

THE MAGS METRIC MEN

Three men of the School had significant roles in the metrification of New Zealand.

The first was Ian D Stevenson (1924-1927). He began in a humble way as a cadet on 5 shillings per week and progressed to an MSc (Hons) degree and work within The New Zealand Railways in charge of Electrical Engineering. He became chairman of the Physics Section of the RSNZ. 1

He was appointed Chairman of the Metric Advisory Board set up in February 1969. In order to give metrification a human face Stevenson worked with the parents of a baby girl and named her Miss Metric and her progress was used to show the progress of metrification in press releases.

Stevenson's board produced a 10- minute film for theatre distribution and produced displays for shopping malls and give-away items such as calendars, cubic decimetres, a 150mm ruler and much else.

By mid 1974 the Board had over 300 people on its planning committees and had 74 registered speakers. It had industry – oriented circulars, guides and booklets. Building and construction, transportation and a wide range of manufacturing and processing industries had largely completed the changeover. By the time that Parliament had passed the *Weights and Measures Amendment Act* (1976) it had set the scene for the outlawing of imperial measurements. 2

That it all went a great deal better than it might have is a testament to Ian Stevenson's guiding hand.

Sydney L Moses (1923-1925) was a man of parts. As well as being a prefect he was an action-man; two years in the First XV and senior record holder in the 100, 220 and 440 yards. Post-school he won the New Zealand Tourist Trophy motorcycle races in 1931, 1933 and 1934. He represented New Zealand in the Isle of Man TT in 1933. In the Second World War he rose to the rank of major. 3

On returning from war he held several managerial positions before being selected as Chairman of the Decimal Currency Board in 1964. The Board was charged with changing the duo-decimal currency system (12 pence to the shilling and 20 shillings to the pound) to a decimal system.

The Board introduced a cartoon character called "Mr Dollar" (who had European and Maori incarnations) and while Mr Dollar appeared in the same media as Miss Metric, the new, powerful medium of television saw the animated Mr Dollar complete with backing group and a catchy jingle. During 1966 he could be heard with: "The tenth of July next year, when pounds, shillings and pence become dollars and cents".

When the changeover came at midnight on Monday 10 July 1967, 27 million new bank notes in \$1, \$2, \$5, \$10, \$20 and \$100 denominations and 165 million new coins in 1c, 2c, 5c, 10c (still called a shilling), 20c, 50c, were all set to go. Old currency remained legal tender but as it was returned to banks it was withdrawn. However sixpence, shilling and florin coins had precise decimal equivalents and remained in circulation longer before being demonetised.

As Syd Moses said, "No change is made without inconvenience" 4. He went on to say that people would find the change much easier by using the two values as stepping-

stones. People could offer a little more money and then get the right change back. "I'll be surprised if we haven't managed to complete the changeover by about this time next year". So it proved to be.

The other player in the money makeover was the smallest boy in the School, Rawlings Scholar and captain of the Intermediate B soccer team. Robert D Muldoon (1933-1936).⁵ He left school early and became an arrears clerk for Fletcher Construction.

In 1939 he joined the army and served in the South Pacific and Italy where he completed his accountancy examinations. On his return, in 1947, he joined the Junior Nationals and in 1960 he was elected MP for Tamaki and in 1963 he was Under-Secretary for Finance with responsibility for the introduction of decimal currency.⁶

Moses' Board had members representing Treasury, the Reserve Bank, the Post Office, the trading banks and commerce.

A Coinage Design Advisory Committee to advise the Government was established. The obverse was to be, with Her Majesty's approval, the left-facing effigy designed by Arnold Machin – the same head as that on all UK postage stamps. There was much discussion of the reverse, the bizarre and the avant-garde were rejected in favour of the safe.

The *Coinage Act* 1933 was replaced by the *Decimal Currency Act* 1964 which gave the legal framework for the changeover.

The Post Office had decimal stamps ready for release on Decimal Currency Day (18 definitive stamps, four postal fiscals, six Government Life Insurance, four Ross Dependency).⁷

Before the big day the banks were closed for four days (including a weekend). Prime Minister Keith Holyoake and by-now-Finance Minister Muldoon made soothing speeches predicting that the change would cause no worry. And apart from a few grumpy old people who took the new notes back to a bank demanding that they exchange the play money dollar for a real ten shilling note, there was no real worry.

Syd Moses' Board and Rob Muldoon's acumen ensured a smooth transition.

Seldom has a single school produced three men who have influenced the daily lives of all the member of a nation's citizens.

Brian Murphy
Archivist

1. Brown, J.G. (1971), *Mount Albert Grammar School Golden Jubilee* p: 68 (Broughtwood)
2. Joseph P Reid, President Emeritus, Canadian Metric Association (USMA Website: *Metric usage and metrication in other countries.*)
3. Stone, RCJ. (1997), *Tradition and Change: Mount Albert Grammar School: The First Seventy-Five Years* p 384 (Mount Albert Grammar School).
4. *Southland Times* (undated, unpaginated – on Stuff website).
5. Stone, *ibid.* p 385.
6. Wikipedia (*Robert Muldoon*).
7. Campbell Paterson Ltd: *Catalogue of New Zealand Stamps*. Permanent Pages OD1(A), OD1(B), X3, RD5, Temporary page Z8.