

# The Boer War National Commemorative Medal

The Boer War (strictly the Second Boer War) was fought in Southern Africa between the Boer republics of The Transvaal and The Orange Free State, and the forces of Great Britain and her Empire, from 9<sup>th</sup> October 1899 to 31<sup>st</sup> May 1902. We are not concerned here with the origins of the conflict, its conduct and progress, or the conclusion and outcome. What is of interest is the remarkable, initial level of patriotic fervour and support for the conflict as demonstrated in the eventual production of a National Commemorative Medal as part of fund raising activities in support of soldiers' families.

Most of the men called up from the Army Reserve at the start of the war were ex-soldiers now in regular employment and they were immediately obliged to take a cut in income from perhaps 20/- per week down to basic Army pay which was still, as it had been since the seventeenth century, 1/- per day. Foremost amongst those concerned to alleviate the consequent poverty experienced by the soldier's dependants was Alfred Harmsworth, the proprietor of the *Daily Mail*, who used his newspaper to publicise efforts to assist the families of the Reservists. Rudyard Kipling quickly became aware of the issue and by 22<sup>nd</sup> October had forwarded the text of a poem entitled 'The Absent Minded Beggar' to Harmsworth with permission to use it in fund raising. These are first two verses of that poem in Kipling's own handwriting:

## *The Absent-minded Beggar*

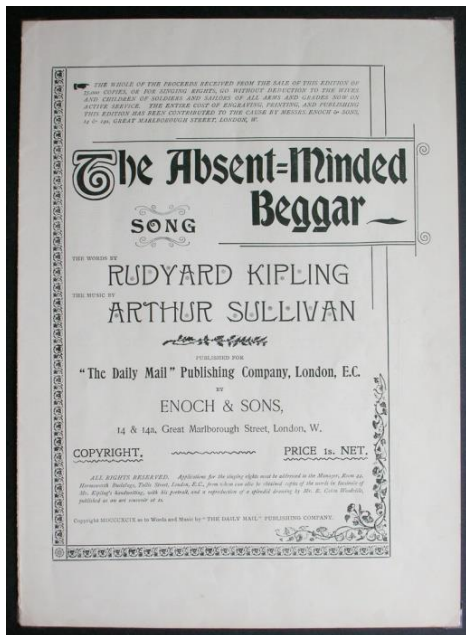
I.

When you're shouted "Rule Britannia" - when you've sung "God Save the Queen" -  
When you're finished killing Kruger with your mouth -  
Will you kindly drop a shilling in my little tambourine  
For a gentleman in Kharke ordered South?  
He's an absent-minded beggar and his weaknesses are great -  
But we and Paul must take him as we find him -  
He is out on active service, wiping something off a slate -  
And he's left a lot o' little things behind him!  
Duke's son - Cook's son - Son of a hundred Kings -  
(Fifty thousand horse and foot going to Table Bay!)  
Each of 'em doing his country's work (and who's to look after his keener  
Pass the hat for your credit's sake, and pay - pay - pay!      Kings?)

II.

There are girls he married secret, asking no permission to,  
For he knew he wouldn't get it if he died.  
There is gas and coals and nittles and the house rent falling due  
And it's more than a letter lately there's a kid  
There are girls he walked with casual they'll be sorry now he's gone,  
For an absent-minded beggar they will find him.  
But it ain't the time for sermons with the winter coming on -  
We must help the girl that Tommy's left behind him!  
Cook's son - Duke's son - Son of a belted Earl -  
Son of a dumbest publican - it's all the same to-day!  
Each of 'em doing his country's work (and who's to look after the girl?)  
Pass the hat for your credit's sake, and pay - pay - pay!

Harmsworth and Kipling subsequently hit on the idea of having the words set to music – “a common and catchy tune” as Kipling put it. Sir Arthur Sullivan, one of the country’s premier composers at the time, was approached and agreed to write the music free of charge (the manuscripts of both Kipling’s poem and Sullivan’s score were auctioned and each fetched £500 towards the fund).

