

# The Butlers Did It:

A Lighthearted Look at a Bunch of Butlers



*"Comme je trouve!"*

By Henry (Hank) Butler Chapin



July 23, 1920 – Pasadena, California  
Ellis Parker Butler taking his first aeroplane ride at Roger's Field. An example of the zany streak in the Butler sense of humor.

## From the Anthill, by Way of Introduction

My father once told me that “the Butlers are an interesting family.” He sure knew what he was talking about, because he married my mother, Jean Butler, in 1934. Mother was a fascinating conversationalist. Naturally I didn’t appreciate that fact until after I grew up. She had a bit of imaginative, Celtic poetic wildness in her. When I was sixteen, she once asked me, “did you ever wish you could get in a car and just drive and drive and drive on forever?” Was that *my* mother speaking?

My parents were together until death did them part, sixty-three years later in 1997. All the while, Mom was a Butler to the hilt, and she often reminded her five children of that fact. Her “Papa,” as she called her father, was Ellis Parker Butler, a well-known comic writer of the last century. Essentially, he was the hero of our family, and his name was often invoked. Mom also had a witty sense of humor no doubt picked up from her father. Sometimes I wondered if she felt a bit sorry for all of us because we were stuck with the wrong surname. In my opinion, Mother felt her children were really Butlers dressed in Chapin clothing.

Speaking of a touch of wildness, Dad once gave me a photograph of Wild Bill Hickok, the frontier desperado of the old Wild West, and asked me how I liked my collateral relative. This was a new and intriguing thought. Could Wild Bill Hickok actually be a Butler? My father, Henry M. Chapin, turned out to be right. Wild Bill *was* a Butler. You can look it up.

This kindled my interest in noting other Butlers of interest. One of my favorites is James Butler, 9<sup>th</sup> Earl of Ormonde, whose plaque can be found right in St. Canice’s Cathedral in Kilkenny. In 1542, “he was poisoned in England and there buried. His heart was sent to Ireland and deposited in

this Cathedral.” His body may have stayed in England, but his heart belonged to Ireland! You can check it out when the Butler Rally convenes in the Cathedral at the end of the week. While I’m on the subject of ancient Butlers, I’ve often wondered how many Piers or Pierce Butlers there were in olden times? Hundreds, it seems.

The first time I visited Kilkenny, I walked into a pub and proudly announced that I was a Butler come to visit the old country. The bartender skewered me with, “Oh, is that the family whose members sacrifice their dogs when they are buried?” And you can easily look around in the Cathedral and see that, indeed, many of the tombs have a dog lying at the feet of the recumbent statue of a knight. Of course, a dog is a Medieval icon for fidelity. That’s why dogs have often been named Fido—or “fideaux”-- for faithfulness.

I mustn’t forget the man who has meant so much to the Butler Society—Hubert Butler. He was an authentic Irish intellectual who wrote numerous essays on literature, Irish politics and history, and modern society, which he likened to an anthill from which we need to escape to be human. What could be a better example of the anthill metaphor than a modern airport undergoing a terrorist alert?

Twentieth Century Ireland had many gigantic literary figures, mostly in poetry, fiction and theatre, but Hubert Butler stands without peers (or Piers, for that matter) in the essay genre. Hubert attended my first Butler Rally in 1985 and was our central figure, truly a scholar and a gentleman for us to rally around. Incidentally, the 1985 Rally was billed as the Butlers’ 800<sup>th</sup> birthday, from 1185 to 1985. How’s that for tradition? At my second Butler Rally, in 2003, we all had a get-together in the home where Hubert Butler had lived, a connection with what in the Hawaiian language would be called *mana* (or the spirit) of the Butler tradition. Incidentally, I noticed on the wall

of Hubert's home a picture of Tyrone Power, the famous actor who came from a theatrical family. However, I didn't discover the connection. I hope to find out this time at the 2006 Butler Rally.

I've also prepared some decidedly unencylopedic entries on various Butlers. I'm sure I've left out some wonderful Butlers—we're all wonderful, for that matter-- and I definitely would appreciate the help of any Butler Rally participants who have ideas for additions. This list is not finished.

As I write, news has just come about the terrorist plot in England. Everybody's travel plans are bound to be fouled up. At this moment, I'm not even 100% certain I'll be at the Rally, though I plan to be. So, without further ado, here are some entries on a bunch of Butlers.

**Butler** That was the name of the seven-year-old African-American boy who attended P. S. 42 with me in Elmhurst, Queens, New York City during the war. I can't remember his first name. But he liked me, he was my buddy, no one would mess with him, and he stood up for me against my archenemy, a kid named Wolfgang. I felt safe in school because of Butler, and that's important when you're seven. Wherever Butler is, I sure hope he's had a good life.

**Butler Institute of American Art, The** This museum in Youngstown, Ohio was founded in 1919 and is the first museum dedicated exclusively to American art. One of its famous paintings is "The Whip," by Winslow Homer, which portrays school children playing snap the whip at recess. See **Joseph Green Butler, Jr.** for comments on the founder.

**Dune: The Butlerian Jihad** This book is the first of a trilogy written by Brian Herbert (son of Frank Herbert) and Kevin J Anderson. It is set in the beginnings of the Dune universe, known to all science fiction fans, created by Frank Herbert. Some of the main characters come from a family named Butler, hence the title. After a tip from Ambassador Charles Salmon, a sci-fi fan, I got this information online from Wikipedia, which has been a helpful source for me.

