

harp  
IRELAND



CRUIT  
ÉIREANN

MAY 2021

# HARP PERSPECTIVES

origins of the modern Irish harp  
John Egan and James McFall

NANCY HURRELL

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 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 other 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

May 2021

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# ORIGINS OF THE MODERN IRISH HARP: JOHN EGAN AND JAMES MCFALL

Nancy Hurrell

An Ireland without harps is inconceivable. The symbolic harp, at the core of Irish identity, represents a rich musical heritage. From the chieftain's prized harper at the medieval court to the later traveling harpers welcomed in the big houses, the tradition has lasted nearly a millennium. With a deep-rooted heritage and the vibrant harping scene of today, it's difficult to imagine a time without harps. And yet, in two significant periods, in the final decades of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Irish harps had essentially disappeared from use. These were pivotal junctures in history, for the national emblem generates a desire to continually maintain a playable Irish harp in the culture. At these times when Ireland's harp faced an uncertain future, cultural revival movements emerged to inspire talented craftsmen to develop new forms of Irish harps, infusing new life into the tradition.

In the first critical phase, the early Irish harp, or wire-strung *cláirseach*<sup>1</sup> played for centuries, had finally died out by 1800, despite revival attempts by the Belfast Harp Society.<sup>2</sup> Efforts continued with special schools set up by harp societies in Belfast and Dublin to teach wire harp repertoire and techniques to the next generation. The societies commissioned John Egan to make wire-strung harps for the schools.<sup>3</sup> At this same time, Egan also invented a new, modernized harp for Ireland called the 'Portable Irish Harp'. The small portable harp with gut strings and sharpening mechanisms, steered the harping tradition in a new direction<sup>4</sup> (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Egan Portable Irish Harp at Snowhill Manor, England, courtesy of the National Trust.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms 'early Irish harp', 'Gaelic harp' and *cláirseach* all refer to the same form of metal-strung early harp in Ireland, as distinct from the gut-strung European harps.

<sup>2</sup> See Aiken McClelland, 'The Irish harp society', *Ulster Folklife*, 21 (Belfast, 1975). For an account of the Belfast Harp Festival of 1792, see Gráinne Yeats, *The Harp of Ireland* (Belfast, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion on the society school harps by John Egan, see Hurrell, Nancy, *The Egan Irish Harps: Tradition, patrons and players* (Four Courts Press, 2019), pp. 64-97.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pp. 98-135.



Figure 2. McFall Tara harp. Photo by Bernacki & Ass., courtesy of The O'Brien Collection.

By the late 1800s, Egan's Portable Irish Harps had become antiques, and yet there were no new Irish harps to replace them, as harp production in the country had ceased. This second phase when harping seemed to have diminished coincided with the unfolding of an era of cultural renewal, called the Celtic Revival. In the 1880s and 1890s, several parallel movements formed societies to revive traditional Irish arts, games, literature, the Irish language and music. A Belfast craftsman, James McFall, was encouraged to develop and produce a new Irish harp model, and around 1902 he introduced the 'Tara' harp. Once again the culture had access to locally-made instruments, infusing new life into the harping tradition<sup>5</sup> (Figure 2).

The harp designs of Egan and McFall, although conceived a century apart, each demonstrate the influences of nationalism and revival movements. Responding to the cultural leanings in their time, they each found ways to fuse symbolic signifiers of

'Irishness' into their instrument designs. Each merged the culture's romanticized notion of an Irish harp into modern, commercially viable instruments. The harps of Egan and McFall were the templates for Irish harp production worldwide, copied by subsequent generations of makers. The legacy is the modern Irish harp of today.

To discover the origins of the modern Irish harp, we look not only to the early harps, but also to the music played and people who played them. Several notable figures in history owned harps by the leading makers, Egan and McFall. Players were attracted to these striking harps for a variety of reasons, but foremost was a patriotic desire to be seen with the national instrument.

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<sup>5</sup> Hurrell, Nancy, 'James McFall: maker and reviver of the Irish harp', *Harpesmag* 33 (Spring 2021) pp. 18-22.

## John Egan, ‘Inventor’

It was only by chance that John Egan (fl.1797-1829) became a harp maker; he was originally apprenticed to a blacksmith. According to Sydney Owenson, ‘Mr Egan was still serving his time to a smith, when chance threw in his way a French harp’.<sup>6</sup> Egan purchased the harp, copied it and successfully sold the harp he had made. For years afterwards, he marketed himself in adverts as ‘Mr John Egan, a self-taught artist’. In the early 1800s, he began producing pedal harps in his Dawson Street workshop. At the time, these desirable instruments were imported to Ireland from either France or England at a great expense, and Egan saw an opening in the marketplace for more affordable Irish-made harps.

