

fall 2009 • Issue no.144

\$9.00US

FOLK HARP

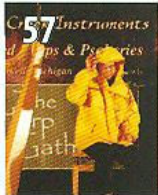
Journal



inside this issue:

- Mary O'Hara: Travels With My Harp
- HBU Summer Harp Camp, a Student's Report
- Make Room for MIDI!
Exploring the Possibilities

Promoting the tradition, beauty, and joy of the folk harp in all aspects and to all ages.



IN EACH ISSUE:

- 2 | Editor's Note**
- 2 | President's Letter**
- 5 | Membership Form**
- 8 | Ringing Strings**
by Cynthia Cathcart
- 35 | Kid's Korner**
- 38 | CD Reviews**
by Rhett Barnwell
- 38 | New Music Reviews**
by Denise Grupp-Verbon
- 64 | News & Events**
- 70 | What's the Reason?**
by Laurie Riley
- 74 | Classifieds**
- 76 | Advertisers' Index**
Contributors and How to Advertise in the FHJ

IN THIS ISSUE:

- 3 | HarpCon 2010 Notice**
- 14 | Travels With My Harp**
The Story of Mary O'Hara
by Anselm Kelleher
- 26 | Make Room for MIDI!**
by Martha Gallagher
- 40 | Report on HBU Summer Harp Camp**
by Alexis Haight
- 42 | Music:**
The Wide Missouri
by W. Mahon
- 44 | Music:**
The Queen's Marsh
arr. Rebekah Passmore
- 46 | Music:**
Sioban ni Laoghaire
arr. Judith Mostyn White
- 50 | Harpers With Heart**
by Jeannie Kern Chenette
- 55 | Harp Gathering Report**
by Pat Eisenberger
- 58 | Tuning Boot Camp**
by Elizabeth Paine

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INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY OF FOLK
HARPERS AND CRAFTSMEN (ISFHC)
1614 Pittman Drive
Missoula, MT 59803



On the cover

Cover portrait is of Mary O'Hara and was taken from the cover of her renowned book entitled *Travels With My Harp*, published by Afghan Press. Available at www.AfghanPress.com. Original painting by Bridget Marlin, used with permission.

Official Publication of the International Society of Folk Harpers and Craftsmen, Inc. ISSN: 0094-8934

The *Folk Harp Journal* is published four times yearly, in Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter, by the International Society of Folk Harpers and Craftsmen, Inc. (ISFHC). One year of the journal (four issues) is included in ISFHC membership, obtained by a minimum contribution to the society of \$30.00. Send all membership inquiries and changes of address to ISFHC, 1614 Pittman Drive, Missoula, MT 59803. Tel. (406) 542-1976. E-mail to clem@in-tch.com.

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Travels With My Harp

The Story of Mary O'Hara

by Anselm Kelleher

In 1996 Mary O'Hara packed in her music, crated her harp and, with her husband Pat, took off for Africa. She felt life had been good to her and that she could now do something different with her time. Her African sojourn lasted six years and it was a further three years before she took the harp out of its crate and restrung it.

This was not the first time Mary O'Hara hung up her harp supposedly for good. She did the same almost 33 years previously after the premature death of her young poet husband, Richard Selig. They were married for 15 months. As a consequence she entered a strict Benedictine order of nuns and stayed there for 12½ years till eventually ill health forced her to leave.



Mary, while staying in a Maasai village. Tanzania, 1999

Born in Yeats Country

Mary O'Hara was born in 1935 in Sligo, under the shadow of Knocknarea, in the west of Ireland.



Knocknarea with a Carrowmore tomb in the fore. Photo: Jon Sullivan.

