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IRELAND



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# HARP PERSPECTIVES

THE LINEN HALL LIBRARY, BELFAST,  
AND THE HERITAGE OF THE HARP

JOHN GRAY

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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 November edition, John Gray, Chair of Belfast-based Reclaim the Enlightenment, brings us the history of Belfast's Linen Hall Library and its formative role in supporting the publication of Edward Bunting's *Ancient Music of Ireland*, and sustaining the harping tradition.

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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# THE LINEN HALL LIBRARY, BELFAST, AND THE HERITAGE OF THE HARP

John Gray

It was very appropriate that in July 2022 the launch of the Harps Alive | An Chruit Bheo | Harps Leevin Festival marking the 230th anniversary of that seminal assembly of harpers in Belfast in 1792, took place in the historic Linen Hall Library. The Library had played a key role in progressing that enterprise, and in later centuries played a significant role in the revival of the harp. Now it was great to be at the centre of an



Figure 1: John Gray speaking at the launch of the Harps Alive Festival in the Linen Hall, Belfast, July 2022

assembly of some 50 harpers who played over one weekend, and almost certainly comprised the largest gathering of harpers in Belfast's history, fruit of the manifest revival of harp playing.

Founded as the Belfast Reading Society in 1788 by men variously described as 'intelligent artisans' or 'the sans culottes of Belfast', by

1792 the society was colonised by the merchant class who had much grander ambitions for it; renaming it as The Belfast Library and Society for Promoting Knowledge in November of that year. Although they had no permanent premises they now aspired to create a library, which would particularly focus on materials relating to our own country including the collection of manuscripts in the Irish language, to create a museum, and to provide free and universal education.

Thus the institution became one of the key pillars in Presbyterian Belfast's proto-Republican government which largely supplanted the corrupt and ineffective Corporation of the town. The other pillars were the three Presbyterian churches in



Rosemary Street, and the Charitable Society which ran the poor house in Clifton House, providing the town's water supply and did much else besides.

All the members of the committee formed in April 1792 to progress the planned assembly of harpers in July were leading members of what was still the Belfast Reading Society. Amongst them perhaps the most significant were Doctor James McDonnell, who in his youth had been taught harp by Arthur O'Neill in his County Antrim home, and Henry Joy, editor of the Belfast News-Letter. This was not necessarily a radical enterprise. Henry Joy was to become a bitter opponent of the United Irishmen and MacDonnell opposed the rebellion in 1798.

That is not to say that radical enthusiasm was absent. After all, the young Edward Bunting, the organist at St George's church, who famously transcribed the music of the harpers was a lodger with the McCracken family. Henry Joy McCracken served on the library committee, and following his execution as leader of the United Irish rebellion in County Antrim, his sister, Mary Ann was elected to membership of the library in his place thus becoming the first female member of the institution. She was to prove a long standing advocate and assistant in Bunting's work.



Figure 2: The bust of Mary Ann McCracken, Clifton House, Belfast.

It is true that the most famous radical judgement on the harpers, and on the face of it a pretty damning one, came from none other than Wolfe Tone. In his journal for 11th July 1792 he records;

All go to the harpers at one; poor enough; ten performers; seven execrable, three good, one of them, Fanning, far the best. No new musical discovery; believe all the good Irish airs are already written.

It is surprising that he went again as he recorded on the 13th:

The harpers again. Strum strum and be hanged.

