

This article by Caitríona Rowsome was first published in the August 2019 issue of the Sylvia Woods Harp Center e-Newsletter

You can find Caitríona's PDFs at www.harpcenter.com/Rowsome

When I was very young, my parents asked if I'd like to learn the harp. For this, and so much more, I owe them a debt of gratitude as it nourished a fledgling desire to play and learn about Ireland's national emblem.



My first harp was a basic starter harp of 26 strings built from a home kit. It started me on my musical journey, and so I set out to learn scales, arpeggios, hand positions, and key changes. My father, Leon Rowsome, a fourth-generation uilleann piper and pipe-maker, must have seen my love for the instrument. Not long after, he agreed with Mr. Walton of Waltons Music to make a full set of uilleann pipes in exchange for my first 34-string Irish harp.

I look back in awe at the incredibly supportive and creative commitment on my parents' part. I watched in wonder at the chanter turning on the lathe; reamers boring into regulators to the rhythm of the lathe; reeds being gouged; hemp being waxed, and templates used to mark the material for bag and bellows -- all for the love of family and music.

And so it was on Saturday 12th October 1985, the day had come that I was the proud owner of my first professional harp.

My harp teacher Nancy Calthorpe was wonderful. She taught in the DIT College of Music, Chatham Row, Dublin and instilled in her many harp pupils a love of the instrument and its music. With her, I learned the three ancient classifications of harpers' music: *Goltraí* (music of sorrow / lament), *Geantraí* (music of joy) and *Suantraí* (sleep music / lullaby). She taught me an arrangement of *King of the Fairies* from Sylvia Woods' [Irish Dance Tunes for All Harps](#) which was a favourite in our house.



I first heard the music of Turlough O'Carolan played by my father on the uilleann pipes. He played music that was passed on to him by his ancestors. Many of the airs were from O'Neill's *Music of Ireland*, such as *Carolan's Concerto*, *Carolan's Receipt for Drinking*, and *Blind Mary*.



I achieved a teaching Diploma in the Irish harp in 1990 and taught the harp for a time in the DIT College of Music, Chatham Row. In 1992 I graduated with a BSc in Computer Applications, and my career led me in that direction for many years. However, it was not until 2008 that I took advantage of a break between IT jobs to revert back to music. This marked the beginning of [The Complete Carolan Songs and Airs](#) -- a book and four-CD set published by Waltons -- a four-year journey of music and discovery, of challenges and great pleasure.

I am incredibly grateful to Waltons for such a wonderful opportunity. And I am thankful for all the positive responses and encouraging messages I received from around the world since the launch of [The Complete Carolan Songs and Airs](#) in October 2012.

***Buíochas ó chroí libh go léir* (A heartfelt thank you to all).**

In 2010, I joined the committee of *Cairde na Cruite* (Friends of the Harp), and since then I have taken an active voluntary role as editor of their annual harp newsletter *An Cruitire* (The Harper). I have written several articles that focus on the historical harps and music associated with Irish Castles. You can read these articles at <https://www.cairdenacruite.com/news/an-cruitire>



Caoine Phiaruis Feirtéara - (in *An Cruitire* 2014)

Castle Fogarty and the O'Fogerty Harp - (in *An Cruitire* 2015)

Castle Otway and the Castle Otway Harp - (in *An Cruitire* 2016)

I'll finish with a poem that I wrote in 2017 in celebration of the harp in Ireland, and commemorating Ireland's inaugural National Harp Day.

-- *Caitríona Rowsome*

FROM FLAGS AND COINS AND COATS OF ARMS

by Caitríona Rowsome

Oh, strike up the sound of our nation's emblem
From flags and coins and coats of arms
To wire-strung clarity of copper and brass
Or levered tones that ne'er fail to surpass
That pride of place - our musical nation

Collectors, professors and cultured dignitaries
Indebted are we to their noble vision
As they guard and protect our living tradition
For harpers like to harp, to glissando and play
Heralding news of National Harp Day

From harmonic curve to sound-box and pillar
Its three-sided theorem a symbolic shape
Etched on monuments for us to explore
Of gloried tribute through legacy and lore
Its melody: collective; harmonious; ethereal

From flags and coins and coats of arms
Hear now the sound of ubiquitous charm.

Photos:

1. Quinn harp, 2015
2. With my first 34-string harp, 1988
3. At the launch of *The Complete Carolan Songs & Airs*, Clontarf Castle, Dublin 3, Oct 2012
4. At Na Piobairí Uilleann, Notes & Narratives, 15 March 2013