
The themes and thinking behind New Zealand's 1967 decimal coin designs

by Matthew Wright¹

New Zealand's switch to decimal currency in July 1967 concluded around three years' continuous and, at times, controversial work by officials from the Decimal Currency Board, The Treasury and the Reserve Bank, among others. Those directly involved with production of the decimal coins included a Coinage Design Advisory Committee, artists, designers, officials at the Royal Mint and even HRH The Duke of Edinburgh. This article reviews the thinking behind the themes and general imagery picked for New Zealand's original decimal coins. Today, four of the five circulating coins use themes either applied in the original 1967 decimal release, or directly considered at that time.

1 Introduction

The change to decimal currency in 1967 was the most fundamental shift in New Zealand's currency since the first national notes and coins were issued in the early 1930s by the Reserve Bank and The Treasury respectively. It was not an overnight decision; the first call for decimalisation came as early as 1908, the idea gained momentum during the 1930s and the formal process was initiated in 1957 after a series of private members' bills, culminating in the April 1963 decision to make the change in July 1967.²

The cultural context within which decimalisation took place shaped the thinking behind the coin designs and helped define the themes explored during the drafting and design process. Curiously, the final designs did not use many of the iconic images of New Zealand's mid-century culture in favour of more traditional New Zealand iconography, such as the kiwi, albeit still framed by mid-century thinking.

The whole process was handled by the Decimal Currency Board, a statutory body set up for the task, which stood apart from both the Reserve Bank and The Treasury. The Board began its work in 1964, in a New Zealand that was culturally different from that of the early twenty-first century. Some historians have argued that in the 1960s, New Zealand was exploring an emerging nationhood, but much was still framed around a focus on Britain – then



A few of New Zealand's first national coins of 1933 (top) and the last pre-decimal issues of 1965 (bottom).

The imagery and style provided a starting point, and the kiwi was ultimately adopted for two of New Zealand's decimal coins, though not before other ideas had been explored.

Images not to scale

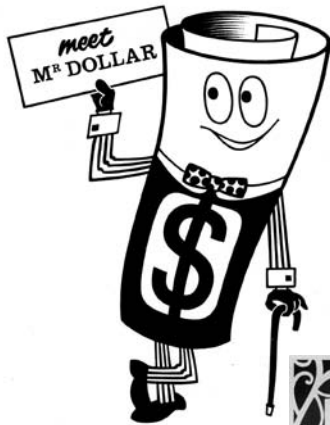
our major export market. Local culture was largely pakeha and male-oriented, exalting national sports such as rugby and racing. In this mono-cultural world Maori were usually symbolised, for pakeha, through stylised imagery, including carvings, artefacts and occasional cultural displays.³

Social ideals of the day were conservative and built around what one historian has called the 'tight society' that emerged during the First World War, a culture that exalted

¹ I wish to thank Michael Reddell, Alan Boaden and Tim Ng for their comments on drafts of this article; and the Reserve Bank Knowledge Centre for assistance with source material.

² R P Hargreaves (1972) *From Beads to Banknotes*, John McIndoe, Dunedin, pp 172-73, 179.

³ James Belich (2002) *Paradise Reforged*, Allen Lane, Auckland, pp. 307-316, 346-352, 378-388; Matthew Wright (2004) *The Reed Illustrated History of New Zealand*, Reed, Auckland, pp 384-401; see also Michael King (2003) *The Penguin History of New Zealand*, Penguin, Auckland, pp 411-413, 429-432, 510-513.



Decimal promotions of the mid-1960s; our 'Mr Dollar' echoed the Australian 'Dollar Bill'. In the New Zealand version, Maori were specifically catered for.



and demanded conformity to a narrow set of social values designed to exalt the nuclear family and regulate society.⁴ By the 1950s this had evolved into the 'suburban' world of mid-century New Zealand, which another historian has dubbed our 'pavlova society'; less restrictive but still conformist.⁵ It has been argued that a good deal of New Zealand's self-image of the day reflected the 'cultural cringe', the notion that New Zealand lagged behind the wider world. This was matched against an image of New Zealanders as extraordinarily capable – a duality that found one resolution in the 'overseas experience', principally a pilgrimage to Britain. By this thinking, only Kiwis who had earned credibility there had much worth at home, though there were exceptions.⁶

