

Lady Llanover and the Triple Harp

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Augusta Hall, Lady Llanover, ‘Gwenynen Gwent’:¹ three names but one person, and each name reveals a particular facet of a woman who did so much to save the Welsh triple harp from oblivion. Although she only acquired the title of Lady Llanover in 1859 she already belonged to the world of the landed gentry. She made use of her status throughout her life, especially when insisting on having her own way. The eisteddfodic title, ‘Gwenynen Gwent’ (‘The Bee of Gwent’), which she adopted in 1834 illustrates the fervent Welshness she developed. Lastly she was Augusta Hall – the married name of a woman who felt the burden of her fellow countrymen’s ‘betrayal’.

Augusta Hall was born to a family of English landowners who settled in Llanover, near Abergavenny, Monmouthshire. It was there that she was born, lived and died. Although she moved within London circles, she always came back to Llanover. Not only was that the place of her upbringing, at Tŷ Uchaf; it was here that she and her husband, Benjamin Hall, built a new mansion, Llanover Court. In her home she recreated a court which resembled the old house of the nobility, where generous patronage was offered to bards and musicians.

Augusta Hall was not one of those gentlewomen in Wales who cultivated only the English tongue and English ways: she had always been interested in the Welsh language and the traditions of Wales since her childhood, and this interest continued until her death almost a century later. Like many of her fellow Welshmen she embraced the harp as a national symbol, and not just any harp, but the triple harp of Wales. The triple harp was enthroned at Llanover Court from the completion of the house in 1837, and Lady Llanover did all that she could to promote and patronize this traditional Welsh instrument.

The triple harp was not, of course, Welsh in origin: the instrument came to Britain from Italy in the seventeenth century. But it was in Wales that its use persisted. Known as the *arpa doppia* in Italy, this harp – as the British name suggests – has three rows of strings: two rows of diatonic notes tuned in unison, and an inner row containing the chromatic notes.

In England, Handel and his eighteenth-century contemporaries wrote concert music for the triple harp,² but in Wales its provenance was predominantly domestic, associated with an oral tradition of music. It was primarily the harp of north Wales, while the single-strung harp remained more popular in the south.³ As the aristocracy turned its back on native culture, patronage decreased, and therefore harpists became fewer in number. Another threat to its survival was the appearance of the ‘new’ harp, the pedal harp, which became popular throughout Britain in the nineteenth century.⁴

At this time a great battle was fought between the pedal harp and the old triple harp, or rather between the supporters of the ‘developed’ harp and the supporters of the Welsh harp. On one side stood John Thomas, ‘Pencerdd Gwalia’ – a harpist who turned away from the triple harp – and his supporters, and on the other side stood Augusta Hall and her followers.⁵ She was a great leader, and she fought hard against the tendency of the age to promote the pedal harp and neglect the Welsh triple harp.

What kind of person was she? Which aspects of her character were of great help to her as she fought for the cause? The recollections of Augustus Hare, gentleman and

author, indicate the formidable reputation that went before her, and the experience of making her acquaintance:

The very warnings I had received were enough to annihilate self-confidence. I was not to believe anything Lady Llanover said about different members of her family, for she was always guided by her own prejudices and sympathies. I was not to be guided by her opinion on any subject, yet was never to contradict her ... There is a great deal to admire in Lady Llanover: her pertinacity in what she thinks right, whether she is right or not: her insistence on carrying out her sovereign will in all things.⁶

These were the aspects of her character that made her both a notable patron and a woman who was difficult to deal with. Lady Llanover had the strength of personality to be very influential. This was the secret of her success as she defended the triple harp of Wales in the field of Welsh music.

Despite her tendency to insist that she was right at all times, she used her ability and influence in a very constructive way. Broadly speaking, her patronage falls into two categories: that which she offered on a continuous basis in her home, and that which she offered more occasionally by her support of competitions and eisteddfodau.

Llanover Court was the centre for her continuous patronage, and the corner-stone of her strategy was her engagement of a resident Welsh harpist. In 1826 Lady Llanover discovered a harpist in the Brecon Eisteddfod who satisfied her requirements. John Wood Jones was a musician of gypsy blood and the descendant of two good harpists from the Wood family.⁷ His pedigree in the long tradition of playing the harp in Wales is recorded as part of his epitaph:

Disgybl telyn oedd i Richard Roberts o Gaernarfon, athraw yr hwn oedd William Williams o Benmorfa, a'i athraw ef oedd John Parry o Riwabon ... a'i athraw yntef Robert Parry o Lanllyfni yn Arfon, yr hwn a dderbyniodd ei gelfyddyd oddiwrth hen delynorion Cymru.⁸

[He was a pupil of Richard Roberts of Caernarfon, whose teacher was William Williams of Penmorfa, and his teacher was John Parry of Ruabon ... and his teacher was Robert Parry of Llanllyfni in Arfon, who received his art from the old harpists of Wales.]

