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# HARP PERSPECTIVES

ROSE and CATHERINE  
two 18<sup>th</sup> century female harpers  
found in EDWARD BUNTING'S manuscripts

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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 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In our September edition, Eilís Lavelle reviews the historical references to two female harpers, Rose Mooney and Catherine (Kate) Martin, to whom Edward Bunting has attributed notations in his manuscript collection and publications.

In the coming months, we will be welcoming more voices to the conversation 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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# ROSE AND CATHERINE: TWO 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY FEMALE HARPERS FOUND IN EDWARD BUNTING'S MANUSCRIPTS

## Eilís Lavelle

This article reviews historical references to two female harpers to whom Edward Bunting has attributed notations in his manuscript collection and publications. Bunting's original notations from the harpers Rose Mooney and Catherine (Kate) Martin can be found in his unpublished manuscript collection, housed in Special Collections and Archives, Queen's University Belfast. Some of the notations are presented in Bunting's later publications.<sup>i</sup> Before reviewing the historical references to Mooney and Martin and the music Bunting collected from them, I will begin with some necessary context on the harping tradition during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, drawing attention to harpers who took part in competitions held specifically to revive interest in the harp during this period.

The history of the Irish harp has been well documented.<sup>ii</sup> Most harpers during the 18<sup>th</sup> century had a challenging itinerant lifestyle, having to travel throughout the country. The introduction and increasing popularity of the piano forte in 18<sup>th</sup> century Ireland resulted in a dwindling demand for travelling harpers during this period.<sup>iii</sup> Various events were held to preserve and promote the harp and its music during this period, including four significant competitions held towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; The Granard Harp Balls in Co. Longford, held in 1781, 1782 and 1785 and The Belfast Assembly in 1792. Many of the performers listed at the three competitions in Granard had attended the festival on several occasions. In total, eleven different harpers performed at all three festivals. At the first festival held in 1781, the harpers who performed were Charles Fanning, Charles Byrne, Patrick Kerr, Patrick Maguire, Hugh

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- i During his lifetime Bunting had three publications: *A General Collection of the Ancient Irish Music* (1796), *A General Collection of the Ancient Music of Ireland* (1809) and *The Ancient Music of Ireland* (1840).
- ii There have been many studies of the instrument, performers, and collectors of music for the Irish harp. Researchers such as Gráinne Yeats, Colette Moloney, Simon Chadwick, Sylvia Crawford, Siobhán Armstrong and Mary Louise O'Donnell (to name a few) have contributed a significant number of publications on the subject. Websites such as [simonchadwick.net](http://simonchadwick.net) and [wirestrungharp.com](http://wirestrungharp.com) provide a wealth of information.
- iii For more information see: David Cooper, "Twas one of those Dreams that by Music are Brought': the development of the piano and the preservation of Irish traditional music. In *Music in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, ed. Michael Murphy and Jan Smaczny (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), 75-93.



Higgins, Arthur O'Neill and Rose Mooney – the sole female performer. At the second Granard Ball in 1782 the seven listed performers from the previous years' competition were joined by a further two harpers, Edward McDermott Roe and Catherine Martin. The third Granard Ball in 1785 featured two new performers: Lawrence Keane and James Duncan (neither Patrick Kerr nor Patrick Maguire attended the third festival).

