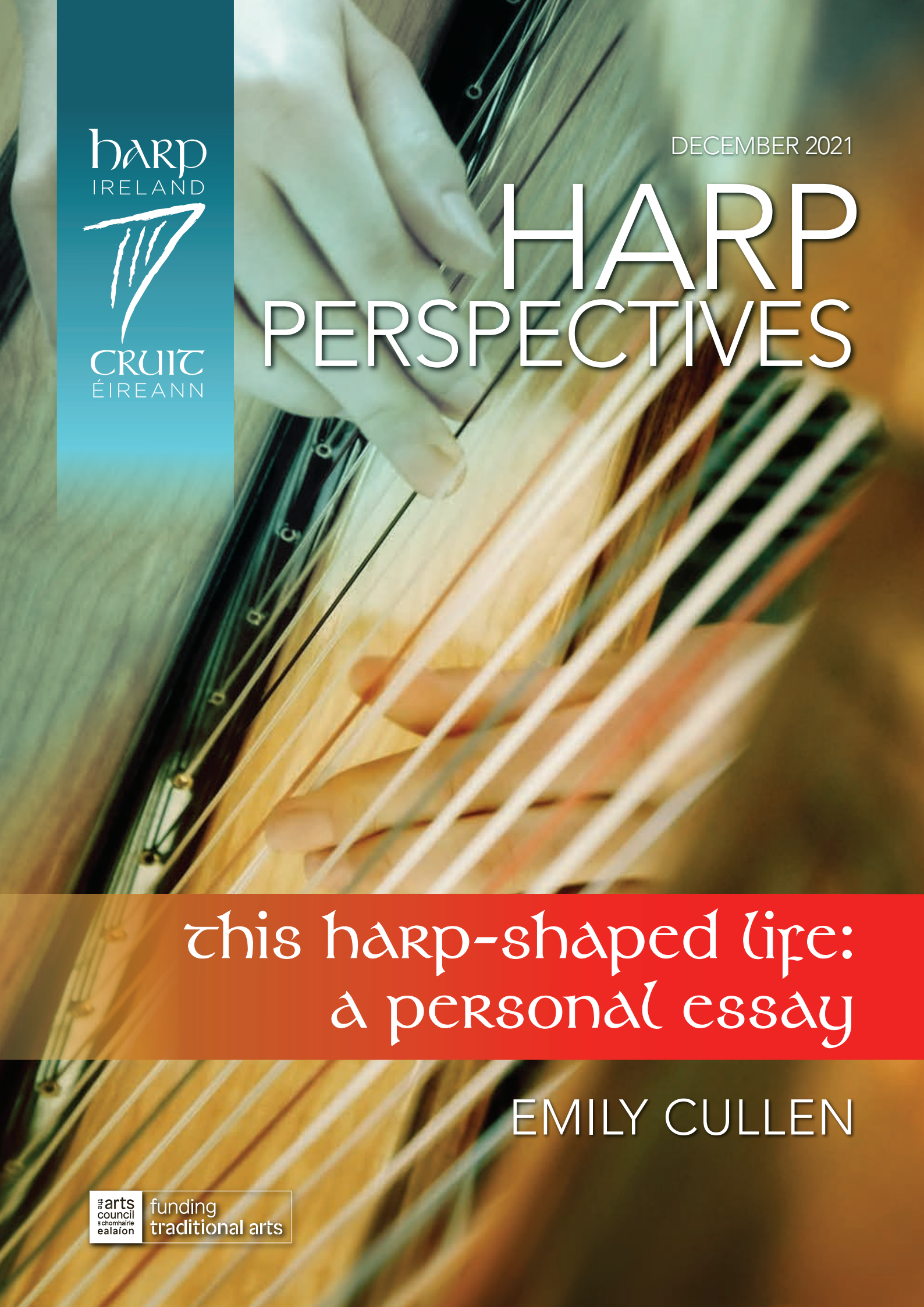


harp IRELAND

CRUIT ÉIREANN

DECEMBER 2021

HARP PERSPECTIVES

this harp-shaped life: a personal essay

EMILY CULLEN

the arts council an chomhairle ealaíon funding traditional arts

Welcome to *Harp Perspectives*, Cruit Éireann, Harp Ireland's online journal.
One of our strategic aims is to establish thought leadership across the harp sector by building up a body of thinking about the harp and harping through a historical and contemporary lens.

