

BOOK REVIEW

By Siobhán Armstrong

The Dublin launch of US scholar-harpist, Nancy Hurrell's new book, *The Egan Irish Harps: Tradition, patrons and players*, took place in April of 2019, at the Irish Traditional Music Archive.

Following are the remarks made at that time by Siobhán Armstrong, Founder-Director of the Historical Harp Society of Ireland

I would like to acknowledge Four Courts Press and to thank them for their commitment to publish the latest scholarship on Irish history and culture and to making new research available to scholars, the wider public, and, as a musician myself, to musicians in the field.



Siobhán Armstrong

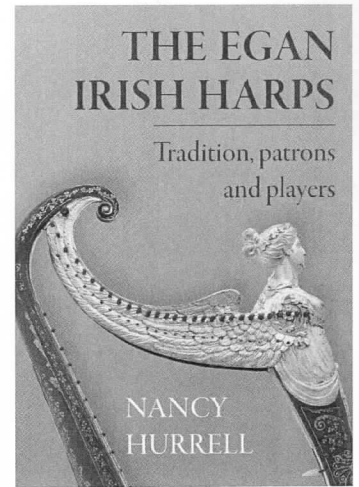
Publications in the area of Irish harp history are very rare so the appearance of any new work is a cause of celebration. But this monograph is particularly impressive for its elegant presentation of Nancy Hurrell's extensive, meticulous and original research. The care she has taken to present her work clearly and engagingly leads to a balanced, nuanced view of Irish harp history, which is very accessible for the general reader but nonetheless invaluable to the academic researcher.

Ms. Hurrell sets John Egan's craftsmanship in context, first describing elegantly the world of the early Irish harp, which was dying out just as Egan was setting forth on his new inventions. It's for his Royal Portable Irish harps that he is best remembered since they were the ones that had the farthest-reaching effect as the fore-runner of modern Irish harps. The author makes the point that had it not been for Egan's work, that we might not have a modern Irish harp tradition at all.

Egan is therefore a vital part of harp history in Ireland but his legacy has only now – some 200 years after he started

**The Egan
Irish Harps**
Traditions, patrons
and players

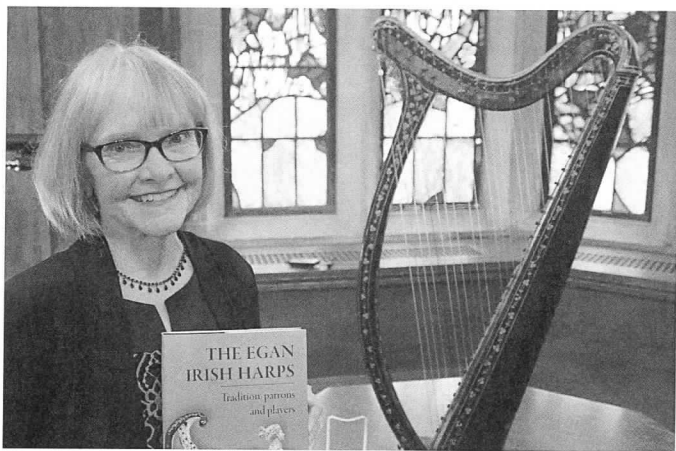
By Nancy Hurrell



producing harps – been addressed in a comprehensive way. One should also acknowledge, at this point, the work of Mary Louise O'Donnell, who included a chapter on Egan in her 2014 publication, *Ireland's Harp: The Shaping of Irish Identity c.1770 to 1880*.

In this new monograph, Nancy Hurrell fills many gaps of knowledge to create a work that will clearly be the standard reference work for the future. She doesn't just set out the historical, cultural and musical context but, using a wide range of source materials, she painstakingly recreates Egan's world for the reader including

- the social milieu and world of the noble lady harpists who played the instruments, and also that of national figures such as Thomas Moore, who played an Egan Royal Portable harp together with international figures such as King George IV, who granted Egan royal patronage.
- the aristocratic ladies' style of playing.
- the important work of Egan's son, Charles, and that of his other children, unknown to many of us before this.
- a chronology of what Egan was building: the subtle and beautiful styling of his different harp models, the influences on his artistic work, his design strategies, and the finer points of his ever-changing, harp-building technology and the perhaps surprising superiority of aspects of his pedal harps compared to giants of the era such as Erard.



Nancy Hurrell at the US launch of the book at the Burns Library, Boston College (Egan Portable Irish Harp in the background).

Hurrell sets out Egan's part in the attempts to reinvigorate the playing of the early Irish harp, with its wire strings, by building revival instruments for the newly-founded harp societies in the early nineteenth century. The author sets out clearly for the first time not only what the differences are between the older Irish harp and Egan's newly invented gut-strung Irish harps but even what the exact differences are between the early Irish harp and Egan's revival wire-strung instruments. Finally, Hurrell assesses Egan's lasting contribution to Irish harp history and includes information about the world-famous builders, from the UK to the USA, who imitated his work.

The monograph includes the first ever catalogue of one hundred Egan harps, sixty of whom the author has personally examined and measured.

Nancy Hurrell is an all-too-rare researcher in that her work is practice-led. The author doesn't just write about harp history; she plays many kinds of historical harps, seemingly equally at home on medieval harps, chromatic baroque harps, single- and double-action pedal harps and modern Irish harp. Hurrell is also the first harpist to make recordings on original Egan harps so her contribution to the field is a delightful binary: as researcher and also as a performer, each strand of activity informing the other.

Her background in art history and her consultancy work with the historical musical instrument collection at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, USA, further equips Nancy Hurrell to be a most appropriate person to write the definitive reference work on John Egan and his harps. ☘



Music, Ireland and the Sixteenth Century

Siobhán Armstrong's latest CD was released in 2018. It is a pioneering recording of the

music of Gaelic Ireland juxtaposed with that of the invading Tudor English. The repertory is late-medieval Irish plainchant; vocal and instrumental music of Henry VIII, Cooper, Cornysh, Holborne, Byrd, Dowland; of harper-composers Scott, MacDermott and Ó Catháin, and that of oral tradition, more than a third of which is reconstructed and recorded here for the first time. Performed by thirteen of Ireland and Europe's best historical and traditional singers and performers on Irish harp, European harp, Renaissance lute, treble and bass viols, recorders and voices, including the Grammy-award nominee, tenor John Elwes.

www.siobhanarmstrong.com



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