

Carolán's Legacy : from Jonathan Swift to Brian Keenan

Part One

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Carolán as Inspiration

It is remarkable that in the year 2000 a writer from the Protestant, Unionist tradition of Northern Ireland should find himself repaying a debt to Turlough Carolán, the Nobber-born harpist, composer and Gaelic poet, who lived from 1670 to 1738. Yet this is what Brian Keenan does in his first novel, *Turlough* (2000,A) launched at the O'Carolán Harp, Cultural and Heritage Festival, 2000, in Nobber.

As a hostage of Muslim fundamentalists for four and a half years in Beirut, Brian Keenan was haunted and sustained in imagination by the presence of Carolán. Keenan describes graphically the unending darkness, isolation and deprivation of his narrow cell. His loneliness was relieved only by the chance ghosts of the fragile mind. They came and went at their own whim. Carolán, the blind harper, was one of these, and Keenan found himself strangely drawn to him. Moments of Carolán's life would suddenly come alive in Keenan's head. These glimpses were like parts of a jigsaw which the prisoner felt compelled to put together again. The compulsion to integrate Carolán's jigsaw – story was intensely strong, as if Keenan's own life and Carolán's depended on it. Sometimes he would hear Carolán whisper to him excitedly "you see now, do you still not understand?" And even if Keenan did not rationally understand, he felt emotionally as if he grasped the reality of Carolán. Carolán's complex story gave focus to his mind. Finally, the ghostly visitor became more physically real to him, so that Keenan came to feel that he had actually kidnapped Carolán out of the ether and had chained him beside him.

It was only after some months of being held with John McCarthy, the British hostage, that Keenan began to discuss with

him his ghostly companion, Carolán, and to question his relationship with him. McCarthy, in time, was drawn into discussion of Carolán's context. The clash of politics and religion in Carolán's Ireland was acutely resonant for them in that prison cell, under guard by Islamic zealots and revolutionary gunmen. Carolán's vaunted drinking prowess sparked discussion about alcohol and artistic creativity. Subsequently, when Keenan and McCarthy were imprisoned in a large underground room, with three Americans, Carolán fascinated all of them. After their release, Terry Anderson, the last of the American hostages to be freed, would regularly phone Brian Keenan to ask if he had yet finished the book about the blind musician.

The book on Carolán was one which Keenan never really believed he would write. However, even in freedom, Carolán still continued to pursue him. Just as Carolán had randomly entered his head in that dark Beirut cell, so now he seemed in chance ways to point Keenan's way. Driving once in Leitrim, the writer took a wrong turn and ended up in the little town of Mohill. Rounding a corner, he came face to face with a large bronze sculpture, a statue of Turlough Carolán, seated on a rough-hewn stone, holding a harp which had no strings. Later on, while lecturing on writing in the University of Fairbanks, Alaska, he mentioned the difficulty he felt in writing the Carolán story: Keenan himself was no musician; he had sight; also, he knew no Irish, and Carolán spoke little else. How then was he to find an imaginative approach which would allow him to encompass the whole of Carolán's life, while remaining true to historical fact, and endowing the character with emotional and psychological vitality?

The difficulty seemed insurmountable, despite the fact that his spirit companion continued to insist that he must write the story, seeming to say "I told you my story for a reason, now you tell it for me!" Keenan felt that he owed Carolán a debt of honour. He now had to pay up and the price was simply Carolán's story. The solution came eventually, by sheer chance. An Inuit woman, who had heard Keenan speak in Alaska, wrote informing him that Carolán was a Dreamwalker. The writer then realised that he had been visited by Carolán for a reason. Carolán had walked into Keenan's dreams and enriched them. "He threw his own special light into my dark place. So if I was to do justice to his story, if I was to put flesh on the myth of the musician, if I was to reveal the man in all his faulted

complexity, then I needed only to reveal his dreams" (Keenan, 2000,B).

Keenan's achievement finally would be to disinter from the grave of history this human being who seemed to him a perfect metaphor for the age in which he lived. In making Carolan live again through his novel, for a brief spell, with sympathy and understanding, he had a sense of having repaid his debt to a man who kept him sane, as he insanely explored his story, in the dark isolation of a Lebanese dungeon. In these terms, Keenan movingly evokes for us the redemptive inspirational power of Carolan's legend at the end of the twentieth century.

