

# Something in the Air



Birds, of course (though swallows are not common yet) but also a general sense of restlessness. Long winter nights encourage us to sleep and let things slide. This issue of *Corncrake* is a bit late too, but now we are making up for lost time.

The poets of *Fermanagh Writers* have been busy lately, not only with [Women Aloud](#) and the upcoming Meadow Musings readings at [Common Ground](#) on the 29th of April, but also in the ongoing series of readings [The Thing Itself](#) at *The Happiness Trap* in Enniskillen. This on-going series of readings features not only local writers but also invited guests such as [John Cummings](#) and an open mic spot for newcomers. Two Fermanagh Writers poets, [Teresa Kane](#) and [Teresa Godfrey](#), have works featured in this issue.

Sometimes poetry inspires other arts: [Cirque des Oiseaux](#) is a multi-media exhibition based on the work of locally-born poet Maria McManus. Two of her poems [Peregrinations](#) and [Corncrakes](#) (naturally) are also here. Poet and photographer Steve Downes takes a different tack. His most recent project (as yet untitled) matches poems to photographs of places. In [Poems and Places](#) he demonstrates how inspiration can be found even in landscapes as desolate as our cover picture.

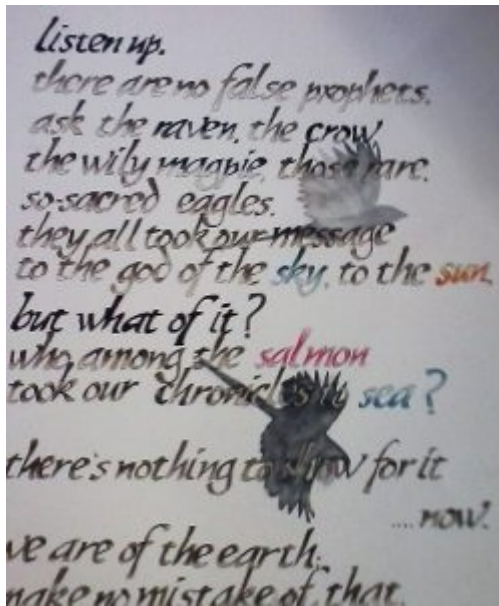
There are other upcoming events too, notably [ComicFest 2017](#), and much more recorded in the pages of [The Spark](#). And there are other Arts to enjoy: [John Llewellyn James](#) writes about his varied musical adventures, while [Caiman O'Shea](#) celebrates the debut of a promising new local rock band.

If that's all too hectic, then Anthony Brady has a gentle [memoir](#) of his time in that 'Citadel of the Looney Left; the Trotskyite alternative seat of government' – the GLC under Ken Livingstone, and nearer to home, [Fermanagh Time](#) invites you to consider just why everything seems to run slower here, and whether that might be a good thing.

If only it didn't all start happening just when the grass needs cutting...

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## Cirque des Oiseaux: Artists & Augurs



Are Artists Augurs? asks the exhibition which opened in the *Higher Bridges Gallery* on the 7th of April and runs to the 29th. *Cirque des Oiseaux* is French for *Circus of Birds* or rather the circling of birds in flight, something we notice particularly at this time of year as new migrants begin to arrive.

Just as we look for signs of Spring, the Augurs of Ancient Rome used to interpret the will of the Gods through observing the flight and the calls of birds. The association of birds and poets is even older than that; it goes right back to the origins of writing itself. According to legend, Palamedes invented eleven letters of the Greek alphabet from the shapes that migrating cranes make in flight.

The exhibition is based around the closely-observed bird poems of Enniskillen-born poet Maria McManus, two of which – [Peregrinations](#) and [Corncrakes](#) are reproduced with permission elsewhere in this issue. They are re-interpreted and complemented through the work of eight other artists in photographs, paintings, sound, video, and sculpture. This gives the whole a pleasing unity, and a diversity that is not normally seen in one-person shows. The works speak to each other, sometimes using the same words and images, but none dominates. There is no predetermined path through, an effect heightened by excellent exhibition notes which, though they number each piece sequentially and map them clearly, do not list them in numerical order but by artist.

