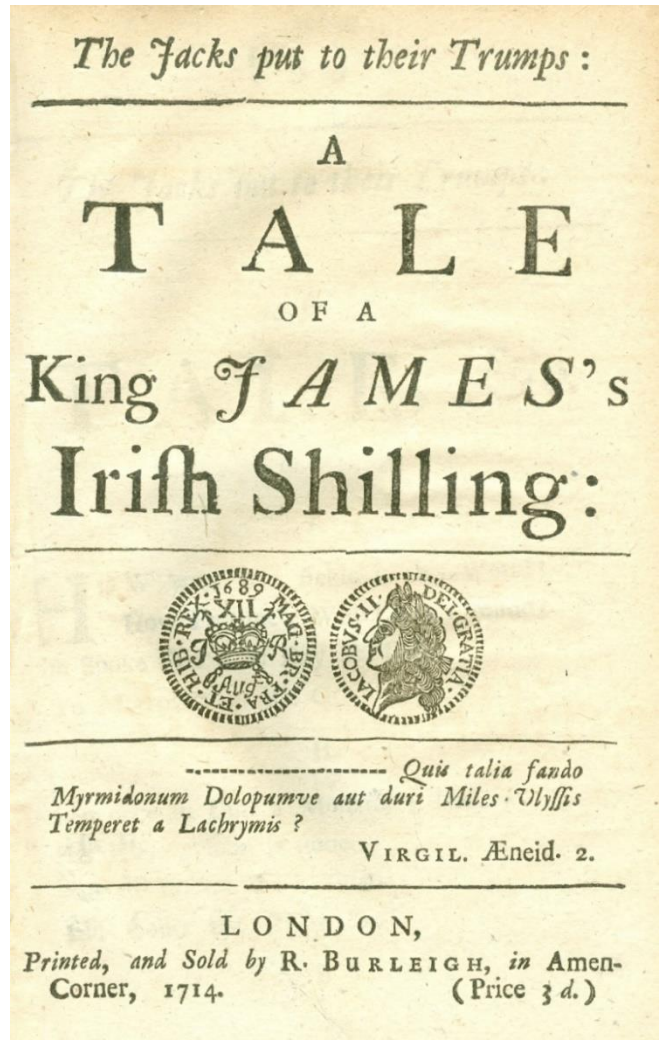


The Jacks put to their Trumps: A Tale of a King James's Irish Shilling

Gary Oddie

During a recent search of my favourite online bookshop (abebooks.com) I randomly stumbled into a small (12 page) pamphlet describing the life of a James II gun-money shilling written in the first person⁽¹⁾. The title page is dated 1714 and includes a good engraving of a shilling dated August 1689 but it does not give the author. Having not seen this before and as it was not mentioned in the recent book published by Timmins⁽²⁾ or the epic die study and history of this series from the Withers⁽³⁾, a few emails confirmed that this small pamphlet had not been noticed in a numismatic context before.

The earliest reference naming the author as Jonathan Swift is in a collection of Irish Ballads from 1841 compiled by T.C. Croker⁽⁴⁾. The attribution and explanation are repeated verbatim in subsequent collections of Swift's work⁽⁵⁾ and is given in full below.



James II. was totally ignorant how to support the credit of his coin. He had but one idea about anything — force; and force, when applied to the currency, is sure to fail. His exceptions to the circulation of his coin, though a clumsy attempt at being honest, were very injurious to its credit. Probably, if he had got a few thousand pounds of sterling coin, and made his copper tokens *convertible*, he might have kept up their credit, as long at least as things went on well in the country; and it would have been time enough for the *restriction* after the battle of the Boyne.

James, like great financiers, soon found himself exceedingly embarrassed. His metal tokens came back rapidly to his exchequer, in the payment of all taxes and assessments. They were paid to him at their nominal value, but in the common transactions of business they fell almost to their intrinsic worth. He could fix a denomination upon his coin; but the seller of any article could fix a price upon his commodity to meet the arbitrary denomination. If a piece of metal worth one penny be tendered for a shilling, the seller of a pennyworth of bread has only to ask a shilling for it, and the difficulty is got rid of. James was puzzled at this. He found it necessary, in order to keep his scheme of currency afloat, to take one step more, and fix a price upon commodities, as he had settled a value upon his coin.

