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# HARP PERSPECTIVES

AN ACCOUNT OF THE  
BUNRATTY CASTLE MEDIEVAL BANQUET  
AND THE PLACE OF THE HARP WITHIN IT:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

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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 May edition, Fiana Ní Chonaill visits Bunratty Castle where she explores the role of the Irish harp in the medieval banquet setting.

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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# AN ACCOUNT OF THE BUNRATTY CASTLE MEDIEVAL BANQUET AND THE PLACE OF THE HARP WITHIN IT: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

Fiana Ní Chonail

## Introduction

The Irish harp has a strong symbolic significance in Irish life through its visual depiction<sup>1</sup> but for many people a sonic experience<sup>2</sup> of the instrument remains more of a rarity. Bunratty Castle, situated in county Clare is an iconic cultural heritage attraction where one is guaranteed to hear the Irish harp<sup>3</sup> at its medieval banquet. The Irish harp has been at the core of this experience since its inception in the 1960s when the castle first opened to the public and the harp remains steadfast in this offering today. Growing up, I listened to stories that my mother told me about her experience of working as a Bunratty Castle entertainer during the 1970s. It was considered a prestigious career choice with celebrity status as the Bunratty Castle entertainers performed all over the world. In 2010, I got the opportunity to work at the castle as a harpist. This ignited my interest in the area of Irish music and tourism and in particular, Bunratty Castle as a site of study.



Figure 1, Bunratty Castle

- 1 It is the symbol of our country and is present on Irish coinage, official documents etc.
- 2 It always surprises me to hear people exclaim that they have never seen or heard a harp played in person. I feel that sometimes I take for granted that I interact with the harp players on a regular basis and this experience is not commonplace.
- 3 When I use the term 'Irish harp' I am referring to the lever harp as it is the type of harp used in the Bunratty Castle setting.



Figure 2, Donogh O'Brien, 4th Earl of Thomond

The narrative of the banquet is based around the castle's long and turbulent history which dates back to 1425. It centres around the O'Brien family who took control of the castle in 1475; they went on to be known as the 'Earls of Thomond'. Elements of this history are depicted in the first part of the ethnography in which I recorded my first-hand experience of the banquet that I attended in November 2011. Therefore, this situates the harp within the broader context of the banquet event as a whole. The harp is used to greet the guests in the great hall on their arrival. It performs background music along with a violinist. Together the musicians select the repertoire

which varies from harp-specific pieces to Irish song airs (played as instrumentals), traditional Irish dance music and some classical tunes. At times, the harp takes a leading role by performing the melody with the violinist and on occasion it provides accompaniment. As the evening's festivities begin to unfold and the butler takes centre



Figure 3, Harper greeting guests at the Bunratty Banquet

stage, the harpist relocates herself momentarily to provide the singers with their starting notes before moving downstairs to the banquet hall in anticipation of the guests. Here the instrument can be seen in a solo capacity performing background music as the guests enter.

The harp is also used to herald the introduction of the banquet courses.

The harpist builds anticipation by playing bright, arpeggiated chords. The singers also perform periodically as the guests consume their meal. The harp is in an accompanying role for these songs. Its role for vocal accompaniment is most evident when the entertainers perform the musical programme at the end of the evening. This lasts for approximately 30 minutes. The harp is challenged with dramatic key changes mid-song and big sweeping chords. The harp is also showcased as a solo instrument in this performative context.

The wide variety of settings in which the harp is encountered over the course of the evening reflects its versatility. This ethnography not only documents the Bunratty

Castle medieval banquet experience, but it reflects on the role of the harp within this cultural tourism offering. In true castle custom, I now invite you to enter with me ‘a world halfway between fantasy and reality’.

## Ethnography

I near the stone archway where a sign points me in the direction of the entrance. It is a cold autumnal evening, red and orange leaves decorate the ground, occasionally dancing in the wind. As I enter the reception building, a variety of pictures catch my eye. They are colourful and bright, depicting scenes of the medieval banquet that I will be attending. The warmth of the room is a welcome contrast to the chilly evening outside.

