HUBERT BUTLER ESSAY PRIZE 2023

SHANE CONNEELY - WINNER OF THE HUBERT BUTLER ESSAY PRIZE 2023

"I'm obviously grateful to the organisers and the judges of the Hubert Butler Essay Prize 2023, and not just for selecting my essay. I'm grateful to them for creating the opportunity to have a think about these ideas and also set them down in ink. Most of all, I'm grateful to them for the introduction to Hubert Butler.

"My first encounter with Hubert was a couple of years ago when I saw another winning essay in print, and after a bit of googling his work proved fruitless, I made the journey to Lilliput Press's shop and bought Prof. Foster's book there. It has been a joy to dip in and out of Hubert's work. Whether it is his attempts at securing asylum for Viennese Jews, the class conflicts and insecurities of Leningrad academics, or the true tale of who didn't dig up Tara, Butler had an enormously empathetic eye for people, even as history obliterated them.

"I'm especially grateful to the organisers for inspiring me to set aside some time to think and write about things which are not my usual domain. I touch off this gently in my essay, but it is hard to find and justify the time it takes to set out your thoughts on paper. In previous years, I wasn't organised enough to write a piece for submission, or maybe I wasn't confident enough about having something sufficiently interesting to say.

"This is the first time that I have submitted anything to a competition like this, so what I'll say to next year's winner is that you shouldn't hold yourself back, and I look forward to reading the thoughts you'll soon be sharing with us." - Shane Conneely

***Shane Conneely** is first, a storyteller, his day job sees him leading the Chambers Ireland policy team in his attempt to reshape the world for the better, albeit through the media of crunched numbers and graphs, or interminable submissions which a captive audience of civil servants have to wade their way through. If not talking or writing or reading, Shane has probably thrown a tent onto a bicycle and has disappeared off to see how far across the continent his legs will take him. He is curious, is full of notions, and is delighted to be the winner of the 2023 Hubert Butler Essay Prize.*

STUART BEGLEY - JOINT RUNNER-UP

“I'll never forget the first time I read Hubert Butler's work as a student. The depth of his intellectual curiosity was astounding. Bucking the human tendency toward reductivism, he sought out complexity and revelled in it. In his wide-ranging writings, tackling such eclectic subjects from the Balkans to Hebraic puns in the Old Testament, he dug deeply, explored and expounded. It was thus not surprising to learn from one of his essays that he was also an amateur archaeologist in his beloved Kilkenny. Being a runner-up in a prize that bears his name is something that I will cherish, along with his writings, forever.” - Stuart Begley

Stuart Begley is a barrister from Dublin. This essay is my first attempt at competitive writing, my previous writing experience being confined to university essays and legal opinions.

DESMOND TRAYNOR - JOINT RUNNER-UP

"It is indeed an honour to be selected for a Runner-Up Prize in the 2023 Hubert Butler Essay Competition – an annual event in commemoration of one of Ireland’s greatest humanitarian writers, whom I admire so much, and which is rapidly becoming a beacon for all that is good in contemporary belles lettres*, and their social application, in these islands. It will be a pleasure to once again visit his hometown, lovely Kilkenny City which I love so much, to collect my award, and to attend some of the many events taking place during there during Kilkenny Arts Festival."* - Desmond Traynor

Desmond Traynor *is a graduate of University College Dublin and Trinity College Dublin, and the winner of a Hennessy Literary Award and an Alumnus Essay Award. His debut novel The Myth of Exile and Return was nominated for the 2005 Irish Novel of the Year Award. His short stories have been widely published. A frequent contributor to many Irish and international publications, writing on literature, music, film and visual art, he has taught literature and creative writing at Franklin College, Lugano, Switzerland; the School of Arts at Dublin Business School; and at UCD. He was recently awarded a Bursary in Literature, and two Agility Awards, by the Arts Council of Ireland, for a collection of essays on which he is currently at work*

Catriona Crowe's Speech at the Hubert Butler Essay Prize 2023 Award Ceremony, Kilkenny

"Our theme this year for the Hubert Butler Essay Prize was **"How far can we trust science?"** The recent appearance of Christopher Nolan's film *Oppenheimer* has created new interest in the dilemmas confronting scientists in the exercise of their often awesome powers, in the tension between solving a practical problem and the implications of that solution. During the pandemic, we became used to admiring and even venerating scientists for their ingenuity and speed in creating life-saving vaccines, unless we were in the grip of highly unscientific conspiracy theories such as the efficacy of swallowing bleach, or beliefs that the vaccine manufacturers were implanting chips into our doses of vaccine to facilitate mass surveillance. By and large, science, in the form of the vaccines and public health measures won, and millions of lives were saved as a result."

