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HARP PERSPECTIVES

tradition, lineage and revival

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Welcome to *Harp Perspectives*, Cruit Éireann, Harp Ireland's online journal.

One of our strategic aims is to establish thought leadership across the harp sector by building up a body of thinking about the harp and harping through a historical and contemporary lens.

Harp Perspectives is the beginning of a conversation about harping and features key informants, harpers and non-harpers, sharing their authentic views and ideas.

We believe that this combination of scholarly research and personal insights will highlight the harping legacy inherited from our tradition bearers and help forge a contemporary harping identity, secure in its understanding of its origin and how it wishes to evolve.

In the coming months, we will be welcoming many voices to the conversation and hope that they will broaden horizons and provide new perspectives on current and future harp directions.

Our thanks to each of our contributors for their willingness to add their voices. Their contributions will no doubt enrich our thinking.

Aibhlín McCrann and Eithne Benson

Editors

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TRADITION, LINEAGE AND REVIVAL

Simon Chadwick

The Irish harp is different from all our other traditional arts because the Irish harp tradition was broken.

The fiddle, the uilleann pipes, the song tradition, the dance, and storytelling traditions – these traditional artforms are defined by them being handed down from one generation to the next, in the ‘carrying stream’ of the living tradition. As people and communities change, so the tradition changes and adapts, because it must stay relevant and alive in the mouths and hands of the people. But there is a core that defines the tradition, and that is the continuous lineage of passing on from parents to children, from elders to youngsters, from teachers to pupils¹.

Though each of these traditional artforms has had their difficult times, when it seemed they might vanish forever, there have always been enough tradition-bearers that a revival can build on the learning and knowledge of the older generations².

But the Irish harp is different, because there is no thread of lineage or transmission that goes back to the old harpers of 200 or more years ago. When Edward Bunting went to the Belfast Harp Festival in 1792 to write down the music of the old harpers, he was doing this because people could see that the tradition was dying; Bunting was tasked to write down the tunes so that when the last of the harpers died, at least their melodies would be saved, by being transcribed, arranged, and published for piano.

Lineage

I want to unpick this aspect of lineage a bit more, because I think it is really important in any tradition, and because it has been a bit neglected in the Irish harp world³.

I first came across the importance of lineage within a tradition, when I was reading about the Welsh harp tradition in Anglesey. A book by Llio Rhydderch and Huw Roberts⁴ included a full-page chart, like a family tree, showing how Llio and Huw had learned the harp from teachers, who knew who their teachers were, in a great column of teachers’ teachers’ teachers’ teachers’ as far back as the great Welsh harpers of the 17th century, and further back to the medieval harpers until it was lost in the mists of time.

I realised that Huw and Llio were justifiably proud of their lineage. And I also realised that this is true in many other old traditions. Even if you only know who your teacher’s teacher was, that

1 Crawford, Sylvia. *Towards the Potential Role of a Neglected Eighteenth-Century Harper in Cultural Tourism in the Oriel Region*, (MA Thesis, Dundalk Institute of Technology, 2018), p.112. Online at <http://www.sylviacrawford.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Sylvia-Crawford-MA-thesis.pdf>.

2 Ní Uallacháin, Pádraigín, *A Hidden Ulster*, (Four Courts Press, 2003); also <http://orielarts.com>.

3 Some of this article is based on a talk I gave at Scoil na gCláirseach, Kilkenny, August 2017. You can see a video of the entire talk online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLF6z6qxPp4>.

4 Rhydderch, Llio, and Roberts, Huw, *Telynorion Llanerch-y-Medd / The Harpers of Llanerch-y-Medd*, (Isle of Anglesey County Council 2000).

still gives you a sort of lineage, it places you within the wider tradition and gives you a sense of where your art comes from.

I started researching the concept of lineage in Irish harping, and I realised that I had to start from both ends separately.

Starting from the Beginning

If we start with the oldest information about harp teaching and learning to play the harp, our information comes from the 18th century. The old Irish harper, Arthur O'Neill from County Tyrone, tells us quite a bit in his *Memoirs*⁵ about who learned the harp from whom. It seems that this knowledge was important to him (of course!). He doesn't give us long detailed lineage charts like Huw and Llio, but he does give us little snippets of information. He tells us the names of harpers who had been taught by Cornelius Lyons, harper to the Earl of Antrim: there were two students, Echlin O Catháin, and Hugh Quinn. He tells us about Charles Byrne, who was taught to play the harp by his uncle.

