

## Hubert Butler Essay Prize 2020

Hubert Butler wrote about dark times, particularly the 1930s, and one of his great contributions was to analyse the way that human beings behave during times of crisis. Above all he showed an unerring ability to clarify people's attitudes towards others, and implicitly towards themselves. The opening words of his essays are invariably striking, but perhaps most arresting is the reflection that begins 'The Kagran Gruppe' (1988):

I believe one of the happiest times of my life was when I was working for the Austrian Jews in Vienna in 1938-9. It is strange to be happy when others are miserable, but all the people at the Freundeszentrum in the Singerstrasse were cheerful too. The reason surely is that we have always known of the immense unhappiness that all humanity has to suffer. We read of it in the newspapers and hear it on the radio but can do nothing about it.

'Doing something about it' is the theme of the lacerating reminiscence that follows, about helping Jewish families escape from Austria after the *Anschluss*. Butler skewers the apathy and collaborationism of people who should have known better, and gives full due to the Quaker organizations which stepped into the breach. Here, as in essays such as 'The Invader Wore Slippers' and 'The Sub-Prefect Should Have Held His Tongue', the competing claims of individualism (whether independent or self-interested) are balanced against the pressures of group identity, and perceived duty to the wider world: a theme which pervades many of his essays on Irish matters too. The issues at stake are not always as clear-cut, nor the times as dark, as in Vienna in 1938. But at the present moment, a time of global crisis and the peddling of dangerously simplistic populist shibboleths, the issue of adherence to personal versus group identity is thrown more powerfully into relief than ever.

These thoughts partly inspired the subject chosen by our Judges' Committee (Catriona Crowe, Nicholas Grene, Eva Hoffman, Barbara Schwepcke and myself) for the 2020 Hubert Butler Essay prize: 'Communal Solidarity and Individual Freedom: antagonists or allies?' The implications of the title are far-reaching, and cover a wide range of possible tensions and conflicts of interest; this was reflected in a large and comprehensive entry. The competition attracted 40 entries, from a wide variety of locations and perspectives. In the end we were unanimous in awarding the first prize to Michael Amherst for his incisive essay focussing on identity politics, and how they operate when several kinds of 'identity' clash- particularly in the case of prioritizing access to drugs that ameliorate one kind of condition as opposed to another. Amherst elegantly makes the case that an assertion of individual rights and 'freedom' necessarily involves engagement with the public realm. He invokes thinkers as varied as the Enlightenment philosopher Benjamin Constant, the religious thinker Martin Buber and the novelist James Baldwin, but argues –appropriately- very much as

his own man. In its exploration of how to negotiate ‘multiple points of belonging and conflicting interests’, as well as its vivid touches of personal experience, this essay delivered the kind of nuanced yet punchy impact which is fully in the spirit of this Prize, and of Hubert Butler himself.

The impressive runners-up also represented striking and relevant discussions of the prescribed theme. Tara McEvoy, like several others, opened her essay by considering the advocates and opponents of face-covering during the coronavirus pandemic, and the way that face-masks have become ‘a symbol of a perceived tension between individual liberties and the necessity of collective action’. Following Dalia Gebrial’s redefinition of ‘individual freedom’ as a necessarily much more comprehensive concept than the limited version embraced by current Western libertarian thought, she broadens out the discussion to the politics of Brexit and attitudes towards refugees, and the heartening examples of communal solidarity ‘*facilitating* individual freedom’ during the pandemic in Belfast, where she lives. The same message comes through Louis MacNeice’s long poem ‘Autumn Journal’ (written at just the time Butler was working in Vienna). She appositely concludes that MacNeice’s vision of human struggle is a precursor to Hubert Butler’s observation in ‘Escape from the Ant-hill’ that his fellow citizens were ‘juggling in different ways with the old human constants which are under threat, neighbourhoods, kinships, beliefs, skills, traditions’.

The other runner-up was David Crane, whose essay throws a wide net covering refugee settlements in Uganda and Ghana, the contrasting attitudes demonstrated in Turkey by the influx from Syria, and the effects of trade liberalization on agricultural production in sub-Saharan Africa. The decisively internationalist perspective of this essay brought a new dimension to the question posed in the title, and pinpointed critical areas where meanings of ‘freedom’ require fresh and close interrogation.

All three essays argue for the necessary interdependence between individual freedom and communal solidarity. They do so by using different examples, illustrations and arguments, but all share the ability to hone a personal reflection into a general argument, central since Montaigne to the essay form- and consummately demonstrated by Hubert Butler. The winning essays are also written with a close attention to style, spectacularly characteristic of his oeuvre, but sometimes at a discount today. The existence of this essay prize, and the entries it galvanizes, is reassuring proof that dark times like those we are experiencing today can be illuminated by the distilled intelligence of a three-thousand-word essay: as brilliantly shown by the intellectual searchlight beamed out to the world from the study of Maidenhall, perched above a Kilkenny river-valley. And in their different ways, these essays point towards ways of achieving the strange sense of fulfillment which Hubert Butler so memorably found in the *Freundeszentrum* in 1938.

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