

**Hon Timothy Knatchbull: ‘wrong’ twin finds peace**

**Long-haunted by the loss of his twin brother, his grandmother and his grandfather, Lord Mountbatten, in an IRA bombing 30 years ago, he has at last buried his demons**

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What you notice about the Hon Timothy Knatchbull is not his immaculate breeding, or his misty left eye, which both have starring roles in his story, but his slightly alarming level of happiness. Seated outside the boutique hotel in Notting Hill that he uses as his London base, he laughs as buses roar past, so upbeat and relaxed in his jeans and his ultra-bright smile you might mistake him for a man who had found religion or a winning lottery ticket.

Actually he has just written a book about the murder of his grandfather, Earl Mountbatten of Burma, his grandmother and, most painfully, his twin brother Nicholas, from whom he could be told apart only by the mole on the left side of his chin, in one of the highest profile terrorist attacks of the 20th century.

"It's difficult for me to stop smiling," laughs Knatchbull who, up until now, has rarely spoken about the tragedy. "I know it's really annoying when you meet someone like that. But I just recognise what an incredible run of luck I've had."

Luck? Thirty years ago on Thursday, on August 27, 1979, the IRA blew up the earl's fishing boat Shadow V in Mullaghmore, Co Sligo, as it set off to check his lobster pots. On board were Timothy's mother - Mountbatten's adored eldest daughter Patricia - her husband John, Lord Brabourne, his mother the Dowager Lady Brabourne, 14-year-old twins Nicholas and Timothy, and Paul Maxwell, a 15-year-old Enniskillen boy who holidayed in the village and helped on the boat.

Knatchbull's parents were perilously injured. His grandmother died in hospital. Paul Maxwell and Nicholas died instantly. . Knatchbull himself escaped with shrapnel wounds, perforated eardrums and damage to his already weak right eye in which he is now effectively blind. "I was incredibly lucky when the bomb went off that I was looking to my right," he says. "If my left eye had been knocked out by the bomb I don't think I'd have been able to ride a bike or read a book or drive a car."

Knatchbull, 44, is the youngest of the six surviving children of Patricia and her husband, a former Coldstream Guards officer and later a successful film producer of A Passage to India and other classics. He is handsome, outgoing and unsnooty, but we shouldn't underestimate the grandeur of his lineage. Mountbatten, his grandfather, was the last viceroy of India and needs little introduction; his mother, the present countess, remains best friends with the Queen. His godfather is Prince Charles. Theirs was a life of rank and privilege - canasta on green-baize tables, salmon fishing, crumpets with the Windsors - and Knatchbull grew up with an overwhelming sense of being loved, not just by his family but also by a benign, helpful, deferential world at large. The fact that they were also loathed and plotted against as symbols of the imperial jackboot has taken him 30 years to absorb.

In the paradise lost of their childhood, the twins - dressed identically and never more than a few feet apart - grew up in the Knatchbulls' home in Mersham, Kent. "Nicholas and I were the tail-end Charlies in this big, noisy family," he recalls. "It was a bit of a joke - no one ever knew which was Nicholas, which was Timothy. My mother couldn't reliably tell us apart. Only my brother Philip could do it at first glance. When I was putting together the photos for the book, I had to ask him which one was Nick and which is me. And he'd say, 'That's you on the left, you fool!' "

Adored by their family and the devoted Nanny Bowden, whose bungalow they would visit to water the plants and wind the clocks, they did everything together: left home at nine for the Dragon school in Oxford, won joint scholarships to Gordonstoun. Tim was messy, Nicky was neat; Tim was a performer, Nicky the organised one. Nicky was more robust, which would leave Tim feeling "the wrong twin" had died.

Every August the family decamped to Ireland, moving between the Brabournes' fishing lodge, Aasleagh in Co Galway, and Mountbatten's Classiebawn castle, with its butler and housekeeper typing out menu cards. Through the mists and meadows of rural Ireland, the tribe of cousins would fish, swim, play golf, pick wild flowers, blissfully ignorant that some in their playground of cap-doffing ghillies and boiling nationalism wanted them dead.

There was a clear sky on the morning of August 27 as the party drove the mile from Classiebawn to the harbour. The 28ft Shadow V set sail at 11.35am, watched over by protection officers from the Irish garda. Eleven minutes later 5lb of gelignite, planted beneath the deck by Thomas McMahon, an IRA bomb-maker, was detonated from the shore. That same day 18 British soldiers were ambushed and killed at Warrenpoint, Co Down. Later, Mountbatten's former house manager told Knatchbull that gunshots of celebration rang out only a fews miles from Mullaghmore that night.

One of the last things Knatchbull recalls before the blast is being asked the time by Paul Maxwell, looking at his black Casio watch and announcing jokily it was "11.39 and 30 seconds". He was pulled out of the water by his hair by a couple who had been following Shadow V in their boat. "Another few seconds I would have been dead."

At Sligo general hospital he was told by Joanna, his older sister, of Nicky's death. He was devastated, alone and also appalled by his dry-eyed numbness, but always aware that his job was to raise his parents' spirits by being "cheerful".

