



**BOOK REVIEW: From a Clear Blue Sky**

**Timothy Knatchbull's investigation into the IRA bombing of Earl Mountbatten takes a profound journey into personal and Irish history**

Updated: 12/10/2010

******

**By** [***Jenny Cathcart***](http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/critic.aspx?c=5)

'On the morning of Monday, August 27, 1979, Paul Maxwell asked me the time. He laughed when I told him it was eleven thirty-nine and forty seconds.'

Thus begins Timothy Knatchbull’s painstakingly researched, personal and often moving account of an event which made headlines around the world.

Less than ten minutes later, at 11.46, *Shadow V*, the pleasure boat carrying Earl Mountbatten, twins Timothy and Nicolas Knatchbull, their parents John and Patricia Brabourne, their grandmother the Dowager Lady Brabourne and Paul Maxwell, the boat boy from Enniskillen, was blown to smithereens just off Mullaghmore Head by a bomb planted by the IRA.

Timothy’s grandfather, Earl Mountbatten died instantly, as did Timothy’s identical twin brother Nicolas (aged 14) and Paul Maxwell (aged 15). The Dowager Lady Brabourne died of her injuries the following day.

[](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Clear-Blue-Sky-Surviving-Mountbatten/dp/0091931460)At the same time, Francis McGirl, driver of a red Ford Escort had been flagged down at a checkpoint in Granard, County Offaly. He and his passenger, Thomas McMahon, were held in the local police station. When questioned by Garda James Lohan, McGirl became nervous and gave the false name Patrick Rehill.

Knatchbull has pieced together, in meticulous detail, the *Shadow V* rescue operation in Mullaghmore. Brian Best and Richard Wallace, doctors from Northern Ireland, oversaw the operation and organised transportation for the survivors and the dead back to Mullaghmore harbour and on to Sligo General hospital.

Lord Mountbatten’s body was taken to shore on Edward Dawson’s fourteen-foot rubber Zodiac. Charlie Pearce’s dinghy relayed Timothy Knatchbull’s seriously injured parents and grandmother. Knatchbull himself was aboard Dick and Elizabeth Wood-Martin’s boat which, with its engine spluttering, made slow progress back to harbour.

Paul Maxwell’s body arrived on Gus Mulligan’s boat, where it was discovered by Paul’s distraught father, John Maxwell. Patricia Brabourne’s dog Twiga also perished and was recovered. But at this point in the book there is no mention of what became of Knatchbull’s twin brother Nicolas, still missing.

At Sligo general hospital Dr Tony Heenan led a small team of doctors and nurses, handling the emergency efficiently and sympathetically. When they were well enough, Timothy and Patricia Brabourne were told that Nicolas had died. Patricia later described it as 'the worst moment of my life'. She decided she did not have the strength even to think about it and that she would deal with it once she had a bit more life in her.

A family friend, Sylvia Crathorne, who came to Classiebawn to support the wounded while family members attended the funeral of Lord Mountbatten, Lady Brabourne and Nicholas Knatchbull in England wrote to her sister:

'I can’t tell you how devastating, how moving, how heartrending this nightmare is. It’s impossible really to describe what a bomb victim looks like – not so as to let the other person feel the full sickening horror.'

Dr Heenan went beyond the call of duty to comfort Norton Knatchbull, the Brabourne’s eldest son who had arrived from England to be with his brothers and sisters. He grabbed a bottle of whiskey and took Norton into one of the drawing rooms at Classiebawn castle, emerging later to warn that 'there should be no more stiff upper lips here'.

As well as detailed accounts of the trial of McMahon and McGirl, the author analyses the inadequate security surrounding Mountbatten and his family. He assesses the IRA’s motives in targeting Mountbatten and describes the complex nature of support for the Republican movement among the population of Ireland in 1979, quoting both Gerry Adams and John Hume.

Thomas McMahon, a Libyan-trained IRA bomb maker, was convicted of the murder of Lord Mountbatten in November 1979. In 1998 he was released from prison under the terms of the Good Friday agreement.
Knatchbull had been christened Timothy Nicolas, and his brother Nicolas Timothy. As identical twins, the surviving brother was particularly traumatised. Because of his injuries he was unable to mourn the loss of his kin. Timothy was unable to attend Nicolas’s funeral. He didn't see the body until he surveyed it in a coroner’s photograph in 2003.

From 2003 to 2006, with the zeal of an investigative journalist, Knatchbull returned to Ireland to meet all of those who held the most vivid memories of the fateful day. They include Sean Brennan and John O’Brien, who manned the Bundoran lifeboat along with Michael ‘Whitie’ Gilbride, described as a supporter of the old IRA. Whitie lifted Nick’s body from the water and Brennan lifted him ever so gently down the side of the boat and laid him on the floor.

Alone in Classiebawn, Knatchbull tells us that he forced himself to confront the ghosts of his past, and in particular to 'have words’ with his dead brother. 'I knew I was in no danger of being heard inside a double-glazed granite castle at the top of a hill on the edge of the Atlantic in an autumn storm,' he writes.

And so he gave full vent to his grief. In his journal he wrote: 'Today I had an hour that was the hardest and best, perhaps of any hour of my life.' At last he felt free to forgive, to live in the present and to continue a full and happy life with his wife Isabella and their five children.

'I left Ireland feeling a love which I projected primarily onto one man: Tony Heenan. He has wit, humour and above all compassion; he cares. And my heart sings because I recognise that on August 27, 1979 Heenan defeated McMahon and I am the proof.'

*Jenny Cathcart*