O'Neill Money: The Irish "Rebel Money" of the 1640s, the battle flag of the Confederated Catholics, and Eoghan Ruadh Ua Néill

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1. Irish "Rebel Money"

The money of necessity produced in Ireland during the conflicts of the 1640s makes the decade one of the most interesting for Irish numismatics. All of the numerous coinages, save one, left a mark in the extant documentary record, and may be attributed with high confidence to a time and place of production. The exception is the coinage represented by the specimen of Figure 1, the so-called "Rebel Money", of which crowns and halfcrowns were issued, at some point between the outbreak of war in Ulster in 1641, and the end of the Commonwealth campaign in Ireland in 1652.

Figure 1. Rebel Money halfcrown, British Museum 1935,0401.8911.

Both denominations are of simple execution. Both feature a cross potent within concentric linear and beaded circles on the obverse, with a single star or on some specimens a pellet above an arm of the cross between the two circles (not visible on the illustrated specimen; see eg Seaby 1970, 68 for a specimen where the star is clear). The reverse of both shows the denomination – a large V with an S above for the crown, or II VI with S and D above for the halfcrown (the S and D largely obscured on the illustrated specimen) – within concentric linear and beaded circles. Their most striking feature is that – to modern eyes – there is no obvious mark of political affiliation, and in particular, no reference to the king, or any royal iconography at all. The final relevant feature of the coinage is that it is systematically underweight relative to the prevailing standard of 1640s currency, as represented by, for example, the Ormonde coinage.

In the absence of record, and with the passing from collective consciousness of the political symbolism of 1640s Ireland, the attribution of these pieces has been a matter of conjecture since the advent of Irish numismatics as a topic of study. Simon, in his pioneering

[1] The author acknowledges gratefully the assistance of Garry Byrne in providing him with a copy of the scarce and significant reference Hayes-McCoy 1979.

survey of Irish coinage of 1749, referred to the belief that it was "supposed to have been struck during the siege of Dublin [presumably by the besieged Protestant Royalists] in 1641", but then conjectured that by the obverse cross it appeared more likely that the coinage was the work of the "chiefs of the rebels".[2] As the first to discuss the coinage in numismatic literature, it appears that this statement of Simon's was the origin of the traditional name of the coinage. However, the evidence he advanced in support of his attribution has been invalidated by later research.[3] Nonetheless his suggestion, if not its timing, was generally accepted, until Willson Yeates 1920 proposed that the coinage may have been struck by the Parliamentarian deputy governor of Dublin Castle, colonel Michael Jones, sometime after March 1647.

In the absence of further investigation, the best that can be said is that a Royalist provenance for the coinage appears very unlikely, given the absence of any royal iconography or inscription. This leaves, it seems, the competing proposals of a Confederated Catholic or Parliamentarian origin advocated by the differing authorities; and, given that the reverses are clearly imitative of Ormonde money, they almost certainly date to later than July 1643, when the Ormonde coinage began to be issued.[4]

In favour of the Parliamentarian attribution, Willson Smith argued that the cross (on a shield) was a key aspect of Commonwealth symbolism; although the Commonwealth cross is much unlike the cross potent of the "Rebel Money". A second argument in favour of the Parliamentarian attribution is that the star or pellet between the obverse circles is reminiscent of the sun initial mark of large Commonwealth silver. A strong argument (in the author's opinion) against the Parliamentarian attribution is that a systematically underweight coinage appears to be inconsistent with the output of a regime that set itself up as the legitimate government, with all the levers and resources of the British state at its disposal. The Standard Catalogue, meanwhile, attributes the coinage to the Confederated Catholics in 1643-4; this has been carried forward unchanged since Seaby 1970, which in turn was apparently derived from no firmer evidential basis than the concurring opinions of Simon and Aquilla Smith.[5]

