

NEWS REVIEW

Kathleen Harris, the documentary maker, first heard the name Natasha O’Brien in June last year, when the young woman stood outside Limerick circuit criminal court to speak against the lenient sentence that her attacker had been given.

On May 24, 2022, O’Brien had been brutally beaten unconscious by Cathal Crotty, who was then an active-duty member of the Irish Defence Forces. The now-retired Judge Tom O’Donnell imposed a fully suspended three-year sentence on Crotty, and his sentencing remarks were roundly criticised as he took into account the impact that a custodial sentence would have on the 22-year-old’s army career.

O’Brien, however, did not go quietly. The subsequent public outcry sparked a wave of protests across the country in support of her, and she became an inadvertent spokeswoman and activist for victims of gender-based violence. Now, her quest for justice is being told in *Natasha*, a documentary directed by Harris.

“Like a lot of people in the country, I was shocked to see the story,” she recalls. “I saw Natasha in the news like everyone else, and was very surprised to see how outspoken she was. We see footage of victims going in and out of court, but we don’t often hear them speaking the way that Natasha spoke. So she caught my attention.”

The American-born film-maker was approached by the producers Elaine Stenson and Stephen McCormack. They brought her on board to document the impact the assault had on O’Brien’s life, as well as the appeal against Crotty’s sentence, which was heard in January and resulted in him being jailed for two years.

“I’m very drawn to stories about women and about activists, and it was a story I thought was important,” Harris says. “When I met Natasha, she was so keen to do a film. She saw it as an opportunity. And she kept saying to me, ‘Kathleen, I want to be vulnerable. You need to push me to be vulnerable. I want this to be raw, I want people to see everything, I want to let it all hang out.’ That was her attitude.”

The film was envisaged as an investigation of the criminal justice system in Ireland, but soon morphed into something more personal. For Stenson, the associate producer and driving force behind the documentary, O’Brien’s charisma dictated that shift. “Natasha annoys people,” Stenson says. “She doesn’t apologise. That upsets people. It upsets people when a woman demands attention and keeps demanding attention.”

Harris, a former Irish Times video journalist, has form in such projects, having previously directed the documentaries *Birdsong* and *Growing Up at the End of the World* – both of which wove personal stories together with wider themes, including environmental activism and climate activism.

At the film’s core are the reverberations that the assault and its aftermath had on O’Brien’s life, particularly on her relationship with her mother, Anne, which became visibly strained at points.

“Those scenes are hard to watch,” Harris says. “There is a lot of pain there, but they were willing to put that out there and allow it to be on camera, and we tried to be as delicate with it as we could. It is difficult to watch, but I think it also lets us see how some of this stuff plays out between loved ones.

“At one point in the film, Natasha explicitly talks about the ripple effect of violence and of trauma – she even mentions the taxpayers who had to pay for her medical bills. This isn’t something we think about. We think that a victim of crime is the face on the news, but there’s a long shadow there,” Harris adds.

“I’ve worked in news for years,” Stenson says, “and there are some stories that need to be told in something more than three minutes, and some people who need to be on a bigger screen.

“Natasha is a tough woman but she also has her vulnerabilities. She wants to tell her story but doing so is a form of retraumatisation. Natasha thought that she was going to die during that attack, and in making this documentary we had to ask her to relive that, over and over.”

In one striking scene O’Brien meets

A WOMAN WITH THE COURAGE TO SPEAK OUT

A documentary delves into Natasha O’Brien’s fight for justice after a random attack by a Defence Forces member. Its makers tell *Lauren Murphy* what happened behind the scenes



“She kept saying to me, ‘Kathleen, I want to be vulnerable. You need to push me to be vulnerable. I want this to be raw, I want people to see everything’

Natasha O’Brien protested outside court in Limerick, top. Above, with the film producer Elaine Stenson, left, and director Kathleen Harris

because you sit across from the person who did this thing to you, but as she also said, going through the court system was daunting as well.”

Tackling such a complex story has had an impact on Harris’s life too, including affording her a new empathy for her relationship with her mother, because “in part, this is a film that is about a mother and a daughter”.

“I’d also say that the film was meant to be a celebration of women, and of women like Natasha in particular – who stick their head above the parapet, who have that courage to speak out and ruffle feathers and be ‘difficult’.

“I think I did a lot more of that when I was younger, but as I’ve gotten older I’ve stayed quiet more. So I think, going forward, when there are moments I see something that’s not quite right or not OK, I will think of Natasha and her courage.”

Harris says she hopes people who see the film are inspired by O’Brien.

