

## Grey Gowrie – Speech on presenting the Ewart-Biggs Prize

This invitation to present the Ewart-Biggs prize means more to me than I can easily say. Twenty years ago I was a Minister in the Northern Ireland office. It was a dark time. The acute crisis of the Hunger Strike was over. It was nonetheless a tragedy; indeed, for once that term was not abused as there had been an epic clash of will affecting an entire society. The backlash, the bitterness of so many self-inflicted deaths was not done with. An elected MP had recently been murdered, a Protestant. So had a judge, a Catholic; murdered in front of his family as he was leaving Sunday Mass. The British government was not ill-intentioned. The Province was awash with public money, even in those *soi-disant* Thatcherite days of equally *soi-disant* private affluence and public squalor. It was, however, haunted by the spirit of Reggie Maudling: "What a bloody awful country – mine's a double scotch." Geoffrey Howe was interested and thoughtful; Willie Whitelaw interested and knowledgeable. The Prime Minister was bewildered. Loyal to her stockings, she was taken aback by the force of Unionist hostility towards her. Peter Robinson burned her in effigy, I seem to remember.

My job, as an Irishman with a Scots name and a German wife, working, somewhat to his surprise, for a very English government and in the throes of moving home from Co. Kildare to Wales, from the Pale to beyond, as it were – my job was to try and explain the politics of the tribe to the politics of the purse. It worked best if you turned them back to front. Ulster under Jim Prior was known as the Avignon of the Wets. I explained that both Orange and Green had an appetite for public spending undreamed of by Grantham or Finchley. "You mean like Scotland?" "Yes, Prime Minister." For a microsecond, I saw a prospect of Home Rule tremble before me. Our eyes met. But the moment passed.

In the end, the Anglo-Irish agreement was signed. No longer would the way forward in Ireland be a matter for Britain alone. We, the Vipers as dear Enoch dubbed us, had won. Garret Fitzgerald, great man, distinguished nominee for this Award, unused to the style, stood his ground. Mrs T was prone to cross the floor with her affections. She was fond of Mitterand, disliked Giscard and Kohl. Garret and Charlie Haughey used to box-and-cox in those days. I fretted, rather, at signs of Haughey preference (remember Jeffrey Archer) but was reassured by a mole at Number Ten. "The PM rather enjoyed being led up the garden path by the Taioseach," he said, "but she didn't like the garden when she got there."

Politics are immeasurably improved now. There will continue to be fits and starts. At present, we are in a fit, with the prospect, in late May, of a start. Street life has a way to go. Both Christopher and Jane Ewart-Biggs have been emblems, beacons. I am now an ex Lord but it was wonderful seeing Jane in the House when we were both members. In my day in Ireland, mornings began with a report from Long Kesh, from the H Blocks (I was Prisons Minister), from all the bewildering nomenclature of the Maze. Then came news from a dark nowhere we called Liaison. One bright miracle day was when Lady Faulkner, widow of Brian, took me to see the archive of the Troubles being formed at Linen Hall. The collection was a museum in daily making, like watching Krakatoa become an island once more. Linen Hall seemed the most even-handed, level-headed institution on our islands; those were not ecumenical days. As Roy Foster reminded us, the Linen Hall Library is also a society for promoting knowledge. The archive seemed to say, with T.S. Eliot, "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" I could not be torn away then and the archive has been 20 years a-growing now. It is a complete pleasure as well as a great honour to announce that Linen Hall's *Troubled Images* has come in as winner in a strong field, and to give thanks and encouragement to all who work there – and who have earned, now and throughout the years, the Ewart-Biggs Prize.