The Confederated Catholics were an uneasy alliance of Old English and Gaelic Irish interests, who made common cause to uphold the Roman Catholic religion and the rights of its practitioners in Ireland. The fundamental tension was less of heritage than it was agrarian: between those who had retained their lands to that point, and with it their stake in the Royalist state, and so behaved with more moderation; and those who had already lost both, and so were inclined to behave more ideologically. They all swore an oath of allegiance to Charles I at their incorporation, broadly sincerely in alignment with their interests in the case of the moderates, but otherwise in at least some other cases. Sincere or not, the fact of the oath sits uneasily with the attribution of the "Rebel Money" to them, at least before July 1646, as moderates comprised a controlling majority of their Supreme Council to that point. The coinage definitely attributable to them is imitative of the English currency of Charles I, and features prominent royalist iconography. This coinage was proclaimed on 15 November

[2] Simon 1749 (1810 reprint) 47.
[3] The coin-making proclamation of the Confederated Catholics to which he referred has since been shown convincingly to refer to the "Blacksmith's" halfcrowns, and copper halfpennies and farthings, of the Confederated Catholics.
[4] Smith 1854.
[5] Smith 1860 135-7.

1642,[6] and on 31 December the Supreme Council wrote to Fr. Hugh Bourke in Flanders to "pray you to hasten to us coyners of money".[7]

It may therefore be concluded by way of introduction that the attribution of the "Rebel Money" to any of the three main factions of 1640s Ireland – Protestant Royalist, Confederated Catholic, or Parliamentarian – is in some way problematical.

2. The battle flag of the Confederated Catholics

On a blog of the miniature modelling of historical soldiers and regiments,[8] the author encountered a reference to what appears to be a key piece of evidence in finally attributing the "Rebel Money" on an evidential basis. The relevant document is contained in the papers of Luke Wadding, an Irish Franciscan friar and priest, and founder of the Irish College in Rome, who provided an important link in communication between the Confederated Catholics and the Papacy. The document, entitled in the publication as "The Standards of the Irish Confederate Army, 1643" enumerates – or quite possibly, specifies from Rome – "Christian symbols used in military emblems by Irish Catholics". These were eight distinct double-sided flags, where the left side of each featured some distinct religious image, all paired with a common motif on the right. The common motif was described by Wadding thus:

> *Nota quod in parte dextra cujuslibet vexilli posita sit crux Hiberniae in cujus circuitu color ruber in campo viridi. Sub cruce vivat Rex Carolus; et super, has literas, C. R. et corona Imperialism*.[9]

Google translates this (with a manual tweak to the last word) as:

> Note that on the right side of each flag is placed the cross of Ireland, surrounded by a red circle on a green field. Under the cross vivat Rex Carolus [may King Charles live]; and above, these letters, C. R. and the crown Imperial.

Figure 2. The battle flag of the Confederated Catholics, after Hayes-McCoy 1979 Plate II. Flag II, from Wadding's description and other evidence. Creative Commons, from the Wikipedia page for the Confederated Catholics.

[6] The proclamation is reproduced by Willson Yeates 1920.
[7] Gilbert 1882 126. That they sourced moneyers from Flanders, or at least, attempted to do so, appears not to have been noted in the numismatic literature before.
[8] https://www.keepyourpowderdry.co.uk/2024/09/flags-and-colours-part-2b-evidence.html
[9] Moran 1878 17-18.

The conclusion of the military historian Gerard Hayes-McCoy, who made a detailed study of Confederated Catholic flags, was that the "cross of Ireland" referred to by Wadding for the battle flag was a cross potent. The evidential basis for this was an illustration of the "Ship of State" of the Confederation,[10] presented to Ormonde by the Supreme Council as part of their treaty of 1646 (see below), which featured four white flags each with a red cross potent; a somewhat later badge worn by students of the Irish College of Salamanca, clearly derived from the battle flag;[11] the "Rebel Money" itself (for which Hayes-McCoy accepted Seaby's date of 1643);[12] and the ancient relevance of the motif in Irish Christianity, as illustrated by the Kilnasaggart stone (c. 700 CE) in County Armagh,[13] Figure 3.

Figure 3. The Kilnasaggart stone, County Armagh.

