

RACHEL WEEPING FOR HER CHILDREN:

UNDERSTANDING THE REACTION TO THE GUN MASSACRE AT DUNBLANE

NATALIE SOLENT

“In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they were no more.”

Matthew 2:18

Two thousand years ago Matthew quoted those words of the prophet Jeremiah to describe the grief of the mothers of the children slain by Herod. A great many Rachels have mourned for their murdered children since then. If a count could be made of all the children murdered in the last two thousand years, a great many of the victims would have been killed by kings and governments, particularly in the dreadful century just gone: one reason to be a Libertarian. As

many, or perhaps more, would have been killed by their own parents or step-parents: and here, too, there is scope for political debate at its grimmest. In our present society we do not live in fear of direct government murder.¹ Although murder within the family is sadly common we do not live in fear of that, either. Even as we sigh over a sad account in a newspaper we are firmly — and usually correctly — convinced that such things do not happen to people like us.

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www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

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Director: Dr Chris R. Tame

Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait

Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb



FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

THAT COULD BE MY CHILD

There is, however, one type of murder that can happen to anyone's child: murder by a madman. There was nothing much Sarah Payne's mother could have done to protect her daughter, short of giving her a miserable, prison-like upbringing. And when, five years ago (five years to the day as I write this) in Dunblane, the parents of sixteen small children said goodbye to them at the beginning of the school day, there was no way they could have predicted that their children, and their teacher, would never come home.

I do not believe I am alone in having thought about Thomas Hamilton's victims, or their families, or the surviving members of the class almost every day for two years or more. One of my own children was then close in age to those killed, and all our little domestic rituals — a bedtime story, family breakfast, the Mother's Day card — were given a dreadful poignancy by the thought that similar rituals must have taken place in the last days of those children's lives. I would hang up little school shirts to dry on the line and think of *their* clothes, not needed now. Particularly horrible was the thought that the grief of the parents was still going on, in real time, as I was thinking about it. I imagined them waking up the first morning after that day, and finding the nightmare still true. And then the second morning, and then the third. Then, inevitably, some diminishment, only for the awful outrage and loss to flare up again every time something brings it to mind. As today's anniversary no doubt will.

If the state is "for" anything it is for stopping that. People want governments because they think that they can even out the unfairness of life, and there is no greater unfairness than having your life, or your child's life, ended. Any fool can oppose the state at its lowest, but when the state acts to preserve innocent life, here, surely it is trying to do good.

My personal reasons for giving them credit for trying, but very little more, go back to when I quite casually took up target shooting, both pistol and rifle, at university. Also at university I had bumbled into libertarianism, although it had taken a long time for me to apply libertarian principles to a mere hobby like guns. Back then owning a pistol was considered mildly raffish and eccentric, but not wicked. I talked happily to all sorts of folk about my hobby. Then, thirteen years ago now, came the gun massacre in Hungerford. Although I was shocked (like many other Britons, I had an unexamined assumption that spree killings only happened in America), it did not oppress my imagination any more than other multiple murders such as the Yorkshire Ripper. This was despite the unwelcome practice in defending my libertarian opinions on gun ownership.

There is no better education than argument. I became thoroughly used to saying that in Britain there was al-

most no control of guns before the 1920 Firearms Act and widespread ownership of pistols for self defence until the 1968 Act and yet there was one of the lowest murder rates of any society in human history. In Britain, as gun laws have got stricter, gun crime has got worse. Everyone then would then say, unencumbered by any shred of evidence, "Aha! But crime would have been yet worse if the laws had not come in!" This was my first introduction to the enormous inertia of a failed policy. It ought to be obvious. If measures brought in to reduce some phenomenon fail, and keep on failing for decades, eventually someone should try another strategy. shouldn't they? I soon learned that it was far from obvious to most people, whether the phenomenon to be reduced was guns or poverty. Such is the will to complacency that people will even deny their own experience; I have several times heard older men and women who *remembered* a time when there was both lower gun crime and little control of guns talk as if a disarmed society was an ancient part of the British tradition.²

Rare indeed is the disinterested seeker after truth: It would never have occurred to me to spend my lunch hours looking up the increase in the murder rate over the last fifty years if I had not owned a gun. Once I did research the question, "facts" I had known for years turned out to be rubbish. The much-quoted appalling US murder rate was concentrated in just those cities where guns were banned: in New York, at that time, there were probably fewer legally held guns than in my suburb of London.

After Hungerford a few, a very few, non-shooting writers and columnists did speak out against the view that restriction was the answer to such crimes but in general the climate for shooters got a good deal colder. Not so cold, though, that I couldn't cope.

