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HARP PERSPECTIVES

PLAYING THE IRISH GAME AND THE IRISH HARP:
TWO PLEASURABLE ACCOMPLISHMENTS, 1590–1790

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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 May edition, Seán Donnelly shares his research on the favourite pleasures and pastimes of the more prosperous folk in the 14th - 16th centuries and discovers many literary references, in both Irish and English, to 'harps and tables' as the popular entertainment of the day.

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

Aibhlín McCrann and Eithne Benson
Editors
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PLAYING THE IRISH GAME AND THE IRISH HARP:
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Seán Donnelly

I

In the seventeenth-century Irish poem, *Aoibhinn beatha an scoláire* ['Delightful is the scholar's life'], the pleasures of that life are said to include playing board-games, harping, and wooing beautiful women:

> Do-bheir sé greas ar tháiplis,
> is ar chláirsigh go mbinne,
> nó fós greas eile ar shuirghe
> is ar chumann mná finne.[1]
>
> He spends a while at tables,
> and on the sweet-sounding harp,
> and a further while wooing
> in the company of a fair lady.

Táiplis (also *táipleasc* and *táibh-fhleasc*), 'tables' in English, was a game played with counters and a pair of dice on two marked-boards (usually hinged). The variety best-known nowadays is backgammon. As the term *táiplis* comes from Old French or Middle English, the game was probably brought to Ireland by the Anglo-Normans. But the term also came to be used of board games in general, occasionally interchanging with the older *fidchell* (Mod. Ir. *ficheall*). The latter term is usually translated as 'chess'; but though the game apparently resembled chess, its rules are unknown.[2]

Given that tables was imported into Ireland, it is intriguing that a version called 'Irish' was played in England and Scotland from the 1500s down to the early 1700s.

1 Thomas F. O'Rahilly (ed.), *Measgra Dánta: miscellaneous Irish poems* ... (Cork, 1927), p. 17 [author's translation].

2 David Greene, 'Un Joc Grossier in Irish and Provençal,' *Ériu*, xvii (1955), p. 7.

Comprising a fore-game and an after-game, it was considered by some to be superior to backgammon itself.[3] A player's fortune could reverse in an instant, so unstable situations were likened to 'an after game at Irish, that is wonne and lost divers times in an instant … .'[4] The length of time the after-game took to play, taken with the concluding move, 'bearing off', also inspired pregnancy-related puns.[5] Irish eventually gave way to backgammon, a much faster game.

Though Irish was assumed to have originated in Ireland, one of the earliest references to it comes from the the Scottish royal-court. Between 1508 and 1512, King James IV (1488–1513) lost various sums of money playing the 'Irish gam(m)yn'. In the context of Lowland Scotland, the term 'Irish' could apply to the Gaelic-speaking Highlands and Western Isles.[6] The highly-cultured James, who was killed at the battle of Flodden, 13 September 1513, was married to Margaret Tudor, sister of Henry VIII, and was said to have spoken Gaelic fluently. He also had strong links to Ireland, particularly with the O'Donnells of Tyrconnell, with whom he entered an alliance in 1495 with the object of putting pressure from the south on the MacDonalds in the Western Isles.[7]

Understandably, a game such as Irish would not normally have been called that in Ireland itself. It is interesting, then, that the label is used to distinguish it from backgammon in *The Irish Hudibras, or Fingallian Prince …* (1689), a satire on the inhabitants of Fingal, an area roughly coterminous with Co. Dublin north of the Liffey. A parody of the sixth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*, the work is the third version of one originally written in the 1660s in New English circles in Dublin for local consumption. A second version dating from 1686 was directed at English audiences, as was the third version here. All three were updated to reflect contemporary political developments at the time of their creation.[8] The reference to Irish is part of a description of the entertainments at a feast, which also includes harping, of course:

3 James Howell, *Epistolae Ho-Elianae: familiar letters, domestic and forren …* (London, 1645; 3rd ed., London, 1655), p. 378; Charles Cotton, The compleat gamester … (London, 1674), pp 154–5.

4 Sir William Cornwallis, *Essayes. By Sir William Corne-Waleys the younger, Knight* (London, 1600–01), [unpaginated]: 'Essay. 50. Of Flattery, Dissimulation, and Lying.'

