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GALLERY

84-94 Great Patrick Street  
Belfast  
BT1 2LU

ISBN 978-1-909989-18-4

We, Too, Sing Belfast  
Donal McCann

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Cover Image: Donal McCann  
Ticket to Ride: the fastest way between meetings in Portland, Oregon is the bus. October

The Lord Mayor of Belfast's term ran from 3 June 2013 to 2 June 2014.  
The pictures in this essay were taken between August 2013 and June 2014.

First published in 2014 by Golden Thread Gallery

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This book was published on the occasion of the exhibition We, Too, Sing Belfast which took place at the Golden Thread Gallery from 2nd October until the 21st October 2014.

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Golden Thread Gallery.

ISBN 978-1-909989-18-4

Designed by Erskine at Belfast Media Group, Belfast

Printed in Belfast by GPS, Belfast

Bound by GPS Belfast

Edited by Mary Morgan

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**WOUNDED CITY:** A final look over Belfast, two hours before the chain of office was handed over, during a visit to the Quaker Cottage on Black Mountain. June

## Foreword

He was the first Sinn Féin Lord Mayor to attend an Armistice Day ceremony at the City Hall Cenotaph. The two minutes silence was broken only by the sound of passing traffic and at one stage he looked skywards at the PSNI helicopter hovering high above Belfast, while police on the ground maintained a respectful and discreet distance as the various dignitaries and members of the Royal British Legion stood to remember the dead of the Great War.

It was not his only act of remembrance that day. Shortly after his official duties ended, he slipped away to Milltown Cemetery to the grave of his father, Sammy Millar, whose anniversary also falls on the 11th of the 11th.

Milltown is where his grandfather, Tommy McKeown, an IRA man in his day, is also buried. He and two brothers were shot by loyalist gunmen at their home near Magherafelt, Co Derry in May 1922. One of them, James, was killed.

But he wanted to make sure he didn't leave the cemetery until he picked out another family head stone - that of John McManus, a retired company sergeant major in the Royal Irish Rifles who fought in the Boer War and who died of natural causes after being called back to train troops for the Front. His funeral in September 1916 was the last for a British soldier to take place on the Falls Road, and unbelievably, this was the first time he stopped at the final resting place of his great grandfather.

He laid some flowers there as well, and then stepped back to gather his thoughts.

For Mairtin Ó Muilleoir, an unapologetic Irish republican, it was a quiet and emotional moment of reconciliation and a time to reflect on

where the world was all those years ago and where it is today, especially in his divided and troubled home city.

Peace-making initiatives and full-on community dialogue were the hallmark of his period as the city's 69th Lord Mayor and nobody, including many who do not share his political affiliations or aspirations can recall a year quite like the term he had. It was frenetic and breathless. He worked incredibly hard during his 364 days in high office. But he was also hard work. His staff will readily testify to the sheer exhaustion some of them felt keeping pace with a ridiculously challenging diary.

He had six months to prepare himself for the role, and once he hit the ground in June 2012 he blazed a trail like no other First Citizen of Belfast - not only here, but across the world. He set out to be bold, imaginative, positive, inclusive and generous with his time, a strategy which by common consent, worked wonders. He possessed the sort of charisma and confidence which illuminated every room he entered. He fulfilled an estimated 2,000 engagements and travelled extensively, criss-crossing the Atlantic eight times to visit nearly every major city in the US, including four in just five days, one of them New York where he owns the Irish Echo newspaper.

Even his wife Helen, daughter Caoimhe (26) son Tíarnán (24) and twins Colm and Fiontán (20) found it difficult to keep track of his movements, frequently turning to his extraordinary Twitter account to find out where he was and what he was up to. He posted an amazing 25,000 Tweets, many of them accompanied by "selfies".

It seemed as if there wasn't enough time in the day for Belfast's undisputed cheer leader to keep all his appointments.

