


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Strum, strum and be hanged: reassessing the 1792 Belfast Harp Festival

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Abstract

Over Bastille Day weekend in July of 1792, nine Irish harpers gathered at the Belfast Assembly Rooms. Their performances of traditional Irish music were heard by a mostly appreciative audience and transcribed by Edward Bunting (1773–1843), a young Anglican church musician from Armagh, whose long and distinguished career of collecting Irish music began that weekend. This article corrects the common misconception that this event, which has come to be known as the 1792 Belfast Harp Festival, was organised by the United Irishmen. It suggests instead that manifestations of Welsh and Scottish cultural and musical nationalism — specifically the *eisteddfod* and *Scots musical museum* — were the true antecedents to the Belfast Harp Festival.

On 23 December 1791, the following notice was printed in the *Belfast News-Letter*:

We are informed, that some inhabitants of Belfast propose to open a subscription, which they intend to apply in attempting to revive *The Ancient Music and Poetry of Ireland*. They are solicitous to preserve from oblivion, the few fragments which have been permitted to remain as monuments of the refined taste and genius of their ancestors.

The proposal went on to outline a plan to attract an assembly of harpers — ‘those descendants of our ancient Bards’ — to Belfast. To encourage the harpers to attend, it was suggested that premiums should be awarded to each musician, with a further prize to be given for the best overall performance. The organisers also wished to engage ‘a skilful musician to transcribe and arrange the most beautiful and interesting parts of their knowledge’.¹ These plans came to fruition the following summer in an event which has retrospectively come to be known as the 1792 Belfast Harp Festival: nine Irish harpers — eight men and one woman — gathered at the Belfast Assembly Rooms from 11–14 July 1792. Their performances of traditional Irish music were heard by a mostly appreciative audience and transcribed by Edward Bunting, a young Anglican church musician from Armagh, whose long and distinguished career of collecting Irish music began that weekend. A tenth harper, known only as Williams, also attended.

¹ *Belfast News-Letter*, 23 Dec. 1791.

The Belfast Harp Festival has come to be associated with the activities of the Society of United Irishmen, the political organisation founded in Belfast the previous year whose agitation for Irish governmental reform and, eventually, an independent Irish republic culminated in the 1798 Rising. Many inferences, to be discussed below, have been drawn from the fact that the festival coincided with the spectacular Bastille Day celebrations held in Belfast that year, but this article argues that we should not rush to connect the Belfast Harp Festival with the radical politics of the day.

The United Irish leader Theobald Wolfe Tone famously (or infamously) listened in on some of the harpers' performances, and the impressions he recorded in his journal have left a complicated legacy for those wishing to connect the Irish republican movement with the musical project. Tone's journal entry for 13 July records his judgement on the harpers: 'Strum strum and be hanged.'² This ill-tempered comment by the revolutionary hero has long been a piece of gravel in the shoe of the narrative that the United Irishmen were directly connected with the Belfast Harp Festival. Although it is not devastating or decisive on its own, it is an inconvenient deviation from an otherwise harmonious picture of Catholic Irish harpers and Protestant republicans cooperating to celebrate and preserve the 'ancient music of Ireland'. Musical and literary scholars have long sought to neutralise Tone's comments, reminding modern readers, for example, that he 'had risen with a severe headache for the third straight day, and was experiencing a great deal of stress'.³

This article will instead allow Tone's judgement to stand undisturbed. The common assumption has been that, as an act of Irish cultural nationalism, the Belfast Harp Festival served to advance the United Irishmen's vision of an independent Irish republic. However, yoking the festival to the legacy of the United Irishmen has had the unintended effect of confining it to the Irish historical narrative. This article reconsiders that relationship, revising our understanding of the underlying politics of the Belfast Harp Festival before discussing it within the wider context of contemporaneous Scottish and Welsh musical antiquarianism.

I

The connection between the Belfast Harp Festival and the radical politics of the United Irishmen has been greatly exaggerated in major studies of Ireland in the 1790s. It probably was the literary scholar Mary Helen Thuente's monograph *The harp re-strung: the United Irishmen and the rise of Irish literary nationalism* which most prolifically spread this interpretation: as it was published in 1994, it appeared at just the right time to influence the outpouring of scholarly work which marked the 1798 bicentenary. 'The newly founded United Irish Society supported the Belfast Harp Festival, which it publicised and promoted in the United Irish newspaper the *Northern Star*,' Thuente wrote in the opening chapter, continuing: 'All four organisers of the festival — James McDonnell [*sic*], Henry Joy, Robert Bradshaw, and Robert Simms — had close ties with the United Irishmen.'⁴ This is misleading, however. The *Northern Star* was not the only newspaper to advertise the Belfast

² *The writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone, 1763–98*, ed. T. W. Moody, R. B. McDowell and C. J. Woods (3 vols, Oxford, 1998–2007), i, 213.

³ Mary Helen Thuente, *The harp re-strung: the United Irishmen and the rise of Irish literary nationalism* (Syracuse, 1994), 6. See also Barra Boydell, 'The United Irishmen: music, harps and nationalist identity', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland/Iris an dá chultúr*, xiii (1998), 49.

⁴ Thuente, *The harp re-strung*, 8. Intriguingly, an undated and unattributed manuscript folio in the Belfast Linen Hall Library's Beath Collection names a Mr John Scott as a fifth member of this committee. A 17 July advertisement in *Northern Star* shows us that other matters may have taken precedence in Scott's affairs, possibly explaining why he drops out of the record in connection with the Harp Festival: '[...] the Bleach-yard of JOHN SCOTT, in the Falls, near Belfast, has, at different times since the 1st of March last, been robbed of fifteen and a half Pieces of Linen Cloth, four and a half of which were taken on the night between 11th and 12th Inst [...]. Scott was not a United Irishman. See also Breandán Ó Buachalla, *I mBéal Feirste cois cuain* (Baile Áthe Cliath, 1968), 20.

