

HUBERT BUTLER ESSAY PRIZE 2022

KEVIN SULLIVAN - WINNER OF THE HUBERT BUTLER ESSAY PRIZE 2022



Upon hearing the news Kevin Sullivan said, “Hubert Butler's lifelong practice of engaging with ideas on his own terms and speaking out even when silence would have been the easier and more comfortable option served as a powerful antidote to misguided assumptions that were prevalent during his lifetime. His legacy of common sense, compassion and intellectual rigour is still very much needed. It is an honour to have been awarded this prize.”

Kevin Sullivan worked as a journalist in Asia for more than a decade, reporting from Beijing, Tokyo, Singapore, and other places. In 1991, he began covering the war in the former Yugoslavia. After being seriously wounded in a land-mine explosion in Bosnia in 1993, he wrote an early draft of *The Longest Winter*, a novel set in Sarajevo, which was published by Bonnier in 2016. Kevin has worked in Sarajevo and The Hague with the Office of the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina and the International Commission on Missing Persons. His other novels include *Out of the West*, published by Armida Books in 2014, and *The Figure in the Photograph* and *The Art of the Assassin*, published by Allison & Busby in 2020 and 2021. Kevin and his wife, the writer and translator Marija Fekete Sullivan, live in Sarajevo.

The 2022 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.

ROY FOSTER ON THE HUBERT BUTLER ESSAY PRIZE 2022 WINNER

"'Dark times' indeed sums up the state of the world in 2022, and Kevin Sullivan's essay decisively confronts the abuse of political power which is all around us. There is something very Butlerian in the way he draws on his own experience of political and cultural life in Eastern Europe, and also in his analysis of the complicated ways that artists and intellectuals reckon with an authoritarian zeitgeist. His perspective considers the world at its widest, and the effort to 'live in truth' at a time when lies are widely peddled and wealth inequality dominates. This is a writer who looks honestly at his own illusions, cherished at a brighter time. But he also suggests that there is still hope for a consensus based on reason and ethics, facing up to the ominous political and ecological portents around us. The judges of the HBEP unanimously agreed to award his essay the 2022 Prize for its forceful and elegant style, its trenchant and wide-ranging conclusions, and its ability to express complex problems with a clarity that does not sacrifice subtlety."

Roy Foster, Chair, Hubert Butler Essay Prize 2022

NICHOLAS GREENE ON THE HUBERT BUTLER ESSAY PRIZE 2022 WINNER

"When the five judges of the 2022 Hubert Butler Essay Prize learned the name of the author of the essay which we had unanimously agreed was the winner, there was something of a gasp audible on our Zoom call: Kevin Sullivan. 'No', we are reassured by Jeremy O'Sullivan, the founder and wonderfully efficient administrator of the Prize, 'he's no relation: note the distinguishing 'O' before the Sullivan'. We were delighted to discover that the journalist and novelist Kevin Sullivan was originally from Glasgow, though now based in Sarajevo, and we welcome him and his wife Marija to Kilkenny."

"Judging the Hubert Butler Essay Prize is always a fascinating task. Essays come to us anonymously, out of nowhere, so to speak. They tackle the subject for the year in extraordinarily different ways, sometimes writing out of very personal experience, sometimes pursuing hobbyhorses of their own. The five of us often differ in opinion on the less successful entrants. But we are rarely in any doubt when it comes to the winners. From the very first sentence of Kevin Sullivan's essay there was a thoughtfulness, intelligence and quiet assurance that rang out unmistakably.

"It surely would have been very gratifying to Butler, so invested as he was in uncovering the truth about the dark times of the Balkans in the Second World War, that Kevin brings to the topic so much knowledge of that part of the world. He is able to show tellingly, for example, how the Yugoslav writers Ivo Andrić and Meša Selimović managed to negotiate their own times of restricted free speech. But what is so impressive in his essay is the sheer reach of his illustrations. He is fully aware of our own dark times from the war in Ukraine through the political crises of Sri Lanka to the global threats of climate change and economic injustice. Yet he can set against this Vaclav Havel's belief in truth, Volodymyr Zelensky's past as an irreverent comedian, the resistance represented by the Argentinian singer-songwriter Victor Heredia. He witnessed first-hand the defiance of the people of Sarajevo under assault in 1992. In an essay that is notable for its even-handedness and balance, he can nonetheless affirm positively in its conclusion: 'Dark times are illuminated by art and by truth and by humour'.

“What is required for a successful entry in the Hubert Butler Essay Prize? What makes it different from a newspaper op ed, say? The answer is the capacity for reflectiveness, and the writing. Kevin begins his essay with the all-important caution: ‘There is a perpetual temptation to attribute disproportionate significance to the present’. That is what so many newspaper articles and editorials do. By contrast, in this essay as in Butler’s own, there is always a longer historical and wider spatial perspective. And in this essay, as in Butler’s, every sentence, every paragraph has its full crisp force. Though the argument may appear to digress, as readers we are never in doubt that it has its defined shape and purpose. That is what holds us in the essays of Hubert Butler and that is the skill so finely demonstrated in our 2022 prizewinning essay.

Nicholas Grene, Judge, Hubert Butler Essay Prize 2022

Hubert Butler
Essay Prize



FIONA SHAW - 2022 HUBERT BUTLER ESSAY PRIZE AWARD SPEECH



Fiona Shaw - Hubert Butler Essay Prize Award Speech in Kilkenny, 9th August 2022

I am aware as I stand here that I have none of the erudition of my predecessors and indeed the presence of the prize’s patron, Mr Banville, is enough to inhibit any other views about the value of the written essay.