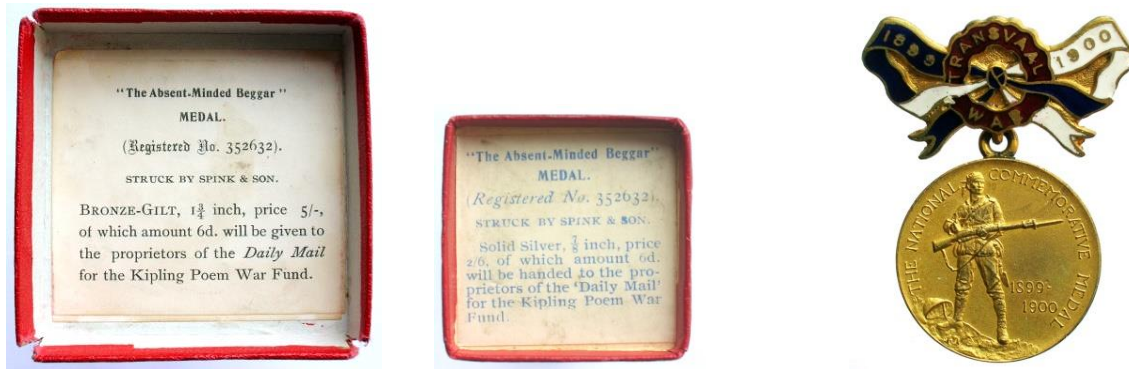


Artist Richard Caton Woodville quickly produced an illustration depicting a wounded, but defiant, British soldier which he titled ‘A Gentleman in Khaki’ (see 4<sup>th</sup> line of 1<sup>st</sup> verse of poem); this was used to embellish some of the published versions of the poem and song. Such was the popularity of both that at one point the *Daily Mail* was having to deal with 12,000 requests a **day** for copies of the poem! Caton Woodville’s image was also reproduced on all manner of souvenirs which were soon decorating homes across the country – all to the benefit of what became known as the ‘Absent Minded Beggar Fund’. By December over £50,000 had been raised and the *Daily Mail* stated that “The history of the world can produce no parallel to the extraordinary record of this poem.” The final total raised was in excess of £250,000. Other newspapers ran similarly successful schemes; the Birmingham *Daily Mail* fund alone reached £55,000.

It is clear that production of the National Commemorative Medal by Spink did not commence until well into 1900. The dates shown on the obverse and reverse – 1899-1900 – would seem to indicate a conclusion to hostilities before the dies were prepared. It is a fact that, once the Boer capitals of Pretoria (Transvaal) and Bloemfontein (Orange Free State), had been occupied by June 1900 it was generally considered that the war was effectively over and a host of souvenirs commemorative of this fact, including many medallions, were produced. The Boers however continued to wage an effective guerrilla campaign which prolonged the actual conflict for a further 2 years!



The obverse of the medal depicts Caton Woodville's 'Gentleman in Khaki'; the reverse displays a suitably patriotic inscription. It was marketed in support of the Daily Mail Fund with a proportion of the price going to what is referred to on the boxes as the 'Kipling Poem War Fund'. The boxes, when present, are of red card, lettered in gold on the lid and containing inside details of the contribution being made through purchase. Of the 5/- which had to be paid for a 1¾ inch gilt bronze specimen 6d went to the Fund; the same amount applied to the 2/6d charged for the 7/8 inch silver medals; there was a 1/- contribution from the 12/6d which a 1¾ inch silver medal cost. The medals were unsigned other than having 'SPINK & SON' on the reverse; the identity of the designer/engraver is unknown.



Both 'British Historical Medals' and 'British Commemorative Medals and Their Values' list several variants of size and metal, as does Michael Laidlaw's 'South African Commemorative Medals' website. None of these listings is complete however and the following table is believed to show all known versions with original prices where known:

	1¾ inches (45mm)	7/8 inch(22mm)
Gold (15ct)	X (cost £11.10.0)	X (occurs with enamelled brooch)
Silver	X (cost 12/6d)	X
Gilt bronze	X (cost 5/-)	X (occurs with enamelled brooch)
Silvered bronze	X	
Bronze (various finishes)	X	
White Metal	X (cost 2/-)	

It was occasionally the practice to present individuals who fought in the war with a specimen of the 1¾ inch silver medal with their name engraved on the edge in commemoration of their service. The large silver medal illustrated above bears the inscription 'CAPTAIN THE HONOURABLE HEDWORTH LAMBTON C.B. R.N.'. Captain Lambton was captain of HMS 'Powerful' and commanded the Naval Brigade (sailors taken from available warships serving in South African waters to augment forces fighting in the field) in Ladysmith during the siege of that town between 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1899 and 28<sup>th</sup> February 1900. The 4.7 inch naval guns, mounted on improvised field carriages, which Lambton and his sailors took with them, provided the only heavy artillery capable of matching the Boers' big guns.

Small medalet identifying Caton Woodville's image as 'The Gentleman in Khaki'