Harp Festival. If the radical newspaper had held *exclusive* rights to publicise the event, that might have been an indication of significant United Irish involvement. However, Joy's *Belfast News-Letter* carried all of the same notices about the event that appeared in *Northern Star*. In fact, when the first advertisement inviting harpers to Belfast was printed in April 1792, it was the more conservative *News-Letter* which printed an additional essay on the 'National Music of Ireland'.⁵ Furthermore, the organisers of the harp festival hoped that the notice would be picked up in the national press, with the announcement stating that 'advertisements are immediately to be published in all the papers, or the principal ones, in the different parts of the South and North of Ireland'.⁶

The modern belief that Irish harps and traditional music are encoded with a rebellious, anti-colonial message is a product of the late-nineteenth-century Gaelic revival. In academic literature, this interpretation is commonly taken up by literary scholars eager to advance a narrative of Irish cultural resistance to British imperialism, often presenting the music performed by the Irish harpers as a critical component in the formation of a postcolonial Irish national identity.⁷ In *Bardic nationalism*, her influential study of the Anglophone early Romantic novel, Katie Trumpener presents the Belfast Harp Festival as the 'political conjuncture between bardic and revolutionary brands of nationalism', placing it at the confluence of 'a political nationalism, oriented toward the future, and a conservative nationalism, attempting to preserve the national past'.⁸ Trumpener further ties the festival, through one of its organisers, to the cause of Catholic emancipation.⁹ However, this is a false connection, based on the author's erroneous conflation of Henry Joy (1754–1835), the conservative proprietor of the *Belfast News-Letter*, with his younger cousin, the United Irishman Henry Joy McCracken (1767–98).¹⁰ Misreadings such as this speak to an incautious, superficial engagement with the historical facts by certain literary and postcolonial scholars in support of a politically-charged narrative about the Belfast Harp Festival and, more broadly, about the history of Irish traditional music and culture. Given the reach and lasting impact of studies like *The harp re-strung* and *Bardic nationalism*, it is inevitable that we find examples of this interpretation gradually being assimilated back into Irish historical literature,¹¹ neatly embodying Ian McBride's observation that 'the rhetorical simplifications of old-style nationalist historiography have begun to re-enter Irish historiography via the literary backdoor'.¹²

Many historical studies published before and after *The harp re-strung* contradict the literary interpretation of the relationship between the United Irishmen and the Belfast Harp Festival. The work of Nancy J. Curtin, Marianne Elliott and R. F. Foster cautions us against too easily associating the Harp Festival and other late-eighteenth-century manifestations of Irish cultural nationalism with the United Irishmen.¹³ In 'The harp without the crown: nationalism and republicanism in the 1790s', McBride addresses *The harp re-strung* directly, elucidating the conservative politics of MacDonnell, Joy and

⁵ *Northern Star*, 25 Apr. 1792; BNL, 24 Apr. 1792.

⁶ BNL, 24 Apr. 1792.

⁷ Leith Davis, *Music, postcolonialism, and gender: the construction of Irish national identity, 1724–1874* (Notre Dame, IN, 2006).

⁸ Katie Trumpener, *Bardic nationalism: the romantic novel and the British Empire* (Princeton, 1997), 10–11.

⁹ Trumpener, *Bardic nationalism*, 11.

¹⁰ This error is later repeated in the same author's 'Afterward: the languages of resistance', *United islands? The languages of resistance*, ed. John Kirk, Andrew Noble and Michael Brown (London, 2012), 195. See also Luke Gibbons, 'Towards a postcolonial Enlightenment: the United Irishmen, cultural diversity and the public sphere', *Ireland and postcolonial theory*, ed. Clare Carroll and Patricia King (Cork, 2003), 89.

¹¹ Michael Brown, *The Irish Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), 432; Kevin Whelan, 'Introduction to Section 1', *1798: a bicentenary perspective*, ed. Thomas Bartlett, David Dickson, Dáire Keogh and Kevin Whelan (Dublin, 2003), 9.

¹² Ian McBride, *Eighteenth-century Ireland: the isle of slaves* (Dublin, 2009), 5.

¹³ Nancy J. Curtin, *The United Irishmen: popular politics in Ulster and Dublin, 1791–1798* (Oxford, 1994), 35; Marianne Elliott, *Wolfe Tone* (2nd ed., Liverpool, 2012), 173; R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600–1972* (London, 1988), 269–70.

Bunting.¹⁴ Further, there are many other secondary works which do not make a connection between the United Irishmen and the Belfast Harp Festival at all. It is telling that the United Irishmen do not meaningfully figure into Gráinne Yeats's definitive work on the Harp Festival, and the harpers are entirely absent from the description of Belfast's Bastille Day celebrations in Ultán Gillen's study of public opinion in Ireland c.1789–1804.¹⁵

The proceedings of Belfast's 1792 Bastille Day celebrations are well known to students of the period: the brigades of Irish Volunteers parading and executing their *feux de joie*; the crowds gathering in the main square to hear proclaimed William Drennan's *Address to the National Assembly of France* and Theobald Wolfe Tone's *Address to the people of Ireland*; and finally, the magnificent dinner which took place in the evening at the Donegall Arms.¹⁶ The fact that the final day of the Harp Festival — 14 July 1792 — coincided with this spectacular celebration has given rise to false assumptions. It has been widely thought that the Harp Festival's organisers deliberately planned to run the event alongside the celebration of the French Revolution. For example, Thuente wrote that the events of that day 'marked the Belfast celebration of the Harp Festival and the fall of the Bastille in July 1792' and elsewhere referred to 'the dinner celebrating the conclusion of the harp festival and the United Irishmen's celebration of the fall of the Bastille'.¹⁷ As we saw above, scholars have taken this to mean that the Bastille Day celebration and the Harp Festival were held under the same banner of the United Irishmen's political ideals. However, a closer examination of dinner arrangements on the evening of 14 July reveals that there was no clear connection between the two events: in fact, a separate dinner was held for the harpers which was entirely unconnected to the more famous one which took place at the Donegall Arms.

