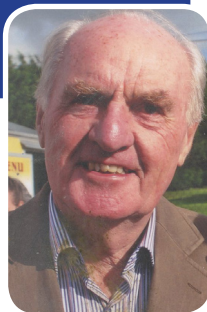


Respecting Amhrán na bhFiann

by Seamus J. King



Back in the early nineteen-fifties, when I boarded in St. Flannan's College, Ennis, one of the high points of the year was the College sports in the month of May, and there were some good athletes in the school at the time, a number of whom made names for themselves at national level. For the ordinary student with lesser ambition his contribution was limited to the drill display, which was a colourful and spectacular part of the sports.

Dressed in white shirts and trousers, with blue and white ties, we marched in various formations on the field and finished off our display with a pyramid in which we succeeded in climbing on other's knees and shoulders to quite a height. A lot of drill went into the display and our master was an army sergeant, known as March, March, March!

One of the exercises the sergeant did with us was, Standing to Attention. He drilled it into us, heels together, toes at an angle of 45 degrees, hands by the side with the thumbs straight down and the eyes fixed on the flag.

I have never forgotten that drill and I never fail to stand in that position when facing the flag during Amhrán na bhFiann on match days. As I do I can't avoid the eyes wandering to the behaviour of others at the same time, particularly the players and other personnel on the field.

Disrespectful

If you have watched their behaviour you will be amazed at what people get up to during the anthem. Most of them cannot stand still, or they stand at ease with their hands behind their backs, or their arms around one another, or fixing their gear in some way, wearing their helmets, drinking from the ubiquitous bottle, or waiting for the moment when the first yahoo shouts from the terrace or for the chance to break from the line before the anthem is finished. It makes me want to scream!

I watched the Russian team in the World Cup standing for their national anthem before the game with Ireland and the attention they paid to it and how they sang it and the apparent intensity the moment meant for them as they clasped their breasts with their hands was impressive. A cynic said to me: 'Ah sure, they knew Putin was looking on!' But they were not alone in their respect and reverence for their national anthem: other nations were equally impressive

I have a theory about this apparent lack of respect for Amhrán na bhFiann. For many years up to about 1970, our national anthem had to compete with Faith of Our Fathers* at hurling and football matches. The latter was well known since it normally featured on



Archbishop Kinnane throwing in the ball before the 1955 All-Ireland, part of the practice in the 1950s and 1960s, after which the Archbishop had to scurry back to his seat in the stand.

the final day of the Mission, which was a feature of many parishes during most of the century. It was given a rousing rendition on the final evening of the Mission, when we were filled with hope in our souls as we renounced the Devil and all his works and pomp! Faith of Our Fathers

When Faith of Our Fathers ceased to be sung on match days, we didn't have the same enthusiasm for the national anthem. It wasn't as rousing as the hymn and the vast number of people didn't know the words. Even today Croke Park recognises this by showing the words on the big screen on match days.

And this brings me to a major gap in our education: pupils don't learn Amhrán na bhFiann in the schools! It came as a surprise to learn that it wasn't taught in the old Civics subject in secondary schools, which was a study of the rights and duties of citizenship. That appears to be gone now and replaced by a watered down version called Wellbeing or something like that. It's not specified in the Primary School curriculum either, being left to the teacher to teach it to fifth and sixth classes.

Croke Park informed me they had no written protocol for the singing of Amhrán na bhFiann on match days except a recommendation that people respect it. At the present, respect seems to be in short supply among the players on the field and whether there is much chance of changing that behaviour in our dysfunctional society is a question for another day.

(*A Catholic hymn, written in 1849 by Englishman, Frederick William Faber in memory of the Catholic martyrs from the time of the establishment of the Church of England by Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. Faber wrote two versions of the hymn, one for Ireland and a second for England. The Irish version was sung at hurling and football before the national anthem until the 1960s.)