

**Edition 5**



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**Association of Open University Graduates  
Europe**

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We are creating within our Newsletters, a good selection of subjects to read, digest, enjoy, even to respond to. Articles on gardens, hobbies, history, literature and home areas are still producing comments and articles for me to include in each Newsletter, so many thanks to all of you for your contributions.

In this Newsletter, Patrick Noble returns with another article, this time with details of his hobby, collecting Euro coins. Although some of you live outside of the Euro zone, the actual subject of coin collecting can be of interest to all, where ever we live. I have a tin box full of coins, of no particular period or country, which I inherited from my grandmother and Patrick's article has prompted me to have another look at them.

Also in this Newsletter, Geoff Mitchell tells us about his reading likes and dislikes. It is always interesting to read another view. As Open University graduates we have diverse interests so it would be interesting to know from all our members, what subjects they studied for their Open University degree. Maeve Race tells me that she is coming to the end of reading all of Dostoyevski, having completed all of Tolstoy. I think I shall follow in her footsteps, it is a long time since I read Tolstoy.

This October we are having another hand shake event with members from Yorkshire. We are meeting up in Amsterdam on Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> October for a day out but I appreciate that to travel all the way to Amsterdam, just for one day, is not very practical for our Europe members, who would have to travel a considerable distance. I am therefore offering some extra time. I can be in Amsterdam for the Monday and would be delighted to meet up with other members, their families and friends and we can put together a programme of places to visit. Please let me know if you would like to meet up with Yorkshire members on the Tuesday and/or, if you would like to extend the visit into 2 days.

**AMSTERDAM  
TUESDAY 29<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER 2013  
10.30 am**

**Meet at the Tourist Office (opposite the Central Station)**

Patricia Cowling  
Europe Contact

## COLLECTING EURO COINS

Ever since my childhood in England, over the decades I have accumulated coins, most of which found their way unsorted by country of origin into a tin box, which today with its contents weighs well over a kilogramme. This random collection built up as a result of my own travels and those of members of my family. However with the introduction of the Euro in 2002 in twelve European states (as well as in three micro states), I felt that this was a once in a lifetime occasion to get in at the very beginning of a huge European wide development of the common currency. In my naivety I thought that as the years rolled by, I would be able to collect an example of each and every coin minted by all the participating countries. However with the proliferation of not just the coins intended for circulation, but also of commemorative and special issues, following the development of the Euro could become almost a full-time job, and more importantly, would cost a fortune. The problem is that *coin collecting* (I prefer this expression to *numismatics*, which is such a mouthful to pronounce and sound a bit pompous) can be addictive, so you have to draw the line somewhere. Consequently I set myself clear limits on the categories of Euro coins I would collect and those I would have to forgo.

Let us take a brief look at the origin of the Euro, which had a long and complicated period of gestation. It was at Maastricht in 1992 that the idea of a common currency was formalized and the economic criteria set for those states that were going to participate. An ancestor of the Euro was the European Currency Unit (ECU), which was a sort of basket of national currencies, an artificial currency only used in transactions between banks. However in 1992 The United Kingdom (UK) minted a set of ECU coins of ten, five, two and one ECU, together with coins for a half, a quarter and a tenth of an ECU. These coins were not legal tender, but were just issued for collectors. I am glad I bought a set at the time. The effigies on the coins represent Saint George, the Three Graces, a full figure of Britannia, the head of Britannia, the British lion, the Houses of Parliament and the Mayflower. See Figure 1. On the reverse side there is a common representation of the allegorical figures of Neptune and Europa either side of a map of Europe. The irony is that when it came to the crunch, the UK did not join the Euro. Given the actual problems of the Euro Zone, perhaps it was a lucky escape!

In 1999 the ECU transformed itself into the Euro, but was still only a virtual money limited to operations of high finance. It was not until 1<sup>st</sup> January 2002 that the Euro was launched simultaneously as a real currency for everyday use in Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Portugal and Spain, as well as in the micro states of Monaco, San Marino and the Vatican, but more about them later. I went to the bank (I live in France) to pick up a starter set of Euro coins and drew some Euro notes from a cash machine. The format and design of Euro notes are common, though a letter in front of the serial number identifies the issuing country. However whilst the Euro coins have a common side, basically a stylized map of Europe with the denomination, the reverse side is specific to each country, but at the same time any Euro coin intended for normal circulation is legal tender in all the countries constituting "Euroland". To find out more I subscribed to "Monnaie Magazine", for I wanted to see how I could obtain Euros minted in the other countries. Every time I received change in a shop I scrutinized the coins; I still do. Little by little I started to find non-French coins, but the process was very slow,

and for the most part was limited to coins from France's immediate neighbours, that is to say Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, Italy and Spain. Coins from more remote countries, such as Ireland or Finland, were rare. So it became obvious that waiting for an example of each and every Euro coin to arrive in my hand as change was completely unrealistic. So I bought a set for each country and set them in a presentation case. Of course I had to pay in excess of the face values, but overall the purchase was not ruinous.