Having done this, his views suddenly enlarged. He found that money might be made of it; and he turned merchant himself. He bought large quantities of butter, corn, hides, wool, and other articles at such prices as he thought proper to give, and he paid for all by a few pounds' weight of tin or copper. It is easy to believe that he was no welcome customer; but he had persons employed to find out who had goods to sell, and none dared to refuse to deal with a customer who had forty-two regiments of foot and fourteen of cavalry. All those commodities he shipped to France, where they were sold for his own account. By this traffic he realised large sums of money at the expense of his subjects.

There can be no question that the following ballad, upon internal evidence, may be as fairly attributed to dean Swift as many effusions which have appeared in several editions of his works ; but when it is stated that the pamphlet from which, it is copied was found among a bundle of broadsides, most if not all of which are well known to be Swift's composition, and when it is remembered how many of the productions of Swift's muse about the period when this 'Tale of King James's Shilling' was printed (1714) are unknown, and to which the dean himself has made especial reference, it will be admitted that this ballad deserves more than ordinary consideration, especially if it be possible to trace in it the germs of feeling which afterwards displayed themselves so vigorously in the Drapier's opposition to Wood's coinage, and which have formed an immortal wreath for the brow of Swift.

This interpretation, 150 years after the events, does not align with modern understanding of King James' finances, but more importantly it connects the pamphlet to Swift and his other interests in Irish coinage.

The existence of the pamphlet is another piece of contemporary evidence that confirms that the gunmoney coinage was still circulating at the beginning of the reign of George I.

The image of the coin on the title page is very good and is sufficient to allow the likely dies to be identified as Withers August Obv 25 / Rev 25, in all respects excepting the absence of stops after the 1689 and XII.



To save space, the 27 verses of the poem printed over 8 pages have been transcribed as follows:

I.

How wondrous fickle is this world!
How Fortune's wheel turns round!
The spoke that is today at top,
To-morrow's on the ground.

II.

When once in dust a Monarch's laid,
His honour soon is gone;
All in an instant tack about
And Court the rising sun.

III.

True friendship with Astraea went,
And took to heav'n her flight,
For she and loyalty long since
Were banished Ireland quite.

IV.

The name of Christians we assume,
But are than pagans worse;
There's few amongst us who have more
Religion than a horse.

V.

Religion a chimera proves;
Heaven has our pray'rs the least;
All our sincere devotion's paid
Alone to interest.

VI.

While my dear master smiled on me,
Whose image still I bear,
I was a welcome guest to all,—
Was courted everywhere.

VII.

The gentleman and tradesman too
My company approved;
In city and at court I dwelt,
And was by all beloved.

VIII.

The miser hugg'd me in his arms,
And lock'd me in his chest,
And never once his visit fail'd
Before he went to rest.

IX.

The ladies did my shapes approve,
My features, too, admired;
Where e'en my king could never go
Securely I retired.

X.

Within their bosoms lay all day,
And revell'd in their arms;
I was myself all over love,
And they all over charms.

XI.

Thus for a time I liv'd secure,
And at my heart's content;
But soon I found a wondrous change
On Will's establishment.

XII.

Some few, indeed, my stamp did prize,
As high as e'er before;
Yet, as the revolution grew,
I wasted more and more.

XIII.

Those few at least veer'd quite about,
And joined in my disgrace;
They cried my master's son and I
Came both of bastard race:—

XIV.

That I had never seen the light,
If James had never run;
That I at Dublin was begot,
And was a canon's son.

XV.

In such contempt, in short, I fell,
Which was a very hard thing,
They scurrilously used me there
For nothing but a farthing.

XVI.

Mad, you may think, to be thus used,
Though miserably poor,
Thinking I couldn't well be worse,
To England I came o'er.

