VINTAGE

AFTERMATH

RUTH DUDLEY EDWARDS

Contents

About the Book

On Saturday, 15 August 1998, a massive bomb placed by the so-called Real IRA ripped through the town of Omagh, killing twenty-nine people, including eleven children, and injuring over two hundred. It was the worst massacre in Northern Ireland's modern history – yet from it came a most extraordinary tale of human resilience, as families of ten of the dead channelled their grief into action.

Taking as their motto 'For evil to triumph, all that is necessary is for good men to do nothing', they decided to pursue the men whom the police believed responsible for the atrocity through the civil courts, where the burden of proof is lower. This is the remarkable account of how these families – who had no knowledge of the law and no money – became internationally recognised, formidable campaigners and surmounted countless daunting obstacles to win a famous victory.

About the Author

Dr Ruth Dudley Edwards is an historian, journalist and crime writer. Her non-fiction includes *Patrick Pearse: the Triumph of Failure, Victor Gollancz: a Biography* (winner of the James Tait Black Memorial Prize), *The Pursuit of Reason: The Economist, 1843–1993*, *The Faithful Tribe: an Intimate Portrait of the Loyal Institutions*, and, most recently *Newspapermen: Hugh Cudlipp, Cecil Harmsworth King and the Glory Days of Fleet Street*. Her eleven crime novels are satires on the British Establishment.

ALSO BY RUTH DUDLEY EDWARDS

An Atlas of Irish History

Patrick Pearse: The Triumph of Failure

James Connolly

Harold Macmillan: A Life in Pictures

Victor Gollancz: A Biography

The Pursuit of Reason: The Economist 1843–1993

The Best of Bagshot

True Brits: Inside the Foreign Office

The Faithful Tribe:

An Intimate Portrait of the Loyal Institutions

Newspapermen: Hugh Cudlipp, Cecil Harmsworth King and the glory days of Fleet Street

‘Ruth – who was central to our campaign from Day One – has ensured that the true story of what happened to the Omagh victims will never be forgotten. We hope it will inspire people all over the world to stand up to terrorists’
Victor Barker, father of James; Michael Gallagher, father of Aiden

‘What happened leading up to and after Omagh . . . [is] all covered in fascinating and moving detail – the lives of the victims leading up to that terrible day, the botched warning calls, the mobile phones that caught the bombers, the political fallout, the grief of the families and their campaign that eventually did the impossible. It combines Dudley Edwards’s ability as a gifted historian with her skill as a journalist to produce a hugely important and authoritative book that reads as compulsively as a thriller’
John Spain, *Irish Independent*

‘Dudley Edwards’ mastery of small human details defines this book – Lorraine Wilson (15) buried in her mother’s wedding dress which she’d tried on a fortnight earlier . . . Dudley Edwards’ passionate commitment to the families is clear . . . Its portrayal of cruelty and suffering is relevant far beyond Ireland. It should be compulsory reading for everyone – terrorists and state forces – contemplating planting, or dropping, a bomb in conflict’
Suzanne Breen, *Sunday Tribune*

‘*Aftermath* by Ruth Dudley Edwards is both a harrowing study of the human cost of violence and an uplifting story of courage in the face of evil. This gripping account of one of Northern Ireland’s defining moments will move everyone who reads it, as the author shows not only the worst side of humanity, but also its most noble, as ordinary people find the strength to stand up and fight a battle the authorities turned away from’

Stuart Neville, author of *The Twelve*

‘Ruth Dudley Edwards provides a heart-warming, tear-jerking and at times shocking account of how these families – taking as their motto “For evil to triumph, all that is necessary is for good men to do nothing” – decided to pursue the Real IRA through the civil courts, where the burden of proof is lower than in the criminal courts . . . Edwards skillfully captures the emotion and persistence of these mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters who became the scourge of the hard men of the Real IRA. Once you begin reading, you become gripped by what they did – it is an inspiration to ordinary people anywhere devastated by terrorism . . . an Irish masterpiece’
John Coulter, *Tribune*