YOU COULD SEE THE NEXT MASSACRE COMING

It was, of course, obvious that eventually there would be another gun mass murder in Britain. Murderers copy other murderers. Earlier I said that, though saddened by the Hungerford killings, they did not obsess me, as the Dunblane ones later did. But the belief that it was up to me to defend gun rights did mean that every time I opened a newspaper I breathed a small, selfish sigh of relief that "it" hadn't happened today.

Meanwhile life went on. I started a family. New mothers, and to some extent fathers, often notice that press or even historical accounts of the suffering of children start to upset them much more than before they had their own. This happened to me.

DUNBLANE

And so, eventually the Dunblane murders came along. The second British spree killing had finally come to

pass, in a manner more cruel than anything I had imagined. I could not bear, then or now, to find out the exact details. Believe me, my imagination supplied more than enough.

Despite the fact that people like me have to leave the room, despite the fact that press interest is ghoulish and intrusive, disaster victims do apparently want to be heard. It is in the public interest that they should be; publicity counteracts the tendency to undervalue the griefs of others if they are out of sight. But in the case of a crime so unparalleled as Dunblane one would be scarcely human if one did not feel for the families. I don't believe the "out of sight, out of mind" tendency operated at all. I, for one, couldn't get them *out* of my mind. I would have done anything to comfort them, ... anything, that is, except believe what I knew to be untrue. I *knew* gun laws would never work. When had they ever?

When the parents of the Dunblane children spoke there was every reason for the world to hear about their terrible *experience*. There was never any particular reason to suppose that their *opinions* were right. In fact their opinions should carry less weight than almost anyone else's should. This point is well understood when it comes to juries. It goes without saying, or, at least, it once did, that guilt or innocence must be decided by impartial people. Decisions of policy require the same cast of mind as decisions of guilt and innocence. The relatives of murder victims cannot be impartial. In a murder trial it is no use saying that it is as important to the family of the victim as to the judge that no innocent person be punished. In pure logic it ought to be, but in fact it almost never is. The bereaved want to believe that the evildoer has been punished. If the real evildoer has escaped (either escaped in the literal meaning of the word or escaped by suicide, as Hamilton did) someone must be found to suffer. Even in cases of pure accident we don't have Acts of God any more: always some arm of government or business is pursued and sued so that the weight of blame may fall on somebody.

We want to comfort those who have suffered unfairly. One way you comfort someone is by agreeing with them, by allowing them emotional license for any outburst. In the ordinary course of life and death, though, even as we say, "yes, yes" to a distraught person we discount — not ignore, but discount — the content of what they say. Phrases such as "He didn't know what he was saying" or "She was mad with grief" illustrate this. Then, after a while, they are expected to get back to normal.

When people die in large numbers new and different rules apply. I can't quite trace the route by which our society got where we are now, but the compensation culture comes into it somehow, as does the democratization of fame. Or quite possibly it all comes from

people being willing these days to cry on TV: the camera ensures that one individual's pain is felt by everybody, and the individual's understanding of the situation tends to be absorbed by everybody, too. However it came about, nowadays we give the bereaved parents at Dunblane, the survivors of rail crashes, and similar groups *both* the license to say anything due to the distraught *and* the intellectual consideration due to experts. They can't have both. Not because I'm too mean to give it to them, but because the two are logically incompatible. The press and public have handed power to those least able to exercise it well.

It may happen that members of survivors' groups eventually become genuinely knowledgeable. The cocoon of sympathy still surrounds them. It would seem — perhaps it would be — too brutal to deliver an opposing argument with full force.

Dunblane had its emotional effects on pro-gun people no less than on "antis". Paralysis. Fear of hatred. Doubt of their own case.³ Yet for me, and I am sure for many other shooters, the overwhelming emotion was the same one felt by the rest of the world, however different my opinions. I was desperately sad, almost obsessed. The sadness didn't arise from my personal interest as a gun owner or from my politics; it came from the crime itself. My politics were like a ball and chain preventing me from dragging my mind away.

I couldn't stop thinking about it. Yet I could scarcely bear to talk about it, except to rake over the ashes with friends who I already knew agreed with me. Why the silence — which was typical of once-eloquent pro-gun activists?⁴ Now it so happened that for personal reasons 1996 was a bad time to ask me to put any time, energy or most especially money into doomed political lobbying. It has to be said, though, that the major reason for me keeping quiet was a craven fear of unpopularity. Judge not, till you've been there! Unpopularity is a serious social penalty if most of your circle is made up of normal, unpolitical people. You fear your kids will come home crying because of what some other kid's dad said about you. You fear that you — or your husband or wife — won't get that much-needed contract if the guy awarding it thinks you are an extremist. Britain seems to have moved from a conception of democracy where majority rule is seen as the "least worst" option to one where the majority is seen as always right. Anything shooters say doesn't count, because "they would, wouldn't they?"