John Egan became a harp maker in an era when the emblematic Irish harp was ubiquitous in independence imagery, and yet ironically the playable Irish harp had disappeared.<sup>7</sup> The harper and *cláirseach*, formerly welcomed in music rooms by the Anglo-Irish aristocracy, were usurped by the modern French pedal harp played by family members themselves. Musical tastes had changed, with a preference for Italian art songs and opera themes imported from the Continent. To play this music on a gut-strung pedal harp, a harpist simply moved the pedals to access chromatic notes, and mechanisms on the harp’s neck ‘pinched’ the pliable strings for semitones. The *cláirseach*, although suited to ancient airs, was unable to access chromatic notes due to its wire strings in a fixed modal tuning. Unable to accommodate the music requests of patrons, invitations dwindled and the *cláirseach* eventually became obsolete.<sup>8</sup> The warmer gut-strung harp sound was now preferred over the brighter timbre of the *cláirseach*, just as the pianoforte replaced the harpsichord.

Musical Instruments are not evolutionary in the same sense as the natural world. Changes in instrumental design are driven by fashion and tastes in music at any given time. In post-union Ireland,<sup>9</sup> while the preferred instrument for society music-making was the pedal or *concert* harp, the culture also felt an urgency to ‘save’ the older native harp with its ideological implications. Egan aligned himself with revival

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<sup>6</sup> Owenson, Sydney, *Patriotic sketches of Ireland*, vol. 1 (London, 1807) pp. 162–3.

<sup>7</sup> See Barra Boydell, ‘The iconography of the Irish harp as a national symbol’ in Patrick Devine and Harry White (eds), *The Maynooth International Musicological Conference 1995: selected proceedings part III*, Irish Musical Studies 5 (Dublin, 1996) pp.131–45.

<sup>8</sup> The early Irish harp was historically an elite instrument played for patrons, as opposed to a folk instrument.

<sup>9</sup> The 1801 the Act of Union officially joined Ireland to the United Kingdom, and Dublin’s parliament was dissolved, transferring governmental rule to Westminster.

movements as harp maker to the Irish Harp Society of Dublin (1809-12) and the later Irish Harp Society of Belfast (1819-39) and produced modern light-weight wire-strung harps for the society schools. His model, the 'Improved Irish Harp', departed from the *cláirseach*'s traditional hollowed log construction, and instead had a conical soundbox of pieced together sections, similar to pedal harps. Visually, the Improved Irish Harp had the same 5ft height of ancient harps and a Gaelic high-headed shape. Handsomely decorated with strands of gilt shamrocks on the back, neck and pillar, the soundboard was painted with clusters of green shamrocks and the maker's inscription. John Egan's wire-strung harps have generally been overlooked in Irish harp history, and yet these instruments played a crucial role in the continued transmission of the ancient harp repertoire well into the nineteenth century.

One performer on an Egan wire harp, Patrick Byrne (c.1794-1863), achieved extraordinary fame touring Ireland, England and Scotland, and Prince Albert



appointed him 'Irish Harper to His Royal Highness'. Known for his personal charisma in performances, one correspondent commented that the harper 'tells some of his country's stories with great glee'.<sup>10</sup> Promoted as the 'last blind harper', a familiar trope in imagery, audiences flocked to his not-to-be-missed concerts. In 1845 Byrne obligingly posed in bardic dress, improvised from a blanket, as 'The Last Minstrel Striking the Irish Harp', in calotypes by Adamson and Hill, a rare historical record of both harp and harper (Figure 3). Byrne's repertoire combined traditional Irish ballads with

Figure 3. Patrick Byrne calotype by Hill and Adamson © National Gallery, London.

<sup>10</sup> *Greenock Advertiser*, 24 June 1845.

Scottish and Welsh tunes and also Thomas Moore songs. In his signature piece, ‘Brian Boru’s March’, the range of soundscapes was described as ‘a whisper like the sigh of the rising wind on a summer eve’, continuing with ‘fairy music heard from a distance’, and then rising to a ‘clang with a martial fierceness’. <sup>11</sup>



Figure 4. Trinity College Harp in the 1840 Bunting collection.

strings and mechanisms of either ring stops (Figure 5) or ivory ditals (Figure 6) for key changes. The ring stops were a form of levers, and the ivory ditals were like hand-operated pedals, linked to the same *fourchette* disc mechanism used on pedal harps. Instantly recognised as an Irish harp, it was capable of playing art music as well as traditional Irish tunes. With the harp’s launch, the maker’s signature on harps became ‘John Egan, Inventor’.

