

DOSTOYEVSKY IN DUBLIN 4

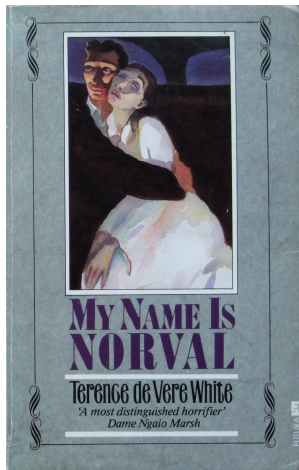
Dennis Kennedy

Paper read to the Belfast Literary Society, October 6th, 2008.

I have long been fascinated by coincidences, and this paper has its origins in a set of such accidental occurrences, but its main concern is the overlap between fiction and historical fact.

About two years ago, in a charity shop, I came across a book which I immediately bought for three coincidental reasons. One, I had known the author personally; two, inside the book was a bookmark from the Bray Bookshop in county Wicklow, of which I had been a regular patron for most of twenty years, and third, the original owner had written her name on the flyleaf – it was Rita O'Hare, late of this parish, and of some repute in the troubled history of our times.

(I could add another delightful coincidence – the book, originally published in 1978, is dedicated to Russell Murphy, the flamboyant Dublin accountant, to whom the great and the good, from Gay Byrne to Hugh Leonard, had entrusted the stewardship of much of their considerable wealth. To their dismay, and the delight of the rest of Dublin, most of this wealth was not to be found when Mr Murphy died suddenly in 1984.)



The book is *My Name is Norval*, and the author is Terence de Vere White. I had worked with Terence in the *Irish Times* for most of a decade, from my joining the paper in 1968, until his departure for London in, I think, 1977. He was Literary Editor, and an assistant editor, which meant that, like me from 1974 onwards, he shared in the task of being the duty editor. He was also a lawyer, and was consulted from time to time for legal opinion on matters of libel. So I got to know him fairly well. He was a novelist and writer, and by that time had several novels to his credit, plus a much praised biography of Terence O'Higgins, and another of Isaac Butt. His best known, and simply best work was the autobiographical *A Fretful Midge*, published in 1957 when Terence was only 45 years old. I regret to say that, while I was aware of this work, I had not read it

until I started working on this paper. It is a wonderful account not just of his own earlier years, but of Dublin life and society of the 1940s and 50s, certainly comparable with Gogarty's *As I was Going Down Sackville Street*, published 20 years earlier.

Terence dressed more like a barrister than a journalist – I doubt if he would ever have called himself a journalist – spoke in a prissy, precise voice with a very upper class Dublin accent, and looked the epitome of an Anglo-Irishman. In fact he was Catholic, though from a mixed background, and far from wealthy. He was in some ways a latter-

day renaissance man, long involved with the Gate Theatre under MacLiammoir and Edwards, and an expert on Irish art, serving for years on the board of the National Gallery. He was not everyone's cup of tea, but I got on with him very well, helped perhaps, by the fact that I had, as a student, actually read one of his earlier novels.

My Name is Norval was published by Victor Gollancz in 1978, just after Terence had left the *Irish Times*. Though well reviewed, it attracted little attention in Dublin ó certainly I was unaware of it until I came across the (1988) paperback version in the charity shop. It is essentially a thriller, something Terence had not previously attempted. Ngaio Marsh deemed it 'A most distinguished horrifier' and *The Times* (of London) found it 'thoroughly successful'

It begins as the story of a wealthy Dublin lady, unmarried and now 52, on her own since the death of her half-brother, still attractive, and not yet resigned to spinsterhood. She goes to stay, alone, in a guest house in Donegal, her doctor having recommended a change of air. The time is the recent past ó that is the 1960s or even the early 70s ó though it often reads much more like the 50s. Another unaccompanied guest, a man of her own age or not much older, arrives. He seems to recognise her, or at least registers something akin to shock or horror when he first sees her.

