Belfast Hymn

A poem by Paul Muldoon
(1951-)
Paul Muldoon

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.
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
“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.
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.
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!
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 Lunns 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.
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.
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.
The Belfast Ropework Company, the largest in the world, kept us from being all at sea. The Queen of the May birled 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.
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.
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.
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).
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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 Carnduff’s ‘Men of Belfast’ can be found in _The Belfast Anthology_, edited by Patricia Craig and published by The Blackstaff Press.