

Kitty and Tommy Linnane were recalling some years ago  
Tommy's first appearance at a concert in Kilfenora  
People had heard about this young fiddle player from Donegal  
who had this strange and wonderful style  
slurring and skidding, doing unlikely things with the fiddle and bow  
And whose music was so unusual and intricate and other worldly

And when came out on the stage, people leaned forward in their seats  
And as he started to play, the collectors at the doors abandoned their posts  
And people who were having a cup of tea behind the stage left the table  
and crowded out to the door  
And one man standing on the stairs leaned over too far  
and fell off the back of the stage into the darkness below  
And nobody stirred.  
They left him there until the music was finished, forgetting Christian charity  
If he's down there today, I hope he's recovered from his fall  
and don't blame the people of Kilfenora, blame Tommy Peoples and his music

Tommy was a bright boy and won a scholarship to St. Eunan's Letterkenny  
And in 1961, when I was starting in St. Flannan's, Tommy was starting in St. Eunan's  
But when I was tucked into bed, Tommy was off over the wall  
to the owner of the corner shop to play a few tunes.  
And he got away with it for a year and a half

He had been given his first lessons by his cousin Joe Cassidy  
Who had been taught by his grandfather, James Peoples  
And another more unlikely influence was Sam Nesbitt, a Scottish Presbyterian,  
Who arranged for Tommy to attend formal music classes in Derry  
And learn musical notation  
Which was not common among traditional musicians at the time

I don't know when it was that people started to talk about Tommy  
But I suppose special people were always special  
The wonderful Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, praises  
'all things counter, original, spare, strange',  
And I think that describes his playing,  
*Counter, original, spare, strange*

In the ancient tradition their prowess at the Goltraí, the Geantraí, the Suantraí  
Music to draw tears, music to raise the spirits, music to soothe  
Were the measure of the musician.  
And we know that Tommy could do all that –  
As a player, as a composer  
And when playing became too difficult, he was still compsing  
His mind teeming with music and with ideas.

If he played a cheap fiddle made in Hong Kong  
It didn't sound like a cheap fiddle any more  
And the humble ballad which his mother sang around the house,  
'My Granny's Highland Hame'  
Was elevated to a place of honour beside Scott Skinner's 'Our Highland Queen'

Tommy People's name became known all over Ireland, all over the world,  
but not to everyone  
A couple of young lads in St. Flannan's, Kevin and Alphonse,  
Had expressed an interest in learning the fiddle  
And Maria will remember Tommy gave them their first lessons in his house in Toonagh  
I asked Kevin on the way back the first day had he ever heard of Tommy Peoples  
And he thought for a little while and said  
'I heard of Tommy but I never heard of Peoples'.

Tommy was a humble and unassuming man.  
He told me recently that he wanted to be buried in Drumcliff  
And mentioned a few humble characters that he thought would be good company  
That he would enjoy being near.  
He was also a proud man  
He knew who he was  
He loved his county and his adopted county  
He loved his country, the history and the language  
His religious beliefs and customs and traditions  
And this humble man knew that he had been given a precious gift  
And he didn't neglect it – he spent hours practising, imagining, writing

The first time I met Tommy, it was at concert in Clarecastle  
Organised by his good friend Seán Keane  
Seán had persuaded me to be Fear a' Tí  
And I was very nervous about the idea  
But not half as nervous as Tommy  
As he waited to come on stage  
In recent years, I think he had become more relaxed  
Didn't feel so much under scrutiny  
It was great to hear him telling stories to the audience  
And singing – because he loved songs and singing

Tommy has left a rich legacy to his family  
And to us all  
Not just for what he achieved  
Not just for his music  
But for who he was  
The music an expression of his spirit.  
I think Tommy always had an inclination to believe in other worlds  
And it is hard to imagine that such a spirit  
Will not live on and come to fulfilment  
In a strange world that none of us has yet experienced  
But where we hope to meet again, transformed and renewed

Ar dheis láimh Dé go raibh sé