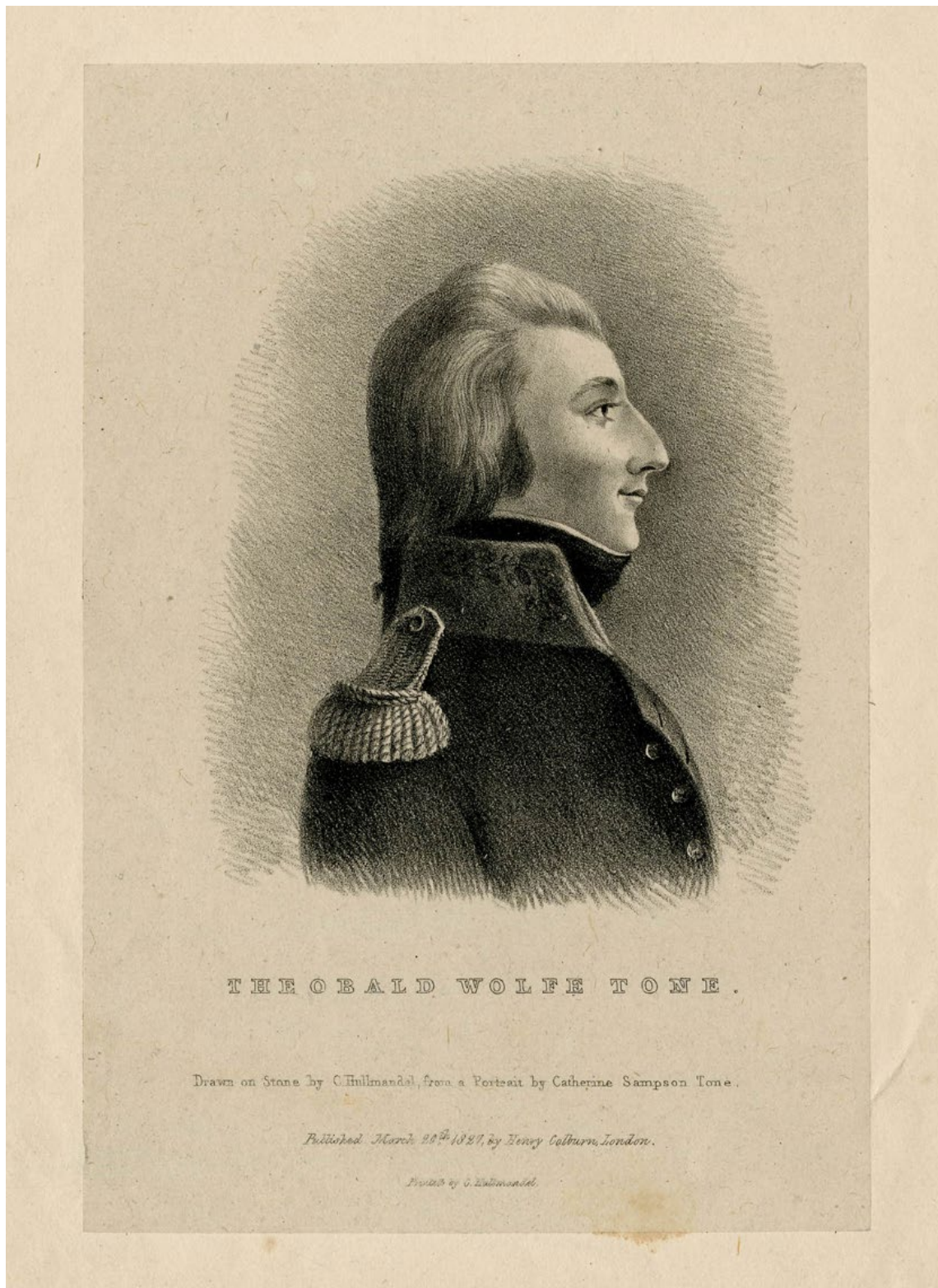


Figure 3: Theobald Wolfe Tone (1763 – 1798) founder of the United Irishmen

It is not that Tone was unmusical – he was a talented flute player. It may be that Belfast's late night entertainments had taken their toll. On the 11th he had woken 'with a great headache' and it was the same on the 13th.



Figure 4: The United Irishmen insignia

In any case, the harp enterprise clearly had symbolic significance for the United Irishmen. They adopted the harp restrung as the emblem and motto for the organisation.

What can be said is that the preservation and preferably the revival of the harp tradition were supported by both conservatives and radicals – despite their increasingly bitter political divisions. The same was true of the library.

Crucially of course, Edward Bunting had transcribed the music played by the harpers in 1792 thus embarking on a lifetime's work to preserve their historic repertoire.

