



## The Irish Harpers in Belfast in 1792.

BY ROBERT YOUNG, J.P., C.E.

An article from the *Ulster Journal of Archeology*, Vol.1, No.2, January 1895, pp.120-127

Now that the *Ulster Journal of Archeology* is making a fresh start, and that its conductors [i.e. the editorial board] promise that the claims of our native music will not be forgotten, it seems to be not an unsuitable opportunity to let its readers know how the ancient melodies of Ireland were rescued from the oblivion towards which they were fast hastening, and the conspicuous part taken in this patriotic work by a number of our townsmen near the end of the last century.

Whilst it might not be strictly accurate to assume that the ultimate fate of Irish music was then dependent on the preservation of the melodies composed for the harp — for there were a considerable number of tunes composed and only suitable for the bagpipe, not to speak of the old lullabies and labour songs for the voice alone — yet it would appear that this was practically the way the matter was looked on here about one hundred years ago.

At that period our town only numbered some 18,000 inhabitants, but it was a focus of intellectual life and progress in Ireland; and whilst several important movements had their beginnings here, it may be fairly questioned (at least by musicians) whether the assemblage of the Irish Harpers in Belfast had not as far-reaching, beneficial, and lasting results as any of the political movements begun here at that eventful period in our history.

But the credit of originating this movement must not, in all fairness, be claimed for Belfast. Sir Robert Stewart tells us that so early as 1730 “Contentions of the Bards” were held at Bruree, Co.

Limerick, under the presidency of the Rev. Charles Bunworth, himself a performer of merit. He was Crofton Croker's great grandfather, and his harp was preserved in Croker's Museum at Rosamond's Bower, Fulham. Nothing practical, however, seems to have followed these efforts to preserve the native music.

The honour of making the next movement is due to James Dungan, a native of Granard, in County Longford. He was an enthusiastic lover of his native music, and having acquired an ample fortune in Copenhagen, conceived the idea of having annual festivals to promote the cultivation of music and revive the practice of the Harp, intending to encourage the skilful by giving liberal premiums for excellence.

The first meeting was held in Granard in 1781, but only seven Harpers attended. Charles Fanning gained first prize of ten guineas for playing the "Coolin", O'Neill the second prize of eight guineas for the "Green Woods of Truagh", and Rose Mooney the third for "Planxty Burke".

The proceedings were wound up by a ball, at which 500 attended.

James Dungan did not come over on this occasion, but defrayed all expenses. Next year another meeting was held, which was better attended both by the Harpers and the public. Dungan himself was present, but, for some reason which cannot now be ascertained, ceased to take any further part in these gatherings.

However, there was a third meeting [1785], at which Lord and Lady Longford and the county gentry were present, and handsome presents were made to all the Harpers, whether successful or not, so that general satisfaction prevailed.

These Granard meetings excited a very wide interest and enthusiasm for Irish music, and no doubt helped to stir up the not less patriotic and probably more practical townsmen of Belfast to united action in the same good cause.

A circular was accordingly issued in 1791 by Dr. James MacDonnell and others, of which the following is the substance:—

A subscription to be opened to be applied in an attempt 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. To assemble the Harpers, those descendants of our ancient bards, who are at present (1791) almost exclusively possessed of all that remains of the music, poetry, and oral traditions of Ireland." Prizes were to be awarded, and a person well versed in the language and antiquities of the nation should attend, and also an accomplished musician, "to transcribe and arrange the most interesting portions of their knowledge." It was considered that this project would be approved by men of taste and refinement; "and when it is considered how intimately the spirit and character of a people are connected with their national poetry and music, it is presumed that the Irish patriot and politician will not deem it an object unworthy of his patronage and support."

The following advertisement appeared in the *Belfast News-Letter*, Friday, 6 July, 1792:—

*The Meeting of the Irish Harpers at Belfast.*

To be held in the Exchange Rooms, on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, the 11th, 12th, 13th, and 14th July, instant. The Entertainment to commence at one o'clock each afternoon, excepting Saturday, when, on account of the Review [the Bastille celebrations], it will be held at seven in the evening. It is requested that the subscribers will immediately pay in their subscriptions.