In eighteenth-century Ireland, the after-dinner ritual of toasting served to instil in those present a feeling of, in the words of Martyn J. Powell, 'an additional degree of unity and purpose, a collective bonhomie, an awareness of a shared past and a common set of goals in the present'.¹⁸ No gathering of sympathetic diners would have been complete without the raising of a glass to a common hero, memory, ideal or cause. At political dinners, toasting allowed those present to declaim and reiterate their shared purpose and ideals to themselves and to a wider public; although these private dinners may have taken place behind closed doors, they occurred in a 'political space ambiguously poised between public and private spheres',¹⁹ and lists of the toasts drunk at a dinner were customarily published in newspapers soon after, with overly political toasts tending to be printed only in ideologically aligned periodicals.²⁰ Therefore, the list of toasts which were drunk at the United Irishmen's Bastille Day dinner in 1792 was printed in the next edition of *Northern Star*, but it was absent from the pages of Henry Joy's more moderate *Belfast News-Letter*.²¹ Interestingly, the list of toasts was later included in Joy's *Historical collections relative to the town of Belfast: from the earliest period to the Union with Great Britain*, which he published

¹⁴ McBride, 'The harp without the crown: nationalism and republicanism in the 1790s', *Political ideas in eighteenth-century Ireland*, ed. S. J. Connolly (Dublin, 2000), 170.

¹⁵ Gráinne Yeats, *The harp of Ireland: the Belfast Harpers' Festival, 1792 and the saving of Ireland's harp music by Edward Bunting* (Belfast, 1992); Ultán Gillen, 'Monarchy, republic and empire: Irish public opinion and France, c.1789–1804' (Oxford Univ., DPhil, 2005), 129–31.

¹⁶ Henry Joy, *Historical collections relative to the town of Belfast: from the earliest period to the union with Great Britain* (Belfast, 1817), 371–81; Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 177.

¹⁷ Thuente, *The harp re-strung*, 51, 126.

¹⁸ Martyn J. Powell, *The politics of consumption in eighteenth-century Ireland* (Basingstoke, 2005), 18, and Powell, 'Political toasting in eighteenth-century Ireland', *History*, ix (2006), 509.

¹⁹ James Epstein, *Radical expression: political language, ritual, and symbol in England, 1790–1850* (New York, 1994), 189.

²⁰ Rémy Duthille, 'Toasting and the diffusion of radical ideas, 1780–1832', *Radical voices, radical ways: articulating and disseminating radicalism in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain*, ed. Laurent Cruelly and Nigel Smith (Manchester, 2016), 171; Powell, *Politics of consumption*, 18.

²¹ NS, 11 July 1792.

anonymously in 1817.²² On this occasion, the toasts were exclusively devoted to political and revolutionary topics, for example: ‘Confusion to the enemies of French Liberty’, ‘The Union of Irishmen, without which we can never be free’, and ‘Mr Paine, may perverted eloquence ever find so able an opposer’. For our purposes, it is essential to note here that *none* of these toasts honoured ancient Ireland, Gaelic culture, harps, harpers, the Irish language, Irish music, Edward Bunting, Dr James MacDonnell, nor any of the other organisers of the Belfast Harp Festival. Surely it would have been reflected in the list of toasts if the dinner had been at all engaged with the Harp Festival or, more broadly, with Irish cultural nationalism.

Music was intrinsic to the toasting ritual.²³ Punctuating the litany of toasts with singing and musical performances heightened their overall emotional impact, even more so when combined with the effects of alcohol and the feeling of ‘collective bonhomie’. It is not surprising, then, to find that there is evidence that music was featured at the 1792 Bastille Day dinner. It was not, however, the music of the Irish harpers. Soon after the dinner a collection of six songs was printed in Belfast, entitled *Songs on the French Revolution that took place at Paris, 14 July 1789. Sung at the celebration thereof at Belfast, on Saturday, 14 July 1792*.²⁴ We know from the *Northern Star* that one of these, entitled ‘Muses’ Retreat’, was written by Tone and sung at the dinner by a Mr McNally of Newry.²⁵ Four of the six songs²⁶ dwell on political themes like liberty, the defeat of tyranny and unity – all appropriate interjections into a series of toasts celebrating the ideals of the French Revolution. We know from the *Northern Star*’s description that Tone’s ‘Muses’ Retreat’ was performed. Taking Powell’s point that published political toasts were meant to be “consumed” and then reused by a patriotic population,²⁷ it becomes quite clear that both the songs and their afterlife in print were intended to fulfil the same purpose. The *Songs on the French Revolution* were distinct from the Irish traditional music that was the preserve of the musicians who performed at the Belfast Harp Festival, and the inclusion of these political songs underscores the absence of the harpers from the United Irishmen’s Bastille Day dinner.

As to the whereabouts of the harpers, the memoirs of the harper Art O’Neill reveal how he and his fellow musicians passed the evening of 14 July 1792. O’Neill was a prolific player and teacher; as young men, James MacDonnell and his brothers studied the Irish harp with him. At 55 years of age, O’Neill was one of the Harp Festival’s younger participants. He dictated his memoirs to Thomas Hughes of Belfast before his death in 1816. Regarding the evening in question, he recalled:

Dr J. MacDonnell invited all the harpers to dine with him, which they accepted. We accordingly met and dined with him, and if we had all been peers of the realms we

²² Joy, *Historical collections*, 375–6.

²³ Duthille, ‘Bastille Day dinners in Scotland and festivals in France: transnational relations or monologues in the 1790s?’, *Revue électronique d’études sur le monde anglophone*, doi.org/10.4000/erea.13369 (accessed 10 Sept. 2025). An especially stirring narrative description of after-dinner toasting complete with instrumental and choral music can be found in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York, 2007), 310–11.

²⁴ Thuente, *The harp re-strung*, 125–7.

