



History of God Defend New Zealand

God Defend New Zealand was first performed in Dunedin's Queen's Theatre on Christmas Day, 1876. Played by the Royal Artillery Band and sung by the Lydia Howard Burlesque and Opera Burle Troupe, the patriotic hymn found immediate favour with the Dunedin public.

Written by Thomas Bracken in the 1870s the words for God Defend New Zealand were first published as a competition run by *The Saturday Advertiser and New Zealand Literary Miscellany*.

The competition to compose a National Air based on five verses of the poem appeared in the *Advertiser* on 1 July, 1876, with a prize of 10 guineas. Copyright of the successful tune would become property of the *Advertiser's* proprietors, and entries were to be judged by musicians in Melbourne, Australia.

In a period of widespread home music and the growing popularity of the piano, there was no

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shortage of enthusiastic composers but few managed to complete the task.

Finding a winner - and a national song

On September 9, the *Advertiser* reported that 12 completed entries had been sent to Melbourne and a decision was expected in three weeks. This proved optimistic. On 21 October the newspaper printed a letter from its Melbourne agent, Mr George Musgrave.

'I received the manuscripts safely, and have at last succeeded in my commission. I have had great difficulty on getting the best men to act, Zelman at first refusing as he said he did not like to pass an opinion on other people's work.'

Zelman did later consent and two other German musicians, Siede and Zeplin, completed the panel — each judging the 12 scores independently. There was no doubt about the winner. All chose the score identified by the nom-de-plume 'Orpheus' saying it had more melody than the other entries. 'Orpheus', the *Advertiser* revealed, was Lawrence school teacher J J Woods — the young man who had dashed off the music in a single sitting.

The popularity of God Defend New Zealand grew throughout the 19th century and entered the 20th century as one of the most popular hymns. Through the efforts of many people, mainly John McDermott, chief engineer of the Post Office from 1935-39 and an admirer of Bracken's work, God Defend New Zealand was made New Zealand's national song in time for the 1940 Centennial celebrations.

In 1976, almost 100 years after the first public performance, a petition calling for God Defend New Zealand to become the national anthem of New

Zealand, organised in Dunedin by Mr G H Latta and others, was presented to the Petitions Committee of Parliament with 7750 signatures.

With the permission of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, the Government adopted God Defend New Zealand as a national anthem of equal status in New Zealand with God Save The Queen.

Origins of the Māori translation

In 1878 Governor Sir George Grey requested a first Māori translation. The translator was Thomas H Smith of Auckland, a judge in the Native Land Court. From as early as the late 1880s, a number of versions of the Māori translation of the National Anthem have been incorrect. A typescript of the translation by T H Smith uses 'Whakarangona' as one word. 'Whaka' is a prefix and can't stand alone, and 'rangona' and 'rongona' mean the same thing but Smith used the former. 'Ihowā' is the standard version of God (Jehovah) and was the one used by Smith. The incorrect form, 'Ihoa', has been used for so long as to seem correct but 'Ihowa' is the correct version.

Pacific's triple star

In God Defend New Zealand the first verse refers to 'Pacific's triple star' - a line that has intrigued many. The meaning isn't certain as Bracken didn't leave detailed notes, but popular belief is that 'Pacific's triple star' refers to New Zealand's three main islands: the North, South and Stewart Islands.

Parliamentary action timeline

1897

Prime Minister Richard Seddon presents a copy of

words and music for God Defend New Zealand to Queen Victoria.

1939

Cabinet considers a request, led by John McDermott, to make God Defend New Zealand our National Song in time for the Centennial Year.

1940

Announcement declaring God Defend New Zealand as the National Song of New Zealand made by Prime Minister Peter Fraser.

1973

Prime Minister Norman Kirk attempts, unsuccessfully, to promote God Defend New Zealand to national anthem status.

1976

On 3 November, a petition was presented to Parliament asking that God Defend New Zealand become New Zealand's official anthem.

1977

On 21 November, then Minister of Internal Affairs Hon D A Highet, announced in the New Zealand Gazette 'that the National Anthems of New Zealand shall be the traditional anthem God Save The Queen and the poem God Defend New Zealand, written by Thomas Bracken, as set to music by John Joseph Woods, both being of equal status as national anthems appropriate to the occasion'. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II gave her consent.

Find out more

Read more about the story behind God Defend New Zealand in these books:

God Defend New Zealand : a history of the National Anthem / Ashley Heenan, School of Music, University of Canterbury, 2004

Hear our voices, we entreat : the extraordinary story of New Zealand's national anthems / Max Cryer, Exisle, 2004.

God Defend New Zealand television documentary

This David Farrier-fronted documentary traces the history of New Zealand's national anthem. David Farrier dives into the archives to tell the story of the Thomas Bracken poem set to music by John Joseph Woods; and a band of 2011 musicians have a go at updating it. The patriotic tune was first played at an Olympic medal ceremony when our rowing eight won gold in 1972, displacing 'God Save the Queen'; and it was adapted into Māori as early as 1882 but a te reo version still caused controversy in 1999. This documentary screened on TV3 the day before the 2011 Rugby World Cup final.

View this documentary on NZ On Screen.

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