Admittance for the four nights to non-subscribers, half-a-guinea; the tickets transferable. Tickets for non-subscribers to be had at Mr. Joy's, Mr. Magee's, Mr. Bradshaw's, and the Coffee-room.

BELFAST, July 4th, 1792.

\*\* On account of the Coterie, the meeting is unavoidingly postponed from Tuesday to Wednesday.

The same notice appeared in the *Northern Star*, dated 4 July, 1792.

The *News-Letter* of 13 July, 1792, contains an account of the first day's meeting only. It is prefaced by a really interesting disquisition on the subject of National Music, the gist of which is that in Greece, the Mistress of the Fine Arts, Music was not considered merely as an amusement, but attracted the attention of the State.

The *Northern Star*, published some days later, makes up for the deficiencies of its rival, so that by combining their accounts we have a tolerably full description of the proceedings of the four days, from 11th till 14th July.

The *News-Letter's* account of the first day's doings is much more ample and interesting than the very condensed and generalised statement of the four days in the *Northern Star*.

We find from it that when the meeting was opened on Wednesday, 11 July, 1792, only ten Harpers had been brought together for the friendly contest, but a very important advance was now made on the way in which the Granard meetings had been carried on.

“As a chief motive in this undertaking was to revive some of the most ancient airs now nearly obsolete, their dates and authors perhaps for centuries unknown, pains were therefore taken to have a skilled musician to reduce to notes some of those played, which might lead to a general publication of the best sets of our times.” By a singular concurrence of events the choice of the directors fell upon young Edward Bunting, the man of all others specially fitted for the work.

As his warm friend George Petrie says, “This was a task for the accomplishment of which his mind peculiarly fitted him, and he entered upon it with enthusiasm; for he was deeply imbued with the political feelings so prevalent among the middle classes of the locality at the time; and his musical sensibilities led him, as indeed they did throughout his subsequent life, to consider melody the important — the *sine quâ non* — quality of musical composition. Moreover, it was most fortunate that there was just at that time one so fitted to undertake the task, for it would have been a happy chance, that if any other musician had been employed he would not, in the prejudiced spirit of the time, have held in contempt the strange and wild strains, so unlike anything he had been accustomed to regard as good music — often feebly performed and barbarised by rude harmonies, and that having accomplished his task in this spirit, he would not have allowed the tunes to have shared the fate to which the minstrels were fast hastening whose harps had given them utterance”.

Resuming the narrative of Wednesday's meeting, we find the Harpers played in the following order the airs which each had selected:—

	Dennis Dempsey* (blind), from the County of Derry, aged 68 [sic – see note p.5],		
played —	“The Dawning of the Day,”	...	Carolan.
	“Ul a Condo Wo,”	... }	
	“The County of Leitrim,”	... }	Authors and dates unknown.

\* Dempsey is obviously an error for Hempsey or Hempson, of Magilligan, County Derry.

	Arthur O'Neill (blind), from the County Tyrone, aged 55,		
played —	“Green Woods of Truagh,”	...	Author and date unknown.

	“The Fairy Queen,”	...	Carolan.
	“Mrs. Crofton,”	...	Same.
played —	Charles Fanning, from the County of Cavan, aged 56, “Condow Deelish, or Black-headed Deary,”	...	Author and date unknown.
	“Rose Dillon and jig,”	...	Carolan.
	“Colonel O’Hara,”	...	Same.
played —	Daniel Black (blind), from the County of Derry, aged 75, “The Receipt for drinking Whiskey,”	...	Carolan.
	“Sir Alic O’Burke.”	...	Same.
	“Thomas a Burke,”	...	Same.
played —	Charles Byrne, from the County of Leitrim, aged 80, “The Old Trough,”	...	Author and date unknown.
	“Oganioge,”	...	The same—very ancient.
played —	Hugh Higgins (blind), from the County Mayo aged 55, “Madam Cole,”	...	Carolan.
played —	Paddy Quin (blind), from the County Armagh, aged 70, “The Rocks of Pleasure.”		
	“Carolan s Devotion.”		
	“Grace Nugent.”	...	Carolan.
played —	Wm. Carr, from the County Armagh, aged 15, “The Dawn of the Day.”		
played —	Rose Mooney (blind), from the County Meath, [aged ??] “Sir Charles Coote.”		
	“Mrs. Judge.”		
	“Mrs. French, or Miss Fanny Power.”		
played —	James Duncan, From the County of Down, aged 45, “Molly A store.”	...	Date and author unknown.
	“Morning Star,”	...	The same.
	“Catherine Tyrrel,”	...	The same.

