

HUBERT BUTLER ESSAY PRIZE 2019

ANDREW HAMMOND - WINNER OF THE HUBERT BUTLER ESSAY PRIZE 2019



John Banville, Honorary Patron of the Hubert Butler Essay Prize and 2019 winner Andrew Hammond, Embassy of Ireland in London.

JOINT RUNNERS-UP NOEL RUSSELL, MANUS CHARLETON AND NIGEL LEWIS



Noel Russell (Joint Runner-up), Manus Charleton (Join Runner-up), Andrew Hammond (Winner), John Banville (Honorary Patron) and Nigel Lewis (Joint Runner-up) with host of the awards the Ambassador of Ireland H.E. Mr Adrian O'Neill.

JUDGES



Judges of the essay prize: Professor Roy Foster (Chair), Dr Eva Hoffman and Professor Nicholas Grene.

The 2019 prize was judged by 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 introducing the 2019 Hubert Butler Essay Prize at the Irish Embassy on 23rd October 2019

OPENING SPEECH BY PROF ROY FOSTER, CHAIR OF THE JUDGES HUBERT BUTLER ESSAY PRIZE 2019

“I’m speaking as the Chair of the judges of the Hubert Butler Essay Prize; my co-judges are the distinguished writers and critics Nicholas Grene and Eva Hoffman and I’m very grateful to them, and to Paula Johnson for organising us so efficiently; and those who have contributed to establish this Prize. I’d also like to thank the person who thought of it in the first place, Jeremy O’Sullivan, and the Irish Ambassador Adrian O’Neill for his support of the Prize and his hospitality tonight.”

“I also feel I should thank someone not in the room tonight, and that’s Hubert Butler- for the inspiration which his extraordinary essays have provided since they began being published in volume form by Antony Farrell’s Lilliput Press in 1985. Hubert effectively reinvented the essay form, recognised in the acclaim he has received from writers as distinguished as Joseph Brodsky, Neal Ascherson, Fintan O’Toole and indeed John Banville, who is with us tonight. Into a short compass, often no more than half a dozen pages, Butler compressed multitudes; moving easily from memory and observation to reflection in a style which was subtly inflected, sometimes laceratingly vivid, and utterly his own. His analytical cut-and-thrust was scintillating, skewering double-think or sloppy reasoning with one swift metaphor. And he was unnervingly prescient about questions of religion, national identity and the fractured histories of Central and Eastern Europe, no less than Ireland. Above all, he had a gift for catching the essence of a historical moment, often in an uncannily prescient way.

“And therefore, he stays enduringly relevant. Last Saturday I was marching through London with several hundred thousand other people to demand a People’s Vote on Brexit, the third such march I’ve attended. My belief in the rightness of the cause remained certain, but I found myself grumpily annoyed by the juvenile, personal, name-calling nature of the slogans and

caricatures carried by so many of the marchers, and the inevitable sense of people reciting, as in *Animal Farm*, 'Four Legs Good, Two Legs Bad'. And suddenly I thought of a passage in what is possibly my favourite of Butler's essays, 'Peter's Window'- describing his life in St Petersburg (then Leningrad) in 1931. Here he is recalling his thoughts as he marched with his friends through the snowy streets to celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of Socialist Reconstruction. He watches people he knows, as they parade under banners, looking oddly different and translated from their usual selves. 'Organised in processions, those whom we have known as complex individuals shed colour and character.' And he goes on to reflect:

"I have thought that just as half our physical lives passes in sleep, it is perhaps intended that our mental life should be equally distributed between the assertion of our uniqueness and its renunciation. If that trance-like state of submersion in a public or collective mood bears an analogy to sleep, it would reflect our individual and self-centred lives by very simple images and phrases in dream-like sequences. In such a way the caricatures and slogans that floated above them would complement, like dreams, the intricate, logical natures of Kolya and the Baroness [his companions on the march]. The slogans were the shadows of human thinking in which their thoughts merged restfully, just as their footsteps concurred in the broad beaten track upon the snow, and we do not expect faithfulness in tone or form or colour from shadows.'

"This suddenly reconciled me to my circumstances, and reminded me once more of how much Butler has to teach us.