Ó Muilleoir is the product of a highly disciplined political organisation, but as managing director and owner of the Belfast Media Group, he is very much his own man and succeeded in making a massive impression everywhere he went. Well, almost. He had to make a run for it after being kicked and slapped by a crowd of rowdy loyalists in Woodvale Park, off the Shankill Road, just minutes after telling one of his aides: "I've got a good feeling about this." How wrong he was. In a year of many, many highs, this was his one and only low point. He sympathised with the police who protected him and later forgave those who attacked him. But it was proof – if proof was needed – that nowhere in Belfast was considered out of bounds and his parlour at City Hall was open to all. No flags in the corner of the room, and on the walls where they always hung, were photographs of Queen Elizabeth, the Duke of Edinburgh, the late Queen Mother, and a framed copy of the 1916 Proclamation. President Michael D Higgins who was accompanied by Ian Paisley and his wife Eileen, were among the many hundreds who stopped by for tea and buns.

He was introduced to President Barack Obama and he travelled to meet the Mayor of London Boris Johnston. He supped with the Queen at Windsor Castle. He was on first name terms with many senior American politicians, among them Andrew Cuomo, the New York Governor and Jerry Brown, the Governor of California. He named 24 ambassadors for the city, among them the actor Liam Neeson and Marcus Robison, the Belfast born documentarian who made the film, *Rebuilding the World Trade Centre*. He also presented 50 special commendations, acknowledging the work of many organisations and charities and appointed nine chaplains to represent the four main religious

denominations in the city as well as the Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Baha'i faiths.

Even though he was at the centre of many major set piece events, including the World Police and Fire Games, the Giro d'Italia cycle race when he dyed his hair pink, and introduced Van Morrison as a Freeman of Belfast at the Waterfront Hall, it was his engagement with the less well off, the disadvantaged; the carers; the men and women who trained kids in all kinds of sports; community volunteers, the sick, the aged, and those who helped them, which gave him the most satisfaction. He much preferred disappearing into the background to meet and greet, rather than take his place at the front line before the cameras.

He has a drawer full of correspondence from all sides in Northern Ireland who wrote to express their admiration. Two in particular moved him to tears. One was from a woman, a recovering alcoholic, who had lost custody of her children. Her husband had been murdered in a street attack several years previously. He met her at a Salvation Army hostel and she handed him a letter inside the gift of a book saying she hadn't had a drink for four months. Her faith and hope had been restored and she yearned for the day when she could be re-united with her children.

The second was from the daughter of a patient in the Belfast Hospice where his father, a former sheet metal worker at Harland & Wolff and Short Brothers passed away in 2004, aged 74. He sat at the bedside of her sleeping mother, a Protestant, the day before she died. She reminded him of a little bird – an elderly lady in her final hours in the company of a man she probably once detested. After he left, the daughter whispered into her mother's ear: "You've just had a visit from the Lord of Mayor of Belfast. Him Sinn Féin and you Mum, a wee woman

born and raised in Sandy Row in Belfast. You see across the divide..."

Here were two thank-you notes by two strangers, written from the heart, and which he will treasure for the rest of his life.

When he was first elected as a councillor in 1987 he travelled to the City Hall wearing a flak jacket under his overcoat and varied his routes, such as the poisonous atmosphere which existed at the time. Belfast was a dark and dangerous city back then, and although it still has a long way to go, it's a much different and better place.

The Lord Mayor sometimes ran the three and a half miles from home to the office, and when his schedule was based in and around the city centre, he cycled. Occasionally the chain of office which is insured for £500,000 was transported in the mayoral limo which followed behind – a car which he sometimes used as a dressing room as he hurried to his next meeting. At times they were as many as 13 a day.

Ó Muilleoir has wonderfully disarming social skills and is one of the great communicators. He might not be to everyone's liking, even among the cynics within his own nationalist and republican constituency, but few have challenged the widely held view that he delivered on nearly all of what he promised, hammering home time and time again his message, handed down by his Buddhist chaplain Paul Haller of San Francisco: "Edit out the negativity". In their initial statement, his chaplains also used two words which guided him: "Generosity and Imagination".

Parliament Buildings in Belfast is one of the great listening posts and in all the time I spent there while he went about his business at City Hall, I didn't hear a single adverse comment about his impressive and positive leadership qualities.

