

HUBERT BUTLER ESSAY PRIZE 2024



Hubert Butler Essay Prize Awards: judges and winners - (L-R) Catriona Crowe, Roy Foster, runner-up Niamh Cullen, guest speaker Olivia O'Leary, winner Conor Daly, and Nicky Grene (photo by John D. Kelly) (9/9/2025).

DR CONOR DALY - WINNER OF THE HUBERT BUTLER ESSAY PRIZE 2024



"It is a great honour to have been awarded this year's Hubert Butler Essay Prize. Were it not for this prize, another decade or so might have elapsed before I ever encountered the maverick and impish kindred spirit of Hubert Butler, whose life path echoes uncannily in so many ways with my own.

"Just as 'a cat may look at a king', so I will risk listing a few of those similarities here...

"Like Butler I grew up with feelings of ambiguity or ambivalence about my identity: where was 'home'? and what did 'home' really mean? Whereas Butler was a 'Protestant Republican', I was an 'Irish English boy'. As a child born and educated in England, I might have found myself during a typical day playing conkers in the school playground, a poppy pinned to my lapel, and yet would

come home that same evening to a house where a framed facsimile of the 1916 Proclamation took pride of place in the hallway. For Butler that early home was in Maiden Hall, Co. Kilkenny. For me it was in Maidenhead, Co. Berkshire.

"With Hubert Butler I have in common the later experience of English boarding schools, our study of 'the Classics' at university, as well as official invitations from government agencies in post-war Yugoslavia to visit that country (in my own case in the early 1980s, to study Macedonian in Ohrid and Albanian in Prishtina). Above all I like to think that I share with Butler some aspects of a lifetime exploring and contemplating the fault lines of empire, religion,

language and identity in that region of intense cultural-political seismological activity that is Central and Eastern Europe, with its elusive and ever-shifting fault lines and those huge collisions between armies and ideologies – where a kaleidoscope of labels have tussled insistently for attention: Communism, Fascism, social democracy, Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Jewishness... And where we have witnessed war, famine, ethnic cleansing, terror and genocide on an unprecedented scale.

*“If Butler’s major insights came through his practical activism and advocacy for Austrian Jews in the late 1930s and his later discovery and courageous exposure of the insidious rule of the Catholic Church in glossing over the Vatican’s connivance at – and the direct participation of Croatian clergy in – the massacre of Serbs and other minorities at Jasenovac after 1941, in my case it was Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s meticulous chronicling of the Soviet prison camp system in *The Gulag Archipelago* which first brought me to a flickering awareness of how any all-powerful and unchecked establishment or ideology could wield an intimidating, overwhelming, unaccountable and ultimately merciless power over individuals.*

“Butler knew that we can never become complacent about the threats from totalitarianisms of one kind or another – religious or secular. Like the wart or herpes virus in humans, the authoritarian totalitarian germ can lie dormant for decades in a population before becoming reactivated. The warnings throughout Butler’s essays – on both Irish and ‘other European’ subjects – about the contagion and poison that can result from any all-too-literal interpretations of that terrible triad of nationalism, patriotism and empire ring particularly loudly today. Maurice Craig, in his introduction to Butler’s essay collection ‘Escape from the Anthill’ (1985) singles out this prescient sentence written by Butler in 1941: “A nation cannot be created negatively by elimination or strategic retreats into the past”. For Butler any authentic concept of nation and patriotism must be about the here-and-now and must be in tune with the imperative to ‘bloom where you are planted’. Butler is impatient with simplistic narratives of origin. His essays always foreground the present, the human perspective, the role of the individual, of dialogue and of neighbours (however awkward). And this is the single idea which – in Butler’s own words – “skewer together” his essays and present them, for all their apparent heterogeneity, as coherent parts of a single whole.