"It is just such reflections on the tensions between generalised beliefs, individualism and political commitment which strike a resonant chord, as it did for me so resonantly last Saturday. It's the kind of insight which we judges were looking for when we read through the 28 entries we received, responding to the question 'Where does a citizen of the world belong?' Last year, the subject concerned borders and frontiers, a subject on which Butler wrote over and over again; this year the preoccupation was the varying implications of internationalism and cosmopolitanism, as seen through the claim that a citizen of the world is a citizen of nowhere- that repellent mantra declared by the last Prime Minister, which -fairly or not- will mark her record as indelibly as Margaret Thatcher's statement that there is no such thing as society. Appropriately, the entries came from all over Britain and Ireland, as well as Latvia, Slovenia and the USA (the judges only discovered this later, everything is strictly anonymised in the first instance).

"The essays were of an impressively high standard, and we found it hard to arrive at a shortlist of four, from which the winner and three runners-up would be selected. But we chose essays which lived up to the Butlerian model of fitting wide-ranging intellectual explorations into an economic compass (the word-length was a strict 3000): and carrying it off with elegant style. I'll outline the four, in alphabetical order, before asking John Banville, to announce and present the prizes. The short-listed authors were Manus Charlton, Andrew Hammond, Nigel Lewis, and Noel Russell.

"Manus Charlton's extremely well-crafted essay starts and ends with a view of the world as seen from the Apollo 8 spacecraft, and the implications of that view for changing our perceptions- ethical, political and ecological. (We were struck, incidentally, by the prevalence of climate change as a theme in so many of the essays we read.) Charlton's essay moves on to aerial views of processions of migrants and then shifts to the perspectives on humanity and history provided by the philosopher Spinoza, with his holistic view of nature, and his conclusion that humanity operates in 'a certain species of eternity'. The underlying idea of rational ethics as a response to the natural world we inhabit bears a clear relation to themes of internationalism and belonging; Charlton's essay moves on to consider the horrific threats to such ideals in the extremist twenty-first century, and confronts the rather bleak view of progress, or regress, advanced in John Gray's 2016 Butler lecture at Kilkenny, which Gray called

‘The Fragility of Freedom’. Charlton posits the ideals of a community of nations, so threatened today, against the rise of authoritarian nationalism and in his conclusion addresses the need to belong to various worlds, and to adhere to that perspective of rational ethics decreed by Spinoza. It describes a very Butlerian circuit, as did several of these essays.

“Andrew Hammond’s essay begins with a vivid and chilling image of a Syrian boy from a refugee background being bullied and physically abused in a school playground in Huddersfield, an the percussion of events which this event sets off. It raises the question of belonging versus the rise of disruptive xenophobic politics; it counters the unanalytical assumption that the aspiration to global citizenship is automatically a good (and unproblematic) thing by pointing out the failures and lacunae inherent in the concept and the way it has been attempted, as well as the utopian notions behind the embrace of processes supposed to minimise conflict. Hammond advances the concepts of ‘good belonging’ and ‘bad belonging’, which may sound riskily Orwellian; but the notion is explore with insight as well as panache, as in the claim that ‘good belonging is always possible at a level well below the global, and indeed confirms the suspicion that the globalist idea is misguided, not just impractical’. (I think Hubert Butler’s early critique of the international ‘Organisation Man’ strikes some echoes here.) ‘Belonging well’ is also applied to the processes created by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland, which operated by taking seriously the issues of religious-political affiliations, and allowing several kinds of belonging. (This is a subtle and imaginative approach much threatened at the moment). Using a wide range of illustrations, Hammond ranges over the possibilities of peaceful coexistence in divided societies, and reminds us that it is still possible, through what he calls ‘benign pragmatism’ at ground level.

“Nigel Lewis’s essay addresses Theresa May’s comment head-on and relates it to the way the word ‘cosmopolitan’ has been used, particularly in the late nineteenth century. His argument spans out to take in ideas of utopian identity throughout the long 19th and 20th centuries, culminating in UNESCO’s Global Citizenship Education project in the twenty-first- a re-boot of the UN’s Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. But the point is made that the radical antecedents of utopian projects in the 18th and 19th centuries cannot be adopted today in the moral-absolutist fashion whereby –for instance- the British Raj outlawed suttee in India. The dangers of tokenism, opportunism, and the business-speak of ‘glocalisation’ loom large. (Often reading these essays, one thought of Orwell’s influence as well as Butler’s). Lewis’s essay is one of those which highlights the dangers of irreversible climate change as a factor which should enforce a new concentration of what being a citizen of the world literally means, especially since America’s rogue’s progress began ripping up the rule-book in 2016. He points out acidly that ‘those most in need of Global Citizenship Education are those who govern us’. This is where the revolutionary consciousness that queries an *ancien regime* is now needed.

