

Forensic Science Society

Symposium

Dead Men Tell Tales

(Scientific Investigation of Suspicious Death)

St Patrick's College

Drumcondra

Dublin 24/25 June 1988

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Death at Babeswood

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At 8.40 am on Saturday 29th April 1972, the body of an unknown man was found lying on the roadside in the townland of Babeswood, Dromiskin, Castlebellingham, Co Louth. This location is about 3 miles west of the main Dublin-Belfast Road. The Road mentioned is no more than a quiet country lane serving several farming communities in the area.

Garda Sergeant James McAteer arrived at the scene at 9.20 am and having viewed the body, set in motion an investigation, which was to have international connections involving such locations as Belfast, Guernsey and California, USA.

The investigation was headed by C/Superintendent M. Bohan, Drogheda with the assistance from the Garda Technical Bureau under the direction of C/Supt Dan Murphy. Forensic experts from the Forensic Science Laboratory, Belfast and from the Institute of Research and Standards, Glasnevin, Dublin provided the necessary technical evidence.

Technical examination of the scene by the Pathologist Dr Raymond O'Neill, Cork and the Garda Technical Bureau personnel revealed that the deceased probably was a victim of a 'Hit and Run' traffic accident. A particle of red substance resembling paint was found on a protrusion from a limestone wall adjacent to the body. This was the only material clue which was alien to the immediate area, apart from the body. The usual soil and vegetation samples were taken.

The postmortem examination held at Louth County Hospital, Dundalk, further revealed that death was caused by asphyxia as a result of suffocation, due to inhalation of regurgitated stomach contents, while comatose as a result of multiple injuries.

The injuries found on the deceased were consistent with his having been struck by a motor vehicle while in an upright position and having been felled to the ground was dragged for some distance while pinned under the vehicle.

Blood and urine samples subsequently revealed the presence of

- (1) Blood carbon monoxide content of the blood and stated that the percentage found would indicate the inhalation of exhaust fumes by the deceased while lying with his face close to the exhaust.
- (2) Alcohol content of 123 milligrams per 100 millilitres of blood and 233 milligrams of alcohol per 100 millilitres of urine.

It is interesting to note that Dr O'Neill in his report referred to the carbon monoxide content of the blood and stated that the percentage found would indicate the inhalation of exhaust fumes by the deceased while lying with his face close the exhaust.

The unidentified body was removed to Dublin City Morgue where storage and preservation facilities were available.

I might add that at that point in the time neither Dr J. Harbison or Dr J. Donovan had taken over their respective roles in Pathology and Forensic Science and the facilities which are available to us today as the investigators were not then to hand.

A full description of the dead man was circulated throughout the country and to the police forces in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The assistance of Press, Television and Radio was sought. No information concerning the identity of the body came to light until the 5th of May 1972.

While this investigation was in progress, an incident occurred on the Island of Guernsey, a channel island normally peaceful and crime free. Hotel Receptionist, Linda Gale Thompson took particular notice of a male guest who booked into the Duke of Richmond Hotel at St Peters Port on the 1st May. He registered as Robert M. Nish and cashed a number of travellers cheques the Hotel, producing an Education Students card bearing a photograph of himself in the name of Robert M. Nish and also an American Express Card in the same name.

However, late that night, on making up the daily cash and payments, Miss Thompson noticed that the aforementioned travellers' cheques were mud stained and on closer examination noticed that the signatures of the drawer Robert Nish at the bottom of each cheque differed from the drawers endorsement at the top of each cheque.

Unknown to investigators, this was the breakthrough awaited in the investigation being carried out into the death of an unknown male at Babeswood, Co Louth.

On 2nd May, Detective Constable Richard C. Smith of the Guernsey Island Police investigated the suspected fraud at the Duke of Richmond Hotel and late on that day charges relating to the false pretences were preferred against one William David Coleman alias Robert M. Nish. He was remanded in custody for one week.

During that week, the machinery now available to the police forces which involves communications and fingerprint, photographic and forensic experts went into operation and resulted in the identification of the body at Babeswood as Robert Munroe Nish and American Teacher from Glendale, California USA.

The suspect for involvement in the death of Robert Nish was now in custody in A Guernsey jail and links in the chain of evidence remained to be found.

William David Coleman, born 23rd January 1948, has many aliases and his previous convictions recorded at Interpol Headquarters, Paris, proved him to be a truly international Criminal. Fraud, theft, and traffic offences were listed against him in the UK, Federal Germany, Netherlands, Monaco and Hong Kong.

At 7pm on the 5th May, a red Rover motor car, registered number BFN 149K was located at Belfast Airport by Detective Inspector Jack Skully of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. This car had been reported stolen by Hertz Car Hire at London and preliminary enquiries and inspection indicated a possible connection between this car, the body at Babeswood, a guesthouse at London and the Prisoner Coleman in Guernsey.