²⁵ NS, 18 July 1792. These two sources confirm that Tone’s song was unmistakably written for the Bastille Day dinner and not the Harp Festival, *pace* McBride, *Isle of slaves*, 369. Three years later, Tone’s song was included in the United Irish songbook *Paddy’s resource* under the title ‘Ierne United’, and from this we glean the further information that it was sung to the tune ‘Ballinamoney’, although it could also be sung to the tune of ‘The Little Cruiskeen Lawn’: See Moody *et al.*, *Writings of Tone*, i, 214.

²⁶ The final two songs, ‘Paddy Bull’s Expedition’ and ‘The Wand’ring Sailor’ seem to be unrelated to the first group, and were not included in subsequent United Irish songbooks or publications: Thuente, *The harp re-strung*, 126–7.

²⁷ Powell, *Politics of consumption*, 510.

could not have been better treated, as the assiduity of the doctor and his family was more than I can describe.²⁸

This description confirms that MacDonnell hosted the harpers at a private dinner which was separate from the political dinner held at the Donegall Arms.

In *The harp of Ireland*, Gráinne Yeats suggests that the Harp Festival was planned for the same weekend as the Bastille Day excitement due to the organisers' savvy decision to have their event coincide with another which was known to be bringing in many out-of-town visitors, thus augmenting their potential audience (and pool of potential financial supporters).²⁹ The first newspaper item regarding the Belfast Harp Festival appeared on 23 December 1791, and it bears out Yeats's theory — though not at first glance, as the advertisement reads: 'It is proposed, that the Harpers should be induced to assemble at Belfast, (suppose on the first of July next).'³⁰ However, James Kelly's classic work on Protestant commemorations in eighteenth-century Ireland has shown that in 1792, the Battle of the Boyne was still being marked in Belfast on 1 July.³¹ As enthusiasm for the French Revolution increased, the two commemorations — of the Boyne and the Bastille — were merged, with the celebrations emphasising the latter.³² It is, therefore, plausible that the initial proposal of 1 July as the starting date for the Harp Festival was an attempt by the organisers to attract the crowds which, in different times, had been coming to Belfast for the annual Boyne commemorations, and the date was changed once the plans for 14 July came to be known.

II

In an important essay which returns the interpretation of post-union novels written by Maria Edgeworth, Sydney Owenson and other Irish authors to a firmly historical context, R. F. Foster observes that 'the cultural condition of Ireland in the early nineteenth century may not have been as unique as sometimes supposed, and Scottish parallels and influences came easily to contemporary minds'.³³ While it has therefore been possible to acknowledge Hiberno-Caledonian cultural interpenetration in the literary realm, studies of the musical histories of Ireland and Scotland in this period have yet to explore this possibility in a meaningful way. With their concern to 'preserve from oblivion, the few fragments which have been permitted to remain as monuments of the refined taste and genius of their ancestors',³⁴ the organisers of the Belfast Harp Festival showed themselves to have been influenced by the antiquarian activity which was prevalent in late-eighteenth-century Britain and Ireland.³⁵ Many who are familiar with late-eighteenth-century Ireland will associate the term 'antiquarianism' with the polite and fashionable world of ascendancy

²⁸ Charlotte Milligan Fox, *Annals of the Irish harpers*, ed. Sara Lanier (Larne, 2013), 186.

²⁹ Yeats, *Harp of Ireland*, 11.

³⁰ *BNL*, 23 Dec. 1791.

³¹ This, despite the mid-century change of calendar style; the date of the Boyne anniversary should have been moved to 12 July.

³² James Kelly, "'The glorious and immortal memory": commemoration and Protestant identity in Ireland 1660–1800', *PRIA*, section C, xciv (1994), 49.

³³ Foster, 'National tales and national futures in Ireland and Scotland after 1800' in Foster, *Words alone: Yeats and his inheritances* (Oxford, 2011), 10.

³⁴ *BNL*, 23 Dec. 1791.

³⁵ See Clare O'Halloran, *Golden ages and barbarous nations: antiquarian debate and cultural politics in Ireland, c.1750–1800* (Cork, 2004); Rosemary Sweet, *Antiquaries: the discovery of the past in eighteenth-century Britain* (London, 2004); Prys Morgan, 'The hunt for the Welsh past in the Romantic period', *The invention of tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, 1983), 15–42; Colin Kidd, 'Gaelic antiquity and national identity in Enlightenment Ireland and Scotland', *EHR*, cix (1994), 1197–1214.

Dublin, and with institutions like the Royal Irish Academy, which was established in 1785 and granted its royal charter the following year.³⁶ However, this is not the proper context for discussing the musical antiquarianism of the 1792 Belfast Harp Festival. There is instead strong historical evidence which supports a compelling argument for recognising Scottish and Welsh antecedents to the Belfast project.

The antiquarianism of late-eighteenth-century Ireland was highly responsive to the political climate of the day. Antiquarian scholars like Charlotte Brooke, Joseph Cooper Walker, Charles O'Connor and Sylvester O'Halloran worked and published in a climate in which every new insight into the Irish past had the potential to inflame arguments in consequential contemporary debates about, for example, the legitimacy of the Anglo-Irish political system.³⁷ Antiquarian research afforded Irish Protestants like Brooke and Walker the opportunity to articulate the Irish aspect of an essentially Unionist cultural identity *avant la lettre*. Although antiquarian research was not a common pursuit of the late-eighteenth-century Ulster Presbyterian intelligentsia — William Crawford's *History of Ireland* (1783)³⁸ being the notable exception — the organisers of the Belfast Harp Festival seem to have pursued a similar interest in the history and heritage that were unique to Ireland, without necessarily arguing for its political separation from Britain.

