

List of Officers, 2003/2004

Patrons

DR. MICHAEL SMITH, D.C.L., BISHOP OF MEATH
MOST REV. DR. RICHARD CLARKE, BISHOP OF MEATH AND KILDARE
PROF. GEORGE EOGAN, CHAIRMAN, THE DISCOVERY PROGRAMME

President

JOHN GAVIN

Vice-President

REV. GERARD RICE, P.P.

Council

| | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|
| WILLIAM CARR | MICHELLE NUGENT-LEONARD |
| CARMEL DUFFY | ENDA OBOYLE |
| NOEL FRENCH | MAURA O'DONOGHUE |
| CIARAN MANGAN | JANE O'REILLY |
| JOHN MCCULLEN | REGINALD O'REILLY |
| PATRICK MCNAMEE | WILLIAM SMITH |

Hon. Secretary and Publications Secretary

OLIVER WARD, Spiddal, Nobber, Co. Meath

Hon. Assistant Secretary

JULITTA CLANCY, Parsonstown, Batterstown, Co. Meath

Public Relations Officer

MARIE MACSWEENEY, 9 Five Oaks, Dublin Rd., Drogheda, Co. Louth

Hon. Treasurer

ANN O'REILLY, Rathfeigh, Tara, Co. Meath

Hon. Assistant Treasurer

PATRICK O'ROURKE, Athlumney, Navan

Hon. Auditor

UITAN O'REILLY

Hon. Editor

SÉAMUS MAC GABHANN

Department of English, N.U.I. Maynooth, Maynooth, Co. Kildare

© The Meath Archaeological and Historical Society

Cover by Daniel Ahern

Ríocht na Midhe

Vol. XV 2004

Cumann Seandálaíochta agus Staire na Mí

Meath Archaeological and Historical Society

"A hui Chuind, a Chormaic," *ol Carpre*
"Cid is dech do rig?"

"Ni hansa," *ol Cormac.* "Dech do . . .

Deithide Senchasa

Fritfoalad fir."

"O grandson of Conn, o Cormac," *said Carbery,*

"What is best for a king?"

"Not hard to tell," *said Cormac.* "Best for him . . .

Taking care of ancient lore

Giving truth for truth."

TECOSCA CORMAIC

The generous support of Meath County Council in the publication
of *Ríocht na Midhe* is warmly acknowledged by the Society.

Hon. Editor: SÉAMUS MAC GABHANN

Carolan honoured by Nobber monument

SÉAMUS MAC GABHANN

Turlough O'Carolan never forgot his native Nobber. After he left it, he composed repeatedly for his beloved Bridget Cruise. And he returned to Nobber to play and compose for Nelly Plunkett of Robertstown. In their turn, the people of Nobber have not forgotten O'Carolan. The brilliantly successful O'Carolan Festival has hosted numerous renowned musicians and groups who have played his music worldwide – from The Chieftains and The Belfast Harp Orchestra to The Angel Band. O'Carolan was a legend even in his lifetime and since then he has been an inspiration for scholars, painters, poets, sculptors, dramatists and very recently for the writer Brian Keenan in his fine novel *Turlough* (2000). And now Ann Hugh's splendid sculpture in Nobber gives him a permanent artistic presence at the heart of his own native place. Ann Hugh's bronze statue of O'Carolan was unveiled by Tony Finnegan, Uachtarán, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, at the O'Carolan Harp, Cultural and Heritage Festival, Nobber, 5 October 2003.

O'Carolan was born in 1670 in the townland of Spiddal, about half a mile from Nobber. The location of his father's house is still pointed out in a field on the Kells side of the railway crossing, to the south-east side of the road. His father was a small farmer and a blacksmith. The young Turlough attended a school run by the Cruise family in nearby Cruisetown. The Cruises were an Anglo-Norman family who had been Gaelicised over the centuries. Despite their loss of Brittas to the Blighs in the Cromwellian Plantation of the 1650s, they clung on in Cruisetown and Rahood, and the family continued as patrons of native poetry and learning. One member of the family, Murtagh Cruise, who died in 1702, was the subject of a lament by the great Oriel poet, Séamus Dall Mac Cuarta. The poem highlights the striking hospitality of the Cruises and their support of literature, learning and harp music.¹

At the Cruise school O'Carolan met and fell in love with a daughter of the family, Bridget Cruise. So intense was his affection for Bridget that in later years he composed four airs which bear her name and also three or four songs in her honour. His friend Charles O'Connor related that throughout his life O'Carolan always recalled Bridget with great affection. Tradition has it that years later when O'Carolan was blind, the pair met again while on pilgrimage to St. Patrick's Purgatory at

