

MARCH 2024

HARP PERSPECTIVES

DENIS HEMPSON
THE BLIND HARPER OF MAGILLIGAN
1695 – 1807

STEPHEN McCRACKEN

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 March edition, Stephen McCracken shines a spotlight on Denis Hempson, the oldest harper to perform at the Belfast Harpers' Assembly in 1792. Stephen gives us a compelling account of Hempson's life, times and music and describes his childhood fascination with this local hero.

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

Editor

March 2024

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DENIS HEMPSON

THE BLIND HARPER OF MAGILLIGAN

1695 – 1807

Stephen McCracken

“In the time of Noah, I was green
After his flood I’ve not been seen.
Until seventeen hundred and two, I was found
By Cormac Kelly underground:
He raised me to that degree-
Queen of Musick, you may call me.”

The above inscription is engraved upon the most famous harp in the world, the Downhill Harp, now part of the Guinness collection in Dublin.



Denis Hempson

As a child growing up in Magilligan, I regularly explored the sites and hidden history which made this place special to many and also secretive to others, from the Templars’ Double Cross only a few hundred yards from where Hempson rests to the Martello Tower close by. However, what was most intriguing to me was the story of the blind harper, the man with the two heads who played with his fingernails. To be honest us 10/13 year olds were more interested in the two head part of the story, a man who lived under the shadow of Benevenagh Mountain was more in line with the old haunting stories told by “others’ grandparents” and retold on the school yard.

The above engraved image was purchased by Edward Bunting for his 1840 collection, *The Ancient Music of Ireland*, and he paid Denis Hempson £15 for the image rights.

A harper such as Denis Hempson belonged to the social elite of his time, and his playing was equally celebrated by both Planter and Gael. At the reported age of 97, he was the oldest harper at the 1792 Belfast Harpers' Assembly concerts, and the music he performed was copied down for posterity by the musician Edward Bunting. Before and after the great festival, Bunting visited Hempson's home at Magilligan to collect more tunes from the elderly harper, he would later be accompanied to Magilligan by John and Mary Ann McCracken. On the 28th November 1797, Henry Joy McCracken writes to his sister from Kilmainham prison in Dublin:

"I hope John & Bunting will have a pleasant trip to Magilligan amongst friends"

John McCracken's descendants would later inherit a large tract of land in Magilligan and it's his 4th great grandson who is penning this short article. I didn't make the connection until later in life when researching the 1792 Harp Assembly and wanting to know who Bunting was.

The Rev. George Vaughan Sampson of Aghanloo and Ballykelly (North Derry/ Londonderry) had the privilege of visiting Denis in July 1805. He wrote that *'He played at the famous meeting of harpers at Belfast, under the patronage of some amateurs of Irish music. Mr Bunton, the celebrated musician of that town, was here the year before, at Hampson's, noting his tunes and his manner of playing, which is in the best old style. He said, with the honest feeling of self-love, "When I played the old tunes, not another of the harpers would play after me."'*

Denis is reported to have been born in 1695 between Limavady and Garvagh at Craigmores, with his father Bryan being from the slopes of Benevenagh at Tircrean in Magilligan. As a child of 3 years, it is reported that he contracted smallpox and lost his sight. He was taken pity upon at the age of 12 by the landowning Garvagh Canning family, and he was granted Bridget O'Cahan as his harp teacher. He would be further taught by other harpers and was given his own harp by **"Squire Gage and Dr Bacon"** (both of Magilligan) as noted by the Rev Sampson.



Looking up towards Benevenagh from the Dunes at the Magilligan Point by my great Aunt Winnifred Silletto in 1950, now in her 98th year.

Over the next 90 years Denis Hempson would travel the length of Ireland and visit Scotland. In his old age, he married a lady from across Lough Foyle in Donegal, who Rev George Sampson records was lame. They had one child, and they were given a small cottage to live in from the Earl Bishop, on condition that on request he would play for the Bruce family at the Palace. They lived here for the rest of their lives. However, in the winter months they frequented the larger towns and the Bruce estate for the warmth and hospitality they provided.



