Edward Bunting (1773-1843)

Life
b. Armagh, Feb. 1773, the second son of a Derby engineer who worked in Dungannon colliery, his mother being a descendant to Patrick O'Quin; moved to Drogheda on early death of father, his br. Anthony being organist and music teacher there, 1782; app. sub-organist in Belfast at eleven, 1784, being article to Mr Weir; a handsome and popular young man, he taught music on his own account, but fell into conviviality and drinking; attended harpers’ festival organised in Belfast, held around Bastille Day, at which 10 harpers played traditional 40 tunes, 1792, following the pattern of the Granard Harp Festival of 1784; travelled in Ireland collecting old airs 1793-; apppt. organist at St. George’s Church, High St., Belfast;

issued A General Collection of the Ancient Irish Music (1796; 2nd. rev. edn. 1809), containing 66 airs and published by Belfast Society for Promoting Knowledge [Linen Hall Library]; orig. published by Preston in London but pirated by Lee in Dublin; secured Thomas Campbell to write words for his airs; with Dr James MacDonnell, founded a Harp Society intending to instruct blind children to play the instrument in the traditional Irish manner, 1807-17; issued second series of same but adding 77 tunes, many copied from a centenarian harper called Dennis Hempsey [vars. Hempson, Hampson; Gl. (Donnchadh Ó Hámsaigh; note) of Magilligan, 1809, followed by a third in 1840 - bringing the sum to 151 tunes;

mounted performance of Handel's Messiah in Belfast, 1813; travelled to London and Paris, Belgium and Holland, 1815-17; m. Miss Chapman, 1819, settled in Dublin as organist at St. Stephen’s and teacher, 1819; d. 21 Dec. 1843; bur. Mount Jerome Cemetery, Dublin; notice by George Petrie in laudatory obit. (Dublin University Magazine, Jan. 1847); eight of the twelve melodies in Moore’s first anthology were from Bunting’s collection; the Irish words were re-instated by Donal O’Sullivan; the plaque at St. George’s Church, High St., was unveiled in Oct. 2009; his papers, long lost, were rediscovered and housed in Queen’s University Library in 1907.

Bunting’s papers are the subject of a digital project at Queen’s University, Belfast [online].

Works
- A General Collection of the Ancient Irish Music; a variety of admired airs never before published, and also the compositions of Conolan and Carolan [...], [1 Vol.; subseq. styled Vol. 1] [London [Belfast Society for Promoting Knowledge] 1796] [see details]; Do. [another edn.] [Dublin: Publish’d by Hime at his Musical Circulating Library [1798]], [2], iv p., 36pp. of music; fol. [ESTC T301188];
- Do. [2nd edn.] as A General Collection of the Ancient Irish Music: containing a variety of admired airs never before published and also the compositions of Conolan and Carolan, Vol 1 / collected from the harpers &c in the different provinces of Ireland, and adapted for the piano-forte, with a prefatory introduction by Edward Bunting. (Dublin: W. Power & Cos. 1809), [6], 31, [1]p.; 34.4cm./4° [Published and sold at W. Powers music ware house ... and at J. Powers music and instrument ware house ...], and Do. (London: Clementi & Co. 1809), 1 score [(2), iii, [1], 28, [2], 72 p., ill. [4 lvs of pls.], fol., [see details];
- Do. [3rd edn.], as The Ancient Music of Ireland, arranged for the Piano Forte. To which is prefixed a Dissertation on the Irish Harp and Harpers, including an account of the old melodies of Ireland, 2 vols. [ded. to Queen Victoria] (Dublin: Hodges & Smith 1840), [v], 100, [2], xi ,[1],109pp. [see details];
- The Ancient Music of Ireland : an edition comprising the three collections of William Bunting originally published in 1796, 1809 and 1840 (Dublin: Waltons’ Piano and Musical Instrument Galleries 1969), ill. [plates];
- The Ancient Music of Ireland arranged for pianoforte, to which is prefixed a Dissertation on the Irish Harp and Harpers, including an Account of the Old Melodies of Ireland [rep. of Hodges & Smith Dublin edn. of 1840] (Belfast: Linen hall Library 1996) [printed in November 1796 by Mr R. Jameson of London; with loose leaflet giving an historical introduction to the work.

