



GRAND  
CENTRAL  
HOTEL BELFAST

# Belfast Hymn

A poem by  
Paul Muldoon  
(1951-)

# Paul Muldoon



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Paul Muldoon is an Irish poet, described as being 'the most significant English-language poet born since the Second World War'. He has won many awards, including the the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry 2003 and the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 2017.

Windsor House promotional brochure, c1974. During the 1970s and 80s Paul Muldoon spent a number of years working for the BBC, with an office in Windsor House, now the Grand Central Hotel Belfast.

# Hope & home

I was tempted by the idea of trying to write a new poem about Belfast for several reasons. The first is that, despite my not having lived here since 1986, I still feel very connected to the city. I came here first as a child in the 1950s, usually traveling by train via Portadown and usually returning with an animal — a rabbit, or a tortoise — bought in a pet store in the Smithfield Market. It seems odd now that I had to leave the country to acquire some wildlife, but it was perfectly natural at the time.

My father was a market gardener, so I often came with him in the very early morning to St George’s Market, where he sold cauliflowers off the back of a lorry. That was in the early 1960s.

In 1969, I came to Queen’s as a student, just as things were hotting up on the streets. On July 21, 1972, a date that would become known as Bloody Friday, Smithfield Bus Station was bombed. Smithfield Market was destroyed by incendiary bombs in 1974.

By that stage I was at the BBC, where I worked as a radio and television producer between 1973 and 1986. I spent several of those years in an office in Windsor House. Completed in 1974, Windsor House was known as the tallest office building in Ireland. It is now known as the Grand Central Hotel.

Having long been an admirer of the Hastings family and their profound sense of civic responsibility, I am delighted to offer this poem in the spirit of hope, and the idea of home, they so wonderfully embody.

**Paul Muldoon**





1 | “A sandbar near a river mouth”  
would give Belfast its name.  
The river where we’ve slaked our drouth  
and where we staked our claim

with those who built the Giant’s Ring  
five thousand years ago,  
with Normans, Essex, the Dutch king,  
with Chichester & Co.

For even Ptolemy the Greek  
set his sights on the Lagan.  
He used to come for the Twelfth week  
despite warnings of “dragons.”

Although we’re sometimes seen as staid  
we’ve tossed our bowler hats  
and cheered on every new parade  
across the tidal flats.

2 | The Vikings gave us a wide berth  
and focused more on Larne.  
They'd overrun the Solway Firth  
and ransacked Lindisfarne

so they had nothing left to prove  
about their derring-do.  
We'd kept the Picts at some remove  
despite their being True Blues.

What really put us on the map?  
The world viewed through the prism  
of eggs and bacon in a bap.  
It's a Belfast Baptism!

It's seen us through our darkest hours  
and salved our troubled souls.  
Since we were granted devolved powers  
we've all been on a roll.

3 | Although we've so much on our plate,  
we take it as a badge  
of honour to eat twice our weight  
in wheaten farls and fadge.

What sets the Ulster Fry apart  
is its calorie count.  
It's a clear insult to the heart.  
The casualties mount

from Portavogie to Ardglass  
where they've given up erring  
on the side of caution, alas,  
determined to prove herrings

and prawns will happily coexist  
if served on beds of dulse.  
The reason why they hold your wrist?  
To check if you've a pulse!

4 | For Belfast's long been a byword  
for hospitality –  
the slice of barm brack, lemon curd,  
the drop scones at high tea.

It's for sponge cakes and Sally Lunn's  
we Belfast people yearn.  
A spot of bother? All "wee buns,"  
as far as we're concerned.

Most of the things we love to share  
are made with Cream of Tartar  
though any putting on of airs  
is a complete non-starter.

It's Adam's Ale straight from the tap  
that we still most esteem –  
unless it's Châteauneuf-du-Pape  
or Costières de Nîmes.



5 | Although it's true we do enjoy  
a pint and a wee Bush  
restraint's the technique we employ.  
We just don't like to push

unless it's with a certain tact,  
like when we're simply forced  
to read someone the riot act  
for backing the wrong horse

or give our caddies an earful  
when we've kicked up a divot  
or into a Titanic hull  
hammer those white-hot rivets...

That great ship waiting to be launched  
was set off down the slip  
by men like us. Stalwart. And staunch.  
And taking no auld lip.

6 | That smell's the smell of retting flax  
from County Down flax dams.  
Some sheets are sewn from old flour sacks  
but some are monogrammed.

For from the cradle to the grave  
we wear our linen bleached.  
We see it breaking like a wave  
on a North Antrim beach

where some diehards still like to surf  
and some fish in chest-waders.  
We know that artificial turf  
is favored by Crusaders

along with polyester mesh.  
In times of joy or grief,  
of course, there's nothing quite so fresh  
as a fresh handkerchief.

7 | The Belfast Ropework Company,  
the largest in the world,  
kept us from being all at sea.  
The Queen of the May birlled

her leg and hunkered down to caulk  
a seam with hanks of goat  
hair even as she scanned the Lough  
for Shorts' new flying boat.

It's known Shorts aircraft had a fin  
sometimes described as "ventral."  
Known, too, the best of days begin  
and end at the Grand Central

where we counter the cold and damp  
with oatmeal, ancient grains,  
entrecôte aux champignons, champ,  
a flute of gold Champagne.

8 | The flute on which James Galway soared  
was really made of gold.  
Some dwell in the House of the Lord  
and some on the threshold

of hotels like the Maritime,  
Van Morrison and Them  
summoning from our glow and grime  
melodious mayhem.