It might take several volumes to record everything he did, but Donal McCann's brilliant pictorial record of his year, is but a snapshot, albeit an important one. McCann (37), who specialises in architectural and construction photography was allowed uninhibited access for this special portraiture assignment and he must have taken up to 10,000 images – beginning with the Mayor wearing a poncho while being drenched in the rain at an open air Snow Patrol concert to his final day at City Hall when Gerry Adams called in to congratulate him on a job well done. McCann followed him everywhere, even to the United States, to photograph him at all hours of the day and night, once at 5.30 am as he set off under a street light to jog the streets of San Francisco. With his wife Eileen at home expecting their second child Aidan – a brother for little Gabriel (5) – it was a tiring but exhilarating experience, but the mayor's regular companion never failed to be amazed at how his subject matter could connect with people, no matter when or where.

Ó Muilleoir, a fitness fanatic who runs regularly, enjoys the occasional glass of good wine when off-duty, but his enthusiastic and respectful manner, and his easy and uncomplicated line of chat, can be intoxicating. Everyone it seemed, has a good word for him. The title of this catalogue "We, Too, Sing Belfast" is a variation of "I, Too Sing America" by the poet and novelist Langston Hughes, who is known for his insightful portrayals of black life in the United States from the twenties to the sixties. It's classic Ó Muilleoir. America, its history and culture have had a huge influence on his business, political and personal life.

But it is Belfast – a city which he loves – and especially its people, which shaped him, and it's doubtful if there will ever again be a Lord Mayor of his generation to compare with him. He is a one-off.

Deric Henderson

**ON THE RED CARPET:** Ascending the grand staircase in City Hall. September





**left**  
**FOR THE RECORD:** Adrian Flannelly of Irish Radio in New York puts the questions, August.



**bottom**  
**TAKE BACK THE CITY:** Chatting with friends, with daughter Caoimhe, before the Snow Patrol Concert in Belfast, August

**opposite**  
**CORRIDOR OF POWER:** Outside the Lord Mayor's Parlour, August



**MEETING OF MINDS:** Ryushin Paul Haller (right), Belfast emigré in California and Buddhist chaplain to the Lord Mayor, and Frank Liddy, founder of the Black Mountain Zen Centre, at the centre's Sunday morning meeting. September







**left**  
**BREAKING THE ICE:** London Mayor Boris Johnson dons his Belfast Giants jersey gift - a perfect fit, without the padding. September



**bottom**  
**STATING THE OBVIOUS:** A warm welcome at a UNISON reception to fight closure of old people's homes. August

**opposite**  
**ENTRE NOUS:** Mayor Boris Johnson is asked, "Would you like to be Prime Minister?" He replies, "That job is taken." September



**CITY LIGHTS:** Atop Millbank Tower on the Thames to promote Belfast as a conference destination. September





**left**  
**GOLDFINGERS:** Starting the final day in office with young people who slept overnight outside City Hall to highlight the plight of the homeless. June



**bottom**  
**INVESTING IN THE FUTURE:** A business mission from the US visits Belfast at the Lord Mayor's invitation. Californian Karl May of Vello Systems is among the visiting business leaders. February

**opposite**  
**A PRAYER FOR BELFAST:** Fr Gerry Reynolds of Clonard speaks up at the first-ever meeting of the faith leaders of Belfast in the Lord Mayor's Parlour. August



**GRÁSTA Ó DHIA ORTHU;** Addressing those who lost loved ones in the conflict at the unveiling of the Remembering Quilt by Relatives for Justice.





**left**  
**IN THE FRAME:** Artist Conrad Atkinson, creator of the 'New Northern Ireland Wallpaper', in San Francisco. October



**bottom**  
**WATERBABY:** Cathal at a children's water polo tournament in Andersonstown Leisure Centre. December

**opposite**  
**EATING ON THE GO:** Enjoying a peach on the pavement in San Francisco. October



**AMERICAN TIES:** In the Nines Hotel in Portland, Oregon, the city where Clark Gable once sold gentlemen's neckwear. October





**left**  
**CATCHING UP:** In a downtown San Francisco hotel following a reception hosted by the Northern Ireland Bureau. October

**bottom**  
**V FOR VOICES:** On the campus of the University of California Berkeley, birthplace of the Free Speech Movement. October