As the epitaph indicates, the art (and the repertoire) passed from teacher to pupil in an oral tradition. John Wood Jones therefore belonged to a line of some of the most famous harpists known in Wales. Patronage was secured for him at Llanover in the same way that it had been secured for his forebears in other great houses. Thus, August Hall not only supported a harpist, but ensured the continuation of a lineage of traditional harpists and their repertoire.

After the death of John Jones, his pupil, Thomas Gruffydd, succeeded him at Llanover Court.⁹ This harpist was a competitor of distinction, and he also had a talent for singing and composing. It is claimed that he won thirty-seven prizes and taught forty pupils. He also had the privilege of being appointed 'Special Welsh harpist to His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales' in 1869. An additional harpist, Walter Watkins

of Breconshire, was used for the frequent dancing in the great house.¹⁰ He was a pupil of John Jones and Thomas Gruffydd, and therefore another musician who profited from the art of the oral tradition.

At Llanover Court the harpist would play as needed. He was called upon in particular to entertain the court's guests and to play the familiar old Welsh tunes after the evening meal. Again Augustus Hare is a source of information:

We had more of the Welsh music in the evening. We went and sat in the armchairs in the hall, and the household filed in above, and filled the music-gallery, and sang most gloriously ... At other times, the blind harper attached to the house came in and harped to us, and four little boys sat in a circle on the floor and sang.¹¹

Gruffydd died in 1887, but the influence of the past did not end there since his daughter, Susannah Berrington Gruffydd Richards, then became harpist to Augusta Hall.¹² She was, like her father, a successful competitor and had performed duets with him. An important aspect of her role as family harpist was her contribution as a teacher. She received a monthly income to teach scholarship pupils who were supported and housed by Augusta Hall.

Lady Llanover's 'scholarships', which enabled children to learn the triple harp, represent a second facet of her patronage at the house. She provided both accommodation and lessons free of charge; but the children had to work hard and behave, or else they would lose their position. This is noted in a letter of 1884 which discusses a scholarship offered to Edward Davies of Taibach, Cwmafon:

Conditions: To find himself in Lodging & food & have his Scholarship renewed every Quarter for one year, if deserving & well conducted or otherwise dismissal.¹³

This generosity was typical of 'Gwenynen Gwent'; but this was not sign of weakness, for there were very definite boundaries to her generosity.

A third sphere of patronage at Llanover was her support of triple-harp makers. Through her dealings with the Abergavenny Cymreigyddion Society, which held eisteddfodau between 1834 and 1854, Bassett Jones of Cardiff was commissioned to make harps to be awarded as prizes.¹⁴ Additionally she supported two harp-makers in Llanover itself: Abram Jeremiah and Elias Francis.¹⁵ It is very likely that these men were carpenters by trade, and that they made triple harps when the need arose. Robert Griffith, the author of *Llyfr Cerdd Dannau*, claims that Abram was the only harp maker in Wales:

a ystyrriid yn wneuthurwr profedig, ac yn feistr ar y gwaith o wneyd telynau yn ôl dull yr hen wneuthurwyr.¹⁶

[who was considered to be an approved maker, and a master of harp making in the manner of the old makers.]

Abram was also the last harp-maker in Wales to make harp strings.

It appears that Abram Jeremiah and Elias Francis of Highmead worked together at Llanover for a long period, making harps in the manner of Wales's most famous harp-maker, John Richards of Llanrwst.¹⁷ Lady Llanover explains in 1869:

Mae y delyn a roddir genyf yn wobwr yma heddyw ... wedi ei gwneuthur yn yr un ddull ac yn yr un modd a thelyn sydd yn awr yn fy meddiant, yr hon a wnawd gan y gwneuthurwr telynau enwog John Richard.¹⁸

[The harp which is given by myself here today ... has been made in the same manner and in the same form as a harp which is now in my keeping, which was made by the famous harp-maker John Richard.]

