THE IRISH EMERGENCY COINAGES OF JAMES II
1689 - 1691
By D. STEVENSON

The purpose of this paper is to examine the circumstances in which the Irish emergency coinages of James II were struck and to indicate the reactions of contemporaries to them. Emergency coinages' seems the most suitable name for the coins that contemporaries knew as 'brass money', 'pewter money' and 'hibernias'; the term 'gunmoney' is ambiguous in that it is sometimes used to refer to all three types of coin, sometimes only to the brass.

James II fled from England to France in December 1688. The following March he arrived in Ireland to attempt to win back his throne with the help of the Irish Catholics who remained loyal to him. He was faced with many problems in Ireland, and one of the most serious of these was the financial situation. In the past few years many Protestants had sent large amounts of gold and silver coin to England for safekeeping, as they feared that James' policy of favouring Catholics would lead to trouble in Ireland, and now that civil war threatened much coin was being hoarded. Thus gold and silver coin had largely disappeared from circulation at a time when government expenditure was increasing fast, for a large army was being raised, and revenue was falling as the disordered state of the country hindered tax collection. The little gold and silver that the government did manage to collect was needed to buy arms and other necessities of war abroad. Some sort of emergency coinage was vitally needed to pay for the army and administration and thus prevent the collapse of the Jacobite war effort. It was therefore decided to issue a token coinage. This seems to have been the idea of a Quaker, William Bromfield, who was appointed one of the commissioners of the mint and was described as 'the Man that King James trusted the Management of his Mint to, the other Commissioners being Men of no Knowledge in such matters'. That the government intended to set up a mint was common knowledge in Dublin by 8 June 1689, but no official announcement was made until 18 June, when a proclamation was issued 'for remedy of the present scarcity of money, and that our standing forces may be the better paid, and that our subjects of this realm may be the better enabled to pay and discharge the taxes, excise, customs, rents, and other debts and duties, which are or shall be hereafter payable to us'. It announced that sixpenny pieces were to be coined in copper and brass, and were to be used in all payments (the only exemptions being payment of debts and the first sales of imported goods). Those who refused to accept the new coins would be 'punished according to the utmost rigour of the law, as contemners of our royal prerogative and command'. The coins, it was stressed, were only temporary, and would be exchanged for gold and silver

1 Detailed descriptions of the coins may be found in P. Nelson, 'The coinage of Ireland in copper, tin and pewter, 1460-1826', British Numismatic Journal, i, 192-9.
2 For the first few months of issue the 'brass' coins were often referred to as 'copper money', but after this they were usually called 'brass'.
3 The earliest use of the term 'gunmoney' that I know of is in a sale catalogue of 1764, Musæum Thorsbyanum . . . (Lond. 1764), p. 14.
4 D'Avaux, Negoziations de M. le Comte d'Avaux en Irlande, 1688-95, ed. J. Hogan (Dublin 1834), i, 198.
5 G. Story, A true and impartial history of the wars of Ireland (Lond. 1691), p. 50; J. Oldmixon, Memoirs of Ireland . . . (Lond. 1716), pp. 188-9.
6 Loc. cit.
once the present crisis was over. The following day a warrant was issued for the seizing of coining presses and other equipment from colonel Roger Moore, who held a patent for coining copper halfpennies (originally issued to Sir John Knox). It would seem from the wording of the warrant that coining of brass had already begun before the presses were seized. On 27 June another proclamation announced the issue of brass half-crowns and shillings on the same terms as the sixpences, adding that counterfeiters would be regarded as guilty of high treason and that those who informed against them would be rewarded. To encourage use of the new coin the commissioners of the mint were ordered to give 20/6 in brass in exchange for every 20/- of gold and silver offered to them.

Coining at the mint (in Capel Street, Dublin) was evidently slower than anticipated, for on 1 July the commissioners were ordered to 'consult what is fit to be done to advance the coinage'. They recommended shift working so that the mint could work night and day, but there was a shortage of engravers and there is no evidence that double shift working was in fact adopted. Apart from this all went well at first with the new coinage, and a branch mint was set up in the Deanery at Limerick. The French ambassador in Ireland, d'Avaux, reported to Louis XIV on 4 July that the brass money was being accepted, to the great relief of James II, and in August the mint commissioners were ordered to pay £2,000 a week in brass coin to the receivers general and the rest (at least nine-tenths of the total) to the paymaster of the army, Sir Michael Creagh.