**Ellis O. Butler** (1915- ) Butler was awarded a battlefield promotion from sergeant to lieutenant during the Battle of the Bulge. Many will recognize that this means the fighting was so fierce that all the officers in his unit had been killed. Ellis is also known as the Limerick King of Knoxville, Tennessee because he wins the St. Patrick's Day limerick contest every year with such ease. Because not everybody in those parts knows that Butler is itself an Irish name, he changes his name to Ellis O'Butler once a year when he reigns and rides

in a convertible as the Limerick King in the Knoxville St. Patrick's Day Parade. He also told me once that the Butlers must have lots of self-confidence because they held their Rally in a zoo. It's true. The first day of the 1985 Rally was held in the Zoo at Phoenix Park in Dublin, from whence we then went to Kilkenny.

**Ellis Parker Butler** (1869-1937) American humorist and author of the once well-known *Pigs Is Pigs* (1904), which is still a laff-riot when read today. I have thirty-five other books my grandfather wrote on my shelves. I wrote an article about him in *Journal of the Butler Society* Vol. 3, No. 1. The picture of him in 1920 taking his "first aeroplane ride," as it says on the back of the photo, is typical of the zany sense of humor which some Butlers are said to possess. An aficionado in Texas has constructed a marvelous website dedicated to EPB, as we refer to him in our family. You can access it through <http://socrates.uhwo.hawaii.edu/humanities/chapin> on the internet.

**Frank Butler** He was a sharpshooter who was eventually bested by an even sharper shooter, the incredible Annie Oakley. The two eventually married, and she was legally Annie Oakley Butler as is apparent in the proceedings of the lawsuits that marred her later life. Remember the character of "Frank" in *Annie Get Your Gun?* That's Frank Butler.

**Hubert Butler** Greatly loved and revered by members of The Butler Society which he helped to found. Three important and very readable books I have in my library are *The Sub-Prefect Should Have Held His Tongue and Other Essays*, *Escape from the Anthill*, and *Independent Spirit*.

**Joseph Green Butler, Jr.** (1840's-1927) He worked in the open furnaces of Ohio and founded Youngstown Sheet

and Tube in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. He became a self-taught appreciator of art. His first art collection was destroyed by fire, so he vowed to start another collection of American art which is housed in the museum he finished building in 1919. (Thanks to Pat McCormick, Archivist of the museum.)

**Jean Butler** Lead dancer, along with Michael Flatley, in the very exciting and imaginative Irish dance troupe *Riverdance*. She eventually ran afoul of Flatley's ego and left *Riverdance*.

**Nicholas Murray Butler** (1862-1947) Known to some as Nicholas Miraculous for his many achievements and years as president of Columbia University in New York City. He was president for almost half a century from 1902 to 1945. Nowadays, the average college president lasts five years.

**Pierce Butler** (1866-1939) He was an American Supreme Court Justice. Judging from his dates on the bench (1923-1939), I have a sneaking suspicion he was one of the "nine old men" who led President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to try to pack the Supreme Court in desperation at their recalcitrance. Another one of the plethora of Piers and Pierces in the Butler family

**Rhett Butler** This famous Butler didn't even exist in real life. The fictional role was played by Clark Gable in the movie, *Gone with the Wind*. Famous for dumping the high-maintenance Scarlett O'Hara with the deathless words, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

**Robert Olen Butler** Author of *Had a Good Time: Stories from American Postcards*. I own a tenth edition of *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*. Some wag once said, "if you want to collect really rare books, collect tenth editions, not first editions."

**Samuel Butler** (1612-1680) Author of *Hudibras*, a well-known poem not known to many (except to some English majors). It's written in galloping meters.

**Samuel Butler** (1835-1902) Author of the novel, *The Way of All Flesh*. It's a good read, considering it's a classic. Contains trenchant observations about father-child relationships and an allegory about bees digging into the banks of a river, the meaning of which I have forgotten. I've talked myself into reading *The Way of All Flesh* again.

**Simon Kenton** He was an 18<sup>th</sup> Century frontiersman who was not a Butler, though he had enough sense to aspire to that condition. Kenton thought he was wanted for murder, so he left town as a fugitive and changed his name to Simon Butler. As he became famous for daring exploits and great bravery, the Indians came to know him as Badlah (a corruption of Butler). He saved the life of Davy Crockett with some well-placed shots. You can read all about it in one of the best books I've ever read, Allen Eckert's *The Frontiersmen*.

**Smedley Butler** His name alone endears him to me. Smedley was a very important and a very unorthodox Marine Corps General. Famous for saying, "to Hell with the admirals." This man was an original in every way. His life reflects the meaning of Hubert Butler's title, *Independent Spirit*, as is true of so many Butlers.

**Wild Bill Hickok** (1837-1876) Wild Bill's real name was James Butler Hickok. He was a legendary character of the Wild West, a gambler, a marshal, and a killer. He was eventually shot while playing cards. The hand he held, a pair of aces and a pair of eights with all cards black, has since been known as the "dead man's hand."

**William Butler Yeats** (1865-1939) Yeats is certainly one of the great poets of all time. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923. Yeats also helped to found the Abbey Theatre in Dublin which helped to dramatize and articulate a vision of Irish Culture. He was quite proud of being descended from one of the Dukes of Ormonde who was a Butler, hence the poet's middle name. Irish literature written in English experienced an absolute Renaissance in the Twentieth Century, and William Butler Yeats was one of the best, along with James Joyce, George Bernard Shaw, Samuel Beckett, John Millington Synge, Frank O'Connor, Sean O'Faolain, Mary Lavin, Elizabeth Bowen, Somerville and Ross, Edna O'Brien, and William Trevor. The incredible list goes on and on.

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*"Comme je trouve!"*

***Butler a boo!***

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