



Cruit Éireann  
Harp Ireland

June 2025

# Harp Perspectives

Valentine Rennie –  
Celebrated Professor of the Irish Harp

Mark Doherty

the arts  
council  
a chomhairle  
ealaíon

funding  
traditional arts

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 June edition, to coincide with our cross-border festival, Harps Alive | An Chruit Bheo, which we present with our partners Reclaim the Enlightenment, Mark Doherty shares his research on Valentine Rennie, a forgotten professor of the Irish Harp. Rennie was one of the foremost entertainers of Georgian Ireland. Initially a student of the Irish Harp Society, Rennie became the last great master harper of that institution.

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

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# Valentine Rennie – Celebrated Professor of the Irish Harp

## Mark Doherty

### Rediscovery

While researching at the Linen Hall Library in Belfast, I read a brief note in an old book of gravestone transcriptions with great interest. I had to follow my curiosity to a conclusion. After subsequently discovering an 150 year-old hand-drawn map, I



Valentine Rennie's gravestone

walked with it along a row of forgotten graves. Suspecting that I had identified the correct spot, I was delighted to see that there was still a headstone. The memorial is in a typical style from the 1830s, with the top shaped into three peaks. Squatting low on the lush grass, I looked closer. It is formed from warm honeycomb-coloured sandstone, leaning gently forward. Most of the face of this soft slab is eroded away; hollowed out by two centuries of Ulster rain. Low on the left, three carved letters are still legible, "I-R-I." Low on the right, "F-A-S-T". This was the confirmation for which I had hoped; I am at the grave of Valentine Rennie, Professor of the Irish Harp.

### Friar's Bush

The burial ground at Friar's Bush occupies a quiet and secluded two acres near the Malone Road, formerly the ancient highway leading west and south from the lower Lagan valley, where Belfast now stands. The first reference to a settlement of friars here dates from 1567, when the site was probably already in decline due to King Henry VIII closing down the old religious foundations. A short walk away is the elaborate red-brick elegance of Queen's College (now University) completed in 1849.





Friar's Bush coffin carriageway

Twenty years earlier, in 1829, this old burying ground was extended and walled around, with an attractive little symmetrical Gothic gate lodge fronting the roadway. It has spiky stone finials and a central 'coffin carriageway', paved with square setts. Strong circumstantial evidence points to William Vitruvius Morrison as the architect. The site was leased on very generous terms by the Marquis of Donegall on 29th May, about 6 weeks after Catholic Emancipation. The cemetery was consecrated on 5<sup>th</sup> August 1829 – the first in Ireland under the management of the Roman Catholic Church since the Reformation.

After clanking through two heavy sets of gates, a walk up the central grassy pathway through the cemetery leads to the heaped-earth of the old ground, with ancient gravestones leaning and broken on land swollen by the interments of many centuries. This was once a country graveyard, sitting in a field

about an Irish mile south of the sandy ford which gave Belfast its name. The oldest headstone dates from 1717. Of the old church, a single stone remains. Originally used as a holy water font, it now sits on the top of the mound. Although now overlooked by the Ulster Museum, this graveyard is still an evocative haunt of ancient peace, described by the late local historian Dr. Eamon Phoenix as a place of '*history and mystery*.'

I was born at Malone Place, half-a-mile away. I may have relatives buried here – Donnellys from the maternal line. Alas, records from late Georgian and early Victorian times are very poor, so I may never have this confirmed. While studying at Queen's



Gate Lodge with Rennie's stone on the left.

University in the 1980s, I passed by this graveyard thousands of times, and the area has been part of my life for over forty years. Just before the Covid epidemic, I walked away from my engineering career to work as a tour guide and historian. I studied the history of the cemetery during a covid-era tour guiding course, and then finally 'came home' when I entered the gates of Friar's Bush a couple of years ago. I had already started researching the history of this place.

Friar's Bush was used for illicit Mass in Penal times, and it is said that in the early 1700s a friar was caught here celebrating Mass. He was shot dead and buried on the spot, just below the Friar's Bush – a fairy thorn which still grows in the centre of the burial ground. This oral tradition is supported by a written report of another secret Mass at Friar's Bush being dispersed and the ringleaders arrested, on St. Patrick's Day 1724.

