AN ELIZABETHAN COINER.  

By the Rev. J. Charles Cox, LL.D., F.S.A.

Duncannon Fort, on the river Barrow in the south of Ireland, which for a long period was of considerable service in protecting the harbour of Waterford, when it ranked high among the general defences of the kingdom, has an interesting and diversified history. The first castle of any importance that occupied this site was probably—

"built to the order of the great Earl of Shrewsbury shortly after his grant in 1422 for the better protection of the border, though it is highly improbable that, as Seneschal of Ireland, he ever lived there."

This castle and its surroundings were granted on lease by Queen Elizabeth to Sir Nicholas White, Master of the Rolls.

In 1587, when the rumours of a Spanish invasion were crystallising, the admirable defensive position of the castellated residence of Sir Nicholas White suggested the strengthening of the site, for it commanded the entrance to the forts of Waterford and Ross, through which there was access to twelve towns from the sea. The result was that the neck of land on which the old castle stood was most strongly fortified in accordance with the best engineering knowledge of the times. There are various letters relative to the erection of Duncannon Fort, as it was henceforth termed, among the Irish State papers of the year 1587. A plan (undated, but doubtless contemporary with its erection) among the Carew papers at Lambeth Palace, shows at a glance that it was constructed on most formidable lines, and occupied a position marked out by nature as a stronghold.  

1 After I had incidentally come across the papers relative to this case at the Public Record Office, and had made various transcripts, I learned that much of this material had been recently used in Hore's History of Wexford, vol. iv.

2 Reproduced in Hore's History of Wexford.
Into the highly interesting subsequent history of this fort, its gradual strengthening and arming with ordnance from 1588 to the end of Elizabeth's reign, and its eventual reduction by the beginning of the eighteenth century to little more than a convenient storehouse for arms and a centre for the assembling and training of the Waterford Artillery Militia, it would be foreign to our purpose here to enter. Our present concern is simply with the strange use that was made of this fort by one of its commandants at the close of Elizabeth's reign, an episode which seems to be pertinent to the objects of this Society.

In June, 1601, Sir John Brockett was appointed governor or constable of the fort. On the 23rd of that month he wrote from Dublin to Sir Robert Cecil, of the Privy Council:

"Ryght Honble, after extreme and hard labour I have gotten the command of H.M.'s forte of Doncannon in Wexford, where I have with all diligenst inquired bothe the news of Spayne and other Countreys, as also serched the estate of all occurrentes as hath passed in or out of this harbor sence I have byne here, always respectinge the nott greving the subject."

He further stated that he was shortly returning to his charge, that the new money went current, but that £5,000 had been paid in silver to Frenchmen for corn and had been taken out of the country.

In another letter to Cecil, under date July 25th, Sir John, writing from Duncannon Fort, gave an account of the fear of another Spanish invasion, and promised a plan to scale, then in course of preparation, of the fort, together with every neck of the harbour and every village within eight or ten miles. In conclusion he stated that in Waterford and the immediate surroundings there was more traffic and change of money than in all Ireland save Dublin, and that in spite of the recent proclamation forbidding the exportation of silver coin after the 10th of July, yet all traders continued to sell their wares for silver, and no man troubled to inquire if the seller was a foreigner. Unless some stricter course was adopted, it would not be long before there was no silver coinage left, for "the frenche men ancl other nations do carry itt a waye for ther wines and other martchandys."

An army list of this date shows that Sir John Brockett, as Constable of Duncannon, was in receipt of 3s. 4d. a day; and he had
under him a lieutenant, at 18d., a cannonier at 12d., and thirty warders at 6d. a day each.

On August 2nd, 1602, Sir John Brockett wrote from Duncannon to Cecil giving notice of the reported preparation of a Spanish fleet to effect a landing in Ireland, and complaining of the "exceeding defects and wants of this Forte." In January, 1602-3, Sir John Brockett left for England, entrusting the command of the fort during his absence to his son, Lieutenant John Brockett; but he never returned, for on reaching London he was arrested and sent to the Tower under suspicion of treasonable actions, but more especially on a charge of coining.

This was by no means the first effort at illicit coining in Ireland at this period. A debased silver coinage was struck in the spring of 1601 for exclusive use in Ireland, as is clearly set forth in the Carew Papers of Lambeth Library. In a letter of the Queen to Sir George Carew, in May of that year, it is stated:

"that the wisdom of all our progenitors for the most part did maintain a difference between the coins of both realms (that in Ireland being ever inferior in goodness to that of this realm), howsoever, by error of late crept in, it hath been otherwise tolerated, to the infinite loss of this Kingdom, our moneys being out of that realm transported into foreign countries for lack of merchandise; we have thought it reason to revive the ancient course of our progenitors in that matter of moneys, and have caused a coin proper for Ireland to be stamped here of such a standard as we find to have been in use for the same, and do now send a great quantity thither for the payment of our army and for other uses, and the same do authorise by our proclamation, and deny all other moneys."

