



Cruit Éireann
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Harp Perspectives

A Rare Gift

Donncha Ó hAmhsaigh, Denis O'Hampsey,
The Blind Bard of Magilligan

Marcas Ó Murchú

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 July edition of *Harp Perspectives* Marcas Ó Murchú reveals a rare portrait of the famous harper Denis Hempson and gathers what is known about his life, his patrons and his musical repertoire.

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

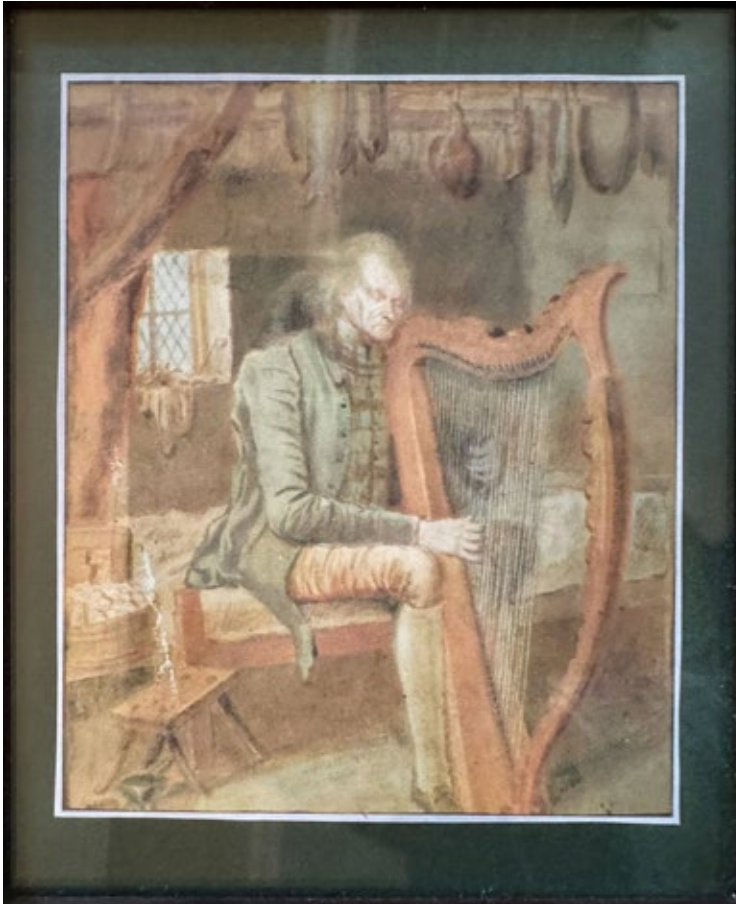
Editor

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A Rare Gift

Donncha Ó hAmhsaigh, Denis O'Hampsey, The Blind Bard of Magilligan Marcas Ó Murchú



Portrait of Dennis O'Hampsey c 1804-05, commissioned by General Hart of Muff.

Recently, the backstory of one of Ireland's greatest harpers was brought to my attention by an unexpected source. The house of Henry Hart at the foot of McCool's Bray, between the Magnet Bar and the shore at Culmore at the foot of south Inis Eoghain was once adorned by a portrait of the county Derry-born, Donncha Ó hAmhsaigh (1695-1807), the renowned harper from Craigmores, Magilligan.

He was first mentioned to me while I was a primary school child walking in central Belfast with my late father, who pointed out the Assembly Rooms in Bridge Street, off High Street near the Albert Clock, Belfast. This was the venue for an incredible line up of the cream of Irish harpers on 14 July 1792 by the local Presbyterian Irish speakers, and antiquarians like Dr. James McDonnell, Henry Joy McCracken (proprietor of the *News Letter*) and the scribe and organist, Edward Bunting, formerly of Armagh, then of St George's Church of Ireland, High Street, Belfast. At age 97, Denis O'Hampsey, or Hempson as he is also known, was the oldest harper amongst them.

It is known that O'Hampsey was a renowned harper and travelled to Inis Eoghain and Scotland to perform. Small wonder then that the Hart family of Culmore wished to have his portrait on their wall. Indeed, an interesting conversation at Culmore Hub in 2025 with Henry Hartnow of Edinburgh revealed that the image had for many years hung above his bed. His ancestor George Vaughan Hart had been a patron to the Magilligan bard.

