

NUMISMATICALLY SPEAKING

by Trevor W. Hearl

Collecting Colonial and Commonwealth coinage may never achieve philatelic popularity, but devotees derive valuable artistic, social and economic insights into the countries they study. Nor does one have to be a collector; reading up on the subject also offers new perspectives on a country's history and culture.

Numismatic newcomers interested in British West Africa and St Helena, for example, can get a flying start from an excellent book by David Vice, giving a thorough, illustrated review of coinage with a fascinating explanation of the economic background. Currencies of chartered companies and governments in Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast and other West African settlements are covered from the 1790s; and from the days of Charles II in 1684 at St Helena.

St Helena's little-known currency attracted my interest. Here are detailed the East India Company's issues of copper bars and silver 3d. pieces; tradesmen's and Army canteen tokens; even half-crowns, shillings and sixpences, struck in 1832 before the Company surrendered control to the Crown. The bewildering assortment of coins then in circulation is deftly explained as St Helena operated within an extensive Indo-European currency area where Indian rupees mingled with gold pagodas, ducatoons, Venetian sequins and a score more.

The island was "a money-changers headache" but not for the reader for whom the complexities of its visitors' gold and silver coinage are simplified into a table of their fluctuating values between 1819 and 1836.

Transfer to Colonial Office control brought the intricate system near to collapse. While trade grew at an unprecedented rate, the currency fell into "a shocking state". £5,000 in British silver rushed out in desperation in 1841 disappeared within the year! How these and later currency crises were met is traced in a few jargon-free pages which add a new ingredient to my view of "our Island story". An economic historian is now needed to use this and other relevant data to analyse the cautionary tale of its topsy-turvy economy.

David Vice takes his survey down to 1958. This leaves another challenge - to record St Helena's decimal coinage from 1984, with its commemorative companions which, after the first in 1973 (Tercentenary of the Company's Charter), seems to have degenerated into mere exploitation of the coin collecting market.

Vice, David. *The Coinage of British West Africa and St Helena 1684-1958*. Birmingham: Peter Ireland, 1983.

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