

**A STUDY OF IRISH  
NUMISMATIC DESIGN**

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**By Maureen Kelly**

# a study of irish numismatic design

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PREFACE

The original idea in choosing this topic was to prepare a study of Irish coins from the establishment of the Free State to the present day, because these are the first coins which can be classified as genuinely Irish both in concept and design. Research on the period involved sifting through many old articles and reports written by the various members of the committee responsible for the introduction of these coins, and in doing so the tremendous feeling of pride and reverence which surrounded the new coinage was striking. In a country emerging from the throes of a civil war, free at least from centuries of British control, these little coins so full of imagination, energy and freedom aptly expressed the ideals and optimism of the young patriots. Widely acclaimed by international media critics and artists alike for their outstanding beauty, they instilled an unprecedented national sense of pride, as the country rejoiced in its newly-acquired independence. Although the elation and emotion which greeted the new coinage was undeniably touching, the extraordinary importance politicians and economists attached to them was also somewhat puzzling. Why were these coins held in such esteem and what was so remarkable about their design?

In order to understand the implications and repercussions of this event and to fully comprehend the concepts behind the designs, it was necessary to delve back into the annals of numismatic history. As coins are documents illustrative of a country's past, Ireland's history is illuminated in the vicissitudes of this island's coinage. The Gaelic people had been suppressed and dominated for centuries, consequently the coinage reflects different foreign influences from the early years to the start of the 20th century. Nonetheless, many of the coins employed are beautiful representations - reflective of a memorable past that goes back into antiquity.

Therefore, this thesis has endeavoured to trace the progression of Irish coinage from the early days of the Vikings, to the arrival of Strongbow's Anglo-Normans and down through the reign of the many English monarchs. The aim was to produce an illuminated narrative account of Ireland's coinage from a designer's point of view, with

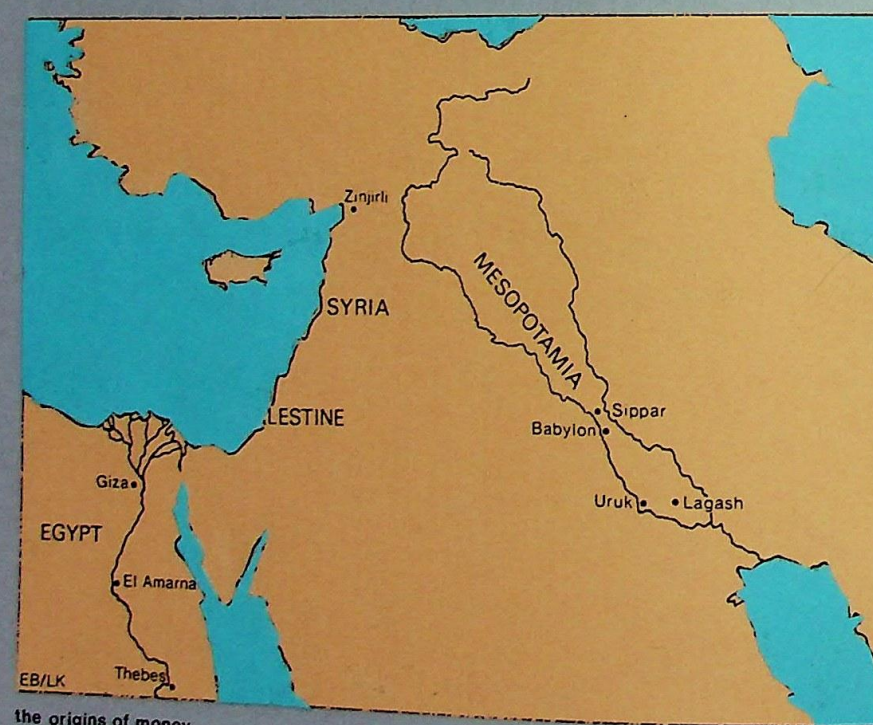
a brief review of the political, social and economic forces which governed this evolution. Because of a great personal interest in the coins produced in the period subsequent to 1928, there is an in-depth analysis of the coins issued by the first Irish Government, and their influence on contemporary decimal coinage today.



## INTRODUCTION



cowrie shells



the origins of money

"Money makes the world go 'round" proclaims the title of a famous song and we must certainly agree that money plays a crucial part in almost every aspect of our lives today. In modern times, it is hard for us to conceive of a world without money - the bygone days when goods were exchanged solely by means of a primitive barter system. And yet the introduction of a monetary system was a relatively recent historical event here in Ireland, reaching our shores just under 1000 years ago.

The story of money has largely been the story of coins and it is coins that are the central concern of this thesis. For, despite the introduction of other forms of money over the centuries, coins have undeniably come to be the most important form in daily use around the world. History attributes the invention of coinage to the ancient civilisations of the Middle East where payments using minted silver were first recorded after the invention of writing in Mesopotamia. Apparently, for several centuries prior to this, copper, gold and iron bullion had functioned as a medium of exchange both in Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt; and in China the Corwie Shell represents an even earlier stage in money's evolution.

Coins, by definition (from the French word 'coin' literally meaning a wedge or die), are therefore pieces of metal impressed with an officially authorised device, the stamped mark designed to greatly facilitate commercial transactions. Although this practice reached Britain around 200 BC, a further twelve centuries were to pass before the first coins were struck on Irish soil. Perhaps the reason for this lies in the fact that without large urban settlements, our Irish ancestors did not require the complications of a coinage system until very late in their history.

This thesis will analyse the changing faces of the different objects which have been used as coinage since Irishmen and women first began to make written records of their activities. Because this spans such a long period, it would be impossible to analyse each coin individually. Furthermore, up until the 1920s, when Ireland became an independent State, all its coins were imposed by



a selection of Irish coins

foreigners and hence cannot be classified as distinctively Irish. Consequently, this thesis will concentrate on a number of coins in each period - coins which made a deliberate attempt to embrace the nation's culture, despite being the product of an outside influence, and coins which provide a personal interest because of their unusual design or typographic treatment. The earliest form of Irish currency, i.e., Celtic Ring money will be discussed prior to the introduction of coinage by the Otsmen of Scandinavia and an analysis of the evolution of the harp on Anglo-Irish coins will precede the Free-State series. Because these coins were essentially the first series issued by an independent Irish Government, they were for the first time consciously Irish in concept and design. These shall be discussed in detail in Chapter 4, accompanied by a design analysis and a brief account of the general public's reaction to the new series. The final chapter will deal with the changes necessitated by the introduction of a new decimalised system of currency, and consequently the degradation of one of the finest series of coinage ever produced.

This will give an overall impression of the standard of design on Irish coinage down through the ages. Providing an insight into the political and social scene of the time, our coins are more than an artistic heritage of which we are immensely proud. They are a rich legacy of an eventful past; enduring monuments of our nation.



## CHAPTER 1



### CELTIC RING MONEY

Before coinage in its modern sense was introduced into Ireland, cattle were probably used as a standard unit of wealth. Gold ornaments are also likely to have been circulated as an early form of currency - similar to the Cowrie Shells of China. However, many critics disregard this period claiming that insufficient evidence exists to substantiate this claim. Nonetheless, it would be improper to ignore their existence for the purpose of this thesis and after researching deeply into the subject, it was considered by the writer that these personal jewel ornaments were in fact used by the Celts as a primitive medium of exchange, and hence were the forerunners of early Irish coinage.

To date, many specimens of this 'Celtic Ring money' have been found throughout the country in the form of beads, ear-rings, nose-rings, finger-rings, fibula's and so forth, all in the finest gold. Opinions differ as to whether they were used exclusively as a money currency or whether they played a dual role, both as articles of ornament and for exchange purposes. To discredit the theory that they were merely valuable possessions and not money, we must acknowledge that ornamental jewellery was only worn by the chiefs or leaders of that far-distant day as an outward proclamation of their wealth. How then can critics account for an inferior variety of similarly formed rings in silver, bronze and even bone, found throughout the country unless these too functioned as a common ring currency for the peasants or serfs in imitation of the previous gold used by their rulers? Furthermore, some items of the ring currency have been divided into smaller portions, perhaps to equal lesser values (similar to our pennies and half-pennies today). Because this too exists in all metals inferior as well as precious, it would seem to be a reasonable assumption that these jewel ornaments were used primarily as an ancient monetary system. The existence of a similar ring currency in Africa is an additional proof and indeed evidence of its ancient date. Why should it be discredited because it possesses not an impress or a mark, the invention of a later age?



19,44 Depicted here are four ear ornaments of a Celtic era - all in their original size and made, like so many others of the time, of the finest and purest standard of gold (fig. 1). The workmanship is very rough, evidently the production of an unskilful age, but no less beautiful for all its imperfections. All are sculpted crudely but yet quite an amazing amount of detail is achieved. Quite remarkable for the primitive tools in existence at the time. A dominant feature of all four is the prominent curvature manifested in the use of circles, ovals or spirals. Experts claim that these specimens produce a superb series unsurpassed by any other country or nation. Over the years their crescentic form has given rise to much speculation. Did this penannular formation arise from some unknown pagan religious or mystic rites? Perhaps it mirrors the crescentic form of the moon worshipped by the ancient Celts and adopted to preserve and protect the character. Whatever deep symbolical meaning lies behind them is lost forever in the annals of time, but it is interesting to note that the penannular symbol is echoed in nearly all the early ornaments of Ireland and is still continued amongst some Eastern ornamental objects of the present day.

#### THE HIBERNO NORSE COINAGE

It was at the very end of the eighth century that the Vikings launched their first assaults upon England and Ireland, and by the first half of the ninth century large groups of Norsemen were settling in Ireland and converting to Christian ways. Although they found the use of money foreign to the Gaelic economy it was not until the last years of the tenth century that the Viking settlers seem to have felt the need for a coinage to be struck on our shores. This was rather strange considering that their Danish cousins were quick to establish a series of Viking coinages to replace the existing silver coinage in south-east England as Saxon mints rapidly sprung up over the country shortly after the preliminary invasion.

Many of the Norsemen were driven out by the Irish in 901 AD but others returned a decade later and a succession of Norse kings



Early in the 9th century two distinct Viking spheres of influence began to colonise Ireland and the British Isles.



held Dublin. As the Scandinavians intermarried and allied with the Irish kings, their fortresses grew into commercial centres and it was at their chief fortress 'Dyflinr', now called Dublin, that the first Hiberno Norse mint was established in 995 AD. The first known coins were small silver pieces minted under the authority of the Norse King Sihtric III (Silkenbeard). They are easily identifiable bearing the name of Sihtric (fig. 2) and directly in imitation of contemporary Anglo-Saxon issues - the 'long cross' silver pennies struck by Aethelred II of England (fig. 3). In fact many of the coins bear the name of Altaelred instead of Sihtric - which indicates the general incompetence surrounding their introduction. Nonetheless all were of excellent workmanship and good weight. Because they were virtual replicas of the English issues, these coins must also be recognised as silver pennies.

Because there are so many varieties, it is impossible to give an accurate analysis of the general design quality. Thus I will look closely at one of the earlier coins issued from which all the others have evolved (fig. 4). This particular coin is dated somewhere between 995 and 1000AD. It bears a crest facing to the left without a head-dress - the hair represented by diverging, radiating straight lines ending in tiny pellets. The figure is draped in a cloak tied at the neck and held in place by a circular brooch. The bust breaks the legend at the bottom and an inner circle forms the baseline of the type, which reads 'SIHTRIC', in bold crudely cut letters. Of the facial features, the eye is the most dominant and is grossly exaggerated in proportion to the other features. The obverse of the coin depicts a long cross voided with a central pellet, each limb of the cross dividing the legend and terminating in crescents, each enclosing one tiny pellet. A beaded circle surrounds the outer rim of the coin, which encloses the legend within its confines. The type is quite difficult to decipher - possibly it is blundered and the letter spacing is tightened to allow for the protrusion of the cross at each angle.

This new Dublin mint, apparently the only mint to be established by the Vikings in Ireland, remained in operation after the defeat



5



6

of Sihtric at the Battle of the Boyne in 1014, sporadically producing the one continuous coinage of silver pennies up until about 1150 AD. However, subsequent to the first period, the coins reflect the declining power of the Dublin Norsemen and their integration into a coinless Irish milieu. As time went on the Hiberno-Norse coins became more and more debased in style and the workmanship degenerated; the legends became blundered and meaningless and the inscription unintelligible. The weight had dropped considerably and a confused sequence of slavishly made and increasingly lighter issues were produced. As well as a continuation of coins indicative of the contemporary coinage of England, the Dublin mint began to produce lightweight copies of its own copies and degeneracy reached a new pitch (fig. 5). In later issues words became progressively blundered or totally mis-spelt. In one example "Sihtric" is rendered "NHTRC" and numerous versions of "Dyflne" or Dublin can be found, e.g., 'DYFLN, DYFLIM, DIFLMN, DYFLIMO, DIIFLIINE, and DYFELI". Such would pass unnoticed amongst the people, many of whom were illiterate, provided that the coin presented the same superficial appearance. Added to these anomalies additional confusion is caused by inverted retrograde and incomplete letterforms which very often reduces the legends to a meaningless set of symbols. The degradation of the traditional imitation of imitations had reached an all-time low.