They meet, and an uneasy friendship develops, with the two sharing drives out from the guest house. He is, it emerges, a Mr Robinson, from Perth in Western Australia, where he has been living for many years, though originally from Ireland. His reaction to Miss Kelly when he had first seen her, he tells her, was because she reminded him greatly of his own mother.

Much of the first half of the book is an account of this fragile friendship, continued when they both return to Dublin. It becomes clear that Mr Robinson is deeply disturbed by some event in his distant past, and meeting Miss Kelly has reawakened the trauma, whatever it was. The hints about Mr Robinson's past become slightly more menacing, while, on her part, Miss Kelly is torn between seeing him as the potential husband she has been seeking, and being offended by his odd, irrational behaviour.

Up to this point I had derived modest enjoyment from the book, without being bowled over by it. This changed as the full story of Mr Robinson's murky past emerged. Some forty years earlier he had been charged with and found guilty of the murder of his own mother, deemed of unsound mind, and sent to a secure mental hospital. By his own account ó to Miss Kelly - of the murder of which he had been accused, he had returned home late one night to the house he had from time to time shared with his mother, with whom he had a very tempestuous relationship,- and finding himself locked out had climbed in a window. His mother, hearing the noise, had left her bed and started to come down. She had fallen, split her head open, and died on the spot. In panic he had disposed of the body in the sea. It was never found, but he had nonetheless been convicted of killing her with an axe, which was found in the garden shed with traces of her blood on it.

(Those who know their *Crime and Punishment* will now begin to see the Dostoyevsky connection.)

Robinson told Miss Kelly he had served a considerable time in a mental hospital, before being released, and had then settled in Australia. Now he was paying a last visit to Ireland, and hinted that he was seeking to clear his name. It was Miss Kelly's remarkable resemblance to his mother that had so startled him in Donegal, and was the explanation for his erratic behaviour.

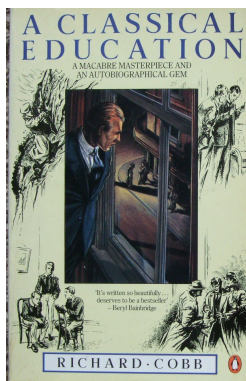
As I read this I realised that I knew the story already. In the early 1980s, when I had been researching my PhD at Trinity, I had spent hours in the National Library working on the newspaper files of the Twenties, Thirties and Forties. As anyone who has used newspaper files in this way will agree it is the item totally unrelated to your own research which proves the most fascinating. Thus I had wasted a week or two reading the detailed accounts in the *Irish Times* of the trial, in 1936, of Edward Ball for the murder of his mother, and of his conviction and eventual incarceration in Dundrum Central Mental Hospital. It was exactly the story, in almost every detail, that was emerging in *My Name is Norval*.

One reason why the account of the Ball murder caught my attention back then 6 and here we are again in the rich realm of coincidence - was that I knew well the location of the murder; it was in St Helen's Rd, Booterstown, not far from my wife's family home in Strand Road, Sandymount. We had been a regular visitors to St Helen's Road, as our friends Pearce and Mary O'Malley, of the Lyric Theatre had bought a house there as a Dublin base. It was identical to Number 23 in which Mrs Ball had met her fate, and not many doors down from it.

In the *Irish Times* at that time I shared an office with my great friend Bruce Williamson, Deputy Editor, man of letters, sometime poet and supplier of endless Mars Bars and chocolate doughnuts, who had lived in Dublin since the 1930s. I asked him if he remembered the Ball murder case. Not only did he remember it, but he had known Ball himself, albeit very slightly. They had overlapped briefly at Shrewsbury School. I left the *Irish Times* in August 1985 and came to Belfast. I continued to live part-time in Dublin, and dropped in regularly to chat to Bruce and fortify myself with a chocolate doughnut. On one such visit in 1987 he produced a book and gave it to me, saying I should find it interesting. It was *A Classical Education*, by Richard Cobb, first published in 1985, but then just out in paperback. Cobb had been Professor of Modern History at Oxford from 1973 to 84, and was a renowned authority and prolific author on the French Revolution. He had also been at Shrewsbury in the early 30s, some years ahead of Bruce, but contemporary with Edward Ball.



