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# HARP PERSPECTIVES

DA MIHI MANUM; (GIVE ME YOUR HAND)  
BUT WHOSE HAND WAS IT?

KEITH SANGER

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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 February edition, Keith Sanger casts doubts on the ancient harper Arthur O'Neill's claim that 'Da Mihi Manum' ('Give Me Your Hand' / 'Tabhair Dom Do Lámh') was composed by blind Irish harper Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin and questions the existence of a Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin, who, according to O'Neill, lived in Scotland in the 1600s.

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

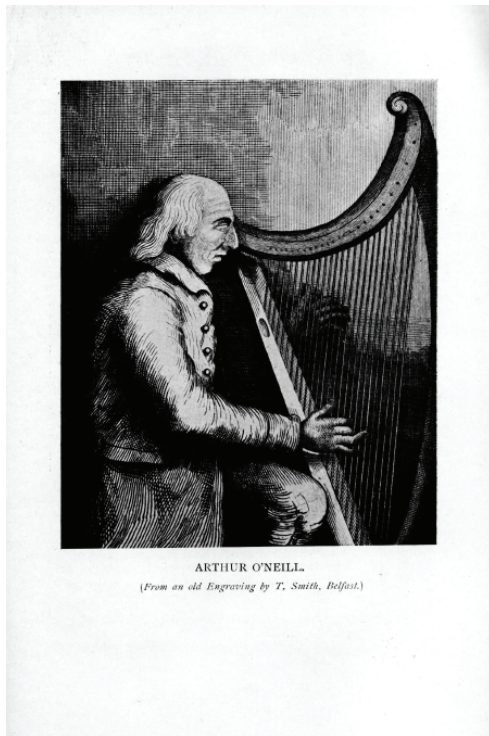
Editor

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# DA MIHI MANUM; (GIVE ME YOUR HAND) BUT WHOSE HAND WAS IT?

Keith Sanger



Arthur O'Neill

On several occasions elsewhere I have expressed my reservations regarding the existence of the harper Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin (to whom this tune has often been attributed), or whether he was simply an invention of Arthur O'Neill. It therefore seems sensible to pull all my arguments into one article which can then be more easily subjected to criticism.

O'Neill's account, which first appears in his memoir, noted down around 1808 by a scribe working for Edward Bunting, is the ultimate source of all later versions of the 'life of Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin'. The manuscript seems to have remained among Bunting's papers and therefore little known until in

1839 when it was loaned to Samuel Ferguson who was helping Bunting with his 1840 publication. Bunting used it in the chapter on the antiquity of the harp and bagpipe in Ireland, 'anecdotes on Irish harpers'. It was the publication of the 1840 work that resulted in Arthur O'Neill's claims about Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin being exposed to a much wider readership.<sup>1</sup> A view of Samuel Ferguson's (1810 – 1886) motivation can be gained by a letter he wrote to Dr James MacDonnell on 17 November 1839 as he was working on Bunting's book, apparently at the Doctor's request. He admits that *'It is a task for which, from my want of all musical requirements, I have been but*

<sup>1</sup> Arthur O'Neill's 'Memoir' was first published by C Milligan Fox in her *The Annals of the Irish Harpers* in 1911. It was published again by Donal O'Sullivan in his *Carolan: The Life Times and Music of an Irish Harper* in 1958, in which he criticised Fox for editing the memoir, something he then proceeded to do himself. A transcription by Michael Billinge based on a scan of the whole of Queens University. Bunting MS MS4/14/1, I obtained some years ago appears here [https://wirestrungharp.com/library/oneill-memoir\\_ms4-14/](https://wirestrungharp.com/library/oneill-memoir_ms4-14/). Since then, digital copies of both versions of the memoir MS4/14/1 and MS4/46 have been added to the university site, with the latter described as 'First Rough draft'. The internal evidence of both documents indicates that they are independent of each other and variant copies from the same exemplar, probably the original notes made by the memoir's scribe.