5 David Gunby, David Carnegie, et al. (eds), *The works of John Webster …* (3 vols, Cambridge, 2007–8), ii, pp 135, 233; Edward H. Sugden, *A topographical dictionary to the works of Shakespeare and his fellow dramatists* (Manchester, 1926), p. 271.

6 Thomas Dickson, Sir James Balfour Paul, et al. (eds), *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland* (13 vols, 1873–1978), iii, 1507–1513 (Edinburgh, 1902), pp 101, 102, 104, 107, 344, 345.

7 Simon Egan, 'James IV, the O'Donnells of Tyrconnell, and the road to Flodden', *History Ireland*, xxiv, no. 6 (November/December 2016), pp 16–19.

8 Andrew Carpenter, 'Lawyers and the circulation of scurrilous verse in seventeenth-century Dublin', in Coleman A. Dennehy (ed.), *Law and revolution in seventeenth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 2020), pp 289–301.

The Priests that Lodge upon this Common,
Do play at Irish, and Bac-Gammon …

There was O Threicy, with Old Darcy,
Playing all Weathers at the Clarsey:
The Irish Harp, whose rusty Mettle,
Sounds like the patching of a Kettle.[9]

II

It has been suggested that the ordering of tables, harping, and wooing was not random in *Aoibhinn beatha an scoláire*, and that gaming and music were preliminaries to lovemaking.[10] Understandably, playing musical instruments and games easily lends itself to sexual innuendo, with terms used in music and games taking on a sexual meaning. An obscure Irish poem on the tuning of a harp, *Ní fhéadaim cobhlach to ghléas* ['I am unable to tune a *cobhlach*'], found only in the Book of the Dean of Lismore, a manuscript dating from the early 1500s written in Perthshire, Scotland, is taken to be an extended sexual metaphor.[11] Harping and lovemaking are also linked, rather amusingly, in an eighteenth century-version of the tale of Mis – the mythological woman who gave her name to Sliabh Mis in Co. Kerry – and the harper Dubh Ruis.[12] The two activities had previously intertwined in a seventeenth-century poem, *Mealltar bean le beagán téad* ['A woman is seduced with a few strings']. The author was bitter at ending up an incel – *avant le lettre* – because he could not play the harp:

Mealltar bean le beagán téad;
atá orm 'na oiréad
(lór méad ar n-anfhorlainn as!)
daghfhoghlaim téad nár thógbhas.

9 James Farewell, *The Irish Hudibras, or, Fingallian Prince taken from the sixth book of Virgil's Æneids*, and adapted to the present times … (London, 1689), pp 102, 103. The wording is different – though not vitally so – in the two earlier manuscript versions of this work: Andrew Carpenter (ed.), *Verse travesty in Restoration Ireland: "Purgatorium Hibernicum" (NLI, Ms 470) with "The Fingallian Travesty" (BL, Sloane 900)* (Dublin, 2013), pp 138, 139, 223, 224.

10 James E. Doan, 'The erotics of backgammon in Provençal and Irish poetry', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, xii (1992), pp 33–4.

11 William Gillies, 'A poem on tuning a harp', in Ailbhe Ó Corráin, Fionntán de Brún and Maxim Famin (eds), *Scotha cennderca cen on: a festschrift for Séamus Mac Mathúna* (Uppsala, 2020), pp 77–92.

12 Brian Ó Cuív, 'The romance of Mis and Dubh Ruis', *Celtica*, ii, part 2 (1954), p. 330

Truagh liom nár leathas mo lámh
ar sheinm robhuig na ruagán;
d'fhagháil mná uaisle is oighre
a-tá an uair-se ar n-aghaidhe-ne.[13]

A woman is seduced with a few strings;
It is a cause of great jealousy to me
(great is our misfortune because of it!)
we never took up the proper learning of strings.

I regret that I never turned my hand
to the trivial playing of ditties;
To acquire a noble wife and an heir
which are now beyond our reach.

The poet then names, mostly disparagingly, tunes he should have learned, including 'Cailín ó Chois tSiúire mé' – the 'Calen o custure me' of Shakespeare (also found as 'Callino Casturame', or simply 'Callino(e)'):

Dom anródh nár fhoghlaim mé
seinm chailín ó chois tSiúire,
i dtráth suain le sreing n-umha,
nach beinn uaidh in-aontumha.[14]

To my misfortune I never learned
to play the Girl from beside the Suir,
at bedtime on brass strings,
I would not be celibate because of it.

