

THE PRIESTS SOUL + SONG



REFLECTIONS ON AN
UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

About the Book

Known collectively as The Priests, Fr Martin, Fr Eugene and Fr David, have taken the music world by storm. Since they signed their much-reported Sony contract in front of Westminster Cathedral in April 2008, their album has sold almost 2,000,000 copies worldwide and broke the Guinness record for the fastest-selling debut classical album in the UK. It has also chalked up an impressive fifteen weeks at No. 1 on the Classic FM chart and was nominated for a Classical Brit Award. In June 2009, The Priests topped off their incredibly successful year with a highly-acclaimed mini-tour of the UK and Ireland.

But long lunches in swanky restaurants and celebrity parties count for little with these down-to-earth, wonderfully talented singers, because first and foremost, David, Martin and Eugene are priests; their faith and the work they undertake in their busy parishes takes priority over everything else they do. So, whilst their gruelling promotional schedule for the album has taken them around the world – from Europe to Montreal and Toronto, from Washington to New York and Sydney, where they have played to packed houses and given dozens of press, radio and tv interviews – they have always been happy to return to their parishes in Belfast and the people they serve.

Now in *Soul Song*, The Priests draw upon their unique experiences as priests and performers, their love of music and their faith, as they weave together a rich, illuminating tapestry of spiritual wisdom. Insightful and engaging, it is a treasury of memories which offers us all a rare and timely opportunity to reflect on our own journey through life.



Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Epigraph

1 Beginnings

Father David

Father Martin

Father Eugene

2 Gifts

Father Martin

Father Eugene

Father David

3 Life's Lessons

Father Martin

Father Eugene

Father David

4 The Circle of Life

Father David
Father Eugene
Father Martin

5 Meditations

Father Eugene
Father Martin
Father David

Postscript

Acknowledgements

About the Authors

Copyright

SOUL SONG

Reflections on an
Unexpected Journey

THE PRIESTS

Father David Delargy,
Father Eugene O'Hagan
and Father Martin O'Hagan

*For my parents, Francis and Colette, and
for my brother and sisters, with love.*

Father David

*We dedicate the thoughts and stories in this book
to our father, Francis, our brother and sisters,
and in memory of our mother, Joan,
who was a great influence in our lives.*

Father Eugene and Father Martin

*Let us begin this day with singing
whether we feel like it or not,
let us make glad sounds
and force our tongues to articulate
words of thanksgiving and praise.*

Psalm 95

1



Beginnings

*Whatever you do, or dream you
can do,
begin it - boldness has genius,
power and
magic in it. Begin it now.*

Goethe



Father David

ROBERT MCMULLAN, MY MATERNAL grandfather, emigrated to New York in 1928, aged twenty-six. He went there as an economic migrant, just as countless Irish men and women had done before him and have done since, though in his case economic necessity was not the only, or even the principal, reason.

His father, Alexander, who had been in the Royal Irish Constabulary, thought it fitting that Robert should follow in his footsteps. So Robert was sent from his home in Glenariffe in County Antrim to the Phoenix Park in Dublin in order to receive the necessary training. Ireland in the 1920s was just emerging from a period of intense political and constitutional upheaval. Many nationalists in the northern six counties felt that constitutional issues were far from settled and there was still much to play for. Consequently there were some who looked none too kindly on a young man such as Robert joining the Royal Irish Constabulary, and who expressed this opinion to his parents in a manner which caused them to reconsider. It was to escape such pressures and potential dangers that young Robert abandoned his plans to join the Constabulary and turned his

thoughts westwards to the opportunities that New York had to offer.

Mary McAuley, Robert's sweetheart, then aged twenty-one, was living in her parental home at Fallowvee, on the coast road below Carrivemurphy. It was a somewhat isolated spot in an area that was historically part of the summer estate of Lady Londonderry, close to Garron Point on the Antrim Coast. In front of and past their door wound the gloriously scenic coast road stretching from Larne to Ballycastle, which, between 1832 and 1842, had in a monumental feat of engineering been blasted out of the limestone rock. The construction of this road provided not only relief from unemployment for the local people in the days prior to the catastrophic potato famine, the great hunger of 1845-52, but also a military road into a previously inaccessible part of the country, which had been a refuge for insurgents during the 1798 rebellion.

