

Then & Now

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The ballad of Tim Madigan puts village on the map

The song Shanagolden recalls the life of Irish freedom fighter

SHANAGOLDEN IS one of Limerick's best known songs and a day never passes without it being played on one of the local radio stations. It is also a standard number to be sung or danced to at any social gathering. The song has helped to make the village so well known all round the country and numerous artists have recorded the song including Margo and Brendan Bowyer.

Oh! The cold wind from the mountains are calling soft to me

The smell of scented heather brings bitter memory

The wild and lonely eagle up in the summer sky

Flies high o'er Shanagolden where my young Willie lies.

I met him in the winter time when snow was on the ground

The Irish hills were peaceful and love was all around

Scarcely twenty one years old a young man in his prime

We were married, darling Willie, by the Eve of Christmas time.

Do you remember darling we walked the moonlit road

I held you in my arms love; I would never let you go

Our hands they were entwined my love all in the pale moonlight

By the fields of Shanagolden on a lonely winter's night.

It was the death of Capt Tim Madigan, Clashganniffe, Shanagolden who died for the cause of Irish Freedom on December 28, 1920 that inspired Sean McCarthy from Finuge to compose the very popular song. Tim Madigan who was one of

Shanagolden's favourite sons was involved in the War of Independence which came into being following the 1916 Easter Rising. He was only 23 years old when he was shot by the Black and Tans close to his home.

Sean was a very talented singer/songwriter and wordsmith who passed from this world on November 1, 1990. He was a man so full of life, of joy, sympathy, understanding of human weakness, and so full of appreciation of the gifts of God all round us. He left a deep and bright imprint on the folk scene, and he had a very deep insight into the heart and soul of Ireland. Sean was a man of great humour who offered the hand of friendship and encouragement to aspiring songwriters, and he had his own column Mc Carthy's Women in the Kerryman.

Many of his ballads like Red Haired Mary, In Shame Love, In Shame, Step it out Mary, Mountain Tae, Highland Paddy, Red Bloomers, Where Wild Wind Blows, and My Kerry Hill have stood the test of time. There is warmth about his songs and the wild music of the Lark and Snipe entered early into his blood. He sang the sad love songs of the Gael in the language of the Invader, but the soul and spirit of the unconquered people throb proudly in every line.

The story of how Sean wrote Shanagolden in his own words from the Book Rhymes and Reasons goes as follows. William Sweeney wanted to be a soldier on horseback, and Sean wanted to be a soldier too, but he wasn't too worried about the horse just as long as he got a nice uniform with shiny buttons and boots that didn't leak. We grew up together near Sande's bog Finuge where food was scarce, song



Capt Tim Madigan was shot dead by the Black and Tans in 1920. The song Shanagolden was inspired by the Freedom fighter and written by Sean McCarthy from Finuge

plentiful, money non-existent but where love grew and flourished like reeds in a mountain stream.

When we were around 15 years old we ran away to join the Army and our destination was Limerick City. The road from Listowel to Newcastle West was long and lonely with dark shadows, strange noises, and whispering ghosts especially around midnight. The little pub on the edge of town was open late, and the dilapidated lorry parked in the forecourt looked very inviting.

We fell asleep soon after our bodies touched the loose hay and the bright sunshine awoke us the next morning in a field outside Shanagolden. Larry the tipsy driver was a blacksmith with a problem which, he said only two fine Kerry boys could solve. He had a half-acre of potatoes ready for digging and no one to help him. He was a noted rogue but a kindly one with a fund of stories told in an alcoholic haze, punctuated with frequent spits of tobacco into an open fire.

We dug his potatoes and it was the happiest four days that I could remember. One evening as twilight stole across the mighty Shannon; our tipsy friend strolled with us across a quiet meadow to a place where souls rest in peace. There was no inscription on the modest cross, but Larry stood and gazed at it for a long time. Just before he turned away he spoke softly to himself, Sleep well Willy, sleep well.

With the brashness and ignorance of youth I asked him who was Willy. Larry's eyes foggy for the most part, blazed with anger. He pointed to a distant hill beyond the

Sean was a man so full of life, of joy, sympathy, understanding of human weakness

meadow and said: Willy died up there my young Bucko. He died fighting so that you and your pal could walk this land and walk it free.

That night when the three of us were sitting before the warm turf fire he staggered to an old wooden dresser and rummaged around until he found a small shiny snapshot. His voice still with a hint of anger in it, grated on my young ears. He shoved the snapshot towards me saying: Well my Kerry friend, There's Willy and his family, and now you know, don't you?

I knew that it was a combination of drink, grief and anger talking, but I took the photo and looked at it. Willy stood tall and proud as he gazed into the camera lens. It was the girl who took my breath away. Her face even in the badly taken photo, shone like an angel's smile as she pressed the small baby to her breast. Long hair reaching her waist made me think of maidens bathing in a Grecian pool by moonlight. I wanted to shake him out of his alcoholic haze and demand her address. But when I moved close I could see he was crying. Before we left for the City the next morning he told me everything.

The Army turned us down. Too young they said. It was 25 years later in an apartment high above Upper

Manhattan that I wrote down Willy's story. I wrote it in song and I called it Shanagolden.

Then came the call to arms love and the hills they were aflame

Down from the silent mountains the Saxon strangers came

I held you in my arms then my young heart wild with fear

By the fields of Shanagolden in the springtime of the year.

You fought them darling Willie all through the summer days

I heard the rifles firing in the mountains far away

I held you in my arms then our blood ran free and bright

And you died in Shanagolden on a lonely summer's night

Oh! But that was long ago my love and your son grows fine and tall

The hills they are at peace again, the Saxon strangers gone

We'll place a red rose on your grave by the silvery pale moonlight

And we'll think of Shanagolden on a lonely winter's night.

Sean Mc Carthy scattered songs in his wake with the same enthusiasm as he smoked his crooked pipe. Wherever he went he was wreathed in smoke and surrounded by fragments of melodies and wisps of words. While the smoke dissipated the songs did not and we are all the richer for that. The people of Ireland owes a lot to the late Sean for preserving so much of our stories history lore and heritage in song. Spare a thought for Sean this Thursday November 1 on his anniversary.