Egan understood his wire harp model was perceived as a relic of the past and decided not to market these harps to the general public. Living in an ‘Improving Age’, he was driven by a desire to innovate. His forward-looking instinct was to create a new *chromatic* instrument for contemporary music, but in an intrinsically Irish form. His seminal invention, the Portable Irish Harp, cleverly forged old with new by paying homage to Ireland’s oldest and most iconic instrument, the ‘Brian Boru’ harp in Trinity College (Figure 4). Formed in the same small height of 3ft, it also imitated the bowed pillar shape. To reinforce a symbolic Irishness, the harp was gilded with patriotic shamrocks and wolf-hounds on a ground of green, blue or black. It was an up-to-date chromatic instrument with gut

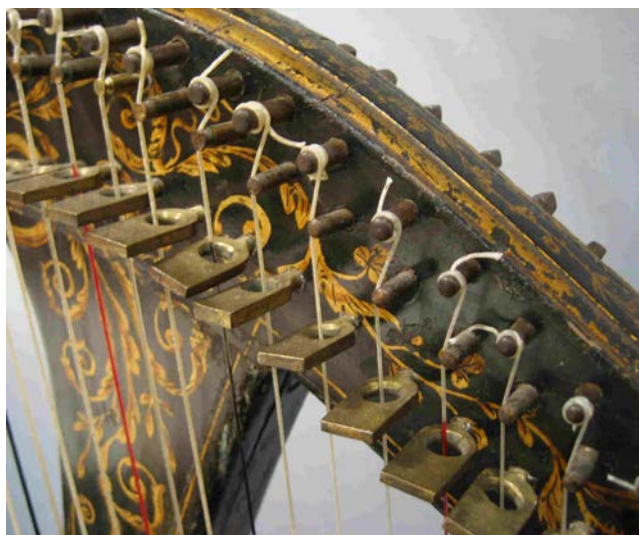


Figure 5. Ring stops on an Egan Royal Portable Irish Harp in the MFA, Boston.

<sup>11</sup> From an article in *The Emerald* of New York City, 1870, quoted in Capt. Francis O’Neill, *Irish minstrels and musicians, with numerous dissertations on related subjects* ([1913]; Cork and Dublin, 1987) p. 81.



Figure 6. Ditals on an Egan Portable Irish Harp, courtesy of Oxmantown Settlement Trust, Birr Castle.

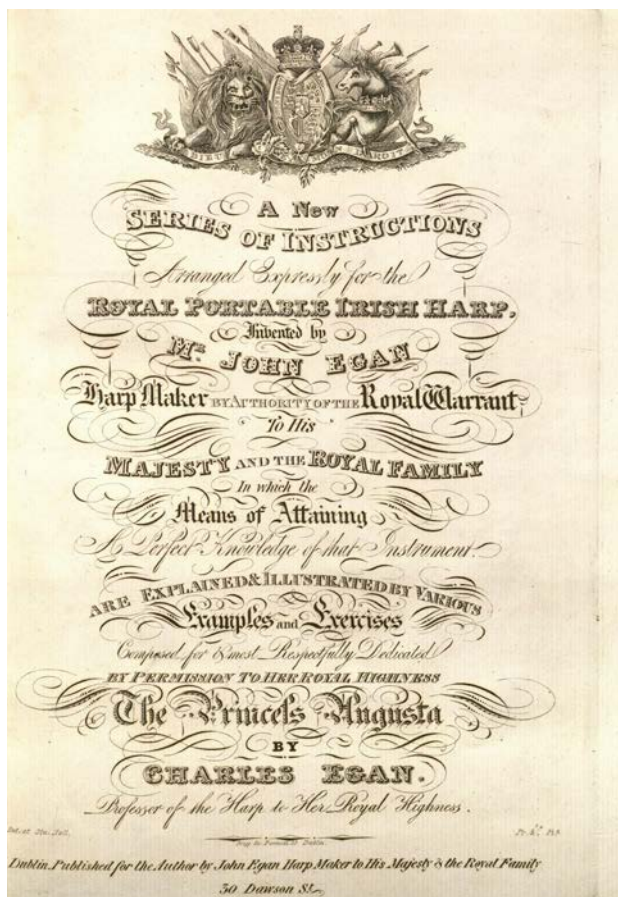


Figure 7. Charles Egan, *A new series of instructions*. Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University.

