Hubert Butler
Essay Prize

Honorary Patron
John Banville

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'Where does a citizen of the world belong?'

by Andrew Hammond

Winner of the Hubert Butler Essay Prize 2019

Introduced by Professor Nicholas Grene

On Citizenship and Belonging
by Professor Nicholas Grene

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.

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In November 2018, a fifteen-year-old Syrian boy was filmed being pushed to the ground at his school in Huddersfield by another boy, a white boy. He was held down, showered in spat-out expletives and then more literally showered from a bottle of water, a mock waterboarding. The last seconds of the film – which had been shot by a mate of the bully - were the most wrenching. The boy, who already bore the signs of some previous injury, his arm in a bandage, said nothing, but stood up and loped away, not fully upright. His body language spoke of no extreme of emotion: more a closed-in resignation, almost inexpressive, speaking volumes.

A few months later, I was at an exhibition about the refugee experience, and met a Syrian man who, it turned out, was from Huddersfield and knew the family of the bullied boy. 'How is he, how are the family?' I asked. 'They're ok; they've moved away' he replied. He – a refugee himself – had recently been in Lebanon, seeing friends and family. Social media having sent the vicious video across the world, they had said to him 'how can you

live amongst such people?' But he then showed them about the crowd-funding campaign, which, in days, raised some £158,000 for the family, enabling them to find somewhere better to live. 'This happens in the UK too,' he had said to his friends.

The refugee situation, and the concomitant rise in nationalist, xenophobic, populist politics, should make us think about belonging: and about what people might mean by a 'citizen of the world' (and where they belong). My contention is that while the idea of global citizenship is founded in some simple, fine sentiments, or aspirations, it is at the very least naïve: and that in an important way it is not just impractical, but wrong-headed. When we think about belonging, we find that even someone who calls herself a citizen of the world needs to belong somewhere: but not just anywhere. And what we can distil from that vague notion of being a citizen of the world can be put to more immediate and better use to work at what we might call 'good belonging'.

For the purposes of this short essay, let us sit quite light to the more formal notions of global citizenship, those ideas that have led people to try to establish institutions and

grand systems of thought. These are rather specialist, small-scale, and have not stood the test of time. Think of Esperanto. There are political and quasi-spiritual examples of such activity. But in much more general terms, we can see both in them and in the vaguer expressions of being a citizen of the world some noble ideas: the commitment to peace, justice, economic fairness, democracy and freedom of belief and speech, for all people everywhere. At the level of the state, this finds its classic and most effective expression in the United Nations, if only at the level of aspiration and effort. The twentieth century horrors of total war, genocide and nuclear weaponry put irresistible fire under this; as well as the growing rejection of the repression of women, and of racism and colonialism. Much of this work is in its infancy, of course, and there are as many steps back as forwards, it can often seem. But the endeavour is happening in the world of political reality, a reality in which even the most virtuous and ambitiously imaginative actors have constantly to make compromises to achieve anything at all.

It seems to me that in the heart of the desire to be a 'citizen of the world', in amongst those simple fine

sentiments, is a constellation of experiences of 'bad belonging': the desire is to get away from that. Whenever conflict, violence or warfare break out, your belonging, your sense of settled commitment to the society in which you live, is necessarily involved. You have to take a side. The greater the move towards a global order, the fewer the sides to be taken. At both the macro level (states) and the micro (individuals), this is about reducing the scope for conflict. If we all belong to the same side, eventually, the scope for conflict will have reduced to zero. Or so runs a utopian argument. The way in which conflict now often manifests itself – based in religious or ethnic ideology rather than statehood – shows just how utopian (i.e. well-intentioned but illusory) any kind of politically-organised globalism is. Then there is the rapidly-growing power of trans-national corporations, and the way this intersects with political structures. In any case, as any number of critics have argued over the last half-century, it is very hard to see how a single world governmental system could possibly work democratically: the distance between rulers and ruled could only be alienating, however federated; its demise built in. And, of course, much of the conflict which can make belonging so hard or even traumatic is

nothing to do with politics and everything to do with personal relationships.

We are still skittering about on the surface of all this, brandishing very broad concepts in very shorthand fashion. So we should home in on the more concrete, and explore what belonging – good and bad – really looks like in some specific examples. They will all show, in their very different ways, that good belonging is always possible at a level well below the global: and indeed confirm the suspicion that the globalist idea is misguided, not just impractical.

