

The Northern Ireland 50th Anniversary Commemorative Medal

By Barrie Renwick FCNRS

In Ireland, years of civil unease following Britain's iron-handed defeat of the 1916 Easter Rising—Irish nationalists' attempted secession of Ireland from The United Kingdom—led Britain to ultimately impose compromise settlement conditions: to placate basic demands by Irish “nationalists,” soothe opposing wishes of Irish “unionists,” and yet conform to Britain's Act of Union. That brought timely relief but partitioned Ireland. Its thirty-two counties split; twenty-six separated, and under the conditions they emerged as the Irish Free State, a dominion in the British Empire. That new entity had changes over many years, eventually becoming the Republic of Ireland. In the island's north, six counties out of nine in Ulster province retained allegiance to the UK, officially becoming Northern Ireland, in 1921.

Northern Ireland's governance from 1922 to 1972 was administered by its Northern Ireland Executive empowered with certain local area administrative responsibilities devolved by the UK government: Westminster. Known as Ulster by some, Northern Ireland had a never-ending history of unrest, violence and unresolved political and or religious differences because of intransigence among committed members in various groups of locals opposed to liberties sought by others. Nevertheless, Britain decided to honour the timely request by the Government of Northern Ireland, for a medal to commemorate its 50th Anniversary, in 1971.

The medal, struck by the Royal Mint, has on its obverse the effigy of Queen Elizabeth II facing right and wearing a tiara. This likeness, adapted from an RM copy of the 1966 effigy created by Humphrey Paget (1893–1974) shows her as she would have appeared in the last third of those Northern Ireland 50-years being celebrated. In the legend above: QUEEN ELIZABETH II and below, REGINA. Centred on the medal's reverse—the official Arms of Northern Ireland with the legend above: NORTHERN IRELAND and below, 1921–1971. The reverse was adapted by RM's engravers from a 2p coin design by Christopher Ironside (1913–1992). The medal in silver is 44.45mm diameter weighing 70.29g. In bronze it is 31.75mm weighing 27.21g. The Northern Ireland 50th Anniversary Medal is catalogued: Eimer 2123.

Royal Mint in-house memo M12/70 notes that in July 1970 the Government of Northern Ireland ordered 1000 anniversary silver medals and 5000 bronze. The memo forecasts RM delivering these by mid-December 1970. Another RM memo says preparatory work for the medal started in 1970 but soon got suspended, for what became a prolonged pause, awaiting Royal approval to use the Queen's effigy. After this approval in March 1971, work resumed well past the forecast delivery time. RM lacked Paget's original Elizabeth II model, so, die workers copied this effigy from an RM one made for a different project. That copy needed retouching to improve its rendering on the die. Unfortunately, the die eventually failed. Production stopped. In time a new die, with the effigy now copied from a more-suitable RM source, replaced it.

RM Mint Report 103 for the period gives total medal production numbers by category, but shows no summary of individual entries. We're left to conclude that the numbers of silver and bronze medals supplied completed the order. What is clear though, is that well-struck silver medals from

the first die were among the quantity supplied. The retouching of the first die is most noticeable in the effigy's cheek area when a first-die strike is compared to the replacement effigy on a second-die strike. An enlargement of each image is shown for comparison.

Afterword

Fifty years on from 1971 and several Northern Ireland silver medals from each die-run have been turning up. Royal Mint files don't disclose how many acceptable first-die strikes were in the delivered order. But rather than replace them, it was likely: delays, the urgency to supply, and an economic choice to complete the order with medals from the second-die. That seems a reasonable decision; and silver medals of each die version, in today's market, support this.

Medal collectors will refer to the first-die strike as a "minor variety."

Information source:

The Royal Mint Museum, Wales, UK for the medal's development and description



First die Obv



Second die Obv



Rev