In 1822, the harp maker's son, Charles Egan, a harpist, provided an instruction manual with appropriate pieces for the new instrument: *A new series of instructions arranged expressly for the Royal Portable Irish Harp invented by Mr John Egan*<sup>12</sup> (Figure 7). The book offers a range of pieces, from the Continental favourites 'Sul margine d'un Rio' and 'French air' to arrangements of 'Irish melody' and 'Last rose of summer'. Several subsequent collections by Charles Egan from the 1820s all demonstrate the same mixed genre format,<sup>13</sup> and adverts for the Portable Irish Harp claimed that pedal harp music was also playable on the instrument.

With Egan's invention, a new Irish harping tradition began to evolve.

The Portable Irish Harp's organology, stringing and sound were borrowed elements from the pedal harp tradition, and yet the shape, small size and decoration was accepted as 'Irish'. The combination of gut strings, a thin flexible soundboard and a rounded-back soundbox created a particularly clear tone and resonance, and the small size contributed to a short decay of sound. This clarity of resonance was perfectly suited to the classical style with Albert bass and rapid scale-wise passages.<sup>14</sup> On this small harp, harpists played concert harp music, piano music and Irish airs. As the instrument became the new accepted form of an Irish harp, the canon of harp music expanded to include different genres and styles, continually influenced by concert harp repertoire.

<sup>12</sup> Egan, Charles, *A new series of instructions arranged expressly for the Royal Portable Irish Harp invented by Mr John Egan* (Dublin, 1822).

<sup>13</sup> For detailed information on Charles Egan harp books see Hurrell, *The Egan Irish Harps* pp. 131-3 and pp. 171-8.

<sup>14</sup> See the CD, *The Egan Irish Harp* by Nancy Hurrell (2011) recorded on two Portable Irish Harps and videos on <https://hurrellharp.com/>.

Another key selling point of Egan's model was portability. In contrast to the larger static pedal harp, a mainstay in the music room, the portable harp was perfectly suited to travel, marketed to 'ladies of distinction' embarking on the grand tour of Europe. One lady who ventured across Europe with her Egan harp in a wooden traveling case, was the author Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan) (?1783-1859). The female Irish bard affectionately referred to it as her 'constant companion', and the emblematic harp became an essential part of her public persona.

In Owenson's bestselling book, *The wild Irish girl: a national tale* (1806), the fictional heroine, Glorvina, was a Gaelic princess who played the harp. Sydney shrewdly assumed the name Glorvina for her signature and adopted her character's ancient dress. With lines blurred between fact and fiction, she appeared in a scarlet cloak and wore a golden bodkin in her upswept hair for salon performances. 'Glorvina cloaks' and Irish harps became fashion trends in England and Ireland, and Dublin jewelers struggled to keep up with the popular demand for gold bodkins.<sup>15</sup> Preferring Irish airs over foreign art music, Sydney's favourite songs were 'Ned of the hills' and 'Dream of the young man', sung adoring audiences in London drawing rooms.

A fellow literary celebrity and friend, the famed poet Thomas Moore (1779-1852) of the *Irish Melodies*,<sup>16</sup> also owned an Egan portable harp. The entrepreneur Egan, appreciating high-profile endorsements, had the idea to place one of his harps in the hands of the Bard of Erin – a case of masterful product placement. The gift was mutually advantageous to Moore in that it was the perfect prop for the national bard's public image, singing his harp-infused lyrics of the *Melodies* to the chords of the national instrument. In 1823 an exquisite green shamrock-covered Royal Portable Irish Harp was delivered to Moore: 'My Irish harp arrived from Ireland, and a little one of two octaves with it for Anastasia'.<sup>17</sup> Both harps are visible in the painting *Thomas Moore in his study at Sloperton Cottage* in the National Gallery of Ireland.

Curiously, no further harp references appear in Moore's journal, and little is known of his harp-playing, which may have been a purely private pursuit in contrast to his piano performances. Several glowing first-hand accounts of Moore singing at the piano describe the powerful emotional effect he had on listeners. Nonetheless, a bardic myth

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<sup>15</sup> Campbell, Mary, *Lady Morgan, the life and times of Sydney Owenson* (London, 1988) pp. 71-2.