Bassett Jones, the famous nineteenth-century harp-maker, also followed the design of John Richards. There are therefore only minor differences between the triple harps of John Richards, Bassett Jones and those of the Llanover makers. A prominent feature of Llanover harps is the single row of acorns with their leaves which can be seen along the neck. It is possible that Bassett Jones decorated his harps with acorns because of their druidic connection.

Bassett Jones's harps were associated with the other area of Lady Llanover's patronage: her occasional support of eisteddfodau and competitions. For twenty years, from its formation in 1833, she played a leading role in the activities of the Abergavenny Cymreigyddion Society. There was a quiet period for the triple harp after that society came to an end in 1853. (Many of the most faithful members had died and the initial enthusiasm had been lost).

However, August Hall staged a revival. In October 1868 a triple harp competition was held at Llanover, and harpists were invited there for three days to compete for the prize of a triple harp. In her address she comments on the declining interest in the Welsh harp, and makes it clear that the competition is intended to revive what was lost at Abergavenny:

Diben penodol fy ngwahoddiad i chwi, delynorion Cymru, i'r gystadleuaeth hon yw adfywio, ac adferu, a chefnogi yr offeryn cerdd cenedlaethol ardderchocaf yn yr holl fyd. Y mae yn ddrwg gennyf ddyweyd fod ein telyn, drwy yr anghefnogaeth a dderbyniodd yn ystod y pymtheg neu yr un mlynedd ar bymtheg diweddfaf, wedi myned yn hytrach yn ddisylw.¹⁹

[The main aim of my invitation to you, harpists of Wales, to this competition, is to revive, and restore, and support the world's most excellent national musical instrument. I am sorry to say that our harp, through the lack of support it has received during the last fifteen or sixteen years, has gone rather unnoticed.]

As ever, Lady Llanover established her own rules: no one who had been known to play the pedal harp could compete. Lady Llanover was unshakeable: a lack of support from the Welsh people in general, and the developments of the age could not persuade her to give up her ideal. Consequently one competitor was disqualified because at one point he had turned to the pedal harp; another faced the same fate because he did not own a triple harp of Welsh design. This was not only a competition, but a protest against the anglicized nature of the National Eisteddfod.

Lady Llanover did not turn her back on the National Eisteddfod completely, however. In 1883, when the National Eisteddfod was held in Cardiff, she desperately tried to reason with the music committee to make them agree to her plans, but they did not see eye to eye. Augusta Hall had, according to her custom, offered to be patron of the festival's triple-harp competition. Initially this was welcomed until, as was typical, she listed her requirements. Her offer was declined on the grounds that it was the music committee's responsibility to arrange the competitions.

Further evidence of Augusta Hall's strength of character was her ability to see her wishes carried out, and to redirect her patronage in the face of opposition. She did not give up easily, and without her uncompromising determination all her activities, including the great contests of the 1880s, would have remained unfulfilled dreams. The first of these competitions, which was an obvious protest against the Cardiff eisteddfod, was held just a few months later, in Swansea in October 1883. Lady Llanover herself was not present (she was by then eighty years old), but her opinion of the National Eisteddfod was voiced in a speech at the event and reported in the newspaper, thus:

'Gwynnyn Gwent' had the heartiest sympathy, as he had himself, for everything that was truly Welsh, and for everybody save 'Dic Shon Dafydd'. (Laughter.) The Eisteddfod had her ladyship's most cordial support when it was the true Welsh eisteddfod, but not when it was of the mongrel sort that had recently taken place at Cardiff (laughter and applause). But she could not look with toleration upon such a fellow as 'Dic Shon Dafydd', who was half ashamed of his mother, his language, his harp, and the religion of his country.²⁰

The patronage of the Marquis of Bute was also secured for the competition and he contributed half of the forty pounds to be awarded in prizes.²¹ Gentry and scholars were present in order to place the seal of social and academic approval on the playing of the 'national' instrument and on the evening's activities. However, it was Lady Llanover's inspiration that brought the competition into being, and consequently she received special praise from the evening's speakers.

That competition was a success, and so was a similar one held two years later in September 1885, again at Swansea. Harpists from across Wales came to compete, including the sons of John Roberts, 'Telynor Cymru'.²² The presence of the highly acclaimed and revered composer, Joseph Parry, ensured a special status for both competitions.²³ Parry would have been a comfort to Augusta Hall, especially in the light of the lack of support from, and 'betrayal' by, such influential individuals as John Thomas, 'Pencerdd Gwalia'.

