

Don McCullin on HIV/AIDS in Africa

25 March 2019

Twenty years ago, Don McCullin joined a Christian Aid project in southern Africa. As Tate Britain stages a retrospective of his work, we consider the place of photography in raising awareness and understanding.

Don McCullin, one of the world's leading photojournalists, documented the major conflicts of the second half of the 20th century: Cyprus, Congo, Biafra, Vietnam, Cambodia and Iraq. From 1991, based in Somerset, he concentrated on still-life and landscape photography.

In 1999, in his first overseas project in a decade, McCullin went on assignment with Christian Aid to report on the HIV/AIDS pandemic in South Africa, Botswana and Zambia.

“ I sat in England and I thought - what is the purpose of my life? I've been reading a lot about AIDS in Africa... I thought, I don't want to sit in England looking at the beautiful landscape. I should be doing something. ”



Image courtesy of Don McCullin
Photo: Tate Photography/Matt Greenwood

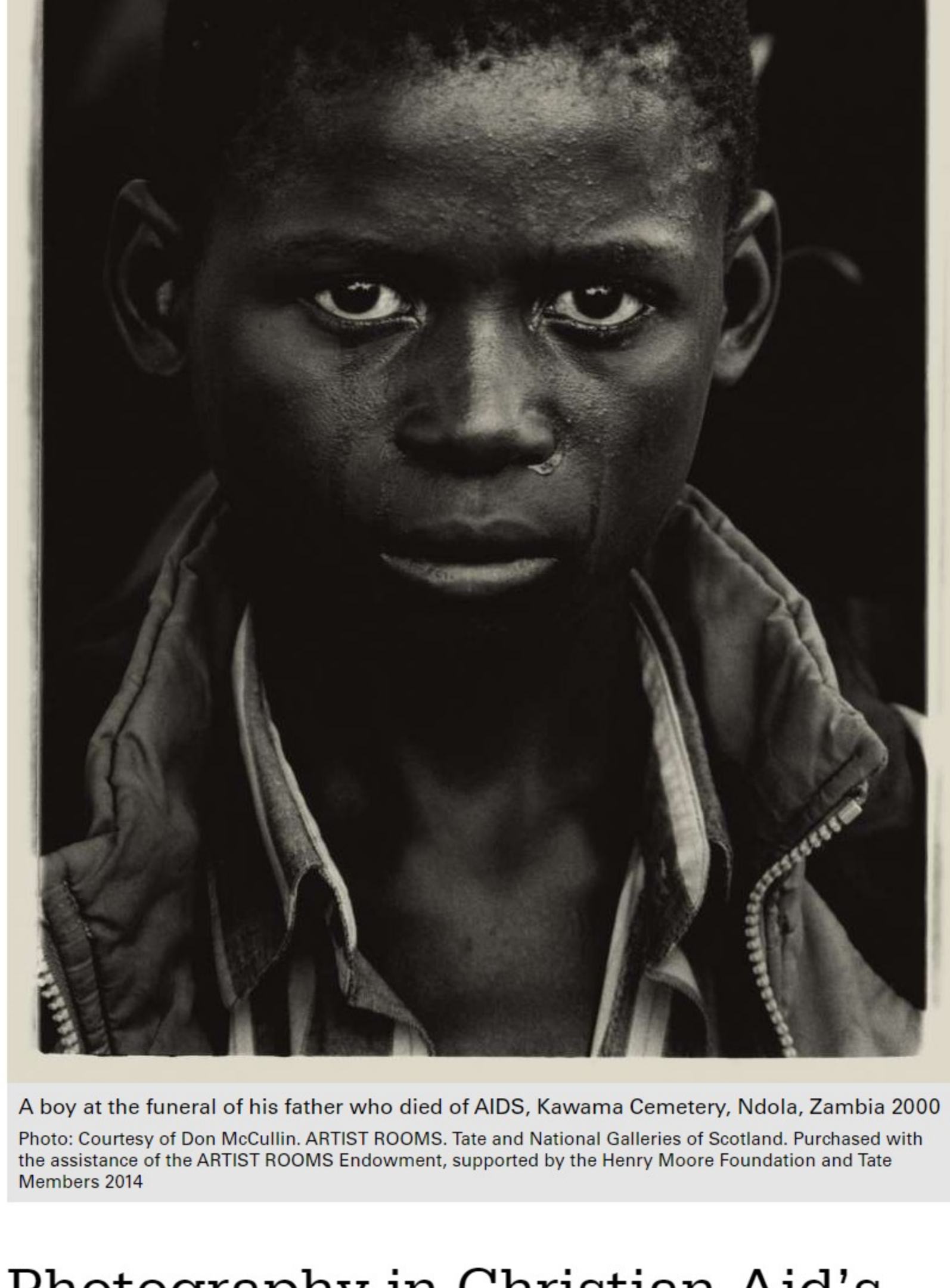
“ When I got to Africa, I found that it's not a story just about AIDS. It's a story about poverty. In a way, poverty is a war. It's a disgrace; it's abominable. To find people sleeping in darkened rooms, lying on the floor... finding people who have no medication whatsoever, no food, nothing, living in these intolerable conditions. It's just unacceptable in terms of humanity. ”

