The Clàrsach and the Clàrsair

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From early times the harp seems to have been the musical instrument characteristic of the Celtic speaking areas of the British Isles. Giraldus Cambrensis, writing *c.*1185 and listing the musical instruments of Ireland, Scotland and Wales, maintained that the one instrument that they had in common was the *cithara* which frequently described a harp in the Latin of this period (Dimock 1867: 154; Page 1987: 149, 329).

In the Gaelic law tracts of the seventh and early eighth centuries on status in society the harpist is singled out for special attention. *Uraicecht Becc* says of harp music that it is 'the only craft of music that is entitled to franchise' (Binchy 1978: 5. 1616; MacNeill 1921–4: 36. 280). The harpist was accorded the status and privileges of the highest ranking commoner in society. The contemporary *Críth Gablach* designates a special place for the harpist in the king's hall, while herding flute-players and horn-players, along with jugglers, into a corner under the eyes of the king's bodyguard (Binchy 1941: 23).

The chief function of the harpist was to accompany the poet's most elevated poetry and that was, of course, panegyric, praise poetry of all kinds (Murphy 1948: 43–4). The close relationship between poet and harpist is manifested as early as the eighth century in the disposition of the king's hall just mentioned. The master poet or *ollam rígh*, 'the king's poet', has the same status and privileges in society as his employer and was accordingly placed opposite the king and his wife in the safest and most honourable part of the hall, which was the end farthest from the door. The harpist, although not himself of noble status, as we saw, is nevertheless placed beside the poet. The inauguration of Alexander III, King of Scots, in 1249, as depicted on a contemporary seal of Scone Abbey, portrays the harpist seated immediately behind the poet.[1] Another demonstration of the interdependence of poet and harpist comes from the other end of the medieval period in the sixteenth-century crown rentals of South Kintyre which show the lands held by the MacMhuirich poets to the Lords of the Isles neighbouring those held by the MacGhille-Sheanaich family who were hereditary harpists to the Lords of the Isles (*ER:* 12. 700).

The Gaelic word used for the harp in the early eighth century *Uraicecht Becc* was *crott* in what became its more usual variant *cruitt,* originally a dative form. This last was identical with the old noun of agency from *crott* which described the harpist himself in *Críth Gablach*. Later the agent ending '-ire' was added to *cruitt,* 'harp', giving *cruittire* in Old Gaelic (Binchy 1958: 18. 47). *Crott* or *cruitt* is translated harp or lute in the Royal Irish Academy dictionary (RIA Dict.: C. 552, 562). But for the Old Gaelic period, as we shall see, 'lyre' should probably be read for 'lute' and this is how the later *cruit* is sometimes translated (Dineen 1927: 276). One of the principal differences between the present day

harp and the lyre, both stringed instruments, is their shape, the harp being triangular and the lyre quadrangular (Rimmer 1977: 4-5). The great majority of the stringed instruments portrayed in illuminated manuscripts, on metal and memorial stonework of Dark Age Ireland are quadrangular or nearly so, the uppermost end often being rounded or humped (*op. cit*: 17-21). The assumption must be that the *crott* or *cruitt* usually denoted a lyre-shaped harp at this early periood, which would explain the apparent transference of *crott* to mean also a 'hunch' or 'hump' (RIA Dict.: C. 553). Its cognate in Welsh is *crwth* borrowed into English as *crowd* and into Scots as *croude*. It can be described as a three- to six-stringed musical instrument of the lyre class, originally plucked, later bowed (Remnant 1986: 42-5; *OED*: 67). In modern Scottish Gaelic, according to Dwelly (1971: 282), *cruit* means crowd, lute, even violin. Curiously enough, he does not give either 'harp' or 'lyre' as a meaning but perhaps too much should not be made of this. The overall impression given is that *cruit* was the generic term for most, perhaps all, stringed instruments (Galpin 1965: 9).

Whatever the case and whatever it might mean on any given occasion, that the *cruit* continued to be played in Scotland into the late medieval period is proclaimed by the presence of the surname *Mac a' chruiteir,* literally, 'son of the *cruit* player', now usually Scoticised as *MacWhirter,* and once found all over Scotland but most commonly in the southwest (Black 1962: 468, 571). The present day MacWhirters from that area are likely to be descendants of Michael (Gaelic *Gille-Micheil*), described as *citharistc de Carrick,* 'harpist of Carrick', in 1346. In that year his son Patricius or Gille-Pádruig, was granted lands in Carrick by David II, King of Scots, and *c.*1385 his grandson Duncanus or Donnchadh is on record surnamed *Mac a' chruiteir* (Anderson 1899: 11, 19-20).

If *cruit* could stand for a variety of stringed instruments what about *clàrsach*? It is noteworthy that it is translated 'harp' only in the dictionaries and even that may be giving it too wide an application, for the English word is neutral to the extent that it can be applied to any kind of harp. I suggest that *clàrsach* always meant a triangular framed harp of the kind with which we are familiar and none other.

