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# ALFRED RONALDS AND HIS VICTORIAN SEPARATION MEDAL

By DR John M Chapman F.R.N.S.

The Victorian Separation Medal (Carlisle 1850/1) was the first medal struck in Australasia and is so rare that no record of its sale can be found in the last fifty years.

Apart from my specimen that came from the Ray Jewell collection, I know of only two others. One is a rather poor example in the Museum of Victoria and the other reputedly in the possession of a descendant of its creator.

Its production was entirely the work of a man who had never made a medal before and never did again, a man destined to be remembered through fish, flies, fruit and flowers, rather than for his sole numismatic venture.

Alfred Ronalds (1802-1860) was born in London on the 10<sup>th</sup> July, 1802, the eleventh of the twelve children of Francis Ronalds, who died when Alfred was only four years of age.

When a senior schoolboy, he assisted his eldest brother Francis, who became famous for his invention in 1816 of the electric telegraph, for which he was later honoured with a knighthood. Alfred commenced an apprenticeship in 1817 and in the 1820's was skilled in engraving, intaglio printing, and lithography and also was a competent surveyor.

He moved to Staffordshire in about 1830, and being a keen angler, applied his scientific training to a systematic study of the biology, diet and habits of trout and grayling. He was particularly interested in their seasonal feeding habits



Portrait of Alfred Ronalds  
from the Fishing Gazette, 1913

and the role played by insects, building an observatory hut overhanging the Blythe River to carry out his research.

The following year, 1831, Ronalds married Margaret Bond and they were to have eight children, one dying in infancy.

In the years that followed he refined his piscatorial researches and experimented with fabricated flies, imitating the seasonal natural prey of the fish and was the first to design artificial lures scientifically.

In 1836 Ronalds published a book that became recognised as a landmark in angling history "THE/FLY-FISHER'S ENTOMOLOGY/ILLUSTRATED/BY COLOURED REPRESENTATIONS/ OF THE/ NATURAL AND ARTIFICIAL INSECT./AND ACCOMPANIED BY/A FEW OBSERVATIONS/AND INSTRUCTIONS RELATIVE TO/TROUT-AND-GRAYLING FISHING."

The success of the work was largely due to its nineteen hand-coloured copper-plate etchings prepared by Ronalds himself. He says in the preface:

*"The Author of this little work entreats that it may be considered and judged of as the labour, or rather the amusement, of an amateur; whose chief object has been to facilitate to the Tyro in the art, the making and choice of artificial flies, on a plan of elucidation derived from personal experience.*

*Having himself sorely felt the inadequacy of mere verbal instructions to enable him to imitate the natural fly correctly, or even approximately, and the little utility of graphical illustrations unaccompanied by the principal requisite, viz. colour, he has been induced to paint both the natural and artificial fly from nature, to etch them with his own hand, and to colour, or superintend the colouring of each particular impression."*

This book was the standard authority on its subject for the following century, its popularity warranting twelve editions to 1921. The first edition is now

a rare and highly prized collector's item, and I have spent many years endeavouring to assemble a complete collection, but admit that it is an almost impossible goal. However, I treasure my copy of the magnificent commemorative two volume eleventh edition of 1913, which includes Ronalds' biography (which is appallingly inaccurate and does not mention his medal) and portrait silhouette; the second volume being an album with cells containing a reference collection of actual artificial flies! A "Publishers Note" in this edition begins:

*"The publishers do not consider that an apology is needed for issuing a handsome edition of the work which, for more than three-quarters of a century, has been regarded as the best treatise on the subject and which has won for itself the right to be called a classic."*

The first few years of his marriage were spent by Ronalds in farming and preparing the first edition of his book. He continued farming in Leafields, Staffordshire until 1844, when he moved to Wales. During this period he was in business as a fishing tackle maker specialising in artificial flies.

Tragically, Margaret died in 1847, aged 33, shortly after the birth of their last child.