By this time however difficulties had arisen. There was a shortage of brass, and warrant had been issued for the coining of two guns (presumably obsolete ones) from Dublin castle. Revenue collectors had been ordered to buy up any copper and brass they could find and send it to Dublin. D'Avaux reported trouble in the Dublin mint; there was a lack of skilled workers, and most of those that could be found were Protestants and hostile to the Jacobite regime, though they had been ordered to swear to serve the king faithfully. D'Avaux managed to find a loyal entrepreneur, but the chief melter was jealous of him. The ambassador begged that fifty tons of copper, some steel (for making dies) and engravers be sent from France. More serious than these difficulties in the manufacture of the coins was the increasing reluctance of the public to accept them. This first appeared in August, when it was reported that people were refusing to bring their goods to market as they would have to accept payment in brass for them, and that a senior official of James's, the lord chancellor, was refusing to accept payment of rent from his tenants in brass. 'Brass money began to fall and things began to rise' recorded a diarist under 23 August, and other reports confirm this. From now on references to rising prices and the falling value of brass become constant.

1 A true account of the present state of Ireland (Lond. 1689); J. Simon, An essay towards an historical account of Irish Coins ... (Dublin 1749), pp. 152-3.
2 Ibid., pp. 59, 148-50, 152.
4 W. H. Harding, 'A concluding memoir on manuscript mapped and other townland surveys in Ireland', Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy, xxiv. 309.
5 The Limerick mint may not have been established until some months after this: In August d'Avaux was planning to set up a mint in Athlone, but this was not done and the Limerick mint may have been set up instead, D'Avaux, op. cit., i 382. The Limerick mint is first mentioned as being at work in January 1690, Simon, Essay, p. 164.
6 D'Avaux, op. cit., i, 258.
7 Harding, op. cit., p. 312.
8 Ibid., p. 311.
10 Ibid., i, 382; W. King, The diary of William King ... kept during his imprisonment in Dublin Castle, 1689, ed. H. J. Lawlor (Dublin 1903), pp. 38, 40-1; Colles, 'A diary of events in Ireland from 1685 to 1690', HMC (Historical manuscripts commission) 36: Ormonde N.S. VIII, 370; L. Tate (ed.), 'Franco-Irish correspondence, 1688-1691', Analecta Hibernica, xxi, 169.
is only one dissident voice, that of John Stevens, an English Catholic serving in the Irish army. He maintained that brass money remained equal in value to silver until the spring of 1690.1 Perhaps the explanation of this lies in the fact that he was a soldier and therefore people did not dare illegally to refuse to accept brass when he tendered it.

The shortage of brass grew worse, "which made the Irish to wonder that England had more silver and gold than Ireland brass".2 Writing to James II's wife, Mary of Modena, in France the duke of Tyrconnell (the lord lieutenant of Ireland) included in a list of 'things we cannot subsist here without' a request that 'forty guns may be sent us to coin into money'. In November he stated that he would need eighty or ninety tons of copper before the end of March 1690, and he stressed that this was more important than sending arms or ammunition. Forty tons of copper would coin only £300,000, and war expenses were £100,000 per month. While awaiting French copper, cannon from Limerick, Kinsale, Galway, Athlone, Dublin and even Brest in France were coined. Trouble continued at the Dublin mint, where dishonesty was discovered among some of the workers.3

Amid all these difficulties prices continued to rise and brass to be despised. It was even alleged that the government refused to accept payment of taxes in brass if there was a possibility of forcing payment in gold or silver.4 Rather than trust their wealth to brass money many Protestant merchants began to hoard staple goods which would always have some value—hides, tallow, leather, wool, and so on. This hoarding forced up prices still further and led to the issuing of a proclamation in February 1690 fixing the prices of such goods and threatening to seize them from Protestants unless they would sell the government as much as it needed.5

