

The story of the harp ...

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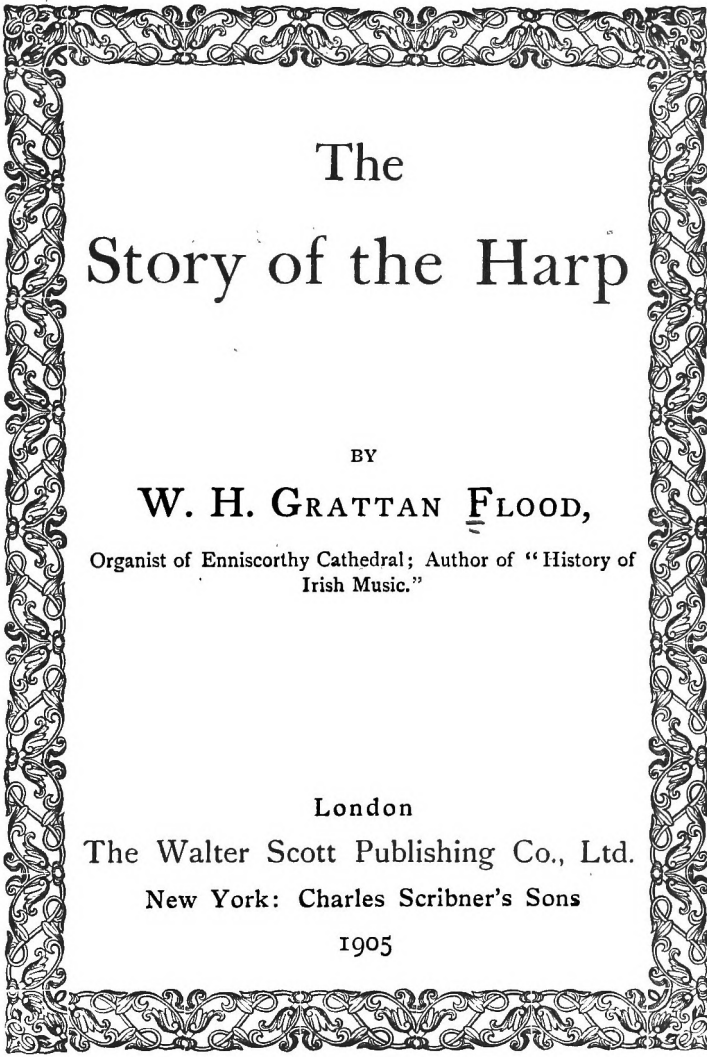


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The
Story of the Harp

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CHAPTER V.

“BRIAN BORU’S” HARP.

Outline of the “Brian Boru” legend—Examination of claims in the light of history—Description of the O’Brien harp—Clue to the real story—Probable date—Its wanderings—Restrung in the eighteenth century—Presented to Trinity College, Dublin—Cast of it in South Kensington Museum.

ALL visitors to Trinity College, Dublin, are shown “Brian Boru’s” harp, it being supposed that this venerable instrument really belonged to King Brian the hero of Clontarf. Perhaps it may be necessary to explain that Brian Boru, *recte* Brian Borūmha, was supreme monarch of Ireland from 1003 to 1014. On April 23rd, 1014, he gave an overwhelming defeat to the Danes at Clontarf, near Dublin, but was, unfortunately, slain in the hour of victory. His harp and jewels were, as the story goes, taken by his son Donogh, who, however, did not succeed to the sovereignty of Ireland, Malachi, the former monarch, having resumed the government.

Donogh O’Brien, after Clontarf, returned to his palace at Kincora, but his right to the kingship of

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Thomond was disputed by his elder brother, Tadhg. For years a fratricidal war continued, which only ended with the death of Tadhg in 1023, whereupon Donogh was acknowledged King of Munster. He had a troubled reign, and at length was defeated, in 1061, at Slieve Crot, Co. Tipperary, by Dermot mac Maelnambo, King of Leinster. After this, misfortune followed on misfortune, and, in 1062, King Donogh, then over seventy years of age, made a pilgrimage to Rome, and presented his crown and sceptre to Pope Alexander II. Not alone did Donogh O'Brien (whose wife was Driella, sister of Harold II., King of England) bring his father's crown and regalia to Rome, but, as is said, also brought his father's harp, which he bequeathed to the Pope. Anyhow, he died, "after the victory of penance," at the monastery of St. Stephen, in Rome, in 1064, and the harp is said to have remained as one of the treasures of the Vatican till 1521. In the latter year it was given by Pope Leo X. to King Henry VIII. of England, at the same time that the Pontiff conferred on the English monarch the title "Fidei Defensor" (F.D. = Defender of the Faith), in recognition of his Defence of the Seven Sacraments. Finally, in 1543, when Henry VIII. conferred the title of Earl of Clanrickarde on MacWilliam (Ulick) de Burgo, he presented the Earl with this Irish

Outline of the Legend

harp, said to have belonged to Brian Borūmha. Vallancey says that the harp, after a time, reverted to O'Brien, Earl of Thomond, and eventually became the property of Ralph Ouseley of Limerick.