The majority of those interred here are the forgotten poor – including thousands



Kevin Buggy memorial (1843)

of children – who died of cholera, smallpox, typhus, tuberculosis, infections and many other causes. One old headstone recalls 21 children. The cemetery has one of the three famine grounds in Belfast, piled with the nameless dead of Black '47. But there are also many people buried here whose interesting lives are recorded, if not widely known. Fondly remembered is Barney Hughes, the immensely successful baker who fed the poor of Victorian Belfast. Kevin Buggy, newspaper editor and good friend of Daniel O'Connell was buried here in 1843. His enormous

memorial is decorated with two splendid carvings of harps surrounded by shamrock. Another person of note buried at Friar's Bush is the harper, Valentine Rennie.

## Robert Burns and the Antrim Glensmen



Curfew Tower, Cushendall, built from 1809 (National Museums NI)

Valentine Rennie was born in 1795 in Cushendall, a scenic coastal village in the Glens of Antrim. In a time of no standard spellings, there were many variations of this



Robert Burns by A. Nasmyth

surname; Rainey being one of the more common. However, we know from his own signature that 'Rennie' is the form he used. In clear weather, Ayrshire is visible across the North Channel, and communication between this part of Ireland and neighbouring Scotland was close and regular in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This accounts for the fact that Valentine is related to Scotland's national poet, Robert Burns. Burns' maternal grandmother was Agnes Rainie (another spelling variation) and she provides the link between the two men. Agnes Galt, Robert's sister, undoubtedly named for her grandmother, is buried in Dundalk.



I wonder did Agnes ever meet Valentine, when he was travelling through Dundalk on one of his many journeys between Belfast and Dublin.

Young Valentine had very poor eyesight, likely to have been caused by smallpox. He was celebrated as an outstanding fiddler from a young age, and his musical talent came to the attention of a fellow Cushendall native, Doctor James MacDonnell. Dr. MacDonnell profoundly added to the intellectual development of Belfast after relocating to the growing town as a young man. He became one of the fathers of the Belfast Enlightenment, a period when educated and prosperous Presbyterians like himself worked in many ways to improve society for all. In 1788 he was involved with setting up the first lending library, which still exists as the venerable old Linen Hall Library. He was one of the main drivers behind the great Belfast Harp Festival in 1792. Dr. MacDonnell also founded the first hospital in the growing town in 1793. Yet another project was the setting up of the Academical Institution (now the Royal Belfast Academical Institution) in 1810, the first non-denominational college in Ireland. When he retired in 1828, Dr. MacDonnell was presented with a large inscribed silver service, which is now owned by Queen's University. He is buried below an impressive Celtic Cross at Layde ancient church near Cushendall, where Valentine Rennie's parents probably lie. In Belfast, if you look above the entrance to Queen's Arcade at Donegall Place, in the busy commercial centre, you will see a blue plaque marking the former location of his home.

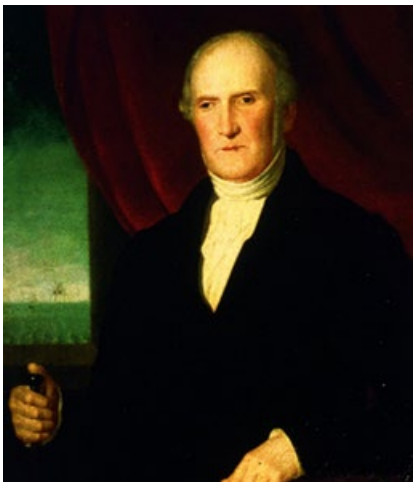


Bust of Dr James MacDonnell

## The Belfast Harp Society

The Presbyterians of Belfast preserved the ancient music of Ireland by recording the old tunes played during the Harp Festival in 1792. A further practical venture was initiated on Saint Patrick's Day 1808, when the Irish Harp Society was founded, with Dr. MacDonnell as vice-president. The society was formed to continue the traditional teaching of the harp to young people, mainly blind and mainly boys, and to set them up in a career as travelling musicians.

Committee members of the society included some of the leading intellectuals of the town. One was musician Edward Bunting, the transcriber of the old harp tunes. Another was the committed social reformer Mary Ann McCracken, sister of the famously ill-fated United Irishman Henry Joy McCracken, hanged at Corn Market on 17<sup>th</sup> July 1798. Mary Ann was a foster-sister of Edward Bunting, who was taken in by her family when he arrived as a young musician in Belfast. Two of Mary Ann's brother, John & Francis, also served on the committee, as did Dr. William Drennan, poet of 'Emerald Isle' fame. Another person involved was Thomas McCabe, a founder of the United Irishmen and a watchmaker who in 1786 had convinced the Belfast Assembly to vote down the proposal to establish a Belfast Slave Ship Company.



