



Thomas Evans, who joined al-Shabaab and died in Kenya

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This unforgettable documentary managed to explain a High Wycombe lad's flight to an Islamist death cult

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My Son the Jihadi

Channel 4

★★★★★

The Last Kingdom

BBC One

★★★★☆

It is a cliché, as Sally Evans acknowledged on the unforgettable documentary **My Son the Jihadi**, that a mother should not outlive her son. It is, fortunately, no cliché when a mother wishes that son dead. As she washed the dishes, we followed, in voiceover, the process that led Mrs Evans towards that terrible hope. If he died, it might be easier, because he could harm no one else . . . but then her son would be gone . . . but, then again, had he not gone already?

Gone Thomas Evans certainly had, to Somalia, to al-Shabaab, to a life of terror and murder, and, very likely, to his death. When it came, by means of an ambush as he raided a military installation in Kenya, Mrs Evans had no doubts as to how “easy” his death was. “I did not,” she said, “expect to feel so empty, so lost, so overwhelmingly sad.”

Nor, perhaps did the viewer, who will have started with zero sympathy for a white, middle-class boy from High Wycombe who ended up slaughtering innocent Kenyans in front of their wives. One of the remarkable things about Peter Beard's film, the result of nine months spent with Mrs Evans and her younger son, Michael, is that it managed to explain Thomas's flight from reason, a series, really, of unfortunate events: his father's cruel decision to leave the family; the wrong friends; the wrong mosque; ultimately the wrong embrace, that of an Islamist death cult.

If you could take the misery, you could see this documentary was technically near-perfect television. There was so much access, and so much of Thomas’s life on video: the baby fresh out of the maternity ward, the cheeky kid, the bearded terrorist, even the moment of his death and, then, his corpse. Tonally the film was varied, even at times the darkest of domestic comedies. When Thomas’s child bride rang her to celebrate Thomas’s arrival in paradise, she could not, obviously, share her “sentiments”.

What was consistent was Mrs Evans’s fortitude, good sense and charity — although none of them made her eloquence when she stood up at the end to address a fundraiser for an anti-extremism charity any less extraordinary.

Game of Thrones is medieval fantasy. The BBC’s reply, **The Last Kingdom**, is Anglo-Saxon realism. It is so real, the leading man and woman have sex with their clothes on, there being no underfloor heating in 9th century Northumberland. It is not only *Game* that makes this drama topical: beards are back and so is English nationalism. What never goes out of fashion is a strong, clear narrative (the latter admittedly not helped by the Bebbanburg family’s insistence on sharing the Christian name Uhtred), great fight scenes, shocking decapitations, and vivid character acting — led last night by Ian Hart’s canny priest, by Matthew Macfadyen, who will be sorely missed as Uhtred Snr, and the youngest Uhtred of all, the boy actor Tom Taylor. The lad’s unreliable Uncle Aelfric had earlier told him there was horse s**t to shovel. How wrong he was. *Last Kingdom* is all anyone could have hoped of it.

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