

Hands across a minefield

BOOKENDS

FROM the images churned up by the Ulster maelstrom, one particularly haunting memory recurs: Jane Ewart-Biggs broadcasting on Irish television in 1976 just after her husband had been assassinated by the IRA in the second week of his appointment as ambassador to Ireland. A diplomatic wife, with three small children, pitchforked into an alien nightmare, her emphatic message was remarkable: she bore the Irish people no ill will and wished the tragedy to bring the two countries closer together.

Her courage and magnanimity had an inspirational effect. When the Christopher Ewart-Biggs Memorial Trust was set up shortly afterwards, donations flooded in from all over Ireland. The prize thus funded celebrates its tenth anniversary this week.

Since 1977, the Ewart-Biggs Prize (now worth £2,000) has been offered to a work increasing understanding between the peoples of Britain and Ireland, or co-operation between the partners of the European Community—but it is the Irish dimension which has invariably (and inevitably) come to the fore. For a literary prize, it canvasses a remarkable range of entries: television scripts, journalism, plays, novels, history, poetry, sociology. Uniquely and intrepidly, it ventures not only into the minefield of Irish politics, but also into the equally vexed (and often overlapping) world of Irish literary reputations. ('A tank of alligators,' said Cyril Connolly, escaping from a Dublin literary gathering: 'cannibal alligators.')

Past winners have sometimes been overtaken by controversy. Father Michéal Mac Gréil, a Maynooth sociologist, won the prize in 1977 with a trailblazing study of prejudice in Ireland, and was

promptly faced by a campaign to oust him from the Executive Committee of the Gaelic League unless he refused it. By contrast, the award of the prize to the aggressive Belfast journal *Fortnight* in 1982 annoyed many in the Unionist establishment, who had perceived it as a thorn in their side for years. A. T. Q. Stewart won the prize with his brilliant and bitter study of Ulster history, 'The Narrow Ground'; Brian Friel and the Field Day Company, coming from a very different tradition of cultural critique, for the luminous play 'Translations.' Elegant historical dissections like F.S.L. Lyons's 'Culture and Anarchy in Ireland 1890-1939' and Oliver MacDonogh's 'States of Mind' have been honoured, along with autobiographical *tours de force* like Dervla Murphy's 'A Place Apart,' plays like Stewart Parker's 'I'm a Dreamer Montreal,' and television programmes like Robert Kee's 'Ireland: A History.' Whatever else the prize has done, it has managed to reflect an extraordinarily varied and combative range of intellectual activity.

One striking pattern which emerges is the way that the entries (not just the winners) have generally reflected the preoccupations and developments of the moment—often in a manner only evident in retrospect. Thus in the late 1970s, the most obvious contenders tended to explore and analyse the roots of the sectarian divide. In the early 80s, the concentration moved on to patterns of alienation among the Northern minority. More recent winners have explored the Republic's view of the North—perhaps

part of the same current of introspection that produced the Forum Report and the Kilbrandon Commission.

By the same token, the short-list this post-Hillsborough year seems to stress the identity of Ulster Unionism. The final contenders include Ed Moloney and Andy Pollak's biography of Ian Paisley; Anthony Kenny's 'The Road to Hillsborough,' detailing the background to the Anglo-Irish Accord; Hubert Butler's incisive Anglo-Irish essays, 'Escape from the Anthill'; Peter Somerville-Large's study of an Irish rural community, 'Cappaghglass'; and Frank McGuinness's play 'Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching towards the Somme,' recently and electrifyingly staged at the Hampstead Theatre. The award ceremony, which rotates between Dublin, Belfast and London, will take place on Friday, in Dublin.

Ten years on, Jane Ewart-Biggs has built a new career—a life peer, a prominent Labour spokesman on home affairs, President of the UK committee of UNICEF. The Irish preoccupation continues: the Ewart-Biggs Trust has recently founded another prize, for community work in Northern Ireland. In a decade's celebration of diverse cultural interrogations, both political and artistic, even the most jaundiced quidnuncs (or alligators) must recognise some kind of progress towards 'increasing understanding'—what Seamus Heaney, presenting the prize in 1983, referred to as its 'kinetic effect.' Moving people in generally desirable directions. It offers unlikely but triumphant proof that even tragedies perpetrated by extremists can be turned to the purposes of reconciliation.