<sup>16</sup> Moore's *Irish Melodies* comprised ten volumes spanning the years 1808-1834 published by brothers William and James Power, in Dublin and London. Thomas Moore's harp is in the Royal Irish Academy collection.

<sup>17</sup> Dowden, Wilfred S. (ed.), *The Journal of Thomas Moore* (East Brunswick, N.J., 1983) ii, p. 683.

of Moore composing the *Melodies* at the harp continued to be embellished following his death, and the poet's small harp acquired a legendary status. The first recorded description of the harp's sound actually came fifty years after Moore's death, in 1879, when the poet's harp was played by the Swedish harpist Herr Sjoden in the Moore centenary concert in Dublin. A reporter described the moment as 'the clamouring crowd was stilled into silence...and the strains of "Dear harp of my country" coming from that old harp stirred many a heart and indeed made many an eye glisten [...].'<sup>18</sup>

The performers Moore, Owenson and Byrne took advantage of the national branding of their Irish harps, and accordingly, nostalgic language was used in descriptions of their performances. Other players, such as the daughters in prominent Irish families, learned to play the harp primarily as a desirable 'female accomplishment'. Lady Alicia Rosse at Birr Castle and Frances Power Cobbe of Newbridge House are two notable examples from this period. The Portable Irish Harp was not entirely an elite instrument. Increasingly it was marketed to daughters in the rising middle classes, for a small portable harp was a more affordable alternative to the pedal harp. With harps now

within reach to a wider segment of society, at least for a time, numbers of players increased.



Figure 8. Egan Winged-maiden Portable Irish Harp, courtesy of the Royal Academy of Music Museum, London.

John Egan went on to design a dozen different harp models, including a triple-action pedal harp, and occasionally harps were formed in quite unorthodox bodies. This imaginative maker decided to transform the winged-maiden symbol into a playable instrument. The stunning result was a harp in the form of Hibernia presented to George IV as the ultimate souvenir of his historic visit to Dublin in 1821 (Figure 8). Within days, Egan was appointed 'harp maker to the king', the sole harp maker in his time to receive this prestigious honour. For a self-taught Irish harp maker, it was a remarkable achievement to be awarded the highest accolade attainable for a craftsman. As custom permitted, Egan harps thereafter displayed the royal warrant and crest, and his portable harp became the *Royal* Portable Irish harp.

<sup>18</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 29 May 1879.



Figure 9. Holderness digital harp, courtesy of the Hamamatsu Museum of Musical Instruments, Japan.

## Shaping the Future

Towards mid-century, fewer Irish harps were manufactured due to the popularity of the piano and also the events surrounding the devastating famine and subsequent mass migration. After John Egan's death, his son, John Jnr, and his daughter, who became Mrs. Jackson, each maintained businesses primarily producing pedal harps, with portable harps 'made to order'. From the 1840s to the 1860s Egan's nephew, Francis Hewson, made a few pedal harps and also wire-strung harps in the Egan design. Eventually, harp making transitioned from harp workshops associated with the renowned Egan family to Irish harps produced under the larger umbrella of a music company selling both instruments and sheet music.

Music companies commissioned individual craftsmen to make and supply Irish harps on demand. These harps, no longer branded by a well-known maker's signature, were now stamped with a firm's initials and inscribed with a company name. Examples of green harps in an Egan shape with shamrock decoration survive from the 1830s, with 'I.W.' stamped inside the harps for the Isaac Willis Company. The Willis Company became Robinson & Bussell in the 1840s, and an iconic green harp from this period bearing the painted inscription 'Robinson & Bussell' is on display at the Áras an Uachtaráin, the official residence of the president. This harp is a rare early imitation of Egan's Portable Irish Harp design. Clearly, Egan's model set the standard for Irish harps going forward.

At the turn of the new century, a small green shamrock-adorned harp continued to be the archetype of an Irish harp. In London, Charles Holdernes not only imitated the design, but also replicated Egan's dital mechanism, as seen on a surviving example in the Hamamatsu Museum in Japan (Figure 9). Most of Egan's imitators fitted their harps with the simpler ring stops, and later, blades became the mechanism of choice. Viewed through the lens of Irishness, the national branding of these green harps with shamrocks, copied by foreign makers, contributed to their longevity. American maker Melville Clark (1883-1953) purchased an Egan harp while visiting Ireland, and later used it as the basis for his Clark Irish Harp model.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See Linda Pembroke Kaiser, *Pulling strings* (Syracuse, 2010).