This was the intellectual and social framework within which our first decimal currency was designed. The Decimal Currency Board handed coin development to a Coinage Design Advisory Committee, which began meeting in 1964. Members included J. N. Searle (divisional director of The Treasury); S. B. MacLennan (director of the National Art

Gallery), parliamentary historian Dr A. H. McIntock, A. Sutherland (past president of the Numismatic Society), E. J. Walker (chief accountant, National Bank of New Zealand) and P. J. Wilkinson (secretary). Their brief was simple; they had to come up with a series of decimal coins. Their terms of reference required them to find designs:

...of an attractive and pleasing nature which will appeal to the public of New Zealand and will, at the same time, be helpful in educating the public in the use of the decimal system of currency, as well as being of a standard recognised as satisfactory for coinage purposes.

Design content that the committee were required to consider included "native or national emblems, features, flora, fauna, historical or geographical subjects and the like".⁷ They did not have to start with *carte blanche*; the old coins could be modified. In the end, the committee retained some sizes and even wording from the pre-decimal set. The word 'shilling' appeared on the 10 cent piece, and the 20 cent was identically sized to the old florin. But it was a long and often rocky road. The committee spent the better part of three years working their way to the final designs. Along the way they conducted a remarkable exploration of the popular iconography of the day.

2 Developing the decimal coin iconography

The design committee had to consider both sides of the coins. The obverse ('heads') was relatively easy. By tradition this always featured the reigning monarch; the only issues revolved around technical matters such as selecting the specific portrait and fitting the lettering and detail into the available space. For technical reasons associated with the way coins were stamped and the 'relief' thickness of the metal, it was problematic to put a New Zealand 'head' on the reverse side. Although traditional, the use of the monarch's portrait gained additional context locally from New Zealand's strong pro-British mind-set of the day, and

⁴ Belich, pp 159-170.

⁵ Wright, pp 367-368.

⁶ Wright, pp 300-303; see also King, pp 317-320; Belich, pp 332-335.

⁷ Decimal Currency Board papers (DCB), 'Coinage design advisory committee minutes' T12/54/15, Coinage Design Advisory Committee – Terms of Reference.



the final design featuring a portrait by Arnold Machin was approved by Cabinet in 1965.

The real issue was what to put on the reverse ('tails'). The question was complex; whatever was chosen had to be locally relevant, and the brief threw focus on the ways in which New Zealanders saw themselves. Although, as the committee eventually put it to the Minister of Finance, "no other country" had "ever chosen coin designs by public selection",⁸ the committee was aware that ordinary New Zealanders would have an opinion. The design process began with a public competition that generated 624 designs submitted by 156 individuals.⁹

Most of these ideas reflected prevailing popular icons, notably New Zealand native birds such as the fantail; kowhais, mountains, Maori images such as the tiki, the dolphin Pelorus Jack, swordfish, stags, trout, the "new Parliament building" – the Beehive, then in sketch design – along with "crops, stock, industry", a "map of the world with New Zealand possessions", Napier foreshore icon Pania of the Reef, cows and sheep.¹⁰

The nature of these ideas provides a window into New Zealand's popular self-image of the day, framed by the original terms of reference; an emerging nation whose

Images not to scale

Above: Different ways of handling lettering and the portrait of HM Queen Elizabeth II on the 'heads' side were investigated, along with optional treatments for the edges. A 'double header' coin with Maori on the reverse, proposed by Professor Paul Beadle, was among the final proposals put forward to the Royal Mint in early 1966, but ruled out at the eleventh hour for technical reasons.

Below: Sports fishing became the theme for this 10 cent proposal by J. Churchward.



Image not to scale

⁸ DCB, 'Treasury memos and DC coin designs', memo to Minister of Finance, 1 June 1966.

⁹ DCB, T.10/71 CDAC Agenda Paper 5/1, 20 November 1964.

¹⁰ DCB, 'Coinage design advisory committee minutes', Second Meeting of Coinage Design Advisory Committee, Wednesday 24 June 1964, agenda and attachments.

