

The Foggy Dew

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The year 2019 marked the 100th year anniversary of the first Dáil Éireann (Irish Parliament) and the beginning of Ireland's war of independence. The year also marks the centenary of the "The Foggy Dew", which is one of the best-known ballads commemorating the Easter Rising. It is also one of the most remarkable songs to have emerged out of the Easter Rising staged by Irish Nationalists in 1916. The inspiration for the song came from Charles O'Neill who later became a parish priest from Kilcoo and Newcastle in Co. Down. The melody is based on an old traditional Irish song called the Banks of Moorlough Shore.

The Irish had staged rebellions against British rule for centuries without ever achieving independence. At the start of the twentieth century that looked to change as political negotiations had led the British Government to consider a Home Rule Bill. However, all such moves were suspended by the British at the outbreak of the First World War, leaving the Irish unsure as to whether they would achieve independence. More than 200,000 Irishmen then went on to fight for Britain in the First World War. However, while many Irish people supported the war effort, many others questioned whether Irish soldiers should be employed fighting for Britain and felt they should be fighting for Ireland instead.

Many Irish nationalists also saw a supreme irony in the concept that the war was seemingly being fought to protect small nations – particularly Belgium having been invaded by Germany. Those nationalists pointed out Ireland too was a small nation and had been occupied by the English for centuries. It too should be allowed to be free.

Why were the English involved in a war to maintain Belgium's independence when they would not allow Ireland to be independent? The English always had a blind side when it came to the Irish so many of the Irish saw this as hypocrisy.

A small group of Irish nationalists staged a rebellion at Easter time in 1916. The rebellion was quietly put down by the British Army and many of the rebels were later executed. The rebellion produced mixed emotions among the Irish people at the time. Many did not support the rebels and felt the rising a mistake. However, their sentiments changed when the British decided to execute the rebels as a warning to others. It was seen as a brutal and gross over-reaction. But the result was far from acting as a warning to others, the heavy-handed tactics increased support for the nationalist cause among ordinary Irish citizens.

Hence, several years later, Charles O'Neill attended the first meeting of the new Irish Parliament called the Dáil Éireann in 1919. As the names of the elected members were called out, he was moved by the number of times the names were answered by "faoi ghlas ag na Gaill" (Fee Gloss ag na goil – locked up by the foreigners). O'Neill was so very moved by the experience that on his return journey, he composed the poem, *The Foggy Dew*. The music preexisted. The song compares two types of Irishmen both fighting for freedom. The first type joined the English army to fight on mainland Europe, in Africa and Asia on the battlefields of the First World war, while the second, fought as Óglaigh na hÉireann (OO glig an Hairon - volunteers or soldiers of Ireland), in the Easter Rising of 1916.

The Foggy Dew summed up the Irish feelings about the Easter Rising. It tells the story of the rebellion at the same time as describing the sentiments many Irish people felt as they reflected on what happened. They felt things could have been so different if only some of the 200,000 Irish servicemen had fought for independence instead of fighting for Britain in The First World War.

In the poem's opening verse goes "As down the Glen one Easter morn" ... describes being passed by squadrons of marching men as they rode into Dublin city that Easter morning. They were the Irish nationalists going into action. There were no pipes playing or drums beating as might be expected on a military march. Instead, the only sound was the Angelus bell ringing out across the river Liffey, which runs through Dublin. The Angelus bells were rung from churches as a call to prayer, perhaps the suggestion is that the coming rebellion has right on its side.

The second verse of the poem, "They hung out the flag of war" ... in reference to the GPO captured by the Irish Republicans where they hung the flag of war. Even as they lost their lives by their actions, it was better to die on Irish soil, for an Irish cause, than it was to die for England's sake on foreign soil.

And lastly, the final line praises the 'glorious dead' who have finally escaped the chains of British rule. For the Irish, death often seemed the only escape. As a result, death in the service of Ireland was seen as a privilege. The Irish must avenge their fallen brothers and sisters.

Written just three years after the Rising, Charles O'Neill personified the vision and political conviction for the Irish nationalists by writing down these unforgettable words that reflected much of the Irish sentiment of the day.

The Foggy Dew

*As down the glen one Easter morn to a city fair rode I
There armed lines of marching men in squadrons passed me by
No fife did hum nor battle drum did sound its dread tattoo
But the Angelus bell o'er the Liffey swell rang out through the foggy dew*

*Right proudly high over Dublin town they hung out the flag of war
'Twas better to die 'neath an Irish sky than at Suvla or Sedd El Bahr
And from the plains of Royal Meath strong men came hurrying through
While Britannia's Huns, with their long-range guns sailed in through the foggy dew*

*'Twas Britannia bade our Wild Geese go that small nations might be free
But their lonely graves are by Suvla's waves or the shore of the Great North Sea
Oh, had they died by Pearse's side or fought with Cathal Brugha
Their names we will keep where the Fenians sleep 'neath the shroud of the foggy dew*

*But the bravest fell, and the requiem bell rang mournfully and clear
For those who died that Eastertide in the springing of the year
And the world did gaze, in deep amaze, at those fearless men, but few
Who bore the fight that freedom's light might shine through the foggy dew*

*Ah, back through the glen I rode again and my heart with grief was sore
For I parted then with valiant men whom I never shall see more
But to and fro in my dreams I go and I'd kneel and pray for you,
For slavery fled, O glorious dead, When you fell in the foggy dew*