Scene of the crime as it is today.



A Classical Education purported to be a second volume of Cobb's much praised, and prize-winning, autobiographical *Still Life; Sketches from a Tunbridge Wells Childhood*. But in fact it was almost entirely an account of his friendship with Edward Ball, including a holiday spent in St Helen's Road in 1934, two years before the murder, of the murder itself and the trial, of his (Cobb's) successful evasion of being called as a witness at the trial, and of his subsequent meetings with Ball after the latter's release. It is a short but intriguing work, on which reviewers lavished the highest praise.

But after twenty years I had almost forgotten about Edward Ball and his trial and conviction, when I suddenly was reminded of it all as I read *My Name is Norval*.

The Ball murder attracted attention partly because it was an extremely brutal case of matricide, partly because the body was never found, partly because the father, the husband of the murder victim, was a well-known figure in Dublin medical circles, and to some extent, because the accused was a former public school boy. (Ball senior was Charles Preston Ball, a specialist in rheumatic complaints, and for a time resident medical officer at the Royal City of Dublin hospital.)

The facts of the murder, as revealed in the newspaper reports of the trial, and recorded in Judge Deale's *Memorable Irish Trials* (1960), are as follows.

On the morning of February 18th 1936, a small car, a Baby Austin, was found abandoned on a laneway leading to the sea at Shankhill in south Dublin. It was wedged against a barrier across the laneway, one door was hanging open, and there was blood on the seats and on a towel. Papers found in the car carried the name and address of Mrs Lavinia Ball, of 23 St Helen's Road, Booterstown. But there was no sign of Mrs Ball, or of anyone else.

When Gardai called at that address they found the maid, Lily Kelly (another Miss Kelly?) waiting for Mrs Ball to return to host a lunch she was giving. She told the Guards Mrs Ball had not been in all morning, and the only other person who had been staying at the house was her 19 year old son Edward, who had also been out all morning. When the Guards returned later that day, Edward Ball told them he had last seen his mother the previous evening, when she had gone out in the car, and she had probably stayed the night with a friend.

They questioned young Ball and searched the house. When they forced the locked door of Mrs Ball's bedroom, they found the bed had been hurriedly made, there was a large stain on the carpet, with an electric fire burning close to it. They also found Ball's shoes, wet, muddy and with sand on them, in the kitchen. In his bedroom they found clothing belonging to him, very wet and bloodstained, and other bloodstained items. Later a suitcase he had left with a friend that morning was recovered, containing bedclothes, shirts belonging to him, and a coat of his mother's, all heavily bloodstained. Two days later Ball was arrested and formally charged with the murder of his mother.

Meanwhile extensive searches, including the use of an aeroplane, had found no trace of Mrs Ball's body.

Ball had initially insisted he had no idea where his mother was, or what had happened to her. Then he had changed his statement, and given a detailed account of how he had had supper with his mother, who had been very depressed, after which she had gone up to her bedroom. When she did not come down, he had gone up about seven o'clock, to find her with her neck cut, a razor blade in her hand, and the bed saturated in blood. He felt for her pulse, but there was no sign of life.

He said his first impulse was to get help, but then his priority became to conceal the fact that she had committed suicide. So he had carried the body downstairs, out into the garage and into the car, and had driven to the laneway at Shankhill, where he had waited until there was no one about, and had then dragged the body to the sea. All the evidence from the car and the area around it, and from eyewitnesses who had seen it there, and had seen Ball later that night, confirmed Ball's account. His statement, which the defence tried to have disallowed, was the only evidence that Mrs Ball was indeed dead.

Ball pleaded not guilty, and after a trial which lasted six days in May 1936, he was found guilty but insane, though it took the jury five hours to reach that verdict. The defence had sought an acquittal, arguing strongly in favour of Mrs Ball having committed suicide, but had also produced medical argument that Ball, whose 20th birthday occurred during the trial, was mentally abnormal, immature and irrational. One expert witness said he was suffering from *dementia praecox*, congenital adolescent insanity in a grave monomaniacal or paranoid form. He had, as a 13 year old, tried to commit suicide, and he had done so again just after the murder, when being questioned by the Guards in St Helen's Road, throwing himself out of a bathroom window.

