

*Killing Thatcher*  
*The IRA, the Manhunt and the Long War on the Crown*  
Rory Carroll  
London: Mudlark (HarperNonFiction), 2023, £20, h/b

### **Simon Matthews**

**I**t's nearly 40 years since the IRA tried to kill Margaret Thatcher. Written by Rory Carroll, Ireland correspondent for *The Guardian*, this book seeks to establish what actually happened. In doing so it traces the career of Patrick Magee, the IRA member tasked with carrying out the operation.

Carroll is broadly successful at describing the events that led up to Brighton. He notes how, within the IRA and Sinn Fein, the demand for retaliation against the UK state became unstoppable after the massacres in Derry (January 1972; popularly known as 'Bloody Sunday') and Ballymurphy (August 1971). Carroll discusses the legal cases that followed, as the UK police and security services attempted to catch the perpetrators of various bombings – eventually sending the wrong people to prison (the Guildford Four, Birmingham Six and Maguire Seven). Also briefly mentioned is the UK's irritation that European and US courts would not accept the same evidence that the UK courts had relied on to convict.

He reminds us that, pre-Thatcher, the Callaghan government pioneered the tactic of treating the IRA/Sinn Fein as a criminal, rather than a political (or military) organization. It had been hoped this would diminish their support and marginalize their standing in the community, with moderate parties like the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists benefitting. This did not transpire. The Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) – a group that broke away from the IRA in 1974 – was particularly angered by the UK government's stance.<sup>1</sup> Proposals were made to assassinate both Roy Mason MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in the Callaghan government and Airey Neave MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland – a close ally of Margaret Thatcher. The operation against Mason was eventually dropped; that against Neave killed him in a car bombing on 30 March 1979.

The precise reasons for Mason being spared may never been known, but

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<sup>1</sup> IRA here means the Provisional IRA, active from late 1969. In the context of a book review, space does not permit a fuller discussion of their origins, motives and development.

might have had something to do with Callaghan's government losing a vote of confidence two days earlier. As a result, a general election had immediately been called and the INLA may have predicted that Labour were going to lose power.<sup>2</sup> A Conservative win would have led to Neave – who wanted to replace the Callaghan/Mason policy of containing and marginalizing the IRA with an outright war against republican 'terrorists' – being in charge of matters relating to Northern Ireland. (Something anathema to both the IRA and INLA.) Carroll doesn't spell this out, but moves on instead to the August 1979 assassination of Lord Mountbatten.

This was an IRA, rather than an INLA, operation. The target now was the Crown itself; or, if not the actual wearer, someone extremely close to the Royal family. It was an event that would guarantee massive publicity and show that no-one was beyond the reach of Republican forces. Carroll's account is serviceable and reminds us that Mountbatten's killing also claimed the lives of innocent civilians. But what was Mountbatten doing – seven years after Bloody Sunday and only a few months after Neave's death – holidaying with limited security cover in the Irish Republic? It was extraordinarily reckless of him, a matter not addressed in the narrative.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, after exploring the 1980-1981 IRA/INLA hunger strike, we arrive at Margaret Thatcher. Or, more specifically, at the centrality of her character in what followed. Watching her TV appearances now – many of them are on YouTube – her combination of (apparent) ignorance and absolute certainty remains striking. As is her invoking of a supposed majority ('our people') that she believed she represented. This ability to write-off a huge proportion of the population was extraordinarily narrow-minded even then, despite 1970s and 80s politicians still trading in the inspirational language and folk-memories of the Second World War. What might have been useful in the book was some consideration of the soil from which she sprang, and the reasons for her rise. Why did she have such appeal? Why did Airey Neave do so much for her in 1975 to ensure that she replaced Edward Heath? And beyond that, an analysis of the new version of Conservatism that had been sketched out so accurately