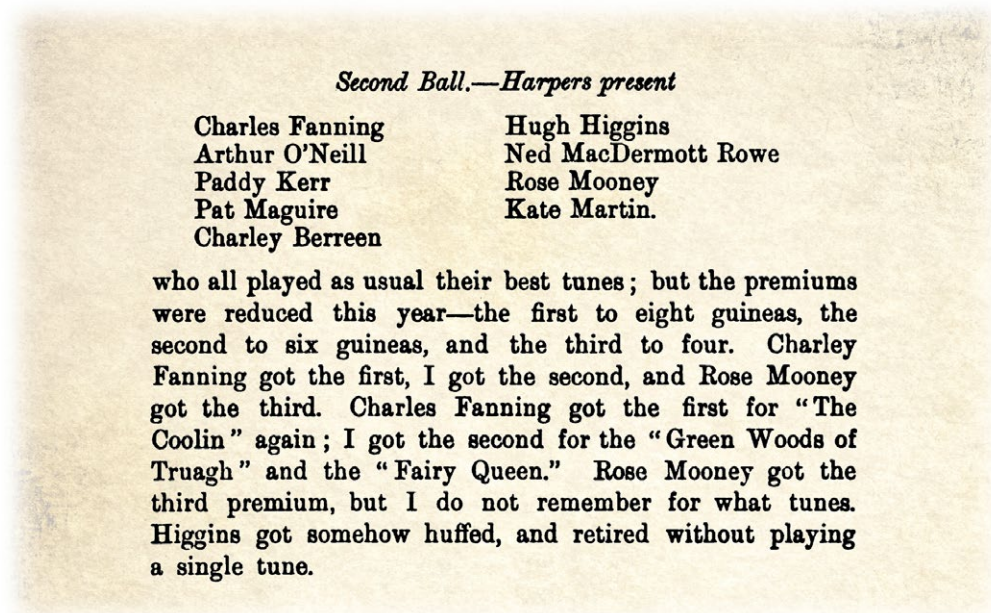


Figure 1. Arthur O'Neill's account in *Annals of the Irish Harpers*, by Charlotte Milligan Fox, (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1911)

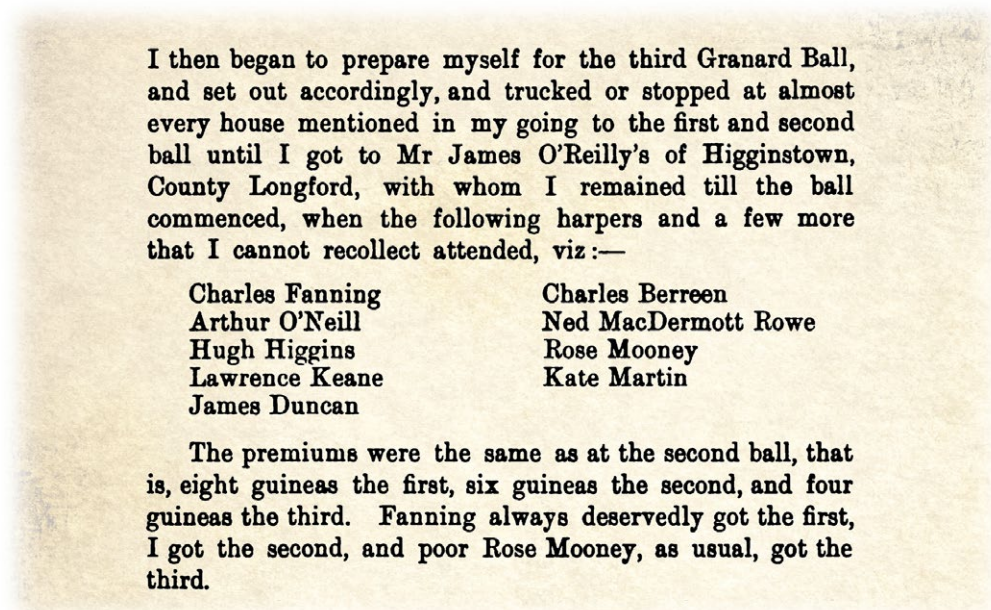


Figure 2. Arthur O'Neill's account of the in *Annals of the Irish Harpers*, by Charlotte Milligan Fox, (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1911)

Similar to the competitions held in Granard, male performers predominated at The Belfast Assembly in 1792, held in the Exchange in Belfast. Many of the performers who attended the Granard Balls were also in attendance at the Belfast Assembly. The performers included Denis Hempson, Arthur O'Neill, Hugh Higgins, Charles Fanning, Charles Byrne, Daniel Black, Parick Quin, Patrick Kerr, James Duncan, William Carr, Rose Mooney and a Welsh harper by the name of Williams. Of the eleven harpers in attendance at the festival, Rose Mooney was the only female performer.

