In *CNL-121,* Dr Danforth presented convincing evidence that the semi–official seventeenth-century Irish issue of halfpennies and farthings, known as the ‘St Patrick’s Coinage’ (although some have suggested that perhaps they were intended to circulate as pennies and halfpence), were struck by Pierre Blondeau on order from Lord-Lieutenant Ormonde between 1667 and 1669. His paper effectively answers the principal questions the author poses: Who was involved in their minting? When were these coins struck? What was the historical context in which these coins were conceived and uttered? However, it misinterprets some of the available evidence and makes an unwarranted assumption about the gold and silver strikings.

Although a few earlier writers have speculated that the St Patrick coins might have been produced during the Civil War in the 1640s, numismatic opinion now agrees that they were struck after the Restoration of 1660. During Charles II’s early years, Sir Thomas Armstrong had been granted a patent to strike farthings for Ireland during twenty–one years. Armstrong’s copper coins were struck in 1660–1, but Ormonde opposed these small pieces and few reached circulation. Nevertheless, production of a new, heavier issue could not begin until the ‘Armstrong Patent’ was seen to have failed to solve the problem of a lack of small change in that country. A *terminus ante quem* for the St Patrick coppers’ circulation was established when two of the small–size pieces were among the 273 coins recovered from the yacht *Mary,* which sank on 24 March 1675 on a voyage from Dublin.

The Players

Pierre Blondeau, an engineer at the Paris mint, came to England in 1649. After Cromwell’s death, Blondeau returned to Paris in 1659, only to be recalled in 1661, after the Restoration of 1660. In 1662, Blondeau obtained ‘a warrant appointing him a free denizen, in order to enable him to better govern his workmen (at the Mint, and gave him leave) to exercise any trade within the kingdom’, which Danforth interprets as giving him license to undertake projects outside the mint, including making farthing tokens. In April 1664 Blondeau travelled to Poland to obtain screw presses, and these could be used to stamp private tokens.

James Butler, Earl, Marquess and Duke of Ormonde (1610–1688), served three terms as Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland: 1644–9, 1661–9, and 1677–84. It was during the second period that the St Patrick pieces must have been struck. In 1667, Ormonde had obtained a ‘king’s letter’ from Charles II granting him sole authority to suppress all tokens in Ireland that did not have his approval. ‘Such an instrument was commonly followed by a proclamation pertaining to a new coinage. This is a strong indication that Ormond (*sic*) had secured at least preliminary support to issue copper money.’

**Acknowledgements:** The author wishes to express his thanks to Eric T. Newman and Peter P. Gaspar who examined multiple specimens of the St Patrick coinage and advised on the implications of their observations.

2 Ibid., p. 2378.
3 Ibid., p. 2389.
In that same year, Ormonde had requested approval from London to mint £30,000 in farthings.4 ‘His motives were directed toward satisfying two main objectives. First was the desire to reestablish a Dublin Mint that would enable the Kingdom to achieve better control over its finances. The second objective was to pay the troops at a time of fiscal crisis when soldiers were needed to quell what was perceived as mounting unrest in the countryside. It is the convergence of these two objectives on Ormond’s agenda in the 1667–9 era that fostered the creation of a semi–official coinage.’5

Once Ormonde had received the ‘king’s letter’ of approval, it may be assumed that he would have moved quickly to begin the production process by authorizing the manufacture of ‘petitioning’ St Patrick coppers while awaiting final formal approval. The coins were urgently needed to pay the army stationed in Ireland – some of whom had not been paid in seven months and were in a restive, even mutinous, mood.

When Blondeau came to England, he brought his secret process of marking coin edges. Danforth claims that the coins were struck in a one–step process within a collar that marked the edges at the same time as impressing the obverse and reverse designs and not by the parallel–bar method.6 This thesis is inconsistent with an examination of some two dozen specimens, both copper and silver, which reveals that the St Patrick coins were struck on Blondeau’s screw–presses and were indeed marked by a parallel–bar edging machine. The lettering shows bifurcated (‘fish–tailed’) bases and metal flow of the beading towards the rims and thus could not have been struck in a collar. The edges show overlapping graining – a frequent occurrence with parallel–bar edge–marking.

