

The Lockerbie Bombing: A Father's Search for Justice

Jim Swire and Peter Biddulph

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Jim Swire prefaces his powerful and moving book with this arresting question: 'How could initial faith in the establishment take thirty years to convert into distrust towards all those touched by that addictive drug we call power?'

This is much more than the anguished grief of the father of Flora, one of the 270 victims of the 1988 Pan AM Flight 103 disaster. The 23-year-old medical student had left Heathrow on December 21 to spend Christmas with her American boyfriend. She died when Clipper Maid of the Seas exploded over Lockerbie, killing all its 243 passengers, 16 crew and 11 residents of the small West Scotland town.

It is the painful saga of a traumatized parent being denied access to the truth of his daughter's death – of a humane community doctor forced to confront the ugly realities of *realpolitik* on both sides of the Atlantic.

With his fellow author, Swire details Flora's promising life and the cost to him and his family of his pursuit of the truth about its abrupt and brutal termination. They take us from his initial struggle to gain entrance to the temporary morgue where Flora's body was taken, via the Lockerbie visit of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, through the decades-long fight to establish what really happened to the trial, imprisonment and death of Abdelbaset al-Megrahi, the Libyan found guilty of causing the death of his daughter.

If Thatcher, who fails even to describe Lockerbie in her memoirs, had wanted a more doughty foe than Dr Swire she'd have been hard put to find one. A former Army officer and BBC television engineer who then retrained as a general practitioner, Flora's father was just the kind of honourable, hard-working and patriotic figure Thatcher told us was the very best of British.

The book details her refusal not only to meet him after Lockerbie but to deny an inquiry into what caused her and the grieving relatives from around the world to visit the crash scene. This isn't so much the Iron Lady as the craven, lily-livered one, prepared to do anything to gratify the power of the United States ahead of the decent demand of her own

citizens for truth and understanding.

The story *The Lockerbie Bombing* tells is too long and complex to summarise in a short review. But the theme running through it is well expressed by Swire in its preface:

After many years running the British Empire we have evolved all sorts of subtle ways of concealing truth when it is inconvenient for government to admit failure. Supposedly even these subtle secrecies are limited by a 'thirty-year rule'; but now we sail into a future where up to fifty Lockerbie documents are sequestered from public view well beyond that thirty-year limit with no explanation as to why. There seems no sign of conscience or even knowledge of right and wrong. My daughter and all those who died with her deserve better; it is as though their deaths did not matter.

The author visited Libyan leader Muammar al-Gaddafi and spent time with the imprisoned al-Magrahi before he was released to die in Libya in 2012. He also closely observed his Zeist trial and is properly shocked by its verdict and the subsequent failure of his appeals against it.

Along the way Swire observes the servile performances of Thatcher, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, David Cameron, Jack Straw and David Miliband – none willing to challenge the determination of Washington to pin the blame for Lockerbie on Libya. He is no less critical of senior political and legal figures in Scotland while paying tribute to those north and south of the border who offered strong practical support, including veteran Labour MP Tam Dalyell and emeritus law professor Robert Black of Edinburgh University.

The Lockerbie Bombing lacks an index but is well footnoted in support of a powerful narrative of the painful personal and political journey Swire has made. It is also the story of many in British public life paid to defend and uphold the safety and welfare of its citizens yet complicit in deceit, dishonesty and decadence.

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