The similarity of the flag described by Wadding to the obverse of the "Rebel Money" is so manifest as to dispel any reasonable doubt that those who issued the coinage were associated in some way to the Confederated Catholics. But it raises two further questions: why was such an overtly warlike symbol chosen, and why were the royal insignia and legend of the flag described by Wadding suppressed on the coins?

The usual purpose of money of necessity throughout history has been to pay for soldiers. The overtly martial symbolism of the "Rebel Money", and the high denominations in which it was struck, suggest very strongly that it was made for, or by, troops that fought under the flag it depicts. The Confederated Catholics fielded three main armies during the wars. Two of these – the Army of Leinster, commanded by the Royalist Old English general Thomas Preston, and the Army of Munster, led by a succession of landed Royalist Irish commanders – both campaigned largely ineffectually, before going down to crushing defeats. The third, the Army of Ulster, was led by an aged, dispossessed and battle-hardened Irish soldier with republican sympathies[14] from a royal house, who paid only lip-service loyalty (and then only when expedient) to the Stuarts who had dispossessed him, his family, and his

[10] Reproduced by Hayes-McCoy 1979 49.
[11] Hayes-McCoy 1979 51.
[12] Hayes-McCoy 1979 49.
[13] Hayes-McCoy 1979 52.
[14] Sympathetic to republicanism, but emphatically not to Parliamentarianism.

followers; and who, alone of the Confederated Catholic generals, won a remarkable victory and died undefeated.

3. Eoghan Ruadh Ua Néill[15]

Eoghan Ruadh Mac Airt Ua Néill was born around 1585 or a little before, a half-nephew of Aodh Mór, earl of Tyrone. As a youth he fought in his uncle's rebellion against Elizabeth I, and emigrated to Spain around or as part of the Flight of the Earls in 1607, when the ancestral Uí Néill lands were confiscated and planted by James I & VI. He entered Spanish military service in an Irish regiment, and spent most of his adult life as a professional soldier in the Spanish Netherlands, campaigning for thirty-five years against the Dutch Republic and France. In 1626 he petitioned Philip III of Spain in person to support Irish independence from Britain, proposing a republic as an interim form of government before the establishment of a new Catholic monarchy.

The Ulster rebellion of 1641 that precipitated the Wars of the Three Kingdoms was started by his cousin Féilim Ua Néill. Eoghan returned to Ireland to join the rebellion in 1642, and assumed command of Irish forces in Ulster. His goals were to establish a Catholic Ascendancy, to reverse the Plantation of Ulster, and to gain self-governance, if not outright independence, for Ireland.[16] He appears to have been dismayed by the massacres of Protestant civilians in Ulster, and put a stop to them, his intervention noted in a first-hand account of the war given by "A British Soldier in the Regiment of Sir John Clotworthy":

> "*Such was the fury of both Scotts and Irish for Blood and Revenge, that they thought it good service to God, to destroy one another, as indeed it continued so till in May [1642] the Scottish army came out of Scotland…under the command of General Lesley…and until Owen MacArt came over from beyond seas, and was Captain General of the Irish of Ulster, who both gave fair quarters like Soldiers, and halted those inhumane acts before done*."[17]

Ua Néill was, perhaps, the most competent and effective soldier that Ireland has produced.[18] He took an irregular rebel rabble, and, with very limited resources, not only kept them in being for the rest of his life in a small and anarchic theatre, but also, drawing on his immense experience of Continental warfare, trained and disciplined them into a formidable army that was more than a match for his adversaries. When he deemed them ready, he engaged; and at Binn Bhorb (Benburb) in Tír Eoghain (Eoghan's Country; Tyrone) on 5 June 1646, he achieved a unique feat for an Irish general in the age of firearms, by destroying a regular British army in a straight fight on an open battlefield.[19] In light of his background, politics, objectives, the tenor of the speech with which he launched his decisive attack from