The Irish Harpers were followed by a Welshman, whose execution was very brilliant. The contrast between the plaintive tones of the Irish instrument and the bold, martial tones of the Welsh had a pleasing effect, and marked a difference of character between the two nations.

Referring now to the *Northern Star*, we find that what it styles “the probationary rehearsals” were continued for about two hours each day, from Wednesday till Saturday, when the fund which arose from the sale of tickets and from subscriptions was distributed in premiums (or donations) from ten to two guineas each, according to the different degrees of merit of the Harpers.

Charles Fanning, from the County Cavan, gained the first prize. He had the advantage of sight, and having had opportunities of acquiring a knowledge of the taste and fashion of modern music, he had attained a high degree of perfection in his playing, which gave his hearers a vivid idea of what this kind of music is capable, in producing alternately the most lively, plaintive, and pathetic sensations.

The *Northern Star* gives the following as the names of the tunes that were played:—

Coulin — Fairy Queen — Molly Veagg, O — Miss Moore — Planksty Kingsland — Gra go nish — Dennis Dealy — Miss Fenning — Collough an Tinnie — Collendoon — Carolan's Concerto — Lady Latitia — Planksty Reily — Baccaugh Buie — Scarant na Gompanaugh — The Dawning of the Day — Pearla an Veoley Vaan — Canher vac Aough — Mable Kelly — Lady Veagh — Tierna Vujoc — Patrick's Day — Aelion na Ruaen — Mailin Guidey Uyain — Nancy Cooper — Gracy Newgent — Carolan's Cap — Thomas Burke — Lady Bleany — Mrs. Maxwell — Plearurca na Ruare — Doctor Hart — Carric a Nuienish — Shiely ni Conolan — Mrs. Crofton — Sir Festus Burke — Cionn Dhu Dielish — The Humours of Whiskey — Denis Aily — Cathelien Treall — Trugh.

NOTE.— The names of the tunes are given *verbatim et literatim* as they appeared in the *News-Letter* and *Northern Star*, and serve to exhibit the singular incapacity of the proof-reader of that period. Take two examples:— “Ul a condo wo” is a curious perversion for “Ulican dub o” [Uileacán dubh ó] — the song of sorrow — an air which Hardiman says is “of the most remote antiquity”. “Tierna Vujoc” for “Tierna Mhuigheo” — “Lord Mayo”. The ages of the Harpers are also given very incorrectly by the *News-Letter*. Hempsey, or Hempson, must have been in his 97th year in 1792; Arthur O'Neill was 58, not 55; and Daniel Black 77, instead of 75 as stated. W. Carr must have been more than 15 years of age.



HEMPSON  
*The Blind Harper of Magilligan, County Derry.*

Of the ten performers at this Belfast meeting very little is known except about the first two, who were in many respects quite remarkable, both as men and as harpers. Hempson may be considered the last of the genuine old Irish school, and O'Neill as a worthy representative of the more modern style of playing, as carried to perfection by Carolan.

Denis Hempson was born in 1695 (twenty-five years after Carolan), at Craigmore, Co. Derry. His father was the owner of the townland of Tyrcrevan. He lost his eyesight by smallpox when three years of age.

His first teacher on the harp was Bridget O’Cahan; afterwards he had lessons from others, but specially from Pat Connor from Connacht, at that time celebrated for its harpers and music. He travelled for ten years through Ireland and Scotland. In 1745 he went the second time to Scotland, and, happening to be in Edinburgh at the time Prince Charlie was there, was brought before him, and played the popular air, “The king shall enjoy his own again.” When he attended the Belfast meeting he was in his ninety-seventh year.

