

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

The Sunday Times review by Ed Caesar

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My mother keeps a special place in her loft for Lord Mountbatten. In 1975, my father's last job as a Royal Navy helicopter pilot was to fly dignitaries around the country. One of his regular passengers was Earl Mountbatten of Burma - "Dickie" to his friends, "honorary grandfather" to Prince Charles, and "Sir" to my dad. The reason my mother still holds such peculiar affection for him is that after every flight he wrote a note to say thank you, letters that are still attracting dust in the loft. It was the no-frills kindness that struck her. He was, says Mum, "old school".

For all his qualities, you would hesitate to call Timothy Knatchbull, Mountbatten's grandson, "old school". In From a Clear Blue Sky, his plangent account of the innocence he lost as a 14-year-old in August 1979, when the IRA detonated a bomb on his family's boat in Ireland (severely injuring both him and his parents and killing his grandfather, his grandmother, his twin Nicholas, and Paul Maxwell, an amiable Irish teenager who worked on the boat), he wears his heart on his sleeve.

This approach would not have done for his grandfather. Maxwell had once asked Mountbatten about his experiences in the second world war, particularly when his ship, HMS Kelly, was sunk. The boy asked the old man whether he was ever frightened during battle. "Yes," came the reply. "But you bloody well don't show it!"

Knatchbull does show it, but his candour is affecting without ever being mawkish. His relationship with his twin "Nicky", in particular, is rendered in moving detail. They were the last two children in a flock of seven siblings, and throughout their childhood even their family were forced to check the underside of Timothy's chin for a mole in order to distinguish them. Despite their physical similarities, Nicholas was always the tidy, robust, organised one; Timothy the outgoing, messy performer. When Nicholas was murdered, Tim could not shake the feeling that "the wrong twin" had died.

The rest of Knatchbull's life has been an attempt to find peace with his family's tragedy. Given his connections, that recovery was always going to be extraordinary - from recuperating in the eye of the world's media, to spending holidays with his godfather Prince Charles and the Queen "in full mothering mode" at Balmoral, to attending memorial services at St Paul's Cathedral.

Knatchbull's memoir, however, is more concerned with private journeys, physical and spiritual. He revisits the west-coast spot in Ireland where he spent idyllic summer holidays before the tragedy and tries to unpick the complex personal and political relationships that led to the attack on his family. That he manages to discuss both the IRA and the bombing without rancour is testament to a remarkable, benevolent soul.

There is an exhaustive, sometimes fatiguing quality to Knatchbull's investigations, as he attempts to reconnect with the events of 30 years ago, but certain episodes are chilling. He remembers entering a shop the afternoon before the bomb went off, and encountering a man and a woman who "visibly tensed up" when they saw him - people he now believes were complicit in the attack. He never mentioned the incident to anyone, but replayed it in his mind in the following years.

When he returned to the same shop in 2003, he made this entry in his journal: "I will never forget the two people freezing on seeing me. They recognised me in-stantly. They must have thought I was a dead child walking. Their terror was, in hindsight, pathetic. From their reaction you would have thought I was an SAS commando. I was a scrawny, doe-eyed 14- year-old boy whose voice hadn't broken. They could not possibly have known which twin I was. Next day they would have known that one us was killed but they would not have known if it was the polite, timid little boy who had spent a minute or so in their presence, before looking them each in the eye and saying 'goodbye' with a smile before walking out into the sunshine."

This episode could stand for the whole book. The Mountbatten bomb is inevitably interpreted politically. At the time it was described, variously, as the greatest crime in Irish history, or a devastating blow against the Establishment, or the declarative end point of the British Empire. But what Knatchbull offers is another, smaller account. He tells the story of the innocent teenager who lost his twin on a bright August day. With this public love letter, he has found a way to say goodbye.

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