All the citations of *clàrsach* and *clàrsair,* 'the player of the instrument', in the Royal Irish Academy dictionary are Middle or Early Modern Gaelic and none need be earlier than the fifteenth century. The earliest certain examples known to me appear in a poem praising the beautiful *clàirsioch Chnuic I Chosgair,* 'the *clàrsach* of Cnoc I Chosgair', composed by Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh sometime between 1382 and his death in 1387 (Bergin 1970: 66-70). In 1416, according to *Annála Connacht,* the *timpán* and *clársech* belonging to Ó Cuirnín head of a literary family employed by the Ó Ruairc kindred of Connaught, were burnt in the church on Church Island, Loch Gill (Freeman 1944: 430), [2] and there is also a reference in English records relating to Ireland to *clàrsairean,* among other musicians and literary men, who were accused of giving aid to England's enemies in Ireland in 1435 (Hardman 1971: 1. xviii-xix). The Scottish poet Gille-Brígde Albanach praises the harp given to him by his Irish patron Donnchadh Cairbreach Ó Bríuin, King of Thomond, who died in 1242, but he uses the word *cruit,* never *clàrsach* (Walsh 1933: 113-15). It is the

Book of the Dean of Lismore that contains the earliest known reference to *clàrsaich* in a Scottish Gaelic context. One comes in a eulogy to the chiefs of Clan Gregor composed between 1415 and 1440 and another in a poem by Gille-Críst Brúilingeach of the MacBhreatnaich harping family of Leim on the island of Gigha. In return for a poem in praise of Tomaltach MacDiarmata, King of Magh Luirg, Connaught, who died in 1458, Gille-Críst asked for a *clàrsach* and a second poem by him reveals that he duly received it (Watson 1937: 30, 32-58, 262-3, 267; Thomson 1968: 69).

Clàrsach, in its earlier form *cláirseach,* was borrowed into Scots giving *clarschach* or *clareschaw,* which was sometimes used to describe the harpist himself. But *clàrsair* was also borrowed into Scots, again in its earlier form of *cláirseóir,* as *clarschar* or *clarschioner* (*DOST*: 538-9). The earliest reference in Scots to the *clàrsach* is in the poem *The Buke of the Howlat* composed *c.*1448 (Amours 1897: 74). Both *clàrsach* and *clàrsair* appear in Scots dress with increasing frequency towards the end of the fifteenth century in the *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland* (TA: *passim*).

The concentration of the earliest examples from the late fourteenth into the fifteenth century is striking and if we add the fact that, unlike *cruitear, clàrsair* seldom, perhaps never, forms a surname in *mac* (Black 1962: 469) and moreover, that the three earliest surviving *clàrsaich* are almost certainly products of fifteenth-century workshops (*infra,* 9, 13), then the question has to be asked at this point—was this type of harp an innovation of that period? The very fact that *clàrsach* and *clàrsair* were already in Scots by the second half of the fifteenth century and that there were by this time also *clàrsairean* who were not Gaelic speaking—such a one, judging by his name, was "Pate Harpar Clarsha" who received payment from the crown on a number of occasions in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries (TA: 1. 309, 326, *etc*: 3. 152, 190 *etc*)—suggest that, at least in a Scottish Gaelic context, these words already had a long if unfortunately unrecorded history behind them. The lack of examples in the vastly fuller Irish Gaelic record earlier than the late fourteenth century could best be explained if *clàrsach* and *clàrsair* were Scottish Gaelic words, only just beginning to penetrate Irish Gaelic. It is noteworthy that the ambience of early Irish examples, whose provenance can be identified, belongs to Northern rather than to Southern Ireland (Knott 1957: 70-1, 109; Bergin 1970: 20; O'Grady 1892: 276-89). As far as the lack or rarity of a surname based on *clàrsair* is concerned, a generic term is probably more likely than a specific to form a surname, hence *Mac a' chruiteir* rather than *Mac a' chlàrsair.*

It need not be the case that the instrument was also unknown in Ireland until this period. After all one of the earliest occurrences of *clàrsach* in a Scottish Gaelic context, also one of the earliest in an Irish context, was the request of a *clàrsach* from an Irish lord by Gille-Críst Brúilingeach. The word *clàrsach* contains the element *clár* whose primary meaning is 'a plank or board of wood' (RIA Dict.: C. 219-21), so, if the 's' can be ignored, 'the planked one' might be a literal translation of *clàrsach.* Clearly it has reference to the amount of wood required by a framed triangular harp of this kind. In his description of the *cruit* gifted to him by Donnchadh Cairbreach sometime before 1242, Gille-Brígde Albanach's

concentration on the wood that went into its construction suggests that it was a triangular frame harp (Walsh 1933: 113-15). He refers to it on a number of occasions as a *crann* or *crann ciúil* which has the literal meaning of a wooden musical instrument (RIA Dict.: C. 509). Once he seems to use the word *clár* to describe the harp itself, rather than some part of the sound box, as indeed does Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh in the fourteenth century (Bergin 1970: 66), and certainly by the eighteenth century it was possible to refer to the *clàrsach* in Scottish Gaelic poetry by the word *clàr,* especially in the combination *cruit is clàr* (Gunn 1807: 32, 34-5)[3].

