

Valentine Rennie (1795/97 - 1837) by Keith Sanger



Valentine Rennie (alternatively, Rainey or Reanne) was a pupil of Arthur O'Neill at the Irish Harp Society's first school held at Cromac Street, Belfast. In the only surviving list of students given in the society minute book under the 2nd January 1811 he was said to be 14 years old, but according to his obituary which appeared in the Belfast News-Letter on the 26 September 1837, he had died at Cromac Street on the 23 September aged 42. He was a native of Cushendall in County Antrim and on his fathers side was a second cousin of Robert Burns, the Ayrshire poet. He resided for a while in Dublin and in 1821, along with Edward MacBride, James MacMonagle and John MacLoughlin, was one of the four harpers who played before George IV on his visit there.

According to John Bell's notes taken down from Patrick Byrne around 1849, Rennie's own harp was made by James MacBride, an amateur harper and wheelwright from near Omagh and better known as the father of Edward MacBride. Valentine Rennie succeeded MacBride as 'Professor' of the Harp School in 1823, a position he held until his death. He left a widow and a son aged six and a half, and was interred on the morning of the 25 September in the Friars Bush burying ground.

The drawing of Valentine Rennie was made from memory by Thomas Smyth of the engravers J & T Smyth, who had previously made the engraving of the only known portrait, by an unknown artist, of the harper Arthur O'Neill. The Smyths lived adjacent to the harp school, and Rennie had been a frequent visitor to their house during the time he was master of the school.

Keith Sanger 2002

Portrait of Valentine Rennie by Thomas Smyth, from the Ulster Journal of Archaeology vol VII, January 1901

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