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The Irish harp: political symbolism and romantic revival, 1534-1854

TOM DUNNE

THE HARP HAS LONG BEEN UBIQUITOUS AS A SYMBOL OF IRELAND – ON ITS COINAGE since 1534, on the British Royal Standard since 1603, on the insignia of Irish regiments in the British, French and American armies, and across the range of patriotic and nationalist movements from the mid-eighteenth century (since when it has also featured as a motif on consumer goods and commercial enterprises). It has been the official symbol of the Irish state since 1922. Politically it has been a highly contested symbol, its appropriation by the state – imperial and national – at times an assertion of legitimacy against its use by rebel forces. In the 1640s it featured on the flags of rival armies, those of the Parliamentary forces of Lord Inchiquin and of the commander of the army of the Catholic Confederation of Kilkenny, Hugh O'Neill, whose harp was shown against a green field, in contrast to the harp on the blue of the Royal Standard. Green was to become established as the colour of Irish patriotism in the late eighteenth century when the United Irishmen adopted it, together with a harp, minus the crown that usually surmounted it in royal insignia. As the leading authority on Irish flags and emblems has put it: 'As far as symbolism is a guide to history we may speak of the Irish struggle of modern times as one to remove the crown from above the harp, and to place the harp itself on a green field rather than a blue one.'[1]

The origin of the Irish harp symbol is, thus, complexly colonial – from English control to Irish nationalist resistance and, ultimately, national independence – but with every manifestation retaining shadows of its opposite. There was also a significant tension between the harp as symbol and the harp as musical instrument, to the extent that a leading musicologist has argued that in the age of nationalism, especially, the force of the symbol proved stultifying for the development of harp music, and, indeed, Irish music

1 – John Kelly harp, also called the Bunworth harp

1734, painted willow and brass, 167.8 x 78.6 x 33.4 cm (Museum of Fine Arts Boston: Leslie Lindsey Mason Collection)

in general.[2] This tension was signalled from the beginning when its English origins meant that the harp image used on Tudor coins was modelled on English or continental harps rather than Irish examples.[3]

It is not clear why a musical instrument was invested with such political significance, initially, by the English crown. A claim of continuity with an iconic Gaelic kingship was suggested in 1786 by Charles Vallancey, in a characteristically colourful – and fanciful – essay on 'The Harp of Brian Boiromh'.[4] According to this, Brian Boru's son brought his father's harp and crown to Rome after his death in 1014, and these were cited by a later pope as part of his legitimisation of the Norman conquest. The ancient harp donated to Trinity College Dublin, in the year of patriotic excitement, 1782, and identified as Brian Boru's harp, was soon to become the model of the harp as national symbol. Vallancey's account continued to surface throughout the nineteenth century despite George Petrie's scholarly demolition of it in 1840 (he dated the Trinity College harp to the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, and speculated that it was used for church rather than court music).[5]

A better insight into the use of the harp to represent Ireland in the Royal Standard can be found in the language of some contemporary writers and politicians. Sir John Davies, in his *Discoverie of the True Causes why Ireland was never entirely Subdued* (1612), wrote, 'the strings of the Irish harp, which the civil magistrate doth finger, are all in tune ... and make good Harmony in this Commonweal. So, as we may well conceive hope that Ireland ... will from henceforth prove a land of Peace and Concord.'[6] Resonating with this imagery was the often-noted fact that the only aspect of Gaelic society praised in early colonialist writing on Ireland, notably that of Gerald of Wales in the late twelfth century, was its harp music. This partiality had endured; the Irish harp was fashionable in the Stuart court in the early seventeenth century, and Irish harpers were employed there. This also helps to account for the fact that 'the characteristically robust build of the Irish harp' was more faithfully represented in the new royal coat of arms in 1603 than on the earlier coins.[7]

More significant, however, may have been the fact that through its association with the officially reviled 'bards', the harp had come to symbolise rebellion in the decades before it was incorporated in, or appropriated for, the Royal Standard. Thus, that same year, 1603, the Lord President and Council of Munster outlawed 'harpers, rymers, bardes' (along with 'all idle men, sturdie beggers, vagabons'), echoing a series of decrees during the colonial wars of the previous decades.[8] The writings of 'New English' colonists confused the elite hereditary order of 'file', pragmatic court poets, who were dedicated to praising the ancestry and legitimacy of the Gaelic (or Norman, or New English) ruling families, with the more lowly 'bards', who replaced them in the later decades of the seventeenth century due to the collapse of the old elite patronage. These popular entertainers were now often targeted as inciters of rebellion. At the same time the figure of the harper or 'cruitire', whose role had been to accompany the eulogies of the 'file', was now attached to the 'bard', hence their proscription. In John Derricke's well-known 1578

image of 'the Wilde Men of Ireland' feasting, the poet, bard and harper were all portrayed, the accompanying verse explaining that their role was to praise the Lord's 'noble conquests', and that this 'pricks the Rebells on'.[9] The use of the harp in the Royal Standard, therefore, may represent an attempt to nullify rebellion and to recruit a potent Gaelic symbol to the new colonial order. But it also remained rooted in ambivalence. The Irish harp was both fashionable at court and perceived still as dangerous in the continuing Irish wars.