The connection with augury is perhaps most plainly seen in the work of Helen Sharp. What at first sight appeared to be silhouettes of birds in flight *The Jackdaws of the Newtown Butler Spar* are seen on closer inspection as shapes pierced in white cloth – literal rendings of the veil. The same image is used on a set of 'Oracle Cards' laid out like a Tarot reading on a table in the middle of the room.

Others are more oblique. Catherine Gaston's mysterious oil paintings contain

no birds at all (one is even titled *No Birds Here, Winter, Lough Erne*) except for the one titled *Murmuration for Maria*. Bernarde Lynn's photographs *Caged Birds of Hong Kong 1-6* and *People of Hong Kong* invite comparisons between the brightly coloured soft-focus close-up of the birds and the invisible people – represented by several floors of the facade of a massive block of flats – as neat and regular as a repeating pattern, yet no two exactly alike.

Some of the poems are presented in handwritten form. *Emigrés* is written in a tiny book perched on a swallow's nest and protected by a bell jar, *Corncrakes* on an accordion-fold set upright so that only a few lines are visible from any one position. It is accompanied by Simon Walters sound installation in which two recordings of the poem weave together in a sort of fugue, reflecting the tenuous lives of the birds themselves.

Others are meant to be handled (white gloves are provided) most notably Irene Uhlemann's massive handmade book *In Principio Erat Verbum* (In the Beginning was the Word) which with its illustrated excerpts stands somewhat in the tradition of the *Book of Kells* and evokes some of its reverence. *Home* is a collage of handwritten letters and poems contained within a folded map, as if remembering the journeys for which it was consulted, and *Peregrinations* is typewritten on luggage labels, one per line – a device that McManus also uses in her [Label Lit](#) project.

It is strange and somewhat delightful to experience poetry in such an indirect fashion, but does that mean that poets and artists are akin to augurs? Perhaps. As with all forms of divination, augurs relied on observations that were somewhat predictable (with a good knowledge of natural history you know what to expect expect from birds)

but never entirely so. They wove a story out of commonplace and overlooked details, always keeping a eye open for the extraordinary moments that give them special significance.

And so do these artists: go see for yourselves.

***The Artists:***

[Maria McManus](#) [Tom Hughes](#) [Pearl Kinnear](#)

[Helen Sharp](#) [Simon Waters](#) [Irene Uhlemann](#)

[Bernarde Lynn](#) [Catherine Gaston](#) [Rosie McGurran](#)

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## Corncrakes

Not one among the rushes  
 None in the meadows  
 None where the farmer dropped to his knees  
 Lamenting the crumpled nest its requiem  
     wringing his hands  
     like a chaplain  
     bringing bad news  
     to the door  
     in the night time  
*Them's rare wee things – them's rare!*  
     ... and rarer still  
     the small clutch  
     a universe among the rushes  
 Small planets grounded in troubled heavens.  
 These scragplings scurry in frantic sorties  
 To grub in the undergrowth  
     amongst the brackens.  
 It is the night, it is the stars impress  
 Africa, Africa, Africa  
 Opening the night  
     terra incognita –  
 There is no way  
     only opening the night

Listen, first intently;  
     closely – no further than at arms length  
     and then, when everything is detailed,  
     clocked & inventoried & only then,  
     double the circle  
 Listen, double the circle, Listen  
     sense unreachable places,  
     calm places at the eye

of hurricanes.  
Flee your fever  
and with unholy impetus  
hurl  
Into the nomadic sky,  
into severe places  
into unspeakable theatres of ablation,  
Into mystery, uncertainty, doubt,  
and tell everything  
when  
you  
return.

[Maria McManus](#)

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## [Peregrinations](#)



If you took a chance

And let those plates stop spinning,  
Stuck your hands in your pockets  
Or your fingers in your ears  
And stepped back –  
What would happen then?

After all that clatter  
And when the shreds –  
All the broken pieces  
Were shovelled up  
Wrapped away carefully  
And left somewhere for landfill  
What then?