See also Prospectus of A general collection of the ancient music of Ireland : comprising notices of the tunes, and of the more eminent harpers of later times, with some account of the various efforts towards a revival of the Irish harp. Edward Bunting, (Dublin: Hodges & Smith [1851], 24pp., 21cm.

Discography
- The Chieftains, The Celtic Harp, a tribute to Edward Bunting with the Belfast Harp Orchestra (RCA [1994]).
A General Collection of the Ancient Irish Music: containing a variety of admired airs never before published, and also the compositions of Conolan and Carolan / collected from the harpers &c. in the different provinces of Ireland, and adapted for the piano-forte, with a prefatory introduction by Edward Bunting [2 vols.] (London: Printed & sold by Preston & Son ... [1796]), [2], v, [1]pp., 36pp. of music; fol. [incl. 66 songs, without words; titles in Gaelic & English; historical ‘Preface’ in letterpress (p. i-v); t.p. and music engraved - viz., ‘[Samuel John] Neele sc.’ (t.p.), ‘Engrav’d by Thos. Straight ... Surry’ (music; p.35). [Cf. another copy as Do. (Dublin: I. Willis [1800], 1 score, iv, 36pp., 35cm.]

A General Collection of the Ancient Music of Ireland arranged for the Piano Forte; some of the most admired Melodies are adapted for the Voice, to poetry chiefly translated from the original Irish Songs, by T. Campbell Esqr. and other eminent poets: to which is prefixed a historical & critical dissertation on the Egyptian, British and Irish Harp by Edward Bunting. [2 vols.] (London: Printed & sold for the editor by Clementi & Compy. ... and all other music sellers in the United Kingdom. [1809], 1 score, [2], iii, [1], 28, [2], 72pp., ill. [4 lvs. of pls. (front. + 3), fol.; contains 66 instrumental settings of songs from the 1796 edn., with 75 add. songs with titles; in Gaelic & English]; Imprint of T. Davison, printer of the letterpress text (p.66); ‘Engraved by R.T. Skarratt’ (p.72.).

The Ancient Music of Ireland arranged for the Piano Forte. To which is prefixed a Dissertation on the Irish Harp and Harpers, including an account of the old melodies of Ireland, 2 vols. [ded. to Queen Victoria] (Dublin: Hodges & Smith 1840), [vi], 100, [2], xi ,[1],109pp., 4pp. of music between p.88 & 89, 109pp. at end; ill. [3 pls.], 32 cm.; t.p. in gold & cols., ill., pls.; contains 151 airs. Note: a copy bound by George Mullen, Dublin, in purple morocco, richly tooled, with purple watered silk doublures in BL. The Dissertation consists of 5 chaps. including a musicological analysis of Irish music [sixth degree], an analysis of the historical Irish harp, biographies of the chief players.

Criticism

- Robert Welch, A History of Verse Translation from the Irish 1789-1897(Gerrards Cross 1988), pp.45-55;


Commentary

Thomas Moore, Preface to Poems (1841 End.), acknowledging debt to Bunting: ‘To the zeal and industry of Mr Bunting his country is indebted for the preservation of her old national airs ... But for the zeal and intelligent research of Mr Bunting, at that crisis, the greater part of our musical treasures would probably have been lost to the world ... It was in the year 1797 that, through the medium of Mr Bunting’s book, I was first made acquainted with the beauties of our native music ... [Irish Melodies] the only work of my pen ... whose fame (thanks to the sweet music in which it is embalmed) may boast a chance of prolonging its existence to a day much beyond our own.’ (Poems 1841; rep. London: Longmans 1865, pp.viii.; cited in Partridge, Language and Society in Anglo-Irish Literature(1984), pp.161-63.)