In March 1793 Dr McDonnell was central to bringing forward a proposal to the library committee;

[A] collection of old Irish music superior to any hitherto published [had been] made at the late meeting of the harpers at Belfast. It was resolved that it be recommended to the society to take said work under the society's patronage and to publish it in London under the name of the society with a prefatory discourse allowing the profits derived therefrom to to the person who took down the notes.

Bunting enthusiastically agreed to the proposal and Dr McDonnell and Henry Joy set about securing a printer. In May 1794 it was agreed to proceed with a Mr R. Jameson of London who was paid an advance of £50. Publication was then dogged by what to the committee seemed unwonted delays.

Meanwhile a new figure had entered the fray. Radicals were in the ascendant on the committee when in January 1794 they appointed United Irishman, Thomas Russell, as librarian. Russell was actually with Tone in Dublin when he heard of his appointment, one Tone urged him to take up.

He was an enthusiastic supporter of Bunting's work. In his journal under the date 6 November 1794 he recorded, 'A meeting of the society in the evening. Tedious. Irish music discussed. I think it may go on if well managed'. The next day Russell met Bunting at McDonnell's house and they composed a letter to the committee. On the 6th Russell recorded its effect; 'A meeting of the society in the evening. By means of the letter etc., the Irish music went down well and was agreed to be done.'



Henry Joy and the Rev. Patrick Vance, Minister of the Second Presbyterian Church, were now delegated to see the business through. It was still to be no easy matter and much chasing of Mr Jameson was required. It was only in November 1796 that Bunting's, *Ancient Irish Music* was published. Appropriately, the Linen Hall's copy is signed by Bunting on the title page and as indicated on the reverse passed to Mary Balfour, Belfast's first published poetess, a radical and friend of Mary Ann McCracken who assisted Bunting with translations. She in turn gifted it to her cousin, Mary Balfour Manson who was almost certainly related to David Manson, Belfast's progressive school master who educated the McCracken children.

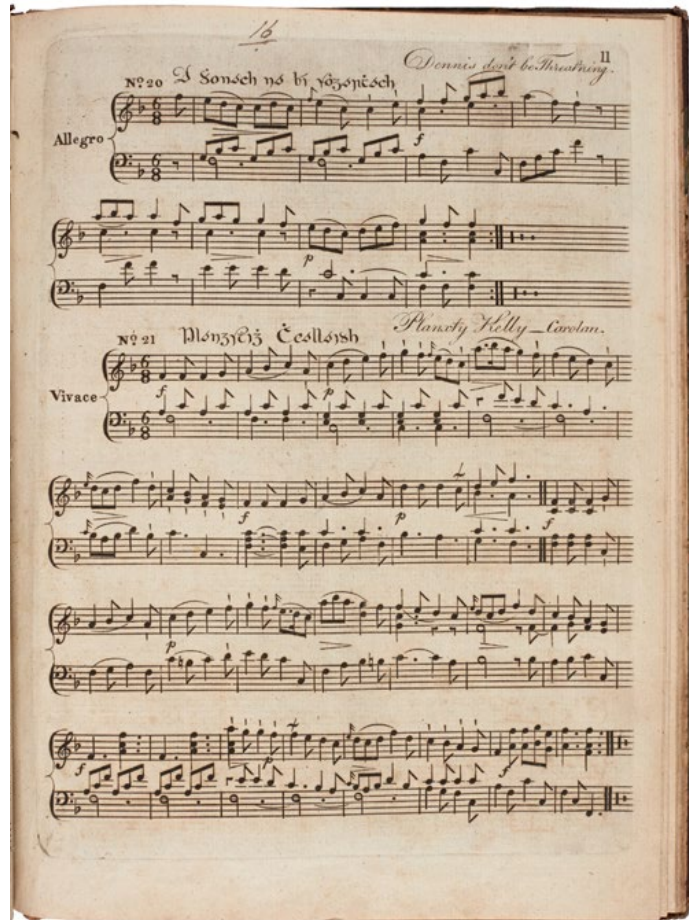


Figure 5: A page from *A General Collection of the Ancient Irish Music, Vol. One*, Edward Bunting, 1796

That great chronicler of the era, Martha McTier, wrote to her brother, William Drennan, recording the reception of the work;

Have you heard Bunting's Irish music – well play'd – no for you have not heard him – To me they are sounds might make Pitt melt for the poor Irish – not a copy is now to be got.