Arthur O'Neill also tells us about himself: 'I was about 10 years old when I commenced learning to play the Harp under Owen Keenan of Augher. He frequented my father's house for 2 years and I attended him in Augher for about half a year, at which time I was considered to play middling well...'

Arthur O'Neill also taught other people to play the harp. He tells us that he was engaged by Michael McDonnell in the Glens of Antrim, to teach the three sons, Randal, James, and Alexander. James McDonnell was too distracted by his medical and scientific studies to make much progress on the harp, but his childhood harp lessons must have been an influence on him when he came to organise the 1792 gathering in Belfast.

So, we can start to see that Dr James McDonnell and his brothers had a lineage, through their teacher Arthur O'Neill, back to his teacher Owen Keenan.

By 1792, most of the harpers were old men, and these old men were not teaching young people to play the harp. People were worried that the harp was in danger of dying out, and so the Belfast Harp Festival was organised to bring the last of the old harpers together. Edward Bunting was commissioned to write down their tunes, so that even if the harp tradition came to an end, the tunes could at least be published and preserved.

Perhaps the organisers realised that it was no use just having the tunes, if there was not also a harp tradition kept alive. So, eleven years later, in 1803, the new Belfast Harp Society employed Arthur O'Neill to teach young blind boys to play the harp⁶. He had quite a few pupils, and they did well. But the school ran out of money and had to close.

5 Arthur O'Neill wrote his autobiography around 1800. The first draft manuscript version is Queen's University Belfast, Special Collections, MS4.46, online at <http://digital-library.qub.ac.uk/digital/collection/p15979coll9/id/2001/rec/16> and the second, neat version is QUB SC MS4.14.1, online at <http://digital-library.qub.ac.uk/digital/collection/p15979coll9/id/1673/rec/4> There are two edited published versions of Arthur O'Neill's Memoirs; in Milligan Fox, Charlotte, *Annals of the Irish Harpers* (1911), and in O'Sullivan, Donal, *Carolán, the Life, Times and Music of an Irish Harper*, (1958).

6 McClelland, Aiken, 'The Irish Harp Society', *Ulster Folklife* Volume 21, (1975).

After Arthur O'Neill died, there was a fresh fundraising effort, and a new school was opened in Belfast in 18197. By that date, there were 'no harpers in Ireland, save those who derived their education from Arthur O'Neill, master in the first school'⁸. One of those harpers who had learned under Arthur O'Neill at the first school, Edward McBride, became the master of the new school. McBride taught quite a few harpers to play, including the famous Patrick Byrne⁹ who played for Queen Victoria, and had his photograph taken in Edinburgh in 1845.

So, Patrick Byrne had a great lineage, through his teacher Edward MacBride, who was taught the harp by Arthur O'Neill, who was taught the harp in the early 18th century by Owen Keenan. But we don't know who taught Owen Keenan to play the harp.

There were quite a few harpers in the later 1800s who had learned the harp at the Belfast school. Patrick Byrne was the most famous, but others include Valentine Rennie, who also learned from Arthur O'Neill, and who took over as master after McBride. Patrick Murney was still alive in 1882¹⁰; Samuel Patrick died in 1888¹¹.

But none of this last generation of harpers taught. After Byrne, Rennie, Murney and the others had died, they had not passed on their traditions to the next generation. Yes, their tunes were alive, published by Bunting and others, played on pianos, fiddles, and pipes, but the harp tradition had stopped. The playing techniques, the styles, the sound of the harp, all the things that are so important for a living tradition, had stopped.

I am always on the look-out for extra information – a hint of a student, another name to add to these lineages – never say never! But it doesn't look promising.

Starting from the End

We can work in the opposite direction, to trace the lineages of today's players backwards. I myself don't have a lineage in Irish harping; I mostly taught myself, with a lot of influence from Ann Heymann and Siobhán Armstrong. But most harp players in Ireland today do have a lineage that they can trace back a number of 'generations'.

It seems to me that today's Irish harpers can trace their lineages back in two main branches through the middle of the 20th century¹². At Sion Hill there were the Ní Shé sisters, Mairín and Róisín, and at Loreto there was Mother Alphonsus O'Connor and her harp teacher Mother Attracta Coffey.

Mairín Ní Shé taught a number of people including Mary O'Hara and Janet Harbison. Janet has taught so many people to play; I can't imagine the number of Irish harpers nowadays who can trace their lineage back through their teacher, who was taught by Janet, who was taught by Mairín.