Lough Derg. When Bridget reached to help the blind man, O'Carolan instantly recognised her by the touch of her hand and exclaimed in Irish: "By the hand of my godfather, this is the hand of Bridget Cruise!"²

O'Carolan's family moved to north Roscommon in his teens. There he was fortunate in gaining the enlightened patronage of the Mac Dermottroe and O'Connor families, both of old Gaelic aristocratic descent. In keeping with age-old Gaelic tradition, both families still supported poets, harpers and native learning. So when O'Carolan was struck blind by smallpox at about 18 years of age, Máire Mac Dermottroe had him taught to play the harp. On his completion of a three-year spell of training, she gave O'Carolan a horse, a guide and some money, and launched him on his career as an itinerant harper. In subsequent decades he composed and played for both the declining Catholic Irish gentry and the newcomers of Planter origin. He thus represents a cultural bridge between the two nations of Ireland during the era of the penal laws.

O'Carolan's first visit was to a Leitrim landowner named Reynolds who was of old Gaelic stock. Reynolds persuaded O'Carolan to try his hand at poetry, and suggested as a subject a battle between the fairy hosts of two neighbouring hills. The result was the graceful song "Sheebeg and Sheemore". From then on O'Carolan normally composed verse to accompany his tunes.

O'Carolan's identity as a poet had an impact on the popular imagination. His poetic gift was widely regarded as originating in the mysterious otherworld, the realm of the fairies. Tradition in Nobber around 1820, about 80 years after his death, related how the young O'Carolan used to rest and doze on a rath or moat near his father's house in Spiddal. One day he started up suddenly out of his sleep. On reaching home he called for his harp and began to compose the music and words of his song to Bridget Cruise. Nobber people at the time firmly believed that O'Carolan got his gift from the queen of the good people, who held her court in the interior of this rath. This belief that poetry is a gift from the otherworld goes back to the pagan Celts. Among the Celts the poet was a druid or seer, with vision beyond the normal, and in their mythology the mystical gift of poetry was bestowed by a goddess.³

His fellow Gaelic poets also cherished O'Carolan. His closest friend was Charles Mac Cabe, Cathaoir Mac Cába, from Mullagh, Co. Cavan. Mac Cabe's first name was "Cathaoir", Irish for a chair, as well as for

Charles. His surname, "Cába" in Irish, also means a cape. So when the pair first met, O'Carolan asked him his name, and was answered in a riddle: "Tá m'ainm faoi mo thóin agus mo shloinne idir mo dhá shlinneán" (My name is under my backside and my surname between my two shoulders). With his poet's insight, O'Carolan instantly understood the riddle and welcomed him by name: "Céad míle fáilte romhat, a Chathail Mhic Cába" (A hundred thousand welcomes to you Charles Mac Cabe). And after that, the two settled in for a long drinking session that lasted for some days. The antics of the pair were vividly remembered by the people. On one occasion while drinking, they had a wager that whoever fell asleep first would pay the night's bill. Mac Cabe was soon fast asleep. O'Carolan at once called for a sack and tied Mac Cabe in it, up to his neck, in case he would renege on the bet when he awakened. This episode led to a poetic contention between the pair, in which each wrote satirical verse against the other.⁴ The disparaging verses were good-humoured, however, and not charged with the poisonous venom which true satire was reputed to convey. The ancient pagan origin of the poet, as a kind of druid, endowed his curse or satire with devastating power. The Irish annals record that in the year 1414 the English Viceroy, Sir John Stanley, died from the "poison" of a satire made on him by an Irish poet whom he had wronged.⁵

O'Carolan and Mac Cabe were reconciled, however, and later Mac Cabe turned the tables on his friend. On meeting O'Carolan once in Leitrim, Mac Cabe disguised his voice and told the visitor that the only news in the area was the death of a wandering harper called Mac Cabe. O'Carolan was deeply upset and upon being led to the supposed grave, he composed a poem of lament for his old friend.

Other Gaelic poets also praised O'Carolan in verse, among them Seán Ó Gara of Sligo and Philip "Minister" Brady from Cavan. O'Carolan composed music for the Irish verse of his friend Hugh Magauran, afterwards translated by Jonathan Swift as "An Irish Feast".