In De Vere White's book, the account that Robinson progressively reveals to Miss Kelly of the murder for which he was, according to his version, wrongfully convicted and adjudged insane, follows many details of the Ball case. The family background is the same – parents separated, bad relations between a difficult, neurotic mother and the son – Ball's private name for his mother was Medea, an indication of her awfulness in his eyes – an earlier attempt at suicide by the son, the son's interest in the theatre and a friendship with an actor. All these are elements of the Ball case. There are some differences – the location of the murder is not St Helen's Road, Booterstown, but Carrickmines, and the body is disposed of in north County Dublin near the Malahide estuary, not at Shankill. (De Vere White had spent his own childhood in that area.) Ball senior is a lawyer, not a doctor. The theatre is the Phoenix, not the Gate.

Robinson is fascinated by the tidal movements in the sea – every time he and Miss Kelly are at the sea he wants to discuss currents and tides. The extensive search by the Guards for Mrs Ball's body had included several experiments with floating boxes to track the likely path of objects carried away by the tides and currents off Shankill.

In both the real case and the novel the accused's explanation of the death of the mother is contradicted by a mass of evidence, and he is convicted of having killed her in her room with an axe from the garden shed, but found insane. In both accounts the mother's refusal to lend her son £60 (or £50) to go on tour with the theatre company is one of the immediate causes of the fatal row. In both cases, the accused pleads not guilty and continues to protest his innocence.

Important to De Vere White's novel, particularly to its sinister ending, is the account of the two to three hours that Robinson spent in the laneway down to the sea waiting to dispose of the body of the mother. Having arrived there in his mother's car, with her dead body propped up in the back seat, he had been unable to dispose of it because two other cars, with courting couples, had driven into the laneway and parked behind him. He had moved into the back seat beside the corpse, with his mother's bloodied head on his shoulder, and had sat there for some two hours until the other cars had left.

Robinson's version is taken exactly from Ball's second statement to the police, read at the trial.

The key difference between the actual Ball case and the story De Vere White tells centres on the character of the actor friend with whom Ball shared a flat in Mount Street for the three months prior to the murder. Cecil Monson, an actor at the Gate, by his own testimony met Ball only in late 1935, when the latter attached himself to the Gate, helping with back stage chores and occasional walk-on parts. They were not close friends, and it would seem they shared the flat mainly as a matter of convenience, and he

described Ball as "extremely moody and queer". But he had met Mrs Ball with her son several times, and they had dined together at Dublin restaurants. Even so, Monson's evidence at the trial was peripheral.

In De Vere White's novel, the character of the actor friend, Max Morrison, is much more important, indeed central to the story. He seems to be an amalgam of Cecil Monson and Richard Cobb. Cobb does not appear at the trial, and is not, in fact mentioned, though the Gardai at one stage sought to call him as a witness. In his own book, *A Classical Education*, Cobb portrays his friendship with Ball as circumstantial rather than deeply personal, and of no great significance. But they were friends for their whole time at Shrewsbury, close enough to plot together in decidedly vindictive ways against members of staff, and close enough for Ball to spend a holiday with the Cobbs in Tunbridge Wells, and for Cobb to go off to Dublin in 1934 to spend a fortnight with Ball and his mother - at St Helen's Road.

They remained in contact for the rest of Ball's life and he died in the late 1980s. After his arrest, and before his trial, Ball wrote several times to Cobb, having his letters smuggled out from Mountjoy Prison by a friendly warder. The two continued to correspond, Ball writing on a weekly basis throughout his time in Dundrum, and soon after his release travelled to Paris to meet Cobb. (That meeting is the starting point of *A Classical Education*.) To Cobb, Ball made no effort to deny his guilt, indeed, according to Cobb, he seemed rather proud of having killed his mother with a hatchet.

