

History of the Irish Harp



If the average American even gives it any thought, it is most likely that they believe that the shamrock, so closely associated with St. Patrick's Day, is Ireland's most important symbol. It is true that the Irish shamrock is ubiquitous and is used in a myriad of ways. It is the symbol for most Irish international sports teams such as the soccer teams and the rugby teams. (It must be noted that the rugby team, currently ranked no. 1 in the world, is a 32-county team while the island has two international soccer teams.) As ever present as the shamrock is, the official symbol of Ireland is actually the harp. It appears on all official government documents including passports and correspondence as well as featuring on Ireland's currency. This makes Ireland unique among the countries of the world as it is the only one with a musical instrument as its official symbol. The harp symbol is based on an ancient harp known as the Brian Boru harp which is housed in Dublin's Trinity College.

The historical importance of the harp (Irish: *Cláirseach*) cannot be understated. The Irish diaspora brought their love of music and the harp around the world. It featured on the Irish flag until the tricolor was adopted by the Irish Free State in 1922 as well as being the on the flag of the Irish Brigade during the American civil war.

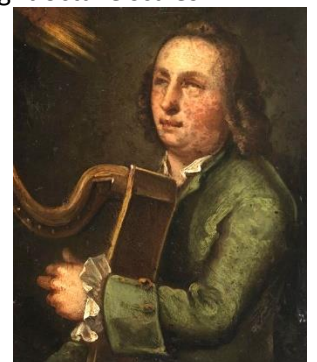
Historians believe that the harp dates back to about the sixth century. The harps used up until the 17th century differ from the modern Celtic harp. The earlier harps were carved from a single block of wood with a large soundbox. They had to be sturdy enough to support upwards of fifty brass strings under great tension. The harp was played by plucking the strings with the fingernails. Modern harps use gut or nylon strings and tend to be lighter and easier to play. Modern harpers use an eight-tone scale whereas the earlier harpists used a seven-tone scale.

English oppression of Irish culture, traditional sports, and religion extended to harpists and poets. In a 1603 proclamation by the Lord President of Munster, the Marshal of the Province was strictly charged "*to exterminate by martial law all manner of Bards, Harpers,*" etc. It has been alleged by some historians that Queen Elizabeth herself, within ten days of the edict being promulgated, issued the order "*to hang the harpers wherever found, and destroy their instruments.*" Regardless of the veracity of this allegation, it indicates the lengths to which the English would go to stamp out all vestiges of Irishness. The end result was that harpers who were once celebrated not only in Ireland but throughout Europe were reduced to penury and were almost wiped out.

The harp and some of its associated music was saved by a man named Edward Bunting. He arranged a harp festival in Belfast in order to collect and transcribe harp music. It is thanks to him that we have much of the music that we know today. He transcribed tunes and songs by Turlough O'Carolan and Pádraig Dall Ó Beirn among many others. However, in order to "modernize" the tunes he transcribed them in eight octave scales using musical keys that would have been unknown to the harpers. It is these versions of the tunes that we know today.

Turlough O'Carolan

Perhaps the best-known harper today is Turlough O'Carolan. O'Carolan was born in 1670 in Co. Meath where his father was a blacksmith. The family moved to Co. Roscommon when O'Carolan was fourteen. It was there that he received his education and was apprenticed to a local harper. He contracted smallpox at the age of eighteen and was blinded by the disease. After his apprenticeship, he travelled the country with a guide



composing melodies and songs for various patrons. At least twelve of his tunes were written as tributes to patrons. Each of these is titled "Planxty" followed by the patron's name. Planxty is a term that O'Carolan coined, and he meant it to mean "In tribute to." In 1720 at the age of fifty he married Mary Maguire with whom he had seven children. They lived in Mohill Co. Leitrim where he died in 1738. He is buried in the MacDermott Roe family crypt in Kilronan Burial Ground near Ballyfarnon, Co. Roscommon.

Pádraig Dall Ó Beirn



Pádraig Dall ó Beirn or Blind Patrick Byrne was, as is obvious by his name, another blind harper. Born in Monaghan, Byrne learned his craft in the Belfast school for blind boys set up by The Irish Harp Society following the Belfast harp festival. He is considered to be the last practitioner of the old style of playing. Byrne travelled extensively throughout Ireland, England, and Scotland. Edward Bunting transcribed two of his pieces. Byrne holds the distinction of being the first Irish harper to be photographed as his picture was taken in Edinburgh in 1845. He was also appointed as the Royal Irish Harper to Queen Victoria's husband Prince Albert. (Why Albert would want or need a Royal Irish Harper is anyone's guess.) Byrne returned to Monaghan in 1847 where he died in Carrickmacross in April 1863. Since 2007, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann has organized the Féile Patrick Byrne which is held annually on the weekend before Easter in Carrickmacross.

Links to music:

Planxty Burke

<https://youtu.be/hOV5rLHptb8>

Sí Beag Sí Mór

<https://youtu.be/odKl7lOfzC0>

Lament for Owen Roe O'Neill

<https://youtu.be/ZpRKuzzlWQQ>

Brian Boru's March

<https://youtu.be/owF60WWWrks>

Links:

<http://www.earlygaelicharp.info/patrickbyrne/>

<https://www.wirestrungharp.com/>