McCullin's work with Christian Aid led to an exhibition, *Cold Heaven: Don McCullin on AIDS in Africa*. It is a powerful portrait of communities and people living through a humanitarian disaster.

'It was a privilege to work alongside Don McCullin, who is a master at capturing the full complexity of a situation whilst maintaining the dignity of his subject,' explains Julia Fairrie, Christian Aid's Media and Communications Advisor. 'Social documentary photography is a powerful medium for telling stories and raising awareness about important issues.'

'As Don found in war it is difficult to photograph people who are dying without violating their dignity', noted John Swain, *Sunday Times* foreign correspondent. 'But with a unique sensibility, he brings to his work among people living with HIV/AIDS a depth of experience and ethical standards built up over years of working as a photographer amidst the most heart-rending and raw situations. Every film that he exposes is from the heart.'

Cold Heaven was launched at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London in May 2001. To coincide with the United Nations' special session on AIDS, the portraits were shown at the UN General Assembly in New York in August 2001. The exhibition then toured the UK and Europe.



A boy at the funeral of his father who died of AIDS, Kawama Cemetery, Ndola, Zambia 2000
Photo: Courtesy of Don McCullin, ARTIST ROOMS. Tate and National Galleries of Scotland. Purchased with the assistance of the ARTIST ROOMS Endowment, supported by the Henry Moore Foundation and Tate Members 2014

Photography in Christian Aid's work

Photography plays an important role in communicating stories and raising awareness.

The use of 'social documentary' photography is a vital tool in allowing us to convey powerful messages, while maintaining the dignity of the people whose stories we are trying to tell.

Great photographers are adept at determining not only that there may be a story to be told in a place and time, but also that many more stories may be discovered, seen or imagined. They are skilled at turning chaotic, disordered scenes into photographs that convey loss, heartbreak - or happiness.

By using a sharp sense of context, the inherent movement and the tensions within a scene, photographs are loaded with significance. They are small tools for changing the world.

Our work on HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS is a major public health concern in many parts of Africa. The countries with the highest prevalence rates are in Southern Africa: in Swaziland and Lesotho, more than one in four people are living with HIV/AIDS, and around one in five in Botswana and South Africa. Yet countries across the continent face massive public health challenges.

Despite continued investments from multiple donors and government, and much progress in HIV treatment, the UNAIDS data report for 2018 says that 'the global AIDS response is at a precarious point'. Funding and prevention are close to crisis. The response risks leaving children behind. Women and girls remain disproportionately affected, and HIV continues to carry terrible consequences of stigma and discrimination for already vulnerable people.

Christian Aid's HIV work is focused on advocacy and working with faith actors to address HIV stigma and discrimination. In Nigeria, the focus has been on:

- adapting the SAVE model to align with and strengthen national guidelines on reducing HIV stigma and discrimination.
- training faith leaders as change agents to address sexual and gender-based violence and its connection to HIV/AIDS.
- the People Living Positively project for effective HIV care in Sierra Leone and Nigeria.

A selection of the works from *Cold Heaven* now features in the Tate Britain exhibition until 6 May. [Book now](#)

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We have more than 70 years' experience of working in partnership to support communities to thrive. We tackle the root causes of poverty so that women, men and children the world over are strengthened against future knocks. And if disasters happen, we get people the help they want straight away.

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