ELIZABETHAN BUNGAL(L)—A CONTRIBUTION TO ANGLO-IRISH LEXICOGRAPHY

By MICHAEL DOLLEY

On p. 36 of both the 1749 and 1810 editions of James Simon's invaluable work entitled with undue modesty An Essay towards an Historical Account of Irish Coins and of the Currency of Foreign Monies in Ireland, there occurs the following passage relative to the state of the Anglo-Irish coinage in the early part of the reign of Elizabeth I:

'No sooner was the base money deeryed, and prohibited in England, but it was sent over in great quantities into this kingdom, where the Bungals, as they were then called, went for six pence, and the broad pieces for twelve pence; but in a short time after, the former passed for two pence, the latter for a groat; and when they were refused elsewhere, they passed in Connaught, the first for one penny [sic], and the last for two pence.'

This neglected statement derives from the following passage which appears on p. 168 of William Nicolson's Irish Historical Library of 1724:

'The Bungalls (as call’d by the Irish) went for Six-pence, and the Broad-Pieces for Twelve-pence, at first: But afterwards the former went only for Two-pence, and the latter for a Groat. This lasted not long. After they were refused elsewhere they continued to pass in Connaught: the former at a Penny, and the latter at Two-pence.'

Nicolson's authority is a passage in the English version of Robert Ware's recension of his father's unpublished Annals of Queen Elizabeth which are most readily accessible in the edition of Sir James Ware's Irish Antiquities published in London in 1705, the source which Nicolson in fact employed. On p. 8, s.a. 1564, appears the following:

'The mixt Money of England, not passing there any longer, great Store of it came over hither: the Bungalls (as called by the Irish) went for six pence, and the broad Pieces for twelve pence at first: but because the Coyne had been lately Amended, the six pences went here for two pence; and the shillings for a Groat, for a while; and since that, they continued to pass in Connaught, the former at a penny, and the latter for two pence.'

For the numismatist there is the problem of identifying the coins concerned, 'sixpences' known as bungal(l)s and 'shillings' known as broads, while the concern of the linguist must be to recognize the early Modern Irish coin-name underlying bungal(l). At this point it may be observed that one looks in vain for bungal(l), and also for the Irish *bonn geal which this note suggests underlies it, in the standard numismatic dictionaries of Schrötter, Martinori and Frey. Equally bungal(l) is wanting from the Oxford English Dictionary, while more understandably the combination *bonn geal is not commented upon in Kuno Meyer's Contributions to Irish Lexicography nor under the letter 'G' in the Royal Irish Academy's Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language—the fascicle for 'B' has yet to appear.

It is probably easiest as well as safest to approach the two problems on the basis of Ware's text. The reference there to the recent 'Amendment' of the Anglo-Irish coinage is surely to Elizabeth's 1561 issue of virtually sterling silver shillings and groats Irish. In London
these pieces were estimated to be three-quarters of the value of the shilling English, so that in theory at least each shilling should have weighed 72 grains and, more important for our purpose, have contained 66 grains or so of pure silver. In other words, an English base ‘sixpence’ which after 1561 passed only in Ireland and for twopence should have contained little more than 22 grains of pure silver and might conceivably have contained very much less. There can be little doubt that these *bungal(l)s* were the 3 oz. fine base shillings of Edward VI with initial marks lis, lion and rose, and dates 1550 and 1551, which contained only 20 grains of pure silver, and which had been revalued already under Edward VI as sixpences. In England in 1560 they were again revalued at 2½d, and countermarked with a greyhound before being finally demonetised in 1561. It may seem a little surprising that in the late 1550s such coins had passed in Ireland for sixpences Irish, but in fact the valuation was not all that wide of the mark. The Anglo-Irish groat at this period seems normally to have contained in theory 12 grains of silver, so that any sixpence Irish should have contained 18 grains. What is interesting is to find the name of *bungal(l)* attaching to silver coins which were only 3 oz. fine, coins which to this day have a very distinctive colour and texture. It is a point to which we will have to return.