The area is known as Yeats' Country because of its association with the poet W. B. Yeats. She was a teenager in the Ireland of the fifties, a dreary and impoverished rural society, wracked with guilt and self-doubt after a disastrous civil war that brought bitterness, economic stagnation and a rush to emigrate - to anywhere, but particularly to America, England and Australia. But for Mary, teenage life in the Dublin of the fifties was good. Her own people could be described as middle-class with a sprinkling of doctors, civil engineers, politicians and entrepreneurs on both sides of the family. Both of her parents were university graduates at a time when the newly independent Ireland boasted few, relative to the size of the population. On the O'Hara side there was a tradition of music in the family. Her grandfather and her uncle Pat played several instruments and owned a dance hall and a successful music 'band' near the provincial town of Sligo on the west coast of Ireland. Her mother had been the pianist in her school orchestra, and at the drop of a hat her father would burst into song. The scene is aptly captured by Mary's nephew, Sebastian Barry, in his award winning novel, *The Secret Scripture*. Mary attended the local convent school, efficiently run by the Ursuline nuns. Music was very much part of her life both at school and at home. It was not just the traditional Irish music but also the songs popularized by Thomas Moore, the mid 19th century poet that stamped the Irish nationalism of the period, and also music-hall material from the stage. The

London and Dublin stage was never far from their sitting-room, where Mary's mother played the latest fashionable tunes on the piano with the children singing along. There were the annual local and national music competitions called 'Feis Ceóil' (Music Festivals) for which Mary was regularly entered and which she disliked doing because she almost always won, which guaranteed being entered again next time.

Revival of the Irish Harp

Despite regularly winning at the 'Feis Ceóil' competitions, Mary had no ambition to take up music or singing as a career. In fact the opposite. "I had no ambition at all," she says, "musical or otherwise. It was others, like my sister Joan, who had ambitions on my behalf and tried to interest me." Her older sister Joan joined the Abbey Theatre and later became a very successful actress. Her brother became an accountant. "There was no parental pressure on anyone to become anything." After finishing secondary school, while halfheartedly deciding what to do with her life, Mary trained as a fashion model and then spent a while at the College of Art in Dublin before taking off for four months in Africa where her father held an administrative post in the British Colonial Service. While in Africa she did some broadcasts on Radio Gold Coast, in present-day Ghana. But, unbeknownst to her, the seeds of her future career in music were already firmly sown. It happened at Sion Hill School in Dublin where she was a boarder and games captain. 'Camógaí' is



One of Mary's Harps

the female counterpart of 'hurling', the Gaelic equivalent of hockey. "I lived for camógaí in the winter and tennis in the summer," she says, "The rest of school was a chore."

In her *Travels With My Harp* lectures, Mary refers to that period: "It was around 1951, my second last year at Sion Hill. The annual pageant that year was going to be based on the life and work of Thomas Moore, who in his poems depicted the harp as a symbol of Ireland. For that reason, harps and

harpers had to be found. Unfortunately, both had by then gone out of fashion in Ireland. The forward-looking prioress of Sion Hill, Mother Jordan, had earlier decided to introduce the harp to the school, probably with the pageant in mind. Malachy McFall of Belfast, the only harp-maker left in Ireland at the time could offer only one second-hand Tara harp for £65, a very stiff figure in those days. So, the school scoured the country high and low and collected old harps from barns, outhouses and attics – most of them riddled with wood worm – and managed to 'fit' three Brian Boru knee-harps to



London: 1956



New Zealand: 1959



London: 1956

Photo credit: Brian, 1956



Mary, while on tour in Australia in 1959

three young singers in the pageant, of whom I was one. Then it was suggested that, rather than using the harp as a stage prop, we should learn to play it and to accompany ourselves as we sang *Moore's Melodies*, which is not that far removed from what the harpers of old did. The school found someone to teach the harp, (just for the pageant), one Máirín Ní Shéa, herself one of the last of a dying breed of Irish harp enthusiasts.”

