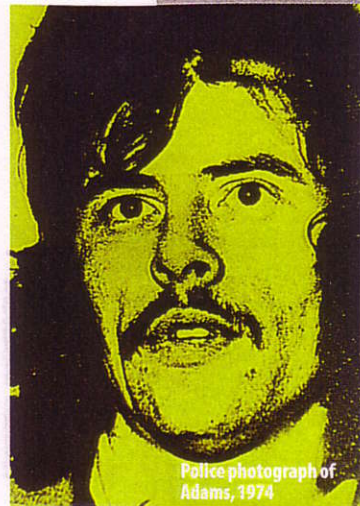


The man who came in from the cold

Gerry Adams is now arguably the most important figure in British politics. Yet he has always been a mass of contradictions. Is he killer or peacemaker? Conman or hero? GQ moves beyond the claim and counterclaim, beyond the media image, to join him on the streets, in the pub and on his way to last year's controversial meeting at Number 10.

Story: Eamonn O'Neill. Photographs: Hugo Glendinning



Police photograph of Adams, 1974

Spears of silvery rain pound my windscreen. The wipers slice the deluge into mercury-coloured waves and clouds. I stop at a set of traffic lights. There's a sudden movement to my left; a second later a face appears. He holds an official-looking ID card at head-height. I roll down my window.

"Police! Pull your vehicle over at the side of the road up ahead, please."

The policeman is about my age – early thirties – and, curiously, he sounds nervous. I drive forward slowly and park where I've been instructed. Then he's back at my window again, with a small official-issue notebook in his hand.

"Name?"

I give him my name.

"Address?"

I refuse to give him my address.

"May I ask why I'm being questioned?"

I sound indignant.

He counters quickly. "Section 30, Offences Against The State Act," he says.

It's then that I realize what's happening. I'm in Cork City in the Republic of Ireland and I'm being pulled over by the Irish police force – the Garda Síochána – who suspect me of being a terrorist. A slap of fear hits my abdomen. The policeman's face is covered in a thin layer of rain. I can see his breath in the night air.

"You've been seen in the company of individuals we're interested in."

"Who?" I ask. "Gerry Adams?"

He keeps his head down to avoid eye contact and hops from foot to foot. "No. Other people," he says. "I'm not going to divulge who."

Silence. Rain has started to slant through the open window. Droplets have formed on my clothes; they sparkle underneath the orange street lamps. "Other people?" I enquire, trying to look bewildered. He shrugs and glances over

his shoulder at his police car. In my rear-view mirror I can see he has a colleague. The policeman is deciding whether he should arrest me.

As far as I'm concerned this is all nonsense. I've broken no laws. For the purposes of writing this article I've been shadowing Gerry Adams, the president of Sinn Féin, for four weeks. During this time he's met countless individuals who could fall into the category of "other people". I've watched him meet young people in a West Belfast youth centre, shake hands with hundreds of activists attending a Sinn Féin rally at Belfast's Europa Hotel, attend the Stormont peace process talks, visit the House of Commons in London and even pose for photographs after church this morning.

I've seen him participate in a pipe-band parade and address a crowd of 4,000 at a place called Kilmichael – the site of a 1920 IRA ambush. We've eaten together, along with an entire Irish village who claimed him as their honoured guest. I've chased him to Cork airport for a quick interview. Walking through the terminal he was stopped by a handful of "other people", who shook his hand and had their pictures taken with him. I said goodbye to Adams at the departure gate. Both he, his press aide and his security staff seemed happy enough to see the back of me.

Now, 20 minutes later, I'm being questioned by someone who's been tailing me for God knows how long. I decide to take the initiative.

"I'm a journalist," I say. I state my occupation as if it's a nationality. At first he doesn't react. Then he steps back a little.

"Oh...well... that's fine. OK." He takes another step back and smiles.

"Who do you write for?"

I tell him. I even spell out the publisher's name – twice. He writes it

down diligently. "I'm just doing my job," he says.

"So am I."

"You won't put me in your story, will you?"

Two days later I'm driving through Belfast

for a meeting with Adams at a training centre for the unemployed in the heart of Catholic nationalist West Belfast.

I pass "RPG Alley", a narrow lane where the IRA have been known to fire missiles at passing RUC or Army patrols. RPG stands for "rocket-propelled grenade". One of the nearby intersections is known locally as "Hijack Corner" – Adams met President Clinton yards from here in 1994. IRA murals are splashed against gable ends. One reads, "Mo Mowlam is a Fat Cow".

Here, in this small area of the city, I stick out, an obvious stranger in a place where everyone knows everyone else. Still, at least I'm here – many who write about Adams don't even bother making the effort to travel. They succumb to the temptation of doing a straightforward clippings-job at their desks, back in the office, nailing together an article about him which consists of opinions and impressions, culled from the tens of thousands that have gone before.

A subject like Gerry Adams needs to be taken a bit more seriously. He casts a long shadow over modern Anglo-Irish history: a second IRA cease-fire, which he brokered, is holding. He also appears to have the credibility to keep the most experienced and well-armed Republicans under control (if you ignore the "punishment" shootings and beatings which have continued in both Nationalist and Loyalist strongholds) and these days he uses the word "peace" in almost every speech he makes.

It's small wonder that his actions and motives are scrutinized by the world's ▶

Cork, December 1997: Gerry Adams in his car, preparing the speech for a rally. Richard McAuley, his press-aide, is in the back seat.