While not mentioned directly, *táiplis* is invoked elliptically:

Mór n-adhbhar croidhe do chrádh!
tuar seirce seinm na strioncán;
tarla dhó ar dtaobh do tholladh
Aon is dó nách dearnamar.[15]

13 Thomas O Rathile (ed.), *Dánta grádha: an anthology of Irish love poetry*, 1350–1750 … (Cork, 1926; rep. 1994), p. 97 [author's translation. Thanks to Séamas de Barra for his assistance here].

14 ibid., p. 98; Gerard Murphy, 'Calen o custure me', *Éigse*, i–ii (1939), pp 125–9; Claude M. Simpson, *The British broadside ballad and its music* (New Jersey, 1966), pp 79–80.

15 O Rathile, *Dánta grádha*, p. 98 [author's translation]..

A great cause of heart-torment!
that an omen of love is playing jingles;
it has sorely wounded our side
that we never played one-and-two.

Aon-is-dó is a throw in tables – two on one dice and one on the other – called 'ace-and-deuce' in English (also 'deucace'). The last line in the quatrain appears to mean, then, that the poet had not even got to play tables with his beloved. However, ace-and-deuce is a double-entendre here, and he is actually bemoaning failing to score in the modern sense. The use of the game of tables as a metaphor for lovemaking is found elsewhere in Irish literature. The board becomes the woman's body, and the terms for the counters and moves take on double-meanings. The concept probably reached Ireland with the game itself, as it occurs in a Troubadour poem from twelfth-century Provençe. (It possibly originated in the similarity of the terms for a playing-board and a woman's apron in Provençal and Old French.) In Irish the conceit is found in a poem from the early 1500s, also in the Book of the Dean of Lismore, in another from the the mid-1650s, and in a prose work of the 1720s. Originally denoting the male genitalia, *aon-is-dó* then came to be used of the act itself. While not in the first poem, the term is used in both senses several times in the other two sources, while synonymous terms occur in all three.[16]

Nowadays, ace-and-deuce survives in English as 'acey-deucey', the name of a variety of backgammon particularly popular in the United States. In English dialects, the term also developed the meaning 'utterly', 'completely', as in to beat someone 'ace-and-deuce'.[17] The term survives in this sense in Irish traditional music as the title of the set-dance (hornpipe), '*Aon is Dó na Píobaireachta*', 'Ace and Deuce of Piping'. Publishing this tune in 1873, P.W. Joyce wrote:

> The words "Ace and Deuce" (or one and two) mean here the highest pitch of excellence; and as the name indicates, the tune was considered the perfection of music when well played on the bag-pipes, and its correct performance was believed to be a sufficient test of the instrumental skill of a piper.[18]

16 Greene, 'Un Joc Grossier', pp 7–15; Doan, 'The erotics of backgammon', pp 29–42

17 Joseph Wright (ed.), *The English Dialect Dictionary* … (6 vols, London, 1898– 1906), i, p. 12.

18 P.W. Joyce (ed.), *Ancient Irish Music: compromising one hundred airs hitherto unpublished* … (Dublin, London, and Edinburgh, 1873), pp 14–15.

Other versions of this piece are also known and, despite Joyce's statement, it is not particularly difficult to play.

III

Though the pairing of harp and tables in both *Aoibhinn beatha an scoláire* and *Mealltar bean le beagán téad* was metaphorical and erotic, it also reflected reality to some extent. A noble or gentry residence in Gaelic society was usually furnished with at least one harp, a pair of tables and, presumably, a board for playing *fidchell*. A bride could bring a harp and tables in her dowry, often levied by her father (or guardian) on his tenants and followers.[19] Evidence for one such dowry was given at an inquisition in Waterford on 11 April 1587. It was held to determine whether Margaret Tobin of Brickenden, Co. Tipperary, had been validly married to Thomas fitz Richard of Pallas, Co. Limerick, who had 'put her away' in favour of another woman after a number of years of marriage:

> Thomas Halpine of Castletane, of the Coursey, states that he was present, and saw the marriage. … He was privie to the marriage goods agreed on betwixt Rickard Toben and Thomas FitzRichard, and he saw four score cows, four-and- twentie mares, five horses, a paire of playinge tables, and a harpe, besides household stuff, after the weddinge, delivered to the said Thomas, as marriadge goods with Margaret Toben.[20]

The story was reversed in a case heard in the Court of Chancery in Dublin in November 1596. It sought to establish the legitimacy of the descendants of Oliver Fitzgerald (1494–1537), fourth son of the 8th earl of Kildare – nicknamed 'M'Inerle' [Irish *Mac an Iarla* – 'Son of the Earl'] – and Maeve, daughter of Cahir O'Connor, chief of the O'Connors of Offaly. (Oliver M'Inerle and four of his brothers were executed at Tyburn on 3 February 1537 after the rebellion of their nephew, 'Silken Thomas', Thomas Fitzgerald (b. 1513), 10th earl of Kildare.) The witnesses unanimously testified that Maeve had been married to Shane mac Hugh O'Molloy of Fercall, Co. Offaly, and had left him for Oliver M'Inerle. Those present at the wedding had seen the 'marriage

19 Herbert F. Hore and James Graves (eds), *The social state of the southern and eastern counties of Ireland in the sixteenth century …* (Dublin, 1870), pp 178, 188, 271–2.

20 James Morrin (ed.), *Calendar of the patent and close rolls of chancery in Ireland from the 18th to the 45th of Queen Elizabeth*, (3 vols, Dublin, 1861–3), ii, pp 507–8.

goods,' which amounted "'to the value of £300, as money then went.'" Owen O'Coffey, 'four score and ten years,' was able to recall details:

> Coffie swore that Shane, on his marriage with Meawe, received of her friends, as marriage goods, a hundred cows, two plowes of studd mares, a plough of garrans, two horses, two hundred sheep, a harp and a paier of tables.[21]

'Garran' (Irish *gearrán* 'gelding') meant a 'small horse' in English, and clearly 'plough' here meant a certain number, like a 'yoke of oxen'. The bride's 'friends' here would have been her relatives and her father's followers and tenants, as previously mentioned. However, despite the number and (suspicious?) unanimity of the witnesses in the 1596 case, a later descendant of Oliver and Maeve's convinced a court in 1620 that she had not been married to Shane mac Hugh O'Molloy, and that her children by Oliver were indeed legitimate.[22]

IV

Harps and tables were obviously high-value items in these dowries, and not just 'household stuff'. That a harp would have been an expensive item hardly needs saying; but game-boards were often described in poetry as being elaborately- ornamented, with the figures and counters made of gold or silver, or set with precious jewels. An entry in the *Annals of Loch Cé* for 1554 records that when Brian Mac Dermot, son of the lord of Moylurg, Co. Roscommon, lost his dishes and tables' [*míassa ocus taipliss* ...] in a raid on his lands, he seized fifty cows from the raiders '... in retaliation for the chess-board [*sic*]...' [*dá fhichit dhec bó ... a ndíghuil na taiplissi* ...].[23] A further hint at the use of precious metals in gaming-boards occurs in a poem written soon after the Plantation of Ulster (1607), *Cáit ar ghabhatar Gaoidhil?* ['Where have the Gaels gone?']. The poet deplores the lack of interest on the part of the Scots and English planters in poetry, music, history, genealogy, etc., and speaks of Ireland as *clár óir fa fhoirinn tacoir* ... ['a golden chessboard under bass chessmen ...'].[24]

21 ibid., pp 449, 451.

22 ibid., p. 452.

23 William M. Hennessy (ed.), *The annals of Loch Cé. A chronicle of Irish affairs from A.D. 1014 to A.D. 1590* ... (2 vols, London, 1871), ii, pp 364, 365.

