

A Pilgrimage of Harps

By Susa Morgan Black, FSA.Scot

This past March, I traveled to Ireland and Scotland on a pilgrimage to see the three great harps of the British Isles – the **Brian Boru** harp at Trinity College in Dublin, and the **Queen Mary** and **Lamont** harps at the Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh.

My traveling companions were an unlikely crew – a group tour with Celtic Travel Agency (San Francisco) for employees of various California police agencies. I couldn't have chosen a livelier group to share my adventure with!

The tour started in Dublin. Built originally by Vikings who began to settle in Ireland, it is an ancient city of gray stones with dark wood beamed interiors, and narrow cobble stone streets. The River Liffey, with its many bridges, runs through the middle of the town. We passed the General Post Office, a large building with somber Greek columns, where the Easter Rising of 1916 had commenced. Dublin is distinguished by the unique and colorful front doors that line several of their streets. The Irish emblem of the harp was everywhere – embossed on the stones of every official building, displayed on the walls of the courts, proudly flying on the flag, found in every souvenir and gift shop. I brought back harp dolls, harp pins and pendants, harp statuettes, even a harp bath towel from the Guinness Museum (where they have their own harp on display)! I found the harp symbol to be a common thread throughout my Irish journey, in both the northern counties that are part of Great Britain, and in the Republic of Ireland.

At Trinity College, we entered the **Book of Kells** exhibit, displaying illuminations from the Celtic manuscript created by Ionian monks in the Ninth Century. Also on exhibit were the Medieval **Book of Armagh** and the **Book of Durrow**. From there we climbed the stairs to Trinity's Old Library – a long hall of dark wooden shelves and columns, the precious books roped off from tourists. Between two wooden columns stood a simple glass case enclosing the **Brian Boru Harp**. Mythically, it dates back to the great Irish king who won Irish independence from the Norse invaders almost one thousand years ago. The harp, ornately carved with geometric designs and mythical animals, is probably from the 14th or 15th century. It is a "low headed" Celtic harp, about 33 inches high; the sound box is carved from a single piece of willow, with a fore pillar of oak, and strung with thirty brass strings. I stood in front of the glass case in awe, tears rolling down my face; the security guard giving me a quizzical look. After years of longing, I'd finally reached one of the holy shrines of Celtic harpers.



The tour continued through the countryside, west towards Galway. We passed boggy lands, stacks of drying peat, rivers and waterfalls. We saw fields of sheep and cattle, and in some fields, Conamara ponies. We

stopped in many a pub on the tour, in cities, towns and country. Since it was St. Patrick's Day weekend, most pubs were crowded with celebrating families. Little girls and boys were dressed in their finest, dancing traditional Irish dances to the local pub band – usually an accordion, penny whistle, fiddle, and bodran player. With typical Irish generosity, many locals bought me a drink and allowed me to join in their conversations. Mostly they were concerned about the impact of the hoof and mouth disease on their agricultural and tourist industries, which could potentially cripple the burgeoning economy of Ireland.

The bus tour continued on to the North and we entered County Antrim, which is a part of Great Britain. The guide told us that the Good Friday Peace Accord was only four years old, and the tourist industry in the northern counties was still developing. We passed areas that had been heavily militarized, while our guide told us stories of tourists being searched by British soldiers in the past. This time, tour buses were being stopped in every direction to have their tires sprayed with disinfectant to curb the spread of the deadly hoof and mouth disease.

What struck me throughout my Irish journey was a sense of their fragility in the advent of disaster – whether war, occupation, or plague – and the resilience and quiet dignity with which the Irish people faced those perilous circumstances.

We toured Belfast and traveled streets I had heard of in news broadcasts over the years – Shankill Road and Falls Road. In Derry, I sat in the gallery of the Guild Hall and listened to the testimony at the Tribunal of the Bloody Sunday massacre in 1972. I saw police officers in armored jeeps, reluctant to come out for a photo, police stations guarded by gun turrets and barbed wire. My comrades from California police agencies were stunned into an uncomfortable silence. Yet even here, I saw the harp, displayed on the very police caps of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. A symbol of the Irish people, of hope and reconciliation.

In ancient times, the Celtic Bards were Druids, trained in the art of storytelling with their harps, and in mediation between tribal groups. A Druid had the authority to call off an inter-tribal war and force the chieftains to negotiate their differences.

To Janet Harbison, director of the **Belfast Harp Orchestra**, the harp is a symbol of the unity between the many political and religious factions of Northern Ireland, as she draws young people together to play the music that is their shared Irish musical tradition. She has thus reclaimed the ancient prerogative of the harper as peacemaker.

Our journey continued on to Scotland, which shares much of its Celtic heritage with Ireland, including the bardic tradition of the harp. There are many legends of traditional families of harpers to the great clans, such as the MacGhille Sheanaich harpers of Clan Donald, the MacEwans of Clan Lamont, and the MacVicars of Clan Campbell..

I saw the harp motif depicted in the castles of Stirling and Edinburgh – painted on walls, carved on pillars, and even sewn in a tapestry. There was a Renaissance harp in the music room at Holyrood Palace. A harp was included in an intricate silver sculpture - part of the regimental honors in a military museum. And finally I found the two greatest harps of Scotland, the **Queen Mary** and the **Lamont** harps. Again, I had the mystical feeling that I had entered a holy shrine as I discovered these Medieval harps in the National Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh.



The Queen Mary Harp



The Lamont Harp

Both “low headed” Celtic harps date from the 15th Century, and each is from a single piece of wood, possibly hornbeam, hollowed out from the back. The Lamont harp, which is unadorned, is the larger harp at 37 ½ “, with 32 wire strings. The Queen Mary is ornately carved with intricate designs, including griffins, a lion, a dragon and a unicorn, almost 31” high, with 30 wire strings. The Lamont was the more worn, probably more used, of the two.

My pilgrimage to view the three great harps of the British Isles exceeded all my expectations and left me longing to come back. The Brian Boru, Queen Mary, and Lamont harps were the core inspiration of my journey discovering the history, culture and spirit of these two extraordinary Celtic nations.

Bibliography

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