



# Belfast's first Irish Harp Society, 1808

From the *Ulster Journal of Archeology*, Vol. I. No.2, January 1895, p.151

**IRISH HARPER:** — In Kilrush Graveyard, near Lisburn, in the parish of Blaris, is a tombstone with the following inscription :—

“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.”

The writer would be glad to learn the origin of the Irish Harp Society, and something of its history.  
Joseph Gardiner.

**REPLY:** — [*Ulster Journal of Archeology*, Vol. I. No.4, July 1895, pp.302, 303]

The Irish Harp Society (see Part II., page 151). — I can give J. Gardiner the following particulars as to the origin and early history of the Irish Harp Society, having some time ago had the privilege of perusing its first MS. Minute Book, through the kindness of the owner, Robert Young, J.P., C.E.—

The Society was established, primarily, to provide blind boys and girls with the means of earning a living by teaching them the harp; secondarily, to promote the study of the Irish language, history, and antiquities. Its formal association was Belfast, St. Patrick's Day, 1808. It held its first meetings at Linn's Hotel, the White Cross, No. 1, Castle Street.

In the list of original subscribers embodied in the minutes there are 191 names, representing a total annual subscription of 281 guineas, mostly in single guineas, but headed by the Marquis of Donegall with 20 guineas, Lord O'Neill with 15, the Hon. John O'Neill with 10, and the Earl of Belmore and the Bishop of Dromore (Dr. Percy) with 5 guineas each. Among the original subscribers we meet Edward Bunting, Dr. Drennan, John Templeton the naturalist, Henry Joy, Dr. Bryson, William Tennent, Dr. Robert Tennent, Thomas McCabe, Miss Mary [Ann] McCracken, Miss Balfour, &c. The first President chosen was the Bishop of Dromore. As he declined to act, the office was accepted by Lord O'Neill. Dr. James MacDonnell was Vice-President.

At first, the Society's Secretary was Patrick Connor, but subsequently Patrick Reynolds, with Robert Tennent as Treasurer. Drs. Bryson, Tennent. and MacDonnell drew up the Rules.

The first teacher employed was the well-known harper, Arthur O'Neill.

The first register of the Society's *protégés* is as follows:— William Gorman, Ballymena, aged 15, recommended by the Rev. John Fitzsimons of that place; Patrick McGrath, Dundalk, 14, recommended by Mr. Bell of Lambeg; Edward McBride, Omagh, 19, recommended by Mr. Galbraith of Armagh; Patrick O'Neill, Dungannon, 13, recommended by the Society's harper; James O'Neill, Dungannon, 17, and Nathaniel Rainey, Glens of Antrim, 14, recommended by Dr.

James MacDonnell; Abraham Wilkinson, Ballymoney, 13, recommended by Mr. Moore, of Moore's Lodge, Co. Antrim ; James McMolaghan, Lifford, 13, recommended by Mr. Mitchell, Beersbridge; and Bridget O'Reilly, Virginia, Co. Cavan, age and recommendation not stated, but who was soon rewarded "for her services with a new Suit of Cloaths" (Pat Reynolds's spelling).

Of these, William Gorman and James O'Neill were dismissed in June, 1810, for inaptitude to learn. As day scholars, not dependent on the Society for their support, the Minute Book has the following: — Edward O'Neill, Hugh Dornan, and John Wallace, all of Belfast or neighbourhood. Edward Bunting, William Magee, and John McCracken were appointed to examine the qualifications of the boys on the list and to investigate the claims of candidates proposed for admission; but in May, 1810, the musical committee was settled as Edward Bunting, John McCracken, Robert McAdam, and Alexander Mitchell. Another committee had charge of canvassing for subscriptions, Belfast being parcelled out for them in districts.