Carolan and Anglo-Ireland

However, Carolan's compelling imaginative appeal, extending far beyond the limits of his own Gaelic community, had long been a striking reality. Even in the course of his own lifetime, Carolan's musical genius had made him a legend. Born of humble stock in Spiddal, near Nobber, in 1670, he was educated at a school run by the Cruises in nearby Cruicetown. In his teens the family moved to Ballyfarnon in north Roscommon, where Turlough was befriended by Maire MacDermott Roe and Denis O'Connor, both of aristocratic Gaelic family. When Turlough was struck blind by smallpox, Maire MacDermott Roe had him taught to play the harp. Shortly after the defeat of Catholic Ireland at the battle of the Boyne in 1690, Carolan was ready to set out on the roads of Ireland as an itinerant harper and composer. His subsequent career established him as a bridge between the Anglo-Irish and Gaelic worlds, in the dark era of the penal laws. As a composer and Gaelic poet, he was welcomed in the big houses of both the English planters and the declining Irish aristocracy.

A striking indication of Carolan's impact upon the Anglo-Irish is given by a book of Irish tunes published in Dublin in 1724 by John and William Neale. The Neales 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 (Carolan, xii). Only three of these tunes were attributed to a composer, and in each case the composer named is 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 Carolan. Hence, he can be identified as the composer of 24 out of the total of 49 tunes in the Neals' book. The three tunes which the Neals attribute to Carolan are "Luke Dillon," "Grace Nugent" and "Fairy Queen." In the case of the latter, he is termed as "Sigr Carrollini," an affectation reflective of the very strong vogue for Italian music in Dublin and in London at this time. Incidentally, only one copy of the Neals' book still survives. This was owned by Edward Bunting, who apparently acquired it in 1794, and it is now in the library of Queen's University Belfast. A facsimile edition with a valuable introduction and scholarly annotation by Nicholas Carolan was published by the Folk Music Society of Ireland/Cumann Cheol Tíre Éireann in Dublin in 1985.

Pilkington: "The Progress of Music in Ireland"

Carolan's presence hovers over a further work emanating from Anglo-Ireland when, in the following year, 1725, a Dublin clergyman, Thomas Pilkington published a poem titled "The Progress of Music in Ireland." Pilkington draws a clear distinction between the native Irish music and imported music. The progress charted in the poem involves a movement towards the eclipse of the native music. Initially, Pilkington introduces the figure of the itinerant bard, identified by some scholars as Turlough Carolan (Deane, 410).

The vagrant Bard his circling visits pays,
And charms the villages with venal lays.
The solemn harp beneath his shoulder plac'd,
With both his arms is earnestly embrac'd,
Sweetly irregular, now swift, now slow,
With soft variety his numbers flow,
The shrill, the deep, the gentle and the strong,
With pleasing dissonance adorn his song;
While thro' the chords his hands unwear'd range,
The music changing as his fingers change.

(Deane, 410)

The "soft variety" and transforming power of the harp music is evoked. Pilkington, continuing, shows the listeners "transported in attention." The bard is likened to Thracian Orpheus who, according to classical myth, visited the underworld in quest of Eurydice, his wife. For Pilkington, the bard's music is a natural harmony: "Now nature, pleas'd, her gifts profusely pours." Nature herself is wonderstruck at the spirit of gaiety with which the harp music imbues even inanimate things. Subsequently, Pilkington draws a clear distinction between such native music and the inspiration now to be derived from the imperial centre, Britain, "Albion's Isle."

The Muses now from Albion's Isle retreat
And here with kind indulgence fix their seat.

This imported music is associated by Pilkington with such notable figures as Matthew Dubourg, an English violinist and musical director who visited Dublin in 1724, and also with the Italian, Lorenzo Bocchi, renowned as a performer on the violincello, who also was in Dublin in 1724. This fashionable music of English and Italian derivation is celebrated in Pilkington's poem. It is shown as refined, exalted, complex: a highly ornate and sophisticated art. It holds sway so fully that the charms of native music are "now but meanly priz'd," and of little consequence.