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[15] Spelled here in contemporary 17th-century Irish, Ó Néill in modern spelling. Also called Don Eugenius and Owen Roe. Eoghan Ruadh means "Red-haired Eoghan".
[16] McClory 2012.
[17] Hogan 1873 9.
[18] In the author's opinion the contest for the accolade is between him and Arthur Wellesley, the duke of Wellington.
[19] Such scant success as other Irish military commanders in gunpowder wars enjoyed was always either against yeomanry or in the context of ambushes or skirmishing engagements in bogs, glens, forests, mountain passes, siege breaches or other narrow ways; never once save at Benburb against regulars in the open field. See Hayes-McCoy 1989 for a detailed account of the battle, and a justification of the preceding statement.

the high ground of Droim Fliuch,[20] and the manner in which he addressed king Charles in the immediate aftermath of the battle (see below), it seems inconceivable that any Stuart royal insignia featured on his battle flags at Benburb. Rather than the usual bald-headed Gaelic charge, his tactics were to first neutralise the British cavalry, then to make a carefully timed[21] and controlled infantry advance into cannon and small-arms fire without response with a mixed formation of pikemen and musketeers, retaining their shot for delivery at point-blank range to remove the opposing pike-wall at the last moment before engagement,[22] followed by an immediate short formed pike charge and a general melée, in a sort of infantry equivalent of what Nelson did at Trafalgar. It was a bold approach, belying his reputation for caution, and rooted in self-belief; it could only have been executed by highly trained and disciplined troops, and it worked, devastatingly. The spoils of the battle included "forty flags and the great standard [of the cavalry]" of his opponents, which were sent to Rome.[23]

Figure 4. Eoghan Ua Néill as a young man, from a contemporary portrait.

The victory was aided by the papal nuncio Giovanni Rinuccini, who had arrived in Ireland in October 1645. He was sent to assist the Confederated Catholics, and brought with him approximately £22,750-equivalent in silver, and £7,000-worth of munitions.[24] On 10 April 1646, he reported to Rome that it had been decided that half of this money was to be

[20] Two versions in English, the first heresay told to Clotworthy's British Soldier and the second a concoction, at https://cartlann.org/authors/eoghan-ruadh-o-neill/owen-roe-oneills-speech-at-benburb/. A third short fragment from the start of the speech was recorded in Irish (the language in which the speech was almost certainly delivered) by the diarist priest Toirdhealbhach Ó Mealláin, who was an eyewitness. It ends after a few lines with an ampersand as though a transcriber had given up, and is roughly consistent with the start of the British Soldier's version. It emphasises Irish dispossession, temporal and spiritual, implemented by "the enemies of your souls" on the other side of the battlefield, Ó Donnchadha 1931 41.

[21] With the setting sun and the veering wind behind him, putting the light and smoke in his opponents' eyes. His infantry stood through an afternoon of cannon-fire before he deemed the moment right.

[22] His speech as reported by Clotworthy's British Soldier ends with the key instruction "so in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, advance, and give not fire till you are within pike-length."

[23] Rinuccini, letter to the Pope, 16 June 1646, Hutton 1873 172.

[24] These figures arrived at by tallying the account given in the footnotes of Hutton 1873 x-xi, assuming that the word "dollar" refers to a piece of eight (converted to sterling at four shillings and sixpence) and that the word "crown" refers to five shillings.

given to Preston in Leinster, and the other half to Ua Néill.[25] In this letter he assessed Ua Néill as "a strange and grasping man", although he later re-assessed the general as "a man of few words, cautious and phlegmatic in his operations, a great adept in concealing his feelings".[26] He also stated that he had wanted to give all the money to Ua Néill; and in his final report of his mission, in 1649, he re-iterated that "I am sorry that I had not devoted all the Papal subsidies to the Ulster army."[27] Nonetheless, the evidence of his correspondence and account shows that Ua Néill received a flood of silver – of the order of £10,000 – two months before Benburb. Doubtless he spent a portion of this on pay and supplies in the lead-up to the battle, but it would have been a practical impossibility for him to have spent it all.