‘Dudley Edwards’ finely-researched book benefits from her own proximity to the events and her personal knowledge of the protagonists – the hitherto ordinary people – who took on the Real IRA in the courts, even though there was no precedent anywhere in the world for what they sought to achieve’
John Burke, *Sunday Business Post*

‘Dudley Edwards expertly weaves human interest, politics and the legal realm together to tell the remarkable tale of determination which saw the families stay the course to see those they felt responsible held accountable for the worst massacre in the recent history of Northern Ireland. Essential reading’
Metro

‘It is a remarkable story, complete with celebrity cameos by Bob Geldof and George Clooney, a small group of London sympathizers that numbered a viscount, who helped raise invaluable funds, a pair of Republican ex-terrorists; a young,

idealistic and fervent legal team . . . and an unlikely hero in Peter Mandelson'
Richard Fitzpatrick, *Irish Examiner*

'I stayed up all night reading it. It's a brilliant account. What terrible memories it brings back but also hugely illuminates and elucidates. Ruth Dudley Edwards brings all her skills as a detective writer, journalist and historian to paint a terrifying if often darkly comic canvas of the entire nightmare'
Paul Durcan

'The brilliant new book by Ruth Dudley Edwards . . . charts the story of the bombing and of the families' long and defiant fight for some sort of justice . . . the impact of their civil action in the wider fight against terrorism will truly resonate throughout the world for years to come'
Lindy McDowell, *Belfast Telegraph*

'Important, enthralling and morally serious'
Lord Bew, Professor of Politics, Queen's University

'When the government failed to prosecute the Omagh bombers for the single worst act of terrorism in Northern Ireland's history, the survivors and their families took the bombers to civil court and bankrupted them. It took nine years. But when they won, these ordinary people had changed the law so that terrorists can never again rely on government to shield them from justice. Ruth Dudley Edwards, who was with the Omagh families every inch of the way, tells their thrilling story in *Aftermath*. It is a book you will never forget'
John O'Sullivan, Executive Editor, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

'Harrowing and upsetting, it is also inspiring'

Douglas Murray, *Standpoint*

‘The case was never about money, but about pursuing individuals who thought they had literally got away with murder. Legal victories will never bring back those who were lost but . . . they have eased some of the pain. Such campaigns can stand as an assertion of humanity against those responsible for inhuman acts’
David McKittrick, *Independent*

To Nina, who thought I was mad to take this on but kept me going throughout, to all those in the strange and wonderful team who saw the case through, and, of course, to Victor, Michael, and to the brave and tenacious families of Omagh who won a famous victory.

Eimear and Evelyn Monaghan (unborn)
Breda Devine (1)
Maura Monaghan (1)
Oran Doherty (8)
James Barker (12)
Fernando Blasco Baselga (12)
Sean McLaughlin (12)
Lorraine Wilson (15)
Alan Radford (16)
Brenda Logue (17)
Samantha McFarland (17)
Jolene Marlow (17)
Gareth Conway (18)
Deborah-Anne Cartwright (20)
Aiden Gallagher (21)
Julia Hughes (21)
Rocio Abad Ramos (23)
Bryan White (27)
Avril Monaghan (30)
Esther Gibson (36)
Geraldine Breslin (43)
Ann McCombe (48)
Philomena Skelton (49)
Brian McCrory (54)
Veda Short (56)
Elizabeth Rush (57)
Olive Hawkes (60)
Frederick White (60)
Sean McGrath (61)
Mary Grimes (66)

Aftermath

The Omagh Bombing and the Families' Pursuit of Justice

Ruth Dudley Edwards

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

PART I

First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out – because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for the communists and I did not speak out – because I was not a communist.
Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out – because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak out for me.

Pastor Niemöller,
quote pinned to the notice board of the Omagh Support and Self-help Group

For evil to flourish it is only necessary for good men to do nothing

Attributed to Edmund Burke, this quote has been an inspiration to Michael Gallagher

PROLOGUE

AT 2.29 P.M. on Saturday, 15 August 1998, Maggie Hall, a programme assistant in the Belfast newsroom of Ulster Television, received a phone call via the switchboard. 'A male voice with a northern country accent spoke to me,' she would tell the coroner at the inquest on the dead of Omagh. 'I am unable to recall his initial words as I found him so difficult to understand because of his accent.' She believed him to be a man in his early fifties and in retrospect guessed that he had muffled his voice.

