

THE LOVE OF STRANGERS

(A brief address on the occasion of Brian Keenan's winning the 1993
Christopher Ewart-Bigg's Memorial Prize)

In the earliest European masterpieces, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, Homer gives Zeus a handful of epithets. One of the most frequently employed is *philoxenos*. Zeus *philoxenos*. Zeus lover of strangers. The King of the Gods is a lover - a protector - of strangers. He is an ultimate patron of the ideal of hospitality, of making all visitors feel welcome and safe. To desecrate that ideal is to insult God (or the gods); is to sin against the light.

Ambassadors - those who live in another country as representatives of their own country - are strangers and visitors of a special kind. A sacred trust should surround them. It was therefore a desecration of the darkest colour when the IRA murdered Ambassador Ewart-Biggs in 1976. One of the reasons we have all come here today is to participate in some kind of continuing expiation.

For most Irish people it has been a relief and an honour to try to follow the lead of the Ambassador's widow, Jane Ewart-Biggs. In the wake of her terrible bereavement she chose to join forces with the Peace Movement here, to conjure out of death-dealing horror something life-enhancing and positive. She worked hard to promote peace and understanding between Ireland and Britain; to hold taut and untangled the cat's-cradle of our relationships. This literary prize and the community prize (they are awarded in alternative years) were close to her heart and represent brilliantly her ideals.

The death of Jane Ewart-Biggs last October leaves an enormous gap. Today we celebrate the elegance, courage, generosity and grace of this remarkable couple. For years to come may the memory of their enriching lives continue to be a challenge as well as a comfort.

In his report on behalf of the judges Roy Foster has already reminded us of the powerful short-list they have drawn up. I would like to add a footnote. There's an interesting tie-up between *two* of the shortlisted

authors. When I mentioned this to Roy on the phone the other day, he said, "How very Belfast!"

The author of the majestic *A History of Ulster*, Jonathan Bardon, taught the author of *An Evil Cradling*, Brian Keenan. This was for a brief period at Orangefield, where Jonathan was the editor, at the time, of a modestly proportioned, cyclostyled journal called *The Orangefield Observer*. The February 1967 issue (Volume Nine, No. Five, Price 4d) contains a ballad and an article by Brian Keenan - and an interview with him. [This will remain concealed on my person - for a small fee!] In a note Jonathan tells me: "I also taught him for a full academic year when I moved to the College of Business Studies...I *think* he got an A Grade in 'A' Level History."

Brian Keenan was also an ambassador - not, strictly speaking, in the diplomatic sense, but he was certainly an academic ambassador, a wandering scholar. He too suffered grievously at the hands of zealots, desecrators of the ideals of welcome and hospitality; and he was lucky to survive.

But he did more than survive. *An Evil Cradling* is his breathtaking, heart-stopping account of his cruel incarceration. He himself writes about the richness of the phrase "in extremis". But seldom do those who have been "in extremis" - be they astronauts, conquerors of Everest, Arctic explorers, or prisoners - seldom do such people also have the gift of words. Brian Keenan has that gift in abundance.

It might seem impertinent - impious even - to want brave people to be eloquent as well. But surely it is right and proper that the rest of us should learn about the extremes, the giddy limits. The huge imaginative scope of this book permits us to follow in our minds what Brian Keenan at one point calls "that hellish descent" and, at another, his "existential journey". When he and his fellow-captive John McCarthy hear about the fall of the Berlin Wall, "our minds," he writes, "could not be amazed by simply human things, for they had travelled into more amazing and awesome places."

He ends this brilliant passage by saying: "This journey ends like all journeys. That the human mind can travel into those dark regions and return exhausted but intact is more a miracle than the word can ever convey." The sheer scale of *An Evil Cradling* humbles and uplifts the reader. And the scale is conveyed in language that flows in spate, with the steadiest pulse; that sustains telling detail and philosophical speculation; that juxtaposes religious intensity and scatological hilarity; that reveals the sacramental value in the most mundane object and releases the benediction hidden behind the most vulgar of swear words.

Writing about himself and John McCarthy and the other hostages, Brian Keenan says: "In searching through the complex panorama of our past, one thing emerged again and again: our relationship to and understanding and experience of love underlay everything else....The experience of love was the stepladder up which we could climb."

Blessed are those who take care of strangers. Blessed are the peacemakers: Christopher and Jane Ewart-Biggs, all of today's short-listed authors, and the winner of the 1993 Ewart-Biggs Memorial Prize, Brian Keenan.

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at the First Trust Bank, Queen's Square, Belfast

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