*“These essays are not an easy read, because Butler can be acerbic company. He was particularly dismissive, for example, of the Jesuits, accusing them – in his essay with the tongue-in-cheek title *A Prayful Project* (1960) – of cynical and self-serving motives in their indiscriminate support of all secessionist independence movements in the Soviet Union of that time – be they ‘White Russian’, Ukrainian, Cossack or any other. “You will be dazzled”, writes Butler of two Jesuits of the American province, “by the fresh lustre which they give to that faded adjective Jesuitical”.*

“But I think there may be at least one Jesuit that Butler might have approved of – Fr. Michael Bossy SJ, the headmaster of the school I attended in my teens, now in his nineties and living in London. I remember him delivering a particular punchline, in his deliberate but deadpan manner at one particular student assembly nearly 50 years ago. One proactive history teacher had issued an invitation to the Soviet ambassador to visit the school and Fr. Bossy was explaining to us his reasons for ‘uninviting’ him. Having aired some concerns around prisoners of conscience in Soviet jails at the time, Fr. Bossy proceeded to contemplate whether the feelings of the Soviet Ambassador might have been hurt by the inconsistency and discourtesy shown him. He did not spend too long on this contemplation. I remember that his eyes did not blink as he surveyed us all: “You are nice, all of you. Nice. Yes indeed. But niceness is not enough”.

“A sentiment which I think Hubert Butler would endorse – as he proves over and over again in these jewels of essays.

“On behalf of all the contestants for this year’s Hubert Butler Essay Prize, I would like to thank Prof. Roy Foster and his team of judges for their careful consideration of our entries. I would like to thank Anthony Farrell and his Lilliput Press for their pioneering work in first collating Butler’s essays over 40 years ago. If not for Lilliput Press Butler’s words might well have been scattered to the four winds, forever unheard. And all of us – contestants and reader alike – owe a huge debt of gratitude to Jeremy O’Sullivan, who founded the Hubert Butler Essay Prize in 2018. As a result of his initiative and his sheer enthusiasm for Hubert Butler, new generations of readers will continue to experience these gems of creativity, spirit and authenticity for many years to come.

“In my own case, I can promise that no reading list I give to my students in future will ever be lacking the name of Hubert Butler.” - Conor Daly

Conor Daly is a graduate of Trinity College Dublin (Russian and Ancient Greek; Theoretical Linguistics). He has a PhD in Slavic Languages and Literatures from the University of California, Berkeley. His doctoral dissertation was in the field of cultural semiotics (the development of Russian scholarly prose) but his research interests include the history of the Russian language in Alaska, Jewish intellectual life in the Russian Empire and the image of the dissident in Soviet culture.

Since 2019 Conor has been a Visiting Research and Teaching Fellow at Trinity College Dublin where he lectures and tutors on Central and East European area studies, translation, literature and film. He organised the weekly public lecture series Understanding Europe's East, held at TCD in the spring of 2024. He has chaired sessions on Russia and Ukraine at the MacGill Summer School in Glenties, Co. Donegal. As ‘Conchubhar Ó Dálaigh’ he is a regular contributor on Eastern European affairs for Raidió na Gaeltachta. He is currently learning Ukrainian.

DR NIAMH CULLEN - JOINT RUNNER-UP



Olivia O’Leary and Dr Niamh Cullen, runner-up of the Hubert Butler Essay Prize 2024 (Photo by John D. Kelly)

“I am grateful for the opportunity that the Hubert Butler Essay Prize gave me to think both deeply and widely about our European past and what it might mean for the challenges we face as a society today: to think not just about history, but with history and what it might mean for

our shared future. As a firmly European minded citizen of Ireland, Hubert Butler's example is more needed than ever at a time when nationalism and xenophobia are on the rise again almost everywhere. It is an honour to be recognised for this prize." - Niamh Cullen

Niamh Cullen teaches modern European history at Queen's University Belfast. She is working on a creative biography of Darina Silone and a novel. Her essays and stories have appeared in the Dublin Review, the Tangerine Magazine and the London Magazine. Her most recent book is 'Love, Honour and Jealousy: An Intimate History of the Italian Economic Miracle' (Oxford, 2019; Milan, 2024).

DR MAURICE FITZPATRICK - JOINT RUNNER-UP



"I go to the Tyrone Guthrie Centre in Monaghan every chance I get. I can think more clearly there than anywhere else and get more written. I love its borderland location and ecumenical composition. It was on a shelf in the Tyrone Guthrie Centre that I first encountered Hubert Butler. His books have stayed with me ever since. The essays seem to be renewed through each new phase of our island's complex evolution. 'Boycott Village', for example, while rooted in Ireland in the 1950s, nevertheless asserts an important moral and political need in Ireland today. As Butler wrote in that essay: 'A great common gesture would have given us courage and confidence and arrested the sad, slow Protestant decline. It would have reminded the northern Protestants that we belong together and that they belong to Ireland'.

