AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FORGERY OF AN ANGLO-IRISH GROAT OR HALF GROAT OF EDWARD IV

By R. H. M. DOLLEY

Among William Hunter's coins preserved in the Hunterian Museum at Glasgow University are some sixty silver pieces which can be assigned to the mediaeval Anglo-Irish series. One of them is a coin of which the interest may be thought not to be confined to Ireland. A fairly full description is as follows:—

*Obv.* A crowned, facing bust exactly as on late English pennies of Edward I.  
+EDWARRANGLDNHSYB ('N's apparently Roman)

*Rev.* A sun of eleven (?) rays.  
Uncertain *i.m. CIVITASDVBLINIE* ('N' Lombardic)

*Weight* 14-9 grains.

What the coin purports to be would seem clear enough, one of the denominations of the so-called 'doubles' coinage of 1467 from the Dublin mint. In this issue the theoretical weight of the Irish coin was exactly half that of its English counterpart, and in the Hunter trays the coin described above lies beside an authentic double-groat and groat, and in this company appears to pass as the half-groat, making up as it were the 'collector's set'. Until 1776 the piece was still in the Duane cabinet, and in 1767 we find it published by Thomas Snelling in the following terms:—

'At the first sight of the head side of Numb. 25 [of his First Additional Plate to Simon], it strikes us as an English penny of Edward the second, its inscription EDWAR.R.ANGL.DNS.
[sic.] is a farther confirmation of it, but then its weight contradicts such an arrangement, being only fourteen grains and a half or not more than two thirds the weight of those pennies, altho’ it is well preserved. When we see the sun on its reverse, we can think of it belonging to no other prince than Edward the fourth, however its weight agrees as little with this as the former supposition, being half as heavy again as the best of this kings [sic] pennies, it is likewise observable, that the sun on this piece has only eleven rays, whereas on all the others there are fifteen or twenty-four rays, beside which this piece has no rose in the center [sic] of it, nor is the inscription, CIVITAS DUBLINIE divided into four parts, by three small roses, as is the manner on all the others; this very rare piece is in the collection of Mr. Duane.’

It is perhaps worth remarking that Snelling’s engraving by no means corresponds exactly to his description, nor indeed to the actual coin. The principal points of difference are that the artist has depicted a sun of only ten rays, has read the reverse legend as rose i.m. CIVITAS DUBLINIE, and made all the N’s uniformly Lombardic. For all this it is clearly the same coin as that which lies today in the Hunter trays, and especially when one compares illegibilities on the engraving with patches of weak striking on the actual coin.

Not surprisingly the passage of two centuries almost to the year means that there is something that can be added to Snelling’s assessment, though it must be conceded at the outset that the famous eighteenth-century numismatist had come very near indeed to an acceptable solution of the problem. As Snelling observed, the obverse of the Duane coin does correspond very closely to that of a Fox class X penny from the period c. 1305–1310, and the suggestion of this note is that this is because the apparent Anglo-Irish half-groat of Edward IV in fact is a tooled English penny from the last years of Edward I or the very first months of the reign of Edward II. Here, of course, there would be an admirable explanation of the discrepant weight, inasmuch as the planing off of the reverse as an essential preliminary to its remodeling would more than account for the circumstance that the ‘half-groat’ is only just over two-thirds the weight of the Edwardian sterling. Incidentally, had the forger really understood the series, he would have carried his planing a little further, since as it is his ‘half-groat’ is too heavy by some three grains plausibly to belong to the series of 48-grain double-groats, 24-grain groats and 12-grain half-groats ordained by the 1467 Dublin parliament. It is against this background of metrological discrepancy, too, that we can begin to pile up anomalies of type, style and punctuation until a point is reached when the cumulative divergency from the norm is so marked as virtually to preclude all possibility of the piece in question being an authentic coin of Edward IV. In this connection it may be remarked that in 1839 John Lindsay was driven to suggest that the coin might have been a pattern penny, while in the same year Aquilla Smith, while rehearsing the anomalies, very wisely reserved judgement with the plea that he had not inspected the original. It would appear, though, that neither of these authorities had entertained the possibility of fraudulent fabrication in modern times.

Our further objections to the authenticity of the Duane coin in the Hunter cabinet may be summarized under three heads. In the first place, the obverse legend, exactly that of an Edwardian sterling, is almost without precedent where an Anglo-Irish coin of the fifteenth century is concerned, and it may be thought particularly inappropriate in the case of a

2 The penny, halfpenny and farthing were intended to be base, and so would have come in another category if not indeed beneath the notice of an eighteenth-century collector.
3 J. Lindsay, View of the Coinage of Ireland, 1839, p. 41.
4 A. Smith, TRIA, XIX, p. 18.
coin of the ‘doubles’ issue. It may also be remarked that all other specimens of this issue eschew the English title. Secondly there is the only less decisive consideration, also remarked by the observant Snelling, that the reverse legend is not broken up into four segments by roses, though this feature is one that might be thought a fundamental characteristic of the issue as a whole. Finally, and pace Snelling’s description, it is necessary to remark that punctuation is entirely absent from this particular ‘half-groat’, an absence the more surprising when it is remembered that saltire stops are quite a feature of genuine coins of the issue, from the double-groat down to the base penny. Cumulatively such anomalies unite utterly to condemn the Duane piece which henceforth must rank as a curiously successful example of the forger’s art, and all that has now to be decided is whether the counterfeiter was at work in the middle ages or was simply an eighteenth-century cheat.