In 1810, Montagu Talbot, proprietor of the Belfast Theatre, gave the Society a free benefit, having been waited upon and solicited to do so by a deputation of members consisting of the Rev. E. Groves, A. Barr, and Robert McAdam. The date when this benefit came off is not in the minutes; but on looking over the file of the *Belfast News-Letter*, I find it advertised for Friday, 15 June, 1810. The play was Cumberland's *West Indian*, followed by a farce called *The Honest Thieves, or the Faithful Irishman*, with a song by a Miss Harding, and an Irish dance by Mrs. Maywood and Miss S. Treby. Tickets for the benefit, the advertisement states, were to be had at the New Circulating Library, 116, High Street, as well as at the Box Office. What it realised is not stated, the Minute Book only recording that it brought in, "after paying for Dresses for the occasion, a net sum of £—."

Money was also raised for the Society by a system of winter balls, commenced in 1810 — one a month or six in a season — with Gilbert McIlveen and William Stevenson as first stewards, assisted by the Rev. E. Groves, Robert McAdam, Francis Whitla, and John Riddel. Master of the ceremonies, Thomas Hull [yes, the man who bought a substantial pipe organ from Stephen White — the one which likely became the first organ in St George's Church, High Street]. These balls were held in the Exchange Rooms, granted for the occasion by the Marchioness of Donegall. Season tickets — gentlemen, a guinea and a-half, *i.e.*, £1 14s. 1½d.; ladies, a guinea, *i.e.*, £1 2s. 9d. Strangers, introduced — gentlemen, 6/- (subsequently 7/6) per ball; ladies, 5/-. Dancing from 9 p.m. till 2 a.m.

The pupils wore a uniform at their public appearances. At other times it was ordered to be "carefully locked up". It seems to have been of Inishowen cloth. At least a resolution was adopted to provide each pupil with a suit of that stuff, provided Talbot agreed to give the aforesaid benefit.

The harps purchased by the Society appear to have been made by [Stephen] White of Belfast, though there is mention of treating for some with McClenaghan and McCabe. They cost ten guineas each. [See the PDF on this webpage listing the instruments, mainly organs, made by Stephen White and the specific section on the Irish Harp Society.] McBride and Rainey were the first sent out to try their fortune. This was in the summer of 1810. The period assigned for their experimental tour was three months. In 1818, Whitelaw and Walsh, in their *History of Dublin* (vol. ii, p.767), state that "several blind minstrels educated in the seminary at Belfast are found wandering through different parts of the country, affording a pleasing and harmless amusement to the people who hear them, providing a comfortable support for their necessities, and a sweet consolation to their infirmities;" and these historians contrast this state of affairs with the sterility of the Harp Society originated in the capital [Dublin].

This, it may be added, was an imitation of the Belfast one, and was established 13 July, 1809, according to the title-page of its *Rules and Regulations*, printed in 1810. The Minute Book of the

Belfast Society shows its members to have maintained friendly relations with the Dublin gentlemen, recommending them to purchase harps here. Persons whose memory of Belfast can extend back fifty years may recollect the Irish Harp Society's Academy, 21, Cromac Street.

The Society's efforts to promote the knowledge of Irish began on 17 July, 1809, when the following gentlemen subscribed an undertaking to commence the study of our native language under James Cody, 8. Pottinger's Entry: — Rev. E. Groves, John McAdam, Robert McAdam, Dr. Alexander MacDonnell, William McClurkin, Robert James Tennent, John Riddel, Henry McDowell, and Alexander Mitchell.

Petrie has the following remarks on the Irish Harp Society in a communication to Eugene O'Curry: — "The effort of the people of the North to perpetuate the existence of the harp in Ireland by trying to give a harper's skill to a number of poor blind boys was at once a benevolent and a patriotic one; but it was a delusion. The harp at the time was virtually dead, and such effort could give it for a while only a sort of galvanised vitality. The selection of blind boys, without any greater regard for their musical capacities than the possession of the organ of hearing, for a calling which doomed them to a wandering life, depending for existence mainly if not wholly on the sympathies of the poorer classes, and necessarily conducive to intemperate habits, was not a well-considered benevolence, and should never have had any fair hope of success." (See O'Curry's *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish*, vol. iii., p.298: London and Dublin, 1873.)

JOHN SALMON.