**opposite**  
**HELLO:** At a "Visit Belfast" promotional event in London. September



**ON THE RUN:** Setting out on pre-dawn run on first morning in San Francisco, October







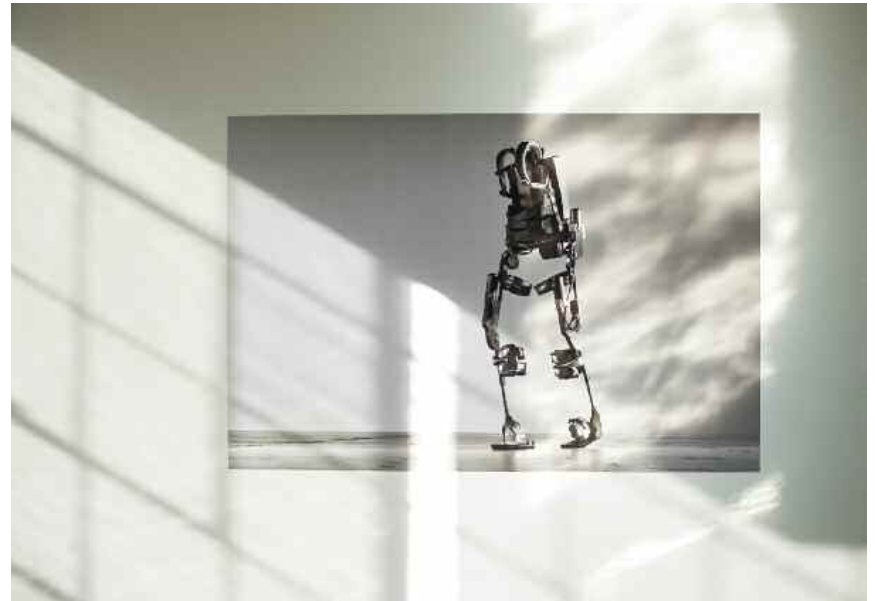
**left**  
**IF YOU'RE GOING:** Capturing a street scene from the window of a San Francisco hotel on the morning of the first full day there as head of a Belfast Technology Mission. October

**bottom**  
**HOOKING UP:** Colloquing with Belfast expat Robbie Hunter, President of the 400,000-strong Construction Workers' Union of California, in a cloakroom corner of America's most famous restaurant, Chez Panisse, in Berkeley, California. October

**opposite**  
**GAME PLAN:** Veteran civil rights and peace activist Tom Hayden provides some pointers for the Lord Mayor before a meeting with California Governor Jerry Brown at his Oakland offices. October



**HYPNOTIC ROBOTIC:** A photograph in the reception of Ekso Bionics, a Californian company pioneering the use of exoskeletons to help the disabled walk. October





**left**  
**ON THE ROAD AGAIN:** Car journey from San Francisco to Palo Alto, the world epicentre of venture capital. October



**bottom**  
**THE HOTLINE:** Breaking from meetings in San Francisco to discuss response to statement issued by some councillors criticising the Lord Mayor. October

**opposite**  
**INTO THE LIGHT:** Outside San José City Hall with Dr Suzanne Saffie-Siebert, founder of Belfast medical start-up SISAF. October



**BEST FOOT FORWARD:** Sunshine and shadow at a parade in San Francisco, October





**left**  
**TABLE FOR ONE:** Catching up on emails and Tweets in a Portland, Oregon café.  
October



**bottom**  
**WINDOW ON THE WORLD:** An evening meal in a San Francisco restaurant.  
October

**opposite**  
**TICKET TO RIDE:** The fastest way between meetings in Portland, Oregon is the bus.  
October



**CROSSING OVER:** On the Bay Bridge from San Francisco to Oakland with Alcatraz in the background. October





**left**  
**BOXED-IN:** A Belfast City Council 'community centre' for Travellers made from shipping crates. November



**bottom**  
**BARRED:** Visiting the Travelling community in West Belfast. November

**opposite**  
**ON SONG:** Meeting women from the Traveller community's Rockin' Robins choir in a makeshift community centre. November





**DECORATIONS:** Armistice Day in Belfast. November





**left**  
**IF THE CAP FITS:** Greeting visitors to Belfast Day - a celebration of the contribution of our ethnic minorities to Belfast - on the lawn of City Hall. September.