The above is a summary of the story as generally told; but there is another version, written by Ralph Ouseley above mentioned, dated October 22nd, 1783, to be found among the Egerton Manuscripts in the British Museum:—¹

“ This harp lay in the Vatican till Innocent XI., in 1678, sent it as a token of his goodwill to Charles II., who had it deposited in the Tower. Soon after this, the Earl of Clanrickarde, seeing it among the curiosities, mentioned to the King that he knew an Irish nobleman that would probably give a limb of his estate for it (meaning the Earl of Thomond), on which his Majesty immediately replied: ‘ I make you a present of it; dispose of it as you please.’ Lord Clanrickarde brought it to Ireland, and Lord Thomond, being on his travels, never was possessed of it. Some years after, it was purchased by Lady Huxley for twenty rams and as many swine of English breed, and bestowed by her on her son-in-law, Henry MacMahon of Clenagh, in the County of Clare, who, about the year 1756, bestowed it

**Ouseley's
Version
of the
Legend**

¹ *Bibl. Egerton*, Brit. Mus., No. 74, p. 351.

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to Matt. MacNamara, of Limerick, Esq., Counsellor-at-Law, and some years Recorder of that city, a most worthy, honoured, polite, and hospitable gentleman. When given to Counsellor MacNamara, it had *silver strings* and some more ornaments of plate than are now to be seen; they were stolen or destroyed by the servants, or idle people fiddling withal, as was also a letter from Mr. MacMahon, giving a full and particular history of the said harp. It was left as a token of esteem by Counsellor MacNamara, who died in 1774, to Ralph Ouseley, of Dublin, an admirer of antiquity, and by him presented, in 1781, to the Right Hon. W. Conyngham, whose taste for the fine arts . . . deserves the highest encomiums.”

The latter account looks very circumstantial, but the only part that can be accepted without hesitation is the history of the instrument from about the year 1720, when it came into the possession of Henry MacMahon. Let us now briefly examine the claims. We may at once state that an examination of the harp itself is conclusive as against the supposed date of 1014. The workmanship is thirteenth century, though Petrie inclined to the view that it was not made before the second half of the fourteenth century.

There is no documentary evidence that Donogh

O'Brien Harp

O'Brien brought any harp with him to Rome; nor yet has any one of the Irish annalists alluded to King Brian Borūmha as a harpist, although they *do* tell us that he was a skilled chess-player. Again, there is no proof that Pope Innocent XI., in 1678, sent any Irish harp to King Charles II. Here let us give Dr. Petrie's admirable description of the "Brian Boru" harp:—

"From recent [1838] examination, it appears that this harp had but one row of strings; that these were 30 in number, not 28, as was formerly supposed, 30 being the number of brass tuning-pins and of corresponding string-holes. It is



FIG. 15.—BRIAN BORU'S HARP.

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32 inches high, and of exquisite workmanship; the upright pillar is of oak, and the sound-board of red
sallow; the extremity of the fore-arm, or
Description harmonic curved bar, is capped in part with
of the silver, extremely well wrought and chiselled.
O'Brien
Harp It also contains a large crystal set in silver,
under which was another stone, now lost.

The buttons [bosses], or ornamental knobs, at the side of the curved bar are of silver. The string-holes of the sound-board are neatly ornamented with escutcheons of bears [? lions] carved and gilt. The four sounding-holes have also had ornaments, probably of silver, as they have been the object of theft. The bottom which it rests upon is a little broken, and the wood very much decayed. The whole bears evidence of having been the work of a very expert artist."

Before adding any comment on this excellent description, it may be well to quote an incident of
Clue to the the year 1216, which furnishes a clue to the
Real Story real origin of the "Brian Boru" harp.