On 30 July 1646, it was proclaimed in Dublin that the (largely moderate, landed, and predominantly Old English) Supreme Council of the Confederation had signed a peace treaty with the Protestant Royalists, represented by Ormonde. The terms were unacceptable to Ua Néill, and to Rinucinni, who excommunicated the council members who supported the treaty. This crystallisation of the fundamentally different objectives of the moderates and the ideologues split the Confederation, and Ua Néill, fresh from Benburb and backed by Rinucinni, emerged as the leader of its separatist and predominantly Gaelic rump. Attempts at joint action with the Army of Leinster were undermined by a long history of deep personal hatred between Ua Néill and Preston[28], which precluded any meaningful collaboration; and the net result was that the strategic possibilities opened up by Benburb were not grasped by the Confederation as they might have been, and time and opportunities were wasted irrevocably.

The New Model Army landed in Ireland in August 1649, facilitated by Ormonde's failure of leadership at the battle of Rathmines. Faced with this unprecedented threat, radical and moderate Catholics, and Protestant Royalists, all united. Ua Néill prepared to confront the greatest challenge of his life, but just when his cause needed him the most, he sickened, took to his bed, and died in November. He was manifestly irreplaceable; although whether he would have been able to make any real difference against the disparity in manpower and resources he faced will remain forever one of the great what-ifs of Irish history. Notably, the most effective resistance to the invasion was mounted by a detachment of his veterans, under the command of his nephew Aodh Dubh (Black-haired Hugh), at the siege of Clonmel. There, undeterred by the events at the sieges of Drogheda and Wexford town, and through the meticulous preparation of a long and narrow killing-ground inside the breach wherein they raked and repulsed the last assault by dismounted "Ironsides" with the chain-shot of two cannons, they inflicted on the New Model Army the most casualties it ever sustained in a single engagement, before vanishing away in the night through the leaguer of their shocked opponents.

Ua Néill was deeply and sincerely committed to his religious beliefs, to the point of fundamentalism to modern secular eyes, and in this regard, was very much a person of his times. Rinucinni recognised and utilised this, although he was not above ill-tempered complaint about it, as in a letter to Rome in April 1647:

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[25] Hutton 1873 158.
[26] Hutton 1873 505.
[27] Hutton 1873 486.
[28] Assessed by Rinucinni as "very subject to fits of anger in which he was so rash and outspoken that he had often to retract with apologies what he had said, so hasty in his warlike enterprises that he was sometimes called inconsiderate", Hutton 1873 505.

> "*One thing I cannot pardon; either through gratitude for the money given last year, or for the glory of his country, or for some other purpose, he allowed his soldiers to call themselves the army of the Pope and the Church. The result is that whenever the Ulster soldiers (barbarous enough by nature although good Catholics) perform any act of cruelty or robbery, the sufferers execrate His Holiness and me, and curse the clergy whom they consider the patrons of this army*."[29]

He evidently got over his upset at his ally's transparent public loyalty to Roman Catholicism; in another letter in September 1648 he wrote that "Five times during my mission has General O'Neill saved religion from destruction".[30] Whilst of his time in matters of religion, Ua Néill was different to all the other senior leaders of all the Irish factions in that he had nothing left to lose in pursuing his cause. He had been dispossessed of his inheritance and (to an extent) of his hereditary status by plantation, had voluntarily quit an outstanding Continental career to return to Ireland to fight, and his only hope of material benefit from his participation was by ultimate total victory. This may have contributed to an ideological commitment that was absolute; not for him were the concessions to Ormonde of July 1646 wrought by worldly concern for the preservation of land rights. Furthermore, he was unique amongst the senior Confederated Catholic and Protestant Royalist leadership in that the only sort of British king that he was prepared to tolerate was one such as Charles I that was too weak to intervene in Ireland. This is illustrated by his reply to a letter he received from Charles after Benburb, in which the king asked him to release lord Montgomery of Ards, whom Ua Néill had captured in the battle. He addressed Charles (to the author's reading, with dripping irony) as his "dread sovereign", while commenting that "[were you] in that free condition you ought to be,[31] your majesty would never have been drawn to press me into the enlargement of so notorious a rebel", and, although he signed himself "your majesty's most humble and obedient servant and subject", he flatly refused the king's request.[32] He might as well have laughed in Charles's face.

