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press release

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From: The Publishers Association, 19 Bedford Square,
London, W.C. 1.

The winner of the third £5,000 Booker Prize for fiction, sponsored jointly by the Publishers Association and Booker McConnell Ltd. will be chosen from among the following six short-listed novels. The authors are in alphabetical order:

The Big Chapel by Thomas Kilroy (Faber & Faber)
Briefing for a Descent into Hell by Doris Lessing (Cape)
In a Free State by V.S. Naipaul (Andre Deutsch)
St. Urbain's Horseman by Mordecai Richler (Weidenfeld)
Goshawk Squadron by Derek Robinson (Heinemann)
Mrs. Palfrey at the Claremont by Elizabeth Taylor (Chatto & Windus)

The terms of reference for the 1971 prize are "the best full-length novel in the opinion of the judges". The books, to be eligible, had to be written in English by citizens of the Commonwealth, Eire and South Africa with scheduled publication dates between 1 September and 15 November 1971 only. However, the judges were entitled to call in novels first published in the UK at any time during 1971. The judges are John Gross (Chairman), Lady Antonia Fraser, Saul Bellow, John Fowles and Philip Toynbee. John Gross makes the following comments:

"The judges considered 42 novels that had been submitted by publishers or called in. Although the level of achievement fluctuated a great deal, it was generally felt to be encouraging; about a dozen titles were considered at length as serious contenders, and the final short list consists of six books which in their various and often unpredictable ways are all of exceptional interest.

The Big Chapel by Thomas Kilroy is an extremely self-assured first novel based on the actual career of a rebellious priest in nineteenth-century Ireland and the violent reactions which he provoked. In terms of historical reconstruction this is something of a tour de force, although it also has many contemporary reverberations, while the author's irony and feeling for idiosyncrasy prevent a sombre theme turning ponderous.

Briefing for a Descent into Hell by Doris Lessing, which is defined by the author as a work of "inner space fiction",

describes the fantasies of a professor who has undergone a breakdown in a series of De Quincey-like fantasies, while at the same time anchoring them firmly in the context of his experiences in a mental hospital, and relating them to his personality through the letters of friends and others who have been close to him. A bold, highly original work, at one level it is an indictment of civilization's obtuse treatment of the mentally disturbed, at another an attempt to explore the imaginative truths which lie beyond the reach of everyday rationality.

"In a Free State by V.S. Naipaul dramatises the possibilities and limitations of freedom, personal as well as political, in the post-colonial epoch. A prologue and epilogue, together with three episodes dealing respectively with an Indian in Washington, a West Indian in London, and English expatriates in a newly-independent African state, enable the author to bring out the global dimensions of his theme without sacrificing a powerful, wholly convincing sense of the individual and the unique. The characters are subtly presented, the comic and poignant undertones beautifully handled, the implications unexpected and often disturbing.

"St. Urbain's Horseman by Mordecai Richler chronicles the fortunes and farcical (though alarming) misfortunes of a Canadian scriptwriter living in London, though it also ranges beyond them through fantasy and picaresque techniques to evoke some of the darker issues of recent history. An unfailingly energetic work, full of comic energy and enlivened by a sharp eye for grotesque contemporary detail.

"Goshawk Squadron by Derek Robinson is a compelling first novel about the Royal Flying Corps in the closing stages of the first world war. The squadron which Mr. Robinson describes is dominated by "a wild old man of twenty three", a ruthless, sarcastic, foul-mouthed C.O. who gets results — at a price. Savagely yet (from an artistic point of view) lovingly portrayed, he is a frightening and memorable creation, and the little world in which he wields his power is equally vividly presented.

"Mrs. Palfrey at the Claremont, by Elizabeth Taylor, is the deceptively low-keyed story of an old lady living in a hotel on the Cromwell Road and the friendship which she strikes up with a vague young man whose first thought is to put her into a novel. Every stroke is made to tell, and what looks at first like a miniature develops into a compassionate, tough-minded, almost Chekhovian study of human strength and weakness."

The announcement of the winner will be made on the evening of 25 November, when the cheque and a trophy will be presented at a dinner at the Cafe Royal

For further general information about the Booker Prize and photographs of the trophy please contact Marilyn Edwards at the Publishers Association (01 580 6321)