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# The Conundrum of the Wire Strung Harp Revival

## a fresh evaluation of the facts

by Keith Sanger

The history of the attempts to 'revive' the playing of wire strung harps; and by the description 'wire–strung harp' it is usually interpreted to mean the wire strung instruments once played in both Ireland and Scotland, raises many often contentious issues. Not least the question of when, between the end of the 'old tradition', (itself an arguable date) and more modern times; what actually defined a 'revival'? Indeed looking at the history of the 'revivals' has a similarity to waiting for a bus, just missed one then hang on because there will soon be another coming along behind it.

However, from the current standpoint where there are now more wire–strung harp makers and players, both amateur and professional, than there ever were in the truly historic period; it can be argued that the question is one of only a historic relevance since the wire strung harp is now well and truly revived. But the word 'revival' continues to be used because as often happens with words the meaning has been changed from being the general modern use of wire strung harps to mean historical research into early instruments and playing techniques. Something which at best can mostly only be informed speculation, often based on a somewhat inadequate understanding of the wider historical background of the periods.

The problems start with the three early instruments known as the Lamont, Queen Mary and Trinity College Harps, which have gained an almost iconic status. Especially the Trinity, which apart from its former mythical association with Brian Boru, has through a political identification with Ireland become embedded with the image of that nation state. A somewhat ironic fact given that at the period when that politicalisation was underway, there were still harpers around in Ireland but the adopted 'image' was a late medieval harp rather than the contemporary 18th (and early 19th) century instruments then still in use.

Leaving aside the arguments which have been made that the Trinity College harp also originally came from Scotland, the three harps present the only firm evidence that the wire strung instruments of Ireland and Scotland were similar at that period. All the other surviving instruments are Irish and the grounds for suggesting that those later and larger harps were also replicated in Scotland are now somewhat dubious. It is though those three earlier harps which catch the popular enthusiasm, inspiring a number of people who decide they want to build a harp and want to model it on one of those three. Or, of people who want to own and play one and can easily find harp makers prepared to supply an instrument modelled to varying degrees on what information can be gathered about the originals.

It is after the harp has been made however that the real difficulties start to appear. Instruments are made to be played and that requires a suitable repertoire. However at the period the originals of these three harps were

played, beyond the fact that they were used to support the performance of the syllabic verse composed by the Gaelic poets known as the File there is no record of what or how they were played or sounded. Furthermore, we have no way of ever knowing what the sound expectations of the audience for that performance actually were, other than it would have been quite different to that of a modern audience shaped by twentieth century recording technology and other physiological changes which apply to today's human hearing expectations.

Even the basic question of stringing the reproduction harp is beset by the same lack of genuine evidence. Basic physics can be used to determine a likely optimum 'pitch range' in Hertz for a given string length, but two of the three harps are certainly no longer in the form they were when they were first made; a critical factor when determining string lengths. Furthermore, details about the composition and dimensions of the original strings which has implications for the 'tone' is still a very grey area. Identifying the likely optimum pitch range in Hertz for each string still only provides part of an answer. The nominal basic pitch of the note A in the musical scale is well known to have varied considerably over the centuries; therefore assigning a modern scale name to any of the notes also falls into the realm of informed speculation.

Attempts to use the tuning noted by Edward Bunting from one of the harpers at the Belfast Harp Festival as a reference point also fall short of being unequivocal evidence. The pitch is not absolute as it was referenced to that of another instrument at a period when instrumental pitches were very variable. Likewise the overall harmonic 'tone' is a factor which can never be determined although it probably was not as bad as suggested by one contemporary listener who attended the Belfast Harp Festival and left a record of his opinion of the event.

A further problem with the Bunting scale is that it only applies to one known 18th century harp of 30 strings and it is clear from a letter to Bunting from Dr McDonnell that the numbers of strings on harps of that period and the placement of the 'sisters' was variable. It is therefore something of a leap of faith to project that one large 18th century harp back over 200 years and apply it to those older and much smaller instruments. However, having acquired a reproduction and strung it in some fashion, the major problem of what to do with it arrives. It is here that the earlier 'leap of faith' turns into one of sublime over–optimism when the result is to turn to the material left by Edward Bunting.

The earliest that any of the material recorded by Bunting can actually date from is 1792 when he was employed to note the playing of the harpers at the Belfast Harp Festival.[1] Even then it was not typical of the repertoire of the 18th century harpers since in keeping with the 'antiquarian' approach adopted for that festival, the harpers had been requested to 'only play Irish music'.[2] Therefore what was noted down by Bunting had in fact already undergone some pre–selection by those harpers attempting to meet the expectations of their audience.

A further problem arises due to the failure to adhere to the original proposal that as the harpers actually sang to their own accompaniment a specialist Gaelic scribe would also be present to note down the words to correspond with Bunting's notation of the music. The scribe failed to appear but although Bunting went ahead and duly recorded the music it is far from clear if the melody lines reflect the singers voice or the harp. In fact some of that music contains accidentals that would have been impossible to play on those diatonically tuned harps. But as the late Grainne Yeats pointed out some years ago as vocal melody lines they would present no difficulty as the harp accompaniment could easily work around them.

Yeats also expressed her regrets that few people today sing to their harps accompaniment which was historically the principle use for the instrument. This does raise the main problem encountered by those players involved in the 'historical revival' of the wire strung harps. Few of them have a Gaelic background let alone can or do sing in an 18th century (or earlier), traditional style and pronunciation, assuming that can even be identified; and that is for a period where there are some surviving contemporary manuscript notations of the songs and poems that would have been accompanied by a harp.

It is when we turn to those players of reproductions of the three iconic medieval harps that the widest disconnection occurs between what little is really known about their use and 'historically informed performance'. Given that the principle use would have been to support the poets verse we really have no way of knowing how that worked. In any case most of the modern revivalists are instrumentalists rather than singers and this has led to many 'creative' attempts to square the circle. These range from attempts to 'improve' the sound of the copies by adding precious metal strings, to establishing an instrumental harp repertoire based on that of other instruments.