The first rude lays are now but meanly priz'd,
As rude, neglected, as untun'd, despis'd:
Dead – (in esteem too dead) the bard that sung,
The fife neglected, and the harp unstrung.
(Deane, 411)

Native Irish music, "The first rude lays," is therefore doomed. Its lot is to be neglected, and ultimately to be despised. The imported tradition is shown as completely eliminating and supplanting what is native.

Harsh seem the strains which gave delight before,
And far excell'd, those strains delight no more.

Irish melodies now seem "harsh" to a colonial taste nurtured on foreign fashion. Recognising this cultural erosion, perhaps, Pilkington in conclusion seems to make a plea for the natural authenticity of the native music.

The pausing Muse now shuts her vent'rous wings
And, anxious of success, distrustful sings;
O! might her lays to thy esteem succeed,
For whom she tun'd her artless voice and reed,
Thy smiles would swell her heart with honest
pride,
Approv'd by thee she scorns the world beside.
(Deane, 412)

The Muse now "distrustful sings." In other words, the new music now has a less natural bond with the audience than the effortless rapport previously achieved by the "artless voice and reed" of native Irish melody.

Swift: "An Irish Feast"

An interesting example of contact between the native and imported traditions is illustrated by the case of the Irish song "Pléaráca na Ruarcach," the revels of the O'Rourke's. The original Irish verse was by a Leitrim poet, Hugh Magauran, and the air "O'Rourke's Feast" was composed by his friend, Turlough Carolan. Magauran's song tells of a famous feast given by Brian O'Rourke, Lord of Breifne, in his castle at Dromahaire, at the end of the sixteenth century. Carolan's air, arranged by the Italian, Lorenzo Bocchi, forms the centrepiece of the Neals' book *Most celebrated Irish tunes* (1724), where it is designated as "Plea Rarkeh na Rourkough or ye Irish weding improved with diferent divitions after ye Italian maner with A bass and Chorus by Sigr. Lorenzo Bocchi." Magauran's song was then translated by Jonathan Swift, most likely with the help of his friend, Anthony Raymond, who had a good knowledge of Irish (Harrison, 118). Swift's version, "The Description of an Irish Feast," draws full comic value out of the original:

O'Rourk's noble fare
Will ne'er be forgot,
By those who were there
Or those who were not.
His revels to keep
We sup and we dine
On seven score sheep
Fat bullocks and swine.

Usquebagh to our feast
 In pails was brought up,
 An hundred at least,
 And a madder our cup.
 (Deane, 399)

The unforgettable nature of this fantastic feast is vividly realised. It is conducted on a gargantuan scale, characterised by immense feats of hospitality. The unavoidable outcome of such excess is that the guests are reduced to a drunken rabble. Inevitably, disorder and conflict are the result:

Good Lord, what a sight,
 After all their good cheer,
 For people to fight
 In the midst of their beer:
 They rise from their feast,
 And hot are their brains,
 A cubit at least
 The length of their skeans.
 (Deane, 400)

It was most probably Carolan's air which made Magauran's verse palatable to Swift, who regarded the Irish language with hostility. After all, Carolan's tune for the piece, in Bocchi's arrangement, is highlighted in the Neals' book. Further, Carolan was a great favourite of Swift's close friend, Dr. Patrick Delany, Professor of Oratory in Dublin University, for whom he composed a tune (O'Sullivan, 84). The subject-matter, too, was congenial: eating and drinking were cherished subjects for poets of eighteenth-century Ireland (Deane, 399). Indeed, Carolan's own output richly illustrates this partiality. For Swift, then, any apparent vitality in "O'Rourke's noble fare" is fully domesticated, conforming to stereotype, and safely devoid of any uncomfortable political significance.

Laurence Whyte: "A Dissertation"

Lorenzo Bocchi's treatment of Carolan's air, "O'Rourke's Feast" is celebrated by Laurence Whyte in his poem "A Dissertation on Italian and Irish musick with some panegyrick on Carrallan our late

Irish Orpheus," published in 1740, two years after Carolan's death. Whyte was from Westmeath and worked as a teacher of mathematics in Dublin where he was friendly with John and William Neal. Whyte's poem conveys with satirical humour a picture of Irish music in full retreat before the imported Italian taste for opera, which by now has even "cross'd the Shannon." However, he seizes upon Bocchi's adaptation of Carolan's air as an instance of the enhancement of native music by Italian genius.