'At first I thought he was some sort of nutcase. I started saying "what" to him several times, in an effort to make him speak more clearly. I then heard him say, "Bomb Courthouse Omagh, Main Street, 500 pounds explosion, 30 minutes."' As was routine with bomb warnings, she asked for a code word and he said what she thought was 'Malta Pope' or 'Martha Pope'[fn1] and added 'Óglaigh na hÉireann'[fn2] in the 'very thick accent' she found so impenetrable. She dialled 999 and was put through to George Mullan, Constable Controller of the RUC attached to Belfast Regional Control, at Castlereagh RUC station in Belfast: the tape records her saying: 'I'm only after getting a call from a man with a country accent, saying there's a bomb in Omagh main street near the courthouse, a 500-pound bomb. It's going to go off in 30 minutes. I asked him for a codeword and he said it was "Malta Pope" and he did repeat it.'

Mullan immediately phoned the enquiries room at Omagh to alert them and explain that 'Malta Pope' was a Real IRA codeword that had been used two weeks previously in the warning for a 500-pound bomb that blew the heart out of

Banbridge and injured thirty-five. Constable William Hall, the duty officer, relayed to the communications room his notes: ‘UTV, Main Street, Court, 500, Martha Pope.’ Mullan by then was entering ‘a computer record detailing this call, date, time, location, et cetera and a description of the contents of the call’ and committing it to the Atlas Command and Control system that would send a written copy automatically to Omagh communications room, where it would appear on their computer screen for action. Under the heading BMBS (bombs, bomb scare), the substance of his message was ‘Male caller to UTV bomb to go off in 30 mins near the courthouse Main Street, 500 pounds. Codeword, Malta Pope. No organisation mentioned.’

At 2.31, Hilary,[fn3] a volunteer worker with the Samaritans in Coleraine, received a call from a man with a gentle voice she thought was sober, and neither old nor young. He asked if he were through to Omagh and she said, no, this was Coleraine (to which calls from the Omagh office were diverted on Saturdays). He then said, ‘This is a bomb warning’, and that the bomb would go off in the centre of Omagh in thirty minutes. When asked if there was a codeword, he said ‘Martha Pope’, but he was speaking so fast it took three repetitions and his spelling it out before Hilary understood it. ‘I then asked him to clarify whereabouts in Omagh as I do not know the town.’ The bomb, he said, was ‘about 200 yards up from the courthouse – High Street, the main street’. He hung up, she dialled 999 and she told Constable Gary Murphy at Coleraine communications: ‘I have received a bomb call for Omagh town centre approximately 200 yards from the courthouse and the codeword Martha Pope was given.’ The codeword meant nothing to him, but he passed the message to Omagh communications and then logged the information on the computer system with the description: ‘bomb warning received at Samaritans centre Coleraine with effect that a bomb was going to go off in Omagh town

centre near the courthouse (200 yards). Codeword given “Marta Pope”’.

Meanwhile, at 2.31, Maggie Hall at Ulster Television had received another brief message: ‘Martha Pope, 15 minutes, Omagh town’; this 999 call was taken in Belfast Regional Control by Constable Wesley Francis, who likewise relayed the information to Omagh communications. They told him that a car was already responding to the initial call.

That the bombers did not know Omagh accounted for some of the vagueness in the warnings, though had they or their accomplices been concerned about loss of life, they would not have chosen a Saturday afternoon, and could – as was sometimes done – have given information about their car or the name of a shop near where they had parked. Both warnings had referred to ‘Main Street’ or ‘the main street’, but there is no Main Street in Omagh: there is a High Street, which runs from the courthouse to Scarffe’s Entry, which runs south of the beginning of Market Street. It is 240 yards from the front of the courthouse to the corner of High Street and Scarffe’s Entry and 380 yards to where the car bomb was parked. The warning to the Samaritans had mentioned the town centre, but, fatally, people had different views on where that was: some thought it meant Market Street and some thought it meant further up town – the Bridge Street and High Street area running up towards the courthouse.