My own interest was immediate as my mother was a McDermottroe from County Roscommon and DNA tests have revealed that her ancestors' relatives were the patrons who cared for and educated the last great 18th century harper, Turlough Carolan (1670-1738) at their home in Ballyfarnan.



Seamus O'Kane who re-constructed Cormac O'Kelly's Harp with harper Lucia McGinnis and Marcus Ó Murchú.

One Sunday evening in Autumn 2025, Henry kindly drove from Edinburgh to McGrory's Hotel in Culdaff, where I was performing traditional music with my daughter Róise and presented us with a copy of Hempson's image. The next morning, I drove to Dungiven to the house of my old friend, Séamus O'Kane, internationally renowned bodhrán maker and wood craftsman, who had made a copy of the Downhill Harp, as O'Hampsey's county Derry-made harp is known.

Originally constructed by Cormac O'Kelly from Baile na Scríne (literally, town of the holy monument, aka Draperstown), the harp in the image was immediately identified by Séamus as the original. Denis would have been a visitor to the houses of the local gentry, Protestant and Catholic, as was the Gaelic tradition. He is also known to have played at the O'Doherty Keep in Buncrana. He was gifted the harp by Counsellor Canning of Garvagh, and Squire Gage and Doctor Bacon are said to have been patrons.

So, who was Denis O'Hampsey? A man born in one century, he lived through another and died in another, which sounds beyond all realms of comprehension and beyond belief. However, being born around 1695, and attending the Belfast Harp Festival of

July 1792, dying around 1809, and marrying late in life to an Inishowen woman called Nanny Doherty, possibly when he was in his eighties, his age and musical dexterity are often mentioned with wonderment. He played in the old style with the nails, not plucked with the finger pads, and had wire strings which was the ancient way.

Known as O'Hampsey in Magilligan, he played *An Chúilfhionn/The Coulin*, *Aisling an Óigfhir/The Dream of the Young Man*, and *Éirí an Lae/Dawning of the Day*, which formed the basis of the air *Danny Boy* for Edward Bunting in 1792.



Edward Bunting's Manuscript book of Irish airs, 1792. Special Collections & Archives, Queen's University Belfast

He played *Eibhlín a Rún, A Lovely Lass to a Friar Came, Showers of Rain (Love is a Tormenting Pain)*, *Sín Síos Suas Liom, Codladh an tSionnaigh, (The Sleep of the Fox)*, *Lady Letitia Burke, Brighid na bPéarlaí* which may be named after a Brigid Ní Chatháin who is purported to have taught Denis when he was younger, as did John C. Carragher, Loughlin Fanning and Patrick Connor.

O'Cathan's Lament was attributed to him which signalled a strong county Derry source. *Tá an Samhradh ag Teacht* is another tune he performed and may be the same tune that Honoria Galwey (1830-1925) of Moville wrote down from a local musician, to whom she was introduced by her lady servant, Mary Cooke nee McGarvey, who married Galwey's gardener, James.

Other pieces, including *Cití Ní Eaghra/Kitty O Hara, Cad é Sin don Té Sin, Caitlín Triail* and *Slán leis an gCeol*, were also transcribed by Bunting from O'Hampsey.

This last piece is purported to have been composed by Carolan and played by the Roscommon Bard in Alderford House for Mrs Mc Dermottroe in March 1738. It is said that O'Hampsey did not favour the music of Carolan, due to what he felt was its more modern or Italian flavour.

John O'Donovan's Ordnance Survey Memoirs tell us:

"Newtown Limavady, 16th August 1834, on Monday I intend to travel thro(ugh) Magilligan: few of the aborigines or Irish speaking peoples are to be found in it, but I am told that a few have retained the language in consequence of their communication with the opposite side- Inishowen. Of this I am doubtful, but I must try"

Denis would have spoken Irish and English and his wife would have been fluent in Irish, at least. Patrick Lynch who worked gathering music for Bunting records in 1803: "Dinnis a Hampsey of Ballymaclary, 100 his wife Nanny Dougherty, 66". He was around 86 on their marriage, and she bore him a family and one daughter, who went on to marry a man surnamed McKeever.



Figure 2 Lucia McGinnis with her harp class; the first group in county Derry to see the ancient portrait.

Bishop Augustus Hervey of Downhill House was a patron and gave O'Hampsey rent-free land to build a house for his wife Nanny, Denis and family. It is written that a later relative of the Lord Bishop, Sir Henry Hervey Bruce deprived O'Hampsey of his harp and home.