Classical images of money



One of the aspects perhaps lost during the initial design phases was the need for the coins to not only carry New Zealand icons – but also reflect the dignity and sobriety demanded of money. Some of the designs that emerged reflected mid-century aesthetics and in some respects lacked the older visual styles traditionally associated with money. Others harked back to that formality. The designs here include two of British designer William Gardner’s proposals (top). They did not make the final selection. British designer Eric Fraser (left) took a more contemporary approach with his ‘geyser’ five cent, one of the designs made public in early 1966; but his neo-classical images for a commemorative dollar (bottom left and centre) were less favoured. Milner Gray’s ‘heraldic ship’ (below) was very much a classical coin; and a similar image appeared on one of his 20 cent pieces, but the Decimal Coin Committee felt it was not “truly representative of New Zealand”.

Images not to scale

wealth was based on pastoral prosperity, and whose people retained close ties with their rugged colonial past, notably expressed through hunting and fishing. Although birds and native flora also featured, as they had on earlier coins, these ideas became a framing force that helped guide the committee into the next stages of the design process.

Three designers, J. Churchward, L. C. Mitchell and G. Norfolk, produced initial concepts; but these were not enough for an informed decision. The committee then approached 14 professional designers to produce detailed proposals, finally commissioning 11 of them for the job.¹¹ The brief included finding themes that embodied major aspects of New Zealand life, broadly framed around the fundamental ideas of pastoralism, tourism, nationalism, exploration, flora, fauna and Maori.

The selection of designers added another dimension to the thinking behind the images and themes of the currency. Some, such as James Berry, Frank Shurrock and Paul Beadle, were New Zealanders – presenting New Zealand images as New Zealanders saw them. Others, such as Eric Fraser, M. Rizzello and Milner Gray, were British. Inevitably, their coins were New Zealand imagery as seen from a British cultural perspective. This subtly different angle had its effects on the nature of the images they came up with. All the designers overlaid their broad themes with detailed currency-specific styles varying from starker modern patterns to more traditional elaborations, as is evident from the range of different drawings and sketches eventually produced.

3 Developmental process and controversies

The process of sifting the multitude of coin designs and reaching a consensus on the final selection can best be described as tortuous. It is not the aim of this article to review the detailed mechanics of the process or chronicle the creative paths taken by individual designers; however, from the viewpoint of the design themes, much boiled down to aesthetic taste and efforts to judge public mood. There

¹¹ DCB, *Clippings and Photos*, *Wairarapa Times-Age*, 9 February 1966.

Down on the farm



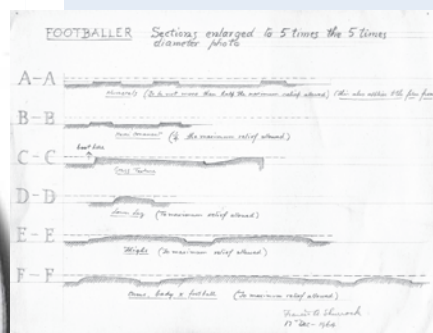
Images not to scale

New Zealand's pastoral activity featured on a wide range of proposals by different designers. British designer M. Rizzello (10 and 50 cent, top) featured a ram that was more reflective of a British pastoral show than a Kiwi back-block, differing sharply from Eileen May's more realistic shearing sketch (centre), Joseph Churchward's five cent sheep (centre left) and Frank Shurrock's 50 cent musterer (centre right). James Berry took the concepts a step further as part of a sequence exploring our pastoral life (above). Shurrock's musterer was approved by Cabinet for submission to the Royal Mint Advisory Committee (RMAC).

Frank Shurrock's footballer

The first set of New Zealand coin designs met a mixed reception when considered by the RMAC in December 1965. Frank Shurrock's football player, described as a "vigorous conception of a typical New Zealand club footballer" was accepted by Cabinet as a contender for the 20 cent piece, but the idea met little favour when passed on to the RMAC.

