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HARP PERSPECTIVES

a retrospective look at the
research into Scottish harps

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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 February edition, Keith Sanger investigates the origins of two famous Scottish harps – The Queen Mary harp and the Lamont harp, the influence and presence of Irish harpers in the 16th and 17th century and challenges some previously held views on the use of the Irish wire-strung harp in the Scottish Highlands. He discusses how professional 'clarsairs' (harpers) were a vanishing breed in Scotland by the 18th century with the increasing popularity of the violin.

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

Aibhlín McCrann and Eithne Benson

Editors

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A RETROSPECTIVE LOOK AT THE RESEARCH INTO SCOTTISH HARPS

Keith Sanger

Since 1992ⁱ further research into the history of harps in Scotland has made much progress, both in terms of the historical background and in particular the scientific investigations of the two iconic Scottish instruments, known as the Lamont and Queen Mary Harps.ⁱⁱ In the case of the latter, high-quality scans and measurements of the patterns of nails on the fore pillar confirmed an opinion formed from study of the contemporary manuscript sources connected to Lude, that the name given to the harp was not due to it having ‘belonged’ to Queen Mary. It was possible to show that mounted on the fore-pillar of the harp had been a shield incorporating a gold coin showing the head of Mary Queen of Scots – apparently commemorating the start of the rise to prominence of the family of John Tarlochson of Clunes and his wife Beatrix Garden with the purchase by them of Inchmagranich, part of the former church lands of Dunkeld.ⁱⁱⁱ



Queen Mary Harp at the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh (photo by David Monniaux)

Land at that period could be bought and sold, inherited or just passed to a relative, but as nominally all land was held from the Crown, the actual title was confirmed by a charter issued by the Crown and usually bearing the royal seal. This was normally recognised by the arms of the reigning monarch being superimposed over the armorial of the new owners on a main door or fireplace lintel. In the case of the ‘Tarlochsons’, there is nothing to indicate that at that time their dwelling incorporated a fireplace, simply being a larger version of

i The publication date of *Tree of Strings- a history of the harp in Scotland*, by Sanger, K and Kinnaird A.

ii Loomis, K A. *The Organology of the Queen Mary and Lamont Harps*.
Thesis: <https://era.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/19551>

iii Sanger, K. The Queen Mary Harp despoilation.
https://www.wirestrungharp.com/harps/lude/1745_despoiled_queen_mary_harp/



the traditional house with fire in centre of the floor and smoke leaving through the thatched roof. Therefore, mounting the queens head on the harp, one of the grander belongings they would have possessed, served the same purpose.

Where though did they get the harp in the first place? Mary Queen of Scots can be discounted, she did not play the harp nor was there a spare one among her personal or state belongings. She did play both lute and spinet and they tended to travel with her, and she certainly was aware of the native Scottish instruments. The Treasurer's Accounts including those for her reign have been edited and published, but that is not the case for her personal accounts, nor her mother's, which as the *Despences de la Maison Royal* run from 1539 to the end of 1565. Written in French, which probably explains a limited search for musical references, they remain un-edited but certainly include some records of interest. For example, a journey the Queen took in July 1563 from Dumbarton to Castle Carrick then onto Eglinton, recorded payments made to four highlanders harp-players, (*quatre hirlandoys joueurs de herpe*) and two pipers, (*a deux cornemeuzeux*). Later she gave money to a single harp player and five harp players and a violin player at Castle Carrick. She also paid two men who carried the 'Queen's lutes', while one man was paid to take her spinet straight from Dumbarton to Eglinton.^{iv}

The 'Queen Mary' harp from its decoration shows a west highland origin and following radio carbon dating^v, the upper peak is close to the suggested date for the grave slab at Keils in Argyle which shows a similar harp design and is thought to be that of a harp maker.^{vi} This dating correlates with the rise to power of the Lords of the Isles and poses the question of how an expensively commissioned instrument associated with the Lords of the Isles was transferred to Lude in the heart of Atholl? There is one attractive explanation which in terms of chronology and personnel involved, albeit without a solid reference to the harp, does tick all the right boxes.

