

## The Shooting of the Admiral

By Alannah Hopkin

Vice Admiral Henry Boyle Townshend Somerville was dining with his wife Mab on 24th March, 1936 at his home, a detached house in the village of Castletownshend.

Somerville, now 73 years of age, devoted most of his time to his studies of the Irish language and archaeology. Boyle and Mab were dining alone, as the servants had been given the night off to attend an entertainment in the village hall.

As they finished their coffee, they heard footsteps on the gravel, and a knock at the door. It was 9pm, an odd time for a caller. 'Probably one of your boys,' Mab said. Boyle Somerville regularly helped local men wishing to join the Royal Navy by giving them a reference. Times were hard in the 1930s, and enlisting was a lifeline for many. But to the IRA it was traitorous to join the Royal Navy, so petitioners often called under cover of dark. Boyle picked up an oil lamp and left the room. With the other hand he opened the front door. A man stood on the threshold.

'Are you Mr. Somerville?'

'Admiral Somerville.'

Six bullets were fired at point blank range, one of them piercing the target's heart. Boyle Somerville fell dead, the lamp smashing beside him. Alarmed by the shots, Mab picked up a lamp and ran to the porch, calling out 'What are you doing?' The gunman shot at her and missed, the bullets smashing the glass bowl of the lamp, and embedding

themselves in the plastered wall beside her head. Mab heard at least two men run back to the car and drive off at speed. Boyle was lying on his back, blood pouring from his chest. She knelt to confirm that he was dead.

Because she had heard the car drive off, she judged it safe to walk through their grounds to the house of Boyle's brother, Hugh, who had a telephone. Hugh drove Mab the short distance to Drishane House, where his other siblings, Hildegarde and Cameron, were dining.

Hildegarde, on hearing that the man had asked for Mr. Somerville, realised that it was Boyle's brother Cameron they had been looking for. Cameron, a retired British army officer, officiated at Remembrance Day ceremonies in Skibbereen. He often helped men who wanted to join the British army, and was far better known locally than Boyle. The mistaken identity was confirmed the next day when the guards discovered a note on the floor beside the body reading "This British agent has sent 52 boys to the British Army in the last few months".

The next day all the curtains in the village were drawn out of respect for the deceased. There was great relief that nobody local had been involved: locals would not have needed a car. It was either an IRA operation, or the work of an independent political dissident. The headline in the *Irish Times* read "Murder Most Foul".

The *Irish Times* sent the only available reporter, Lionel Fleming, who was, by coincidence, the victim's younger cousin. Lionel was criticized for reporting the fact that Admiral Somerville wore a dinner jacket when dining alone with his wife. Of course he dressed for dinner, they remarked in Castletownshend. One does, doesn't one?

The Admiral's coffin was carried up the 52 steps to St. Barrahan's Church on the shoulders of a relay of local men, both Protestant and Catholic. As was the tradition of the time, Catholics did not enter the church, but stood outside in silence during the ceremony. A few months later, the IRA was outlawed by the Irish Government, the same government that it had fought to bring to power. No arrest was ever made for the murder.

Many years later Tom Barry, commandant of the IRA in 1936, revealed that he had ordered the Cork IRA to 'get Somerville', meaning kidnap him and hold him hostage. His words were taken literally, and someone 'got' Somerville, the wrong Somerville, as it happened.

Fast forward sixty years: a Cork-born expatriate novelist was researching the life of his grandfather, an IRA man. When he visited the family farm he was shown his grandfather's rusted Colt 45, and told it was the gun that shot Admiral Somerville.

In Castletownshend, the novelist was introduced to Rosemarie Salter Townshend, a niece of the Admiral, and the most senior survivor of the clan.

'I can tell you who shot the Admiral,' he said, simmering with excitement at having solved the crime.

'Don't,' said Rosemarie Salter Townshend, 'I don't want to know.'

'Why not?'

'Because it doesn't matter who pulled the trigger. It is history now. Please do not tell me.'

And she turned on her heel and walked away.