In his paper, Danforth refers several times to silver shillings, and towards the end he summarizes his belief that coins other than coppers were meant to circulate:

‘A final aspect of the St Patrick coinage that basically confirms their semi–official status is that this series was produced in four denominations, which is unlike any other token series for the era. The gold coin is listed as unique. The silver coin is referred to as a shilling.’7

These two sentences do not really support any of his arguments for an issue of the copper coins and should not have been included. There are five principal problems with this claim:

1. No denomination is posited for the gold striking, nor is there any indication of why a gold coin would have been much use in Ireland in the late 1660s. True, the Lord Justices of Ireland had produced the so–called ‘Inchquin Money’ gold double–pistoles and pistoles in 1646. These were not true coins with a stated value, however, and were meant to be exchanged for whatever their bullion weight, marked in pennyweights and grains, would bring under troublesome wartime conditions when large amounts of supplies had to be procured for the armies. If intended for circulation, surely the small size St Patrick’s piece in gold would have had some indication of a fixed weight or even denomination; otherwise it was just a piece of bullion. Much more likely, it was a ‘favor piece’ – perhaps a gift to help assure approval of the project.

2. Although Danforth only states that the small–size silver pieces have been referred to as shillings, it might have been better not to dignify this obviously false speculation. Why obviously? In the first place, as with the gold striking, there is no indication of value and no surviving contemporary record to identify them as circulating coins. Thirty years after the St Patrick’s appeared, the diarist John Evelyn (1620–1706) included the smaller silver piece in his book on British medals.8

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4 £30,000 worth of farthings would amount to 28,800,000 coins. Of course halfpennies were produced also, although apparently in fewer numbers than the farthings. Even if the entire £30,000 worth were not struck, many millions of farthings would have been produced.

5 Danforth, p. 2385.

6 Ibid., p. 2376, et seq.

7 Ibid., p. 2396.

A short generation later, the indefatigable collector Ralph Thoresby (1658–1725) also described his piece as a medal:

‘481. An Irish (Silver) Medal, with a crowned King playing upon a Harp, as K. David is represented, over which the Crown of England, FLOREAT REX. Rev. St Patrick, or a mitred Bishop, with a double Cross, QVIESCAT.PLEBES.(d). These were also originally of Copper, and were current, I presume, for Half–pence and Farthings, for they are of different Dimensions.’

Writing at a few years later, Bishop William Nicolson (1655–1727) follows Evelyn and Thoresby in calling them medals:

‘There is also a silver Irish Medal, with a Crown’d King playing upon the Harp, as King David is represented; over which is the Crown of England with this Inscription FLOREAT REX. On the Reverse, St Patrick (or some other mitred Bishop) with a Crosier in his Hand inscrib’d QVIESCAT.PLEBS. These are still common in Copper and Brass; and being of different Dimensions are Current for Half–pence and Farthings.’

Another generation after Nicolson, James Simon (originally Jaques Simon de Lessiard, of Chatelleraud, Poitou province, western France; died in Dublin, 8 January 1757), the ‘First Irish Numismatist’, thought that the small size silver pieces were struck in 1642, at which time they might have been intended as shillings.

‘There are still preserved, by the curious, some few silver pieces, with the same impressions and inscriptions of these copper pieces: it is thought that they were struck as medals, but for my part I think they were struck upon the same occasion, and intended by the Kilkenny–assembly to pass for shillings.