Our common heritage and the island we share are fundamental concerns in Butler's work. That spirit encouraged me when I attempted my essay. I am highly honoured that it has been chosen as a runner-up in this year's Hubert Butler Essay Prize. I wish to thank the Butler family, the judges and everyone involved in this competition." - Maurice Fitzpatrick

Maurice Fitzpatrick is a filmmaker and an academic. He was a Visiting Professor of Irish Studies at the University of Tübingen, Germany, in 2022/23. In 2020, he held the Heimbold Chair of Irish Studies at Villanova University, Philadelphia, and he was a Poynter Fellow at Yale University in 2019. He has made several documentary films for RTÉ, and the BBC including *The Boys of St. Columb's* and *Translations Revisited*. In 2017, he wrote, directed and produced a documentary feature film, *John Hume in America*, on the political life of Nobel Peace Prize laureate John Hume, which has screened in over 30 countries. He is also the author of *The Boys of St. Columb's* (The Liffey Press, 2010; University of Notre Dame Press, 2020) and *John Hume in America: From Derry to DC* (Irish Academic Press, 2017; University of Notre Dame Press, 2019).

Prof Roy Foster's Speech at the Hubert Butler Essay Prize 2024 Award Ceremony, Kilkenny



“It is wonderful to be back in the beautiful Parade Tower, in Hubert Butler’s city, together with a company that includes members of his family, particularly his daughter Julia and son-in-law Dick. I must warmly thank Olga and her team for the Festival’s stellar support for this Prize, Jeremy O’Sullivan for dreaming it up, and keeping us up to the mark, and my fellow judges Nicky Grene, Catriona Crowe and Barbara Schwepcke for their unstinting labours and rapier-sharp judgement. And above all I salute the enduring spirit of the great man himself, a continuing inspiration.

“After seven years and hundreds of entries, the Hubert Butler Essay Prize is now established enough for us to take stock. A key objective, ever since it was just a gleam in Jeremy’s eagle eye, was to create a space in the literary marketplace for the essay form, and to celebrate Hubert Butler’s achievement in showing just how an essay could be formulated, directed and sent out into the world to hit its readership like a bullseye. This process is a more knotty question than might be assumed. A novel can be written like a bird creating a nest: building out thickening layers of accretion from a fundamental core. (Indeed, it might be said that too many novels are indeed written like that; you can’t repeat *Tristram Shandy*, or at least you shouldn’t try.) But an essay needs to be constructed like a bird flying home, with the odd dip and swoop, but a firmly concentrated sense of direction and ultimate outcome. However, the route can still allow for creative diversion. That is how Hubert Butler wrote, as he described in a 1943 letter to an editor who had found one of his pieces obscure:

As I felt fairly certain where I wanted to get, and there wasn’t much space, my idea was to hustle the reader (for his own good) past all the turns and forks and not picnic at each cross-roads and take him into my confidence. That would have been a different kind of journey. I was quite ready to make it, but not in that article... I usually find indirect methods the best and have sympathy with the man who gave his son a good slap so that he would remember having seen a salamander.

“The way Butler used indirection ‘to find direction out’ was nonetheless highly disciplined; the arguments could be buttressed by sharp personal insights, vivid anecdotes, and unforgettable snatches of dialogue, but the bird flew home as straight as an arrow.

“He also had the gift of connecting current and past crises, without ever simplifying the context; and since 2017 the committee who organise the Essay Prize have tried to sustain this kind of connection. Over a period ominously racked by global crisis and conflict, we have tried to focus attention on themes and issues which are central both to Butler’s work, and the world today. Thus, the subject-titles have invoked frontiers, identity, the abuse of political power, coping with pandemics, and the tension between individual and community values. Last year’s winner Shane Conneely, addressing the question ‘How far can we trust science?’, concluded that we can only trust it as far as we can trust each other; and trustworthiness was much in our minds when choosing a topic for 2024. We wanted to encourage examination of the uses and abuses of history, at a time when deep-rooted antagonisms all round us have taken a particularly toxic form, and also to consider the implications of the tendency to discount ‘history’ in favour of ‘memory’.

