

Butler, Hubert Marshall

by Kate Bateman

Butler, Hubert Marshall (1900–91), essayist and antiquarian, was born 23 October 1900 in Maidenhall, Bennettsbridge, Co. Kilkenny, eldest son and second of four children of George Butler (1859–1941) of Maidenhall, farmer and high sheriff of Kilkenny, and his wife Harriet (1867–1939), daughter of Marshall Neville Clarke of Graiguenoe Park, Holycross, Co. Tipperary. Hubert attended Bigshotte Rayles, a prep school in Berkshire, and from there won a mathematics scholarship to Charterhouse. He attended Reading University for two terms, where he studied agriculture and was greatly influenced by the philosophy professor, Willie de Burgh, a distant relative. Having won a classics scholarship in 1919, he transferred to St John's College, Oxford, and after a disappointing college career graduated in 1922 with a pass degree. While at university he met W. B. Yeats (qv) and in the vacations visited Horace Plunkett (qv) at Kilteragh. The cooperative ideals of Plunkett and George Russell (qv) influenced him throughout his life.

After graduation Butler worked as a county librarian for the Carnegie libraries, based in Coleraine, Co. Londonderry. His work required him to travel to Ballymena, Derry, and Portstewart (he used a motorcycle), and he acquired a good knowledge of Ulster and its people. When the headquarters of the Irish county libraries moved to Scotland in 1924, he left the library service, claiming that 'the last cultural bridge between the twenty-six counties and the six was broken down'. This controversial incident is recorded in his essay 'The county libraries: sex, religion, and censorship'.

In a sense Hubert Butler applied himself to having no career. From his early teens he resisted strong parental urgings to take up training for a profession. Seeing himself as an independent nineteenth-century country scholar on the lines of Charles Graves (qv) and J. G. A. Prim (qv), who had founded the Kilkenny Archaeological Society in the 1840s, he was particularly anxious to explore the antiquities of his home county. His mind and pen were constantly exercised by local issues such as the preservation of the Nore bridges and the workings of county archaeological societies. He had a particular abhorrence of international commerce and the notion that 'big is beautiful'. However, his outlook was far from parochial and he was keenly interested in national and international developments, giving much thought to ideas concerning authority and private judgement, unionism and nationalism. Before inheriting Maidenhall in 1941, he travelled extensively in Europe and acquired fluency in French, German, Russian, and Serbo-Croat, which enabled him to take an informed interest in the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

To supplement his modest private income he worked as an English teacher in Egypt (1927) and Leningrad (1931), and from 1934 to 1937 lived in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, supported by a scholarship from the School of Slavonic Studies in London. His

translation of Leonov's novel *The thief* was published in 1931, and in 1934 his brother-in-law Tyrone Guthrie (qv) staged his translation of Chekhov's 'The cherry orchard' at the Old Vic. He described the year 1938–9, which he spent working with the quakers at the Freundeszentrum in Vienna, helping Austrian Jews to emigrate, as one of the happiest times of his life.

In 1941, on the death of his father, he became owner of Maidenhall with its fifty acres. He had little interest in farming, but was a keen market gardener and became a founder member of the Kilkenny branch of Irish Country Markets Ltd – a cooperative enterprise. Although he continued to travel widely, Maidenhall became a permanent home and writing his main activity. Becoming a regular contributor to *The Bell*, on the resignation of Sean O'Faolain (qv) as editor in 1945 Butler became a member of the advisory council and eventually review editor, until the journal's demise in 1954. He reviewed over 150 books during his life, many on Russian or East European subjects. Butler also wrote articles on a wide range of subjects for about fifty different publications, including *An Cosantóir* (the Irish defence forces journal), *War Resisters International*, the *Free Thinker*, the *Catholic Standard*, the *Manchester Guardian*, and the *Treblin Times*. These were often written to support an underdog, to correct a misapprehension, or to expose what he saw as a plain lie. When an instant reaction was necessary he regularly made use of the correspondence column of the *Irish Times*. From time to time he broadcast on Radio Éireann and BBC. On 24 September 1963, the bicentenary of the birth of Wolfe Tone (qv), Butler gave a talk, 'Wolfe Tone and the common name of Irishman', at the Mansion House in Dublin (it was published as a pamphlet by Lilliput Press in 1985). The central argument was that the 'lure of broad horizons' (p. 18) had hypnotised the people of Ireland, north and south, between whom 'there is no ancient and inviolable tradition in favour of one or the other, and that to associate the Anglo-Irish with monarchy and the Gaelic-Irish with republicanism is a fantastic misreading of history' (p. 23).

Stimulated by the desire to breathe intellectual and cultural life into his locality, he revived the Kilkenny Archaeological Society in 1944. He edited the first number of its journal, *Old Kilkenny Review*, and was honorary secretary until 1952, when he had to resign over what became known as the 'nuncio affair'. Butler recorded the incident in the essay 'The sub-prefect should have held his tongue'. After the war he returned to Zagreb and, while researching Croatian war-time newspapers, discovered the atrocities suffered by orthodox Serbs at the hands of the Ustashi (pro-Nazi Croats), and the catholic church's complicity in these events. When he raised the matter at a meeting of the Foreign Affairs Association in Dublin in 1952, the papal nuncio, who was in the audience, walked out. Butler maintained that he was unaware of the legate's presence, and no insult was intended. The upshot, however, was public opprobrium: he was castigated by the national press and was removed from many of his small public offices; Kilkenny county council expelled him from the ancient-monuments subcommittee. By his own account it was thanks to the security of his 'few inherited acres' that he was able to survive the disapproval he encountered. He

withdrew from public life and occupied himself with his garden, his writing, and his research into Irish and European origins. His fascination with the legend and cult-centres of the Irish saint-figures culminated in the publication of *Ten thousand saints: a study in Irish and European origins* (Kilkenny, 1972).