Such complexity is often presented, especially by literary scholars, as central to the Irish colonial experience, which, like all such, involved the creation of a hybrid culture. Recent studies of Edmund Spenser in Ireland, for example, have moved away from the view of him as simply an apologist for an extreme and brutal colonialism (in his *A View of the State of Ireland, 1596* [1633]) to the sense of a poet profoundly shaped by his time as a colonist and administrator in Ireland, not only by the survival there of remnants of Chaucerian English, but even by his understanding of the role and skill of Gaelic court poets, some of whose work he got translated.[10] While agreeing that they were often guilty of encouraging rebellion 'to the hurt of the English, or maintenance of their owne lewde libertie', he admired their 'sweet wit and invention', and urged 'reformation' rather than destruction of their role, maybe even reflecting some envy of their comparative success and influence as court poets.[11]

Despite periodic official proscription, harp music also remained the aspect of Gaelic life most easily assimilated into Irish colonist culture, and its practitioners continued to find hospitality in many houses of the new ruling elite well into the eighteenth century. As the Gaelic political and military threat receded, and a new cult of 'sensibility' developed, some of that elite also began to take a wider interest in the Gaelic past as an ancient aristocratic culture with which they could identify. When, later in the eighteenth century, the harp playing 'bard' became a key trope of early European romanticism, representative of a lost, but newly appealing primitive culture, a new positive version of the Irish 'bard' already existed in the remarkable popularity of the blind poet, composer and harpist, Turlough Carolan (1660-1738).[12] Growing up in remote Roscommon (and never moving very far from it), blinded by smallpox at eighteen, Carolan was helped initially by the patronage of leading *déclassé* Gaelic families, and there were echoes of the 'file' in his circuit of the houses of his bilingual, relatively wealthy patrons, Protestant as well as Catholic, his welcome assured by praise poems celebrating weddings and funerals as well as by his music. Thanks to the strong metropolitan connections of his main patrons, he gained national fame as a composer, one capable of inflecting the Gaelic repertoire with the new vogue for Italian music, and even having some of his music published during his lifetime, albeit arranged 'for the Violin, German Flute and Hautboy'.[13]

What made him a truly iconic figure, however, was his ultimate assimilation into the new romantic cult of 'the bard'. The contrasting representations of the bard in Thomas Grey's *The Bard: a Pindaric Ode* (1753) and in James Macpherson's *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760) continued to resonate in the way the harp symbol was used in Ireland. The former represented the bard as a symbol of Welsh resistance to English

power, while the latter introduced the figure of 'Ossian', a feeble blind singer of past glories claimed by Macpherson to be Scottish (with counter-claims that he was Irish), and soon to capture the northern European imagination. In the same year (1760) that Ossian burst on the literary scene, Carolan was introduced to the British public by Oliver Goldsmith, who was originally from the same part of Ireland and had relatives who had been patrons of the poet/musician. Now intent on making his way in English literary circles, Goldsmith portrayed Carolan as the product of a remote, backward country, of value mainly in offering a way of understanding 'the ancient manners of our own [i.e. British] ancestors'. Carolan, he wrote, was 'the last and greatest of the bards'.[14] From the 1770s a fashionable classical gloss was added to this primitivist view, with Carolan compared to Orpheus and to Homer by Joseph Cooper Walker and Thomas Campbell.[15] Walker had set out to write a book on Carolan as an Irish Ossian, but the evidence that emerged from his main source, the antiquarian Charles O'Conor, who had been taught the harp by Carolan, revealed a real and fallible figure with human weaknesses, redeemed by his music and religious faith.[16] Instead, Walker projected modish primitivist (as well as classicising) ideas onto the Irish bardic tradition as a whole, describing Carolan as 'the voice of nature', as well as 'the last of his order'.[17] By the early nineteenth century, however, Walker's original vision had become irresistible, and Carolan was seen in his blindness and his evocation of a lost tradition more and more in terms of Ossian.

It is, perhaps, surprising, given their literary vogue, that neither Ossian nor Carolan featured significantly in Irish art. James Barry, whose Irish Catholic identity constituted a key subtext of his painting, portrayed Ossian as a small, distant but distinctive figure in *Elysium and Tartarus* (1774-78, RSA, London), his great sweep of world history. He did so in a manner that implicitly supported the case of the Catholic antiquarians (who had argued that Macpherson's originals were Irish, not Scottish) by giving him an Irish harp, commenting in his own account of the pictures 'that Ossian, whatever his abilities may have been as a bard, was an Irish bard'.[18] The only known contemporary portrait of Carolan is possibly by Francis Bindon (c.1690-1765), a friend of Jonathan Swift, whose portrait he painted and who also had connections to the musician. The small oil on copper, *Portrait of Turlough O'Carolan* (c.1720, NGI) is an awkwardly painted half-portrait of him playing a small harp (Plate 2).[19] While it was engraved and published several times, it lacks any sense of the charismatic image of Carolan already prevalent. There was to be no other painting of him until James Christopher Trimbell's *O'Carolan, the Irish Bard*, exhibited in the Royal Academy in 1844. This, as we will see, was a Victorian rather than an Ossianic version of the poet/musician, appealing to a different kind of romantic sensibility.