There are, however, two aspects to witnessing huge events, the visceral and the analytic. This prize wisely celebrates the latter through this essay’s pithy ability to add meaning and understanding to political upheavals by connecting them through historic parallels.

I should like tonight to concentrate on the visceral, the disorder and confusion that occurs before there are words to order the experience. One reason I want to do this is that seismic events produce chaos, and it takes time to understand them. In his essay Mr Sullivan says we are too preoccupied with the present but in part it is because it is the seed of the future history and for that we are 'just waiting'.

Like many, I am normally someone who learns about significant events through the medium of a calm essay, I found myself, however, in Sri Lanka for the past two months at possibly the most momentous time in its history since its freedom in 1947. I had the gruesome privilege of seeing a country change in that short time and descend into poverty and depression. I choose this example as Sri Lanka is the same size as Ireland and the similarities help me understand as I translate the scale of their problems into our own. Two islands 'both alike in dignity', 'small enough to visit your grandmother and get home in a day'. Sri Lanka's population is four times that of Ireland, but its climate makes the accommodation of so many people easier and in general they seem, like the Irish, quite easily contented. I met a trishaw driver who has an acre of land in Jaffna and he hoped to retire there to live off this scrap. 'Is that enough?', I asked. 'More than,' he replied. A diet of fresh fish and beautifully cut vegetables rice and curry is all anyone needs.

This summer all that changed for him and for many others. Due to long-term government corruption and theft, the country's coffers emptied out into a debt crisis. In April the imported petrol and diesel and gas dried up. The country was broke largely due to mismanagement and theft by the ruling class. Huge loans from China and Europe had been squandered and the Sri Lankan rupee tumbled as the dollar reserves ran dry. The country's debt so high it began to default on its loans.

Tantalisingly, we could see huge oil tankers in the beautiful port of the city's Galle Face waiting for payment and then sailing away. Sri Lanka has long survived on subsidised petrol and subsidised fertiliser and last year decided to stop the latter so in the rupture of one year the rice crop failed, and rice sky-rocketed in price, causing huge hardship. Queues formed for fuel; women lined up for paraffin, some watching over the hundreds of fuel containers chained together as mothers reverted to cooking on open fires with wood, at least those who were lucky enough to have outdoor spaces in the vicinity. Those in flats were not able to do this.

The army of trishaw drivers who make a living for their families waited for gas in queues sometimes miles long and began a wait for fuel of up to five days and nights. Initially they did so with good hearted patience and a kind of resignation – playing chess, talking in groups and sometimes playing music on their phones. But by the time I left 16 people had died in queues from dehydration or worry or shock.

All over the country this was the phenomenon in towns and villages as trickles of fuel sent from Sri Lanka's neighbour India were shared at petrol stations. I saw young girls doing their homework in the back of tuk-tuks until schools were closed. Then they stopped being seen in their white uniforms. After lockdown, the situation played further havoc with their futures. Young people began to leave the country in droves for the Middle East, Australia, anywhere. I doubt many will return. A young massage artist doing well, taking weekends to discover this paradise of a country, travelling to the national parks to see elephants, leopards and bears, found herself struggling to buy string hoppers for her brothers whom she supported. 'Last week they were four for 120 rupees; now the cost is 800 rupees'. As the weeks went by all events were cancelled, and tourism shrank to the zero it once was, The hotel staff, so reliant on tips, now stopped working, their livery unused, and waiters found it hard to come and work in city restaurants - those few that could still stay open, since most customers stopped coming too.

Meanwhile the country has eight million Facebook users, so the swell of discontent was being organised in part by the student “Aragalaya” movement on that platform and 9 July was named as the day the whole nation could at last protest. There was so much excitement. The demoralisation vanished as the people shouted against the President - ‘Gota, go home’ - and some people processed miles from the outskirts wearing flip flops. Some hung on to the sides of farm lorries and some commandeered the trains from Kandy, sitting on the roof. By 11am on that day with the beautiful blue sea on one side, the Galle Face was full of people, maybe as many as two million, none of them armed. They united in race and religion for this one purpose: to exercise their demand for a democracy that might allow them to live.

The President did resign later that week and sadly the man who replaced him immediately began to round up the students who had kept the vigil of protest over previous months. A young man who had stolen a mug as a souvenir during the storming of the President’s palace was arrested for theft, while billions had been robbed from ‘the people’. Tear gas unleashed by soldiers who are often brothers of the protesters led to some interesting confusion. One protester I saw had his eyes washed out with bottled water by the same soldier who had tear-gassed him moments before.

Who knows how it will end. We need the essay to make sense of this kind of event, to hold it, mark the moment like a flag, a piece of sculpture, a testament to what has happened. We need the essay to connect it to other events unique to their own circumstances and yet similar. History gets carved out of the present and past through words that weave patterns and point us to resolution. That is why we need sense after chaos.

The Sinhalese greet each other as follows: ‘Kohomada?’ (‘How are you?’), to which the reply is ‘Ohe innawa’ (‘Just waiting’), We are all ‘just waiting’. I congratulate Mr Sullivan. Please write more essays.

Fiona Shaw, Kilkenny, 9th August 2022