

2 Irish History Through Songs

Can music help to reclaim history and define a nation's identity?

1 The harp, a symbol of resistance

- A.** Observe the illustration: what symbolic elements can you see? Imagine why the harp was considered a symbol of resistance.
- B.** Read the text and check your hypotheses. Then, explain what the harp symbolised for the English. Is it still the case today?


The Irish Harp is the oldest of the Irish instruments. A symbol of Irish identity: it appears on Irish coins and flag. Until the 16th century, harpists enjoyed quite a privileged position in Irish society. The ruling chieftains employed them under a patronage system to compose and perform music.

However the English had a dislike for the harpists. At the time efforts had been made to anglicise Ireland, the harpists were seen as 'keepers of the tradition'. So in 1571 Queen Elizabeth I issued a decree to "hang the harpers and burn their instruments". This, coupled with the 1607 "Flight of the Earls" where the last of the Irish chieftains fled to Europe, dealt a serious blow to the harpists. The skill went into decline for some time afterwards.

Alison Hughes, _____, 3 March 2016

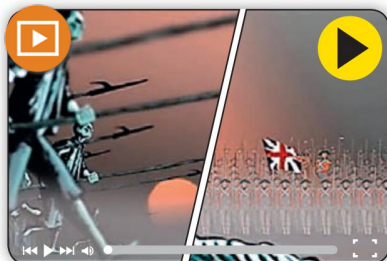


2 "The Wind that Shakes the Barley"

- A.** Look at the still below. Guess who these people are and what is going to happen.
- B.** Watch the video and check your guesses.
- C.** Read the *Cultural fact*. Guess what the song may symbolise.
- D.** Listen to the first verse (sung by Loreena McKennitt) **MP3 n°** 
- What kind of song do you think it is?
- E.** Read the song lyrics. Explain the historical context and what the barley symbolises.
- F. Groupwork.** Each group works on one topic: the story, the character's feelings, the representation of Ireland. Share your findings with the class.

Cultural fact

The Irish Rebellion of 1798 was an uprising against British Rule in Ireland. Even though it failed, it paved the way for more rebellions such as the Easter Rising (1916) and the Irish Civil War (1922-1923).



VIDEO N°06

I sat within a valley green,
I sat there with my true love,
My sad heart strove¹ the two between,
The old love and the new love,
The old for her, the new that made
Me think of Ireland dearly,
While soft the wind blew down the glade²
And shook the golden barley.
Twas hard the woeful³ words to frame⁴
To break the ties that bound us
Twas harder still to bear the shame
Of foreign chains around us
And so I said, "The mountain glen⁵
I'll seek next morning early
And join the brave United Men!"
While soft winds shook the barley.
While sad I kissed away her tears,
My fond arms 'round her flinging,
The foeman's⁶ shot burst on our ears,
From out the wildwood ringing,
A bullet pierced my true love's side,
In life's young spring so early,
And on my breast in blood she died
While soft winds shook the barley.

1 fight • 2 an open space in a forest • 3 dreadful •
4 say • 5 a small, narrow valley • 6 enemy