

Michael Dolley Medal

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As reported in the Finnish Numismatic Journal (2/2025, p. 48), the Northern Ireland branch of the Numismatic Society of Ireland organised a lecture in Belfast last April to mark the centenary of the birth of Professor Michael Dolley (1925–1983). The British Numismatic Society held a similar event in London in July 2025.

Dolley was not only a numismatist but also a well-known historian and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He was elected a Corresponding Member of the Finnish Numismatic Society in 1979 in recognition of his assistance in the publication of the Anglo-Saxon coins in Finnish finds from the Viking Age. He visited Finland several times.

The Numismatic Society of Ireland (Northern Branch) also minted a medal in Dolley's memory. It was designed by Polish-born Danuta Solowiej (Wedderburn), one of Britain's most renowned medal artists, who has also made commemorative coins for the Royal Mint, among others. The medal is sympathetically old-fashioned: it is small (40 mm) and on its reverse side there is only the emblem of the minting Society, the crozier of St. Patrick, which can also be seen as a reference to the strong Irishness of Dolley, who was born in England. The portrait is surrounded by Dolley's name and years of life, as well as the year of minting, mmxxv, and on the reverse side there is the name PATRICIVS and the name of the minting Society around the crozier.



Danuta Sołowiej: Michael Dolley (1925–1983), 2025. Photograph by T. Talvio.

Both the size of the medal, which is quite modest from today's perspective, and the simple reverse side indicate that the minter has had to save on costs. This is of course a phenomenon familiar from the history of Finnish medals as well.

The portrait raises questions: did Dolley himself sit as a model or is the artist's work only based on photographs? Since the artist moved to Britain in 1987, she has not been able to meet her model herself. It is known that she only had a few photographs at her disposal, and she has also been in contact with Dolley's family. Among the photographs that served as models, one can particularly recognize the photo of Dolley taken in Visby in 1977, looking pensive.

The photo published in the poster of the April 2025 lecture in Belfast would perhaps have been more characteristic. I dare to say this after meeting Dolley for the first time in 1972, when his health was still relatively good. However, the artist has clearly had her reasons for using the 1977 photo. Dolley died six years after the photo was taken. During those years the illnesses affected his entire being in a way that would not have been meaningful to immortalize in metal. Death overtook him at the age of only 57 in Cork, where he had arrived to receive an honorary doctorate from the National University of Ireland.

Finally, let us return to the thoughts aroused by the size of the medal. When Finnish Numismatic Society issued its first medals, their usual diameter was 50–60 mm. Then, from the 1960s onwards, large cast medals gradually became more common, and the size of struck medals also increased. Cast medals were of course already relatively large during the Renaissance, but they were not as thick as in Finland today. There is no reason in itself why a cast medal should be large, even in diameter. Presumably, this development is popular because large medals can be billed more.

These questions, as well as the disappearance of portraits and verbal expression from Finnish medal art, should perhaps be discussed in more depth in another context. Let us just state here that as late as the early 19th century, medals of very important people were in the Northern countries made with a diameter of 30–40 mm. It was natural to strike such monetary medals also in silver, and they also have the advantage of being suitable for ordinary money cabinets, unlike most of today's art medals, which end up gathering dust on window sills and on bureaus.

I would like to thank Elina Screen, the president of the British Numismatic Society, from whom I received information about the minting of the Michael Dolley medal. She also arranged for me to acquire a copy of the medal.