According to the musically knowledgeable, the precise and detailed delineation of what seems to be a musical performance from Ireland by Giraldus Cambrensis *c.*1185 must refer to music played on a harp of this kind. It could not have been produced on a lyre for instance (Dimock 1867: 153-4; Rimmer 1969: 30). Finally, and this is the clinching evidence, a fine representation of a triangular frame harp which looks very like the *clàrsach* as we know it today is on *Brecc Máedóic,* 'the speckled one of Máedóc', a Celtic Church house-shrine dedicated to Máedóc, the founding saint of the monastery of Ferns in Leinster. The cast bronze openwork figure of the harpist, doubtless intended to be King David of the Old Testament, is shown seated playing the harp off his left shoulder with the foot of the harp resting above his left knee. The relevant panel has been dated to *c.*1100 (Henry 1970: 117-19, pl. 31). Clearly in Ireland the triangular frame harp must have been described by the word *cruit* until challenged by the Scottish Gaelic *clàrsach* entering from the north by the late fourteenth century.

The fact that this type of harp seems to have had a specifically Scottish Gaelic name might indicate that the instrument itself was originally of Scottish provenance. It appears to be the case, as we shall see, that the earliest pictorial representations anywhere of the triangular frame harps are carved on Scottish stone monuments. However, they were preceded by portrayals of quadrangular or nearly quadrangular harps similar to those of Ireland. Two figure on the great free-standing crosses on Iona which date to the middle or second half of the eighth century. The one on the west face of the shaft of St Martin's cross is part of a scene depicting David and his musicians and the other is played by a seated figure carved on the right arm of St Oran's cross (RCAHMS 1982: 195-6, 206-7). The close links between the ornament on these crosses and the Book of Kells has long been recognised and helps to confirm the Book of Kells as a product of Iona's scriptorium sometime in the second half of the eighth or early ninth centuries (*op. cit.:* 18, 47). It is not surprising therefore that the outline of the harp composed of interlaced creatures in the Book of Kells is likewise quadrangular (Henry 1974: pls. 95, 112). But these three apart, all other depictions of stringed instruments are of triangular harps. An Early Christian cross-decorated stone at Ardchattan, like the cross of St Martin, has on it David's musicians including the harpist. In the trimming of this stone to adapt it for other purposes, the forepillar of the harp has been cut away but it was clearly triangular in shape (RCAHMS 1975: 111, fig. 99). There can be no doubt about the triangular shape of the harp on the Nigg cross-slab. This stone was once dated to the ninth century but in the light

of the demonstrable affinity of its carving to the ornament in the Book of Kells it could be eighth century in date (Henderson 1982: 84-9, 97, pl. IVb). All other stone monuments with harps carved on them are later. They include the well known tenth-century standing cross at Dupplin in Perthshire (Allen and Anderson 1903: 3. 319-21, fig. 334B) and the cross-slab at Aldbar in Angus bearing perhaps one of the latest representations getting structurally closer to the present day *clàrsach* (*op. cit.*: 3. 245-7, fig. 259B). It is clear that the triangular frame harp was the characteristic stringed musical instrument of Scotia, the new political entity that came into being as a result of the permanent take-over of Pictland by the Scots of Dalriada in the fifth decade of the ninth century. It is true that the Nigg slab seems to precede this event but the slab's strong Iona connections, reflected also in the other contemporary monumental stones in Ross-shire (Allen and Anderson: 2. 129-413), are compatible with an earlier albeit temporary Scottish take over of all Pictland which occurred sometime towards the end of the eighth century.[4]

In contemporary Ireland on the other hand, as we have already noted, depictions of quadrangular lyre-shaped harps are in the vast majority, and where they are triangular in shape like that in the ninth-century Psalter of Folchard from the Irish monastery of St Gall on the Continent (Rimmer 1977: 14) they do not seem to be framed and moreover they do not begin to look like a *clàrsach*. So the triangular frame harp of *c.*1100 on *Brecc Máedóic* is generally recognised to be the earliest dateable Irish representation (Cone 1977: 218-19; Ryan 1983: 180).

Returning to Giraldus Cambrensis, writing *c.*1185, he claimed that

> in the opinion of many Scotland today not only equals Ireland, her mentor, but also far outdoes and surpasses her in musical skill. Hence many people already look there as though to the fountain-head of the art (Dimock 1867: 154-5).

Should the superiority of Scotland's 'musical skill' *vis-à-vis* Ireland be seen, in part at least, as due to the recent introduction from Scotland to Ireland of a new type of harp, the triangular frame harp or *clársach*? The Irishman Gille-Pátraic, who was Bishop of Dublin from 1074 to 1084, composed a long allegorical Latin poem which at one point tells how, as a young man, he was taught poems to the accompaniment of 'well-contrived music on a *cithara* that sounded with six strings' (Gwynn 1955: 90), a lyre presumably. Later on in the poem and describing a large *urbs* or community of some kind he mentions its musical instruments: besides *organa terna,* 'three-rank organs', and *lyrae,* 'lyres', there were also *citherae novae,* 'new harps' (*op. cit.*: 96). It has already been suggested that the *citherae novae* were triangular frame harps (Rimmer 1977: 25-6). Whether the *urbs* he had in mind was Dublin or the Benedictine monastery at Worcester, where there was a great organ, and where he spent some time as a monk before becoming Bishop of Dublin matters little. If the triangular frame harp was moving out of Scotland at this point, it could have gone to England as well as to Ireland and for that matter to Wales also.

