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Rex-dollars in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland during the 17th century

This is a belated reply to Tony Dalton's query related to rex-dollars (*WHN&Q*, Dec 2015, 3/29, p. 31) and can add some additional examples on the circulation of this type of money in the Highlands and Islands during the seventeenth century further to the responses supplied by Jean Munro from the Records of the Hammermen of Edinburgh and the coin hoards at Islay and Stornoway flagged up by David H. Caldwell (*WHN&Q*, April 2016, 3/30, 14-15). The reference to 'Bishop's dollars' remains obscure but 'rex-dollaris' (with variant spellings) appear in other documentary sources and a number of these, from throughout Scotland, can be seen collated in the online *Dictionar of the Scots Leid*.¹ The Gaidhealtachd has tended to be seen by some as an area that was cut off and isolated from contemporary developments with little cash circulation. Tenants often paid their rents in kind. Yet, while payment in kind remained important, more cash circulated in the Highlands and Islands than is sometimes realised.² Most of the money in circulation was Scottish but on occasion the circulating

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coinage could include English and foreign currency such as 'rex-dollars.' Indeed rex-dollars became proverbial in Gaelic.

A h-uile fear a thèid a dholaidh, gheibh e dolair bho MacAoidh
(*every man that down on his luck can get a dollar from Mackay*).

This probably refers to Dòmhnall Mackay, Lord Reay, who recruited soldiers from the Highlands and Islands for the Scandinavian and German wars in the 1620s and 1630s, largely paid for by Danish and then Swedish monies.³ Reay accused the Duke of Hamilton and a subordinate of Hamilton's, Captain David Ramsay, of plotting treason in March 1631, stating that Ramsay had told him forces raised by Hamilton in Scotland for Swedish service might be used against Charles I. These charges seem to have been dismissed.⁴ News of this, however, was carried in a letter from Gilleasbuig Campbell of Glencarradale at Edinburgh to the laird of Glenorchy, July 1631, giving reactions there to the latest developments at Edinburgh, together with news of restrictions on the importation of rex-dollars by the Privy Council.⁵

These two facts, carried in Campbell's letter were not necessarily linked. The Privy Council at Edinburgh had, in fact, discussed rex-dollars before this. As long ago as 1602 and 1611 the Council discussed measures to control and regulate foreign coinage. These controls needed to be relaxed in 1624 due to a shortage of bullion but the use of foreign coins led to anxiety about the weight and

purity of imported money.⁶ Moreover, by February 1629 the merchant community and the treasury brought their concerns before the Privy Council regarding:

‘...the difference of the rex dollours amongs thameselffes in value, weight or fynness, [and that] the Lords [of Council] ordanis the Maister of the Cunziehous [Mint] to try the dollours, callit the Matthias dollour, the Spinolas dollour, the Beare dollour, and the Ramme dollour, and to report thair fynesse to the Counsell....’⁷

That Sir John Acheson, General of the Mint, proposed measures in November 1630, to deal with the inflow of rex-dollars, restraining the inflow of foreign currency along with concerns about the relative value of these coins, is an indication of the amount of rex-dollars in circulation. It was proposed to convert these foreign monies into ‘your Hienes awne coyne.’⁸

Many of the rex-dollars in Scotland came, perhaps obviously, as a result of external contact or intervention. Dòmhnall Mackay, Lord Reay’s direct involvement in the service of the Swedish Crown ended in 1637 with his retirement and a payment from the Swedes to him of 600 ‘riksdaler’, some of which probably filtered through the local economy in Sutherland.⁹ Both Steve

[p.21] Murdoch and Thomas Brochard have published papers on the extensive interaction and connections between the north of Scotland and northern Europe which show that we should be in no way surprised that European currency circulated in the area given the scale of contact over the course of the seventeenth century.¹⁰ Indeed, one of the examples Brochard gives in his paper which refers specifically to the unit of currency in question, cites a deal made by Dòmhnall Mackay, Lord Reay and his son, Iain, with traders from Hamburg in 1643 involving salmon to the value of 440 rex-dollars. Another instance cited by Brochard related to how the Macdonalds of Clanranald boarded a Leith ship which ended up off course at Barra in 1627. This had been bound from Glasgow to Gdansk before Clanranald relieved the ship of its cargo together with a number of dollar pieces.¹¹ The Dutch settlers who agreed with the Earl of Seaforth to settle at Stornoway, 31 May 1629, seemed to be able to use ‘gilder Holland money’ (rather than rex-dollars) in Lewis alongside Scottish currency with little difficulty in exchange or conversion.¹² Such documentary evidence of foreign coinage in the Isle of Lewis is supported by finds of an English sixpence (1580) at Dùn Èistean, a French coin dating from 1640 at Barabhas Machair and a hoard with a number of continental coins at Stornoway deposited some time around 1670.¹³ More dramatically, Montrose’s last, ill-fated rebellion, which ended at Carbisdale, 1650, was funded by a payment of ‘24,000 Rixdoller’ advanced by the Danish Crown.¹⁴