Immediately behind the McAuley home and lapping the limestone and basalt rocks that constitute the Antrim coast lies the Sea of Moyle. This is the ancient and poetic name given to that part of the North Channel situated at the narrowest point between Ireland and the Mull of Kintyre in Scotland. From this point, on a clear day, there are magnificent views in an easterly direction towards Scotland and northwards across the bay to Cushendall, a picturesque market village sheltering at the foot of mighty Lurigethan.

Such a glorious, unspoilt, natural environment could not be more different from the towering skyscrapers, noise and hustle and bustle of the teeming modern metropolis that was New York, where in a few years' time Mary would find herself.

Before Robert left for New York, he and Mary reached an understanding that she would join him in America as soon as she could. He undertook to send some money home to help pay for her fare. True to his word, he wrote often,

extolling the virtues of the wonderful, exciting place that was New York, whetting her appetite for the great adventure of coming to America, and sending her, in instalments, the fare that would permit her to join him, as they had agreed.

For Mary, however, given her pious upbringing and the social mores of the day, it would not have been seemly to go to Robert directly. As luck would have it, however, she had an aunt and some cousins already living in New York. They too had written to Mary, urging her to come across and offering her accommodation. So it was that on 17 May 1930, at the age of twenty-three, Mary McAuley boarded the SS *Caledonia* and set out from the Harland and Wolff docks in Belfast to make the long sea crossing that would take her to New York. As her ship passed along the coast she could make out her parents and her family standing at the back of the house – tiny black dots in the distance – waving her off with their white bed sheets.

On arrival in New York, Mary took up lodgings with her aunt and cousins in Brooklyn and set about making a living as a seamstress. She was thrilled to be reunited with Robert, but at the same time felt in no immediate hurry to wed. She relished the opportunities now available to her to socialize and make new friends. She loved to dance, and in New York there was no lack of opportunity. Inevitably she attracted new admirers, who, although she did not much encourage them, nevertheless posed an unwelcome challenge to Robert for her affections.

Robert, however, was a persistent suitor and on 28 June 1931 he and Mary were married at St Mary's Church in Long Island City, New York. Their first child, Robert, was born in May 1932. Almost immediately Mary found herself pregnant once again. The baby would be born the following summer. Realizing that the intense humidity of New York in the summer did not suit her, and overwhelmed with homesickness, she determined that this baby should be

born in Ireland. Intending to take a holiday in Ireland and return to New York once the baby was born, with her husband's encouragement she and the boy Robert sailed home to Ireland, leaving Robert Senior to continue his work on the building sites in order to support his young and growing family.



Father David's grandparents, Robert and Mary, on their wedding day, 1931.

Back home in Ireland, in July of that year Mary gave birth to her second child, a girl whom she named Marese. By now, Mary was starting to have second thoughts about returning to New York. Exciting and exhilarating as that great city undoubtedly was, she did not consider it a suitable environment in which to bring up her young family. Her roots and indeed her heart were in Ireland, by the sea, where she had been born and had grown up. Furthermore, having been reunited with her family and friends in the Glens of Antrim, she could not bring herself to leave them all a second time.

She wrote to Robert in New York, suggesting that he should come home so they could rear their children in Ireland, which he duly did. They bought a dwelling at the church end of Red Bay, at the foot of Glenariffe, that glen known as the Queen of the Glens and arguably the most majestic of the nine scenic glens of Antrim. It was here, in a spot more or less equidistant from Mary's family at Fallowvee and Robert's in Foriff, that Robert and Mary settled down to rear their family of six – Robert, Marese, Colette (my mother), Dermot, Enda and baby Gerard (who died young) – and live out the rest of their days.



