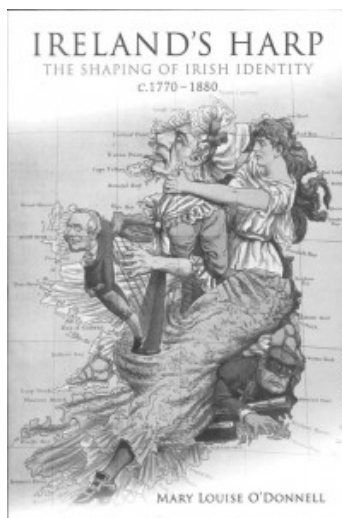


Books Ireland May/June 2015

Bookcase: Rory Brennan — Ireland's Harp: the shaping of Irish identity c. 1770–1880, by Mary Louise O'Donnell.

Ireland's Harp: the shaping of Irish identity c. 1770–1880. Mary Louise O'Donnell. UCD Press; 176pp + 16pp of photos; €35/£28 pb; flapped; 23cm; 978-1-906359-86-7.

In no need of restringing



In northern Europe we take our national symbols lightly. The British plaster the Union Jack on coffee mugs, teeshirts and the roofs of mini-cars. We do not have to go far in Ireland to discover that this flag is far from an affectionate plaything but rather a source of embittered contention. Some take their images too seriously, literally with deadly intent, as events in Paris have shown. Our national symbol? Many might assume that it is the shamrock, but it is the harp, whose background as icon and instrument is vividly charted by O'Donnell.

How is the harp perceived today? On an official document it strikes a slightly sombre chord. It is, of course, on Guinness bottles and on the cover of our maroon EU passports. The winged harp is actually on Ryanair planes. But it is essentially a staid, almost establishment seal, with a lighter side in rather saccharine renditions of Irish airs epitomised by Bunratty's 'medieval' maidens. The 'wild harp' of Thomas Moore is well tamed, even if Moore himself helped to tame it. Wolfe Tone's flippant remark—'Strum, strum and be damned!'—at the 1792 Belfast harpers' festival is long out of fashion but still memorable. The United Irishmen's boast that 'it is new-strung and shall be heard' almost recast the harp into a rebel pike.

O'Donnell takes us deeper into the symbolism and practice of the harp. It appears in John Speed's famous map of 1612 as an emblem borrowed by the new settler ascendancy. The harper always had high status in Gaelic society, level pegging with the poet. Gerald of Wales in the twelfth century found its skilled use hard to equate with what he dismissed as Irish barbarism. Indeed, various English laws were passed to eliminate its practitioners and destroy their instruments—evidence indeed of harping's cohesive influence. The fall of the Gaelic order saw the now (often blind) itinerant players absorb foreign influences, as they depended on the patronage of the new gentry. Here enters Turlough O'Carolan, and he exits, too, as he became tagged with the epithet 'last of the bards'. But O'Donnell takes us beyond the commonly accepted narratives of the male/female harper and the wire/gut-strung instrument into subtle, scholarly dissections of their roles and modes of depiction.

The crown on the harp appeared as early as Henry VIII's Irish coinage and survived on the RUC badge until recently. An animal head or griffin often topped the forepillar, but this evolved into an angel or winged maiden design. The Volunteer companies of the 1770s adopted the harp as a favoured emblem. It was used in the pamphlets and political polemic of the time as a convenient metaphor (harmony, tuning etc.) for social and constitutional reform. Ballads referred to its restringing as the harbinger of better times. The crown was sometimes replaced by the Cap of Liberty, a seditious emblem.

Around this time the amateur or gentleman harper emerged, just as the traditional player was perceived as heading for oblivion. With exemplary scholarship, O'Donnell unearths and records the names of these forgotten practitioners, their gathering in such places as Granard, the provenance of old instruments such as the Brian Boru harp, and the nature of the first collections of ancient music. She discusses it as a motif in the novels of Lady Morgan and Charles Maturin and in Moore's verse. Terry Eagleton accuses Moore of being deliberately vague in his sympathies, but then fence-sitting is an old charge against him. Nonetheless, his *Melodies* enjoyed enormous 'parlour' popularity well into the last century.

The foundation of the Irish Harp Society in Belfast in 1808 marked a sense of custodial responsibility and practical initiative in the maintenance of the art. The livelihood of players was of concern, and a group of Ulstermen in Calcutta sent a donation to the distressed harper Arthur O'Neill. This book is packed with such curious incidents. A chapter is devoted to the harp-maker John Egan and other noted craftsmen. The evolution of the instrument, soundbox, pedals, stringing, plucking (once with long fingernails), portable versions and so on are all handled with an expertise that O'Donnell brings as a practitioner herself.

The nineteenth century really saw the harp 'go public' when it was played aboard a float preceding Daniel O'Connell at monster meetings. The familiar iconography of the round tower, wolfhound, dolmen, ruined castle, etc. had by then become embedded with the harp.

O'Donnell sees the story of the harp in her chosen period of 1770–1880 as one of 'resilience and reinvention', though the tale is well littered with quotes from that familiar wolf-crier, the Irish prophet of doom, who habitually hits the wrong target. The instrument has survived as far more than a museum curio. Its future seems secure as long as people play significant music. And as a symbol? Well, no one wants to burn it or rip its image off a wall. It seems more unifying than anything else, and that has to be a good thing.

Rory Brennan