But she added the annoying news that 'I hear they are very unjustly going to reprint them in Dub[lin].' This was a pirate edition which is also in the Linen Hall collection.

The *Ancient Irish Music* had finally appeared in deeply troubled times. Thomas Russell had been arrested on the library premises in September along with Samuel Neilson, also a United Irishman, and a member of the library's committee, though best known as editor of the United Irish newspaper, the *Northern Star*.

Uniquely Russell was to remain imprisoned without trial right through to 1802. He returned secretly to Ireland and was ultimately executed for his role as the northern general in Emmett's failed rebellion of 1803.

Even during his long years of imprisonment Russell had maintained his interest in Bunting's continued work. In 1800, he wrote to his close friend John Templeton enclosing 'a tune for my friend Bunting, which I beg you to give him.' In 1802, while then



Figure 6: The White Linen Hall, from Donegall Square North, Belfast. 1888. It was demolished in 1897 to make way for the new City Hall.

imprisoned at Fort George in Scotland he asked Templeton to 'remember me to Bunting. I have a copy of his music with me, and will do all I can to introduce it to notice.'

The '98 rebellion and its bitter aftermath delayed Bunting's endeavours and further attempts to revive the harp. The Library escaped the sacking that befell other reading societies in Antrim

and Down perhaps because by then its President was the Reverend William Bruce, a bitter opponent of the United Irishmen who had actually joined the yeomanry. His respectability helped secure the library its first permanent premises in the White Linen Hall in 1802, and hence the library's popular name even today.

When on St Patrick's Day 1808 the inaugural meeting of the Belfast Harp Society was held, it was not a direct venture of the library but all the members of the committee were library members. There we find Dr McDonnell, Henry Joy, and John and Francis McCracken – all still active. When a celebratory dinner was held to mark the publication in 1809 of Bunting's second edition of the *Ancient Music of Ireland* the guests were serenaded by the first pupils of the harp society. Though launched with great fanfare, the society ran out of funds by 1813.

The society was revived in 1819 thanks to substantial funds raised in India and mainly by Irishmen serving in the Indian Army. Once again familiar names appear on the committee. There we find Edward Bunting, Henry Joy, John McCracken and John Templeton. The second iteration of the Harp Society survived until 1839 when the



Indian funds ran out, an ageing committee could not find replacements, and could not raise funds in Belfast. Fashions were changing, and with the assistance of Tom Moore, the harp was being supplanted by the pianoforte and the model of training up blind children as harpers seemed increasingly anachronistic.

It must have seemed like the end of the story. Not so.

