“LE MONEY DEL ORAYLLY” (O’REILLY’S MONEY)

By MICHAEL DOLLEY and W. A. SEABY

In January 1447 an Anglo-Irish parliament met at Trim, and its legislation included the following:—

‘Also, forasmuch as the clipping of the coin of our lord the King has caused divers men in this land of Ireland to counterfeit the said coin, to the extreme hurt and destruction of the said land, and the making of gold bridles and poitrels also has wasted and consumed the gold of the said land for the greater part, and is like to do more hereafter, if it be not speedily remedied; wherefore it is ordained and agreed by authority of this present parliament that no money so clipped be received in any place of the said land from the first day of May next to come, nor the money of Oraylly or any other unlawful money, provided that a coiner be ready at the said day to make the coin. And also that no man be so daring henceforward as to use any bridles of gold, poitrel or any other harness of gold in any place of the said land, except knights and prelates of holy Church; and if any man be found with any such bridle, poitrel or any other harness of gold from the same day, that it shall be lawful for every man who will, to take the said man, his horse and harness, and to possess it as his own goods.’

In December 1456 a similar parliament convened this time at Naas ordained:—

‘Also, at the request of the Commons. Whereas this land of Ireland is greatly impoverished from one day to another by the great withdrawing, taking and carrying out of the said land into England, of silver plate, broken silver, bullion, and wedges of silver made of the great clipping of the coin of our sovereign lord the King, by his Irish enemies and English rebels within the said land, by which his said coin is diminished and greatly impaired, and the Irish silver called Reilly’s increase from one day to another, to the great injury and impoverishment of his said people of this his said land, and annihilation of his said coin. Whereupon the premises considered, It is ordained, established and provided by authority of said parliament that for every ounce of broken silver, bullion and wedges of silver, taken by any person or persons out of the said land, the said person or persons to pay, satisfy and content to the King, twelve pence of each ounce for custom, to be received by the hands of his customers for the time being; except lords and messengers going into England upon the business of the land, who may take plate with them according to their degree.’

The two extracts are, of course, quoted here in translation, the edition used being that of Berry, but for a serious student the original Norman French does not present any undue difficulty, though in passing we may remark that the principal difference between Berry’s rendering and Simon’s of more than a century and a half before is that one would not know from the eighteenth-century numismatist’s version that the 1447 statute was hitting at gold-mounted harness as well as at counterfeit coin. The problem still confronting the numismatist is the identity of le money del Oraylly or Argent irrois appelé Raillyes, a mystery which has exercised students of Irish history for rather more than three hundred years.

What has first clearly to be recognized is that there ought to be some fundamental connection between the widespread clipping of “the coin of our lord the King”—at this period

1 H. F. Berry, Statute Rolls of the Parliament of Ireland, Reign of Henry VI, Dublin, 1910, pp. 91 & 481.
2 J. Simon, An Essay on Irish Coins etc., 2nd edn., Dublin 1810, pp. 20 & 78 (identical pagination with 1st edn., Dublin, 1749). In the main text the relevant statutes are dated to 1446 and 1457 and in the appendix to 1447 and 1457. Confusion over the regnal year seems the cause of the inconsistency.
essentially, as is shown by coin-hoards, English groats of Edward III and of Henry VI—and the production and currency of *le money del Oraylly*. Both the 1447 and 1456 statutes stress this connection. In other words there is a pretty strong suggestion that the Irish forgeries closely resembled clipped English groats, and might even have been made from the clippings. We may stress also the fact that they are described as *Argent irrois* ("Irish silver"), so we can postulate a coin that purports to be silver. As it happens, too, hoards provide some useful corroboration that the clipping of English coin was extensively practised in Ireland about the middle of the fifteenth century. Perhaps the most spectacular illustration is the 1840 Oldcastle find which is in process of publication on the basis of a MS listing by Dean Richard Butler of Clonmacnoise, the Trim antiquary, recently discovered in his graingerized copy of Lindsay’s *Coinage of Ireland*. In this hoard concealed c. 1468 there were 75 English groats of Edward III—Henry VI, all but four of them clipped.

A second requirement of any plausible identification of *le money del Oraylly* is that it should be associated in some way with the Ò Raghallaigh. Berry saw this very clearly when he argued that the coins should be equated with the "cross caoile" money which he supposed to have been struck "by O’Reilly at Crossakeel" near Kells in the west of Co. Meath. Recently, however, it has been shown that the *croise caoile* or *cross-keele* coins belong to a later period, and were the so-called *three-crown* groats struck for Richard III and Henry VII at Dublin and Waterford. Accepting an association with the Ò Raghallaigh, it seems reasonable to suppose either that the legends and/or types of *le money del Oraylly* adverted to that family—which is unlikely inasmuch as generations of numismatists have been looking out for such a link and have failed to report success—or it should hail from a part of Ireland where the Ò Raghallaigh were supreme. The most important sept of the Ò Raghallaigh in fact was that of Broffny, and the Cavan-Meath mearing may be regarded as the epicentre of Ò Raghallaigh influence. It will not be lost on the Irish reader that Oldcastle lies in this general area.