The two afore-mentioned female performers, Rose Mooney and Catherine Martin, are the focus of this short article. Their contributions to the harping tradition are particularly pertinent in light of the significant shift in gender associations the harp has experienced since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As the lists of performers above suggests, male harpers predominated during this period, although this gender disparity may not have been as pronounced in earlier times. Writing of the female harpers Rose Mooney and Catherine Martin, Bunting noted that 'Although formerly it was very useful for females to apply themselves to the harp, yet at the epoch there were but two female performers of any repute in Ulster.'<sup>iv</sup> In more recent times, however, 'The harp, in its Irish, Celtic or concert-harp form, has a particularly strong female association, perhaps more so than any other instrument.'<sup>v</sup> Helen O'Shea also observes that 'The only instruments associated particularly with women are the soft-voiced harp...'<sup>vi</sup>

## Rose Mooney

Rose Mooney, originally from Co. Meath, is recognised as the most celebrated and accomplished female harper from whom Bunting collected. Mooney was the most successful female harper at the harp competitions under discussion here, having won third prize at each of the Granard Harp Balls. Mooney also performed at the Belfast Assembly in 1792, however she did not receive a prize on this occasion, instead, she was offered six guineas along with all performers for participation and attending the festival. It is believed that Rose Mooney was 52 at the Belfast Assembly and Simon Chadwick has estimated that Mooney lived from roughly 1739/1740-post 1800.<sup>vii</sup> Similarly to other harp players at the time, it could be presumed that Rose Mooney began learning the harp at a young age.

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iv Edward Bunting, *The Ancient Music of Ireland*. (Dublin: Hodges & Smith, 1840), 81.

v Helen Lawlor, *Irish Harping 1900-2010*. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012), 142.

vi Helen O'Shea, *The Making of Irish Traditional Music*. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 106.

vii Simon Chadwick, "Simon Chadwick", May 13, 2021. <http://simonchadwick.net/>.

MEMOIRS OF ARTHUR O'NEILL—CONCLUSION

WHEN the third Ball was over I took my leave of Duncan and Keane, two of the harpers, but I forgot to mention that before the Ball opened Rose Mooney pledged her harp, petticoat, and cloak. When I make this remark of poor Rose, it is with no ludicrous intention of exposing her faults, which should chiefly be attributed to her maid, Mary, whose uncommon desire for drinking was unlimited, and taking advantage of her mistress's blindness, she always when drink was wanting, pawned any article on which she could raise half a pint, therefore poor Rose I acquit you of any meanness on your own part, as your guides and mine have often lead us into hobbles, which are inseparable from poor blind harpers, and afterwards laughed at us ; but we in general think it is better for people in every station in life to have about them the rogue they know, rather than the rogue they don't know.

Figure 3. Arthur O'Neill's account of the in *Annals of the Irish Harpers*, by Charlotte Milligan Fox, (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1911)

Much of the information available on Rose Mooney's personality and information on her life is found in the memoirs of Arthur O'Neill.<sup>viii</sup> O'Neill explains that Mooney was taught by harper Thady Elliott and became a proficient performer on the harp. Arthur O'Neill also describes that Rose Mooney experienced some bad luck in her day due to '...her maid, Mary, whose uncommon desire for drinking was unlimited, and taking advantage of her mistress's blindness, she always when drink was wanting pawned any article on which she could raise half a pint...'.<sup>ix</sup> As O'Neill points out 'Rose was at one time much respected, but it is certain that her maid was the principal cause of her falling into dis-esteem as she would and did sacrifice her mistress's reputation for a glass of whiskey.'<sup>x</sup> Unfortunately O'Neill does not have much to say regarding Mooney's ability on the harp and her performances.

