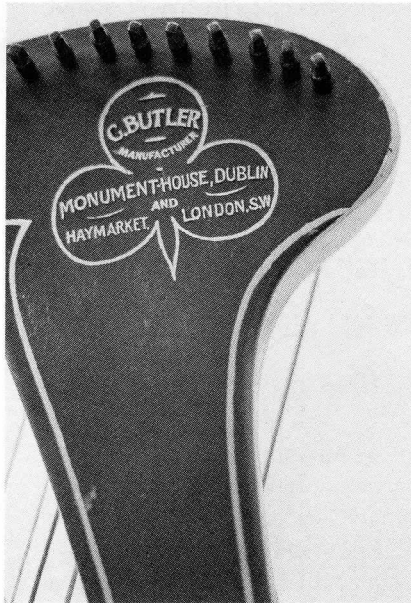


# Historical Harps:

## A Harp of Erin Rediscovered in the Horniman Museum

by Nancy Hurrell



In London, I recently visited two wonderful collections of historical harps, at the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Horniman Museum. The V&A has at least fifteen harps, including two Welsh triples, harps by Erard and Egan, and several French harps from the eighteenth century. The Horniman Museum

collection has eleven European harps, including harps by Cousineau, Erard, Egan and others, as well as several small ethnic harps. I had arranged with Margaret Birley, Keeper of Musical Instruments at the Horniman, to examine and photograph harps in the collection. In addition to the harps in the Music Gallery, I was also granted access to survey harps at the Horniman Museum's off-site Study Collections Centre, where the instruments not on display are stored. The Horniman Museum owns 7,000 musical instruments. Dr. Bradley Strauchen, Deputy Keeper of Musical Instruments, was my guide to the harp collection at the SCC. It seems I was the first person in at least twenty years (since Margaret has been curator) to examine the harps in the Horniman Museum.

### *~The Horniman Museum owns 7,000 musical instruments.~*

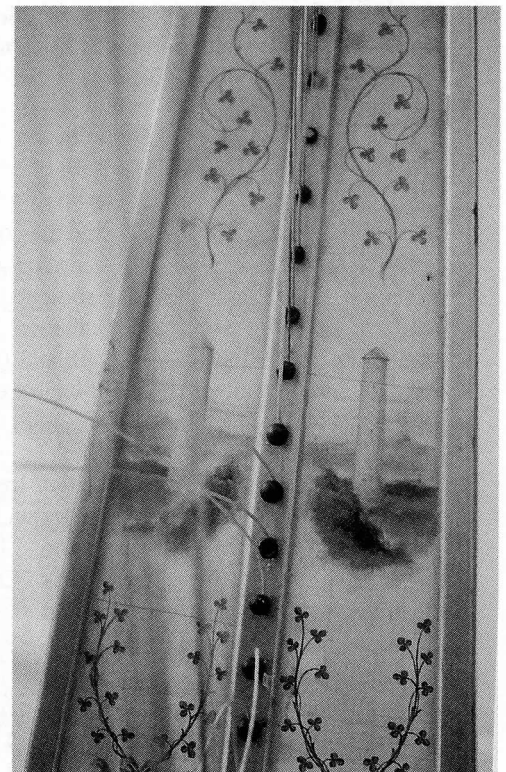
The Horniman Museum was started by Frederick John Horniman, a Victorian tea trader, who began collecting artifacts from around the world in the 1860's. In Forest Hill, the collection began as a family house museum, and eventually moved to a purpose-built museum, which opened in 1901. In addition to the Musical Instruments collection, the museum has two other areas: World Cultures and Natural History. Three harps acquired prior to 1898, were part of the collection housed in Horniman's home: an Irish John Egan dital harp, a French Cousineau single-action pedal harp, and an Irish Butler harp. I examined the Cousineau and Egan harps in the Music

Gallery, and looked forward to viewing the harps at the Study Collection Centre on the following day, including the 19th century Irish harp by George Butler.

