

**Comhaltas Ceóltoiri Éireann
Tom Finucane Branch
Rochester, New York**



Newsletter

January/February 2019

**Eanáir
Agus
Feabhra
2019**

An organization dedicated to the advancement of traditional Irish music, language, dance and culture

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Comhaltas Hall of Fame Celebration at the Brickstone
December 15, 2018



Wren Day, 2018 photo by Pat Carey

Branch website: www.irishrochester.com
Facebook: rochester irish musicians association

NOTE: not much is happening in Jan-Feb and I found this fascinating article about Turlough O'Carolan that you will surely enjoy reading.



By Geoffrey Cobb

Reprinted from the September / October 2018 issue of **Irish America**

In 1691, a poor, blind, twenty-one-year-old son of a blacksmith and his guide set out on a journey from a backwater estate, Alderford, near the town of Balyfarnon, County Roscommon, hoping to make a living as an itinerant harper. He seemed an unlikely figure to leave a lasting stamp on Ireland's musical culture, yet Turlough O'Carolan would become a great composer, creating some of the most hauntingly melodies that ever came out of Ireland. His music is even said to have inspired the "Star Spangled Banner."

O'Carolan's achievements are even more amazing when you consider the backstory. Born in 1670 on a farm in Nobber, County Meath, at a time when Ireland was still suffering the reverberations of Oliver Cromwell's "To Hell or Connaught" land confiscations, the family moved, first to Carrig-on-Shannon in County Leitrim, and then, in 1684, to Ballyfarnon, a village in what is now Northern Roscommon. His father, Hugh, found employment on the estate of the McDermott Roes, a leading Irish family of the old Gaelic order who, despite being Catholic, had managed to retain substantial landholding.

The lady of the house, Mary McDermott Roe, took a liking to 14-year-old Turlough, and saw to it that he got some schooling. He proved himself adept at poetry and verse, yet any dreams he may have had of scholarly pursuits were not to be. The plan was that he would follow his father into the blacksmithing trade but fate intervened. At 18, O'Carolan was stricken with smallpox and nearly died. He survived, but the disease left him permanently blind.

Again, Mrs. McDermott Roe rose to the occasion, arranging for Turlough to have lessons on the harp. In those days, music was often the only possible livelihood for the blind. It was learned by repetition and transmitted from teacher to student orally. Also, for centuries, the harper, like the poets enjoyed an elevated social position in Ireland, and were welcomed in



the houses of wealthy landowners, in exchange for compositions and verse that praised their hosts. The harp was a symbol of Irish nationalism, and harpists were often the political commentators of the day, feared for their satirical verses. So much so, that during Cromwell's invasion of Ireland, harpists were hunted down and killed, their instruments destroyed. By 1691, the courts of Irish chieftains who had once patronized the harpists were long gone. Nonetheless, there were still, in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, enough Irish families with the means to support O'Carolan in his travels as an itinerant musician. There were also the more recently arrived Protestant gentry who, curious about the ancient folk culture of the land they dominated, welcomed O'Carolan into their homes as a living vestige of Gaelic Ireland.



O'Carolan's harp, Clonalis House, Castlerea, County Roscommon

O'Carolan's First Disappointing Gig

O'Carolan's first stop on his journey away from the McDermott Roe estate was at the landed property of Squire George Reynolds. Legend has it that the squire, who was himself a harpist and a poet, did not think much of the young harpist's talent. "You might make a better hand of your tongue than of your fingers," the Squire is reputed to have said. He suggested that O'Carolan compose a tune about a legendary battle between the fairies that took place in the nearby hills. O'Carolan complied and his "Sheebeg" is still played today.

O'Carolan had found a niche. He would match the music he played and wrote to the taste of his hosts. He might play traditional Gaelic airs for one patron, and an Italian-influenced



melody for another. He typically came up with the tune first, riding on horseback while composing. He then added words to the melody. Often his tunes were joyful “planxties” – a word that he is said to have invented. They were akin to jigs for the harp.

The blind bard toured Ireland for more than four decades. As his fame spread weddings, even funerals, were sometimes delayed until he arrived to perform.

Unlike many tormented musical geniuses who lived on the fringes, O’Carolan’s music gained him entrée into the most elite circles of Irish society. He dined at the tables of lords, high churchmen and university professors.

At the homes of the elite, O’Carolan discovered the Italian Baroque style of Corelli, Vivaldi, and Geminiani, whom he greatly admired. He began incorporating Baroque elements into his own music, skillfully weaving continental rhythms into a distinctively Gaelic musical language. He incorporated Italian concerto and giga, the French menuette and gigue, the Renaissance branle and the medieval estampie, combining them with subtly irregular phrase lengths, which are a distinctive feature of his compositions.

