

Erick Falc'her-Poyroux

## Ireland's Harp

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### Référence électronique

Erick Falc'her-Poyroux, « Ireland's Harp », *Études irlandaises* [En ligne], 40-2 | 2015, mis en ligne le 15 décembre 2015, consulté le 17 mars 2016. URL : <http://etudesirlandaises.revues.org/4761>

Éditeur : Presses universitaires de Rennes

<http://etudesirlandaises.revues.org>

<http://www.revues.org>

Document accessible en ligne sur : <http://etudesirlandaises.revues.org/4761>

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Mary Louise O'DONNELL, *Ireland's Harp: The Shaping of Irish Identity c.1770 to 1880*, Dublin, UCD Press, 2014, x + 162 p., ISBN 978 1 906359 86 7.

This collection of research articles on extremely varied topics examines different aspects of the history of the harp during the 18th and 19th centuries, and how the instrument came to be a major signifier of Ireland and Irishness. It is richly illustrated with two sets of 8 pages in colour, and additional black and white documents inserted in the text, and also includes an index of names.

Mary Louise O'Donnell, the author, is a harp player and a researcher with a respectable list of publications on Irish music to her credit, and a PhD from the University of Limerick under the supervision of Prof. Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin, presented in 2009.

The achievement of this book in placing Irish music in context cannot be over-stated: in one single volume, the author manages to cover more than 150 years of the history of harps in Ireland, from musical, iconographic and symbolic points of view. Mary Louise O'Donnell suggests that the harp became detached from its Gaelic tradition as it became linked to Protestant nationalism and gradually evolved into a symbol of colonial heritage, an idea reiterated throughout the book. The main thesis of the author, linking Irish politics and music and considered at length in the first chapter, leads the author to posit that the harp was “employed as an iconographic and metaphoric tool of the coloniser”, losing its musical voice in the process, in favour of an iconographic and metaphoric voice. An important portion of the book is also devoted to the musical and commercial innovations proposed by John Egan, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century harp-maker who, almost single-handedly, managed to modernise the harp in Ireland and save it from oblivion. Several other chapters deal with emblematic figures such as 19<sup>th</sup>-century harpers Patrick Byrne and Matthew Walls, with George IV's visit to Ireland in 1821, or with Daniel O'Connell's use of the harp and harpers from 1829 on.

Still, some questions remain after reading this book : the issue of continuity and change in particular, and what Mary Louise O'Donnell means exactly by “Irish harp”, has been analysed in detail by Siobhán Armstrong in a long review in the *Journal of Music*, and it will not be necessary to underline here again the limitations of this study in this regard. I am however more concerned with analyses based on the idea that “From the fifteenth century onwards [...] various decrees were issued to execute harpers and destroy their instruments”, when recent research has shown that such a vision was mostly a 20<sup>th</sup>-century nationalist construct and re-writing of Irish history.

But overall, the idea of the book, i.e. to explain why and how “the harp's metaphoric significance eclipsed its musical one”, is an excellent one, even if not com-

pletely achieved, and there is undoubtedly room for many more volumes on the links between politics and music in 19th-century Ireland.

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Martin DOWLING, *Traditional Music and Irish Society – Historical perspectives*, Farnham, 2014, xvii + 350 p., ISBN 978 1 4724 6098 1.

A very personal book by an “outsider” can also constitute an exciting and novel approach to Irish music, combining different disciplines such as history, sociology, musicology, philosophy and, in this case, first and foremost, socio-economics. And this has to be the first book I have read which considers the social history of Irish music in an economic context, with great success and in a very readable style.

Martin Dowling, a fiddle player from the USA, belongs to the soaring number of performers who have gained academic training and gone out of their way to make Irish music a respectable subject in academic circles. As such, he laments in the introduction the almost complete disregard for traditional Irish music in the major explorations of Irish society and culture published in the eighties and nineties by authors such as T. Browne, L. Gibbons, B. Fallon, H. White or R. Pine.

The book then goes on to offer a broad panorama of the musical tradition of Ireland in the making, mostly from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to today in five thoroughly-researched and well-documented chapters, drawing on painstaking exploration of forgotten archives like the minutes of the Feis Ceoil Executive Committee meetings or the archives of original Gaelic Leaguer Eoin MacNeill.

The first three chapters probably represent the most consistent feature of his multi-faceted research, starting with the reconstruction of a musical tradition by the elites, through a careful assessment of the inchoate nature of the historical narrative of Irish traditional music, then follows an analysis of the impact of the Act of Union on musical practice and class delineations; the third chapter is a minute description of the tensions at work during the cultural revival between the Gaelic League and Feis Ceoil movements, with a general view to explaining how “traditional music evolved as response to [...] economic change and the transformation of social life”.

The last two chapters of the book might not seem as well connected to this initial narrative, but the meticulous and convincing pages on James Joyce’s relationship with music and the revival movement bring to life the actual context of