O'Carolan was taken by Colonel Maguire of Fermanagh to meet the Co. Louth poets Séamus Dall Mac Cuarta and Patrick Mac Alindon, both of whom welcomed him in verse. Mac Alindon's poem is addressed both to O'Carolan and Bridget Cruise. In the poem, Bridget is speaking of her love of O'Carolan. Harps at the time were usually ornamented with a female figure. So Bridget is made to regret that she is not created in the form of a shapely harp. Then O'Carolan's fingers, in playing, would give her joy, and he would hold her gently to his

heart, in the manner of a harpist. They would be united in love like some of the famous lovers of old.⁶

Mac Cuarta's poem is a splendid tribute to O'Carolan who is shown as a conquering hero of music, coming to Cooley from Queen Maeve's territory of Connacht:

Dhá mhiliúin déag fáilte dhaoibh
Ó áras Mheadhbha, iníon Eochaidh,
Go fearann Oirghiall glúnmhar, grinn
Lérbh ionmhain éachta Chon Chulainn.

Twelve million welcomes to thee

From the dwelling of Maeve, the daughter of Eochy,
To the fruitful pleasant land of Oriel,
Which treasured the feats of Cuchulainn.⁷

Although O'Carolan was a product of Gaelic Ireland, composing Irish verse and melodies, yet to a remarkable degree he bridged the gap between Gael and Planter. The names of those for whom he composed are evidence of this: Cooté, Cooper, Crofton, Brabazon, Pratt, all colonial hard-liners. In addition, there were more liberal Protestants like O'Hara, Irwin, Beragh, Stafford and Blayney. In Dublin, O'Carolan was the frequent guest of Dr. Patrick Delany, Professor of Oratory at Trinity College, in whose honour he composed a tune. Through Delany he came to know Jonathan Swift. Swift translated a poem by O'Carolan's friend, Hugh Magauran, for which O'Carolan had composed the air.⁸

Further striking indication of O'Carolan's impact upon the Anglo-Irish is given by a book of Irish tunes published in Dublin in 1724 by John and William Neal. The Neals were the foremost publishers of music in Dublin, and the book, *A collection of the most celebrated Irish tunes*, is by far the earliest printed collection of Irish music and is much older than any existing manuscript collection.⁹ Only three of these tunes were attributed to a composer, and in each case the composer named is O'Carolan. One further tune is attributed to him by implication, "Carollans Devotion". However, in later years, scholars such as Bunting, Hardiman, Petrie and O'Sullivan attributed a further 20 tunes in the collection to O'Carolan. Hence, he can be identified as the composer of 24, out of the total of 49 tunes in the Neals' book. In one case he is named as "Sigr Carrollini", an affectation which reflects the very strong vogue for Italian music in Dublin and London at this time.

Ireland then was strongly influenced by the European taste for baroque music, a highly ornate style which emerged from northern

Italy. O'Carolan encountered baroque melodies and idioms in the big houses of the gentry and in Dublin, where a number of Italian musicians had settled, including Francesco Geminiani. Charles O'Connor recorded that O'Carolan loved the Italian compositions: "Vivaldi charmed him, and with Corelli he was enraptured."¹⁰ Although O'Carolan's formation was in native music, nevertheless his brilliant technical ability enabled him to combine the traditional Irish mode he had inherited with an overlay of the latest, most fashionable Italian and French styles. This superb technical virtuosity is at the heart of his success. His creative fusion of baroque and native styles generated highly attractive melodies which enhanced his stature and assured his reputation as a composer both in Anglo-Irish and in Gaelic circles.

At the end of his life, O'Carolan returned to the house of his old friend and patron, Máire Mac Dermottroe at Ballyfarnon. There he died in 1738, mourned by the entire community. His former patron and music pupil Charles O'Connor recorded his passing with sadness: "Saturday, the 25th day of March, 1738. Turlough O'Carolan, the wise master and chief musician of the whole of Ireland, died today and was buried in the O'Duignan's church of Kiltonan, in the sixty-eighth year of his age. May his soul find mercy, for he was a moral and religious man."¹¹

Anglo-Ireland felt his loss also. In 1740, two years after O'Carolan's death, the Dublin poet Laurence Whyte laments his passing in a poem on Italian and Irish music. He salutes O'Carolan thus:

The greatest genius in his way
An Orpheus, who could sing and play,
So great a Bard where can we find,
Like him illiterate, and blind.¹²

The poet regards O'Carolan as irreplaceable and sees the native tradition which he represented as outmoded. This view is shared by Oliver Goldsmith, writing in 1760, who looks back upon O'Carolan as a symbol of a vanishing Irish culture, now totally eclipsed by that of imperial Britain.

Remarkably, however, as the Anglo-Irish began to put down firm Irish roots, O'Carolan's work gained deeper significance. Joseph Cooper Walker's *Irish Bards* (1786) carried a study of O'Carolan, and in 1789, Charlotte Brooke, from Rantavan House, Mullagh, published her *Reliques of Irish Poetry*, including material by O'Carolan.