A further blow to the prestige of brass was the decision to pay French troops which were being sent to Ireland in gold and silver. James and Tyrconnell had requested that they be paid in brass6 but the French had refused, not surprisingly as an attempt to pay their troops in brass might have provoked mutiny and certainly would have gravely undermined their morale. Yet the decision was disastrous to what little credit brass retained. John Stevens attributed the fall in the value of brass entirely to French contempt for it and the competition of French silver.7 All attempts to restore confidence failed. The few restrictions on the use of brass were removed and it was promised that in future the coining of brass would be limited to what was absolutely necessary. The government offered to receive loans of brass, paying 6% p.a. interest. But response to the offer was so poor that in June the interest rate was raised to 10%, and there is no evidence that coining was limited.8 In the same month it was forbidden to give more than 38/- of brass for a gold guinea, or 7/6 for a silver crown, but as up to £4:10:0 was already being offered for guineas the limitation had little effect.9

The failure of the brass money was of much assistance to the Williamite troops which had landed in Ulster the previous Summer, for many Irish farmers preferred rather to sell their

---

2 Colles, Diary, p. 372.
3 Tyrconnell, op. cit., pp. 102-3, 105-7; King, Diary, pp. 55, 71; D'Avaux, op. cit., i, 659-60; Colles, Diary, pp. 374, 377; Hardinge, op. cit., p. 311; Simon, Essay, p. 164; Account of the transactions of the late king James in Ireland . . . (Lond. 1689), p. 57.
4 News from Chester . . . (Lond. 1689), p. 1; A large and particular relation of the affairs of Ireland . . . (Lond. 1689), p. 2; The Character of the Protestants of Ireland . . . (Lond. 1689), p. 16.
5 HMC 36; Ormonde II, 430-1; Account of the transactions of the late king James . . ., pp. 13-16; Colles, Diary, p. 377; True and perfect journal of the affairs of Ireland . . . (Lond. 1690), p. 12; An account of the present state Ireland is in . . . (Lond. 1690), p. 1.
9 Ibid., pp. 163-4; Colles, Diary, p. 384.
provisions to the Williamites in exchange for silver than to their countrymen in exchange for brass. The contempt of the Williamites for the brass was seen when they captured Cavan in February 1690: they found about £4,000 of brass in the town, but the soldiers threw it away as not worth keeping.

However, in spite of its great depreciation the brass money was still better than no coinage at all as far as James was concerned, for it was all he had with which to pay his troops. At the end of March 1690 he ordered the issue of new coins, pennies and halfpennies in pewter. Soon after this a pewter crown was struck and the brass half-crowns and shillings were reduced in weight—hardly a move likely to inspire confidence but rendered necessary by the continuing shortage of brass. On 15 June one proclamation withdrew the large half-crowns and shillings from circulation, while a second announced the issue of brass crown pieces. Though officially there was no connection between the two, in fact the new crowns were merely the old half-crowns struck with a new design.

On 1 July 1690 the Irish were defeated at the battle of the Boyne, and a week later the Williamites entered Dublin. William III announced new rates for the Jacobite emergency coins: the brass crowns and large half-crowns were reduced to the value of one penny, the large shillings and pewter pennies to a halfpenny, and the rest of the coins to a farthing. The Jacobites had left over £22,000 in brass and pewter in the Dublin mint; at the new rates it was only worth about £642.

Brass continued to be struck at the Limerick mint until October, but even in Jacobite held areas the coin was now almost worthless, and this was one of the main reasons that Tyrconnell gave when he unsuccessfully advised a Jacobite surrender—he could not see how the army could be paid any longer now that the brass was of no value. In January 1691 the Irish finally admitted that nothing was going to restore the value of their emergency coinages by devaluing them, the crown becoming worth fivepence, and announcing that the brass would be withdrawn from circulation on 15 March. Those who had brass coins were to bring them to the treasury where they would be given receipts which would entitle them to full repayment when James was restored to his throne. As James Stevens remarked, this 'might have been done long before, or not at all, because . . . it was of no value'. The Williamites declared the coins valueless on 23 February, for many Irish had found that even the reduced rates guaranteed in Williamite areas were higher than those obtainable in Irish held areas and had therefore brought large amounts of brass from the latter to the former to spend 'with vast advantage to themselves', and the Williamites naturally had no wish to support the coinage of their enemies.