XVII.

But, to my sorrow, when I came,
Like treatment there I found;
No Jacobite amongst 'em all
My former value own'd.

XVIII.

And Will's, and best of Anna's, reign,
No better was my state;
But yet I cheer'd myself with hopes
I should be fortunate.

XIX.

My master's son I thought would come,
His father's cause t'advance;
I thought t' have shown my face again,
And welcomed him from France.

XX.

In greater lustre thought to shine,
Long hoped to be preferr'd,
T' have laid the father's image down,
For that of James the Third.

XXI.

But all my hopes abortive proved,
In need he found no friend;
There wasn't one amongst 'em all
Would sail against the wind.

XXII.

Misfortunes never come alone:
Just before Anna died,
By Whig and Tory too was I
Most basely mortified.

XXIII.

No piece that wore m' unhappy face
Amongst the rogues would pass
For any more than what would prove
To be my weight in brass.

XXIV.

And now king George and all his tribe
Is settled in the nation,
I still a harder fate do dread,
As far worse transmigration.

XXV.

Some founder soon will melt me down,
And sell my despised mettle
To some damn'd tinker in the street
To mend some whore's damn'd kettle.

XXVI.

Take warning, brother Jacks, by me,
Before 'tis quite too late;
Think what will be your next remove
If you should transmigrate.

XXVII.

If you at Tyburn chance to swing,
You 're brought all to such passes,
That when you quit your present shapes
You'll change, I fear, to asses.

As might be expected of Swift, the verse is very compact and well written, with the unexpected numismatic twist in the last word with the dual meaning of asses and reference to the Roman copper coins that are about the same size and weight as a large gunmoney shilling.

The attribution to Swift, however, was not unanimous and by the 20th Century, Harold Williams countered as follows.

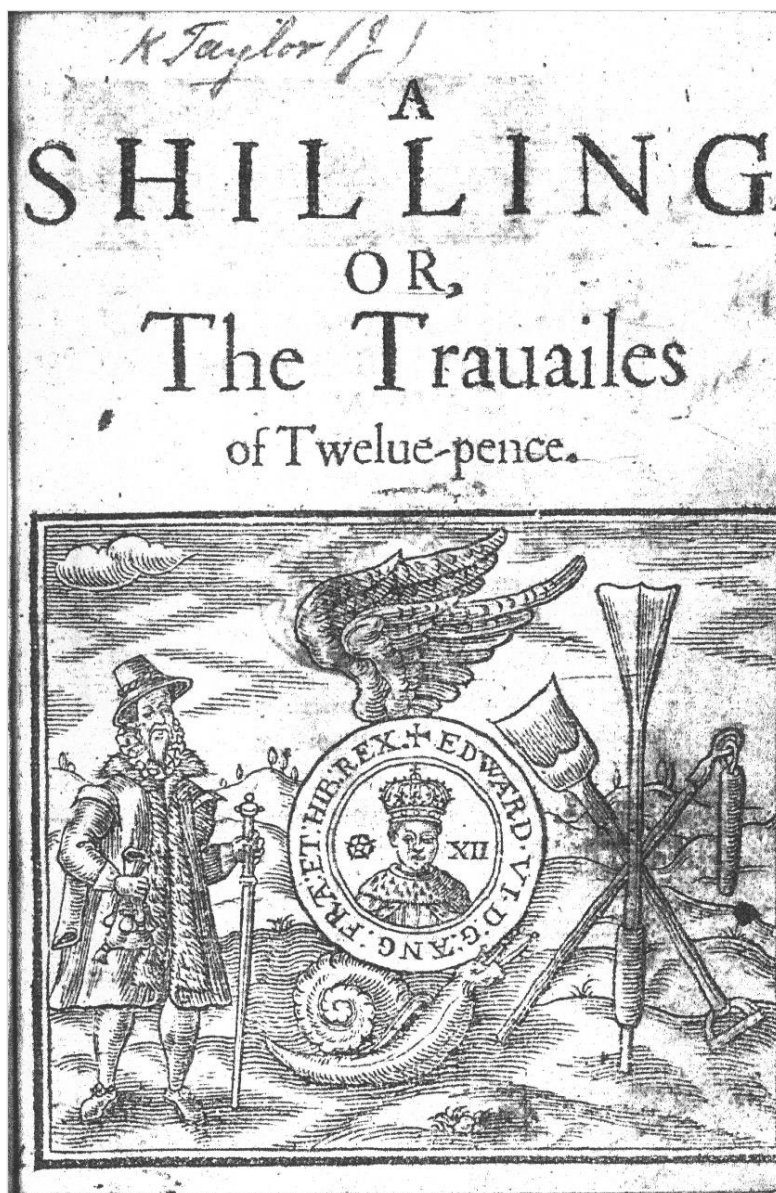
Thomas Roscoe, in his edition of Swift's works, 1841, ii, 852-3, attributes this ballad to Swift, on the suggestion of T.C. Croker. But the date of the piece, the printer, with whom Swift was not associated, and the internal evidence of content and style, put Croker's suggestion out of court.