Bunting and another (unnamed and unknown) scribe did meet with Mooney following the Belfast Assembly, presumably while they were travelling around Ireland collecting music. Aside from these transcriptions there is little information available on Mooney's performances. There are eight entries attributed to Rose Mooney in Edward Bunting's unpublished manuscript collection. Three of these entries are in Bunting's hand, the

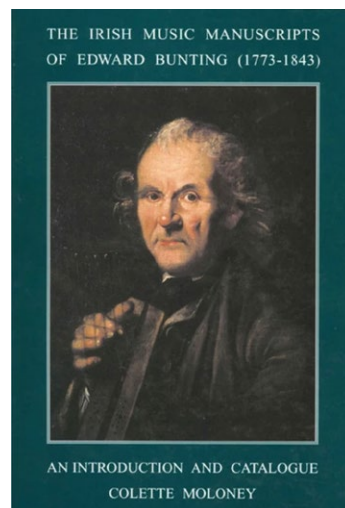
viii Arthur O'Neill's memoirs are found in MS4.14 in Edward Bunting's unpublished collection. Some of O'Neill's memoirs were also published by Charlotte Milligan Fox in *Annals of the Irish Harpers*. (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1911).

ix Charlotte Milligan Fox, *Annals of the Irish Harpers*, 188.

x *Ibid.*, 126.



additional five are attributed to ‘Scribe H’, whose identity is, as of yet, unknown.<sup>xi</sup> Fascinatingly, all of the melodies notated from Rose Mooney are compositions of Turlough Carolan. There are three examples of *Planxty Charles Coote* – a Carolan composition well-known to contemporary harpers – attributed to Rose Mooney among Bunting’s unpublished manuscripts. Only one of these notations is found in Bunting’s hand in MS4.33(3). Other Carolan compositions notated from Mooney include, *Planxty Miss Burke* MS4.13, *Lady Blaney* MS4.27 and *Madam Maxwell* MS4.27. The final tune Bunting attributed to Rose Mooney is given the title *Pléaraca na Ruarcach* found in MS4.33(2);



Carolan is said to have composed this tune also.<sup>xii</sup> All tunes associated with Mooney can be found in four different manuscripts in Bunting’s unpublished manuscripts. Two of these manuscripts (MS4.33(2) and MS4.33(3)) contain draft notations in Bunting’s hand transcribed in preparation for Bunting’s later publications. Notations in both of these manuscripts were not notated from live performances. Instead, they are transcriptions of melodies with added arrangements in preparation for Bunting’s publications. The other two manuscripts, MS4.13 and MS4.27, include notations attributed to Rose Mooney in the handwriting belonging to Scribe H. It appears that Bunting’s notations associated with Mooney were notated following notations found in the handwriting of Scribe H, indicating that they may not have come from live performances. There is a possibility that Bunting copied the melodies from notations belonging to Scribe H.

*Planxty Charles Coote* is included in Edward Bunting’s third publication and despite the fact that Bunting published all other tunes attributed to Mooney in his unpublished manuscripts. *Charles Coote* is the only tune where he explicitly names Mooney as his source in his publications.<sup>xiii</sup> Bunting notes in his index that *Charles Coote* was collected from ‘Rose Mooney, harper...1800.’<sup>xiv</sup> Interestingly, Scribe H gives the

xi The three notations in Bunting’s hand were also transcribed by Scribe H in different manuscripts. The name ‘Scribe H’ is assigned by Colette Moloney in her study on the Bunting Manuscripts. See: Colette Moloney, *The Irish Music Manuscripts of Edward Bunting (1773-1843)*. (Dublin: Irish Traditional Music Archive, 2000), 22-24.

