A Further Note on the Fourteenth-Century Armorial of Ireland

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Felicitously enough preparation of this present *Festschrift* coincided with the silver jubilee of the appearance of one of its recipient's most perceptive contributions to heraldic studies (E. MacLysaght, "Some Observations on the Arms of the Four Provinces", *JRSAI,* 79 (1949), pp. 60-63), and it may be thought no less appropriate that this little offering to a superbly lettered Munsterman should concern itself with a late medieval armorial coincident with that of Munster from a date at least as early as the second quarter of the seventeenth century. A dozen years later, on page 80 of *JRSAI,* 92 (1962), Professor John Barry went on to remind us of the young Richard II's 1385 (*recte* 1386) licence to Robert de Vere, Marquis of Dublin and future Duke of Ireland, of "arms *azure* with three antique crowns *or* and a border *argent*", though his further claim that the undifferenced armorial appears "on the first distinct Irish coins issued in the reign of Edward IV in 1460" has been disputed by Mr. Wilmer Dykes who has pointed out (*JRSAI,* 96 (1966), pp. 111-120) that the particular coins in fact belong to the years 1483-1489, though there are, as it happens, some rare copper pieces of Edward IV, sometimes dated to 1467 but more probably falling after 1471, which exhibit the true armorial of the lordship of Ireland with the three crowns disposed two and one and not in pale. The purpose of the present note is to suggest that the licence of 3 January 1386 (*Calendar of the Patent Rolls: Richard II, A.D. 1385-1389,* London 1900, p. 78) in fact provides rather more evidence that the three golden crowns on a blue field, undifferenced by a silver border, already constituted the arms of the Irish lordship than the remarks of the Rev. James Graves (*A Roll of the Proceedings of the King's Council in Ireland,* London 1877, p. xiii) might lead us to suppose. It was Mr. Graves' contention that the arms were "specially devised by the King in honour of de Vere's new dignity', but the 4th April 1388 charge to Bishop Alexander Balscot when set in the context of the period as a whole must suggest that the differenced armorial granted in 1386 was so close to the undifferenced which it superseded that the former's replacement had not seemed urgent (Graves, *op. cit.,* pp. xiii and xiv; *Calendar of the Close Rolls: Richard II, A.D. 1385-1389,* London 1921, p. 388).

The de Vere licence of 3rd January 1386 had authorized the use of the differenced form of the armorial in what we may term military contexts, *i.e.* on banners, pennons and what we today would call uniform. The suggestion of this note is that the grant was to enhance de Vere's authority by identifying his forces with those of the Crown. The mind boggles at the prospect, clearly envisaged at the time as impossible, that there should ever be conflict between troops fighting under a blue flag with three

gold crowns and others rallying to a blue flag with three gold crowns and a silver border. At about the same time the Marquis was empowered to use a new version of the Great Seal, and from the charge of 4th April 1388 it would again seem that confusion with its predecessor was only too easy. It has been assumed that this seal included the di erenced arms of Ireland, but in fact the Great Seal for Ireland at this period quartered the royal arms of England and France ancient and contained no specific Irish allusion (*Archaeologi* , 85 (1935), p. 319 and pl. XCI, 1 & 2). In any case it could have been pointed out that the tinctured difference would be even less remarkable when transferred to essentially monochromatic media. Leaving aside the question when precisely there were evolved in these islands universally agreed conventions for rendering heraldic tinctures by different hatchings, there is the further problem of the extent to which such subtleties would have been understood by the King's Anglo-Irish "friends" let alone his Irish "enemies". Balscot, we may suppose, had been employing the de Vere versions of the seal and Irish armorial on the principle we would term "near enough" and from very understandable motives of economy. As regards the military regalia, then, it may be taken that the blazon of three golden crowns on a blue field in fact was one by friend and foe alike immediately recognizable as the essential and traditional armorial of the Irish lordship, and we must not forget that one consequence of de Vere's failure to take up his Irish command was persistent fiscal crisis. The unfortunate Balscot was being expected to maintain an English presence in Ireland without adequate financial resources, and it is only too easy to find reasons why the Bishop of Meath should have sought to spare his improverished exchequer the expense of preparing new flags, liveries, surcoats and the like. De Vere's enemies at the English court may have been cock-a-hoop and would naturally have demanded replacements, but what is significant is that the prelate retained the confidence of the real and continuing administration right into the reign of Henry IV. Surely this would not have been the case had he persisted in waging war and in conducting public business with a standard and seal tainted by the spectacular novelty implied by Mr. Graves' choice of the words "specially devised". This is not to say that de Vere's Great Seal did not include some minor modification, but it cannot have been all that different from the repeatedly recut Great Seal used under Edward I, II and III and under Richard himself in 1381 and again in the 1390s (*Archaeologia, vol. cit.*, p. 316).

The suggestion of this note, then, is that already by the last quarter of the fourteenth century the arms of the lordship of Ireland were universally recognized as being "*azure* with three antique crowns *or*". The licence of 3rd January 1386 to de Vere was simply one of difference—the "border *argent*". To be stressed in this connection is the blood relationship existing between the future Duke of Ireland and his sovereign. Throughout this critical document (*Rolls of Parliament*, London 1767-77, III, pp. 209 and 210), the Earl of Oxford and Marquess of Dublin is referred to as "our cousin" (*consanguineus noster*), and in this instance the formula for once reflects reality and physical consanguinity. Against this background there is nothing at all implausible in the grant of the differenced arms of the lordship, and especially when in the same document the recipient was in the process of being overwhelmed with extraordinary privileges where the government of the colony was concerned. This is not to say that the numismatist would go along with the suggestion (Graves, *op. cit.*, p. xiii) that the royal favourite was empowered to strike a coinage in his own name, but that is altogether another story, and one which merits technical discussion at a length that would be quite inappropriate in a note of this description. What does seem indisputable, though, is that at the beginning of 1386 the new Marquis of Dublin occupied

a position of favour and influence with respect to Richard II that is consistent in every way with a grant to him of the differenced armorial borne by the English king in respect of Ireland. When precisely the undifferenced three antique, *i.e.* open, crowns on a blue field had become the Irish arms is, of course, quite another question, but at least we are now taken back beyond the middle of the fourteenth century. If only in the hope, moreover, of stimulating further discussion it is proposed to end this offering on a note of provocation. Is it possible that the original (twelfth-century?) arms of the Irish lordship were a single crown on a blue field, and that the device was in due course trebled to bring it into line with the three lions of the English royal armorial as apparently modified by Richard I at least from 1194?