Music was a topic of great interest to the British and Irish antiquarians of the late eighteenth century because of its place within the national bardic traditions of Ireland, Wales and Scotland — an outgrowth of the scholarly debates which were set in motion by the publication of James Macpherson's *Ossian* 'translations' in the 1760s.³⁹ Although nationalism was a motivating factor for many of these antiquarians and enthusiasts, it cannot be assumed that the study and preservation of Irish, Welsh and Scottish bardic traditions was definitionally expressive of separatist ambitions.⁴⁰

Eighteenth-century British and Irish antiquarians had both the time and the financial resources to spend travelling in pursuit of ancient relics to collect and memorialise. They were also keen to share their discoveries and insights with each other via the many learned antiquarian societies which were formed in the eighteenth century. Such bodies flourished in London, Edinburgh and Dublin. In London by the last quarter of the eighteenth century, we find both the Royal Society and the Society of Antiquaries operating out of fashionable premises in Somerset House. Also active in London at this time were the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion and the Gwyneddigion Society, comprising Welsh-speaking Londoners, as well as corresponding members in Wales; the latter of these played a direct role in the revival of the *eisteddfod* in 1789.⁴¹ In Scotland, the earl of Buchan founded the Scottish Society of Antiquaries in 1780, which was a specifically antiquarian offshoot from the wider-ranging 'learned discussions' of the Philosophical

³⁶ O'Halloran, *Golden ages*, 166.

³⁷ O'Halloran, 'Harping on the past: translating antiquarian learning into popular culture in early nineteenth-century Ireland', *Exploring cultural history: essays in honour of Peter Burke*, ed. Melissa Calaresu Filippo de Vivo and Joan-Pau Rubies (Farnham, 2010), 330.

³⁸ Norman Vance, 'Volunteer thought: William Crawford of Strabane', *Political discourse in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Ireland*, ed. D. George Boyce, Robert Eccleshall and Vincent Geoghegan (Basingstoke, 2001), 257–69.

³⁹ O'Halloran, 'Harping on the past', 333. See: *From Gaelic to Romantic: Ossianic translations*, ed. Fiona Stafford and Howard Gaskell (Leiden, 1998); *The reception of Ossian in Europe*, ed. Gaskell (London, 2004).

⁴⁰ A similar point has been made by historians of the period regarding music and poetry, as well: see Mary-Ann Constantine and Elizabeth Edwards, "'Bard of liberty": Iolo Morganwg, Wales and radical song', *United islands? The languages of resistance*, ed. Michael Brown, John Kirk and Andrew Noble (London, 2012), 93–110; A. T. Q. Stewart, "'The harp new-strung": nationalism, culture and the United Irishmen', *Ireland and Irish-Australia: studies in cultural and political history*, ed. Oliver MacDonagh and W. F. Mandle (Beckenham, 1986), 258–69; Frank Ferguson, "'Burns the conservative": revising the Lowland Scottish tradition in Ulster poetry', *Revising Robert Burns in Ulster: literature, religion, and politics, c.1770–1920*, ed. Ferguson and Andrew R. Holmes (Dublin, 2009), 83–105.

⁴¹ Hywel Teifi Edwards, *The eisteddfod* (Cardiff, 1990), 3.

Society in Edinburgh. In Ireland, Ascendancy Dublin was the centre of institutional antiquarian activity, with the first manifestation being a committee ‘for enquiry into the antiquities of Ireland’ which was established by the Dublin Society in 1772.⁴² This activity reached its fulfilment in the next decade with the founding of the Royal Irish Academy.

The Belfast Harp Festival’s remit to collect and preserve traditional Irish music makes it a rare but, as we shall see, not wholly unprecedented undertaking in late-eighteenth-century British and Irish history. Its focus on ‘the music itself’⁴³ does, however, distinguish it from the antiquarian work of the Irish Ascendancy. The very ephemerality of music complicates the question of ‘collecting’ musical melodies, tunes or ‘ancient airs’, as they were sometimes called.⁴⁴ Perhaps because of this challenge, the polite eighteenth-century antiquarians showed little affinity for the music of the past. The assessment of a leading historian of antiquarianism is that ‘[t]he antiquary’s materials were primarily artefacts; tangible objects which represented a physical contact with the past, transcending the passage of time’.⁴⁵ For example, William Burton Conyngham is known for having presented a rare medieval Irish harp to Trinity College, Dublin, now known the world over as the Trinity College Harp, but this was the extent of his interest in music and his main antiquarian interests tended towards ruins and excavations in Ireland and on the Iberian peninsula.⁴⁶ Musical artefacts such as the Trinity College Harp or the indecipherable Robert ap Huw manuscript of late medieval Welsh harp music occasionally attracted antiquarian interest,⁴⁷ but overall the intangible nature of music made it an elusive subject of interest for the polite collector hoping to add another item to his cabinet of curiosities.

Prior to 1792, the most robust antiquarian study of music published in Ireland was found in Joseph Cooper Walker’s *Historical memoirs of the Irish bards* (1786). Walker, along with Conyngham, was a founding member of the Royal Irish Academy. It should be noted that while Walker had an interest in traditional Irish music as an aspect of Irish antiquity, he did not systematically collect the airs and melodies himself. It is only in the ninth appendix at the very end of the book that there is to be found any notated music at all; of the book’s 327 pages, only the four pages of this index contain any musical notation. Walker’s introduction reads: ‘Having occasionally treated of Irish Music in the Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards, I will here subjoin a few specimens of it, for the purpose of illustrating that part of my subject.’⁴⁸ Presented in this manner, almost as an afterthought, it is clear that the musical ‘specimens’ are not of primary importance to the overall study. If Walker’s *Irish bards* is a reliable gauge of the typical Ascendancy antiquarian’s interest in Irish harp music, then it is difficult to see a direct connection between Dublin antiquarianism and the Belfast Harp Festival, which instead prioritised the music played by the Irish harpers. It is worth noting here that Walker’s book is not listed amongst the titles owned in 1793 by the Belfast Society for Promoting Knowledge — the name of the Linen Hall Library when it was founded in 1788.⁴⁹

⁴² Sweet, *Antiquaries*, 97–100 and 11; Prys Morgan, ‘Hunt for the Welsh past’, 59; Toby Barnard, ‘The Dublin Society and other improving societies’, *Clubs and societies in eighteenth-century Ireland*, ed. James Kelly and Martyn J. Powell (Dublin, 2010), 66–8.

