



Cruit Éireann
Harp Ireland

April 2026

Harp Perspectives

The Harp That Once
Through Belfast's Halls

Moya Cannon



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 April 2026 edition we publish an essay by renowned poet and member of Aos Dána, Moya Cannon, to mark Belfast City Council's purchase of the historic Assembly Rooms – the original location for the gathering of harpers in 1792 – where Edward Bunting was to capture the richness of our harping legacy for posterity. We are also honoured to have Moya's permission to reprint *Bunting's Honey*, her poem commissioned from CÉHI for the 2022 Harps Alive |An Chruit Bheo|Harps Leevin Festival.

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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Edward Bunting

Edward Bunting, who rescued a great many of our Irish airs and tunes from oblivion, is well known among harpers and Irish traditional musicians generally, but outside of Belfast and Northern Ireland he is less well known to the general public. In July 1792, at the age of nineteen, he was commissioned to transcribe the music of “the last Irish harpers” at an assembly in Belfast. Completely enthused by the experience and supported and encouraged by the organiser of the festival, Dr. James MacDonnell, Bunting continued to collect, play, and publish Irish airs, tunes and songs for the rest of his life. He published three major collections of Irish music, the last volume forty-eight

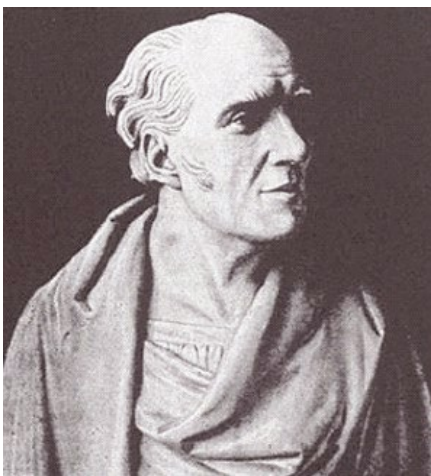
years later, in 1840. Thomas Moore, as a student at Trinity College, was introduced to Bunting’s first collection almost as soon as it appeared in 1796. He described playing the airs on the piano in his home in Aungier Street, Dublin, to his friend, Robert Emmet, the two students as enthusiastic about the tunes as any present-day members of a garage band with a new song.

Edward Bunting was born in Armagh in 1773 to an English engineer father and an Irish mother whose surname was O’Quinn. He and his two brothers received musical training from the organist of the nearby Protestant cathedral. When Edward was nine

his father died and the boy was sent to study the organ with his brother, Anthony, already employed as organist in Drogheda. Two years later he was apprenticed to William Ware, organist at St. Anne's Church in Belfast. An exceptionally promising musician, he was soon deputising for Ware, not only as church organist but also as music teacher. Being much younger than many of his female pupils and having a critical teaching style, he had his ears boxed by at least one indignant young lady.

From his arrival in Belfast until his move to Dublin thirty-five years later, when he married Mary Ann Chapman, he lived with the family of the merchant John McCracken. They had six children, one of whom was Henry Joy McCracken, later of the United Irishmen. Mary Ann McCracken, Henry Joy's sister, and Edward Bunting were to remain lifelong friends. The young musical prodigy was, we are told in an article written after his death by his friend George Petrie, "courted, caressed and flattered" by Belfast society. In 1791, in Belfast's Washington Club, Theobald Wolfe Tone came across the eighteen-year-old Bunting, known already to be truculent and hotheaded, in the throes of a heated argument.

At an assembly of the Belfast United Irishmen the following year, the two met again. Tone had traveled from Dublin to promote the causes of Catholic emancipation and the Rights of Man. The assembly, which opened on July 11, 1792, had been organised to celebrate the third anniversary of the storming of the Bastille. One impressed lady wrote to her friend: "I suppose that there never was such a number of people in Belfast at once; the grand review was nothing to it . . . and so you must have an account of the harpists too . . . you can't imagine anything sweeter than the music." To coincide with the meeting of the United Irishmen, a young doctor from Antrim, James MacDonnell,



James MacDonnell

a Protestant sympathetic to the cause of Catholic emancipation but not to the principle of violence, had formed a committee, raised funds, placed advertisements, and organised an assembly of the dwindling company of Irish traveling harpers, with the intention of collecting their music. The advertisement read: "Some inhabitants of Belfast . . . propose to open a subscription, which they intend to apply in attempting to revive and perpetuate the ancient Music and Poetry of Ireland. They are

solicitous to preserve from oblivion the few fragments which have been permitted to remain, as monuments of the refined taste and genius of their ancestors.”



The four-day Belfast Harpers Assembly, a seminal event in the musical history of Ireland, took place in the former Exchange and Assembly Rooms.

Ten Irish harpers and one Welsh harper turned up — the understanding being that, although there would be a competition, all would receive a fee or ‘premium.’ The event took place over four days in the Exchange Rooms; the audience entrance fee was ten shillings, making it quite a society occasion. A hungover Wolfe Tone attended but was not gripped by the music. (Petrie tells us that “hard drinking was the habit of the Belfastians in those days.”) Tone, famously, wrote in his diary, “The harpers again, strum, strum and be hanged.” Others, however, were greatly impressed. An enthralled Bunting had caught the collecting bug and, after the festival, travelled to Derry and Tyrone to collect more airs and tunes, initially from Denis Hempson, the eldest of the harpers who had attended. On a later trip to Galway and Mayo, an Irish speaker, Patrick Lynch, was also employed to note the Irish words of songs. On this trip Bunting was greatly aided by Richard Kirwan of Cregg Castle, president of the Royal Irish Academy.