“I hope other victims and other women see it and think, ‘OK, she could do that; I can do it too’ – if it’s right for them, of course. And I think she’ll make people feel not so alone going through that process, and that they’re not a weirdo for feeling all these weird, contradictory, messy emotions in the wake of something horrible that happened to them.”

Stenson agrees. “Natasha is going to be on our screens again this week. And that’s going to annoy people again. Natasha is unfiltered, so unashamedly herself. You don’t know what she is going to say next. She doesn’t care what you think of her. And that’s what makes her so remarkable.”

Natasha airs on RTE1 on Wednesday at 9.35pm

Lord Mount Charles, a proud Irishman despite the name

The owner of Slane Castle, who turned it into a vital music venue, became a rock promoter through necessity, writes *Tom Doorley*

first met Lord Henry Mount Charles when he dropped into my mother-in-law’s – Ethel McKeever – house in Slane to wish my sister-in-law a happy birthday. And so I got to know him over the years and ended up writing about him, too.

Despite having an aristocratic lineage, and a great deal of Scottish and English blood, the Lord Mount Charles that I knew was first and foremost an Irishman. He was also an Irishman who resented being considered an alien in his own land.

In the weeks before the first Slane Castle concert, when Thin Lizzy played in 1981, some locals opposing the event told him to “go back to England” and he was pilloried when he announced that he would take his seat in the House of Lords when he succeeded his father as the 8th Marquess Conyngham. At the time he said to me: “Well,

they have been interfering in this country for centuries, so why shouldn’t I interfere in theirs?”

Born in 1951, to the wildly glamorous and beautiful Eileen Newsom and her husband Frederick Mount Charles, Henry was sent to Headfort, near Kells, a preparatory school for boys intended for English public schools.

Unlike his father, he didn’t

go to Eton but instead to Harrow, where he first became truly conscious of his Irishness. He was teased about his nationality. After school he went to Harvard and then to London where he worked in the publishing house Faber & Faber. Here he developed a reputation as a tough negotiator for the rights department.

Now married to Juliet Kitson and working in a congenial environment, Mount Charles’s pleasant London life came to an end when his father – never

the easiest of men – announced that he was to become a tax exile in the Isle of Man. This resulted from the Fine Gael government’s introduction of a wealth tax in 1976, and Mount Charles’s father was a very wealthy man owning, in addition to the Slane estate, extensive landholdings in Kent in England.

Aged 25, Mount Charles was told to come home and take over. Otherwise, the castle and the estate would be sold. It was an ultimatum that he resented and he always had a rather distant

relationship with his father. Mount Charles Sr was notoriously unfaithful during his 20-year marriage to Eileen, and his son was deeply troubled by their divorce in 1970. Mount Charles Sr would go on to have three further wives.

Although resentful of the position he was placed in by his father, Mount Charles rose to the challenge. Had his father not decided to move to the Isle of Man, he might have deferred moving back to Ireland for many years and Slane Castle would be a very different place.

Soon after his return, Mount Charles realised that the natural amphitheatre in which the castle stands was an ideal venue for large concerts. And despite the unreliability of Irish weather, none of the Slane concerts, from Thin Lizzy in 1981 to Harry Styles in 2023, has been a washout.

In 1986, much to his surprise, he was bequeathed the beautiful Georgian Beauparc House, further along the banks of the Boyne, by a distant relative, the gloriously eccentric and heirless Sir Oliver

Lambart. Mount Charles and his second wife, Iona, moved in after some restoration was completed and lived there ever since. Were it not for Lambart’s bequest, they would almost certainly have perished when Slane Castle was engulfed by fire in 1991.

The fire was, Mount Charles told me, his lowest point. The restoration of the castle absorbed much of his

Lord Henry Mount Charles, below middle. Queen, left, and Bob Dylan, two of many Slane Castle performers

energy and income in the subsequent years.

When Mount Charles thought of entering politics in the early 1980s, he was initially attracted to Fianna Fail as the party of business. However, his background did not appeal to the party and he was rebuffed.

He later joined Fine Gael and stood as its second candidate in Louth in the 1992 general election. He was later considered for a European seat but deferred to Máiréad McGuinness.

Mount Charles’s marriage to Juliet, whose mother, Penelope, was a mistress of J Paul Getty II, ended in divorce in 1985 and she moved back to England with their three children. Later that year he married Lady Iona Grimston, daughter of the Earl and Countess of Verulam, with whom he has one daughter, Lady Tamara Speers.

He is succeeded as the 9th Marquess Conyngham by his son, Alex.