Both in the Ulster Museum and in the National Museum of Ireland at Dublin there are rare coins which seem to measure up to all our requirements. It will be remembered that in April 1852 there was found at Pettigo in Co. Fermanagh a most interesting group of forgeries of unclipped Scottish groats produced by hammering thin sheets of silver over actual coins and then pairing up the resultant clichés with a lead-solder core. The plated groats to which we would draw attention are produced in the same way but the models are clipped groats, in the case of the Ulster Museum specimen of the smaller denomination, a Calais groat of Henry VI [Plate XIV, 1], and in the case of the National Museum specimen of the larger denomination what seems to be a contemporary forgery of an Anglo-Irish groat of Edward IV [Plate XIV, 2]. Not illustrated is a second ‘coin’ in the National Museum of Ireland, a cliché of the reverse only of a heavily clipped annulet Calais groat of Henry VI, the surviving portion apparently of a disintegrated forgery corresponding in every way to that now in the Ulster Museum.

Both the National Museum of Ireland coins are without provenance.

It will be objected, doubtless, that the coins which it is sought to identify with the *Argent irrois appelle Raillies* are too rare to be the apparently common pieces so vehemently denounced by the Anglo-Irish parliaments of 1447 and 1456, but a factor that must be taken into consideration is the selectivity of the modern collector, public as well as private. It will

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3 M. Dolley and G. MacNieceall, ‘Some Coin-

4 *Inventory* 310, and papers by Aquilla Smith and D. F. Allen therein cited.
be recalled that the Oldcastle find is on record as containing no fewer than 71 clipped English groats, although of course the degree of clipping is uncertain and it could be that the shearing did not in every case remove the whole of the outer legends. Of comparable coins there are none in the National Museum of Ireland, and only 8 heavily clipped in the Ulster Museum, where until quite recently the manner of acquisition was much more haphazard, or 11 if we include half-groats cut down to penny size. Interestingly, too, the provenances of the Ulster Museum coins can be interpreted as looking towards Breffny. It is our belief, too, that now that the Argent irrois appelie Raillyes have been identified, more attention will be given to heavily clipped coins of the period, and especially if le money del Oraylly should once begin to be sought after by collectors and others. The very method of its construction, though, must militate against its preservation in the soil except under the most favourable circumstances—one may compare a certain type of plated forgery of the Anglo-Saxon penny of which only the odd specimen is known today although its prevalence in its heyday led to systematic physical tests being carried out on the great majority of the coins which found their way to Scandinavia, virtually tens of thousands of coins exhibiting the all too familiar “pecks”.

To sum up, le money del Oraylly or Argent irrois appelie Raillyes may be identified as plated copies of the clipped English groat of the last half of the fourteenth and first half of the fifteenth centuries. The clipped groats usually weigh in the region of 30 grains, and the Dublin specimen, which is without provenance, in fact weighs just over 29 grains. Less frequently both groats and half-groats also were cut down to “penny” size, and here the weights are in the region of 18 grains, so that the Belfast specimen, acquired in 1955 from an antique dealer, Mr. Angus Macdonald, which tips the scale at just under 16 grains would easily have passed muster. It can be shown from the Pettigo hoard that the method of manufacture was known in the Lough Erne area immediately to the north-west of Breffny, and no less significantly it is Oldcastle, in the heart of “O'Reilly's country”, which has provided the largest recorded hoard of the prototypes. What one cannot help wondering, of course, is how many of the forgeries were in fact in the hoard. In Dean Butler's day, one fears, scarcely as much as a second glance was given to any coin clipped to such an extent that it might be thought unworthy to grace the cabinets of collectors perhaps just a little too concerned with the choice and the rare.

1 Cf. Appendix infra for list. It should be noted, nevertheless, that these reduced coins amount to approximately 10% of the total groats (Edward III-Henry VI) and more than 5% of the total half-groats, of the same period, in the Belfast cabinet. 2 R. H. M. Dolley, ‘Contemporary Forgeries of Late Saxon Pence’, BNJ XXVIII, i(1955), pp. 185-189. 3 It came with a hoard from an unknown source, the other coins mostly dating from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries but so worn, clipped, broken and chipped that they may well have survived in circulation in Ireland to be deposited in the second quarter of the fifteenth century. Publication is planned in the near future.
APPENDIX

Clipped English groats and half-groats (Edward III–Henry VI) in the Ulster Museum

Group A—groats cut down to make the larger denomination.
(1), (2) & (3) Edward III, pre-Treaty issues, London mint, ex Grainger coll., wts. 29.6, 29.1 and 28.8 grains. [Plate XIV, 3–5.]
(4) Edward III, pre-Treaty issue, London mint, ex O'Connor coll. (Newry), wt. 32.8 grains. [Plate XIV, 6.]
(5) Henry V, Brooke type C, mullet on rt. shoulder, London mint, ex Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society, wt. 26.7 grains. [Plate XIV, 7.]
(6) & (7) Henry VI, annulet issue, Calais mint, ex Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society, wts. 37.0 and 32.0 grains. [Plate XIV, 8 & 9.]

Group B—groat cut down to make the smaller denomination.
(8) Henry VI, annulet issue, Calais mint, ex McConiskey coll., wt. 17.0 grains. [Plate XIV, 10.]

Group C—half-groats cut down to make the smaller denomination.
(10) Edward III, pre-Treaty or Treaty issue?, London mint, ex Swan coll. (Donegal), wt. 19.0 grains. [Plate XIV, 12.]

Clipped Anglo-Irish groat (Edward IV) in the Ulster Museum

(12) Edward IV English type, light issue, G on breast, Coffey, pp. 32/3, Nos. 32–33 (roses in 2nd and 4th quarters) ex O'Connor coll. (Newry), wt. 19.3 grains. [Plate XIV, 13.]