The *bungal(l)s*, then, stand provisionally identified with the very basest of the English testoons of Edward VI. What were the ‘broad’ pieces which in the late 1550s passed in Ireland for shillings, but after 1561 only for groats, and ultimately for even less? Clearly they were the double of the *bungal(l)*, so that the silver content should have been in the region of 44 grains. Inevitably one thinks first of the 6 oz. fine shillings of Edward VI struck only very slightly earlier than the *bungal(l)s* and revalued by Elizabeth at 4½d when they were countermarked with a portcullis. There is no evidence, however, that countermarking was official where Ireland was concerned, and to the ordinary user the 3 oz. and 6 oz. shillings were scarcely distinguishable—hence the need for countermarking. If the 6 oz. shilling did reach Ireland in any quantity, it doubtless passed with its 3 oz. brethren, not the first time that the better coin has been dragged down to the level of the worse. To be stressed is Ware’s description of the coins which originally passed for shillings as ‘broad’. What is required are coins with a diameter appreciably greater than that of the Edward VI 6 oz. and 3 oz. shilling, and containing roughly 44 grains of silver. There can be little doubt that the place is filled by the late testoons of Henry VIII and by those of Edward VI in Henry’s name. The latest coins in this degenerating series had a theoretical weight of 120 grains and were struck 4 oz. fine, so that the silver content was intended to be 40 grains. The diameter, significantly, is roughly 1½ inches as against the 1¾ inches of the *bungal(l)s* and the portrait is not in profile but ‘broad-face’. The difference of ¼ inch may not seem all that much, but those who have handled the two series in any quantity will appreciate that size alone enables them to be distinguished without risk of confusion.

We may now profitably examine the Irish term that underlies the Elizabethan Anglo-Irish *bungal(l)*. As already suggested, it is early Modern Irish *bonn geal*, (cf. J. O’Donovan, *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland of the Four Masters*, Dublin, 1848–1851, Vol. V. p. 1432, note b.) so that the spelling *bungall* found in Ware and Nicolson is easily explained. Unfortunately Simon does not tell us why he substituted *bungal*—was it conceivably because he had been advised that the earlier anglicization could have prompted a false etymology? Had it been suggested perhaps that the underlying Irish was *bonn gall*—‘groat of the foreigners’, *i.e.* ‘foreign groat’? The etymology would not be impossible, and especially in a sixteenth-century context, though today one would expect *bonn gallda*, while the alternative
*bonn na nGall* is obviously still less satisfying. The weight of the evidence, however, is, as will appear, against *bonn gall*. Reverting to *bonn geal*, the first element is the substantive *bonn* which has a general meaning of ‘coin’ and more specialised meanings of ‘groat’ and—later and very much more rarely—‘shilling’. The idea is very much one of a basic unit, a coin in general use. The second element in *bonn geal* is the adjective *geal* which has the sense of ‘white’ where metals are concerned. If, then, an Irish scholar unaware of the above cited passages in Ware, Nicolson and Simon were to come across the phrase *bonn geal*, his instinct would be to render it ‘white groat’, or possibly on reflection ‘white coin’.

A parallel paper published elsewhere has sought to show that in the last years of the sixteenth century—and in the early years of the seventeenth—the term ‘white groat’ was in common use among the Englishry of Ireland. It occurs several times in the so-called Ulster Inquisitions but without gloss, though one passage does suggest that in 1609 two ‘white groats’ together might be allowed to pass for a groat English, and likewise in the Desmond Survey of 1598 from the other end of Ireland. Here it is abundantly clear from the contexts that the ‘white groat’ was commonly valued at 1½d., which is nine to the shilling English. That this valuation was a general one emerged pretty clearly from a neglected passage in Fynes Moryson’s *Itinerary* which was published in London in 1617 but which draws on the author’s experience of nearly twenty years earlier when he campaigned against Hugh O’Neill. The passage occurs on p. 284 of this work, and lists those Anglo-Irish coins which were still current in Ireland at the end of the sixteenth century. Moryson begins with the full-face and three-crown groats from the last third of the fifteenth century, and goes on to distinguish two classes of harp-groats, the *Dомтнг* issue of relatively good silver, and the *Rex* issue which was considered notably base. His account of the groats ends as follows:

‘Also they had white groats, which were coynd for foure pence, but of such base allay, as nine of them were given for an English shilling.’