Investigation teams travelled from Dublin to Belfast, London and Guernsey.

The car was transported by low loader from Belfast to Garda Headquarters, Dublin for expert examination.

As information was received, from the investigating teams and collated at the Incident Room the chain of evidence was pieced together and finally a complete picture of the last movements of Robert Nish came to light.

Robert Munroe Nish was born on the 20th June 1935 at Port Arthur, Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada. He was single and resided at Glendale, California where he was employed as a language teacher. He was a victim of polio which left

him with paralysis of the right leg. He took leave of absence from his school for the purpose of studying educational methods in Europe and left the USA on 23rd April 1972.

On Monday 24th April, he arrived at a guesthouse at Wavendon Avenue Chiswick, London where he stayed until the morning of the 27th April when he left London in the company of a man now known as William D. Coleman. Coleman was in possession of a red Rover motor car, hired from Hertz rent a car, Edgware, Road, London which had not been returned to the hirer and was subsequently reported stolen.

Before leaving the guesthouse, Nish was warned by the Landlady to be careful as she was suspicious of the driver due to his actions and as she felt that he was not truthful in some of his remarks.

On the night of the 27th April they travelled by ferry from Heyshaw to Belfast bringing with them the Rover car. On the 28th May they drove from Belfast to Dublin making a number of stops en route. They are known to have visited a number of licensed premises during the course of the day and at one stage of the journey they gave three girls a lift but due to a heated political argument the girls were requested to leave the car somewhere near Drogheda, Co Louth.

The last sighting of the two men together was at a licensed premises at Ballough, Lusk, Co Dublin on the same evening and it was noted by the barman and customers that the Englishman was ordering triple scotch whiskeys for the American while he sipped a single drink. The Englishman did not appear to have any money. They left the premises at 9.30pm and Mr Nish was not seen alive by any person known to us after that time.

A man booked into the Europa Hotel, Belfast, around midnight on that same evening, 28th April and it became apparent later from enquiries that this man was William Coleman and he had now assumed the identity of Robert Nish. He left Belfast by air on the following morning, leaving the car at the Airport and hurriedly taking a flight to Glasgow, thence to London and from there (Gatwick) to Jersey.

The chain of evidence was near to completion when he checked into the Duke of Richmond Hotel in Guernsey on the 1st May.

Since leaving Belfast, Coleman had negotiated financial transactions at various locations in the name of Robert Nish and through a combination of luck and

experience had succeeded in his new role until the vigilance of Linda Gale Thompson sent the wheels of justice in motion.

Fingerprints identified Coleman with the Rover car and handwriting linked him with the forgery and false pretences involved in cashing the cheques.

Witnesses positively identified the deceased Nish and suspect Coleman as having been together at various locations mentioned.

The fragment of red paint found at the scene matched the red paint of the car.

This car spoke for itself in so far as that, evidence found in the booth and underneath revealed its involvement in a bloody accident.

Trace evidence on the underside indicated that the car had passed over a body, travelling in both a forward and reverse direction.

It was evident from the car booth that a badly injured person had been entombed therein and had made frantic efforts to escape.

Forensic experts were able to connect the body of Robert Nish with this car.

Coleman was interviewed at Guernsey by Detective Chief Superintendent Dan Murphy and Detective Inspector Miles Hawkshaw from the Garda Siochana, on the 10th May and he made a statement in which he stated that he accidentally drove the car over Nish after he fell from the car while feeling sick. He left him on the side of the road and drove away to seek assistance.

He was extradited to Dublin and subsequently stood trial for the murder of Robert Nish. An interesting feature of the trial was that the entire court, including jury, travelled to Garda Headquarters to view the main exhibit in this case, which was the motor car.

However, early in the trial, the accused intimated that he was prepared to plead to manslaughter and this plea was accepted. He was sentenced to a term of imprisonment at Mountjoy Prison and has long since departed from these shores with yet another conviction to his international record.

After the trial, certain sections of the media produced articles titled 'Murder at Babeswood' and civil actions ensued resulting it is presumed in financial gain for William D. Coleman. Hence, I title this lecture 'Death at Babeswood'.

The short excursion taken by Robert Nish to Southern Ireland was to be an expensive one in every sense of the word and it is difficult in this case to agree with the saying 'Crime does not pay'.

Prologue by retired Detective Superintendent Pat Jordan

My input into the investigation involved examination of the scene, collection of evidence at post-mortem, Belfast Forensic Laboratory and the liaison with the various agencies.

As exhibits officer, I supervised the Judge's and Jury's visit to Garda Headquarters to view the main exhibit (Red rover car) and on opening the car booth, I can remember one lady Jurors' shock at the sight of a bloodied horror chamber.

Many years later, during my stint as President of the Superintendents association, I received this correspondence from Garda Headquarters seeking clarification of his (Coleman) conviction which I had to concede was 'Manslaughter'