During Bunting’s lifetime he did not profit financially from his labours. He was dispirited when his first volume, expensively produced in London, was pirated and cheaply produced in Dublin. Furthermore, Thomas Moore used Bunting’s collections

as sources for his celebrated *Melodies*, a cause of deep resentment on Bunting's part as Moore was very late indeed to acknowledge the borrowings. For the last two decades of his life Bunting worked in Dublin as a music teacher, promoter of the sale of Broadwood pianos, and organist in both the Pepper Canister Church and St. George's Church. He kept up links with Belfast and conducted the first performance of George Frideric Handel's *Messiah* there in 1813. Dying in poverty in 1843, he was buried in Mount Jerome Cemetery, Dublin, where his friends raised a headstone to his memory.



Moya Cannon and Aisling Lyons performed 'Bunting's Honey' at Edward Bunting's graveside in Mount Jerome, 2022

In 2022, to mark the 230th anniversary of the Belfast Festival, the organisation Cruit Éireann|Harp Ireland restored Bunting's headstone and organized a commemorative ceremony at his graveside. The following year, to celebrate his legacy and also to reflect the ancient relationship between the poet and the harper in Irish society in a contemporary way, Aibhlín McCrann, chair of Cruit Éireann, commissioned the brilliant young Clare harper Aisling Lyons and myself to write a piece of work together. I focused on the Belfast harp festival and in researching it came across a marvelous book, *Annals of the Irish Harpers*, published in 1911 by Charlotte Milligan Fox. She

gives a lively, scholarly description of the festival, of the harpers attending it, and of Bunting himself. Aisling Lyons composed a new air to accompany my poem, *Bunting's Honey*, and also integrated a number of the tunes played by the harpers at the Belfast festival. On October 22, 2023, it was a great honour to read *Bunting's Honey* with Aisling playing her newly composed music, at Bunting's graveside in Mount Jerome and later at a gala harp concert in his former workplace, the Pepper Canister Church, Mount Street Crescent, Dublin. Under-celebrated though Bunting was in his lifetime, no greater tribute could possibly be paid to him and to his labours than the astonishing flourishing of Irish traditional music and of the Irish harp tradition in our country, north and south, and indeed worldwide, in the twenty-first century.



Aisling Lyons and Moya Cannon performed *Bunting's Honey* at the Pepper Canister Church, Dublin, 2023

Bunting's Honey

I have a great desire that you should endeavour to keep the instrument as well as the music alive, and you are perhaps the only person who can now do it.

Dr. James MacDonnell to Edward Bunting, September 28, 1840

Three years ago the walls
of the Bastille were breached
and today the Irish Volunteers,
Protestant and Papist,
march down a Belfast Street,
fire three *feux de joie*,
then enter the Linen Hall
to forge a new state
through keen debate.

Nearby, in the Exchange Rooms,
an old order seems to breathe its last —
eleven harpers, six blind,
have taken their several paths
to Doctor MacDonnell's festival of harps.

The eldest is blind Denis Hempson,
last player in the old style,
who plucks brass strings with crooked nails,

then blind, dapper Arthur O'Neill,
who has given away his spare good suit
to harper Pat McAlinden of Oriel,
who went rambling and won't arrive;

here is blind Rose Mooney, whose feckless maid
once pawned her mistress's harp
and best petticoat for drink;

and there is harper Williams from Wales,
fated to die, too soon, on the grey-green waves

and, listen, from Oriel too, comes young William Carr
who plays “The Dawn of Day.”

The other six, come-down gentlemen some,
are dressed in grey or drab-coloured cloth.
Their old patrons are generations gone
to France, to Spain, to the tuneless grave,

but the old music still travels
Ireland’s metalled
and unmetalled roads,
played to all,
regardless of creed or name,
who esteem music and song,
and keep a house good enough
to afford bed, board, and maybe drink
to a harper for a week or a month.
A good hostess might, with luck,
be repaid with a tune in her name,
fine enough to catch the ear
and be held in trust
by some country piper or fiddler

or even by the very young man—
a musical prodigy it is agreed,
an opinionated youth, a few claim—
who now moves among the harpers,
steady as a beekeeper,
jotting down air after air,
noting shakes and graces,
double slurs and turns, delighting
in the most ancient tunes,

seeking out the nimble felicities
of the harper's art.

Gentry of the first fashion,
from Belfast and its environs
pay half a guinea to listen
and look on with attention
and Theobald Wolfe Tone looks in
but his mind is on revolution.

Decades before young Edward Bunting dies
he will see a great French empire rise and fall
Wolfe Tone's revolution will have failed
yet Bunting's life will still be held in thrall
by this treasure he garners in the Exchange hall.

But now the harpers, mostly old, display
to each other and salvage
airs which remember and relay
griefs, gaieties, and passions
of spirits long parted from their clay;
for what do a musician's hands ever hold
but the hammered treasure of the human soul?

Moya Cannon's *Collected Poems* was published in 2021 by Carcanet Press, Manchester, and her seventh collection, *Bunting's Honey*, was launched by Carcanet Press in 2025. *Bunting's Honey* was among *Guardian's* 'best recent poetry' collections and received a UK Poetry Book Society recommendation. *No Todo Termina en un Libro*, a bilingual selection of poems with Spanish translations by Jorge Fondebrider, Florencia Fragasso and Julian Massaldi, was also published by Ediciones Gog Y Magog, Buenos Aires in 2025. A recipient of the Brendan Behan Award and the O'Shaughnessy Award, she was 2011 Heimbold Professor of Irish Studies at the University of Villanova.
moyacannon.ie

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