

Ireland's Harp and the Shaping of Irish Identity c. 1770-1880.

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A review of

Mary Louise O'Donnell, *Ireland's Harp: The Shaping of Irish Identity c.1770-1880*

(Dublin, University College Dublin Press, 2014). ISBN: 978-1-906359-86-7, paperback, x+162 pp, 16 unnumbered pages of plates: illustrations (some colour), £28.00.

On 23 June 1888 a lithograph was published in the *St Stephen's Review*, London, that depicted a satirical map of Ireland composed of figures representing the Leader of the Liberal Party, William Gladstone (1809-1898), playing a harp while being strangled by Erin, the personification of Ireland. The scene can be understood as a struggle for the command of the instrument, and symbolic power over the nation, at the time when Home Rule was being discussed in Parliament. Produced at the end of the chronological period discussed in this book, the image, used on the front cover, is indicative of the continued prominence of the harp, and harper, as contested visual symbols of Ireland in the nineteenth century. In *Ireland's Harp: the Shaping of Irish Identity c. 1770-1880*, Mary Louise O'Donnell, herself an internationally renowned harpist, traces references to the wire-strung Irish harp in visual, literary and material culture from the period in a variety of sources (including newspaper reports and advertisements, poetry, literature, songs, images and official symbolism such as coins), in light of the corresponding socio-cultural-political specificities of the production, patronage and performance of the instrument. O'Donnell argues that the Irish harp, and its representation in text and image, was, at times, a politically-loaded symbol that was capable of being mobilised in the construction of 'Irish' national identity, often in relation to British politics. The book also demonstrates that 'the Irish harp and harpers [...] play[ed] a significant role in Irish society after 1792', a date

that has been associated previously in scholarship with the demise of that musical tradition (p. 7).

The book comprises seven concise chapters, organised chronologically, and an epilogue. The discussion is weighted towards the late-eighteenth and early- to mid-nineteenth centuries, with six chapters dedicated to that period. Chapter One, 'The Irish Harp as "a Driving Image of Revolution" in the Late Eighteenth Century', explores how the harp was used as a politically radical signifier by the Volunteer Movement and United Irishmen in the 1790s, the latter's motto being 'it is new strung and shall be heard'. It is argued that the harp offered a utopian vision of the future based on longstanding cultural discourses about the instrument; the history of harp practice and patronage from the Gaelic aristocracy to the Protestant Ascendancy is outlined in the book's introduction. In Chapter Two, "'Towards the Grave of Oblivion": the Politics of Irish Harping in the Eighteenth Century', the focus turns to the Belfast Harp Festival of July 1792. The tradition was perceived to be a dying art form in need of urgent revitalisation, in part due to its negative alignment with patronage by the Ascendancy.

Following socio-political and cultural upheavals in the aftermaths of the 1798 Rebellion against British rule and the Act of Union (1801), O'Donnell argues in Chapters Three ("One Faithful Harp" and Harper in the Works of Owenson, Maturin, and Moore') and Four ('Custodians of Culture: Patronage and the Sacred Fire of Patriotism') that in the early-nineteenth century the harp and harper were ubiquitous metaphors in emergent Irish patriotic and nationalist discourses propounded in literature and ballads. These discourses impacted on the patronage and production of

the instrument (including a new portable harp and the establishment of training Schools in Belfast, Dublin and Drogheda) by urban middle class audiences seeking to articulate patriotism. The concomitant changes to harp production in this period, and the modification of the harp structure and form, are examined in Chapter Five, 'John Egan: an Innovator and Inventor'.

Between 1820-45, the harp remained a socio-political signifier of 'Irish nationalism' in contrast to Britain (p. 111). In public performance and representation of the harp during King George IV's state visit to Ireland in August 1821 (the first since the English Reformation) and processions during Daniel O'Connell's (1775-1847) campaign for emancipation in the 1820s, O'Donnell shows in Chapter Six, 'The Harp of Kings and Liberators', that there was a shift from the depiction of the winged maiden harp to the 'Brian Boru' (or Trinity College harp). This became the standard symbol used at the mass meetings of the Repeal Association in the 1840s, along with an ageing bard harper rather than a female harpist or Erin. Chapter Seven, 'Cultural Curiosities: the Last of the Blind Harpers' draws the book to a close with an analysis of the transition to the pedal harp tradition, ending with a discussion of the Irish Harp Festival of 1879 which was the last major public celebration of the wire-strung harp, and of the interest in blind harpers in that century. The harp had become less visible in the years after the famine, in part due to the cultural vacuum created by harpers seeking patronage abroad, and increased Anglicanisation. The book's epilogue, 'Relics and Revivals', provides an overview of the historiography, performance and representation of the wire-strung harp from the 1870s to present.

The study is ambitious in its scope, meaning that at times it lacks depth of analysis, for example of the images mentioned and the relative audiences of the discourses discussed. The book would benefit from a sustained theoretical engagement with the national identity formation articulated by Benedict Anderson as imagined political communities.¹ The implied focus on Irish audiences without consideration of how the discourses about the harp were received, and also constructed, in Britain undermines the complexity of the Anglo-Irish relationship which was, at times, central to the patronage, production, practice and representation of the harp in Ireland that the author outlines. It would be particularly interesting to explore the parallel constructions of British national identity via, for example, the symbols of John Bull, Britannia and Hibernia/Erin.² Nevertheless, this is a widely researched and thought-provoking study that synthesises a large amount of material and addresses significant gaps in existing scholarship on Irish music and cultural history.

¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1991). O'Donnell references Anderson on page 48.

² Tamara L. Hunt in *Defining John Bull: Political Caricature and National Identity in Late Georgian England* (Aldershot, 2003), pp 121-69.