On my right there is a crowd of casually-dressed people gathered in a corner. There is a sense of anticipation in the air. A friendly, dark-haired lady dressed in the castle livery welcomes me. I tell her my name. Smiling, she hands me a ticket and directs me to the castle where the evening’s events are about to unfold.

Passing the crowd of people on my left, I once again step into the cold night. It is completely dark now, the path illuminated by large, black, old-fashioned street lights. I pass a small cottage with a variety of farm objects and boats outside it. There is a group of people huddled together in the yard. They are being addressed by a smartly dressed man who is explaining that each of them will receive a ticket for the evening’s festivities in the castle. The smell of a turf fire fills the air. This is coming from a whitewashed cottage adorned by a thatched roof.

Through the trees, I see a grey stone structure looming. Towering high into the air, the castle dominates the skyline, standing in all its glory dwarfing the cottages. Passing through the stone wall, I enter a large open space. On my left there are three cannons of varying sizes. In front of me are wooden steps that lead to the drawbridge. As I approach the castle, the pebbles crunch beneath my feet. I join the queue to ascend the steps. People are quietly discussing the forthcoming evening, enjoying the thrill of the unknown. I am greeted by a young man with short dark hair dressed in a colourful heavy velvet costume. Together with his female companion they say, “Good evening, my lady” and send me up the stone staircase to my right.

Holding tightly to the metal railing I climb the stone steps. It is not long until the sound of music fills the air. As I wait to enter the hall one of the friendly castle hostesses dressed in blue and gold offers me a green and yellow pottery goblet. It is filled with mead, a sweet honey wine. On my right-hand side is a girl dressed in red velvet with



Figure 4, Musicians entertain as guests arrive to the hall.

a matching headdress on her long black hair. Her gesture is the invitation to enter the great hall. A small platform has been erected in the centre of the room. A young lady in a pink dress with a purple, hooded cloak is seated behind a harp made of dark brown wood which sits on three tall legs. Her companion is a violinist dressed in a blue and gold costume. Their fingers glide gracefully over the strings to produce the atmospheric background music for all to enjoy. This room has a long table with a large, ornate chair positioned at its head. Medieval furnishings, such as tapestries, adorn the walls. As the music comes to a close the violin player immediately starts another tune. I take a seat on a small wooden bench towards the back of the hall.

Looking around, there is a large number of people mingling, dressed in warm casual clothing. They are taking numerous photographs of each other in groups, and also posing with the musicians and singers. A young man with blonde curly hair approaches me, offers me the 'bite of friendship' and informs me that it is to keep me safe within the castle walls. Taking a piece of brown bread, I dip it into the salt provided. The sharp dry taste of the salt is not unpleasant. The people, who, judging by their accents, have travelled far and wide, enthusiastically applaud the musicians on the completion of their set of music. A Carolan melody fills the air and the audience gaze at the musicians in awe. It is evident they are captivated by the music.

The music comes to a close and the harp player lifts her harp and relocates herself to the left of the stage. The man and woman who greeted me earlier mount the stage. The audience quickly switch their attention to the couple. The man introduces himself as the butler to the Earl of Thomond and welcomes the audience to Bunratty Castle. He speaks in old English as he gives the guests a brief history of the castle. He tells them that the castle in which they stand was completed by Síoda Macnamara in 1425. The lady informs the audience of the importance of the castle's strategic location. They offer the castle toast "Sláinte is Saol". The audience join in to recite the response. The entertainers have clearly captured the imaginations of the audience, who are now laughing and joining in with their jokes.

