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The murder of Billy Wright: was there collusion?

Wednesday, May 30, 2007

A decade after infamous loyalist Billy Wright was shot inside a high-security prison, suspicions about his murder remain. As the inquiry into his death begins taking public evidence, Chief Reporter Chris Thornton outlines the questions it hopes to answer

It was over within minutes. At five to ten in the morning, two days after Christmas in 1997, the most notorious loyalist in Northern Ireland was escorted from his cell in the Maze Prison to be taken to see a visitor.

As Billy Wright emerged, three INLA inmates of the H-block quickly crawled through a cut section of fence, climbed over the roof and dropped down in the entrance yard where Wright was entering a prison van. He was shot several times and pronounced dead within the hour.

The repercussions have lasted for years. A police investigation, a Prison Service report, a Crown Court trial and an inquest have failed to answer many lingering questions about how the LVF leader could be murdered inside a high-security prison.

Now, nearly 10 years later, comes the public inquiry. The start of evidence in Banbridge today marks the public phase of the first investigation to look specifically at the circumstances around the killing.

The tribunal hearing the case has essentially one point to address: was there collusion in the murder of Billy Wright?

The judge who reported on the murder describe as "irregularities": how the INLA smuggled guns into the prison; how they apparently knew Wright would be going on a visit; how a breach of the fence and access to the roof went unnoticed; why a camera overlooking the scene was not working; and why a guard was stood down from a watchtower.

The inquiry will not plough immediately into the detail of the killing. This week, Queen's University Professor of Politics, Professor Richard English, will set out the political context and background to the murder - shortly after the second IRA ceasefire and in the midst of negotiations that would lead to the Good Friday Agreement.

Dubbed King Rat by the media, Wright was a prominent figure in the Mid Ulster UVF for nearly two decades, and was considered to have plotted and carried out a string of sectarian murders. From his base in Portadown, he was linked to a particularly vicious string of killings: a pregnant mother; an elderly woman; teenage girls.

His ability to evade capture for so long, despite his infamy, gave rise to suggestions he was an agent for the security forces. It is an allegation that carried weight among nationalists, but has never been proven.

After the ceasefires, Wright was on the wrong side of the peace process. He latched on to the Drumcree protests as a way of exercising his power and, in 1996, violence committed by his UVF unit was instrumental in convincing police to force the Orange Parade through the Garvaghy Road.

But it also contributed to his demise. He was thrown out of the UVF, ostensibly over the murder of taxi driver Michael McGoldrick, and threatened with death. In response, he formed the Loyalist Volunteer Force, which continued to carry out grisly sectarian killings.






Wright was imprisoned for making threats against a woman in Portadown. He was nine months into his eight-year sentence when he was killed.

In some respects, the notoriety surrounding Wright gives rise to many of the suspicions about his death.

He was a known target, but was housed with prisoners who had allegedly already tried to kill him.

Wright was originally imprisoned at Maghaberry jail, away from the main body of prisoners, but was transferred to the Maze in late April 1997. He staged protests and short-term hunger strikes to get the transfer to the LVF wing in the Maze's H-6 block.

Days afterwards, two INLA prisoners, Christopher McWilliams and John Kennaway, took a prison guard hostage with a gun in Maghaberry.

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They made an unsuccessful attempt to kill Kevin McAlorum, who was believed to have killed INLA leader Gino Gallagher a year earlier.

McAlorum was eventually shot dead in Belfast in 2004.

It was later claimed that the gun had been smuggled into the prison to kill Wright, and McAlorum was a secondary target.

Days later, McWilliams - serving life after gunning down pub manager Colm Mahon for barring him - and Kennaway - who tried to kill former Northern Ireland Tory Dr Laurence Kennedy - were transferred to the same H-block where Wright was now housed.

There were repeated warnings from prison officers and the INLA about the decision to house republican and loyalist factions - neither of which had declared a ceasefire - in the same part of the prison.

Joined by John 'Sonny' Glennon, McWilliams and Kennaway's second attempt at prison murder turned out to be more successful.

They have denied the way was cleared for them; in fact, they say they were counting on the alarm being raised to shut down the block and seal the van containing Wright's body in the yard.

After killing Wright, they returned over the roof and handed over the two handguns they had used.