“Butler was mordantly conscious of the need to interrogate our history in order to avoid ‘bitterly recoiling into self-sufficiency, pedantry, mythology and linguistics’. Thus, canonical essays about the wartime history of the Balkans such as ‘The Sub-Prefect Should Have Held His Tongue’ forensically examine the evasions and self-serving amnesia that blanketed over the terrible fate visited on Orthodox Christians by Pavelić’s Nazi-collaborationist government, despite the wealth of evidence recording it. A decade after the war ended, Butler wrote:

Speed of communications has increased, and we are expected to have strong feelings about an infinite series of remote events. But our powers of understanding and sympathy have not correspondingly increased. In an atmosphere of artificially heated emotionalism truth simply dissolves into expediency. This shifting current of expediency may be illustrated by a chronicle of the changing attitudes to Pavelić in the last ten years.... In one way or another the memory of a terrible crime against humanity is being confused and effaced, so that many people believe that it never happened at all or that it has been monstrously exaggerated.

“This was uncannily prophetic in 1956.

“In an even earlier essay of 1947, ‘The Last Izmerenje’, Butler recorded observing in 1937 an extraordinary ritual of forgiveness between two families in a mountain village in Montenegro. The objective was to end a vendetta by following an ancient procedure of expiation, carefully worked out by precedent. While acutely conscious that this procedure was archaic and doomed to extinction, he pointed out that ‘most European law is based on compensation and punishment; justice is important but it is also impersonal. Montenegrin custom on the other hand takes into account forgiveness which English justice ignores, and because of that, when “izmerenje” passes away, as pass it must, an important element of justice will have gone with it.’ It’s a remarkable essay, bringing the vectors of conflict, history and reconciliation together through a vivid, pointed and wickedly funny personal account.

“Our essay subject this year therefore invoked some key Butler preoccupations, by asking. ‘With narratives of conflict currently distorted by misinformation and the substitution of memory for history, what are the chances of reconciliation?’ The twenty-seven entries approached the topic in a wide variety of ways, some making direct reference to Butler’s writing. Several chose to address the questions of memory, history, conflict and reconciliation in a directly autobiographical mode, with varying success. While the upheavals of European history and conflict featured, the essays more predominantly tackled the ongoing tragedy of Palestine and

Israel, and (especially when considering misinformation and historical distortion), Putin's Russia. Occasional entries made us think of last year's subject ('How far can we trust science?') by being clearly midwived through artificial Intelligence- though they were very few, and very easily identified. Some entries were heavily oriented towards philosophy, with name-checks from Heidegger and Kant to Foucault and Nussbaum; rather to my surprise only one person referred to Pierre Nora, the doyen of history-and-memory studies (and mentor to President Macron, for better or worse). There was a wide variety of styles, and an equally varied approach to typographical checks, leading one person to relate marine climate change to "rising seal levels", which I rather liked. Overall, there was a sense of engagement, commitment and combativeness which cheered us, and we ended our reading convinced that the essay form is alive and kicking.

"In choosing three front-runners we turned out to be very much of a mind. Niamh Cullen's reflective essay on 'Bomb Shelters in Belfast' was tellingly subtitled 'the uneasy consolations of history'. It focussed on the selective memory of war and the dominance of certain narratives in history, relating these issues to the life of a radical Irishwoman caught in the flux of World War II in Italy and France. The author made incisive points about the current nostalgic preoccupation with the struggles of 1939-1945, at the expense of facing up to the horrors unfolding around us now.

"Maurice Fitzpatrick's essay also begins with World War II, starting with the massacre of the Czech village Lidice by the Nazis and the manipulation by later generations of the received view of his terrible event. The essay expanded to take in similarly prescriptive 'official' approaches to Polish history, the current rewriting of Gandhi's achievement by Hindu fundamentalists, France's uneasy relationship with the Vichy years, and Japan's with its wartime history. Overall, the complexity and contradictions of history are posited against the determination of states to impose a preferred 'record', not excepting our own island in the wake of the Good Friday and St Andrew's Agreements. Fitzpatrick mordantly surveys the agreed narrative presented in cinema and television treatments, as well as formulated by governments, and suggests that nuance and ambiguity receive short shrift thereby. He closes with an imaginative flourish, suggesting that artistic creativity might supply a more illuminating route to recognising the uncomfortable complexity that is a necessary precondition to reconciliation.