*badly prepared. However, feeling the importance of the undertaking, and seeing if I did not lend a hand Bunting would be left at a loss, I have done what I could to reduce his material into form and to add such information as I had in my own power to communicate, so that I hope and trust his book will yet make a figure not wholly unworthy of its admirable subject.'*

The letter while informative is long and rambles a little, but it is clear that the main purpose was to establish whether the story about the harp *was an authentic one, and not founded on the anecdote of Echlin Kane mentioned in the Tour in 1773* [by Johnson and Boswell], *perhaps you can recollect whether you heard that story when a boy from O'Neill or from any other source early enough to take it out of the authority of Johnson and set it up on independent traditionary founds.*<sup>2</sup>

Apart from demonstrating that there were some reservations regarding Arthur O'Neill's story even then, the rest of the letter indicates that Ferguson's main motivation was to use the story of Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin as the main part of his argument (developed further in the 1840 publication), that the harp known as the Queen Mary harp in Scotland had formerly belonged to Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin and was therefore Irish. His request to Dr MacDonnell also suggests that maths may not have been one of his strong points given that the Doctor's acquaintance with O'Neill came about at the age of 15 in 1778 when his father employed the harper to teach him and his brothers. This ended in 1780 when his father died and he then spent the next 4 years studying medicine at Edinburgh University. Even if the good doctor could remember what he had learnt nearly 60 years previously, the date of 1778 when he became acquainted with O'Neill is still 5 years after the story regarding Echlin Ó Catháin was told to Johnson and Boswell. The actual event must have occurred earlier still.<sup>3</sup>



Queen Mary Harp at the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh

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<sup>2</sup> Young, R M. Sir Samuel Ferguson and the Irish Harp, *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*. Second Series Vol. 4. No. 3. pp. 189-190. (April 1898).

<sup>3</sup> The original anecdote told to Dr Johnson and Boswell did not aim to provide biographical information regarding the harper Echlin Ó Catháin but was being used to illustrate the miserliness of Lord MacDonald. As it was, when the journal of the 'Tour' was published, Lord MacDonald wrote a letter contesting most of the details of the story. That letter usually gets buried in a footnote in the later editions.

One claim made in Arthur O'Neill's account was that Roger (ie. 'Ruaidhrí Dall') *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...* If, as O'Neill is suggesting, Echlin Ó Catháin had visited Scotland just 40 years after the death of 'Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin' and we know that Echlin first visited Scotland circa 1751, then 'about' 40 years before that correlates closely with the death of the Scottish Rory Dall Morison. This also confirms that O'Neill was aware of the death of a harper called 'Rory Dall' in Scotland, and together with an orally acquired version of the incident involving a harp key and Echlin Ó Catháin, provides the ingredients for adding two plus two and making five with the story of an Irish 'Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin'.

It was the linkage to Echlin Ó Catháin which first raised my doubts about an Irish Ruaidhrí Dall, because like Arthur O'Neill, Echlin also left an account of his own life and that of other harpers. It was taken down in Argyle in 1779 but remained among the family papers of its scribe and did not become more widely known until published in *Eigse* in 1948, even then a journal with a small circulation.<sup>4</sup> Echlin was not modest about his own talents and rates himself against several early harpers and adds a list of, as he puts it, *Second rate Players on the Harp alive in 1779*. He makes no mention of an earlier namesake called Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin, which is surprising if there had been a famous harper by that name. Furthermore his own accounts of his travels and an anecdote about Carolan and Lyons, (who was his own tutor), suggests that O'Neill and Bunting's coverage was heavily embellished. It is also interesting to note that he does not mention Arthur O'Neill despite the latter's claim to have often met him, suggesting that if true, in Echlin's estimation O'Neill did not reach even the status of 'second rate players alive in 1779'.<sup>5</sup>

The first serious academic study of Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin was undertaken by Colm O'Baoill as part of a wider look at Irish Harpers in Scotland, published in the *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* in 1972.<sup>6</sup> A revised and updated version was then included as 'Two Irish harpers in Scotland' in a collection of studies on the

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4 Campbell, J. L. An Account of Some Irish Harpers as Given by Echlin O'Kean, Harper Anno 1779. *Eigse; A Journal of Irish Studies*. Vol. 6. pp 146-148. (1948).

