

HUBERT BUTLER ESSAY PRIZE 2025



(L to R) Nicholas Grene, Adam Charles Smith, Aoife Bhreatnach, Stephanie O'Connor, John Banville, Roy Foster, Barbara Schwepcke and Catriona Crowe at the HBEP Award ceremony, Kilkenny Castle (9/9/2025).

STEPHANIE O'CONNOR - WINNER OF THE HUBERT BUTLER ESSAY PRIZE 2025



"I am deeply honoured to receive the Hubert Butler Essay Prize 2025. This essay began with a personal moment. In February this year, I was present at the peaceful death of someone I loved deeply. It was a moment marked by stillness and grace, intimate and unadorned, and it left behind not only sorrow, but a set of ethical and philosophical questions that would not easily let me go.

"At the same time, my daughter was preparing for her Leaving Certificate. Beside her desk, among stacked textbooks and scribbled notes, lay a copy of King Lear — unremarkable at first glance, yet quietly insistent each time I entered her room. So, when I later saw the title of this year's essay, "Men must endure their going hence, even as their coming hither", it seemed more like a summons than a coincidence; it felt like something I was meant to respond to.

"I wanted to attempt to reckon with that brilliant, ancient line from King Lear and ask whether such resignation still holds today. Or to what extent our relationship with death, and with birth, has shifted in an age shaped increasingly by law, medicine, and technology — through reproductive technologies, end-of-life decisions, and legal and ethical debates, including cases such as PP v HSE. We are no longer merely enduring these thresholds of life; we are actively involved in shaping them, even taking ownership of them, in ways that Shakespeare and our ancestors could scarcely have imagined. But with that power—are we any wiser?"

“While writing my essay, I tried to explore the moral dynamic between autonomy, vulnerability, and responsibility in the context of dying, and care. Reading Hubert Butler’s work gave me not only the courage to write and ask difficult questions, but also the tools to approach them with greater clarity and care. And to recognise that, for all our advancements, when medicine, law, and conscience intersect, we remain haunted by the same uncertainties — about suffering, dignity, and what it means to act wisely.

“The moral complexity between endurance, intervention, and imposition lies at the heart of modern life and medicine, and it seemed to me a tension that Hubert Butler would have recognised. His writing is rooted in the belief that history is not something remote, abstract or settled, but something lived and shaped by conscience and contested by individuals. He understood the complexity and pressure of moral decision-making — when to speak, when to remain silent, when to act. Whether writing about the displaced Jews of wartime Europe, the abuses of power in church and state, or the obligations of a writer in the public square, he resisted simplification. He valued clarity over certainty, and moral courage over conformity. “If Hubert Butler were to reflect on contemporary medicine and ethical questions such as somatic prolongation, I believe he would likely bring to bear the same moral seriousness and insistence on personal responsibility that shaped his entire body of work. I believe he would have recognised our modern dilemmas around life and death not merely as legal or clinical questions, but as matters of profound human reckoning. He might view modern technology as morally neutral — capable of either deep compassion or quiet cruelty — depending on how we choose to use it.

“In that spirit, Hubert Butler might have viewed Edgar’s line “Men must endure their going hence, even as their coming hither” with a mixture of empathy and resistance. He would have recognised its timeless humility in its acceptance but challenged its fatalism in light of our modern capacity for moral agency. He believed in personal responsibility — in resisting injustice and refusing to be passive in the face of suffering. He believed that we are not merely here to endure, but to act, and to act justly. As he once wrote, “Science has enormously extended the sphere of our responsibilities, while our consciences have remained the same size.” That is still our challenge today.

“Winning the Hubert Butler Essay Prize is a profound honour. To receive this award here in Kilkenny, Hubert Butler’s home, where he did so much of his thinking and writing, is especially meaningful. I’m deeply grateful to the entire Hubert Butler Essay Prize team. Sincere thanks to the judges, Professor Roy Foster, Catriona Crowe, Professor Nicholas Grene and Dr Barbara Haus Schwepcke, for their time reading my words and for their generous response to my essay. I am deeply grateful to Suzanna Crampton and the wider Butler family for their enduring role in preserving Hubert Butler’s remarkable legacy. My sincere thanks to Jeremy O’Sullivan, whose vision in founding this prize not only honours Hubert Butler’s memory but creates a wonderful opportunity for us all to think slowly and seriously about the world we inhabit. Above all, preserving a special space for the spirit of critical inquiry and moral reflection that Hubert Butler so powerfully embodied.