24 William Gillies, 'A poem on the downfall of the Gaoidhil', *Éigse*, xiii (1969– 70), pp 206, 207.

A literary reference to the taking of a harp and a gaming-board as booty occurs in a poem to MacWilliam Burke by Tadhg Dall Ó Huiginn, who praises the prowess of one of Burke's ancestors:

> Coire ríogh Mhannan tar muir,
> cruit bheannchor Bheinne hÉdair
> le drithlinn Teamhra dá thoigh,
> go bhfidhchill Eamhna i nUltoibh.
>
> The caldron of the king of Man across the sea,
> the smooth-framed harp of *Beann Éadair*
> were brought to his house by the hero (?) of Tara,
> together with the chess from *Eamhain* in Ulster.[25]

Almost certainly, Tadhg Dall is speaking figuratively here. *Beann Éadair* is Howth, Co. Dublin, and together with the reference to the Isle of Man and to Eamhain Macha in Armagh, the poet is emphasising the extent of Richard's raiding, the value and high status of the booty he seized, and the importance of the places he was able to plunder.

Besides playing tables and the other board-games themselves, an Irish lord and his household would also have entertained wandering professional gamblers, *cearrbhaigh* – 'carroughs' or 'carrowes' in English – a class repeatedly legislated against.[26] Harpers are also mentioned in these ordinances against wandering folk; but they, along with the other Gaelic learned orders, poets, historians, judges, physicians, et al., could hold lands from a lord by virtue of their office.[27] Indeed, it was recorded *c.*1500 that Piers Ruadh Butler (*c.*1467–1539), 8th earl of Ormond and 1st earl of Ossory, had granted his harper a castle no less: '"Item ther ys another Castell rawteryn In ye counte of kylkene ye wych Persse hath geue to hys harperre…"'.[28]

25 Eleanor Knott (ed.), *The bardic poems of Tadhg Dall Ó Huiginn (1550–1591)* (2 vols, London, 1922–6), i, p. 127; ii, pp 85, 258.

26 Alan J. Fletcher, Drama and the performing arts in pre-cromwellian Ireland: a repertory of sources and documents from the earliest times until c.1642 (Woodbridge, 2001), pp 173–5, 178–84, 187–8, 190, 192–3, 207, 224, 387, 397.

27 Katherine Simms, *From kings to warlords: the changing political structure of Gaelic Ireland in the later middle ages* (Woodbridge, 1987; rep. 2000), pp 87– 8.

28 Edmund Curtis (ed.), *Calendar of Ormond Deeds* (6 vols, Dublin, 1932–43), iv, p. 345.

V

Naturally harping and playing board-games feature in the descriptions of castles of Gaelic nobility and gentry in bardic poetry. A poet might describe a castle as being a 'weir of harps', or claim that as he approached one, he could not hear a man speak at his shoulder for the sound of music from it. Some descriptions give the impression that nothing else was to be heard from morning to night but harp-music, and that even at night a lord (and presumably his lady) were put to sleep by it. Patrons were praised for their appreciation of music, and for their generosity towards musicians, and their voices are occasionally described as being as sweet as harp strings. The absence or death of a lord, or the capture/destruction of his castle, meant that music was no longer to be heard. A patron's harp, or one he presented to a poet, could also be the subject of a poem, particularly if he was absent, or had died.[29]

As just mentioned, board-games, particularly *fidchell*, also feature frequently in these descriptions, often along with harping.[30] In *Deithfridh am dháil, a leobhráin* ['Hasten towards me my booklet'], for example, a personal poem by an amateur poet, the author seeks consolation for the loss of friends in possessions he values: his books, his sword, his jewelled-dagger, his tables, and above all in his harp. He devotes three verses to the harp, and two to the tables. While he uses the term *fidchell*, the opening line of his second verse is *Ag cur dhísle ó ghrian go roile* ['Casting dice from sun to sun'], suggests that tables was in question.[31]

If the author of *Deithfridh am dháil, a leobhráin* found consolation in playing the harp and tables, the author of *Aiste Dháibhí Cúndún*, a long vernacular poem written between 1654 and 1657 had a far greater reason for sorrow: 'the disintegration of Ireland …' after the Eleven Years War, 1641– 52:[32]

29 Cathal Ó Háinle, 'An ceol san fhilíocht chlasaiceach', in Pádraig Ó Fiannachta (eag.), *An Ceol i Litríocht na Gaeilge: Léachtaí Cholm Cille vii* (Má Nuad, 1976), lgh. 31–57.