Figure 10. Morley  
Irish harp, courtesy of  
Robert Pacey.

Similarly, the London maker J.G. Morley (1847-1921) patterned his Morley Irish Harp (Figure 10) after an Egan harp in his collection. Strangely, in the 1890s the only Irish harp available to purchase was from Morley in England. The idea to produce an Irish harp model most likely occurred to Morley in 1897 when he lent his Egan Portable Irish Harp to be displayed at a festival exhibition of the Gaelic League.<sup>20</sup> The Gaelic League, *Conradh na Gaeilge*, was formed three years earlier by Douglas Hyde to revive the Irish language, and it had expanded with musical instrument classes and *Feis Ceoil* and *Oireachtas* festivals, holding competitions, performances and exhibitions featuring harps.



Figure 11. Owen Lloyd's music book, 'An Cruitire' ('The Harpist').

In the ensuing months after the *Feis Ceoil* festival, Morley began to construct an Irish harp, and by October he presented the finished instrument to the Gaelic League for use in harp classes. An announcement in the *Flag of Ireland* informed the public that the celebrated harpist, Owen Lloyd, would teach Irish harp classes at 24 O'Connell Street on a small harp presented by Mr J.G. Morley of London.<sup>21</sup> In the following year Morley donated three additional Irish harps for prizes at the League's harp competition.<sup>22</sup> Lloyd's book of harp arrangements, 'An Cruitire' ('The Harpist'), published by the League gives an idea of what was being played in his classes<sup>23</sup> (Figure 11). True to the spirit of the Gaelic revival, the collection consists of traditional Irish and Carolan tunes, and on the cover is an ancient bard rendered in a Celtic art style, however the music is arranged in the lush, chordal style of the concert harp.

<sup>20</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 25 Mar. 1897.

<sup>21</sup> *Flag of Ireland*, 16 Oct. 1897. See also Hurrell, *The Egan Irish harps*, pp. 235-41.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 Feb. 1898.

<sup>23</sup> See O'Donnell, Mary Louise, 'Owen Lloyd', *Éire-Ireland*, (48, 3/4, 2013).

Egan's wire-strung Improved Irish Harp also continued to be an influential design. In the 1840s, the model was the inspiration for harps made for the Drogheda Harp Society, the last revival school, founded by Father Thomas Burke.<sup>24</sup> The teacher, Hugh Frazer, had been a fellow pupil at the Belfast society school with Patrick Byrne. Later, wire-strung harps by Francis Hewson were still played by Hugh O'Hagan<sup>25</sup> and also Owen Lloyd, but these remnants of a revived wire-harp tradition were gradually disappearing.

## James McFall, 'Maker and Reviver of the Irish Harp'

Whereas the first revival of Irish harp making was initiated by harp societies, the second re-emergence of Irish-made harps was part of a broader movement – the Celtic Revival. Societies sought to revive several aspects of Irish culture, from folklore, sport and language to art and music, as a source of pride and Irish identity. Sheehy describes the nineteenth century as, 'Ireland was increasingly aware of itself not only politically but culturally different from England.'<sup>26</sup> Revivalists were part of a political anti-colonial movement, with patriotic emphasis placed on buying Irish-made goods in an effort to 'de-Anglicize' the country. As the new century approached, it had been decades since harps were made in the country, and renewed interest in the Irish harp was part of the cultural re-awakening. James McFall (c.1867-1948?) decided to become a harp maker and re-interpret the image of an Irish harp.

Like Egan before him, James McFall turned to harp making from another trade, in his case, cabinetmaking. For a decade he had refined his wood-working skills in the family's Belfast furniture business. Earlier, McFall was at Mount Melleray Abbey, where his fellow monks had encouraged him to try his hand at harp making.<sup>27</sup> Around 1900, McFall, working as a master cabinetmaker, lived in Holywood, where he came under the influence of his parish priest, Rev. Monsignor O'Laverty. Rev. O'Laverty, a knowledgeable harp historian, had long championed a harp revival in Belfast, mounting a campaign in the press for years. A collector of historical harps, O'Laverty made his instruments available to McFall for study, including a wire-strung Irish harp by Egan.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Hurrell, Nancy, 'A Drogheda harp: instrument and icon', *History Ireland*, 21:1 (Jan./Feb. 2013) 34-7.

<sup>25</sup> Anonymous, 'The harp of the last minstrel of County Louth', *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological Society*, 1:4 (Oct. 1907) p.104.