The cult of the blind harper, 'last of the bards', was part of what Joep Leerssen has called the wider 'cultural transfer' of elements of the old Gaelic world to the 'new English speaking civic and urban environment', and especially into a patriotic 'Anglo-Irish' identity.[20] As early as 1725, the neglect of the native musical tradition was lamented by Mathew Pilkington in terms of 'the harp unstrung', a phrase reused sixty years later by

2 – Francis Bindon (c.1690-1765) (attrib.)
Portrait of Turlough O'Carolan
c.1720, oil on copper, 20 x 17 cm (detail) (National Gallery of Ireland)

Charlotte Brooke, whose *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (1789) included Irish language originals as well as Ossianic translations.[21] Yet, in the process whereby aspects of the disappearing Gaelic world were of increasing interest to liberal Protestant antiquarians and politicians, language remained a barrier, despite important translations of texts from the 1720s. Music offered a more accessible and politically neutral connection to this exotic world (as did the study of architectural and archaeological remains). Yet political controversy could also colour commentary in this area. Thus, in the attempt to develop a flattering Phoenician/Milesian myth of origin for the Gaelic Irish, the harp was equated frequently to the Grecian lyre. However, some traditional Protestant antiquarians, who argued for a barbarous Teutonic myth of origin for the Gaelic Irish, echoed one rebarbative seventeenth-century colonist's view of the Irish harp as primitive, and 'unlike unto Orpheus'.[22]

'Patriot' opposition to the Dublin Castle administration in the (exclusively Protestant) Irish parliament also came to feature the harp, having earlier recruited St Patrick to its cause in the pamphlet war that marked the constitutional crises of the 1750s (a fashion exploited by the young art student, James Barry in his first exhibited work).[23] When Patriot feeling reached fever pitch at the end of the 1770s, in opposition to the stalling of reform and the war against the American colonies, volunteer corps were raised throughout the country to reinforce these views. Lacking a strong central organisation, they outdid each other in elaborate uniforms and regimental regalia, many featuring the

3 – Medal of the Order of St Patrick
(Niamh & Philip Maddock / photo: Tim Nighswander, Imaging4Art)

opposite

4 – Samuel Walker, two-handled covered cup
c.1761-66, silver gilt with applied decoration, h. 45.7 cm (Philadelphia Museum of Art, gift of anonymous donor, 2008)

5 – Mack, Williams & Gibton (after a design by Francis Johnston), wine cooler
c.1812, mahogany, 106.7 x 64.8 x 76.2 cm
(L. Knife & Son / photo: Tim Nighswander, Imaging4Art)

harp, usually surmounted by the crown, as in the royal arms, but sometimes, provocatively, without it. Part of the administration's response was to inaugurate a new royal chivalric order in 1783, the Order of St Patrick.[24] Leading Irish peers were appointed to it, including many who had been prominent in the Volunteer movement. The elaborate insignia, worn by the Lord Lieutenant as head of the Order, featured a crest (the cross of St Patrick and shamrocks, and the motto, 'quis separabit' ('who will separate us?')) hanging from a crowned harp (Plate 3). The Irish harp also featured in the elaborate gold chain, with the crests of the sister orders of the Garter and the Thistle as clasps. This renewed attempt to identify the harp symbol with the state may have had some success among the aristocracy, and it certainly further popularised the idea of the harp as the key Irish emblem. Increasingly, it appeared on luxury consumer goods, especially silverware, glassware and pottery (Plate 4). A fine mahogany wine cooler by Dublin cabinetmakers Mack, Williams & Gibton even incorporated the crowned harp and crest of the Order (Plate 5).

But much of the target audience was not won over. In a 1785 Volunteer pamphlet, William Drennan, using the Swiftian *nom de plume* 'an Irish Helot', called for reform and for the addition of 'new strings to the Irish harp'.[25] Six years later a new and more radical reform movement, the United Irishmen, adopted the 'winged maiden' harp of the Order of St Patrick (that is, a harp image featuring a winged, bare-breasted female figure on the fore-pillar, a feature of the royal arms since 1707), but with the crown replaced

6 – The United Irish seal
from G.A. Hayes-McCoy, A History of Irish Flags (1979) 120

opposite

7 – Robert Fagan (1761-1816), Portrait of a Lady as Hibernia
c.1801, oil on canvas, 137 x 107 cm (detail) (private collection)

by the revolutionary cap of liberty, and the motto 'It is new strung and shall be heard' (Plate 6). Thuente has argued that this adoption of the harp image by political radicals, despite its royal associations, reflected 'classical, Christian and Irish traditions', which featured women as symbols of power and liberty.[26] Given its largely Protestant leadership, the Gaelic dimensions of United Irish propaganda are particularly striking, especially their promotion of the Irish language and of the Belfast Harp Festival of 1795.[27] The harp motif featured in their newspapers and ballads, especially after the organisation became radicalised and dedicated to open rebellion in 1796. In the 1798 rebellion, which it organised, though not altogether controlled, some rebel flags featured the harp with the cap of liberty, and the motto 'Erin go bragh' ('Ireland forever'). This flag reappeared in the abortive Robert Emmet rebellion that followed in 1803. The same motto was put in the mouth of the leading parliamentary reformer Henry Grattan in a provocative 1798 cartoon by James Gillray, which portrayed Grattan as a leader of the Wexford rebellion because of his opposition to the Union.[28]