If you lived in Northern Ireland in the decades before the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, you had a very sharp sense of what belonging meant. It was a matter of life and death. The ways in which your sectarian allegiance could be judged were legion, and exercised with neurotic and febrile zeal. Much has been written about this, and a particularly acute literary example is Anna Burns' 2018 novel *Milkman*. Even with its cleverly non-referential terminology, it is clearly about the Catholic/Nationalist community. That literary device serves to make more pungently clear how even just the fear of being thought

disloyal is both controlling and debilitating: we recognise it as a feature common to many tyrannical or totalitarian regimes. In the context of Northern Ireland, religious conviction and commitment, in which the shibboleths of Reformation-period disagreements were kept fiercely alive; and political affiliation based in competing histories of persecution and injustice, long-burnished in the re-telling – these meant that to belong to your community (whichever it was) was more about fear and fervour than mutuality and benevolence. Or at least, the former far outweighed the latter.

However, the peace process achieved something, even if that is perilously under threat at the moment. Having outside brokers obviously helped, but the impetus to make things better arose within the communities themselves. Mutuality and benevolence found their expression in the courage of people both ordinary and powerful, and began to press down on the scales. And those people were there, in the midst of it all: the capacity to change things for the better was already there, in the people who were living through it. Some would no doubt share the Sunday-newspaper-in-bed commentariat's disdain for religious

enthusiasm or the maintenance of historical grievances. But the peace process worked because it had to take seriously those commitments. It painstakingly edged across a crucial line into a way of living where your religious and political affiliations were still fundamental, but were not (for most) the rationale for violence and fear. The phenomenal difficulty in achieving this, and the fragile sustaining of it, speak of a kind of benign pragmatism. 'We can't simply dissolve our history, our beliefs, our grievances,' the voice of Northern Ireland might say, 'and actually there's much to value and which binds us together. We just want to live out these commitments more fruitfully.' Or, to use my terminology, the desire is to belong well.

Another novel gives us a second example: Louis de Bernières' *Bird Without Wings* (2004). This is an ambitiously capacious story which begins in a fictionalised south Turkish village, and which takes us through the dying of the Ottoman Empire, the Balkan Wars, the First World War, the Greco-Turkish War and the rise of Kemal Ataturk. What we see is the destruction of a long-established co-habitation between the Turkish

Muslim and Greek Orthodox communities. They have found a way to live together, with a mixture of mutual religious respect (including occasionally what a purist might call some syncretistic activity) and a sense of difference that manifests itself much more often in gentle teasing than anything more aggressive. This is eventually destroyed by the forced repatriation of those of Greek origin, despite their many generations of settlement in the village. We also see another smaller group forcibly evicted: the Armenians.

It is temptingly easy to romanticise life across the Ottoman Empire, but the experience of so many towns and cities in the Middle East in the subsequent century is what it is, and we see what we see: communities now seemingly locked into suspicion, hatred and sometimes-violent conflict. It needs a long book, not a short section of a short essay, to analyse this: not least how places where communities of different religious tradition live alongside flourish or flounder depending on how those who wield power over them wield that power. Neither the post-imperial drawing of lines across maps nor the liberation movements of the Arab Spring appear to have nourished

either properly cosmopolitan cities or muddling-along little villages.

My only point here is that in the history of those cities and villages there were times when most folk just got along, whatever their deep-seated and ancient traditional fidelities. These were times of good belonging, on balance: doing comparatively fine where they were. The current state of the Middle East has a quality of tragedy to it, given the particularly rich and ancient set of traditions they have inherited; and it has danger too, given how some internecine antipathies have snaked-out across the rest of the world. Those who exert power over these communities also live, or lived, in communities themselves. We must hope that those who have not been so corrupted by power or wealth or ideology, or so damaged by experiences of bad belonging, might remember, and recognise the beauty of peaceful co-existence and dare the painstaking work of re-establishing it. This is not about dewy-eyed nostalgia. It is the work of now. Such work will be clear-eyed about how the contemporary situation might benefit from some ancient

wisdom about living together well: which is to say, belonging well.

Sometimes people are forced from their place of belonging in other ways. Let us consider two very disparate examples. What they tell us about the urge to belong is helpful. The first is very particular. The 1990 film *Paris is Burning*, and the contemporary US drama series *Pose*, both tell the story of queer youngsters finding their way to the New York 'ballroom' scene in the 1980's and early 90's. Most have been thrown out of their family homes by conservative parents, and in the ballroom scene they find a home. They find a home for their self-expression, of course, but they find a home literally too – in the 'houses', gathered families living with a housefather (usually gay) and/or mother (usually trans). They are often still poor, but they have found a new family and home. It is not a version of family and home that the conservative parents who threw them out would recognise as such. But at its heart are acceptance, and love and a measure of safety (the last often compromised by the vulnerability of impoverished queer people, sometimes fatally compromised). In the houses we see not just those who

have been rejected by their families finding a place to live. We see them realising their fundamental human need to belong: and in real, local, specific situations. They haven't been rescued by some utopian universal notions of (deserving to) belong anywhere. They have found how to belong somewhere: but somewhere else, their original home having turned out not to be a place where belonging was possible.