“Thank you so much.” Stephanie O’Connor

Stephanie O’Connor is a Research Officer at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), supporting grant applications. She previously worked at the US Naval Blood Research Laboratory in Boston and later returned to Ireland to manage the clinical trials lab at Biosys Clinical Ltd. She holds a Biology degree from the University of Ulster and an MSc in Healthcare Ethics and Law from RCSI and has a long-standing interest in the ethical dimensions of science and medicine. She has also written numerous children’s books and short stories for adults.

AOIFE BHREATNACH - JOINT RUNNER-UP



"I am grateful to have made an acquaintance of Hubert Butler this year. His bracing, sometimes bleak, observations on collective actions are softened by his tender sympathy for individuals. In an era that favours equivocal writing, it is stimulating to read an essayist who will not or perhaps cannot, dissimulate. His willingness to interrogate himself, his subject and his readers will stay with me. Thanks to Butler, I have a new appreciation of this 'soft, sweet-smelling porridge' in which we all swim. It is an honour to be recognised for this prize." - Aoife Bhreatnach

Aoife Bhreatnach lives in Cork and writes in English, and Irish. She explores the censorship culture of twentieth-century Ireland in her podcast, Censored. Her historical writing covers a wide range of topics: the history of Irish Travellers, garrison towns and burial practices. Aoife's essays have been published in

Howl, The Stinging Fly and on Aistí ón Aer (RnaG).

ADAM CHRISTOPHER SMITH - JOINT RUNNER-UP



"At this bleak and confounding time, I take some comfort in Hubert Butler's dictum that "nothing has happened that cannot be reversed if it is accurately recorded"—surely an admirable principle that most writers would do well to embrace, even if it seems to contradict many of the prevailing currents of our particular moment. Having spent so long working in solitude, at a remove from a culture that often appears to have dispensed with any need for prolonged reflection, it comes as a great encouragement to receive some recognition for doing what little I can to propagate the notion that writing still has the capacity to reconfigure the substance of the material world. While the horrors of life today strain our comprehension, prompting us to search for new ways of disrupting the seemingly unbreakable patterns of violence and retribution, we must not forget the answers that can be found in the past, through the immortal thought of philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard and

Emmanuel Levinas. Though responding to the struggles of their own bleak times, these thinkers offer observations that echo through history, reverberating in the hollows of our contemporary age. We would do well to keep their words in mind as we continue to grapple with what it means to be ethical beings in this often grim and dismal century. As I return to the country of Butler's birth, I continue to hold onto the hope that one day, perhaps even within my own lifetime, we might newly embrace a forgotten way of being, one that once again serves our better values. For now, I suppose, art alone may have to suffice in fulfilling that particular vision." - Adam Christopher Smith

Adam Christopher Smith is a writer from England. Born in the London commuter belt, he played in punk bands and organised warehouse parties before moving to Wales, where he began his career as a journalist. His experiences as a tabloid reporter form the basis of a debut novel, now nearing completion. After leaving the newspaper industry, he travelled through the Balkans with his close friend, the author Richard Owain Roberts. His work has been featured on the Rose Books Hotline and included in an anthology from surrealist publisher Morbid Books. Alongside work on his novel, Adam reviews music for *VICE* magazine.

Prof Roy Foster's Speech at the Hubert Butler Essay Prize 2025 Award Ceremony, Kilkenny



“This year marks the fortieth anniversary of the publication of Hubert Butler’s first essay collection, *Escape from the Anthill*, which appeared in 1985- the author’s 86th year. It was also the first production from Antony Farrell’s Lilliput Press, started enterprisingly from his bedroom in Gigginstown, County Westmeath. Both author and publisher rapidly became part of Ireland’s literary history, and we should salute Antony’s devotion and industry in unearthing and publishing the extraordinary flood of essays which Hubert produced over his long life. The elegantly produced volumes that followed *Escape from the Anthill- The Children of Drancy, Grandmother and Wolfe Tone, The Poet and the Appleman, In the Land of Nod-* stand as a testament to Butler’s remarkable mind and unique voice. This will be reinforced by the anniversary reprint of *Escape from the Anthill*, shortly to appear from Lilliput Press.

