

HUBERT BUTLER ESSAY PRIZE 2021

ALISON WILLIAMS - WINNER OF THE HUBERT BUTLER ESSAY PRIZE 2021



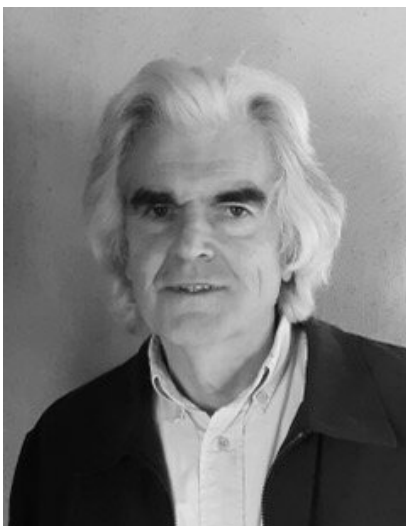
Upon hearing the news Alison Williams said, “Winning the Hubert Butler Essay Prize means so much to me on so many different levels, but two in particular: As a self-defined European Scot, it is a joyful experience to be joined once again with the honourable and ancient lineage of European-ness and European values that Hubert Butler espoused and promoted. Then, to have my writing recognised publicly, in such a prestigious setting, is to know beyond doubt that the work is worth the doing. Words cast spells, and I hope that the words of this essay reach out to others and cast good spells.

“And it is a joyful experience indeed to find myself in such excellent good company. My heartfelt thanks for their imagination and energy in creating and supporting this prize go to the Kilkenny Arts Festival, HEART, and the Essay Prize itself, for giving me the meaty subject matter to work with.”

Alison Williams is a visual artist and ‘late-onset academic’, whose 2013 PhD thesis proposed a visuo-spatial grammar of creative workplaces. Co-editor of *BITE: Recipes for remarkable research* (2014) and *EqualBITE: Gender equality in higher education* (2017), she has written and presented extensively on the creative process and has published in journals as diverse as *Regenerative Medicine* and *Business Innovation and Disruption by Design*. She is currently working on *Between the mountain and the tree: A journey of wilding women* and growing an international community of wilding women.

In a former life she designed glasswork for Freddie Mercury and Dustin Hoffman, ran an arts centre for amateur painters, and was a consultant in creativity to multinationals.

MANUS CHARLETON - JOINT RUNNER-UP



“As a master of the essay form and humanitarian activist, Hubert Butler ‘spoke truth to power’ in an open and engaging style. His example is inspiring and necessary now more than ever in a time when partisan emotive assertion is supplanting evidence-based judgement and respect for difference in public discourse. My thanks to the organisers, supporters and judges for the opportunity to participate in an essay competition that pays tribute to him.”

Manus Charleton has taught ethics and politics in the Institute of Technology, Sligo. He wrote the textbook *Ethics for Social Care in Ireland: Philosophy and Practice*. His essays, short fiction, and a short memoir have been published in *Irish Pages, a Journal of Contemporary Writing*. His review essays have been published in *The Dublin Review of Books*. He has also had short pieces published on the *Brainstorm* website of the Irish national radio and television station (RTE), and an essay published on Australian Broadcasting Corporation's website *Religion & Ethics*. His writing interests include looking at current events in the light of ethical and philosophical ideas. He is also interested in the work of writers and artists and has had pieces published on Marcel Proust, Seamus Heaney, Edvard Munch and Mark Rothko. He was a joint runner-up in the Hubert Butler essay prize in 2019 for an essay on the question 'Where does a citizen of the world belong?'

CONOR MATTHEWS - JOINT RUNNER-UP



"I am deeply grateful to have been chosen as joint runner-up for the Hubert Butler Essay Prize. It's an honour considering Hubert Butler's inspiring work and the fact myself and my fellow prize recipients get to add to that legacy. Now more than ever it's important to think not just about what we value and but also how we can value others, following in the footsteps of the late Mr. Butler."

Conor Matthews studied Film and Animation at Dundalk Institute of Technology, later winning a scholarship to attend the Irish Film School, taught by Oscar Nominee John Boorman. Conor's previous acknowledgements include the Jim Craven Poetry Award, becoming a contributing author to the DKIT writers group anthology book *No Bother*, led by writer Ferdia MacAnna, and taking part in a writers group held by playwright Jimmy Murphy and Glass Mask Theatre at Smock Alley. Conor lives in Kildare with his long-term partner and their dogs, Poppy and Roscoe. His website, conormatthewswriter.com, links to his work.

The 2021 prize was judged by Catriona Crowe, Roy Foster (Chair), Nicholas Grene, Eva Hoffman and Barbara Schwepcke and is designed to reflect Hubert Butler's interest in the common ground between the European nation states that emerged after the First World War; his concern with the position of religious and ethnic minorities; his life and writings as an encapsulation of the mantra 'Think globally, act locally'; the importance of the individual conscience; and his work with refugees.