How much longer this phase continued is not too easy to determine, but numismatics suggest that they were being produced up to the end of the eleventh century. By this time the coins had become so thin that they could no longer be struck between the metal dies in the ordinary manner, so each design was either impressed separately or the coin was impressed on one side only. These coins are known as 'semi-bracteates' (fig 6) and are so paper-thin that the impression of the obverse can be seen clearly on the reverse and vice versa. They are the last pieces that can be attributed with confidence to the Dublin mint and to the Norsemen.

There is, however, one more coinage of this era, called "the Bracteates", which has grown in numismatic significance since recent research has cast doubt on its traditional association with the

the Hiberno-Norse. Similar in style to the semi-Bracteates,  
5,43 many people believe they were struck by an Irish King Toirdhealbach  
O Conchubair (Turlough O'Connor), who ruled Connacht at the time, in  
a vain attempt to salvage the declining currency system from total  
obliteration. Again, these coins were struck on a very thin piece  
of metal (fig. 7), almost as thin as the modern metal foils used  
for wrapping, and because they were struck on one side only the design  
is in relief on one side and incuse on the other. Because of their  
fragility, they too were soon phased out and by the time that the  
first Anglo-Norman invaders set foot on Irish soil in 1169, the  
country had relapsed into a state of total coinlessness. Probably  
half a century separates the last of the Hiberno-Norse coinage  
from the earliest of the Anglo-Irish series.





## CHAPTER 2



# THE ANGLO-NORMAN CONQUEST AND THE FIRST ANGLO-IRISH COINS

The Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland began in 1169 in the reign of Henry II of England. Ironically, Strongbow's armies originally assailed the country as hired allies of a Gaelic ruler, Dermot MacMurrough, who unwisely sought their assistance in recovering his lost territory. His plans backfired, however, and the Anglo-Norman adventurers soon began carving out new estates and establishing themselves as a dominant force in Ireland. By now only mere traces of an extinct monetary economy remained in the former Viking centres of influence. The Scandinavian settlers had long since been assimilated into the Celtic milieu and curiously now neither foreign nor native apparently felt the need for a tangible monetary system. Within two decades of the initial Anglo-Norman conquest, however, a spate of new coins had been produced on the island colony.

Henry II of England, seeing the powerful ruling position assumed by the Norman colonists feared they might become a threat to his suzerainty if their ambition was not checked. So to assert his authority over his barons, he obtained papal recognition of his sovereignty of the island bestowing upon himself "Lord of Ireland". This title he soon relinquished to his ten-year-old son Prince John, and from thence Ireland became an autonomous feudal state (in theory at least) linked to England by its absentee lord - the future King John. In 1185, under Henry's reign, the juvenile lord issued the first Anglo-Irish coins of the series (fig. 8) bearing a profile bust with the name of John and of half-pence denomination. This is significant as contemporary English coinage consisted of pence alone, the minor denominations, numismatics suggest, revealed a deliberate intention to signify Ireland's inferior status. This issue signalled the first in a long series of coinage produced for Ireland by the British monarchy.



## THE ANGLO-IRISH COINAGE

The Anglo-Irish series of coinage stretches over a period of approximately seven hundred and forty years during which time a total of twenty-eight British monarchs ruled over Ireland. Because this is such a broad historical period, it would be impossible to attempt a comprehensive survey of all Anglo-Irish coins in this thesis. Therefore, the following is a fundamental analysis of selective coins of the era. During this time, many great changes occurred in the field of Irish numismatics as coinage evolved from the primitive Hiberno-Norse pennies to the recognisable denominations of the present century. In addition to the half-pence, the farthing and the half-farthing were gradually introduced, as were the three pence, the groat (4d), the half-groat (2d), the crown (60d or 5/-) and the half-crown (30d), most of which were already current in Britain before their introduction in Ireland.

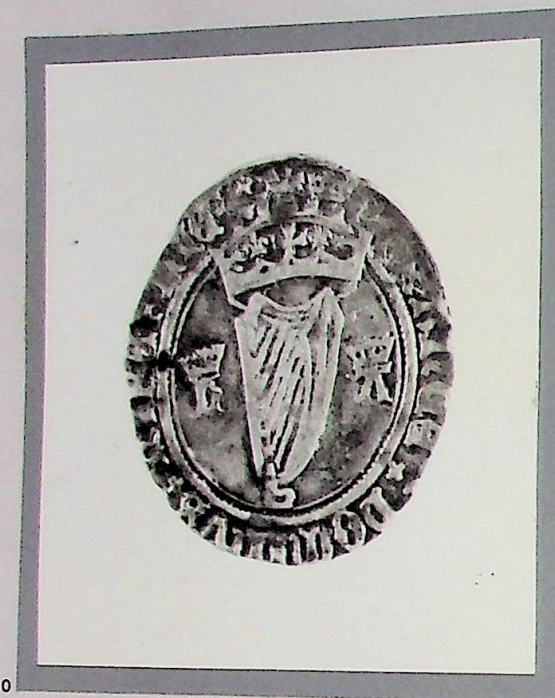
Essentially, British control extended from the reign of Henry II until that of Edward VII at the start of the twentieth century. It encompasses many generations during which Irish coinage was largely based on contemporary British designs with a few surface variations in theme in which the sovereign power attempts to represent the dominion by employing certain symbols of the Gaelic culture. These are the coins which gave a definite sense of identity to Ireland, while simultaneously confirming its subservience to the throne of England - which are the central concern of this chapter.

## THE THREE CROWNS COINAGE (1483-1490)

The first English king to issue coinage imprinted with an Irish emblem was Richard III in 1453; prior to this, monarchical coins portrayed the royal portrait or a large bejewelled crown symbolising British sovereignty. Richard's new coinage showed the royal arms on the obverse and on the reverse the arms of Ireland: three crowns, encircled and imprinted over a cross ending in three pellets at each corner (fig. 9).



9a

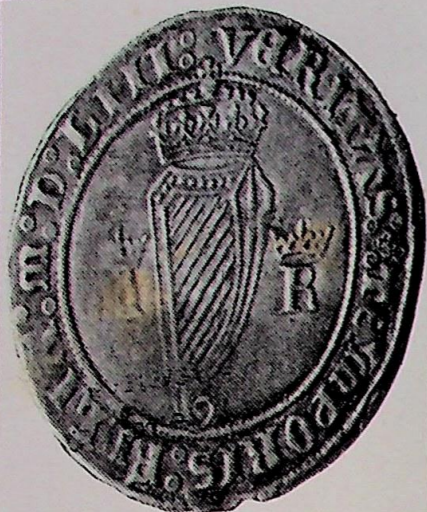


10

In the legend surrounding the beaded circle, the words 'RICARD, DONINUS MYBANIE' appear and the legend is broken by the protrusion of the cross. The type is heavy and angular, in typical medieval fashion and both the crown and royal arms are rendered rather crudely with little detail. However, they were the first serious attempt to establish a coinage for Ireland granting it a separate identity and quite distinct from England's coinage - although the presence of the royal arms and the words 'DOMINVS HYBERNIA' serve as a forceful reminder of Britain's dominance. This coinage is continued during the reign of his successor Henry VII and soon became known as the three crown coinage. (fig 9a)

#### THE HARP ON ANGLO-IRISH COINS (1509-1830)

The harp first appears on Anglo-Irish coinage in 1509 under Henry VII, replacing the three crowns as the badge of Ireland. In fact, it was to play a very important role in Irish numismatic history, only very rarely absent from the Anglo-Irish series and reinstated on Irish coins issued between 1928 and the present day. It is an intriguing problem to ascertain why Henry VII should have decided on the alteration. One suggestion was that of anti-papalism, the three crowns being too reminiscent of the triple tiara worn by the pope and a blatant reminder that Ireland was technically a papal fief. Other arguments suggest the opposite: that it was a ploy by Henry to emphasise to the Irish his good-standing with the pope, because tradition claims that Pope Leo X presented Henry with an Irish harp as a gesture of goodwill. The exact reason is immaterial, but its appearance is of vital historical and numismatic importance. A close scrutiny of the examples depicted opposite (fig. 10) is extremely revealing of English attitudes to Ireland at that time. The harp is portrayed as a crowned instrument possibly a demonstration of authority by the English king. The emblem is encircled and the legend outside the circle reads 'DOMINVS HYBERNIAE'. Following the King's clash with Rome, when Henry declared himself supreme head of the church in Ireland, the title 'HYBERNIAE REX' replace the former and the initial letters of each of his wives in turn were included in the design. The bow of the



11



11a

harp faces to the right and the faulty perspective produces a completely unrealistic representation of the instrument. It is quite obvious that the engraver was unfamiliar with the Irish harp - probably only known in England at that time from illustrations, hence the delineation the figure. On the reverse, the royal coat of arms is also crowned for the first time which leads one to speculate - was this deliberately included for design purposes, to create a balance with the crowned harp on the reverse, or was it used merely to reiterate the notion of the power of royalty.

#### MARY (1553-1558)

The coins of Mary are the next important harp issues - those of her predecessor Edward VI continuing the image initiated by Henry VII. It was in this reign that the power of the English crown was extended by the shiring and plantation of English settlers in Leix, Offaly and other areas throughout the country. Again, Mary's coins reveal that the engraver had never seen a real Irish harp (fig. 11). Pegs for strings are depicted on the neck of the harp - at a point where they could never have been strung and the tendency for the strings to run into the forepillar has become even more pronounced. One may hazard a guess that the actual design was modelled as one of Henry's coins and certainly the harp portrayed could never have been played. The layout is very similar to that of Henry VIII's in that the harp is crowned, this time the crown being narrower and arched on top. The legend surrounds the circle and by now the type is more defined with the letterforms quite crisp and less angular than before. It is beginning to form an early but recognisable old-English classical typeface. Mary's initials appear one each side of the harp, both surmounted by a simplified version of the larger crown, similar in concept to the design used by her father during his reign.

Those coins issued after Mary's marriage to Phillip of Spain reveal no marked improvement in form or design of the instrument. The harp is still purely conventional and it is significant that it appears to become longer and narrower as the engraver no longer



realises that it is being represented at an angle to the viewer. (fig 11a)

#### ELIZABETH (1558-1603)

The initial Irish coinage by Elizabeth was literally a continuation of the previous reign with an identical harp (fig. 12) - obviously engraved by the same hand. Again, it is obvious that the engraver had no idea of the real appearance of the small low-headed Irish harp, but was trying to delineate on the late base coins of the reign. The crown is allowed to break the legend and in doing so become somewhat wider. To preserve the balance, the harp too is widened but the strings still run into the uncarved forepillar. There are still completely pointless pegs for strings on the part of the neck immediately adjacent to the sounding box. Once again this is a completely unrealistic heraldic representation of the instrument which could not feasibly serve its musical purpose. The type on Elizabethan harp coins has evolved to a distinct serif face although the weight of the ascenders tend to vary from letter to letter - nonetheless extraordinarily well cut for the sixteenth century.

#### JAMES I (1603-1626)

With the accession of James, the harp on Anglo-Irish coins is utterly transformed. Because James I of England was also James VI of Scotland, he commenced his reign by suitably updating the English armorial. In the new coat of arms, the lower left-hand quarter was assigned to Ireland and the harp was redesigned for use as the emblem of Ireland. Thus on Anglo-Irish coins, the harp was modified to bring it into conformity with the heraldry of the English arms. It now faces in the opposite direction with the bow or forepillar to the left (fig. 13). This was not the only innovation, however. England now had a sovereign who was perfectly familiar with the Gaelic harp - by now not alone had it reached England, but was played extensively there as well. Moreover, an evolution had occurred in the form of the real Irish harp making it half as large again as its precursor while maintaining similar proportions. This change was mirrored in the delineation on James coinage and quite accurate depictions of

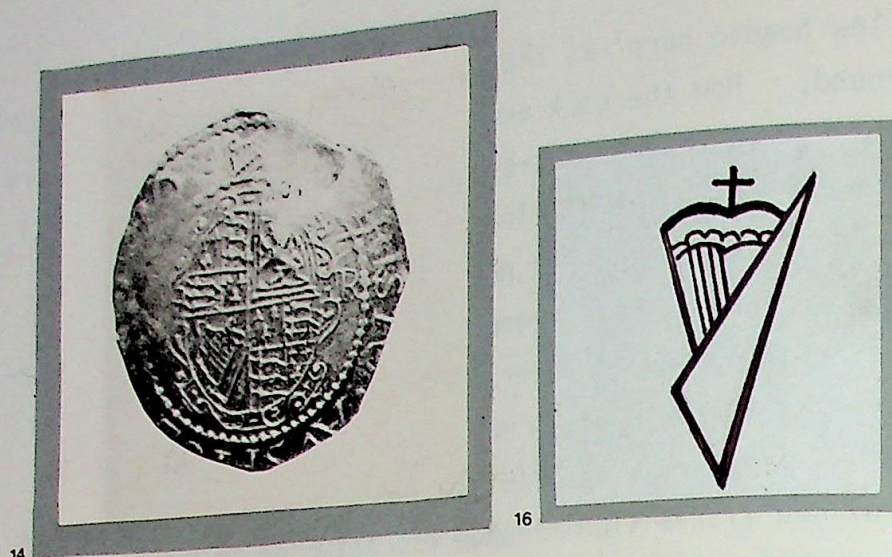
the 'large low headed harp' as the new version came to be known, have been found. Now the neck and forepillar began to be much more elaborately decorated - the free-standing motifs including a scroll and animal or human heads. At least this instrument looks as if it could be played - the strings now run down from the neck to the sounding box and the stylistic rendition reflects the artists understanding of the object. In later adaptations, however, the 'bird headed' or 'griffin headed' harp was used at different times and eventually simultaneously on different coins, which may be an indication of how little significance was attached to the precise form of the symbol - individual engravers apparently being free to adapt it to distinguish their different hands.