Thus, the inclusion of 'Erin go Bragh' in Robert Fagan's extraordinary painting, now titled *Portrait of a Lady as Hibernia*, could be taken as indicating political radicalism (Plate 7). However, in the years after the Union, when this painting was probably executed, that phrase, like others in the United Irish lexicon, had lost some of its revolutionary connotations and become part of literary exoticism. For example, Lady Morgan's far from radical heroine Glorvina, in the *Wild Irish Girl* (1806), sighing 'over the chords

of her national lyre ... faintly murmured Campbell's ancient air of "Erin go brach" [*sic*]'.[29] Similarly, the fashionable shamrock decoration on the gown in Fagan's painting, together with the attendant wolfhound and the harp, certainly echo romantic patriotic modes, but were common to moderate anti-Union reformers and revolutionary United Irishmen alike, as, for example, in a Grattanite cartoon in *The Dublin Magazine* in 1799.[30] Anti-Union sentiment may also be hinted at in the similarity of Fagan's figure to Vincent Waldré's allegorical representation of Ireland in *George III, supported by Justice and Liberty*, one of the pro-Union ceiling paintings commissioned for St Patrick's Hall in Dublin Castle (c.1787-1802). This Hibernia is also in a green dress, with one breast exposed, and in a similar pose, though standing rather than seated, with a hand on a barely visible harp.[31]

Dillon family tradition suggests that Fagan's painting involves a portrait rather than an allegorical figure, and features Margaret Simpson, mistress of the 13th Viscount Dillon. Hence, for example, the provocative pose and the overt sexuality of the painting, including the depiction of the female figure on the harp which mocks the stylised 'winged maiden' motif on the royal arms.[32] The Dillon connection, and the artist's background, also suggest a complex politics. The Dillons were an Irish Catholic Jacobite family, the 12th Viscount only becoming a Protestant in 1766, subsequently becoming an MP and Knight of St Patrick. The family had a strong military tradition and had been heavily involved in a regiment of the 'Irish Brigade' in the French army, which bore their name. 'Dillon's Regiment' was disbanded in 1791, having remained loyal to the monarchy. The future 13th Viscount, aged seventeen, became an honorary colonel of a reconstituted Dillon's Regiment in 1794, but it was now part of an *émigré* Catholic 'Irish Brigade' recruited into the British army, only to be wiped out on an expedition to Jamaica that same year.[33] The flag of the French Dillon's Regiment had featured a crowned harp in the centre of a cross, with crowns also in the four quarters, representing the Stuart claim to the 'Kingdoms' of England, Scotland, Ireland and France. The motto was the Catholic 'in hoc signo vinces' ('in this sign you will conquer').[34] If there is a Dillon subtext to the painting, the broken strings of the harp may refer to the destruction of a proud military tradition, and 'Erin go Bragh' may be a Catholic Jacobite cry rather than a contemporary revolutionary one.

This would chime with Fagan's own background and what can be inferred of his politics. Born in London to a prosperous Irish-born baker, he was brought up and remained a Catholic, spent most of his career in Italy, finding patrons there among English Catholics, like the Acton family.[35] While the 13th Viscount Dillon was a Protestant, and like his father became an MP, first in the Irish then the British parliament, he remained Catholic in sympathy, publishing pamphlets in favour of Catholic Emancipation. William Laffan's comparison of Fagan with the better-known 'Irish Catholic' artist James Barry is an interesting one, but the political stance common to both may have been Catholic rather than republican.[36] Barry's two versions of *Study for the Act of Union between Great Britain and Ireland* (c.1800) feature Hibernia, with her 'winged maiden' harp, as an equal partner with Britannia in the proposed union – the hope expressed by the Catholic bishops in both countries.[37]

At the same time as the harp became a potent political and cultural symbol, traditional harp music was losing ground to the violin, the transverse German flute and the Uileann pipes. Indeed, Carolan's popularity was partly due to the fact that his Italian-influenced music reflected that transition. Early attempts to revive the harp tradition coincided with the patriotic excitement of 'Grattan's parliament', with a series of harp festivals being held in Granard, county Longford, during 1781-85. These are described in *The Memoirs of Arthur O'Neill* (1810), a blind harper who took part and was later a key participant in the more significant Belfast Harp Festival of 1792. O'Neill also gave an account of being invited to restring the Brian Boru harp in Limerick in 1760, then playing it through the streets before a large crowd.[38] The enduring importance of the Belfast festival came from the decision to employ the young, classically trained Edward Bunting to write down the music, and later to travel in search of further airs. His *A General Collection of Ancient Irish Music* (1796, with further, expanded editions in 1809 and 1840) was central to the 'translation' of the Gaelic musical tradition into that of fashionable English and Irish society, particularly through the *Irish Melodies* (1807-34) of Thomas Moore, several of which were based on Bunting's transcriptions. Crucial to the limitations of such 'translation' was that Bunting understood neither the musical tradition nor the language of its songs. The transcriptions of what he heard at the Belfast Festival and later were 'for the pianoforte', and he travelled 'accompanied by a person versed in the Irish tongue who took down the original words'.[39]

