

HENRY COTTON, DEAN OF LISMORE, COIN COLLECTOR

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I purchased for myself, about a year ago, via the AbeBooks website, an interleaved and annotated copy of George Marshall's *A View of the Silver Coin and Coinage of Great Britain, from the year 1662 to 1837*, London, John Hearne 1838. My attention had been drawn to it by a note in the accompanying description of the copy by the bookseller who was offering it for sale that it had been "in the ownership of one H. Cotton whose first note in a good nineteenth century hand reads "Marshall here describes rather more than 900 pieces: viz. English 794 Scottish 78 Patterns 33 - 905. Of these I have, at present, about 450". The description went on to record that the copy had "many interesting notes and amendments to text from this collector".

Discovering the identity of this "H.Cotton" was to prove no particular problem, for although there is no entry for an individual named Cotton with this initial in the volume of the late Harry Manville's *Encyclopaedia of British Numismatics* devoted to biographies of numismatists, the notes by the annotator on the blank interleaves refer in a number of cases to specimens of rare varieties in the English regal milled silver series as being held by the "Bodleian", i.e. the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

Access to Oxford University's primary coin collection, held in the Bodleian Library until its transference in 1921 to the Heberden Coin Room in the Ashmolean Museum, was tightly controlled during the nineteenth century, and Sir Charles Oman records that when an undergraduate with a burgeoning interest in numismatics he was told by the then Librarian that "the coins could only be inspected in the presence of the librarian or one of his two sub-librarians, who had many other duties to discharge" and that as a result he, Oman, never obtained access at that time to "the dark and rather dank coin-room in the Upper Gallery [of the Bodleian Library]"¹. As it happens, the first appointment held after graduation from the University of Oxford by Henry Cotton (1790-1879)², subsequently to be ordained as a clergyman and beneficed in Ireland as Archdeacon of Cashel and Dean of Lismore, was that of Sub-Librarian of the Bodleian Library, a position held by him between 1814 and 1822, and he must certainly have been the individual who annotated my copy of Marshall and who put together this substantial collection of English and Scottish milled silver coins.

The regal milled silver series is not one of my own areas of specialist knowledge, but Cotton was evidently both knowledgeable about it himself and in touch with knowledgeable contemporaries. Where he possessed a specimen of a coin variety listed by Marshall, he records the fact by writing an ink letter C in the book's blank outer margin against Marshall's entry for the coin variety in question, so the exact content of his collection can still be ascertained. Additionally, where the coins were rare or were otherwise of interest, he provides comments of his own on the blank interleaves, and here are the three that are probably the most interesting:

¹ Sir C.Oman, *Memories of Victorian Oxford and of some early years*, London, 1941, 246.

² Henry Cotton, son of a Buckinghamshire vicar, had come into residence as an undergraduate at Christ Church, Oxford, in 1807, having previously been a King's Scholar at Westminster School.

introduction, p.xi (in relation to a statement by Marshall that a mark below the word DEI on a crown of Charles II dated 1677, interpreted by some collectors as a boar's head mint mark, was in reality "only a flaw in the die") : "So thinks Ruding , as explained to me in a letter on my sending him my coin for examination previously to the publication of his work. These pieces are very uncommon. There is one in the Bodleian Library ; and I have only seen one other".

p.30 (added entry, numbered by Cotton 195x, a variant of Marshall 195, William and Mary, half crown, 1690, with ANNI REGNO SECVNDO edge inscription) : "Obv. same as No.195, except that GRATIA is mis-spelt GRETIA. This piece is extremely rare. It is probable that all were called in as the blunder was discovered. I never saw more than one other, besides my own".

p.56 (comment on Marshall 344, Anne, half crown, 1703, without VIGO under the bust) : "This piece is extremely scarce. A fine one is worth four guineas. Matthew Young [the famous London coin dealer] told me in London (1838) that I could not find twenty, if I offered twenty guineas apiece for them".

In 1818 Cotton had married Mary Vaughan Laurence, daughter of Rev. Richard Laurence DD, Regius Professor of Hebrew and Canon of Christ Church, Oxford, and this marriage had the unexpected consequence that when in 1822 his father-in-law, Richard Laurence, although English by birth and upbringing, was offered and accepted the Archbishopric of Cashel in the south of Ireland³, Cotton was to follow the new archbishop to Ireland as his domestic chaplain. Under the conventions prevailing at the time, it was not long before Archbishop Laurence was able to get Cotton appointed as Archdeacon of his own diocese of Cashel, to which Cotton was able to add over time additional positions as Treasurer of Christ Church, Dublin, and as Dean of Lismore⁴.

Cotton is best remembered today as the author of *Fasti Ecclesiae Hibernicae*, a publication of which the first four volumes were issued between 1847 and 1850, supplementary volumes following in 1860 and 1878. The purpose of Cotton's *Fasti* was to provide reliable evidence-based lists of all the recorded archbishops, bishops and cathedral clergy of the very numerous Irish dioceses with a continuous history – Catholic to the Reformation, Protestant afterwards - between the early middle ages and Cotton's own time. Although the volumes do not record prelates belonging to the parallel Roman Catholic hierarchy in existence in Ireland, north and south, from the middle of the sixteenth century onwards, this is understandable in the context of nineteenth century church politics, and Cotton's programme of research for his publication, summarised in his preface to the second edition, 1851, of his volume

³ Henry Cotton states in his *Fasti Ecclesiae Hibernicae*, vol.i, The Province of Munster, second edition, Dublin, 1851, 28, that Richard Laurence accepted the archbishopric "most unwillingly, after repeated solicitation of the Prime Minister, the Earl of Liverpool".