It is not difficult to show that these can only be the base harp-groats of Philip and Mary and of the first years of Elizabeth, and the omission of all mention of the minute emissions of relatively fine shillings and groats by Mary in 1553 and by Elizabeth in 1561 does not surprise the numismatist who is only too aware of the fact that these quite exceptional coins did not find their way into general circulation. The ‘white groat’, on the other hand, occurs in a wide range of finds, and it has been suggested even that the *cόта bάn* of the document known as *Ceart Uí Néill* could be for *grόта bάн*. *Geal* is not the only Irish word for ‘white’ that can be attached to a metal, cf. the *pinginн bάnα* of the *Annals of the Four Masters* s.a. 1545 and the Omeath usage of *bonn bάn* cited by Dinneen in his *Focloir Gaedhilge agus Bearla* (Dublin, 1927) to mean a shilling, though admittedly *geal* is the more usual adjective. It is *airgead geal*, for example, that one would use to distinguish ‘silver’ from ‘copper’ when talking of change for a note.

The English shilling cited by Moryson was the Elizabethan shilling which contained in theory 88-8 grains of pure silver. Nine of the ‘white groats’ should have contained in theory 108 grains of silver, so that it seems at first sight that the ‘white groat’ had been unduly

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2 The attention of numismatists was drawn to this work by Sir Henry Ellis more than a century ago (*N.J.* II (1837/1838), pp. 110 & 111) but it has since been largely ignored.

written down. In practice the discrepancy would not have been so large. Low-silver alloys are notably unstable, and one may suspect that a good proportion of the alleged 3 oz. fine groats fell short of the standard. It is interesting that contemporaries alleged that the base groat of 1601 ran at '2 ounces 18 pennyweight out of the fire which is according to the standards of England 3 ounces of fine silver in the body'. Such a shortfall in itself would reduce the silver content of nine 'white groats' to 104.4 grains. Another narrowing of the gap would result from the circumstance that the English shilling of Elizabeth which came into Ireland in quantity only in the 1590s was consistently of good weight and durable. In contrast the forty-year-old 'white groats' did not wear well, and 19 specimens from at least two and probably three finds which there seems no reason to place anything like so late as the 1590s have proved to have an average weight of 41.2 grains. On this evidence nine 'white groats' would have tipped the scale at 89.6 grains, so that the simple formula of 'three white groats = one groat English' would seem very realistic as well as practical. Equally, though, one can understand the exceptional reckoning of 'two white groats = one groat English' of the 1609 Fermanagh Inquisition. The English groat should have contained 29.6 grains of silver, and two unchipped 'white groats' might possibly contain as many as 24.

Characteristic of the 3 oz. fine Anglo-Irish 'white groat' of Philip and Mary and of Elizabeth is precisely the same whitish texture and colour already observed in the case of the 3 oz. fine shilling of Edward VI which passed among the Englishry in Ireland under the name of *bungal(l). It seems perfectly plausible then that the name *bonn geal should have been given by the Irish to both, and especially since the two 'denominations' were so close. The original *bungal(l) contained, as we saw, 20 grains of silver and passed after 1561 for two-pence, the 'white groat' 12 grains of silver and for 1½d. At first sight this may seem unfair to the 'white groat', but the appreciably larger English piece does seem to have worn better in circulation. Ware, incidentally, was writing in the second quarter of the seventeenth century at the earliest, and there is no reason to suppose that the *bungal(l)'s final devaluation in Connacht occurred before the end of the heyday of the 'white groat' proper. It is a pity that there is no Fynes Moryson to tell us what coins circulated west of the Shannon and at what valuations after the flight of the Earls in 1607, but if the plantation of Ulster finally killed the 'white groat' in the North, it does not necessarily follow that the *bungal(l) and *bonn geal did not linger on in the west. Indeed a proclamation of the Confederate Catholics on 15 November 1642 'enhanced' the 'white groats of Coper to 2d.' (cf. *Proceedings of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society, I* (1849-1851), p. 452).