In 1848 Ronalds decided to emigrate to Australia, taking all his children except the infant Hugh, who was left in the care of relatives. They sailed in the *Lord Hungerford* on the 9<sup>th</sup> November, arriving at Williamstown on the 10<sup>th</sup> February 1849. Three days later the *Argus* reported that:

*"The arrival of this ship was anxiously looked for, being the first trial of the mutual co-operation principle, the passengers all coming out on a level (without the customary distinctions of*



*cabins, intermediate and steerage) and at a uniform price. So far as the Lord Hungerford is concerned, we are happy to learn that the experiment has succeeded to admiration... The passengers are of a very superior class, some of them being men of substance, and a considerable number ranking as small capitalists; there are also a number of superior tradesmen and a few of that unfortunately mostly overlooked class, mercantile clerks."*

After disembarking, Ronalds with his six children, proceeded to Geelong, possibly having corresponded with a friend there regarding the opportunities for earning his living by his profession. He may have considered Melbourne less congenial for his young family, being country bred.

At this time Melbourne and Geelong were the main centres of population in the burgeoning Port Phillip District of New South Wales.

Ronalds lost no time in setting up in business, placing a series of advertisements in the "*Geelong Advertiser*". The initial entry announced:

**"ALFRED RONALDS  
DRAFTSMAN, ENGRAVER AND  
COPPER PLATE PRINTER**

*Having brought with him from England the complete apparatus for carrying on the above business, is now ready to receive orders for cards, maps, cheques, circulars and all other descriptions of copper-plate engraving and printing, which he will execute with neatness and accuracy, and at prices which will be found reasonable."*

A few weeks later, on the 26<sup>th</sup> March 1849, his address was given as "*Mr Dean's, at the corner of Moorabool Street and Market Square.*" Later still, an advertisement of the 4<sup>th</sup> December, 1849 announced: "*Orders received by Mr Paterson, Watchmaker, Kardinia Street or at Mr Ronalds' residence, Little Scotland, facing the Town Reserve at the corner of the Great Western Road.*"

He engraved the above copper plate for his ornate business cards, headed by the British Coat of Arms, with appropriate text on a banner between two fluted columns, flanked by sailing ships.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> November, 1849, Ronalds married his second wife, Mary Ann Harlow, a 32 year-old spinster he had met on the *Lord Hungerford* during his voyage to Australia. This marriage produced four more children.

In searching for suitable lithographic stone for his increasing printing orders from Geelong merchants for bill-heads, cheques etc, he discovered marble at Limeburner's Point at the east end of the Botanic Gardens. During one of Superintendent La Trobe's visits to Geelong, Ronalds canvassed the commercial potential of the deposit with him, but was told that the colony was too young for such a venture to be successful.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> November, 1850, the vessel *Lysander* brought the glorious news to the sorely aggrieved residents of Port Phillip, that they had at last been granted separation from New South Wales. The Separation Act had been passed by the British Parliament on the 1<sup>st</sup> August and received Royal assent on the 5<sup>th</sup> August. From the 1<sup>st</sup> July, 1851, the Port Phillip District was to become the separate Colony of Victoria. The jubilant populace converted the opening of the first Prince's Bridge by La Trobe on the 15<sup>th</sup> November, into a dual celebration, and the festivities continued for days.

The excitement in the community at this time inspired Alfred Ronalds to produce a medal as an enduring memento of the birth of this new colony. Contemporary press reports confirm that it was purely a private commercial venture and not officially sponsored.