30 A search under 'gaming, board games, gambling, betting', will find numerous references in the Bardic Poetry Database @ https://bardic.celt.dias.ie/

31 Osborn Bergin, *Irish bardic poetry: texts and translations, together with an introductory lecture …* compiled and edited by David Greene and Fergus Kelly; with a foreword by D.A. Binchy (Dublin, 1970), pp 177, 296.

32 Michelle O Riordan, '"Political" poems in the mid-seventeenth-century political crisis', in Jane H. Ohlmeyer (ed.), *Ireland from independence to occupation, 1641–1660* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 112.

Ní sheinnim go sámh ar chlairsig théidbhinn.
Ní imrim áce ar tháiplis thaobhthais
’s i n-imirt na gcárt an t-ás ní léir dham.[33]

I do not play softly on the sweet-stringed harp.
I do not throw an ace on the smooth-sided tables,
And in the playing of cards, the ace is lost to me.

Whatever about playing board games, the claim that sadness, particularly disappointment in love, stole the ability to enjoy playing the harp was apparently a literary motif.[34] But the late 1600s and early 1700s saw the image of a silent harp used to mean general rather than just personal sorrow. Aodhagán Ó Rathaille (*c.*1670–1726), in his poem *Ar bhás Ghearailt, Mhic Ridire an Ghleanna* [‘On the death of Gerald, son of the Knight of Glin’], uses the image (among many others) to signify widespread mourning: *Do bhalbhuigh cláirseach bhláithgheal* Éireann … [‘The fair-blooming harp of Ireland is silenced …’].[35]

In a poem composed in the early 1700s, *A Mhuire Óigh fhionnghlan fhíor* [‘O Virgin Mary, fair, pure and true’], the poet and scholar, Seán Ó Neachtain (*c.*1647–1729), from Co. Roscommon, who lived in Dublin since *c.*1670, chided the Virgin Mary for favouring English-speakers who despised her over Irish-speakers (like himself) who were devoted to her. He has Ireland speak to her directly:

Do sgabadh mo bhláth gach árd, ol Éire bhocht
Do chailleas mo dhán ’s mo chláirseach théad ’na tocht
Mo theanga gan fáir fo tháir ag Béarla nocht
Taradh-sa ’Mháire, tráth, a’s féach-sa so …

33 Cecile O’Rahilly (ed.), *Five seventeenth-century political poems* (Dublin, 1952; rep., Dublin, 1977), pp 13, 37–8, 47–8 [author’s translation].

34 Ó Rathile, *Dánta Grádha*, p. 49; see also, J. Carmichael Watson (ed.), *The Gaelic songs of Mary MacLeod* (Edinburgh, 1934; rep. Edinburgh and London, 1965), pp 18, 19, 88, 89; Colm Ó Baoill (ed.), *Eachainn Bacach and other Maclean poets* (Edinburgh, 1979), pp 90, 91, 256.

35 Patrick S. Dineen and Tadhg O’Donoghue (eds), *Dánta Aodhagáin Uí Rathaille – The poems of Egan O’Rahilly* … (2nd ed., London, 1911), p. 154.

My flower was scattered on every height, poor Ireland said
I lost my poetry and my stringed harp is silent
My language without succour is under the disgrace of bare English
Come, Mary, some time, and consider this.[36]

Incidentally, in another poem, *Diomoladh Phádraig Naofa* ['The dispraise of St Patrick'], Ó Neachtain chastised St Patrick, a Briton, for always supporting his countrymen in conflicts between Ireland and England.[37]

VI

In the later seventeenth century, harp and tables continued to be associated in visitors' accounts: 'The *Irish* Gentry are musically disposed, & therefore many of them play singular well upon the *Irish Harp*: they effect also to play at tables …'.[38] On a visit to Ireland in 1698, John Dunton noted: 'Their games within doors are Backgammon and Five Cards, as common here as All Fours in England.'[39] The presence of a harp and tables in a house was also seen as a badge of respectability, particularly among the lesser gentry – the 'middling sort' – and prosperous farmers. In a history of Co. Fermanagh dating from 1718–19, John Dolan wrote that the local Irish nobility and gentry prided themselves on their hospitality, and were fond of hunting, hawking, and 'playing at chess or tables.' He added that the 'British are nothing inferior to the Irish in performing these customs, for they hold a poor liberal man at more respect than a stingy rich one.' Both classes were 'admirers of harp music,' and the houses of gentlemen and farmers 'were furnished … with kettles, harps and tables.'[40] (The 'kettles'would have been brewing-kettles.)

