**Roy Foster**

FROM A CLEAR BLUE SKY: SURVIVING THE MOUNTBATTEN BOMB

by Timothy Knatchbull

The north Sligo coast is a dramatically beautiful landscape, dominated by the table-mountain slab of Ben Bulben, immortalised by Yeats, whose grave lies in its shadow. Up the coast at Raghly Bay sits the gloomy mansion of Lissadell, ancestral home of the Ascendancy rebel Countess Markiewicz, and also immortalised by Yeats. Offshore, the often inaccessible island of Inishmurray contains an early Christian monastic ‘cashel’, or enclosure, of great antiquity, dedicated to the shadowy St Molaise. An absorbing book about this coastline published in 1991 by James Charles Roy is called, appropriately, *Islands of Storm*; it describes his attempts to set out from Mullaghmore towards Inishmurray, continually thwarted by gale force winds and horizontal rain.

The weather was very different on the flawlessly blue August Bank Holiday weekend in 1979, when another celebrated visitor to the area, Earl Mountbatten of Burma, set off from Mullaghmore harbour in his eccentrically converted launch to examine his lobster-pots, and possibly to picnic, as he often had before, on Inishmurray. On board *Shadow V* were his daughter Patricia, her husband, the film producer Lord Brabourne, Lord Brabourne’s mother, his 14-year-old identical twin sons, Timothy and Nicholas Knatchbull, a local 15-year old called Paul Maxwell, and a 5lb gelignite bomb hidden below decks by an IRA team earlier that morning.

The explosion was detonated by remote control, blowing the boat to smithereens and killing Mountbatten, Paul Maxwell and Nicholas Knatchbull almost instantaneously; a witness described the pools along the shore slowly filling with blood-stained water. The Dowager Lady Brabourne died later in hospital. Timothy Knatchbull and his parents survived, terribly injured. ‘Between the three survivors, we had three functioning eyes and no working eardrums.’ Their survival owed much to the fact that the holiday weather meant that the bay was full of other small craft, which came immediately to the rescue; to the fortuitous presence of two young Belfast doctors, with experience of dealing with bomb injuries; and to the work of the nearby Sligo regional hospital. By the IRA’s standards, it was a spectacular success. The entry in Tony Benn’s diary probably replicates the way the bombers hoped ‘the Establishment’ would react:

It may have the most tremendous repercussion. The murder of an international figure, the Supreme Allied Commander in South-East

Asia during the war, a Viceroy of India, a member of the royal

family ... is going to make people think again about Northern Ireland. The whole world will discuss this particular event and I think it may be a turning point.

Why these murders should have ‘made people think again about Northern Ireland’

would be worth analysing, but the logic of terrorism tends to work within a carefully sealed compartment of argument, much like Gerry Adams’s comfortable belief that Mountbatten would have appreciated the manner of his death:

The IRA gave clear reasons for the execution. I think it is unfortunate that anyone has to be killed, but the furore created by Mountbatten’s death showed up the hypocritical attitude of the media establishment. As a member of the House of Lords, Mountbatten was an emotional figure in both British and Irish politics. What the IRA did to him is what Mountbatten had been doing all his life to other people; and with his war record I don’t think he could have objected to dying in what was clearly a war situation. He knew the danger involved in coming to this country. In my opinion, the IRA achieved its objective: people started paying attention to what was happening in Ireland.

Apart from the suggestive, if unintended implication that Mountbatten’s part in the

war against Fascism, rather than his membership of the royal family, made him a legitimate target, the most significant remark concerns the ‘danger involved’ in coming to ‘a war situation’ in ‘this country . . . Ireland’. For Sligo is in the Republic, not in Northern Ireland. Taken with the assassination of another soft target, the British ambassador Christopher Ewart-Biggs, in Dublin three years earlier, the Mountbatten murder can be seen as part of an IRA strategy to bring the campaign south and to destabilise relations between Britain and

Ireland, thus, they hoped, precipitating British withdrawal from the North. This scenario, once again, rested on a particularly solipsistic logic. As it happens, the bomb placed by Thomas MacMahon and (probably) Francis McGirl on *Shadow V* did not create the fall-out desired by the IRA. Thirty years on, it is becoming easier to understand why. Timothy Knatchbull’s eloquent and thoughtful memoir contains many indications why this was so.