My grandparents' house was ideally situated to take advantage of the breathtakingly beautiful sea and mountain views. Looking out to sea, to the left was the small village of Waterfoot, with its pier and the red arch making a passage for the coast road through the sandstone cliff, whose top was dominated by the ruins of Sir James McDonnell's castle, built in 1561 and the scene of many battles in the late sixteenth century. To the right was the white limestone arch

which carried the railway to the old pier at Fallowvee. This was built to accommodate the boats that transported away the iron ore that was quarried in the mountain near Galboly. Further along the coast road was the White Lady, a chalk figure resembling a seated woman gazing out to sea, which had been formed over many centuries by the sea's erosion of the limestone rock.

Surrounding my grandparents' house was a garden, divided into four more or less equal parts. To the front, where the garden met the public road, was a well-trimmed lawn, used on warm summer evenings for playing bowls. Running parallel to the lawn were Mary's meticulously tended flowerbeds, displaying red, purple and pink fuchsias, golden honeysuckle and blue and pink hydrangeas, as well as wonderfully scented roses, dahlias, red hot pokers, daisies and many other flowers – all providing a riot of vivid colour in spring and summer.

Behind that, and largely hidden by the flowers, was a neat kitchen garden. That was Robert's domain, where, in order to provide for his growing family, he cultivated rows of potatoes, lettuce, cabbage, onions, leeks, carrots, turnips, spring onions, raspberries and gooseberries. The combination of fertile soil and Robert's careful tending resulted each year in a bumper harvest, and whenever my family or my cousins' families called to visit, we would invariably depart with a brown paper bag or a cardboard box packed with a variety of wonderfully fresh garden produce.

The section of the garden directly behind the house was shielded from public view. It was here that on warm summer days the babies and toddlers played, while the grown-ups sat around chatting and enjoying the afternoon sun. In one corner there was a rowing boat, complete with rowlocks, oars and fishing nets. In another corner there was a whitewashed shed roofed with weathered and rusted

corrugated iron. Once upon a time it had been used as a byre – I recall looking on as a child in fascinated wonder as Robert and Uncle Dermot birthed a calf there – but mostly it seemed to me to be a mysterious dark cave, which, as one's eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, gradually revealed its contents to the curious: fishing rods, hooks and sinkers, assorted golf clubs, broken things, hurleys, old furniture, half-used paint tins, brightly striped canvas and wooden deck chairs, heavy, old-fashioned black push bikes, plant pots, assorted gardening implements, bags of fertilizer, coal and slack, and a stack of wood blocks and turf for the fire.

A low, white pebble-dashed wall, built by my grandfather, separated this part of the garden from a long red sandy beach. For us children, this was undoubtedly the main attraction. The sand, the sea, the waves and the rock pools provided us with limitless scope for exploration and fun – building sandcastles or damming the burn that flowed from Milltown under the road and across the beach to the sea, running races, playing rounders, kicking a ball, paddling as we made our way home with sweets from Peggy's shop, swimming, skimming flat rocks, boating, fishing for cod or mackerel, rock climbing, crabbing and shell hunting or bashing limpets off rocks – these were our summer seaside pastimes. There was always something entertaining to do and fun to be had.

For several years, my parents kept a good-sized caravan in a field beside my grandparents' house which easily accommodated my parents, my four sisters, my brother, our home help, Mary, our dog Rusty and me. To climb into our bunks each night, exhausted by the day's exertions, and be lulled to sleep by the crashing of the waves on the shore, or to awaken on a bright summer morning and hear the gentle lapping of the ebbing tide – these were magical experiences.



Father David as a schoolboy, aged five.

In the daytime, if it was wet outside, we might go across and play with our cousins in my grandparents' house or else stay in the caravan playing cards or reading, the caravan windows all misted up and running with condensation. But if it was dry and fine we stayed outside all day long, from early morning till late evening, with the beach and the sea as our limitless playground.

And on those days, or so it seemed to me, my grandmother, Mary, would always be there, standing at the low wall in the back garden, worriedly scanning the beach for sight of us, screening her eyes with her hand against the glare of the sun, and occasionally calling to us with an edge of anxiety in her voice if, in our fearless thirst for adventure, we had wandered too far up the beach or ventured out too far in the boat.