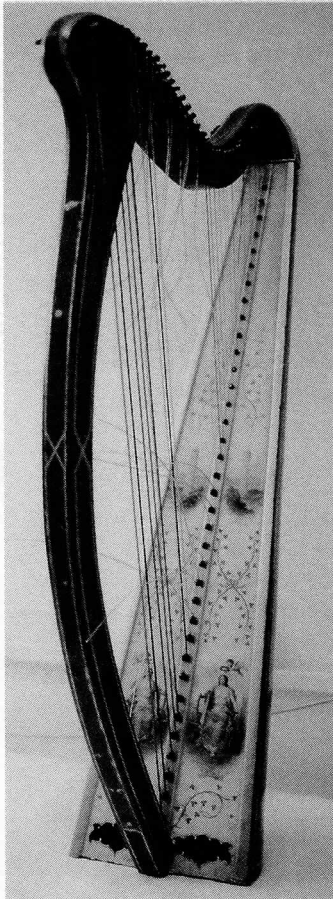
### *~An Irish wolfhound sits next to each figure.~*

I had not heard of George Butler, and was curious as to the shape and design of this harp. Records show that the harp was acquired by F.J. Horniman for £16.16s. The harp, in storage for some time, was wrapped in layers of paper, inside a large box. It was with great anticipation that Bradley and I carefully lifted out the harp and unwrapped it. At once we were struck by what we saw: a green Irish revival harp in quite good condition, with beautiful paintings on the soundboard. The paintings, in mirror image on both sides of the center strip, are of two round towers, and below, are two almost identical seated female figures, each holding a harp. An Irish wolfhound sits next to each figure. The neck, column and back of the soundbox are painted deep green, decorated with gold trim. On the back of the column, where it joins the neck, is a painted gold outline of a shamrock, containing the inscription: G

BUTLER-MANUFACTURER-MONUMENT-HOUSE, DUBLIN-AND-HAYMARKET, LONDON, S.W. According to Grove's Dictionary, George Butler was a firm of instrument makers, producing mostly brass and woodwind instruments, active in London and Dublin between 1826 and 1927. The firm was based at Haymarket from 1865-1913.



Round towers set in a hilly landscape



*The Butler Irish harp is similar in shape to the John Egan design.*

The harp was listed as an "Irish dital harp, Butler, number 3869". Although it doesn't have ditals (ivory knobs on the column to activate the sharpening mechanism), the Butler harp is actually very similar in shape to the dital harps made by John Egan in the early 1800's, which he called the Royal Portable Harp. It is believed that some of the workers in the Egan workshop continued to make harps after the Egan business was closed. For raising the pitch of the strings, the Butler harp has ring stops, in groups of one and two. A ring stop acts like a blade (type of lever), with the string passing through the hole in the blade. I've seen ring stops on Egan harps, and I was interested to also discover ring stops on an English Harp Lute, c.1815, in the Victoria and Albert Museum. These hybrid

instruments combined the shapes of guitars and harps, and were popular with London ladies and their Parisian counterparts.

The overall height of the Butler harp is 39in., and it has 36 string holes. The extreme width of the soundboard is 23.5cm. The length of the longest string is 92.5cm., and the shortest string is 10cm. Inside the soundboard, there is a fitting for a retractable stabilizing rod, another feature found in John Egan harps. The rod would have been stored inside the soundboard, but the rod is missing. When drawn out to the necessary length and fastened by a brass screw at the back, the rod would have stood on the floor supporting the harp as it was held in the lap.

The harp, we know, is the symbol of Ireland. When looking at the soundboard paintings on this harp, one recognizes other nationalistic symbols. The female figures, so sensitively rendered, are of Erin or Hibernia, the female personification of Ireland. She holds a harp. It is interesting that the harp she holds is actually a small slender gothic (pointed) shaped instrument, not the chunky high-headed traditional wire-strung Irish harp. Nor does it resemble the revival shaped harps of the Egan or Butler. It is more like a medieval or early renaissance harp, of natural wood. There is a tradition of

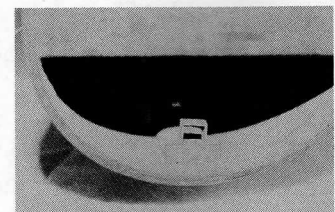
harpmakers sending the soundboards to an artist's studio to be painted; that may have been the case with the Butler harp. Bouquets of symbolic shamrocks tied with ribbons are above and below the figure. Another popular emblem of national identity, an Irish wolf-hound, sitting beside Erin, looks adoringly at her. The wolf-hound wears a gold crown around his neck, a symbol of loyalty. A beehive, a symbol of industry, is on the other side of the figure.