This speculation can be shown to be wrong on both counts. One genuine small–size silver piece has been weighed at 108.1 grains, with a specific gravity of 10.495. An English shilling of the time was struck at approximately 92.9 grains. 925 fine silver and although the weights of the copper pieces vary considerably (farthings 77–110 grains; half–pennies normally 142–9 grains), silver (and gold) coins of a fixed denomination would have adhered much more closely to uniform weights.

3. And even if the small–size silver pieces had been intended as shillings, how does one explain the large–size specimen in silver (which Danforth ignores)? The only record of this is in a paper published by Dr Aquilla Smith (1806–90) in 1854:

‘I happen to be the possessor of one of the silver pieces alluded to by Harris. It is the identical coin which belonged to Mr Putland, and from a careful comparison of it with one of the larger copper Patricks, it is evident that it was struck from the same die as the copper coin. The existence of this piece, which as far as I know is unique, is of considerable importance respecting the question before us, for if the smaller pieces were issued as shillings, we must conclude that the larger pieces were intended to pass at some higher denomination.

This piece is somewhat worn, and weighs 176| grains. Of three of the smaller pieces of silver in my cabinet, one, which is in the highest state of preservation, weighs 123 grains; the other two are somewhat worn, and weigh, respectively, 108 and 107 grains. Now taking the weight of one of the smaller pieces which is worn, to that of the larger piece which is in similar condition, it is as 1 to 1.64, consequently, it cannot be believed that they were intended to pass for shillings and six–pences.

... (T)he conclusion I draw from the evidence now adduced is, that they are “model,” or proof pieces from the dies of the copper coins, which is supported by the existence of a proof in lead in my cabinet, from the dies of the smaller copper coin. I may also add, that proofs in silver of the Irish half–pence of Charles the Second, date 1680 and 1681, and of William the Third, 1696, as well as of the different kinds of James the Second’s gun–money, are not uncommon.’

9 Ralph Thoresby, Ducatus Leodiensis – Museum Thoresbyanum (Leeds, 1715), pp. 82–3.
Unfortunately this large-size St Patrick piece in silver has disappeared. Smith’s collection went to the Royal Irish Academy. The R.I.A. coins were later transferred to the National Museum of Ireland, but during a visit to the Museum in October 2001 Dr Smith’s piece could not be located. No other specimen of the large-size St Patrick’s in silver has been recorded.

Silver strikings exist of the ‘Armstrong’ patent Irish farthing of 1660–1 and the Dublin halfpenny of 1679, as well as all denominations of the ‘Gunmoney’ coins, and it should be added that since Dr Smith’s paper, one each of silver strikings of the Irish halfpence for James II and William & Mary have been located. The weights of five silver strikings of Irish halfpence between Charles II and William III vary from 70.2 grains to 127.3 grains, from which we may conclude that weights were relatively unimportant in what are now called proofs and were likely used as presentation ‘favor pieces’, meant to sweeten the approval process and help to assure continuation of the minting franchises.

4. The small-size silver pieces were struck from the same designs as the coppers, in at least several examples from the identical dies. This should never occur for two circulation pieces of different metals, when it would be only too easy to silverplate a copper to pass for the higher denomination.

5. The clinching evidence that the small-size silver pieces were not intended to be circulating coins, whether shillings or any other denomination, is the specific gravity of 10.495 — essentially pure silver, which wears quickly and is too soft for coinage. Pure silver was sometimes employed for medals and proof or presentation strikings but not for issued coins.

Danforth’s paper concludes:

‘The St. Patrick coins were the finest coppers that had ever been produced for Ireland up to that time. They were a tribute to the technology employed in their manufacture and to the men who participated in their production. It was a reflection of their determination to produce a coinage that would meet the needs of ordinary citizens in their every day transactions, giving them a degree of fair value unlike token issued by others.’

Although Danforth’s paper is a convincing contribution on when and by whom the St Patrick coppers were struck, there are problems with his edging theory and it would have been better if he had not included references to the gold and silver pieces as coins intended for circulation.

HARRINGTON E. MANVILLE

15 Danforth, p 2397.