All that falling, can only happen once,  
And then it's over. Done with.

As an alternative.  
You could gather in those plates  
Stack them neatly, one on top of the other  
File under 'something for someone else  
Another time', and let them sit there.

Or you could just watch the wobbly poles  
Come to their inevitable standstill and decide  
Whether to break them, so that puts  
A stop to this, forever.

One way or another – you could choose  
Silence, choose stillness, stop playing.

You choose.

## II

When Nuria tells me  
The Robin died  
Because it flew into the glass  
I know it is true.

It thought  
That what it saw  
Was endless sky –  
That this reflection of sky  
And the Bay of Biscay was reality.

Its neck has broken  
And it lies supine on the steps.  
I dare say  
Death was instant –  
I hope so, and that it didn't suffer.

## III

I know this one  
And will share with you  
Two stories of my own –  
Near-misses, if you like.

## IV

The first was a dream  
Of the Hummingbird  
In all its shimmering brilliance, battering  
On the window of my smallest most under-used room.  
Outside, I'd made a garden, full of colours,  
Into it, I planted tame versions of my dreams

Underneath the wild flowers  
That greeted everyone who beat their path  
To my front door,

But it was the illusion of the garden  
Brought the Hummingbird  
To beat itself to death upon the glass.

## V

The second is the story of an interview.  
I faced a four-strong panel. They were back-lit  
With the afternoon sun  
And the scene outside was rich and wonderful –  
A river tumbled down a small green glen – all ferns and damp  
And luscious. I could hear the sounds of water  
Breakthrough the stultifying must inside.  
The vigour of the river had, at one time,  
Channelled a mill – the force of it ground millstones.

I remember I wore funereal black –  
Considered smart and fitting  
For such occasions; an indication  
I was serious, reverential,  
Intentional about the task –  
It was a tailored form of knee-  
Bending, a genuflection to authority, to formality –  
A message that I would  
Concede, submit, serve,  
Toe-the-line, fit in.

Then, just as I gathered  
My first breath, to lift  
The register of my voice,  
A summer Swallow flew  
Full tilt into the image  
Of that garden paradise  
And was lost,  
After it slammed hard against the glass  
And fell into Montbretia.

## VI

At The Gower when we walked  
We looked skywards. You could  
Tell the difference between Swifts  
And Swallows, House-martins and Sand-martins.

They're all beautiful to me.  
I find that I am mesmerized and gaze  
Always into the blue of where they are –  
And it's enough.

## VII

This past year or so,  
I've tracked the Swallows too,  
From Ireland, to Wales,  
To Spain and Portugal, to Hungary,  
And all the way to Cape Town  
And back again.

## VIII

Was it you I told the stories of the Hummingbirds to?  
I've talked about it recently again, I know.

I heard Attenborough  
Talk about them on the radio – of how,  
Amidst the chaos of this world, and the catastrophic,  
Devastation of our earth,  
There is one small hopeful story, and it is this –

How people have laid a corridor of sweetness  
All the way from Costa Rica to the North of North America  
And how in this symbiosis  
The Hummingbirds flourish against all odds–  
How they reward the wilderness  
Of our grey lives,  
Gem-like and shimmering  
Captivating the available light  
And give it back to us  
As they migrate  
North – South – North –South –  
North.....

They are delicate and tiny in the dying of this light.

## IX

And then, there is another story–  
In the poem of Sah-Sin. Tess Gallagher tells us,  
It is the Native American name for Hummingbird  
And she tells how, when she found one,  
In torpor, in the cold – she lifted it  
And slipped it in under her breast  
Next to her heart, to warm it,  
In the hope it would revive again.

## X

Finally, here's my last message  
to you, for now.

I found a montage  
Of Hummingbirds with the 'mirror in the mirror',



And I'll play that for you sometime, but –

Between here and there  
Between now and then  
Don't fear anything.

## XI

And, if you decide  
To stop catching those spinning falling plates

And, if you need something for your hands to hold –  
Here's mine.

You might.

And if you take that chance,  
Just think –

Then maybe, just maybe,  
We could dance instead.

