

Melincryddan

Any stranger to Neath who seeks direction to Melincryddan will invariably be given proper bearings by the first person he meets. It is just a small area of the town in a rather drab looking place, but everyone knows its locality because it was once the industrial centre of the town, and most of the inhabitants of Neath found work there. My reasons for knowing and loving the place are entirely different. I was born and brought up in the area. I spent a childhood of great deprivation, but also great happiness there. We were very parochial even as children. Anyone from outside the area was regarded with deep suspicion.

Melincryddan, at "the Melyn" as it is called by the locals, had a very fortunate locality for us children. Ten minutes walk in one direction and we were in a lovely wooded valley complete with trout stream, a magic blasted oak, and no fewer than three haunted caves, which in our braver moments we approached to within ten foot of. Five minutes walk in the opposite direction and we were among great steel sheet clad structures, emitting hideous noise, and belching off smoke and fumes. A place that afforded great opportunity for all kinds of mischief. The change in our characters when we visited these completely different environments was uncanny. On our excursions to our little valley, as the shade of the first tree fell on us we ceased to be loud mouthed townies, ragged urchins, out effing and blinding each other. We became predators, as stealthy and cunning as any of the woodland animals. The valley would have to feed us for the day, and until enough food for our need was acquired, we trod like ballet dancers, spoke in whispers if at all. The soft tread as we approached the trout stream armed with hazel saplings from whose end hung short lengths of lined and hook was understandable. Why our verbal shyness? We caught the occasional rabbit in previously laid snares, but the poor throttled creature was hardly likely to bolt at the sound of our voices. We gathered all kinds of edible fungi. These strange parastic life forms wern't going to fly at our approach. The hazel nuts and wild apples would still hang from the tree. even if we

advances singing 'Calon lan'. One of the few songs we were taught at school, and often belted out, proudly convinced it was a Melin song. We had reason, a very good reason, "Master Bertie". This well heeled thug was the local suire and magistrate. He owned the valley, and was convinced all boys were demons from Ha`des, (in our case not far wrong) to be chased and belted without provocation, and at all times. We hated this ogre of the woods, yet delighted in our battle of wits with him. When we left the valley, and returned to the mean streets of our beloved Melin we became our usual precious selves. Wise in the ways of our little world.

At six a.m. two p.m. and ten p.m. the streets rang with the sound of hundreds of wood and steel shod feet, A great mass of men, sweat towels around their necks, billy cans of tea swinging from their hands, poured into the Melin from all directions to start their soul destroying stint in one or other of the hand rolling mills. With baggy trousers, clogs, and bright pink face patches caused by constant exposure to furnace heat, they were clowns of a capitalist circus. The ringmaster was to be found in the manager's office. At five minutes past the hour the same din, as the homegoing shifts converged on the Pubs, of which there were plenty, to quench raging thirsts. The gallons of water brought to them at their work by a monkey faced water boy had been all sweated out.

Saturday afternoons saw the trek of the faithful to "Galve Park". This was an area of slag and works refuse behind the Neath Steel and Galvanising Company's works. The locals had given many hours to levelling and laying cinder to form a home football pitch for their team, the "Melyn Dynamoses", who previously had only been able to play away fixtures. Galve Park had the aforementioned works at one end, the steep slope of the tip it sat on at the other, and skirted at one touchline by the old Neath Canal effectively named "the dogs broth". This on account of the great number of dogs who departed this earth tied inside a weighted sack and thrown therein. From the other touchline, anyone turning their back on the pitch would be afforded a magnificent view of a stretch of the River Neath, shot through with