From Moore's Melodies to Folk-Song

The Thomas Moore Pageant was a great success. Three attractive young girls coupled with equally attractive looking harps singing patriotic songs – it was an idea brim-full of positive symbolism in an otherwise depressing era. The reaction of the public was such that the harp teacher post at Sion Hill was made permanent and scores of young girls signed on for harp lessons. The chattering public also took the idea to heart, and Mary soon found herself with her own programme on national radio. There has never been a tradition of women singing in public in Irish culture, much less a tradition of women singers accompanying themselves on the Irish harp, and Mary O'Hara soon found herself unwittingly forging a new one. Before she realized it, she was in full-time employment. Christopher Fitz-Simon, now a retired professor and writer, was then a student at Trinity College, Dublin. As a member of the 'Trinity Players' he helped to stage four of W B Yeats' one-act plays during lunch hour at the university theatre. "To fill the gap between plays, while changing scenery, we roped in Mary O'Hara

to sing and play the Irish harp. For two weeks there wasn't a single empty seat in the hall. We knew that it wasn't the plays that attracted them." Because of this, when later that summer the Trinity Players took the plays to the 1955 Edinburgh Fringe Festival, they were keen to have Mary O'Hara come along too. As it happened, if the newspaper reports are to be believed, she "stole the whole giddy show of the entire festival" resulting with an invitation to perform in the official Edinburgh Festival the following year. This exposure to a wider audience resulted in regular broadcasts with BBC radio and her own prime-time Saturday night series on BBC TV. This acclaim enhanced her reputation all the more in her native Ireland. Decca Records offered her a recording contract and her recorded voice was soon to be heard not only in Ireland, England and Holland, but on television in America, Australia and New Zealand – wherever the Irish diaspora had settled. Particularly in Ireland was she the lone forerunner of what later became known as the 'Folk Phenomenon'. By a couple of years she pre-dated the so called 'Folk Era' that nowadays many associate with Joan Baez, The Clancy Brothers, Bob Dylan, et al. Liam Clancy in his 2002 autobiography, *Memoirs of an Irish Troubadour*, writes about how the singing of Mary O'Hara had inspired him and others of that period. Photographed by Baron for the London Evening Standard's "Baron Profiles", and featured in PUNCH in a Ronald Searle cartoon, she was not short of admirers. Her harp playing helped start a tradition of using the Irish harp as an accompaniment instrument.

Irish and Scottish Traditional Song – The Edinburgh Festival

Up till then, Mary O'Hara's repertoire consisted entirely of traditional Irish and Scottish songs, mostly in Gaelic. Mary has always made a distinction between traditional and folk. Among the canon of traditional Gaelic songs is the 'Amhrán Mór' (Great Song) that Dr. Percy Jones, one-time Head of Music at Melbourne University, deemed as on par with chanson and lied. These songs were composed by trained poets and musicians and, ideally, the singer needed classical training to do them justice. With the collapse of Gaelic culture after the middle of the 17th century the social system that supported such music no longer existed and ordinary untrained country folk found it difficult to realise the full potential of such songs. Because of her background and particular artistry, Mary was able to bring these songs to the notice of a discerning public, hungry for such gems. Poet Séamus Heaney, presenting Mary with the Gold Medal of the Irish Society of Boston, USA, in 1985 remarked "As a nationalist-

minded undergraduate at Queen's [university] in the 1950s we hankered for someone or something to make us proud of our culture. Then Mary O'Hara came along." Though not a native Gaelic speaker, Mary had a very good grasp of the language and took care to get both the phonetics and the meaning correct. As an interpreter of traditional song, this thoroughness in research gave her work the stamp of authenticity. For someone who claims that she was only a half-hearted student at school, the dedication with which she threw herself into 'perfecting her art' amazed even herself. Whether it was collecting Scots Gaelic songs in the Hebrides, mastering 'braed scots' with professor Murrison of the School of Scottish Studies, in Edinburgh, learning the orchestral harp from Mercedes Bolger at the Royal Irish Academy of Music in Dublin or changing her harp fingering while studying harp with Lucien Thompson in New York, Mary showed the single-mindedness of a true artist. Déirdre Flynn, who along with Mary and Kathleen Watkins became the media face of the Sion Hill pageant, remarks: "It amazed us how Mary always developed new skills for playing the harp as an accompanying instrument – skills our teacher had not even thought of and sometimes even resented. Mary is very musical and can be very inventive."



