

Amhrán na bhFiann

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.



It's probably the only song in existence whose lyrics are known by most of the Irish people in their first national language. So, ask yourself this question: when was the last time you watched an Irish international soccer, boxing or a Gaelic games sporting event and heard anyone singing the lyric 'Soldiers are we, whose lives are pledged to Ireland' as opposed to 'Sinne Fianna Fáil atá faoi gheall ag Éirinn'?



This somewhat may diminish the achievement of Peadar Kearney, co-composer of the Irish National Anthem. Kearney penned the original English lyrics of *The Soldiers Song* sitting in a café in 1907. His friend and musical collaborator Patrick Heeney (second), composed the melody in 1909 to Kearney's lyrics. Unfortunately, impoverished, Heeney died a young man in 1911. The other problem is that the English language version has been almost entirely superseded by the Irish translation, *Amhrán na bhFiann* (Oh-rawn nah Vee-on), written by Liam Ó Rinn in 1923. It is this version that Imelda May sang at the Conor McGregor vs Floyd Mayweather fight a few years back. The song did cause some controversy when it was played in its English language form at the Ryders cup in the United States in 2004. Similar confusion reigned when an American band played unfamiliar verses at the Irish World Cup games. (Pictures from top to bottom: Peadar Kearney, Patrick Heeney, and Liam Ó Rinn.)



It should be noted that *Amhrán na bhFiann*, did not replace *God Save Ireland* nor *A Nation Once Again* as the Irish national anthem despite their iconic status. The fact is the Irish Free State did not move to adopt a national anthem of any kind until 1926. *Ireland's Call* penned in 1995, with no political undertones, is used by the Irish rugby team. At rugby matches played in the Republic both national anthems are sung; elsewhere *Ireland's call* is the only one used.

Kearney composed other well-known ballads including *The Bold Fenian Men*, *Down by the Liffey Side*, *Knockcroghery*, and *Erin Go Bragh*. But it was *The Soldiers Song* that proved to be his most popular marching song among the Irish Volunteers. Kearney's profession was a house painter and his sister

Kathleen married another painter, Stephen Behan, one of Michael Collins's "Twelve Apostles." This made Kearney the uncle of prominent Irish writers Brendan, Brian and Dominic Behan.

Kearney joined the Gaelic League in 1901 where the soon to be renowned Sean O'Casey became one of his pupils in Irish language classes. He took the Irish Republican Brotherhood oath in 1903. He was actively involved in the 1916 Rising and escaped capture fighting at Jacob's biscuit factory. In the Irish War of Independence, he became a close friend of Michael Collins. Later he would side with the Free State in the Civil War, a move that probably helped his song be chosen as the national anthem by the government of W. T. Cosgrave. He was a witness to the death of Michael Collins in Béal na Bláth in August 1922 while travelling in the lead vehicle in the ill-fated convoy. Disillusioned, he never took part in politics again and returned to his old job as a painter.

In July 1926, the executive council of the Irish Free State decided to adopt the music of *Amhrán na bhFiann* as the official national anthem. Kearney was not paid any royalties for the rather unfamiliar English language version of the Irish national anthem. He died in relative poverty in 1942 and is buried in Glasnevin cemetery with Thomas Ashe, who died on a hunger strike in 1917. The three men responsible for the Irish national anthem are: Peadar Kearney, Patrick Heeney and Liam Ó Rinn, who were from Dublin's north inner city and lived 200 yards from each other.