This rebuff did not go down well in New Zealand, but in fact the proposals were heavily framed by the national self-conception and the iconography of the young nation, and the designers responded to the requested specification professionally. But currency needed something more than their brief implied; it also demanded a redolence of money. The dissonance between New Zealand's concepts and the expectations of more traditional monetary designs did not reduce the quality or quantity of work, as surviving sketches of the controversial rugby coin reveal.



Images not to scale

were elimination rounds and iterative consultation with the designers, and it was November 1965 before several sets were approved by the Cabinet for submission to the British-based Royal Mint. This step was partly a function of practicality; the coins were likely to be struck by the Royal Mint, and the Mint also carried a body of long-standing expertise in regard to designs. This expertise did not exist in New Zealand in the 1960s. But, like the coin images themselves, the process also reflected the New Zealand mind-set of the day. Even in the 1960s, New Zealand continued to look to the mother country for guidance and advice.

The sets submitted for the Mint's comments were a mix-and-match of designs by four individuals: two London

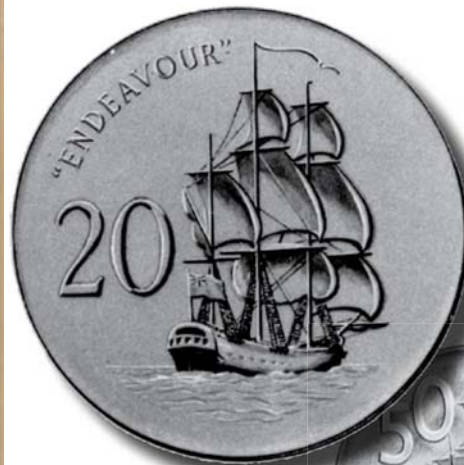
designers, Milner Gray and Eric Fraser; and two Christchurch designers, Francis (Frank) Shurrock and Eileen Mayo.¹² Content included New Zealand images such as the rifleman, tuatara, athletes and fernleaf, to more abstracted images such as a "heraldic ship".¹³

Their designs were not well received. Shurrock's football player came in for particular criticism.¹⁴ In response the New Zealand committee asked for fresh designs, incorporating

¹² DCB, "Coinage advisory committee notes", "Proposed press statement, new coins".

¹³ DCB, "Memos, press releases", Statement: Parliamentary Under-Secretary to the Minister of Finance.

¹⁴ DCB, "Coinage design advisory committee minutes", Minutes of the Thirteenth Meeting of the Coinage Design Advisory Committee, 23 December 1965.



Explorers and their ships featured on a number of coin designs; this sequence, above, traces part of the evolution of James Berry's thinking towards the eventual 50 cent piece, above right. Other proposed coin designs featured agricultural or national themes. The difference between New Zealand and British perceptions was clear; one of British designer Milner Gray's two cent ideas involved a sheaf of corn, below, which the New Zealand committee rejected because New Zealand was a net importer of wheat, "notwithstanding that agriculture is a prime source of wealth". Designs released for public comment in March 1966 included a one cent featuring mountain daisies, right. Maurice Conly favoured historical ideas, bottom.

Images not to scale

the mint's suggestions, from Eileen Mayo, Juliet Cowen, T. V. Johnston, T. J. Taylor and James Berry.¹⁵ However, the rejected designs shortly leaked out to the media, creating a brief storm that swiftly embroiled the politician in charge, Robert Muldoon, then under-secretary for Finance. There was a public outcry; Invercargill residents, for instance, described the proposed designs as everything from "all right" to "terrible", even "mad".¹⁶ It had been an unfortunate *faux pas*, but as at least one paper observed, it did create an opportunity to debate the issue.¹⁷ The media approached the designers for comment; 78-year old Shurrock declared that he was not worried.¹⁸



Design based on Waitangi, historically the most important place in New Zealand, showing Treaty House behind flagstaff with N.Z. ensign, and stars of the Southern Cross.

¹⁵ DCB, 'Memos, press releases', Press Statement, 8 February 1966.

¹⁶ *Southland Daily News*, 9 February 1966, clipping in DCB Box 10 "Clippings and photos".

¹⁷ See, eg *Timaru Herald*, 9 February 1966, clipping in DCB, "Clippings and photos".