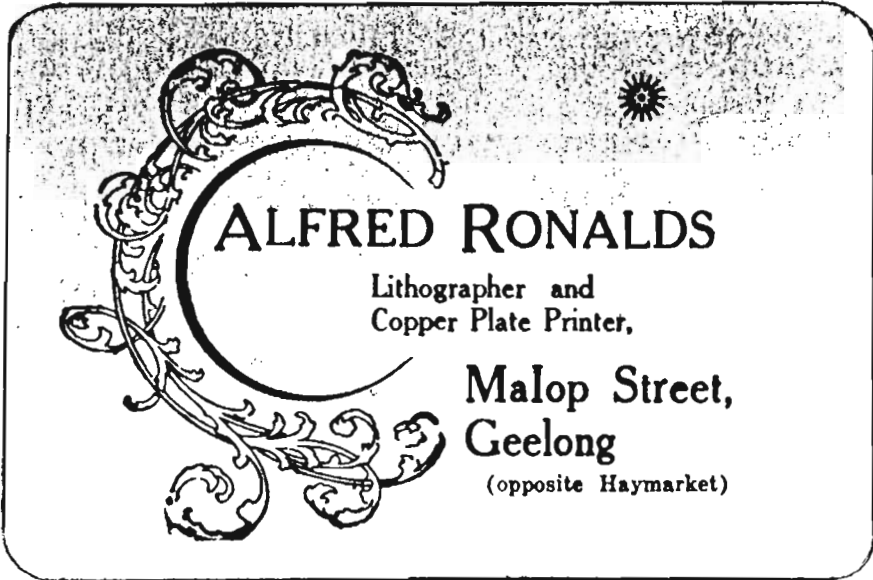
There is no record of the practical details of the medal's production, but the most likely scenario is that Ronalds ordered two carefully machined steel

cylinders with a matching collar a from local engineering works. The cylinders were two inches in diameter, the end of one used to engrave the obverse design, and the end of the other the reverse design. Being a copper-plate engraver with no expertise as a die sinker, Ronalds' dies were predictably cut to an even shallow depth, without the sculptured variations of the experienced medallist. Two inch pewter blanks for the issue were probably obtained from the same source as the steel. There was no coining press in Australia, much less Geelong, at this period, so the simple but effective drop-hammer process must have been used to strike the medals. A blank would have been placed within the collar between the two dies and a heavy weight dropped from a height onto the sandwich. The low even relief of Ronalds' design meant that a good impression could be struck on the relatively soft pewter with moderate force. Extreme care would have been necessary as the dies were unlikely to have been expertly tempered. The number struck is not known, but the great rarity of this piece suggests that it must have been quite small.

In describing the Separation Medal, it is difficult to decide which side should be considered obverse and which reverse! Alfred Ronalds explained his symbolism on a card that accompanied each medal. The card is illustrated in this article.

Ronalds continued in business in Geelong until late 1851, when he joined the gold rush that followed the sensational discovery of rich gold deposits in Victoria. However before leaving, he was involved in another "first". He produced (and signed) the lithographic illustrations of "*A Patent*

THE CARD THAT WAS SOLD WITH THE MEDAL, EXPLAINING THE  
SYMBOLISM OF THE DESIGN



## Symbols of Medal

(Struck by Alfred Ronalds, in Geelong,  
1850).

To Commemorate the Separation of  
Victoria from New South Wales.

The Bird—with the crown pendant—is made to represent New South Wales as a mother country, dropping the boon of Self-Government into the open mouths of the young Colony of Victoria.

The Butterfly—leaving its chrysalis—is symbolical of the birth of the new Colony, Victoria, leaving its husk behind and fleeing to partake of the sweets of a new generation.

The Bird—escaped from its cage—represents Victoria escaping from the bonds of control, with all the vicissitudes of life, soaring on the wings of liberty into the expanse of Nations.

The hands—clasped across the waters—show that although the waters of the River Murray divide us, the hearts of the people are still united.

The Sun in the centre—which is the Geelong crest—is seen to shine alike, on "Maternal affection," "The birth of a new Colony," "Liberty," and the "United hearts of the people."



COMMEMORATIVE / OF THE / GREAT CHARTER / OF / SELF GOVERNMENT / GRANTED TO THE / COLONY / OF / VICTORIA / AUG<sup>ST</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> / 1850, surrounded by a wreath of British emblems, rose, thistle and shamrock, divided by a crown above. At the base in small script, A. Ronalds Engr.

51mm in diameter and weighs 41.8 grams.

