

A NOTE ON "ST. PATRICK'S PENCE."

BY WILLIAM SHARP OGDEN.

TOWARDS the close of the reign of King Charles II., and not later than the year 1680, the copper currency of Ireland was enriched or recruited by the rudely executed but picturesque addition of the halfpence and farthings, known as "St. Patrick's pence."

These coins, so far as their appearance and varieties are concerned, are fully described by Dr. Nelson in his paper on the "Copper, Tin and Pewter Coinage of Ireland," *British Numismatic Journal*, vol. i, pp. 184-186. With his careful reasoning and deduction, which enabled him to arrive at the date 1678 for their issue, I entirely concur; but as no attempt is made to elucidate either the remarkable character of their design, or the motive for their issue, I purpose in this note to offer a possible and perhaps not improbable explanation of both.

Shortly before, and at the time of the appearance of these coins, the kingdom was convulsed by fears, real or imaginary, of Catholic plots, to which the King, Charles II., was suspected of being a party. The Commons introduced a Bill for the exclusion from the succession of his brother the Duke of York, who publicly adhered to the old and unreformed religion; incompetency and misrule were general, and the mischief wrought by Titus Oates and similar miscreants brought about, as Lord Macaulay says, "a general impression that a great blow was about to be aimed at the Protestant religion."

The utility of issuing political tokens as pocket pieces or *quasi* money, was proved when the revolt of the Dutch Netherlands from Spanish domination resulted in their obtaining independence, for during the later years of the sixteenth and the earlier years of the seventeenth centuries, many pieces of this kind were issued from the Dutch mints. The designs in recording great events of the time served to keep alive

the memory of past wrongs and the heroic struggles that finally resulted in the freedom of the Netherlands.

These Dutch tokens are numerous even at the present day, and may well have suggested to Irish partisans that a species of halfpence, certain of circulation where the copper currency was limited, and bearing a novel and striking design flattering to the national pride, might in the hands of a lively and imaginative people be made the means of extensively propagating their secret political intentions. Especially would the object aimed at be attained if the design and inscription were capable of a double interpretation: the one harmless and loyal, the other, and the true meaning, one which any of their partisans would readily supply.

These halfpence¹ bear on the obverse a kingly figure kneeling, robed and wearing a celestial or radiate crown, and playing upon an Irish harp, over which is the British crown. This kneeling figure is generally called King David, and the inscription is FLOREAT:REX²: We have a precisely similar design, except for the Irish symbol of the harp, illustrating the *Eikon Basilike* and personifying King Charles I. The figure on the coin is undoubtedly taken from this engraving, which is a portrait of that Sovereign.³ The legend *Floreat Rex* is the classical form of "God Bless the King."

The reverse of the coin represents St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, robed, mitred and with a richly adorned crozier, his right hand holding a shamrock before the assembled people; to his left is a shield bearing the arms of Dublin: the legend is ECCE G.REX, Behold the flock, or assembly." Another type of reverse shows St. Patrick with a patriarchal cross instead of the crozier, and the arms of Dublin are replaced by a cathedral, the saint being in the act of casting out the snakes and other reptiles, the most prominent being a large dragon. To this reverse the legend is QUIESCAT PLEBS, "Let the people be quiet." The words of the legends are divided in parts by the design

¹ There are several types or varieties of both halfpence and farthings.

² Illustrated, Plate II, Figs. 12-14, facing p. 180, *British Numismatic Journal*, vol. i.

³ Compare the illustrations to Miss Helen Farquhar's Paper, *British Numismatic Journal*, vol. ii, pp. 266-269.

and also by stops, not always correctly placed. One in my collection has the word REX spelt RIEX, and another GREX. Attention is directed to the illustrations, Plate II, Figs. 12, 13, 14, of Dr. Nelson's paper published in *British Numismatic Journal*, vol. i.

I submit that the letters hitherto accepted as ECCE G.REX should be read ECCE C. REX="Behold King Charles," and that they directly refer to the kingly figure over which they are placed. The full-stop after the G, which will be noticed on Fig. 14, is significant of this construction. By reading the obverse and reverse legends continuously we obtain what I believe to be the intention, namely: "Behold King Charles, God Bless the King."

Objection should not be taken to reading G in G.REX as a C, inasmuch as on many of the Irish coins of this period the letters C and G show little distinction, and we have only to refer to the initial letter of *Carolus* in Fig. 17 of the same plate for an example of this.

It is not likely that much, if any, exception would be taken to a limited circulation of pieces loyally typifying the then late King Charles as the "Royal Martyr," with the patron saint breathing peace and tranquillity. For a short period they also passed current in the Isle of Man, and, as Dr. Nelson relates, a few years later they became legal currency in America.

I think, however, it is possible to show that the coins may have had another and less loyal, if more patriotic, meaning so far as Ireland and its ancient national Church were concerned. It will be noted that the Catholic Church is represented by St. Patrick, who is standing erect and dominant beside the church wearing, so far as can be ascertained from the details of the coin, the full Eucharistic vestments, notwithstanding the date of issue. The legend we may read as *ECClesia Et GREX* for "The Church and the people." The saint is expelling the reptiles from Ireland, chief among which appears a dragon. This is a heraldic badge of the Tudor dynasty, which in the persons of Henry VIII. and Elizabeth established the Protestant Church in Ireland. Thus St. Patrick, in driving out the dragon, clearly forecasts the intended destruction of the Church they had established.

The figure of the King, on the other hand, although nominally

intended to personify Charles I., as already evidenced by comparison with the illustrations in the *Eikon Basilike*, could for the then present political purposes, as readily represent his son Charles II., who in the year 1670 was credited with having bound himself by treaty with Louis XIV. of France, to restore the Catholic Faith, a procedure which his brother the Duke of York never ceased to urge upon him.

Heuce, I infer that these halfpence were really political pieces issued by the Catholic party, and probably with the connivance of the Duke of York; the object being to advance its aims and familiarise the people with coming changes and the approaching restoration of the Catholic Church. The kneeling figure and legends may have been symbolical that only under it would the Crown flourish and the people rest in peace.

The coins are somewhat incorrectly described as "plugged with brass"; this is a mistake. The crown over the kneeling figure of the King is stamped upon a very thin film of brass of irregular shape and size. This appears to have been dropped, in a molten state, upon the heated copper flan immediately before striking, for I have seen examples on which several minute spots of the same metal appear in other parts of the field of the coin; but instances entirely of copper are not uncommon. It is just possible that this yellow metal may have been obtained from some national relic or consecrated source.