Following the forfeiture of the Lord of the Isles in 1493, the senior members of Clan Donald jostled for influence with John McEan of Ardnamurchan managing to retain large landholdings on Islay, the former centre of the Lordship. After his death these lands descended to his daughter Marion but neither she nor her husband, Robertson

iv National Records of Scotland E33/8 f.21r. My thanks to Thomas Brochard for help identifying the passage and his translation.

v <https://www.socantscot.org/research-project/radiocarbon-dating-the-queen-mary-harp/>

vi https://www.wirestrungharp.com/harps/other_images/keills_grave_slab/

of Strowan could raise the money required by the Crown to complete the title so they sold the right to the title to the Earl of Argyll. Marion NicEan had married at the parish Kirk of Rannoch under the Diocese of Dunkeld where the seal of Dunkeld was applied in 1538.^{vii} The connection continues by the fact that John Tarlochson of Clunes and Inchmagranichan, in whose hands we have the earliest firm record of the harp, although descended from a junior line of the original Lude family, held Clunes from Robertson of Strowan.



The Lamont harp, 15th century Scottish Gaelic medieval harp

Turning to the second of the two harps, the Lamont, it has been possible to reconcile the laboratory studies even more closely with the contemporary archival material. During the museum's investigation it was noticed that there was a date of 1452, in a style matching written dates in contemporary Lude-related documents, inside the sound box. In addition, a piece of vellum with traces of writing still visible had been used to repair a crack in the box. It was then possible from the contemporary archives to both identify the significance of that date and also determine the nature and dating of the vellum document. That in turn provided a date after which the document would have had no further use, other than providing the material for the repair.^{viii}

The Lamont Harp as it currently exists has been extensively restored, including using parts from more than one harp. As a result, the misfit at the tenon and mortise joint where the end of the harmonic curve meets the top of the pillar, was strengthened by using the two very heavy metal straps secured through rivets to the reverse side of the two parts.^{ix} Fortunately, the decoration on the

vii Munro, J and Munro R.W. *Acts of the Lords of the Isles*. (1986), p. 285; National Records of Scotland RH6/1252. RH6/1255; GD1/947/3.

viii For a detailed explanation of the background to the Lamont Harp see this link, especially the section entitled, The physical evidence and historical context. https://www.wirestrungharp.com/harps/historic/lamont_table/

ix Some other harps have straps at this point to prevent a gap occurring between the join but these are only nailed on, this is the only harp secured by through rivets and the resulting rigidity by effectively making those braces the actual joint led over time under the tension of the strings, to the severe distortion of especially the pillar. This conclusion was drawn from a long period of study of the joints of this harp in conjunction with the historical harp maker Michael Billinge. For detail of such straps see, Billinge, M. *The Ballinderry Fragments a re-assessment*. Under 'neck to forepillar straps'. <https://www.wirestrungharp.com/harps/historic/ballinderry-harp/>

straps which with artistic licence represents the Tarlochson family armorial of two wolf heads and a star or rowel, helps provide a further dating. After Alexander Tarlochson of Inchmagranich purchased Lude from Campbell of Glenorchy in 1621 he promptly dropped the 'Tarlochson' name and arms in favour of simply calling himself Alexander Robertson of Lude, (and borrowed the original Lude family arms of three wolf heads). Putting all the evidence together, it becomes clear that the major refurbishment of the harp coincided with the lands of Lude returning to a branch of the original family associated with Lude.^x

Moving on from studies of the physical instruments, continued research in contemporary sources has also produced a larger picture of the harp in Scotland and one which challenges previously held views. For example, and especially when looking from an Irish viewpoint, the statement when referring to the wire-strung harp of Ireland that it was also used in the 'Highlands and Islands of Scotland' is no longer viable. Although Argyle and the lands under Clan Donald more closely followed the Irish structure for the professional classes, the rest of Gaelic Scotland was less conforming.^{xi} This seems to have been particularly so when it comes to the poets and harpers, where in Scotland the two roles had merged into one in the Scottish version of a 'bard'.