Poet Richard Selig

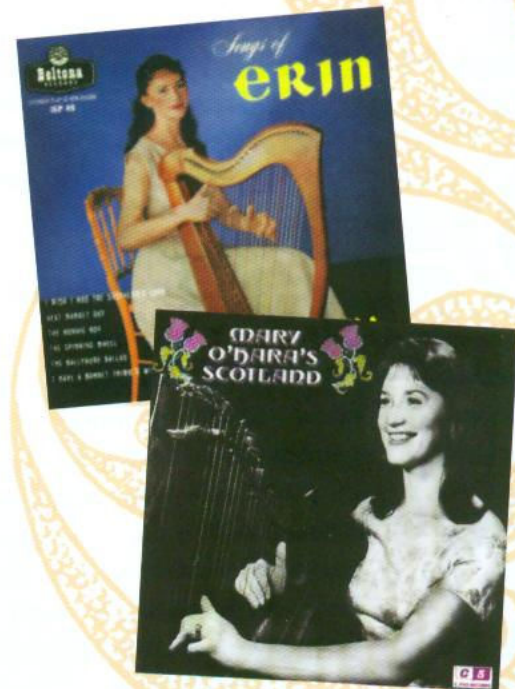
Romance, Marriage and Premature Widowhood

The mid 1950s were a busy and productive phase in Mary's life. She was much in demand. During this time she met, fell in love with, and married Richard Selig, who was a young poet and Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. Richard understood and appreciated her special talent and he helped and encouraged her in her work. They married in 1956 and, turning her back on a promising career in Europe, she returned with him to live in New York where Richard got a job in Public Relations.

Mary had recorded enough material for an LP for Decca but they dragged their feet on releasing it, hoping Mary might consider other "more commercial" material that they continually bombarded her with. They also considered her harp playing to be too eclectic, and it was only when a test EP they released in Holland sold out overnight that they regarded Mary's traditional material bankable enough to warrant the release of her first LP. It was called SONGS OF ÉRIN (1956) and was an instant success. It was followed by the equally successful LOVE SONGS OF IRELAND (1957). Mary was now living in America and got Decca's permission to record SONGS OF IRELAND (1957) with the Clancy Brothers who ran the Tradition label in New York. Richard and Mary worked together on this album. Unfortunately, before leaving Oxford, Richard was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Disease, known at the time as "the young man's disease," and was incurable. The young couple kept the sad news to themselves, not even letting close family members in on the secret. They decided that because of Richard's illness, Mary would need to take up singing again. They put together a concert programme which Richard helped structure. Her first public recital in America opened at the Phillip's Gallery to rave reviews:

"A droll storyteller, charming without ever fawning over her audience... it's on the musical level that she's so winning... shows a consistently fascinating and surprising phrasing... makes familiar lyrics yield new levels of meaning."

- The Globe & Mail (Toronto)



DYK?: First released in 1956 Songs of Érin became an instant hit and, in one form or another, it has never been out of print to this day...

"Exquisite purity and delicacy that almost defies description....Only a poet could avoid gaucherie in describing, song by song, Mary O'Hara's recital...[She] made her American debut in the Phillips Gallery yesterday. I have little doubt that she will soon be heard in many halls throughout the land: and I have every confidence that if we are lucky enough to hear her decades from now, she will sound as wonderfully fresh as she did on her first hearing." – Washington Evening Star (1957)

"She raised to a new high level the art of folk-singing."
– The Washington Post.

A spot on the Ed Sullivan show soon followed.

