

# A Nineteenth-Century Discovery of Elizabethan Coins in Co. Clare

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A recent paper in this journal<sup>1</sup> has brought together references to a score of mediaeval coin-hoards from Thomond, nine of them from Co. Clare. The tally was bound to be incomplete, and a subsequent note in *Irish Numismatics*<sup>2</sup> has put on record details of an unpublished thirteenth-century hoard from Barnatrick near Ennis which came to light in 1936. The purpose of the present note is to draw attention to yet another neglected hoard from the same county which was discovered as long ago as 1832. The source of my information, which I owe to the kindness of Mr. Gréagóir Ó Dughail, B.A., of the Public Record Office in Dublin Castle, is a letter which is preserved, along with a copy of the reply, among the Registered Papers of the Chief Secretary's Office in the State Paper Office in Dublin Castle under the reference 1832/3543. The letter occupies the whole on one side of a piece of paper measuring approximately 12 x 7½ inches (30.3 x 18.4 cms.). This had been folded in on itself, sealed and addressed. The endorsements on the exterior are as follows:—

Six mile Bridge July nineteen 1832

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The Right Honorable  
Sir W<sup>m</sup> Gossett K.C.H.  
etc etc etc  
Dublin Castle

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and there are the impressions of two stamps. That on the front is circular with the words +FREE +DUBLIN enclosing the date JY20 / 1832, while that on the back is oblong and unbordered and reads *Ennis* in a curious slanting script.

The recipient was Lieutenant-Colonel Sir William Gossett, Under Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland (at that time the Marquess of Anglesey and later the Marquess Wellesley in turn to be followed by the Earl of Haddington) since 1 January 1831. He was succeeded by the far more capable and energetic Thomas Drummond on 25 July 1835, having served under five Chief Secretaries (Hardinge, Smith-Stanley, Hobhouse, Hatherton and Howard). A Knight Commander of the Order of the Guelphs of Hanover since 1831, he was eventually gazetted Major-General

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<sup>1</sup> M. Dolley, "The Medieval Coin-Hoards of Thomond", *N. Munster Antiq. J.*, 12 (1969), 23-34.

<sup>2</sup> M. Dolley and W. A. Seaby, "A Small Find of Edwardian Sterlings from the County Clare", *Irish Numismatics*, 5:3 (May-June 1972), 107-109.

on 9 November 1846, but did not live long in enjoyment of this final dignity. His widow appears to have continued to reside in Ireland. As a collector of coins he appears to have been even less distinguished than as a civil servant and his name is not one that figures in the early membership-lists of the Numismatic Society of London, now the Royal Numismatic Society.

The actual letter reads as follows:—

Six mile Bridge County of  
Clare      July 19      1832

Honorable Sir

It is highly probable that you will / accept of the humble proffer I make as I / have distinguished you to be a most proper autho- / -rity under Government to refer to on any matter / Tending to identify the Royal Succession of the / British Monarchy, ( sic ) in an antient Building / adjacent to Six-m Bridge there was recently found / Silver Coins having the impression of Queen Elizabeth / & the date 1576. I have got an half Crown, a / Shilling & Sixpence of this impression & Name & / I will forward them to you Sir, should you / accept thereof or if not I may be directed as / To whom I should address myself on such / an occasion.  
I am

Honorable Sir  
With the Most profound  
Respect   Tighe mac Mahon

There are two endorsements. The first is Gossett's secretary's instructions to his clerk and runs:—

Thank him for his kind / offer which Sir William begs to / decline accepting as he has lately / obtained the Coins in question.

The second is the office's terse:—

done / 24 July

The copy of the reply is neither signed nor initialled but runs:—

Dublin Castle 24<sup>th</sup> July 1832

Sir,

I have to return you thanks for your kind / offer of some Coins which you have found / of Queen Elizabeths Reign, but which I beg to decline / Accepting, having lately obtained Coins bearing / the same date.