The other entertainers, dressed in costume, are forming a circle around the stage. The butler informs us that the entertainers are now going to welcome us by singing a madrigal – a popular form of entertainment in the castle during the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The

harp player strikes a resounding chord which echoes around the thick stone walls of the castle. By now the entertainers have gracefully swept into place and are filling the hall with a variety of vocal harmonies. The room is silent except for the dulcet tones of the singers and musicians, who are engaging with as many of the guests as possible by making prolonged eye contact with them.

The audience bursts into applause as the song draws to a close. The butler now announces that it is time for the Earl and his most gracious lady to take their rightful place and preside over the banquet. An arpeggio is played on the violin and harp to announce the coronation of the unsuspecting audience members who will play the King and Queen for the night. As they are being crowned, the harp player discreetly lifts her harp and exits the room. The butler then announces the Earl's toast once again as he leads the newly crowned Earl and his lady downstairs to the Banquet. Voices echo throughout the great hall as the toast is repeated and the violinist once more fills the hall with a solo rendition of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*.

I join the orderly queue for the banquet area. I overhear an American ask the lady who is accompanying him about the Irish pronunciation of the toast. He enquires about her competence in the Irish language as well as her experience of learning it in school. Their conversation fades as I leave the stone staircase and enter the banquet hall. The sound of the harp echoes around the hall. A man with a deep voice asks if I am with a group and he turns to his colleague and asks her where I should be seated. Walking



Figure 5, Tables set at the banquet hall

past long, wooden tables and benches, I notice the large white candles on either end. They are laden with pottery jugs, goblets, wooden platters and sharp knives with wooden handles. The harp creates a relaxing and enjoyable atmosphere which is evident from the audience who are chatting and helping themselves to the wine in the jugs. I am seated opposite a couple with Dublin

accents. As I slide into my seat we exchange friendly nods. The woman is dressed all in black. She has dark hair pulled firmly back from her face. Her partner is dressed in denim jeans and a blue striped shirt. He enquires about the contents of the jugs.

When everyone is seated, the butler emerges onto the balcony which overlooks the banquet hall. With outstretched hands he invites the audience to enter a world half way between fantasy and reality. He finishes by calling for the ancient spirits to join with us as the harpist plucks a strong chord. This is his signal to entertain the guests once

again with song. As the chorus commences, the ladies, who are now lined up at the end of each wooden table, join in. They move between the lines of tables, and, as they reach the stage, they turn to face the audience. Their stage presence is palpable as they smile and engage with the spectators during the performance.

When the song has come to a dramatic conclusion, the butler introduces each of the entertainers to the appreciative crowd. He asks for a momentary silence as the entertainers inform us of the protocol for the evening. She announces that we will be eating with our daggers, and in place of forks we will have to use our fingers. We are also told that the hungry prisoners below are anxiously awaiting the end of the feast. Without warning, there are a couple of loud banging sounds, causing some of the guests to gasp with surprise.

With the announcement of the arrival of the soup, the Earl is asked to give his approval. The lady of the castle glides gracefully through the rows of people and pours the bowl of soup. In the meantime, the butler intones that the Earl had better like it or he will be... replaced. The audience erupts with laughter in response to the joke. The butler looks happy that the quip has provoked the anticipated response. The room is silent as everyone anxiously awaits the Earl's decision. As he voices his approval, the room bursts into rapturous applause. The sounds of the harp and violin once again fill the hall. Pushing the bowl of broth to my lips, I taste the warm soup and I concur with the Earl's verdict, it is very good. The homemade brown bread is the topic of conversation at the table. The eating of the soup is accompanied by the hum of conversation, and it is at this point that a gong echoes through the hall to announce the next stage of the festivities. The butler declares that they are going to sing a song and asks the audience to accompany them. As the butler leads the audience in song, the ladies resume their formation at the ends of the wooden tables. As they join the butler in song, he calls for everyone to sway. The ladies next to me join in as they realise that they know the piece – *When Irish Eyes are Smiling*. Their American accents are evident as they enthusiastically participate. The female entertainers once again sweep majestically through the lines of diners and join the butler and the other male singers in front of the stage while the harp and violin play an interlude. The song comes to a dramatic dénouement as the ladies raise their left arms. The room is filled with appreciative applause, whistles and banging of the table, as the guests immerse themselves in the atmosphere and enjoyment of the entertainment being staged for their benefit. The entertainers disperse and Derek who is attending our table leans over the lady opposite me and asks if we could kindly pass the bowls to the end of the table.