The high place accorded the *clàrsach* in Scotland is a further indication, it seems to me,

of its provenance. It was played by the MacBhreatnaich and by the MacGhille-Sheanaich harpists who were at the very apex of their profession, employed as they were by the kings of Scots and the Lords of the Isles respectively, the two most important sources of patronage for the native arts in the country. Furthermore, while Ireland continued to be the fountain-head, to use Giraldus Cambrensis' expression, of most of the other native professions and crafts—the origins of many of the important Scottish professional and craft families of the late medieval period can be traced to Ireland in the relatively recent past, the Beaton physicians, the MacMhuirich poets, the Ó Brolchan stonemasons to name a few (Bannerman 1986: 8-11; Thomson 1960-3: 277-8; Steer and Bannerman 1977: 106-7)—it is not possible to so trace any direct Irish influence of this kind in the musical profession. Not only were these surnames unrecorded in Ireland at an early stage but they have a Scottish rather than an Irish flavour. So *MacBhreatnaich* means literally 'son of the Briton' and the family must have been in existence at least as early as the twelfth century, for their eponymous ancestor cannot have been so identified later than this.[5] The forename *Gille-Sheanaich*, devotee of a saint called Seanach, which appears in the surname *MacGhille-Sheanaich*, is surely the saint who was commemorated in the church name *Kilmachanach* which is nearby the lands held by the MacGhille-Sheanaich family in sixteenth-century Kintyre (*ER*: 12. 364; *OPS*: 2 (pt. i). 9 and map; Watson 1926: 309). [6] It is possible indeed that they were in origin a local ecclesiastical family responsible for servicing the church in question (MacQueen 1973: 19).

The MacBhreatnaich harpists employed by the crown come into view when the crown records become more detailed in the second half of the fifteenth century, the earliest being *Martinus cytharista*, who was receiving fermes from lands in Galloway in 1471 (*ER*: 8. 89). *The Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland*, written in Scots, tells us that he was paid for entertaining the king and court at Linlithgow on 16 April 1491 and again in January of the following year (TA: 1. 177, 184). On both occasions he was described as a *clareschaw* and at the same time payment was made to the "toder Ersche clareschaw", implying that Martinus or Gille-Mártainn was also Gaelic-speaking, because that is what *Ersche* meant in Scots of this period.

Gille-Mártainn was succeeded in turn by John MacBhreatnaich (d. *c.*1504) and then by Rollandus or Lachlann who seems to have accompanied his king to Flodden with the same fatal result that attended Henry Leich of Kildavanan, James IV's Beaton doctor (Bannerman 1986: 61). It is interesting that in the summer of that year, 1513, Ó Domhnuill's harpist, who had accompanied his employer to Edinburgh in early June, received on 11 July payment of £7 from the Scottish crown, doubtless for musical performances (TA: 4. 45, 434). There must have been ample opportunity for these two harpists at the very top of their profession to hear and enjoy one another's repertoire.

It was probably Lachlann who as "Makberty the clarscha" was paid five French crowns on 2 May 1503 "to pas in the Ilis", presumaby on crown business (TA: 2. 369).[7] He would surely have visited his kinsmen, the MacBhreatnaich harpists of Leim on the island of Gigha. The contemporary head of the family may even have been his namesake, for a

Lachlann MacBhreatnaich is the subject of a mock elegy in the *Book of the Dean of Lismore* by Duncan Campbell of Glenorchy (d. 1513) (Watson 1937: 14–20). Duncan Campbell describes Lachlann as 'sweet voiced' but otherwise it was an unflattering portrait, for Lachlann seems to have been notorious for demanding gifts of all kinds, presumably in recompense for his harp music. We have already mentioned an earlier member of this family, Gille-Críst Brúilingeach who requested and received a *clàrsach* from Tomaltach MacDiarmata, King of Magh Luirg (d. 1458). Their descendants are still with us using the surname *Galbraith* in non-Gaelic contexts (Thomson 1968: 69)[8]

The earliest MacGhille-Sheanaich on record was Duncan who witnessed a notarial instrument in 1456 (Munro and Munro 1986: 92). By the opening of the sixteenth century the head of the family, then seen to be located in South Kintyre, was Muireach, *citharista*. He was still to the fore in 1528 (*ER*: 12. 364; 15. 433). It is probably he who heads a list of what seems to be the names of at least thirty-two *clàrsairean* from different parts of Scotland north of the Forth-Clyde line. The list, arranged in two irregular columns, was written into the *Book of the Dean of Lismore* compiled over the years from 1512 to 1542 (N.L.S. 72. 1. 37., p. 92). Not only was Muireach given pride of place but another indication of his pre-eminence is the absence of his forename. He is described simply as "Mcoschennak a Brounerre", that is, 'MacGhille-Sheanaich from Brunerican'. which was the family's main holding of land in South Kintyre. No less than seven other members of the family are listed including his son Aodh Riabhach. The last of them is entered as 'Gille-Coluim MacGhille-Sheanaich in Kintryre', doubtless the person of that name on record in 1505 and 1506 as holding the lands of Lephenstrath some two miles west of Brunerican (*ER*: 12. 356, 578, 700, 708). By 1541 Lephenstrath was in the possession of Aodh Buidhe MacGhille-Sheanaich (*ER*: 17. 362), presumably the same as Aodh Buidhe, son of Diarmait, son of Tadhg, of the list.[9] His brother, Gille-Coluim is also listed along with his son, Gille-glas. Then come the names of yet another branch of the family, Eoghan, son of Gill-Iosa, and his son, Aodh. In 1596 the lands of Machribeg, lying beteen Brunerican and Lephenstrath, were being held by a Gill-Iosa MacGhille-Sheanaich (MacPhail 1914–34: 3. 77).[10]