Hubert Butler
Essay Prize



PROF ROY FOSTER (CHAIR) ON THE HUBERT BUTLER ESSAY PRIZE 2021 WINNER

“Visiting the impressive and lavishly-appointed Museum of Literature Ireland (MOLI) in its splendid premises on Stephen’s Green last week, I was struck by the fact that the definition of ‘literature’ seemed to be restricted to fiction and poetry (and those, overwhelmingly of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries). This gives rather short shrift to the essay form, practised with such despatch and impact by Jonathan Swift, W.E.H. Lecky, John Eglinton, George Russell, W.B. Yeats, Sean O’Faolain and above all by Hubert Butler, whose achievement this Prize celebrates. From his first volume *Escape from the Anthill*, collected by Lilliput Press in 1985, Butler emerged as the master of a muscular and sharp-edged style, perfectly adapted to explore large themes in an economical compass. In a landmark review of that first volume, Hugh Bredin defined the essayist’s gifts: ‘a clear strong prose, a fascination with everyday affairs and their significance *sub specie aeternitatis*, a readiness to generalize, the ability to digress without wandering from the point, to inform without pedantry and enlighten without condescension, to give us pleasure simply by sharing his thoughts.’ The writers who contributed introductions to subsequent volumes of Butler’s essays, such as Maurice Craig, Dervla Murphy, Neal Ascherson, Fintan O’Toole, and John Banville, epitomise these qualities too, and it is this tradition which the Butler Essay Prize exists to encourage.

“Butler wrote searingly to the moment, and the topics set for previous iterations of the Prize have suggested themes that reflect this: asking on one occasion, in the shadow of Brexit, ‘Where does a citizen of the world belong?’ and most recently, exploring identity politics by positing the tension that arises between communal solidarity and individual freedom. In both instances, the response was as challenging and thought-provoking as the judges could have wished. For the 2021 Prize, one issue had to dominate: the vast and worldwide *bouleversement* created by the pandemic, which not only created global disruption in economic, social and political terms, but drastically altered the way we live our lives day to day. The topic we chose was inspired by a line in Anthony Hecht’s poem ‘Tarantula, or The Dance of Death’, first published in 1962.

***During the plague I came into my own.
It was a time of smoke-pots in the house
Against infection. The blind head of bone
Grinned its abuse***

***Like a good democrat at everyone.
Runes were recited daily, charms were applied.
That was the time I came into my own.
Half Europe died.***

.....

***That was the black winter when I came
Into my own.***

“Coming out of our own black winter (or so we hope), this seemed a judicious moment to call for essays asking who or what profited from this world-shaking event, and the answers offered were predictably various: international drug-companies, some murky financial combines, practitioners of political opportunism and chicanery, all featured. But there were also notes of hope and affirmation, reflecting how lockdown and the enforcement of the inward look could open up new perspectives, and the cliché of ‘small mercies’ took on a new meaning.

“From time to time the search for benefits and blessings struck a sentimental of Panglossian note, but not often. In keeping with the title, the literature of plague recurred, with striking invocations and discussions of Daniel Defoe and Albert Camus. Some of the essays veered in unexpected directions to make radical or even questionable assertions; the ones that struck us most practised the Butlerian stratagem of invoking personal experience in order to open it out into an affirmation of broader, even cosmic, themes. The finalist essays were those which addressed the gains and losses of a world crisis in a clear-eyed way, and effectively argued from personal experience to universal conclusions.

“Alison Williams frankly confronted the connections between privilege, vulnerability and self-sufficiency, engagingly exploring the reasons and assumptions why her own experience, and that of those around her, allowed a space to breathe- and above all, the ability to make connections with people in a new way. (The importance of electronic and digital technology at this time of crisis, and the newly crucial level of our dependence on it, is a theme that recurred in many essays.) Above all, Williams’s essay celebrates a time of paradoxical revelation.

“The interpretation of the essay theme by Manus Charleton (who was also a runner-up for the Prize in 2019) confronts Hecht’s poem head-on and explores the way Montaigne’s famous essay on approaching death philosophically took on new meanings during the pandemic. He argues for a ‘beneficial re-set’ of our attitudes towards social relations and economic interdependence, given the resources ploughed by (some) national governments into supporting their vulnerable populations, while accepting that this is far from implying a new approach to moral responsibility, and that civil liberties have inevitably been threatened. Charleton reads Camus more closely than many and invokes the chilling sense of internal exile that comes with living under conditions of plague.

“In marked contrast, Conor Matthews’s essay is unremittingly and sometimes laceratingly personal, arrestingly delineating an individual crisis in order to illuminate how the pandemic enforced a new attitude towards mortality: “If it wasn’t for Covid, I’d be dead”. The sobering experience of unemployment, alienation and uncertain mental health is re-read powerfully through the perspective of Covid and its discontents; it is an essay full of uncomfortable truths. “The same might be said of most of the reading which my fellow judges and I embarked upon this autumn. My thanks to them all- Eva Hoffman, Nicholas Grene, Catriona Crowe and Barbara Schwegcke; to our administrator and presiding genius Jeremy O’Sullivan for his passionate commitment to this Prize which he originated; to Olga and her team at Kilkenny for hosting it, and to the great sage of Bennettsbridge Hubert Butler, a hundred and twenty-one years old tomorrow, and still educating us by his inspiration, imagination and profundity of insight.”

Prof. Roy Foster

Chair of the Hubert Butler Essay Prize 2021