The memorial services passed, statues were raised, charitable funds established and Knatchbull, who now runs a small media company, appeared to be getting on with his life. He returned to Gordonstoun after a few months, studied social and political sciences at Cambridge and Harvard's Kennedy School, worked at the BBC as a documentary maker and learnt to check under his car for bombs while looking as if he were searching for dropped coins. Mostly he fooled himself he had recovered, except on the days when he couldn't bear to answer the phone.

His book, From a Clear Blue Sky, is a record of his emotional journey and coming to terms with his loss. It is also an account of a real journey back to the scene of the atrocity, to which the security services warned he might never safely return.

He eventually sought bereavement counselling and psychotherapy to deal with the tragedy, finding solidarity in the Lone Twin Network. In the process he shed the stiff upper-lip and discretion innate to the English nobility. His emotional candour must sometimes perturb his deeply private family.

"My brother Joe and I were having a barbecue on holiday last Easter. And as he was turning over the sausages and burgers, he turned to me and said, 'In one sentence Tim, what's your book about?' And I said, 'It's about saying goodbye to Nick.' There was a very long silence while he . . . he went on cooking the sausages. He wrote to me later saying that phrase said everything."

In 1998 he married Isabella Norman, a Montessori teacher whom he had met at his cousin India Hicks's home in the Bahamas. The service was attended by the Queen; guests later said they saw tears in her eyes as he spoke of his brother. They honeymooned in Ireland, but at Delphi in Co Galway rather than Sligo, and now have five children aged between nine and nine months.

He is open with them about their murdered relatives. "From the youngest age I'd ask them, 'Who are my brothers and sisters?' and if they didn't include Nicky I'd say, 'And?' And they'd look at me, 'Oh, and Uncle Nicky.' We look at photographs, I say, 'Which one is Uncle Nicky and which is me?' And they look at the photograph and say, 'I don't know. Which are you?' And I say, 'I don't know either!' They love talking about it. They're fascinated. They say, 'Tell us about the boat again, daddy. Who died? Where was the bomb?' "

The right side of his body was blasted in the attack but "my left buttock managed to get a big scar. My kids love feeling it in the shower and hearing about the bomb that did it. My eldest daughter wanted to count the scars in the shower with me the other day, but she got to about a dozen and started losing interest". He laughs: "I'm scarred but it doesn't seem to frighten anyone on the beach."

It wasn't always so easy to talk about. After 18 months of work, his psychotherapist challenged him to think about what was holding him back in his recovery. He hadn't seen Nick's body and had been too injured to attend his funeral, so found himself in desperate need of a full stop. He decided to visit the waters where his relatives died and the mortuary where his brother lay, and talk to the men who pulled Nick from the water, entangled in a fishing line with a hook in his thigh. He dared to look at the photograph, kept on the files of Ireland's state pathologist, of his dead twin wearing the jumper knitted by nanny, the thought of whose grief reduced him to a heap. He sought out the rescuers, nurses and doctors, neighbours. Finally, he put on a CD of Hot Hits 6, the boys' special album of 1979, and sat by the drawing-room fire at Classiebawn, where he had once crawled and played with his twin, to say goodbye, alone and weeping.

Knatchbull recalls his grandfather as a "darling man", a joker and punner, never happier than when his houses were full of children. "We'd go on the beach, which had a stream flowing down onto it. He would organise us to get shovels and spades: 10, 12, 14 of us. Grandpapa would have the biggest shovel, my father and my 21-year-old brother Norton would have a big shovel. I was maybe four years old and wanted a shovel, so I had one not much bigger than a child's teacup. My grandfather would hold us all back and draw lines in the sand and say, 'Right, the tide's going to be coming in and the waters will be flowing here. We're going to dam this stream and build up the bank here. When I say "Go!", all hands to the pump!' "

Mountbatten was an inveterate hoarder, which proved useful in his grandson's paper trail: records, letters, laundry lists were stored in the basement of Broadlands in Hampshire, Mountbatten's Palladian mansion, and overseen by two archivists. "They were called the two Mollies," Knatchbull recalls. "As a child I thought they lived down there."

Years later this obsessive archiving helped Knatchbull escape "the maze" that trapped him. His discoveries were invigorating, tear-jerking and cathartic, although there were moments of revulsion: "The work the IRA carried out was so awful. To think that they were studying our little group of holidaymakers, pensioners and children, knowing their job was to blow them to bits.

"I needed to understand the bigger picture from other people's point of view. The therapy of my journey back to Ireland came from being able to understand more. Forgiving wasn't so easy if I didn't know who I was forgiving and what I was forgiving them for."

One question was high on his list. Was it wise for the family to holiday at Classiebawn during the Troubles? In 1974 IRA activity had been considered dangerous enough for the Metropolitan police to advise Mountbatten not to "offer a challenge". Certainly he took soundings on whether it was safe for his family to visit, corresponded copiously with the Cabinet Office, the Irish ambassador, even discussed the matter at length with Harold Wilson. Levels of IRA activity shifted from year to year, but there was a constant concern about safety, tip-offs about kidnap attempts; Shadow V had apparently been sabotaged twice.

