

Review

Ireland's Harp: The Shaping of Irish Identity c. 1770 – 1880

Mary Louise O'Donnell

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Ireland's Harp: The Shaping of Irish Identity c. 1770 – 1880 is a valuable contribution to the ongoing critical debate regarding why the harp's symbolic significance eclipsed its musical one. It takes up where a number of recent, more partially-focused studies have left off, by synthesizing them, adding a helpful superstructure, and by focusing on an era during which the representational value of the harp icon flourished while the use of the early-Irish (wire-strung) harp greatly diminished. Mary Louise O'Donnell's main argument is stated in the Introduction and reiterated further on: "The history of the Irish harp in the eighteenth century is remarkably complex but the overemphasis on Carolan and the [Belfast] Harp Festival, and the consequent neglect of other significant aspects of the instrument's history, have resulted in a somewhat disjointed narrative on the harp in this period" (30). The author sets out to address this situation by highlighting "the importance of the Irish harp icon and metaphor on the formation and expression of national identity and the effect of their employment on contemporary Irish harp performance and patronage" during the century in question. In chronological order, O'Donnell deftly traces the main events in which the harp played an important symbolic and/or musical role.

Comprising an introduction, seven chapters and an epilogue, the book is cogently shaped and O'Donnell writes lucidly throughout. Charting its changing iconography, from the winged-maiden of the ascendancy to the more populist 'Brian Boru harp', the book addresses the use of the harp as visual and literary metaphor in coinage, religious and political writings, the lyrics of Thomas Moore, and popular discourse. In each of her chapters, the author skillfully collates a wide range of sources to provide pithy synopses of the main ideas in the field. For example, consolidating the work of other scholars, she argues that the wire-strung harping tradition was certainly *not* dead in the wake of the 1792 Belfast Harpers Festival, but that the over-arching culture of loss surrounding the harp and figure of the bard created a false impression of a moribund instrument. By the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries the popular understanding of the early-Irish harping tradition had become suffused with the rhetoric of Ossianic demise which promoted an image of a harping culture that could not easily be revived.

Though O'Donnell notes that the framing of the Belfast Harpers Festival drew heavily upon bardic tropes, perhaps more could be explored about the international cult of the bard and the historical validity of the harper/bard construct. The conflation of harp and bard symbolism is a convenient alignment that is seldom critically examined, yet ubiquitous in its popular deployment from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. The process of flattening the complexity of the Gaelic harping tradition continues through the

use of heavily politicized catchphrases such as 'bard' and 'minstrel'. O'Donnell's ability to artfully distill a wealth of scholarship is impressive. Sometimes, however, this seductive succinctness has the effect of narrowing the possibilities of deeper critical interpretations.

Usefully, the book integrates an examination and assessment of contemporary harpers of the eighteenth century by Arthur O'Neill and Eclan O'Kane. Both testimonies, which have been underutilised in harp studies, are rich accounts of the contemporary musical landscape as it was perceived by the two harpers themselves, and not as it was reflected in the apocalyptic language of bardic-laden reportage. They offer a realistic glimpse of who was playing the harp at this time and sustaining the admittedly fragile wire-strung harp tradition. O'Donnell ably demonstrates that, though certainly in steep decline, Gaelic harping culture was far from extinct during the nineteenth century.

A particularly valuable contribution is O'Donnell's illustration of the socio-political climate surrounding attempts to revive the harp in Dublin through anecdotes on Watty Cox's *Irish Magazine* and John Bernard Trotter's life and writings. Her discussion of the organological innovations of Irish harp-maker, John Egan is also notable, as is her elaboration of the role of Owen Lloyd in the attempted revival of the Irish harp in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Other gems within this book include the author's consideration of the role of the harp in political propaganda during the Irish visit of King George IV and her integration of reports on the Belfast Harpers' Festival from contemporary newspapers. The section on Mathew Wall, Patrick Byrne and the concept of the 'emigrant harper' addresses the area of migrant studies and brings a fresh thematic focus into the field.

The book might have benefitted from greater international contextualization, particularly in chapter three when Charles Maturin and Sydney Owenson are discussed without a concomitant appraisal of the European taste for the Gothic, the Burkean sublime/beautiful, sensibility primitivism and the Aeolian harp as metaphor in Romantic literature. The construction of our metaphorical understandings of the harp did not occur in a Hibernian vacuum; all of these literary movements and developments were absorbed into Irish literature and impacted upon the way the harp was imagined and packaged for metropolitan audiences in Dublin, London and further afield.

O'Donnell touches upon some gender aspects around the commodification of the harp and the changing sociological profile of the typical harp-player in the nineteenth century. However, a fuller gender analysis would have greatly enhanced this narrative, particularly around socio-economic factors, the conventions of a sentimental age, the notion of disability associated with the blind male harp-player, and the Burkean concept of the beautiful as feminine – all of which were fundamentally gendered during the era under consideration.

There is a recurring tendency, particularly in Chapter Five, to invoke the phrase 'the Irish harp tradition' which leads to a confusing illusion of a

monolithic continuum. Though this is somewhat understandable – as O'Donnell attempts to help the reader navigate the variety of harps in use in Ireland during the nineteenth century, and the increasing demand for chromaticism in Irish music – the phrase, nonetheless, has an ambiguous effect.

Ireland's Harp serves a very useful purpose: to condense for the reader a significant amount of historical detail about the Irish harp. What is sacrificed in this synoptic presentation is depth of context and interpretation. Overall, however, as a book-length study of the multivalent significance of the Irish harp in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this text fills an important gap and will energise the burgeoning field of harp studies.

Emily Cullen
National University of Ireland, Galway