Borrowing from the repertoire of other instruments in a modern context, to widen the available number of pieces playable on those reproduction harps is a legitimate process but, attempting to justify the wire harp's original repertoire from that process runs straight into a number of problems. The other instruments usually involved in that borrowing are the Lute, Bagpipe (and specifically what is known today as the Highland Bagpipe) and the violin or fiddle. This last, at least in Scotland, produces its own immediate problem as the terms viol, violin and fiddle and their corresponding 'violer' and 'fidler' for the players, were certainly interchangeable in Scotland as far back as the mid seventeenth century, thereby opening a different sort of Pandora's box.

Of those instruments, the lute is the only one for which there is some evidence of its repertoire, from the survival of contemporary manuscripts of lute music. However this musical source is not problem free, not least being the common difficulty of reconstructing music from old scores when the question of how closely those scores actually reflect what was played is always present.[3] In this case the problem is magnified by the fact that *'the lute had very little presence in Ireland being confined to the Pale and consisted mostly of Elizabethan pieces, while in Scotland the lute repertoire comprises music which reflects the economic and cultural ties with the Continent wrought by a sovereign nation — France, Flanders and Italy. Remarkably, many traditional Scottish tunes found their way into lute manuscripts thus making up a truly unique repertoire for the instrument, while Irish lute manuscripts totally ignore native Irish music*'.[4]

That is a perspective from a modern French academic, which essentially is correct but could have gone further in regard to how those 'traditional Scottish tunes' found their way into the lute manuscripts. At that time Scotland, unlike Ireland, was indeed a 'sovereign nation' with at its head a King whose court as with most monarchies, was the pinnacle of cultural life. Until 1603 when James VI of Scotland also became James I of England and moved to London, the Scottish court although subject to changing fashions, had been a centre where elements of the music and instruments reflecting all of Scotland's cultural diversity could be found.

It was that cultural milieu of instruments including both wire and gut strung harps, lutes, viols and early keyboards, against which the contents of the lute manuscripts have to be viewed. There is certainly evidence that Gaelic music was represented in that mix, not least by the inclusion of some 'ports', which was originally a descriptive Gaelic musical term, although like another Gaelic word 'piobaireachd' which meant simply

the ‘act of piping’, they were absorbed into Lowland Scots. The use of the lute manuscripts to ‘restore’ the music of the wire strung harp however illustrates many of the problems already noted regarding the lack of music for that period, or earlier, indicating how the harpers actually played.

It seems like stating the obvious to say that the music in those lute manuscripts is for the lute, but it has to be emphasised that as it appears it is not harp music. To move on from there the argument is that the tunes noted as ‘ports’ were of Gaelic origin and therefore at that period likely to have been played on the harp and the music was then borrowed and adapted by the luters for themselves. It is a suggestion which has some merit but before drawing any firm conclusions it has to be placed in the wider context. Of the tunes whose titles allow a geographical placement, they all occur in East and central Scotland, an area that was mostly dominated by the Royal Court and courtiers.

Although that same area appears to have been almost the ‘heartland of the wire strung clarsach in Scotland’,[5] it was at the period that music reflects, also the domain of what at that time was the still flourishing Scottish gut strung harp. A common factor of both wire and gut harps is the lack of any firm evidence of how and what they played, but if the music noted in those lute manuscripts was shared with other instruments then the gut strung Scottish harp is also a contender. Although not as frequently as the ‘clarsair’ the Lowland harpers also appear in what would be regarded as ‘Gaelic’ households, and in one case can be shown to have gone to Ireland and then returned.

From the Scottish lute manuscripts the next major sources for constructing a repertoire for the wire strung harp are linked in that they are the tunes classified as piobaireachd among the fiddle and bagpipe manuscripts. Linked because the ‘*fiddle pibroch’* are clearly a case of the fiddle imitating the bagpipe and a term which gained a greater currency following its use in the title of an album called Fiddle Pibroch and Other Fancies, released in 1989 by the McGibbon Ensemble, a trio comprising Edna Arthur on violin, Bryce Gould on harpsichord, and the late David Johnson on cello. It is at this point that some confusion has been sown over the years by various commentators, including Dr Johnson, having published arguments that in the case of ‘fiddle pibroch’ it is a case of the fiddle imitating the bagpipe but then totally ignoring their own logical arguments when then turning to consideration of the bagpipe and harp music.

At this point before moving forward it is necessary to start with a firm base by considering that description ‘fiddle pibroch’ where it might be said that a clue actually lies in that title which is not Gaelic but a form of Lowland Scots, albeit that ‘*pibroch*’ is derived from the Gaelic word piobaireachd. In its original Gaelic usage *piobaireachd* simply means what a piper does, i.e. plays music on his pipe. If the fiddler was playing music from the fiddle repertoire, or for that matter adapted or adopted by the fiddle from the harp it would have been called simply *fidhleireachd*, and like *piobaireachd* no further qualification would have been necessary.

Moving onto the more solid evidence and the argument that the fiddle was simply imitating the pipe starts with the comments made by Francis Collinson which have then been endorsed by other specialist writers on Scottish fiddle music. As Collinson succinctly puts it in his influential *The Traditional and National Music of Scotland:*

> Curiously enough, the fiddle, although technically unrestricted to any particular scale, is influenced quite a great deal in Scots music by the bagpipe scale, and by this sequence of triads in particular. Many early fiddle tunes were simply borrowed from the existing pipe–music, and to this day many Scots fiddlers play very little else but pipe–tunes (and use the musical ornamentation appropriate to piping technique in doing so).

That was published in 1966 but his argument was taken up and endorsed in 1983 by Mary Anne Alburger in her Scottish Fiddlers and their Music where using the tune Tullochgorum (also mentioned by Collinson) as her example and reiterating Collinson that it is "*basically the same (ignoring the variations between bagpipe intonation and concert pitch) as the bagpipe scale"*, and "*it has the same range as the pipes, nine notes only (excepting the a")*"; and continues "*It is outside the scope of this book to discuss in any detail the relationship of bagpipe and fiddle music, but it is obvious from the list above that fiddle music has been greatly influenced by the musical characteristics of the bagpipe and, no doubt, by its repertoire"*.