I am Sir,  
Your most obedient  
Humble Servant

Mr Tighe Mac Mahon  
Six Mile Bridge

The firmness of the refusal is unmistakable, and one suspects that even the easy-going Gossett had more than a suspicion that to have acted otherwise would have been to invite in due course an application for him to use his influence to obtain for his correspondent a liquor licence or other manifestation of local patronage. If one is left, too, with rather more of respect for the fluency of Mac Mahon's pen than for the



degrading subservience of the sentiments it conveyed, there is perhaps a vestige still of ancestral pride in the claim to have exercised personal judgement in arriving at the conclusion that Gossett was a suitable person to be the recipient of Mac Mahon's largesse. There is, moreover, the engaging possibility that the Tighe Mac Mahon of the 1832 letter is the remarkable Tadhg or Teague Mac Mahon, originally from Killadysart who was befriended by Eugene O'Curry and George Petrie.<sup>3</sup>

What can be said about the hoard? Clearly it was not a large one, but for this there are enough parallels where Irish finds of the middle part of the reign of Elizabeth are concerned.<sup>4</sup> The 'half Crown' is assuredly a shilling, the 'Shilling' a sixpence, and the 'Sixpence' either a groat or a threepenny-piece. English shillings and groats from the period 1558-1561 are common in Irish finds, and sixpences from the 1570s even more so, while the threepence is far from being a rarity. A recent paper, too, has shown that there is quite a well-defined grouping of finds of Elizabethan fine silver interposed between the 'white money' hoards from the first years of the reign and the spate of 'sterling' hoards associated with the last decade of the century.<sup>5</sup> Geographically closest to the find under discussion is the 1921 hoard from St. John's Hospital in Limerick City which contained 22 coins with the latest bearing the date 1573, and one even begins to wonder whether one should not now finally bring back to this phase of concealment the shadowy discovery made in or shortly before 1855 at Ennis and until recently assumed perhaps too lightly to belong to the last years of the reign.<sup>6</sup> There is, though, one other aspect of the find at Sixmilebridge that merits remark. If it is interesting that it seems never to have occurred to Gossett that Mac Mahon's overtures related to a discovery raising a presumption at least of Treasure Trove, there is the further consideration that Mac Mahon would scarcely have written out of the blue with the 'proffer' in question. Was there perhaps a tradition that offers of old and curious coins to the Castle gentry would be well received? The numismatic renaissance embodied in men like Butler, Dawson, Lindsay, Petrie, Sainthill and Smith was even then gathering momentum, and would inevitably prove fatal to any such practice, but it could conceivably be no coincidence that Leveson Gower had been Chief Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant between 1828 and 1830 and that an Ellesmere provenance attaches to the only recorded specimens of Ormonde's double-pistole. Certainly the Mac Mahon epistle suggests more than one line of enquiry that could be relevant in this context, and the thanks of students of Irish numismatics as well as of the antiquities of Thomond are due to the authorities of the State Paper Office for permission to publish it here.

<sup>3</sup> C. Ó Danachair, "The Irish Language in County Clare in the 19th Century", *N. Munster Antiq. J.*, 13 (1970), 40-52, where on pp. 45-47 there is a vivid pen-sketch of Tadhg Mac Mahon which includes an 1886 comment that 'Teague only knows a limited amount of English. He speaks like a foreigner, with difficulty and deliberation, using the most dignified idioms and with a tantalizing slowness but with a wonderful good accent. He evidently picked it up late in life from educated people . . . .'. One would only question the 'late in life', and perhaps 'as an adult' would better meet the case. If the identification be accepted — and 'the most dignified idioms' hits off the letter to Gossett perfectly — the epistle here published must rank as one of his earliest essays in the cultivation of the lettered that brought him into contact with many of the Academy notables of his day.

<sup>4</sup> I. D. Brown and M. Dolley, *Coin Hoards of Great Britain and Ireland*, London 1971, p. 72.

<sup>5</sup> M. Dolley, "The Pattern of Elizabethan Coin-Hoards from Ireland", *Ulster J. Archae.*, 33 (1970), 77-88.

<sup>6</sup> *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, (1856-57), 50.