5 Sanger, K. Echlin Ó Catháin (2014). <https://www.wirestrungharp.com/harps/harpers/o-cathain-echlin/>

6 O'Baoill, C. Some Irish Harpers in Scotland. *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*. Vol 47. pp 143-153 (1972)

musical life of Scots in the seventeenth century published in 2007.<sup>7</sup> Based primarily on the accounts in Bunting and the published versions of Arthur O'Neill's memoir and with the assumption that there had been a Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin, O'Baoill explores the evidential background. Starting with O'Neill's claims that Ruaidhrí Dall had been a 'chief of the Ó Catháins' with all the prestige that would have incurred; O'Baoill concludes that 'the known history of the Ó Catháin family does not support that account in any way', before looking at other possible explanations of the harper's supposed background.

This includes looking at an alternative branch of the Ó Catháins rather than the main line, but again there is no solid evidence and includes a dating problem. The only new information included by O'Baoill in the second article is a reference tucked away in a footnote that in the Chambers Edinburgh Journal of September 1840, an 'anonymous writer' had heard that the late Alexander Campbell had visited the grave of Ruaidhrí Dall somewhere in the West Highlands. Although that is indeed what the Journal says, it is clear from an unpublished account kept by Alexander Campbell while touring the highlands collecting material for his *Albans Anthology* that the grave he visited was that of Murdoch MacDonald, harper to MacLean of Coll. While these two articles by O'Baoill are a good coverage of the background to Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin, there is no solid evidence, and his own summary is 'we must conclude that the only real relic we have of Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin is his music'.

Turning to the music, much discussion has occurred over the years trying to assign tunes attributed to a Rory Dall to either the Scottish Rory Dall Morison or to an Irish Dall Ó Catháin. Once again, this assumes the existence of both and is based on a tune which appears in the 'Straloch manuscript', dated to 1627-29, called *Port Rorie Dall*. As it is generally agreed, that date is too early to be Morison, then by default, it is accepted to be the Irishman and therefore evidence of his existence. However, there are some problems as the Straloch manuscript, which was last seen when auctioned in 1845, has never been subjected to a modern examination to confirm whether it was all of one period and hand: or as other modern studies of music manuscripts have demonstrated that additions can be made by later owners, and binding changes show they are sections of more than one original work.

What is now known as the Straloch manuscript is a partial transcript made by G F Graham in 1839 before the original had disappeared. This is the source of the tune

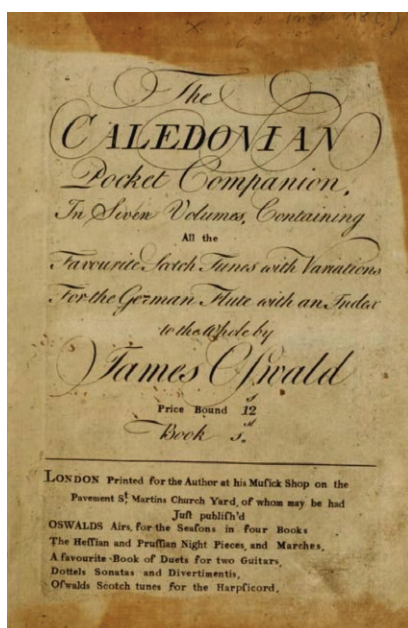
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7 O'Baoill, C. Two Irish Harpers in Scotland. *Defining Strains*, ed. Porter, J. pp. 228-237 (2007).

*Port Rorie Dall* and raises a major problem. Apart from the partial transcript of the Straloch manuscript, Graham separately compiled a list of all the tunes in the original manuscript and this list, while including several ‘ports’ some of them unnamed, does not list one called *Port Rorie Dall*.<sup>8</sup> The problem is compounded by the fact that an even earlier list of the contents of the Straloch manuscript published in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* in February 1823 also lacks a tune called *Port Rorie Dall*. Many other questions surround the original manuscript including a suggestion that it may have been written from both ends, a common practice of the time but which has implications for dating it from just the title page, but the discrepancy regarding the ‘Rory Dall’ tune makes using it as solid evidence for a ‘Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin’ unsound.<sup>9</sup>

Remaining with the music leads to this article’s title of ‘Da Mihi Manum’. Following on from the claims about Dall Ó Catháin’s chiefly status, O’Neill continues with the story of Ruaidhrí Dall’s meeting with Lady Eglinton and the circumstances of the composition of ‘Da Mihi Manum’ for her, followed by the claim that he also performed for James VI of Scotland and I of England. This tune which is central to that story first

appears in Scotland in the lute manuscripts of Lady Margaret Wemyss, dated to circa 1644, followed by the neighbouring estate of Balcarres manuscript of circa 1700-1702.