[Maria McManus](#)



## [Two Poems by Teresa Kane](#)

### HORIZON

I have a daughter with eyes as wide and blue as the sky  
what advice can I give as she stands before me, smiling  
set to fly? There will be days when clouds come in  
when rains pour down hard but don't worry,  
I've packed your boots, you can sing and splash

dance the dance you learned here in your own back yard.

When you face each new day with dreams in one hand and trust in the other  
and in return the world gives you disillusionment and disappointment  
when the wind has been taken completely out of your sails  
and you've been knocked so hard in the solar plexus  
that you can't even breathe, believe me when I say  
those will be the days when you will know the sweetness of air  
as each breath enters your lungs. I want you to put the star into  
starting over and over and over again, put the free into fall and as you do,  
spread your wings, swoop and glide and when you land, girl you stand tall.

Tonight I'm unfurling a kite, it will fly with Cassiopeia and the Milky Way,  
keep your eyes fixed on it and, if at times it moves out of view, don't worry,  
it has gone beyond where your eyes can't see, it will always be there for  
you.

I've made a map and now I'm letting you go because you know this map off by  
heart.

It's got names old and new and names from beyond the order of time.  
It's got touch stones and place names too

*Craghan, Trory, Friday's Land, Coa  
Enniskillen, Newcastle, Belfast, Kilcar  
Downings. Bundoran, Chang Mai, Lacoste  
Teelin, Pubble, Elswick, Swad.*

Slip this map into the back of your book  
the one you're writing with the new chapter.  
Oh and by the way I've packed a multi-coloured pen  
Write the next chapter big, write it bold and my restless seeker  
from this place within my heart, I shall watch it unfold.

## **MOON KEEPER**

There's a beat in this night  
that rises from the heat of the rain-drenched streets  
there are eyes in the beams  
raining tears on the beer garden of the pub  
where you stood and asked about love from every passer-by  
and they told you through smoke rings and wedding rings  
of love that sings and catches the heart in the part where it hurts  
of love that cries and dies and phoenixes itself up  
from the ashes of the soul  
and the woman at your side holds the moon in her arms.

Some spoke of stars and scars  
and a beauty within that scorches the mind  
and dances to danger with a stranger holding its hand  
some told of the broken, the unspoken  
a man who was leaving stopped to say  
that he had found love in the place  
where the lonely go to dream. A girl with green eyes

said love was a sentence without a full stop  
a passage rite into salty waters in a boat with glass sides.

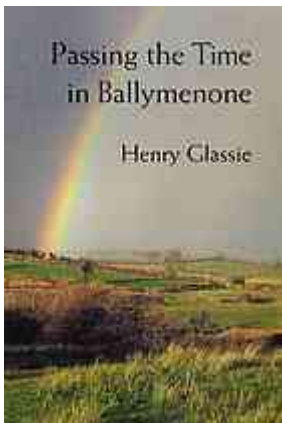
And still you asked and still you stood  
and still you wondered why, yet no answers found  
until it did seem as you leaned into the night under those beams  
that held up the sky that love had indeed lingered with you  
and then passed you by while you were blowing smoke rings at the stars  
and the woman at your side holds the moon in her arms  
the moon in her arms  
the moon in her arms.

**Moon Keeper** was shortlisted for the 2017 Seamus Heaney Award for New Writing.

**Teresa Kane** has worked as a freelance journalist for the BBC and has a long history of working with children in their poetry writing. She is currently Principal of Magherlough Primary School, Trillick.

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## Fermanagh Time



This time of year the days lengthen, the clocks go forwards, and busy people have for once an excuse for being late. Not so in Fermanagh. Here the rhythm never changes; it is constant all year round. Summer or winter, you may wait half an hour for someone to turn up – and if you chance to wonder aloud what is keeping them, then people wag their heads and say, “Ah, Fermanagh Time.”