A number of the harps that were played at these festivals survive, notably the Downhill harp of Dennis Hampson in the Guinness Storehouse in Dublin, and the Mullagh harp in the National Museum of Ireland. Bunting included an engraving of Hampson and his harp in his second edition, together with a drawing of Arthur O'Neill playing a large scroll-top harp. Bunting described 'the common Irish harp' as a descendant of 'the ceannaire cruit or great harp [once] used in public assemblies'. It was 'at present about five feet tall' and had approximately thirty strings.[40] There is also a drawing by 'Miss Reilly of Scarva' of her former teacher, Charles Byrne, a major source for the musical tradition, playing the Mullagh harp.[41] According to harp historian Michel Billinge, this was made by John Kelly,[42] maker also of the Hehir harp, illustrated by Cooper Walker in *Historical Memoirs*, and of the Bunworth harp (Plate 1).[43] Billinge's detailed technical analysis emphasises as Kelly's unique characteristic feature 'the pronounced carved loop and scroll at the top of the neck near the shoulder'.[44] The Bunworth harp is so-called because it was made by Kelly in 1734 for Charles Bunworth, a Church of Ireland clergyman who lived in Buttevant, county Cork. His great-grandson, the folklorist Thomas Crofton Croker, eventually inherited the harp, and in his *Fairy Legends and Traditions in the South of Ireland* (1825) he paid tribute to his ancestor, noting especially 'his performance on the Irish harp, and his hospitable reception and entertainment of the poor harpers who travelled from house to house throughout the country'. While Crofton Croker's main interest was in the story of Bunworth's death being announced in advance to a servant by the 'banshee' (fairy woman), he included an account of the destruction of his harp collection

8 – John Egan, Royal Portable Harp

c.1820, maple, spruce, ivory, brass, modern gut strings, green paint and gilt decoration, 90 x 49 x 22 cm
(The O'Brien Collection / photo: Jamie Stukenberg)

'by an ignorant follower of the family' during their absence. The Bunworth harp, in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is the only one to survive.[45]

Within a decade of the Belfast Harp Festival, a new kind of Irish harp was being manufactured by former smith, John Egan, whose Dublin factory produced over 2,000 harps between 1801 and 1841.[46] Egan's new harp was a modification of Sebastian Erard's French pedal harp, and was presented as 'a reinvention' of the traditional Irish harp, though having little in common with it apart from its shape.[47] Its success was partly due to the comparative cheapness of acquiring and repairing it, as well as to the ease of playing it, as that ever-practical romantic, Sydney Owenson (later Lady Morgan) enthused. She bought one in 1805 with her first significant literary earnings and promoted it among her fashionable friends. Her patron, Lady Abercorn, wrote to her in 1810, 'Pray tell poor Egan I shall show it off to the best advantage, and I sincerely hope he will have many orders in consequence.'[48] The cultural shift from the Belfast Festival to the drawing rooms of Dublin, and later London, was significant, but Egan's harp bridged the gap, selling also to the traditional harp societies.

However, between 1812 and 1819, in response to the extraordinary vogue for the harp following the literary and musical performances of Owenson and the huge success of Moore's *Melodies*, Egan designed an entirely new harp (Plate 8). Eventually known as 'Egan's Royal Portable Harp', it was much smaller (three feet rather than five), had gut strings rather than wire, a pleasing romantic shape (not unlike the patriotic Brian Boru harp in Trinity College), and new technology (ivory ditals on the fore-pillar to change pitch). It carried the coat of arms of King George IV, and was hand-painted with gold shamrocks.[49] Its use as a fashion statement can be seen in Thomas Lawrence's *Portrait of Lady Elizabeth Conyngham* (1821-24) (Plate 9). (Her husband, the first Marquess Conyngham, was a nephew of the aristocratic antiquarian who had donated the Brian Boru harp to Trinity College). Egan's new harp was perfectly adapted to amateur accompaniment of Moore's *Melodies*, and in 1821 Egan presented one to the poet. It can be seen in the portrait of Moore in Sloperton Cottage (English School, n.d., NGI), lying on its side against the piano, Moore's instrument of choice (Plate 10). He rarely played the harp. In Egan's Royal Portable, the harp as symbol and the harp as instrument might be said to have achieved symbiosis. Like all fashions, it proved fleeting. Mass politics, and ultimately famine, brought different images of Ireland to the fore. The Belfast Harp Society collapsed in 1839, and Egan went out of business shortly afterwards.

No one did more in this period to promote the romantic fashion of the Irish harp – or better exemplified the translation from Gaelic to English, from rural tradition to urban consumerism – than Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan. Her mixed Irish-English parentage was symbolic of the Union to which she was passionately committed, and which informed the political sub-plot of her Irish novels. She identified hugely with her father, Robert Owenson, who grew up speaking Irish and with a repertoire of traditional songs, including Carolan's, but made his early career as an actor in London, playing stage-Irish parts. Moving to Dublin to establish a new 'national' theatre in support of the patriotic

9 – Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830)
Portrait of Lady Elizabeth Conyngham
1821-24, oil on canvas, 91 x 71 cm (detail) (courtesy Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon)

opposite

10 – English School
Portrait of Thomas Moore in his study at Sloperton Cottage
n.d., oil on panel, 30 x 36 cm (National Gallery of Ireland)

Grattanites, he provided his daughter with the politics that she carried through life. He also provided her with the material for her 1807 book of Irish songs, *The Lay of the Irish Harp*, in which she (or rather he, because she had little Irish) put English on the 'wild and plaintive strains' of his originals.[50] This small volume was aimed at a market she herself had done much to create the previous year with her best-selling novel, *The Wild Irish Girl*.