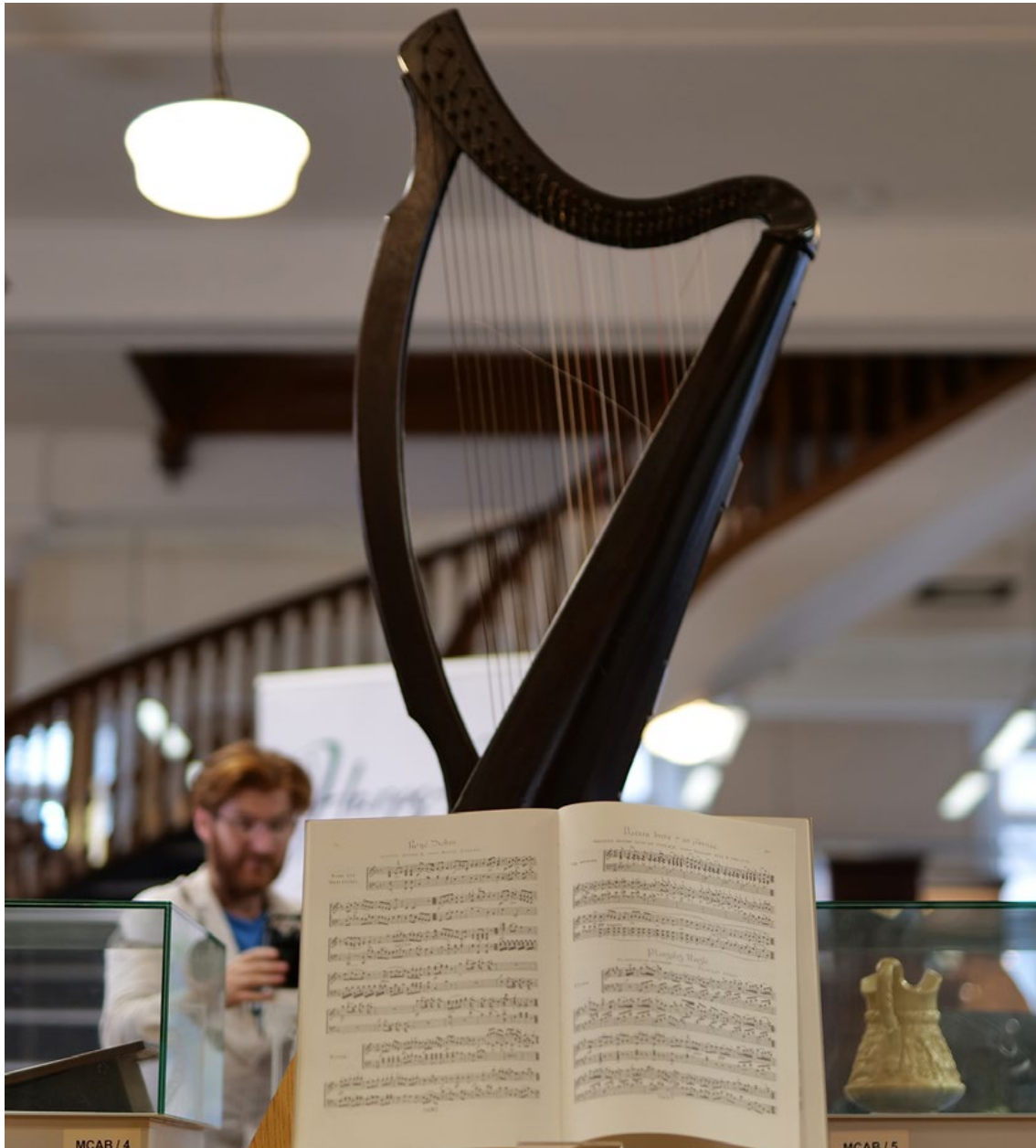


Figure 7: A 1920s James McFall harp with a copy of Bunting's *Ancient Irish Music* on display at the Linen Hall Library, Belfast

The library developed a new vigour in the late nineteenth century. Its supporters rose to the challenge presented, when they lost their premises in the White Linen Hall which made way for the City Hall, and raised the funds to purchase the present library

premises in 1892. Suitably the building is a former linen warehouse. The new building came with sufficient space to engage in cultural programming and, briefly, there was an enthusiasm for cultural exploration.

In May 1903 the library organised a harp festival which involved a re-enactment of the 1792 assembly. There were three key people involved. One was Robert Young, the President of the Library, who as a civil engineer travelling throughout Ireland had been an avid collector of traditional songs. Within his collection were documents relating to the original assembly of harpers and the subsequent harp societies which he had been gifted by Robert McAdam. The other significant players were Francis Joseph Bigger, a Governor of the Library, and an enthusiast for every aspect of the Irish cultural revival, and the young Herbert Hughes who acted as secretary for the festival.

On display during the festival were the harps of Hempson and O'Neill. The venture was so successful that extra performances had to be laid on in the larger Wellington Hall.

The library's Edwardian era of cultural adventurousness was short lived. The Home Rule crisis and World War intervened. Our own more recent Troubles almost led to the closure of the library but even in the worst of times important acquisitions were made. In 1974 Norah Beath, a granddaughter of Robert Young, that key collector at the beginning of the century, donated his archive to the library. This now forms the Beath collection, the library's most significant resource in respect of the early attempts to save the harping tradition.

