

THE STORY OF OUR NATIONAL SONG

Recognition At Last For "God Defend New Zealand"

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SEVENTY years after Thomas Bracken wrote it, his "God Defend New Zealand" has been accepted officially as our National Song. It was set to music in 1875 by a musician then living in Lawrence, Otago: John Joseph Woods. Bracken died in 1898, at Dunedin, and Woods survived him by thirty-six years, to die in 1934 at Lawrence, where he was for many years the County Clerk. The song has survived them both. Through the years, it has appeared occasionally as an item at concerts, a chorus at community sings, in school song-books. It has been called New Zealand's "National Anthem," but this is wrong. It never has been, and never could have been, declared our national anthem, for the copyright for it was held privately and, in any case, our national anthem is "God Save the King."

The story of its final recognition this year as our national song is the story of ten years' work and more, on the part of a private individual, J. McDermott, whose energy in popularising the song has at last been successful.

"A Heartfelt Prayer"

Mr. McDermott describes the song as a "stirring national song, a heartfelt prayer, and a great poem." So enthusiastic has he been that during those ten years he has delved into all sources of information about Bracken, distributed at his own expense copies of the words and music, and records for playing over broadcasting stations. Copies of Bracken's book of verse "Musings in Maoriland," have always been hard to come by. They were printed, expensively, overseas; but Mr. McDermott managed to secure more than 30 copies. He distributed them to various officials, hoping to secure support for his plans to establish Bracken authoritatively as a New Zealand poet and Bracken's song as a national song for his country.

His work bore fruit in the increasing interest in this fine martial air, but he still had to overcome a good deal of apathy towards the suggestion that "God Defend New Zealand" should be a national song. At last, with the assistance of Mr. J. W. Heenan, Under-Secretary to the Department of Internal Affairs, he has seen the Government purchase the copyright and accept the song officially.

It may now be sung and played by anyone on any occasion. Conductors and bandmasters should note that the tempo should *not* be slow. The music is martial, and stirring, and should be treated accordingly.

Except for this song and his "Not Understood," Thomas Bracken has not been as widely known to New Zealanders as might be expected of one of the first prolific authors in the country. From information compiled by Mr. McDermott, we have been able to prepare a series of articles about him. This is the first.

"Not Understood"

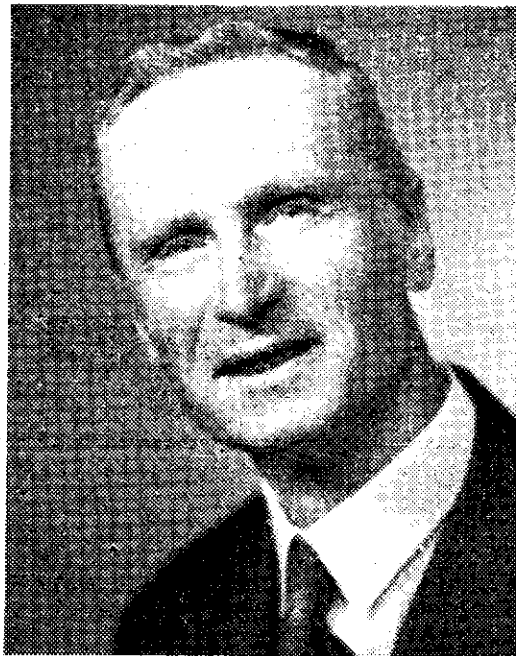
The grave of Thomas Bracken is near the northern boundary of Dunedin Cemetery. Public subscription provided funds for the monument, on which are inscribed the words:

*Sacred to the Memory of
Thomas Bracken*

*Poet Journalist Legislator
Born in Ireland 1843. Died in Dunedin 1898.*

Beneath the inscription are two verses of one of the poems by which Bracken is best remembered: "Not Understood."

Ten years after he was born in Clones, near Dublin, on December 25, 1843, Bracken was an orphan. His mother died a few days after his birth, and when his father died Thomas was put to the care of an aunt, who shipped him off to Uncle John Kiernan, a farmer, near Geelong, Victoria, Australia. Bracken was then 13, and evidently well suited to colonial life. After a few years on the farm he became apprentice to Hugh Boyd, chemist, of Bendigo,



Spencer Digby, photograph

J. McDERMOTT
Ten Years' Work Have Borne Fruit

but within 18 months was away up to Winter Brothers' station. From there he came to New Zealand, and landed in Dunedin in 1869.