Gille-glas is an unusual forename and it is present in another similar list of names on the previous page of the *Book of the Dean of Lismore* (N.L.S. 72. 1. 37, p. 91). Angus, son of Gille-glas, is named followed immediately by the entry: 'Gille-glas himself.' This list is certainly later in date and it includes *clàrsairean*.[11] Goraidh Ó Doraidh, is present in both,[12] "Robert clarsair loyd", 'Robert, clàrsair of Leod or Lude' in Atholl is named thus in the second list, and Brian MacVicar of that list is on record in 1549 as *cytharista* to the Earl of Argyll (SHS *Misc.*: 1983- : 4. 265). Finally, the list of *clàrsairean* includes "[Far]chir mc riocardi with Mcloyd"; presumably Fearchar, son of Richard, was employed by MacLeod of Dunvegan. It is his son, Gille-Coluim, who is named in the second list. He too is said to be 'with MacLeod', indicating that here we have another hereditary family of harpists.

By 1596 another Duncan MacGhille-Sheanaich was in Brunerican (MacPhail 1914–34: 3. 78, 84). Like the MacBhreatnaichs of Leim, this family is also still to the fore and still

in Kintyre, their surname being Scoticised to *MacShannon or Shannon* (McKerral 1948: 169). They still play a musical instrument—perhaps significantly, as we shall see, the bagpipes rather than the *clàrsach*.

Gille-Brígde Albanach, who, it has been suggested (*supra*, 3-4) was describing a *clàrsach* gifted to him by his Irish patron sometime before 1242, refers indirectly to the making of these instruments in both Ireland and Scotland. In one verse he says

> Dear to me (it is my birthright)
> the beautiful wood of Scotland
> Though dear, I prefer
> this harp of the wood of Ireland.
> (Walsh 1933: 115)

At this early date *clàrsaich* might be made almost anywhere in Scotland and there is reason to believe that Gille-Brígde himself was from east of the Highland line[13] but by the fifteenth century the production of *clàrsaich* was likely to be confined to Gaelic-speaking Scotland which had narrowed in the interval. Although it has already been noted (*supra*, 3) that there were *clàrsairean* by this time who were not Gaelic speakers, nevertheless it was believed that the best harpists were to be found in the Gàidhealtachd. Thus, John Major who issued his Latin *Historia Majoris Britanniae* in 1521 says of James I, King of Scots (1424-37) that he was such a skilful harpist that he even excelled 'the Wild Scots who are in that art pre-eminent' (Constable 1892: 366).

Elsewhere Major states: 'for musical instruments and vocal music the Wild Scots use the harp, whose strings are of brass and not of animal gut; and on this they make most pleasing melody' (*op. cit.*: 50). George Buchanan writing in 1582 and referring specifically to the inhabitants of the Western Isles says

> They are exceedingly fond of music and employ harps of a peculiar kind, some of which are strung with brass, and some with catgut. In playing they strike the wires either with a quill, or with their nails suffered to grow long for this purpose (Aikman 1827-30: 1. 41).

A tract written in 1597 and heavily dependent on Buchanan's description of the Western Isles says

> They delight much in musike, but chiefly in harps and clairschoes of their owne fashion. The strings of clairschoes are made of brasse-wire and the strings of the harps of sinews (Monipennie 1603: 389).

This distinction between harp and *clàrsach* may be an artificial one suggested by Buchanan's wording[14] but the emphasis on 'brass-wire' strings in these sources is important. We first hear of them from Giraldus Cambrensis who, having just listed the musical instruments of Ireland, Scotland and Wales, adds, 'also they use strings of brass not of leather' (Dimock 1867: 154). This must surely refer to the *cithara,* the one

instrument, according to Giraldus Cambrensis, that all three countries had in common, so it was presumably a triangular frame harp.

Given that assumption we can be more confident about what Giraldus Cambrensis meant by the other musical instruments that he named, for it is notoriously difficult to pin down the medieval terms for musical instruments in whatever language. He informs us that 'Ireland uses and delights in two instruments only, the *cithara* and the *tympanum*', meaning, of course, that these were the characteristic Irish musical instruments of his day, not that they were the only ones played in the country. In medieval Latin *tympanum* meant 'drum' or 'tambourine', occasionally 'psaltery', a stringed instrument (Marcuse 1966: 553), but in Gaelic *timpán* clearly described a stringed instrument (RIA Dict.: T. 173-4; Buckley 1978: 53-88), which, if Giraldus's *cithara* was a triangular frame harp, must be the quadrangular lyre shaped harp so frequently portrayed on manuscript, metal and stone in Ireland of the Dark Ages. Scotland, besides the *cithara* and the *tympanum* 'delights' in a third instrument, the *chorus* which, according to Giraldus, she shared with Wales whose other two instruments were the *cithara* and the *tibiae,* which can only be a wind instrument, some form of pipes. The *cithara* or triangular frame harp is called a *telyn* in Welsh, so the *chorus* must surely be that most characteristic of Welsh instruments, the *crwth* (Marcuse 1966: 98). And the *crwth* is surely what the Scots would find in the British kingdom of Strathclyde as they moved into and took over that area in the tenth and eleventh centuries. So by the twelfth century in Giraldus Cambrensis' opinion, the Scots were performing on no less than three distinct stringed instruments—further evidence of their expertise in that type of music.