The success of the latter was all the more remarkable because so much of this romantic tale consisted of erudite lectures based on the antiquarian controversies of earlier decades, given mainly by its sophisticated Gaelic heroine, Glorvina (referenced in a footnote by Owenson to her own harp-playing grandmother), in educating the sympathetic Englishman, Mortimer, on the claims of Gaelic Ireland to be considered a great, ancient civilisation. Glorvina put particular emphasis on Irish music because 'in music only do you English allow us poor Irish any superiority'. However, she was no naive enthusiast, but saw in 'the wild effusions of the modern and unlettered bards of Ireland' an 'Ossianic style'. Despite her erudite defence of the Catholic antiquarian claim that Macpherson's originals were Irish rather than Scottish (and her claim to be familiar with them), her real interest lay in what she calls 'my English Ossian', its fashionable melancholy captured by her own harp, which, when stirred by 'the passing breeze', seems 'to call forth its own requiem as it expires'.[51] The contrast with the portrayal of the madly romantic harp-playing hero of Charles Robert Maturin's novel of the same period, *The Milesian Chief* (1812), is remarkable. While heavily identified with Ossian by Maturin,

the hero, Conall O'Morvan's real inspiration is Thomas Grey's Bard, as he leads a rebellion against the English in 'the ancient Irish dress', inspired by his antiquarian grandfather and quoting Moore on the need to redeem 'the emerald gem of the western world'.[52]

Crucial to the success of Morgan's romantic didactic novel was the author's public identification with the heroine. In her memoirs, she delighted in the fact that she was known as 'Glorvina' until her marriage, and that her appearances in Dublin and London society playing the harp and singing Irish songs inspired new fashions in harp brooches and Irish 'bodkins' (ornamental hairpins) called 'Glorvinas', as well as in acquiring and playing the instrument itself.[53] This performative role had a strong colonial dimension, especially during the period when she was the live-in harpist/singer in the household of society hostess Lady Abercorn in London. In the preface to the 1846 edition of *Wild Irish Girl*, she described herself, perhaps with some residual resentment, as 'last and least of the "mere Irishry" drawn within the English Pale ... an obscure girl, whose sole passport into circles so brilliant was that she had written an Irish tale, in the Irish interest, sung Irish songs translated by herself from Irish poems and played the Irish harp'.[54]

However, in the key activity of cultural 'translation' focussed on the harp, Lady Morgan was to be eclipsed by the yet more remarkable success of her childhood acquaintance in Dublin, Thomas Moore. Despite his student friendships with United Irish activists, Moore was never a revolutionary, or even a radical, then or later. He belonged rather to the middle-class Catholic tradition of masking deeply felt resentment at injustice

with a deferential rhetoric of petition and appeal to the liberal instincts of English Whigs, the party in which he found his political home. He continued the Catholic antiquarian tradition, which also shaped his sense of Irish music as a bearer of an ancient culture, but he added to their invocation of history and justice an appeal, above all, to sentiment. In 'Oh blame not the Bard', after lamenting that 'the patriot heart' cannot be aroused because of the broken state of Ireland, he claims that all he can do, as a modern 'bard', is to keep the name and wrongs of 'loved Erin' alive in his songs, and appeal to her English rulers.

> The stranger shall hear thy lament on his plains
> The sigh of thy harp shall be heard o'er the deep,
> 'Till thy masters themselves, as they rivet thy chains
> Shall pause at the song of their captor and weep.[55]

Moore had little interest in the Gaelic harp tradition (which, he maintained, contained few airs 'of a civilised description' until modern times), but was mainly interested in the harp as symbol and in Irish music as 'the truest of all comments on our history' and the best reflection of Irish national character, which he described in the fashionable paradigm of opposites as comprising a 'romantic mixture of mirth and sadness'.[56] The *Melodies* stressed 'sadness' over 'mirth', whereas the Irish song and harp tradition mainly featured 'lively airs', as Bunting pointed out in the preface to the 1840 edition of *The Ancient Music of Ireland*.[57] Moore's great theme was loss.

