

The Ewart-Biggs Prize, set up to increase understanding within this island will be awarded for the tenth time in Dublin tomorrow. ROY FOSTER looks at past winners and the short list for this year's awards.

A Prize for Understanding

PRESENTING the Ewart-Biggs prize to John Bowman in 1984, Seamus Heaney described it as having "a commemorative function and an ameliorating effect." The winner of the tenth prize, worth £2,000 and offered to a work increasing understanding between the people of Britain and of Ireland, will be announced tomorrow in a ceremony at the National Gallery of Ireland.

It will add another name to a list as remarkable for its diversity as for its distinction: the decade since Jane Ewart-Biggs founded the Prize in the aftermath of her husband's assassination constitutes a record worth analysing, as well as an achievement worth celebrating.

The very first prize was divided between Father Micheál MacGréil's sociological study of prejudice in Ireland and A. T. O. Stewart's reflections on Ulster History, "The Narrow Ground." This even-handedness, and these preoccupations, have persisted. Stewart Parker's "I'm a Dreamer Montreal," Dervla Murphy's "A Place Apart," F. S. L. Lyons's "Culture and Anarchy in Ireland," Brian Friel's "Translations," Robert Kee's television history of Ireland, *Fortnight* magazine, John Bowman's "De Valera and the Ulster Question," Pádraig O'Malley's "The Uncivil Wars," Oliver MacDonagh's "States of Mind": it is an impressive list. Though works increasing co-operation between members of the EEC are also eligible, they do not seem to present themselves in the same profusion, or the same quality: Irish introspection provides an embarrassment of riches.

The prize has not gone to the anodyne and well-meaning Establishment candidates anticipated in some jaundiced quarters when it was set up: if the winners have anything in common besides distinction, it is a heavyweight and often combative quality, and they have aroused criticism as well as approval. They have also engaged with the issues and conditions of the time, whether from the standpoint of history, fiction, drama, journalism or sociology.

The short-list for the tenth prize carries on the tradition. There is Anthony Kenny's lucid account of the background to the Anglo-Irish accord, "The Road to Hillsborough"; Ed Moloney's and Andy Pollak's blockbuster biography of Ian Paisley; Frank



Lady Jane Ewart-Biggs

McGuinness's play "Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme," acclaimed in London as well as Belfast and Dublin; Peter Somerville-Large's portrait of a composite Irish rural community, "Cappaghglass"; and "Escape from the Anthill," Hubert Butler's resonant and universally praised essays, whose commitment to pluralism, and determination to face up to the awkward questions of the Irish inheritance, echo many themes of previous winners, and the inspiration behind the prize.

Ten years on, Jane Ewart-Biggs comes back to Dublin as a prominent Labour life peer, much involved in public life in Britain and Europe. But the Irish preoccupation continues. The Ewart-Biggs Trust has recently founded another prize, for community work in Northern Ireland, awarded in Belfast today. The literary prize has gone from strength to strength. Its tenth anniversary celebrates a continuing effort to reconcile, a recognition of the need to "increase understanding" no matter what the odds.