Although there had been seventeen Omagh bomb scares already that year – some with codewords and some without – the police took the threat very seriously. Immediately on being told of the first warning by Constable Martin Millar, the Omagh communications officer, the duty sergeant, Philip Marshall, told him to instruct mobile police units to go and clear the area. ‘I got all three bomb warnings together,’ said Millar at the inquest, ‘and I thought to myself, two say the courthouse, one says the town centre . . . my assessment was that there was a bomb in the general area of the courthouse and that that was the main place to be

evacuated.’ He ‘wanted them to basically make a sterile area around the courthouse and then start pushing everybody back down, away from the courthouse, towards Market Street’. It was a rational interpretation of ambiguous information that would set the police herding hundreds of people away from safety and towards the bomb.

By 2.49, four local police cars had been assigned along with one from nearby Newtownstewart. Sergeant Marshall and Constable Norman Haslett, who had been expecting to lead a parade of carnival floats that afternoon, were clearing crowds from John Street up towards the Kevlin Road junction: ‘We had some difficulty in moving patrons, some of whom were intoxicated, from the three public houses.’ Their colleagues were also finding it difficult to get people to move. Lulled into a sense of security by the IRA’s ceasefire, bored with hoaxes and convinced that only Protestant towns were threatened by the Real IRA, no one really believed anyone would place a bomb in a packed market town with a Catholic majority. ‘It never actually entered my head there was a bomb,’ said Marguerrita Larsen, who was at the bottom of Market Street helping another traffic warden, Rosemary Ingram, to follow the instructions of Constable Alan Palmer to block cars from entering the street. ‘Over the years there were quite a few that came to nothing. Nobody seemed to think there was a bomb, there was quite a light-hearted atmosphere. A lot of people wanted just to go to their cars and go home. They were moving towards the lower end of Market Street. Everyone seemed to be heading off in that direction.’

Constable Tara McBurney, having cleared shops and premises in the bottom half of High Street and pushed back the crowd towards Scarffe’s Entry, was with Constable Palmer when they sealed the road with police tape. ‘We ran back to the top of Market Street and, as we were having difficulty moving people down the street, I told Constable Palmer to take the white tape and cross the road to

SuperValu. I had the other end of the tape and we started to walk down Market Street clearing premises as we went, moving people along with the tape. People in general were very reluctant to move and I had to constantly push and shove them physically in order to keep them moving away from the courthouse.'

Just after Omagh communications warned Sergeant Marshall via his personal radio that there were only three or four minutes of the warning period left, he stood in front of the courthouse and looked down the High Street, John Street, Georges Street and Market Street, as far as Scarffe's Entry, and saw they were all clear of pedestrians. Now only the police were in danger: they had managed to clear almost two hundred premises. 'My initial thought was that it was perfect, that we couldn't have done better. Omagh was like a ghost town, I thought: if something goes up now, it's buildings only.' He walked down High Street, relaying a message to the station that he and his men were about to check the cars on both sides of the street for incendiary devices, though they could see no suspicious signs and no car that seemed heavily laden. They had just begun to look when, twenty seconds after 3.04 p.m.,[fn4] the bomb went off.

At about 4.15, my close friend Henry Reid, a farmer in County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, rang me in London to tell me to turn on the television: a huge bomb had gone off in his local town. He said his wife and two children, who had been there shopping, were safe. Fearful when she heard there was a bomb warning, Lorraine had packed the children into the car; they were still only a few feet away when the bomb exploded. 'They've gone to hospital,' Henry said, 'but they're all right. Just shock, I think, and trouble with their eardrums. I'm off to get them and then I'll ring you.'

I watched the horrifying television coverage all afternoon and evening as the death toll climbed into the twenties and the injured into the hundreds. Henry reported that though

Lorraine's car had shuddered violently and was extensively damaged, it had been insulated from the worst of the blast by a wall of people. Only five-year-old Erin's and four-year-old Thomas's seatbelts had saved them from being sucked out by the vacuum caused by the blast. 'I hope Daddy wasn't killed in the bomb,' Thomas had remarked thoughtfully as they drove to the hospital, where Lorraine, in deep shock as well as pain from the effect of the suction on her whole body, was kept in overnight. Before he took them home, Henry brought Erin and Thomas to the children's ward to play for a while – amid shocking scenes – with some of the injured, frightened and lost. They tried to distract the toddler wearing just a nappy, whose legs, said Henry, 'looked as though she'd been pulled through a briar patch. Her head was shaved and she was crying with hunger but couldn't be fed because she was to have an operation.'