When Ball and Cobb first became acquainted at Shrewsbury, Mrs Ball enthusiastically encouraged the friendship. She met Cobb's parents at the school, and she clearly regarded Cobb as a good influence on her son, or at least as a model he might usefully follow. That all changed dramatically during the holiday in Dublin in 1934. Cobb was already aware of the strained relationship between Ball and his mother, and of that lady's eccentric and often violent behaviour towards both her son and her estranged husband, but at St Helen's Road he was to witness first hand just how violent and irrational Mrs Ball could be. All this is recounted in *A Classical Education*.

Mrs Ball had told Cobb how her husband had taken all her jewellery and silver when they had separated, and refused to give them back. Cobb had immediately suggested he and Edward would get them back for her, and all three planned how the two boys would burgle Ball senior's house and recover the lost treasure. It all went wrong, and Mrs Ball promptly accused Cobb of dreaming up the whole scheme, leading her son astray and generally being an evil influence upon him. She ordered him out of the house, and wrote to his parents informing them of the whole affair.

Cobb left Shrewsbury for Oxford at the end of 1934, while Ball remained to complete that school year. They corresponded, and met in March in London, when they stayed together in a friend's flat for a couple of days. Their next meeting was to be about 1950, when Ball was released from Dundrum.

After the fiasco of the holiday in Dublin, Mrs Ball's animosity towards Cobb had intensified. She found copies of letters he had written to Edward, and instituted libel proceedings against him, or at least against his parents as his legal guardians. In the letters, Cobb had referred to things Edward had told him, about how his mother had tried to poison her husband, about her threats to commit suicide, and much more, including, possibly, how Edward might rid himself of her. Both the Cobbs and Shrewsbury School took this matter very seriously, and went to extraordinary lengths to stop it coming to

court. In the end, on advice from the school, or its legal team, the Cobbs had two medical experts attest that Richard had suffered a mental breakdown over the previous months, and could not be held legally responsible for his actions.

Thus thwarted, Mrs Ball then wrote to all the colleges in both Oxford and Cambridge accepting male students to warn them against admitting a Richard Cobb from Shrewsbury, who had ruined her son, was corrupt and utterly immoral, a thief, a burglar, a cheat and a liar.

This history between Cobb and the Balls was presumably known to the Gardai when they started investigating Mrs Ball's disappearance. They certainly wanted to call him as a witness, and asked Scotland Yard to interview him on their behalf. Detectives called at the Cobb home in Tunbridge Wells, apparently unaware that he was a student at Oxford. There was speculation that Cobb might be charged with incitement to murder, even of being an accomplice to the murder, for the Guards initially assumed Ball must have had some help in moving the body of his mother from the house into the car, and then from the car into the sea. (Mrs Ball was of medium height, but considerably overweight.)

Just as Shrewsbury had done in 1934, Merton went to great lengths to keep its student safe from the clutches of the law. After seeking sanctuary for five days in the college - barred to police - Cobb was, eventually, interviewed by Scotland Yard detectives, in the presence of the law tutor of Merton. By that time the British police were satisfied that Cobb had nothing to do with the murder - there was ample evidence to prove that he had been in Oxford at the time. They did, however, advise Cobb to go for the next month or so, not to France as he was planning, but to Belgium, where he would be beyond the powers of the Free State to extradite him. This he did.

As I said, none of this came out at the trial. Cobb was not mentioned. But in the De Vere White novel, the actor and flatmate of Robinson, Max Morrison, is accused of all the wickedness Mrs Ball had attributed to Cobb. Robinson tells Miss Kelly that he had met Morrison through a friend of his mother; Morrison, he said, was a marvel; he made him feel important, he took his side against his father and mother for refusing to fund him at drama school. It was Morrison who had introduced him to the Phoenix theatre. He found out that Morrison was a liar, and a thief, but by that time he was completely dominated by him.

The worst thing Morrison had done to him, said Robinson, was to lend him a book. It had had an extraordinary effect on him: 'That book took me over so completely that I was never certain whether I was acting in my own life, or as a character in the novel.' He goes on to tell Miss Kelly that the novel was made into a play, a production of which he had watched in rehearsal and had become yet more obsessed by the story and its central character. He outlines the plot, how an old woman is murdered with an axe, but does not tell Miss Kelly the name of the book. She later finds out it is *Crime and Punishment*, by Dostoyevsky.