One of his patrons, perhaps the greatest Irish genius of the age, was Dean Jonathon Swift. Legend has it that O’Carolan met up with a group of Italian musicians at a party in Swift’s home and challenged the violinist and music teacher Francesco Geminiani to a test of musical skill. The Italian accepted and played from Vivaldi’s Fifth Violin Concerto. Hoping to have some fun at O’Carolan’s expense, he made deliberate mistakes. The bard was not to be fooled. “It limps and stumbles,” O’Carolan exclaimed in Irish, when Geminiani finished. He then played the same piece on his harp, without error. The amazed Italians declared him a musical genius. He followed this with the first performance of “Mrs. Powers,” known now as “O’Carolan’s Concerto.” A marriage of the Irish tradition with the Baroque, the concerto was said to be a favorite of all his compositions. He fashioned it in honor of Elizabeth Keating, a patron, who became Mrs. Power of Coorheen, County Galway.

O’Carolan’s Loves

O’Carolan’s first great love was a girl who lived near his birthplace in Nobber, County Meath. As a boy, he attended a school that was run by a wealthy landowning family and fell in love with the daughter of the house, Bridget Cruise. Bridget’s parents would never have allowed a romance between their daughter and a peasant like O’Carolan to blossom. And in any case, Turlough’s family were uprooted when he was 14 and he left Nobber. Still, his affection for Bridget remained lifelong, and he composed four airs in her honor. Legend has it that after many years had passed, the blind bard went on a pilgrimage to St. Patrick’s purgatory in Lough Derg, County Donegal. Returning to the shore, O’Carolan began assisting his fellow pilgrims out of the boat. Upon taking the hand one woman, he is said to have exclaimed in a loud voice, “This is the hand of Bridget Cruise,” and it was.

O’Carolan did marry, but not to Bridget. He married Mary Maguire, who is said to have been from County Fermanagh, and of higher birth than the harpist. There is some disagreement about the year of their marriage; some records state it was in 1720 when O’Carolan was 50 years old, others say he married younger. The couple had seven children, six girls and a boy.



They lived on a farm in Mohill, County Leitrim until Mary's death in 1733.



O'Carolan's Grave in County Roscommon

We know far too little about Turlough O'Carolan, but much of the lore around the great harpist relates to his love of drinking. It's said that a doctor advised him to abstain for the good of his health, and he did, but as a result, he became depressed and his harp lay "neglected and unstrung." Another physician, Dr. John Stafford of Elphin, County Roscommon, who happened to be a friend, convinced the bard to take up the drink again. He immediately felt better and composed a stanza in Irish that comes down to us as:

*He's a fool who gives up the liquor,
It softens the skinflint at once,
It urges the slow coach on quicker;
Gives spirit and brains to the dunce.
The man who is dumb as a rule
Discovers a great deal to say,
While he who is bashful since Yule
Will talk in an amorous way.
It's drink that uplifts the coward
To give battle in France and in Spain,
Now here is an end of my turn
And fill me that bumper again!*



O'Carolan drank freely after that, his depression lifted, and to thank his doctor friend, he composed a celebratory tune, ever after known as "Carolan's Receipt to Stafford." In 1738, at the age of 68, O'Carolan sensed that the end was nigh. He made his way back to the home of Mrs. McDermott Roe, and wrote these touching lines in praise of his patroness who had changed his life:

*Mary Fitzgerald, dear heart,
Love of my breast and my friend,
Alas, that I am parting from you,
O Lady who succored me at every stage.*

In his final days, O'Carolan requested his harp and played the hauntingly beautiful "Farewell to Music," a tune in the old Gaelic tradition. His remains were laid out in the greatest style and news of his death spread across the country. He was waked for four days and buried on the fifth in the MacDermott Roe family crypt in Kilronan graveyard near Ballyfarnon, County Roscommon. Ten harpers attended night and day. They followed the funeral procession and played a dirge over his grave. His great friend and fellow harper, Charles MacCabe, however, was absent from the funeral and distraught to have missed it, he wrote the most beautiful elegy to O'Carolan in Gaelic about visiting the bard's grave, that in part reads:

*Alas, that I am not buried along with Turlough!
O tombstone, what joy it were to be laid with him,
With the world's music to be with one for company.*



Mohill, Co. Leitrim: Sculpture of O'Carolan by the Irish artist Oisín Kelly



O'Carolan left some two hundred tunes. Most of his compositions were not published or even written down in his lifetime. They survived in the repertoires of fiddlers, pipers, and the last of the old Irish harper/singers. They were collected and published during the late 18th century and beyond, largely beginning with the work of Edward Bunting and his assistants in 1792. For many years, though his music was not widely known, even in Ireland. In 1967, Seán O'Riada helped revive the music of O'Carolan with his solo recordings and his recordings with Ceoltóirí Chualann of O'Carolan's Concerto, which was recorded on the disc *Ceol na Nuasal*. Much of the popularity of O'Carolan's music is thanks to Derek Bell of the Chieftains who helped present it to a worldwide audience. The annual O'Carolan Harp Festival and Summer School commemorates his life and work in Keadue, County Roscommon.

Geoffrey Cobb is writing a performance piece on the life and music of O'Carolan. ♦

Spring Ceili Schedule

February 16 and May 4.

