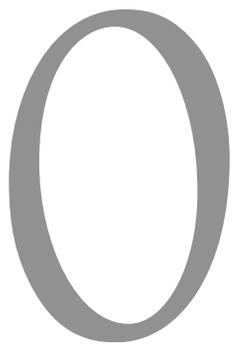




JOHN EGAN'S
INGENIOUS INVENTION—
THE "PORTABLE IRISH HARP"
by Nancy Hurrell



One August morning in 2015 in a small rental car, I began my journey across Dublin's busy streets in rush hour traffic—driving on the left side of the road while trying to remember how to use a stick shift—and to not be too distracted by the thought that I was on my way to the house of the President of Ireland. The President's *aide-de-camp* was expecting me, and with the help of a GPS and a map, I reached the gate at Phoenix Park at the appointed time, was waved through by the guard and proceeded right up to the main entrance of *Áras an Uachtaráin*, the President's House.¹ This was just another extraordinary day of historical harp research in my quest to examine the harps of nineteenth century harpmaker, John Egan (*fl.* 1797–1829).

The culmination of my years spent studying Egan harps is a book, *THE EGAN IRISH HARPS: Tradition, Patrons and Players*, to be published in 2019 by Four Courts Press, Dublin. For over a decade I have personally surveyed and photographed around sixty Egan harps in off-site museum storage facilities, including the National Museum of Ireland (Dublin), the Victoria & Albert Museum (London), the Fitzwilliam Museum (Cambridge), and the Metropolitan Museum (New York), as well as private collections in castles and the Great Houses of Ireland, Scotland, and England. For the auspicious visit to the President's House in 2015, I was granted permission to examine the small Irish harp housed in the prestigious Francini Corridor at *Áras an Uachtaráin*. The instrument had been presented to President DeValera by Mrs. Julia Fennell in 1972, and the symbolic green harp is prominently displayed in an alcove, where it is regularly seen by dignitaries, heads of state, and royalty as they enter the official residence.

I was excited to view the harp, which had not been examined in recent times, and I also anticipated visiting the historic house, formerly known as the Viceregal Lodge, particularly the State Reception Room, where an event relating to my book's subject had taken place. In 1821, during King George IV's momentous visit to Ireland, the harpmaker's son, Charles, had performed on an Egan harp for the monarch one evening at the house. As I entered the splendid space, still decorated in period style furniture, satin wall coverings, and gilt ornate plaster ceiling, I could easily visualize a royal performance with Irish tunes played on a harp in the flickering candlelight. My study of the President's harp proved to be equally enlightening. About three feet in height, with bowed pillar and gold shamrock decoration, it was "vintage Egan," made in the familiar form and decoration of his "Portable Irish Harp" model. However, when the *aide-de-camp* kindly opened the glass case and lifted out the harp, to my surprise I read the painted inscription on the lower soundboard: *ROBINSON & BUSSELL*. Although everything about this instrument mirrored the work of John Egan, the harp had the stamp of another musical instrument firm. The important discovery led me in yet another direction of research, and I eventually uncovered a string of harpmakers who imitated Egan's original harp model well into the nineteenth century.



ABOVE
Birr Castle, Co. Offaly, Ireland

BELOW
John Egan harp in the Gothic music room at Birr Castle.

LEFT
Nancy Hurrell's CD, *The Egan Irish Harp*



Why devote years to the study of a nineteenth century Irish harpmaker? I have often asked myself this question. In our Boston Biographers Group, a monthly meeting of local writers, I've observed a common goal among members: to bring recognition to the life of another person who has either been overlooked in history or incorrectly represented in the historical record. Initially, I was simply curious about the harps of John Egan, but as time went on, I felt it was important to acknowledge the inventor of the first modern Irish harp.² My initial encounter with an Egan harp came in 2002, when a portable harp was briefly in the office of Darcy Kuronen, Pappalardo Curator of Musical Instruments at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. I'm a harp consultant to the MFA, and I assist with re-stringing harps in the collection and present gallery talks—demonstrating the historical harps which are still playable. I was asked to advise the owner of the Egan harp as to restoration and a suitable home for the instrument.³ My first impression of the harp was fairly negative, for it had been clumsily overpainted in a modern bright green color, and when I lifted it up, it was awkwardly heavy for such a small instrument, only three feet in height. The weight was due to its unusual mechanism with metal discs on the neck and ivory levers, or “ditals,” on the inner pillar, which I later perceived as an ingenious invention for playing sharps and flats. A closer look revealed intricately painted gold shamrocks visible on the soundboard, and on the brass plate was a finely engraved royal crest with a lion and a unicorn, along with the inscription: *J. Egan 30 Dawson St Dublin; Harp Maker by Authority of the Royal Warrant to His Most Gracious Majesty George IVth & the Royal Family*. The idea of a royal harpmaker was intriguing, and the inscription confirmed the harp's vintage date of around 1820–30, the reign of George IVth. Curious to learn more about John Egan, I consulted the *New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* but was disappointed to find only a brief and rather negative entry. There seemed to be very little



