



Review: *The Egan Irish Harps: Tradition, Patrons and Players*

by Leslie Shortlidge

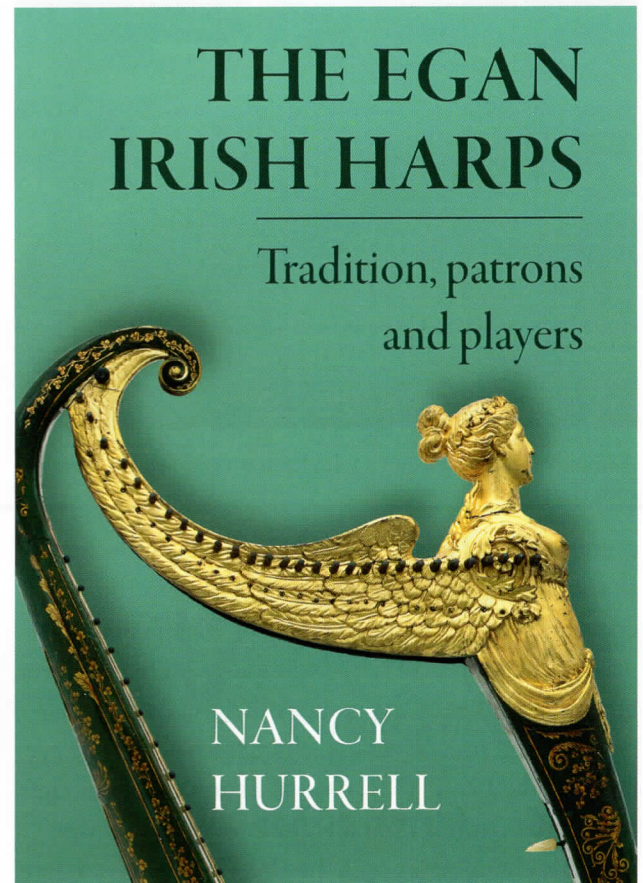
The Egan Irish Harps: Tradition, patrons and players by Nancy Hurrell. Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2019, 302 pp. 44 color plates. € 50.00.

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HOW do we know where we're going unless we know where we've been? For Celtic and lever harpists, Nancy Hurrell's latest book, a well-written history of the long-lasting influence of canny and successful instrument manufacturer John Egan, will provide fascinating insights into the past of their instruments.

John Egan of Dublin was a master of marketing, a skilled craftsman, and a man who found himself in the right place at the right time. Egan successfully harnessed the purchasing power of a rising middle class and the sentiment of an Ireland perhaps not entirely sold on the Act of Union of 1801, an agreement that brought Ireland into the fold of Great Britain.

Pride and patriotism spurred the desire to own Irish-manufactured goods, and the feared spectacle of a vanishing tradition of Irish harpers gave birth to schools and inspired the upper classes to take up the harp. John Egan also gave Sébastian Erard a run for his money by dominating the Irish market and appealing to the Anglo-Irish aristocracy. Erard wrote of the difficulties selling harps in Dublin, remarking that a preference for native instruments was paramount: "This national spirit has won friends for Egan" (179). Egan also rode the artistic wave of Romanticism, which encouraged self-expression as well as preservation of the past. The portable harp served both needs.



An "early adopter" of the Egan portable harp was novelist Sydney Owenson. Owenson took on the persona Lady Glorvina from her popular novel *The Wild Irish Girl*, performing music in private homes on her Egan harp while in character as Glorvina, wearing a black cloak and a bodkin in her hair, looking beautiful in the parlors of private homes (illus. 2.5 and 2.6). Owenson championed Irish music and culture by harnessing both nationalism and Romanticism, and then performing for receptive audiences.

Author Hurrell's narrative reminds us that any successful venture, in business and/or the arts, re-



Author Nancy Hurrell and a John Egan winged-maiden Portable Irish Harp.

quires trial and error. Trained as a blacksmith, Egan abandoned a more humble career path after first encountering a French pedal harp: “Egan’s ability to unlock the secrets of harp organology on his own was an early signifier of the maker’s lifelong traits of self-reliance and inventiveness, characteristics of the age in which he lived” (33). One of Egan’s earlier models included a curious dital mechanism: levers on the neck for changing keys at the touch of a finger. Egan was not the inventor but was willing to make a run at the new technology (107).

Festooned with hand-painted golden shamrocks on a deep green surface and often featuring the spirit of Ireland as personified by a winged Hibernia atop the neck, Egan’s Portable Irish Harps were the perfect instrument to indulge nationalist sentiment by playing modern versions of traditional Irish songs. “With its bowed pillar shape and small size, the model visually paid homage to Ireland’s oldest and most celebrated instrument, the iconic ‘Brian Boru’ harp” (14). The portable harp was soon styled the *Royal Portable Irish Harp* after Egan’s well-executed

courting of Great Britain’s royal family. These harps often bore a thistle and a rose in addition to a shamrock: an acknowledgement of the union of Ireland, Scotland, and England under the crown of England (illus. 2.4).

Beautiful harps and beautiful women were a winning combination. Young ladies of quality proved their worth as mates by their musical prowess: “Visually, an exquisite empire-style pedal harp was the perfect prop in the ongoing drama of courtship unfolding in the music room. A finely decorated instrument drew attention to a young woman’s own loveliness...” (201).

At least one woman was also a commercial success in harp manufacture: Miss Egan, daughter of John Egan. Although we don’t know Miss Egan’s first name, we do know that she was married to harp-maker William Jackson. They passed along a stable business to a third generation of harp makers, (190-197). And Egan’s nephew, Francis Hewson, made harps through the 1860s. His harps were adorned with Irish wolfhounds rather than the lion and unicorn of Great Britain (197).

Nancy Hurrell has written a fine history that should appeal even to non-specialists. Her detailed research, generous use of illustrations, and clear technical explanations make this an authoritative book. Hurrell’s foregrounding and importance of women in the popularity of the portable harp is much appreciated, from marriageable young ladies to a one-woman act on through to the commercial success of John Egan’s daughter. Folk and lever harpists who read *The Egan Irish Harps* will gain an appreciation of their own place along the continuum of musicians, as well as understand how improvements in technology have made it possible to play and afford their own portable gems.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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