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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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THE PERCY SMITH MEDAL

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The Percy Smith Medal for 1978 has been awarded to Foss Leach. As readers beyond Otago may be unfamiliar with the medal and its history the following details are given.

The award is made for published research work in Anthropology by past or present students or members of staff of the University of Otago, or past or present members of staff of the Otago Museum. It is offered not more than once in four years. Previous recipients have been H.D. Skinner (1926), Peter Buck (1930), D.G. Kennedy (1934), David Teviotdale (1937), Herries Beattie (1941), Roger Duff (1948), Catherine Berndt (1950), J.D. Freeman, W.R. Geddes, L. Lockerbie (1956), H.B. Hawthorn (1960) and T.T. Barrow (1965). In 1970, the University decided that one medal too many had been awarded and that another should not be awarded until 1974; in that year, however there was no candidate of sufficient merit.

What is not revealed in the above account is that the medal owed its existence and continuation to the determination of one man - H.D. Skinner. In the file about the medal was found the following statement by Skinner himself, dated 12 May, 1970.

"It has been stated that the Percy Smith Medal was founded by Stevenson Percy Smith. This is not strictly accurate. The Hector Medal and fund were awarded to Stephenson Percy Smith in 1920. He retained half the fund, twenty pounds, for himself and sent the other half to H. D. Skinner, as a free gift because in 1919 the latter had been made lecturer in anthropology in the University of Otago, and this constituted the first academic recognition of anthropology in New Zealand. I decided the money should be used to found a Percy Smith Medal to commemorate his ethnographic work, in particular his founding of the Polynesian Society. The money was given to the University of Otago, the University subsidizing the gift, pound for pound. It was allowed to accumulate at compound interest. It was decided that the medal should be awarded once in every four years and that each recipient should receive half the accumulated income, the other half to be added to capital. It was to be awarded for published work in anthropology by members or former members of the staffs of Otago University or of Otago Museum. I recommended to the Anthropology Committee that the first award be made to Peter Buck. To my complete surprize the committee, of which Doctor Benham and Professor Dunlop were members, recommended the University Council to award the medal to me. Four years later the medal was awarded to Peter Buck. I was asked by the

University to make recommendations of persons who should be considered for the award at the end of each four-yearly period. As each accepted I asked each to forego the immediate cash grant so that capital might be built up with the intention of founding a medal and a fund and this each of them successively agreed to do. When capital reached about £120 I approached the Royal Mint, London, supposing that the Mint might consider the making of a dye. I had secured from Miss Ethel Smith, daughter of Percy Smith, a portrait photograph which might be used by the dye-cutter. The authorities at the Royal Mint informed me that the cost of cutting such a dye would be upwards of £400. It was therefore obvious that nothing could be done at that time. A few years later I received a private letter from a member of staff of the Mint saying that, without instructions, the dye-cutter had cut a likeness; that he had since died; and that his widow was anxious to accept any payment we were prepared to make. I replied that we would gladly hand over our total in hand, amounting to just over £200. The Mint authorities accepted the money on behalf of the widow, and struck a dozen medals which were handed to the University of Otago. The University handed them to eleven recipients who had up to that time been named. It is clear that it is now highly desirable that the capital sum should be augmented."

University records show that medals were received from the Royal Mint in 1951, 1956, 1957 and 1971, the last perhaps in response to Skinner's final effort to ensure the continuation of the medal for which he had gone to so much trouble.

The medal is a handsome one, more than 6cm in diameter and struck in bronze. The obverse shows the portrait of Stephenson Percy Smith, 1840-1922, while the reverse carries the legend "University of Otago. For research in Anthropology".



PERCY SMITH MEDAL



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