

Early Irish harp music

played by Simon Chadwick

Wighton Harpist Lunchtime Recital

Wighton Heritage Centre, Dundee Central Library Wednesday 20th December 2006

Today's recital looks at the 18th century repertory of the early clàrsach. Though it died out in Scotland between 1700 and 1750, the Gaelic harp was still played in Ireland up to 1800, and even after that there were a few attempts to keep the tradition alive, before it became quite extinct in the late 1800s.

Though many tunes survive in Scottish books, the sole source for the playing technique and technical details is the work of Edward Bunting. From 1792 he collected tunes, techniques, terminology and lore from the last of the old harpers. He published his findings in 1796, 1804 and 1840. The Wighton Collection has pirate copies of the first two volumes but strangely does not have a copy of the 1840 publication - by far the most important. I have brought my own copy along for you to look at if you wish.

Amazingly, most of Bunting's field notebooks and rough drafts survive, kept in Queens University Library, Belfast. These allow us to see how he came to develop his published piano arrangements (something we can do for almost nothing else in the Wighton Collection). More importantly from my point of view, we can also see how he jotted down the actual playing of the old harpers. Today's recital includes some tunes, in settings which have taken directly from the field notebooks.

Bunting's most important informant was Denis O'Hampsey. He was taught a conservative and old fashioned repertory and style in the early 1700s by Bríghid Ní Chatháin. Hampsey came to Scotland at least twice. Around 1730 he was in Lude, Perthshire, where he restrung and played the Queen Mary harp, and in September 1745 he was at Holyrood where he performed for Charles. His harp was made in 1702 by Cormac O'Kelly. The instrument still exists, preserved in the Guinness Museum in Dublin. My harp is an accurate copy of it, made by David Kortier in July of this year.

Féachain Gléis
Cumb Caoine an Albannaich

Collected from Denis O'Hampsey by Edward Bunting in the 1790s, these two settings are straight from Bunting's field notebook (QUB ms4.29). The lament is by John Scott and was composed in 1599. These tunes were published in 1840 and do not (to my knowledge) appear in the Wighton collection.

The Irish Cry
Jigg to the Irish Cry

A number of 18th century collections (including Bunting's) include an "Irish cry", a vocal lamentation or keening. This one, with its unusual jig, is from Burk Thumoth's "12 Scotch and 12 Irish Airs" of c.1742 (Wighton 53692)

Eibhlín a Rúin

This tune appears dozens of times in the Wighton Collection, in Scottish as well as Irish books. I play Hampsey's version (from QUB ms4.29) which Bunting describes: "This set is quite different from any I ever met with".

Mrs Power

By Turlough O'Carolan (1670-1738). More commonly known as Carolan's Concerto. This setting is from Bunting's 1796 published collection. (Wighton 7066)

Seabhad na hÉirne

A song by Carolan in praise of Katherine O'More, also known as "The Hawk of Ballyshannon". The setting I play was collected by Bunting from the harper Arthur O'Neill (1734 - 1816) (QUB ms4.33.1). Carolan did not compose the tune; it is "Port Atholl" by Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin (c. 1570 - 1650), which appears in Oswald's "Caledonian Pocket Companion" (Wighton 31983).

Miss Hamilton

Composed by Cornelius Lyons (c. 1680 - c. 1750). From O'Hampsey, in Bunting's field notebook (QUB ms4.29)

A Chailini, an bhfaca sibh Seoirse
or *Conchubhar Mhac Coiréibhe*

A traditional air, used for a number of songs (hence the multiple titles), with variations by Cornelius Lyons. This is Denis O'Hampsey's set from Bunting's field notebook (QUB ms4.29). The only occurrence in the Wighton collection is Bunting's 1798 collection (Wighton 7066) where it is printed without the variations .



Engraved from an Original Drawing by J. Johnson.

H E M P S O N

THE HARPER OF MAGILLIGAN, COUNTY OF L'DERRY.

London, Published by E. Bunting, No. 15, 1789.

Denis O'Hampsey (1695 - 1807)
from Edward Bunting, *A General Collection of the Ancient Music of Ireland*, 1809. (Wighton 7066)