

Strings attached – An Irishman’s Diary on Ireland and the harp



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Last Updated: Thursday, March 5, 2015, 01:01

No musical instrument has ever had to carry so much baggage, surely, as the Irish harp. It has been the symbol both of Ireland under English rule and of Ireland independent. Unadorned, on a green background, it was a rebel flag in 1916. On blue, it still represents this island – or a bit of it – on the British royal standard.

There, the Irish part of the quadrant is unique in not containing wildlife – England, Scotland, and Wales being epitomised by lions and dragons instead. But the harp is also unique as the only musical instrument anywhere that serves as a State symbol.

And along with adorning all official documents in Ireland, it doubles – in reverse or abstracted form – as the logo of certain unofficial flagships, notably Guinness and Ryanair.

Its complex political history is the subject of a new book called *Ireland’s Harp: The Shaping of Irish Identity c.1770-1880*. But in concentrating on the relatively modern period between those dates, author Mary Louise O’Donnell also reminds us of the instrument’s much more ancient roots.

Irish proficiency in music was, she writes, famous even at the time of the Norman invasion. Indeed, the invaders’ apologist/historian Giraldus Cambrensis considered it one of the few signs of civilisation among a barbarous people.

In a backhanded compliment to the harp’s importance here, it was the new overlords who first used it (with the strategic addition of a crown) as code for Ireland – a symbol formalised by coinage during the reign of Henry VIII.

But by the early 1600s, official relations with the instrument had turned so sour that it was included in a decommissioning process after the Battle of Kinsale. Worse, as a famous order to “hang the harpers and burn their instruments” made clear, the players were to be decommissioned too.

Somehow, a harping tradition survived. Thereafter, symbolists increasingly concerned themselves with the instrument’s metaphorical tuning. A 1638 poem praised the late Elizabeth I for improving its tone, viz: “Her maiden fingers tuned the Irish Harpe/And made that note a meane, which was a sharpe.”

Conversely, a French commentator writing about the harp-reviving United Irishmen of the 1790s, suggested that under their influence the instrument had moved from a minor key – “the note of plaint” – to a major, “the mode of reproach or demand”.

The poet and radical William Drennan went further – predicting that, with some new strings, the harp would reverberate so much, “the Aristocracy will dread it like the sound of the last trumpet”.

The Belfast Harp festival of 1792 was an attempt to add those strings. But after a brief revival, and the doomed insurrection, the century that followed was one of general decline, as the old, wire-strung instrument and its repertoire sank, in O’Donnell’s words, beneath “the weight of metaphoric and iconographic significance”.

And yet the era also featured the strange career of Padraig Dall Ó Beirn – a Monaghan man who, for his unpromising origins, could have given Sammy Davis jnr’s old joke about being one-eyed, black, and Jewish a run for its money.

Ó Beirn was born in 1794 – poor, Catholic, and Irish-speaking. He was then blinded by smallpox at the age of two. But thanks to the Belfast Harp School and to big-house patronage, he became (as Patrick Byrne) one of the most famous musicians of his era and feted by the aristocracy, including Queen Victoria.

He played only the old airs, with fingernails on wire strings, and spent the latter part of his career being described as “the last of the great Irish harpers”, a role he accepted with fatalism, having no heirs or apprentices.

He also died a member of the Church of Ireland, asking to be buried in the “Protestant burying ground” at Carrickmacross, in 1863. And maybe it was the aforementioned historical baggage, along with the shifting politics of a later revolutionary era, that allowed him to be long forgotten in what is my home town.

In any case, he is now commemorated with an annual festival, Féile Patrick Byrne, the 2015 edition of which takes place later this month. I’m not involved with that event in any capacity. But even so, in mentioning it, I should probably declare my own historical baggage. As I found out a few years ago, Patrick Byrne was my great-great-granduncle.

Ireland’s Harp: The Shaping of Irish Identity c. 1770-1880 by Mary Louise O’Donnell is published by UCD Press. Féile Patrick Byrne takes place from March 25th to 29th.

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