JOHN GLOAG MURDOCH, 1830–1902

LORD STEWARTBY

If the founding of the British Numismatic Society was the major numismatic event of 1903, we may recall that this year also saw the sale of one of the greatest collections of British coins ever put together. Apart from the magnificence of his collection, little was known to numismatists about J.G. Murdoch for most of the twentieth century. In 1984, however, the late Lieutenant-Colonel J.K.R. Murray received a copy of an obituary of Murdoch from one of his descendants, Mr Colin Smythe, of Gerrards Cross. Although not mentioning his numismatic interests, this gives extensive information about his life and the business career that provided him with the means to finance his collecting.\(^1\) The text is reproduced hereafter as an Appendix. The publication from which it is taken has not been identified, but it appears to have been a periodical designed for a general readership (like, for example, *The Illustrated London News*), since the text of the obituary was set out in two columns and appears on a page headed ‘MUSIC’. It was accompanied by the same photograph as appears on the frontispiece of the Murdoch sale catalogue.

Murdoch’s collection was described by Sotheby’s in a preface to the catalogue as being ‘second only to the late Mr Montagu’s. The two collections are probably the most important, valuable and extensive ever formed in England. Mr Murdoch did not collect Greek and Roman coins. If these series are eliminated from the Montagu Collection, we think Mr Murdoch’s will be found to be the most important numismatic collection ever sold in this country’. Apart from the lack of ancient coins in Murdoch’s, the two collections differed in some other ways. Montagu tended to buy whole collections and then dispose of any consequent duplicates; several such sales took place between 1883 and 1894, one of them following his acquisition in 1887 of the Brice collection *en bloc*. He also disposed of his English coins post-1714 to Spink, who produced a splendid catalogue of the series (1890–1). Montagu did not collect Scottish coins prior to the Union of 1603, which must be why when Addington’s collection was broken up in 1883, his Scottish coins, unlike his English which were bought by Montagu, went to Richardson and then to Murdoch, to whom as Scotsmen the series was of particular interest. Montagu sold colonial patterns and proofs in 1892, but did not otherwise collect, or did not retain, other coins of the British colonies, or foreign coins, from America or Europe, of the kind which were the subject of the largest of Murdoch’s sales. In terms of English coins Montagu’s medieval series was much the larger, and infinitely richer, but Murdoch’s collection was extremely strong for the Tudor and Stuart periods. In the English milled series, which Montagu had shed, Murdoch’s series was also outstanding, including a splendid run of patterns and proofs. What made the Montagu and Murdoch collections both so remarkable was the combination of scale, superb condition and the presence of so many of the greatest rarities.

Unlike Montagu, Murdoch did not publish anything on coins, but the extent and richness of his collection mean that he must have devoted a considerable part of his time to his numismatic interests in his later years. He had joined the Numismatic Society of London (as it then was) in 1885, and he does not appear to have been collecting much earlier than that since most of the sales from which his coins were obtained took place after that date. In relatively few years, therefore, he managed to compile a collection of coins and medals numbering well into five figures, which was dispersed in 5,386 lots over thirty-nine days in 1903–4. In summary, the Murdoch sales were as follows:

\(^1\) D. Wainwright, *The Piano Makers* (1975), also contains some information about Murdoch’s business, as well as giving his second name (pp. 131–2 and 151–2). The London directories show Murdoch Murdoch and Co. listed for the last time in 1949, but John G. Murdoch & Co., retailers of pianos (and later of radios and televisions), survived until 1970.
The sales began with five days of English coins up to James I, which made a total of £6,829 13s. At this period fewer than 200 lots were normally sold in a single day, indeed often fewer than 150, so the dispersal of a major collection was a substantial undertaking. In the four months from the end of March 1903 Sotheby’s conducted four large Murdoch sales, involving twenty-three days in the actual saleroom. The catalogues of these four sales alone ran to 394 pages of meticulous descriptive text, with forty-five plates, and must have taken several months of intensive and expert work to prepare.