Harp Perspectives is a conversation about harping and features key informants, harpers and non-harpers, sharing their authentic views and ideas. We believe that this combination of scholarly research and personal insights will highlight the harping legacy inherited from our tradition bearers and help forge a contemporary harping identity, secure in its understanding of its origin and how it wishes to evolve.

In our December edition, poet, playwright and harper, Emily Cullen, chronicles her journey from her youth with her harper sisters in rural Co. Leitrim, steeped in Carolan country to her travels with the Belfast Harp Orchestra, to her concerns about slowly morphing into a "tweed-sporting harp anorak, nestled in some ivory tower of academia" while she researched the significance of the Irish harp for her PhD. Ten years later, her relationship with the Irish harp appears in more poetic terms as she takes inspiration from the harpers at the 1792 Belfast Harp Festival recreating their voices for us in a deeply personal way. Emily's reflection is a welcome addition to our series.

Our thanks to each of our contributors for their willingness to add their voices. Their contributions will no doubt enrich our thinking.

Aibhlín McCrann and Eithne Benson
Editors
December 2021

THIS HARP-SHAPED LIFE: A PERSONAL ESSAY

Emily Cullen

A Harping family

The harp has brought enchantment to my life. Toward the end of my teenage years, my first 'real job,' was as principal harp teacher at the Mullingar Harp School, founded by the late Tom Maher. A room at the top of the Greville Arms Hotel served as our venue and Tom, a kind gent of the old school with a passion for the harp (his son was the wonderful harp-maker, Colm Maher and Tom himself wrote the book, *The Harp's a Wonder*), oversaw the proceedings. As the eldest of four sheltered girls, getting the train from Carrick-on-Shannon on Saturday mornings to spend the day offering harp tuition was my first taste of independence. The harp was, thus, imprinted on my childhood and resounded throughout my formative teen years.

It is only in hindsight that I appreciate how steeped we were in the cultural geography of the harp, growing up in Carrick. From my back bedroom window, I could see the hills of Sheebeag Sheemore, those twin peaks which inspired Turlough Carolan's very first composition. When my sisters and I took our initial harp lessons at Keadue, we were traversing roads that Carolan must have crossed around Leitrim and Roscommon, in the hinterlands of Ballyfarnon, where his patron, Mary McDermott Roe, resided. Our own home, the Georgian house on Summerhill which our Dad Cyril lovingly restored, was built in 1760 by the St. George family, for whom the Sligo harper composer, Thomas Connellan (b. 1640) had composed the piece 'Molly St. George'. It was fitting, then, that the harp should echo inside its walls.

You don't need to have a topographical link to Irish harping landmarks to feel that magic, though. There is already an enchantment in touching the harp and striking its strings - a feeling of aboriginal connection to our forebears. To be able to perform the repertoire they played, thanks to the efforts of Edward Bunting and others who preserved it for future generations, feels like a great privilege. Tunes such as 'Eibhlín a Rún', composed in 1405 by Carrol O'Dálaigh for his beloved, 'Tabhair Dom do Lámh',

written by Rory Dall Ó Catháin for Lady Eglinton, 'Limerick's Lamentation' which evokes the sad embarkation of the Wild Geese for the continent, and so many others at our fingertips – airs that encapsulate the great loves and losses, joys and penal suffering of our history. Melodies that embody the native mysteries of the *goltraí*, *suantraí* and *geanntraí*. We could easily take it for granted if we didn't perceive the element of enchantment, how it touches all of us who touch the harp.