#### CHARLES I

Before dealing with these coins, it is vital to understand the political background which initiated the various issues.

Racial and religious discrimination and the dispossession of large numbers of the native Irish population in the years since the Elizabethan conquest of Ireland has assured a permanently discontented majority of the population and tension exploded into open rebellion in October 1641. As the insurrection spread, the English Catholic settlers joined forces with the Irish and banded together under the name of the "Confederated Catholics", meeting in Kilkenny to decide on a policy for the governing of Ireland. As metal became scarce during the uprising and additional coin was urgently needed, a number of different coinages were issued from various sources. They included:

- |                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| 1) Kilkenny money     | - Issued by the Confederated Catholics                       |
| 2) Inchiquin money    | - Issued by the Lord Justices                                |
| 3) Dublin money       | - Commissioner unknown                                       |
| 4) Ormonde money      | - Issued by the Marquis of Ormonde<br>on behalf of Charles I |
| 5) Blacksmith's money | - Issued by the the Confederated Catholics                   |



- 6) Rebel money - Allegedly issued by the Confederated Catholics in imitation of Ormond money
- 7) Southern cities of refuge money - Possibly issued for/by the parliamentary troops.

Of the entire range, only the Kilkenny money and the Blacksmith's bear a harp on the obverse. It is obvious that the latter coins (fig. 14) were engraved in Ireland as the position and size of the sound box is for once very obvious and reflective of the 'large low headed Irish harp'. The Kilkenny money, however (fig. 15), was obviously based on royal farthings circulated at the time, but these too display quite an accurate and naturalistic representation of the harp. Using minimal ornamentation and a simple scroll for the forepillar, the overall design is a fairly faithful and even lively depiction. The same cannot be said of the harp that appears on the minority of extant coins, which use a few straight lines rendered with a complete lack of deftness (fig. 16). This stylistic application is totally alienated from any sense of reality but yet bears a certain simplified charm.

Of the remaining coins issued, the Dublin money, Ormond money and the coinage of the Lord Justices, no pieces have a particularly Irish slant. However, all are quite interesting from a design and typographic point of view (figs. 17-19). The Ormond and Lord Justices coinage were all issues on behalf of Charles, but the Dublin money is also unashamedly royalist in character, and obviously an imitation. In these coins the typographic element is extremely strong with Roman numerals depicted boldly in a fine serified type.

After the insurrection, the conquest of Ireland by Cromwell and his puritan army continued until, by 1653, Ireland was formally declared part of the protectorate and was at last firmly under the control of the British throne.

#### CHARLES II (1660-1685)

During the reign of Charles II, there was a further critical development in the morphology of the Irish harp. The framework tended to be more curvaceous, the bow became taller so that the neck had to



20



21



22

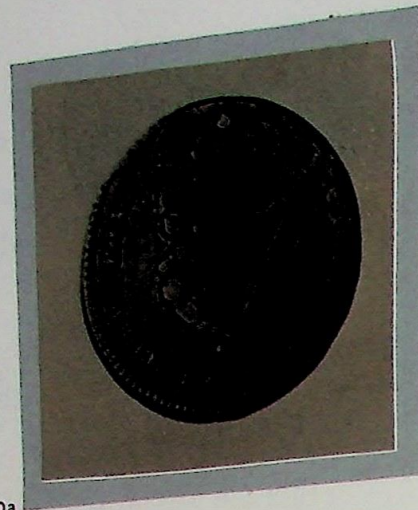


swing upwards to join it. It was, however, some time before this evolution was depicted on Anglo-Irish coinage. A number of coins with a definite Irish slant were issued during this reign - notably the Armstrong farthings and the St. Patrick's half-pennies.

On the former, the harp is of a novel type, best described as anthropomorphic (fig. 20), for the first time ever the bow is replaced by a statuette clearly human in form but not easy to identify. Actual evidence of a specimen bearing this feature has never been recorded in Celtic history and it has been argued that no wooden harp with this feature could have taken up the tension on the wire strings. The original concept of the design is unknown to this day but its addition reflects the obvious English influence. Seemingly, it represents an angel or a winged sylph-like creature as the line of the neck of the harp forms the shape of outstretched wings.

19,44 Numismatics suspect that it may be a 'satyre' or a rustic personification of the 'wilde Irish' scantily clad so as not to offend medieval tastes and hence its resemblance to an angel is purely coincidental. The figure, which continued to appear on Anglo-Irish coins for many generations after, is male but not particularly masculine in the resemblance, and this causes some marked confusion in later issues.

The second coinage of Irish characteristic issued during the reign of Charles II were the St. Patrick's coinage, though little is known of the circumstances of the issue. Both half-pence and farthing denominations were produced, the former bearing St. Patrick holding a crozier and preaching to the multitude (fig. 21) and the latter showing the saint with patriarchal cross driving away reptiles (fig. 22). The obverse of both coins is the same, showing a kneeling figure of King David playing a harp, all surmounted by a crown - again perhaps a not so subtle reminder of Ireland's subservience to Britain's throne. Once more the little satyre adorns the bow of the harp, but here the chest is bare, the loins adequately draped in a ragged kilt. The neck of the harp again gives the impression of wings.



20a



22



23



In the series of regal half-pennies which follows, there is an exaggerated development of the satyre's chest (Fig. 20a), rather more decollative than might seem appropriate for the masculine figure. The bare midriff and undraped navel became more dominant, a point which might have outraged the sensibilities of the medieval court.

#### JAMES II (1685-1688)

This same image appears on the half-pennies and farthings of James II. By 1689 the satyre becomes positively pot-bellied (fig. 22) - a lumbering boor beside the nimble retainer found thirty years before on the Armstrong farthings. If it was supposedly female, it was too grotesquely even obscenely pregnant for its stature. But by 1691 the form of the harp itself was quite convincing. Such a harp could very easily be played. These coins are often called 'gunmoney' coinage because, as stocks of metal diminished, they were minted from old bronze cannons.

#### WILLIAM AND MARY (1689-1702)

In the reign of William and Mary, disputes arise as to the sex of the satyre depicted on the harp (fig. 23). The face is now coarse-featured but the sloping chest gives the curious effect of pendulous female breasts. The same grossly-distended stomach with the same scanty costume trailing away into nothingness could be misinterpreted as a pregnant female. These coins represent the last appearance of our grossly obese satyre. The passing of the "supidly good natured features of this proto paddy" to quote Michael Dolley, "intended as an image of our servitude" was not lamented by many, in patriotic, numismatic or artistic circles.

#### GEORGE I AND II (1714-1760)

William Woods coinage issued under George I brought a new look to the Irish harp on coins, and to mirror a change that had already been imposed on English coinage, the reverse bears an image of a seated female (in this case representative of Hibernia) leaning



23



25



24



25a

on a harp, and holding a branch in some later issues (fig. 23). Now the harp no longer dominates the field of the coin and it is significant that the satyre-like creature is replaced by a winged female. The addition of wings in place of the harp's neck testifies to the non-existence of such a specimen in reality - the elaborate plumage restricting the tuning pegs and the strings.

The issues of George II revert to the crowned harp of the seventeenth century, but now the figure is undoubtedly feminine (fig. 24). The face no longer coarse-featured, is very evidently female as are the small rounded breasts; and the drapery of the loins has been given a small but significant hitch upwards. Perhaps this symbol is no longer used as a personification of Ireland - but as the classical concept of victory - maybe the victory of religion over superstition, or perhaps that of Britannia over Hibernia.

Another issue of the period, the 'voce populi' coins show a seated Hibernia armed with a spear - a strange coincidence over two decades before the establishment of the Irish Volunteers. The harp is very crudely illustrated and the forepillar is so coarsened that the figure is not immediately obvious.

#### GEORGE III AND IV (1760-1830)

During the reign of George III, the instrument is still unrealistically portrayed and even in the absence of silver regal coinage, those issued by the Bank of Ireland also reflect a similar treatment - not intentionally abstract, yet certainly not realistic. The winged victory appears to be more elongated and the wings even larger so that it looks like a sylph or angel about to rise into flight (fig. 25). By the time of George IV, the harp, again surmounted by a crown is still quite unrealistic, although more in proportion than before. The feminine victory that occupies the forepillar is still treated with great delicacy, though now assumes a more robust stature, quite unlike the fairy-like creature on the coins of George III. It is still obviously female with a softly-featured face and hair neatly clipped behind the head. A scroll

is substituted for the too-realistic drapery which previously seemed to be on the point of slipping down the hips. Again very little importance is attached to the strings leading from the plumage on top to the back of the sounding box at the bottom - instead of into holes prepared for their reception. Now the sounding box is decorated with three shamrocks - a symbol for Ireland which appears here for the second and last time on an Irish coin. (fig 25a)

These issues are essentially the last of the Anglo-Irish coinage - bringing to an end a series which lasted over 600 years. Though essentially an alien and not a native coinage, they nonetheless represent an important development in the field of Irish numismatic design, providing us with the harp as a national emblem - an adaptation of which still survives into the latter part of the 1980s.

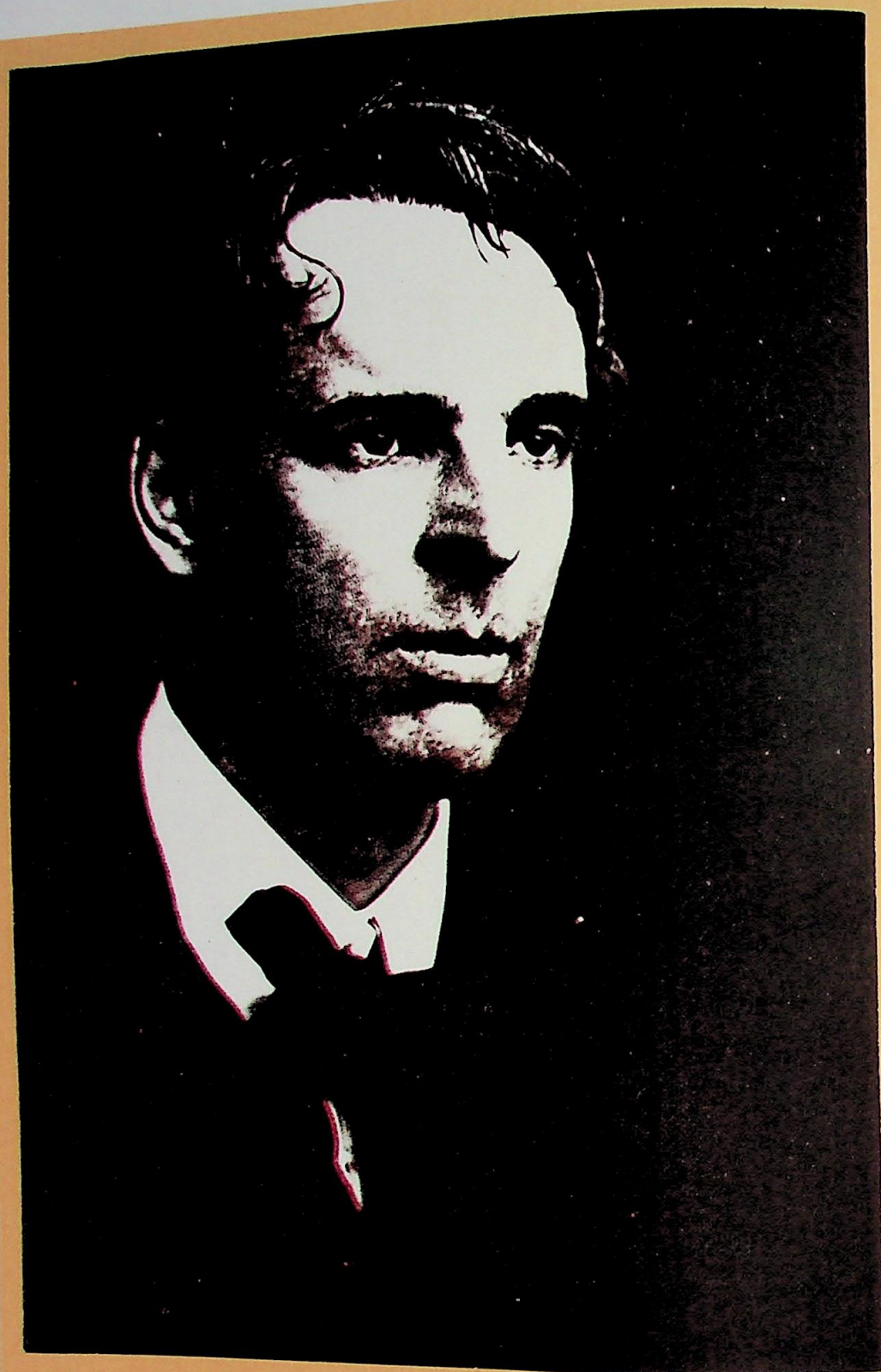


## FREE-STATE COINAGE

On Easter Monday 1916, the whole course of Irish history was changed when a group of insurgents seized the GPO in Dublin and proclaimed the establishment of a provisional Government for the Irish Republic. Although the rising was suppressed within a week by the British authorities, it paved the way for the War of Independence and subsequently the Anglo-Irish treaty of 1921, which granted Ireland (with the exception of the six north-eastern counties) dominion status within the British Commonwealth. After centuries of struggle, determination was won by the Irish nation, and at last the freedom to develop and achieve the ultimate freedom that all nations aspire to.