*The Caledonian Pocket Companion* by James Oswald, c. 1740

In further Scottish sources it appeared in print in *The Caledonian Pocket Companion* by James Oswald, who came from Crail close to the Balcarres Estate in Fife, although like all his work, was published circa 1745-59 in London. It was also included in the *MacFarland Manuscript* written circa 1740 by David Young (mainly associated with Aberdeen where he was born and Edinburgh where he lived for a while), and in the *Collection of Ancient Scots Music*, published circa 1778 by Daniel Dow from Southeast Perthshire.

8 The tune appears in the slightly earlier Skene MS (c. 1615-1625), as Port Ballangowne, and other ‘ports’ also have alternative name variants so it is conceivable that it was one of the unnamed ports in the Straloch MS which over time had later acquired the *Port Rorie Dall* name and was so noted by Graham.

9 Stell, E F. *Sources of Scottish Instrumental Music 1603 to 1707*. PhD Thesis (1999) pp 186-193; For evidence of later additions see Edwards, W. The Musical Sources, p. 50, footnote 8 in *Defining Strain*, ed. Porter, J (2007), and for a critique of G F Grahams transcription see in the same work, pp 81-86. MacKillop, R. *For kissing for clapping for loving for proveing*.

Da Mihi Manum's first appearance in Ireland was in '*A Collection of the most celebrated Irish Tunes*', by John and William Neal published in 1724. It was also mentioned by the Dublin poet Laurence Whyte in his collection of poems published in 1742.<sup>10</sup> The tune is noted on three occasions among the Bunting MS but none dated to before 1800. However, Bunting must have known about 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 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, mention who composed the tune and, in all cases, including Bunting's manuscript and Arthur O'Neill'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 attempted 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.

How 'Da Mihi Manum' reached Ireland is unknown, but there is a potential link between its publication by Neal in Dublin in 1724 and Scotland through the involvement of the Italian musician Lorenzo Bocchi. The Wemyss lute manuscript was compiled by Lady Margaret Wemyss (1630-1648), at her home in Fife in 1644, and 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 a suggestion that

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<sup>10</sup> Whyte L '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 O'Rourke tune it continues 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 O'Neill's later claims.

Lorenzo 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*, is correct; if the music manuscript did not move to Sutherland until the 1734 marriage, it may still have been at Wemyss and available for him to examine.<sup>11</sup>

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 wedding*.

Consideration of the background to Da Mihi Manum has always been biased towards Arthur O'Neill's claim that it was composed by Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin for Lady Eglinton. 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. After Neal's work of 1724, the next appearance in print is in Daniel Wright's *Aria Di Camera* of 1727-30, published in London and thought to have been copied from Neal. The first printed publication associated with Scotland was by James Oswald, who also published in London and then the manuscript by David Young and the printed work by Daniel Dow. None of these sources name a composer, all use the Latin title, and there is no suggestion of any connection to the Eglinton family.

'Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence' is a neat quote but in real terms 'evidence of absence' can be used but with appropriate qualification. This requires looking at where, if Arthur O'Neill's claims for a Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin are correct, he should appear. This starts with O'Neill's contemporary Echlin Ó Catháin who also left

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11 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.

us a memoir, but does not make any mention of a Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin which is odd and suggests he had no knowledge of such a namesake. Moving on to the question of ‘Lady Eglinton’ who is central to O’Neill’s account, the Eglinton papers comprise one of the largest collections of family archives held in the National Records of Scotland, and I have worked through them twice, the second time after they were subject to a major modern re-cataloguing, in case I had missed anything the first time.