---

1 J. Shirley, The true impartial history and war of the kingdom of Ireland . . . (1692), pp. 55, 59.
2 Story, True and impartial history, pp. 54–5; Calendar of state papers, domestic, 1689–90, p. 535.
3 Simon, Essay, pp. 159–62; These pewter coins may have given a word to the English language, for the Irish called them uim bog ('soft copper'), and it has been suggested that this came to be applied to any form of deception or sham, being anglicised as 'humbug', Notes and Queries, viii, 422; cited in A. Smith, Money of necessity issued in Ireland in the reign of James II', N.C., 1870, pp. 265–6.
5 Ibid., pp. 64, 165–6; Hardinge, op. cit., p. 270; later some of the brass money was sold 'and sent over in barrels to England, to be transported to our colonies in North America', Oldmixon, Memoirs of Ireland, p. 188.
8 Tate, 'Franco-Irish correspondence', Analecta Hibernica, xxii, 206–7; Gilbert, Jacobite narrative, p. 129; Stevens, Journal, p. 197.
9 Simon, Essay, p. 165; Calendar of state papers, domestic, 1690–1, p. 285.
The Jacobites made one more effort to establish a coinage. Some of the brass shillings were recoined in Limerick, the large ones as halfpennies, the small ones as farthings, at some time between their withdrawal from circulation as shillings in March 1691 and the surrender of the city in October. The main interest of these coins lies in the reverse type, a seated figure representing Hibernia (whence they became known as ‘hibernias’). This was the first time such a figure had appeared on Irish coins and it must have been a reflection of the nationalism of Limerick’s defenders, a rival to the Britannia of English coins.

In design the emergency coinages progressively deteriorated. The brass coins are very attractive pieces and well struck, though the crown (the last of the coins issued) is the least pleasing. The pewter and the hibernias have little to recommend them, many of the latter being very crudely struck. Philip Nelson states that all the emergency coins were engraved by one of the Roettier family of medallists, but it is hard to believe that they were all the work of the same man. Certainly the brass may have been by a Roettier, and even the pewter, but whoever designed these coins probably left Ireland after the Boyne, the hibernias being the work of some Irish craftsman. Two points deserve note concerning the inscriptions of the coins. The first is the inclusion of the month as well as the year in the dates on all the brass (except the crowns). This was doubtless intended to stress the temporary nature of the coinage, a thing that James was always at pains to do, and perhaps to make it possible to redeem the coins for gold or silver once the crisis was over in the order that they had been issued. The second feature of the inscriptions is common to all the emergency coins; the list of James’s titles on them includes the traditional style of king of France. It is strange that James should have risked causing offence by including this technical claim at a time when he was wholly dependent on French help—even for copper on which to strike his coins. Strangely no contemporary appears to have remarked on this inappropriate claim.

Contemporaries were almost unanimous in their hostility to the emergency coinages. Protestant propagandists claimed that only Protestants were forced to accept the coins and that they were one of James’s evil devices to ruin them. Their contempt for the coins and those who had issued them was unlimited, and they talked of ‘their Tinkerly Treasure’ and ‘their brass imaginary coin made only valuable by the magic of their priests’. They sarcastically invented supposed benefits of the coin; it helped the poor, for those who had the valueless coin were generous in giving it away, and ‘this advantage is by their Brass Money that it Circulates more than Silver; for those that have it are very uneasy until they dispose of it’. Hatred of the memory of the coins remained strong in the eighteenth century. Protestants toasted ‘the glorious, pious and immortal memory of the good and great King William, who delivered us from Popery, slavery, arbitrary power, brass money, and wooden shoes’ and pamphleteers (including Jonathan Swift) trying to rouse feeling against ‘Wood’s halfpence’ in the 1720s compared it with James’s brass money; one of those who did so was Sir Michael Creagh, who could speak with authority on the harmful effects of such coins since as paymaster of James’s Irish army most of the brass money had passed through his hands.

2. W. King, State of the Protestants of Ireland . . . (Lond. 1691), pp. 150-1; Account of the transactions of the late king James . . ., pp. 10, 16, 57, 63; The character of the Protestants of Ireland . . ., p. 16; HMC 71; Finch II, 337; A. Smith, ‘On the Irish pewter coins of James II’, Kilkenny Journal, iii, 144; Account of the present state Ireland is in . . ., p. 1.
4. E.g., J. Swift, The Drapier’s letters, ed. H. Davis (Oxford 1935), pp. 8, 51; A defence of the conduct of the people of Ireland . . . (Dublin, 1724), pp. 21-2; Sir M. Creagh, Remarks upon Mr. Wood’s coin . . . (Dublin 1724), p. 8.
If brass money was long remembered among Irish Protestants as among the worst features of James II’s rule, it was no more popular with Catholics. They denounced it as the worst of the means used to support the Irish army, and it was ‘generally believed to be in a great measure the occasion of the ruin of the Irish’, its value ‘equivalent almost to nothing’.1

A few claimed that the brass had saved many from starving, though it was not explained how this was achieved,2 and apart from this no one had a good word for it. Yet from the Jacobite viewpoint the coinages had been most useful. Without them James could not have paid his army or fought at all.3 Williamites might sneer at the coins as ‘imaginary sinews of a war’,4 but they were far more than imaginary.