**bottom**  
**HEAVYWEIGHT MIDDLEWEIGHT:** In the city centre, a boxer from the US tries on the weighty mayoral chain. September

**opposite**  
**SELFIE:** With young people who slept outside City Hall to highlight homelessness. June



**VAN THE FREEMAN;** Freedom of the City ceremony for Van Morrison at the Waterfront Hall. Mayor Ó Muilleoir:  
"Van Morrison united us in the past, he unites us tonight, he will unite us in the future." November





**left**  
**AT THE WHEEL:** The Lord Mayor's driver, Trevor Ball, awaits his charge. October.



**bottom**  
**CHRISTMAS SPIRIT:** Sister Olive in the laundry room of the Welcome Organisation shelter for the homeless on Christmas Day, December

**opposite**  
**CRASHING:** Homeless on Christ's birthday. Welcome Organisation shelter on the Falls Road, Belfast. December



**BEAR IN MIND THESE DEAD:** Launch of the Relatives for Justice Remembering Quilt in City Hall - one square for each life lost. April





**left**  
**SHOW OF HANDS:** Councillors voting at the monthly meeting of Belfast City Council, May



**bottom**  
**HOMELAND:** Remembering Mandela at memorial service in St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast, December

**opposite**  
**MADIBA:** Voices raised for Nelson Mandela at a memorial service in St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast, December



**HAIRWAY TO HEAVEN:** The Lord Mayor has his hair sprayed pink each morning of the Giro d'Italia, donning a disposable Giro rain coat to protect his suit. May





**left**  
**IN THE PINK:** THE Giro d'Italia, the world's toughest cycle, is keenly anticipated in Belfast. May



**bottom**  
**SOCK IT TO HIM:** Putting schoolchildren through their pushbike paces at Strandtown Primary School in East Belfast as part of the Giro build-up. March

**opposite**  
**DOUBLE-ACT:** Blind runner Tony McEvoy took part in a 5k park run with the Mayor, running on his shoulder as directions were shouted. January



**BARD OF BELFAST:** With Poet Laureate Sinéad Morrissey, whose term also came to an end when the Lord Mayor stepped down. June





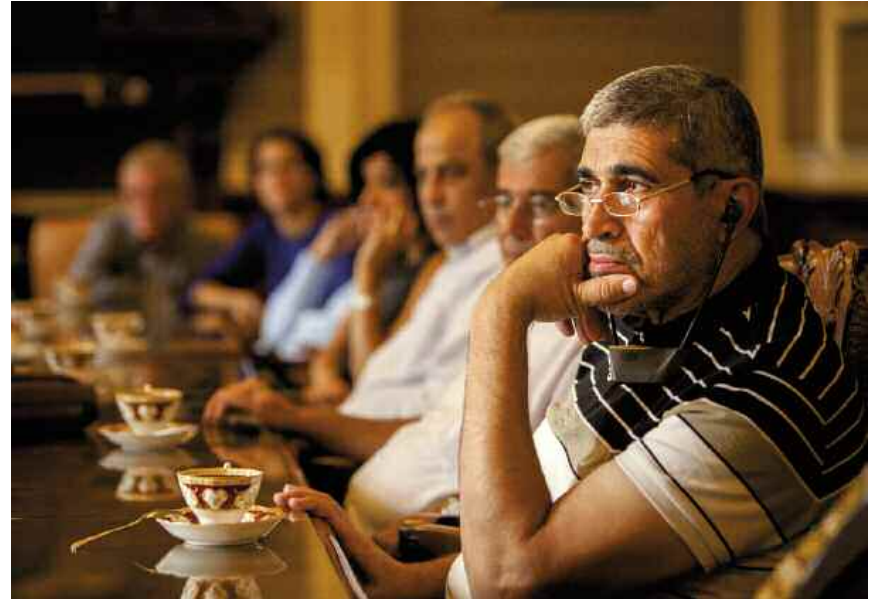


**left**  
**STATING THE OBVIOUS:** A warm welcome at a UNISON reception to fight closure of old people's homes. August



**bottom**  
**SERVICE WITH A SMILE:** Gerry Adams pours the tea for Sinn Féin members gathered in the Parlour to make a presentation to the Mayor on his final day. June