Not all usage was as a direct result of external influence. Foreign coins could and did circulate more locally alongside Scots and English currency. Some additional references, showing rex-dollars in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland during the seventeenth century follow. Iain Mackay, a native of

Thurso, trading in the Isle of Lewis as a fish merchant, paid duty on 12 lasts of herring and 2200 codling and ling, with '14 dolloris' in 1634.¹⁵ A group of men from Culbokie in the Black Isle, 'Farq[ua]r Mack Ane vick Ane, Thomas Mack Alister Millar, Alexander mackomas greasiche and Gillemichell mckeane vick Finlay' (*Fearchar mac Iain mhic Iain, Tòmas mac Alasdair Millar, Alasdair mac Thòmais greusaiche and Gillemìcheil mac Iain mhic Fhionnlaigh*), borrowed from an Uilleam Mackenzie of 'Mulliche' in September 1648 the number of ten 'rix dolloris extending to the sowme of fourtie thrie merkis sex schillingis...'¹⁶ This last deed is useful as it shows the relative value being placed on the rex-dollars in comparison with Scots money, something that is not always apparent. A number of documents in the Tain and Balnagown papers refer to transactions involving this unit of currency in 1639, 1677, 1688, 1689, 1696, 1698.¹⁷ Rothesay Town Council records contain a number of references to rex-dollars in circulation being used for payments in the area and in the town, especially between 1668 and 1678; and Kingarth Kirk Session records, similarly, contain a number of payments being made within Bute using rex-dollars in the period 1650-1685.¹⁸ Further examination of the papers of

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Mackays, Munros of Easter Ross and other families from the period, where such can be found, especially if they were involved in either continental trade or in the wars of the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and Germany may well yield more occasional references of this nature.¹⁹ Scottish coinage was, as one might expect, the most prevalent form of currency in the Gaidhealtachd in the seventeenth century together with some English and European coinage. This is not only suggested by the documentary record but confirmed by the discoveries of coins and coin hoards from all parts of the Gaidhealtachd: foreign coins have been found from Lewis to Perthshire and from Islay to Caithness, underlining the connections of the area with the wider world during this the period.²⁰

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¹ See the online *Dictionar o the Scots Leid* (Dictionary of the Scots Language) under headings such as 'Rix', 'Rex-dollour', 'Leg-dollour': <<http://www.dsl.ac.uk/>> .

² R.A. Dodgshon, *From chiefs to Landlords. Social and Economic change in the western Highlands*, . c. 1493-1820 (Edinburgh, 1998), 103-115. A. MacCoinnich, *Plantation and Civility in the North Atlantic World. The Case of the Northern Hebrides, 1570-1637* (Leiden, 2015), 4-6, 198-208, 258, 261-262, 288.

³ A. Nicolson, ed., *Gaelic Proverbs. The gu leòr cho math ri culm. A collection of Gaelic proverbs and familiar phrases* (4th edition, Birlinn, Edinburgh, 2011), 5. This proverbial saying is also found in A. Mackay, *The Book of Mackay* (Edinburgh, 1906), 132. For the career of Lord Reay and some specific references to rex-dollars see I. Grumble, *The Chief of Mackay* (1965: Saltire Society, Edinburgh, 1993), chapter 5 & 109-111, 116-117, 145, 156. NRS, GD 84/2/182.

⁴ A.N.L. Grosjean, 'Mackay, Donald, first Lord Reay (1591-1649), army officer in the Danish-Norwegian and Swedish service' in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/17556>, accessed 28 April 2016]. I Grimble, *The Chief of Mackay*, 112-116.

⁵ Letter, dated 26 July 1631, from Archibald Campbell of Glencarradale at Edinburgh to 'my Ryt hon[orabi]ll', presumably Colin Campbell of Glenorchy, NRS, GD112/39/42/31.