Seven years later, to symbolise their newly-acquired independence, the Irish Government decided to institute a separate coinage quite distinct from the British coins still circulating in Ireland. The occasion was unique - until 1928 Ireland had no coinage of her own and now the time was ripe to start afresh, to abandon all emblems dictated by politics and tradition. It was a great, an unprecedented opportunity to conceive of the series as a whole - each coin matching the others in tone and artistry. And so a new coinage was born - and with it international recognition for the Free State and the distinction of being the first modern nation to produce from scratch a sequent series of related design.

The Coinage Act of 1926, though specifying weight, denominations and metals, left to the discretion of the Minister the prescription of the designs. Fortunately, the Minister was sensitive to the importance of the designs, and anxious to obtain the best advice available to secure worthy images, he appointed an Advisory Committee under the chairmanship of W. B. Yeats, the poet and senator. Other members included representatives of the National Gallery, the Royal Hibernian Academy and Dail Eireann, individually men of artistic backgrounds.



W.B. Yeats

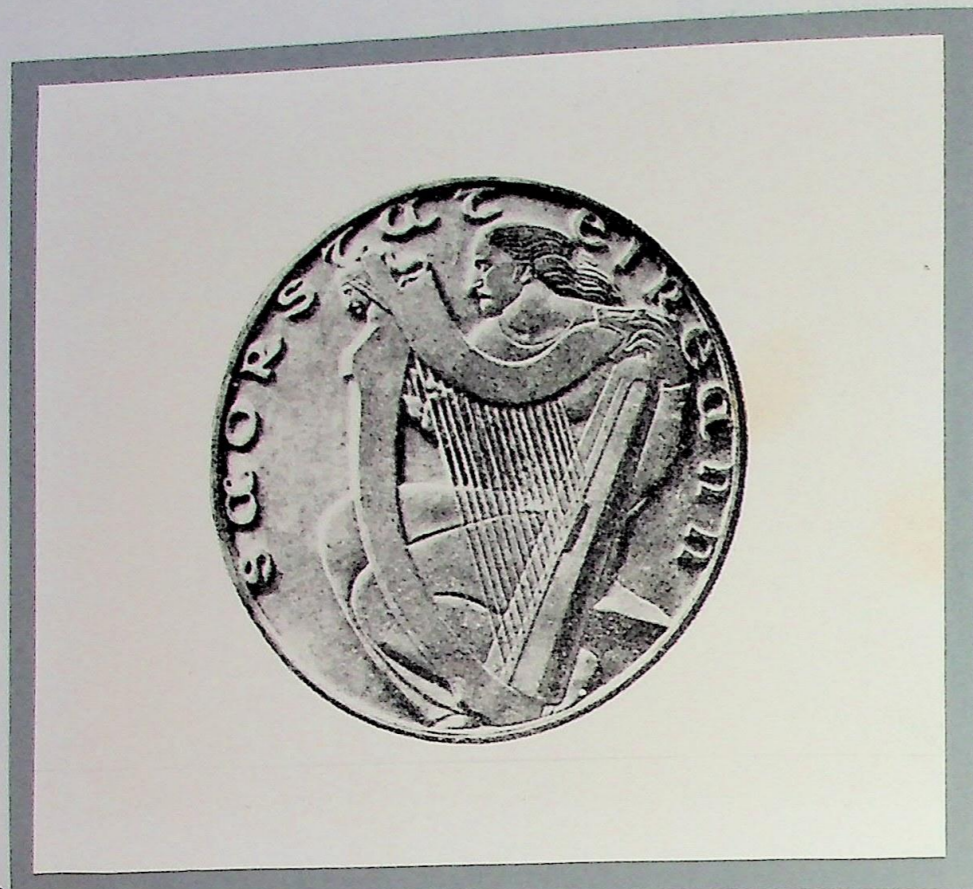
#### THE FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPT

16.44 Yeats had a considerable influence on the Committee's deliberation, and he recommended a suggestion by Sir William Orpen, the painter, that the designs for the whole range should "tell one story". Thus the Committee's initial task was to decide on a central theme which could be carried through to the various denominations - a set of symbols reflective of the nation's culture and easily adaptable to the different sizes. The Department of Finance had previously set out three provisional conditions to govern the design:

- 1) That the harp be maintained as the symbol on the obverse;
- 2) That the inscription should be in Irish only with the denomination also indicated by a numeral for the assistance of persons unfamiliar with Irish;
- 3) That no effigies of modern persons should be used.

The last prohibition doubtless saved a great deal of trouble eliminating the difficult process of selecting patriots of modern times whose effigies were pre-eminently worthy to adorn the new coinage, and the subsequent problem of allocating them to the various denominations without unduly undermining the importance of one or elevating the standing of another above the rest. The suggestion of depicting some of the heroes of antiquity, e.g., Cuchulainn, Brian Boru or St. Patrick himself provided another insuperable obstacle: the impossibility of discovering any such effigies with an historical warrant. And so it was decided to break free from traditional notions and no longer to feature human representations on Irish coins. A more impressive alternative had to be found.

On consulting the public for suggestions and advice, the Committee received numerous recommendations of wolf-hounds, round towers, dolmens and shamrocks. They had, however, already decided to avoid patriotic symbols like the latter, seeking instead a form which would permit an artist to display all his capacity for design and expression. The others might produce individual coins of artistic excellence,



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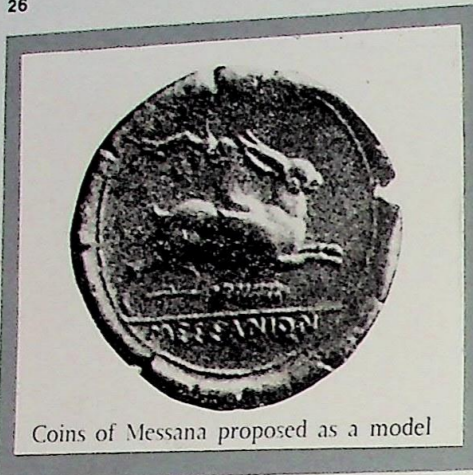
but as a related series would undoubtedly fail dismally. Another suggestion by Sir William Orpen that the designs should portray the products of the country had instant appeal. Each denomination would symbolise a different product - the range designed to typify the natural products of the country, its sports and industries. This idea was unanimously approved by the Committee and in the discussions that followed, suggestions of corn sheafs, wheat ears and floral motifs were all discarded as unsuitable themes. The choice was ultimately limited to animals and birds indigenous to the Irish countryside. So, after further deliberation, it was decided to feature a horse, salmon, bull, greyhound, hare, hen, pig and woodcock on the new Irish coins, ranging from the half-crown to the farthing, the nobler or more dignified types on the higher denominations and the more humble types on the lower. The British crown or 5/- was rendered obsolete by the Committee and the 3d and 6d increased in size to differentiate them from the British counterparts. The courage of the Committee in recommending these subjects for design - so much at variance with the coinage tradition to which we are accustomed - has been justified in the excellence of the designs eventually secured. In the words of W. B. Yeats himself: "What better symbols could we find for this horse-riding, salmon fishing, cattle-raising country?"

#### THE ORIGINS OF THE DESIGNS

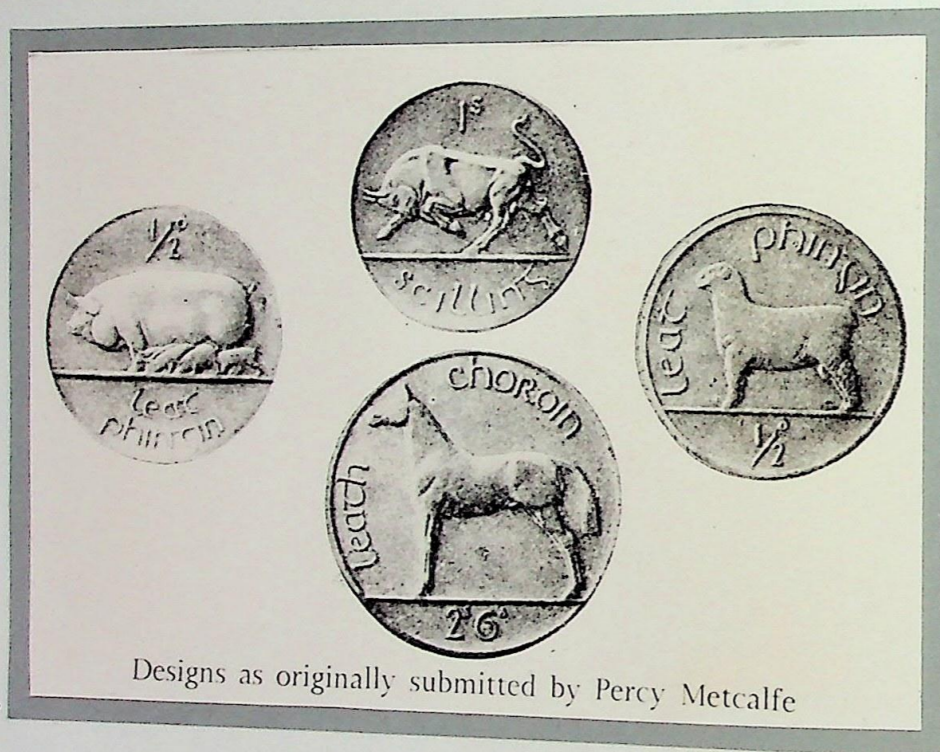
To secure designs befitting the subject, the Committee decided to run a competition inviting seven prominent artists to submit proposals in accordance with the guidelines they had established. Those who competed included: two Dublin sculptors of note, Albert Power and Oliver Sheppard; Carl Milles, the illustrious Swedish sculptor; metallist public Morbiducci from Rome; Americal sculptor, Paul Manship; Jerome Connor, a monumental sculptor from New York; and, lastly, a young unknown British sculptor called Percy Metcalfe. (An invitation to sculptor Ivan Mestrovic from Yugoslavia failed to reach him in time to accept, but nonetheless he produced one magnificent design which he presented to the Irish Free State with



26



Coins of Messana proposed as a model



27

Designs as originally submitted by Percy Metcalfe

great generosity as a gesture of goodwill (fig. 26.)

The conditions of the competition required each artist to submit a specified number of designs by 31st January 1927 - each to receive a fee of £50 for his efforts, regardless of whether his designs were chosen or not. The competitors were supplied with details of the subjects - illustrations and photographs of Irish wolfhounds and hunters, and of the Trinity College and Dalway harps; examples of the typeface to be used on the coins - a new Gaelic script specially drawn up by the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland; and photographs of some ancient Greek and Carthaginian coins (fig. 26) bearing a horse, a bull and a hare. Because Yeats had a keen interest in Greek coins, he asked the selected artists to model their designs "as far as possible" on these examples.

The Committee received sixty six models from the seven artists and after detailed consideration the designs submitted by Percy Metcalfe were selected. Having declined to inspect the models until all had been received, the Committee was unaware of the identity of the individual artists responsible for the pieces, as they made their decision. One set has so marked a style and was so expertly sculpted that it seemed incomparably superior to the others (fig. 27). Only when the final decision was made was the authorship of the sets disclosed. Apparently the original aim was to compose a series by selecting the designs of three or four different artists, but as an entire series, Metcalf's designs worked so splendidly that it was undesirable to augment it with those of any other designs. Overall, the superb quality of all the designs submitted was quite startling. There were so many fine pieces that nobody could lay aside without a pang - from the violent rhythmical energy of Morbiducci's horse and his charging bull (fig. 28) to the supernatural energy of the animals of Milles (fig. 29). That so much fine work was surpassed is a tribute to the excellence of Metcalf's originals.