Fermanagh Time gives us the dark winter mornings that keep us in our beds, and the long summer evenings that keep us out of them. A hundred years ago, when British Summer Time was new, there was New Time, Old Time and Fermanagh Time – or as some called it *God’s Own Time* – when the sun was always highest at noon. Old Time – Greenwich Mean Time – was then not all that old. It came with the railways, and most people who didn’t need to catch trains still went by God’s Own Time. Fermanagh is seven and a half degrees West, so here by Greenwich Time the sun rises and sets half an hour later than it should.

Time is a strange thing, like manna in the wilderness. We each get it at the

same rate – twenty-four hours each day, neither more nor less, and if we are lucky, that happens maybe three thousand times in our lifetime. We may measure it in different different ways and spend it in different ways, but we cannot save it for 'later'. 'Later' is just more time that must be spent. Of course, it makes no sense to spend time doing things that we neither enjoy nor profit from. If such things need to be done, we can always pay other people to do them. But then we have to spend time working to pay them, and time waiting for them to show up. What is the point in working at something you don't want to do, in order that others should work at something they do not want to do?

Time has to be spent, and if life is worth living then it has to be spent in a way that allows us to live all the time. Perhaps we in Fermanagh have always known that, because of the weather. The grass will grow when it grows, the turf will dry when it dries – probably later than we expect, but that's Fermanagh Time for you. We may be glad when it's early, but we can not rely on it. In the meantime, there is time to be passed. To get an idea of how we used to do that, read some of the books [Henry Glassie](#) wrote about his time here in the 1970's – many of which are available in Enniskillen Library.

Perhaps we are beginning to catch ourselves on; to appreciate once again the value of slow: [slow food](#), [slow reading](#), [slow gardening](#), [slow streets](#), [slow architecture](#). Four or five times each summer I give hospitality to passing cycle tourists – people who have travelled slowly through all corners of the world, sometimes for months, even years at a time, and on a budget of perhaps £5 a day. From them too I have learned how little we need to pass the time well: clean water, decent food, dry clothes, and most of all, a safe place to rest and make friends. There is no reason why anyone should be denied these things. With just this much secure, the poorest person is willing to freely give of their time, because they will have more time tomorrow. From that time, freely given, has come all the art and culture in the world.

People don't just like to do things that are easy and fun. If there is no great penalty for failure, most want to challenge themselves, to try something that might just possibly work until they succeed. Once in a while they may produce a genuine and original work of art. It's not so much a matter of making as of growing. This being Fermanagh, it will probably take longer than you might have expected, but that doesn't matter. There is all the time in the world.

To paraphrase [David Graeber](#), the most productive thing to do with stuff is to help grow people: curious people, inventive people, kind people; the sort of people you would want to have around you in your old age. That takes a lot of time, the right sort of time.

Fermanagh Time.

***Jenny Brien*** Editor

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## Ghosts

We set out that morning  
Bright and determined  
To make our mark  
On this frozen place,  
To capture  
And claim it, make it  
Our own, note the trees,  
The glistening lake,  
The bog-brown streams,  
Assess its great potential  
And create pointers for our return.

We had been so busy gauging  
Distances and light patterns  
From a low, watery sun  
That it was sometime  
Before we realised  
We were following the path  
Of a pair of foxes;  
Overnight hunters  
That in daylight had become  
Ghosts of themselves  
Leaving only an impression  
Of survival and fierce parenthood.

One branched off into the forest.  
We followed the other  
Up into the high plain  
Where we lost him,  
Or her,  
Though they had only existed  
In our imaginations



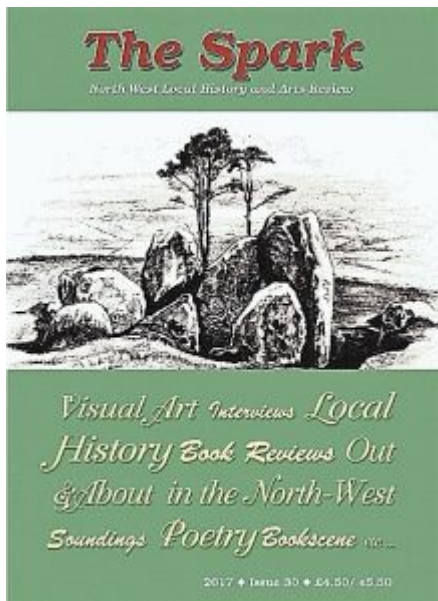
Like dreams.