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<sup>2</sup> Callaghan lost his vote of confidence on 28 March by one vote. Both Frank Maguire, Independent MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and Gerry Fitt, SDLP MP for West Belfast, abstained, Fitt stating that this was due to 'the attitude of the Secretary of State'. This quotation comes from Michael Murphy's, *Gerry Fitt - A Political Chameleon* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> From 1960 Mountbatten holidayed regularly at Classiebawn Castle, in Sligo, which his wife had inherited in 1939. It does not appear to have occurred to him to alter his arrangements given changed circumstances in Ireland.

by Enoch Powell in 1968.<sup>4</sup>

But this isn't that type of book. It's more akin to a police procedural crime thriller. With the next intended victim introduced, we start following Magee on his training and missions, against a backdrop of bombs exploding at Chelsea Barracks, Hyde Park, Regents Park and Harrods. Finally, we reach his rendezvous with Thatcher in Brighton on 12 October 1984. Precise operational details concerning this remain lacking, presumably because even at this late stage neither Magee nor the UK police/security services wish to fully disclose how much they knew, or didn't know, about each other. There are some fascinating unexplained gaps in the account. But we know the ending. Reading this provides no real tension, no additional horror.

What we get instead, is a counter-factual. Carroll asks what would have happened if Thatcher had died. A variation of this is what would have happened if the IRA had decided *against* trying to kill her.<sup>5</sup> He considers, in the latter case, that Norman Tebbit would eventually have replaced Thatcher as Prime Minister. Based on polling amongst Conservative members and voters in 1983-1984, this seems not unreasonable. However, when might this have happened? She would still have won the 1987 election, and would still have introduced the Poll Tax, which Tebbit also supported. When the anti-Thatcher coup happened, he might have stood, but would he have beaten John Major and/or Michael Heseltine? This must be debatable because, on balance, either Major or Heseltine would have won when Conservative MPs – looking at opinion polls in 1990 – reverted to their well-honed instinct for self-preservation.

Which brings us to consider what might have happened had Magee succeeded. Suppose his bomb had destroyed the entire hotel? Both Thatcher and Tebbit are killed. Also, for that matter – assuming the whole building goes down – are Nigel Lawson, Leon Brittain and Geoffrey Howe. Carroll postulates that Willie Whitelaw would have taken over as a caretaker PM. But he, too, was in the hotel and could just have easily been killed – plus he was sixty-six years

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<sup>4</sup> Powell outlined an ideal budget for a future Conservative government at Morecambe in October 1968, a great deal of which has subsequently come to pass. Against devolution within the UK, on the grounds that it would be 'the sign that a separate nation had been consciously, deliberately and once-for-all admitted to be there', he ended his political career defending the sovereignty of the Protestant, Unionist community in Northern Ireland.

<sup>5</sup> A case is made in the book that Gerry Adams, President of Sinn Fein and MP for Belfast West, was a consistent advocate of a political line approach, rather than a reliance on spectacular military operations.

old and already in the House of Lords.<sup>6</sup> As was another grandee, Lord Carrington, who was also Secretary-General of NATO. Still in the House of Commons, and obvious contenders, were Francis Pym and Michael Heseltine, neither of whom were in the hotel. Heseltine was out of the country.<sup>7</sup> Surely this would have been his moment.

Having survived though, Thatcher continued as PM, exhibiting strident defiance in public. On 15 October 1984 she appeared on Channel 4, stating 'I expect that there will be a demand to have another debate on the death penalty. We had one at the beginning of this Parliament. I personally have always voted for the death penalty. . . .'<sup>8</sup> All of which was red meat for her base. As we know, the death penalty was not re-introduced. In fact, Thatcher had been briefed for some time by UK military intelligence that she could not realistically fight the IRA head-on (as Neave would have wished) and the likelihood was that high levels of violence would continue unless she sought a political solution to the Troubles. Four months *before* her narrow escape, President Reagan had visited the Irish Republic. Mindful of the significant scale and bi-partisan nature of the US 'Irish lobby', he told Thatcher on her reciprocal December 1984 visit to the US that progress needed to be made, that there was great Congressional interest in Ireland and that she should be 'reasonable and forthcoming'.<sup>9</sup>

What emerged was the November 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, the origins of which lay several years earlier, in discussions that had been commenced between Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong and the Secretary to the Irish government, Dermot Nally. None of that would have changed if Magee had succeeded, although Heseltine might have done it more quickly, reaching the Downing Street Declaration by – say – 1989 rather than 1993, as was accomplished by John Major. The direction of travel would have been the same, irrespective of the outcome of the Brighton bomb.