> Sing sad Harp, thus sing to me / Alike our dream is cast.
> Both lost to all but memory / We live but in the Past.[58]

In that, and indeed other respects, he unconsciously echoed major themes of aristocratic Gaelic praise poetry from the time that the colonial revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries began to destroy the polity and culture of the Gaelic elite. These themes of loss, nostalgia and fatalism are wonderfully captured in Moore's 'Let Erin Remember the Days of old'.[59] Like Morgan's, Moore's representation of the harp was primarily Ossianic, an echo of Macpherson's primitive, blind, feeble bard, singer of a remote past, and no threat to the status quo. Moore's harp, like Ossian's, is passive, an Aeolian harp, played by the winds of history rather than by the poet. In the final lines of what Moore intended to be his last melody, 'Dear harp of my Country', he characterised his role merely as that of 'the wind passing heedlessly o'er' the strings, so that 'all the wild sweetness I wak'd was thy own'.[60] Like Morgan also, he disassociated his invocation of Irish 'wrongs' from 'dangerous politics' and from 'any appeal to the passions of an ignorant and angry multitude'. His work, he wrote, 'looks much higher for its audience and readers – it is found upon the pianoforte of the rich and educated.'[61]

However, in some of the melodies, Moore invoked a martial tradition, ascribing to harpers the role of leading armies into battle against 'the proud invader', the best-known being 'The Minstrel Boy'. Yet this poem is not specifically about Ireland, and given the ubiquity of the harp symbol in all of the countries that made up the new United Kingdom,

11 – Frederic William Burton's frontispiece for THE SPIRIT OF THE NATION *(1845)*

it may well have been designed to have a broad appeal. It portrays the 'warrior bard' going to war with 'his wild harp slung behind him', and when defeated, and bound by 'the foeman's chain', breaking the strings of his harp rather than have it 'sound in slavery'.[62]

The contrasting evocations of the harp as either Ossianic nostalgia or patriotic resistance was captured best in Frederic William Burton's frontispiece for *The Spirit of the Nation* (1845), a compilation of patriotic songs, edited by Burton's friend, Thomas Davis (Plate 11). In this drawing, a vibrant young harper strides forth, with the feeble benediction of the slumped figure of an ancient bard and to the animated approval of some young Gaelic warriors. Davis enthused that 'the singing of the minstrel had broken the old harpers spell' and inspired 'the young brothers in arms'.[63] No wonder *The Nation* was enthusiastic about Samuel Watson's romantic portrayal of *The Battle of Clontarf* (RHA, 1845), which featured a harper playing to urge on Brian Boru's army, with a foot on one of the enemy dead.[64] Burton's drawing was considered so daring that the artist's identity was concealed, perhaps in reaction to the citation of the harp and sunburst symbols on Repeal Association membership cards as incendiary during the trial of Daniel O'Connell for sedition the previous year. While O'Connell's use of the harp symbol

ultimately copied that of his more radical Young Ireland rivals, a traditional harp had long featured in his large public meetings. His procession through Dublin as 'Liberator' after the passing of Catholic Emancipation included a seated harper in the 'triumphal chariot', and live harp music was a feature of his Repeal meetings.[65] Thus, reflecting his rural Gaelic background, O'Connell could combine to great effect the actual harping tradition and its use as romantic symbol, something impossible for the anglicised urban intellectuals of Young Ireland.

The attenuated manner in which Moore's *Melodies* helped to keep the memory of Carolan alive is echoed in the first and only representation of him in a history painting, James Christopher Timbrell's large canvas, *Carolan the Irish Bard* (exhibited at the Royal Academy, London, 1844) (Plate 12). Little is known of this Irish artist apart from his dates (1807-1850), the fact that he exhibited one painting in the Royal Hibernian Academy before moving to London in 1830, and his subsequent appearance in British Institution exhibitions before showing this one painting at the Royal Academy, the only one of his known to have survived.[66] Before leaving Ireland he also contributed some slight, charming and stereotypical illustrations of Irish peasant figures to Anna Maria Hall, *Sketches of Irish character* (1820). His illustrations for Mr and Mrs S.C. Hall's, *Ireland, its Scenery, Character etc*. (1841), to which Daniel Maclise also contributed, were more complex and interesting, especially a series of three drawings on that topic of endless fascination, 'The Wake'. Carefully and respectfully observed, and set in a moderately prosperous house,

13 – James Barry (1741-1806)
Minerva turning from scenes of Destruction and Violence to Religion and the Arts
1805, etching, frontispiece for Francis Burroughs, A Poetical Epistle to James Barry (1805)

opposite

12 – James Christopher Timbrell (1807-1850)
Carolan the Irish Bard
1844, oil on canvas, 105 x 147 cm
(The O'Brien Collection / photo: Jamie Stukenberg)

they belong to a type of representation of Irish life that developed from the time of the Union in which traditional English (and essentially colonial) representations of Irish poverty, superstition and lawlessness were combated with depictions of gentility, domesticity and piety, although (as was the case in the fictions they mirrored) elements of the stereotype, humorously presented, might still survive. The interiors painted by John George Mulvany offer good examples, and Daniel Maclise's *Snap Apple Night* (1833, private collection), exhibited in the Royal Academy shortly after Timbrell moved to London, may have been an influence. With its well-dressed men and women enjoying a convivial music evening, albeit one featuring dancing and games rather than respectful attention to the performer, it has much in common with Timbrell's painting.[67]