**opposite**  
**COMMON LANGUAGE:** Palestinian-Israeli citizens in the Mayoral Parlour to discuss loss and healing. August



**MULTI-TASKING:** Phone and iPad on the go before en route to an engagement. August





**left**  
**SHOEDOWN:** Shoes off – and the chain of office off too – before meditation at the Black Mountain Zen Centre. September



**bottom**  
**WHERE TO NEXT?:** Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams in the Parlour on the Mayor's last day in office. June

**opposite**  
**MIRROR IMAGE:** Meeting young volunteers and veterans of the Society of Friends in the Quaker Cottage. JUNE



**\*OH, THE WATER\***: Soaking up the atmosphere at the Tennents Vital Snow Patrol Concert., August





**left**  
**DULY NOTED:** Homework during car journey from San Francisco to Palo Alto, California. October



**bottom**  
**WAY UP THERE:** Chatting to Patsy Bell, tenant of Belfast's highest home, beside the Quaker Cottage on the Black Mountain. June

**opposite**  
**GOLDEN MOMENT:** Olympic gold medal winner Mary Peters visited the Lord Mayor's Parlour for a knees-up to mark her stepping down as Lord Lieutenant of Belfast. May



**I'LL JUST GET MY COAT:** Heading home on Shank's mare after the annual general meeting of Belfast City Council and the handover of the chain of office to Lord Mayor Nichola Mallon. June



## Biographies

Deric Henderson is the former Ireland Editor of the Press Association, the national news agency for the UK and Irish Republic. He began his journalistic career with the Tyrone Constitution in his home town of Omagh in 1968, moved to the Belfast Telegraph in 1973 and then to Fleet St with the PA in 1980. He was appointed Ireland editor just before the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. He set up his own media consultancy business in April this year.

Donal launched his photographic career back in 2008 after winning the prestigious title of 'Photographer Of The Year in the UK'. His winning image was described as 'The best winning entry in the 50 year history of the magazine'. In 2010 Donal launched his first solo exhibition in The Waterfront Hall, producing a series of evocative B&W images of Belfast's homeless community. In 2012, with some of the same images, he reached a personal milestone by achieving his Fellowship with the Royal Photographic Society. In October 2014, with the help of The Golden Thread Gallery, Donal has launched his latest photographic exhibition, a collection of images based on a year in office of the former Lord Mayor of Belfast Máirtín Ó Muilleoir. Over 10,000 images were taken within 11 months, with 67 being published in his first book 'We, Too, Sing, Belfast'.

## Acknowledgements

Warm thanks to the Lord Mayor's team for facilitating this photographic odyssey, even though it placed an onerous burden on an already stretched office. For their smiles, ribbings and patience, a big 'thank you' to Sandra, Gwenn, Debbie, Vicky, Sharon and Emma - they had more plates spinning than a dishwasher factory - and to the cheerful chauffeurs Philip, Nigel and Trevor. For her many cups of tea and even the odd photographic tip, I raise a glass to Vicky in the Parlour whose big smile kept the show on the road. I intruded and disrupted many a private meeting in the Parlour and thank those who allowed their confidential moments with the mayor to be captured for the greater good of telling the story of a city on the rise. To my wife Eileen who stood by me for a year whilst on this amazing journey. I promise this Christmas morning, I'll be at home!  
To Ciarán Sheehan, for coming up with the mad idea of hitching a ride with the Lord Mayor for a year, I owe you.

Donal McCann

With special go raibh maith agaibh to Jayne Brady at Kernel Capital, Paul Cooper of Cooper's Chemists, Des Lamph of McDonald's, Jim Ferran of Gregory Guesthouse, Philip Cassidy of Concentrix, Frank Cullen of Mercury Security and Bill Flynn of New York, Hugh 'Curley' Kennedy of Kennedy Centre.



This book has been produced by the Golden Thread Gallery, on xerox colour impression silk paper throughout to a design by Erskine at Belfast Media group, Belfast in a limited edition of 300 in October 2014 of which the first 100 are signed copies. It was printed and bound by GPS, Belfast.



**TABLES TURNED:** Lensman Dónal McCann is put in the frame by Lord Mayor's assistant Vicky Hargrove. June