7 O'Donnell, Mary Louise, 'The Bengal Subscription', in Joyce, Sandra, and Lawlor, Helen (eds), *Harp Studies* (Four Courts Press, 2016) pp. 75-89.

8 Bunting, Edward, *The Ancient Music of Ireland*, (Hodges & Smith, 1840) introduction p.65

9 <https://www.orielarts.com/harp/patrick-byrne/>.

10 O'Laverty, James, 'The Irish Harp', *Denvir's Monthly*, (1903).

11 'The Irish Harp: A Case of Distress', *Belfast News-Letter* (Friday 23rd March, 1888).

12 Linnett, Oona, *The Irish Harp*, MA thesis (Bangor 2003).

Mother Alphonsus taught Sheila Larchet-Cuthbert, and of course her book has been a huge influence on many people¹³. Nancy Calthorpe¹⁴ studied both with Sheila and with Mairín, and so the two branches come together, and Nancy's students have the honour of having two different lineages, one back through Sheila and Mother Alphonsus and Mother Attracta, and the other back to Mairín.

It gets harder the further back we go though. Mother Attracta's lineage is simpler and more linked with the classical pedal harping tradition; she was in correspondence with the Welsh pedal harpist John Thomas, who learned the harp in England from John Balsir Chatterton, who had studied with the great French classical pedal harpist, Boscha. Mother Attracta had been taught the harp by Owen Lloyd, who is a very interesting and important figure in the Gaelic revivals of the 1890s. He taught quite a few people to play the harp¹⁵, and he also worked with James McFall in Belfast, who designed and made new models of Irish harp. Owen Lloyd himself first learned pedal harp from John Thomas's brother, Thomas ApThomas, and then studied with the Swedish classical pedal harpist and composer, Adolf Sjöden¹⁶. Lloyd's pedal harp background explains the quite classical-style arrangements that have been noticed in this lineage of Irish harpers¹⁷.

I did wonder at one point¹⁸ if Lloyd might have been some kind of 'missing link' to the old tradition – in 1879 as a young student, he performed at an event in Dublin that had been organised by Sjöden, and there were also one or two of the Belfast Society students performing that evening. At some point, Lloyd had got hold of one of the Egan wire-strung harps that had been made in the 1830s for the Belfast Harp Society, but the photo of him with it clearly shows he has fitted it with thick pale gut strings. But it was not his main instrument; he usually played his pedal harp¹⁹, and his music arrangements²⁰ have very classical chordal accompaniments and show no traces of the older Irish tradition.

The Ní Shé sisters were taught to play the harp by Caroline Townshend. Now we come to a dead end because no-one seems to know where Carrie learned to play the harp²¹. There was another Cork harpist performing at the same time, Sile MacCurtain²², who was involved in the same kinds of political and social circles – did they know each other? We don't know who taught Sile to play either. We are told that Carrie got her harp from Wales, which is interesting because it gives some kind of Welsh connection to this branch of the lineage as well.

I think there are two possibilities for these people, Carrie and Sile. One is that they learned pedal harp at a music school or with a private teacher; another possibility is that they learned piano and singing, and then they 'taught themselves' to play the harp, a bit like I did – you get hold of an instrument, and you work alone with just the harp and your own previous knowledge of music, gradually working out fingering patterns and arrangement styles that sound right to

13 Larchet Cuthbert, Sheila, *The Irish Harp Book, a Tutor and Companion* (The Mercier Press, 1975).

14 Jim Cooke, *A Musical Journey 1890-1993: From Municipal School of Music to Dublin Institute of Technology* (1994), Appendix 1, p.87-88 online at <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ditpress/5/>.

15 Ó Lochlainn, Colm, 'Review of Carolan: The Life, Times and Music of an Irish Harper by Donal O'Sullivan', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 48, No. 190 (Summer, 1959), p.221.

16 O'Donnell, Mary Louise, 'Owen Lloyd', *Éire-Ireland*, (48, 3/4, 2013).

17 Lawlor, Helen, *Irish Harping 1900-2010*, (Four Courts Press 2012) pp.25-34.

18 <http://simonchadwick.net/2017/05/continuity-of-tradition.html> .

19 See for example *An Claidheamh Soluis* 17th June 1899.

20 Laoide, Eoghan (Owen Lloyd), *An Cruitire*, (Conradh na Gaedhilge, 1903).

21 Frewen, Angela, *The Life and Legacy of Caroline Townshend*, online at <http://www.astro.wisc.edu/~townsend/tree/scrapbooks/5Co8.pdf>.