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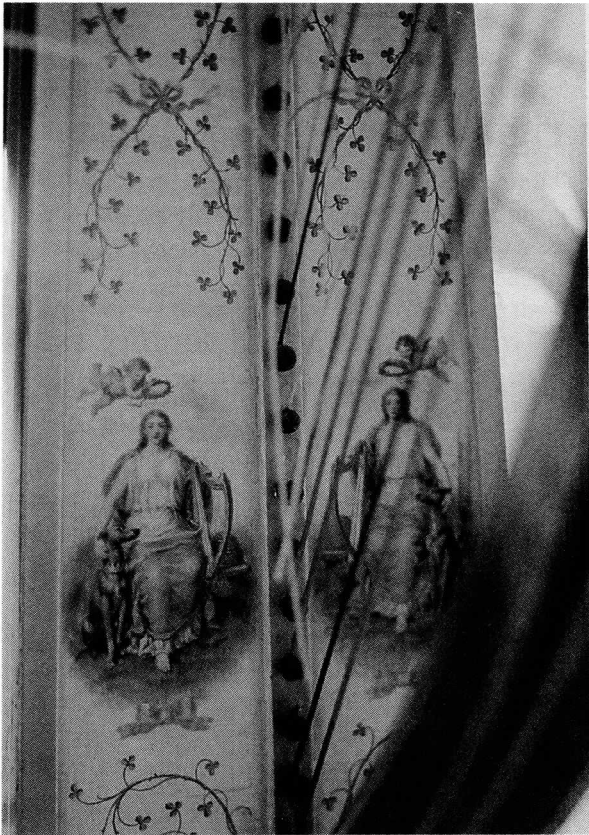
What did the round towers mean? Back in Boston, I forwarded photos of the harp to Beth Sweeney, Irish Music Center, Burns Library, Boston College. Beth and her colleague, Shelly Barber, found many pictures of similar round towers set in a hilly landscape in Ireland, as well as references to them as nationalistic symbols. According to an article by Eileen Reilly, round towers were symbols of "the antiquity of Ireland's civilization which preceded English conquest...an image which signified durability as well as accomplishment." The figure Erin has been described as a symbol of "prosperity, peace, and national unity", and was often depicted in political cartoons in the 19th century [L. Perry Curtis, Jr.]. The iconic Erin is typically endowed with youth, purity, and bare feet. She is often portrayed in the struggle for home rule, about to be crowned. On the Butler harp, a putti figure is about to crown Erin with a laurel wreath. In Reilly's article, the emblems which represent Ireland's nationalist identity are often the harp, shamrock, wolfhound and round tower. In the political cartoons of the 1830's, these 'emblems' often surrounded the politician Daniel O'Connell, the 'Liberator', who advocated independence from Britain.

*~At the bottom of the soundboard are two curious black shapes.~*

At the bottom of the soundboard are two curious black shapes. Although their meaning is unknown, I have a theory as to what they might be. In the same position at the bottom of the Egan harp in the



*Inside the soundboard there is a fitting for a retractable stabilizing rod.*



Erin with harp, wolfhound and beehive

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is the royal warrant and coat of arms of King George IV, who reigned from 1820-30. George IV was a patron of the arts and was popular in Ireland. Instrument makers displayed the coveted royal warrant, and Egan named his small harp: the Royal Portable Harp. The royal warrant, with lion and unicorn, on Egan harps is either painted in gold somewhere on the harp, or it is etched on the brass plate. Two Egan harps I have seen in the Boston area, one in the Edward R. Hewitt Collection at Harvard University, and another at the John J. Burns Library, Boston College, both have rubbed out areas on the brass plates where a coat of arms might have existed. I wondered if the royal insignia had actually been removed, since throughout history there has been a continuing anti-British sentiment in Ireland. On the Butler harp, the fluted black shape is similar to the shape of the warrant on the Egan at the MFA. Might there have been an inscription or a royal coat of arms, which was painted out in black at a later date?

***~Might there have been an inscription or a royal coat of arms, which was painted out in black at a later date?~***

There are many unknowns: the date it was made, who it was made for, and the music played upon it. Studying the

paintings on the Irish Butler harp gives insights into the history, national identity and culture of Ireland. The decoration on this 19th century harp in the Horniman Museum is an interesting example of nationalistic icons and individual artistry, on this unique harp of Erin.

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Nancy Hurrell performs on classical, celtic and historical harps. Nancy plays renaissance harp in the early music group, RENAISSONICS, for concerts, radio, and monthly renaissance dances. She is a harp consultant for the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, presenting gallery talks on the harp collection. Nancy serves on the board of



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