A. P. Graves, Irish Literary and Musical Studies (London: Elkin Mathews 1913), writes: ‘Moore ... was perfectly frank in replying to Bunting’s charge that the original airs have been altered by Stevenson to suit his words. In a [diary] entry of July 15 1840, he thus writes “Bunting lays the blame of all these alterations on Stevenson, but poor Sir John was entirely innocent of them; as the whole task of selecting the airs, and in some instances shaping them to the general sentiment which the melody appeared to me to express, was undertaken solely by myself. [...] Had I not ventured on these very admissible liberties, many of the songs now most known and popular would have been still sleeping with all their authentic dross about them in Mr. Bunting’s first volume. The same charge is brought by him respecting those airs which I took from the second volume of his collection.” Bunting married as an old bachelor Miss Mary Ann Chapman and moved to Dublin, where he secured work and companionship from Petrie, Stokes, O’Curry [...] it was not until this period that he produced his last collection and [...] magnum opus, with a memoir by Petrie.’ (q.p.)
Joseph Th. Leerssen, *Mere Irish & Fior-Ghael: Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, Its Development and Literary Expression Prior To The Nineteenth Century* (Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins Pub. Co. 1986), notes that The Ulster Gaelic Society (Cuideacht Gaedhilge Uladh) was founded in 1830 by Dr. James McDonnell in Belfast with others such as Dr Bryce, Robert McAdam, and Tomás Ó Fiannachta; McDonnell previously organised the famous Belfast harpers festival of 1793 [sic]; An Irish Harp Society was active from 1807 to 1817. (Leerssen, p.439; citing Robert Welch, *A History of Verse Translation from the Irish 1789-1897* (Gerrards Cross 1988), pp.45-55.)

Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton UP 1997), ‘The high point of Ireland’s “first Celtic revival,” as commentators have often argued, was the 1792 Belfast harpists’ festival, held around Bastille Day; intended, according to its 1791 circular, “to revive and perpetuate the ancient Music and Poetry of Ireland,” the festival gathered twelve elderly harpers from across Ireland, “descendants of our Ancient Bards, who are at present almost exclusively possessed of all that remains of the Music Poetry and oral traditions of Ireland,” to perform for a large, appreciative audience, while antiquarian Edward Bunting and a team of transcribers noted each song. Bunting’s three volumes of melodies from the festival, published over the next forty years, had a major influence on young nationalist poets; William Drennan and Thomas Moore, for instance, set some of their most influential “Irish melodies” to its music. The Belfast festival thus marks the conjunction of new and old bards, of traditional music and romantic poetry. / It also marks a much briefer political conjuncture between bardic and revolutionary brands of nationalism. The Belfast festival coincided with a major convention of some six thousand Irish volunteers and United Irishmen; the harpers’ performances were framed by processions and parades, debates on Catholic emancipation, and banquets with toasts to the fall of the Bastille and the rights of man. [...]’

Quotations

**A General Collection of the Ancient Irish Music** [...] (1796), Preface: Bunting expresses it as the task of him at the Belfast Harpers’ Festival of 1792 ‘to take down the airs played by the different harpers [without] adding a single note to the old melodies.’ Further: ‘The music of a country and its language are analogous. There are idioms and characteristic delicacies in both, to enter into the spirit of which, some time and practice are requisite: And this is peculiarly the case with those compositions, which are the production of a very distant period.’ He and his associates believe that their purpose would ‘not merely gratify the natural feeling of national pride; we are tracing the progress of the human mind, and endeavouring to restore a page in the history of man.’ (pp.i-iv; quoted in Emer Nolan, *Captain Rock* [...] &c.] by Thomas Moore [rep. edn.] (Cork: Field Day Co. 2008), Introduction, p.xii.