Of the three earliest surviving triangular frame harps or *clàrsaich* in existence, two significantly are in Scotland, the Queen Mary harp and the Lamont harp, both now in the National Museum of Antiquities. The third one, the Brian Boru harp so-called, is in the Library of Trinity College, Dublin. It has long been recognised that the distinctive geometric pattern of the ornament on the sound boxes of the Queen Mary and Trinity College harps, among other common features, indicates that they were the products of the same workshop. That pattern reappears on the sound box of a finely carved *clàrsach* on a fifteenth century graveslab at Keills, Knapdale. While this is important evidence for dating these harps, it is, of course, still the case that the *clàrsach* so carved could be a copy of one imported from across the North Channel (Steer and Bannerman 1977: 146, 185, pl. 23c). But the feature that clinches their Scottish provenance is the ornamentaion on the upper part of the sound-box and on the fore-pillar of the Queen Mary harp, in particular the spiral arrangment of clusters of split-palmette leaves which is one of the characteristic patterns of late medieval monumental sculpture in the West Highlands and which has no parallel in Irish art of this period (*op. cit.*: 185, pl. 37B).

For further evidence of their provenance we can turn to George Buchanan again, who goes on to claim of the inhabitants of the Western Isles that

> their grand ambition is to adorn their harps with great quantities of silver and gems; those who are too poor to afford jewels substituting crystals in their stead (Aikman 1827-30: 1. 41).

Apart from a line of six small silver bosses on the outer face of the fore-pillar, the Queen Mary harp has no such adornment in its present condition, nor in fact does the profusion of wood carving leave much room for such. However, on the right hand side of the upper part of the fore-pillar, there is a round indentation which may well have once held a jewelled setting of some kind, and significantly, besides a ring of brass tacks high on the outer face of the fore-pillar, there are three small nails on the outer end of the neck. The outer end of the neck of the Trinity College harp carries a decorated silver plate with two settings, one now empty, the other still filled with rock crystal.

Accepting Buchanan at face value, the Trinity College *clàrsach* was a poor man's harp, which is not what the quality of the wood carving would suggest. However, it is almost certain that the silver plating and settings were later additions and probably obscured carved ornamentation. Thus, the mutilation of an existing and finely carved griffin-like creature by the setting indentation gouged out of the fore-pillar of the Queen Mary harp, not to mention the fact that the brass tacks on the fore-pillar and the nails on the outer end of the neck are within the existing design pattern, clearly show that jewelled and silver ornament once had little or no place thereon. Indeed, it was implied by General Robertson of Lude in 1805 on the occasion of the inspection by the Highland Society of the Queen Mary and Lamont harps, both of which had been in the possession of his family for some time previously, that 'golden' and 'jewelled' ornaments were not added to the Queen Mary harp until the reign of Mary, Queen of Scots.[15] He went on to claim that they were stolen about 1745 (Gunn 1807: 13-14). The earlier date is, of course, contemporary with George Buchanan. A study of the memorial stonework of the West Highlands shows that the distinctive style of carving, present also on the Queen Mary harp, ran into the sand about the middle of the sixteenth century (Steer and Bannerman 1977: 82-3). I suggest that the desire to adorn harps 'with great quantities of silver and gems', as Buchanan put it, was in an attempt to find an adequate substitute for the fine wood carving of the previous period. Whatever the reason, surviving harps of that period, like the Queen Mary and Trinity College harps, had to be made fashionable, although fortunately, in view of Buchanan's words, some restraint was exercised and not too much damage was done in the process.

A number of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century harps of Irish provenance have survived in part or in whole but none bear silver plating and jewelled or crystal settings comparable to those described by George Buchanan and present on the Trinity College harp (Rimmer 1977: 44-66, 75-7). Presumably, then, it has to be concluded that the Trinity College harp cannot have left Scotland for Ireland until the second half of the sixteenth century at the earliest. Certainly the earliest possible Irish owners, who are not the invention of nineteenth-century myth makers, seem to be a branch of the Ó Néill kindred who flourished in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Day 1876-8: 4. 498; 1890-1: 1. 282-3; Ryan 1983: 180).[16]

The fact is that, in any general survey of art in the Gaelic revival period of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Ireland, the Trinity College harp is given a high profile as one of the

The Queen Mary Harp
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best examples, if not the best example, of continuing native art production in what was otherwise a scenario largely derivative on the one hand of pre-Anglo-Norman styles and techniques, often much debased, and on the other of the contemporary European art scene. As one commentator put it recently, 'most Irish artists after 1200 could not avoid the shadow of England and the Continent' (Cone 1977: 191-6). I would submit that the Trinity College harp is outstanding, indeed unique, in an Irish context, because it was not a product of fifteenth-century Ireland, but of the vigorous, self confident and native West Highland style of carving developed in the contemporary Lordship of the Isles, the kind of art that Ireland herself might have evolved had she not been so pressurised by English intervention. Indeed, the main exponents of this style of carving on stone in the Lordship of the Isles were hereditary families of stonemasons bearing the obvious Irish surnames of Ó Cuinn and Ó Brolchán and it has already been shown that the latter, whose involvement in stone-working is on record in Ireland as far back as the early eleventh century, had crossed to Scotland by the middle of the fourteenth century at least (Steer and Bannerman 1977: 105-9, 119-20, 134-5).