<sup>26</sup> Sheehy, Jeanne, *The Rediscovery of Ireland's Past: the Celtic Revival 1830-1930* (Thames and Hudson, 1980) p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> *Irish News and Belfast Morning News*, 8 Dec. 1903.

<sup>28</sup> *Irish News and Belfast Morning News*, 22 Mar. 1902.

For inspiration, McFall also looked to the surviving early *cláirseachs* in Dublin's Royal Irish Academy, Trinity College and the Belfast Museum. He focused his research on Gaelic harps rather than Egan's Portable Irish Harp model. Sheehy notes that by the end of the century, shamrock decoration was considered shallow and sentimental.<sup>29</sup> The Arts and Crafts movement looked to medieval Celtic treasures like the *Book of Kells* and objects of ancient metalwork and jewelry to develop the new Irish art style. The design challenge for McFall, like Egan before him, was to create a 'true' Irish harp which also functioned as a modern chromatic instrument.

McFall's approach was to design a contemporary gut-strung harp in a pseudo-ancient-looking body. He adopted a bowed-pillar contour and high-headed shape and copied the rounded sound chamber of Egan's Improved Irish Harp. Initially McFall harps were available with either gut or wire strings,<sup>30</sup> but later the stringing was model-specific. McFall added a novel feature of placing the harp body on a slightly raised platform held up by four 'feet.' In decoration, the harps messaged an Irish medieval style. The pillar carvings had zoomorphic motifs with Celtic knotwork, and on the outer pillar were raised decorative jewel settings reminiscent of the Trinity College Harp. On the soundboard, painted interlaced patterns and fantastic beast motifs were inspired by early Christian manuscripts. The model name, 'Tara', suggested the former seat of the high kings of Ireland. In a medieval guise, the instrument was actually a modern chromatic gut-strung harp with adjustable ring stops for key changes (Figure 12). The maker's signature on harps reflected his achievement: 'James McFall / Maker and Reviver of the Irish Harp / 22 York Lane / Belfast'.



Figure 12. McFall Tara and Bardic harps, courtesy of The O'Brien Collection.

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<sup>29</sup> Sheehy, p.92.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

## Irish Harp Festival 1903

One of the first Tara harps made was for Cardinal Logue in 1902, called the 'Armagh Harp'. An image of the instrument appeared in Grattan Flood's 1905 publication, *The Story of the Harp* (Figure 13). The soundboard featured Celtic interlace and disks painted by artists in the Irish Decorative Art Association of Belfast. The harp debuted at the Irish Harp Festival held in the Linen Hall Library on May 8-16, 1903.<sup>31</sup> The festival included a week-long exhibition of instruments (including the harps of O'Neill and Hempson) and historical artefacts from the Belfast Harp Festival of 1792. Several new harps by James McFall were on display, and they were played in the festival concert held on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May. Seven harpists performed, including Owen Lloyd, Florrie Kerin, and Emily MacDonald and also the harp maker's son, Master Malachy McFall.<sup>32</sup> The music played was Irish ballads, traditional tunes, and pieces by Carolan and Thomas Moore.



Figure 13. McFall Tara harp made for Cardinal Logue in Flood's *The Story of the Harp*, 1905.

In the early 1900s, harps by McFall were supplied to Irish convent schools for music classes, including Loreto Abbey, Rathfarnham and Sion Hill, Blackrock. And abroad, Cardinal Moran promoted McFall's 'Bardic' model for use in Australian convent schools, and these harps were also shipped to abbeys in New Zealand and South Africa.<sup>33</sup> The Bardic model, slightly smaller than the Tara harp, was made in a similar shape and decorative style. McFall also produced a third harp model, called the 'Minstrel,' which was a smaller hand-held wire-strung harp (Figure 14). Sold at a low cost to promote widespread harp playing throughout the country, the Minstrel was advertised as suitable for playing traditional music and folk songs. McFall made an interesting

<sup>31</sup> A McFall harp from a later period is displayed in the Linen Hall Library.

<sup>32</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 9 May, 1903.

<sup>33</sup> *Irish News and Belfast Morning News*, 25 Feb. 1904.