As far as the harp is concerned Alburger restricts her comments to quoting Collinson regarding the presence of harp compositions in Dow's Collection,[6] and in a rather mixed up paragraph notes the harp tunes originating with the Lude family that were recorded in fiddle versions by John Bowie. On the other hand David Johnson in his work Scottish Fiddle Music in the 18th Century published in 1984, tackles both harp and pipe music, albeit in a somewhat disjointed fashion. To be fair he does in his introduction explain why he deliberately opted for the approach he uses, including the fact that "*partly because it was more fun to write the book this way*", and he also then discusses the disadvantage of his choice. However the result when it comes to mentions of the harp or pipes is somewhat contradictory.[7] For example, in a passage which in general is a good summation of 'fiddle' music he expresses it thus;–

> The fiddle's three 'big musics' varied in the amounts they owed to foreign influence. The variation sonata was the most European of the three, its format taken neat from Corelli's de camera sonatas, only the tunes on which it was based being Scottish. The fiddle pibroch was the least European, since it derived directly from an indigenous 17th century bagpipe form; if outside influence had a foothold here, it was only in the transcription process from pipes to fiddle. The long variation set came somewhere between the other two.

But while there is nothing to dispute in that statement the issue starts to get confused elsewhere when 'estimating' (his word) the nature of 17th century fiddle music he goes on;–

> Some of these pieces were probably extended by short sets of variations; but there are no firm indications that the 17th century fiddling ran to a 'ceòl mór' or 'big music' — a repertory of long pieces designed for sustained listening and virtuoso performance. Such sophisticated matters seem to have been left to the bagpipes and harp.

However this reference to the harp, a term which in a Scottish context would have covered both the wire strung and gut strung instruments, is turned into just the clarsach in a wider discussion in another part of the work when discussing '*pibroch*' which in the main cites Collinson's view expressed in his *The Bagpipe*, published in 1975. Thus following a large circular route which through these and other later works invariably returns to the arguments first expressed by Collinson in 1966. In that work he devotes two whole chapters to the bagpipe, the first on its general history and the second to its music but with absolutely no mention at all of the harp or clarsach. It is not until the chapter on the harp that a connection between harp music and pipe music is introduced.

In common with his approach to the bagpipe where the chapter starts with a brief overview and history of the instrument, before concentrating solely on the 'Highland pipe', his chapter on the harp starts with a history of that instrument in Scotland before then spending the rest of the chapter discussing the 'clarsach' while ignoring its gut strung companion. A critical analysis of the bagpipe chapters indicates numerous problems with them but when turning to the harp chapter, even before its mention of 'pibroch', those

problems appear relatively minor in comparison. The two primary sources used by Collinson for the harp chapter were John Gunn's *Historical Inquiry* published in 1807 and Sir John Graham Dalyell's *Musical Memoirs of Scotland* published in 1849. Gunn was a musician not a historian and had been commissioned to report on the two Lude Harps which had come into the Highland Society of Scotland's hands in 1805. As a result Gunn did have access to some covering letters on the harps and their background which have since been lost.

Dalyell on the other hand was a lawyer with an antiquarian, but not specifically musical interest. He was though, (it would appear to his own amusement as a 'Lowlander'), admitted to the Highland Society of Scotland and included in its panel of judges for the piping competitions. He is also the sole source for the information that two droned bagpipes were discouraged by the competition organisers around 1822, a decision that was never formally discussed and minuted by the society. His book though reflects a legal approach to documenting factual information including some access to manuscript sources. Gunn on the other hand tends to include a lot of 'traditional tales' as a means of padding out his work, but although both works are dated there is no reason why after a critical analysis of their contents they should not be used as source material.

What does raise a number of questions regarding Collinson's work is how he missed or did not use the major work on the *Irish and Highland Harps* published by Robert Bruce Armstrong in 1904? It was not a case of rarity as there are a number of copies in the local libraries close to his working base at the University of Edinburgh, including the university's own library. Nor are they hard to find as opening the card index drawer in the Edinburgh Central Library Music Department and looking under 'harp' would have produced a cross reference to the work listed under Armstrong in that same index. If he had used Armstrong a number of errors with his 'history' section would probably have been avoided while producing a more rounded overview.

From one major lapse he then proceeds to another when he moves to discussing '*what the extinct harp music of Scotland was like*' and advancing the suggestion that it had in fact been taken over by the pipers. But before reaching the question of pibroch there is a long discourse relating to the question of the 'two Rory Dalls' before a return to the question "*What then, we may ask, has become of all the true harp music of Scotland? It is most unlikely, and indeed hardly possible, that the doubtlessly numerous melodies composed by some hundreds of Scots harpers down the ages have simply ceased to exist,"* and continues in similar vein before reaching a conclusion that the probability is that other musical instruments have fallen heir to them.

Although the question refers to 'the true harp music of Scotland' which implies it covered both the gut strung harp and the wire strung harp or clarsach, it is clear from the continuing discussion that only the clarsach is under consideration. Furthermore the suggestion that numerous melodies had been composed by the hundreds of Scots harpers places him at variance with William Matheson, one of his departmental colleagues, whose own opinion was that "I*t is doubtful whether conscious composition ever contributed much to the development of Gaelic vocal music*",[8] and it has to be remembered that supporting the declamation of the verse composed by the File was the major function of those three early wire strung harps.

The question is then pursued over a number of pages before arriving at "*The probability is that the harp melodies lived on in the song airs, in the repertoire of the fiddle (as we have seen) and of the lute, the flute and the bagpipe*", with 'on the bagpipe' emphasised. Although the way it was written suggests that the

vocalist was almost incidental, since both types of harp were used to accompany song then it is true that any Gaelic or Scots song old enough to have been accompanied by a harp probably was, if one was available. The 'as we have seen' in parenthesis is a little more puzzling as in his fiddle section he had argued that the 'fiddle pibroch' was the fiddle copying the pipes, then presumably he meant other types of fiddle music. The inclusion of the flute among the remaining instruments clearly indicates that the whole statement is in effect a 'catch all' as the flute only starts to appear in Scotland during the eighteenth century usually in the hands of young males of the gentry having learnt to play while travelling abroad. The possibility of Scottish harp music being directly copied by a flautist is not really viable as the the former had disappeared well before the latter had gained a more general distribution.[9]

The reason that 'on the bagpipe' had been emphasised was because from there on follows several pages where the 'evidence' is discussed. This when précised to its core argument consists of one tune taken from the Angus Fraser manuscript where it had been given the title *Craobh nan Teud*. At this point Collinson excelled his earlier failure to notice Armstrong's work by failing to notice or mention Fraser's own words about that tune. How they were missed is inexplicable since Collinson clearly had the manuscript in his hands and at several points in it Fraser had made clear exactly what he had done with that tune.