That the Edwardian sterling was altered in the reign of Edward IV must seem very unlikely. The fortunate finder of a comparatively unworn English penny of a century and a half earlier would have had no need to resort to hours of tedious forgery to secure an adequate reward for his luck. In the Ireland of Garret More it would have been public knowledge that the silver content of one of these old pennies was only marginally less than that of one of the new groats of the 1467 issue, and one cannot imagine that the finder would have had any difficulty in obtaining with it goods to the value of a half-groat, the denomination which we may suppose that the Duane coin essayed if in fact a fabrication from the fifteenth century. On the other hand, in the eighteenth century there is known to have been at work a forger to whom the production of the 1467 ‘half-groat’ would have been child’s play. The identity of this unsavoury character is no longer really in doubt, and John White is fairly generally considered the author of a number of extremely ingenious forgeries in the Anglo-Saxon and early mediaeval series. These include pennies of Edward the Confessor in the British Museum and the Hunter cabinet with obverse or reverse legends tooled to produce a new type for a reign (e.g. BMC Cnut 466) or a new moneyer for a mint (e.g. SCBI Hunter 1014 & 1026, 1228 etc.), and the notorious Short-Cross penny in the British Museum which too long masqueraded as a unique Richard I penny of the Lichfield mint1. All these concoctions can be traced to an eighteenth-century stable, and it is worth noting that in 1749 Simon had published his pioneer treatise on the coinage of Ireland, and included in it (p. 25) an account of the 1467 instrument providing for three standard silver denominations, a double-groat, groat and half-groat, and three alloyed denominations, penny, halfpenny and farthing. Here was an invitation to forgery, and especially when Simon went on to say ‘These coins are very rare, and except the groat and the penny, I have not seen any of them.’

If, however, we consult Simon’s plates, it is to find that the groat has become a double-groat (Pl. 4, 72), while even the penny (Pl. 5, 114) is rendered disproportionately large. Although, then, there seems little doubt that Hunter accepted the Duane coin as the half-groat needed to make up his set of the standard silver denominations, it is by no means certain that this is what our eighteenth-century forger originally intended to produce. Indeed the greater probability must be that he was interested in the groat which Simon does not illustrate, and ironically Snelling’s suspicions would not have been aroused had the forger remoulded the reverse of his Edwardian sterling instead of planing away a proportion of the silver. In the National Museum of Ireland and the Ulster Museum there are a total of fifteen of the 1467 double-groats, and the average weight is just over 43.25 grains, while eight of the groats tip the scales at an average of just over 22.25 grains. It is by no

means exceptional for an Edward I penny from a hoard to weigh 22 grains, so that White
could easily have avoided suspicion if he had refrained from removing metal. Ironically,
too, the ephemeral character of the 1467 'doubles' coinage conspired against him. Had the
coins circulated for a protracted period, the weights of extant specimens would have been
not nearly so uniform, and it is possible that a virtually 15-grain 'groat' would have gone
unremarked. The whole 'doubles' nomenclature is, however, so confused and so confusing
that one may even wonder whether Simon did not write 'groat' in the passage quoted when
he intended, 'double-groat' while it was probably inevitable that writers such as Lindsay
and Aquilla Smith, not to mention Snelling, should have considered the Duane piece only
in terms of 'half-groat' or 'penny'.

There is, then, a very real possibility that White intended his fabrication to pass as a groat,
but once it reached a cabinet where already there were an authentic double-groat and groat,
the latter on a flan notably more spread than that of the coin we are here considering, it
would have been remarkable if the tooled penny of Edward I did not secure acceptance
as the half-groat needed to complete the set. In consequence no little credit attaches to
Snelling for having stressed the discrepant weight, and to Lindsay for the highly ingenious
suggestion of a piedfort pattern. Once again, too, one must commend Aquilla Smith's
reluctance to pronounce without autopsy, but even so it seems surely a measure of neglect
of the Anglo-Irish series that it has taken almost two centuries for an Irish student to follow
up Snelling's extraordinarily acute observation that 'the head side . . . strikes us as an English
penny of Edward the second'. This is indeed the nub of the whole problem, and inevitably
one wonders what other coins as yet unsuspected may prove to be from the same stable.
For the present writer the same Hunter cabinet perhaps provides one candidate, the pattern
groat (?) of sovereign type of London of Henry VII (North 1753, cf. BNJ XXV, i (1945/1946),
p. 75, ibid. XXX, ii (1961), p. 276 etc.), though here the coin's omission from the works of
Hawkins and Brooke after acceptance by Folkes, Snelling and Ruding means that to others
must belong the credit of having first suspected forgery. We may observe in passing,
though, that the coin's rehabilitation if unjustified would illustrate admirably one danger
of what we may perhaps style the 'Lawrence' approach to numismatics, an undue reliance
upon lettering to the virtual exclusion of all other criteria. By an unfortunate quirk our
eighteenth-century forger left the legends of this groat entirely alone, though in fairness
it must be admitted that the tooling of the obverse type is obvious only when the actual
coin is inspected in strong daylight. It only remains for the writer to express his obligations
to Miss A. S. Robertson, F.S.A., for her kindness in allowing him to study Hunter's Anglo-
Irish coins, and for supplying him with the excellent plaster-casts which were the basis of
the very indifferent text-block that heads this note.¹

¹The block-maker had attempted to produce a block without intermediate photography and there was
no time to replace the casts which had been spoiled by the application of graphite.