¹⁸ *Weekly News*, 9 February 1966, clipping in DCB "Clippings and photos".

James Berry: chosen designer

James Berry got involved with the coin design process early, competing with the other designers to produce a variety of proposals. His 'Southern Cross' one cent piece (centre) was accepted by Cabinet. In 1966, in wake of the Royal Mint comments and other feedback, Berry was picked as the main designer, coming up with specific ideas that were honed into a definitive set.



Images not to scale

Much of the public comment that followed was framed by the published design concepts, but new suggestions retained mid-twentieth century New Zealand imagery. One correspondent suggested “national birds”, tourist attractions such as Mitre Peak, export themes, and a “Maori carving”. Even those wanting something “more inspiring and modern” than existing coins framed their ideas around these images. Only a few were more abstract; one Invercargill resident submitted an embroidery pattern intended to symbolise “closer co-operation of pakeha and Maori”.¹⁹

Any popular idea that this public debate might decide the content of the coins was, however, misplaced. A public petition pushing for the Beadle designs was rejected. The Minister of Finance publicly agreed to change four of the six initially approved designs in early February;²⁰ but by the time the argument brewed up, the committee had already commissioned fresh professional input, and the new proposals were submitted to the Royal Mint in March. Twenty six of them were made public for comment, but in a practical sense, this was largely to inform. The more influential remarks from the committee’s perspective were those of the RMAC, who reported back in May largely favouring Berry’s designs.²¹

Even these assessments, however, were taken with some caution; the difference between the British and New Zealand perception of what was most socially relevant remained clear, and the New Zealand coinage committee concluded that the Mint committee might have been “handicapped by having limited familiarity with the New Zealand scene”. The result was that the New Zealand committee did not have a particularly clear consensus to work from, and when it came down to the final decision the coinage committee initially put forward “majority” and “minority” lists. All reflected the existing iconography – Maori motifs, classic New Zealand scenery such as geysers and mountains, pastoralism, the kiwi, and the colonial process represented by HMS *Endeavour*.²²

¹⁹ DCB, T10/70, ‘Correspondence’, various letters.

²⁰ DCB, ‘Clippings and photos’, *Auckland Star*, 8 February 1966.

²¹ DCB, “Memos, press releases”, Searle to Minister of Finance, 30 May 1966.

²² DCB, “Coinage design advisory minutes 1964-66”, Minutes of the 16th Meeting of the Coinage Design Advisory Committee, 31 May 1966.

The commemorative dollar

The social themes running through New Zealand's decimal coin design process in the mid-1960s were particularly evident in the dollar coin. This was produced as a commemorative coin and apparently not intended to go into circulation, but a very wide range of design themes were explored. The contrast between 1960s thinking and that of even a few years later was made particularly clear by one of James Berry's designs, proposing a 'nuclear' dollar. Others featured landscapes, explorers, birds and the range of themes in vogue at the time.



Images not to scale



Almost ran: at the penultimate moment, the "Maori mask or Tekoteko" design that James Berry proposed for the five cent piece (right, below) was substituted for the Shurrock-derived 10 cent Maori motif (bottom); and Berry's 10-cent Tuatara motif (right) was adopted for the five cent (centre right).

Images not to scale

A final decision still had to be made; and after a series of to-and-fro discussions, the committee finally plumped for Berry's artwork, which had been prepared through an iterative process in consultation with the committee, and which was built on the directions, design work and decisions of the previous 18 months. The ultimate choices were thematically more conservative than some of the ideas explored up to that point, an angle that was informed in part by similarly styled approaches taken not only to the decimal notes but also to the postage stamps of the day. Themes included the fernleaf (one cent), kowhai flower (two cent), Kiwi (20 cent) and *Endeavour* (50 cent). The committee



The 1967 decimal coins

(uncirculated proof set, images not to scale)



reserved judgement on the five cent, thinking it might feature Berry's 10 cent Tuatara, and thought that a Berry-developed modification of one of Shurrock's Maori motifs – called a tekoteko in some reports, but actually a koruru²³ – could be used for the 10 cent, basing the decision in part on technical issues associated with the spread of metal across the coin.²⁴ These recommendations were adopted. The only non-Berry design was the commemorative dollar by William Gardner.