"J. Robert Oppenheimer was faced with fiendishly difficult moral decisions about the use to which his creation, the first atomic bomb, was to be put, and he didn't even have control over those decisions. It is to the credit of Christopher Nolan, and our own Cillian Murphy, who gives a superlative performance as Oppenheimer, that the difficulty, moral ambiguity and moral consequences of the Manhattan Project are not elided or evaded, and that Oppenheimer's tortured regret at the destruction of life in Hiroshima and Nagasaki is fully apparent. People leave the cinema asking questions instead of proclaiming certainty, which is surely what the scientific method is all about.

"We were very pleased with the quality and versatility of the essays we received this year, 19 in all. Subjects covered included climate change, artificial intelligence, cosmology, Big Oil, Big Tobacco, Big Pharma, vaccines, genetic modification, the "post-truth world", religion, and a delightful essay on history as a science. As you can see, plenty of room for heroes and villains in that range of ideas. Also dealt with was what scientists call "the hard problem": the unknown mechanism through which humans are self-aware. AI, now exemplified in the evils of Chatbots and the bane of teachers' lives, came in for most attention. You'll be relieved to hear that most of our essayists don't believe the machines are going to outsmart us and turn us into slaves. The winning essay, by Shane Conneely, who works for Chambers Ireland, begins by rejoicing in the vast quantity of information about science available on YouTube from experts in various fields, all anxious to explain complicated and vital processes to us for nothing. Then he points out that, despite this cornucopia of scientific knowledge waiting for us, most of us, perforce, trust science every day by using objects and processes which we do not understand: "Whether it is washing machines or WhatsApp, we are surrounded by things we use in spite of our ignorance.

"The essay moves on to question the characters of many scientists in the past: Ronald Fischer, statistician and racist, Francis Galton, polymath, statistician and the father of eugenics, James Watson, discoverer of DNA and racist, and the odious Richard Lynn, until 2018 a professor emeritus of psychology in the University of Ulster and unashamed racist and white supremacist. Lynn doesn't even have the virtue of useful scientific research to his credit, unlike the other three. Conneely uses him as an example of both bad scientific process and unwillingness to learn from peers because of his motivations.

"The question of who or what to trust – science, scientists, other interests – is the basic issue in this essay. Sometimes we have to separate the science from the scientist, as with Fischer, Galton and Watson: their odious views do not detract from the brilliance of their scientific scholarship. George Orwell provided us with a handy guide to this process when he wrote that

Salvador Dali, surrealist painter and ardent fascist, was “a magnificent draughtsman and a disgusting human being”.

“Conneely concludes with an exploration of the hard problem of consciousness: he doubts that neuroscience can answer the question of how we know who we are. Another villain, Elon Musk, gets called out for his futile, expensive and cruel attempts to do just that. Plucking out the heart of our mystery, to adapt Hamlet, will probably take more than algorithms and scanners. The essay ends with a visit to Sarajevo, in a nod to our presiding genius, Hubert Butler, where the author discerns murderous intentionality in the bullet holes at head level to be found all along its buildings but points out that science cannot get to the root of that intentionality. **“**Science is only one of those things that we do, and we can only trust it as far as we can trust each other.” We have two runners-up, Stuart Begley and Desmond Traynor. Begley begins with a glorious description of the physical act of listening to Henryk Gorecki’s *Copernican* Symphony, composed to mark the 500th birthday of the great astronomer. He then concludes that an account of the merely physical act of listening is insufficient to describe the full experience of hearing the music. That requires unscientific subjective language, which bring us again to the hard problem of self-awareness. He excavates the scientific response to the problem and finds it wanting. Along the way, he draws our attention to some of the many scientific mistakes of the past, including the interesting idea that “women engaged in higher education deplete energy that should otherwise be used in procreation.” Smart, hard-working Moms everywhere, take note. He concludes, as does our winner, that the purely physical approach to the location of human consciousness is doomed to fail.