This is not Knatchbull’s primary intention, which is to chart his own coming to terms with the loss of a twin who seemed literally part of himself, and from whom he had hardly ever been separated. His way of doing this compels admiration: repeated returns to Ireland and the scene of the tragedy, persistent interviews with witnesses, authorities and local people, and great deal of research into British and Irish police and intelligence records, as well as family archives: the eventual catharsis that this brings about is immensely moving. His own recall of events on that August morning is hyper-real, from waking up in his shared tower bedroom in Classiebawn, Mountbatten’s castellated house, to showing Paul Maxwell the time on his new digital watch, the instant before the bomb ended Maxwell’s life and transformed Knatchbull’s for ever. Police and legal evidence enable him to counterpoint these personal memories with the movements of the IRA team in the area, and to chart the probable previous attempts at sabotage – as well as to describe the history of police protection afforded to the Mountbatten family in the area. And a major theme is his attempt to reconstruct the events immediately following the explosion. The emotional climax of the book is an interview with the retired state pathologist in Dublin, which uncovers an extraordinarily detailed file of medical evidence and – utterly unexpected – photographs of the dead. This, and detailed discussion of the physical trauma suffered by his twin, finally removes the ‘unreasoned and unreasonable emotion’ that he has somehow abandoned his brother.

Other records around the incident are equally and exceptionally profuse: photographs were taken up to the minute before the bomb went off, several of the principals

(including Lord Brabourne) wrote down detailed accounts afterwards, and the memory of the events was etched into the memories of the extended family gathered at Classiebawn. Knatchbull’s epigraph, from Jung, is carefully chosen:

The great events of world history are at bottom profoundly unimportant. In the last analysis the essential thing is the life of the individual. This alone makes history, here alone do the great transformations first take place, and the whole future, the whole history of the world ultimately spring as a gigantic summation from these hidden sources in individuals.

But given the people and the family involved, this personal tragedy was recognisably part of history. Apart from Mountbatten, his fellow victim Doreen Brabourne represented a strain of Irish history: a daughter of the marquess of Sligo, she had grown up during the Troubles of the early 20th century, and had herself been married to an imperial pro-consul (her husband had been acting viceroy of India at the time of his sudden death in 1939). As a child she had seen her family’s shooting lodge burned down; her son, Knatchbull’s father, later bought it back, and it features in his story too.

Above all, Knatchbull builds up a compelling picture of Mountbatten’s relationship to his Irish fastness, inherited through his wife, Edwina, and originally part of Palmerston’s Irish estates. While Mountbatten was determined to hold onto the house after his wife’s death, it is surprising to learn that this presented considerable financial difficulty; unable to afford the upkeep of this comparatively modest house and estate, he offered it to the Irish state in 1975, rent-free, as an occasional official residence, if the government would pay its expenses. The taoiseach politely refused, while ‘greatly appreciating the generous gesture and the friendly feelings towards Ireland’, and the next year Mountbatten leased the house to Hugh Tunney, a rich Irish businessman, reserving the right for a family holiday there in August. Tunney invariably visited at the end of this period, and was staying there that fateful weekend.

As far as Mountbatten was concerned, his relationship with local people was excellent, but this was not altogether true; Sligo is not far from the border, and there is a strong Republican tradition in the area. ‘In this slow-paced, observant, communicative fishing village, where the bush telegraph hummed with all the energy of today’s cyberspace, repeated visits by IRA volunteers would have been noticed by some and shared with others.’ Knatchbull remembers wandering into a quayside shop days before the bomb and precipitating an uncharacteristic sudden silence: were the two strangers by the counter members of a reconnaissance team? He builds up a percussion of small incidents, suggesting that the idea of targeting Classiebawn was well established; he also shows the uncertain extent of protection afforded by the Dublin government, and recalls the exciting dimension this lent to the children’s Irish summers of ‘Aran jumpers and cream crackers and Bovril’. At the same time, Mountbatten’s determination to express ‘friendly feelings towards Ireland’ continued and he was a believer in unification as the only long-term solution to the Troubles

– a belief he confided to the Irish ambassador in London seven years before his death.