Alexander Mitchell, blind musician & lighthouse builder

A particularly interesting committee member was the harbour commissioner, Alexander Mitchell. He is celebrated as the blind engineer who devised the Mitchell pile lighthouse that could be built on shifting sands and mudbanks. One of his lights still stands near Cobh harbour. He was a passionate musician, playing the flute and accordion. He was inspired to assist others who set out in life with the handicap of poor eyesight to discover the joy of playing music.

## The Last Bard

The Harp Society also had the grand aim of teaching the Irish language, but this was never realised. Limited funding resulted in music lessons being the main focus of the classes. The first master of this school was the last great bardic harper, Arthur O'Neill.

Arthur O'Neill had previously been tutor to a young James MacDonnell and his two brothers in Cushendall, when he lived with the family for two years. O'Neill judged James to be the poorest harper of the three brothers, but he was forgiven for that, as he applied his considerable talents in many other areas, particularly medicine. MacDonnell was one of the sponsors of



Arthur O'Neill



the Belfast Harpers' Meeting of 1792, and he prevailed on his old harp master to play at that event. Possibly the greatest legacy of O'Neill was a picaresque and entertaining account of his life which was published by Edward Bunting.

The Harp School was based in premises at Pottinger's Entry, off High Street. Pupils who came from out of town were given bed and board. There would have been a daily programme of lessons, with O'Neill using the



Pottinger's Entry 1790 (National Museums NI)



MacDonnell cross at Layde Church

ancient teaching methods by which he himself had learned his trade. As the young students increased in proficiency they started giving public performances, in smart costumes supplied by the society. Eventually, when judged suitably proficient, a student would be presented with a certificate and a harp, and would take to the road as a travelling entertainer.

## The Student Harper

In early 1809, at the age of 14 years, after being recommended by Dr. MacDonnell, Valentine began his formal harp training in Belfast. As an accomplished fiddle player, he now began the transition from a 4-stringed instrument to one of about 36 strings. This

was an interesting reversal, as one of the causes of the waning popularity of the harp was the increased availability of the compact, loud and easily-tuned Italian violin, allied with the sensational new classical music of Geminiani, Corelli and Vivaldi. As his harp lessons progressed, it was said that Valentine's skills soon surpassed those of his master.

The Harp Society regularly struggled to attract sufficient funds. In 1809, the year Valentine came to Belfast, a benefit concert took place at the New Theatre in Arthur Square. At that time it was under the management of colourful actor-impresario Montague Talbot. Montague, from an aristocratic Anglo-Irish background, had travelled widely. He had debuted at Covent Garden in the 1790s, relocating to Ireland



New Theatre, Arthur Square

at the start of the 1800s, when he became a regular performer at the Crow Street Theatre in Dublin and many other places across the country, before settling in Belfast. At the grand finale of the New Theatre fund-raiser, the young students would have been on the stage demonstrating their new-learned skills. No doubt the capable young Valentine was a star performer, at what was

probably his first experience of a large concert venue. For a few winters, a subscribers' Ball was held in the Assembly Rooms, the location of the original Harp Festival in 1792. Valentine also had a chance, along with his fellow students, to play in this notable venue, which still stands as the oldest building in Belfast.

Tastes were changing, new instruments and music were coming from continental Europe. The melodies of old Ireland, and the harpers who preserved them, were less fashionable to younger ears, as is the way of the world. Disappointingly, the society folded in 1813, with the elderly Arthur O'Neill retiring to his home county of Tyrone.

Dr. MacDonnell paid him a pension until the old bard passed in 1816.