The Cullen Harpers L-R: Emily, Benita, Tara and Margot Cullen

The Irish Harp: a Spell

In Ireland, the harp wafts seamlessly into our collective sense of heritage, identity and cultural prowess. It is "our outstanding glory in music," as Seán Ó Riada uttered. Many of us have internalised this pride in our national instrument, which is also emblematic of our sovereignty and our passport to international realms. The fact that we pinned our hopes on the harp through various cycles of our history is undeniable. Both the size and shape of the physical instrument, as well as its symbolism, altered through time in sympathy with the fate of the nation. "It is New Strung and Shall Be Heard," pronounced the United Irishmen, powerfully, in the 1790s. Half a century later, Thomas Davis struck a similar note of affirmation as he claimed a new martial confidence for the harp of Young Ireland's 'spirit of the nation.' Endeavouring to veer away from Thomas Moore's mute harps on Tara's walls and from the blind, decrepit

Frontispiece of *The Spirit of the Nation* (Dublin, 1845). Reproduced from the original held in the collections of the James Hardiman Library, National University of Ireland, Galway

Ossianic bards of Scotland, Davis contended that: "The Irish Harp too much loves to weep. Let us, while our strength is great and our hopes high, cultivate its bolder strains, its raging and rejoicing."

As a highly malleable metaphor, our national emblem has been reimagined continously throughout history to different ends. Of course, it is not possible to calibrate our national captivation with the harp and, perhaps, this unquantifable thralldom is part of its enduring mystique. As a poet and harper, (I play the neo-lever Irish harp), who was raised in a harp-playing household and went on to research the multi-layered significance of the Irish harp for a PhD., I'm only too aware of its seductive legacy of romanticism. But as Nietzsche asserted: "illusion is necessary for action" and, for me, no amount of dispassionate scholarly enquiry could break the encompassing spell of the Irish harp.

Harp Summer Schools

I remember the thrill of hearing a room full of twenty odd harps chiming together for the first time; the joy of an open D bass reverberating through the building. The place was An Grianán; we were at the annual *Cúirt Chruitireachta* Summer School. Over successive summers, I came to hear that breathtaking resonance more and more; the collective vibrations, robustly ethereal. Now I could fathom how the harp had powerfully led the way into the famous battles of our mythology. Vamping together, we were learning new music quickly via the 'aural method'; we watched, listening attentively to Janet Harbison, then repeated what she played on our own harps. The trick lay in placing our fingers on the strings ahead of time so they appeared to fall over the notes with ease. We were rapidly learning and swapping tunes with new friends in a vibrant Summer School in an exotic, windswept location: Glencolumcille, Co. Donegal.

Alongside the musical frisson was another current of excitement: at fifteen, I met my first boyfriend, Mark from Norfolk, as I unwittingly danced the 'Siege of Ennis' with his mother, who was also learning the harp in my class. But that, as they say, is another story with a layer of enchantment, all of its own…

A Bicentenary

By late 1991, my Leaving Cert year, we were approaching the bicentenary year of the famous 1792 Belfast Harp Festival – a watershed in the history of the harp and the preservation of Irish music. We were excited to learn that Janet was forming a harp orchestra to mark the occasion. Soon the Belfast Harp Orchestra (BHO) was born with twenty odd harps sounding in unison.

Members of the Belfast Harp Orchestra led by Janet Harbison, performing at The Barbican Theatre, London in 1992. Emily is at the front, far right, and Benita Cullen is at the back, far right.

At the height of the Northern Irish 'Troubles', my sister, Benita and I found ourselves crossing the Border with our ever-patient Dad on a regular basis, with harps in the boot of our car. The mostly good-humoured young British soldiers cracked jokes to know if we had any 'Harp' of the lager variety instead. The Orchestra took us on many national and international adventures; to places such as Brittany in France, the Milwaukee Irish Fest, the Kennedy Arts Centre in Washington and even to Carnegie Hall to perform alongside The Chieftains one snowy day in 1992! On that occasion, our opportunistic

New York bus driver requested an extra thousand dollars to drive us the final six blocks to the famous concert hall and, rather than accede to his extortionate demand, Janet encouraged us to get out and push our harp boxes those final blocks through the slush. As we stopped at traffic lights, one observant fellow remarked: "That's how you get to Carnegie Hall – you push!"