The Mountbatten in these pages is partly recognisable from previous portraits. Once again, we encounter his vanity, peremptory manner and preoccupation with his historical reputation, but these characteristics are here seen from his grandson’s indulgent perspective. Padding around his Irish house in his HMS Kelly Reunion Association sweatshirt, the old man is affectionate to his many grandchildren, calls the household theatrically to order every evening to plan the next day’s expedition, and has a penchant for discussing the arrangements for his eventual state funeral. Knatchbull’s book is not another salvo in the violent historiographical wars over Mountbatten’s reputation, but he certainly backs Philip

Ziegler’s authorised portrait rather than the denunciations of Andrew Roberts and

David Reynolds. And for all the revisionist controversy over someone whom Attlee described as ‘rather a Ruritanian figure’, Mountbatten’s identification remains firmly with colonial concession– though this, again, did not mesh with the IRA’s version of their target.

His record in India was, however, made much of in the international reaction to his death, which was as seismic as the IRA hoped, although it did not produce the effect they had counted on.

Much as with the assassination of Ewart-Biggs in 1976, the feeling in the Republic was one of revulsion, and the government seized the opportunity to affirm its solidarity with policies of peaceful reconciliation and, implicitly, a twin-track approach with the British government, though this is only now becoming clear with the release of official documents. Knatchbull believes that the reaction of the Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, was seen as inadequate at the time and claims that he was thought to be sympathetic to the IRA. While this may have been the perception in Britain, it was emphatically not true in Ireland. Lynch was in any case navigating extremely difficult political waters, and was shortly to stand down and be unexpectedly succeeded by the Mephistophelian figure of Charles James Haughey – who had his own history of sympathy with the IRA.

But a detailed exegesis on Anglo-Irish political relations is not part of Knatchbull’s brief. He does produce arresting vignettes of some local reactions. He talks to a man from the Bundoran lifeboat crew, 17 years old at the time, who pulled his twin’s body from the water:

I couldn’t take on board he was actually dead. I remember quite vividly the speed we were going. There was a bit of turbulence and a couple of times I fell on top of your brother and the jackets covering him kept blowing off. I could see his hair blowing in the wind. Whitie kept covering his head up so no one could see.

His testament ends with the exhausted return to Bundoran that evening. ‘The town was quiet but I saw a man with a bottle dancing in the street, saying “The old bastard is dead.”’ In Bundoran, too, a 1998 German television documentary about the assassination elicited an interview with a man in a local pub: ‘There has never been any English blood innocently spilt in this country. The only innocent blood that was ever spilt in this country was the Irish innocent blood.’

On this occasion the loss of putatively innocent human life seems soon to have been seen by the IRA as an own goal. Quite rapidly, their public statements took refuge in self-justifying obfuscation. A defensive and fanciful protestation was issued five days later:

Young Maxwell shouldn’t have been there. Latest intelligence before the attack said that there would be additional members of the Royal Family, not civilians, on the boat. Their presence would still not have inhibited the operation going ahead . . . But Paul Maxwell was not scheduled to be there. It should have been a more mature man, an older man who would have been able to weigh up the political company he was keeping and the repercussions of it.

