

The Spirit of The Boots McCann - Kilbeggan - 2009

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For those who might remember, my name is The Boots McCann. They called me that because I was very particular about my nails. Not my finger nails, most of us had few enough of those left. No it was my boot nails. You see I had gone for a slip off a deck, 72M I think, one frosty February night up near Derry Bridge and only the lock keeper's dog found me in the reeds it might have all ended there. After that I was very particular about my boot nails. As it was I worked on for another twenty years till they closed the canals down. That took the heart out of a lot of us, being too old to start something new. A few years later the reaper I had cheated up at Derry Bridge came to call again, and this time there was no lock keeper's dog.

Having worked on the boats for so long made me a bit of a traveller, I suppose, and I found it hard to settle up above. I took to wandering back along the towpaths calling to locks and keepers cottages, standing on bridges waiting for the odd boat that might pass. And even though I don't have one anymore, a heart that is, it still felt like it would jump in my chest when one of our old girls would come down the line. So it was I was mooching around the old harbour in Kilbeggan Saturday morning last, sitting on the quay wall with my legs dangling into the water that wasn't there, thinking of some good times we had in that fine place. Sure with the town just up the road it was a great spot to meet a few girls, have a few pints and a chat with the lads working up in Lockes, we even went to the races one evening and ended up loosening a weeks pay! Aye, a grand spot, shame there's no water in it, it would be a great place for the tourist boats to visit.

Strange, I thought I heard the steel shoes of a heavy horse on stone, you can tell a heavy horse, sounds different, more of a clop than the clap of the fine shod fillies the gentlepeople ride to church or the hunt. Anyway, must be my old ears playing tricks on me again, haven't seen heavy horses around here since the branch line closed and Lockes had to move their fine whiskey by road. Very partial to that stuff you know, very partial. As I said, the old ears haven't been the best, sometimes I think I hear the thump of an old Bolinder coming down the main line, and sure that couldn't be, but I still listen all the same, for it is the finest sound and an old boatman must have his pleasures, fine whiskey and strong boats, or is it the other way around, both ways maybe.

Well if that don't beat Banagher! Am I in the wrong century? There's an old Leyland truck coming up the hill to the harbour, with a couple of barrels of my heart's desire. St. Peter, you're playing a queer one on me this time all right! By holy, that's old Ned in the shafts of that cart, well he was old when I saw him last, so he must be ancient now. Still able to pull a good load, though, don't know who that fine looking fellow is working him. Well! If it's not young Jim, last time I saw him he was stealing apples out of the harbourmaster's orchard and him in short pants and scabby knees. It's all too much to take in, so I close my eyes and shake my head to clear these wistful dreams but when I open them what do I see in the middle of the harbour but Canalboat 4B! I am getting worried now, it would nearly put you off the drink. Careful now, I said nearly!

I wander through the crowd, accents from all over the land, I hear some Dublin, Fermanagh, a bit of Galway here, some Clare there and lots of Midland, and I hear of a great plan, a great, great plan, to reopen the Kilbeggan Branch Line. Well I'll count me in I shout, and I shout it again. Agh! They can't hear me, but I will do my bit. I will go down and scare the bejzus out of those fellows from the Grand Canal Company down in Tullamore and I'll pay a visit too, to my mates up in the Dail, there are a few right spooks up there, they'll make sure the main man signs the paper.

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I think I'll take a stroll down the Branch Line behind Ned, I heard talk of boats down at Ballycommon, you never know, they might be some of my old girls. What a day, the sun would be warm on my back, if I had a back, and I've good company walking with me, the young and the not quite so young, all on a mission. I can't keep up with those two young lads in front, Luke and Alim, they're making good time, fast as 31B on a good day. Some day they will come down this line in their own canalboats and make even better time! You see, I know these things, one of the perks!

But what's this, it's Ballycommon Bridge, and she full of people and flags, and them all cheering. I can see 68M and 31B through the bridge, and there's 4E and Number 2 and more down the bank. There'll be a right party tonight. I might drop up to the pub for a few pints of Gerry's fine black porter. The punters are sometime wondering what happens to their pints when they come back from a smoke, sure they were grand! Then off up to Jimmy the Lock, for some eggs. The Lock's eggs, hard boiled and washed down with a drop of the Locke's; sure where would you be. The childer were good enough to light a fine wood fire on the bank so I'll just warm my hands here by the flames while my eggs boil and I'll listen to the stories. There are stories of fishing and canoes, of building dams and bridges, of where we were and where we're going. Nothing much changes on the canal.

Tired now after a grand day, think I'll slip on to 107B with my hard boiled eggs and see if I can find any of my old crew. What's this, two casks of Locke's Grand Crew! Didn't I hear that Big Michael fellow say when he was making his sp that they were for the boatmen, sure that's me! Ah, it'll be a fine trip to Dublin, though you might be shy a bit of whiskey when you get there. And all you new 107B boatmen, if you hear a bit of a shindig on board crossing the bog beyond Edenderry, don't come down below, it will be me and my mates taking our share of the "Crew". Just steady your hand on the tiller, straighten the bow and and keep her in the middle.

And of course say a wee prayer for The Boots McCann and his crew; it might just keep you from harm.

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