⁶ R.B.K. Stevenson & J. Porteous, 'Two seventeenth century coin hoards,' in the *British Numismatic Journal*, 41 (1972), 136-146, at 140-141.

⁷ P. Hume Brown, ed., *Register of the Privy Council of Scotland, 2nd Series*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh, 1901), 51.

⁸ P. Hume Brown, ed., *Register of the Privy Council of Scotland, 2nd Series*, vol. 4 (Edinburgh, 1902), 63-64.

⁹ Grosjean, 'Mackay, Donald, first Lord Reay,' (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry, no. 17566).

¹⁰ S. Murdoch, 'More than just Mackay's and mercenaries'; Gaelic influences in Scandinavia, 1580-1707', in, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 60 (1997-98), 161-186. T. Brochard, 'The Socio-economic relations between Scotland's northern

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territories and Scandinavia and the Baltic in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', *International Journal of Maritime History*, 26 (2014), 210-234.

¹¹ Brochard, 'The Socio-economic relations between Scotland's northern territories and Scandinavia and the Baltic', 220, 224.

¹² MacCoinnich, 265-267, 277-279, 464-468, 473, 478. See also 'Description' by Captain John Dymes of the Dutch in Lewis, 1630, in W. C. Mackenzie, *History of the Outer Hebrides* (Paisley, 1903), 592.

¹³ J.D. Bateson, 'Roman and medieval coins found in Scotland, to 1987', *P[roceedings of the] S[ociety of] A[ntiquaries], S[cotland]*, 119 (1989), 165-188, at 171. D. Bateson, 'Coins', in R. Barrowman, ed., *Dùn Èistean, Ness. The excavation of a Clan Stronghold* (Acair, 2015), 240-242. R. Kerr, 'A Hoard of coins from Stornoway,' *PSAS*, 88 (1954-56), 222-223.

¹⁴ Murdoch, 'More than just Mackay's and Mercenaries', 177.

¹⁵ MacCoinnich, *Plantation and Civility*, 420. NRS, GD 188/31/12/1.

¹⁶ A band, dated at Culbokie, the 18 September 1648. This document wrapped in a bundle of papers with a wrapper bearing the legend 'anent the Mackenzies', in, NRS, SC 34/28/8. The identification of 'Mulliche' is less apparent but might a place similarly named 'Mulchaich' which appears on modern OS maps, two miles to the south east of Culbokie.

¹⁷ W. MacGill, ed., *Old Ross-shire and Scotland as seen in the Balnagown documents* (Inverness, 1909), Nos 181, 345, 468, 510, 531. 540, 752 (pp. 73, 131, 186, 203, 211-12, 216-18. 297).

¹⁸ M. B. Johnson, ed., *Rothsay Town Council records, 1653-1766* (2 vols, Edinburgh, 1935), i, 149. 178, 180, 196. 210, 246, 367. H. Paton, ed., *Kingarth Parish Records. The Session book of Kingarth, 1641-1703* (Bute Scottish Records Series, Edinburgh, 1932), 24, 43, 103, 109, 131.

¹⁹ The online catalogue of the National Records of Scotland, Edinburgh, for example, indicates that a number of documents in the Mackay of Reay papers, NRS, GD 84, contain references to rex-dollars.

²⁰ This is suggested not only by documentary sources but also by the presence of foreign coins (English and continental) which have been found among Scottish coinage in hoards deposited (c.1570-1700) in Lewis (see note 13, above) and at Hillhead in Wick, Glenelg, Castle Maol and Snizort, Ardnave in Islay, Colonsay, Rannoch, Annat, Barbreck, Ardmaddy in Kilbrandon (Argyll), Cromarty, Invergordon and Glenquach in Perthshire. Stevenson & Porteous, 'Two seventeenth century coin hoards,' 136, 138-139. R. Kerr & R.B.K. Stevenson, 'Coin hoards in Scotland, 1955', in *PSAS*, 89 (1955-56), 107-117, at 112-113. J.D. Bateson, 'Roman and Medieval coins found in Scotland, to 1987,' *PSAS*, 119 (1989), 182, 185-186. R.B.K. Stevenson, 'Coin hoard, Castle Maol, Skye', *PSAS*, 85 (1950-51), 158-159. However, in contrast to this, a hoard of 134 coins found at Castlecary, Stirlingshire, deposited in the 1640s contained no English or European coins. D. Bateson, 'The Castlecary hoard and the civil war currency of Scotland', *British Numismatic Journal*, 77 (2007), 246-263.