(The ‘royal family’ was wishful thinking, though Knatchbull’s account does indicate the support offered to the bereaved family by their Windsor cousins: in his discreet description of a visit to Balmoral shortly after the tragedy, the queen appears ‘in almost unstoppable mothering mode’, displacing the Helen Mirren image now printed on the national consciousness.) There were IRA supporters in Sligo; celebratory shots were fired around Lissadell on the night of the bomb. One of the most impressive features of this book is the manner in which Knatchbull reckons with the extent of armchair republicanism in the area, and the way it coexisted with conflicting loyalties and affections. He astutely analyses the complicated ‘weave of allegiances’ as well as ‘the unpredictable response of some Irish to illegal activity’. The summer visitors were capable of responding in kind: it was rumoured that on occasion Mountbatten sported an Easter lily – the traditional republican symbol – in his buttonhole, and Knatchbull recalls his father telling him firmly that today’s Provisional

IRA must not be confused with their nobler predecessors in the Troubles – those predecessors who burned down his own father’s house. Some locals clearly treated that German film crew differently from their English counterparts, sometimes to their discomfiture. ‘At one pub a number of people…at the end of their talk, stood up and gave the Heil Hitler sign.’

This is hardly typical, and in Sligo the weight of local opinion during the fall-out from the bomb seems to have been cast firmly against IRA sympathisers. Moreover, Knatchbull’s researches were carried out against a very different background. During the 20-odd years after 1979 the IRA campaign for British withdrawal from Northern Ireland went through several phases; but the overall development was a slow realisation that the main obstacle was not an implacable imperial will, but the local Unionists. This required a re-think, which came in fits and starts; by the late 1990s, Sinn Fein and the IRA were using a new language, closely noted by Knatchbull himself when he attended a lecture given by Martin McGuinness in 1997 at Harvard. The academic chairperson acted like a star-struck teenager, and innocents from South Boston whistled with delight and stamped their feet at any mention of the IRA. Knatchbull notes that the host and audience seemed incapable of understanding the complexity of McGuinness’s position. It is to his credit that he himself made the effort to do so: all the more so as McGuinness was allegedly chief of staff of the IRA in August 1979.

Since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, an era of ‘peace and reconciliation’ has dawned. McGuinness and Adams as members of a power-sharing devolved Belfast government, de facto recognising Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom. Sinn Fein has effectively succeeded to the political position held by the constitutional-nationalist SDLP in the 1970s. For peace process reasons, and in order to keep the republican movement on side as far as possible, it has to be claimed that assassinations such as those of Mountbatten and Ewart-Biggs were somehow a necessary prelude, along with the deaths of the 18 British soldiers blown up at Warrenpoint on the same day as the Mountbatten bomb. On 13 October, Patrick Magee, the ‘Brighton Bomber’ appeared at the House of Commons, addressing an all-party group called the Forgiveness Project along with Jo Berry, the daughter of one of his victims in the 1984 Grand Hotel bombing, Sir Anthony Berry. He said that he was not asking for forgiveness: ‘I can feel regret . . . that’s the best I can do . . . I look back to those days and I don’t think I would have made another choice . . . When you close off options for people to pursue their aims openly through politics or agitation, violence can come on to the agenda.’

Nobody seems to have asked him how political channels were ‘closed off ’ to nationalists in Northern Ireland in that era, but peace and reconciliation clearly require accepting a great deal of questionable and woolly statements, sometimes made in good faith. After Ewart-Biggs was blown up a few hundred yards away from his three small children, his widow, Jane – with considerable courage as well as magnanimity – devoted her life to working for peace in Northern Ireland and the improvement of relations between Britain and Ireland. She frequently visited the province, where she was much liked. During one animated discussion with a local republican sympathiser, who was describing the sufferings of life there, her interlocutor said to her: ‘But you don’t understand what it’s *like*!’ ‘Forgive me,’ she replied, ‘but I think I *do*.’

Timothy Knatchbull could say the same. Thomas MacMahon, who was convicted of planting the bomb on *Shadow V*, was released from prison after serving nearly 19 years (and trying to escape twice, using a smuggled gun and explosives). He has since apparently severed his connection with the IRA. Knatchbull supported his release. MacMahon refused two approaches to meet Paul Maxwell’s father. Perhaps, like Patrick Magee, the best McMahon can do is feel regret; or perhaps not. Meanwhile, republican dissidents currently present more of a threat than at any time over the last six years, and ‘peace walls’ separating the two Northern Irish communities are more present than ever. Whatever the state of the peace, public reconciliation has a long way to go before the wounds of 30 years’ mayhem are cauterised as effectively as the private grief charted in this book.

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