

A page of Shannon's history in a silver penny

by

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Recently a keen-eyed schoolboy, Conor O Nuanain, picked up a small coin in the garden to the south of no. 64 Tullyglass Court in the new housing development at Shannon immediately to the east of the modern Airport (formerly Rineanna). The house is one of those situated at the foot of Tullyglass Hill in the old parish of Clonlochan, and almost due north of Illaunaconeen Point and rather less than half a mile from the present River Shannon foreshore. Sharp eyes are not rare among Irish twelve-year-olds; less common is the sense of national heritage which led the boy to bring his find to the notice of the authorities. The happy upshot is that we know for certain not only that the coin was found in Tullyglass townland but that it was at a point quite near the Drumgeely boundary. We may also be confident that the coin was lost in the fourteenth century and, unlike some other pieces of its class, not thrown away or otherwise discarded by some eighteenth - or nineteenth-century collector of minor curiosities.

Enlarged photographs (Fig. 1) should give some idea of the coin's battered appearance. It is of silver with a mean diameter in the region of 18.5 mm, roughly that of the old sixpenny piece, but

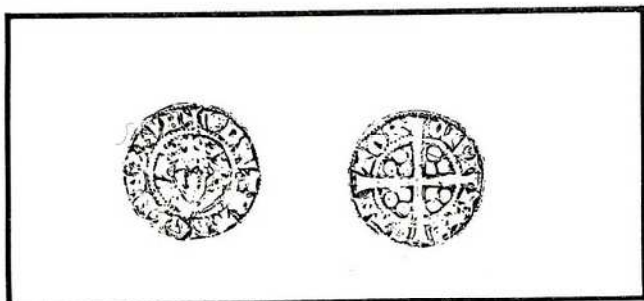


Fig. 1

the thickness is little more than that of a good-quality picture postcard. The weight is 1.31 g., which is normal for coins of its period which left the mint with a nominal weight of 22.5 troy grains, but which very soon lost several grains through wear if not from fraudulent clipping. It was also quite common for the heavier coins in a batch to be 'culled', i.e. to be taken out of circulation and hoarded where not melted down. To this end there existed special pocket-balances, sometimes known as tumbrels or *trebuchets*, which were illegal with heavy penalties (including in France excommunication) so that it is not surprising that only three or four are extant today. The silver of the Tullyglass coin, incidentally, approximates to 925 fine, the so-called sterling standard which evolved in England in the early mediaeval period.

The obverse type is particularly obscured by wear and by corrosion, but the accompanying sketch (Fig. 2) may assist in its elucidation. Essentially the design consists of a formalised, facing

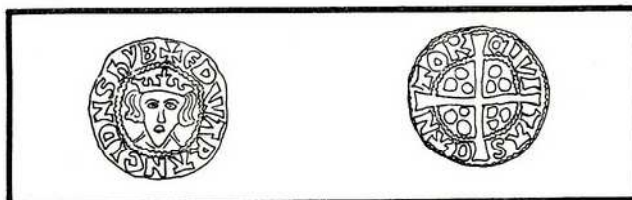


Fig. 2

likeness of a beardless king with long hair and a fleured crown. This is enclosed in a beaded circle which is surrounded in its turn by the letters of a heavily contracted Latin legend executed in a typically mediaeval ('Lombardic' or 'Gothic') script. Expanded the legend runs - beginning at the top of the coin with a small cross - *EDWARDUS REX ANGLIAE DOMINUS HYBERNIAE* ('Edward, King of England, Lord of Ireland'). At once we are reminded how 'bad' King John, nicknamed 'Lackland', and his successors technically were not kings of Ireland but ruled it as lords of a Papal fief, so that it was Henry VIII after the breach with Rome who first claimed to rule Ireland as King - with the lack of logic if not consistency that has usually characterised English policies towards Ireland his daughter 'bloody' Mary persisted in the usurpation even after the reconciliation with the Papacy! The coin's reverse type consists of a simple cross with flared arms and with three pellets in each angle. The legend, broken by the extremities of the cross and divided off from the field by a beaded circle, runs *CIVI // TAS // CNAN // TOR* ('City of Canterbury'), the second element being a contraction of a Latin adjective which today is more usually written *Cantuarensis*.

The coin, then, is English and struck at Canterbury for an English King Edward. There are, however, five English kings of that name who claimed to rule Ireland as Lord - or six if we count Lambert Simnel crowned in Christ Church cathedral Dublin with a crown taken from the statue of the Virgin in St. Mary's Abbey. However, the numismatist has little difficulty in recognising in the Tullyglass coin a very common English penny struck c. 1305 - c. 1310, i.e. during the very last years of Edward I or the very first of Edward II (it was only in the sixteenth century that numerals and dates begin to appear on English and Anglo-Irish coins). Early in the fourteenth century London was as ever the principal English mint, but coins could also be struck at a number of other centres, and it was usual for a sizeable proportion to be minted at Canterbury. There were two reasons for this. Church and State worked hand in glove - the civil service was largely composed of clerics - and traditionally the Archbishopric of Canterbury, the English primatial see, was entitled to a share in the profits of the mint in that city and Canterbury was well placed geographically to turn into English coin foreign silver sent from France and the Low Countries to purchase wool, the country's major

export. How the coins are dated depends on the observation of minute and largely accidental differences in the treatment of the portrait and of the lettering, and careful noting of which coins occur in hoards often of hundreds which can be placed in a chronological series by the presence or absence of coins from other series which can be dated. At Durham, for example, the Bishops not only had the right to strike, but were accustomed to put on the coins their personal, heraldic emblems, while there are few major coin-hoards which do not include the odd coin struck by a wide variety of Continental rulers.