“Butler’s mastery of the essay form, his scintillating style, his ability to cast out the widest of intellectual nets in the most deftly economical of gestures, gained him many admirers in Ireland and beyond- such as John Banville, Fintan O’Toole, Dervla Murphy, Joseph Brodsky, Neal Ascherson, Alfred Brendel and Isaiah Berlin. And he became and has remained a local hero. The centenary of his birth in 2000 was marked by a major symposium here in Kilkenny, the Hubert Butler Lecture is an intrinsic part of the marvellous Kilkenny Arts Festival, and the annual

Hubert Butler Essay Prize, brainchild of Jeremy O'Sullivan, was founded seven years ago and has also -thanks to Olga and her team- become integral to the Festival. It is wonderful to be back in the Parade Tower to announce and celebrate the Prize once more and I'd like to thank Jeremy for inventing it, Olga for supporting it, and above all my fellow judges Catriona Crowe, Nicky Grene and Barbara Schwepcke, for their devoted and discriminating work in judging it.

"Hubert Butler's achievement and lasting fame rests partly on his breathtaking style and lacerating insights, but also on the fact that the themes which recur in his work have become more urgently relevant with time. This is reflected in the subjects which we as judges have chosen over the past seven years; they have highlighted issues such as national identity, the nature and permeability of frontiers, the abuse of political power, the trustworthiness (or not) of science, the impact of pandemics, the tension between communal solidarity and individual freedom, and the competing claims of memory and history. This year we asked candidates to address the question of how far we can and should control our destinies over life, birth and death, instancing Edgar's stoical admonition to his despairing father Gloucester in *King Lear*: 'Men must endure/Their going hence, even as their coming hither.'

"There's a very Butlerian implication here, provocatively raising issues of personal conscience, religious dictation, legal and political definition, and scientific innovation- and the way they interact and affect our lives. We received thirty-eight essays, two-thirds of them from Ireland, several from the UK, and others from Bulgaria, Greece, Germany and Slovakia. I should say that what we're looking for in the essays submitted is not necessarily a specific invocation of Butler's work- though that often is a component of the essays that come in. What's more important to us is to recognise writing characterised by the elements that distinguish a Butlerian essay- style, substance, structure, economy and the occasional skewer-like thrust which takes the reader by surprise. There's also the factor which Butler's friend Elizabeth Bowen said distinguished a good short story- 'the ability to open and close time like a fan'. But an essay isn't a short story, nor is it a memoir. This raises the challenging question of how to employ a certain element of illustrative personal material without deflecting the main thrust of the argument. It's fair to say that quite a few of the entries we read failed to strike this balance. But the three which we short-listed managed to accomplish this, and a good deal else, within the limit of three thousand words. I'll briefly outline why, before handing over to Barbara to announce the winner and present the prize.

"The title, once again, was "'Men must endure/ Their going hence, even as their coming hither"' (King Lear). Have we no more active control over life, birth and death?' Stephanie O'Connor's essay went straight to the point of asking whether we were any the wiser for the increased options available in an age of reproductive technology and end-of-life planning. She concentrated on the legal and moral ethics of keeping a brain-dead woman on life-support for the sake of an unborn infant who will almost certainly not survive. She discusses with compassion and empathy the 'uncanny ambiguity where the dead might remain legally ambiguous', and incisively states the need for 'a new ethical framework, shaped by legislation and public debate': medical ethics being 'the scaffolding by which we try to uphold the human spirit in a world increasingly seduced by the procedural and drawn to the utilitarian'. The clarity with which she addresses issues described rightly as intimate and harrowing is deeply impressive, and her definition of 'dignity' as a guiding principle strikes a powerful concluding note.

"Aoife Breathnach's essay presents a bracing historical perspective, with fascinating material about the recent replacement of the 1832 Anatomy Act by the 'Human Tissues Act', and the implications for the legal definition of the lifeless body. She trenchantly surveys the way that the supposed implications of this change were taken up by far-right rhetoric, at the expense of rational and considered analysis. The essay goes on to place Irish medical-ethical issues in a

wide European tradition, instancing the medical researches of the Victorian polymath Sir William Wilde, the distinctiveness of Irish approaches to funerary practice, and the popular addiction to medical crisis served up as TV drama. The controversies over dissection of dead bodies for purposes of medical research are vividly presented, with some ghoulish examples from 'the anatomy trade', past and present. Above all the argument highlights the vexed question of consent. The conclusion returns to the Human Tissues Act, and the principle of opting out of, rather than into, post-mortem experimentation- raising the question of the legal and cultural status of a dead body.

