

Caroline Mary Townshend [5C08]

THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF CAROLINE TOWNSHEND

by

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"Much of the credit, for the current revival of enthusiasm for the instrument that is almost the symbol of Irish music, must go to the late Miss Caroline Townshend, a Cork woman living in Dublin.

Most of the girl harpists who have been appearing on concert platforms at home and abroad, and on radio and television programmes, have been taught by Caroline Townshend or by her pupils." (Undated account from an Irish newspaper archive)

"At the end of the [19th] century, attempts were made once more, mainly by the infant Gaelic League, to get [the true ancient harping tradition] going again, but by this time the nature of the tradition had been forgotten. It was not until the early [nineteen-]twenties, when a Miss Townsend of Castletownshend (sic) in County Cork put her mind to it, that any progress was made. " (Our Musical Heritage, Seán Ó Riada, 1982) Posthumous publication.

A significant acknowledgement of the importance of Carrie Townshend's contribution to Irish music, by the man who himself was the greatest influence on the genre in the decade before his early death in 1971.

Caroline Mary Townshend was born in Dublin on 31 July 1859 to Charles Uniacke Townshend and Anna Maria Tottenham-Townshend. Caroline was the third of what was to become a family of eight children, seven of whom survived infancy which was pretty good going for the time. At the time of Carrie's birth the family were living at Waterloo Road, but later moved to Hadley House, Burlington Road and also maintained a house at Myross in Co Cork.

Carrie's mother died just a few weeks before Carrie's 14th birthday. Her father remarried two years later and went on to have seven more children with his second wife, the last of them born in 1890 making her more than thirty years Carrie's junior.

No information has been forthcoming about Carrie's childhood or early life and one can only surmise as to what sort of education she had. What we do know is that she was intensely musical and described by those who knew her in later life as an accomplished pianist. She may have studied at some point at either the Royal Irish Academy or the College of Music in Dublin. An examination of the archives might reveal more. We can also surmise that she was not only a musician, but a singer of some accomplishment, as her particular interest lay in revival of the art of singing Irish songs to one's own harp accompaniment, and it is in this art that she instructed her many pupils.

There is just a slim chance that she may have received some general education at Alexandra College in Dublin. This prestigious school for girls was founded in 1866 and was located in Earlsfort Terrace, within walking distance of her home, so depending on her father's views on education for girls she might well have had at least a couple of terms there.

The first concrete information on Carrie dates from 1907 when her father died leaving her a sizeable inheritance of 3,00 pounds, equal to about 400,000 pounds in today's money. Clearly this, wisely invested, would have provided a reasonable annual income and placed her in a position of financial independence. The next definite information on her activities is in 1912 when she is living at the Castle in Castletownshend and is teaching Irish to anyone willing to learn, including her cousin Violet Martin of Somerville and Ross fame. We don't know how or where Carrie learned Irish. Her initial interest may have been sparked by her visits to Co Cork which still has a strong Irish language tradition. It is unlikely though that she simply picked

up the language from the locals. It is more likely that she herself learned through the Gaelic League, (also known as Conradh na Gaeilge). The Gaelic League was founded in Cork in 1897 for the promotion of the Irish language and all aspects of Irish culture. Irish classes were held through the League and we know that Carrie was a member as in 1921 she is referred to as an officer of the Gaelic League in Co Cork. More might be learned of Carrie's Gaelic League activities by perusal of their archives. These were recently donated to University College Galway and are presently being digitized.

Violet Martin wrote in her diary of 1912 year how she went for her Irish lesson with Carrie and had 'the usual talk about politics' referring to Carrie's support of Irish independence. She is also said to have been a member of the United Irishwomen at that time. The Society for United Irishwomen was founded in 1910 for the social and educational development of women in rural Ireland. Clearly like many Anglo-Irish women of her class, she was interested in politics, social reform and womens' rights.

In or around 1914 she moved to Shorecliffe House in Glandore, Co Cork, another Townshend property a few miles from Castletownshend. It was here in 1919 that she hosted an Irish summer school, which was in fact a cover for an Irish Volunteers training camp. The men were housed in the gate lodge and in tents on the front lawn. The RIC received a tip off and raided the house one night, finding revolvers and rifles hidden in the bushes in the garden.

The Guardian of 14 August 1919 contains an account of the RIC raid of Shorecliffe House, including the following:

"A thorough search of the house and tents was made, and it is understood that revolvers and pistols were found around the shrubbery near the camp. Four persons were arrested, including . Mr. Gerald O'Sullivan, M.A., and Mr. J. B. O'Driscoll, a rural councillor. The military took possession of the house and grounds, forcing the occupants to leave. There was no resistance of any kind." We must hope that Carrie found shelter in the Castle!

In light of these activities, one might expect to find her name on the Cumman na mBan membership list but she does not appear there. Cumman na mBan was the women's auxiliary corps of the IRA. Countess Constance Markiewicz, another Anglo-Irish lady, is probably the most famous member, who took part in the Easter Rising of 1916.

In 1921 Carrie went to America with Louie Bennett an Irish trade union activist and Suffragette, and gave evidence regarding the activities of the Black and Tans to a congress in Washington.

In 1926 she is listed in a Cork street directory for that year as living in Shorecliffe House.