The publication of *The Jacks put to their Trumps* pamphlet came just four years after Joseph Addison's adventures of a shilling⁽⁶⁾ from which the title of James O'Donald Mays' book 'The Splendid Shilling' was taken⁽⁷⁾.

A similar work was published in 1621 by the water poet John Taylor with the title *A Shilling, or, the travailes of a twelve pence*.⁽⁸⁾ As with the poem presented above, Taylor's work was also in rhyme, filling 39 pages. The title page also included an image of the coin in question, an Edward VI fine issue shilling.

This work, also in the first person, traces the life of the shilling, including encounters with the rich and poor, the kind and the criminal and at one point its use in the game of shovel-board shilling⁽⁹⁾.

Whilst my own interest is in the shillings, I am curious if any other works have been written in the first person about any other coins, tokens or banknotes?



References and Acknowledgements

- (1) Swift, J. (attributed). *The Jacks Put to Their Trumps: a tale of a King James's Irish shilling*. 1714. Full colour scan at:
https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The_Jacks_Put_to_Their_Trumps_a_Tale_of/e6ZYAAAcAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1
- (2) P. Timmins. *Gunmoney*. 2nd edition, 2020.
- (3) P. & B.R. Withers. *Irish Gunmoney and the Emergency Issues of 1689-1691. A Corpus and Die Study*. Galata, 2020.
- (4) T.C. Croker (Ed.). *The Historical Songs of Ireland Illustrative of the Revolutionary Struggle Between James II and William III*. 1841. pp123-139.
https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The_Historical_Songs_of_Ireland/ZJNMAAAAcAAJ?hl=en
- (5) T. Roscoe (Ed.). *The complete works of Jonathan Swift; Containing interesting and valuable papers not hitherto published, and an autograph letter. With memoir of the author*. 1869. Volume 4 pp 852-53.
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015078563924&view=1up&seq=497&skin=2021&q1=trumps>.
- (6) J. Addison. Adventures Of A Shilling. *The Tatler* No. 249 Saturday 11 November 1710.
https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The_Works_of_Joseph_Addison_The_Tatler_T/jTpeMQEA CAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1
- (7) J. O'Donald Mays. *The Splendid Shilling: The Social History of an Engaging Coin*. New Forest Leaves, 1982.
- (8) J. Taylor. *A Shilling, or, the travailes of a twelve pence*. 1621. Text available here:
<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A13495.0001.001/1:5?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>
- (9) G. Oddie. Shovel-Board Shilling, A Tudor and Stuart Pastime. *Token Corresponding Society Bulletin*, Vol. 9 No. 8, September 2009, pp.292-303.
- (10) H. Williams. *The Poems of Jonathan Swift*. Oxford, 1937. Volume III p1098 in the section, Poems attributed to Swift, entry no 20.

Many thanks to Bente and Paul Withers for useful corrections and to John Rainey for bringing the Harold Williams work to my attention.