The custom of keeping a harp (though not tables) was also noticed in 1770 by the Limerick surgeon and historian, Sylvester O'Halloran (1728–1807): 'It was the custom even into the eighteenth century for prosperous Irish families to keep one or more

36 Liam Ó Mathúna, *The Ó Neachtain window on Gaelic Dublin, 1700–1750* (Cork, 2021), p. 73.

37 Nessa Ní Shéaghdha, 'Diomoladh Phádraig Naofa', *Celtica*, xv (1983), pp 67– 8.

38 [Anon.], *The present state of Ireland together with some remarques upon the antient state thereof* (London, 1673), p. 153.

39 Edward MacLysaght, *Irish life in the seventeenth century* (Dublin, 1939; 2nd ed., rev. and enl., Cork and Oxford, 1949), p. 355.

40 P. Ó Maolagáin, 'An early history of Fermanagh,' *Clogher Record*, i, no. 3 (1955), p. 131; idem., 'An early history of Fermanagh (continued)', ibid., i, no. 4 (1956), pp 113, 114.

harps in their houses on which visiting players could perform, and doubtless these instruments were passed down the generations.'[41] Indeed, Arthur O'Neill (*c.*1734–1816) recalled once passing 'through the chief part of the county of Cavan, from one gentleman's seat to another, without carrying my own harp, as there was scarce a house where I touched at but there was one.'[42] O'Neill also knew his way around a pair of tables. He said that Dr Cadogan Keatinge, Dean of the Diocese of Clogher, 1781–99, 'would never let me touch a harp in his house, but indulging him in playing the enticing game of backgammon, whom I always excelled, blind as I was.'[43]

This general picture is confirmed by literary sources in both Irish and English, with harps and tables continuing to be associated with comfort and prosperity in vernacular Irish poems and songs dating from the late 1600s to the early 1800s.[44] The two are paired, for instance, in the celebrated poem, *Donn na Duimhche* 'Hail! Donn of the Sandhills', composed in the 1730s by the Co. Clare poet and *seanchaidhe* [traditional-historian], Aindrias Mac Cruitín (*c.*1670–1738). Facing Christmas in impoverished old-age and bereft of human patronage, Mac Cruitín begs the fairy-king, Donn, to be admitted to his enchanted palace among the sandhills on the west-coast of Clare. At feasts, he would entertain the king with poems and lays, tales from Irish and Greek history and mythology, stories from the Bible, as well as with harp and tables:

> … Nó chuirfead dán le cláirsig caoin duit,
> Nó lámhach ar tháiplis nó ar dhísle …
>
> … Or I will set a poem to a lovely harp for you,
> Or set about casting the dice on the backgammon-board …[45]

Carolan also pairs harp and tables in at least one song, and invariably mentions tables and music together elsewhere.[46] Lúcás Gasta – a contemporary of Carolan's? – also has the pairing in '*Tír-a-Ruain*', a song in defence of a place in north-east Co. Roscommon:

41 Sylvester O'Halloran, *An introduction to the history and antiquities of Ireland* (Dublin, 1770), pp 75–6.

42 Donal O'Sullivan (ed.), *Carolan: the life, times and music of an Irish harper* (London, 2 vols, 1958), ii, p 151.

43 ibid., p. 168.

44 A search for *táiplis* will find various examples in the Historical Irish Corpus, 1600–1926 @http://corpas.ria.ie/

45 Luke McInerney, 'Donn na Duimhche: "Hail Donn of the Sand Hills!" Aindrias Mac Cruitín's celebrated poem: background, context, and literal translation', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland – Iris an dá chultúr*, xxxvii (2022), pp 69.

46 Tomás Ó Máille (eag.), *Amhráin Chearbhalláin* (London, 1916), pp 129, 135, 192.

Tá muic-fheoil shaillte a's mairt-fheoil bhríoghmhar,
A's im go teannta air mhiasa dlúith,
Ceolta chruit' agus beart air tháiplis,
Teach Mhuiris Mhac (a') Bháird i dTír a-Rúain.[47]

There's salted pork and nourishing beef,
And butter heaped thickly on well-made dishes,
Tunes on a harp and a trick at tables
In the house of Maurice Ward in Tír-a-Rúain.