“Desmond Traynor begins with a quote from Bertrand Russell: ‘Science in itself appears to me neutral, that is to say, it increases men’s power whether for good or for evil.’ He uses Arthur Koestler, Thomas Kuhn and our own John Banville to illustrate the necessity for paradigm shifts in knowledge to advance science, and has a terrific quote from CP Snow on the invincible and contemptuous ignorance of certain humanities luminaries when it comes to science, which ends: “So the great edifice of modern physics goes up, and the majority of the cleverest people in the western world have about as much insight into it as their neolithic ancestors would have had.” He points out the dangers of disinformation with the example of Cambridge Analytica’s decisive influence in both the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump. Then he takes us on a thoroughly enjoyable tour of science fiction books and movies, and their representations of human beings’ interactions with cleverer machines. Remember Hal in *2001: A Space Odyssey*? He brings us back to Oppenheimer with JG Ballard’s justification for dropping the bombs on Japan – they saved his family’s lives. And he quotes the great Lou Reed on the miracle of isotopes as cancer treatment. His final question is: “how far can we trust humans?”

“All of these essays are serious and learned explorations of the question we asked, and it was difficult to choose between them. The takeaway would seem to be that we can trust the scientific process if it is carried out properly, but not all scientists and certainly not all humans. Discernment is needed, and that takes some effort. In a world riddled with misinformation, disinformation, and “alternative facts”, we all need to be educated about how to find credible and trustworthy sources of information. Hubert Butler’s marvellous essays are among those sources, and it is to the credit of Lilliput Press that we can still read them and educate ourselves on subjects which will always matter.”

Catriona Crowe, 13th August 2023, Kilkenny

Hubert Butler
Essay Prize

PROF DIARMAID FERRITER - 2023 HUBERT BUTLER ESSAY PRIZE AWARD SPEECH

Diarmaid Ferriter - Hubert Butler Essay Prize Award Speech in Kilkenny, 13th August 2023

As a history undergraduate at UCD in 1991, I was taught a course on the history of science by Peter Butterfield. Peter was a quiet, considerate, generous minded and understated teacher. It could not have been easy for him teaching in the shadow of his famous father, Herbert Butterfield, the Cambridge historian and public intellectual. Shrewd and insightful, Herbert Butterfield's range of interests was very wide, covering religion, international relations and historiography, and significantly, in light of this year's essay competition, science. One of his best-known books was The Origins of Modern Science (1949). He was intrigued by the nature and limits of power, the role of individuals and the morality of the questions that surrounded them. He also recognized, and this was something his son Peter came to appreciate, that an historical understanding of the evolution of science was vital, as was the need for historians and scientists to appreciate each other: "It is an essential part of the historian's technique, which the student of the natural sciences might not find congenial at first- to regard each generation as existing in its own right; as an end in itself and not merely a link in a chain leading to us, and therefore as interesting for its own sake…one seeks to know not just of the emergence of new scientific ideas, but to understand the older view being superseded. It is unhistorical to dismiss the ancient teaching as merely wrong science or even as an obstruction that had to be overcome".

In the mid-1950s Butterfield made a strong case as to why historians were bound to take an interest in science, but also how, in his view, scientists had not understood "the kind of things that can be achieved by historical enquiry or attained by historical reflection…I do not think that the history of science can be properly written by scientists who imagine that all they have to do

is get up a little history…It has occasionally seemed to me that the scientists, while possessing their own severely critical method in the handling of his evidence when engaged in scientific research, have tended to forget that history has its own technique, its own apparatus for the handling of sources."

As Butterfield offered these reflections, his Irish peers, Theo Moody in Trinity College Dublin and one of my predecessors in UCD, Robert Dudley Edwards, had firmly established the importance of the professionalisation of Irish historiography, what's often referred to as the promotion of 'scientific history'. This professionalisation began in the mid 1930s and the two men were heavily influenced by their time in England and experiences in London University's Institute of Historical Research. In Ireland, they established the Ulster Society for Irish Historical Studies and the Irish Historical Society, equivalents of the Royal Historical Society. With increased professionalization, the focus was on history written based on extensive research in primary sources. But we need to be careful of sweeping assertions about this representing a revolution in technique; Queen's University Belfast's David Hayton points out that those who preceded Moody and Edwards were not ignorant of the 'scientific' method; indeed, Irish medievalists had a tradition of basing their work firmly on documentary analysis. What was at play during the Moody/Dudley Edwards era was a determination that rigorous, document-based history- 'scientific history'- would replace politically prejudiced or sectarian history that dominated public understandings of the past.