"Adam Charles Smith opens his essay by discussing the tech mogul Bryan Johnson's baroquely narcissistic efforts to ensure his own bodily survival via a regime of blood transfusions and monitoring 'metrics such as liver-fat percentage and "erection hardness score"'. There are unexpected but incisive parallels with Shakespeare's play: 'Lear shows us the danger of letting go too late, while Johnson may offer a cautionary tale in refusing to let go at all.' The argument moves surprisingly but effectively from this 'billionaire's passion play' to Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher of 'anguish and absurdity', and his conviction that humanity is trapped between inherent limitations and the ability to infer some kind of transcendence. *King Lear* remains a touchstone, as it apparently was for Kierkegaard himself. The essay presents a thoughtful meditation on the multiple forms of tragic irony about life and death raised by the play, and by the implications of Johnson's experiment- concluding with a passionate invocation of Lear's recognition of 'ripeness'.

"Each of these essays follows through a topic which, as it happens, preoccupied Butler himself. In 1967 he wrote a powerful and meditative essay on euthanasia, religion and social practice, frankly admitting the enormous and insoluble ethical problems involved. Looking to the future, he wrote:

"The average man is unconcerned. Since death and decay await us all, he might take a remote interest in euthanasia for the old and sick but he will be more likely to dodge the law when his time comes than to try to change it in advance. I cannot see that even for the elderly or diseased who wish to die, there is any likelihood of a change in the legal or religious position... A reconsideration of this by Church or state might cause a revolution in the structure of society, as Christianity did in its first centuries. In the rebuilding of a new order, a man might recover the rights which he once abdicated to the state.

"Certainly the desire for a revolution, a rebirth, is there but no-one knows in which direction to look for it or how to prepare for its coming.'

"Later in the same essay he anticipates the legal problems over 'the children of sperm-filled capsules and transplanted ovaries... Before there is any change we will have to live through this period of remote and impersonal control and, in the meantime, for the sake of future freedom, a greater burden than ever before will fall upon the man who refuses to conform. Politically, socially, domestically, the individual may have to make in solitude great and tragic decisions and carry them through in the teeth of a hostile and mechanical officialdom.'^[1]

"Thus Hubert Butler characteristically pinpointed, nearly sixty years ago, the preoccupations explored in our three shortlisted essays: all credit to him, and to them, for their perceptiveness. This is why we continue to read him, and why he matters more and more."

Prof. Roy Foster

Chair of the Hubert Butler Essay Prize 2025

^[1] *The Children of Drancy* (1988), pp 265, 271

Hubert Butler
Essay Prize



BARBARA SCHWEPCKE - 2025 HUBERT BUTLER ESSAY PRIZE AWARD SPEECH



“I was reading this year’s entries to the Hubert Butler Essay Prize wearing two pairs of spectacles: one pair was that of a publisher, who once was a journalist, born in Germany, studied in the United States and now lives in the UK; and the other that of the founder of a charity, which deals with conflict in the Middle East and whose pride and joy is an interfaith fellowship. Both pairs of spectacles mean that I read the submitted essays in a different way to my learned fellow judges, who are steeped in Irish tradition and the knowledge of Hubert Butler’s oeuvre.

“The journalist in me had expected this year’s submissions to deal with the debate in- and outside the Westminster Parliament about what is officially called the ‘Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill’, otherwise known as the ‘Assisted Dying’ or ‘Assisted Suicide Bill’ depending on where you stand in the debate. Looking across the pond I had expected an essay on the Supreme Court’s decision to repeal *Roe v. Wade*, which for almost 50 years had enshrined national abortion rights in the constitution, and on the man who had made this decision possible, who is now the President of the United States. I had expected some serious reflections on Catherine Corless’ grim discovery of 800 children who had died at the former Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, County Galway, and had been buried in a mass grave in a disused underground sewage system. I had even expected this year’s essayists to drag Shakespeare’s words into the 21st century and ask what children ‘*must endure / Their going hence [killed by starvation or bullets], even as their coming hither [born in a warzone]*’. I had

expected to be shocked, moved, appalled. The publisher in me, however, looked for something more, something unexpected, something that would rattle me and shake me out of the increasingly complacent, almost complicit stupor of the one who thinks she has heard it all before; the publisher in me looked for the arresting phrase, the paragraph I wanted to read again, the memorable conclusion.