Six hours later, the INLA prisoners in H-6 had been moved to another H-block, which confirmed to Canadian Supreme Court Justice Peter Cory that "there was other accommodation available in the Maze Prison on the day of the murder and ... it was possible to quickly transfer prisoners to that location".

One question the inquiry will have is: why wasn't it done before?

The six-year quest for evidence

The roots of the Billy Wright Inquiry were laid six years ago at Weston Park, a stately home in Staffordshire where London and Dublin met the Northern Ireland parties in one of many bids to get devolution up and running.

Prime Minister Tony Blair agreed at those talks to look into the possibility of public inquiries into several cases of alleged collusion.

The British and Irish governments asked a retired Canadian Supreme Court justice, Peter Cory, to look into six cases of alleged collusion.

In late 2003, he submitted his reports recommending a series of Northern Ireland inquiries to examine the deaths of Billy Wright, solicitor Rosemary Nelson, Portadown man Robert Hamill and solicitor Pat Finucane. In the Republic, he recommended further investigation of one case in which it was alleged that a Garda officer colluded with the IRA killers of RUC officers Harry Breen and Bob Buchanan.

The Government did not publish his reports until April 2004 and waited another six months before agreeing to start three of the Northern Ireland inquiries.

Those three have formally opened, but today the Billy Wright inquiry becomes the first to begin evidence sessions.

The Finucane Inquiry has yet to be established.

The family of the murdered solicitor and the Government are disputing the legal basis for the inquiry. As a result, the Government has so far been unable to secure a chairman.

The main players in the hearing

The man opening the main part of the Billy Wright Inquiry today is Lord Ranald MacLean, a retired Scottish judge.

He was one of three judges who presided over the Lockerbie trial, which was held in the Netherlands. In 2001, they found one of two accused Libyan men guilty of murdering 259 passengers aboard the bombed Pan Am Flight 103 as well as 11 people killed on the ground.

"I have no doubt, on the evidence we heard, that the judgments we made and the verdicts we reached were correct," he told the Scotsman newspaper last year.

Lord MacLean has been a member of the Parole Board for Scotland and the Scottish Judicial Appointments Board. He has also investigated the state of Scottish football and the sentencing and treatment of sexual and violent offenders there.

The second tribunal member is Professor Andrew Coyle, who provides prison expertise. Currently a Professor of Prison Studies at the University of London, he has been the governor of four prisons - Brixton, Shotts, Peterhead and Greenock.

He was also a specialist advisor on prison issues to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee between 2000 and 2001.

The third member of the tribunal is former Bishop of Hereford, Rt Rev John Oliver. He is also the former chaplain and assistant master of Eton College.

The senior counsel to the inquiry, who will lead the questioning of witnesses, is Derek Batchelor QC.

Missing key prison files major handicap to probe

Missing Prison Service documents present a major handicap to the Billy Wright Inquiry as it sets out on its public hearings about the LVF chief's murder.

Key records from the Maze Prison at the time of the murder are known to have been destroyed, including security files on 800 prisoners - among them virtually every inmate released under the Good Friday Agreement.

Journals describing activity in the H-6 block, where the murder occurred, in the weeks leading up to the killing were also destroyed - burned as part of a "freedom of information exercise".

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Files on two of Wright's three killers are among the missing material, including John Kennaway, the killer who was recently returned to prison.

Documents that could explain how the murder weapons were smuggled into the prison have also disappeared.

Some of the missing material was previously available to Justice Peter Cory, the retired Canadian judge who recommended the inquiry.

Martin Mogg, the prison's governor at the time of the murder - which occurred the same month that an IRA prisoner escaped dressed as a woman - has been blamed for ordering the destruction of much of the material. He is unable to confirm or deny those claims as he died in 2005.

Mr Mogg would have been aware that the material should have been retained, since he drafted the Prison Service guidelines for keeping records.

The inquiry was so concerned about the amount of material missing - and some of the contradictory explanations for the disappearance of information - that it held special hearings last year about the Prison Service's document handling.

Derek Batchelor QC, the inquiry's senior lawyer, said the Prison Service supplied "substantial documentation" to the inquiry.

But he also detailed the material that was missing, like visitors' lists and information on contractors who refurbished the H-blocks not long before Wright was murdered.

The inquiry was also given two distinct files about Wright himself, one of which was, according to Mr Batchelor, "devoid of information".

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