#### AN ANALYSIS OF THE NEW DESIGN

Such was the attention to detail that, before production, the Metcalfe

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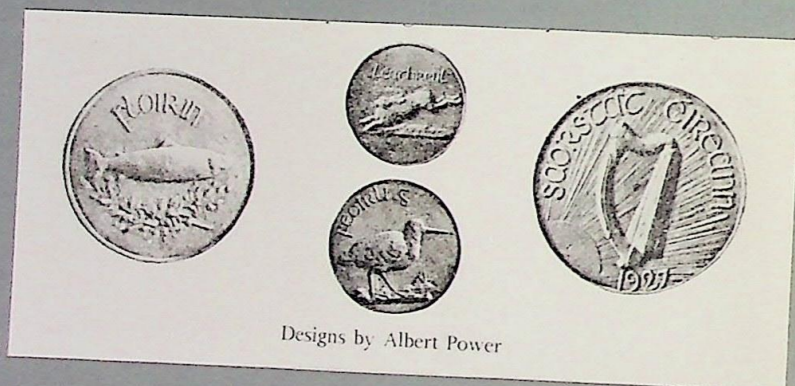
Designs by Oliver Sheppard

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Designs by Jerome Connor

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Designs by Albert Power

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Designs by Publio Morbiducci

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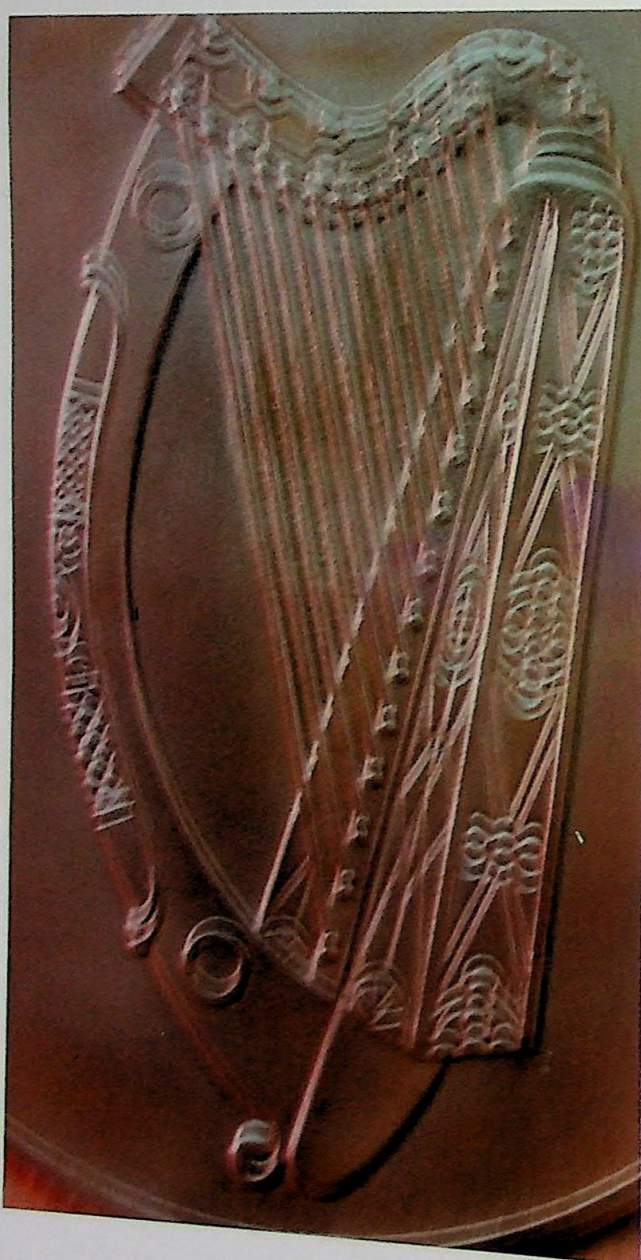
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Detail of the harp from Metcalfe's original cast for the half-crown--from a private collection in the Central Bank of Ireland.'

series was submitted to the Minister for Agriculture for approval and correction. Most of the coins required minor alterations in obedience to technical opinion, but retained their inherent spiritual quality (fig. 34). The first bull energetically charging across the diameter of the coin, had to go, however, as it might have upset "considered as an ideal, the eugenics of the farmward". But the new bill is as fine in a different way. The pig too underwent some changes - the round voluptuous cheek and the lifted head disappeared and with them the look of insolence and wisdom. The comfortable round bodies of the little pigs disappear, and the new animals - although perhaps better merchandise - are less vivacious and aesthetic. The series uses the basic format of ancient Greek coins in that the animal or bird stands boldly on a line traversing the base of the coin, representing the ground (with the notable exception of the farthing and the florin, for obvious reasons). As predetermined, the obverse impression of all the coins is the traditional harp based on the Trinity harp (ironically the instrument supposedly presented to King VIII by Leo X and poorly depicted on early Anglo-Irish coins). Used on the entire set, this achieved a uniformity which rendered the coins immediately and easily identifiable as a Saorstat coin. Indeed, this is the first time a truly accurate rendition of the instrument has ever appeared on a coin and certainly it does Ireland no discredit. On the framework an adaptation of a Celtic design is featured and the exquisite detail achieved is quite remarkable (fig. 35). Even the strings are properly aligned running from the tuning pegs on top to the tiny holes on the sounding box. This harp, beautiful and dignified, almost cries out to be played.

Surrounding the instrument the inscription 'SAORSTAT EIREANN' (Irish Free State) forms an imaginary circle parallel to the circumference of the coins, enclosing the date within its confines. The type, specially designed for the new coins, works splendidly with the image - a modern Gaelic typeface, the characters uniform in weight with a slight hint of a serif on the ascenders (fig. 36). Obviously the designer, Professor R. A. Stewart McAlister of the Society of Antiquaries, studied the round hand of the early Irish



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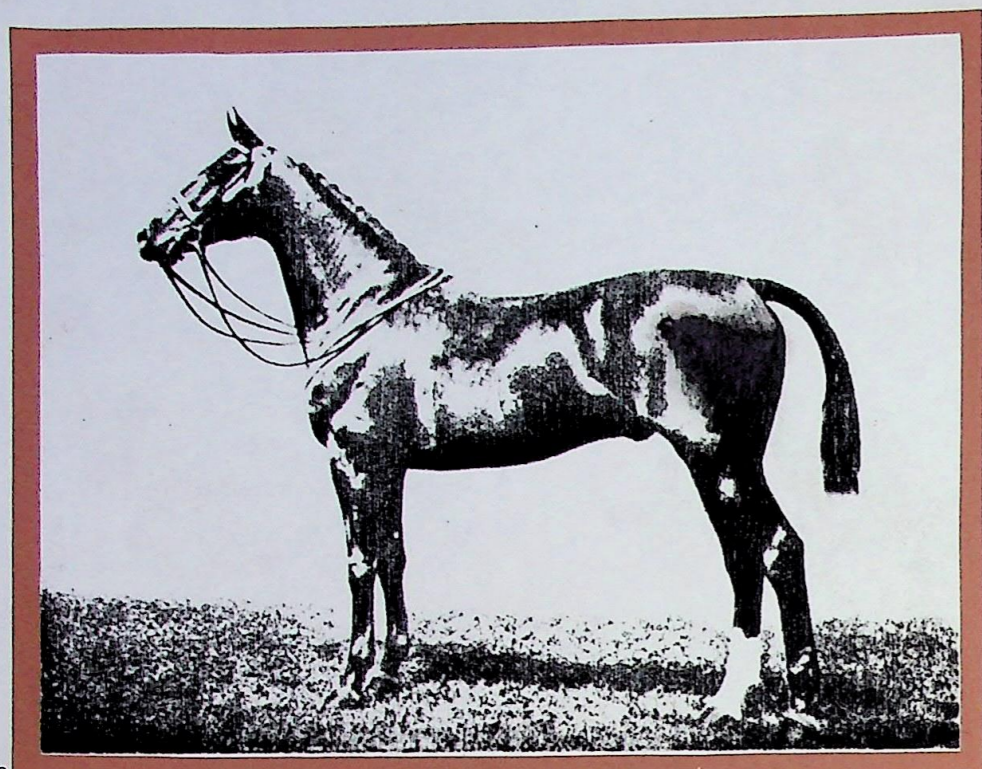
Every scribe instructed  
in the kingdom of heaven  
is like to a man that is a  
householder, who bringeth  
forth out of his treasure  
new things and old :

after the Book of Kells

manuscripts closely and used them as a basis for the new design. A comparative analysis with the uncial letterforms of the Book of Kells (fig. 37) shows that the new type is a typical majuscule face, round and solid with no distinction between upper and lower case letters. Like all majuscule scripts, the 'a' is written somewhat like a 'c' joined to an 'o' (α) and the wedge serifs on the upright strokes of the 'l', 'r' and 'n' are reflective of the smooth, round letterforms of the ancient scribes. Another characteristic of the seventh century manuscripts is the shortness of the ascenders and descenders, apparent in the 'f', 'p' and 'g', and this brevity of line produces a compact legible type, appropriate to the space allocated on the coin. All-in-all, the new typeface is a masterly adaptation of classical Irish letterforms, sharp and elegant, yet modern and fresh. A final distinctive feature of the coins is the beaded outer rim, which differentiates them totally from their British counterparts, many of which were simultaneously in use in Ireland. It also creates a centre of focus within the field of the coin holding the eye within its confines and emphasising the fauna depicted.

#### THE HALF CROWN

Inspired by the coins of ancient Greece and Carthage on which the horse was used successfully, the Committee decided to adapt the Irish hunter to the half-crown - its worldwide fame making it a worthy inclusion at the head of the series. Metcalfe obviously bases his designs on the photograph of Goldfinder II, the famous Irish hunter (fig. 38), as we can see from the proud stance, and with some very fine workmanship produces an exquisite representation of one of our chief natural products (fig. 39). The animal, tall, slender and elegant, stands bold and upright facing left on a solid line at the base of the coin. The tufts of the tail are rendered in fine detail as are the facial features and the body muscles. The words "leat coroin" (meaning half-crown) forms a gentle arc around the horse's head, the rounded characters of the new typeface reflecting the shapely curves of the animal. The value, 2s 6d appears below the line on which the animal stands, and in tiny letters beneath the back leg, the artist's initials "P.M." appear. The beaded



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in ciuitate iudee. Et uenit in domum  
 zacharie. Et saluauit elizabeth. Et  
 factus est ut uideret saluationem  
 tue. elizabeth exultauit in pueris in  
 utero eius. Et repleta est spiritu sancto eliza  
 beth. Et exclamauit uoce magna. Et dixit.  
**E**cce hic tuus frater christi. Et uide hoc  
 mihi ut ueniat in uisceribus meis. Et  
 ecce enim ut factus est uox saluationis  
 tue. in auribus meis exultauit. in gau  
 dio in pueris in utero meo. Et beata quae  
 credidit quoniam perficeretur ei.  
 quae dicitur super tibi. Et ait mari  
**M**ultiplicat anima mea in domino.  
 Et exultauit spiritus meus in  
 domino saluari meo. quia respexit hunc

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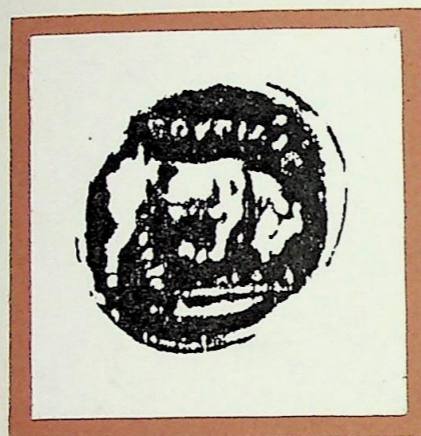
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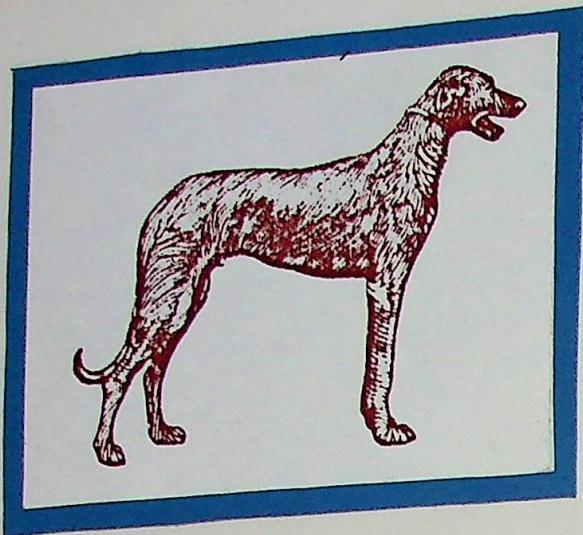
border surrounds the image and reinforces the shape and size of the coin.

### FLORIN (2/-)

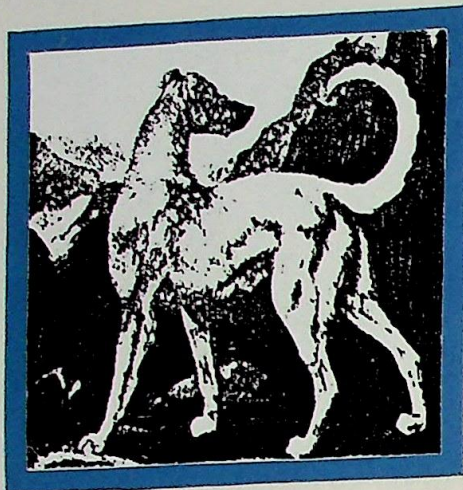
The salmon was chosen both because of its value as a natural product and also because of its place in Irish legend in which it is coupled with the nuts of knowledge. It also lent itself to very artistic treatment - a fact wonderfully exploited by the artist. Unlike his rivals, Metcalfe adapted the body of the fish to the circular field so that it seems to flow within the circumference of the coin (fig. 40). This treatment produces a natural energy completely at variance with the traditional static portraits imposed on the reverse of Irish coins over the centuries. To contrast with the image, this time the type is imprinted in a straight line just below the diameter. As in some of the other coins, a number of the characters tend to merge together forming attractive ligatures, particularly in the 'fl' and 'ri'. Again to minimise the possibility of confusion, the denomination is also indicated by the numerals 2s. The use of type and image differs sufficiently with those employed on the half-crown, with which coin the florin was most likely to be confused, making it quite distinguishable yet sufficiently similar to merge with the others in the series.