This depicts Carolan playing the harp in an aristocratic setting, a room with ancient armour, paintings and good furniture. His audience, men, women and children in indeterminately archaic clothes, are focussed on the blind musician, whose own social status is reflected in the top hat and cane at his feet. This is a Catholic household, as indicated by the corpulent Dominican friar in a place of honour. Carolan is playing a small Brian Boru harp, the model also for Maclise's dejected harper in *Strongbow and Aoife* and for neo-classical sculptor John Hogan. Trimbell's painting is redolent of tradition and respectability, lacking the colour of eighteenth -century accounts of Carolan as a quintessentially Irish character noted for his mischievous wit and fondness for drink as well as for his music. He is presented, instead, as a forerunner of Moore and his *Melodies*,

14 – Daniel Maclise (1806-1870)
The Minstrel Boy (detail), from Thomas Moore, Irish Melodies, illustrated by Daniel Maclise (1846)

the player of traditional Irish music for respectable society. On the eve of the Great Famine, this painting offered an image of Ireland that was affirmative and reassuring, with the harp, as Sir John Davies had envisaged it in 1615, making 'good harmony in the common weal' rather than threatening revolution by mass politics or rebellion.[68] This had also been the message of James Barry's *Minerva turning from scenes of Destruction and Violence to Religion and the Arts* (1805), which contrasted the horrors of 1798 with the potential for Ireland to be a source of harmony and culture in the new United Kingdom, symbolised by a harp as depicted in the royal arms (Plate 13).[69]

In contrast to Timbrell's one-dimensional depiction, Daniel Maclise's illustrated *Irish Melodies* (1846) reflects Moore's complex use of the harp motif, from the languid eroticism of 'The Origins of the Harp' to the martial vigour of 'The Minstrel Boy' (Plate 14). More generally, this brilliant series evoked the fashionable medievalism and cult of chivalry that were defining signatures of Maclise's art and a key context for understanding the evolution of the harp symbol in the Romantic age. He used the harp as a symbol of a number of the indigenous cultures – Anglo-Saxon and Welsh, as well as Irish – that were assimilated to the composite identity of 'Britons', initially through Norman power. This is particularly clear in his contributions, proposed as well as realised, to the elaborate decoration of the new Palace of Westminster. In the key fresco *The Spirit of Chivalry* (1847), positioned over the throne in the House of Lords, a Saxon 'Bard', complete with harp, recites the ancient liberties on which Chivalry was founded. (Later he was to depict a harp-playing *Alfred the Saxon King* (1852, Newcastle upon Tyne)). In his sketch, *Edward 1st presenting his son to the Welsh people* (c.1848-53), approved by the Westminster Commissioners but never attempted as a mural, harpers kneel in submission with the Welsh lords. Again, in the large painting *The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife* (1854), also approved but never turned into a fresco, a similar harper figure represents his sympathy with the defeated Irish (and Vikings) (Plates 15, 16). Thus, the harp in Maclise's art, like that on the royal coat of arms, reflects Ireland's subordinate role in a colonial system, however that may have been mediated through systems of kingdoms or union.[70]

A preparatory painting by Maclise for *The Spirit of Justice* offered a very different

15, 16 – Daniel Maclise (1806-1870), The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife
1854, watercolour on paper, 51 x 81 cm (National Gallery of Ireland)
The more dramatic preparatory watercolour sketch is shown here (with detail below).

17 – Daniel Maclise (1806-1870)
Caroline Norton, a study for the great fresco of Justice in the House of Lords
c.1846, oil on canvas, 102 x 76 cm (private collection; photo © Patrick Guinness)

representation of the harp (Plate 17). *Caroline Norton, a study for the great fresco of Justice in the House of Lords* (c.1846, private collection), featured a wronged Irishwoman, Caroline Norton, a victim of the marriage laws, which gave all rights, including over property, to the husband, and whose crusade to have the law changed was a *cause célèbre* in Maclise's circle. While she clearly represents Justice, she may also represent Ireland, as she carries what is clearly an Irish harp. There may be a 'justice for Ireland' as well as 'justice for Norton' subtext here, though Maclise's cautious Toryism would argue against it. The contrast between the dignified quasi-religious medievalism of Caroline Norton and Fagan's wanton Hibernia is stark, another reflection of the change in romantic sensibility.[71]

There is also an interesting contrast between Maclise's British perspectives on the harp and the overt nationalism of some of John Hogan's neo-classical sculptures of the same period. After early success in Rome, Hogan had returned to Ireland and made a major contribution to the religious art of the new, post-Emancipation Catholic churches. He was the artist most closely associated with Daniel O'Connell's campaigns, and was chosen to place the 'Milesian Crown' he had helped to design on O'Connell's head at the

Mullaghmast 'Monster Repeal meeting' of 1843. Two of Hogan's statues – of the O'Connellite Catholic bishop, James of Kildare and Leighlin (1839, Carlow Cathedral), and of the former United Irishman, Lord Cloncurry (1844, NGI) – featured the figure of Hibernia with a harp.[72] He also did major statues of Davis (1853, City Hall, Dublin) and O'Connell (1856, The Crescent, Limerick). Such sculptures, usually involving more democratic patronage than painting, were closer to public opinion and reflected more clearly the new nationalism. In Hogan's work, the symbolism of the harp in popular politics and in art came together for the first time.

ENDNOTES

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[54] This preface has been added as an appendix to the excellent edition of *The Wild Irish Girl* edited by Claire Connolly and Stephen Copley (London, 2000) 247-63: 258n.

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