According to Fraser the tune in question was the air to an 'old traditional song' called An Leannan Sith or in one note he offers as an alternative *A Bhean Shith* both of which he translates as *The Fairy Lover*, but presumably having recognised it as a variant states that he had decided to change that to the title of the piper's version of *Craobh nan Teud* or *The Harp Tree.* To remove any other doubt he also adds the details of where words to the song could be found. Apart from his music manuscript Angus Fraser also compiled a glossary of terms and phrases associated with the Music and Poetry of the Gaels,[10] also apparently missed by Collinson although in this case not a major loss, but in which Fraser again mentions "*Craobh nan tead which he says was a poetical name for the harp, The tree of Strings, – the lower side to which the strings are fixed... it is also the name of a fine old piobaireachd to the theme of which there is an old Song 'An Leannan Sith*'."

After further very speculative suggestions[11] Collinson does eventually state that;– "*All this is admittedly pure supposition; and as it arises from the single evidence of Angus Fraser's manuscript, much depends on the worth of that evidence... Probably the most that can be said, until more evidence turns up is that the theory is not impossible, while Angus Fraser's evidence does seem to lend it some feasibility*". Unfortunately this statement which is effectively a considerable qualification of his argument gets lost and what was really Angus Fraser's rather confused way of dealing with a song air with variants has become the foundation of a completely different argument which completely misses the point. That most Gaelic and Scots verse was sung and if old enough to have been accompanied by either of the two forms of historical harp wire and gut strung; then as their primary use it probably was. However at best what has survived are the vocal melodies, what is still unknown and probably will remain so is how that harp accompanying arrangement actually worked.

The whole question of a connection between harp music and piobaireachd was re–visited by Collinson in his book 'The Bagpipe' published in 1975. This book, like his earlier one, was to become an influential work, despite an even higher error count upon which was based additional speculation. The reviews of the book were mixed depending upon whether the reviewer already knew much about bagpipes or not. The review by Seamus MacNeill, a professional academic as well as Principle of the College of Piping and editor of the Piping Times, was severely critical of the section on the great Highland bagpipe, describing it as "*little short*

*of a disaster*" and noting that in the preface Collinson had stated that "*There can be fewer subjects about which greater nonsense has been written than that of the Scottish bagpipe"*, MacNeill's caustic comment was that "'*Sadly this main part his book does a lot to support his statement*".[12]

Seamus MacNeill was not someone known for his tact, but his review and his concern that the book contained so many factual mistakes and unreliable speculations that it must eventually do more harm than good, although perhaps somewhat emphatically put; does in a reasoned analysis seem justified.[13]

MacNeill was not alone in such blunt criticism of Collinson's work. When in 1998 John Gibson published his book on 'Traditional Gaelic Bagpiping, 1745 to 1945', he was quite scathing about the section in Collinson's book on the demise of piping following the 1745 Rebellion and its contribution to the myth that bagpipes had been banned, going so far at one point to suggest that "*Collinson deliberately leaves his readers to infer that pipers faced the same penalty for contravening the Disarming Act as men bearing arms or wearing the kilt*". The use of the word 'deliberately' implies a conscious intent by Collinson to mislead, but I doubt if that was in fact the case. Although Collinson had noted that there was no specific mention of bagpipes in the Disarming Act it is more likely that in his usual uncritical treatment of most of his sources, he was still under the impression that the myth of the bagpipe being in someway 'banned' was true.[14] The fact that the myth continues to this day despite the efforts of Gibson and many others to dispel it demonstrates the tenacity of such myths once they gain currency.

Collinson's ability to misunderstand or misread his sources even when they were actually reliable was also mentioned in a later publication by MacNeill when he pointed out that when Collinson was describing the Highland Bagpipe scale he actually claimed to be citing MacNeill's published measurements although actually getting them wrong.[15] In his original review MacNeill made the point that "*More important perhaps than the errors themselves are the speculations based on wrong interpretations*", and goes on to described one which has a direct bearing on the topic of a relationship between piobaireachd and harp music. MacNeill continues, "*He [Collinson] attempts to establish Donald Mor as the absolute inventor of piobaireachd– misconstruing a statement by Archibald Campbell in the preface to the Kilberry book of Ceol Mor. What Kilberry writes is "We have no firm tradition of any MacCrimmon composer earlier than Donald Mor...* ", meaning of course that this is the first MacCrimmon whose compositions we can actually put a name to. Mr Collinson assumes that since Donald Mor was born in 1570 the culture of piobaireachd suddenly appeared about 1590".

This initial error is then compounded when Collinson then proceeds to argue that as piobaireachd had suddenly sprung into being fully fashioned that it must have previously existed ready to hand in another species of music and that was performed on the harp. Apart from this whole argument being based on his misunderstanding of Kilberry's statement it also ignores the fact that as the earliest written forms of piobaireachd are no earlier than the 18th century, there is no way of knowing how it may have evolved prior to that point. There is also a lack of consistency between his earlier approach to the question of 'fiddle pibroch' where Collinson argued that the fiddle was clearly copying the pipe scale and decorations to turning it on its head by suggesting that an instrument with the musical capabilities of the harp would for some reason restrict itself to the narrow range and scale of the pipe chanter and the use of decorations which exploit the one advantage the bagpipe has over other instruments.