The reader can find various parallels with *Crime and Punishment* in White's novel. There is a retired Garda inspector who matches the interrogator, there is a young girl, a Sonia, who sits through the trial and then tries to rescue the prisoner. Ball - Sonia actually arranged his escape from Dundrum in 1937 or 38, but he was recaptured within minutes. And there is, lurking in the background, the suggestion of a young man obsessed with the idea that, with one single decisive act, he can escape from failure and obscurity.

But just as Cobb is not mentioned at the trial, neither is Dostoyevsky. But in this context he is not entirely a creation of White's imagination. When, in the real world, young Ball first sought to attach himself to the Gate Theatre in October-November 1935, what was playing but a stage adaptation of *Crime and Punishment*, starring Michael McLiammoir as Raskalnikov. There is some suggestion that Ball had a walk-on part, but more likely he watched the production from the wings in his *ad hoc* role as a part-time assistant to the stage manager.

He certainly did watch it, for Betty Chancellor, who was playing a leading part, complained to the Director that Ball was putting her off by constantly staring at her from the side of the stage. How do I know that? Terence De Vere White records it in his review of *A Classical Education* which appeared in the *Irish Times* in April 1985, while making the point that Cobb makes no reference at all to the Gate production and Ball's role, however marginal, in it. Incidentally, Cobb shows no awareness, in his book, of White's novel so clearly based on the Ball case. .

What is also worth noting about that review is that in it White himself does not mention his own use of the Ball case as the basis for *My Name is Norval*. In fact when *My Name is Norval* was published in 1978, none of the reviews I have read made the connection with the Ball murder, not even those in the three Irish publications I have been able to trace. In 1986, just a year after the publication of *A Classical Education*, a paperback of *My Name is Norval* appeared. This time the reviews, at least in the Irish papers, all made the connection with the Ball murder.

Admittedly four decades had elapsed between the murder and the first publication of *My Name is Norval* in 1978, but the case had attracted much notice at the time, and had had a re-run when Deale's *Memorable Irish Trials* was published in 1960.

That too was reviewed by Terence De Vere White in the *Irish Times*. White's review concentrated on the theft of the Crown Jewels from Dublin Castle, but added that by far the most interesting of all the others was the Ball case. He added that he wished Judge Deale had had room to speculate more on the motives for murder and on analysing character. I think we can detect there the writer's first sensing of the possibilities for a novel based on the murder, possibly stimulated by Deale's final comments in his chapter, where he mentions the Gate production of *Crime and Punishment* and speculates that this may have placed in Ball's mind the idea of using the hatchet.

White himself was already working as a solicitor in 1936 and would have been aware of the Ball case. He may even then have had a personal interest, as he had a life-long association with the Gate Theatre, having gravitated towards it after much involvement in acting at Trinity, and he was acquainted with MacLiammoir before 1936. But I can find no mention by him of ever having met Ball.

In his review of the Cobb book, White says he had been fascinated by the fact that *Crime and Punishment* was running at the Gate when Ball killed his mother, since he read this –when someone lent me the Ball file– (In fact the play had run for one week in November, some three months before the actual murder.) The file referred to must have been the police file, which could have been the only source for much of White's detail about relations between Ball, his mother, and the Cobb element in the Max Morrison character. The police file plays a significant part in *My Name is Norval*.

White clearly had no intention of promoting his venture into thriller-writing by exploiting the link with the Ball case. This may have been, in part, innate middle-class

Dublin decency and a wish to cause no further pain to Ball's family. Ball himself, of course, was still alive, and at liberty, when the novel appeared. When Ball senior ó Charles Preston Ball - died in 1957, aged 85, the obituary in the *Irish Times* detailed his medical career, and his origins in Yorkshire, but discreetly omitted any mention of his first marriage, his two sons, or the murder.