At the beginning of the 1980s a successful 'Save the Linen Hall Campaign' made a new beginning possible. Cultural programming now became an important ingredient in the expanded possibilities of the institution.

I myself had become Librarian in 1981. Though fond of Irish traditional music and aware of the part the Library had played in the history of the harp, I had no actual familiarity with harp music. All that was to change with the arrival of Janet Harbison on the scene. It is fair to describe her as a force of nature with her own distinctive approach to teaching and playing the harp. In 1985 she approached us with a request to use the library for a one week summer school. We were easily persuaded.

The ongoing success of the summer school co-incided with the library's bicentenary in 1988, and sparked an idea for a major event in the celebratory programme – nothing less than a recreation of the original assembly of harpers in 1792. That was a venture supported by the library's President, John (Jack) Magee whose book, *The History of the Harp; the Linen Hall Library and the Preservation of Irish Music*, was published by the library in 1992.

Janet Harbison took the lead in creating an extraordinarily ambitious event which filled the Ulster Hall with an enthusiastic audience. Her harpers were complemented by arrivals from Dublin, and Helen Davis and Paul Nemeer were soloists. A particular treat was the arrival of Derek Bell of the Chieftains. The concert was compeered by



Figure 8: Janet Harbison and the Belfast Harp Orchestra in rehearsal with The Chieftains, 1992

Seán Rafferty of the BBC and conducted by Dr Havelock Nelson.

The Linen Hall maintained its support of the harping tradition. In 1996 with the support of the National Library of Ireland and Flying Fox Films, it published a facsimile edition of Bunting's original edition to mark the bicentenary of its publication.

Now in 2022 it was fitting that the final concert in the north south collaborative Harps Alive | An Chruit Bheo | Harps Leevin Festival involved a reassembly of the Belfast Harp Orchestra led by Janet. She paid a generous tribute to the role of the Linen Hall Library in giving birth to the orchestra and its role in sustaining the harping tradition.

The harping tradition has been firmly re-established right across the north and in Ireland in general. We look forward to further developments. I am sure that the Linen Hall Library will not be found wanting when it comes to helping it on its way.



# Harp Appendix

## Linen Hall Library History



The standard work is John Killen, *A History of the Linen Hall Library 1788-1988* (Belfast; Linen Hall Library, 1989). See in particular Chapter 8, 'The preservation of the traditional music of Ireland' at pp.173-192.

### See also:

John Magee, *The History of the Harp; the Linen Hall Library and the Preservation of Irish Music* (Belfast; Linen Hall Library, 1992)

*Irish Harp Festival, Linen Hall Library, May 1903* (Belfast W & G Baird, 1903). BPB 1903.3.

## Linen Hall Library Records

### *Minute books*

These commence on 13 May 1788 with the signatures of the 15 founding members of what was then the Belfast Reading Society and with its rules. There are then no minutes until 1792 and thereafter they are complete.

### *Membership register*

A complete register is available for the 1790's including subscriptions paid.

## Editions of Bunting's Work

### **The 1796 edition:**

*A General Collection of the Ancient Irish Music Containing a Variety of Admired Airs never before Published, and also the Compositions of Conolan and Carolan Collected from the Harpers &c in the Different Provinces of Ireland, and Adapted for the Pianoforte, with a Prefatory Introduction* (London; Preston & Son [1796]) Vol.1. Price 10s 6d.

Signed on title page E. Bunting. On reverse inscribed 'To Thomas Johnston esq of the Royal [????] from the author E. Bunting.' Also 'From Mary Balfour to her cousin Mary Balfour Manson.'

Inserted at front Andrew Gibson, 'Edward Bunting the first collector of Irish music.'  
(Offprint from the Belfast News-Letter, 16 May 1898).

Another copy.

Signed by Alicia Beresford and H. Gardiner.

Another copy

With the following variations. Now described as 'in 2 books' and priced at 6s. The publisher is now given simply as 'Preston'. The title page is also stamped;

S.J Piggott  
Parsons [?] Institution  
21 e Grafton Street

This is almost certainly the pirate edition referred to by Martha McTier in her correspondence with her brother, William Drennan.

