

# THE JOHN ADAMS INSTITUTE

AMERICAN CULTURE IN THE NETHERLANDS

Introduction of Ian Buruma by Maarten Westerveen  
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Good evening everyone.

On behalf of the John Adams Institute I welcome you to this evening with Ian Buruma where we discuss his latest work: *Their Promised Land: My Grandparents in Love and War*. A book detailing the correspondence between Mr. Buruma's Jewish grandparents Bernard and Win Schlesinger. A correspondence that spans two world wars and two continents with two components keeping it together: love and the idea of Great Britain.

I hardly need to introduce tonight's speaker, yet I happily do.

Ian Buruma is one of our most treasured writers, an intrepid traveler and commentator of both the exotic and the deeply familiar.

I am using the pronoun "our" in the most liberal way, for Mr. Buruma is a man not bound by a single passport or identity. If we Dutch want to claim him as one of our own, then so can the rest of the world. As a writer he is as comfortable in Asia as he is in the West, his scope ranging from religion and history to philosophy and popular culture.

Born to a Dutch father and an English mother, raised in the Netherlands yet with one eye firmly on Britain, it is hard not to see the seeds of his work being sown so early. In his highly enjoyable book *Anglomania* he describes the allure of the Isle in both historic and personal terms. A collection of articles and stories that in some ways pave the way for the book we will discuss here tonight. If *Anglomania* takes a more essayistic look at the love an outsider might feel for Britain, then *Their Promised Land* goes into the blood and guts of that love.

And we surely must call it love.

Reading Mr. Buruma's books on Britain I recognized much of that love. Growing up by the sea, I would try to spot England from across. To no avail of course. Coming from a family marked by the war, seeing the British forces march through our street to celebrate the liberation of Walcheren confirmed my suspicion that across the North Sea was a safe haven. It unfortunately also left an unreasonable love for the sound of bagpipes.

In my mind Britain was a kind of nature preserve for the pale, the geeky, the socially awkward. It was, as I saw it, a preserve for me.

If my Anglophilia was a tad pathetic and the reasons for it doubly so, it most certainly was not for Mr. Buruma's grandparents. Win and Bernard Schlesinger had faith in their country. That it would stand by its Jews, if perhaps not always as enthusiastically as could be hoped. That faith proved to be justified.

Buruma's book chronicles the horrors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the eyes of two compassionate Jewish Britons, yet the most prevailing theme here is love. A love for each other, for culture, for country. In these days of relentless bad news, of Brexit and uncertainties, the Schlesingers unwavering faith in human decency is an inspiration to us all.