The decisions were announced in mid-June 1966, barely a year before the coins had to be in circulation – in the wider scheme of things, not a great deal of time to finalise, develop and mint them.

4 An enduring selection

The process of developing the decimal designs was unquestionably difficult, spanning the better part of three years. The final consensus offered designs that were very different from many of the drafts and that, in many respects, harked back to more traditional New Zealand themes. In some respects it belied the enthusiasm with which the committee had explored populist mid-century imagery along the way. The final images selected for the coins also had significant public support. An informal survey in 1966, when the ideas were still being bandied about, revealed that over half of those who responded were in favour of the fernleaf motif; around two thirds liked the kowhai; similar figures the tuatara; and more than two thirds liked the kiwi.²⁵

From the wider perspective, the final imagery transcended the immediate social priorities of any particular decade or generation, a point underscored by the evolution of the coin designs over the next 40-odd years. The Reserve Bank acquired authority over New Zealand's coinage in 1989, amalgamating all national currency operations with the Bank. By this time inflation had reduced the value of the dollar to about a tenth of its 1967 value in real terms. The

²³ The error was apparently picked up by J. M. McEwan, Secretary to the Department of Maori Affairs, see DCB, "Treasury Memos, DC Coin designs", Memo to Cabinet, H. R. Lake, and attachments.

²⁴ DCB, "Memos, press releases", Decimal Coinage Designs, 30 May 1966.

²⁵ DCB, "Treasury memos DC coin design", memo to Cabinet, n.d.



The one and two dollar coins introduced in February 1991 (top left and above left); new designs by Maurice Conly reflecting 1967 themes (top centre, top right and above right).

Images not to scale

one and two cent pieces were dropped, and the decision was taken to 'coin' the one and two dollar notes.

Artist and designer Maurice Conly produced designs that took the kiwi and white heron as subjects for the new one and two dollar coins. The kiwi – used on the pre-decimal florin and selected in 1967 as a subject for the 20 cent piece – was consciously used in an effort to bring to reality the colloquial term 'Kiwi dollar'. The heron used on the two dollar coin had been raised as a possible idea in Beadle's design proposals during the 1964-67 evaluation process.

There was further change in the following decade. The size of the decimal coins had been picked, in part, to match familiar pre-decimal currency such as the florin and the shilling. By the twenty-first century these were markedly larger than the coins of most other nations. Smaller and more practical



The 2006 plated steel edition of the 'Pukaki' 20 cent piece with Spanish Flower edging. The 'Pukaki' 20 cent theme, first introduced when the kiwi was transferred to the dollar, was also the first materially new theme for a New Zealand circulating coin since the advent of decimalisation.

Photograph by Stephen A'Court

plated-steel coins were introduced in 2006 – and the 10 and 50 cent pieces retained the original 1967 Berry designs. It was a significant endorsement of the decisions made around 40 years earlier. The result was that, of the five coins in circulation in 2008, four featured general visual themes – the Koruru, the *Endeavour*, the kiwi and the heron – that had their origins in the process of decimalisation.

5 Conclusion

Between 1964 and 1967, the Coinage Design Advisory Committee exhaustively considered a wide range of possible decimal coin designs. Consultation extended to seeking public submissions, a means of gauging opinion, as well as more conventional formal contributions from commissioned designers and official comment from the Royal Mint. The scale of the process was significant, and the iconography explored along the way allows us to gain a particular insight into the New Zealand mind-set of the period. This reflected a young nation that was in the process of emerging from its colonial origins and exploring its identity. The imagery considered for the coins reflected this style of thinking. The need to refine this down into half a dozen coins, in many respects, rendered and simplified the whole mid-twentieth century mind-set into a few iconic themes.

In this respect it is perhaps a testament to the care and thoroughness of the design committee that, while mid-century icons such as the atomic symbol, shearers, a rugby player and horse racing were considered, the themes finally selected – including the kiwi, ferns, tuatara and Maori icons – were more timeless, and retain a cultural relevance in the somewhat different New Zealand society of the early twenty-first century.

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