The musical relationships of what is now referred to as piobaireachd or ceol mor has been explored elsewhere,[16] and is not a unique view. The late Frans Buisman in a draft article called 'Transformations of Piobaireachd in 18th Century Music Collections', which unfortunately had not yet been published before his

unfortunate death, takes a similar view. As he puts it;–

> The need of being economical in respect of compass must have been less obvious to musicians whose instruments covered a greater range than the nine notes of the Highland bagpipes. Whereas composers for the harp and other instruments did not need to bother, piobaireachd composers were obliged to be as economical as possible and to exploit the potentialities of melodic tension between two notes to the utmost when they shaped the contours of their melodic lines. Otherwise they would often run out of possible upward progressing melodic curves too soon. This difference and the many cases that are evidence of a conscious economy of melody in piobaireachd make it unlikely that there were a great many direct links between classical Highland music that was composed for the bagpipes and classical music that was composed for the harp or even popular tunes that were played on any instrument, including the bagpipes.

The discussion so far has been centred on Scotland but its relevance to Ireland must also be examined. The usual assumption that Ireland and Scotland, or at least parts of them were just one common Gaelic world is a generalisation which ignores the fact that each country was its own bi–cultural world and the interaction between the Gaelic speaking and the non Gaelic speaking populations in Ireland and Scotland differed. However, many of the tunes called 'ports' in the Scottish Lute manuscripts are also claimed for the historical Irish harp repertoire through the 'Rory Dall' connection; one Irish and the other a Scot. The latter was Rory Dall Morison who was mostly associated with Macleod of Dunvegan and died circa 1713.

The Irishman was called Rory Dall ÓCathain and what is known about him comes from a mention in the memoir of the blind harper Arthur ÓNeill, which was taken down around 1808. The memoir was then used for the historical section of Bunting's 1840 publication, where it was argued that the Scottish 'Rory Dall' did not exist and was really the Irishman. However there is solid contemporary evidence confirming the existence of the Scot while it is the contemporary evidence for Rory Dall ÓCathain which is lacking. The historical section was written for Bunting (1773–1843), by Samuel Ferguson (1810–1886) and George Petrie (1790–1866), and it was in the section by the former that the claim that there was only the one Rory Dall, and that it was the Irishman was made. Ferguson then went on to claim that the harp known as the Queen Mary was in fact the harp of Rory Dall ÓCathain. His argument was based mainly on the later story about a later harper Echlin ÓCathain and Lord MacDonald involving a harp key that was told to Dr Johnson and James Boswell during their tour of Scotland in 1773.

Ferguson goes to some lengths to establish that Arthur ÓNeill had his story before the publication of Dr Johnson's tour of the Hebrides but the only firm date he gives is a statement that "*Dr M'Donnell of Belfast had heard the story from ÓNeill when a boy*". However at the time of the Hebridian Tour Dr M'Donnell would have only been ten years of age and in 1839 remembering an event which would have occurred 66 years previously, (having also studied medicine in Edinburgh the doctor would also have had the opportunity to have come across the story there). Unfortunately we do not have the doctor's own words and as Bunting's 1840 publication never had a second edition there was no possibility of any corrections.

A similar problem arises with the story as given in Boswell's 'Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides', (Dr Johnson does not actually mention it in his own account). Subsequent to the publication Lord MacDonald wrote to Boswell strongly objecting to the version as given attributing it to the drunken ramblings of the harper Echlin ÓCathain, but even in the modern reprints of Boswell's 'Journal' any reference to Lord MacDonald's letter is relegated to a footnote at best. What is of greater significance though is that Echlin

ÓCathain also left a short memoir of his life and details of some earlier harpers. That account noted down when he was sober, makes no mention of a Rory Dall ÓCathain, which given that they shared the same family name and Rory Dall's claimed fame is somewhat remarkable.

It was the 1840 Bunting publication which brought the story of Rory Dall ÓCathain to a wider audience, but shorn of Ferguson's extra padding we come back to the Arthur ÓNeill memoir as the earliest written source. That starts with a description of Rory Dall ÓCathain's background which certainly does not as written, stand up to a close examination. It then continues with the claim that he visited Scotland complete with his retinue during which he visited Lady Eglintoun, for whom he composed 'Da mihi manum'. He then performed before James VI of Scotland and goes on to claim that Rory Dall composed a number of tunes in Scotland including 'Port Atholl' and 'Port Gordon'.[17] Other than this mention by ÓNeill there is no record of the name 'Port Atholl' in Ireland up to and including the Bunting manuscripts.

When comparing ÓNeill's comments with the other Bunting material the picture is both interesting and confused. Bunting mentions 'Port Gordon' several times but mainly in connection with it being a variant of "Ballyhaunis or Betty Samh". However Bunting also notes another of the 'Ports', 'Port Lennox' which he states came from an "Old printed Book". The book in question was clearly the copy of Dow's 'Collection of Ancient Scots Music' which Bunting had been given by 'Coddy Cody' in 1803, although there was no justification in that work for Bunting's other comment on that tune, 'by Dall'. Several more tunes from Dow were copied again with some attributions to Rorie Dall which did not feature in the original work.

Turning to 'Da mihi manum' (Give me your hand), this tune is almost central to ÓNeill's story about its composition for Lady Eglintoun which in turn directly connects to James I. The tune first appears in Scotland in the lute manuscripts of Lady Margaret Wemyss dated to c 1644 followed by the Balcarres manuscript of c 1700–1702. Its first appearance in Ireland was in 'A Collection of the most celebrated Irish Tunes', by J and W Neal published in 1724. How it reached Ireland is not known, but it should be noted that the Italian musician Lorenzo Bocchi who had been working in Edinburgh since 1720 may have had access to the Wemyss maunuscript[18] before moving to Ireland in 1723[19] where he also had some involvement in the Neal publication.[20]

The tune is noted on three occasions among the Bunting manuscripts but none dated to before 1800. However Bunting must have known of it before then as he possessed a copy of the Neal publication which he had signed and dated Belfast October 31st 1794. He also had available to him the version in Dow and another in his copy of the 'Caledonian Pocket Companion' by James Oswald published between 1745–59. When the latter came into his hands though is unclear as it is annotated with two other names and dates. Other than in his written manuscripts none of the other sources including the two lute manuscripts make any mention of who composed the tune and in all cases, including Bunting's manuscript and Arthur ÓNeill's memoir, the title is given in its original Latin form of 'Da mihi manum'. The first attempt to give the title in Gaelic form was by John Mulholland in 1810 where he attempts to give all the tunes in his work a Gaelic title followed by an English translation. This was followed by Bunting in the 1840 publication where the Gaelic title in that work has no precedence in the actual manuscripts.

