

RETURN TO CAMDEN

Terence O'Flaherty

When I first arrived in Old London Town
Along Camden High Road I did walk down
Fell into the back of John Murphy's van
Full of youth and vigour and white bread and ham
By ten that first morning I thought I'd expire
Stuck down a hole with Connemara Seán
Who for an extra ten bob a week
Set out a pace that would kill Hercules

Then the ganger man came and says 'lads take a break'
Old Seánín jumped out with a ballerina's grace
I felt I was climbing the Post Office Tower
My poor legs and arms like wilting flowers
He wolfed down his sandwich and before I did know
Old Seánín was back down in John Murphy's hole
Diggin away like an Olympian
Twas with great reluctance that I rejoined him

I crawled out of the hole at the end of the day
All of my senses in terminal decay
Crawled into the back of John Murphy's van
Too tired for talk or for white bread and ham
To the favourite in Holloway Seánín did go
To hear Bobby Casey, Con Curtin, John Bowe
Roger Sherlock, Brian Rooney or Finbar O'Dwyer
Danny Meehan, Raymond Roland or Brendan Mulkere

And as I was sleeping the sleep of the dead
Old Seánín was lilting to reels and to jigs
Firing back pints and singing Sean Nós
Where he got his energy God alone knows
And early next morning fresh as a rose
He'd be back down one of John Murphy's holes
Lobbing up muck in his trousers and vest
Such was the life that the Irish possessed

And at the weekends we would all go
To The Forum, The Gresham, The Galtymore
The Harp and the Shamrock, the Garryowen
The Bamba, Hibernian or Buffalo
Waltzin and jiving and singing along
To Joe Dolan, Larry Cunningham or Big Tom
Or horsin' out sets till too tired to stand
To the Tulla or Kilfenora Céilí Bands

When many years later I met poor Seánín
His energy spent and his back bent and lean
He smiled and he said 'Ah sure times they were lean'
When we worked for the man from Caherciveen

For although times were tough, sure the craic it was good
In Camden, in Kilburn and Cricklewood
And we could escape for the nights they were long
Far away from the cruel, brutal Elephant John

But to work on the building sites now you and me
We'd almost need to have a degree
For with health and safety and the CSCS
You need method statements and assessments of risks
There's not too much craic now in John Murphy's vans
Albanians Poles and Lithuanians
Have taken the place of the likes of Séanin
The craic once was ninety but now it is lean

So here's to the music we did enjoy
In the pubs and the clubs with a tear in our eye
And fair play to the players and the singers of songs
Who lifted our hearts when our hearts needed them
Tom O'Connell, Martin Byrnes, Andy Boyle, Lucy Farr,
Seán O'Shea, Julia Clifford and Tommy Maguire
Michael Hynes, Tom McCarthy, Jimmy Power and Reg Hall
Raise up your glasses now here's to them all