It is in the 1930s that we come to the most important part of Carrie's story. Apparently she had already been teaching harp for some years in Co Cork but this is the point, already well into her seventies, at which she moves to Dublin and begins to instruct the pupils who would go on to make harping history not only in Ireland but on the world stage.

Where, when or how Carrie became interested in the Irish harp we simply do not know, again it may possibly have been a natural consequence of her Gaelic League membership. Some part may have been played by one of her closest friends, another remarkable woman named Annie Patterson, who was herself a member of the Gaelic League. One of the first women in the world to obtain a Doctorate of Music, Patterson was a native of Armagh but was educated at Alexandra College in Dublin and later studied at the Royal Irish Academy of Music. In 1897 Patterson founded the Feis Ceoil music competition in Dublin but quickly had a falling out with the other committee members who wanted to steer the festival down the classical route whilst Patterson wanted to foster the pure Irish tradition. Dr Patterson "enjoyed a national reputation..... as an indefatigable propagandist on behalf of Irish music. " In 1909 she accepted a position as organist at Shandon Cathedral and moved to Cork with her two younger sisters. Once again we do not know whether she and Carrie were already acquainted at that stage, or whether the friendship began at that time, but in 1926 the Feis Ceoil syllabus for

that year (pg 21) includes The Townshend Cup presented by Miss Carrie Townshend, to be awarded for the singing of two songs in the Irish language, to one's own harp accompaniment on the Irish harp. In the Feis Ceoil archives, now held at the National Library, Dublin, there is a four-page document containing 'instructions for the adjudicators of the Townshend Cup' where much might be gleaned of Carrie's expectations of her students. When Annie Patterson died in 1934, Caroline endowed the Feis Ceoil with the Dr Annie Patterson Medal in her memory. The medal is still awarded today. The Townshend Cup was still being awarded in the 1950s and in 1953 it was won by Mary O'Hara, the second generation of what might be called Townshend harpists, O'Hara having studied under Mairin Ní Sheaghda who herself had studied under Miss Townshend.

In any case once, she 'put her mind to it', as Ó Riada says, Carrie was unable to find a playable harp in Ireland but eventually located one in Wales. She would probably have had some instruction there in the technique of playing it and indeed according to Ó Riada, much of her harping style owes a good deal to the Welsh tradition. She then prevailed upon Denis McCullough, an Irish Republican activist and musical instrument maker/retailer, to make her a copy of the Brian Boru harp and also to make several other copies for general sale. McCullough would later establish a music shop in Dublin's Suffolk Street, McCullough Piggott, which continues to sell Irish harps today.

Apart from Annie Patterson, Carrie's social circle in Cork, included the Fleischmanns a family of highly regarded classical musicians. Aloys Fleischmann Snr was an organist and composer. His wife Tilly Swertz was a concert pianist of renown who had studied under a pupil of Liszt. The same newspaper article part of which is quoted at the beginning of this account of Carrie's life, claims that Caroline studied piano under a pupil of Wagner. This is probably an error, passed on Chinese whispers fashion from one of Carrie's former pupils, and it is more likely that it was under Tilly Swertz that she did advanced piano studies. Fleischmann's son Aloys Jnr became quite a notable Irish composer with many pieces for harp in his repertoire. As a child he noted in his diary of June 1926 that Pappie spent the evening talking to Miss Townshend about harps. Quite possibly it is through the family's friendship with Carrie that his interest in the Irish harp originated. Incidentally Papa was apparently in considerable pain that day from a leg problem but clearly that didn't deter Miss Townshend from pursuing her topic of interest!

Throughout the 1920s and possibly the 1930s Carrie was teaching harp in Dublin to a number of advanced students who would go on to international acclaim. Most notable amongst these was Sanchia Pielou who in 1935 became a founding member of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra. The other most important students were the Ní Sheaghda sisters Mairin (later Ferriter) and Róisín (later Ó Tuama), natives of Cork but living in Dublin. (Their parents were members of the Gaelic League and it could well be that this was where they made their first acquaintance with Carrie Townshend). These two women taught an entire generation of Irish harpists spanning the 1950s to the 1990s. Mrs Ferriter's most famous pupil was Mary O'Hara who won the Townshend Cup in 1953 and went on to international fame. Cormac De Barra, grandson of Róisín Ní Sheaghda is a present day harpist of great distinction.

Many of Carrie's arrangements were passed on by the Ní Sheaghda sisters to their pupils, in particular by Mrs Ferriter, who is described by Sheila Larchet Cuthbert, in 'The Irish Harp Book: A Tutor and Companion' as 'deeply indebted to harp teacher, Caroline Townshend'.) Carrie's arrangement of the traditional Irish air 'An Spailpín Fánach' contributed by Mrs Ferriter, is included in the book. There is also a brief biographical entry for Caroline Townshend (pg 240).

Carrie died in Dublin May 1951. She seems to have suffered a major stroke, which left her paralysed down one side and died within the week at Coolock House, a private nursing home. She was just a few weeks short of her 92nd birthday.

Though she never married and left no children, yet Caroline Townshend founded a dynasty, a harping dynasty and left a musical legacy, which endures to this day.

Photograph of ladies with the Irish harp at the Celtic Congress in Dublin in 1925



Mrs Ferriter is first on the left in the back row.