White may also have had some concern that Cobb would have recognised something of himself in the Morrison character, and been offended, or even thought himself libelled, though that I think would have been unlikely. Cobb, incidentally, comes across in his own book in rather poor light, first in his arrogant behaviour at Shrewsbury and on his visit to Dublin, and then in the affair of the threatened libel action, and the lengths to which he went to make sure he could not be brought to Dublin to testify as a witness at the murder trial.

To resurrect the literary theme I broached at the beginning (the overlap in a novel between fact and fiction) I think White, in *My Name is Norval*, provides a good example of how this should be done. The novel had its origins, in White's mind, in the real facts of the Ball case; he uses a great deal of the detail presented as evidence at the trial, and also, I presume in the police file, in the telling of his own story, yet the story is sufficiently his own for none of the reviewers in 1978 to make the connection. And the ending is entirely White's own ó as indeed is the beginning. It can be read, as I think White wanted it to be read, as a work of fiction, a thriller with a sub-theme on Dostoyevsky, intended, not to promote discussion of the Ball case, but to stimulate more heated and endless discussion on why Raskolnikov did what he did.

Many writers have used real people and events on which to base their own creations ó not least Shakespeare. Most of John Bannville's books draw on real characters ó some historical as in the trilogy on Copernicus, Kepler and Newton, and some modern as in *The Book of Evidence*, and *The Untouchable*. In those two the author was using works of fiction to comment on contemporary, or near contemporary events and people, and the connection with those events had to be plain. (In *My Name is Norval* the novel can be read, and enjoyed and is intended to be, without the reader making any connection with the real event.)

White's book might usefully be compared with a more recent work, based on another notorious Irish murder case. This is Eoin McNamee's *The Blue Tango*, published in 2000 and not just based on, but purporting to be, in novel form, the real story of the murder of Patricia Curran, daughter of Mr Justice Curran, later Lord Justice Curran, at Whiteabbey, near Belfast, in November 1952. It was showered with praise by reviewers, one describing it as the finest novel published by any Irish writer that year and for many years.

Here we have no Miss Kellys or Mr Robinsons ó everyone from the Curran family, through to the man charged with the killing, Iain Hay Gordon, via Capstick of the Yard and Sir Richard Pim of the RUC appears under his or her own name, displaying their own, we must presume, personalities, flaws, deceitfulness, openness to corruption and lord knows what else.

I came across this book only recently, after I had started digging into *Norval* and Ball, and have no way of knowing where it departs from fact into fiction. I do not know whether Judge Curran, at the time of the murder, was an addicted gambler who had signed over the deeds of his house to the local bookie, or whether he did indeed refuse the

police permission to search his house or question his family. I do not know if Sir Richard Pym, and Capstick of the Yard and everyone else deliberately connived in perverting the course of justice and allowing an innocent man to be charged with a crime they knew he had not committed. Or if Doris Curran was an alcoholic who was eventually sent to a mental hospital.

But I do know that you cannot stand on the seafront at Whiteabbey and watch the port of Larne, that it is Newry not Larne which has a canal through the middle of it, that Desmond Curran did not play rugby for Wesley College in the Lagan Valley Cup, that Supt Captstick could not have stayed at the Europa Hotel in 1952 (not built until 1971), that Mrs Curran could not have visited Lady Dixon Park in 1952 (not opened until 1959), that Patricia Curran did not study art and take life classes at Queen's University, that the Belfast Telegraph was not, in 1952, 'an early morning paper' that Nutt's Corner was an airport, not a market in 1952, that the building of the M1, the creation of Craigavon and the location of the second university were unlikely topics to have been discussed in 1936 between Judge Curran and his future election agent, and that at any rate they could not have discussed them in the Culloden Hotel, which did not open for another thirty years.

Yet all these assertions appear as fact in McNamee's novel, and several more. In reading the novel I was so distracted by what seemed to me blatant errors that I missed what the *Observer* described as 'rich Chandleresque meditations on human weakness, guilt and destiny.' The errors are so many, and so obvious, that I began to wonder if they were deliberate. Was the author trying to convey that the book was indeed a novel, a work of fiction; and while the characters had the names of real people, and an identical murder had indeed happened, this was a work of fiction. Nothing was factual. But then the errors are all extremely local, and only people who know the area well, and are of an appropriate age, would recognise them as errors.