Note: Bunting records his Sir John Stevenson’s arrangements of the Irish airs in Thomas Moore’s *Irish Melodies*, though accompanying such ‘elegant’ poetry, caused him pain and regret that the work of the poet was accounted of so paramount an interest, that the proper order of song writing was in many instances inverted, and, instead of the words being adapted to the tune, the tune was too often adapted to the words, a solecism which could never have happened had the reputation of the writer not been so great as at once to carry the tunes he deigned to make use of altogether out of their old sphere among the simple and tradition-loving people of the country - with whom, in truth, many of the new melodies, to this day, are hardly suspected to be themselves.’ (Preface to the 1840 [3rd] edition.)

References

**Brian de Breffny**, ed., *Ireland: A Cultural Encyclopaedia* (London: Thames & Hudson 1982), provides details as the number of airs in each edition of Bunting’s *A General Collection of the Ancient Irish Music* and its successors: viz, 66 in 1796; an additional 77 (i.e., 143) in 1809; an additional 120 (i.e., 263) in 1840.


**Seamus Deane**, gen. ed., *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (Derry: Field Day 1991), Vol., selects Preface, *A General collection of the ancient Music of Ireland* (1796) [FDA1]: ‘[…] the present is the first General collection of its national airs ... the rapid decrease of the number of itinerant Performers on the Irish Harp, with the consequent decline of that tender and expressive Instrument, gave the first idea of assembling the remaining Harpers dispersed over the
different Provinces of Ireland ... 12 July 1792 ... to procure, while yet attainable, the most approved copies of tunes already in the hands of the practitioners, as well as to revive and perpetuate a variety of others extremely ancient ... likely to become extinct. &c.' [FDA 1982]; also remarks at 962 [harp fest. of 1792 which Bunting after his fashion transcribed, eds. Carpenter and Deane]; 1053 [harvest of Belfast Harp Festival at which nine Irish harpers revealed to him the wealth of Irish traditional music; Bunting did not understand ‘the essential structures of the music, fashioned on a system of modes, rather than major or minor keys’ (quoted from Sean O’Boyle, The Irish Song Tradition, Skerries 1976; D. Hammond, ed., A Centenary Selection from Moore’s Melodies Skerries 1979), he could not therefore record what he heard; the first act of translation, even of transmogrification, had taken place even before Moore asked Bunting to co-operate with him ... Bunting refused, but when William Power, the Dublin music-seller, proposed that Sir John Stevenson should arrange the music to fit Moore’s words, the offer was taken up; it is not therefore entirely to the point to say that Moore violated the old music [in his] ‘very allowable liberties’ [without which, in Moore’s account] ‘many of the songs now most known and popular would have been still sleeping, with all their authentic dross about them, in Mr Bunting’s first volume; Bunting had the magnanimity to admit that ‘The beauty of Mr Moore’s words in a great degree atones for the violence done by the musical arranger to many of the airs which he has adopted’. ed., Deane]; 1252 [ref. in Charles Gavan Duffy’s article on Thomas Moore in The Nation, 1842, to Emmet’s hearing Moore play Bunting’s airs]; 1008, BLOG, son of Derbyshire engineer; eldest brother was organist and music teacher in Louth; article to Weir in Belfast; fondness for alcohol and quick temper; travelled for music collecting in Connaught, Ulster, and Munster; spells in London and Paris; returned via Belgium and Holland; m. Miss Chapman in 1819; organist at St. Stephen’s in Dublin. d. 1843.


Ulster Library Library (Morris Collection) holds Ancient Music of Ireland, IV (Walton, Dublin, 1969) [i.e., the fourth expanded issue of the title, after 1796 & 1809, the Petrie rep. of 1840, and Fox, 1911].

Emerald Isle Books (Catalogue 95) lists The Ancient Music of Ireland [...] added a Dissertation on the Irish Harp and Harpers, incl. an account of the Old Melodies of Ireland (Dublin: Hodges & Smith 1840), 4v; copy John Ward, ‘Belfastiensis’, with fine plates called for; extra ill. copy with rare port. of Bunting by William Brocas Jr., publ. by Sidebotham, Dublin [based on pl. tipped onto title]; printed piece about Bunting by Ward; ills. of Carolan and Hempson; old engraving Patrick Quin, the Portadown harper, from Brocas; sheet of MSS inscribed Crawsfordsburn 1850, with Mallow Castle 1860 on reverse. (£240.)