Beginning with ten Ancient British coins, the first sale continued with a good representative series of Saxon, Norman and Plantagenet coins, mostly in excellent condition, but not on a scale to compare with Montagu’s collection of these periods, from which a high proportion of the best items had been obtained. Murdoch had also bought strongly at various other sales from the later 1880s and the 1890s, such as Allen (1898), Durlacher (1899), Kennard (1892), Kesteven (1899), Marsham (1888), Nunn (1896), Pownall (1887), Richardson (1895), Rostron (1892), Webb (1894–5) and Wyndham (1886). That he was still actively collecting in the last year or two of his life is evident from purchases at the Howard, Moon, Stradling and Wright sales in 1901. Among the most valuable of the Saxon pieces were fine portrait coins of Offa, Cynethryth, Baldred, Archbishop Aethelred and Alfred, although one of Ecberht (62), the Ceolwulf II (lot 34, withdrawn) from Montagu, five of Alfred (83–7) and the Eadwig (124) were forgeries. Among the Norman lots were many very rare mints and some choice rarities of the Civil War period. The early Plantagenets were thinly represented – the only coin of Henry III being Montagu’s gold penny, with a pedigree going back to Trattle, which had cost Murdoch £250 in 1896 and fetched £325 in 1903. From Edward III onwards there was little silver before the Tudors, several half-groats being some of the rarest – Henry IV, Henry VI of York (1423) and Bristol (1470–1), and Richard III the most notable. The late medieval gold, however, was outstanding, beginning with a 1344 noble, and including a heavy noble and half of Henry IV and a half-angel of Henry VI. Two sovereigns of Henry VII were followed by an excellent run of sixteenth-century gold, perhaps most remarkably three George nobles and a half of Henry VIII, double sovereigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI and many sovereigns of all the reigns. The silver is fuller than before, and although generally less distinguished than the gold included many notable items – two shillings of Henry VII ex Montagu (and another, 395, which was false), and one of the (so-called pattern) half-crowns of Philip and Mary, for example. Of James I the silver component is again less extensive than the gold, the strength of which can be measured by the inclusion of no fewer than five spur-ryals. Collections that feature among the pedigrees in the later part of the first Murdoch sale include Chetwynd (1901), Copp (1887), Dillon (1892), Doulton (1888 and 1892), Gurney (1898), Moon (1901), Shepherd (1885), Thorburn (1887) and Gibbs, the last having been bought by Spink in 1886.

Though spanning a period of less than a hundred years, from the accession of Charles I to the death of Anne, the second portion was the largest of the three English sales, and covered a period

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\text{Dates} & \text{Contents} & \text{No. of} & \\
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31 March 1903 + 4 days & Ancient British, Anglo-Saxon and English Coins, First Portion (to James I) & 772 & \\
11 May 1903 + 2 days & Scottish and Anglo-Gallic Coins & 406 & \\
8 June 1903 + 5 days & English Coins, Second Portion (Charles I to Queen Anne) & 919 & \\
21 July 1903 + 8 days & Coins and Tokens of the British Colonies and Dependencies, America and the European Continent & 1233 & \\
15 March 1904 + 4 days & English Coins, Third Portion (George I–Victoria) & 718 & \\
2 June 1904 + 5 days & English Historical Medals from Henry VI to George II & 670 & \\
12 December 1904 + 1 day & Irish Coins and British and Irish Tokens & 254 & \\
14 December 1904 + 2 days & English Historical Medals from George III to Victoria and a Few Coins of Scotland & 414 & \\
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\[ \text{2 For further information on the auction sales of this period see H.E. Manville and T.J. Robertson, British Numismatic Auction Catalogues 1710–1984, 1986. I am indebted to Mr Hugh Pagan for helpful comments.} \]
in which Murdoch was particularly interested. Although there is less variety in the coinage of the Hanoverian era, contained in the third English portion, Murdoch specialised in patterns and proofs which greatly enlarged the series and included numbers of splendid pieces of great rarity. The second portion fetched £6,596 10s. 6d. and the third £4,907. As a measure of their riches, the second sale opened with ten Oxford three-pound pieces of Charles I, and the third included no fewer than seven crowns of William IV. Simon’s 1663 Petition and Reddite crowns fetched by far the highest prices of either sale, £420 and £215 respectively, but there were also many outstanding items of the Civil War period, ranging from the superb 1644 Oxford crown by Rawlings (£151) to the crude obisidional gold pound from Pontefract (£150). Prices in the third sale did not reach such heights – the only coin to fetch three figures was the proof Gothic crown of 1847 in gold (£100). But there was an exceptional run of proofs and patterns of all stages from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, unofficial as well as official, and including a remarkable group of pattern florins by William Wyon produced in 1848 in connection with the abortive plans for decimalisation. Throughout the second and third English sales the Montagu collection was a prime source, along with many of the names already listed for pre-Stuart pedigrees, but there were also several additions, such as Beaufort (1890), Bieber (1889), Briggs (1893), Bush (1902), Krumholz (1897), Maynard (1885), Morris (1898), Shorthouse (1890), Tyrell (1892), Whitaker (1894) and L.C. Wyon (1901).

