

IN THE CLUB (by Michael Lavery)

So, if everybody is comfortably sitting
I thought that a poem would be rather fitting
Cos tonight, for most, is the last time we'll enter
The Famous St Joseph's catholic club / parish centre...

And for all the prayers and the poems and the songs that we sing
We remember the beginning gathered in the Youth wing
Tuck shop, ping pong, that old hall smell
And the curious mural to 'Bat Out of Hell'
Or memories of sneaking into the old club bar
When community mattered, life was simpler by far
Friday night soup club, red tables & chairs
10 pence pieces for the pool table downstairs

Meanwhile in the lounge with a cold glass of fizz
(where boffins would gather for me Mam's monthly quiz)
It was more refined than the bar - but never too stuffy
"Put one in the glass for Fr Duffy"
But the Queens of the lounge (although not quite as billed)
Were the silver haired heroines of the 'Young Mothers Guild'
Who ordered their tipples - gin & tonics or brandies
Babycham, Martinis, or just Sherry shandies

And late in the evening it was whiskies and ports
As the shuffle of dominoes, and the hum of Sky sports
Drifted through from the *new* bar, (which was mainly all blokes)
Laughing (or groaning) at Neil Pegg's latest jokes
Where discipleship flourished and sins were confessed
To a man with a voice box - who was impeccably dressed
(Remember him, what a bloke he was always so canny
I loved serving drinks - to my fave: "Dapper Danny"
He'd always be suited and wearing a grin
And his eyes used to sparkle - just like his tie pin)

Sundays were special, the Lord's Day of rest
When the craic in the club was always the best
Show your card, sign a friend in to the club's nodding doorman
Because nothing got past the great 'Stormin Norman'
Black pudding & pickles, small cubes of cheese
And a packet of Seabrooks (Canadian Ham if you please)
The key draw and football cards, "hold the bells", learn the lingo

“House in the lounge” just announced in the bingo

(this was the days before the pub smoking ban
When you’d cadge a free fag from the great John McCann
Or his son Mark McCann, who, like the former
Stood by Colin & Ronnie - at the bar, in the corner

If you liked a nice pint, then the club was top notch
Whether Carling or Worthies or McEwans Best Scotch
As bar staff we assembled and leading each gatherin’
were bar-stewards Ronnie, Anne & John, Naz or Catherine
Then Chairs like Mick Davison - and before him - Kevin Haigh
Although the role of “the committee” was decidedly vague
But they ran a tight ship like few others could
(As they followed the rules set by Ms Rutherford)

So don’t be downhearted, it’s not all doom and gloom
Just think of the magic right here in this room
Some of it holy, an extension of church
If you were looking for Jesus, beer helped with the search
Sharing beliefs, supporting formation
Laudato Si, group adoration
Pastoral councils, a journey of faith
With a bowl Fr Tony had carved on his lathe

In this room we’d have parties - like a big Lourdes reunion
Or with catechists and children from First Holy Communion
(With meat paste sarnies and a piety stall
And rosary beads and fairy cakes, if I correctly recall)
Then Harvest festival hampers, prayers for world hunger
Ceilidhs and singalongs with Dr Paul Younger
And mass for the housebound then afternoon tea
With Peggy Finnegan in charge, she’d have you agree
The Easter bonnets parade with a procession of darlins
Then a pie & peas supper from Tommy’s son - Steven Collins
The Birtley Town squad drinking pints of Stones Bitter
(With Richie Barrett as Gary Glitter)
And then right up here on this small stage
Is where folks like me would come of age
While the dancefloor has sprung its own moments of joy
Like drunk Irish dancing with that MP: Mary Foy

Then the Christmas fair where behind those creaking doors
Would be big Tony Carey as the real Santa Claus

And from the music tonight great memories evoke
From the Gallaghers & Haighs and all of Joe's Folk
Great stories were told that made everyone merry
(Like when Sandra Neil snogged Brian Ferry)
To Val Waggott singing, and giving it full throttle
While the sliding of coins to get close to the bottle
The auctions, and raffles, tombola, white elephant
All for the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development
(We used to raise funds too for Christian Aid
Put your cash in the envelopes so the Christians got paid)
And the clergy would join us in a real show of union
For a small glass of wine (not like the one at communion)
...and so into the club they'd occasionally pop down
Even Fr Kelly and Michael Brown
(Although he probably drank the least by far
and he'd order in Latin with his back to the bar)

But this was more than a bar, it was a community hub
From the gathering of veterans to the one o'clock club
This centre is special, it became hallowed ground
A place where Alan Sexton first turned around
Where tears were cried and fun was had
And John Walters called you "bonny lad"
Where Jim T, Frank Mc and more of my heroes
Met up on a Tuesday and drank Guinness zeroes
Where we all had our parties, reminisced at a wake
And did more playing than praying, I'd say, give or take

So, it's a cautionary tale - with a message of warning
To reflect on (in silence) at the last coffee morning
Use it or lose it - you'll not get it back
As division and technology lead us off track
From a sense of community, real values that matter
Or it's like Vera's without wool, Bimbis without batter

But there's memories here that will never end
So let's raise a glass to absent friends
And one more time before it goes
Let's raise the roof for old St Joe's