

## JIMMY MCNELIS

He was standing there, alone,  
    leaning against the stone wall,  
    looking about,  
An old man,  
    perhaps 80,  
    yet eyes sharp,  
    mind keen.

Where you from, he asked.  
    He already knew.  
    There weren't but 400 souls in the glen,  
    And us, our invisible "Yank" sign hung round our necks.

But his question wasn't that – rather, an invitation  
    to stop,  
    to lean with him,  
    to visit a while and chat.

You see, Jimmy – Jimmy McNelis was his name –  
    Was a storyteller,  
    A local keeper of lore.  
    Some said a liar – but with kind laughter in their voices

He didn't always make eye contact, not so's you'd notice, anyway.  
Like when,  
    With a glint of laughter in his steel blue eyes,  
    He asked if I heard at all  
        About the "wee bit of difficulty"  
        They'd had in these parts,  
        " gaining their freedom".

I smiled. A long pause. We gazed on each other's faces. Yes, I'd heard a bit about that.

Or when he turned, pointed up the Ardara road  
    See that house, up near the top, the white one with the thatch roof?  
    Aye.  
    Bonnie Prince Charlie hid there  
    til the French ships came for him off the Glen Head.

Or when, with what seemed a hint of sadness in his face,  
    he talked about how most the men lost their work  
    with the collapse of the weaving trade.  
    All the looms sold,  
    Him, invited to work at Shannon greeting tourists,

but what with the drink,  
and the distance,  
no car,  
and less interest,  
he didn't go so often.

The last I saw him, he was gray,  
Ashen,  
And stooped,  
A heavy coat on him,  
Weighing him down,  
Keeping him warm,  
    When in a younger day  
    He'd 'av stood tall,  
The glint now gone,

And, for the first time in my own life,  
I felt loneliness in the Glen.

Who's to tell the tales  
Tend the fires  
Weave the cloth  
Of which we all are made,  
  
Now that Jimmy's gone.

Postscript: 2016

Jimmy was the last of the glen's story tellers. The last of a breed. A thread that wove its way through hundreds, perhaps thousands of years of history ... and myth ... sadness, and mirth ...

He died four years ago. Others in the glen recall the last they remember seeing of him ... leaning against the wall ... in the arms of a beautiful young women ... a smile on his face ...

He died as he had lived ... a thread amongst us all.