On reflection I felt that the real purpose of the author was to portray a narrow introverted society, where pettiness and corruption were rampant behind a façade of middle-class respectability. Fair enough, but not perhaps too fair to the individuals that make up his cast list.

To round off the story of Edward Ball, I should say he eventually settled in Deal, in Kent, and continued to keep in touch with Cobb, by letter and occasional meetings, until his death. In 1984 he received a copy of the typescript of *A Classical Education*, from Cobb's publisher, with an offer to make changes if he requested them. His main concerns were to conceal his address in Kent, to omit a passage reflecting badly on his knowledge of the classics, to point out that he had never held an Irish passport, to add that it was wrong to say he could never return to Dublin, and to complain about dismissive comments on his athletic prowess.

We know all this from correspondence between Ball and Hugo Brunner, of Chatto & Windus, which is held in the Bodleian Library. At one point, in early 1984, he huffily protests that it was untrue to say he had helped in the writing of Cobb's book, adding that he had no intention of granting his imprimatur to its publication. Indeed, he says he is amazed at such a request, seeing that the book depicts him as dishonest, insolvent and homosexual. That, he says, is defamatory and malicious, and if Professor Cobb wished to indulge his taste for character assassination, he must fear the consequences. (Dishonesty, insolvency and homosexuality apparently ranked above matricide in Mr Ball's hierarchy

of defamation.) The correspondence ends, however, in April 1985 with Ball wishing the book every success and hoping that "we are blessed with discreet reviews."

He had indeed returned to Dublin from time to time, and formed a friendship of sorts with his half-sister, the daughter of Ball senior's second marriage. He also kept in touch with Dorothy McArdle, the historian of Republicanism, who had visited him several times during his detention in Dundrum. Here is another literary connection: as well as writing *The Irish Republic*, Dorothy McArdle produced ten other books, among them several novels, mostly concerned with matters psychic. One of these, *Fantastic Summer*, published in 1946, was apparently inspired by the Ball murder.

An Author's Foreword (apostrophe after the s, not before it) to the novel says some readers will recognise the story as coming very close to fact, and will understand why names are altered and incidents a little disguised, and why the identity of one of the authors has been suppressed. The purpose of the book, the note says, is not to explain what happened, but to show the whole of what happened. There is no clue as to what the real events were, or indeed as to who the unnamed fellow author was.

Macardle's biographer, Nadia Clare Smith, however, has no doubt that the Ball family and its tragedy was the inspiration. She draws many parallels between the individuals and the events in the case and the novel, perhaps too many, because in no way is the novel a retelling in fiction of the Ball case. I certainly could have read it without the connection ever occurring to me.

The novel is essentially about the dilemma facing a normal, responsible person who suddenly finds she has the gift of second sight, or pre-cognition or she has visions of future events, tragedies, without any means of averting them. Edward Ball's trial was told that his mother, Vera, had had such a vision a few months before the murder, and had told her husband that something terrible was going to happen, and she hoped Edward would not be involved.

Dorothy Macardle had followed the Ball trial closely, and had resumed her visits to Ball in Dundrum when she returned to Dublin in 1945, after spending the war years in London. It was in 1945 that she began writing *Fantastic Summer*. Could Edward Ball have been the unnamed co-author? Probably not, for there is no evidence he shared Macardle's fascination with and belief in the paranormal.

On his release from Dundrum in 1949, his first port of call, appropriately enough in the context of coincidences, was the office of the *Irish Times*. He went there to see Brian Inglis, then *Quidnunc*, the paper's diarist, and later editor of *The Spectator*, who had been an exact contemporary at Shrewsbury, to ask him if he could help him secure tickets for the Ring cycle at Bayreuth. According to Inglis, Ball spent his time in Dundrum developing a passion for Wagner, and reading the novels, not of Dostoyevsky, but of Charles Morgan.