all the colours of the rainbow as the thick surface of oil sludge and raw sewage floated majestically to the sea. The heady perfume permeating the air at Galve Park was a definite advantage to the Dynamos, who were accustomed to it. Many of the opposition played with handkerchiefs tied around nose and mouth. Not conducive to good football. Both teams played with wrapping at knee and elbow, a fall meant a gravel burn at best, a gash or broken bone at worse. Two players stand out in my mind, and I cannot for the life of me now, understand why they never lost their place, and were hero worshipped by all the Dynamos supporters including myself. "Ianto full pelt", what a man, a footballing artist who charged about the pitch at truly amazing speed, doing nothing constructive. Often in his excitement, and with his appalling sense of direction and vision, he would join an opposing attack and score a superb own goal.. In the pub later he would invariably be asked by someone who had been unable to attend the game, "who won Ianto?". "We did bach, two one". After much back slapping, his glass would be filled. Then there was "Dai Bastard" he had just one thing in common with the kingfisher. The kingfisher is reckoned to make one successful strike in five dives. Dai's boot made contact with leather about once in five attempts. Each time his viciously swinging boot missed the ball he would shout; "Bastard, Bastard" in sympathy. After the game, all would depart. All that is except the team and their nymphomaniac camp followers, and us horrible boys. We would hide under a nearby bridge until the team and their fawning admirers were safely ensconced in a creaking tin sheet edifice called the changing shed. We would then creep up and clamp our hot little eyeballs to one of the many small holes in the walls. Yes, we learned our sex young, and one thing we were unanimous agreement about, I anto full pelt hadn't earned his nickname solely through his amazing speed on the football field.

Years later I became a regular at the centre of Melincryddan entertainment, the Farmers Arms. The Farmers comprised just one long bar room, stoneflagged, the bar being at one end, nearest the only front entrance. The ceiling, blackened by years of exposure to

the carboniferous breathof "sooty" the pot bellied iron stove in the centre of the room, could be touched by the upstretched hand of anyone of average height. The flagstones at the serving area of the bar were very loose and rocked so much as one shifted ones weight while waiting service, the impression of drunkenness was given before imbling. It must have been the only Pub in Wales with a blue Piano. This came about when a gang of regulars volunteered to paint the walls. Gallons of paint looking much the same shade as the factory walls a mile away, were magically acquired. Work proceeded with gusto, with unlimited hints to oil the joints of brush wielding arms. By the time the piano at the far end of the rom was reached , these drunken Van Goghs were incapable of moving it. They couldn'tpaint behind it so thet painted the damn thing itself. One yearly event I feel I must relate. During the summer the pot bellied stove sat dormant and darkly brooding, Each October it was lit and kept burning day and night throughout Winter. This was a great night in the life of the Melin. Local shops displayed hand painted posters proclaiming, "all welcome to our annual event, the lighting of sooty". On the nght, the farmers was bursting at the scene. Orders for best beer were passed overhead to the bar, full glasses returned the same way. Calls of nature during the evening were overcome by shouldering a way to the nearest window, climbing out, walking around the building to the decrepit outside bog at the rear, retracing ones steps and climbing back in helped by many willing hands.

The Melin character, (I emphasize the because there were many) clad in running shorts, and vest sporting No 13, was by now running through adjoining strets. He carried a blazing torch and was cheered on by wives and girlfriends barred from the proceedings. At last, the door would burst open. Breathless, torch held high he would stand there bathing in acclaim. A path would painfully be cleared, and with great ceremony he would advance on Sooty. Not a sound would be heard, the silence in the bar, with so many people packed in was unbelievable. Flame would be put to kindling, and not until a throaty roar could be heard from Sooty's flue pipe would the silence be broken. Then a great burst of song . "Cr-o-o-o-own him, crown

him lord of all". Why this hymn, nobody knew or tried to reason. It was Sooty`s hymn and that was that.. In truth, young men had lumps in their throats, old men tears in their eyes, marvelous incongruity.

The Melin has changed drastically. The works are gone. Replaced here and there by spick and span factories. No tin baths adorn outhouse walls now. The outhouses themselves have been replaced by brick built extentions. The old polestone of the front elevations has shed most of its grime. The Farmers is demolished. The remaining Pubs have all been tarted up. The children sit glued to the box, while the little valley smiles, and clothes unused footpaths. Strange how empty bellies, the spectre of want, and hellish living and working conditions, are often softened in the memory, when looking back