In 1216 Finn O'Bradley, steward of the Prince of Tyrconnell (Donal *mor* O'Donnell), was sent to collect tribute, but was slain, in a fit of anger, by Muiredach O'Daly of Lisadil, Co. Sligo, a famous Irish minstrel, who fled to Scotland, where he remained from 1217 to 1222. Whilst in Scotland, he wrote three celebrated

O'Brien Harp Date

poems to O'Donnell, who allowed him to return to his native country, and took him back into friendship. Meantime, Donnohadh Caribre O'Brien, King of Thomond, *sent his own harp*—"the jewel of the O'Briens"—as a pledge to Scotland for the ransom of the bard O'Daly. Accordingly, the Irish minstrel was allowed to return home, but the harp was detained in Scotland, where it remained for over eighty years.

Thus we can trace the history of *a rare harp of the O'Briens*, sent to Scotland about the year 1221, as a pledge, by the valiant King of Thomond, whose death took place on March 8th, 1243.

O'Daly's Irish poems are preserved in Scotland in the Dean of Lismore's Book, the editor of which work says that O'Daly "was the ancestor of the MacVurricks, bards to the MacDonalds of Clanranald"—the bard himself being known in Ireland as *albanach*—that is, "the Scotchman"—from his seven years' residence in Scotland.

The O'Brien harp may fairly be dated as from about the year 1220, and it was sent to Scotland in 1222. In 1228 or 1229, Gillabride MacConmidhe, a famous Ulster bard, was commissioned by King O'Brien to endeavour to ransom the much-prized instrument. In response to this request, the bard composed the well-known "Ransom Song,"

Probable
Date

Story of the Harp

but, alas ! the lovely O'Brien harp would not be restored for "whole flocks of sheep," and so, as O'Curry remarks, it remained in Scotland until King Edward I. took it with him to Westminster in 1307.

It lay at Westminster from 1307 until July 1st, 1543, when Henry VIII. presented it to the first Earl of Clanrickarde, who, at his death in 1547, bequeathed it to his son Richard, second Earl, husband of Margaret, daughter of O'Brien, Earl of Thomond. Thus the harp reverted to its old owners about the middle of the sixteenth century, as Lady Clanrickarde presented it to Conor, Earl of Thomond.

In 1570 there was an Irish poem written in praise of the "O'Brien Harp," which had, during the enforced absence of its owner, Conor, Earl of Thomond, been in temporary possession of a certain O'Gilligan, a famous harper. The Irish bard describes it as "a musical, fine-pointed [curved], speckled [ornamented] harp," and it is added: "though sweet in the hands of O'Gilligan, it was *sweeter far in the halls of O'Brien.*"

By intermarriage, we find the O'Brien Harp in possession of Henry MacMahon of Clenagh, Co. Clare, in 1750, who, in 1756, presented it to Matthew MacNamara, Recorder of Limerick.

“Restored” by Dr. Robert Ball

Arthur O'Neill, the harpist, tells us that when he visited Limerick in 1760, he had the honour of playing on the “Brian Boru” harp, restored for the occasion at the cost of Mr. MacNamara. On the death of the latter gentleman in 1774, the harp was bequeathed to Ralph Ouseley, a musical amateur (grandfather of Sir Frederick Gore Ouseley, Bart., Mus. Doc.), and a noted antiquarian, who, in 1781, as before stated, presented it to the Right Hon. William Burton Conyngham, P.C.

Conyngham (who died in 1796) presented the O'Brien Harp to Trinity College, where it has ever since remained. When deposited in the College Museum it was in a deplorable condition, as the harmonic curved bar was broken and fastened over the sound-box. Dr. Robert Ball made a very careful restoration of the instrument, supplying the lost portions from analogy, and lent it “as the oldest known specimen of Irish harp” to the committee of the Dublin Exhibition, in 1853.

Presented
to
Trinity
College,
Dublin

Curiously enough, one of the escutcheons, or silvered-bronze badges, which Petrie describes as having been stolen, was found in the Phoenix Park, Dublin, in 1876. From the armorial bearings Petrie was led to believe that the harp belonged to an ecclesiastic of the O'Neill family, and he dated the

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instrument as from the close of the fourteenth century, but O'Curry's view is convincing in favour of the harp having belonged to Donnchadh Caribre O'Brien, King of Thomond, in 1218.

Although the original harp of O'Brien is in the Library of Trinity College, Dublin, there is a good cast of it in the South Kensington Museum, and a description of it is furnished by Carl Engel in his admirable Catalogue. However, by far the most accurate drawings of this venerable instrument will be found in Mr. R. Bruce Armstrong's magnificent monograph on the Irish and Highland Harps, a sumptuous quarto, issued in 1904, but now withdrawn from circulation. Only 180 copies were printed. Mr. Armstrong enters into the most minute particulars as to the harp itself and its Irish ornamentation.¹

¹ I take this opportunity of acknowledging the courtesy of Mr. Armstrong, who presented me with a copy of his valuable book.