We were silent  
On our way back.  
As silent as the ghosts  
We too were destined to become.

*Teresa Godfrey is a freelance writer with two children's dramas broadcast on Channel 4. Her Allingham Award winning story, The Jackdaw in the Attic, was broadcast on radio. She is the recipient of the EU New Media Talent Award for her screenplay adaptation of the novel Black Harvest by Ann Pilling and she has written five feature length screenplays on commission. She was the founder of the award winning TIDY Theatre Company, and has been co-ordinator for a number of television documentaries produced by Besom Productions. Teresa currently lives in Enniskillen and is working on a poetry collection and a stage play.*

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## The Spark



For those of you not familiar with it, *The Spark* is a Local History and Arts Review magazine. It is published once a year in April and is distributed in seven counties of the North-West: Donegal, Tyrone, Monaghan, Cavan, Fermanagh, Leitrim and north Sligo.

The next issue (No. 30) has almost 30 articles and features that cover a wide spectrum of interests – local history, interviews, visual art and poetry as well as book reviews and other matters about books and publishing.

Some of the local history articles are: Richard Hayward's *North-West Connections*; *Out and About in the North-West*; *History in a Postcard – Aghalane Bridge*; *Folk Cures from Cavan and Fermanagh*; *The Savile Estate in Co. Tyrone*; *Sir David Storey – Tydavnet Knight*; *Carnaween and Disert in the*

*Blue Stacks; History in a House – Aviemore House (Monaghan); Arthur Parry – the boy who went to war; Irish Neutrality – Sacred Cow or Myth?; Enniskillen and the Spanish Civil War; and Memories of the S.L.N.C.R. (Sligo Leitrim and Northern Counties Railway).*

On the more literary and arts side there is a short piece on W.F. Marshall 'the bard of Tyrone.' Ted McCarthy has a beautifully written short piece on a personal connection with Robert Zimmerman (Bob Dylan) and Patrick Kavanagh.

There are two interviews:

Bobby Hanvey (the *Ramblin' Man* of Downtown radio for many years) and photographer of many famous people, talks to Michael McPhillips. Photographs of Heaney, Friel, De Valera (in coffin) and Lord Brookeborough, etc. are included.

Prof. Frank Shovlin talks about the writings of John McGahern. Shovlin was once taught by McGahern in Galway University. It is a very insightful interview (by Melanie Ward) about McGahern and much else to do with writing.

Ciaran Parker from Cavan gives off steam in the 'Soundings' feature, and Mary Montague, a poet born in Ederney, has a pageful of poems. Mary has her third collection coming out soon. She has been translated into at least three other languages.

Two final year students from South-West College show their paintings, and besides all that there are other bits and pieces to whet the historical and artistic appetites.

The Spark is on sale in all the main towns of those seven counties, and many smaller towns too.

***Dermot Maguire*** Editor/Proprietor

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## [The Magic of Music](#)

There are so many things in this world that divide us as human beings, that seem to create conflict and strife, but if there is one thing that can be pointed to, as bringing brings people together in a positive way, it is music.

More than any other art form, music has this great collectivising aspect. It can be enjoyed on your own, in the privacy of your home or through the plastic earpieces of your iPhone, but there is little doubt that the experience is enhanced by coming together and sharing it, either by participating or just communal listening.

Some anthropologists have speculated that early humans sang before a common language was developed. You don't always need to comprehend the precise meaning behind chants, chorals or songs, for them to touch the emotional centres of your cortex. From the ululations of the warriors of the Serengeti, to plainsong in Gregorian Chant, from the whirling Sufi dervishes to the polyphonic harmonies of traditional Georgian, the keening sorrows of Iberian Fado to contemporary Gangsta Rap – they all have the capacity to reach into our hearts and to transport us to other, more ethereal forms.