My emotions were frozen for hours. The anger came later, as it had in the wake of other terrorist atrocities in Ireland. I attended a 'Service in Solidarity with Omagh' at Trafalgar Square's St Martin-in-the-Fields a week later, where the names of the dead were read out. I had been to such commemorative events before, but this time it was personal: I knew Omagh very well, and my friends had almost died. Although, compared to many of their neighbours, the Reids had been very, very lucky, for a long time Lorraine would suffer from blinding headaches and survivor guilt, Erin have nightmares and Thomas organise other children to play games of hospitals and dead bodies.

For the next eighteen months, like so many victims and onlookers, I was intensely frustrated that – though the Real IRA had admitted responsibility for the car bomb and the police believed they knew the perpetrators' identities – only one person, a building contractor named Colm Murphy, had been charged in connection with the case. All I could do was to carry on writing and campaigning against the political violence that had devastated so many lives in Ireland. And

then, in January 2000, I had a call from Simon Shaw, a London friend from my crime-fiction world. Could he introduce me to Victor Barker, whose twelve-year-old son James had been killed in Omagh? Contemporaries at Cambridge University in the 1980s, they had met at a recent reunion and Victor had asked him if he knew anyone who could help him in his quest for justice for James.

'But there's nothing I can do for him, Simon. He'll be wasting his time.'

'You were the only person I could think of who has anything to do with Ireland,' said Simon, a note of desperation in his voice. 'And I had to suggest something. Victor's very persistent. That's what I remember best about him from Cambridge. He was incredibly dogged. Having been disappointed with his performance in his first-year exams, he gave up most of his social life, threw himself into his work and got a good degree.'

Reluctantly, I arranged to have a drink with them and another of their Cambridge contemporaries early in February in a small literary club in Soho. Victor, a short, bespectacled solicitor in his early forties who practised in a small English town, told me the story of how James had come to die in Omagh. Victor's Northern Ireland-born wife, Donna-Maria, had been homesick, and to give Estella, James and Oliver, the three youngest children, a better quality of life, she had moved with them to Buncrana, County Donegal, in the north-west of the Republic of Ireland, where her parents had settled on retirement. Their new house was across the political border from her Northern Ireland hometown of Derry, was surrounded by trees and had a wonderful view over Lough Swilly. Victor spent every third weekend there, and during the week lived in Chertsey, in Surrey, working in the solicitors' firm in which he was a partner. He was also a local Conservative councillor. He is a doer.

James had died because he went across the border for a day out with a group of Irish and Spanish children. Without self-pity – for he accepts the capriciousness of fate – Victor described to us something of how his family had been devastated by James's death and of what he had done in pursuit of his son's murderers. He spoke of what he had learned about some of those widely believed to have planned and carried out the bombing. He described fruitless correspondence and encounters with British and Irish police and politicians that had culminated in equally fruitless meetings with innumerable powerful people, including Tony Blair, then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Bertie Ahern, then the Republic of Ireland Taoiseach, and Martin McGuinness, widely believed to be the ex-Chief of Staff of the Provisional IRA and Chief Negotiator of Sinn Féin. He told me a little about the Omagh Support and Self Help Group and its chairman, Michael Gallagher, another bereaved father who had become his friend and ally. He recounted how – in an attempt to highlight how badly victims were being treated – he had brought a claim against the state for compensation for James's school fees and other such expenses that was, as he expected, unsuccessful. And he laughed caustically – for Victor has a sharp wit and a very self-deprecating English sense of humour – about the people who in consequence thought him grasping, as well as all those who found him a confounded nuisance. As indefatigable as Simon had promised, he made it clear that he intended to go on and on. The trouble was, he had little idea where next to go.