⁴³ This is a somewhat clichéd term used often in musicological texts. On the historians’ relationships to the concept: see Neil Gregor, ‘Why does music matter?’, *German History*, xxxiv (2016), 129.

⁴⁴ BNL, 10 July 1792.

⁴⁵ Sweet, *Antiquaries*, 33.

⁴⁶ James Kelly, ‘Conyngham, William Burton’, <https://www.dib.ie> (accessed 7 May 2024); R. B. McDowell and D. A. Webb, *Trinity College Dublin 1592–1952: an academic history* (2nd ed., Dublin, 2004), 108.

⁴⁷ Stephen Rees and Sally Harper, ‘Aspects of the palaeography and history of the Robert ap Huw Manuscript’, *Welsh Music History/Hanes Cerddoriaeth Cymru*, iii (1999), 54–67.

⁴⁸ Joseph Cooper Walker, *Historical memoirs of the Irish bards* (Dublin, 1786), index IX.

⁴⁹ *A catalogue of the books belonging to the Belfast Society for Promoting Knowledge* (Belfast, 1793).

‘National’ music and culture were topics of acute interest in Scotland during this period.⁵⁰ An especially notable example of this was James Johnson and Robert Burns’s *The Scots musical museum* (1787–1803), a musical collection which ran to six volumes, three of which had been published before 1792, the year of the Belfast Harp Festival. These publications featured notated music as well as song lyrics, distinguishing them from earlier Scottish song collections like Allan Ramsay’s *Tea-table miscellany* (1723), which provided only the lyrics. In *The Scots musical museum*, the musical airs were integral to the project and were presented as being of equal importance to the song lyrics. By including notated music, Johnson and Burns would seem to have more directly anticipated Bunting’s work transcribing and arranging the music played by the Irish harpers than Dublin Ascendancy antiquarians like J. C. Walker, who treated music as an afterthought in their studies.

In his preface to the first of many planned volumes, Johnson stated his hope that *The Scots musical museum* would appeal to ‘the true lovers of Caledonian music and song’. After laying out his ambition to assemble ‘a complete collection’ of ‘Scots songs’, he ended his essay by requesting that

if any Lady or Gentleman have any meritorious Song with the Music (never hitherto Published) of the true Ancient Caledonian Strain, that they would be pleased to transmit the same to the Publisher, that it may be submitted to the proper Judges, and so be preserved in this Repository of our National Music and Song.⁵¹

This intention to collect and preserve ‘national’ music anticipates the Belfast Harp Festival, and indeed the language used by the organisers of the latter bears a striking resemblance to that of Johnson’s preface. In April 1792, they wrote:

The idea of preserving the native Music of our own Country, deserves every encouragement . . . The airs to be performed . . . are to be confined solely to the native Music of *Ireland*. In order to revive OBSOLETE AIRS, it is an instruction to the Judges not to be entirely governed in their decisions by the degree of execution, or taste, of the several Performers — but, independently of these circumstances, to consider those persons entitled to additional claim, who shall produce airs not to be found in any public collection; and at the same time deserving of preference by their intrinsic worth.⁵²

It is entirely plausible that word of *The Scots musical museum* project would have reached Belfast by late 1791, whether through any of the city’s Scottish-educated intelligentsia, including James MacDonnell,⁵³ or by Burns’s involvement with the project from 1788.⁵⁴ It has been said that the extent of Burns’s popularity in Ulster was such that ‘his poetry was clearly almost as much part of the local culture as the Bible or the metrical psalms’.⁵⁵ The first Belfast printing of Burns’s poems appeared in 1787, followed by no fewer than sixteen

⁵⁰ Karen McAulay, *Our ancient national airs: Scottish song collecting from the Enlightenment to the Romantic era* (Farnham, 2013); Hamish Mathison, ‘Robert Burns and national song’, *Scotland, Ireland, and the Romantic aesthetic*, ed. David Duff and Catherine Jones (Lewisburg, PA, 2007), 77–92. See also Matthew Gelbart, *The invention of ‘folk music’ and ‘art music’: emerging categories from Ossian to Wagner* (Cambridge, 2009), 99.

⁵¹ James Johnson, *The Scots musical museum* (Edinburgh, 1787), i, p. iii.

⁵² BNL, 24 Apr. 1792; NS, 25 Apr. 1792.

⁵³ Peter Froggatt, ‘MacDonnell, James’, <https://www.dib.ie> (accessed 30 June 2024).

⁵⁴ On Burns and Johnson’s work on *The Scots musical museum*, see David Johnson, *Music and society in Lowland Scotland in the eighteenth century* (2nd ed., Edinburgh, 2003), 147–9; McAulay, *Our ancient national airs*, 37–44.

⁵⁵ Linde Lunney, ‘Ulster attitudes to Scottishness: the eighteenth century and after’, *Scotland and Ulster*, ed. Ian Wood (Edinburgh, 2000), 64.

further Ulster editions in the next thirty years.⁵⁶ Burns also received many admirers from Ulster in person, graciously meeting them when they travelled to Scotland with hopes of meeting the bard of Ayrshire.⁵⁷ Although there is little surviving printed or material evidence of the circulation of *The Scots musical museum* in Ulster (for example, it does not appear on any of the catalogues of Ulster publication lists compiled by J. R. R. Adams),⁵⁸ word of the project could have travelled back across the Irish Sea with these devotees.