The harshest and most vicious example of where people are forced to leave their place of belonging is where human violence displaces them from their homes, even from their home countries. The Syrian exodus is by far the worst in recent times. Millions have fled because staying put seemed impossibly risky and dangerous; or because their homes have been destroyed. Their primary goal has been to find safety. Even their flight has been fraught with danger, especially those who have put to sea across the Mediterranean. Some are still in refugee camps, living acutely difficult lives: but still, living. Many are scratching a livelihood in rented accommodation, often over-crowded and over-charged. Some have been taken in by host countries, as the family in Huddersfield.

In every case, we can imagine refugee families not simply wanting to be safe, but wanting to have at least the simulacrum of belonging. What might this include? Certainly the fundamental basics of having a place to live, food and water, being with family, earning a living… But then there will be that irrepressible human urge to create community, to feel in some sense 'at home', however temporary. Knowing this, even sub-consciously, adds to our nausea at the sight of the boy being bullied on the school playing field in Huddersfield. Instead of being helped along in what must be an alien environment, a boy who may have seen terrible things, who may have lost family and friends to the war back home, is not only subject to violence, but to a violence which makes cruel reference to the viciousness of war.

Fundamental to even a temporary home must be a minimum level of mutual hospitality. It is painfully ironic that the boy was from a part of the world where hospitality is taken rather more seriously than in much of the so-called liberal west. Our response, our version of such hospitality perhaps, was the crowd-funding: 'let's get you

somewhere better'. Somewhere where you are better able to feel a little bit at home.

The motivation, the high ideals of global citizenship surely spring from the endless cycles of violence, prejudice, exclusion and all the other things which make being at home, belonging well, difficult or impossible. But for most people in most places most of the time you cannot simply distil those ideals and try to establish them at global level. Because you have a bad experience of being where you are does not mean that the being where you are is what is bad. It is simply the experience you are having there that is bad. Apart from the most unencumbered well-off, or the most austere of eremitical solitaries, human beings seem to have a relentless hard-wired desire to be at home somewhere. And if circumstances make where they are impossible or unbearable, they try to find another somewhere.

So we might turn back to what I earlier called 'benign pragmatism'. This is engagingly exemplified in the work of 'community organising'. It is where Barack Obama learned so much about the harshness of life for some in the US. He spent three years doing this in Chicago,

straight after college. Community organising, seen in this country in the work of Citizens UK, is precisely and well named. It happens in a community, and is very much about organisation. At its best it is something of a magic trick, where highly educated, motivated organisers enable local people to take action about some local grievance, but in a way which is completely ground up. It does not feel like middle class do-goodery, is not patronising or controlling. It is not like those endless community forums, where the same people who like to go to such meetings sit around and complain, and listen to empty assurances from local politicians. Community organising campaigns see ordinary local people enabled to challenge power, to call to account those who have the power to make a difference. Sometimes the campaign gains wider momentum as, most famously, Citizens UK achieved with the Living Wage.

At its best (which is quite routinely), community organising has the kind of benign – indeed, virtuous - ideals which lie behind utopian global citizenism, but with a pragmatic sense of what can be achieved for people in the here-and-now. The 'here' in the here-and-now matters, I would say: and more than simply pragmatically. It is

about more than what people's present reality permits. It could actually be that there is innate merit in the local. Our values may transcend the local, especially when they derive from universal principles of love, acceptance, generosity and equality: but living them out is for actual people in actual places. Our work is then towards better belonging. Such belonging goes with confident hospitality and living alongside others well, in a virtuous circle. This is how we can do good belonging without crass politics, the latter knowing nothing of hospitality, living-alongside or virtue.

I was made to reflect on this when I lived in London for a while. Even amidst the daily grind of deprivation, people were doing their best to make a home there. This desire to belong could even be seen in the 'postcode gangs'. The desire might have morphed into a violent caricature, but that was because it had become infected by hopelessness and alienation. It makes me wonder about the home life of that playing-field bully in Huddersfield.

The Hubert Butler Essay Prize 2019

'Where does a citizen of the world belong?'

Andrew Hammond
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