### **The 1809 edition:**

*Bunting's General Collection of the Ancient Music of Ireland Including the Compositions of O'Caghan, Conalton, and Carolan, with a Dissertation on the Egyptian, British and Irish Harp (London; Clementi and Co., 1809). Vol.1.*

### **The 1840 edition**

*The Ancient Music of Ireland Arranged for the Pianforte to which is Prefixed a Dissertation on the Irish Harp and Harpers Including an Account of the Old Melodies of Ireland (Dublin; Hodges & Smith 1840).*

Signed John McAdam

### **The 1996 edition**

Facsimile of the 1796 edition (Belfast; Linen Hall Library, 1996).

With 2pp. brochure signed by John Killen, Barry Douglas, David Hammond, Neil Martin and others.

### **The Beath Collection**

This collection was presented to the library by Norah Beath in 1974. Norah was the granddaughter of Robert Young, President of the Library from 1903 to 1913, who was

one of those who helped organise the 1903 harp festival. He had acquired materials relating to the 1792 assembly of harpers and the later work of the Irish Harp Societies from his uncles, John and Robert McAdam. Norah Beath now gifted this material to the library.

IR/BEA/BOX 1 (11)

Edward Bunting to M[ary] McCracken, 1809.  
1p. Typescript copy.

IR/BEA/BOX 1 (12)

Patrick Lynch, Westport, to Mary McCracken.  
2 July 1802. 2pp.

IR/BEA/BOX 1 (13)

Patrick Lynch, Westport, to Mary McCracken.  
9 July 1802. 1p.

IR/BEA/BOX 3 (5)

Irish Harp Society

Printed notice and account of a meeting held 'for the purpose of constituting a society for the management of a fund formed in India to revive the harp and ancient music of Ireland.'  
16 April 1819. 1p.

IR/BEA/BOX 3 (7)

'Names of the noblemen and gentlemen associated for the purpose of reviving and encouraging the harp and the sum subscribed by them, annually.'  
Printed notice. [c.1809]. 1p.

On reverse

Fragment of minute re arrangements for the 1792 assembly of harpers.

IR/BEA/BOX 3 (9)

Edward Bunting to Mary McCracken.  
8 March 1809. 3pp.

IR/BEA/BOX 3 (11)

Edward Bunting to Frank McCracken.  
26 April 1809. 3pp.

IR/BEA/BOX 1 (24)

1p. Printed notice of 'Subscription balls to be held in the Exchange Rooms during the



present Winter for the benefit of the pupils of the Irish Harp Society’.

With undated letter from Robert McAdam to R[obert]M. Young. ‘The costume for the gentlemen... was to be green coats and the vests and trousers white.’ John and Robert McAdam were the writer’s uncles and had been the secretaries of the Irish Harp Society ‘in different departments’. The writer had the minute book of the first society in his possession.

IR/BEA/BOX 4 (25)

Proof copy of a portrait of Bunting.

IR/BEA/BOX 4 (33)

1p. Printed notice of intention to organise an assembly of harpers.

Belfast, 1791

On the reverse.

22 April 1792. Minute of ‘a meeting of several subscribers to the scheme for assembling the harpers.’ Includes appointment of the organising committee.

IR/BEA/BOX 5 (1)

Minute book of the Irish Harp Society 17 March 1808 - 20 November 1810. Includes list of subscribers and amount subscribed at commencement.

IR/BEA/BOX 6 (1)

Norah Beath, ‘Mr Bunting and the harp’, 16pp. typescript of talk read at Lennoxvale for the Drawing Room Circle (n.d.).

IR/BEA/BOX 6 (6)

Patrick Lynch to Miss Mary McCracken, Winecellar Entry, 2 July 1802.

3pp. In pencil.

IR/BEA/BOX 6 (16)

Irish Harp Society

Printed notice recording a meeting at which it had been agreed that this was a ‘favourable opportunity for the regeneration of the society, by giving the management to a new an younger class of our citizens.’

Signed John McAdam, Secretary.

16 October 1837. Ip.