Where then does Arthur ÓNeill's account of Rory Dall ÓCathain, the composition of 'Da mihi manum' for Lady Eglintoun followed by Rory Dall appearing in front of James I stand? Well dealing with absence of evidence is more difficult than when a contemporary reference can be found where it counts as a 'fact' leaving just the context to be explored. There is absolutely no solid support for this story despite the high status levels of the two Scottish participants. It is even odder when other contemporary Irish harpers working

outside of Ireland have been recorded in contemporary records. Several have been noted in England for that period,[21] two more who were working at the Danish Court appear in those court records and even more relevant to ÓNeill's story one William MacEgan clarsair was recorded in the Treasurers Accounts for James VI in 1581 and turns up again in the Household accounts of Lord Elphinstone of Carberry in 1602.

The Treasurer's accounts are complete, detailed and extend beyond the point when James VI left for England in 1603 as the Scottish 'Treasury' maintained a token court ready to be expanded if the King should return to Scotland, as he did with his visit in 1617. Apart from the clarsair MacEgan there were at times some other Irish visitors, including a poet but no Rory Dall ÓCathain. Moving to the Eglintoun papers they consist of a very large deposit in the National Records of Scotland and among the records covering that period include the family expenses when they went down to London for the coronation of James VI and I. Once again there is no sign of a Rory Dall ÓCathain among those papers, nor as that family were themselves musical is there any sign or tradition of the tune 'Da mihi manum' associated with them.[22]

There is a similar situation concerning any reference to the Irish harper among the Atholl family papers. ÓNeill claims that ÓCathain had composed the tune 'Port Atholl' which implies it would have been for Earl of Atholl or a member of his family. The Atholl papers are another very large and varied collection of manuscripts which although still in private hands are open to research in the archives held at Blair Atholl. There is no trace of the Irish Rory Dall among them and since the Earl of Atholl was the patron at that period of at least two generations of harpers whose family name was Reid, it is unlikely they would have waited for an Irish harper to visit and compose a tune for their own patron.

One other aspect of the question of Rory Dall ÓCathain and similar discussions is that they tend to only consider an Irish influence on Scotland and fail to consider the possible Scottish musical influences on Ireland. One major conduit for the movement of musical ideas has yet to be investigated or at least there is no published work on it. From the Union of the Crowns in 1603 the cattle trade became more formalised with droves from the north supplying the southern English market. Cattle from Ulster crossed to southern Scotland to join up with the Scottish droves with the drovers travelling back and forward from markets to home. While heading south the drives kept to more open country but for the faster return journey the drovers now carrying large sums of money followed the main routes and their inns, places of local music making would have exposed the drovers to a wider musical culture.

Then there were the military connections, in 1639 the then Earl of Eglintoun was commissioned to raise a regiment which promptly moved to Ireland. The regiment included a number of Lowland pipers including the son of Habbie Simpson, the piper from Kilbarchan imortalised in the poem by Robert Semple which gave rise to the poetic form known as 'Standard Habbie', widely used in turn by Robert Burns. Staying with military connections and still pre–Bunting's collections the Black Watch was permanently stationed in Ireland from 1749 to 1756, a period of 7 full years. It then left for the war in America but on return from 1767 to 1775 it was again stationed in Ireland a period of a further 8 years. Even after the Belfast harp festival and before Bunting's 1840 collection the regiment spent another 8 years from 1817 to 1825 permanently based in Ireland. That was just one of many Scottish regiments that spent time in Ireland yet again there seem to be no studies of the impact generally made by any interactions with the local populations where the regiments were based.

These could range from in one case an entire regiment turning out to help quickly harvest the local fields before the crop was lost, the Countess of Breadalbane even offered to send the entire regimental band to help, the feelings of the musicians though was not recorded. One regimental order book records an

instruction by the Colonel that the officers were to stop taking the duty piper with them when they went out to the local hostelry in the evenings, while a newspaper account records a thanks being offered to a Colonel and his regiment by a local Irish community for allowing them to borrow a piper for a local wedding.

Returning though to the claims made on the Scottish 'ports' by modern Irish harpers based on their having been composed by Rory Dall ÓCathain, that only holds firm if he really did exist, a belief which hangs by a very fine thread from the account by Arthur ÓNeill in 1808. That there is no contemporary record of him in Ireland, England or Scotland; an anonymity which is perplexing considering that other harpers of that period do show up in the records and especially considering the completeness of the Crown records in both England and Scotland; suggests there must be a very large element of doubt over his actual existence.

So we return to the conundrum mentioned in the title. Having acquired a reproduction early wire harp where does the prospective player turn to find that instrument's original repertoire? In Ireland the classical structure of poet, declaimer and harper had more or less ended by circa 1600 and although many of the poems were written down the music was not. While a few pieces recorded by Bunting may in origin reach back towards that period they are still, as noted, the results of a long period of change. If their attention turns towards Scotland then there are still some problems. The immediate one being that unless some very firm contemporary evidence can be found to substantiate Rory Dall ÓCathain and the claim that he composed the 'ports', then the Irish connection no longer stands and they appear to be a musical product of the Scottish Court and its circle and apart from the lute just as likely to have been played on both of the Scottish harps, gut and wire strung.

# Addendum

## Lorenzzo Bocchi and Da Mihi Manum

The Lady Margaret Wemyss (1630–1648), music manuscript is currently among the Sutherland Estate papers on deposit in the National Library of Scotland. There does not seem to be any record of when the manuscript moved from Wemyss to Sutherland but there are two marriage links which provide likely connections. The first of these was when Lady Jean Wemyss married George, the 14th Earl of Sutherland in 1659. The second occurs in 1734 when Lady Elizabeth Wemyss married William, 16th Earl of Sutherland. It is therefore quite feasible that if Peter Holman's speculation that Lorenzzo Bocchi had been involved in the musical side of Allan Ramsay's *An Ode With a Pastoral Recitative on the Marriage [of] The Right Honourable James Earl of Wemyss and Mrs Janet Charteris*. Edinburgh 17th September 1720; if the music manuscript did not move to Sutherland until the 1734 marriage, it may have still been at Wemyss and available for him to examine.

