

Norman B. Mason (1905–1960)

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Norman Brownsword Mason was born in Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire, England on February 20, 1905. His parents were Earnest, a tin-smith by trade, and Harriet Ann (nee Brownsword) Mason. Norman was born the youngest of five sons: his brothers were Harold, Reginald, Alfred and Alec Earnest. Their mother emigrated April 28, 1908, taking Norman, age 3, and his brothers aboard the S.S. Corsican;* they departed from Liverpool and arrived at Montreal. Mother and her sons travelled to Toronto re-joining the father who had arrived in 1907 to find employment and a family home.

Norman Mason was educated in the public school system of Ontario, joining the workforce at the age of 15. He went to work in the Canadian Head Office of the Hartford Fire Insurance Company of Hartford, Connecticut. He remained with Hartford for a period of forty years, eventually becoming an accountant with the firm.

When Mason was 24 years old, his father passed away on November 7, 1929. His cause of death was recorded as Parkinson's disease, an affliction the father suffered from for 10 years.

* *The S.S. Corsican was operated by Alan Line (more properly Montreal Ocean Steamship Company) from 1907–1917. It was this same ship that Dr. James Bonar travelled to Canada on to assume his position as Deputy Master of the Ottawa Branch of the Royal Mint in July of 1907.*

By this time Mason had been bitten by the coin collecting bug. He once wrote about his start as:

My collection started with a very much worn English shilling dated 1858. Shortly afterwards another "old" coin came my way—a U.S. dime, 1854, which was in nearly as bad shape as the shilling.

Thinking these "antiques" must be valuable I kept them and some time later saw an "old coin" ad in a magazine. The result showed me my coins were "junk" but as the prices quoted seemed to me surprisingly low, I decided to start a collection. I soon realized there is a large spread between buying and selling and despite being gyped [sic] in my first experience of buying coins—I have continued with our engrossing hobby.

Mason was probably the most active of the few coin collectors in the Toronto area between 1935 to 1950. His interests in numismatics were British Empire type sets, as well as Canadian and English coins.

Organized Numismatics

He first joined organized numismatics by way of the American Numismatic Association in 1936; being officially admitted on April 1. His original membership number was 5216. He later became a life member of the association holding LM 157.

Mason was an active member of the ANA. He became the representative for Southern Ontario in the fall of 1938. He was also a frequent attendee of the ANA's annual conventions throughout the mid-1930s and 1940s. During the 1940 convention held in Detroit, Michigan, he served as a member of the Committee on Election. This is the year that J. Douglas Ferguson, a Canadian numismatic icon, was elected as president of the association, for the term 1941–43.

Mason's numismatic news reports appeared frequently in *The Numismatist*. In his first report, from the November 1938 edition, he talks about corresponding with the local newspapers, the *Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail*, and volunteering to answer questions posed to the papers regarding coins.

*Since assuming the office I have communicated with the "Questions Answered" department of the two local evening newspapers, offering to be of any possible service in connection with information regarding coins. I also gave some information to an inquiry in the "Homemaker," which is a department in our morning newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*. From these contacts over 50 inquiries have been received in less than six months, one coming from over 1,500 miles. The information requested has, to the best of my ability, been given and, where the*



Committee on Election—Messrs. Werner, Anderson, Mason, Boesel, Reagan and Morris.

seeming interest warranted, an effort made to interest the inquirer in numismatics, but, unfortunately, all inquiries seem to have been of a mercenary nature, not one interested collector being unearthed. (Incidentally none of the inquiries were about "valuable" coins).

In the same report Mason also talked about sending a letter to all members of the ANA in Canada "endeavoring to bind them more closely together in numismatic interest and the A.N.A." Mason attempted to promote local organized collecting and the ANA whenever possible. He succeeded in some attempts, while he did not in others. On one occasion he tried to do this by seeding the Toronto Public Library with copies of *The Numismatist*. In December of 1942 the chief librarian, Charles R. Sander-son, wrote him to say that unfortunately the copies he sent were so little used "that I could not conscientiously ask you to continue to send it to us."

Mason always looked for ways to organize coin collectors in Canada into local clubs. In one attempt he tried, unsuccessfully, to develop a club in Lindsay, Ontario. He also attempted,

without success, to gather contact information for collectors in the Toronto vicinity by appealing to dealers to supply him with the information.

