

Bottom of Form

**Maurice Hayes: From the clear blue sky comes a compelling account of survival**



*Timothy Knatchbull is taken to hospital after surviving the IRA bomb which killed his grandfather, Lord Louis Mountbatten*

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AUGUST was always a wicked month during the Troubles, not least in 1979 when the atrocities of Mullaghmore and Narrowwater took place.

Timothy Knatchbull, a survivor of Mullaghmore, has written a compelling and moving account of that atrocity and its impact. It's not easy reading, but it is one of the most penetrating and humane books to have emerged from the Troubles.

At times it is a painful book to read, and must have been even more painful to write.

But those who take the trouble will learn much about the impact of acts of violence on individuals and families, of the incredible closeness of the relationship between identical twins, about mourning and grieving, about remembering and forgetting, about the slow processes of retrieval, about the painful search for truth, about one man's struggle with his demons, about accommodation of the past, and, in the end, the hopeful triumph of good over evil.

Knatchbull was a 14-year-old schoolboy on a brilliant August morning in 1979, sitting on the wheelhouse of a battered old fishing boat off the coast of Sligo when, 'From a Clear Blue Sky' of the book's title, he was blown clear into the water and almost into eternity by an IRA bomb which killed his two grandparents, his identical twin brother, and Paul Maxwell -- a schoolboy from Enniskillen who had taken a summer job as boatman. That his grandfather, the prime target, was the Earl Mountbatten of Burma, last Viceroy of India, a great-grandson of Queen Victoria and a close confidante of the British Royal Family, made the event world news.

In fairness, Knatchbull does not treat the killings as any more or less significant than any other death in the Troubles. What he does show is that the impact on a family is the same, rich or poor, high or low on the social scale.

He reconstructs the events of the day from memory: the excitement of the fishing trip, the gaiety of the holiday village, the positioning of people on the boat, the last words to Paul, the last sight of Nick, the seconds before detonation, the bang and then the silence. He finds himself floating face-down in the water, blinded and nearly deaf and stinking of diesel.

Pulled out by the hair by friendly hands, he was triaged by casualty doctors from Belfast in their swimming trunks, transported to hospital into intensive care, not knowing who had lived or died.

In all of this, apart from Tim and his parents who survived the most appalling injuries, the real heroes are the siblings who showed the strength of love and family bonding and also the medics at the scene and in Sligo Hospital.

The book is mainly a journey back to that day, trying to piece together the narrative from a variety of sources; and to face up to what he discovered, trying to reconstruct his own memory of events, trying to make sense of it all; trying, even, in a supreme act of charity, to understand those who had placed the bomb and why they had done so. It is a long and hard journey, with amnesia and migraine as milestones, along with painful memories; with moments of debilitating recall helped by therapy, by family support and personal courage and mental strength.

After nearly 30 years he found it possible to return to Ireland and then to Sligo. He searches out and speaks to witnesses, to rescuers, to gardai, to villagers, to the doctors and nurses who treated him. What he finds is not always easy to stomach. Behind the public sympathy there are pools of private bitterness and enmity, there are those who saw and did not speak of IRA activity in the area, there was respect and affection for the family battle against stereotypes in the folk-memory of famine and oppressive landlords, and some who could still see the murder of two boys and two 80-year-olds as a military triumph.

IN the end he got there, to his personal haven of peace and healing, able to bring his family back to Sligo, supportive of the peace process, relieved to see the ballot-box replacing the bomb and the bullet, and those responsible for his twin's death now committed to the disciplines of democratic government. Ironically, he reflects that his grandfather who was killed ostensibly in the cause of Irish nationalism had himself started the unravelling of the British Empire, and had supported national self-determination not only in India and Burma but also in Ireland.

Knatchbull shows that the journey to release is a deeply personal one, which cannot be ordered by law or managed by regulation. In his case it was made easier by therapy, by becoming a documentary maker, by having a name that would open doors, mouths and archives as well as having a deeply inquiring mind.

The message for society is that other victims and survivors are entitled to release too and to be helped by therapy, by access to records and archives and, most of all, by a willingness from those from both sides who inflicted to talk honestly.

Now there's a job for a real 'Truth Commission'.

*- Maurice Hayes*