"Finally, Conor Daly's powerful piece starts with his own memories of living in the USSR, a half-century after Butler's sojourn in St Petersburg. He richly evokes the student world during the Brezhnev years, and the pulsing desire of the younger generation to 'live in truth' (Vaclav Havel's great phrase). 'They knew that such an authentic history existed somewhere. They had read snatches of it in *samizdat* and *tamizdat* or heard about it from the so-called 'enemy voices' (the shortwave radio broadcasts of *Radio Liberty* and other forbidden stations in the 'rotten West'). For these Moscow friends of mine their own memory, their personal and family stories took primacy over any official narrative.' Written with notable vividness and punch, Daly's essay probes the way that memories of tyranny and oppression shape reactions to the present as well as the past, brought into focus by the all too brief re-set of the Gorbachev years. In conclusion, he skewers the misuses of history in contemporary Russia and the state of 'memory wars' in the Russian public sphere. His essay, spicing acute observation and argument with illuminating personal insights, is Butlerian in more ways than one.

"I now hand over to Olivia O'Leary, doyenne of Irish journalists, who has for many years flown a flag for telling uncomfortable facts, raising difficult questions, and working indefatigably towards that elusive goal of helping us all in Ireland to "Live in truth". No better woman to present the 2024 Hubert Butler Essay Prize. Thank you."

Prof. Roy Foster
Chair of the Hubert Butler Essay Prize 2024

Hubert Butler
Essay Prize



Olivia O’Leary - 2024 HUBERT BUTLER ESSAY PRIZE AWARD SPEECH



Olivia O’Leary speaking at the Hubert Butler Essay Prize awards in Kilkenny Castle, 13th August 2024

I have framed over my office desk an article from The Irish Times by Fintan O’Toole. It arose out of a controversy in 2022 about the number of young Irish people who taken to singing ‘Up the ‘Ra’ on nights out, in a brilliant piece, Fintan wrote that he was all in favour of young people singing ‘Up the ‘Ra’ as long as it was the full version. And he went on to give that full version: ‘Up cutting the legs off young women shopping for wedding dresses; up torturing kids with Black and Decker drills through their kneecaps.... Up burying the body of a widow in a secret place and telling her 10 kids that their mother has run off with some man and left them. Up massacring those mourning the dead of two world wars...’ and he finished many paragraphs later... ‘...up the maimed and the bereaved; the broken and the bereft.’ That long list of Fintan’s is familiar to me as I was up in Northern Ireland reporting for RTE at the time. I covered many of those stories. They happened, as did murders by loyalists and by the British army. And there are younger people who will say to me ‘But we don’t remember them. They are not part of our reality.’ Oh yes, they are, or they should be. I don’t believe any democratic state can function at its best without a sense of shared reality, both about the present and the past. Take Ireland’s refusal, for example, to allow the President to attend any official commemoration of the dead of the last two world wars until the 1990s. Or take our official determination to play down, or excise altogether from our teaching of history, incidents like the murder during the 1798 Rising of about 200 Protestants in a barn at Scullabogue in Co. Wexford. This was the one-sided version of history which helped to create a Roman

Catholic/Protestant faultline down the middle of our society where people owed allegiance to their church, their tribe, rather than to their state. It fractured our sense of shared ownership of our own state. It contributed to a lack of pride in our public places and our shared heritage. It resulted in a weakened sense of citizenship. Hubert Butler has written very cogently about the price to this state of not having as part of our public debate the dissenter tradition represented by Irish Protestants, something for which he excoriates his own community as much as the Roman Catholic one.

So, taking issue slightly with the suggested theme of the essay competition this year, I would say that the danger to reconciliation is not always that memory would be substituted for history, but that partial and unreliable memory is substituted for history. One essayist this year reminded us of the words of Gerry Adams in his funeral oration for former Chief of Staff of the IRA, Kevin McKenna, on 27 June 2019, where he said: 'we will not let the past be written in a way which demonises patriots'. Dictating the way history will be written, refusing to recognise the importance of having a shared reality, undermines our democratic present and poses challenges to reconciliation in the future.

