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Wright, Michael. 2015. *The Jews-Harp in Britain and Ireland*. SOAS Musicology Series. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate. ISBN 978-1-4724-1413-7 £55.00

In a letter to his mother in the early 1930s, Roald Dahl bemoaned the impossibility of finding a good jews-harp ‘with a nice high note’ in Derby: he had to settle instead for playing a ‘rotten little one for 3d.’¹ Michael Wright’s book sets out the background to this sad state of affairs in its account of the rise and decline in the popularity of jews-harps in Britain and Ireland, and of the significant role of these islands in the instrument’s manufacture and distribution. Wright also deals with the problematic aspects of its English nomenclature: ‘jews-harp’ (as he spells it) became the most common term only in the second half of the eighteenth century, ousting ‘trump’ and ‘jew’s trump’, and Wright finds the name’s supposed origin in anti-Semitism to be unproven.

The book has clearly been a labour of love, and the accompanying CD of solo and ensemble studio performances by the Wright family is wonderful. However, to my ears the recording of the author’s arresting vocal on track 10 ‘Hollow Tree (Sherbourne Town)’ sounds badly distorted, and the combination of fascination and frustration that results for the listener rather sets the tone for much of the book itself. Amongst the excellent research and writing is a considerable amount of material that seems arbitrarily chosen, unexplained, or simply unfinished, and the book moves uncomfortably between the tone of an academic volume with a coherently argued thesis, and that of an entertaining collection of ephemera and cuttings.

The strongest section presents Wright’s own research into the commercial exploitation of the instrument, and this draws on a rich store of sources, some of them obscure. He summarises archaeological finds and the records of imports, and tells a compelling story of the rise of jews-harp manufacturing after the Industrial Revolution, when the canal network of the West Midlands enabled mass production and transportation of quality hand-made instruments, and manufacturing centres were established in Dublin and Belfast. The instrument’s eventual decline, until the last makers in Britain and Ireland ceased to be active in 1975, is described in telling detail. The role of exports in particular is an intriguing one: Walter Raleigh was trading jews-harps for hens in Guyana as early as 1595, and the general trend was for England to export its jews-harps, while Scotland and Ireland tended to hang on to theirs and play them!

The surviving information on named players is fragmentary, but Wright draws out valuable information both on playing techniques and on performance contexts, which in the earliest recorded cases tend to be on the wrong side of the law. In 1590, the first British named player, Geillis Duncan, was accused of witchcraft and conspiracy to murder James IV, in North Berwick churchyard.²

When summarising the research of others, as in the opening chapters, the book loses some of its focus, and leaves a great deal unexplained for those who are not already familiar with the material under discussion. Some of the illustrations are downright baffling: why include incomplete hand-drawn sketches of printed illustrations and maps, rather than images of the originals? The lack of simple contextual information such as a date in the captioning of illustrations is a problem throughout the book, compounded by the impression that many of these seem to have been included simply as decoration, rather than as substantive contributions

¹ Dahl, Roald. 2016. *Love from Boy: Roald Dahl’s Letters to His Mother*. Edited by Donald Sturrock. London: John Murray. p.65.

² Wright provides a detailed account of this in Wright, Michael. 2008. ‘The Jew’s Harp in the Law, 1590–1825’. *Folk Music Journal* 9 (3): 349–71. pp.352-357.

to the discussion. Correspondence is used as source material without sufficient explanatory context, and the chapter on the jews-harp in popular culture is little more than a list: the reproduction of crossword clues from *The Times* serves little purpose unless there is also some discussion of what these tell us about the instrument's place in wider culture.

In reference to his own work as a practitioner, Wright refers to himself in the third person, which is confusing and affects an unnecessary detachment from the more personal aspects of the research; similarly, at no point in the book is it clearly stated that John Wright is the author's brother. A simple acknowledgement of this would have saved the uninitiated reader from guesswork, and could have prompted a consideration of the challenges of balancing insider and outsider perspectives in work such as this.

Still, despite its shortcomings Wright's book has the potential to be a spur both to further research, and to a more serious consideration of the instrument in general. I learnt a great deal from it, and I hope it succeeds mightily in both of these respects.

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