4. Attributing the coinage: O'Neill Money

The discussion of the preceding sections may be summarised as follows. "Rebel Money" was stamped on the obverse with a cross potent in a circle, the motif of the battle flag of the Confederated Catholics stripped of its royalist insignia, with a reverse that imitated Ormonde money. The Confederation won one major battle in its wars, under the command of Eoghan Ruadh Ua Néill, while its other generals performed indifferently or badly. Ua Néill was devoutly Catholic and had such a dim view of king Charles that he mocked him in direct communication, and was not only unafraid of offending his titular monarch, but appears to have revelled in it. Two months before his victory he received an enormous sum of money in silver from the papal nuncio, and two months after it he became the effective leader of the radical rump of the Confederation. Within a year of his victory at latest he had proclaimed his army to be that of the pope and of the Roman Catholic church.

[29] Hutton 1873 283.
[30] Hutton 1873 418.
[31] At the time, Charles was confined in the custody of the Scottish Covenanters.
[32] https://cartlann.org/authors/eoghan-ruadh-o-neill/letter-to-king-charles-i/

Ua Néill is therefore indicated with very high probability as the person responsible for issuing "Rebel Money", for which the more specific and less political name "O'Neill Money" is proposed instead. It cannot be gainsaid that by far the most likely time for the issuance of an explicitly non-royalist coinage with an Irish battle symbol stamped on it is in the period of "triumphant rejoicing"[33] in the immediate aftermath of the best performance ever by an Irish army in a major Irish battle in the age of firearms, in which that very symbol was in all likelihood borne to the fray by the victors. And at that time, Ua Néill was the person with the most political authority in the Confederation, the most motivation to commemorate his victory and to propagandise with coinage for his faith and politics, and had the silver available to do so. That the coinage was struck at a low weight standard is consistent with this attribution, because again Ua Néill had every motivation to do this. The Confederation in general, and Ua Néill in particular, were usually desperately short of funds, which hampered their activities enormously. By recoining what he received from Rinucinni at a lower standard, and with the authority and prestige to enforce its acceptance at least amongst the Irish,[34] Ua Néill could in time-honoured fashion make what he had go further. It is reasonable to suppose that as an old and utterly committed campaigning soldier he would have been overwhelmingly more concerned with keeping his forces in the field and following up on his victory than with his monetary reputation; the same could not necessarily be said of the political councils of any of the contemporary Irish factions. The absence of record is also consistent with the attribution of the coinage to the order of a field general for the usage of his personal money supply rather than to the decision of a political council. O'Neill Money is therefore identified, with the possible exception of the Hiberno-Norse bracteates, as the only coinage ever issued by Gaelic Ireland.

A final observation on the attribution concerns the star on the obverse of some of the pieces. An image of Ua Néill's seal survives,[35] bearing the Uí Néill arms, Figure 5. Three stars are a prominent feature of his heraldic signature. The vast majority of coats of arms do not contain stars, and the author did not know before looking that there were stars in the 17th-century Uí Néill arms. The prior improbability of finding stars on Ua Néill's family arms and personal seal is a further corroboration of the attribution of the coinage to him. Perhaps he instructed a star to be placed on the coins, as a mark of their provenance; or perhaps the coins imitated the flags in that also, because the Army of Ulster replaced the crowned royal initials with a star on their standards in honour of their exceptional general.

Figure 5. The seal of Eoghan Ruadh Ua Néill.

[33] The words of Rinuccini in a letter of June 16 1646. Hutton 1873 172.
[34] Rinucinni's complaint about Ua Néill's public loyalty may in part be a veiled reference to the issuance of an underweight coinage to his troops.
[35] Ó Cómain 1991 120, according to the heraldic website https://www.hubert-herald.nl/UKNorthernIreland.htm#_edn11

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