“In the end all four of us judges, Professors Nicholas Grene and Roy Foster as well as Catriona Crowe and I, agreed on the winner and the two runners-up very quickly. All three essays deal with *The Body*: Aoife Breathnach explores the question of what happens to the body after death, while Adam Charles Smith’s essay starts with a billionaire’s obsession with fighting the inevitable ageing of his body. Our winning essayist talks about the body of a brain – “*the cadaveric incubator*” – now here is a phrase which startled me!

“In these grim times essayists should be our collective conscience. They should put their finger on the wound, even if it hurts. They should speak up for those who can’t. They should not stay silent. Being silent means being complicit. “... *silence did not help me ... It became increasingly difficult to be silent.*” There it was! Hubert Butler’s famous quote, speaking up against “*another historical silence, when atrocities in Yugoslavia went unmentioned because naming them would mean naming our own complicity,*” as our winning essayist Stephanie O’Connor puts it. “We must speak with clarity and compassion about where medicine, law, and human dignity intersect – and where they diverge.” **Clarity** and **compassion** – these two words stood out to me. And they reminded me of the words of Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th reincarnation of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, the Buddha of Compassion: “*Since the purpose of a reincarnation is to carry on the work of the predecessor, the new Dalai Lama will be born in the free world so that the traditional mission of the Dalai Lama — that is, to be the voice for universal compassion ... — will continue.*”

“This statement reminded me of when an arrogantly precocious journalist trainee of the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* interviewed His Holiness and asked him to explain reincarnation to the readers of that paper. His answer was a beautiful parable, which he asked the young(ish) reporter to spread like a consoling balm on any grieving heart she would encounter in the future. And it dealt with the two thresholds of life, birth and death, which make up the theme of this year’s Hubert Butler Essay Prize in a surprising way, in a way one wouldn’t expect from “*a simple Buddhist monk*” as the Dalai Lama calls himself, and definitely not in the fatalistic way Edgar expresses with the words to his father: “*Men must endure / Their going hence, even as their coming hither*”. The Dalai Lama’s words then were expressed with **clarity** and **compassion**, the two words which stood out for me in the winning essay.

“His Holiness smiled and said: “*It’s very simple. Imagine a lit candle. The flame is perfect, it illuminates its surrounding, it is hot. And then with that candle you light another one and blow out the first. The flame is the same: it is perfect, it illuminates its surrounding, it is hot. That is reincarnation! Call it the eternal soul. Or the divine spark which is in all of us. It is immortal, unchanging.*”

“His Holiness’ words now, on the occasion of his 90th birthday, deal with **agency** at the heart of the subject of this year’s prize: ‘Have we no more active rights over life, birth and death?’ “And so does our prize-winner. Stephanie O’Connor holds a degree in Biology from the University of Ulster, Coleraine, and a MSc in Healthcare Ethics and Law from RCSI. She is therefore well qualified to ask the all-important question: ‘just because we can act, does it mean we should?’

“Ms O’Connor is a Research Officer at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), where she supports researchers applying for competitive grant funding. Her career began at the US Naval Blood Research Laboratory at Boston University, where she spent nearly a decade supporting

cutting-edge transfusion medicine research. After returning to Ireland, she spent another ten years managing a clinical trial lab, Biosys Clinical Ltd, deepening her understanding of the day-to-day challenges of managing clinical trials. This experience will have informed her choice of Hubert Butler quotes: *“Science has enormously extended the sphere of our responsibilities, while our consciences have remained the same.”* Which lead Stephanie O’Connor to ask what is to me the prize-winning question: ‘Is there a point at which the machinery of law must yield to the compassion of humanity, where rigid adherence gives way to moral judgement grounded not in statutes, but in empathy, respect, and care?’ and answer with clarity and compassion: ‘It is in this space – between what the law allows and what decency demands – that our truest responsibilities begin.’ Stephanie O’Connor feels passionate about this space. And her essay invites us all to explore it with her, to be challenged by her words, be moved by her compassion, and to break our silence. Congratulations on winning the 2025 Hubert Butler Prize!”

Barbara Schwepcke, Kilkenny, 9th August 2025