### SHILLING

The design of this coin in particular, reflects the influence of the ancient Greek coins as is evident from the photographs opposite (fig. 41) on which the bull of Thurium prepares to charge. In fact, Metcalf's original bull reflected the same movement and violent energy as the earlier Greek coin (fig. 42) and his modified version is less spirited by comparison. Nonetheless, as a piece of artistic workmanship, it is still a forceful portrayal - the strength and dominance of the animal reflected in the powerful stride and the determined tilt of the head. Again, a line of uniform thickness indicates the ground, beneath which the word 'scilling' (the Irish



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for shilling) is imprinted. Here we notice that the characters connect at the base so that the word flows in a gentle arc, reflective of the outer curve. The 'g' is particularly reminiscent of the early calligraphic scripts of Celtic manuscripts and the two 'l's have also a definite Irish feel. At a central point, above the bull, the denomination is imprinted creating a sense of balance within the circle.

#### REUE (6d)

Although the wolf-hound cannot be regarded as a natural product of the country - at all comparable with the horse, salmon or bull, it merits a special place as a type, as this species of dog is so peculiarly identified with Ireland, and was also recommended by various members of the public. Metcalfe probably modelled his image on the drawing by George Atkinson R.H.A. (fig. 43) as the stance is very similar, perhaps using Reinagle's wolf-hound (fig. 44) as the basis for the head. On the coin it comes across as a proud and noble animal and the design works so well on so small a coin that the choice was amply justified (fig. 45). The actual layout is very similar to that of the shilling with the word 'reul' (the Irish for sixpence) imprinted below the line on which the dog stands and the value '6d' centrally positioned above its body.

#### THREEPENCE

Also struck in nickel, the threepence is commonly associated with the sixpence and to emphasise this association, the hare was used on the threepence to coincide with the hound on the sixpence. This is a personal favourite from the entire series, possibly because of its minute size and the cheeky look of the seated hare. One can almost visualise the scene as the impish creature glares daringly at the wolf-hound, almost challenging him to a speed test. Again, it is a beautiful piece of tiny sculpture; the hare is seated facing left (fig. 46) with its ears pricked, alert and noble, ready to flee



if the enemy should pounce. Curiously this is the one particular subject with which all the competitors appeared to have had little difficulty, many magnificent varieties being produced, in particular those of Manship, Power and Morbidacci, which are worthy of adorning any coins (fig. 47). Again, this is a testimony to the brilliance of Metcalfe's work. The typographic treatment on this coin is rather similar to that of the half-crown - the word "leat reul" forming a circle around the animal's head. The denomination is in its usual position at the base of the coin.

#### PENNY

The hen and her chicks are featured on the penny coin - representing a staple Irish industry of importance at the time. This too is another personal favourite and one of the finest designs of the entire series. Cast in bronze, it is larger than the florin but smaller than the half-crown, its colour making it clearly distinguishable at a glance (fig. 48). As an individual coin, it is a magnificent piece of artistry, an exquisite portrait of a proud hen strutting along with her infant chicks and yet it conforms wonderfully with the rest of the series. Quite an amount of detail is achieved in the feathers of the tail, the wing and the neck, and even the tiny beaks of the little chicks are quite distinct. The figures form a lovely asymmetrical arrangement which is offset by the typographical treatment - the word "pingin" and the denomination assume the same position as their equivalents on the shilling. Once again quite a distinct ligature is apparent, between the "g" and "i" of "pingin". This is a characteristic prevalent in almost all of the coins.

#### HALFPENNY

The halfpenny reflects another important Irish industry: the pig with a litter of five little bonamh's nestling into the warmth of their mother's body. The final design, though not as fleshy as the original,



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still conveys the notion of homeliness and protection (fig. 49). The ground level on which the animals are standing, moves up almost to the centre of the coin, to accommodate the words "leat pingin" (the Irish for halfpenny), which arranged one above the other forms a curvature reflective of the coin's circumference. Again, in the same Gaelic typeface the numeral '½d' takes up its usual position at the top of the coin. There is a very clever arrangement of elements here which creates a clear uncluttered look, despite the size of the coin.

#### FARTHING

The farthing portrays a woodcock darting diagonally across the little coin, its long pointed beak and spread wings almost filling the circular field (fig. 50). The woodcock is itself a small bird, shy, scarce and elusive, appropriate to the denomination. In this case the typographic treatment differs slightly from the others with the omission of the 'ground level'. However, the baseline of the characters still form a gentle curve and the denomination "1/4d" assumes its usual position on top.

It is rather appropriate that the fauna of the Irish countryside was depicted on Ireland's first coinage as in earlier times wealth was always calculated in terms of cattle and in 1928 the wealth of Ireland was still derived in overwhelming proportion from those products of its soil. It was an opportunity unparalleled anywhere in the history of numismatics and a tribute to the dedication of the Committee that the coins produced, at once beautiful, intelligible and appropriate, had a meaning both for the people of the country and for foreigners. It was also a tribute to the Committee's discrimination and freedom from political bias that the designs of an Englishman and least known of the sculptors were chosen.

#### THE REACTION TO THE COINAGE

Despite its excellence, the new coinage did not escape adverse

criticism and the initial reaction of the people and in particular the Catholic deity was one of shock and disappointment at their 'pagan' connotations. Numerous letters to the newspapers pronounced them "unsuited for the coinage of this ancient Christian nation" as "pagan symbols destined to wipe out all traces of religion from our minds". One critic detected "a turning down of God" and forecast "a land of devil worshippers to replace the land of Saints". To quell the rising squad, Thomas Bodkin pointed out the series is in fact "an expression of praise and gratitude for the natural blessings God bestowed on the Irish people". He wondered what St. Francis would have thought of "such heresy" or St. Thomas who speaks of animals as "the footprints of God by which we learn of his existence". He declared that on the contrary, "the whole set is saturated with religious symbolism delicately hidden to escape parading piety but there for anybody who wants to find it". He quotes biblical references to the various animals confirming his point that the coins are indeed "a masterpiece of prudence, good taste and deep religious feeling". It is interesting and somewhat ironical that to find a set of coins deliberately adorned with religious emblems, one must go back to pagan times so much abhorred by those critics themselves, when Zeus, Aphrodite and other disreputable characters adorned the money of the Greeks.

As time elapsed, the coins were not only accepted but proudly acclaimed as artistically excellent - their success evidenced by the fact that the designs remained virtually unchanged for almost fifty years. The general admission of the superb standard maintained throughout was given vocal expression internationally. The MANCHESTER GUARDIAN wrote "I think that the Irish coinage will be acknowledged as the most beautiful in the modern world . . . I doubt if any country but Ireland would have had the imagination and freedom to lay the conditions that would have made such designs possible". The critic of THE NATION declared "the free state has the most beautiful set of coins in the world" and the critic of the EVENING STANDARD admitted "we may well be jealous of the beautiful new Irish coins". Such generous praise has been



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reiterated down through the years in recognition of the fine work of Metcalfe and of the Committee.

In 1937, a new Constitution was enacted declaring the Free State a sovereign republic with the name 'Eire'. This necessitated a change in the coinage, the word 'Eire' being substituted for SAORSTAT EIREANN. Metcalfe designed the new lettering (fig. 51) and altered the layout of the obverse to suit the new arrangement of type. Other than some minor modifications for technical reasons, the coinage remained unchanged until decimalisation in 1970.

For as long as men collect these little words of art, our Free State coinage will be admired and understood and loved for its beauty and untraditional approach. Even when Yeats' poetry is obsolete in a world of modern languages, he will be remembered for the part he played in the implementation of the designs. For one needs no special knowledge, no gift of language, nothing but an eye for beauty to appreciate the wonderful achievement of the Committee. It is all summed up beautifully in the following lines written by  
15,43 Brian Cleeve in his foreward to the Yeats' coinage:

As long as our coins are treasured, something of us, of our Ireland will survive. These were the horses we rode, the salmon we caught, or failed to catch, or lied about after a long day's fishing. These were the bulls that trod over fields with country majesty, bulls whose ancestry coursed back to the hidden ages of our paganism, into the time of Cuchulainn and the Tain. This was the wolf-hound of our Gaelic nobility; this the hare of our hillsides and our hunting; this our farm wife's hen and farmhouse pig with their broods and litters. And on every coin the harp of our music and the name of our freedom.

CHAPTER 4

### THE DECIMAL COINAGE

Contemplating a move into the European Economic Community, the Irish Government had, by 1960, favoured the establishment of a metric system of weights and measures, and a decimal system of coinage for Ireland, similar to those in use in European countries. A review of the L.s.d. system would also facilitate economic transactions with Britain, which had previously decided to adopt a decimal currency.

### THE BIG DECISION

The Department of Finance was faced with the formidable task of finding a suitable system for Ireland and a decimal currency board was set up for this purpose. One member suggested the ten shilling system, using a half-pound instead of the pound as a unit. Another sector of the committee elected for the 'heavy pound' system - the heavy pound to be worth five existing pounds, each valued at one hundred shillings of ten pence each (i.e. 1,000p = £1). Here the link with sterling might pose some problems, though conversion to European currencies would be somewhat easier. Arguments for a decimal system taking the florin as the unit divided into 100 cents (of farthing equivalents) also met with approval within the committee, as conversion from the British system would be childishly simple - merely a matter of moving the decimal point one place in the appropriate direction. Thus, £5.99 (British) would be £59.50 (Irish florins). In addition the Irish florin would be of the same magnitude as the unit in France, Germany, Holland, Switzerland and Scandinavia, and this would obviate the necessity of a further serious upheaval if a standard European currency should eventually be adopted. This too was abated as larger priced goods, the committee argued, would look unwieldy in price.

The eventual outcome of the discussion saw the government adopting what Derek Young, editor of Irish Numismatics calls "its rubber



stamp approach to British legislation", and employing an identical decimal system - based on the pound as a unit containing "one hundred new pence" - the decided course being less inconvenient and costly than introducing a different system. The government's decision was greeted with a spate of criticism in the press, reflecting the public's anger that "a separate and independent currency" was not adopted for Ireland, instead of "a siamese twin of the British pound". Disregarding public opinion, D-Day (Decimalisation Day) was scheduled for Feb 15th 1971.

#### THE DECIMAL COINAGE

Under the new system, the country's coinage was reduced from eight denominations to six - the new decimal denominations being  $\frac{1}{2}$ p, 1p and 2p in bronze and 5p, 10p and 50p in cupro-nickel. (fig. 52). The "ridiculous and awkward term new pence" also gave rise to some adverse criticism and psychological confusion, many people arguing that it would be easier to concentrate on conversion if the old and new units did not have the same name.

#### THE END OF AN ERA

By now, the magnificance of Metcalf's series had been sadly damaged; the farthing had virtually disappeared from circulation years before, a victim of inflation and by August 1st 1969, in the gradual phase-out before D-Day, was officially demonetized along with the half-pence. By the autumn of 1970, the half crown was to disappear altogether, except as a collector's piece and on January 1st 1972, the penny, threepence and sixpence were also withdrawn from circulation. The shilling and florin, designed to be struck in 75 percent fine silver, were now lost in a flood of cupro-nickel five- and ten-pence pieces circulated in advance of D-Day to make the change-over period a little less difficult. Eventually all that remained of the series was a fading shadow of its former glory. From February 15th 1971, a change-over period



The original cast for the decimal halfpenny as submitted by Gabriel Hayes - from a private collection in the Central Bank.

was designated during which both currencies, old and new, were in use - two systems of currency running side by side for a period of eighteen months.