The Assembly Rooms

## God Save the King

Valentine, along with fellow star pupil Edward McBride (whose father is said to have made Valentine's harp) then spent some years travelling the roads of Ireland as a musical duo performing to great acclaim, no doubt mainly to the older citizens. I wonder, as well as evoking the romance of old Ireland on the harp, whether Valentine played his violin to add another dimension to their performance. He was also a very entertaining story-teller, and no doubt his connection to Robert Burns featured in his performances. It is noted that he often played *A man's a man for a' that* and *Green grow the rushes, O* composed by the Scottish Bard in honour of men & women respectively. By 1821 Valentine had been living in Dublin for some time. He was well enough known and respected to be the lead performer in a unique concert following a 'city banquet' at the grand opening of the Round Room at the Mansion House on 23rd August. This was the first purpose-built concert hall in Ireland, said to have been completed in only six weeks. Nearly a century later, it would become the venue for the first meeting of Dáil Eireann.

The grand occasion was a welcome for King George IV, the first English monarch to cross the Irish Sea since 1690, when King William of Orange led tens of thousands of men out of Belfast past Friar's Bush, heading south to do battle at the river Boyne. And what a contrast this Royal visit was; a peaceful visit with no accompanying army. George was not popular in England, being viewed as a 'corpulent, bibulous, philanderer,' vain and profligate. Shortly after his coronation, he made this visit to Ireland and his colonial subjects enjoyed the pomp of many grand events. The first Royal Arch in Ireland was constructed on Cavendish Row to welcome him, built to



King George IV's welcome to Dublin, 1821

the designs of Sir Richard Morrison (father of William Vitruvius). The King's indulgent lifestyle meant that even at breakfast he consumed liberal amounts of alcohol. He referred to Dubliners (probably even the women!) as "Jack". This saved him trying to understand accents or remember names. This is why citizens of Dublin are still



referred to as ‘Jackeens’ by those outside of the capital. It is this dissipated monarch who inspired the children’s rhyme ‘Georgie Porgie.’ The first straight road in Ireland was laid out to ease his travel north to Slane Castle to visit his Irish mistress.



Concert programme, 21 August 1821

In Dublin, after the grand banquet, four harpers took to the stage to play a generous selection of Irish melodies to entertain their regal guest. The first credit in the programme is for ‘Valentine Reannev’ (a new surname variation), followed by Edward MacBride, James MacMonagal, and John MacLoghlin. All were former students of the Belfast Harp Society.

A copy of the programme still exists, and it names all 34 tunes that were performed, these being a fairly typical selection. They commenced with *God save our King*, followed by *Patrick’s Day* and *Ireland Forever*. The tunes are listed in Irish, in the old insular script, and also translated into English. Two successive tunes are *Mary, My Love!* and *The Dear*

*Love of My Heart*. Did Valentine include these to honour his new love, Maryanne Lord of Anglesea Street?

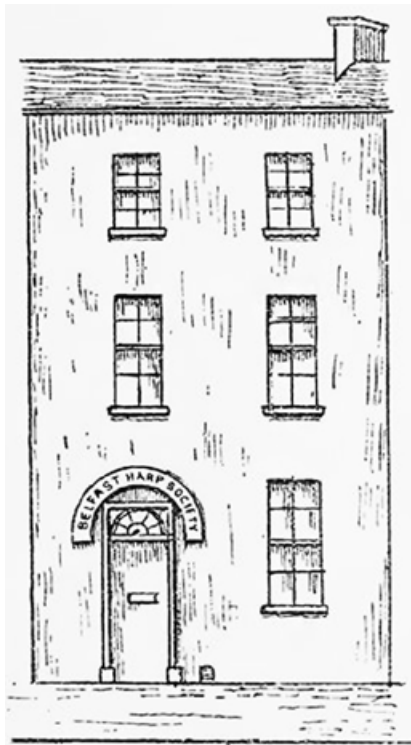
## A Return to the North

The Irish Harp Society in Belfast was reformed in 1819. Most of the funding for the next 20 years came from a surprising source – India. The Bengal Subscription was raised in Calcutta by British Army Officers of Irish origin. These men were passionate about preserving the ancient harp tradition of their homeland. The first harp master of the reconstituted society was Edward McBride, who was replaced by Valentine in late 1821. The harp school had acquired a three-storey terrace house on Cromac Street, where accommodation was provided for the harp master and his students. Possibly it was the

respectable life of a teacher's wife that brought Maryanne Lord to Belfast. She married her Valentine on 7<sup>th</sup> September 1823 at St. Patrick's Catholic Church on Donegall Street, and they began their married life in the society house on Cromac Street.



St. Patrick's Church, Donegall St.