22 A harp given to Sile MacCurtain by Maude Gonne was sold at Whyte's in Dublin in May 2015. See <https://www.whytes.ie/art/maud-gonne-a-harp-given-to-her-by-wb-yeats/147950/>.

your ear. But the fact that Carrie taught Sanchia Florence Pielou, who became founder and principal harpist of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra at the age of 20, suggests to me that Carrie most likely had pedal harp lessons herself. But we have no information at present.

I would like to do more research on Carrie especially, but also on the other Irish harpists of the 1890s and the early 20th century, to find out more about how they learned, who they taught, and how they played.

But you will see that the revival harpers of the 1890s were not studying with the last of the old men from the Belfast school. I have not seen any hint of a connecting thread from the last of the old harpers who died in the 1880s, and the new generation of revival harpers in the 1890s. I think that is the fundamental break in our tradition.

Revival

Owen Lloyd, Carrie Townshend, and Sile MacCurtain, were all heavily involved in the great revival of Irish life, culture, and politics, which happened in the 1890s. This is the decade when Conradh na Gaeilge was founded, and the Feis Ceoil and Oireachtas na Gaeilge started up. Throughout the early years of the 1900s these movements grew and blossomed, and were as much political as cultural – language, art, culture, and politics feeding each other²³. The harp, as one of the symbols of Ireland, had an important role to play in this mix.

At the first Feis Ceoil in 1897, we find the same concern for the ‘dying’ music traditions which we saw 100 years before in Belfast²⁴. There was a section for ‘previously unpublished airs’, and pipers were asked to play their tunes into a wax-cylinder-recording machine so as to ‘preserve’ them and allow them to be transcribed and published²⁵. If only Edward Bunting had possessed a wax cylinder machine in Belfast in 1792 – we could have heard the sound of Arthur O’Neill, Patrick Quin, and Hugh Higgins playing their tunes!

I think people thought the Irish pipes might die out, but of course we know now that they didn’t. Because there were tradition-bearers alive, and also people who really wanted to learn to play; the learners could go to the tradition bearers to learn the fingerings, sounds, techniques and styles, and so the lineage and the tradition survived and grew.

Na Píobairí Uilleann was founded in 1968 and they estimated that there were only about 100 players of the Uilleann pipes left by then²⁶.

The organisers of the Feis Ceoil in 1897 thought they could do the same for the harp, and they included a category for ‘Irish wire strung harp’, but no-one entered; ‘after diligent enquiry, the Committee were forced to come to the conclusion that there was not a performer living’²⁷. And so we see that for people who really wanted to play the Irish harp in the 1890s, that option of going

23 McMahon, Timothy, ‘The Gaelic revival’, in *Atlas of the Irish Revolution*, (Cork University Press, 2017) pp.98-103.

24 O’Neill, Barry, ‘Piping contests at the Feis, 1897-1935’, *The Seán Reid Society Journal* volume 1, March 1999. Online at <http://seanreidsociety.org/SRSJ1/Feis%20Ceoil.PDF>.

25 O’Brien-Moran, Jimmy, ‘Capturing Diversity whilst creating Canon’ in Thérèse Smith (ed), *Ancestral Imprints*, (Cork University Press 2012), p.93.

26 <https://pipers.ie/about/>.

27 Armstrong, Robert Bruce, *The Irish and the Highland Harps* (David Douglas, Edinburgh, 1904) p. 52-3, footnote 5.

to the tradition bearers to learn playing techniques, fingerings, sounds and styles, was not possible. There were only two options: borrow techniques and styles from somewhere else or invent new ones²⁸. Today's lineages trace back to the people who either borrowed or invented their practice and styles in the late 1800s.

Once we understand our 130-year-old tradition of Irish harping, and how it started off, we can understand better the different strands within it, and we can understand better how each of us fits into the developing and ever-changing flow of the tradition. I think that this fundamental difference between the truly inherited carrying streams of fiddle, pipes, song, and language, and the broken and revived Irish harp tradition, is important for us to understand if we are to develop harp playing in Ireland to its fullest potential.

Because the Irish harp tradition was revived, either by borrowing from classical pedal harp or by inventing new Irish playing techniques, it is naturally quite dependent on the wider social and cultural zeitgeist of the time when that reviving, or inventing happened. We can see this if we look at aspects of the Irish harp tradition in the 20th century. Once we see the Irish harp tradition as a process of revival, we can understand how it fits into other music and cultural spaces.

