

Folk & Traditional Song Lyrics

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The Smashing of the Van

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Attend you gallant Irishmen and listen for a while
I'll sing to you the praises of the sons of Erin's Isle
It's of those gallant heroes who voluntarily ran
To release two Irish Fenians from an English prison van.

On the eighteenth of September, it was a dreadful year,
When sorrow and excitement ran throughout all Lancashire,
At a gathering of the Irish boys they volunteered each man,
To release those Irish prisoners out of the prison van.

Kelly and Deasy were their names, I suppose you knew them well,
Remanded for a week they were in Bellevue Gaol to dwell,
When taking of the prisoners back, their trial for to stand,
To make a safe deliverance they conveyed them in a van.

William Deasy was a man of good and noted fame,
Likewise Michael Larkin, we'll never forget his name,
With young Allen and O'Brien they took a part so grand,
In that glorious liberation and the smashing of the van.

In Manchester one morning those heroes did agree,
Their leaders, Kelly and Deasy, should have their liberty,
They drank a health to Ireland, and soon made up the plan,
To meet the prisoners on the road and take and smash the van.

With courage bold those heroes went and soon the van did stop,
They cleared the guards from back and front and then smashed in the top,
But in blowing open of the lock, they chanced to kill a man,
So three must die on the scaffold high for smashing of the van.

One cold November morning in eighteen sixty-seven
These martyrs to their country's cause a sacrifice were given,
'God save Ireland,' was the cry, all through the crowd it ran,
The Lord have mercy on the boys that helped to smash the van.

So now kind friends I will conclude, I think it would be right
That all true-hearted Irishmen together should unite,
Together should sympathize, my friends, and do the best we can
To keep the memories ever green of the boys that smashed the van.

Source: Patrick Galvin's book of "Irish Songs of Resistance"

In 1863 the Fenian journal, the Irish People, appeared in Dublin; it was edited by Luby and O'Leary, with the help of Kickham and O'Donovan Rossa. The violent denunciations with which it was greeted served only to increase its popularity.

In 1865 the ending of the American Civil War demobilized 200,000 Irish-American Fenians. The Irish People was raided and its leaders were arrested. Stephens escaped (with the help of Fenian warders); Devoy urged immediate insurrection, but Stephens and the Americans insisted on delay. The arrested leaders were brought to trial before Keogh, who inflicted savage sentences of twenty years on Luby, O'Leary and Kickham and of life on Rossa. Devoy was arrested and Stephens proved ineffective in leadership. In America the movement split and split again as a result of inconclusive delays.

In 1867 a rising was planned, at first for February, then for March. Fenian military leaders, Kelley and Deasy, were arrested in Manchester, but daringly rescued, a policeman being killed. The rescuers, Allen, Larkin and O'Brien, were hanged, and are known to history as the Manchester Martyrs. (Ernest Jones, the Chartist, as defence counsel, threw down his brief in protest at the court's refusal to remove the prisoners' handcuffs in the dock.) The celebrated song God Save Ireland, written in their honour, was for fifty years Ireland's unofficial national anthem.

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Oct00