What was the total amount struck in the emergency coinages? In 1749 James Simon printed an account which, by his arithmetic, gave a total of £1,596,799: 0: 6 struck in half-crowns, shillings and sixpences. To this he added various sums to allow for large half-crowns restruck as crowns and large shillings recoined as small shillings and decided that over £2,163,237:9:0 must have been struck altogether. Unfortunately his suggested additions inspire little confidence and in his original adding up of the totals in the account he counts the large shillings and half-crowns twice; the true total is only £907,420 : 13 : 6, not £1,596,799: 0: 6.5 Also, the manuscript account only gives the amount struck up to 14 June 1690, and the Dublin mint continued at work for more than two weeks after that (up to the Boyne) and the Limerick mint for a further four months. Thus Simon’s figures have little value. To add to the confusion caused by Simon’s mistakes, later writers have misinterpreted his figures and stated that he claimed that £1,596,799:0:6 was the total struck,6 whereas his suggestion was £2,163,237:9:0:

A figure commonly accepted in the eighteenth century as the total struck was £965,375.7 This derives from William King’s *State of the Protestants of Ireland*, but he quotes the figure (without giving any authority for it) only as the approximate total struck up to the time of the Boyne, thus taking no account of the later output of the Limerick mint.8 Another contemporary estimate put the total at not much more than £1,100,000, and this is said to have been based on the estimates of ‘people concern’d in the Treasury in King James’s time’.9

These three estimates suggest (when suitably amended in the case of the first two) that the total face value of the emergency coinages struck was somewhere between £1m. and £1½m. Unfortunately we have only a fragment of the official accounts of the mint commissioners, and this suggests that the total was more like £2m. The fragment gives details of the coins struck by the James press in the Dublin mint from 3 August 1689 to 17 May 1690. In this period 10,451,099 coins valuing £777,759:14:11 were struck,10 an average of about £19,000 a week. Now if the press was striking at about the same rate in the rest of the period from 18 June 1689 to the Boyne, then the James press alone would have minted about £950,000.

---

2 Gilbert, *Jacobite narrative*, p. 54; Colles, *Diary*, p. 365.
3 As some Williamites realised—e.g., Story, op. cit., p. 50.
4 HMC 71: Finch II, 345.
5 Simon, *Essay*, p. 63; Nelson, op. cit., p. 190 gives a correct version of the account. The account is in a MS. in the library of Trinity College, Dublin (F. 4. 24.), where it is noted down roughly on a page with notes on unrelated subjects. Nothing is said as to the origin of the figures.
8 King, *State of the Protestants of Ireland ...*, p. 151.
9 Story, *True and impartial history*, p. 93.
10 Hardinge, op. cit., p. 313.
Originally there were two presses at the Dublin mint, the James and the Duchess.\(^1\) Clearly if the Duchess struck at a rate anything like that of the James the total coined at Dublin alone must have been nearly £2m. Unfortunately we have no knowledge of the activities of the Duchess press. Up to 1 July 1689 only one of the presses in the Dublin mint was in use,\(^2\) and though it was then planned to use both presses there is no evidence that this was done. It may well be that the Duchess press was sent to Limerick when a mint was established there, for it is hard to understand from where else the press in Limerick could have come. Whatever press was used at Limerick, there is no basis for even a guess as to how much coin was struck there, but there is no reason why it should not have struck at about the same rate as the James press in Dublin—it was certainly far better placed than Dublin to receive supplies of copper from France. Thus the exact figures for the total face values of the emergency coinages given in the past must be rejected, but in their place one can only put the rather vague estimate that the total was probably between £1 ½m. and £2m.

\(^1\) Ibid., p. 309; Simon, Essay, p. 59.

\(^2\) Hardinge, op. cit., p. 309.