The fifteenth century stonework of the West Highlands may allow us to pinpoint the location of harp-making of the quality of the Queen Mary and Trinity College harps. The remarkable concentration of monuments associated with members of crafts—carpenters, smiths, cloth makers—at Keills and neighbouring Kilmory in Knapdale has already been noted and it has been suggested that this particular group of craftsmen, accustomed as they were to commissioning grave-slabs and crosses inscribed with their names, were of more than local importance (*op. cit.*: 144-6, 150-1). It would be as convenient for the Lords of the Isles as for anyone else to have all or most of the craftsmen whom they patronised located in one township or district. It may be therefore that Ailean who, as the inscription on it tells us, commissioned for himself and his father the graveslab at Keills with the carving of the *clàrsach* on it, and beside it its tuning key, was not only a member of an hereditary family of harpists as already suggested, but also of harp makers and tuners (*op. cit.*: 146, pl. 23c). The annalistic obit of Aed Ó Shochaláin who died in Ireland in 1226 informs us that he was *sai canntairechta ocus crotglesa*, 'master of *canntaireachd* and of harp tuning, who made, besides, a tuning for himself, the like of which had never been made before' (Hennessy 1871: 291). [17]

The evidence to date, it seems to me, leads us to the inescapable conclusion that the triangular-frame harp was a wholly Scottish development which came to fruition in the Gaelic kingdom of Alba or Scotia, a highly successful, centralised and in other ways innovative political entity; perhaps not unlike, although on a larger scale, the much later Lordship of the Isles which itself, as we have seen, continued to be an important centre for harp production into the sixteenth century at least. Nor need we be too surprised about this. After all a new and individual form of yet another musical instrument was developed by the Scots, namely, the Highland bagpipe, the most skilled exponents of which, significantly perhaps, belonged, when they come into view in the seventeenth century, to what had recently been the Lordship of the Isles. There was none more skilful than the

MacCrimmons of Borreraig in Skye, although it is said that the first of them to take service with the MacLeods of Dunvegan was not a piper but a harpist (Campbell 1967-8: 6).[18] Pàdruig Òg MacCrimmon, according to tradition, a noted composer of *cèol mór* or the classical music of the bagpipes, and Roderick Morison, the best known Scottish *clàrsair* of modern times, were together at Dunvegan Castle towards the end of the seventeenth century as official piper and harpist respectively to the MacLeod chiefs (Matheson 1970: 1, 165). The fact that certain technical musical terms originally associated with harp music have been taken over into piping suggest the possible origins of *cèol mór* (*op. cit.*: 165; Collinson 1966: 247-8; Cannon 1988: 101-4), particularly perhaps *canntaireachd;* Aed Ó Shochaláin, harp tuner *par excellence* was also an expert in *canntaireachd.* [19] It is otherwise difficult to explain how this highly sophisticated music sprang to life apparently fully developed in the seventeenth century. If this connection between the *clàrsach* and pipes can be upheld, it is continuing confirmation, if such were needed, of Giraldus Cambrensis' statement of Scotland's superior skills in music making, for although harpists of note continued to perform in Ireland a little longer than in Scotland, nothing comparable to the *cèol mór* of the bagpipes developed there.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to Mr Keith Sanger who read this article in first draft and who generously put at my disposal his deep knowledge of the music and musical instruments of Scotland.

NOTES

1 See J. Bannerman, 'The King's Poet and the Inauguration of Alexander III', *Scottish Historical Review* (forthcoming).
2 Scribe A, responsible for much of the work up to the annal for the year 1486, was probably Páidín Ó Maoilchonaire who died in 1506 (Freeman 1944: xii-xiii). I am indebted to Mr Keith Sanger for drawing my attention to this and the previous reference.
3 It has been suggested that the description of a harp mispraised in a fourteenth-century Welsh poem points to it being a *clàrsach* but it need not be of Irish origin (Jarman 1961: 160-8).
4 See J. Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Scotia* (forthcoming).
5 See J. Bannerman, 'The King's Poet'.
6 There are many Scoticised variants of this surname (Black 1962: 515, 554, 641-2) but the basic form is *McIlschanoch* (*ER*: 17. 632) or *M'Ischenach* (MacPhail 1914-34: 3. 85) which clearly represents Gaelic *MacGhille-Sheanaich.*
7 See J. Bannerman, 'The King's Poet'.
8 Doubtless the MacBhreatnaich family chose *Galbraith*, itself a Gaelic name, because of its British connotation. It means 'stranger Briton', compare *Gall-Ghàidheal*, 'stranger Gael' (Watson 1926: 14, 172-4). In its Scoticised form, it was already thoroughly assimilated as a surname in Lowland Scotland.

The crown in the person of the regent, James Douglas, Earl of Morton, was still employing a *clairschear* in 1574 and 1575 (*TA*: 13. 50, 86, 142). His name was Robert Galbraith. He could be a member of the Leim harping family or one of their kinsmen from Galloway, although there is no evidence that the latter used

Galbraith as a surname in non-Gaelic contexts. However, it was in the sixteenth century that other Gaelic professional families adopted this practice (Bannerman 1986: 2-5), while it is worth noting that the Earl of Morton had large estates in South West Scotland.