The proclamation states that this money, after the standard of the Queen's father, brother and sister, was coined—

"in several pieces of shillings, sixpence, and pieces of three pence, stamped with her Highness' arms crowned, and inscription of her usual style on one side, and on the other with an Harp crowned, being the arms of this her kingdom of Ireland, with the inscription *Posui Deum adjutorem meum*; and also certain pieces of small moneys of mere copper, of pence, halfpence and farthings for the use of the poorer sort."
Immediately after this new coin became current, which was probably far easier to imitate than genuine silver, "one John Nott and Robert Pricktre did fall a counterfeiting the like," as Sir George Carew stated to the Privy Council in a letter of September 12th, 1601, "and did put away and utter some five or six pounds thereof." These delinquents were apprehended, found guilty by a jury, and condemned to die. A third coiner, called William Kirkham, one of the horsemen of Sir Anthony Cook's troop, whose stamps and instruments were secured by Carew, managed to escape to England. Nott, in his examination, said that the stamp used by him and his confederates for coining was commonly of chalk, but they had one stamp of iron wherewith they coined dollars in France. The metal used was a mixture of copper, tin and "a black kind of metal called tinglass," wherewith they made a very fair counterfeiture, in appearance good silver, but there was no silver at all in the composition.

The remarkable point about Sir John Brockett's counterfeiting was the distinguished position held by the delinquent. The informer as to the Duncannon coining was one Richard Meillin, or Milne, a Scotchman, of whom Sir John had made a confidant and to a certain extent an accomplice. In a communication made to the Lord Deputy of Ireland in March, 1602–3, Sir Nicholas Walsh, Mayor of Waterford, and three other justices of the peace for the counties of Wexford and Waterford, gave details as to the information that reached them, through Milne and others, about

"the great treason committed in the fort of Doncanan of coyning of monie in the likenes as well of Spaynishe as of the current coyne of this land."

At nightfall on Ash Wednesday, a search party of justices and others proceeded to the fort,

"to search for toles and other instruments fitt for coyning, who brought hither diverse for that purpose, the substance whereof were found in Sir John Brockett's desk, thinventorie whereof we send herewith, whereby and by theexaminacons it is apparent that there was som quantitie both of Spaynishe and of our mixt moneys counterfeited, and in one of the Crusibles found there are two coyned peces in the bignes of our three pence found fastned to the litle panne which we comaunded should not be discovered."
The letter further stated that Thomas Triclye, "the chiefe contriver of this wicked practise," had gone over into England with Sir John Brockett, to the intent, as Milne asserted, of obtaining stamps and other necessaries for a continuance of the work. John Brockett, jun., the lieutenant of the fort, was at that time committed to Waterford gaol, together with Thomas the younger son of Sir John. Milne, the informer, was also imprisoned, but "with some better libertie least he should be discomforted in his information." The tools and other instruments were left in the mayor's keeping.

The inventory of the contents of Sir John Brockett's desk, opened on March 9th, 1602, is:

"One Tinckers mowld.
Three peeces of brasse and a pese of Ordinance detayned from Sir Georg Bowchier Kt., whereof one pece was wrought and beaten owt.
Five crusabells whereof one groat, and another with newe pennee not fully wrought sticking to the bottom.
Two boxes contayning quicksilver.
A payre of Tinckers pynsors.
A small instrument to sawe.
A file.
A goldsmithes hammer.
A pax contayning bone ashes with two small peeces melted.
A goldsmithes brushe and a haresfote.
A gilding pynn.
A scrach brush.
Six stones of rock allome.
A pax contayning Sandyver (Sain de Vare) and saltpeter.
A small bagg contayning refined clay.
A tuch stone, a silver spone and a sledge.
There is left in the forte a brasse pott full of charcoale with a proporcon of charcoale in the chymney, and an old copp kettell."

The depositions of Milne, the gunner, a yeoman, a soldier, and the two sons of Sir John Brockett, and of George Milly, a Dublin goldsmith, are set forth at length. The evidence is fairly conclusive as to the guilt of Sir John and of the elaborate precautions that he took for concealing the work when it was resumed, as he intended, on a larger
scale. He had a shed built, close to the deep water, where future operations were to be carried on, intending that the tools should be thrown into the sea on any sudden emergency.