RACHEL'S COMFORTERS

In the shadow of Dunblane, and the ever-growing list of school shootings in the US that followed it, I have many times read sentiments on the lines of "Nothing we can do will bring our children back." That is what put me in mind of the Biblical quote with which I

started this article: “*Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they were no more.*” After Dunblane, Rachel did not lack would-be comforters. In a sense our whole society reached out to comfort her. Both in the good, traditional ways of sympathy and ceremony and also in a more contemporary fashion: “doing something about it”.

Nearly everyone who started by saying that the children could not be brought back to life then went on to say something like, “All we can do is try to ensure that such a thing never happens again.” So a campaign is launched on a tide of popular support. Once a grieving parent or relative has salvaged a sense of purpose by embarking on that course, there can be no turning back. It would be betraying the others.

“WE OWE IT TO THE PEOPLE OF DUNBLANE”

The Home Secretary, Jack Straw, was quoted five years ago as saying, “We owe it to the people of Dunblane to press forward for a complete firearms ban.” He went on to extend the restrictions introduced by his Conservative predecessor, Michael Howard. All pistols except archaic muzzle-loaders are now banned. This has had the usual effect. General gun crime has gone up steeply. A contributor⁵ to an on-line discussion on the arming of the police in Nottingham first cited the money spent banning guns and then said, “Now they [the police] plan to arm themselves anyway, why? Surely the streets are safe???” A fair point, but not *the* point. The main aim of the handgun ban was not to cut down general gun crime. That was only ever thrown in as a makeweight. It is important to realise that what ordinary people wanted from a handgun ban was to stop another Hamilton or Ryan. They shut their eyes and wished hard. If troubled by the question, “Won’t the next mad killer just get hold of an illegal gun, as ordinary criminals so frequently do?” then they firmly told themselves, “At least it’s a gesture” in the right direction. The law served as a *gesture* of comfort to the bereaved and to the public.

All sorts of other motivations floated about, to be sure. “Stamping out the gun culture” was one of the most illiberal, and the belief of the South Sea islanders in the good or bad *mana* of objects found its counterpart in “Forbid guns because they are designed to kill.”

A more respectable reason for wanting a gun ban, though more sinister in the long term, is encompassed in that phrase “We owe it to the people of Dunblane.” I do not believe that either Mr Straw or anyone else *owes* the people of Dunblane anything. It is of course right that he, like any man alive, should *feel* for the dead and the bereaved. I would imagine that this business of “owing” goes back to the social contract. The state was supposed to protect those children. It failed. Mr Straw, as the state’s representative, is sincerely

willing to assume some of the guilt for that failure if he can have thereby the power (he would say, the responsibility) to stop it happening again. Should the state fail again, it will apologise again and take up more powers.

LOOK AT IT FROM THEIR POINT OF VIEW

Given, then, that under present conditions the opinion of the bereaved parents of Dunblane is the opinion of the majority in this country, let us look at things from their point of view.

No appeal can be made to “balance” the interests of shooters against the interests of the victims and the bereaved. We see on one side the precious five years of life shared with a beloved child, every memory now shadowed by violent death. On the other side, what? A bunch of hobbyists playing with fire. Which would you choose?

Better to query the assumption behind the “balance” model: that banning guns does in fact make gun massacres less likely, and that the only question is whose interests should prevail. Strangely, not even the most passionate supporters of the ban, now they have one, will state with certainty that there will never be another gun massacre. They will say the ban makes a massacre less likely; that if we could just have a few more “final” gun amnesties, to be followed by yet more draconian measures against illegal guns, and the banning of shotguns, and the suppression of the “gun culture”, why then a massacre will be impossible. Probably.

All those qualifications do in fact contain a well-founded, though unadmitted, doubt that the world really works that way.

NOTES

1. “We means the vast majority of the British public.
2. Even those too young to remember the period before 1968 may well know, if only from novels, that pistols were freely available yet the murder rate low in, say 1950s. Yet they rarely put those two separate pieces of knowledge together.
3. It is good to question your own opinions in the light of events, but most of this doubt was the well-known psychological mechanism whereby the outcast starts to believe everyone else’s opinion of him
4. I was only even an “activist” on a local and conversational scale. Nonetheless I may qualify as one of the “cowards and fools” castigated in Dr Sean Gabb’s admirable *Putting The Case Against Gun Control*, published by the Libertarian Alliance (Tactical Notes No. 17, 1996).
5. “Neil, Scotland” in BBC News Online: Talking Point: Should UK Police Carry Guns? 27th October 2000.