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THE BRISBANE SUNDAY SCHOOL UNION MEDALS

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This medal, issued by the Brisbane Sunday School Union to celebrate the centenary of the founding of Sunday Schools by Robert Raikes, is according to L.J. Carlisle's book, only the second occasion for a medal emanating from Queensland (C1880/3). It is 44mm in size and made of white metal. The minter is unknown.

The Brisbane Sunday School Union was one of many social and religious institutions that had its origin in the late Victorian era. It was comprised of the majority of Protestant Sunday Schools of Brisbane and suburbs in an age when children automatically went or were sent to Sunday School, usually in the afternoon. It sought to raise the standard of teaching through training programmes, and also the participation of the children in competitions and special events.

A preliminary meeting with representatives of the main Sunday Schools was held in Mr. L. Carmichael's back parlour in Queen Street on 14 October 1869. It was convened by the Hon. Simon Fraser M.L.A. representing the

Grey Street Congregational School, South Brisbane, with ten persons present. They stated their aim to be "the drawing together of the schools in the city and suburbs in order that they might afford mutual information and encouragement, and stimulate each other to continued diligence in their great work." The denominations represented were Baptist, Congregational, Presbyterian, Primitive Methodist and Wesleyan. Efforts were made to include the Anglicans but they declined on the ground that they had their own Church of England Sunday School Society. The inaugural meeting was held in the Old Chamber of Commerce, Town Hall, on Friday 26 November 1869 just ten years after the separation of Queensland from New South, Wales. Thirteen schools were enrolled representing 181 teachers and 1571 scholars.

Later the objects of the Union were restated and formalised, with success in some areas and not in others. Teacher training, a main aim, proved disappointing. Finding a suitable

time proved difficult, also the distance from the city centre for outlying schools. However success was achieved for several years with annual demonstrations. The first of these was held in Queens Park on 30 November 1870. Eleven schools, 163 teachers and 1672 scholars were present. His Excellency Colonel Blackall, who was to have spoken, was ill on the day but invited the children to march to Government House where his son, Major Blackall, received and welcomed them. The gathering received a good press. The demonstrations continued to grow, 1885 being the peak year with a total of 45 schools, 648 teachers and 6782 children present, after which with change of venue, wet weather and other factors, numbers declined. In 1896 the Governor was still in attendance but only 3017 persons attended.

The year 1880 was a peak year for the Union as it marked the centenary year of Robert Raikes' founding of Sunday Schools. In London a World Sunday School Convention was held, while at Gloucester the event was celebrated by the unveiling of a statue of Robert Raikes. Carlisle notes (p23) "In the July of 1780 the Editor of the 'Gloucester Journal' and Robert Raikes collaborated to Educate wayward youngsters in the beliefs and tenets of the Christian faith. Raikes was born in Palace Yard near Gloucester Cathedral, on 14 September 1736 and died in Gloucester in April 1811, aged seventy four." The event was celebrated in other Australian capital cities with medals being struck by the Royal Mint, Melbourne, for Tasmania and Victoria, both 31 mm in size. These two (C1880/14,15) are reasonably available and were probably issued to the children attending, the Brisbane 44mm medal (Carlisle 1880/3) is quite scarce. Therein lies an enigma. To whom was the medal issued?

In Brisbane an enthusiastic public meeting was held in the Town Hall, followed by a children's grand musical service in the Exhibition building where the cantata "The Blessing of the Children" was sung. It is stated in the report that 3500 adult persons were present, and though a small charge was made there was a loss of £13-7-11. Was the medal sold or given to the officials or what? There is no reference to the medal in the BSSU Annual Report for the year.

In 1881 the rules of the Union were revised and the next year it became an incorporated body under "The Religious, Educational and Charitable Institutions Act of 1861". The decade of the 80's was generally a prosperous time for Brisbane with a good economy and further migration. Suburban Sunday Schools were increasing in numbers of children but inner city schools declined and withdrew from the Union. Reported statistics for the year 1888 were 54 schools, 723 teachers and 6978 scholars.

From the beginning there was a strong link with the London Sunday School Union. Most Sunday Schools initially used the LSSU lesson books. During the 70's decade a Book Depot was established with help from the LSSU. Resource and general books were also made available from this source to individual school libraries. By the late 80's the Book Depot was no longer needed and closed. (Another important activity of the BSSU was the conduct of Scripture Examinations). In 1892 the BSSU came under new control and changed its name to the Queensland Sunday School Union. Singing competitions, teachers' conferences and school visitation were revived, but changes were afoot as denominations set up their own unions, and competition from new Christian organisations increased. An era of Christian co-operation was coming to an end.

Award Medals of the BSSU

The year 1885 saw the beginning of annual scripture examinations for scholars and teachers which were to become a principal function of the Union until the various denominations began their own. The origin of these exams lies in the offer of Mr. Jonas Myer Myers (1828-1909) to give a yearly silver medal for proficiency in some portion of the Old Testament. Myers was the lay minister of the Brisbane Hebrew congregation and has been called “the father of Queensland Jewry”. He served the congregation in many capacities for about 50 years.

His offer was readily accepted, the committee matching the offer with a similar medal, called the Union medal, for a New Testament theme for children above 15 years. Two years later Mr. W.H. Groom M.L.A. offered a money prize of five guineas for the best essay on the life of St Paul. Rules were set for all three awards, but rather than encourage more scholars to sit for the exams, only top scholars entered so the competition became somewhat elitist. In one year, 1889, the Myers medal was not awarded as less than the minimum number of 30 entered so in 1891 the rules were altered to encourage greater participation. In 1892 the Myers medal was awarded for the Junior examination and the Union medal for the Senior. Also the name was changed to the Queensland Sunday School Union. The prize list was added to by various benefactors, all getting into the act. These included such names as Sir H.W. Norman, Hon Sir S.W. Griffith, Hon Sir Thomas McIlwraith and Thomas Finney. These were cash or book prizes.

Though I have searched for five years I have not sighted any of these scripture medals, neither the earlier ones of the BSSU until 1891 nor the later ones of the QSSU. At some point

they became gold rather than silver. There appears to be little in the way of records or reports beyond 1896 existing, though there are references to QSSU prizes in “The Queensland Baptist” as late as 1917. The name of J.M. Myers must have dropped out in the late 1890’s for in 1901 there were three gold medals awarded in the senior, intermediate and junior divisions.

In 1917 it was decided to discontinue the distribution of the English International lesson books as Sunday Schools were using Australian or American books, also New South Wales scripture exams were used. The QSSU now had no real reason to continue. An attempt was made in 1919 to form a Federation of (denominational) Sunday Schools Unions. Later that year the QSSU voted itself out of existence.

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Medal illustration courtesy of L.J. Carlisle