

The Foggy Dew

'Twas down the glen one Easter morn to a city fair rode I
When Ireland's line of marching men in squadrons passed me by
No pipe did hum nor battle drum did sound it's dread tatoo
But the Angelus bell o'er the Liffey swell rang out in 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 Sulva or Sud El Bar
And from the plains of Royal Meath strong men came hurrying through
While Britannia's sons, with their long range guns sailed in through the foggy dew

'Twas England bade our Wild Geese go that small nations might be free
But their lonely graves are by Sulva's waves on the fringe of the Great North Sea
But had they died by Pearse's side or fought with Cathal Brugha
Their names we'd keep where the fenians sleep 'neath the shroud of the foggy dew

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

"Foggy Dew" was written by Canon Charles O'Neill (1887-1963), a parish priest of Kilcoo and later Newcastle, County Down, sometime after 1919. The music is from a manuscript that was in possession of Kathleen Dallat of Ballycastle. That manuscript gives Carl Hardebeck as the arranger. It is the same air as the folk-song "The Maid of the Moorlough Shore".

This song chronicles the Easter Uprising of 1916, and encourages Irishmen to fight for the cause of Ireland, rather than for the British, as so many young men were doing in World War I.

The Foggy Dew needs to be seen against the political background in Ireland in the aftermath of the Easter Rising and World War I.

As Keith Jeffery, Professor of Modern History at the University of Ulster, pointed out, approximately 210,000 Irishmen joined up and served in the British forces during the war.

This created mixed feelings for many Irish people, particularly for those with nationalist sympathies. While they broadly supported the British war effort, they also felt that one of the moral justifications for the war, "the freedom of small nations" like Belgium and Serbia, should also be applied to Ireland, which at that time was under British rule.

In 1916, a radical group of Irish separatists led by James Connolly and Patrick Pearse decided to take advantage of the fact that Britain was pre-occupied by the war and stage a rebellion. In what became known as the Easter Rising, the rebels seized some of the major buildings in Dublin including the General Post Office.

The rebellion was quickly put down by British forces but the rebellion and, perhaps more importantly, the execution of the leaders that followed, marked a turning point for many Irish people.

Some had opposed the action of the rebels but, as Prof Jeffery points out, the public revulsion at the executions added to the growing sense of alienation from the British Government.

Canon O'Neill was reflecting this sense of alienation when he wrote The Foggy Dew. In 1919, he¹ attended the first sitting of the new Irish Parliament, known as the Dail. The names of the elected members were called out, but many were absent. Their names were answered by the reply "faoi ghlas ag na Gail" which means "locked up by the foreigner".

It had a profound effect on O'Neill and some time after this he wrote the Foggy Dew. The song tells the story of the Easter Rising but more importantly, it tries to reflect the thoughts of many Irish nationalists at the time who had come to believe that the Irishmen who fought for Britain during the war should have stayed home and fought for Irish independence instead.

O'Neill sums up this feeling in the lines: 'Twas far better to die 'neath an Irish sky, Than at Suvla or Sud el Bar."