It was bogus, however, to assume that any historian could stand detached from their times or that they could write, to use a loaded term, 'value free' history, and Dudley Edwards and Moody of course had their own prejudices and were guided by the lights and leanings of their time. Perhaps inevitably, the claim to be championing 'objective' history prompted criticism and the contention that what was really at play was a revisionist critique of nationalist interpretations which in truth, as Hayton and others have observed, was very political. Brendan Bradshaw, the eminent historian of early modern Ireland, upped the ante in 1993 by suggesting the developments of the 1930s amounted to a wrong turn: "the assimilation of a view of history as a science, with the historian akin to the natural scientist peering down his microscope at a range of data…simply viewing it in a detached way". Ulster historian A.T.Q Stewart also offered a version of this critique; when he was interviewed the same year about the difficulty of clinging to the idea of objectivity, he maintained: 'If you look at history it is about humanity and it is about emotions and some historians write as if it were not. Their view has become terribly narrow'.

I have occasionally been asked myself whether history is a science or an art. It is both, I would reply; we use what might be fairly described as scientific methods of research, and we need to trust that approach to a point, but it also must be about humanity, empathy, creativity, philosophy and emotion. We have come much more into that realm in recent years, sometimes for tragic reasons, and on the back of horrific revelations, by focusing on the power of personal testimony. A point often made by Catríona Crowe and myself when reflecting on the theme of historians and archives, is that the documents might tell you what happened, but they do not often tell you what if felt like. We talk much more now about trauma, submerged and marginalised voices and experiences, and we rightly decry an excessive focus on the deeds of men. But we can also confidently assert that the range of our documentary sources, much expanded, can facilitate rigorous standards of research and peer review and a far wider framework of interpretation.

History is also, as Hubert Butler recognised, intensely about the local, or as he put it, "life lived fully and consciously in our own neighbourhood". Reading from the small into the large was something he excelled at, allowing him to reflect, like his contemporary Herbert Butterfield, on such themes as religion, identity, state formation and fracturing.

Butterfield was intensely religious but not self-righteous; indeed in 1952 he asserted “The greatest menace to our civilization is the conflict between giant organized systems of self-righteousness – each only too delighted to find that the other is wicked – each only too glad that the sins of the other give it pretext for still deeper hatred”. These are words that continued to resonate beyond their Cold War context, and also chime with aspects of the legacy of Hubert Butler. In the same year, 1952, when Butler sought to inform a public meeting about the realities of war-time Croatia and the role of the Catholic Church he was ostracised, locally and nationally, by a grand Irish coalition of the righteous.

Butler’s remarkable range was apparent in essays that could be quiet- “the least noisiest of writers” as John Banville called him - but his mind was internationalist, and his writings were suffused with empathy, nuance and spikiness. So are the essays that were submitted for this year’s prize under the title “How far can we trust Science?” It is a great pleasure to pay tribute to their quality and to congratulate the winners. They too recognise in their essays that while we can trust science to a large extent, it is not enough on its own. It must be enveloped in humanity and appreciation of historic context and awareness of the philosophical questions it raises. Science can be enhanced when it embraces a historical perspective. As this year’s winning essayist Shane Conneely recognises, science is not a thing that is “but rather it is a thing that people do together” and as a result the “product of competitions for prestige, biases, ego and artifice”. There is also an acute danger when people visited by genius “use their capacities to be wrong in very clever ways”.

We should never assume that science is the only tool of understanding. Stuart Begley in his essay notes that major scientific discoveries “dislodge and disconnect us”; we can be saturated or overwhelmed, as, say, in the face of Artificial Intelligence. Will our sense of what it is to be human be diminished as a result? If so, we need to fight back. Another of this year’s essayists, Desmond Traynor, thankfully and boldly, asserts that “Science isn’t an exact science” and that those who practised science in the seventeenth century were known as natural philosophers and engaged in a discipline in which intellectual speculation and not technology was paramount.

This year’s essayists, like the great master, Hubert Butler, recognise the undesirability of excessive deference towards science while also denouncing dangerous denials. They understand, as Butterfield and Butler did, the menace of contrived self-righteousness and certainties and that if science is not humanised and understood properly it can do more harm than good. That is true of history also. The important point is that historical considerations are not a diversion from ‘real’ science nor just an assistance to science. Rather, history is intrinsic to all science.

Diarmaid Ferriter, Kilkenny, 13th August 2025