The reputation of 'Gwynnyn Gwent' as a protester was reinforced in August 1886 when she contributed to an eisteddfod held in Caerwys. It was arranged by Welshmen who also were tired of the anglicized National Eisteddfod, and at her own expense she sent eight harpists and sixteen singers under the baton of Joseph Parry to support the festival. The Llanover harpists entertained and competed in the six competitions for the triple harp. The eisteddfod was a great success, and once again Augusta Hall's favourite harp was exalted.

Augusta Hall's determined patronage did much to save the triple harp from oblivion: She supported its continuing use with a fervour unequalled in the field of Welsh

music. It is probable that the triple harp would not have survived at all without her indefatigable support which spanned a period of more than fifty years. Few could have done more to rescue the instrument which then became a national symbol, a link with Wales past and a vehicle for the preservation of its traditional music.

More than fifty years passed before another individual fought for the cause of the triple harp in Wales. In her own time Nansi Richards, a harpist steeped in the background of the Welsh gypsies as well as in native traditions, became an embodiment of all that the triple harp represented and spent many years playing the instrument, demonstrating in Wales and further afield that this was a harp worth preserving.²⁴ At one point in the 1960s she was the only triple harpist in Wales.

Nansi Richards, often known as ‘the queen of the triple harp’, paid tribute to Augusta Hall, the lady of the triple harp. At a time when triple-harp playing had almost completely died out, Lady Llanover’s efforts served to strengthen the resolve of Nansi Richards. In the face of criticism from fellow harpists, she recalled the commitment of that resolute lady who fought until her death for the Welsh triple harp:

all harpists said I was ‘coddling’ + loosing time trying to revive it let them all realise + remember another English lady’s’ enthusiasm, she was the late A[u]gusta hall, known to us all as ‘Gwenynen Gwent.’²⁵

Translated by the Translation Unit, University of Wales, Bangor

¹ Born Augusta Waddington (1802-96), she was the daughter of Benjamin Waddington (1749-1828) and Georgina Mary Ann Port (1771-1850). Her father purchased the Llanover estate and moved from Dunston Park, Berkshire in 1792. Despite her English parentage, there was Celtic blood in her ancestry. She married Benjamin Hall (1802-67), the son of Benjamin Hall and Charlotte Crawshay of the Abercarn Estate, in 1823.

² For example, Handel wrote a harp part for the aria ‘Praise the Lord; from *Esther*, and composed the concerto in B♭ (Op.4, no.6) which was performed during the oratorio *Alexander’s Feast*.

³ A single-strung harp, four feet in height.

⁴ The pedal harp (double action) was perfected by Sébastien Erard (1752-1831) in 1810.

⁵ John Thomas, 1826-1913, born in Bridgend. One of the nineteenth century’s most famous harpists.

⁶ A.J.C. Hare, *The Story of my Life*, 6 chyf., (London, 1900), v, 3-4.

⁷ John Wood Jones, 1800-44.

⁸ Sir Joseph Bradney, *A History of Monmouthshire*, 10 vols. (London, 1992), I, 394.

⁹ Thomas Gruffydd, 1815-87.

¹⁰ Walter Watkins, 1830-1904. Sometimes referred to as Watcyn.

¹¹ Hare, op. cit., v, 5-6.

¹² Susannah Berrington Gruffydd Richards, 1854-1952

¹³ Gwent County Record Office, MS D.1210/820 2, letter dated 10 May 1884 with ‘(copy)’ as a heading.

¹⁴ Bassett Jones, 1809-69

¹⁵ Abram Jeremiah, died 1885; Elias Francis, 1829-1911

¹⁶ Robert Griffith, *Llyfr Cerdd Dannau* (Caernarfon, 1913), 217.

¹⁷ John Richard, 1711-89, triple-harp maker

¹⁸ Anon, ‘Cystadlueaeth y Delyn Gymreig yn Llanofer’, *Y Cerddor Cymreig*, 105 (1 November 1869), 83.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

²⁰ Anon, ‘Welsh Harpers’ competition at Swansea last night’, *The Cambrian* (26 October 1883), 8.

²¹ John Patrick Crichton Stuart, 1847-1900

²² John Roberts, 1816-94; a remarkable harpist from amongst the Welsh gypsies.

²³ Joseph Parry, 1841-1903.

²⁴ Nansi Richards, 1888-1979

²⁵ Llythyr at Joan Rimmer, 18 Hydref 1963, dyfynnir gan Nia Gwyn Roberts, 'Nansi'r llythyrwr', *Barn*, 334 (Tachwedd 1990), 18.