Then he said: 'I've wondered about bringing a civil case against the bombers, but no one takes the idea seriously.'

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fn1 To demonstrate that they are serious, some terrorist organisations use codewords notified to the media, who pass them on to security forces. Terrorists are not long on humour, but the adoption of 'Martha Pope' as a codeword was the Real IRA's idea of a joke. An aide to Senator George Mitchell, broker of the

peace talks that led to the Belfast Agreement, Martha Pope was alleged in 1996 to be having an affair with the notorious Gerry Kelly, a convicted bomber and high-profile Sinn Féin spokesman. The allegations were without any foundation whatsoever: Martha Pope won libel damages.

fn2 'Óglaigh na hÉireann' ('Volunteers of Ireland') is the correct title of the defence forces of the Republic of Ireland; however, since all IRAs (Provisional, Continuity and Real) believe themselves to be the legitimate government of Ireland, each appropriates the term for itself, as later did yet another breakaway group, which is given the abbreviation of OnH. It is mystifying to people with no knowledge of Irish: at the inquest in September 2000, the Coroner had to ask for a translation.

fn3 Because of the Samaritans' strict policy of anonymity, Hilary was screened at the inquest from all in the court except for the Coroner and the court clerk and was referred to as 'Hilary Unknown'.

fn4 The media wrongly reported the time as 3.10 and that is the time which is annually commemorated.

CHAPTER ONE

VICTIMS

> ‘With an explosion of this type, chance does play its part and it can be a lottery who lives and who dies’ – John Leckey, Coroner, inquest on the Omagh bomb

ALL THE THIRTY-ONE deaths left broken-hearted relatives and friends, but this book deals only with the families who became involved in the civil case against some of those they blamed for the atrocity. As it became clear that the criminal justice systems in both parts of Ireland lacked the means, the competence or the will to punish the bombers, these were the people who would refuse to admit defeat. Anguished and frustrated by knowing the names of those they believed were responsible and who were walking the streets, they would decide to take on both those people and the Real IRA. These were good men and women who – despite being sorely tempted – would not take the path of violence, but when they found a legal route to pursue justice for their loved ones, they marched down it.

In a criminal case, guilt has to be proven beyond reasonable doubt: a civil case is decided on the balance of probabilities, though when the allegation is murder, the bar is set higher. More important is that hearsay is, under certain circumstances, admissible, which potentially makes available significant evidence excluded from criminal cases. Suing the people they held responsible for this vile act offered only limited justice, but to these families it was a lot

better than doing nothing. Money was not the primary issue: what mattered was to name and shame at least some of those they believed were liable.

It would take more than eight years after my first meeting with Victor for the case to come to court. Throughout, as a friend, supporter and – later – chronicler, I would be part of a story that was as inspirational as it was harrowing. Along the way, these ordinary people would have to take on not just a terrorist organisation, but most of the Dublin, Belfast and London police, justice and political establishments, who for varied reasons thought their actions misguided, counterproductive or unhelpful to the peace process. They had to draw on reserves of courage, endurance and nerve they did not know they had in order to survive the innumerable disappointments and setbacks. Yet they attracted to their cause an extraordinary collection of mavericks and unlikely bedfellows who, between them, found a way of devising an unprecedented case and finding the millions to make it happen.

Not all the families stayed the course to the end, but all those I write of here, who talked to me so freely over the years, played their part in making it happen. What they did was done for love of their massacred children, siblings and spouses, who had woken up on a sunny Saturday morning looking forward to an enjoyable day.[fn1]

James Victor Barker, aged twelve, had been having a blissful time. A gentle, happy, athletic boy who made friends easily, he had adapted to Irish life and loved outdoor activities, particularly clambering over the seaside rocks. ‘He was just a really sunny little guy,’ said his father. A terrific runner, at Foyle and Londonderry Junior School he was goalkeeper for the football team and a member of the cub scouts. But he did miss his father, for whom he tried to stand in as the man about the house by changing plugs and generally being practical. Although he did not shine academically, he was

bright and shrewd and determined to be a lawyer, as he explained in a rather uncertainly spelled school essay, ‘because my dad is one and he had to work very harde to be a lawyer’. He would live in his father’s house in England when he qualified, he explained, ‘and dad can move over to Ireland to have a rest and I will work the same amount of hours as my dad did. I will study for a coarse from third year till upper 6, then my dad will teach me till I’m ready to take over the Joint.’ It was for James a great bonus that Victor had flown over a day early this particular weekend, arriving on Thursday night with three close friends to play in a Pro-Am golf tournament at Ballyliffin, on Malin Head, where he was a member.

