

I vow to thee, my country: THE STATESMAN-POET COMMEMORATED

On 7 June 2013 relatives of Sir Cecil Spring Rice assembled in Beechwood National Cemetery, Ottawa to pay tribute to the poet at the unveiling of a handsome plaque in his memory. The driving rain which accompanied the ceremony and delayed their return flight by 24 hours did not dampen the ardour of the participants, and was in a way appropriate to the troubled times which formed the backdrop to Sir Cecil's final diplomatic posting as British Ambassador to Washington, and which prompted his moving revision of his earlier poem 'Urbs Dei' to create the national hymn we know today. Irish by birth –in those days this meant he was a British subject- he had spent years warning the government about German militarism, and when war had finally broken out he felt it was a moral duty to fight. His brother Gerald became a Lieutenant in the Border Regiment although already 51 years of age and was killed in France in 1916; another, Bernard, drove an ambulance and mercifully survived the conflict. Cecil was felt by the family to be as much a victim of the war as any serving soldier, serving his country as a diplomat without sparing himself, although his delicate health was to exact its cost. Staying with his wife's cousin, the Governor General of Canada in Ottawa, his enjoyment of a rare moment of family time was rudely cut short by a heart attack only a month after he had left the USA. The creation of a memorial plaque was the inspiration of the present Deputy Consul-General, Ashley Prime, who sought out Caroline Kenny, Sir Cecil's granddaughter, and organized everything with admirable efficiency. The family was consulted on a suitable quotation and the familiar words at the beginning of verse 2 were selected, 'another country' clearly referring to the Kingdom of God (not, as some have mistakenly asserted, England or even Ireland). Chris Alexander, a Canadian MP and diplomat from Sir Cecil's own college of Balliol, Major-General David Fraser (ret'd), former Commander, Multi-national Brigade, Afghanistan, and Mrs Kenny all spoke, after greetings and thanks by the British High Commissioner, Howard Drake, and Mr Prime. In the first photograph you will see the plaque in bronze with raised letters. In the second Mrs Kenny is seen unveiling it, battling the elements under the necessary canopy; to her right are Charles Spring Rice and Biddy Ackerman (Sir Cecil's great granddaughter). Behind, visible over Charles's shoulder, is the white marble gravestone with St Brigid's cross. (Sir Cecil's sparkling personality and wit was early in evidence in his contributions to the Balliol Masque, a book of irreverent poetry, in which he describes himself as 'as Irish as the weather, you must take me altogether, hopeless of distinguishing which is *Rice* and which is *Spring*'.)

Sir Cecil and Gustav Holst shared a mystical streak, which found artistic outlets in poetry and music respectively. This embraced a curiosity to know more of other cultures, and Holst's diligence in learning to translate Sanskrit is paralleled by Sir Cecil's employment of a mirza to teach him Persian when he was posted to that country, resulting in a series of translations, along with poems of a more Christian persuasion. So it was strangely appropriate that when *I vow to thee, my country*, originally penned as a gift in a private letter, reached these shores, of the dozen or more musical settings that it inspired it was Holst's which went to the nation's heart. And although he dashed it off in something of a hurry, using the famous central tune in *Jupiter*, he was moved to tears when hearing it sung by a massed audience, as Herbert Howells testified. I think he would have been equally affected on 7 June, when a young lady called Kelly Sloan led the singing of the hymn 'delightfully and quite straightforwardly' (Mrs Kenny's description) to round off a unique occasion.

***Alan Gibbs
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Note:- Ashley Prime has since retired as Deputy Consul-General. We have omitted the photographs.