



# HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

## One town: two armies



**IAN KENNEALLY**  
Historian and Author

One of the most famous events from the civil war period in Westmeath was, and remains, the fatal shooting in Athlone of George Adamson, a Brigadier-General in the army of the new Irish Provisional Government.

Adamson's death on 25 April 1922 was an event of national significance and the subject of many detailed reports in newspapers throughout the country. His death foreshadowed a dark future, one in which the new Irish state would be ripped apart by civil war.

### George Adamson

Adamson, from Moate, was a veteran of the First World War, having joined the British army in February 1915 while still a teenager, subsequently serving on various fronts with the Machine Gun Corps. He left the British army in March 1919, after which he joined the Irish Republican Army's (IRA) Athlone Brigade. During the War of Independence, Adamson was a member of the brigade's flying column and took part in numerous attacks on the British Crown forces, being wounded on at least two occasions.

Adamson was well-respected within the IRA, as demonstrated in February 1922 when he was chosen to unveil a monument in honour of James Tormey, who had been killed in a gunfight with Black and Tans twelve months earlier. Adamson was one of the officers who led Irish troops into Custume Barracks during the handover from British forces on 28 February

1922 and he had been with Commandant-General Seán MacEoin, the highest ranking IRA officer in the region, when the Irish Tricolour was raised over Athlone Castle later that same day.

In March 1922, the IRA formally split into pro- and anti-Treaty sections, with the forces of the Provisional Government (which became the National Army) comprising those who supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty and the anti-Treaty IRA representing those who rejected the agreement. By March, the IRA in Athlone had an anti-Treaty majority and Seán MacEoin's most pressing task was to ensure that Custume barracks remained in pro-Treaty hands. He ordered the expulsion of all anti-Treaty officers and men from the barracks which became the regional headquarters for the National Army. The local anti-Treaty IRA, under the command of Patrick Morrissey, set up their headquarters in the nearby Royal Hotel, which became a bespoke barracks and a rival centre of power in the town. At this stage, Adamson, a supporter of the Treaty, was promoted by Seán MacEoin to the rank of Brigadier-General in the National Army.

### A town divided

The divisions in Athlone were replicated across the country. In mid-April, the anti-Treaty IRA seized the Four Courts in Dublin, while many midland towns saw pro- and anti-Treaty forces manoeuvring to control key buildings. As the commander of Provisional Government forces in the region, Seán MacEoin received regular threats from the anti-Treaty IRA. One letter, dated 23 April and addressed to MacEoin in the 'Free State Barracks Athlone', warned that if he did not withdraw his troops from Mullingar there

'will be blood on shirts'.

The population of Athlone watched these developments with trepidation. During March and April, local clergymen and Peter Malynn, a long-time republican, mediated between the opposing forces and, according to contemporary newspapers, 'succeeded in effecting an understanding between the leaders of the two parties'. Among these agreements was one that allowed for the movement of pro- and anti-Treaty forces in and out of the town. Yet the close proximity of two mutually hostile forces meant that the tension could not dissipate. A single moment, a provocation or a misunderstanding, could end in bloodshed. For Athlone, that moment arrived in the last week of April 1922.

On the evening of Monday 24 April a party of anti-Treaty IRA, either four or five strong, arrived by car from Birr and drove to the Royal Hotel. Seán MacEoin responded to their arrival by ordering that the car, which was parked outside the hotel, be commandeered and brought to Custume Barracks. This task was completed by a party of officers under George Adamson's command and the car was taken to the barracks some-time after midnight.

MacEoin's order subsequently became a source of controversy when he was accused by Thomas Johnson, leader of the Labour Party, of inciting violence in Athlone. According to Johnson, MacEoin's order to seize the car was an act of aggression. MacEoin rejected Johnson's claim in a letter to national newspapers claiming: '...that this car was taken from the hotel by the officer responsible for the peace of the district, because it carried five armed into Athlone at a late hour on Monday night, contrary to a written agreement between

myself and Sean Fitzpatrick [who had recently arrived to take command of the anti-Treaty forces in the Royal Hotel]'.

### False steps

When Adamson brought the car to Custume Barracks, he realised that two of the officers that had accompanied him, Patrick Fitzpatrick and a man named O'Callaghan, were missing. Fitzpatrick had been pushing the commandeered car when the vehicle started and drove off before he could climb aboard while O'Callaghan had been delegated to act as a lookout on a nearby street. Adamson then volunteered to lead a group in search of the two officers. Initially, he was accompanied by four soldiers, although he soon delegated one of them to a task elsewhere in the town. Fitzpatrick and O'Callaghan, in the meantime, each made their own way back to the barracks and did not encounter Adamson's search party along the way.

Adamson, with the three remaining soldiers, walked as far as the Irishtown area of Athlone when they encountered a man standing in the doorway of house. This man was attached to the anti-Treaty IRA in the Royal Hotel. According to witnesses, Adamson and this man knew each other, or at least recognised each other. The man, whose identity we will confirm in the next article, was standing opposite a house owned by a family called Duffy. On this night, Seán MacEoin, who had recently returned to Athlone from Tralee, was a guest of that family and was staying in an upstairs room in the house. As such, it is unsurprising that Adamson ordered the man to depart the scene.

The man refused and, according to witnesses, for



George Adamson in Custume Barracks shortly before his death in April 1922

the next few minutes he and Adamson continued talking. As they did so, a dangerous situation developed. Adamson was unaware that most of the anti-Treaty party from Birr and a few others from the Royal Hotel had, after their car was taken to Custume Barracks, walked to Poole's Garage in Irishtown in order to secure a replacement. This group suddenly appeared on the street, surrounding Adamson and his three comrades. The sequence of events from this point

onwards is unclear but it would end with Adamson lying on the street bleeding profusely from a gunshot to the head, fatally wounded.

It is a characteristic of the Civil War and how it is remembered that the circumstances surrounding Adamson's death are disputed to this day with many rumours still prevalent as to how, by whom, and why he was killed. In the next article, we will explore those claims and examine the circumstances in which Adamson was shot.