The last part of the collection sold in 1903 was the massive nine-day sale of overseas coins and tokens, mostly of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These covered not only the British Empire, but Europe, the Americas, some coins even from the non-British Far East (such as China, Japan, Siam), not to mention a few Greek and Roman pieces. The series of India and the United States were particularly extensive. The historical medals, foreign as well as English, were dispersed in two sales in 1904, to the second of which were added ‘a few coins of Scotland’, the main Scottish series having been sold with the Anglo-Galic the previous year. Tokens and Irish coins, which fetched £1,565 16s. 6d., occupied a small catalogue of their own in December 1904, although the second medal sale was held consecutively with it, in the same week. There were very few medieval Irish coins but, as with the English, the collection was strong in the seventeenth century and later, with a good representation of the Civil War coinages (including an Inchiquin 1642 gold pistole from the Chapman Collection, 1894), the James II Gunmoney issues (mostly proofs in gold and silver), and patterns and proofs of the four Georges. Many of the tokens, in the later part of this sale, were from the 1901 sale of the well-known student and author, W.J. Davis.

During the period when Murdoch was collecting it was not easy to put together a good Scottish series, but he clearly took a special interest in the coins of his native land and the medieval element of his Scottish collection was, relatively speaking, at least as comprehensive as his later medieval English. Again, there was a disproportionately rich run of gold coins, including the star item, the David II noble from the Martin, Hastings and Addington collections. This coin was sold for £169, a large sum but by no means excessive for such an exceptional, and generally unobtainable, rarity. It is now in the Ashmolean Museum, presented by Horace Hird in 1953, but neither this coin nor any other David noble has passed through the saleroom since 1903. It had come to Murdoch from the collection of A.B. Richardson, the Scottish portion of which Murdoch appears to have acquired en bloc by private treaty c.1895. This provenance is not recorded anywhere in the Murdoch catalogue, but pedigrees of Scottish coins listed in later sales (notably Lockett’s) frequently give the sequence Wingate, Addington, Richardson and Murdoch. Addington’s sale of 1886 contained only a residue; there were no Scottish coins, and it looks as if Richardson had himself acquired them privately.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, between the Wingate sale of 1875 and the Pollexfen sale of 1900, relatively few Scottish coins had come on the market through public auction. The two outstanding collections, those of Thomas Coats of Ferguslie (d. 1883) and R.W.