Father Martin

Journeys are by their nature full of surprises. They evoke a sense of adventure – and during the course of my life, music has guided me to many new horizons.

My mother was a significant influence on me right from the start, as she was very musical – she was both a singer and a pianist – and so, inevitably, music and love are irrevocably entwined for me. A sense of rhythm and an appreciation of all types of music were instilled in me from my earliest days. Music expresses what is otherwise inexpressible; it is a language of the heart which reaches into the very inner depths of who we are.

Musical memory is a crucial element on the journey through life, as the mind gathers together pieces that have resonated over the years. Like a traveller revisiting favourite haunts, I return to these pieces again and again to be nourished and refreshed by them – as if falling upon an oasis in the desert.

My earliest musical memories date from my childhood in the country, a time of exploration and intrigue. If I wasn't digging for treasure like an archaeologist or sliding down the snowy driveway on my mother's tea tray in winter, I was being captivated by music.

I clearly remember the day when I heard one particular piece of music – from the big hit at the time, *The Sound of Music* – as it wafted through our house in Claudy, Hillcrest, Kinkull. The family was gathered around the piano: the two wee ones at the front, the older twins at the back and my brother Eugene in the middle. I recall rushing into what we called ‘the good room’ and shouting excitedly, ‘Don’t forget about me!’ I was determined not to be left out because I loved those singing sessions, and the music that we created with my mother’s help was magical. It seemed as if there was a fountain of music flowing in our home.

There was also the added delight of going somewhere to sing. My mother was a nurse and she would take us along to local nursing homes and to what was then the Waterside Hospital, where we loved to sing for the patients. There was a real feeling of connection with the patients and a sense of healing; the patients seemed soothed and delighted when they saw us tumbling in – my mother at the front and the Von Hagan family trooping in behind! Through experiences such as this I learned how music had the capacity to heal. It certainly played a pivotal role in our lives when my mother was herself ill in hospital, and later in my own life during times of stress.



The young O'Hagan family. Back row, from left: Francis, father Frank, and Eugene. Front row: Joan, Martin, Martina and Mura.



Music continues to shape me in so many ways. Looking back to those early days, I realize there was a kind of electricity in the music we made, a blending that was instinctive. Perhaps it was also a meeting of mind and spirit, a form of unity which I found not only uplifting but empowering.

For example, I remember listening to a recording of Handel's music when I was seven or eight - during the 1970s, when our family was going through a period of change and upheaval. We were leaving our home in Claudy to live in Derry, and I'd found the record in a drawer that I was checking through just before we left the house. Almost immediately, I realized that I had discovered something rather special, a little piece of treasure. I put the record on

the turntable and was instantly thrilled by the new sounds I was hearing.

My imagination went into overdrive and I was captivated by the sheer genius of the piece. The merging instruments, which I had never heard before, seemed to take me on a new path, and I knew with certainty that this was just the beginning of a wonderful new journey of discovery; I wanted to hear and experience more! There was a wonderful sense of symmetry about the piece, as if everything was orderly and made mathematical sense. I closed my eyes and pretended that I was boarding a boat that would take me down the River Thames, listening to the musicians in another boat as we journeyed down the river together. I was entranced by the sound of the violins dancing together, and it was to make a lasting impression on me.



During those days of black-and-white TV, we were encouraged to rely on our imagination for entertainment, and living in the countryside helped with this. We felt a real connection with the landscape, which was enhanced by our day-to-day activities: collecting basketfuls of berries, and then giving in to temptation and eating them all; dipping our toes in the river while waiting for our brothers and sisters to return home from school; playing in the snow and building snowmen in the mountains on icy winter days. This connection with nature was somehow linked to the music that surrounded me, and which seemed to flow with ease through each day, each experience.

Music had a spiritual dimension for me, too, for my mother played the organ in our parish church. I recall the atmosphere and the sense of mystery and delight that enveloped me as a child when I listened to the music filling