Any professional musician of Bocchi's status was likely to have taken an interest in any music manuscripts they came across and two features of Lady Margaret's work would probably have attracted his attention. That what appeared to be a Scottish secular tune had a Latin title, which as an Italian speaker he would have been less likely to translate if he noted down the tune; and that he was arranging music for a wedding and the title 'Da Mihi Manum', or 'Give me your hand' almost begs to be completed with 'in marriage'. Marriage also provides a tenuous thread to the inclusion of 'Da mihi manum' in the Neal publication in which, as the title page makes clear, the centre piece of the collection is the arrangement by Bocchi of the Irish tune *Plea Rarkeh na Rourkough or the Irish weding.*

Consideration of the background to Da mihi manum has always been biased towards Arthur ÓNeill's claim (circa 1808), that it was composed by Rory Dall ÓCathain for Lady Eglinton.[23] If instead we simply track the history of the tune's appearances the picture changes somewhat. The earliest records of the tune are both in Scotland and more importantly geographically close. The Earldoms of Wemyss and Balcarres are almost neighbours in East Fife with no strong connections to Eglinton across to the west in South Ayrshire. Furthermore if we skip Neal's work of 1724 and Daniel Wright's *Aria Di Camera* of 1727, the next Scottish publication was by James Oswald in his *Caledonian Pocket Companio*n, volume 8 (circa 1743–48), and although Oswald published most of his work in London, he originally came from Crail, on the coast of Fife, just a little to the north and east of the Balcarres estate.

The *Aria Di Camera* is a little more complicated since the publisher relied on the work of others including an Irishman and a Scot, but if the tune had been supplied by the latter, one Alexander Urquhart of Edinburgh, then again from the place as well as his name geographically we return to the east of side of Scotland.[24] Therefore following what little contemporary evidence there is for 'Da mihi manum' prior to the claims by ÓNeill in 1808 there is nothing to connect its early origins with the west of Scotland let alone Ireland. Indeed if the extra baggage added by ÓNeill is removed then 'Da mihi manum' could be seen as an innovative marriage proposal from a classically educated and musically literate suitor. Probably, based on where it was first recorded, a proposal addressed to a daughter of the house of Wemyss.

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[1] The material recorded by Bunting both then and in his later follow–up work does constitute solid datable evidence. However, to move beyond that first requires it to be firmly placed in context. For example it was not a complete reflection of the usual repertoire of the harpers involved, (see below Donnelly, Sean). Only one of the harpers still used fingernails for playing and as they mostly sang that element remains a very grey area. It is only after completely contextualising the evidence that consideration can be given on how far the performance practice recorded then can be extended backwards, and the further back from 1792 it goes then the more the subject moves into the realm of informed academic debate rather than the factual 1792 evidence.

There is also one very large problem when trying to extend the evidence back to the period of those three early harps. That is the gap between the period in which those harps were used and the first revival of the Irish harp following the post Cromwell restoration in 1660. How much of the earlier tradition survived through what was a very traumatic period of Irish history, to form any basis for playing those new larger instruments and the increasing Italian musical influences is a moot point. As an example, in Scotland over that same period, which comparatively was not as severe as the Irish experience, it can be shown that in one area which had up to 1640 maintained a large number of clarsairs, they had virtually disappeared by the restoration and unlike Ireland there was no revival of the harp, its former place being taken by the players of the viol, (Sanger, K. forthcoming, 'The 1692 letter to John Aubrey re–visited').

[2] Donnelly, Sean. The Famousest Man in the World for Irish Harp. *Dublin Historical Record*. Vol 57. No 1. (Spring 2004), p 46

[3] It is possible to view this point in reverse. There are many modern recordings by lutenists of material sourced from those early lute manuscripts. Although they are all musical and faithful to the original scores

they still do not all sound the same and few of them actually do reflect the Scottish ‘idiom’.

[4] Tranier, Jacques. Lute Music as a Reflection of Political Destiny: A Tell–tale Comparison between Ireland and Scotland in the 16th and 17th Centuries. in: *Music and the Irish Imagination: Like a Language That We Could All Understand.* (2013)

[5] Sanger, K. Mapping the Clarsach in Scotland (2017).
https://www.wirestrungharp.com/harps/harpers/mapping-clarsach/

[6] Dow, Daniel (or Donald). *Collection of Ancient Scots Music.*
https://www.wirestrungharp.com/library/daniel_dow/

[7] This was also noted by Elizabeth C. Ford in her thesis *The Flute In Musical Life In Eighteenth Century Scotland*. Glasgow. May 2016. Footnote number 104, page 134, where she comments that “Johnson contradicts himself more than usual on the question of pibroch. He writes first that it was only ever played on the Highland pipe, and then goes on to give examples of pibroch from the oral tradition transcribed in manuscripts”.

[8] Matheson, W. *The Blind Harper.* (1970). 152

[9] Collinson may have been misled at this point by the fact that some collections of Music, that of Daniel Dow for example did contain some probable harp tunes and their compilers had added ‘for the flute’ as an additional selling point.

[10] Hand written in two volumes, one a Regimental Defaulters Book and the other a Register of Admissions to Sabbath School Reading Class. They are now in the National Library of Scotland and were certainly compiled sometime after 1841. He also includes his own analysis of piobaireachd, which is more of curiosity value than any real illumination.

[11] Part of Collinson’s argument rests on the fact that some of the song airs in the first section of Fraser’s manuscript had in a later section been arranged for publication as instrumental pieces with variations. In principle therefore similar to piobaireachd, but firstly these are all 19th century arrangements and secondly as Collinson was quoted as saying to William Matheson, (The Blind Harper, 1970. p.156) “*In the Angus Fraser MS. variations are given, but they do not appear to be authentic for, while they can be played on the violin, they are ill adapted to harping technique.*” Matheson includes the renamed song tune from the first section of Fraser’s collection when discussing if any music could be found to fit the words to Blind Harper’s poem ‘Feill nan Crann’. However in the days before photocopying when all copies had to be done by hand, he seems to have been working with a copy made by Collinson rather than having seen the manuscript himself, which explains why Matheson makes no mention of the change of name or the song ‘An Leannan Sith’.