For example, it was natural in the 1890s that the pedal harp and piano style and techniques would be influential, because of the way that the Gaelic revivalists tended to be quite middle-class and urban-based²⁹. We can also see how the harp was very much a woman's instrument from the beginning of the revival in the 1890s³⁰, a complete gender reversal from the old harp tradition, which was mostly male harpers right down to the last of the old men who died in the 1880s. And we also see the urban focus of the revived Irish harp traditions of the 1890s and early 1900s, reflecting the urban focus of Conradh na Gaeilge, which contrasts with the overwhelmingly rural world of the old harpers 200 and more years ago.

Janet Harbison once divided the world of Irish harping into three different categories, classical-style 'harpists', the cabaret-style 'singing harpees', and the trad-style 'hippy harpers'³¹. Harbison's scheme suggests that they are just different approaches from each other, but I wonder if they actually pick up on different stages in the revival. Perhaps we could see Harbison's 'harpists' as being a strand of the revival that has its roots in Owen Lloyd's pedal harp training and style. Her 'harpees' might reflect a more vocal-based strand of the revival, possibly reflecting the earlier stages of the Sion Hill lineage and perhaps even going back to Carrie Townshend.

Certainly, I would see Harbison's trad 'harpers' category as describing new innovative developments in Irish harp style, technique and performance practice from the 1970s onwards. As the folk revival grew, and Irish traditional music spread and became better known and more popular, people like Janet Harbison and Máire Ní Chathasaigh became more and more aware that classical and cabaret styles of Irish harping did not really fit into the world of Irish traditional music and decided to do something about that³². This perception was the same in the other direction; there was a big discussion in the new Comhaltas movement about how Comhaltas

28 Crawford, Sylvia, *An Introduction to Old Irish Harp Playing Techniques* (2021, forthcoming).

29 For example, see Doyle, Aidan, *A History of the Irish Language*, (Oxford University Press, 2015), pp, 256-258.

30 Lawlor, (2012), pp.142-163.

31 Harbison, Janet, 'Harpists, Harpers or Harpees?', *Crosbhealach an Cheoil – The Crossroads Conference 1996*, pp.94-100.

32 The exact same thing was happening at the same time in Scotland, with Alison Kinnaird creating a new traditional Scottish harp style.

should handle the Irish harp³³. And no surprise really, when you think about where the different things had come from; the pipes and fiddle were continuing the inherited tradition from centuries back, whereas the harp was coming out of a new revival which had only begun in the 1890s.

Anyway, these pioneering ‘trad’ harpers developed new techniques, new styles of harping, so as to deliberately position their harp music as part of the wider Irish traditional music scene. These developments have made the Irish harp tradition strong and prominent in today’s wider music scene.

Renewal

There seems to be a process: looking critically at what has been handed down to us; rejecting parts of it as ‘non-traditional’, and re-inventing or borrowing outside of our current harp world in order to renew or re-imagine the Irish harp. I think this is an intrinsic part of the Irish harp scene and has been since the 1890s. I think that pipers and fiddlers don’t really do this. For one thing, the tradition they have learned has a true rootedness in the carrying stream; they have genuine lineages back through centuries to the past masters as far as you like. We don’t have that; our Irish harp lineages go back at best only to the late 19th century, when our teachers’ teachers’ teachers were innovating pioneers, inventing the Irish harp anew to fill a void in Irish musical life.

What they have invented, we can and perhaps must re-invent.

I think that the more we know and study our lineage as we stand today, the more we can honestly assess what has been handed down to us; what is still missing from our tradition; and what we can do to deepen and enrich our work within the now 130-year-long revival of the harp in Ireland.

33 See for example *Treoir Márta/Aibreán* 1971, p.22.

Simon Chadwick



Simon Chadwick is widely acknowledged to be one of the most important international experts on the history and traditions of the early Irish harp, helping to spearhead the current revival. In mid-2018, he relocated from Scotland and now lives in Armagh, where he researches, teaches, and performs the ancient native music traditions of Scotland, Ireland, and neighbouring countries. As well as giving talks and presentations, until recently Simon documented his research on his information website, earlygaelicharp.info, the pre-eminent published source of information on the early Gaelic harp and its traditions. He now presents his research work on his blog at www.simonchadwick.net. Simon has published a pair of tutor books outlining the historical tradition, a book on advanced playing techniques, and articles in the scholarly journals *Early Music*, and *The Galpin Society Journal*.