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Cochran-Patrick (d. 1897), remained in the possession of their families for many years. Apart from ‘Wingate and Addington’ and Pollexfen, there are very few pedigrees recorded for Scottish coins in the Murdoch catalogues. His 1539 ducat and 1576 twenty pound piece were ex Hastings (1880), a crescent sterling of William the Lion and a James V unicorn from Kermack Ford (1884) and the excessively rare half-unicorn of James V (lot 169) from Ouvry (1882). A thirty shilling piece of 1555 and a 1575 twenty pound piece were among a few items obtained from Marsham (1888). Montagu is noted as a source for some of the post-1603 coins, along with names that appear in the English series, such as Copp and Gibbs. The cataloguing of the Scottish series was of a very high standard and (as can be seen from the unusual sequence of metals within each reign, silver, gold, billon/copper) followed closely the arrangement by Burns in his Coinage of Scotland (1887), which was far ahead of anything published on English coinage until well into the twentieth century.5

Out of the 406 lots in the May 1903 sale, 373 were Scottish, the balance consisting of some beautiful Anglo-Galic gold plus books and cabinets. The rest of the Scottish series was listed as lots 1007 to 1080 in the final sale. These were rather modestly described as ‘a few coins of Scotland’, appended to the second sale of historical medals; but although none were illustrated and the descriptions are less comprehensive than in the main Scottish sale, they included a significant number of gold coins and there were also important items among the silver. For example, the Ballyol St Andrews penny reading I Di Gra Scotorum Rx (lot 1021) could hardly be seen as a duplicate of anything in the earlier sale, while of the twelve pence of David I only three were included in the original selection. The two sales therefore need to be taken together to get a balanced view of the Scottish collection as a whole. It is not possible to mention here more than a few of Murdoch’s great Scottish treasures, but it is clear that, in the absence of any coverage of the Pre-Union series by Montagu, the collection would have been of much less account without the Richardson coins. Among the coins from Wingate and Addington, bought from Richardson, were a large number of rare gold pieces, such as the half-crowns of James II and James IV and the one-third lion noble of James VI, but also some spectacular silver, like the James IV Roman-lettered groat and the exceptionally fine 1582 forty-shilling piece. Late in Murdoch’s life the Pollexfen sale also added some very rare items, of which the Malcolm IV sterling, bought through the dealer Rollin & Feuardent, was perhaps the most important.

APPENDIX

Death of Mr. J.G. Murdoch, senr.

We regret to have to announce the death of Mr. John G. Murdoch, senr., the chairman of John G. Murdoch & Co. Ltd., of Farrington Road, and senior partner of Spencer & Co., pianoforte makers, of Regent’s Park, N.W., and Malcolm & Co., organ makers, of Erskine Road, N.W.

Mr. Murdoch was born in 1830 at Huntingtower, Perthshire. Early in life he was apprenticed to block cutting for printing on cotton, but block printing having been supplanted by machine printing immediately after the end of his apprenticeship, he preferred not to be tied to a decaying trade and signed articles for a second apprenticeship to the new process. As an apprenticeship in those days was invariably for seven years, he was about 27 years old before his apprenticeship days were over, although he had begun at the age of 13. After being engaged for several years as a machine printer he began to long for a wider field for his energies, and although his employers were reluctant to part with him, and promised him rapid promotion if he would remain, he relinquished the cotton printing and connected himself with the firm of Messrs. Collins & Co. of Glasgow, who were developing business rapidly as publishers of Family Bibles and similar works. He established successful agencies for their publications in Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester and other towns in the north of England. In 1871 he came to London and began publishing in his own account, his principal business continuing to be in Family Bibles, of which he issued editions in Welsh and Dutch, as well as English. At that time the Family Bible was more popular than it is today, and Mr. Murdoch’s annual output for a number of years was more than 30,000, which were supplied to all parts of the Empire.