The background music continues as the room is filled with additional noise and laughter. This time the musicians perform the triumphant march of Brian Ború who

was the high king of Ireland over one thousand years ago. As I pass my bowl to the lady beside me, she again remarks on the wonderful taste of the brown bread.

In preparation for the next course the harp and violin herald the entrance of the Lady Josephine. She is re-introduced to the audience by the butler. She is holding a piping hot silver platter with juicy spare ribs covered in what smells like a succulent sauce. She announces to the crowd in a loud clear voice “This is the best bacon dish in all of Ireland”. The audience responds with an appreciative “Ahhh”. The butler is now pacing the stage. He takes over from the lady Josephine and announces that he is going to look for an unsuspecting male guest to taste the dish. He strolls through the audience and suddenly coming to a halt, he speaks authoritatively to ensure that he has the attention of all the audience members. “If you do not agree that this is the best tasting bacon dish in all of Ireland, then this chef has cooked his last meal”, he exclaims. He points towards the event co-ordinator in the corner. The audience are now scrambling to get a view of the person at whom the butler is pointing. Stepping forward, the event co-ordinator quickly declares “Ladies and gentlemen, I am not the chef”. While the hall resounds with laughter, the verdict is made on the bacon ribs and the musicians fill the hall with the sound of *Planxty Irwin* and *The Lady Francis Power*, a medley of tunes composed by blind harper Turlough Carolan.

The delicious food is placed on the wooden platters in front of us. There is no hesitation, everyone tucks in with unbridled enthusiasm. An instrumental version of the song *The Lord of The Dance* is now being performed. Taking my share of the ribs, I use my dagger to cut them, and as I take the first bite the gong once again echoes through the hall. This time it takes a couple of minutes to gain silence in the vast room. The butler announces to the crowd that he is a harbinger of bad news. He declares that someone in the Earl’s company has not been behaving himself. As he requests the name of the “scoundrel” he looks through the audience judgmentally. The audience join in and attempt to spot the culprit. The Earl pinpoints the guilty party, and the butler quickly pulls him to his feet requesting to know what should be done. Starting as a quiet chant it grows louder and louder... “dungeon, dungeon”. As quick as a flash the butler has him in the dungeon and the door is slammed with a bang.

When the butler emerges from the dungeon, he requests that the Earl demonstrate some mercy to the prisoner. He asks the audience to listen to the pitiful cries from below. A soft sobbing sound emanates from the stygian depths of the dungeon and quickly grows into a loud cry of pain. With the permission of the Earl, the butler retrieves the prisoner. A humbled Lord Mitch is ordered to kneel and to be contrite. The butler once again pleads on behalf of Lord Mitch using wit, charm and sarcasm to strengthen his case. He addresses the Earl and the noble gathering and conveys

the idea that Lord Mitch is too young and... handsome to die tonight. He begs the Earl's forgiveness and requests that Lord Mitch be allowed the opportunity to redeem himself in some way. From his chair the Earl's voice booms over the whispering of the audience, "sing us a song". A look of shock is portrayed on the butler's face and he responds quickly by reminding the Earl that the idea is to punish the prisoner and not the audience. A wave of laughter runs through the hall and with that, Lord Mitch breaks into song. The audience shouts words of encouragement to show their support. Lord Mitch clears his throat as he approaches the chorus, which is a rousing version of the Queen classic *We Will Rock You*. The song concludes to loud applause in support of Lord Mitch. When he has returned to his seat, Derek, our server requests that we put the bones into the large wooden bowls provided and to pass the wooden platters to the top of the table so that he can commence preparation for the main course.