Furthermore, a small but nevertheless tangible connection can be found in the correspondence of the celebrated County Antrim poet Samuel Thomson. In a letter sent on behalf of Burns to Thomson in March 1791, the latter was informed that the poem 'Rose Bud in June' would be included in the upcoming volume of 'a Miscellany of Scots songs set to a favourite air'.⁵⁹ It duly appeared in August 1792 in the fourth volume of *The Scots musical museum* under the title 'To the Rose Bud', set to the tune 'Jocky's Gray Breeks'.⁶⁰ William Stenhouse, who published an expanded edition of *The Scots musical museum* with commentary in 1853, attributes the poem not to Thomson but to a Belfast joiner named Johnson; from this, Jennifer Orr surmises that Thomson was acting in support of a less established poet by sending his work to Burns.⁶¹ Regardless of the poem's authorship, word of its selection for the forthcoming volume of *The Scots musical museum* reached Belfast in the months directly preceding the announcement of the Belfast Harp Festival, likely stimulating local interest in the collection.

The drive to preserve 'national music' in Scotland also inspired an Ulster forerunner to the Belfast Harp Festival. In his memoirs, the harper Art O'Neill speaks of James Dungan of Granard, County Longford. Dungan, a wealthy Catholic merchant with connections to the West Indian sugar trade,⁶² was aware that groups like the Highland Societies of Scotland and London hosted musical competitions for Highland pipers and awarded a premium to the best performers. Besides materially supporting the musicians themselves, these competitions served to reinvigorate and sustain the local musical tradition.⁶³ These competitions were but one manifestation of the interest that many in Scottish society took in their nation's musical traditions during the Enlightenment, and as Enlightenment shaded into Romanticism.⁶⁴ Dungan was keen to have their success repeated for the Irish harp, and he was instrumental to bringing this style of musical competition to Ulster. He wrote to friends to raise funds for the project: 'I consider my native country half a century behind Scotland in encouraging and rewarding the best performers on the bagpipe, which, if preferred to the wired harp, strongly evinces our taste. The Welsh harp is increasing. The Scotch bagpipes are increasing, but poor Erin's harp is decreasing.'⁶⁵ On Dungan's initiative, three 'Granard Balls' were held annually from 1781–3, hosting seven to nine harpers (including O'Neill) each year, and awarding them premiums for their

⁵⁶ John Hewitt, 'The course of writing in Ulster', *Ancestral voices: the selected prose of John Hewitt*, ed. Tom Clyde (Belfast, 1987), 66.

⁵⁷ John Gray, 'Burns and his visitors from Ulster: from adulation to disaccord', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, xxxiii (2004), 320–34.

⁵⁸ J. R. R. Adams in *The printed word and the common man: popular culture in Ulster 1700–1900* (Belfast, 1987), 175–81.

⁵⁹ Thomas Sloan to Samuel Thomson, 31 Mar. 1791, *The correspondence of Samuel Thomson (1766–1816): fostering an Irish writers' circle*, ed. Jennifer Orr (Dublin, 2012), 27–8.

⁶⁰ Johnson, *The Scots musical museum*, iv, 340.

⁶¹ Stenhouse quoted in Orr, *Correspondence of Samuel Thomson*, 28.

⁶² Orla Power, 'Irish planters, Atlantic merchants: the development of St Croix, Danish West Indies, 1750 to 1766' (NUI Galway, PhD, 2005), 190; Hugh Fenning, 'Documents of Irish interest in the "Fondo Missioni" of the Vatican Archives', *Archivium Hibernicum*, xlix (1995), 40.

⁶³ Gelbart, *Invention of 'folk music' and 'art music'*, 168.

⁶⁴ Kidd and James Coleman, 'Mythical Scotland', *The Oxford handbook of modern Scottish history*, ed. T. M. Devine and Jenny Wormald (Oxford, 2012), 62–78; Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The invention of Scotland: myth and history* (New Haven, 2008), 142, 154.

⁶⁵ Fox, *Annals*, 165–6.

performances.⁶⁶ However, it is not until the Belfast Harp Festival that we first note an interest in collecting and preserving the music and airs played by those musicians.

Another under-explored but noteworthy antecedent to the Belfast Harp Festival is the eisteddfod, the great Welsh festival celebrating the country's native language and bardic tradition.⁶⁷ At these events, which are still held today, participants compete against each other to win prizes in categories including Welsh poetry, musical composition, and performance on Welsh instruments. Although the first known eisteddfod was held in the twelfth century, the origins of the modern eisteddfod lie in the 1780s.⁶⁸ It was in this period that the proceedings were essentially institutionalised by the London-based Gwyneddigion Society – with input and encouragement from men like Thomas Jones of Corwen and the notoriously eccentric Iolo Morganwg (born Edward Williams) – which established a set of rules and procedures for holding an annual national eisteddfod, and sought to centralise the organisation and adjudication of these events.⁶⁹ Eisteddfodau held in Corwen (without the backing of the Gwyneddigion) and Bala (under the auspices of the Society) in May and September of 1789, respectively, heralded the arrival of a revived tradition.⁷⁰

It is very likely that citizens of Belfast were aware of these Welsh developments by the time the first announcement relating to the Belfast Harp Festival was printed in late December of 1791. The *Belfast News-Letter* reported on the September 1789 eisteddfod at Bala, referring to it as 'the meeting of the Welsh Bards'. After describing the literary prizes which were awarded, the report ends with a brief notice that '[a]t the same meeting, another silver medal for the best singer with the harp, was adjudged and given to John Evans, of Llanystendwy of Caernarvonshire.—The vocal performers from St. Asaph merited the highest applause.'⁷¹ According to a later institutional history of the Gwyneddigion, the musical winner, correctly John Evan of Llanystymdwy,⁷² was 'undoubtedly one of the best singers of his day'.⁷³ Specifically, he was an accomplished penillion, or cerdd dant, singer, meaning that he sang Welsh verse while accompanied by another musician playing the harp. Although the name of the harper at the Bala eisteddfod was not reported in the *Belfast News-Letter* or in later sources, there can be no doubting the importance of his or her participation in one of the earliest of the modern eisteddfodau. For our purposes, we must consider the possibility that the organisers of the Belfast Harp Festival had the example of the eisteddfod in mind when they conceived of their project to 'revive *The Ancient Music and Poetry of Ireland*'.⁷⁴

Beyond a solitary newspaper report about John Evan's triumph at the September 1789 eisteddfod, news of Wales's late-eighteenth-century 'Celtic revival' or 'renaissance',⁷⁵ and of Welsh music's place within it, could have reached Belfast by word of mouth. There is sparse but irrefutable evidence that Welsh harpers visited Belfast in the second half of the

⁶⁶ Fox, *Annals*, 165–79.