It is also the case that *Robert* was by this time a characteristic forename of the kindred from the Lennox whose surname was originally *Galbraith* and a group, perhaps a family, of Galbraiths, whose forenames suggest that they too belonged to this kindred, were royal servants for much of the sixteenth century (*ER*: *passim*; TA: *passim*). One of them, William Galbraith, is on record as a singer in the king's chamber in 1526 (*ER*: 15. 292) and in 1531 he received "ane luyt" and "certayne stringis" from the crown (TA: 6. 18).

9 His Scoticised forename and epithet, combined as *Ivoy* in the published text of the crown rental, is *Iboy* in the manuscript (S.R.O. E 40/7, p. 175). To accommodate him in this relationship in the list, 'mc' before *Tadhg* should have been written 'vc' but the compiler was not always consistent in this matter and, physically speaking, Aodh Buidhe's name fits more securely into the first column.

10 The list of names, partly in Gaelic partly in Scots, which is difficult to read, hence the uncertainty about the precise number, is entitled *Nomina Historiarum*, literally 'names of histories'. The compiler may have changed his mind after writing the title, or did he intend to write *histrionum*, genitive plural of *histrio*, 'actor' a word which by the fifteenth century could also mean 'minstrel' (Latham 1965: 227)? Whatever the case, the names seem to be those of contemporary musicians, judging not only by the presence of the MacGhille-Sheanaich family but also by the name Thomas clarsair mac Dhughaill (*Thomas clairscher mc wll*) that heads the second column. Furthermore the epithet *dall* indicates that at least two of them were blind, a characteristic of members of the musical profession in the late medieval period, especially perhaps of harpists (Armstrong 1969: 46-54). That they all played the same instrument and that it was the *clàrsach* seems likely. Only a *clàrsair* is identified and that incidentally, because *clàrsair* was an integral part of his name. Places of origin mentioned or implied include Kintyre, Ardnamurchan, Mull, Uist, Lewis, Skye, Strathglass, Atholl and Fearn, probably the district of that name in Angus rather than Fearn in Easter Ross, for the *clàrsair*, one of those given the epithet *dall*, is otherwise named in Scots as *Dave* simply.

11 But it differs in that it specifically identifies two other classes of musician in the persons of MacGhille-dhuibh, piper, and tympanist, Conchubhair Ó hAngluinn, doubtless of the same family as Fionn Ó hAngluinn whose obit of 1490 called him *primh thiompánach Eireann*, 'chief tympanist of Ireland' (O'Donovan 1851: 4. 1180). Furthermore, a number of other Irish surnames are listed along with the names of four women.

12 Apart from Lochlann Mac an Bháird who is specifically said to be *a herrin*, 'from Ireland', and who was doubtless on circuit in Scotland at the time, Ó Doraidh (*o dorraythe/o dorrode*) seems to bear the only other Irish surname in the list of *clàrsairean*. However, he was not a visiting musician, for his presence therein was surely determined by the stated fact that he was "wyth the lard of gawaill", meaning that he was employed as *clàrsair* by this as yet unidentified Scottish laird.

13 See J. Bannerman, 'The King's Poet'.

14 A history of the Maules of Panmure written in 1611 refers to "ane minstrel quhilk owr cuntraymen callis ane player on the clairschowe and the Englishmen ane harper: for amongst the ancient Scottis the harpe and clairschow, quhilkis ar not far different, wor in gryte price" (Stuart 1874: 1. cxlvi).

15 It has already been noted that harping is associated with Lude as early as the first half of the sixteenth century in the person of Robert, *clàrsair* of Lude, mentioned in the Book of the Dean of Lismore (*supra*, p. 7).

16 There is only minimal wood ornamentation on the Lamont harp but its general appearance, the fact that it was, like the Queen Mary harp, made of hornbeam and that it is still in Scotland and traditionally has been so since 1460 (Gunn 1807: 1) all suggest that it was also made in Scotland in the fifteenth century, perhaps in the same West Highland workshop. It must certainly have been in the Highlands sometime in the second half of the sixteenth or early seventeenth century, for it was presumably then that the outer end of the neck received a brass cap with, in the centre, a representation in brass of a jewelled or crystal setting (Armstrong 1969: opp. 160).

17 "sai canntairechta ocus crotglesa, maroen re gles do denum do fein nach dernadh remhe". W. M. Hennessy, editor of *The Annals of Loch Cé*, translated *crot-glésa* as 'harp making' and *glés* as 'instrument', both of which are possible, but the more literal and likely meaning of *crot-glésa* in this context is 'harp tuning', in which case the following *glés* should be translated 'tuning' (O'Curry 1873: 3. 264). A Welsh

manuscript of harp music compiled *c.*1613 lists eighteen tunings of which at least three are ascribed to named individuals (Dart 1968: 55-9).

18 I am indebted to Mr Hugh Cheape for drawing my attention to this reference.

19 *Canntaireachd,* describing the syllabic notification of *ceòl mór* of the bagpipe, could also mean simply 'singing' or 'chanting' but its use here along with *crot-glésa* implies a technical meaning for it specifically asssociated with harping.

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