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<sup>6</sup> This argument is also made in Simon Heffer's contribution, 'The Brighton Bomb Kills Margaret Thatcher', to Andrew Roberts (ed.) *What Might Have Been: Leading Historians on Twelve "What Ifs" of History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005). Whitelaw has an entry at <[https://alhistory.fandom.com/wiki/William\\_Whitelaw\\_\(Successful\\_Brighton\\_Bombing\)](https://alhistory.fandom.com/wiki/William_Whitelaw_(Successful_Brighton_Bombing))> which lists him as Prime Minister. N.B. that, although this is a Wiki format page, it is not a Wikipedia page.

<sup>7</sup> Attending a NATO meeting in West Germany.

<sup>8</sup> <<https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/105764>>

<sup>9</sup> Reagan had been lobbied to this effect by 45 Senators and Congressmen including Tip O'Neill, Edward Kennedy and Daniel Moynihan. Politically, the Democrats had an overwhelming majority in the House of Representatives. The Republicans had a majority of only 6 in the Senate.

Writing as he does about Magee, what Carroll misses (or chooses not to write about) is how much beyond Ireland was at stake in October 1984. There was miner's strike to begin with, which is barely mentioned. Thatcher ground the NUM down to unconditional surrender. Then, after a third election victory, and a slight reduction in her majority, she opted to introduce the Poll Tax. By 1988, in a nod to the direction the country took subsequently, she became markedly Euro-sceptic, thus paving the way for Brexit. Had Heseltine become PM, one can imagine him trying to settle the miners strike in a less adversarial fashion. Like Thatcher, he would have won the 1987 election but would not have introduced the Poll Tax. He would have taken the UK into the Exchange Rate Mechanism (the precursor of the Euro), and kept it there. It would have been quite a battle, but in fighting it he would also have faced down the Euro-sceptics in his own party.

Carroll argues in this book that Magee changed history by default. Because he failed to kill Thatcher, she became an even more determined figure, thus increasing the likelihood – particularly because of Brexit – of Irish unity. Yet the steps that resulted in the Anglo-Irish Agreement had already been taken when the bomb exploded and despite her bluster (to audiences elsewhere in the UK) the politics of Northern Ireland started moving slowly down that route. Equally, it must also be the case – given her earlier demands for a rebate in UK contributions to the EEC, and her sharing of many of Powell's views – that she would have ended up with a highly adversarial relationship with Europe anyway.

It is not easy to arrive at conclusions via counterfactuals, but the scales are not being weighed thoroughly here. Considering the general context of the time, surely the Irish won either way, and would have won even if Brighton had never happened. On this reading, the real losers at Brighton were the rest of the UK. Even in 2023, though, it must be doubtful if a professional journalist like Rory Carroll wants to advise his readers that Thatcher's survival 39 years earlier was a bad thing. But that is to forget that there were plenty of people then who wanted a different Prime Minister, albeit without wishing that physical force would enable this.

Today, Thatcher's politics live on. Referenda on Irish unity, as required by the Good Friday Agreement and its antecedents, have yet to happen, though in Ireland at least, discussion about their terms of reference is underway. Magee wrote his own account of his time in the IRA and his subsequent wish to put himself at peace with the world.<sup>10</sup> Read Carroll's book in tandem with this.

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<sup>10</sup> *Where Grieving Begins: Building Bridges after the Brighton Bomb – a Memoir* (London: Pluto Press, 2021).

Simon Matthews' latest book is *Free Your Mind!: Giovanni 'Tinto' Brass, 'Swinging London' and the 60s Pop Culture Scene* (Harpenden [Herts]: Oldcastle Books, 2023, £15.99)