8 pm, \$5 for Comhaltas members, \$7 for nonmembers, children with parent are free

Bring an item for the Raffle and receive free admission

McGinnity's Restaurant and Party House, 534 W Ridge Rd, Rochester, NY 14615

Music club activities

January 5, 2019

Box Club, 10:00 am – 12:00 noon Meets at home of Jon Berkner

407 Edgewood Ave in Brighton, 585 953 5670. jonasan@rochester.rr.com

February 2, 2019

Box Club, 10:00 am – 12:00 noon Meets at home of Jon Berkner

407 Edgewood Ave in Brighton, 585 953 5670. jonasan@rochester.rr.com

Irish American Cultural Institute (IACI)

John O'Sullivan Memorial Film Feis continues with 2018-2019 schedule:

- January 6, 2019:** The Journey 94 min. 2017
A gripping account of how two enemies, Martin McGuinness (Colm Meaney) and Ian Paisley (Timothy Spall) find humanity in one another. Could peace be possible?
- February 10, 2019:** A Love Divided 98 min. 1999
Oral Brady and Liam Cunningham star in this true story of a Catholic, Protestant marriage that runs into conflict with the parish priest.
- March 3, 2019:** War of the Buttons 94 min. 1995
When rival gangs of Irish kids win a battle, they remove the buttons and laces of the losers. Trouble is sure to follow!
- April 7, 2019:** Sing Street 116 min. 2016
End the season with music and comedy! A Dublin boy starts a band to impress a mysterious girl.

Location: St. John's Meadows, 1 Johnsarbor Dr. W., Rochester, NY 14620

4-7 pm. Dinner buffet included. \$25 general admission, \$20 for IACI members

For information: contact Katherine McMahan-Flynn: kmcfly@gmail.com



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Comhaltas Rochester T-Shirts are only \$15.
To purchase a t-shirt,
Contact Kate Ballard at
katekballard@gmail.com

Fiddle lessons: Taught by veteran teacher and performer **Kit Fallon**, various traditional fiddle styles, from Bluegrass to Quebecois. No music background is required. Quality rental instruments available. Pre-registration is required; E-mail ckfallon@hotmail.com (put "Beginning Fiddle" in the subject line).



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Singers' Session
Chris Brennan
Music Learner's Session
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Newsletter
Bill Hallahan
Music Instrument Library
Mark Gowman

Look for us on Facebook:

Rochester Irish Musician's Association

Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann

MEMBERSHIP AND DUES for 2019

Dues:

First Adult	\$25.00
Second Adult	\$ 8.00
Family	\$40.00
Junior	\$ 4.00

Make check payable to: "CCE Rochester"

Mail to: Comhaltas
6658 North Avon Road
Honeoye Falls, NY 14472

Your donations are tax-deductible.**Irish Rochester CDs are still available.**

This classic, 2-CD set, produced by John McGraw contains many of the traditional tunes you will hear at sessions as well as local musicians from the Rochester area. **Only \$20.**

To purchase a CD, contact Lynn Pilaroscia:
pilarins@frontiernet.net

Irish music on the internet:

<http://www.clare.fm/listen-live/>

JOIN COMHALTAS AND SUPPORT IRISH MUSIC, AND CULTURE.**NEW MEMBERSHIP YEAR: NOVEMBER 1 (2018) TO OCTOBER 31 (2019). YOU CAN STILL JOIN OR RENEW ANY TIME.**

If you have ideas or articles or announcements or photos to include in this newsletter, please send them to Bill Hallahan at whallah3@naz.edu.



Comhaltas-Sponsored Music Sessions, Dancing, Singing**1st Sunday of every month:**

4:00 pm **The American Hotel** 7304 E. Main Street, Lima, NY

Last Sunday of every month:

**the bar is open but not the kitchen;
bring a snack to share**

Johnny's Irish Pub, 1382 Culver Road, Rochester, NY

3:00 pm Music Learning Session with Mark Ballard

3:00-5:00 pm Singer Session with Chris Brennan

5:00 pm Regular session

Set Dancing Every Wednesday:

McGinnity's Bar & Restaurant

7:30 pm 534 West Ridge Road

No experience, no partner necessary.

Instructors: Arlene Miller (585) 663-4438. James Coughlin, caller.

Every Monday:

Colie's Café, Nazareth College campus

7:00-8:00 pm waltz session

8:00-9:00 pm: jigs, reels, etc. Beginners are especially welcome and the use of sheet music is acceptable, copies & pdfs are available.

Ben's website for the Monday session:

<https://sites.google.com/site/rocnyslowsession/>

The Second Friday Session - suspended for an indefinite period of time.

OTHER TRADITIONAL IRISH & CELTIC MUSIC SESSIONS**Every Tuesday:**

7:00 pm (study session) **Charlotte Tavern**, 2 River Road & Lake Ave.

Every Saturday:

Barry's Old School Irish, 2 W Main St. Webster.

2:00-5:30 pm. Leader: John Ryan

First Wednesdays:

7:00 pm **Scottish Sessions** at 7:00-9:00 pm

Check Facebook for current location:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/rochscotstrad> .