Belfast Harp Society House by Thomas Smyth

Thomas Smyth, a neighbour, produced little sketches of the Society House & seal, as well as a pen-portrait of Valentine Rennie.



Valentine Rennie by Thomas Smyth

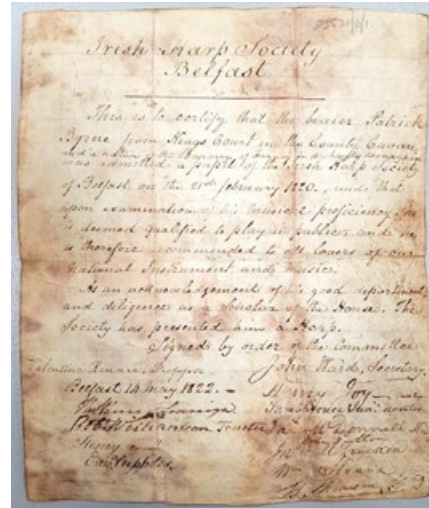
Valentine now imparted the secrets of the Irish Harp to a new generation of young musicians. The names of some of his students are known. Unfortunately, one died while still in training, and was buried at Kilrush, Lisburn. On his headstone, now lost, it stated:

“Erected by the Irish Harp Society in memory of their pupil Patrick McCloskey, in consideration of his good conduct and proficiency in music. Died 7 June 1826 aged 19 years.”

No doubt Valentine would have attended the funeral of his young student.

A student destined for great success was Patrick Byrne. He was nearly the same age as Valentine and had attended the earlier school under Arthur O'Neill. He returned to the Harp Society in 1820 to complete his studies. He became the most sought-after of

Valentine's pupils, and was claimed by some as the last great Irish Harper (a claim often made for many different harpers). Valentine was the lead signature on the certificate of examination, dated 14 May 1822, which Patrick carefully and proudly carried with him for the rest of his days. It was signed by all committee members, including Dr. MacDonnell. This unique artefact is still preserved in Belfast. Patrick spent many years in England and Scotland, playing regularly for Queen Victoria and he received a Royal Warrant from Prince Albert. He was the first Irish traditional musician and the first harper in the world to be photographed. His grave-slab in his home town of Carrickmacross notes:



Patrick Byrne certificate 14 May 1822, signed by Valentine Rennie



Patrick Byrne – the first harper in the world to be photographed (Hill & Adamson)

“IHS Here lieth the body of  
PATRICK BYRNE  
Harper to HRH the late  
PRINCE CONSORT

Who departed this life at Dundalk  
April 8 1863,  
In the 69<sup>th</sup> year of his age.  
May he rest in peace. Amen.”

In Belfast, Valentine kept himself very busy. As well as the Harp Society work, he gave private tuition, and was a popular performer at local events and sometimes further afield. There are many warm reviews of his performances in the 1820s and 1830s. For example, in 1833, following a performance in Limerick, he was praised in the *Belfast News Letter* –

“Beneath the witchery of his touch, our ancient instrument has revived its claims upon the sympathies and nationality of our country, its dulcet notes vibrating from every chord, and dying melodiously in the distance, fill the soul with the tenderest recollections, while the forte of



its bolder efforts fires the heart with a glowing admiration of that love of glory with which the harp of old inspired heroes and patriots.”

Valentine was a much respected and popular member of Belfast society, recognised as an expert on ancient music, and providing the main entertainment for many distinguished gatherings. He was of confident and determined character. It is noted in a newspaper in 1832 that “Mr. Rennie of the Harp Society” had successfully argued in court that, contrary to what he had been told, living free-of-charge in the society house did not exclude him from the right to vote. He is described in another report of February 1837 as the chairman of the lot-holders committee of Friar’s Bush, at a time of some difficulties in the management of the cemetery. He was evidently a busy man in many areas of life, contributing positively to the local community.