There is no mention of a Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin nor anything which would support O’Neill’s account.<sup>12</sup> This is surprising if the account was true, as the Eglinton family was very musical (including one 18th century member whose portrait shows her playing a harp), but there is no evidence that they thought there was any connection between their family and ‘Da Mihi Manum’. This also seems to be confirmed by the employment by the then Earl, sometime before 1805, of the Irish Piper John Murphy (d. 1818) a contemporary of Arthur O’Neill; whose publication *A collection of Irish airs and jiggs with variations adapted for the pianoforte, violin, & violoncello, by John Murphy, performer on the Union Pipes at Eglinton Castle*, undated but published circa 1808-1810. ‘Da Mihi Manum’ is not included in that publication; this is again somewhat surprising as it was supported by the Earl, if the tune was known to be associated with the Earl of Eglinton’s family.

As I have already noted, the first serious academic study was that by Professor Colm Ó Baoill in 1971 and that his revised version was published in 2007. Using mostly published sources and the assumption that a ‘Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin’ had existed, he explored the possible connections but without finding any firm contemporary evidence. These papers which provide a useful coverage of the background, have often been quoted but usually without including the author’s meticulous academic qualification of his results. Then in 2001 came the publication of Alan Fletcher’s *Drama and the Performing Arts in Pre-Cromwellian Ireland*. Started under the umbrella of the Records of Early English Drama Project, (REED), it is the most comprehensive study of the early sources pertaining to musicians and similar performers yet undertaken. It makes absolutely no mention of a Dall Ó Catháin despite covering the period during which he was supposed to have flourished. Another project is currently underway, again under the umbrella of REED, to compile a similar study covering Scotland. Although it is a work still in progress, to date they have not found any contemporary references to Ó Catháin, although they have added some more names to the corpus of Scottish harpers.

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<sup>12</sup> The family papers and history were also used by William Fraser in his *Memorials of the Montgomerie Earls of Eglinton* 2 volumes (1859), again no mention of the harper.

To fully evaluate negative evidence must go beyond specific examples of, in this case where Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin does not appear, but must fully appreciate the quantity of archival sources covering the period. This is especially important when evaluating O'Neill's claims that Ó Catháin performed before James the VI of Scotland and first of England. Wherever the King happened to be was always the centre of the royal court and the English records are extensive with no gaps. For the period covering when Ó Catháin was active, according to Arthur O'Neill, the records have been well searched and produced references to several harpers, both Welsh and Irish and details of the latter have been published, especially through the work of Seán Donnelly.<sup>13</sup>

The Scottish court records tell a similar story, they are complete and detailed and although they do note one Irish harper, a William McEgan who performed for James VI in 1581, like the English crown records there is no sign of a harper called Ó Catháin or any event which would support Arthur O'Neill's story. Even when two Irish harpers ventured further abroad to the Danish Court, they can be found in those court records, and one actually managed to have his portrait painted.<sup>14</sup> Which returns to a consideration of 'Evidence of Absence'; when the full extent of the contemporary records for that period are appreciated, records in which, following O'Neill's account the harper should have appeared, and when those records do include other contemporary harpers, then that 'absence' is significant.

Indeed, the complete lack of any evidence for a 'Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin' other than Arthur O'Neill's completely unsupported story, suggests that treating the harper as a historical fact is very unsound, at least until someone produces some solid contemporary supporting evidence, which given the quantity and nature of the records which have already been searched seems unlikely; there is perhaps a better chance of proving the existence of leprechauns.

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<sup>13</sup> Donnelly, Seán. *Ceol, a journal of Irish music*. Vol. vi (April 1984). pp. 34-36; Vol. vii (December 1984). pp. 54-62 and Vol. viii (July 1986), pp. 40-50. <https://www.itma.ie/texts/ceol-6/#close>

<sup>14</sup> See [https://wirestrungharp.com/harps/other\\_images/thim-painting/](https://wirestrungharp.com/harps/other_images/thim-painting/)

## Keith Sanger

Keith Sanger has been studying the historical background of the harps and bagpipes of Scotland and Ireland for close to fifty years. This has resulted in a number of publications including *Tree of Strings: A History of the Harp in Scotland*, co-authored with Alison Kinnaird in 1992, and *Donald MacDonald's Collection of Piobaireachd, vols 1 and 2* (2006, 2011), co-edited with Roderick Cannon.

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