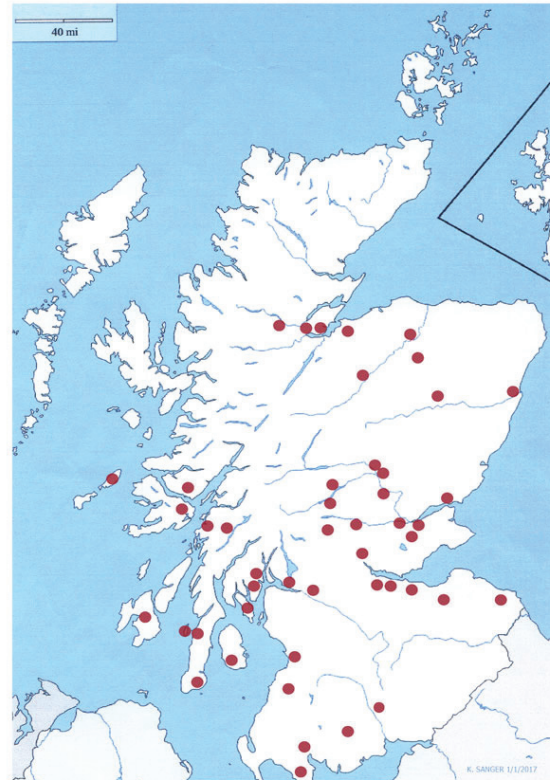
Even where the more Irish structure of poets were to be found, as in Argyle, they were descended from Irish families and mainly looked to Ireland rather than the rest of Scotland. It also has to be remembered that when after the forfeiture of the Lords of the Isles and some of the poets moved northwards, the MacMhuirich family to South Uist and the Ó Mhuirgheasains, first to Mull and then circa 1700 to Dunvegan; they were moving not into what today is regarded as a Gaelic stronghold but to somewhere which only a few hundred years earlier had still been under Scandinavian rule.

In other words, although by then a Gaelic speaking area (unlike today), they were on the periphery of the Gaelic world, and this is reflected when looking at where the clarsach was to be found in Scotland. Indeed, when references to players of the clarsach before 1650 are mapped onto Scotland there are no dots on Skye or the Outer Hebrides.

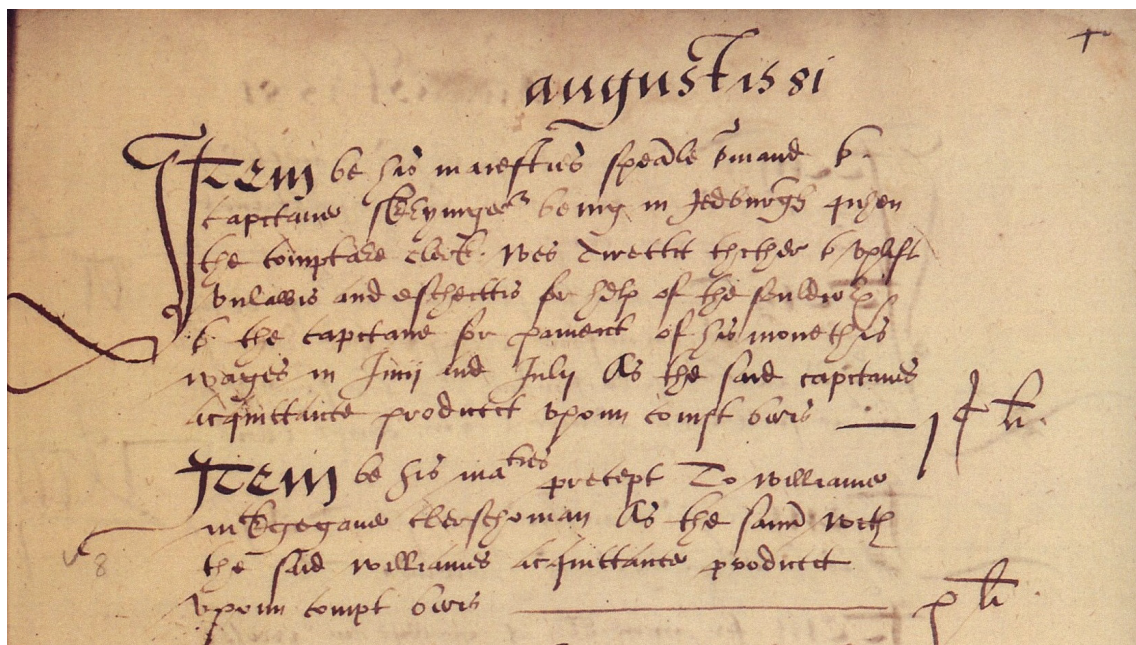
x Why the refurbishment required parts of more than one harp is unclear, although shortly before this a harper called William Robertson had been violently murdered and it may have resulted in damage to his harp. The commissions issued by the Privy Council to pursue the perpetrator can be found at National Records of Scotland PC7/2 f74b

