



In May 2011 the Historic Cemeteries Conservation Trust of NZ, turned their attention to the grave of New Zealand's most-sung but least recognised composer.

Perhaps this welcome move could be the start of more awareness of the Otago man who contributed to New Zealand its most recognisable original melody : John Joseph Woods.

Our national anthem is relentlessly described as “by Thomas Bracken” – excluding mention of its composer. True, Bracken wrote the words, but even the NZ Government’s *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* admits that NZ people’s relationship to *God Defend* -

“owes little to reasoned response to Bracken's words - and much more to the readily identifiable melody by Woods.”

And yet Bracken warrants 1,750 words in that *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* – and Woods has only 15 words.

Behind those 15 words is the melody which is a NZ icon, yet its composer has received little recognition and no awards. Unlike Bracken, the composer’s grave for 73 years lay unattended, deteriorating, and difficult to find, in a quiet and quasi-rural part of a Lawrence cemetery.

John Joseph Woods was Tasmanian, a qualified school-teacher, who moved to New Zealand. In 1874 he became head teacher at St. Patrick’s school in Lawrence, and married a widow with two children, and they had four more children together. On a cold winter’s night in 1876, Woods walked down to meet the mail coach from Dunedin to collect his letters. Among them was a little weekend newspaper called *Saturday Advertiser*. In it, editor Thomas Bracken had placed a poem – announcing that this one needed a tune, and offering ten guineas (\$21) for the best judged. Woods stayed all night at his Lipp piano, kept company and in sustenance by his wife, and the resultant melody was sent to Dunedin then judged in Melbourne along with eleven other entries.

That J.J.Woods’s tune was unhesitatingly judged the best, is now history. For over a hundred years there hasn’t been a NZer who doesn’t know that tune. Bracken made a modest announcement that Woods was the contest winner, then promptly published the sheet music with just his own portrait on the cover. Only pressure from Tuapeka in general and Lawrence in particular, caused Woods’s picture to be added on later editions. Bracken also sub-titled the song ‘*New Zealand’s national anthem*’ which was untrue and totally illegal –the national anthem was *God Save The Queen*. John Joseph Woods remained in Lawrence for the rest of his amazingly busy life.

An expert musician and violin teacher, he was church choirmaster, choral society president, hospital committee, and participant in cricket, bowls, cycling and tennis. He sang concerts all over Otago, bred many kinds of daffodils, and motivated the planting of Lawrence’s poplar and birch trees (still there).

When the Tuapeka County Council was established, Woods became the county clerk – a position he held for 55 years, as an authority on county law.

In the century following publication of Woods’s song, there were 85 other songs published in NZ claiming or aspiring to be NZ’s ‘National anthem.’ All have vanished without trace, nobody can hum even a fragment of them.

Although *God Defend* was not a national anthem, it had a century of quasi-formal acknowledgments - first as a ‘national hymn’ and then an official ‘national song.’ Our

national anthem stoically remained “*God Save the Queen.*” But *God Defend* became so popular it was often mistaken for the official anthem.

‘*God Defend*’ had its first major international exposure by complete accident in 1972. Olympic Games require that a winner is saluted with their nation’s official *anthem*. To prepare anthem music for all participating nations the 1972 Olympic office in Berlin asked a New Zealand visitor to identify her country’s anthem. She unhesitatingly said “*God Defend New Zealand.*”

Wrong. But the result was a sensation.

When the NZ rowing eight won gold, the Olympic band burst into *God Defend* – amazing the rowers, NZ media commentators, NZ athletes watching, and the audiences back home when television played the ceremony. And it was hearing Woods’ *tune* which caused the catch in everyone’s throat - Olympic ceremonies don’t require words.

The NZ Jaycees went into action. Approaches to the Queen were eventually made and received amiably. In 1977, a hundred years after its first publication, ‘*God Defend*’ became our *second* national anthem (‘*God Save*’ still holds obligatory number 1 position if the Queen or the Gov-Gen. is present).

Dame Kiri, world renowned for performing Mozart and Strauss, is loyal to J.J.Woods. She has said “Anywhere in the world, a New Zealander only has to hear the first four notes to know what’s coming – our song.”

The Historic Cemeteries Conservation Trust has recognised the value of Woods’s contribution to NZ’s cultural identity, perhaps further recognition will follow. Perhaps even if we hear his tune connected to a Rugby World Cup triumph, the announcement will say : “New Zealand’s national anthem – by John Joseph Woods.”

Prepared for the Historic Cemeteries Conservation Trust of New Zealand (www.cemeteries.org.nz) by Max Cryer, author of “*Hear Our Voices We Entreat- the history of NZ’s national anthem*”.