All references made to the Angus Fraser manuscript in this article are taken from a microfilm of the whole manuscript I purchased from Edinburgh University in 1974. Although I have indexed my microfilm it is on a frame by frame basis and as the original manuscript was not paginated and had many loose sections with no guarantee that it remains in the same order as the microfilm; it seems pointless trying to provided exact references.

[12] *Piping Times*. Vol 27. No. 4 (February 1975), 24–27

[13] numerating all the errors in Collinson's work would almost produce a book in its own right. They range from carelessness, for example when in his section discussing the MacIntyre Pipes he quotes verbatim from an article on their restoration taken from the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland for 1894, but manages to change the name of the Pipe maker involved from Duncan MacDougall to Duncan MacDonald, twice. The real problems occur when errors are made which affect his arguments. For example when discussing the fact that some tunes have more than one title he 'quotes' as an example an alternative title from Joseph MacDonald's Compleat Theory. The problem here being that although Joseph MacDonald used sections from a number of piobaireachd to illustrate his point in no case does he actually name the tunes.

[14] Circa 1973/4 there was a one day seminar on Piobaireachd held at the Reid School of Music in Edinburgh. It was presented by Capt. John MacLellan of the Army School of Piping and Donald MacLeod (Lewis), and to keep things informal it was announced at the start that rather than leaving any questions to the end of each session they would be taken as they arose. Mr Collinson was sitting in the front row and from almost the start his hand was up and down rather like an animated signaller. It was obvious as the day wore on that both presenters, (although too polite to say anything having invited questions at any point), along with the rest of the audience were not amused. Not with the principle of questions being raised, but the nature of the questions, especially when the answer failed to be understood resulting in a further question; indicated an insufficient depth of background knowledge to really benefit from the seminar. It also came as a surprise to many of us with its publication that a book on the bagpipe was well underway at that point.

[15] *Piping Times.* Vol 38. No. 7 (April 1986), 36–37

[16] Sanger, K. *What is Piobaireachd?* http://www.altpibroch.com/learning/what-is-piobaireachd/

[17] Billinge, Michael. Transcription of Bunting MS4/14, Memoir of Arthur ÓNeill.
https://www.wirestrungharp.com/library/oneill-memoir_ms4-14/

The usual published source for the memoir is the version by Donal ÓSullivan in his 'Carolan'. Unfortunately his editing, by placing it at the start of a chapter along with some changes of wording makes it look a little less anecdotal than in the original. Furthermore his editing removes the ambiguity from some of the statements which may well reflect the correct interpretation, but for those who use ÓSullivan's work as their source for the memoir it prevents their consideration of alternative readings.

For example in its original form in MS4/14, ÓNeill states that "*Roger died in Scotland in a Nobleman's house, where he left his harp and silver key to tune it. About 40 years after a blind Harper named Echlin Keane a scholar of Lyon's (whom I often met, and an excellent Harper) went over to Scotland, and called at the house where Roger's Harp and Key were...*"

This more ambiguous version, although contradicting ÓNeill's previous placement of 'Roger' Dall ÓCathain's florit being around 1600, can be interpreted to indicate that Echlin ÓCathain had visited Scotland just 40 years after the death of Rory Dall ÓCathain. This opens up an interesting correlation as we know that Echlin first visited Scotland in 1751 and if 40 years are subtracted then it produces a date of 'about' 1711. Since William Matheson has provided solid evidence that the Scottish Rory Dall Morison died between the latter part of 1713 and before August 1714, there is a remarkable closeness between between the date of Rory Dall ÓCathain's death as implied by ÓNeill's memoir and the actual date of the death of the Scottish Rory Dall.

[18] Holman, Peter. A Little Light on Lorenzo Bocchi: An Italian in Edinburgh and Dublin. in Cowgill, R and Holman P. eds. *Music in the British Provinces, 1690–1914.* (2007). page 66, where it is suggested that although not actually named Bocchi was probably involved with Allan Ramsay with a work written for the marriage of James, Earl of Wemyss in 1720. See the Addendum for further discussion.

[19] He seems to have wound up his Edinburgh affairs in April 1723, see NRS RD4/133/2/1

[20] Carolan, Nicolas, ed. *John & William Neal, A Collection of the Most Celebrated Irish tunes*. Dublin 1724.

[21] Donnelly, Sean. The Irish Harp In England 1590–1690, in *Ceol, A Journal of Irish Music.* Vol VII, (December 1984).

[22] Apart from the tune's inclusion in early collections of music it was also mentioned by the Dublin poet Laurence Whyte in his A Dissertation on Italian and Irish Music, published in his collection of Original Poems On Various Subjects, Serious, Moral and Diverting. (2nd Edition, 1742). It clearly relates to Neal and includes a dedication to Allan Ramsay, who was among the subscribers. Following a reference to Bocchi and his arrangement of the ÓRourke tune and continuous with the lines

> Together with Da Mihi Manum
> Which we may reckon an arcanum

Although his actual choice of the word 'arcanum', basically meaning a 'mystery' was conditioned by the fact it completes the rhyme with 'manum', presumably that still reflects the concept the poet wished to convey. It therefore does not suggest that Whyte or his circle had any knowledge about 'Da mihi manum' which would support ÓNeill's later claims.

[23] If ÓNeill's account is dubious it does raise the question of why Lady Eglinton. Possibly ÓNeill was aware that around that period when his 'story' was noted down, the Earl of Eglinton was the patron of one Irishman, the piper John Murphy, so providing evidence of one Scottish family with a 'musical' connection to Ireland.

[24] It has been suggested to me by Bonnie Shaljean and Michael Billinge that some of the tunes in Aria Di Camera including 'Da Mihi Manum', appear to have been obtained from Neal's publication. In which case Daniel Wright's publication becomes irrelevant in terms of independent sources of the tune.

Submitted by Keith Sanger, 15 August, 2018