Those in power will always try to dictate the way history is written and sometimes people go along with it because it's easier that way, or it's what they want to hear. I am old enough to have grown up in an Ireland in the 50s which must have been the most Catholic place in the world. We had Catholic writers- Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, François Mauriac. We had Catholic singers- Bing Crosby, Mary O'Hara, and Canon Sydney McEwan. All our heroes and heroines were Catholic and most of our villains were Communist. We were taught to hate the communists even more than the Nazis. When after the second world war the communist authorities in Croatia imprisoned Catholic Archbishop Stepinac, we knew whose side we were on. So, the fur flew when Hubert Butler, at a meeting of the International Affairs Association in Dublin in 1952, dared to raise the extent to which the Catholic Church authorities in Croatia including Stepinac collaborated in, or at least were ready to benefit from, the forced conversion to Catholicism of Serbian Orthodox Christians by the pro-Nazi Croatian authorities. The Papal Nuncio walked out of the meeting and the papers next day reported this scandalous 'insult to the Nuncio'. Hubert Butler was denounced and votes of condemnation against him passed in local authorities around the country. Worst of all, in the revived Kilkenny Archaeological Society which he had co-founded with my grandfather, John O'Leary, the Graignamanagh baker, a motion was put down to remove him as secretary. The motion was well defeated so Butler could have stayed on. However, he said he didn't want to be a source of division in a society he had hoped would provide common ground for Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants to celebrate their joint archaeological inheritance. So, he resigned.

Which brings me to another picture hanging on my wall at home. It is a cartoon by the artist Rita Harte of that famous Kilkenny Archaeological Society, with Hubert Butler in the dock. It was given to me by Hubert's granddaughter, Suzanna. All those who supported Butler have a halo around their heads. All those who opposed him have devil's horns on their heads. And my bewildered-looking grandfather who, as President, chaired the meeting, has over his head one horn and a half a halo. The support for Butler was overwhelming so my grandfather didn't have to cast the deciding vote. He was a loyal Catholic, so I imagine he was vastly relieved. He died when I was 12 so I never got to ask him.

So, I recognise in the essays here other countries that had similar dictated mindsets. In his essay, 'Remembering the Future', Maurice Fitzpatrick writes about the village of Lidice in Czechoslovakia where after the assassination of the assistant head of the SS Reinhard Heydrich in 1942, all the men were massacred, and the women and children were taken to concentration camps. Then a historian discovered in 2020 that only two days before the assassination, a Jewish man who had been sheltering for years in the town was handed over to the Nazi authorities. This was an inconvenient fact in the official story of Lidice's victimhood under

Nazism and the authorities insisted that local schools and museums continue to stick to the original and official story.

In her essay, 'Bomb Shelters in Belfast - the Uneasy Consolations of History', Niamh Cullen looks at the fact that neither the British notion of their national stoicism – the 'keep calm and carry on' of popular imagination – nor the notion that 'Britain stood alone against Hitler' which figured large in the Brexit debate, quite fit actual histories of the war. They are more a consoling myth in an uncertain world.

Then take Russia, where there was the general belief that Stalin was the standard bearer against fascism until that wonderful book by Vasily Grossman, 'Life and Fate', written in the 1950s, was published in the 80s, long after the Jewish author, imprisoned for his dissident views, had died. As Dr Conor Daly writes, "the novel presents Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union and Stalin's resistance as a struggle between two brutal dictatorships – a totalitarian Nazi Germany and an equally totalitarian Soviet Union – in which all humanity is the victim." It even dares to have a chapter set in a gas chamber as the gas is turned on. It was the most powerful book I had read in forty years, but it told a story of a brutal and incompetent Stalin that many Russians didn't want to hear. It was a novel which probably contributed to the end of the Soviet Empire. And now that Putin in an attempt to make Russians feel great again is trying to return to a version of that Stalinist or even imperial past, he may find ready Russian takers. As Conor Daly says, history shows that we can go backwards as well as forwards. Hubert Butler was a true member of the awkward squad. He believed in challenging his readers, and these essays, in a competition which bears his name, do the same. Like him, these three prizewinning essay writers explore and make us face uncomfortable truths; they challenge us intellectually; and they write beautifully. Hubert Butler would have approved.

Olivia O'Leary, Kilkenny, 13th August 2025