Figure 14. McFall Minstrel harp, courtesy of the Historical Harp Society of Ireland Collection.

distinction between his wire harp model made for the masses and his larger gut-strung harps, which were suitable for ‘convents and virtuosi’. The gut-strung harps with chromatic action were advertised as meeting the ‘requirements of modern music’, but McFall was keen to point out that they were ‘no less a genuine Irish harp’.<sup>34</sup>

McFall, feeling pressure from the revivalist O’Lavery to build ‘authentic’ wire harps, issued a defensive response in the press citing ‘bread and butter’ issues as the driving force behind his design choices.<sup>35</sup> Another similar ideological dispute was taking place in the Gaelic League’s Feis Ceoil committee, where Annie Patterson and

others felt the primary goal of competitions was the revival and rebirth of Irish music. Other committee members thought it was more important to promote music-making in general, and in the end, all genres of music were included in competitions.<sup>36</sup> Newspaper reports of the Feis Ceoil harp competitions in the early 1900s confirm this course of action with competitors on concert harps performing pieces by Verdalle, Parish Alvars and Handel, and the Irish harp entrants played harp studies from *Twenty-seven studies for the Irish harp* by Mother Attracta Coffey (M.A.C.).<sup>37</sup> The distinguished teacher of pedal and Irish harp at Loreto Abbey, Rathfarnham, was instrumental in the inclusion of harp competitions in the Feis Ceoil syllabus.<sup>38</sup> Lawlor’s interesting examination of M.A.C.’s music proved that M.A.C.’s Irish harp compositions were stylistically identical to pedal harp music.<sup>39</sup>

A McFall Irish harp was also owned by the historical figure Patrick Pearse. Harp lessons were offered at his St. Enda’s school for boys, taught by Owen Lloyd.<sup>40</sup> The McFall models continued to be made into the 1940s by James’ son, Malachy McFall, and

<sup>34</sup> *Irish News and Belfast Morning News*, 8 Dec. 1903.

<sup>35</sup> *Irish News and Belfast Morning News*, 15 Dec. 1904.

<sup>36</sup> O’Connor, Jennifer, *The role of women in music in nineteenth-century Dublin*. PhD thesis, National University of Ireland Maynooth (2010).

<sup>37</sup> *Dublin Daily Express*, 23 May 1907. M.A.C.

<sup>38</sup> Cuthbert, Sheila Larchet, *The Irish Harp Book* (Mercier Press, 1975) p.239.

<sup>39</sup> Lawlor, Helen, *Irish Harping 1900-2010* (Four Courts Press, 2012) pp. 20-34.

<sup>40</sup> A Tara harp is preserved in the Pearse Museum, Dublin.

grandson, also named Malachy.<sup>41</sup> In the 1950s the actor Richard Hayward performed on a McFall harp,<sup>42</sup> and in the 1980s Róisín Ní Shé played her McFall Tara harp in the popular RTÉ Television children's programme, 'Dilín Ó Deamhas'.<sup>43</sup>

The lasting influences from McFall's designs are the 'legs' seen on modern Irish harps and the use of Celtic interlace motifs for decoration, which was adopted by Morley, Clark and Lyon & Healy (Figure 15). From the late 1900s to today, several harp makers in Australia, New Zealand, Scotland and the US have produced versions of the Tara model, and for a time in the 1980s, Salvi Harps in Italy manufactured a model named the 'Salvi McFall'.

The McFall harp shape, with medieval-style carvings and Celtic decoration successfully strengthened a connection to the ancient Irish harp, albeit in decoration only as opposed to organology. However, it was Egan who invented the lasting concept of a modern Irish harp – a small, portable, affordable, gut-strung harp with a bright tone and mechanisms for playing in different keys – an instrument suited to the music people wanted to play.



Figure 15. Lyon & Healy Folk Harp.

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<sup>41</sup> Private message from Frank McFall to Siobhán Armstrong, 11 April 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Hayward's McFall harp survives in the Ulster Folk Museum.

<sup>43</sup> The harp was passed on to Cormac de Barra, grandson of Róisín Ní Shé.

## Nancy Hurrell



Nancy Hurrell is the author of *The Egan Irish Harps: Tradition, patrons and players* (Four Courts Press, 2019). An expert in Irish harp history, she has published articles in *History Ireland*, *Irish Arts Review*, several harp journals, and she authored the Egan entry in the *Grove dictionary of musical instruments* (2014). Hurrell is a harp consultant to the

Boston Museum of Fine Arts, she performs in early music ensembles and is a frequent presenter at festivals in the US, Ireland and the UK. She has seven books of traditional and early harp arrangements and currently teaches harp at Brandeis University.

[www.hurrellharp.com](http://www.hurrellharp.com)