Members of the O'Carolan Harp, Cultural and Heritage Festival Committee, Nobber, 2003. (Front, from left) Ann Finnegan, Teresa Kelly, Tony Finnegan, Julie Phillips, Helen Fagan. (Second row) Marie Cassidy, Bridie McEintee, Ann McDowell. (Third row) Phyllis Ward, Michael Smith, Nora Corrigan. (Back) Pádraig Lewis, Brian Murphy, Gerry McCormack.

The decade of the Rebellion of 1798 saw the rise of Irish nationalism and an urgent emphasis on Irish heritage. Edward Bunting, the great collector, recorded tunes by O'Carolan at the Belfast Harp Festival of 1792, and Thomas Moore incorporated some of these into his *Irish Melodies*. Edward O'Reilly researched O'Carolan's story, and the eminent scholars, James Hardiman and Samuel Ferguson, translated his verse during the course of a notable revival of interest in Irish culture and tradition, in the 1830s.

The mould-breaking Irish revival which occurred in the decades after 1890, led ultimately to independence for the Irish Free State in 1922. Now a notable advance in O'Carolan studies was the publication by Tomás Ó Máille of his *Ambráin Chearbhalláin* (1916), which collected the original Irish verse of O'Carolan.

In recent years, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and Gael Linn led a modern revival of Irish music and culture which had just begun when Donal O'Sullivan published his major study, *Carolan: The Life, Times and Music of an Irish Harper* (1958), in two volumes. O'Carolan's music

was now widely available and became a rich source of inspiration to Seán Ó Riada, the gifted composer, and founder of the famed Ceoltóirí Chualann. Members of this ensemble later combined under Paddy Moloney as the renowned group, The Chieftains. These brilliant stylists, in common with other eminent Irish musicians, have played O'Carolan's melodies on the world stage, to universal acclaim. Meanwhile, at home, O'Carolan's genius is celebrated in his native Nobber by the O'Carolan Festival which has generated a range of promising cultural initiatives locally, and given a new dynamism and vigour to communities throughout the neighbouring historic region. A striking innovation was the foundation of the flourishing Meath Harp School which, with the help of Cairde na Cruite, provides expert tuition on the harp to young musicians from Co. Meath and beyond, a fitting tribute to the gifted composer whose graceful music and joyous verse brightened the gloom of a dark era in Irish history. O'Carolan's genius continues to fascinate and challenge, just as it inspired Brian Keenan in the narrow confines of a dark Beirut cell. Now, thanks to the generous initiative of the Festival Committee, Ann Hugh's richly evocative sculpture embodies for all the blind composer's inspirational force in a new century. It is an eloquent symbol, set here at the heart of his own place, of O'Carolan's enduring legacy to later generations, for whom his music is a unifying and creative heritage.

REFERENCES

1. Ó Gallchoíir, Seán, 1971, *Seamus Dall Mac Cuaria: Dánta. An Clóchomhar/Eigse Orráda*. See "Tuireamh Mhurcha Críis", pp 32–7.
2. O'Sullivan, Donal, 1958, *Carolan: The Life, Times and Music of an Irish Harper*, London, Vol. 1, p. 65.
3. Mac Cana, Proinsias, 1970, *Celtic Mythology*, London, pp 14–15.
4. O'Sullivan, *op. cit.*, pp 74–81.
5. O hÓgáin, Dáithí, 1990, *Myth, Legend and Romance*, London, p. 368.
6. O'Sullivan, *op. cit.*, pp 88–9. For more on Macalindon, see Ní Uallacháin, Pádraigín, 2003, *A Hidden Ulster*, pp 343–6.
7. O'Sullivan, *op. cit.*, p. 87.
8. Deane, Seamus (ed.), 1991, *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol. 1, pp 399–400.
9. Carolan, Nicholas (ed.), 1985, *A collection of the most celebrated Irish tunes proper for the violin, German flute and hautboy* (Dublin, 1724) by John and William Neal; facsimile edition, Folk Music Society of Ireland/Cumann Cheol Tíre Éireann, Dublin.
10. Walker, J.C., 1786, *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards*, Dublin, p. 326.
11. O'Sullivan, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
12. Deane, *op. cit.*, p. 414. For further detail on O'Carolan and Anglo-Ireland, see Mac Gabhann, Seamus, "Carolan's Legacy: from Jonathan Swift to Brian Keenan", *Ríocht na Mídhre*, Vol. XIII, 2002, pp 100–110.