My Grandfather sang at weddings and funerals, – sadly, much more of the latter. He did it for a shilling, which paid for the following Saturday:, a ticket to the rugby or a theatre show, a few beers, a sneaky bet and fish & chips on the way home. He had a lovely lyric tenor voice, that to my biased ears, sounded like the great Enrico Caruso on the 78 that he used to played on a gramophone.

Music was always present in my home as I grew up. We had one of those old Radiograms and I used to play all my parents' records: *Favourite Arias*, Mario Lanza, Kathleen Ferrier, Frank Sinatra, Nina Simone – to *The Dubliners*. I would sit on the speaker part of it, turn the Bass wheel up to 10 on the dial (there was no 11!) and feel the deep, low vibrations through my backside.

To my parents' horror I moved on to heavy rock and metal of *Led Zeppelin*, *Queen* and *Iron Maiden*. That was was simply beyond their comprehension at the time – though I later had my father watching VHS videos with the likes of Meat Loaf, Gary Moore, *Heart*, and *Whitesnake* and thoroughly enjoying them.

This was the thing; my parents taught me not to be too 'precious' in your music listening and to try different things, my tastes remains catholic and eclectic to this day.

Live music has led me to have many wonderful experiences and come together with a diverse range of people: a week in Bayreuth, enjoying *The Ring Cycle* by Wagner and the endless conversations in the hotel bar with fellow Wagner enthusiasts; seeing *Madame Butterfly* for the first time and having my heart broke sore by her death at the end. Then there was a Manowar concert in Birmingham. where Joey DeMaio played *Sting of the Bumblebee* (his take on the more well-known *Flight*) on a 12-string Rickenbacker Bass, and the even more impossibly flying digits of Scandinavian axeman Yngwie J. Malmsteen in Bristol.

There was that time in Edinburgh seeing Scotrock band *Runrig*, when the notes of Banks of Loch Lomond struck up and I was grabbed by a leery-eyed, bekilted native and told to '*Sing ye Sassenach gobshite ye*' (I am Welsh but I did not argue the point). So we sang and pogoed until I needed a double hip replacement and – my blood roiling with Braveheart blue woad – I was rewarded with a whisky-sodden sloppy kiss on the lips. It was a little forward, but *When in Rome...* as they say.

Then in Dublin one steamy July evening, I went to see *The Lone Bellow*, a band who performed a range of self-penned Americana. At the end of the concert, they came down from the stage and in the middle of the crowd, sans electric



amplification, performed Paul Simon's *Slip Slidin' Away*. Kanene Doheny's soulful vocals were met with a chorus of 200 drunken concert-goers.

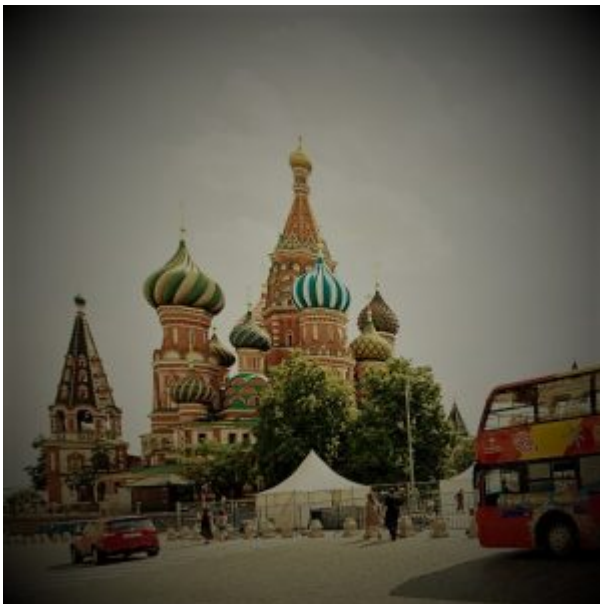
Here's the thing, it was not roared out: instead there were perfect harmonies, totally unrehearsed; and we sang with restraint, gentleness and with perfect pitch. It was a spiritual experience and our cheeks were wet with tears; it was an unforgettable moment.