The Cullen Harpers with the late Gay Byrne after appearing on *The Late Late Show*, May 1995. L-R: Margot Cullen, Tara Cullen, Gay Byrne, Benita Cullen & Emily Cullen.

Research

Throughout my college years, the harp loomed large in my life, with concerts, gigs, weddings and even a stint at Bunratty, Dun Guaire and Knappogues Castles one Summer – once seen as a sort of rite of passage for harpers performing on the musical circuit. With my three sisters, Benita, Tara and Margot, our group 'The Cullen Harpers' was in demand, performing on programmes such as *The Late Late Show*, *The Kelly Show* on UTV and *The Bibi Baskin Show*, and we were engaged to play at many state functions, including the visit of the Governor General of Australia to Dublin Castle. I was also very active as a harp teacher around this time and enjoyed nurturing new young players in Galway city and county. When I eventually set out on my doctoral journey in 2004, after gratefully securing an Irish Research Council fellowship for an interdisciplinary study of the harp, I found myself beset by a new worry: would I slowly

morph into a tweed-sporting 'harp anorak,' nestled in some ivory tower of academia over the next few years? Could sustained enquiry into the harp's history potentially dry up my passion for playing the three-dimensional instrument? Thankfully, this concern proved to be unfounded and, instead, a world of cultural interconnection opened up before my eyes, where historiography mingled with romantic myth in fascinating ways.

My thesis uncovered how the Irish harp's meanings were continually reimagined, and often contested, through the centuries. It was exhilarating to discover that the metaphor of the harp was employed by successive colonial administrators as a useful shorthand to describe the state of relations with the 'exotic' Gaelic colony – something which had not been researched previously as an intextual trope. Monarchs such as 'Eliza' were described as tuning the 'jarring dischord' of the Irish harp with their imperial touch. My work also highlighted the fact that the harp became a vital pawn in the ideological debates of eighteenth-century antiquarians about the civilised or barbaric origins of the ancient Irish people. While scholars such as Edward Ledwich claimed that the harp of pre-Christian Ireland came from the brutish Danes of 'the rude North,' those on the opposing side argued that it originated with the civilised Milesians of the East. The figure of the harp was invoked in discourses of barbarism and civility to discuss the Irish colony and to describe the native Irish – sometimes by differentiating them and their bards from 'civilised' Orpheus or, conversely, by drawing an analogy with classical Greek culture and casting Carolan as an "Irish Orpheus." Lady Morgan's famous novel of 1806, *The Wild Irish Girl* and the lyrics of Thomas Moore's melodies frequently invoke the 'Lyre of Erin' suggesting an illustrious heritage and a long, unbroken link to the civilised world. I also became fascinated by the politicised figure of the bard in each of the Celtic nations, how he – (it was nearly always a male-based iconography for bards) - was portrayed clutching a harp, and how the representation and packaging of the bard tended to differ in proportion to the respective geopolitics ie. the Scottish defeat at Culloden occurred relatively early in the eighteenth century and this partly accounts for the Ossianic-type bard, who is blind, decrepit and unthreatening for metropolitan audiences in London. On the other hand, the Welsh bard was fully sighted, much more sanguine and portrayed defiantly holding his harp at the edge of a cliff as Edward's armies advance toward him in the distance. The cultural politics at play was riveting.

Ultimately, my comparative study showed me that the harp's enchantment has permeated many international cultures and narratives, in both pagan and Christian traditions. From the classical myth of Orpheus, to Plato's *Phaedo*, which talks about the

Frontispiece of *Musical and Poetical Relicks of the Welsh Bards* by Edward Jones, published in Wales in 1784, depicting a defiant Welsh bard.

concept of *arpa-armonia-alma* ('the harp attunes the soul') to the biblical King David, keeping the cosmos in harmonious order, the iconic allure of the harp is universal. A rich referential history, through the centuries, linked the tuning of the harp with the maintenance of harmony and balance. The startlingly original Hieronymous Bosch, who never fails to shock, was in an auspicious minority, then, when he represented a human soul nightmarishly strung up onto a harp – an unforgettable antidote to our celestial notion of the harp resounding in paradise!