“The final essay on the short-list, by Noel Russell, is written with considerable style, and interrogates identity and citizenship in the light of the Good Friday Agreement, and the hopes it raised: remarking that 25 years on, we have ‘entered again that darkening room of defeated hope’, and the politicians’ clichés don’t answer any more. We are all ‘slow learners’ now, to adapt Seamus Mallon’s mordant phrase. This bleak moment is sharply related to the dislocations of Europolitcs over the last few years, and the senses in which these disruptions repeatedly raise the concept of ‘belonging’. In Noel Russell’s words, ‘Identity faced economics, and as we know from politics in the Fourth Green Field, identity always wins.’ His essay interrogates various varieties of wishful thinking and hypocrisy, including the use of the word ‘elite’ by people who themselves represent some very dark forces of elite plutocracy indeed. Towards the end of this punchy piece, -coming back to the Four Green Fields- Russell makes large claims for Ireland’s internationalist record, in terms of religious influence as well as migration. Less controversially, he invokes Hubert Butler, putting him with writers such as Shaw, Orwell, Chomsky, Greer, Sontag and Weil, and raising the question of whether (given the

internet, 'fake news', 'alternative facts', and much else) it is easier or more difficult to be a committed, idiosyncratic, sometimes iconoclastic writer nowadays.

"That large question remains open, and I think it's one of the reasons why this Prize is a valuable and enabling institution, and why Nicky Grene, Eva Hoffman and I have been so happy to judge it.

"I'll now ask John Banville, a great novelist who writes as a citizen of the world, and who deeply admires Butler's work, to announce and present the Prizes. Thank you."

Prof Roy Foster

Chair of the Hubert Butler Essay Prize 2019

ON CITIZENSHIP AND BELONGING BY PROFESSOR NICHOLAS GRENE INTRODUCTION TO THE 2019 PRIZE ESSAY

Hubert Butler would have appreciated the subject of this year's essay awarded in his name. He was a convinced internationalist, travelling extensively throughout his life, bringing to bear on all that he saw and experienced, at home and abroad, the same sense of committed interest and moral engagement. Yet he rooted himself in the family home of Maidenhall, Co. Kilkenny, and unquestionably felt that was where he belonged. Now, twenty-nine years after his death, nearly a hundred and twenty after his birth, is it still possible to combine such a globally concerned perspective with an assured sense of localized identity? Where, if anywhere, does a citizen of the world now belong?

One of the great pleasures of acting as a judge for this prize – in my case now for a second time – has been seeing the sheer diversity of the responses to the question: tightly packed philosophical analyses, autobiographical memoirs, parables and political arguments. Many challenged Theresa May's statement that "a citizen of the world is a citizen of nowhere", though some pointed out that technically there could be no such thing – citizenship had to be of a given state or states, not of the world. Climate change, refugees displaced by war or poverty and the resurgent populism that shut borders against them, figured prominently as the most urgent crises that needed to be addressed globally. But it was the individuality of the best essayists that was most striking and most appropriately reflected the work of Butler himself. Butler, an Irish nationalist from an Anglo-Irish Protestant family, someone who refused to follow any established professional career, was from early on a dissenter, if not a contrarian. In cultivating the essay form of which he became such a master, he wrote always from a personal viewpoint. He would start from an anecdote, an individual experience or perception. But the essay habitually opened out into a broad-ranging set of reflections that were hauntingly atmospheric (*Peter's Window, On Riga's Strand*) or deeply disturbing (*The Children of Drancy, The Invader Wore Slippers*). It is no part of the design of the Hubert Butler Essay Prize to seek imitations of his essays; they are in any case inimitable. But it is intended to encourage his sort of vigilant intelligence, the use of the essay to give voice to a sharply distinctive, a nay-saying point of view, where necessary.

Andrew Hammond's winning essay is a fine example of just this. He contends that whatever the ideals or aspirations behind it, the idea of global citizenship is 'naïve', 'impractical', perhaps even 'wrongheaded'. He makes a distinction between what he calls 'good' and 'bad' belonging. The desire for a universal citizenship, he argues, is based on flight from conflicts

within individual communities – ‘bad belonging’ – but they can only be solved within such communities by ‘good belonging’. He cites the example of the Northern Irish peace process which worked because people from both sides, without giving up their own culture or beliefs, were willing to reach out to one another. Taking illustrations from situations as disparate as interethnic relations in the late Ottoman Empire and young gay people in 1990s New York, he advances a principle of ‘benign pragmatism’. ‘Our values may transcend the local’, he concludes, ‘but living them out is for actual people in actual places’. Hubert Butler would surely have assented.