Topical Events in Verse

Already he had shaped his hand to facile versification. His Australian poems were the stuff that men recited in the woolsheds and around the diggings: "Old Bendigo" and "Rogers of Eaglehawk."

His first work in Dunedin was on the staff of the "Otago Guardian," but he founded and conducted "The Saturday Advertiser," with Judge Bathgate. Its circulation was surprising for those days. It reached 7,000 copies.

To the journalist, the handiness of the poet was more than useful. Bracken delighted to put topical events into verse. Often his work was nothing more than topical, written in the careless flowery language of a restless Irishman. Sometimes he became truly poetical, but most often he mixed his natural lyricism with a very ordinary sort of rhyming. Less often, he struck the true poetic note, and it is for these efforts that he deserves such praise as may have come his way. He has not had much. Most of Mr. McDermott's difficulty has lain in overcoming apathy; but the words of Sir Robert Stout in a foreword to "Musings in Maoriland" may be repeated:

"This may be said: Mr. Bracken need not be ashamed of his efforts. When the history of our literature is written, his poem will not be forgotten, and in the future will not the labours of the writer be ranked as high as the work of the statesman or the warrior?"

Sir George Grey also made a critical but appreciative comment on Bracken and his work in a preface to the same volume.

Music for Bracken's Words

"God Defend New Zealand" must have been written early in the seventies. But it was not until 1875 that "The Saturday Advertiser" offered a prize for the best musical setting to the words.

In *The Listener* last week was published a reproduction of the cover of the first printing of the words and music. On it were listed the names of the competition judges, Messrs. Zelman, Zeplin, and Siede, all Australians. The conditions required that each should hear the entries alone, and give separate judgment. They unanimously accepted the entry of John Joseph Woods, who had received word of the competition one evening when the coach came into Lawrence from Dunedin, and who immediately set about composing, to continue through the night until he had finished.

To Woods, Bracken passed the copyright of both words and music. From Woods the copyright was acquired by Chas. Begg and Co. Ltd. The song was dedicated to the then Governor of New Zealand, the Marquis of Normandy, and perhaps on the strength of this, it was described as the "National Anthem" of New Zealand, and published as such by the owners of the copyright from the first print until Begg and Co. Ltd. published it through their business. In fact, when a contributor to the "Otago Daily Times" suggested in 1938 that it was not our National Anthem, the firm wrote to establish its status.

Only One National Anthem

Actually, it was not legally a National Anthem, and still is not. It has only been officially accepted this year as the National Song.

In an interview with *The Listener* Mr. McDermott pointed out that we have only one National Anthem, "God Save the King," and that in recent years the governments of Canada and South Africa were nearly wrecked through efforts to introduce new anthems.

Official recognition of the song is mentioned in the last annual report of the Department of Internal Affairs. This is the first official mention of the work in Government files. Earlier, it had been approved by the Centennial Council as the Dominion's national song, on December 8, 1938.

Recognition Overseas

Lukewarm as its recognition may have been in New Zealand, "God Defend New Zealand" has been widely accepted overseas. There is an excellent recording of it by the Welsh Guards Band, and by the Band of the New South Wales Police. Peter Dawson and Ernest McKinlay have sung it. Numerous overseas authorities have accepted it before now and described it wrongly as our National Anthem. In 1907, for instance, a Dunedin business man in Rome attended a public celebration at which massed bands played various national anthems. Nationals of each country stood as their anthems were played. When "God Defend New Zealand" was played he recovered from his astonishment in time to stand, alone. Harmsworth's *Children's Encyclopaedia* says: "National hymns are seldom a high form of poetry. They have an air of being manufactured for the purpose. Our own National Anthem is such a bad example that only two verses of it are usually sung. This from New Zealand is irreproachable in sentiment, and a fair specimen of hymn-making for a special occasion."

(To be continued.)