It was the custom in those days to give a premium plate to purchasers of the Family Bible and this eventually led Mr. Murdoch into print publishing. At the time when the oleograph was in its prime and publishers were eager to issue

first-class pictures in artistic style, he established a great business in this department. He secured paintings from some of the most eminent artists of the day, such as the late Alphonse de Neuville, Richard Beavis, Frederick Goodall, RA, Phil Morris, ARA, Robert Müller, and others, and from these he reproduced pictures in the best style of colour printing then extant. Several of these pictures had the good fortune to attract the attention of Her late Majesty Queen Victoria, and owing to her patronage and the merits of the pictures themselves, they commanded an enormous sale.

About the same period the trade in photograph albums arose to great proportions in England, and as it had been for many years the practice to put a family portrait register into the Family Bible, it was an easy transition for the great Family Bible publisher to become an album publisher as well, and that on a large scale.

This album publishing had a great influence on the future of Mr. Murdoch's business, for, strange to say, it formed the base of the extensive musical business for which Messrs. Murdoch & Co. are now well known. The stages of this curious development are simple enough when understood. In many of the portrait albums it became the custom to supply a little Swiss musical box which played as the album was opened. This Mr. Murdoch supplied in many of his albums, and speedily he found himself interested not only in that but in all kinds of musical boxes up to the very largest and most expensive. The business in musical boxes grew rapidly, and customers on all sides began to press for instruments of other kinds, so that in a short time there grew up a considerable trade in pianofortes and organs and all sorts of musical instruments.

Early in 1883 Mr. Murdoch's business was amalgamated with that of Messrs. John and Alexander Dow (an offspring, several years previous) and converted into a private company, Mr. Murdoch becoming the chairman and Messrs. John Dow, George Murdoch, and Alexander Dow the other directors. This company has followed the lines laid down by Mr. Murdoch, and has grown steadily from that time until now.

The business in pianos and organs eventually became so large that it was found necessary to start factories to supply the needs of the company, and from these have emerged the well-known concerns of Spencer & Co., who have lately become pianoforte makers to HRH the Princess of Wales, and Malcolm & Co., organ and Phoneon makers, Regent's Park. In both of these concerns Mr. Murdoch was the senior partner, and his sons, Mr. J.G. Murdoch, junr., and Mr. James Murdoch, the respective managing partners.

During the building of this great business, Messrs. Murdoch & Co. have ever been zealous that all their concerns should be conducted in the most straightforward manner, and that the goods manufactured and sold by them should be strictly in accordance with their description, and of sound quality. As time has passed, even the most violent of their opponents have come to see that the businesses established by Mr. Murdoch and his company have been a help to the musical instrument trade and that they are amongst its most useful members.

Mr. Murdoch was a most lovable man, and everyone who came in personal touch with him found him to be a real friend. In him was to be seen none of the bluster and overbearing character usually associated with a successful business career. The marvellous success which converted a working cotton printer of 1857 into the great manufacturer and merchant of 1902 was due to a rare sympathy with men, which drew out their best from those with whom he was associated—a cleanness of mind which saw plainly the practical; a shrewdness of judgment that saved him from making many mistakes; a courage that boldly seized the occasion; and a quiet perseverance that grappled with and overcame whatever difficulties lay in his path. Combined with these rare business qualities, he possessed a mind of lofty religious character. Throughout his life he never failed to meet an engagement and never broke a promise.

Mr. Murdoch took an active part in the political life of St Pancras, and more than once was invited to stand for Parliament. In 1892 he was candidate for East Renfrewshire, a district familiar to him since boyhood, and he made a capital fight, greatly reducing the majority against his side; but the times were against him, and he shared with many others the disastrous fortunes of his party throughout the country.

The world is poorer for the passing of Mr. Murdoch, and those who were in touch with him have sustained a loss in his death that time can never make good, but his influence remains, and they who are left in charge of the businesses founded by him have doubtless received an inspiration that will carry them forward on the principles he laid down.

Note: In the General Election of July 1892 Murdoch, as the Liberal candidate, polled 3,397 votes, being defeated in a straight fight with the Conservative (4,484). Despite what the obituarist says, this was the only Election between 1885 and 1906 that the Liberal party won, and it resulted in a new government under Gladstone.