"Our family wasn't in Ireland to act as emissaries for the British people," Knatchbull says. "But we were seen by some as symbols of the British state. We were totemic for the system of foreign owners and landlords." He takes a breath and adds a thought as surprising as it is sincere: "Having taken that truth on board, it became clear it wasn't just about me forgiving them, it was about me understanding that to some degree I needed to be asking their forgiveness. I can see someone saying: who does this man think he is, coming back, trying to be forgiving of us? He should be asking our forgiveness for the misery inflicted on Ireland for generations by the British."

For a long time after the attack his whole family was considered at risk; before the peace in Northern Ireland he lived with a daily sense of dread. He is still given the "odd nod and wink" by the police: "The real fear was the phone call would come and it would be someone saying: it's bad news, are you on your own? I'd always think: my God, it's one of the family who've been blown up."

He ascribes no blame to the authorities for not preventing the murders; nor has it ever occurred to him that being targeted is the price of privilege, that the elevated will be loathed as well as loved. "No," he says firmly. "It was like an earthquake that was going to happen. The plate tectonics were shifting in the 1970s in Ireland and we just happened to be where the plates came together and there was the explosion. I regard it as the bad luck of being hit by a bolt of lightning."

Throughout the ordeal they relied on the enfolding ranks of their friends, a tight circle of trusted hunting, fishing, no-nonsense stalwarts, none more so than the Windsors, with whom the Knatchbulls have been historically entwined for nearly two centuries. The Queen and Countess Mountbatten have been best friends since they were little girls; the royal princesses were bridesmaids at the Brabournes' 1946 wedding and the two women make a point of attending each other's children's weddings.

After the bomb Timothy was invited with his sister Amanda to Balmoral for the weekend, so that the Queen could nurture her best friend's children. He describes arriving late, expecting to tiptoe to bed, only to be met by the Queen armed with soup and sandwiches "in unstoppable mothering mode". She even began unpacking their suitcases until they insisted she retire. "In that little sliver of my life where I was going to either go on a downward slope or upward slope, those few days spent within Balmoral which is a family home, were very precious to me."

He adds: "I feel utterly relaxed and happy around her but to me she's always the Queen. I address her as 'Ma'am' and that never changes. But it's difficult to explain the tremendous degree of warmth and informality that can co-exist with that respect . . . The fact that it was the Queen is of interest to other people, but really it was one woman mothering another woman's child in their hour of need. All my life I have read the accounts of the royal family being unloving . . . in private they're the most wonderful, warm, generous family. Anyone who doesn't see that is fooling themselves."

Charles was only 16 when he became godfather to the Knatchbull twins, and he remains close. "The letters he would send from all over the world, and the trouble he would go to . . . and the fun we had just rolling around . . . that faded as the chunks were taken out of him by the criticism and unkindness and the troubles that he faced in his private life and marriage. The joy of seeing him now turn back into that joking, infectiously funny man that he used to be . . . When I was writing the book, I just rang up and asked if he had time for tea. We had tea and I asked how he felt about me writing a book. He said it seemed to him to be about healing. And that's really what he felt he was about. He is such a sweetie pie . . . He always kisses me hello and there's always 'lots of love' at the end of a call."

After breaking down during the prince's speech at the memorial service for his three dead relatives in St Paul's cathedral - "he could in a few short sentences unpick me" - he decided never again to leave home without a handkerchief. With a laugh, he pulls out a wad of hankies from his pocket, although these days they are used to wipe "chocolate and snot" from his children's faces rather than his own tears of grief. In 2004 Charles unveiled a plaque in Nick's memory in the Dragon school's dining hall, beside the one that Mountbatten had unveiled when they were pupils there. "Nick and I, and our cousin Ashley and my brother Philip would come in with our trays for breakfast and see the plaque and mumble to ourselves, 'Morning grandpapa'."

Where is Nick now, I ask, as he prepares to return home for a tea party with nine young children. "Free. And gone," he replies decisively. "Wherever he needs to be. Maybe in a place where I'll meet him again. I still think about him every day." The depression of the survivor has passed, leaving a smiling, contented, dedicated counter of blessings. "The two strokes of luck in my life were my twin and my wife." He beams with pride, the terrorist bomb finally silenced. "No one deserves to have so much luck in one life."

*A Clear Blue Sky by Timothy Knatchbull will be published by Hutchinson on August 31 at £20. Copies can be ordered for £18, including postage, from The Sunday Times BooksFirst on 0845 271 2135*

*The Sunday Times is making a donation to The Lone Twin Network (*[*www.lonetwinnetwork.org.uk*](http://www.lonetwinnetwork.org.uk)*) whose book The Lone Twin by Joan Woodward is available at* [*www.fabooks.com*](http://www.fabooks.com)*.*

*The Sunday Times is also contributing to the Nicholas Knatchbull Memorial Bursaries at the Dragon school in Oxford. Donations can be made at* [*www.nicholasknatchbullmemorial.com*](http://www.nicholasknatchbullmemorial.com) *or by sending a cheque made payable to the Dragon School Trust to the Dragon School, Oxford OX2 6SS.*