medallic landscape, possibly because of sensitivities around them harking back to an imperialist era (Britannia?) and cultural misappropriation (the Lion?).
- But it's not just Britannia and the Lion that are fading, it does seem recent medals generally have far less human or animal personifications than before. Yes the Rhodesia medal (MYB 202) has a stable antelope and the Iraq medal (MYB 204B) has a Lamassu (that said, the Australian Iraq medal (MYB A30) has a lion, but one copied from an ancient Babylonian gateway), but they seem to be the exceptions.