James was very keen on fishing, so Victor booked a trip with a local fisherman and on Friday afternoon they all went to Lough Swilly. ‘We travelled up the coast by Rathmullen and back again, and I remember him sitting on my lap and saying, “Dad, this is a great place. The only sad thing is that you’re not here every day.”’ Victor’s friend Barry Hancock recalled an afternoon punctuated by laughter at his mock-resentment that James kept catching fish while Barry caught nothing. He would shove him up the deck demanding his space on the grounds that it was full of fish. ‘My last memory of that afternoon,’ recalled Tony Rattue, another of Victor’s guests, ‘was of Victor standing with his arms around James and James’s were around Victor. At that instant I realised how much I missed having children. It was a wonderful moment.’

The following morning, James was intending to caddy for his father, but there was a change of plan. Lucrezia Blasco Baselga, an exchange student from Madrid, was staying with the Barkers, and on Saturday morning her twelve-year-old brother Fernando, who was staying with a neighbour, arrived early to ask James to come with him and some other friends on a coach trip to the Ulster American Folk Park near Omagh, which he had never seen. James’s sister, Estella,

had intended to go, but was unwell, so there was a spare place. ‘Dad, can I go?’ ‘As was natural for a child,’ Victor told the inquest, ‘he would much prefer to be with his friends than lugging a golf bag around for his father, particularly given the state of my golf game, and he went on the trip.’

Victor, James and Lucrezia had breakfast around 7.30 a.m. Donna-Maria packed her son a lunch of ham sandwiches, cheese and onion crisps, sweets and chocolates and took the three children to catch the coach into town. He wanted to wear the new Chelsea shirt he had been wearing almost non-stop for two weeks, but she took it away from him to wash and he went off instead in his Three Lions England football shirt. ‘He was out the back of the car so fast I didn’t even get the chance to say goodbye,’ said Donna-Maria later. ‘I just saw him walking off smiling at me. He was always smiling.’

James, Fernando and Lucrezia joined twenty-eight Spanish children, their three youth leaders and nine local children, including James’s friends Sean McLaughlin, who was also twelve, and eight-year-old Oran Doherty. After seeing the Folk Park, the youth leaders decided to visit Omagh for a shopping trip. The driver had parked the coach by 2.40, when he directed all his passengers towards the main shopping area in Market Street. When the alarm was raised several of the children ran back to the bus, but James, Oran, Sean, Fernando, Lucrezia and Rocio Abad Ramon, the young woman looking after them, were among those who stayed at the shops. Lucrezia, seriously injured, would be the only one to survive.

Most of the staff members of Wattersons drapers shop had been evacuated through a rear door by three o’clock, but three of the shop assistants – Geraldine Breslin, Ann McCombe and Veda Short – were in Market Street enjoying the sunshine. Geraldine had gone out through the front because she was helping a customer with a pram. The three of them had worked together for years: ‘They were utterly

dedicated, dependable and trustworthy,' said Tom Watterson later. 'They were employees,' said his wife Maretta, 'but they were very special friends. We were really one big family.'

Geraldine was forty-three. When she had met Mark Breslin, five years earlier, she was a single mother living with her parents, grandfather and nine-year-old son, Gareth. Mark, a quantity surveyor, had worked in Belfast for some years, but left after a colleague was shot by loyalist terrorists. After a while in London, he came home to Omagh. Quiet, easy-going and rather shy, he met Geraldine at a concert, was greatly taken by her outgoing nature, and 'I plucked up the courage to ask her out.' An attractive woman, who loved make-up and fashion, she greatly enjoyed her job and had many friends, not least among the hundreds of customers to whom she would chat. 'Religion or politics never came up in her conversations,' recalled a friend. Geraldine brought Mark out into a more lively world and gave him social confidence, they fell very much in love and, in December 1995, they married, both for the first time: by then, Mark regarded Gareth as a son. Their social life was put mostly on hold as they focused on making their house a home for the three of them.