When Sam and Dave fell foul of Saul  
they took refuge in Naioth.  
For us there's no escape at all  
from Samson and Goliath

except perhaps to lose ourselves  
in big band and bebop  
as we go thumbing through the shelves  
of a used vinyl shop.

9 | Those two iconic gantry cranes  
have held us in their thrall  
long after they've thrown off their chains  
or we've had any call

for their great feats of strength  
or other shows of force.  
History holds us at arm's length  
until the Dutch King's horse

charges us from a gable-end  
and Henry Joy McCracken  
expounds on all that might impend  
while on Cavehill the bracken

brings us right back to the Bronze age  
and a cauldron's dull glow.  
It's time to check the pressure gauge  
in case the whole thing blows.

10 | And what we cherish, it would seem,  
are the rough and the smooth  
of Brillo Pads, Brylcreem,  
tang, tungsten, tongue and groove,

the Sliced Pan, the Sliced Plain, plain fegs,  
jaw-box sinks, wheelie-bins,  
the goatskin bodhráns, the Lambegs  
made from their kith and kin.

When we bake apple tarts or pies  
we keep it in the family.  
The apple on which we rely  
would be an Armagh Bramley,

resistant as it is to scab.  
We ourselves resist blabs, blowhards,  
gasbags with the gift of the gab  
(unless it's our own bards).

11 | For though we've lost some afternoons  
drinking from a tin can  
in the snug Crown Liquor Saloon  
beloved of Betjeman

we've also found our poets best  
sustain us with their words.  
Now we're known less for snipers' nests  
than nests of singing birds

we laud the poetical wing  
where Mahon, Longley, Hewitt,  
McGuckian, and Carson ring  
out the seed-bells, suet,

and bacon rind they've set in store  
against our winter wants.  
We track them still on the foreshore  
by their typewriter fonts.

12

Our painters, too, have seen the light  
where water meets the sky.  
Cadmium Red. Titanium White.  
How often have they vied

for supremacy in the air?  
Andrew Nicholl giving a vague  
sense Cavehill might still shelter bears.  
Tom Carr, James Humbert Craig,

Dermot Seymour's footrot- and fluke-  
ridden sheep, William Conor,  
Rita Duffy, the great John Luke  
whose many selves we honour

as we struggle with points of view  
and depth real or perceived.  
They come at us out of the blue  
where sea-heave meets land-heave.



13 | Though the green hills lie on all sides  
we come back to red brick.  
Short, narrow streets run far and wide  
as if they were homesick

for Manchester or Birmingham  
and not Dublin or Cork.  
In times gone by we'd run ram-stam  
with pikestaffs and pitchforks

across those cobble-littered streets  
and then put on the kettle.  
Long years of beating a retreat  
have made us show our mettle

and muse at length upon the stuff  
we're made of. Granite. Gault.  
We jubilate in being gruff  
and gracious to a fault.

14 | We like to get down to brass tacks,  
the no-frills nuts and bolts,  
but not before we've had some crack.  
We do tend to revolt

against whatever powers might be.  
We rejoice in high jinks,  
gooseberry jam, Nambarrie tea,  
Irwin's malt bread, Kerr's Pinks.

Some like potatoes "balls of flour"  
and some prefer them waxy.  
Some hire a limo by the hour  
and some hop a black taxi

to visit those old trouble spots  
on the Shankill and Falls  
before taking one last straight shot  
back to the City Hall.

15 | For years we found it hard to wean  
ourselves off giving vent  
to something very much like spleen  
against those we resent.

But now we harbour not a grudge  
but something more like hope.  
Even the hardest heart will budge  
when we throw it a rope

unless it fears being pinned down  
like that high-profile giant.  
That doesn't play in Sailortown.  
That makes us more defiant.

We revel in the linen mills  
and the yarns they still spin.  
Though on all sides lie the green hills  
we'll never be hemmed in.

16 | For if the future's less than clear  
that won't leave us nonplussed.  
It's not our style to live in fear  
of what's in store for us.

Our shipyard workers packed their gear  
and a "piece" in a box.  
But now it's peace we've engineered  
and christened in the Docks.

The spirit of those men of steel,  
their gray-eyed wives and daughters,  
will keep us on an even keel  
through the uncharted waters.

For we steer by the Northern Star.  
However far we roam,  
that "river mouth near a sandbar"  
will signal we've come home.

# An ode to Belfast

**AROUND 1924 A SHIPYARD WORKER**, poet and playwright called Thomas Carnduff wrote a poem called ‘Men of Belfast’\*. His poem captured a sense of how Belfast was back then; from the ‘sound and motion’ and ‘endless stir’ of the city to the ‘ring of the anvil’ and the ‘song of the loom’ of our industries; with clarity Carnduff painted a vivid picture with words.

Carnduff worked at the time for Workman, Clark & Company, one of Belfast’s largest shipbuilders — our Grand Central Hotel is built on the site of Robert and John Workman’s linen warehouse. That name isn’t a coincidence, everything in Belfast is connected.

The thought occurred to us: Has the time come for a new poem? Mr Muldoon has written that for us and for that, we are enormously grateful.

There is a sweeping quality to ‘Belfast Hymn’ — it takes us on a tour through a province, a people and a history, but we shouldn’t say too much — please enjoy it on your own terms.

To those here for a short while, we hope it reveals more of this city than you might otherwise have experienced. To those living and working here, we hope you recognise a place you know and love.

**The Directors of Hastings Hotels**

\* Thomas Carduff’s ‘Men of Belfast’ can be found in *The Belfast Anthology*, edited by Patricia Craig and published by The Blackstaff Press.