Music at its best is capable of these all things and many more besides. Music is magic and those of us blessed to be open to it, can have our lives transformed by it.

*John Llewellyn James*

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## Always Keep Your Pass



I could not believe my eyes. Could it be real? Was it a trick of my imagination? A mirage perhaps? What was before me was an Ulsterbus. But why on this road as it was not a bus route? Where was the driver?

Could this be the first chance ever to use my Bus Pass? It was the only concession I had been awarded two years ago after a lifetime of paid taxes and contributions. Free spectacles, free dental treatment, free chiropody and the rest? Forget it! All a futile socialist dream...

Now was my chance to hop on the bus for a free ride to Tempo. I fumbled for my wallet and fingered over the various plastic cards it contained. Damn! I had forgotten to bring it. Never mind, I still had the one I never leave home without: my Greater London Council Security Pass.

I had worked in County Hall, just across Westminster Bridge and a short

stroll from The Houses of Parliament for eight years until it was abolished by Margaret Thatcher in 1986. She had condemned it as the '*Citadel of the Looney Left; the Trotskyite alternative seat of government, the Bolshevic Kremlin,*' but everyone in County Hall knew that Lambeth & Southwark Town Halls were where the Militant politburo really held sway.

My supreme political boss was Ken Livingstone. "Red Ken" worked in the main original building while my cadre was situated in the tacked-on gulag known as *The Island Block*. It was built on a traffic roundabout and entered from the second floor of the main building's South Block by an enclosed corridor bridge. From my desk I had a panoramic view that took in St. Thomas' Hospital, The Palace of Westminster, The former Lambeth Women's Lying-in Hospital, the metropolitan taxi's entrance to Waterloo Station, and The Florence Nightingale Pub, our team's watering hole.

Our work area, coded PILWASWOL – *People In London Without A Settled Way Of Life*, was positioned between the *Squatter's Liaison Section* and the *Grants Unit*. From the latter, according to myths put about by the pro-Thatcher press at the time, Ken's staff dispensed unrestrained largesse to lesbian, gay and ethnic minorities and was even said to have channelled funds to Libya, Cuba, the IRA, and freedom movements world-wide.

The chair Ken sat on when visiting our Section was venerated with mock reverence and reserved for him exclusively. Between times, it held my Chairman Mao type overalls, *Class War* dungarees and a change of battle-fatigue style *Solidarity with Nicaragua* trousers. After Abolition I won the chair in a sweepstake. I brought it with me when I moved to Northern Ireland in 1997. Later, when I bought a vintage Ferguson tractor it became the driving seat.

The other token I retained was my GLC Security Pass. Colleagues had laughingly said to me that, armed with it, I would be able to enter any public building in the world: The Coliseum, The Tower of Pisa, you name it! They recalled the story put about by his opponents of when Ken Livingstone visited Russia:

Like all devout socialists, he decided to visit the Tomb of Lenin. Although the queue was nearly a mile long Ken was informed that, due to his status, he could bypass it, and found himself at the front. The guards demanded to see his identification. He duly showed his passport.

The response was "Niet!"

He then showed his special visa documents.

"Niet!" was repeated.

He presented his return air ticket. "Niet!" once more.

Then Ken had a brainwave: he produced his GLC Pass. The effect on the guards was immediate.

"Da! Da! Da!"

He was escorted in with enthusiastic back-slapping. When he completed his visit and came out into Red Square an official car with outriders was standing by to escort him to his hospitality dacha. *Dastvedanya! Comrade Livingstone!*

The Ulsterbus was empty of passengers. Soon the driver appeared from behind a hedge. I bid him the best of the day and he explained that he was "...off route and out of service" before driving away. My bus-pass is still unused, but perhaps one day my ex-GLC pass will be of use – when I finally set off for that around the world in eighty days trip that I have been promising myself before I die.

**Anthony Brady** was born in Romford, Essex. Since his retirement he has had prose published in Ireland's Eye and Ireland's Own, and poetry in The Guardian and The Spectator blogs. He is a former Chair of Fermanagh Writers.