⁶⁷ See Edwards, *The eisteddfod*. On the specifically musical aspects of the eisteddfod, see the chapters by Rhidian Griffiths ('The eisteddfod tradition') and Helen Barlow ('The Celtic revival') in *A history of Welsh music*, ed. Trevor Herbert, Martin Clarke and Barlow (Cambridge, 2023), 100–20 and 171–94, respectively.

⁶⁸ Edwards, *The eisteddfod*, 1.

⁶⁹ Edwards, *The eisteddfod*, 11–12. Cathryn A. Charnell-White's *Bardic circles: national, regional and personal identity in the bardic vision of Iolo Morganwg* (Cardiff, 2007) is a useful introduction to Iolo, although his legacy may now be inextricable from John Davies's conclusion that 'there can hardly ever have been so tireless a forger as Iolo' in *A history of Wales* (rev. ed., London, 2007), 334.

⁷⁰ Edwards, *The eisteddfod*, 12–15.

⁷¹ BNL, 30 Oct. 1789.

⁷² Known today as Llanystymdwy in the county of Gwynedd.

⁷³ William Davies Leathart, *The origin and progress of the Gwyneddigion Society of London: instituted M.DCC.LXX* (London, 1831), 22.

⁷⁴ BNL, 23 Dec. 1791.

⁷⁵ See Prys Morgan, *The eighteenth-century renaissance* (Llandybie, 1981).

eighteenth century: for example, in 1764, a benefit for ‘Mr JONES, a Native of Wales,’⁷⁶ was advertised in the *Belfast News-Letter*. The concert was to feature Jones’s performance ‘on the WELCH HARP several Pieces in the Taste peculiar to the Genius of his Country, accompanied with other Instruments.’⁷⁷ This may not have been a successful venture, however, as similar benefits do not appear to have subsequently been advertised in Belfast. Nevertheless, a Welsh harper known to us only as Williams was on hand in 1792, and although Edward Bunting did not transcribe his performance, he did play at the Belfast Harp Festival. The contemporary report spoke highly of his playing, commenting that his ‘execution was very great. The contrast between the plaintive tones of the Irish instrument, and the bold martial ones of the Welsh, had a pleasing effect; and marked a difference of character between the two nations.’⁷⁸ Bunting later recalled that he ‘was a good performer, and died on ship board soon after this date [i.e. 1792].’⁷⁹ These connections between Belfast and the nascent Celtic revival in Wales are significant and would repay further close study from experts on Irish and Welsh traditional music but in this context, they call our attention to the influence of late-eighteenth-century Welsh cultural developments on the Belfast Harp Festival.

III

This article has resolved an unnecessary contradiction in the literature on the United Irishmen and Ireland in the 1790s. Careful consideration of the historical context of the events of Belfast’s Bastille Day celebrations demonstrates that the 1792 Belfast Harp Festival was not an expression of Irish republican nationalism under the banner of the Society of United Irishmen. Instead, its cultural influences arose from the wider Celtic region in the late eighteenth century. We find notable antecedents in examples from Welsh and Scottish musical and cultural history, and including these allows a more nuanced narrative of late eighteenth-century Irish cultural nationalism to come to the fore. Although the festival promoted and celebrated the harp and musical traditions of Ireland, it was not intended to contribute to arguments for an independent Irish republic. This does not detract from its impact on the later arc of Irish cultural nationalism. Rather, by clearing away the accumulated layers of nationalist historiography and literary interpretation, we are now better able to appreciate the extent to which the Belfast Harp Festival and similar antiquarian undertakings in Scotland and Wales could be expressive of a more subtle, but no less consequential, variety of cultural nationalism.

During the Belfast Harp Festival, Edward Bunting began what would become his life’s work of collecting traditional Irish harp music. Over the next fifty years, his efforts yielded three published collections of these melodies which he arranged for pianoforte.⁸⁰ In this mediated form, they could be played in the parlours and drawing rooms of those trained in the continental European musical style. The notion that this music, which Bunting first encountered at the festival, was held by its proponents to be a vector for Irish republicanism is difficult to sustain considering Bunting’s dedication of the third of these volumes ‘To the Queen’s Most Excellent Majesty’. However, the text of the dedication goes on to extol Ireland as ‘that part of Her Majesty’s dominions which, from the earliest ages,

⁷⁶ I have not been able to identify this Mr Jones, although he could not have been the great harper and antiquarian Edward Jones (1752–1824), *Bardd y Brenin* (The King’s Bard), on account of the latter’s age: Tecwyn Ellis, ‘Jones, Edward’, <https://www.biography.wales> (accessed 11 June 2024).

⁷⁷ *BNL*, 5 Oct. 1764.

⁷⁸ *BNL*, 10 July 1792.

⁷⁹ Edward Bunting, *The ancient music of Ireland* (Dublin, 1840), 64.

⁸⁰ Edward Bunting, *A general collection of the ancient Irish music* (Dublin, 1796); also his *A general collection of the ancient music of Ireland* (London, 1809), and the abovementioned *The ancient music of Ireland* (Dublin, 1840).

has been pre-eminent in the originality and purity of its native melodies'.⁸¹ This juxtaposition of political loyalism and Irish cultural nationalism illustrates the context in which we must understand the 1792 Belfast Harp Festival and invites us to reconsider long-held assumptions about the politics of cultural nationalism.

⁸¹ Bunting, *Ancient music of Ireland*.