Mason clearly practiced what he preached and never gave up. In 1936 an ANA member from Toronto, (Bob) G. N. Robillard contacted Mason when he saw Mason's membership published in *The Numismatist*. They quickly formed an informal group of local collectors, meeting at Robillard's home. Soon Mason lobbied for something more formal. During a meeting on May 26, 1939 the group decided to organize as a club and elect officers. Thus was born the "Toronto Coin Club" (TCC). Mason was given membership No. 1 and was Secretary protempore. G. N. Robillard was elected President, William Williams - Vice President and J. Bruce Parker - Secretary. The other charter members of the club were: Ted Parsons, John Sunden, H. Ernie Roseborough, John L. Sharpe, William E. Marely, Paul Boros, Sam Snider, J. Albert Peddie and James E. Charlton. Mason informed the ANA membership of the founding of the TCC in his report published in the July 1939 edition of *The Numismatist*.

The TCC flourished and continues to this day. Mason was an active member, serving on the executive committee as a vice-president in 1954 and long-term treasurer until his death.

It should be no surprise that Mason was also one of the 200 original members of the Canadian Numismatic Association holding membership No. 155. He was a welcomed addition to the executive of the fledgling association serving as an area director for Ontario

until 1953 and as vice-president for the 1953–54 term.

The TCC supported the C.N.A. from the outset; becoming an early corporate member (No. 209) in 1950 and sponsoring its first annual convention in 1954, when Mason was vice-president of both organizations and member of the organizing committee.

Mason the Collector

In addition to Mason working to promote organized numismatics in Canada, he was also an active numismatic researcher, collector and writer.

Besides his report as the local representative, the November 1938 edition of *The Numismatist* included a paper entitled "A Canadian Rarity" which he presented to the 1938 ANA convention in Columbus, Ohio. This paper is a rare insight into Mason the coin collector, in which he describes his search for "a coin that is not supposed to exist, the comment I received was that any coin that Breton, Leroux, and Gravel have not seen must be 100 per cent worthwhile." The elusive coin he was referring to was the 1921 Canadian silver 5-cent piece. Mason reveals himself as a true coin collector. Searching through rolls of coins that he would purchase from one bank and then returning them to another bank. His reason in searching for the rarity "a nut who collects old coins (types only) decided to save a complete date set of Canadian cents and nickels." Mason finally found his chase piece after almost a decade of extensive searching. He came across one in circulation in the fall of 1937, while trying to help a fellow collector complete his 5-cent Victorian series.

He was the first collector to recognize and publicize the fact that the 1921 Canadian small 5-cent silver coin was a true rarity due to the vast majority of the mintage of 1,400,000 being melted at the mint. He continued to track and maintain a database of provenance of the 1921 5 cents and 50 cents through his ties with the C.N.A.

Mason, Researcher and Writer

Norman B. Mason was a prolific writer. His articles appeared in *The Numismatist* as well as other publications. One such publication was a hobby magazine called *The Canadian Hobby - Craft Magazine*. Mason wrote a regular "Coin Collecting" column in the late 1940s under the pen-name of *A Numismatist*. Starting in 1950–51 the magazine changed its name to *The Canadian Home and HOBBYCRAFT Magazine*. At this point Mason used his real name in the by-line.

As an example of the lengths Mason would go to to promote the hobby, he wrote an article appearing in the May 10, 1942 (Vol. 8 No. 14) edition of an obscure newsletter published by the OLIVET SOCIETY† called the "Chatter-Box."

In this introductory level article entitled *Numismatics*, Mason introduces

† *The Olivet Society is a congregation of the New Church (or Swedenborgianism.) It is the name for a religious movement developed from the writings of the Swedish scientist and theologian Emanuel Swedenborg [Swedenborg](1688-1772). Swedenborg's visions primarily explain how and why the Bible is Divinely Inspired, and it is methodically delineated word by word in his massive multi-volume work, the Arcana Coelestia (meaning Heavenly Secrets).*

the uninitiated reader to the subject using spiritual references to numismatics. In one way he looks to capture the imagination of the reader through three Swedish coins in his collection — dated 1688 — that he suggests might have been carried by Swedenborg (the founder of the New Church).

Mason also frequently wrote letters to Parliament, local newspapers and radio stations on the subject of new and proposed coins.

In addition to belonging to multiple numismatic organizations Mason was a thirty-year member in the Canadian Order of Foresters. He held several offices in that organization, at one time being a member of the Dominion Executive and later, Treasurer of Dominion Court No. 202.

Norman B. Mason passed away in the Toronto Western Hospital May 12, 1960. He was 55 years old. Surviving him were his wife Helena, daughter Norma, brothers, Alec and Reginald, and sister Grace.

The authors would like to thank the RCNA Librarian, Dan Gosling, for his valued help in researching this article.

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