

CHAPTER TWO

Kidnapping by the Book Lord and Lady Donoughmore

'You had this unit driving around the Irish countryside with this fucking book, a hardback, The Stately Homes of Ireland, and they had it spread out on their laps. This is what they were working from. Pictures of rich people's homes.'

IRA source

At two o'clock on the afternoon of Tuesday, 4 June 1974, Joe Phelan watched a blue Ford Cortina drive slowly past the gate lodge of Knocklofty House, County Tipperary, where he lived with his family. His father, Tom, had been chauffeur and gunkeeper to Lord Donoughmore, the wealthy peer, for more than thirty years. Knocklofty House was a twenty-four bedroom, eighteenth-century stately home set on a 650-acre estate a few miles from Clonmel. It was a tranquil, sparsely populated area in the rolling foothills of the Comeragh and Knockmealdown mountains, where outsiders tended to stand out. The three men in the Cortina did. They were taking everything in. When they saw that Joe had noticed them, they turned their faces away and the car sped off.



Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave was worried. He had been alerted by Garda intelligence that a group of extremists on the fringes of the Provisional IRA was planning a high profile kidnapping. Members of the Irish and British governments and their families had been identified as likely targets. Cosgrave himself, the minister for justice Paddy Cooney and the minister for foreign affairs Garret FitzGerald, were warned that they were most at risk.

Cosgrave regarded the IRA as a threat to democracy as well as to the State. When he received the kidnap warning he decided that there was only one way to deal with it. In the autumn of 1973, Cosgrave sat down with his Cabinet and made a death pact. The deal that he and his colleagues agreed on was that they were all expendable. If any one of them was taken hostage, there would be no bartering for his life. If a minister's wife or any member of his family was snatched, the minister would immediately resign from the government and no negotiations would be entered into with the kidnappers, even if it meant the murder of a loved one. According to Garret FitzGerald:

The information we got was that a member of the Government could be kidnapped by some unnamed subversive group. Ministers didn't have a great deal of protection at the time. Our official Garda drivers carried guns, but if we left our cars their instructions were to remain with the cars. It appeared the guns were to protect the State cars rather than the ministers. It was very strange. So after we got this warning we all got two more armed guards, who escorted us in another car. I remember that around that time we also talked about it, this kidnapping threat. Because, while we now

felt a bit safer, we knew that our families were still quite open. So everyone in the Government sat down, and we agreed that if any of our wives or members of our families were taken hostage, then that person would resign from Cabinet and no concessions would be made.

The Cosgrave years were a time of uncertainty and fear in the Republic and marked a dramatic change in the security climate. The Dublin and Monaghan car bombings killed thirty-three people and brought the reality of the modern Troubles spilling across the border for the first time. The murder of Senator Billy Fox, the assassination of the British Ambassador to Ireland, Christopher Ewart Biggs, and a number of spectacular prison breaks and hijackings demonstrated the strength and ruthlessness of the resurgent IRA and created the sense of a country under siege. The organisation was openly flouting the authority of the State and Cosgrave felt the same pressure to deal with them as his father, William T Cosgrave, Ireland's first Taoiseach, did in 1922. Liam's response was a raft of new anti-terrorism laws, while the term 'subversives' became common coinage to describe republicans during the time of his Government.

To Paddy Cooney it was a seminal point in history. The IRA appeared to be operating with impunity within the Republic, and the Government had to show the force of its will. He remembers:

Around that time – the Seventies – kidnapping, not just in Ireland, was a not uncommon terrorist tactic and it was agreed that it could not be rewarded, for to do so would be likely to increase its incidence, and the Government had to take the lead.

In fact, at that time the Provisional IRA – reborn out of the sectarian fighting that exploded in Belfast and Derry in the late 1960s – was opposed to kidnapping, though more for operational than ideological reasons. Taking a hostage was like poking a wasp’s nest with a stick. The huge mobilisation of police and soldiers that inevitably followed led to safe houses being turned over and arms dumps being uncovered. The IRA knew that a kidnapping in the Republic would bring untold heat on the organisation, inviting the Government to introduce even more repressive security measures and laws, while alienating them from their silent sympathisers in the political establishment and the Gardaí. Many republicans already suspected that Cosgrave planned to introduce internment without trial in the Republic as a sop to Brian Faulkner, the leader of the new power-sharing executive in Northern Ireland. At the very least, they believed his hard-line law-and-order government would conduct a round-up of suspects and put them before the juryless Special Criminal Court on nebulous membership charges.

‘The biggest issue we had with kidnappings was that they paralyse the whole country,’ says one senior IRA figure from the time.

They put all kinds of things at risk – arms dumps, planned operations, safe houses. You’re got guys on the run who are put at serious risk of capture because all of a sudden there’s this heightened state of security. There’s roadblocks, searches. It makes it impossible to operate. And it gives the police a perfect excuse to round republicans up. To go into their homes and tear them up. And they knew it

was inevitable they’d find stuff. The guards would use things like that as an excuse for a huge intelligence-gathering exercise.

The intelligence supplied to Cosgrave about the kidnapping threat almost certainly referred to a small group of dissident IRA Volunteers who were operating around the border, carrying out bank raids and gun attacks from the relative sanctuary of the Republic. British Prime Minister Harold Wilson and the security forces in Northern Ireland had been putting pressure on Cosgrave for some months now to deal with them. And the Garda intelligence was well founded.

It was a time when emotions were running high among republicans because of the treatment of the Price sisters, and many were of the opinion that something drastic had to be done to save them. Marian and Dolours Price, two sisters who were members of the first Provisional IRA active service unit to bomb London, were on hunger strike in Brixton Prison, demanding to be allowed serve their sentences as political prisoners in Northern Ireland. They were being subjected to forced feeding, a cruel and draconian process that involved clamping the mouth with a metal device and inserting a tube down the oesophagus into the stomach.



On 27 December 1973, a group of IRA Volunteers, acting without authorisation, kidnapped Thomas Niedermayer, the West German consul in Belfast, in the hope of exerting international pressure on the British to end the ordeal of the sisters. But the operation was badly botched. Niedermayer