That Saturday, like every Saturday, Mark gave Geraldine a lift to Wattersons, picked her up at 1.15, took her for lunch to their home a mile outside Omagh, dropped her back at the shop around 2.15, and went back to do some gardening.

Like Mark, Geraldine was a non-practising Catholic: her best friend, forty-eight-year-old Ann McCombe, was a devout church-going Protestant. There are parts of Northern Ireland in which cross-community friendships would be remarked upon or disapproved of, but they were nothing special in Omagh. Some areas might have been classified as more Catholic/nationalist or Protestant/unionist than others, but no-go areas did not exist. 'Omagh is a town where you are judged on who you are, not what you are,' said

Independent Councillor Paddy McGowan a few days after the bomb. ‘A good person is a good person and an evil person is an evil person.’

The McCombes had celebrated their silver wedding anniversary in June. Temperamentally they were opposites. Stanley, who was retired from the electricity board, was a part-time bookie, a member of a pipe band and an immensely gregarious drinker and smoker who seemed to know everyone in town; when not at work or singing in a local choir, Ann was a homebody, dedicated to looking after Stanley and their sons, Clive, who was twenty-two, and eighteen-year-old Colin, who had learning difficulties. She was a quiet perfectionist, who, said Stanley, ‘never came downstairs without being properly dressed and with her make-up on’. Her husband thought her ‘the kindest-hearted person that I’ve ever known and she cared for everybody’. Ann’s parents, who had both died within the previous twelve months, had been nursed by her for years; sometimes she would visit them twice in a night. ‘She was,’ said Michael and Patsy Gallagher, who in the 1980s had lived beside the McCombes for several years, ‘the nicest woman in the world.’

Ann and Geraldine were last seen chatting, standing together in front of Carland Newsagents.

Breda Devine was doing what she did every day. The youngest of three girls and one boy, at twenty months she was learning to walk and talk. She had had a tough start to life; born three months prematurely and weighing only just over two pounds, she had not been expected to live.

Breda had been taken into Omagh by her mother, Tracey, her uncle Garry and his fiancée Donna Marie, who were to be married the following week: Breda was to be a bridesmaid and needed new shoes. All four were crossing Market Street shortly after three o’clock.

Adrian Michael Gallagher, twenty-one, known as Aiden, had arrived in Market Street earlier. An adored only son and

brother, and a cheery, hardworking, clean-cut young man with a great sense of humour and plenty of friends, he was mad about sports cars. Having taken the Light Vehicle Body Repairs course at Portadown College, he had spent two years building his own car business with his father, Michael, who attended to the mechanics: together they would watch programmes about rally driving. Aiden was ambitious. His business had outgrown the family garage so he had hired a larger one two miles away: Michael now worked for his son.

Aiden saved enthusiastically for whatever he wanted, so would have worked on a Saturday, for he needed money to renovate the old family cottage – across the street from the Gallaghers' new, bigger house – which his parents intended to give him. That Saturday, after a late night, he was slow to get up. His younger sister, Cathy, to whom he was very close (the age gap was only fourteen months and they made common cause over being laughed at for their ginger hair), came into his bedroom to extract information about what he had been up to the night before and which girl he might have been out with, but gave up when all she could elicit was a grunt. When Aiden finally got up, Cathy had gone out and Patsy, their mother, was busy cleaning the kitchen. In that part of the world, women are very houseproud: cleanliness really is seen as being next to godliness.

Aiden had a mock altercation with Patsy about a missing brown bag containing sausages – his favourite food – that he had brought home from a takeaway late the night before and that she claimed to have put in the bin. When, laughing, she finally retrieved the sausages from the refrigerator, he rushed out with them and went off to pay a work bill. He came back still peckish, searched for something to eat and found some noodles in a packet. He refused to let Patsy, who was still cleaning, cook them for him. When he had finished eating and chatting, he rang Sharon, his older sister, spoke to her partner, and then called his great friend