Internal Lots Plot Farm A		Friar's Bush	
Oct 3 1829	John Blantyre	5	£1 0 0
Mar 17 1830	Joseph Molloy	3	£1 0 0
Jun 26 1830	John <del>Blantyre</del>	5	
April 14 1830	Edward Brauland	7	£1 0 0
Do Do Do	1830 Hugh Martin	9	
Do Do Do	Do	11	
Jan 31 1831	John McQuinn	13	£1 0 0
Feb 19 1831	Montague Talbot	15	
	1831 Valentine Rennie	17	
Mar 5 1831	Wm Rennie Teacher	19	

Lot owners' register, 1831

## Family and Death



Maryanne Rennie's grave in Glasnevin

During their life on Cromac Street, Maryanne bore three children. The first of these was a daughter, also named Maryanne, born early in 1825. She died on 1st June 1829, and is probably buried at Friar’s Bush, which acquired the cemetery extension three days before her death. She is nearly certain to lie in the old, unregulated, burying ground. The next record we have is of a second child, John Burns Rennie, born in 1831. He was joined by a little brother, Robert James Rennie, in December 1832. Alas, both boys seem to have fallen ill the following March. Valentine rushed back after another concert commitment in Limerick, but Robert had died. Fortunately, his brother, John,

survived. As Valentine had acquired a lot at Friar's Bush in 1831, Robert's became the first burial in the family grave.

Valentine suffered from poor health in this final years. It was reported that he had been invited to play in Calcutta, but he did not go. Maybe his fragile state made him reluctant to risk the journey, and it would have kept him from his teaching commitments and his family for a long period. He passed away at Cromac Street on Saturday 23 September 1837, and was buried at Friar's Bush on the following Monday. The funeral was "numerously and respectably attended."

The day after the funeral, an obituary was carried in the *Belfast News Letter* which included the following lines:

"DEATH OF MR. VALENTINE RENNIE, PROFESSOR OF THE IRISH HARP. On Saturday morning last, at the age of 42 years, Mr. V. Rennie, the celebrated Professor of the Irish Harp, expired, after a lingering illness, at the Harp Society's House in Cromac-street. In consequence of the decease of this truly distinguished performer, the race of the ancient minstrels of Erin may almost be said to have become extinct, since it is to be feared that amongst his numerous pupils there is scarcely to be found one who, in all the departments of musical excellence, can approach to the attainments of Rennie himself."

It is a long and detailed account, with the final paragraph stating:

"In private life, Mr. Rennie was distinguished for amiability of manners, benevolence of disposition, and genuine warmth of heart... Considering the disadvantages under which he laboured from defective sight, he had amassed an astonishing fund of information on general subjects, and his stores of anecdotes were exhaustless. No individual, whatever might be his party, could long be acquainted with Rennie without being delighted with his excellent qualities as a man, as well as his genius as a musician. By his death the Harp Society have sustained a severe loss, and the National Minstrelsy of Ireland has been deprived of one of its brightest ornaments, whose genius had not only contributed to preserve it from utter extinction, but to revive in great measure its ancient glories, which must otherwise have been lost in the silence and desolation of 'Tara's Hall'."

## A Homeless Widow

And what of Maryanne? As the accommodation was a benefit of her husband's job, she had no choice but to vacate her Cromac Street home of the previous 16 years when the new harp master, Alex Jackson, took up residence. The bereft homeless widow returned to Dublin, bringing her young son, John Burns Rennie. She seemed to have lived with her father, her mother presumably having died previously. In 1844, she buried her father in Glasnevin, the stone being inscribed as follows:

“IHS Erected by MARYANNE RENNIE To the memory of her belov'd Father  
GEORGE LORD who Departed this life 4th March 1844 Aged 63 years.”

There are no further names inscribed, but records show that Maryanne was buried here in 1888 aged 83 years, over 50 years after the death of her dear Valentine. She had spent her declining years in St. Mary's Hospice, Martello Terrace, a very pleasant seafront location overlooking Kingstown Harbour. Her death certificate states “had been a musician's wife.”

John Burns Rennie qualified as a solicitor, firstly living at Parnell Place, close to the Rotunda Hospital and later moving to 85 Lower Dorset Street. He married Anne Forsythe, and four of their young children are buried in the Glasnevin plot. In June 1863 they laid two daughters to rest, Elizabeth and Maryanne. Possibly most poignant was the burial in 1867 of their two year-old son, Valentine William Rennie. It is also interesting that there are two people called George Lord Rennie buried at Glasnevin, who died in 1918 and 1923. They are almost certainly descendants of Valentine and Maryanne. It is possible that there are still relatives living in Dublin today.