xi McLeod, Wilson. *Divided Gaels- Gaelic Cultural Identities in Scotland and Ireland c. 1200-c.1650*. (2004); MacCoinnich, A. Divided Gaels, Review in *History Scotland* Vol. 6. No 5 (Sept/Oct 2006). Pp 50-53.

This partly explains the reason why the bagpipe came to predominate in that area. Indeed, when looking at such a map for the 'heartland' of the clarsach in Scotland it is to the South and East rather than the North and West that it can be found.^{xii} This may be partly due to the historical presence of the Royal court meaning that players of the clarsach could appear at the pinnacle of the performing arts in Scotland and were familiar enough that the Gaelic word 'clarsach' was adopted into Scots.



This picture of the clarsach's distribution is also reflected by where any visiting Irish harpers were to be found, even after that court had moved to England when James VI moved south in 1603. One of the earliest Irish visitors in fact first appears at court when on the 23 August 1581 one William McKegane clarschoman is noted in The Treasurer's Accounts receiving a payment



Transcript: Item be his maiesties precept To williamc mckegane clarschoman As the samin with the said williames acquittance productit vpoun compt beris x li

xii Sanger, K. *Mapping the Clarsach in Scotland*. (2017).
<https://www.wirestrungharp.com/harps/harpers/mapping-clarsach/>

of ten pounds. Those accounts are complete with no gaps but the parallel series of vouchers; the individual chits signed by the King authorising payment have large gaps but fortunately in this case the harper's one with James's signature has also survived.^{xiii} What the harper was doing in Scotland is unclear but earlier in May of that year the poet Fergal Óg Mac an Bhaird had been a visitor to court and there may be some connection. The poet returned to Ireland, but the harper may have stayed on, or returned as he reappears in the accounts of Lord Elphinstone in 1602. Under a marginal heading of 'menstrall' Wm Mageigan clarscher received 20 shillings.^{xiv} It is interesting to note that like a lot of the Irish harpers whose names suggest connections to other professional families, this harper would appear to be a member of the MacEgan family of Brehon Lawyers.

This same picture of other visiting 'clarsairs' mainly appearing in Southern Scotland can be seen later with two other harpers, Thomas Connellan who turns up in Edinburgh, where he was made a Burgess, and was possibly the unnamed harper who was involved in an early therapeutic use of harp music to cure depression.^{xv} Likewise Echlin Ó Cathain was made a Burgess of Inveraray in Argyle which he seems to have visited on many occasions, the last probably being when he attempted to set fire to Inveraray Castle because he thought he was being ignored.^{xvi}

Apart from an ever-growing database of harpers in Scotland, a complementary list of early references to players of the viol and violin has also been compiled. This in turn has helped explain the demise of both the gut and wire strung harp in Scotland. Prior to these bowed instruments there seems to have been no real competition between harps and the other plucked instrument, the lute. Indeed, the lute and gut-strung harps may have been complimentary. However, after the viol first appears on the scene at court in the 16th century and from there started to spread throughout the lowlands, the gut strung harp was the first of the two forms of harp to be affected. It was only after the viol started to move across the 'highland line' that the clarsach also faced its first challenge.

xiii National Records of Scotland E21/62 f.148 and E23/6/8

xiv National Records of Scotland GD156/31/1/2 p. 25. This record is no longer fit for production and is awaiting conservation.

xv Sanger, K. *The Healing Harp* (2019). <https://www.wirestrungharp.com/culture/healing-harp/>

xvi Sanger, K. *Echlin Ó Cathain* (2014). <https://www.wirestrungharp.com/harps/harpers/o-cathain-echlin/>