Notes

“The Londonderry Air” [‘Oh Danny Boy’], first collected by Bunting; the modern words in two verses were written by Edward Weatherley, an English barrister, in 1913; the original reputedly composed by Rory Dall O’Cahan, a blind harper who played in Limavady market square. (See Malachy McCourt, Danny Boy: The Legend of the Beloved Irish Ballad US: Running Press 2002, 142pp.)

Denis Hampson [Hempson] - account given in Sydney Owenson [afterwards Lady Morgan]’s The Wild Irish Girl (1806), said to have been supplied to the author by Rev. Mr. Sampson of Magillan writing from the address, Umbrae, July 3d, 1805: ‘Dennis Hampson, or the man with two heads, is a native of Craigmore, near Garavgh, county Derry; his father, Bryan Darragher (blackish complexion) Hampson, held the whole town-land of Tyrcrevan; his mother’s relations were in possession of the wood-town (both considerable farms in Magilligan). He lost his sight at the age of three years by the small-pox; at twelve years he began to learn to play the harp under Bridget O’Cahan: “For,” as he said, “in those old times, women as well as men were taught the Irish harp in the best families; and every old Irish family had harps in plenty.” His next master was John C. Garragher, a blind travelling harper, whom he followed to Buncranagh, where his master used to play for Colonel Vaughan: he had afterwards Laughlin Hanning and Pat Connor in succession as masters.’ (The Wild Irish Girl, Letter XXVII.) Note: The passage of the novel from which this extract is taken gives an account of Hampson’s career at several pages length and incorporates a reference to Bunting as Bunter. A final remark on Lady Morgan’s part - closing the footnote in which Rev. Sampson’s letter is reproduced, indicates that Hampson offered to sell his harp to her in Feb. 1806, being then in his 109th year. In the novel itself, Mortimer and Glorvina make a visit to Hampson in his Magilligan home. (See full text version in RICORSO Library, “Irish Classics”, infra.)

Rescued papers: For account of the retrieval of Bunting’s documents, see Charlotte Fox, Annals of the Irish Harpers (1911).

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Irish pipes: See near contemporary works on Scotch and Irish pipes [uilleann] by one P/ O'Farrell - viz., O'Farrell's *Collection of National Irish Music for the Union Pipes* ... Comprising a Variety of the Most Favorite Slow & Sprightly Tunes ... with Variations ... with a Selection of ... Scotch Tunes, also a Treatise with ... Instructions ... for the Pipes. (London: Gow [1804.]); O Farrell's *Pocket Companion for the Irish or Union Pipes, being a grand selection of favorite tunes both Scotch and Irish. Adapted for the pipes, flute, flageolet and violin, etc.,* Vol. [2] (London: Goulding, D'Almaine, Potter & Co. [1811]).

Drogheda Harp Society - Edward Bunting's brother Anthony had been organist for many years at Drogheda, and Bunting himself had lived there as a child. A Harp Society commenced there on January 15th 1840 — three years before Bunting’s death (he must have been cheered by news of it). Father Thomas V. Burke, O.P., of Drogheda, was the organiser. He brought Hugh Fraser from Belfast as teacher at a salary of £27 per annum. Hugh had been a day pupil at the Belfast Irish Harp Society. Fraser was born in 1808, the year the Belfast society officially commenced, so he was only 34 when he commenced teaching at Drogheda. By its third anniversary in 1843 the school had fifteen pupils and 12 new harps made under Father Burke’s direction by a local carpenter Francis Flood at a cost of £3 each. (The *Drogheda Argus* for April 22nd 1843 gives an account of a meeting held at ...]) File supplied by Frank Callery via FB - 16.03.2015.)