## Old Friends

In 1929 the Ulster Museum was built alongside the graveyard, and this large building is very close to Valentine Rennie's grave. The museum curates a painting of the late harper. I recently had the opportunity to view this portrait in the museum stores off-site. He is pictured sitting on a stool playing his harp, dressed in a dark suit with a high white collar. Unfortunately, this interesting work is not on public display, and restoration would be challenging. It was gifted to the museum in 1948 by Evelyn Rennie. She was a great-great grand-daughter of the harper who lived in Dublin.



On the back is written the date 1814. This would have been at the time when he was establishing himself as a musical entertainer. In the Ulster Museum visitors can view a glass cabinet containing a harp that is claimed to have been the property of Arthur O'Neill. If this is the case, young Valentine would have learned his trade on this venerable old instrument.

At the Public Records Office in Belfast, a blurry old microfilm preserves the first page of the lot holders register for the new cemetery at Friar's Bush. On 19th February 1831, it is noted that Montague Talbot acquired lot A15. On the same date, Valentine Rennie acquired neighbouring lot A17. A bereft Montague had visited the graveyard to arrange for the burial of his eldest daughter, Emily. It seems that he was accompanied by his friend, Valentine Rennie, who also acquired a family burial ground that day. Montague and Valentine would have first met in 1809, when the young student harper from Cushendall played in the New Theatre in Belfast. As two of the most popular entertainers in Georgian Ireland, these men would have crossed paths often, in Belfast and in Dublin. The joint visit to the graveyard on that sombre day is compelling evidence of their friendship. Montague died a few months later, and was laid to rest with his daughter. The headstone on his grave lies broken and buried below the grass, but there is hope that it can be carefully raised so that any remaining inscription can be read. In 1837 Valentine was also buried at Friar's Bush, and these two men, who brought joy into the life of many, lie forever as neighbours in this quiet green corner of the city.



Montague Talbot, Hibernian Magazine

My fellow guides and I now conduct popular weekly tours at Friar's Bush, and we regularly share the unique story of the life of Valentine Rennie, and that of Montague Talbot. The severe erosion of Valentine's headstone is a source of much regret. It would be lovely if funding was found to erect a fresh memorial, in imitation of the existing stone, and inscribed in the style of the time. My conjecturally restored inscription reads:

ERECTED BY  
IHS  
MARYANNE RENNIE  
In memory of her belov'd husband  
VALENTINE RENNIE  
of Cushendall and Belfast  
Professor of the Irish Harp,  
Died 23 September 1837, Aged 42 years  
Also two of his children  
Maryanne and Robert James

Being paid by the Bengal Subscription to the  
Irish Harp Society, Cromac Street, Belfast.



Valentine Rennie painting, Ulster Museum (National Museum NI)

## Notes

The book that prompted this journey is *Graveyard Inscriptions Belfast, Volume 2* edited by the late Richard Clarke and published in 1984. The inscriptions were transcribed from the stones by Tony Merrick in 1982.

Acknowledgement to Simon Chadwick for some excellent information used in this article. I highly recommend [www.simonchadwick.net](http://www.simonchadwick.net) for a world of beautifully presented information on the old harpers of Ireland, which includes much about Valentine Rennie. Also thanks to Kim Campbell Mawhinney, Senior curator of Art, NMNI, for kindly arranging access to the painting of Valentine. If you wish to visit or learn more about Valentine, or Friar's Bush, contact Mark Doherty at [hodkram@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:hodkram@hotmail.co.uk) or refer to the dedicated history page on Facebook 'Friar's Bush Graveyard Belfast.'

I am grateful to the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland, PRONI, for access to various documents that cast further light on the story of Valentine Rennie.

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## Mark Doherty

Mark is a knowledgeable and enthusiastic Irish historian and qualified tour guide. A Belfast native, he prides himself on knowing every corner of the island of Ireland. He has been a guide in most of the historic buildings of Belfast, and enjoys researching and delivering his own tours & talks on a wide range of topics. He has long had a fascination with the music & culture of the Gaelic Harp, and has been in the presence of the three oldest harps in existence.



Mark has been taking part in the Harps Alive Festival since 2022. He was a leading participant in the inaugural musical event at Mussenden Temple, a coastal clifftop Georgian building that echoed to the evocative sound of the Irish harp.

At this year's Harps Alive festival, Mark will deliver a lecture on Valentine Rennie at Rosemary Street Church Hall on Friday 13th June at 1pm. Admission is free. Register at [Eventbrite.ie](https://www.eventbrite.ie).