

Eunice Burr Stebbins (Couch) 1893-1992 by Faith Ford Sandstrom

Eunice Couch (née Stebbins) was passionate about the Classics, and especially passionate about ancient coins¹. But twice in her life her desire to broaden her work in numismatics and to publish her numismatic studies was thwarted. As a post-graduate student in Athens she was the victim of an administrative conflict which prevented her participation in further study of numismatics at that point. Later, soon after her marriage she undertook an independent study of the coinage of Argos. She devoted nearly ten years to building a corpus of casts and photographs for a die study, hoping that one day her efforts would be shared with others through publication of her study. But the conventions of her time and perhaps others' personal prejudices placed a glass ceiling over her ambition and her long study of the coinage of Argos was never published. It was perhaps her deepest academic disappointment.

Eunice Burr Stebbins was born November 11, 1893 in Newark Valley, New York. As a young girl she spent several years with her mother in residence in Europe. Over four years of living in pensions for long periods in Tours and Hanover, she studied French and German and mastered these languages. They returned to the United States and in 1908 spent the summer in Williamstown, Massachusetts. In preparation for entering Miss Capen's School in Northampton, Massachusetts, Eunice studied Latin with Professor Monroe N. Wetmore of Williams College. Prof. Wetmore was pleased with his young student who when assigned to translate a modest number of lines of Virgil's *Aeneid*, instead read the entire first book.

Eunice entered Miss Capen's School in Northampton, Massachusetts in 1908, where Miss Capen further encouraged her academic directions. She graduated Miss Capen's School in 1912. She then attended Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts, from 1912-1916, where she studied Classics. She received her Bachelor of Arts *Phi Beta Kappa* from Smith College in 1916.

Eunice was an extraordinary female student for her times. She felt obliged to follow her mother's peripatetic life, but whether living with her mother in New York or in Europe, Eunice managed to further her own academic ambitions. She continued her study of Classics and Archaeology at Columbia University in New York in 1919-1920, followed by a year attending the lectures at the American Academy in Rome, 1920-1921. In Rome she and her mother lived at the Pensione Girardet, favored by American students studying in Rome. Tutored by the Girardet sisters, Louisa and Eugenia, she became fluent in Italian.

Her mother died in February, 1924. During the following year, 1924-1925, Eunice again studied at Columbia University. But in 1925 she became a full-time graduate student at Johns Hopkins University. She received the degree of Masters of Arts in 1926, and in 1927 she was awarded the Doctor of Philosophy. Her principal advisor during her years at Johns Hopkins was Prof. David Moore Robinson, who also directed her work on her dissertation. In her dissertation she referred to many images of dolphins on ancient coins. She studied the collections of the American Numismatic Society in New York, and

enjoyed the guidance and advice of the ANS's curators, Edward T. Newell and Sydney P. Noe, as well as the assistance of Agnes Baldwin Brett. The dissertation, The Dolphin in the Literature and Art of Greece and Rome, was published in 1929.

While a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University Eunice Burr Stebbins met Herbert Newell Couch, a Canadian, and also a graduate student in Classics at Johns Hopkins. Similar to Eunice, he received the M.A. from Johns Hopkins in 1926 and the Ph.D. in 1927. The two students fell in love and chose similar paths for the year following the end of their studies at Johns Hopkins. In early October, 1927, Eunice Stebbins applied for membership in the American School of Classical Studies at Athens. Her purpose, as stated in the application, was to gain "preparation for continued research in Greek archaeology." She was admitted as a School Fellow. A few months later, in January, 1928, Herbert Couch likewise applied for membership in the American School in Athens. His stated purpose was the "furtherance of Greek studies for teaching same." He was admitted as an Associate Member of the School, and joined Eunice in Athens.

The year in Athens at the American School was both wonderful and disappointing for Eunice. Her relationship with Herbert Couch flourished, quietly and discretely; but her hopes for deepening her studies in numismatics with the rich resources at the School were frustrated. For her required "school paper" she was assigned the cataloguing of the coins from the School's excavations at Corinth in 1927. Her catalogue would be incorporated in the definitive publication of the coins of Corinth under the direction of Professor Bellinger. This was a much-desired opportunity for Eunice and she was delighted that Professor Carpenter, then Director of the School, had allowed that the coin catalogue could stand as a School Paper.

But her aspirations for work on the Corinth coins met with a conflict. Eunice had received the Sophia Smith Fellowship from Smith College for continuing her studies at the American School in Athens. Writing in December, 1927 to the Committee on Fellowships of Smith College, she asked that the proposed catalogue she would write for the 1927 excavation coins at Corinth be accepted as the original piece of work required by the conditions of the fellowship. If this was not acceptable to the committee, she offered to pursue a topic in epigraphy suggested by Prof. Meritt. It seems that the Smith College Committee on Fellowships turned down her request to present her numismatic work, and instead she worked on the epigraphy project. Under the heading of The American School of Classical Studies at Athens, her paper titled, "An Interpretation of the Prescript *πολες αυται φορον ταχσαμεναι* in the Athenian Tribute Lists," was published in AJA vol. 33, no.4 (Oct.-Dec. 1929), 502-514. When the Corinth excavation coins were later published in 1935 there was no mention of Eunice Stebbins Couch as a contributor to the study or the catalogue.