ABOVE
John Egan Royal Portable Irish Harp
before restoration.

BELOW
Egan harp displayed in the
John J. Burns Library, Boston College.



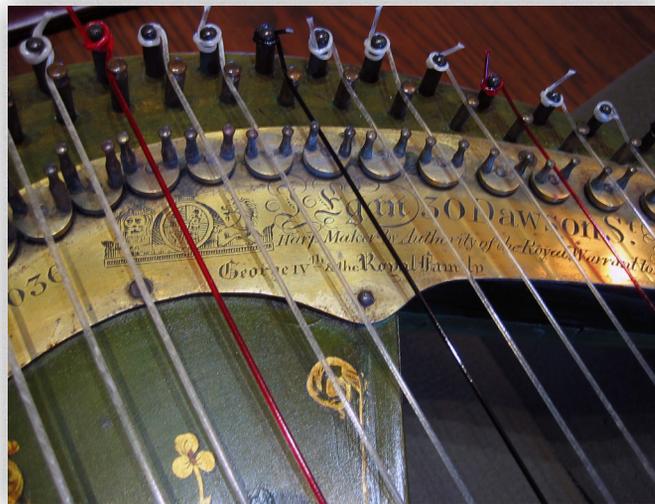
written about this royal harpmaker, and so my research initially began with the study of other surviving harps. Over the ensuing months I visited Egan harps in New England instrument collections at Harvard, Yale, and Boston College, and later I continued the work further afield, in museums abroad. As my understanding of the harps and the socio-political period of early 1800s Ireland evolved, I shared the information in lectures and papers at conferences and in journal articles, including the *Folk Harp Journal*.⁴ And a dozen years after seeing the first Egan harp, I was invited by the editor of the *New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* to revise and expand the “John Egan” entry in the 2014 edition, published by Oxford University Press.

Although Egan harps are perceived today mainly as rare historical art objects, they were made to be musical instruments, and the book therefore introduces each harp model through the players and the music played. In the age of Jane Austen, a Grecian pedal harp was the instrument of choice in the Regency music room for aristocratic ladies, and several sumptuously decorated Egan pedal harps still survive in the Great Houses. The literary celebrities Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan) and Thomas Moore, “the Bard of Erin,” also played Egan portable harps. Moore's harp still survives in the Royal Irish Academy, which houses the Library of Thomas Moore. In 2008 the RIA celebrated the 200th anniversary of the publication of Moore's *Irish Melodies*, and I was invited to present a talk as part of the commemorative lunchtime lecture series. A review described a “record attendance from all parts of the country” for my harp lecture,⁵ and afterwards many audience members queued up to speak to me for nearly two hours. I heard poignant anecdotes of family members who played the harp, and others gave me leads to Egan harp sightings, and many expressed gratitude for my work on Egan harps. An awareness of the importance of the national instrument within the culture stayed with me, and the experience propelled me to consider a book project.

Finding time to devote to writing while working as a professional harpist was not an easy task. Nonetheless, it seemed as if at each stage, right on cue, an unforeseen opportunity came to my aid. When I reached the chapter on the fascinating novelist/harpist Sydney Owenson, I was invited to collaborate with radio broadcaster Una Hunt for a R TE program, “The Wild Irish Girl and her Harp.”⁶ Similarly, a chance to present a lecture at the Royal Academy of Music Museum, London, prompted further research on the academy’s splendid winged-maiden Egan harp and its relation to George IV’s visit to Ireland. An invitation to present a paper at the meeting of the Historical Harp Society of Ireland, Kilkenny, helped to solidify information on the Egan wire-strung harps made for the Dublin and Belfast Harp Society Schools. And then there were other surprising occurrences, such as the discovery of an Egan harp in a dumpster in New York City in 2009. First I was contacted for information by Julie Finch, the “dumpster diver” who discovered the harp, and soon after, the phone rang and it was *The New York Times* wanting to interview me, followed by a call from the *Irish Times* in Dublin! Apparently I had become the recognized authority on Egan harps.

