

Harping to a different tune in the 21st century

Mary Louise O'Donnell on Ireland's Harp, her history of our national symbol



Harpers in an open-air concert on the Samuel Beckett Bridge, Dublin, to celebrate National Music Day in 2010. Photograph : Matt Kavanagh

Several months ago my three-year old daughter brought me by the hand into the living room to show me what she had spent the previous half hour doing. Relieved that it did not involve drawing on the wallpaper with a permanent marker, I discovered that she had emptied the contents of my purse on the ground, had squashed up the notes to make a nest for her miniature dinosaurs and arranged the coins into “brown ones, yellow ones and magic shiny ones”.

“Here’s a harp one, here’s another harp one”, she boasted. Being the child of a freelance harpist, she knew what harps were long before she could say the word. “Here’s a bird one and a tree one, that’s a boat and a man?” she announced. Intrigued by her observations but knowing that she must be mistaken, I was about to explain that Irish euro coins always have an Irish harp on one side. But these were not Irish coins. Laid out on the ground in various patterns were Greek and Dutch two- and five-cent coins and a smattering of coins with buildings, flowers and human figures. In fact, nearly half of the two-euro and one-euro coins from my purse were not Irish: they had a German eagle, a tree surrounded by the motto *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* and a bust of Mozart on an Austrian one-euro coin. Visually the Irish coins with harps seemed to be swamped by a plethora of unfamiliar motifs and obscure images of European monarchs.

Since the introduction of the euro in 2002, it was inevitable that euro coins minted with the Irish harp emblem would gradually be absorbed into the circulation of billions of coins between various countries in the eurozone. The Irish population of over 4.5 million is, after all, only a tiny percentage of a single currency zone incorporating over more than 330 million people. The process seems to have happened relatively quickly and without much attention. It

is indicative, however, of a further erosion of the significance of the Irish harp as an emblem of Irish identity, in particular, over the past few decades.

For centuries, the Irish harp, the revered instrument of early Gaelic society with over a thousand years of history, has been the ultimate signifier of Ireland and Irishness. Throughout the centuries, changes to its image and practice have always anticipated or reflected major shifts in Irish politics, society and culture.

In the sixteenth century, during the reign of Henry VIII, the image of a harp surmounted by a crown on Irish coinage was used to represent English sovereignty over Ireland. In the following centuries various attempts were made to remove the crown surmounting the harp and to replace it with an “antique” (Irish) crown.

In the eighteenth century, the United Irishmen used a gold harp on a green background on the Movement’s flag and adopted the motto “It is new-strung and shall be heard” to inspire thousands of Irish men and women to revolt against British forces.

In the mid-nineteenth century Daniel O’Connell was often accompanied on his ceremonial carriage to “monster meetings” advocating for the repeal of the Act of Union by a harper dressed in bardic costume. Following the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922, a design based on the oldest extant Irish harp, the “Brian Boru” or Trinity College harp, was adopted as the official emblem of the nascent nation state and to this day is used on coinage, the seal and standard of Uachtarán na hÉireann (President of Ireland) and some government departments.

In recent decades, however, it has become increasingly evident that the Brian Boru/ Trinity College harp is losing its potency as the quintessential emblem of Ireland. During the Celtic Tiger years, thousands of euro was paid by various government departments to marketing and visual communications consultants to update, refresh or modernise the old Brian Boru harp emblem. This has produced a bizarre collection of images, including what appears to be a squiggle shaped like a harp on the logo of the Department of Defence, a figure (loosely shaped like a harp) in a bowing position on the Courts Service of Ireland logo, and a harp, in a somewhat emaciated state, employed to represent the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

Despite the transformation of the harp emblem by various government departments and other institutions of the State in recent decades, the instrument remains a central visual element in the Irish political landscape. The Irish harp and harper are so deeply embedded in Irish society, politics, and culture, that the instrument will always have some role to play in Irish life whether through its music, as a symbol of Irish politics, or indeed, Irish capitalism (e.g. Guinness and Ryanair).

Ireland’s Harp, The Shaping of Irish Identity c.1770 to 1880 by Mary Louise O’Donnell (UCD Press, €35)