The discovery in North Munster of an English penny from this period does not surprise, and in a paper published more than a decade ago the present writer listed quite a catalogue of mediaeval coins found in Thomond. ⁽¹⁾ In theory Ireland had its own mints under Edward I - Dublin, Waterford and Cork - but their output had always been relatively small, and by the first years of the fourteenth century production even at Dublin had entirely withered away. As in England the mints had struck pennies, halfpence and farthings, the idea being that the two smaller denominations should meet the local need for coin among the Anglo-Irish, while the pennies would be sent overseas where they would swell the war-coffers of the English king. How many in Ireland today know that in the Middle ages Anglo-Irish coins reached the Continent of Europe in such quantity and were so highly regarded that they were the subject of imitation in the Low Countries and Western Germany? So serious in fact was the drain on the economy of the Irish Lordship that under Edward II the Crown was even driven to promise that in future if people would only pay their taxes the money raised would all be spent in Ireland! What saved the day for the Anglo-Irish economy was that even as late as this the great Anglo-Irish lords with their estates both sides of the Irish Sea were still remitting a proportion of their English revenues to furnish capital for the development of their lands in Ireland. For this the silver penny was the natural medium, for not until the second half of the fourteenth century would England have a viable silver multiple - the *groat* or fourpenny-piece - and a gold coinage which was from the first acceptable at home and abroad, the *noble* valued at 6s. 8d. with its half and quarter. We must also remember that Ireland was valued by Edward I and his successors as a base against Scotland, and that English quartermasters may have spent considerable sums on urgently needed supplies which could not always be requisitioned.

Our coin from Tullyglass exhibits a degree of wear, and probably was not lost within the first decade of its currency. Among the native Irish, coins of any description did not circulate freely until the second quarter of the sixteenth century, when with 'Surrender and Re-grant' the Irish chieftains suddenly woke up to the possibilities which a monetary economy offered for the exploitation of their followers become overnight their tenants at the stroke of a Tudor pen. It is reasonable to associate Conor O Nuanain's find with the Englishry settled

since early in the thirteenth century in Tradaree, the old name for this portion of the Co. Clare shore of the Shannon estuary, and if the coin was not a casual loss from a husbandman's equivalent of a modern pocket, there is an obvious occasion for it to have found its way into the soil when in the early May of 1318 the native Irish inflicted on their De Clare overlords a major defeat at Dysert O'Dea, and swept triumphantly down to the Shannon. Bunratty Castle itself, a few miles to the east of Tullyglass, for the moment weathered the storm, but the dependant lands passed into Irish hands with the expulsion of the Anglo-Irish yeoman tenants whose agricultural activities had provided the economic base for De Clare power north of the river. It could well be that the silver penny here discussed was part of the loot or dropped in the confusion, and it is by no means impossible that somewhere in the immediate vicinity of the present Tullyglass Court there stood a thirteenth-century homestead razed to the ground as the Irish drove the De Clare tenantry behind the walls of Bunratty from where in due course the survivors would take boat across the Shannon to find lands where they could to the south and east of Limerick.

What this note has tried to do is to suggest to its readers that in the hands of a student a little piece of battered metal can evoke a whole page from the past. That the coin's loss was touched off by the great Irish victory at Dysert O'Dea is something that is not perhaps susceptible of demonstration, let alone of proof, but even without this the coin from Tullyglass is a witness to a social order very different from our own. It is for precisely this reason that every Irishman should be grateful to young Conor O Nuanain for reporting his discovery. In the same way the present writer would like to express his thanks to Mr. Cian O'Carroll, the Estates Manager of the Shannon Free Airport Development Company Limited and the author of a very valuable paper on the history of the area, ⁽²⁾ who sent him the coin for identification, and who at once fell in with the suggestion that the discovery warranted publication here. The coin is not one that is at all valuable in any commercial sense - examples even in perfect condition may be obtained in London for a matter of pounds - but it is only when all such coins are brought to the attention of those especially concerned with the past that we will be able to begin to create a rounded picture of our heritage that will be a source of inspiration to the next generation. A proper pride in our Gaelic past is not chauvinism, but rather should be considered an ingredient of good citizenship.

Michael Dolley who has just taken up a lectureship in mediaeval history at the University of New England at Armidale in New South Wales (Australia), was formerly Professor of Historical Numismatics at the Queen's University of Belfast.

- 1) 'A small find of Fourteenth Century Coins from West Limerick' *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, Vol. VIII No. 4 (1961) pp. 157 - 167.
- 2) C. O'Carroll, 'Shannon/Tradaree Historical Background', *The Other Clare*, Vol. II (April 1978), pp. 31 - 5.