An Emigrant

I also discovered for myself how the worldwide appeal of the harp and its readily recognisable symbolism translates across cultures. In 2012, when my husband was offered an opportunity to live in Australia, we found ourselves living in Melbourne. We upped sticks with our two-year old son to embark on a new adventure for a couple of years and I was fortunate enough to find work teaching Creative Writing with Professor Kevin Brophy at the School of Culture and Communications, University of Melbourne. Bearing in mind that the green harp flag was our national Irish flag up until the 1916 Easter Rising, when it was replaced by the tricolour, I became interested in the cultural value of the harp emblem to Irish emigrants before, and since, the Great Famine. It was fascinating to discover that, at a time of hotly contested citizenship battles around the

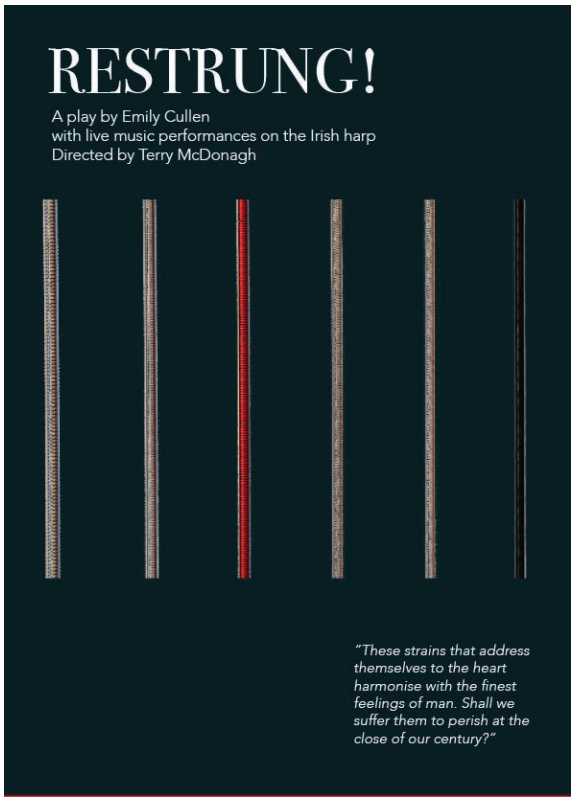
American Civil War, the harp emblem was a vital locus of civility. Along with portraits of Father Mathew, who signalled temperance as opposed to drunkenness, the harp flag was used to denote respectability; it offered an alternative to the disparaging narratives being propagated about the lazy, intoxicated Irish. It ran counter to the simianised, stage Irish leprechaun figures depicted on the pages of magazines and newspapers such as *Punch* and it heralded that new Irish emigrants were respectable and ripe for citizenship and employment. On the flip side, I was amazed to discover that the term 'harp' could also be brandished as a kind of ethnic slur for an Irish Catholic, as John Gregory Dunne (late husband of Joan Didion) has so eloquently shown in his 1989 memoir *Harp*. "I am a harp, that is my history, Irish and Catholic, from steerage to suburbia in three generations," he writes. Shortly after we arrived in Melbourne, I was also intrigued to discover Ruth Park's novel, *The Harp in the South*. Was the harp a widely recognisable badge of group identity for Irish emigrants in Australia and, if so, how had this come about? As Dunne had demonstrated, the term 'harp' could also be used disparagingly to denote poor Catholic Irish immigrant communities.