xii This tune was also published in John and William Neal’s publication in 1724. This is the only tune in the Neals’ collection which is published on two staves: with a treble and bass clef. All other tunes in the collection are presented as melody only. The title given in the Neals’ collection is ‘*Plea rarkeh na Rourkough or ye Irish wedding improved with different divitions agter ye Italian maner with A bass and Chorus by Sigr. Lorenzo Bocchi*’. See: John & William Neal, *A Collection of the most Celebrated Irish Tunes, proper for the violin, German flute or hautboy*, ed. Nicholas Carolan (Dublin: Irish Traditional Music Archive, 2010)

xiii Bunting does not cite sources of tunes in his first (1796) or second (1809) publications.

xiv Edward Bunting, *The Ancient Music of Ireland*. ix.

year 1799 as the year they notated the melody from Rose Mooney in unpublished manuscripts MS4.13 and MS4.27. Bunting's notation of *Charles Coote* in MS4.33(3) does not give a year of notation; however, it is believed that this manuscript was notated by Bunting between c.1796-1798.<sup>xv</sup> Nowhere in the unpublished manuscripts is there a note beside a notation of *Charles Coote* to indicate that Mooney performed the tune in 1800. This demonstrates that the years given in the publications do not always precisely align with dates found in Bunting's unpublished manuscripts. It could be assumed that notations attributed to Rose Mooney in the unpublished manuscripts were collected at different times and by different scribes.

As mentioned, there is little evidence available of Mooney's performances following the Belfast Assembly in 1792.<sup>xvi</sup> However, in 2019 Michael Billinge compiled information on Rose Mooney's harp, drawing largely on the letters from Dr. James McDonnell found in Bunting's unpublished manuscripts.<sup>xvii</sup> Having a detailed account of the harp performed on by Mooney is significant to the scholarship of harp making during this period. Unfortunately, there is no such evidence in regard to the harp performed by Catherine Martin.



Fig.4: Charles Coote by Carolan found in MS4.33(3) in Edward Bunting's handwriting. With permission from *Special Collections* in Queen's University Belfast.

xv See: Colette Moloney, *The Irish Music Manuscripts of Edward Bunting (1773-1843)*. 28-36.

xvi In a copy of his publications found in the British Library in London, Bunting gives Mooney as a source to eleven entries. There are pencil markings by Bunting in these publications: four in his 1796 publication and seven entries in his 1809 publication. However, not all the notations found of these tunes in the unpublished manuscripts have Mooney as the source.

xvii Michael Billinge, "Rose Mooney's Harp," May 6, 2021. <http://wirestrungharp.com/>. Like Arthur O'Neill's memoirs, Charlotte Milligan Fox published some of the letters written by Dr. James McDonnell to Edward Bunting. See: Charlotte Milligan Fox, *Annals of the Irish Harpers*. 273-292.



## Catherine (Kate) Martin

Catherine (Kate) Martin is the second female harper to whom Bunting attributes specific entries to in his unpublished manuscripts. Martin appears as Kate Martin in the unpublished manuscripts and as C. Martin in Bunting's third publication in 1840. Martin is believed to have hailed from Co. Cavan. Martin did not make it to the Belfast Assembly; however, she attended two of the Granard Harp Balls in 1782 and 1785 and was not placed at either of the Granard Balls she attended. In his memoirs, Arthur O'Neill mentions Kate Martin as a harper from Lurgan, Co. Cavan, who he met while on his travels. It seems Martin was blind, like many harp players of the era. O'Neill notes, 'I do not know how she became nearly blind, as she walked without a guide.'<sup>xviii</sup> According to O'Neill her favourite airs were compositions of Parson Sterling – a rector of the parish in Lurgan, Co. Cavan, who was a noted bagpiper. Unfortunately, Bunting did not notate any of Sterling's compositions from Kate Martin.

In Bunting's unpublished manuscripts there are six entries identified as having been collected from Kate Martin. Like the notations of music associated with Rose Mooney, the entries found connected to Martin are notated by Bunting and Scribe H. Similar to notations associated with Rose Mooney, some of the notations credited to the performance of Kate Martin are notated more than once in the unpublished manuscripts. In total there are four tunes attributed to Martin in Bunting's unpublished manuscripts, *Maguire's Lamentation*, *The Merchants Daughter*, *Radara Meen Chusogh* and *Lady Maisterson*.<sup>xix</sup> There are three notations of the tune *Lady Maisterson* among the manuscripts, all of which are associated with Martin's playing. Four of the six entries associated with Martin were reportedly collected in Co. Cavan between 1800-1802.