⁴ Cotton held all three of these ecclesiastical appointments simultaneously, although they were in different dioceses, between 1834 and 1849. It should be recorded, in fairness to him, that he performed the duties of Dean of Lismore, such as they were, without payment. I use the words "such as they were", for as recently as the time of the 2016 Irish Census Lismore, a small town in County Waterford, still only had a population of 1374 people, of whom 81% were Roman Catholics ; the proportion of Protestant worshippers may well have been higher during Cotton's tenure of the Deanery, but the size of the regular congregation attending cathedral services cannot have been at all large.

devoted to the dioceses in the province of Munster, was arduous enough, entailing inspection by him of documents in “every single one” of the Diocesan Registraries in Ireland, as well as of extensive other documentation held in official records kept centrally in Dublin.

Cotton’s large collection of books, used by him to forward his research into the ecclesiastical history of Ireland and for other scholarly projects, survives today as the principal component of what is now named the Cotton Library, built in 1851 as a library for clerical use attached to Lismore Cathedral.

I am unaware of the fate of his collection of English and Scottish milled silver coins, as to which some better informed reader of this blog may be able to pronounce, but his move to Ireland had evidently had the effect of widening his numismatic interests, for on the final page of the text proper of John Lindsay’s *A View of the Coinage of Ireland*, 1839 (p.139), Lindsay records his thanks to “the Very Rev. the Dean of Lismore, for Notices relative to the Gun Money, of which he possesses some of the rarest specimens, and for other valuable information, relative to Irish Coins”. Information given elsewhere in Lindsay’s book shows that the Dean of Lismore, i.e. Henry Cotton, then possessed a Gun Money crown dated September 1690 and a Gun Money sixpence dated May 1690 (p.127), as well as a silver proof of a Wood’s halfpenny (p.132).

An extension of Cotton’s collection to cover the post-1660 Irish series can be seen as a natural enough development from the collection’s scope as recorded in his annotated copy of Marshall, but by the time Lindsay came to write his *A View of the Coinage of the Heptarchy*, 1842, Lindsay chose to go on record as expressing his thanks “to the Very Rev. H. Cotton, Dean of Lismore” for “a list of unpublished moneyers from coins in his cabinet, and also, for some important communications relative to Anglo-Saxon coins” (p.vii of his preface). Lindsay does not make specific mention of any of Cotton’s Anglo-Saxon coins in his text, but in this context I have an old note of my own that item 63182 in the Spink firm’s *Numismatic Circular* for May-June 1918, p.279, was : “A silver ingot (cut at one end) probably intended and used as a piece of money, found in Limerick prior to or about, the year 1857 (wt. 402 grs.).

Accompanying the ingot is a paper written in 1857 as follows: - “A piece of ancient Irish silver money, cut by weight from a bar or ingot. It was found with several other pieces, near Adare in the Co.Limerick ; and was given me by Lord Adare” (signed) HC (H Cotton) 1857”.

The ingot fragment in question was evidently from the Mungret, co. Limerick, hoard, deposited c.953 and containing coins of Eadweard the Elder, Aethelstan, Eadred, and the York ruler Regnald Guthfrithsson, on which there is an excellent note by the late Michael Dolley⁵. The gift to Cotton must in fact been made before 1850, the year in which Lord Adare succeeded his father as 3rd Earl of Dunraven, and it may indeed be speculated that the gift had taken place not long after the hoard’s discovery. It is worth pointing out in this connection that although the date of the Mungret hoard’s discovery is given as c.1842 in the current version of the *Checklist of Coin Hoards from the British Isles, c.450-1180*, on the Fitzwilliam Museum’s EMC/SCBI website,

⁵ R.H.M.Dolley, ‘Some new light on the Viking-age silver hoard from Mungret’, *North Munster Antiquarian Journal* vol.viii, 1960, 116-33.

Lindsay records its discovery in his *A View of The Coinage of the Heptarchy*, published in 1842, as having happened “a few years since”⁶, and Dolley’s suggested date for the discovery as c.1840 is obviously nearer the mark.

My note of the item in the *Numismatic Circular* goes on to say that “Messrs. Spink were then offering for sale – in the same list – Irish coins from the ‘Archdeacon Cotton’ collection”. In current lockdown conditions I do not have access to the relevant issue of the *Circular*, but it is obvious that ‘Archdeacon Cotton’ is our Henry Cotton, who was, as recorded above, Archdeacon of Cashel as well as Dean of Lismore, and clearly a careful look at the listing of these Irish coins will shed further light on the character of this part of Cotton’s collection.

It is somewhat baffling to me why neither Harry Manville nor I, acting at that point in time as Harry’s closest adviser, failed to realise that there ought to be an entry for Henry Cotton in the biographical volume of Harry’s *Encyclopaedia*, but I hope that the present note has done something to rescue from numismatic oblivion a scholarly coin collector who may well have been the only person during the last three hundred years occupying a curatorial role in relation to Oxford University’s coin collection to have taken a coin-by-coin interest in the University’s holdings of coins in the English and Scottish milled silver series.



⁶Lindsay, op.cit., 125.