This is well illustrated with the first major appearance of the viol on the other side of that line when in 1620 the Laird of Grant on a business trip to Edinburgh was impressed with Robert Scott, the local violer and burgess. The Laird then introduced the viol into Strathspey where its presence grew, although by 1640 the clarsach and an occasional gut harp were still the dominant stringed instruments. Following the dramatic political events between then and the restoration of Charles II and a return to a more peaceful life, the harp had disappeared from Strathspey having been replaced by the viol, which had taken over both the accompaniment of Gaelic verses and playing for dancing. In its turn c. 1700, the viol was replaced by the violin.^{xvii}

This was the pattern, which was to continue; a steady encroachment of the bowed instruments to the detriment of the harps, although there were two harpers of some wealth and status still alive towards the end of the 17th century. One of them, blind Duncan MacIndeor who died in 1694 left a very detailed testament showing that his contacts extended from his main home in Argyle right the way through to a second home in Edinburgh, with probable links to the compilers of the Balcarres Lute manuscript.^{xviii} The other was Alexander Menzies who died in 1705 at Logierait and was of sufficient status to have accumulated considerable wealth over his lifetime; to the extent that he was able to loan one of the local lairds the sum of 1000 Scottish pounds. Most of what is in fact known about this harper was due to the debt still owing at the time of the harper's death. Despite this apparent demand for harp music, by 1723 he had been replaced at Logierait by the Duke of Atholl's violer and the violin was in increasing demand around that part of the country.^{xix}

Although there were a few professional clarsairs around at the start of the 18th century they were a vanishing breed as the violin continued to increase its penetration across Gaelic Scotland. It is therefore not too surprising that the last professional player of the clarsach, Murdoch MacDonald harper to MacLean of Coll, albeit living on his patron's Mull lands, was in a place which so far appears low in references to the violin. However, any idea that before the violin made its presence felt the Gaelic musical world was insular does not stand up to close examination. For example, in the early 1670s there was a 'pair of Virginals worth Six pound ten shillings Sterling' at Duart House on Mull and between 1693 and 1696 one William Niven Professor of

xvii Sanger, K. forthcoming *The 1692 letter to John Aubrey re-visited*.

xviii Sanger, K. *Duncan MacIndeor, harper to Campbell of Auchinbreck*. (2016). Includes a complete transcript of the testament. https://www.wirestrungharp.com/harps/harpers/duncan_mac-in-deor/

xix Sanger, K. Alexander Menzies, the harper of Logierait. *West Highland Notes and Queries*. Series 5. No. 3. pp 11 – 14.

Music' seems to have been resident at Dunvegan at a time when the blind harper Rory Dall Morison was also one of the retainers.^{xx}

Although the death of Murdoch MacDonald around 1740 brought the line of trained professional Scottish harpers to an end, the sound of a clarsach did continue in the hands of the harper's son John. In 1904, a letter from John Johnson in Coll recounts that his grandfather, who was born in 1765, had known the harper's son *Eoin MacMhuirichidh Chlasair*, or John, son of Murdoch harper, as he was called locally, and was told by him that he had studied harping under his father 'til he had become somewhat proficient but that one day having failed to finger certain notes in one particularly difficult tune to the satisfaction of his father, words passed between them, when he stopped abruptly in disgust at the extreme exactitude of his father and never studied much further. The harper's son inherited his father's clarsach and although the son never became a proficient harper he could play fairly well, according to John Johnson's grandfather who had often heard him play.^{xxi}

Keith Sanger

Keith Sanger has been studying the historical background of the harps and bagpipes of Scotland and Ireland for close to fifty years. This has resulted in a number of publications including *Tree of Strings: A History of the Harp in Scotland*, co-authored with Alison Kinnaird in 1992, and *Donald MacDonald's Collection of Piobaireachd, vols 1 and 2* (2006, 2011), co-edited with Roderick Cannon.

xx Sanger, K. Maclean of Broilass and a 'pair of virginals', *West Highland Notes & Queries*. Series 4. No. 13 (June 2020). pp 10 – 11; Sanger, K. 'Some Musical Notes from Skye'. *West Highland Notes and Queries*. Series 4. No 2. (December 2016).

xxi Sanger, K. 'Maclean Harpers, some loose ends'. *West Highland Notes & Queries*. Series 3. No 15. (October 2010). Pp 15 - 18