Eunice Stebbins and Herbert Couch completed their studies in Athens in 1928. They announced their engagement at the School's Final Dinner at the end of the spring term, 1928. On May 12, 1928 they were married in a ceremony performed at the British Consulate in Salonika, Greece.

From when she left Greece in 1928 Eunice Stebbins Couch would follow her husband's career, first to the University of Illinois at Urbana (1928-1930), and then to Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island in 1930. He was a Professor in the Department of Classics at Brown for the remainder of his life. He was named David Benedict Professor of Classics in 1949, and served as Chairman of the Department from 1948 until his early death from a heart attack in 1959. Eunice Couch continued to live in Providence until her death at age 98 in July, 1992.

Since leaving Athens Eunice Stebbins Couch no longer held formal ties to academia, yet she continued to pursue her passion for numismatics. At one point in her studies Eunice encountered the scholarly contributions in Greek numismatics of Charles T. Seltman, Lecturer in Classics in the University of Cambridge. Eunice and her husband were in Cambridge during the summer of 1928, and perhaps it was during that period that their long friendship with Charles Seltman began. She later claimed his influence in leading her to undertake the study of the coinage of Argos. Charles Seltman would become the godfather of Eunice and Herbert's daughter, Eunice.

Eunice began her study of the coinage of Argos in 1928. Her research led her to make casts from coins in private and public collections from the United States and Europe. In an interview published in The Evening Bulletin, Providence, March 13, 1935, she described how she made her study through plaster casts poured into sealing wax impressions of coins. Then she would photograph the plasters and form a card file that would become the catalogue. It was a multi-step process but she delighted in the tedious work. Her husband helped her by making sturdy standard coin trays to contain the collection of fragile plasters.

Her goal was that her study would be published and available to future scholars. In the 1935 interview she suggests that her Argos study would be published by the American Numismatic Society (ANS) in a two-volume edition. She expected that it would be ready for publication in three years. Sadly, that proposal was never executed, nor was her study ever published later elsewhere. Today, her precious collection of die-casts has disappeared, along with her meticulous notes and the die-study to the extent that she had completed it.

Eunice Burr Stebbins Couch was happy as a devoted wife who shared a common scholarly calling with her husband, happy as the mother of their daughter, and happy to encourage future woman scholars, especially women who pursued studies in numismatics. She was unrelenting in her encouragement, even to this author, to "finish the dissertation," and "make sure the dissertation is published." Eunice accomplished both at an early time for women's contributions to be recognized and she wanted nothing less for women scholars who succeeded her. One understands her sadness and disappointment that her most cherished labor, the study of the coins of Argos, was not recognized and not published.

Eunice Couch was a member of the American Numismatic Society for 65 years. She was elected to membership in 1927; and in July, 1992, only two weeks before her death, she was elected an Honorary Member, in recognition of her long membership.

In keeping with her long commitment to the study of classics and classical archaeology at Brown University, and honoring her long friendship with Professor R. Ross Holloway, Elisha Benjamin Andrews Professor and Professor of Central Mediterranean Archaeology at Brown University, Eunice Stebbins Couch donated her personal collection of ancient coins to the Center for Old World Archaeology and Art at Brown University. The collection is housed at the Center. In 1999 Professor Holloway published a study of the Argos coins from Eunice's gift².

Sources:

Couch, Eunice Burr, "An Interpretation of the Prescript *πολες αυται φορον ταχσαμεναι* in the Athenian Tribute Lists," *The American School of Classical Studies at Athens*, AJA vol. 33, no.4 (Oct.-Dec. 1929), 502-514.

"Eunice B. Couch," obituary, Providence Journal, August 2, 1992.

Holloway, R. Ross, "A Group of Argive Coins at Brown University, in *Pour Denyse. Divertissements Numismatiques*, ed. Silvia Mani Hurter et Carmen Arnold-Biucchi, Bern, 2000, 75-86, pls. 9 & 10.

Mitchell, Martha, "Herbert Newell Couch," in *Encyclopedia Brunoniana*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1993, 166.

"Mrs. Herbert N. Couch (65 years)" in Newsletter, American Numismatic Society, Summer 1992, p.2.

"A Numismatist at Work on Greek Coins," The Evening Bulletin, Providence, Rhode Island, Wednesday, March 13, 1935.

Stebbins, Eunice Burr, *The Dolphin in the Literature and Art of Greece and Rome*, Menasha, Wisconsin, 1929.

¹ With thanks to Sebastian Heath, American Numismatic Society, New York; Professor R. Ross Holloway, Center for Old World Archaeology and Art, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island; Barbara Lesko, Department of Egyptology, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island; Anne Lozier, Archivist, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College Archives, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts; Dr. Natalia Vogiekoff-Brogan, Archivist, American School of Classical Studies at Athens, Greece.

And with special thanks to Eunice Couch Claflin who shared her treasury of memories of her mother.

² R. Ross Holloway, “A Group of Argive Coins at Brown University,” in *Pour Denyse, Diversissements Numismatiques*, ed. Silvia Mani Hurter et Carmen Arnold-Biucchi, Bern, 2000, 75-86, pls. 9 & 10.