In two English poems written in the early 1700s and set in the counties of the old Pale close to Dublin, the presence of a harp and tables is also seen as denoting comfort and respectability. Published in 1740, 'The Parting Cup, or The Humours of Deoch an Doruis' by Laurence Whyte (*c.*1683–*c.*1753), a mathematics teacher in Dublin City, describes the unostentatious lifestyle of a prosperous tenant farmer and his wife in Whyte's native Co. Westmeath in the early 1700s. Besides mentioning that the couple 'kept a *Harp* and Pair of *Tables* …', Whyte also gives an interesting description of a blind harper entertaining the company at a Christmas feast.[48]

A similar picture is painted by William Moffat [Walter Jones] in an earlier poem, *Hesperi-neso-graphia: or, a description of the Western Isle*, first published in 1716. Though slightly satirical in tone, Moffat is not mocking, and speaks positively of the harp, for example: 'Meanwhile the harp conjoin'd with voice,/ Throughout the house made charming noise …', and again, 'The crooked harp with joy shall sound.'[49] He also pokes gentle fun at the Irish obsession with genealogy, and when the respectability of the family of 'Gormley', wife of the poem's hero, 'Gillo', is impugned by 'Sheela Roe,' the former defends her descent:

And that she was by Mother's Side
To *Cormuck More Mc. Gragh* ally'd;
Who in his House three Harps did keep,
And killed each Week a brace of Sheep;
And every Month at least a Cow,

47 ibid., p. 268. [author's translation]

48 Michael Griffin (ed.), *The collected poems of Laurence Whyte* (Lewisburg [PA] and London, 2016), pp 106, 116–18.

49 [William Moffet], Hesperi-neso-graphia: or, a description of the Western Isle. In eight canto's … (Dublin, 1724), pp 16, 17.

Which to 's House did still allow
Moreover said, she and her Spouse,
Had Harp and Tables in their House;
In spacious Fields had Cows and Sheep,
And did a great many Servants keep.[50]

VII

In light of the references quoted above to the presence of harp and tables in households in Co. Fermanagh in John Dolan's history of 1718–19, it is an interesting coincidence that a late glimpse of tables in a Gaelic context also comes from that county. In April 1833, the Belfast antiquarian and Irish scholar, Robert MacAdam (1808–95), was sent a pair of tables by a James MacQuinn in Enniskillen:

'Enniskillen,
April 25th, 1833

> I send these articles to you according to promise. They are called the back-gammon (or Playing Tables) or in Irish *tamhlisc*. They are two boards, one of them not whole, the other safe as yet. They are consisting of Thirty Men; in Irish they are called *furren na tafliska*. The one half of these articles differs in stamp from the other. … They are the oldest articles in the Kingdom …'.[51]

MacQuinn also passed on instructions for two games with Irish titles, suggesting that if he had not played them himself, he had at least seen them played. He added: 'I promised my brother a pound for them and if you be pleased to to give that for them there yours. You may judge by their appearance that they are richly worth the money.'[52]

This apparent survival of tables into the early 1800s in south Ulster, one of the areas in which harping also survived into the nineteenth century, is an intriguing coincidence, given how often the two are are linked in earlier sources.

50 ibid., pp 34–5.

51 Breandán Ó Buachalla, *I mBéal Feirste cois Cuain* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1968), lch. 99.

52 ibid.

Seán Donnelly

Educated at Trinity College, Dublin, Seán Donnelly has written widely on the history of piping and harping in Ireland, and on the history of Irish music in general, including Irish dancing, subjects on which he has also lectured. Early connections between Irish and Scottish piping remain a particular interest, as does the history of the Irish harp in England and in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Having first learnt the Highland pipes, he later took up the uilleann pipes, joining Na Píobairí Uilleann, where his growing interest in research was encouraged by Breandán Breathnach, the founder and chairman, a major collector of Irish music and an outstanding authority on the subject. His interest in the history of harping developed from his research in general, and he is especially intrigued by the reaction of outsiders to the Irish harp in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As well as publications devoted to music, Seán's articles have appeared in academic, local history, and military history journals, and occasionally online.