Full-length portrait of Dennis Hempson, facing right, seated playing for a group of children, his dog by his side by Henry Brocus (1762-1837) created in 1782.

Rev George Sampson writes - :

'Lord Bristol, when lodging at the bathing house of Mount Salut, near Magilligan, gave three guineas, and ground rent free, to build the house where Hampson now lives. At the housewarming, His Lordship with his lady and family came, and the children danced to his harp; the bishop gave three crowns to the family, and in the dear year, his Lordship called in his coach and six, stopped at the door, and gave a guinea to buy meal.'



Mount Salut, Downhill

After the Earl passed away, Sir Henry Hervey Bruce inherited the Downhill estate and paid Denis a visit. By now being in his mid-100s and after days of being bed ridden, Denis managed to sit up in his bed and called for his harp which had been donated to him by the Bruce family. This was the last time Denis was able to sit up and hold his harp; shortly afterwards he passed into eternity.

Frederick Hervey, the energetic and eccentric Earl of Bristol and Bishop of Derry planned his remote estate at Downhill and he constructed the Mussenden Temple to honour his niece, Frideswide Mussenden. Hervey gave Hempson support in his old age. The Mussenden Temple overlooks the North Channel and Scotland can be seen to the east. Last year this was one of the sites for the 230th anniversary of the Harpers Assembly as part of the inaugural **Harps Alive/An Chruit Bheo/Harps Leevin** festival. During his performing career, Denis Hempson toured Scotland and played



Dennis Hempson (1695-1807), harper, playing for a group of children by Denis Brocus 1762-1837.

at Holyrood House in Edinburgh for Bonnie Prince Charlie in 1745. Today, two of the oldest surviving Gaelic harps are still preserved in Edinburgh. We do not know whether Hempson ever saw the inside of the great Mussenden temple as it was used as a library, and actually as a place of worship for the local Catholic community.

Rev Sampson writes about Hempson's visit with the Pretender - :

“He was called into the great hall to play; at first he was alone, afterwards four fiddlers joined: the tune called for was, ‘The king shall enjoy his own again’ — he sung here part of the words following:

I hope to see the day, When the Whigs shall run away, And the king shall enjoy his own again.”

“I asked him if he heard the Pretender speak; he replied ‘I only heard him ask, “Is Sylvan there?”’, on which some one answered, “He is not here please your Royal Highness, but he shall be sent for.” ‘He meant to say Sullivan’, continued Hampson, ‘but that was the way he called the name.’ ”

Hempson was not the first of the Irish harpers to play at Holyrood. In the early 1600s, King James 1st was entertained by a wandering harper. This harper later stated that his praise left the minstrel unmoved and that his music had “warmed better blood than thine”. When asked who this was, “the great O’Neil”, was his reply.

Hempson was one of the last of the old breed of travelling harpers, who played this instrument in a particular archaic manner with long crooked nails. He died after reputedly living for 112 years and is buried in the graveyard of St. Aidan’s Church in the great shadow of Benevenagh Mountain. His instrument, the Downhill Harp, is preserved in Dublin and the tunes he loved are still shared today.

There has always been local folklore and stories regarding the location where Denis Hempson lived. In 1905 L Walkington travelled to Magilligan for a number of days gathering information on this character. He sat down and interviewed numerous people. Mr Conn told him that Denis lived opposite Lafferty’s Pub at the corner of the field, where a lane branched off from the road into the mountain, in a house which had been given to the Hempson family by the Bishop. This has now been proven to be opposite the Seacoast Bar between Benone and Magilligan Station.

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Stephen McCracken



Stephen McCracken grew up Magilligan, removed to Antrim 12 years ago and has written / researched extensively about the United Irishmen period. He has published many historical pieces for the local and national papers and often organises historical tours. He is on the committee of Coleraine Historical Society and is the current Secretary of Reclaim the Enlightenment; he also co-hosts on the all-Ireland history channel Trasna na Tire.