

Hubert Butler: notes toward an origin story
The HB Essay Prize 12.00 10 August 2026
Parade Tower, Kilkenny Castle

What a pleasure to be back in the Marble City. Where to start? At the beginning I suppose. How I came upon this extra ordinary writer and worked as his editor and publisher. How *he* became the foundation stone and tutelary spirit of The Lilliput Press. A man, both of his time and prescient, who I came to regard as a secular saint.

Although fifty years apart (HB was born in 1900, I in 1950), we shared a bifurcated background that gave us common cause. We were *both* sent abroad to England for our secondary schooling, which he continued at Oxford while I came back to Trinity College Dublin. We *both* grew up in what our friend the writer Maurice Craig called 'classic houses of the middle size', mine was in Gigginstown, Westmeath, Hubert's at Maidenhall, Bennettsbridge, of this parish. We were *both* countrymen at heart, and it was in the porch of Maidenhall where I first read the magazine *Resurgence* (now twinned with *The Ecologist*), and which Lilliput was subsequently to publish as an anthology of its first twenty-five years in association with Green Books of Devon in 1991.

Hubert identified as a market gardener, commemorated in the title piece of his fifth volume of essays *The Appleman and the Poet* that we published in 2014 long after his death. Suzanna Crampton happily continues this tradition of farming-with-nature at Maidenhall in a mutual concern for the earth and its creatures so nurtured by her grandfather. Their shared instinct for conservation anticipates an imperilled world.

My own upbringing was enmeshed with the horse but Hubert quietly distanced himself from the horse-Protestant tradition by letting Maidenhall each winter, enabling he and Peggy to travel to Europe and farther afield as the hunting season led into early spring. Protestantism and its consequences and habits was another thread connecting us in the wider scheme of mid-to late twentieth- century Ireland. One of Lilliput Press's first Hubert Butler publications was a pamphlet essay, 'Wolfe Tone and the Common Name of Irishman', given as a talk in Dublin's

Mansion House in September 1963 on the bicentenary of Wolfe Tone's birth. It spoke to our divided country as it does to this day, and remains a remarkable clarion call to the future.

I come back to Westmeath from London in 1980 to raise a family and return home, my wife a cheesemaker, myself an editor for various Dublin publishing houses (on leaving Trinity, I'd cut my teeth as an apprentice in London during the seventies, editing gardening books and a literary journal); one of these Dublin imprints was Seamus Cashman's Wolfhound Press, where Frank McGuinness the embryo playwright and I vetted manuscripts in a backroom in Mountjoy Square. There fell to my attention a random sheaf of essays commended to Seamus Cashman by the writer Eithne Strong of Runa Press, a poetry and chapbook publisher. I wrote a report urging publication but Seamus felt they addressed too niche an audience. I had already engaged with Tim Robinson the nature writer and his *Stones of Aran* through my *first* author, Mullingar historian Leo Daly, whose novel *The Rock Garden*, set on Aran, was launched by Benedict Kiely in Belvedere House overlooking Lough Ennell, and *here* was another writer I felt free to pursue.

I telephoned Maidenhall asking for Hubert Butler; a voice replied, 'Do you mean Mr Butler?' I surely did and neither of us ever looked back. I was collected from Kilkenny railway station by Joe Hone, writer, houseguest and adopted son of the family, who told me that Hubert Butler's aspiring publisher should be wearing a tie. I was welcomed by Peggy to the pine kitchen table for a frugal yet sumptuous meal, and so began a conversation that was to last our lifetimes.

As I entered the Butler household I fell under the spell of this stalwart couple, Hubert the peach, Peggy the cotton wool, and we built the volume that became our first published book, *Escape from the Anthill*, sifting and refining a large body of drafts, typescripts, journal offprints and cuttings in the front library room over succeeding weekends. Peggy was our sheltering sky organizing the household and meals. In Maidenhall's bedrooms hung vivid figurative interiors, examples of her work as a young artist – a later self-published volume of cartoons, *They Speak for Themselves*, revealed her wit and quizzical eye, a small volume of poetry her resilience. The gallery across the courtyard here is named in her honour.

Her brother, theatre director Tyrone Guthrie, who had staged Hubert's translation of *The Cherry Orchard* at the Old Vic in 1934 and was chancellor of Queens University Belfast (until he jested about the 'silly little border'), left their Monaghan home Annaghmakerrig to the nation, funded by both arts councils, for the benefit of artists and writers. (In the early 1960s Pamela Travers – author of *Mary Poppins*, who had adopted Joe Hone's younger brother Camillus – introduced Tyrone and Peggy to Yaddo in New York, forming a model for the Irish residency.) Hubert enabled this complicated transfer.