It has not hitherto been found possible to trace the final issue of the case, but it does not appear that the ex-Governor of Duncannon Fort suffered capital punishment. It may be of some interest to set forth Sir John’s own confession in full; it is impossible not to have a certain amount of admiration for the delinquent’s boldness in putting forth the cynical plea that he thought it legitimate to prey upon the coinage of a foreign power at enmity with his own country.

“The examination of Sir John Brockett knight taken this fift of Aprill, by Commissioners at the Gate house. 1

“He confesseth that he had conference with George Mille of Dublyn goldsmith towchinge the coyninge of forren Coyne and that this examine toould the said Mylle that his purpose was not to utter any but only in fforren nations, and that this examine was desirous to be taught by the said goldsmith to cast mettals in a mould and to see the form of moulding tools. And that the gouldsmith toould him that the same must be cast with sand and at this examine’s intreatie toould him that the best sand was for that purpose at Cather Loughe where this examine accordingleie caused a pursefull to be taken uppe. And by way of question demanded whether it was not good after he cam out of England to take an Iland not far from Duncannon where coyning might be without peril. And sayeth that the said Mylle toould him that he was cooning in alchimy and could make white metal for that purpose, but he would not discover the secret to him, and thereupon this examine by way of discourse said that he would trie some in England for obteyning of white mettal for that purpose and confesseth that he had twoo or three Crusibles of the said Myll the Goldsmith and that while he lay at Mylle’s house, which was about 12 days, Myll at his request did melt down three or foure copper pence with an Englishe two pence of which he had of this examine and that when it was melted it looked blacke and after he putt it into licour it cam again to the color which this examine did because he desired to see the manner of melting and all this was done somewhat like Christmas last and confesseth that after John Rowe one of this

1 State Papers, Ireland, ccxv, 9.
2 The Gate house was a Westminster prison, which was celebrated as a place of confinement for Roman Catholic priests during the Elizabethan and Stuart persecutions.
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examinee's servants had offered to utter a counterfeit Spanish peecce in Waterford about 7 weeks after Christmas and was apprehended thereupon Rowe sent this examine word that he had it of . . . Metting this examinees servant who upon examination confessed to this examine as he was going to Derdyn that he had counterfyttd the same and 2 or 3 more and that Tregle taught him to do the same . . . this examine carried Mallyn to the maior of Waterford and discovered this matter to him whereupon this examine bayled Mellin for that Mellin had divers goods and money of his in his custody and Rowe was discharged as guiltless and carried Mellin to the castle of Duncannon and there kept him and Tregle in Irons in safe custody and left Mellin there and brought Tregle over with him and confesseth that he had a mould of iron of Tregle a little after Christmas last and that he had the tooles mentioned in the Inventorie subscribed by Nicholas Welshe and others in Ireland in his desk in the fort of Duncannon that the cause why the newe pence not fully wrought did stick to the bottom of the crusibles was for that this examine did endeavor to melt the same but could not find the cause why he indevored to melt the same was to learne to melt brasse for his mill. And confesseth that Tregle taught Richard Mellin to come and all the cunninge Mellin had therein he learned it of Tregle as Mellin tould this examinee. And denieth that he did ever himself counterfeit either any currant money of this realm or of any forren nation And confesseth that the said Mellin did counterfeit the said Spanish coin in the fort of Duncannon, but in what part of it he knoweth not and being demanded whether it was not done by his privitie answers that it was not done by his privitie And he described the manner howe any coine may be counterfeetted in a mould eyther of wood iron or clay the same being cutt square in the middest and filled with sand chawlke or ashes and any coin being layd in the hollowe upon the sand and another like mould so squared and filled as aforesaid conjoined there do result between them the coin being taken out a perfect mould to press any coine whatsoever And Tregle and Mellin both confessed to this examine that Tregle taught Mellin in the said fort of Duncannon to coyne which confession was a little before Christmas last And that as soon as he and Tregle landed at Crocke and Pill near Bristowe Tregle departed the same night and said he would goe into the west countre where he is nowe he knoweth not And being demanded whether he ever knewe of any English money to be coynd utterly denieth that ever he caused or knew of any English money to be coynd And being demanded whether he knew of any that knew how to coyne or did practise the same sayeth that he knoweth of no other
than Tregle and Mellyn and Tregle tould him that he had known divers Englishmen both in England and the Low Countries could do it but it is long since. But upon better remembrance he sayeth that Roger Marshall a soldier remains about this towne as the said George Milles the goldsmith tould this examine could coyne and taught one Coxe that skill who was convented for the said offence in Ireland.

Exam'd, before us,
Roger Wilbraham and Edd Coke.