



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

Who shot George Adamson: part one



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Not long after the shooting in Irishtown, which we discussed in the previous edition, the fatally wounded George Adamson was brought to Custume Barracks. He died around 10am that morning, 25 April 1922. Adamson, 25-years-old at the time of his death, was subsequently buried in Mount Temple amid an immense public display of mourning with an estimated 10,000 people joining the funeral procession.

'died for his country'

The repercussions of Adamson's death were felt across the country. Arthur Griffith spoke in the Dáil on 26 April, saying that Adamson 'was foully murdered' and that he 'died for his country as truly as any man ever died for it'. That same day the Catholic Hierarchy made a public denunciation directed at the 'young men connected with the military revolt'. The bishops' statement warned those opponents of the Treaty that: '...when in prosecution of these principles they proceed to make shameful war upon their own country, they are parriacles and not patriots. When they shoot their brothers on the opposite side they are murderers.' Newspapers, which were overwhelmingly pro-Treaty, likewise judged that Adamson was killed by the anti-Treaty IRA.

Adamson's death quickly became entangled in a publicity battle between the competing wings of the formerly united IRA, a struggle in which each side sought to blame the other for pushing Ireland towards civil war. On the morning after the shooting, the publicity department of the National Army's headquarters in Beggar's Bush Barracks, Dublin, issued two 'official announcements' which stated that Adamson was alone and that he was returning to barracks when he was 'confronted by a group of armed men, who ordered him to put up his hands' before shooting him. These reports were inaccurate but they were followed a few hours later by a third, more detailed, version.

The third report correctly stated that Adamson was not alone but part of a search party with three others and that they encountered a man standing outside the house of Mr. Bigley in Irishtown. Adamson ordered him to raise his hands but the man refused. Suddenly, according to this report, a group of armed men surrounded Adamson and his comrades. Adamson and his men were disarmed and ordered to put their hands in the air. Then, according to this report, 'the man in the doorway [later shown to be Seán Robbins, an anti-Treaty IRA officer] levelled his revolver at



A scene from George Adamson's funeral procession (Athlone Public Library)

Brigadier Adamson and fired point blank into his ear. The Brigadier fell mortally wounded, the bullet passing through the skull.'

Assigning blame

The statement portrayed the shooting as a calculated and deliberate act, the murder of a helpless prisoner. This version of events was followed by the report of a coroner's inquest held in Athlone on Wednesday 26 April. A local doctor, Thomas McDonnell, had treated Adamson and he informed the inquest that Adamson's body contained two wounds: 'one in the back of the head, high up, the entrance wound, and the exit wound in the left ear'. The cause of death, according to McDonnell, was '...due to shock, haemorrhage, and compression of the brain, the result of a bullet fired from behind at very close range'. According to some reports, McDonnell judged that the shot was fired from no more 'than a couple of yards'. Although the inquest concluded that Adamson was 'murdered at Athlone on Tuesday April 25 by some person or persons unknown', it was widely assumed that the person or persons unknown belonged to the anti-Treaty forces.

The anti-Treaty IRA, through its own publicity department in Dublin's Four Courts, responded in early May by releasing a short communiqué to

the press claiming that there 'was not any evidence whatever to show that Brigadier Adamson was deliberately shot'. Following this initial attempt to deflect blame for Adamson's death, the Four Courts publicity department soon released a more detailed statement. This document declared that: 'The Republican party disclaimed all responsibility for this regrettable shooting' and, in an extraordinary development, it raised the possibility that Adamson had been shot by his commanding officer, Seán MacEoin.

The Four Courts press release made six points. The first two paragraphs briefly summarised details of the shooting. The third paragraph noted that MacEoin was staying upstairs in the house of a man named Duffy which happened to be almost directly opposite where Adamson was shot. The fourth paragraph highlighted sections from MacEoin's evidence to the Athlone coroner's inquest. MacEoin told the inquest that he had heard a scuffle on the street and that he had grabbed a revolver before opening his bedroom window. The fifth paragraph placed MacEoin at the scene of the shooting by highlighting the testimony, of a pro-Treaty officer, and a member of Adamson's search party that night, Lieutenant Liam O'Meara.

Shifting blame

It was the sixth paragraph which tied all the above together and which was most damaging to MacEoin. It claimed that the evidence shows 'that the direction of the bullet was downwards' before adding: 'A levelled revolver is not held and presented so high that the bullet would take the course indicated by the medical testimony'. Of course, in the press release only MacEoin was stated to have been on high ground, the upstairs window of Duffy's house, and the implication was that MacEoin had opened his window, fired and killed Adamson.

The Four Courts statement had used the fact that MacEoin was in the vicinity of the shooting to present a scenario by which he was the only possible suspect, thereby absolving the man in the doorway, Seán Robbins. Journalists picked up on this implication and the possibility of MacEoin's involvement was widely reported. Yet this version of events proved to be untenable. The press release had misrepresented the evidence of Doctor McDonnell, who had told the coroner's inquest that he judged the fatal bullet to have been fired from very close range. Although, at the later military inquiry jointly organised by the National Army and the anti-Treaty IRA, McDonnell was reluctant to state the distance of the

shot he still maintained that it had come from behind and probably to the right of Adamson. He made no mention of the fatal shot having arrived from an elevated position. Also, statements from anti-Treaty witnesses who were at the scene of the shooting do not suggest that any shots came from an elevated position.

Most importantly, anti-Treaty officers in Athlone dismissed suggestions that MacEoin shot Adamson. Commandant Buckley, an Athlone-based anti-Treaty officer who compiled a report on the events surrounding Adamson's death before testifying to the military enquiry, admitted that his report was not accurately represented in the press release from the Four Courts. Soon after Buckley's testimony, a representative of the anti-Treaty IRA in the Four Courts claimed that the contentious press release did not intend to implicate MacEoin and that 'he was not going to stand over any such inference'. Ultimately, the suggestion that MacEoin shot Adamson was dismissed even by its original proponents. That still leaves the question of who shot George Adamson. Was it one of the anti-Treaty IRA? Did one of Adamson's men fire the fatal shot? In our next article, we will attempt to answer those questions.