Metal: pewter.

Edge plain, but rims are milled.

Holed above the crown, as issued.



A circle divided into quadrants, with heavily embossed sun at the centre. The mottoes of the symbolic quadrants designs are opposite them in a peripheral annulus. They read- MATERNAL AFFECTION-ADIEU-HOW SWEET IS LIBERTY-SEPERATED BUT STILL UNITED.

*Washing Machine for Economising Labour*" in "A Treatise on Gold Discovery and Gold Washing ...". This was printed by J. Harrison at the Advertiser Office, Geelong, and is the earliest Australian publication on gold following its discovery. I am fortunate to possess the only copy of this pamphlet in private hands. Leaving his family in Geelong, he prospected widely throughout the goldfields without much success. By 1853 he had moved his family from Geelong to Exeter Street, Ballarat, and resumed his business of copper-plate engraving combined with part-time

surveying of Ballarat streets and other public projects. In 1854 he purchased a six and a half acre bush block on the south-east corner of MacArthur Street and Wendouree Parade, bordering a creek.

On this land he established a successful market garden with a wide variety of vegetables, fruit, flowers, herbs and spices, benefiting no doubt from his English farming experience. In 1858 Ronalds finally gave up his printing business and sold his equipment, preferring to concentrate on horticultural experiments with new and exotic plants. He was involved in the establishment of the Ballarat Botanic Gardens. At the Ballarat Horticultural Show on the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> March, 1860, he exhibited an imposing selection of his produce, winning six first and seven second prizes.

Alfred Ronalds died suddenly of a stroke on the 23<sup>rd</sup> April, 1860, aged 57, and was buried in the cemetery near the Eureka Monument. The following report of his death appeared in the Ballarat paper "*The Miner and Weekly Star*" on the 4<sup>th</sup> May 1860: "*The Cresswick*

*Advertiser says of the late Mr Ronalds, whose death we recorded a few days ago, that he was an old resident of the gold fields having lived under the Adelaide Hill, Forest Creek, in December 1851, whence he removed to Eagle Hawk in 1852, and thence to Bendigo itself. He subsequently became a resident of Creswick, and settled down in Ballarat in 1853. The deceased was the first to start the surfacing west of and near to the Ballarat Cemetery, with which he persevered until a rush surrounded him, depriving him of some really good ground, almost within his grasp. Mr Ronalds shortly after purchased the land for that nursery which he cultivated with so much taste and skill, and the produce of which met with encomiums at the recent Ballarat Show. The deceased gentleman possessed considerable and varied talent, combined with indomitable perseverance. As a proof, he was a self-taught, engraver, copper-plate printer, medallist and lithographer. As an ardent lover of his adopted country, and conceiving that the separation of Victoria from New South Wales deserved some permanent record, he designed and struck a medal commemorative of the event.*

*One of the medals is now in our possession. But the people of Geelong were not so enthusiastic as the artist, and they used to say that he gave away nineteen medals in order to sell the twentieth. In the old country, Mr Ronalds was an ardent follower of Izaak Walton. His work on Fly Fishing (published by Longman and Co.) still maintains its ground, and for some years the profits from its sale, he said, averaged fifty Pounds per annum. Lucky author! The deceased gentleman, who*



was twice married, has left a large family to deplore his loss. Mr Ronalds was closely related to the celebrated Martineau family." Ronalds' widow, Mary, and her children continued the successful market garden business until the late 1870's, when she moved to Melbourne, opening an antique shop in St Kilda. She died in 1895, aged 78. Ronalds' descendants maintained the family's horticultural tradition for a century, and Ronalds Central Florists was a respected business in Melbourne until after the Second World War.

So while we as numismatists remember Alfred Ronalds for his lone medal, because it was the first struck in Australasia, we should not forget that in his relatively short life he was also an engraver, copper-plate printer and lithographer, naturalist, author, fishing tackle maker, gold digger, surveyor, market gardener and nurseryman! In addition he married twice and fathered twelve children!

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