A Play

About ten years had elapsed since I completed my doctoral thesis when I felt an urge to think about the Irish harp in less scholarly, more poetic terms. It was Denis Hempson's mournful resignation and Arthur O'Neill's tears at the famous 'last gathering of the harpers' in Belfast in 1792 that impelled me to compose poems in the voices of historic harpers. I was deeply moved but also a little perplexed. Why did the 98-year-old Hempson feel such a sense of fatalism about passing on his music to collector, Edward Bunting? I wanted to try to understand the constellation of emotions he was feeling, that sense that the world could no longer hear the ancient music of the Gael as it had sounded for centuries. Perhaps the academic left brain was giving way to the artistic right brain again; feelings were the domain of art, not so much scholarly research, and I realised it was timely now to think more deeply about the complex human beings behind the music. Poetry had always gotten me closer to human, felt truth in the past; I felt it would enable me to get to a place of truthfulness again. Was Hempson's response a mix of nostalgia with a sense of futility and loss at the new continental tastes for chromaticism? There was almost an indignation at the modern age. Hempson had expressed his distaste for Carolan's music too and could see that he was clearly in the minority. The tide was moving toward the art music traditions of the continent. In fusing the traditional Irish jig with Italinate modes, Carolan had inaugurated a new

hybrid style that bespoke innovation. It announced Irish excellence to the international world, but to purists such as Hempson, it was the unwelcome augury of a new era.

The first poem came easily, almost writing itself, and when I had it written, I timorously shared it with my writers group in Galway. They liked it and asked, encouragingly, if I had any more to show them. I had – I was compelled to understand Rose Mooney too and the world of a blind, middle-aged woman who was breaking with the gender expectations of the 18th century by venturing into the male-dominated public sphere with her harp. What was that experience like for her? Did she receive adequate support or were aspersions cast upon her integrity because she was moving so visibly outside the realm of the private and the domestic? These are questions I am grappling with now as I attempt to expand the sequence of monologues in the voices of the 1792 harpers in my third collection, *Conditional Perfect* (Doire Press, 2019) into a one act play. I am hopeful that *Restrung!* will be realised on stage in Autumn 2022, during the International Year of the Harp, and will feature live harp music. The play tells the compelling story of the famous 'last gathering of the harpers' in 1792 and of Edward Bunting, the man who rescued Irish music from oblivion.



Pathways Forward

The burgeoning field of Harp Studies has greatly broadened our understanding of the harp's central place in our cultural history as well as its links with Scotland, Wales and further afield. There is deeply fascinating research ongoing around the materiality of the *cláirseach* and the techniques of its players. The experiential and embodied aspects of being a peripatetic harper – most were also blind – during a time of severe penal laws for Catholics have not yet, however, been considered in any great depth. Also, the trajectory of the harpers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – the realities of that lived experience when main roads were often mere rutted tracks. Who could afford horses, and who couldn't? Which big houses kept a harp for use by wandering harpers and which landed estates would have necessitated that the harpers carry their harps with them? We have a good sense of some of this contextual information already, but it would be valuable to collect and map it systematically to convey the fuller picture. With the Penal Laws still in operation, could harpers make a special case to own a horse? There is also, perhaps, a shortfall in the literature around the experiential side of disability and harping at a time when blindness was a much more common condition and progression into a musical career was often assumed to be a natural outcome. Apart from a few notable books such Edward Larrissey's, *The Blind and Blindness in Literature of the Romantic Period* (2007), there is a general paucity of writing on this subject. It is heartening that scholars such as Sylvia Crawford are reexaminining the fingerings and ornamentations Bunting recorded from the perspective of a blind student learning to play the harp. This is also an area where the realm of art can fertilise our understanding. Brian Keenan's book, *Turlough* (2000), took daring imaginative leaps but could also have benefitted from greater pollination with historic sources. Perhaps art and its interdisciplinary possibilities will open up some of these questions more expansively and the boundaries between academic enquiry and artistic creation will continue to blur in fruitful ways. These are just a few of the things I would like to visualise for posterity on the cartography of Ireland.