Total seclusion did not last long, however, and in 1954, under the auspices of the Kilkenny Debating Society, an offshoot of the Kilkenny Arts Society, Butler organised the first of a series of annual debates between Ulster unionists and southern nationalists. Critical of the political quietism of Irish protestants in the republic, he believed they should be more vocal in asserting their position. In an attempt to give protestants a stronger voice in local government, he stood as candidate for the 1955 Kilkenny county council election, but was not elected. He consistently upheld the right to be a protestant in a predominantly catholic state; for example, in 1957 he supported the Church of Ireland congregation of Fethard-on-Sea, who had been boycotted by their catholic neighbours after a bitter dispute over the education of the children of a mixed marriage (see Seán Cloney (qv)). In the essay 'Boycott village', Butler records that 'at that time we were doing up our house in Co. Kilkenny, which was fifty miles away, and we bought all our putty, paint, and as much else as we could at Gardiner's stores and Miss Cooper's fancy goods shop. In two journeys we spent twenty or thirty pounds and I wrote to the *Irish Times* suggesting that if protestants within fifty miles of Fethard did all their shopping there, the boycott would be over in a week. I wrote anonymously, as one often did in the fifties' (*The sub-prefect* (1978), p. 98).

In 1956 he visited China with a small group of artists and scholars before it was accessible to the general public and, after his daughter's marriage in 1959 to an American doctor, spent several consecutive winters in the USA. In 1962, soon after Martin Luther King's 'Freedom riders' made headline news, Butler travelled by Greyhound bus across the southern states, curious to learn the various churches' views on racial integration. In New York he met Alexis Gierovski, an exiled Carpatho-Russian who had been legal advisor to the Holy Synod in Belgrade, and in 1974, when the patriarch of Constantinople wished to thank him for his outspokenness on behalf of the orthodox church, Butler accepted an invitation to visit Istanbul. In 1980 he travelled to Israel and stayed on a kibbutz.

He was a founder and first chairman of the Butler Society, which was founded in 1967 when the 6th marquess of Ormonde, through a local committee convened for the restoration Kilkenny castle, presented the castle to the people of Kilkenny. He edited the first eight numbers of the society's journal. His literary honours include the American-Irish Foundation award for literature (1985), the Ewart-Biggs memorial prize (special citation) (1987), and the Irish Book Award silver medal for literature (1989). As a vigorous octogenarian, still determined to defend the right of private judgement, he addressed audiences in Kilkenny in 1983 during the campaign against the 'pro-life' amendment to the Irish constitution. At the end of his life, in appreciation of their work in local arts and culture, he and his wife, Susan, had the

gallery of modern art at Kilkenny castle named after them. He died 5 January 1991 in Kilkenny and was buried in Ennisnag cemetery.

He married (1930) Susan Margaret ('Peggy' to her friends), daughter of Thomas Clement Guthrie, doctor, of Tunbridge Wells, Kent, and Norah Guthrie (née Power) of Annaghmakerrig, Co. Monaghan. Her brother was Tyrone Guthrie, theatrical director and a close friend of Butler since university. They had one daughter, Julia Mary Synolda.

Collections of Butler's essays were published as *Escape from the anthill* (1986), *The children of Drancy* (1988), and *Grandmother and Wolfe Tone* (1990); '*The sub-prefect should have held his tongue*' (1990) (a selection from the previous three); *L'envahisseur est venu en pantoufles* (1995) (a French translation of a selection from the same); *Independent spirit* (a further selection published in New York, 1996); and *In the land of Nod* (1996). The Butler papers are in TCD.

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Butler MSS, TCD 10304–401; Hubert Butler 'No petty people', *Ir. Times*, 13–18 May 1955; Hubert Butler, *Ten thousand saints* (1972): id., *Escape from the anthill* (1986); id., *Wolfe Tone and the common name of Irishman* (1985): id., *The children of Drancy* (1988); id., *Grandmother and Wolfe Tone* (1990); id., '*The sub-prefect should have held his tongue*', and other essays ed. R. F. Foster (1990); Tom Garvin, *The evolution of Irish nationalist politics* (1981); Terence Brown, *Ireland: a social and cultural history, 1922–85* (1985); T. F. O'Sullivan, 'The last Butler', *Journal of the Butler Society*, iii (1991), 289–96; Seamus Deane (ed.), *The Field Day anthology of Irish writing* (3 vols, 1991), i, 88, 808; Kate Bateman, "'The tradition of myself" (W. B. Yeats) in the essays of Hubert Butler' (MA thesis, NUI (UCD), 1992); R. F. Foster, 'The salamander and the slap: Hubert Butler and his century', id., *The Irish story: telling tales and making it up in Ireland* (2001), 187–210