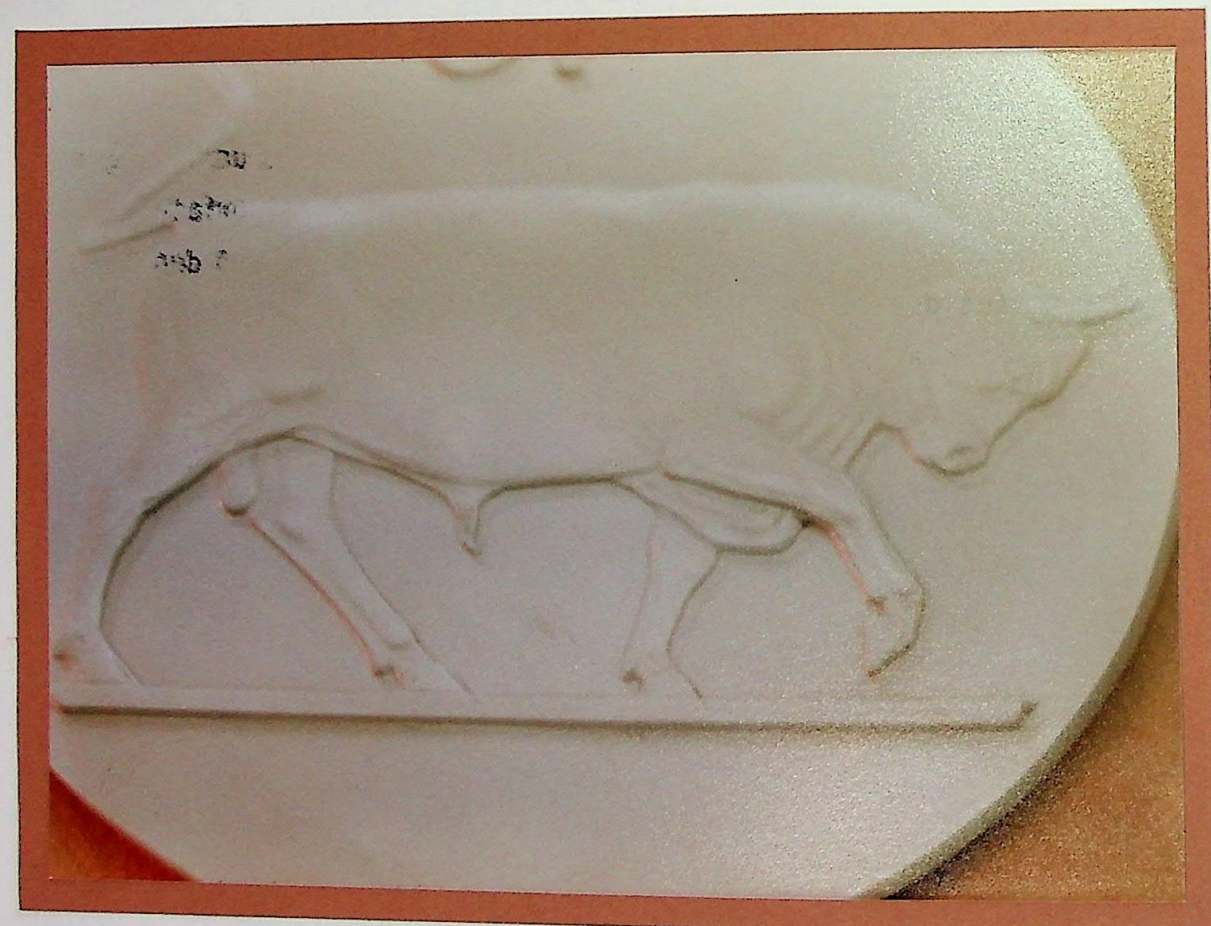
### THE DESIGNS

In stark contrast with the excitement and anticipation which surrounded the designing of Ireland's coinage in 1928, the same task was met with a general feeling of apathy and indifference in 1969. Here was another golden opportunity to recreate an entire series of related coins by either: a) re-employing Metcalfe's originals or b) organising another competition with a view to the production of an entire new series. Unfortunately, the design of the decimal coinage came way down on the list of priorities, with the result that the task was not planned properly from start to finish. Indeed, the Arts Council was not even consulted for advice on the aesthetic nature of the issues. The eventual designs bear a testimony to this sluggish unprofessional approach and in the light of Yeats' efforts and the endeavours of his fellow Committee members in 1928, the coins are poor compromises of what might have been!

The government decided to retain two of the existing designs: the salmon and bull on the 10p and 5p respectively, and to enlarge the woodcock for use on the new 50p coin. For the remaining three coins, it was decided initially that no design was necessary, merely the inscriptions 2p, 1p and  $\frac{1}{2}$ p respectively. Mr. Carroll of the Central Bank announced that an anonymous artist at the mint would execute the numerals and that "these will be good enough for them". The suggestion that a committee might be set up to organise a competition among reputable artists, he disregarded as "an unnecessary expense". With such a callous attitude, it is remarkable that the decimal coins turned out so well at all! The designs eventually used came almost by accident when a Kildare artist, Miss Gabriel Hayes (Mrs. G. O'Riordain) sent in a design which was liked and she was commissioned to produce three.



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original cast

These she based on ornamental details from Irish art illuminations, contained in old manuscripts. And so the new series came into being - a series of many imperfections which has remained intact for the past seventeen years and which seems likely to remain in circulation for quite some time to come.

#### AN ANALYSIS OF THE NEW DESIGNS

##### The 5p and 10p Coins

Because these two coins correspond directly to the old shilling and florin, the retention of the bull and salmon was designed to smooth the entry of the new coins into circulation and to establish an important link in the public mind between the existing currency and the new decimal currency. These coins are still handsome enough but not nearly as handsome as Metcalfe's pre-decimal coins. Now the words 'scilling' and 'florin' are replaced by the denominations 5p and 10p and redundant empty space, especially on the florin, does little for the overall design (fig. 53). The coins had been designed to incorporate the Gaelic typeface, utilising the shape of the coin and the space of the field appropriately. The elimination of the type and the inclusion of the denomination without due consideration for the overall feel of the coin, renders the coin a poor relation of the former - a bad adaptation of another man's design. The beaded circle surrounding the image is also omitted in the new issues, and instead of modernising the coins it renders them more bland by comparison.

##### The 50p Coin

A considerable divergence of opinion surrounding the 50p was resolved with the introduction of a seven-sided coin to replace the ten shilling note. From the point of view of the state, the coin was much more economical, lasting upwards of fifty years, whereas a note requires renewal every three to five months.



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Again, the Board pursued its complete lack of original thought, the new coin being identical in size, shape and weight to the British equivalent. Geometrically, it is an equilateral curve heptagon larger than the old florin and slightly smaller than the half-crown. The choice of design for the new 50p was quite strange, being that of the wood-cock from the demonetized farthing, and this betrays a misunderstanding of the old set of coins where the particular quality of the creatures portrayed related to the denominations on the coins. The nobler creatures were portrayed on the high values and the more mundane creatures on the low values. Now the symbol from Ireland's smallest coin moves up to its largest and highest value one. In addition, the woodcock loses most of its charm - the small elusive creature darting diagonally across the appropriately small farthing is now emerged and splashed in the middle of the hexagon, no longer enclosed in the Gaelic-type but surmounted by the numeral 50p. (fig. 54).

#### The Bronze Coins

The first of the Hayes' designs, the 2p bears an adaptation of an ornamental bird detail from an illumination in the Second Bible of Charles - the Bald, in the Bibliotheque National, Paris (fig.55) Likewise, the design for the penny is based on an ornamental bird detail from an illumination in the Book of Kells in Trinity College (fig.56) that for the halfpenny is an adaptation of a detail of an ornamental bird from a manuscript illumination of the Cathedral (fig.57) Library, Cologne. Admittedly, Hayes' designs are quite pleasant in their own right, the detail delineated with great dexterity. But nonetheless, they are completely different in style from the existing designs. In the light of events, what a pity that Hayes had not been commissioned to produce a completely new series instead of half a series! Obviously, her designs and those of Percy Metcalfe are diametrically opposed to each other, and without casting a reflection on either artist, both suffer by comparison. The heated words of Derek Young in the May 1969 issue of IRISH NUMISMATICS attacks the role of the finance minister in the

matter, "40 years ago W. B. Yeats discovered that it was impossible to combine designs of more than one artist, now in 1969, Mr. Haughey apparently knows better".

All six coins combine to share a common and familiar obverse design, namely the traditional Irish harp to the left of which is the word "Eire" and to the right of which is the date. Thankfully, this has remained virtually unchanged since 1928 but on the bronze coins only serves to emphasise the disparity of the designs.

#### REACTION TO THE DESIGNS

18,44 After the initial confusion had subsided, a number of complaints about the coinage, mostly on aesthetic grounds, arose. Letters published in the Irish newspapers deplored the "haphazard fashion in which the designs have been selected". One man proclaimed "the manner in which the designs were chosen was ignorant, slipshod and dictatorial", while another decided "The Irish public has been steamrolled into accepting a numismatic fait accompli". The general consensus was that the designs of Gabriel Hayes and Percy Metcalfe did not complement each other and many expressed the wish that a new unified design for all the country's coins might come about once the transition period had ended. A critic in the July/August 1969 issue of IRISH NUMISMATICS wrote that the old coins should have been maintained in their entirety being "modest and harmonious as befits their purpose and not attempting to carry a load of metaphysical significance too heavy for them to bear". To break up the unity of the set and issue coins under two formal principles, he describes as "barbarous" as he vents his wrath on the Arts Council for "condoning this absurdity". However, this critic was mistaken in his assumption that the Arts Council was consulted or their advice sought on the matter - an oversight indicative of the careless and negligent fashion in which the designs were selected. In the same article, the critic writes on the concept behind the Hayes' design, "We have no peculiar right to Celtic art - Celtic art is a heavenward leading art



and as such entirely incomprehensible to us. Furthermore" he concluded indignantly, "the published designs are even unhygienic, the fine detail providing numerous dirt traps". It must be agreed that the admiration and respect earned by the existing series of Irish coins made it essential that the designs be continued wherever possible, but the writer would suggest that those of the remaining coins should be equally simple and show other representative Irish fauna rather than taking an entirely different approach. Or, as an alternative, the new design should have been more demonstrably changed to symbolise a new era, a period of new thinking, the design acquired by an international competition as before. This rejection of both these courses of action was regrettable, and the coins reflect the marked indifference of the government.

But the biggest calamity of all was the destruction of the Metcalfe series, so that it no longer exists as a whole, as it was intended. Without the hen and her chickens, without the sow and her banamhs, without the great hunter, without the wolfhound, without the hare, and the woodcock which was designed to dive across the small field of the farthing, now blown up to look like a fat snipe on the 50p piece, the series has effectively been destroyed - even without the addition of the bronze coins. What else can be said of Ireland's decimal coinage, except to lament the nature of things which cannot allow such a fine series as the 1928 coinage to remain complete and unaltered for more than a few decades.

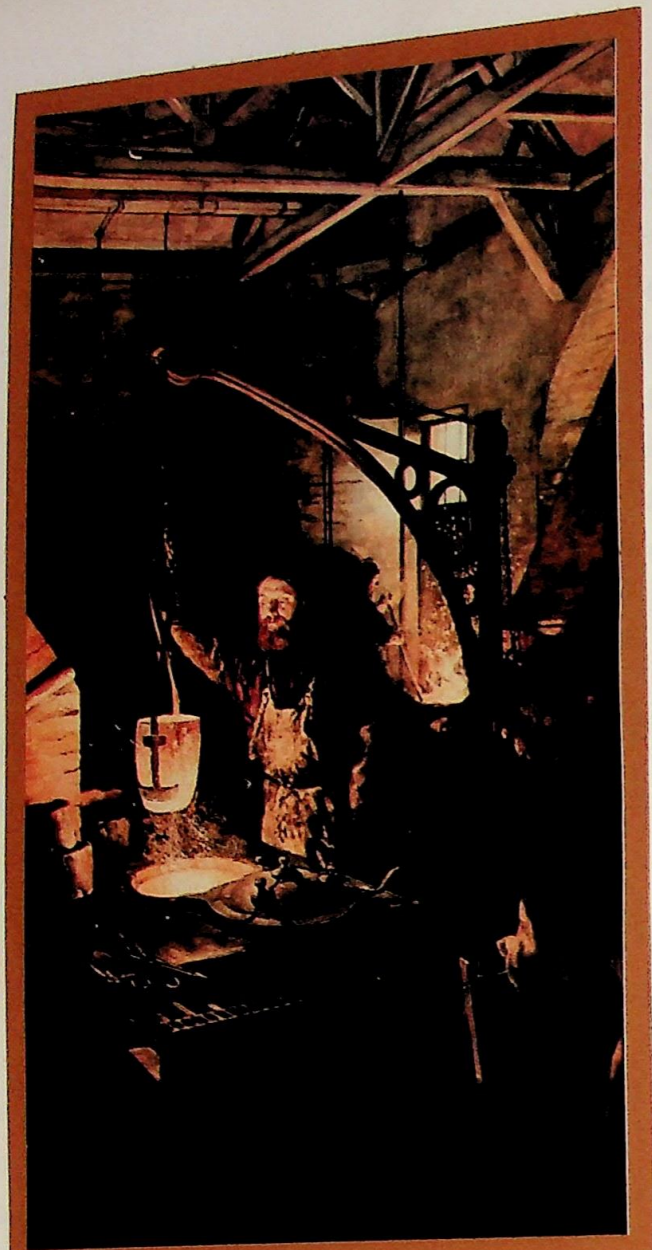
For coinage must change with political and economic facts of life and it is too much to expect that what replaces greatness should also and always be great. Ireland has had magnificent coinage. She still possesses fine individual coins, and for this the public should be grateful. Yet it is hard to accept a compromise when the nation has been accustomed to the finest numismatic examples in the modern world. One can only hope that in the future Ireland's coinage will somehow revert to its former glory, providing once again a sense of national pride, self-respect and esteem for Irish people at home and abroad.

This thesis has traced the evolution of Irish coinage from its origins to the present day, and in doing so has drawn a number of conclusions from the research. Because coins are such commonplace objects, many people forget that their handfuls of change consist of works of art. And yet this is what every coin is . . . or should be! Ireland is fortunate to have had so many coins of artistic excellence down through the centuries. Even if many of these were not truly representative of the national culture, design wise, they were on a par with many European contemporary coins. But it was the foresight of such men as Padraic Pearse that led to the origination of one of the finest series of coinage in the history of numismatics. Pearse's inspired declaration in 1913 that "a good Irishman should blush everytime he sees a penny", proves that even before liberation from Britain was achieved, this patriot had considered the importance of a national coinage, designed expertly to instil a public sense of pride.