The familiar sound of the gong re-echoes through the banquet hall and the butler calls for the Lady Blathnaid to grace the stage with her presence. She is tightly clutching a large oval-shaped bowl from which steam rises. She acknowledges the Earl by bowing with her free hand in front of her. She gestures to the butler to do the same which provokes some amusement in the audience. She addresses the noble Earl and explains the composition of the main meal, and, almost as an aside, voices her concern that the Earl's food may have been poisoned. Once again she curtsies and explains that the gallant butler will first taste it. She repeats her gesture to the butler to bow to the Earl, which he does reluctantly. The Lady Blathnaid senses the ambivalence in the butler's voice as he attempts to talk his way out of tasting the food. She urges the audience to help her to convince him to sample the food, to which he eventually agrees. He cautiously puts the hot food in his mouth and signals his approval. Suddenly, the knife falls to the ground and the butler is doubled over with his hand on his stomach. There is a sharp intake of breath from the audience, but he allays their concern by straightening up and announcing that it is a tad hot but delicious. On this declaration of approval we are all served our main course.

While I wait for my plate to be passed to me, I become aware of a low noise in the background. I look around endeavouring to locate the source. My eyes are drawn to an alcove in the room where the violin player is tuning his instrument on completion of which he steps on the stage as the other entertainers leave the room. I use the knife to cut the vegetables and meat on my plate, and the sound of music once more resounds in the room. The solo violin plays the dance tune *The Irish Washer Woman*. The audience show their enjoyment by clapping along with the music. As the violinist gets faster and faster people stop clapping and watch his fingers move gracefully over the fingerboard. The audience give a hearty round of applause and some whistle in appreciation. The

fiddle player continues with *The Lord of the Dance* followed by *The Last Rose of Summer*, *The Salley Gardens* and *The Entertainer*.

The entertainers once more enter the room. They begin by clearing the plates from the table. Once our table is cleared, Derek arrives down with a tray piled high with desserts. The rest of the table are relieved to see these are accompanied by a spoon. As the gong sounds again, the butler announces we are about to hear the best of Irish music and song and the show commences.

The sound of both male and female voices accompanied by the harp and violin fill the room. Some of the diners at my table are singing along with the song '*The Jug of Punch*' while others manoeuvre to get an improved view of the performers. The sad verse of this song is portrayed by a tempo change and the sorrow in the singers' voices. The audience is mesmerised by the entertainers. The song comes to an upbeat conclusion, and the butler again steps forward. He announces that they are going to continue by singing a macaronic song, which means it is in both the Irish and English language and it is entitled *Cill Mhuire*. Some of the audience prepare their cameras to take photographs of this more unusual type of song. On conclusion the performers are rewarded with generous applause.

At this point the lights dim to a pale yellow and the entertainers are repositioning themselves to allow the harp to take centre stage. The butler informs us that the Lady Elaine is going to play a Carolan tune entitled *Planxty Drew*. The magical sound of the harp fills the room as the Lady Elaine concentrates on what she is doing. The lady beside me moves to get a better view, causing a mild disturbance amongst the people seated nearby, however their attention is again drawn back to the music by the Lady Elaine as she makes use of all dynamics of the harp. At the end of the O'Carolan piece, she quickly changes levers and starts playing a lively dance tune.

When the harp solo is over, normal white lighting is restored, the ladies of the castle again rearrange themselves and the butler addresses the audience. He informs us we are about to listen to *The Connemara Cradle Song* and it will be performed by the ladies of the castle. As the female voices sing in unison and harmony, some audience members are swaying in time to the music. The sweet singing is rudely interrupted by the sound of a ringing phone causing some mild irritation among the listeners, until the unfortunate owner switches it off. However, the ladies quickly regain the attention of the audience. On conclusion they receive an excellent round of applause with some audience members tapping the table and others whistling.