Research for the book required endless hours of poring over newspapers from the period, on microfilm and later online, plus days of careful searching through *Dublin Directories* at the National Library of Ireland. There were moments of discovering “gems” in various archives, such as the Beinecke Library at Yale where a hand-written letter by Charles Egan to Princess Augusta,⁷ describes his father’s invention. In an archive at Oxford University I came across a lock of hair tied with a pink ribbon in a tiny envelope upon which was written, “To be burnt unopened—if I am dead, E.C.”⁸ Each successive harp visited seemed to divulge a new aspect. At times when I was convinced I had seen every conceivable Egan harp model possible, another instrument would become known to me, with an unusual variation of a mechanism or an imaginative decoration, like acrobats and dragons!

A final revelation from the project was the actual sound of an Egan harp. In 2008 an opportunity came my way to purchase a Portable Irish Harp from an owner on Vancouver Island. Wary of cross-country shipping, I collected the harp and traveled back to Boston via train on a memorable week-long journey. I re-strung the harp with historically-correct stringing, and the clear, bright tone of my Egan harp was startling. For period appropriate repertoire, I found music specifically arranged for the instrument by Charles Egan at the British Library in London and the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. My CD, *The Egan Irish Harp*, recorded in 2011, is the first ever recording of an Egan harp. Very few Egan harps are still playable. However, in 2012 I was invited by Lord and Lady Rosse to present a concert on the family Egan harp at Birr Castle, Co. Offaly, Ireland. As the light faded in the stunning Gothic music saloon, I felt a connection to Lady Alicia, the harp’s original owner as I played pieces from her music book. I was a guest in the castle for the weekend, and a secret staircase from my room led to a hidden door in the music room. My journey discovering the world of John Egan and his harps has been truly extraordinary.



ABOVE
Royal crest and inscription on the John Egan harp in the Burns Library, Boston College.

BELOW
Nancy Hurrell with the John Egan winged-maiden harp in the Royal Academy of Music Museum, London.
Photo courtesy of Hana Zushi, RAM



NANCY HURRELL

Nancy is a harp historian and consultant to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. An expert on Egan harps, she authored the "John Egan" entry in *New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* (2014) and has numerous historical harp articles published in journals. Her lectures on Egan harps include the Royal Irish Academy (Dublin), Royal Academy of Music Museum (London), and the Metropolitan Museum (NY). Hurrell performs in several Boston early music ensembles and she has been a harp instructor at the Boston Conservatory and Brandeis University. Her ground breaking CD, *The Egan Irish Harp*, is the first recording of an Egan Portable Irish Harp, circa 1820.

FOOTNOTES

1. During my visit President Higgins and his wife Sabina, were away. A report on the harp was later sent to the Office of Protocol for the President to read, and more recently President Higgins granted me permission to include photos of the harp in my book.
2. Before 1800, the form of Irish harp, or *cláirseach*, played for centuries within the culture was a wire-strung instrument tuned in modes. Egan's new Portable Irish Harp was a small gut-strung instrument with mechanisms similar to levers, to enable sharps and flats, and it became the template for today's Irish or Celtic harp.
3. The harp was too fragile to play, but I oversaw the cosmetic restoration of the harp by a Boston furniture restorer and I re-strung the instrument. It became part of the collection at the John J. Burns Library, Boston College, and is currently on view in the Irish Room. The Burns Library (Mary Stack McNiff Fund) is a generous sponsor of the book and additional funding is granted by O'Brien International.
4. Nancy Hurrell, "A Harp from 19th Century Ireland: The Royal Portable Harp by John Egan," *Folk Harp Journal* 119 (2003).
5. News @ RIA 4: autumn/winter (2008), p. 4.
6. Una Hunt, producer, with contributors Nancy Hurrell, Claire Connolly and Julie Donovan. "The Wild Irish Girl and her Harp." RTÉ Lyric Feature. First broadcast July 25, 2014.
7. Princess Augusta Sophia was King George IV's sister. The letter is among Princess Augusta's music collection in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
8. Conroy Collection, Balliol College Archives & Manuscripts, Oxford University. The envelope belonged to Edward Conroy, who was married to Lady Alicia Parsons whose Egan harp survives at Birr Castle, Co. Offaly, Ireland. The circumstances of the lock of hair was not documented in the archive.



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