There are three tunes included in Bunting's third publication in 1840 attributed to 'C. Martin. Harper, Virginia, County Cavan'.<sup>xx</sup> One entry was supposedly notated in 1796, the other in 1800 and the final one in 1802. The three years stated in the publication correlate with the years of notation transcribed in the unpublished manuscripts. The three melodies in Bunting's publication in 1840 associated with C. Martin are *Maguires's Lamentation*, *Lady Maisterton* and *The Jolly Merchant*. The first two

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xviii Arthur O'Neill Memoirs are found as part of MS4.14 in Bunting's unpublished collection.

xix Spellings of titles given here are as they appear in Bunting's unpublished manuscripts.

xx Edward Bunting, *The Ancient Music of Ireland*. ix. Two other titles associated with Martin can be found in the index on page xi.

titles were collected by Scribe H in Bunting's unpublished manuscripts: *Maquire's Lamentation* (MS4.13) collected in 1796 from Kate Martin, and *Lady Maisterton* (MS4.13 and MS4.27) collected from Kate Martin in Virginia, Co. Cavan, in 1800. The title of the final tune found in Bunting's 1840 publication (*The Jolly Merchant*) cannot be linked to any of the other titles associated with Kate Martin within the unpublished manuscripts.

It is interesting to note that Bunting published more of Kate Martin's music than that of Rose Mooney's. This is surprising given that Rose Mooney seems to have been recognised as the more accomplished performer. There is no apparent reason for this choice as it is unknown how Bunting chose the music he used in his publications.

## Others

I have not discovered any further information relating to female harpers among Bunting's unpublished manuscripts. Of course, there are other women from whom Bunting and other scribes collected. However, there is no precise information on what instrument (if any) they performed. In his memoirs, Arthur O'Neill mentions meeting other female performers of the harp while travelling throughout Ireland, including Nelly Smith and Biddy Reilly from Co. Cavan, and Peggy O'Neill from Co. Tyrone. It would be surprising if Bunting had not encountered these musicians on his travels, but, unfortunately, Bunting and other scribes often neglect to include their sources in the unpublished manuscripts. Therefore, we cannot say with certainty who performed for every notation found in Bunting's manuscripts.

## Conclusion

Although we know that Bunting collected from several female musicians during his collecting career, Mooney and Martin are the only two women that he identifies as harpers. Bunting collected a relatively small number of melodies from Mooney and Martin when compared with the number of melodies collected from other harpers. While the number of melodies recorded from these women are relatively small in the overall context of Bunting's collection, they do provide us with an interesting insight into the repertoires of both harpers, particularly Mooney's interest in the music of Turlough Carolan. The contributions of Mooney and Martin to Bunting's unpublished manuscripts give us an insight to the music they enjoyed performing.

## Eilís Lavelle

Eilís Lavelle, a harper from Monaghan, began learning music at a young age and had the opportunity to learn harp at the Armagh Pipers Club. Eilís continued developing her musical skills with many tutors, gaining vast experience as a performer. Having completed her B.Mus degree at DIT Conservatory of Music and Drama she was awarded the Leo Rowsome award for the highest achievement in Irish traditional music.



Eilís has collaborated and performed with musicians from a wide range of genres. Her broadcasts include performances on TG4's *Sé mo Laoch* and *Geantraí*, RTÉ television, BBC television and radio, RTÉ Lyric Fm and Radio na Gaeltachta. Eilís is currently undertaking a PhD at Queen's University, Belfast, focusing on the Edward Bunting collection of music. In recent years she has had extensive experience both in teaching harp and on stage, having performed throughout USA, Canada, Europe and further afield.