Richard and Mary were hoping to finish recording the SONGS OF IRELAND before he died but sadly, it was not to be. As Richard's illness progressed, Paddy Clancy discovered that he was in the hospital and was taken aback by his friend's condition when he called in to see him unannounced. "Good God, Richard," he blurted out, "you look like death warmed up." Richard passed on just a few days later, and on the night he died the heart-broken Mary decided that life here on earth had lost its meaning. For Richard's sake she decided that she would finish the album they worked on together, but then she would sell her harps, give up singing and enter a monastic order for the rest of her life. She told nobody of this decision but a week after the funeral, recordings over, she left her orchestral harp with friends in New York to be sold, and returned to Ireland with her only her original Briggs harps. She was now determined to search for one thing – a suitable monastic setting.

Search for Monastic Seclusion – a place to live and die

Finding a suitable monastic setting was not as simple as the young widow first thought. It would take a lot of research and visiting and writing. In the meantime she had to live, and it was a difficult time to be cheerful. She was approached by a charity to do an eight-week concert tour in Australia; her expenses would be paid and all profit would go to charity. The place was sufficiently far away, a perfect escape that filled a gap while she continued

her search. The eight week tour stretched to eleven months, which included a tour of New Zealand and a television series in Australia. She finally returned home in order to carry out her monastic plans. She fulfilled all her broadcasting contracts in England and Ireland, packed her bags and finally entered Stanbrook Abbey in England, to become a nun. She was surprised when the Abbess asked her to bring her harp which was then promptly stored in the attic along with all the other 'lay' paraphernalia discarded by other postulants over the years. Before disappearing she recorded enough material for three more albums, though these were not released until after she left her monastery in 1974. Their titles are: MARY OHARA'S IRELAND, MARY O'HARA'S SCOTLAND, and MARY O'HARA'S MONDAY TUESDAY – SONGS FOR CHILDREN. All are traditional material and mark the end of the first phase of Mary's musical biography. MARY O'HARA RECITAL (1974) marks another phase, with what she calls 'God Songs' that developed at Stanbrook. She recorded this in 1972 while still a nun at Stanbrook. God-song sprang from her monastic experience. The album includes two of her husband's poems – which she set to music - Tagore, Benjamin Britten, Sydney Carter, John Dowland and others.



Stanbrook Abbey

Mary considers her 12 ½ years as a nun in Stanbrook a time of immense blessings. “It was a difficult but a very happy period in my life,” she says, and with a twinkle in her eye she adds “Living the minutely regulated life of a nun is not an escape and no picnic.” After ten years of seclusion her health started giving trouble and, eventually, forced her to leave. But she has no regrets, either for going in or for coming out. “For me Stanbrook was the university education I never had or wanted. I studied philosophy and theology and literature. I meditated and prayed. And I worked hard. My spirit is such that I do not find it easy being cooped up but I love silence and quiet. I still do one hour’s meditation every day of my life – no matter how busy I am. I learnt this at Stanbrook and I’m grateful for it.” Once the decision was made, it was easy to leave, but after so many years without newspapers or radio or TV or going shopping or meeting traffic – it felt strange facing the outside world again. Mary continues in her talk: “The abbess was very kind to me, as indeed was the whole community. The abbess insisted on a hairdresser appointment – something unheard of in the monastery where we didn’t even have access to mirrors. Having discarded my monastic black habit, the bursar selected a suitable outfit from the clothes new entrants discarded in the attic. I still have the shoulder bag! A friend collected me in his car. I felt a bit frail but my harp looked okay in the back seat.”

Facing the Music a Second Time

When, in 1974, Mary O’Hara emerged from her monastery, she had no idea how she would go about earning a living. Before entering Stanbrook Abbey she had been a very successful singer, but in life one is seldom given a second chance. Now aged 39, her options were limited, and Mary knew that resurrecting her singing career was a long-shot. She wasn’t even sure that she wanted to sing, or if there was still an appetite for her type of music.