The lights are again lowered to emphasise the candlelight against the relative darkness.

This is in preparation for the next soloist who is introduced as the Lady Sinéad. She performs the vocal solo *Ireland, Mother Ireland*, accompanied by the Lady Elaine on harp. Her operatic soprano voice fills the air and I become aware of a man whispering to his friend that this song was his mother's favourite. He settles back into his seat and closes his eyes. I also become aware of soft whispering through the rest of the audience. The song finishes on a high, again to the sound of rapturous audience applause.

The entertainers regroup for their next pieces which are two acapella street songs, *I'll Tell My Ma* and *Quare Bungle Rye*. The harp is only used for the starting notes and it is followed rapidly by the vocals. The entertainers use hand gestures to portray the light-hearted and humorous nature of the songs. It is evident they have achieved this as the audience giggle hysterically the whole way through the songs and it culminates in undiluted approval from the enthralled listeners.

The next song, we are informed, needs no introduction. The violin begins and then the harp becomes more prominent until the singers' voices enter. Everyone quickly identifies the song as *Danny Boy*. The audience is enthralled by the quality of the performance and they express their appreciation by giving the biggest round of applause of the night as the song comes to a glorious close under the dimming lights.

The butler steps forward for the final time, extends his thanks to the Earl of Thomond and his gracious lady as well as the gallant prisoner Lord Mitch. The butler uses his wit and charm to inform the guests that there will be tea and coffee served on the way out. He also promotes the entertainers' CD and mentions that bottles of mead will be on sale on the way out. The evening will conclude with a rendition of *The Parting Glass*.

As I gaze around the room, people are still finishing desserts and pouring drinks while the final song is being sung. I notice that some audience members are humming along and others are sitting back with their eyes closed. When the song is about to finish the butler steps to centre stage and raises his hands. The lights are raised to signify the finale and everyone jumps to their feet to give a standing ovation.

We are directed to a stone staircase towards the exit. When I join the queue I overhear the couple behind me remarking on the fabulous evening they've had. The smell of strong coffee fills the air. The lower chambers of the castle are lit brightly and there is a long wooden table covered in pottery cups. There are three entertainers standing behind the table pouring tea and coffee for the guests. They chat politely as more guests pass through the room. I take a welcome mug of coffee and add a little drop of milk from the jug located at the end of the table. One of the entertainers comes to chat to me briefly before moving on to the next guest.

As I exit the building, the sound of bagpipes playing traditional Irish dance tunes fills the air. A small circle of people has congregated around them. It is very cold now and completely dark. I walk back down the path illuminated by old street lights. I am directed by the security guard who points me to the building through which I should exit. Nearing the car park, I regain the sense of reality and leave behind the fantasy that is Bunratty Castle.

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## Fiana Ní Chonail

Fiana hails from Castleconnell, Co Limerick. She comes from a family that has been involved in Irish music for three generations and was reared in a household immersed in the Irish music tradition. Her grandmother was an instrument maker, two of her aunts are former all-Ireland winning harpists and another was an all-Ireland winning concertina player.



She began learning the harp with Dr. Janet Harbison at the Limerick School of Music and later at the Irish Harp Centre. She completed a B.A in Irish Music at the University of Limerick in 2012 and went on to attain a Masters in Music at Newcastle University in 2013.

Her achievements in the harp world are diverse and impressive in nature, having won numerous prizes at local harp festivals, such as those in Keadue and Granard and include the senior title at the O'Carolan Harp festival in Nobber, Co. Meath. She has won several All-Ireland medals as well as achieving first place in the Harp Slow Airs at Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann in 2012.

Fiana completed the Comhaltas TTCT teaching Diploma in 2014 as well as their Adjudicators training course. She continues to teach and perform; bringing this wealth of experience of the tradition to her own students and audiences alike while pursuing a PhD at the University of Limerick in Music and Tourism.