In their close circle of writers and artists were Norah McGuinness, Barry Cooke, a Smethwick, a Moss or two (I was introduced to Stanley at an early stage), Nicky and Eleanor Grene, Anne and Christopher FitzSimon and Shevawn Lynam whose life of *Humanity Dick Martin* I was later to publish in paperback. Shevawn, a regular weekend guest at Maidenhall, would descend from Dublin armed with a cooked chicken and bottle of whiskey. Robert Tobin and Eleanor Burgess were further visitors and keepers of the Butler flame, cataloguing the Maidenhall mss and letter-books later acquired by Trinity College for the benefit of future generations and researchers. And Joe Hone, or *Wicked Little Joe* as his wonderful memoir of 2009 was called, grandson of Joseph, the Yeats and George Moore biographer, wrote of life as travel writer and novelist: Irish and English to his bi-cultural bones.

They formed a magic circle of friends where conversation tumbled, ideas were exchanged and wits sharpened. It was a world lost and found. Outer circles were soon established, peopled by those who would intersect to review Lilliput's subsequent essay volumes as they appeared (*The Children of Drancy*, 1988, *Grandmother and Wolfe Tone*, 1990, *In the Land of Nod*, 1996), Monk Gibbon, Dervla Murphy, Eoghan Harris and, most signally, the historian Roy Foster, whom I had met through our mutual friend from TCD days Mike McCarthy Morrough, a fellow historian and my best man, whose father's sister was Kay Summersby Morgan, Eisenhower's driver and mistress during the Second World War. Roy opened the doors to the world of international letters with a stunning review of *Escape from the Anthill* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, his friend Isaiah Berlin stating that 'Peter's Window' (the concluding essay in EFTA

describing Hubert's teaching spell in what was then Leningrad in 1932) was unequalled in its acumen and force.

Later champions included Joseph Brodsky, the exiled Russian Nobel prizewinner, introduced by Samuel Brussells, our French publisher at Anatolia whose *L'invahisseur est venue en pantoufles* appeared in 1994. He called me from a telephone box on the Quai d'Orsay having read 'The Children of Drancy' to say that he wished to publish everything Hubert had ever written. Neal Ascherson, David Reiff and Fintan O'Toole added their names to a roster of admirers.

Then, by way of my friend the editor Paul Keegan, Penguin Books published *The sub-prefect should have held his tongue and other essays* in 1990, selected by Roy Foster; in 1996 the torch was duly passed on to Brodsky's New York publisher, Farrar Straus and Giroux, where Elizabeth Sifton, chief editor and daughter of the distinguished theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, made her own selection, branding it *Independent Spirit*. In that new world, their book was launched in Ireland House by Denis Donoghue, where Richard Crampton, Hubert's son-in-law, Lyndon Baines Johnson's heart surgeon and husband to Julia, gave a gracious call out and raised glass to this Irish publisher. Edna O'Brien, a friend and visitor who Hubert and Peggy had supported during her dark days of the early 1960s, was present. In 2012 John Banville introduced the essays in a two-volume Irish and European divisioning, *The Eggman and the Fairies* and *The Invader Wore Slippers*, published by Notting Hill Editions of London, shepherding Hubert into our present century for a fresh generation of readers.

The Crampton family has long been key to sustaining the Butler legacy. At Richard's urging, and financial support, Lilliput commissioned a new edition of a book that Hubert had given decades of his life to researching and writing, *Ten Thousand Saints, a study in Irish and European origins*. It was first self-published by the local Kilkenny Wellbrook Press in 1972. Salaried academics are often reluctant to let outsiders or 'amateurs' tread on their territories, and in this instance the book received little notice. However, by 2011, with an Afterword by Richard Crampton, resetting and detailed indexing, our edition carried an introduction by UCD's Professor of Irish

Alan Harrison who welcomed Hubert's exciting 'understanding of Ireland as part of the bigger picture of prehistoric Europe': his time had come. DNA findings have since underpinned Hubert's linguistic mapping of the tribal movements north from the Iberian peninsula, the Book of Invasions and Hubert's long Braudelian view affirmed.

And the man himself? His serenity and composure; his clear-eyed equanimity; and for me an abiding image: Hubert and Peggy reading *Daniel Deronda* to each other across a winter fire in the library, the Russian icon, gifted by Leonid Leonov for Hubert's 1931 translation of *The Thief*, aglow above them, the air still.

Today the potency of print and print culture as a cornerstone of civilization and discourse seems under increasing threat as digital dominance and generative AI undermines core values and attention spans. In this accelerated, hyper-connected world of server farms, data centres and enclosed horizons, absorbing our natural and human resources, fuelled by what has been termed the largest copyright theft in history, we seem indeed at risk of 'amusing ourselves to death' in the words of Neil Postman.

The era of Hubert Butler, his reflective capacity, his intelligence, seems distant yet essential. The essay prize in his name is a small but important token of resistance, and sincere congratulation is due to Edoardo Coppie for his winning entry this year for 'Poetry Makes Nothing Happen', on the impact of high culture in the real world.

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