However concerning the three micro states, it was another story, due to the limited number of coins minted, and hence their scarcity value. At the moment of issue new coins are siphoned off by coin traders and never enter into circulation, but are resold to collectors at an inflated rate. As for San Marino I finally paid about 70 Euros for a set of coins, which total a face value of 2.88 Euros. After years of hesitation, in a moment of folly, I bought a set of Vatican coins for some 109 Euros. In the case of Monaco, depending on the year, the going rate for a set with a face value of 2.88 Euros, could be several hundred Euros, even much more. That is something that I can do without and it won't stop me sleeping at night.

As the years went by, Slovenia, Cyprus, Malta, Slovakia and Estonia joined the Euro, so I added a set of each to my collection.

For the coins of normal circulation, there are several configurations according to the country concerned. Irish Euros for example exhibit a single effigy throughout, the Celtic harp. At the other extreme, Italian Euros have a different effigy for each of the eight denominations. However for the majority of countries there are three effigies, one for the bimetal two and one Euro coins, another for the "yellow" coins of 50, 20, and 10 cents and a third one for the "copper coloured" coins of 5, 2 and 1 cent. A particularity of German coins is that production is shared between five different mints, which are identified by the letters A, D, F, G and J, which, depending on the denomination appear on the coin to the left, right or under the year. If you want to see them you are going to need not too worn coins, sharp eyesight, a good light and a magnifying glass, for the identifying letters are minute.

The price paid depends on the state of the coin, whether worn or uncirculated. There can also be a "brilliant minted" version, hand crafted in small quantities, rather than mass produced.

Apart from the run-of-the-mill Euro coins for normal circulation, there has been a tidal wave of all sorts of weird and wonderful special or commemorative coins, especially in the case of Finland and France, of 1 1/2, 2 1/2, 3, 5, 10, 20, 25, 50, 250, 1000 and 5000 Euros face value, some in silver or gold. I realized right from the beginning that there was no way that I could follow, so I just decide to desist from this cavalcade.

However there was a less dramatic series of commemorative coins which got under way in 2004, being of two Euros face value and able to be issued by any country in Euroland to mark a significant national event, personage or anniversary. These coins were minted in reasonable quantities and launched into normal circulation. They could be bought typically for a sum between five and ten Euros. I started to collect them in an album and to date I have some 70 coins. Figure 2 is a photograph of one of

the pages of my album. Depending on the country, these two Euro coins represent various themes. For example, France minted one to mark the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of General de Gaulle's famous broadcast on the BBC of 18<sup>th</sup> June 1940, and this year The Netherlands has minted a coin to celebrate the Abdication of Queen Beatrix in favour of her son Willem Alexander.

As to be expected the two Euro commemorative coins of San Marino, The Vatican and Monaco are very expensive, so I have left them alone. The record is that of a two Euro coin of 2007 marking the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the accidental death of Princess Grace. To buy one today would cost you about 1 500 Euros.

Apart from commemorative two Euro coins minted by individual countries, the following landmark dates have been celebrated by the simultaneous issue of identical coins by some or all of the countries in Euroland:-

The Treaty of Rome 1957 – 2007

Ten Years of Economic and Monetary Union 1999 – 2009

Ten Years of the Euro 2002 – 2012

Figure 3 is a photograph of the first of these sets of coins, including one from each of the German mints.

So what about the future? Are there any more countries expecting to join Euroland? In spite of the crisis, Latvia, the second of the three Baltic States, following the example of Estonia, is programmed to change its national money for the Euro the 1<sup>st</sup> January 2014. Perhaps its motivation is to assert its affinity with Western European culture, rather than that of its neighbouring giant, Russia. The designs of the new Latvian coins are already publicized. Then there is the case of Andorra, a duty free tax haven wedged in a Pyrenean valley between France and Spain, of which the Co-Princes are the President of France and the Spanish bishop of Seo de Urgel. Andorra has never had its own currency, instead using indifferently French Francs and Spanish Pesetas. When the latter were replaced by the Euro, Andorra became a *de facto* Euro country, but now it wants to issue its own Euro coins also programmed for 2014. Will the number of coins minted be restricted, so that the scarcity value sends the prices sky high as is the case for Monaco? Coin collectors will be following this event with a lot of attention.

Finally why should anyone bother to collect coins? Perhaps a psychologist can explain the attraction of collecting. The most famous and talented artists and engravers are commissioned to create the designs, so in a sense a coin collection is a miniature home art gallery accessible to anyone. Furthermore coins tell us something about the culture and history of the countries concerned. Then as the years go by a collection will certainly increase in value, and can even be enjoyed by future generations. Finally it is just good fun!

