



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

Who shot George Adamson: part two



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The controversy that surrounded the shooting of George Adamson in April 1922 continued for many weeks after his death.

That controversy began with, as discussed in the previous edition, statements to the press from the headquarters of both the National Army and the anti-Treaty IRA. Those press releases, at least the early versions, made a number of false claims regarding Adamson's death.

Such reports, although quickly shown to be inaccurate, caused a sensation and led to the National Army and the anti-Treaty IRA jointly holding a military enquiry during May and June 1922. The enquiry concluded that it could not determine who killed Adamson but it expressed the 'firm conviction that the shooting of Brigadier-General Adamson was not premeditated'. In this final article in our George Adamson series, we assess the often-contradictory evidence heard by the enquiry and attempt to pinpoint who killed Adamson.

Endpoint

On the night of his death, Adamson and three comrades, Liam O'Meara, Christopher Conway and an officer named Walsh, walked from Custume Barracks to Irishtown where they encountered anti-Treaty IRA officer Seán Robbins standing in the doorway of a house. Another anti-Treaty officer, Joseph Reddin, was standing across the street, seemingly unnoticed by Adamson's group. Reddin told

the enquiry that Adamson, who held a revolver in his right hand, ordered Robbins to put his hands up and that 'a second man [Adamson's comrade, Walsh] held a revolver to Robbins' breast' shortly before anti-Treaty officer Thomas Burke and a group of six to eight men arrived on the scene.

At that point, Adamson and his men turned to look in the direction of Burke. Robbins, according to his testimony, took this opportunity to grab Walsh's gun before ordering the National Army officer to raise his hands. Walsh 'complied and went back a few yards' and 'immediately' there was gunfire. Robbins reckoned there were about '18 or 20' shots, all compressed into a few seconds. One of those shots left George Adamson stricken on the ground as the combatants scattered through the town.

The accounts of the anti-Treaty soldiers overlap with those of the pro-Treaty soldiers, Walsh and O'Meara, in many areas (although not completely - Walsh, for example, was unable to accurately identify the man opposite him at the time of the shooting). All those accounts suggest that the key moment, the act which precipitated the shooting, was Seán Robbins' decision to grab Walsh's gun shortly after the arrival of Thomas Burke and his comrades. That reckless act was immediately followed by an exchange of gunfire during which Adamson was killed by one of the first shots, perhaps the very first.

A fatal shot

It is not clear who fired the first shot but testimony to the enquiry suggests that it may have been one of Adamson's men, Christopher Conway. Among the other pro-Treaty officers, Walsh was disarmed before he could fire his weapon

and Adamson's gun was later found to be fully loaded. There is some confusion as to whether Liam O'Meara fired his weapon. He testified to being disarmed during the stand-off and that a revolver and grenade were taken from him, although testimony from the anti-Treaty participants suggest that he may have fired a single shot. Conway, however, told the inquiry that he had been the only member of Adamson's party to fire a weapon.

If Conway did indeed fire the first shot, could he also have shot Adamson? It is possible that Adamson was accidentally shot by Conway when he reacted, amid a fraught few seconds, to the sight of Robbins taking Walsh's weapon. Among the various witness statements, Conway's testimony is an outlier since his version cannot be incorporated into the mass of evidence available from the other statements. Conway claimed that Adamson was pushed to the ground by the man in the doorway who proceeded to shoot the brigadier-general in the head. No one else, including Conway's fellow officers, testified that such an event had occurred. Indeed, Walsh's and O'Meara's testimony bore little resemblance to Conway's. Walsh's testimony, for example, gives the impression that the man covering him fired his gun only after someone else had fired the first shot.

Could Conway's testimony have been the statement of a man desperate to cover his culpability for the death of a comrade? Conway admitted to the inquiry that he had fired his weapon and he may be the man that anti-Treaty accounts mention as having fired in response to Robbins' scuffle with Walsh. An officer named Buckley, a member of the anti-Treaty group, claimed that 'a



George Adamson (Athlone Public Library)

man in a crouching position' behind Adamson fired the first shot. Statements made by anti-Treaty IRA witnesses claim that the man who fired the first shot subsequently fired on the rest of their group, before escaping down the road. This could only have been Conway, since Walsh had been disarmed by this stage, while O'Meara remained with the wounded Adamson.

The bitter beginning

The above scenario also leaves open the possibility that Adamson was shot dead by one of the anti-Treaty

soldiers. Perhaps Conway fired first, in reaction to Robbins taking Walsh's gun, and during the return fire from the anti-Treaty group Adamson was shot. Of the anti-Treaty group, at least Buckley, Robbins, and Reddin fired weapons and it is possible that any of them could have hit Adamson. Days after the killing, Seán MacEoin claimed to have evidence that anti-Treaty forces were responsible telling a reporter that he had a 'sworn statement' from one of the men in the Royal Hotel that 'Brigadier-General Adamson was murdered in

the streets of Athlone at ___'s own hands'. This un-named name, according to MacEoin, had 'escaped to Mullingar'. However, MacEoin provided no evidence to substantiate those claims.

If the fatal bullet came from the anti-Treaty side then Seán Robbins may be the most likely culprit. Liam O'Meara recalled that he heard someone shout: 'My God, Sean what did you do that for?' This statement could be taken as someone's reaction to Robbins having fired at and killed Adamson. However, it could also have been someone's reaction to Robbins wrestling the gun from Walsh, thus sparking the violence. Until Robbins grabbed the gun it remained possible that the stand-off could have ended without bloodshed.

Even today, many rumours have attached themselves to the story of Adamson's death. According to those versions, Seán MacEoin or other National Army officers targeted Adamson. Those rumours lack two vital factors: evidence and motive. No conspiracy is needed to explain the death of George Adamson. In the scenarios laid out above his death was unplanned, the disastrous consequence of his location at the centre of a brief gun battle.

Adamson's death would lead to the National Army taking control of Athlone. Within hours of the shooting, MacEoin's soldiers surrounded the anti-Treaty IRA in the Royal Hotel and gave their commander, Seán Fitzpatrick, fifteen minutes to surrender. Fitzpatrick and his men chose to lay down their arms and they were subsequently imprisoned in Custume Barracks. They were the first of many such prisoners and, as we will see in later articles, the barracks became notorious among opponents of the Treaty.

