



The Egan Irish Harps: tradition, patrons and players

by Nancy Hurrell, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2019, 301 pp., €45.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-84682-759-4

Gary Hastings

To cite this article: Gary Hastings (2020) The Egan Irish Harps: tradition, patrons and players, Folk Life, 58:1, 67-67, DOI: [10.1080/04308778.2020.1735106](https://doi.org/10.1080/04308778.2020.1735106)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/04308778.2020.1735106>



Published online: 04 Mar 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 7



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

BOOK REVIEWS

The Egan Irish Harps: tradition, patrons and players, by Nancy Hurrell, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2019, 301 pp., €45.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-84682-759-4

The Irish Harp tradition, which escaped extinction only by the skin of its teeth, has made the journey from the big house to the public house, and as with Uilleann pipes, from obscurity to ubiquity. This book traces the history of the instrument in the last two centuries as it borrowed respectability from wider European classical traditions and then wrapped itself in the shamrock-studded green mist of nineteenth-century Irish identity. This transition was facilitated by John Egan, who developed the '[Royal] Portable Irish Harp', an instrument 'with a lighter timbre suited to the classical style and Regency elegance'. Gut-strung and with mechanisms to facilitate key changes, small, frequently green, and spotted with gold shamrocks, it appealed to all the right musical and nationalistic tastes of the times amongst the rising middle and upper classes. It took the look of the surviving medieval instruments and modernized their design and construction, and thus ensured the survival of the instrument into our own times and into the heart of contemporary traditional music and indeed other genres.

Hurrell initially explores the harp as a symbol of national identity and the cultural role of the Gaelic harp. She then looks at Egan harp models in order of invention, and the career of John Egan himself, from apprentice blacksmith to harp designer in his shop on Dawson Street in Dublin and then harp maker by appointment to George IV. She looks at not just harps but harpists, and gives surrounding context to the instrument and the music played on it. In one chapter, the societal role of the harp as a female 'accomplishment' is investigated through the life and instruments of three women who played Egan harps. She presents new research also on the sounds produced by these harps.

John Egan's harp came at a critical time in the history of the instrument. Without it, it is nearly certain that the harp would have disappeared from the culture. Hurrell has done a wonderful job of documenting this history, generously illustrated and lucidly written in great detail. It provides not just an exhaustive historical account of one kind of instrument, but supplies a missing section of the development of music in Ireland up to the present day.

Gary Hastings
Rector of Holy Trinity Church, Killiney
 gryh@me.com

© 2020 Gary Hastings
<https://doi.org/10.1080/04308778.2020.1735106>



Mass-Observation and visual culture: depicting everyday lives in Britain, by Lucy D. Curzon, Abingdon, Routledge, 2017, 182 pp., 8 colour plates, 21 B/W illustrations, £125.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-4724-3650-4

Mass-Observation began life in 1937, in London and Bolton, as an 'anthropology of ourselves'. As much a cultural movement as a research project, it involved a vast array of voluntary