Despite the setback, the musical tradition in the family continued and a descendant of O'Hampsey surnamed (Catherine) McKeever, wife of a cooper, applied for a scholarship for her son to the Irish Harp Society which was under the stewardship of Arthur O'Neill in

the Pottinger's Entry area of Belfast. It is unsure what came of the approach to Bruce, as a recommendation had to come from a "gentleman" for financial and other assistance.

Despite setbacks, Denis's luck changed when Lord Bristol gave him and the family a home, which stood nearly opposite Laverty's Public House, Ballymaclary. Francis Joseph Bigger, mentions in a letter from L.A. Walkington that wealthy people would gather to hear him perform: "He had a great habit of playing at night, as the dark made no differs to him" and often carriages would pull up outside the house to hear him play. This source also refers to O'Hampsey performing Molly Asthore/ Mollaí a Stór in Dublin at a harp competition.

He is said to have opened his eyes for the first time, before taking his leave of this world; "two beautiful black eyes which no one had ever seen before, as he always kept his eyes closed. They thought he seemed to see them but could not be sure as he was speechless".

The *Belfast Commercial Chronicle* Saturday 21 November 1807 page 3 states:

"On the 11 November 1807 at the advanced age of 110 years, Denis Hampson, the blind bard of Magilligan Ireland, died, of whom so interesting an account is given by Miss Owenson, in her elegant work, *The Wild Irish Girl*. A few hours before his death he tuned his harp, in order to have it in readiness to entertain Sir Henry Bruce's family, who were expecting to pass that way in a few days and who were in the habit of stopping to hear his music".



Thankfully, we now have a copy of this most rare image. We can see perhaps fish or rabbits hanging from the rafters of the house in Magilligan where he lived; his back hunched, his eyes permanently closed but his harp sounding his musical soul. His leggings and jacket were of the time but his music, described by Bunting, was very "ancient".

O'Hampsey's name is synonymous with the ancient music of Ireland, the use of long fingernails, catching the string between the flesh and the nail, damping to stop the vibration, and his renown is due to him having been the oldest harper to safeguard this tradition and play in the old style.



Figure 4: Dr Henry Hart presents Marcos Ó Murchú with the portrait, Róise Ní Mhurchú (left) and George Mills of Culdaff.

Just beyond Strathfoyle lies O'Hampsey's body in the church yard of St Aidan's Church in Magilligan. Here is a vital link with a past whose music is, thankfully, widely known today through harp schools and practitioners such as Nodlaig Ní Bhrollaigh in Dungiven, Lauren Ní Néill and Lucia McGinnis in County Derry, Noeleen McLaughlin in east Donegal, Kayla Reed in west Donegal. Other wonderful developments in Inis Eoghain include in Moville, where his tradition is being preserved by a thriving Harp School, the Ceolán music school directed by multi-instrumentalist Clódagh Warnock, and the Inishowen Music Project managed by herself and fiddle player Róisín McGrory of Culdaff.

Marcas Ó Murchú

Marcas Ó Murchú was recognised at home with the honour Ard-Ollamh, the ‘Chief Bard’ at the All-Ireland Fleadh Cheoil in 2013 to recognise his success in teaching, promotion of Irish music and language for decades and through his musical programmes on national networks *BBC*, *RTÉ* and *Raidió na Gaeltachta*.

As an archivist, Marcas generously donated more than 1700 hours of his own field recordings of Irish musicians globally to the Irish Traditional Music Archive in Dublin. He donated personal archives of over 200 hours of mostly Irish language video material to Acadamh na hOllscolaíochta Gaeilge in Gaith Dobhair; a branch of University College Galway, and over 250 hours of music recorded on video to the Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann national archive in Dublin.

He has been organising workshops, including at the renowned Willie Clancy Summer School in Clare for 35 years, and has also been a respected performer on tours worldwide and a very popular musical guest all over Ireland for many years.

Marcas is a passionate follower of Turlough Carolan; his life and his compositions, particularly as his mother was Nora McDermottroe (1925-1986), a descendant of the family who looked after Carolan and with whom he died in 1738. Marcas has lectured in Spanish on the life of Carolan in Argentina and taught the ancient harper’s compositions there in 2020. Since his retirement he has concentrated on his family and research.