Sweet Bocchi thought it worth his while,
In doing honour to our Isle,
To build on Carallan's foundation,
Which he perform'd to admiration,
On his pheraca's went to work,
With long divisions on O'Rourk.
A Dean the greatest judge of wit,
That ever wrote amongst us yet,
Gave us a version of the song
Verbatim from the Irish tongue.

(Deane, 414)

It is, of course, ironic, that it requires the Italian, Bocchi, to make Irish music palatable to the Irish, by building "on Carallan's foundation." The poem reaches a rather abrupt end with Whyte's salute to the dead Carolan:

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.

Whyte extols the genius of Carolan, likening him to Orpheus, the fabled musician of Greek mythology whose music had power over wild animals and the spirits of the underworld. Carolan possessed an exceptional gift and had achieved greatness, despite being blind and "illiterate." The clear implication of the final question, "So great a bard where can we find," is that Carolan is irreplaceable. The tradition represented by Carolan has now ended. The most that may be hoped for is that the materials of that tradition will provide the foundation for new developments on foreign models. With this ending of the old era, native Irish music is destined merely to nourish Italian sophistication

in refined arrangements, and to fade into "fond remembrance," (White, 18).

Goldsmith's "History of Carolan"

Oliver Goldsmith's essay "The History of Carolan, the last Irish bard" appeared in the *British Magazine* in July 1760. Goldsmith, who was nine years old when Carolan died in 1738, had spent part of his childhood with his maternal uncle, Rev. Thomas Contarine, at Oran, Co. Roscommon. Rev. Contarine was on friendly terms with Charles O'Connor, Carolan's friend and patron. Four years before Goldsmith's birth, Carolan had composed a piece for the wedding of his cousin, Elizabeth Goldsmith to John Drury of Kingsland, near Boyle (O'Sullivan, 20). Very likely Goldsmith had heard stories of the harper and quite possibly he had met him at his uncle's rectory.

Goldsmith's essay is intended for the London reader, at the imperial centre:

There can be perhaps no greater entertainment than to compare rude Celtic simplicity with modern refinement.

(Deane, 667)

His opening clearly indicates the strategy of the piece: Ireland is an exotic location characterised by "rude Celtic simplicity." It is a quaint, cultural museum because of its isolation, free of "intercourse with other nations," remaining "still untinged with foreign refinement, language or breeding." The Irish veneration of their bards evokes for Goldsmith Caesar's description of the ancient Celts in *De Bello Gallico*. Carolan is the "last and greatest" Irish bard, a colourful vestige of this antique Celtic race. Recalling that Carolan had composed the music for "O'Rourke's noble fare," the verse subsequently translated by Swift, he goes on to compare the musician to Pindar and Homer, figures of classical antiquity. Then drawing upon folklore, Goldsmith relates the tale of a notable victory by Carolan in a musical contest. Carolan was said to have played back Vivaldi's fifth concerto after a single hearing. Not resting at that, the hero-composer was said to have gone on and "instantly composed" a concerto of his own which, in Goldsmith's

view, may compare in spirit and elegance with the finest Italian compositions. Goldsmith concludes with a further folklore anecdote, this time about Carolan's drinking prowess: on his deathbed the harper called for the whiskey-bowl, but finding himself too weak to drink, he "observed with a smile that it would be hard if two such friends as he and the cup should part at least without kissing; and then expired" (Deane, 668).

Carolan then is portrayed merely as an exotic representative of a culture which is out of place in the modern age. Like Pindar and Homer, to whom he is likened, Carolan too belongs to the realm of myth. Goldsmith maintains a tone of wondering, affectionate nostalgia. For him, however, as for Pilkington and Whyte, Carolan is symbolic of a vanishing culture, comprehensively eclipsed by that of the imperial centre, and deprived now of all organic vitality or possibility. That native music and culture are now defunct, without any meaningful relation to the sophisticated Enlightenment world of eighteenth-century Britain, for which Goldsmith was writing. This restrictive Ascendancy attitude was, however, to undergo radical alteration, in succeeding decades.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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