Nobody was more surprised than Mary herself when her singing career took off again - adding twelve more long playing albums to the seven she had recorded before embracing monastic silence. In due course she went on to even wider success and acclaim, with her own TV series on the BBC and on ITV in the UK. She toured extensively, collecting plaudits wherever she went and giving concerts in places as diverse as the ancient Herod Atticus Theatre in Athens and the major concert halls of the English-speaking world – Carnegie Hall, London’s Royal Albert Hall, and the Sydney Opera House. There was a play, “The Harp

on the Willow” (based on her autobiography) written about her. It played for ten weeks to packed audiences in Sydney, Australia and, later, for five weeks at the Comedy Theatre, Melbourne. In recent years she also found time to write three best-selling books, one of them her autobiography, and five volumes of her harp accompaniments – appropriately entitled TRAVELS WITH MY HARP. In 1985 she was married to Dr. Pdraig O’Toole, a teacher, and it was his work that brought them both back to Africa (1996) for six wonderful years full of adventure and excitement.



Spending time with HIV orphans in Tanzania, 2002

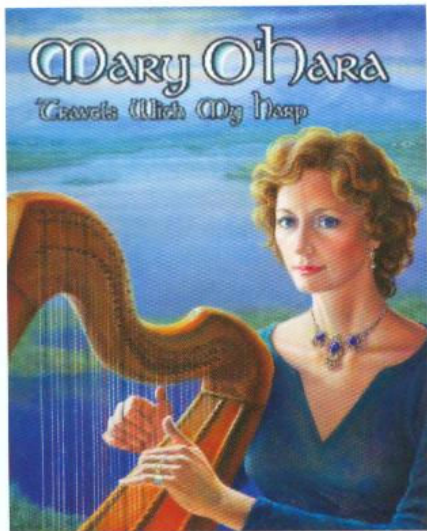
They have now finished with travel and live part of the year in England in a thatched cottage built in 1667 by people fleeing the plague of London. The other part of the year they spend in Spain and on the Aran Islands where Pdraig was born and reared and where Gaelic is the *lingua franca*. Mary has a facility with languages and her new hobby is learning Spanish. Mary plans to spend some time working in South America when she finishes her current series of talks in 2010.



Mary and Pdraig in 1985

Retirement

Mary O'Hara retired from the concert platform (1994) "while my voice was still at its best", she says. She



Cover art from a harp book (Afghan Press)

does not sing any more or play the harp. But she does give talks – recently 56 talks in Australia. In these talks she continues to delight her audiences with witty stories and reminiscences from her days of *Travelling With Her Harp*. Her talks, punctuated with short video clips

from the past, traverses the significant events of her life's story. In retrospect she can now identify and comment upon the 'invisible plan' that gave meaning and unity to the different phases of her life and in her own inimitable way she captivates her audiences just as she once did in the concert halls of Europe, Australia and North America. Her story-telling skills are as evident here as they ever were on the concert stage.

In her talks, she touches on her upbringing in Ireland in the 1950s – her childhood in Sligo, her schooling, how she took up playing the harp and how she became a successful stage, radio and television personality, not only in her native Ireland but also in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

She mentions her marriage to the young poet Richard Selig, their life together in New York and her devastation at his premature death. This caused her to leave the world of music and enter a strict, enclosed order of Benedictine nuns for what she believed to be for the rest of her life. She describes life in the monastery and how eventually she had to leave. Emerging from monastic seclusion to a renewed and even more successful singing career, she reflects on the trappings of show business and discusses the spiritual and commercial forces that shaped her music and her view of life. She talks about her books concluding with some thoughts on her recent six-year sojourn in Africa. Afterwards she takes questions from the audience.

Boston College has a long history of involvement with things Irish. It has a very strong 'Irish Studies'

department and an equally well-stocked library of Irish music. This is where the College is housing Mary O'Hara's papers. Among the collection will be her earliest recordings as well as her Irish harp and the gold medal that The Éire Society of Boston conferred on her in 1985 for her contribution to Irish music and culture. Mary has given a concert at Boston College before but her return this time is very special. To mark the occasion Boston College has arranged a celebratory evening and a talk by Mary. Across the river from Boston College is Harvard where the papers of her first husband Richard Selig are stored. ■

For more information about Mary O'Hara, please visit her website or contact her at:

**www.maryohara.co.uk
information@maryohara.co.uk**