Patrick Noble

**Figure 1. UK ECU coins**



**Figure 2. Commemorative coins – Two Euros**



**Figure 3. Commemorative coins – Two Euros, Treaty of Rome**



### Books - Another readers trip through Literature

Like Patricia, I was an avid reader as a child and I believe that is where it starts. My two daughters were given the same opportunities but whereas one followed in my footsteps and read everything the other struggled and even now has no real love of books or reading. At school she struggled and her primary teacher gave up on her! Need I say more?

My sisters were 6 and 9 years older than me so by the time I was able to read they had ceased to be playmates. So I spent hours reading bits and pieces in Arthur Mee's Children's Encyclopaedias. I was particularly interested in people and places and this has stayed with me. I believe that I developed my love of all things Geographical at that time and it was the underlying subject of my OU degree. Growing up during the war I was drawn to books about Biggles by W.E Johns and scoured the local library for books of that sort. I also discovered Arthur Ransome and the "Swallows and Amazons" stories and in later life introduced my daughter to them. It also introduced me to the Lake District - an area I love. The friendly Librarian encouraged me to explore in the "grown up section" and it was there that I stumbled on Dornford Yates with his thrillers of the inter war years set mostly in France and Baroness Orczy and the Scarlet Pimpernel. Much reading was done in bed with the aid of a torch after lights out!

My next tranche of reading took me into non-fiction where I followed the exploits of Scott and Shackleton and all things to do with the Arctic and Antarctic and latter I turned to accounts of war time exploits and particularly naval action like the Battle of

Jutland and earlier accounts of Trafalgar. This took me back to fiction and the many books written by E. M. Forster and his hero Hornblower. In the same vein I read other authors who write of war on the high seas with France, Spain and the fledgling America, and the place of the Navy in protecting the interests of Great Britain. This included Patrick O'Brien, Alexander Kent, Douglas Reeman and of course historical novels dealing with the army such as those by Alan Mallinson set mostly in India and Bernard Cornwall's, Sharpe series. Books on achievement such as single handed round the world yacht sailing fascinate me so I am familiar with Claire Francis and Francis Chichester and his Gipsy Moth.

In more recent years my interest in people and places has been captured in books by Bill Bryson - that is until I met his autobiography "The Thunderbolt Kid" which I felt was awful - it would have been better left in draft! Again another writer whose travel books I once enjoyed was Paul Theroux but in "The Pillars of Hercules" he writes of areas I know well and I felt he did them less than justice. You cannot right an area off based on a two or three hour visit. So it rather discredits the rest of his narrative. An interesting read was "Shadow of the Silk Road" by Colin Thubron which follows the old Trail across Northern and Central Asia. I love too those books about people's relocation to new areas and their settlement and their passions. The classic "A year in Provence" by Peter Mayle is one such and I have recently discovered Carol Drinkwater of the TV series "All Creatures Great and Small" who again moved to Provence and is passionate about Olives. She has written five or six books about their experiences resuscitating an olive farm and researching the history of the Olive. In similar vein Peter Kerr tells the Spanish story of growing oranges on an old finca he bought in Andalucia. There are others!

Occasionally my daughter will give me a book of her choice for birthday presents and the last two have been "A Thousand Splendid Suns" by Khaled Hosseini about a fragment of life in Afghanistan and the other one was "The Book Thief" by Markus Zusak set in 1939 Nazi Germany. I enjoyed them both and had already read Hosseini's "The Kite Runner" - an earlier birthday present.

Then I come to what I call "How the other half live" and by this I mean those who live under oppression, despotism, racial hatred, brutality and conflict. I include here Terry Waite's incarceration in Beirut and "An evil Cradling" by Brian Keenan which tells a similar story. Many years ago I read "Three Swans" by Jung Chang which tells of growing up in Communist China for a Grandmother, Mother and Daughter and their trials and tribulations. In this group I have read books on the Rwandan holocaust and of one woman's survival (Left to Tell by Immaculee Ilibagiza), Female circumcision in Togo (Do they hear you when you cry by Fauziya Kassindja) and the escape from a brutal life and a forced marriage of a Muslim woman (Infidel - My Life by Ayaan Hirsi Ali) and (The Graves are not yet full by Bill Berkeley) which is about tribe, race and power in the heart of Africa. At the moment I am reading "Cry the Beloved Country" by Alan Paton which was written in 1948 and was instrumental in opening the eyes of the world to the problems in South Africa. I had not read it before but as time has moved on it still has the power to shock. These of course are just a few of the worrying revelations about man's inhumanity to man. It raises the question as to what really goes on behind closed doors in so called modern countries like Great Britain and in the USA.

You will have noted that I have not mentioned main stream classical literature. I hope in the future that I can discover some of these treasures but I had enough of Shakespeare at school to last me a life time so I am unlikely to go down that particular road!

So you can see Patricia that my literature trail has twisted and turned in different directions to your own and I guess to most other readers. I hope I may have awoken a few new ideas for others to explore.

Geoff Mitchell