

**From a Clear Blue Sky: Surviving the Mountbatten Bomb by Timothy Knatchbull: review**

**Philip Johnston is moved by the painful yet cathartic story of Timothy Knatchbull, Lord Mountbatten's grandson, who survived a deadly IRA bomb**

By Philip Johnston 11:30AM BST 12 Oct 2009

It was Lord Mountbatten’s boots that I particularly remember. They were reversed in the stirrups of his favourite black charger, Dolly, as it led the ceremonial procession at his funeral 30 years ago. The riderless horse is known as a caparison, a custom that dates to the time of Genghis Khan. It symbolises a fallen warrior.



We had come to Parliament Square to watch what would be the last great imperial funeral of the 20th century. On the top of his coffin, draped in the Union Flag and pulled by 100 or so naval ratings, was the cocked hat of an Admiral of the Fleet.

The cortege was followed by a large contingent of sailors and marines; it was very much a Senior Service occasion as befitted one of its own. He had been the captain of HMS Kelly which sank in the Mediterranean in 1941. He came to Churchill’s notice and was rapidly promoted. He was later the last viceroy of India.

It helped, perhaps, that he was a grandson of Queen Victoria and a cousin of the Queen; but he was a significant figure in our country’s history. That made him a target for the IRA who murdered him while he was on holiday with his family in County Sligo. They placed a bomb in his boat, Shadow V, and detonated it by remote control. He was 79.

Among those with Mountbatten on that fateful day was his grandson Timothy Knatchbull, the author of this exceptionally moving book, the writing of which has been a cathartic

experience that provides us with a detailed account of the last days of Mountbatten and those who died with him. They included Knatchbull’s paternal grandmother, Lady Brabourne, a 15-year-old Irish boy, Paul Maxwell, who looked after the boat, and, most poignantly, Timothy’s identical twin, Nick. It is the loss of Nick that the author found hardest to come to terms with.

Timothy was too badly injured to attend the funerals. This inability to undergo the rituals of bereavement haunted him until he was emotionally strong enough to face up to what had happened by revisiting the scene and talking to those who had rescued him and brought his brother’s body ashore.

The book is entitled *From a Clear Blue Sky*, yet the events of that day were not unexpected. Every summer since the Sixties, the family had gathered at Classiebawn, a castle on the Sligo coast; but when the Troubles began in 1969, the holidays became more problematic, so much so that each year Mountbatten would consult the Metropolitan Police, the Gardai and both governments to ask if they considered it safe to go. Each year they said yes and the Irish police provided guards to keep an eye (though not a very close one, as it turned out) on the family’s vehicles and boat. It was considered important both to the British and Irish Governments for a family with close links to the Royal household not to be seen to retreat before IRA threats. Mountbatten was not a man easily cowed; but he was also anxious to protect his family.

This book works on several levels: as an affectionate portrait of Mountbatten; as a story of what happens when a cataclysm is visited on what had been until then an idyllic life; and as a carefully researched detective story with Knatchbull endeavouring to find out exactly what happened and why.

This search takes him into the dark heart of Provisional IRA Republicanism. He learns that the IRA had targeted his family on a number of occasions. In 1978, an assassination squad was ready to shoot Mountbatten but he was dining elsewhere on the day chosen for the attack. Knatchbull was also astounded to discover that the British government knew that the IRA had a mole inside Classiebawn working as a cook but had never told Mountbatten despite his annual request for security information. He suspects he even saw the person who detonated the bomb remotely from the shore behaving oddly in a shop a few days earlier.

The greatest irony is that of all the members of the British establishment who could have been chosen for assassination, Mountbatten loved Ireland and was the one most likely to have sympathy for the nationalist cause, having supported it in India and in Burma. The IRA considered him a legitimate target; he was just an easy one.

Much of this book is taken up with the bomb and its immediate aftermath. Knatchbull’s uncanny recall of the day itself is helped by diaries and the memories of others there that day. There is a powerful moment when, a day or so before the assassination, he and his brother talk about what it would be like if one was to die and the other survive. “I looked into his eyes and was lost for words,” Knatchbull writes. “So was he.”

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