Edward Bunting saw him at Magilligan the next year, and noted down several of his tunes and studied his special style of playing. In conversation with him about the other Harpers he did not



conceal his opinion of his own superiority: “When I played the old tunes, not another of the Harpers would play after me.”

Shortly before his death, the Rev. Sir H. H. Bruce of Downhill paid him a friendly visit, and when he found who his visitor was, he got himself raised up in bed and called for his harp. He made an attempt at the first notes of one of his favourite melodies, but, overcome by weakness, the harp slipped from his hands and he sank back, and so parted for ever from what had been his life-long companion. He died in 1807, at the great age of 112 years. "The last of our bards now sleeps cold in the grave," was truly said when the news of his death was announced.

Hempson's harp is said to be preserved at Downhill. The sides and front are of white sallow, the back of bog fir patched with copper and iron plates. The following lines are engraved on it:—

"In the days of Noah I was grown,  
After his flood I've not been seen,  
Until seventeen hundred and two. I was found  
By Cormac Kelly under ground;  
He raised me to that degree —  
Queen of music they call me."

The rival of Hempson was Arthur O'Neill. He was born of highly respectable parents at Drumnaslad, Co. Tyrone, in 1734. He lost the sight of his eyes by an accident when only two years of age. As was almost universally the custom in such cases, his parents devoted him to music, and he was taught the harp by Owen Keenan of Killymoon, near Cookstown. Whilst quite a young man he had made a tour through the four provinces, and seems to have been received by the gentry more as a friend and companion than as a professional musician.

In 1792 he made the acquaintance of E. Bunting, Dr. James MacDonnell, and the other Belfast men, and in 1807, when they founded the Belfast Harp Society, he was chosen unanimously as the resident master, and taught there for several years. He was by all accounts a man of culture and information, well up in Irish history, which knowledge he had gained by his frequent visits to the well-known historian, Charles O'Connor of Belanagar, Co. Roscommon. He was also a most interesting companion, abounding in anecdote and playing many games with skill. He claimed to be of the old Hy Niall race, and the *hand* of the O'Neills was engraven on the large silver buttons of his coat. Hardiman tells the following anecdote, which illustrates the position he assumed:—

"Arthur O'Neill, the Northern Harper, always expected and received an extraordinary degree of attention, on account of the antiquity and respectability of his tribe. He generally sat at table with the gentlemen whose houses he visited, and once at a public dinner in Belfast, where Lord ~~~~ [name omitted] presided, his lordship made a kind of apology to O'Neill, and expressed regret at his being seated so low at the festive board. 'Oh, my Lord,' answered the Harper, 'apology is quite unnecessary, for wherever an O'Neill sits there is the head of the table.' His Lordship had the good sense not to appear offended, and the claim of the Milesian was not controverted."

O'Neill retired from the Harp Society in 1813, and returned to his native place near Dungannon, where he died in 1818, at the age of 85 years.

Of the other Harpers scarcely any records remain. Sir R. Stewart, indeed, tells of James Duncan that he "adopted the profession of a Harper in order to obtain funds to carry on a lawsuit in defence of his patrimony, was successful, and died in 1810 in the enjoyment of a handsome competence."

Patrick Quinn was a native of Portadown, and was a fiddler as well as a harper. His harp, made by Cormac Kelly, and dated 1707, is said to be preserved in Castle Otway, Co. Tipperary.

The limits of this paper will not permit of following up the history of the preparation and publication of the Irish Melodies which were direct results of this famous Harpers' meeting, and which, continued as they were with unabated energy and zeal through a long life, make the name of Edward Bunting very dear to every true Irishman.

On some future occasion a further paper may be given on these and kindred topics, reference being also made to others who have worked in the same field, such as Holden, George Petrie, &c., and a catalogue given of the various published works on the subject, as far as can be now ascertained.

Transcribed by David Byers, 17 March 2018, Belfast.