A Harping Renaissance

There is no escaping the fact that we live in a country saturated with harp iconography, where harps feature on the corporate logos of everything from Ryanair to the insignias of state agencies and organisations like Crisis Pregnancy. It is all-encompassing with some amusing extremes thrown into the mix – who would have thought that the

common denominator of the harp icon could unite Guinness and the Irish Prison Service? If he were alive today, Walter Benjamin would have a field day working out how the 'aura' of the harp instrument has been compromised through centuries of mechanical reproduction on our coinage from the time of Henry VIII, and through our catch-cries of 'heads or harps?' Yet, it is also gratifying to consider that, perhaps for the first time in its history, the harp's iconic ubiquity no longer overwhelms its sound, or its original functionality as a music instrument. And it is very heartening to witness the popularity of the harp – both wire-strung and gut-strung – among musicians young and old today, its social presence no longer burdened by the ideological weight of symbolism. What a priviledge it is to be an Irish harper in the twenty-first century, when there is a wealth of historic information at our fingertips, with new knowledge accruing all the time about the *cláirseach* and its players, and when we have so much choice in relation to the harps we choose to play and the repertoire we perform. The rich diversity of harping on this island now is simply staggering and it is underpinned by a greater appreciation of the true historic harp of the Gael. Many harpers in Ireland have jostled with the lingering image of the 'Irish colleen,' conjured so effectively by successive Irish tourist boards, especially around Bunratty Castle banquets. We have also had to internalise the fact that the neo-lever Irish harp is a much younger invention than the ancient Gaelic wire strung *cláirseach*. I believe, however, that we have arrived at place of joy and vitality now, where there is room and respect for all harps and where knowledge and the sharing of music and information enriches our practices. Those spirited words of the United Irishmen are no longer merely metaphorical; the Irish harp is indeed 'newly strung' and, most certainly, is being heard far and wide.

The sound of the harp has punctuated many important moments in my life. On my wedding day, as I processed up the aisle with my parents, taking steps forward into a new chapter of life, my three sisters played Carolan's 'Planxty Irwin' with memorable grace. In August, I found myself called upon to play the harp at my beloved mother's wake. I hadn't touched – or tuned - the instrument in quite some time, but thankfully all the strings were intact. Friends, neighbours and family were gathered and the priest was waiting to begin. As I tuned the notes with shaking hands, I quickly decided to play the slow air, 'Una Bhán'. Mam had always loved this piece and I poured my heart into it. The presence of the harp in my life continues to be a gift. When I am away from the harp for long periods of time, there is an ache in my fingers to touch the strings again. And, like learning to ride a bicycle, once the harp enters your bloodstream, your fingertips retain the tensile memory of the strings, the spacing between them, their unique tension and the resonances of its treble and bass notes.

Emily Cullen

Emily Cullen is a Galway-based poet, harper, scholar and cultural producer. She has published three collections of poetry: *Conditional Perfect* (Doire Press, 2019), *In Between Angels and Animals* (Arlen House, 2013) and *No Vague Utopia* (Ainnir Publishing, 2003). *Conditional Perfect* was included in *The Irish Times* round-up of "the best new poetry of 2019". Emily was awarded an IRC fellowship for her doctoral research on the Irish harp as trope, icon and instrument and gained a PhD in English from NUI Galway in 2008. A qualified teacher of the harp and former member of the Belfast Harp Orchestra, Emily has performed throughout Europe, Australia and the United States, and recorded on a number of albums, both as solo artist and as part of an ensemble. Emily publishes essays on Irish music and cultural history and gives lectures and recitals, nationally and internationally. Her scholarship on the harp has appeared in many academic publications including: the *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe* (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), *Harp Studies* (Four Courts Press, 2016), *Thomas Moore: Texts, Contexts, Hypertexts* (Peter Lang, 2013), *Visual, Material and Print Culture in Nineteenth Century Ireland* (Four Courts Press, 2010) and *Amhráin Chearbhalláin/The Poems of Carolan: Reassessments* (Irish Texts Society, 2007). Emily has also served as Arts Officer of NUI Galway, Director of the Patrick Kavanagh Centenary and Director of Cúirt International Festival of Literature. She gratefully acknowledges support for her writing from the Arts Council, through professional development funding (2020) and an Agility Award (2021).