It is very important that each design is worthy of its place on a set of coins as undoubtedly coinage is one of the most enduring of all the nation's monuments. When its Gaelic language is no longer spoken, its buildings lie in ruins and its literature no longer accessible to the ordinary mortal, the coins it used will still be admired and valued, bought by collectors and treasured in museums. Today, it represents the little Republic, revealing to foreigners Irish attitudes and tastes - in the future, descendants will judge this generation on the quality of the coinage it uses. And so it should be remembered that coins are not merely inanimate pieces of metal produced to facilitate trade, but also a source of inspiration, pride and respect, for Irish people today and in the centuries to come. Writing about the 1928 series, Brian Cleeve

15.43 sums this up beautifully in the following lines:

When Ireland has long ceased to be anything that we would recognise as Ireland, when some unguessed at civilisation occupies this island, men will still value our coins and think more highly of us because we used such beautiful things to buy our bread, and pay our rent, and give alms to the beggar in the street.



A painting by John Collier (1850–1934) showing the tedious process of melting the metals for coinage in the nineteenth century. Here a pot of molten metal has just been removed from the furnace, its contents about to be poured into a carriage of moulds in the foreground.

## CONCLUSION

Having queried in the Introduction of this thesis, why the 1928 coins had such an impact, the writer now feels the answer lies in the fact that they originated in the throes of a Gaelic revival. This was in essence a cultural revival which flourished at the end of the eighteenth century, designed to re-instate the devalued Gaelic language and promote national games, drama and literary works. The idea was to stress once again the value of being Irish and to arouse in the public a sense of self-respect and pride. By the time independence was achieved, a strong patriotic spirit was stirred among the people. Obviously this accounts for the Committee's decision to feature the fauna of the Irish countryside on the new coins. Ironically, it may also be the reason the members opted unanimously for the Metcalfe designs - the representations of the original decorations betraying more than a whiff of Gaelic revival (not as prevalent in the other entries). What puzzled the writer initially was why the Committee decided to reinstate the harp on the obverse of the new coins - the emblematic instrument used for centuries on Anglo-Irish coins - crowned to reflect the country's subservience to the British monarchy? The answer is seen in the fact that the harp on the new coins stands proud and upright, no longer surmounted by a crown, the omission of which symbolised the undoing of Henry's Kingdom of Ireland. The Gaelic revival deserved to have its monument and what more fitting place than on the obverse type of a series of coins, which proclaimed to the world, not only Ireland's emancipation, but a remarkable instance of Irish taste.

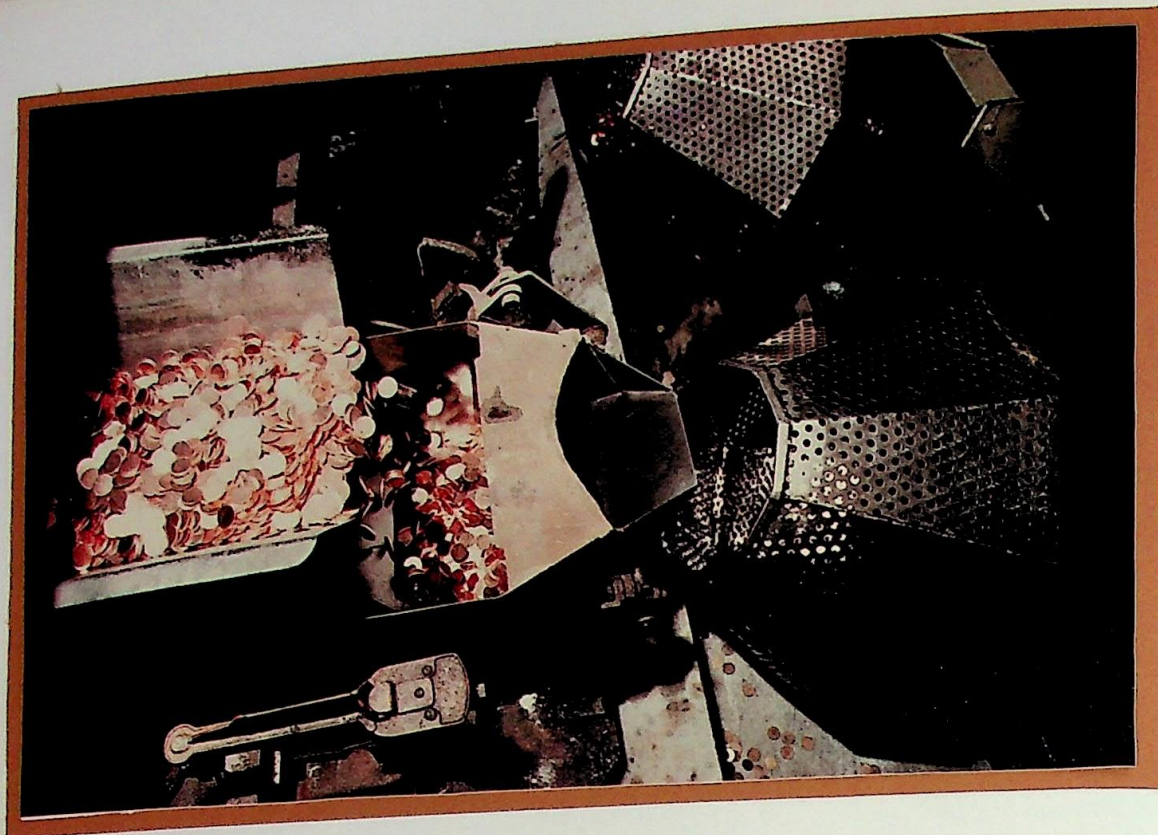
What a contrast there is between the introduction of these Free State coins and that of the new decimal series in 1971! In 1928, the new coins reflected the emotion of the period. In the words of Brian Cleeve, "from these designs all our character, all our history, all our ideals and longings can be traced out".

15.43 Consequently, no cost or trouble was spared in the campaign for their production. The brilliance of the design bears testimony to the careful organisation, the competence of the Committee and the surge of patriotic emotion that governed the set of rules defining the design. In stark contrast, the coins of 1970 reflect

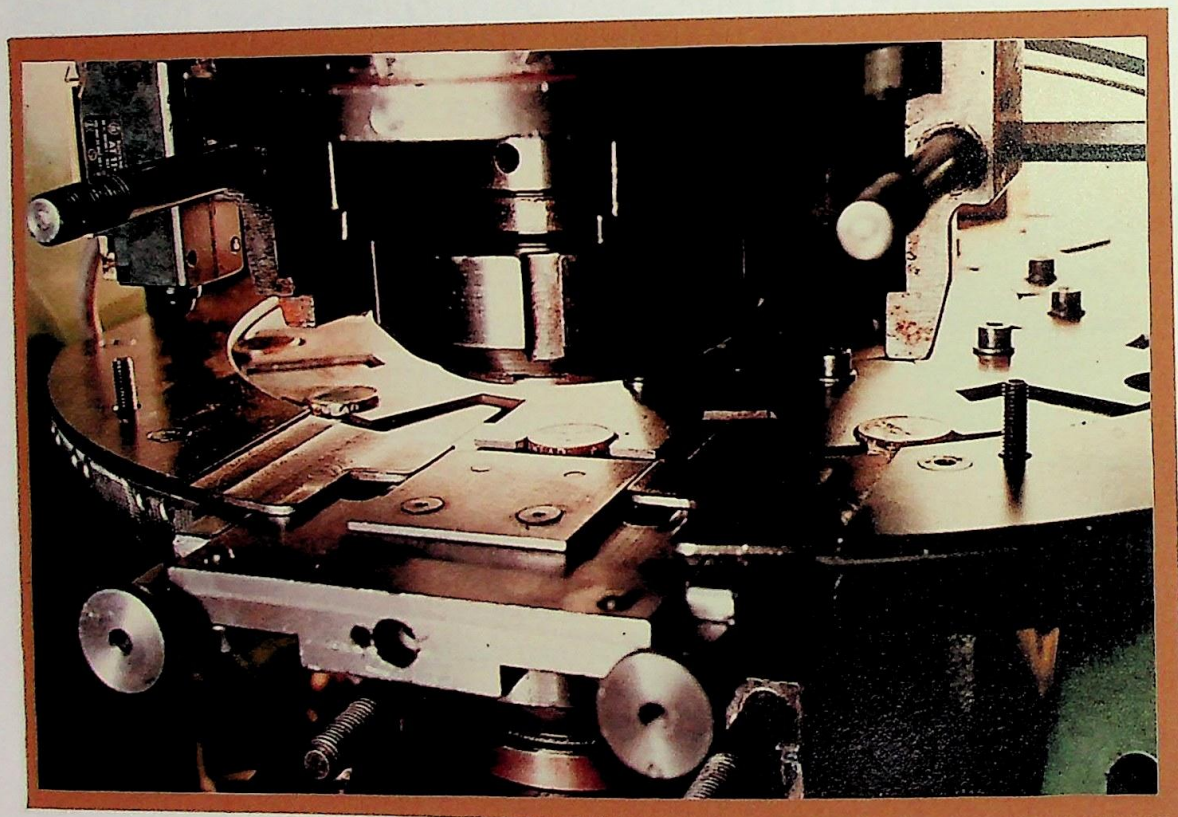


the confusion, the apathy and the lack of concern surrounding their arrival, and, as a set, have very little in the way of aesthetic presentation to offer either the enthusiastic collector or the numismatic scholar. For what message do they convey to the interested viewer? The concept of the original series has long since been dissipated with the inclusion of the three bronze coins. Now the only meaning they seem to convey is that of a nation bereft of artistic appreciation - a nation which combines the abstract and the realistic in one series. The government of 1928 refused to improve our compromise; so too the government of 1970 should have decided on such a course. Then perhaps the confused sequence of coins could have been avoided - for surely the depiction of a different bird on four of the six coins is no longer representative of the fauna of Ireland! And what legacy will be passed on to successive generations? Instead of a unified series, they inherit two unrelated sets of coinage which reflect the general apathy surrounding their issue.

The addition of the twenty pence piece to the series in October 1986 adds another element of confusion to the series. Again the government imitates British legislation, producing what many people feel is an unnecessary denomination. The coin itself is quite presentable, but its design is rather contradictory. Why did the government now revert to the original design of the pre-decimal half-crown? Why was this coin also not designed by Miss Hayes, designer of the bronze denomination? Smaller in size and weight than the ten pence coin, many people questioned on the subject by the writer, expressed the opinion that it is a mere shadow of the original coin - a futile copy of the half-crown tapered to fit into the smaller field (fig. 58). From a design point of view the coin also suffers by comparison with the original. The words 'leat coroin' gently framing the hunter's head have disappeared for obvious reasons, and now only the denomination 20p appears. This creates a much more imbalanced layout than the former. The animal too appears much smaller in proportion to the field of the coin and the new version seems somehow less noble and majestic because of this.



The Central Bank of Ireland's mint at Sandyford, Dublin imports the actual metal blanks from Britain. These blanks must undergo a series of cleaning processes before they reach the coining presses.



Here they are struck between the obverse and reverse dies to receive the impression, which transforms them into the Nations coins.

And what of the future of Irish coinage? Should one dare to hope that the coins might eventually be related together in some semblance of order? Or are there any plans to produce a new unified design for these coins in the foreseeable future? In a questionnaire submitted by the writer to the Currency Centre of the Central Bank, these and other questions were posed. The manager's response was more positive than anticipated. One particular paragraph states:

In his speech to the Dail on 22 May 1986, the Minister for Finance stated that the re-introduction of a uniform design series is something which will be considered. He believes that the co-existence of two design series is not completely satisfactory and that a uniform series, as was the case with the Metcalfe design, for the decimal currency, would be preferable.

So perhaps there is a glimmer of hope for Irish coinage in the future. Perhaps some day Ireland can boast again of a related sequence of designs matching the Free State coins in concept and artistry.

In the meantime, the population awaits the introduction of the new £1 coin which "is under active consideration at present" according to the Central Bank. Apparently no design plans exist at present, as "new legislation is first necessary before the coin is introduced". However, the possibility of readapting one of the remaining Metcalfe designs has obviously not been ruled out. The manager would not disclose any additional information on this point, except to point out that "It will not be similar to the British coin in size or shape". And so, with the introduction of the £1 coin, Ireland will have once again a set of seven coins (the half-pence was demonitized on 1st January 1987 - another victim of inflation). This would be a wonderful opportunity for the government to review the existing set of coins, and to decide on a positive course of action to reproduce once again an appropriately designed series of coins truly representative of the nation. Such would be a fitting tribute to that great literary genius, statesman and chairman of the 1928 Committee - W. B. Yeats, whose

determination and dedication made Ireland's first coinage possible. His achievement paved the way for further generations to create equally imaginative designs, worthy of adorning the country's coinage. Consequently, the present opportunity should be zealously seized and used in fulfilment of Yeats' dreams - to provide Ireland with a coinage of distinction, and to reinstate it once again among the ranks of the numismatic greats.



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