Mad Dog

The Rise and Fall of Johnny Adair and 'C Company'

David Lister and Hugh Jordan

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David Lister dedicates this book to his parents,
Ian and Angie Lister,

and Hugh Jordan to his deceased aunt,
Margaret Noone Murray.

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EDINBURGH AND LONDON

Acknowledgements

The complex and insecure world of Ulster loyalism and its violent manifestation in Protestant terrorist groups has not to date been fully explored by writers and political analysts. By contrast, all aspects of militant Irish republicanism have been studied exhaustively. We hope this book goes some way to redressing the balance by providing an insight into arguably the most feared loyalist terrorist unit of the Troubles, the unique era in which it operated and the tiny clique who led it.

To many UDA members, ‘C Company’ on the Shankill Road was their answer to the IRA’s south Armagh brigade. Under Johnny Adair’s command, they saw it as an elite unit that took the loyalist killing campaign of the early 1990s to a new level of ruthlessness. At a time when many working-class Protestants believed their culture and religion were under attack, they saw Adair as a hero who helped to take the ‘war’ to the doorstep of the Provisionals.

This book is the product of many months of research, which have proved deeply engrossing for both authors. David Lister would like to thank Ben Preston, the *Times*’s deputy editor, and his colleagues on the paper’s newsdesk – above all Graham Paterson, John Wellman, Mike Harvey and Richard Duce. Hugh Jordan would like to thank Colm MacGinty, Jim McDowell and his other colleagues at the *Sunday World*. Both authors would like to acknowledge the support of all the staff at Mainstream Publishing, particularly Bill Campbell, Peter MacKenzie, Sharon Atherton, Tina Hudson, Graeme Blaikie and Ailsa Bathgate, whose patience

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The authors are at pains to stress that this is not an authorised biography of Johnny Adair. During a lengthy interview inside Maghaberry Prison and a series of telephone conversations, Johnny Adair blew hot and cold. When the mood took him, he spoke freely and we acknowledge that contribution. We were also helped by several other prisoners and prison staff, who must remain anonymous but who provided some extraordinary gems of information. On the Shankill Road, we are grateful to Winkie and Maureen Dodds, Tracey and Agnes Coulter, Mabel Adair and her daughters Margaret, Mabel Jnr, Jeanie, Etta and Lizzie. Jackie 'Legs' Robinson, Adair's former girlfriend, provided an amazing insight into his character and never tired of answering our questions. A handful of people who

grew up with Adair but subsequently lost touch with him provided some amazing glimpses into his early life.

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Of the many loyalists who helped us, we are most indebted to seven C Coy gunmen, none of whom have been convicted of murder but nonetheless spoke to us at length. They were among Adair's 'elite' and played central roles in his killing spree of the early 1990s. One is consistently mentioned by his real name. Four of them, who gave detailed accounts of their relationships with Adair, the methods and style of C Coy and the murders they took part in, are quoted as 'Davy', 'Pete', 'John' and 'James'. Their confessions are at times shocking, and we apologise for this to the families of their victims. However, in the interest of setting the record straight and spelling out the awful brutality of C Coy's murderous exploits, we believe this was necessary. Wherever possible we have named the killers who did Adair's dirty work, though many more could not be named for legal reasons. As well as the murders they carried out, we have also gone into detail on their partying, social lives and sexual behaviour. Throughout this book, we have helped to describe this peculiar world with first-hand accounts from the people who knew Adair best. Their words speak louder than ours.

David Lister and Hugh Jordan
August 2004

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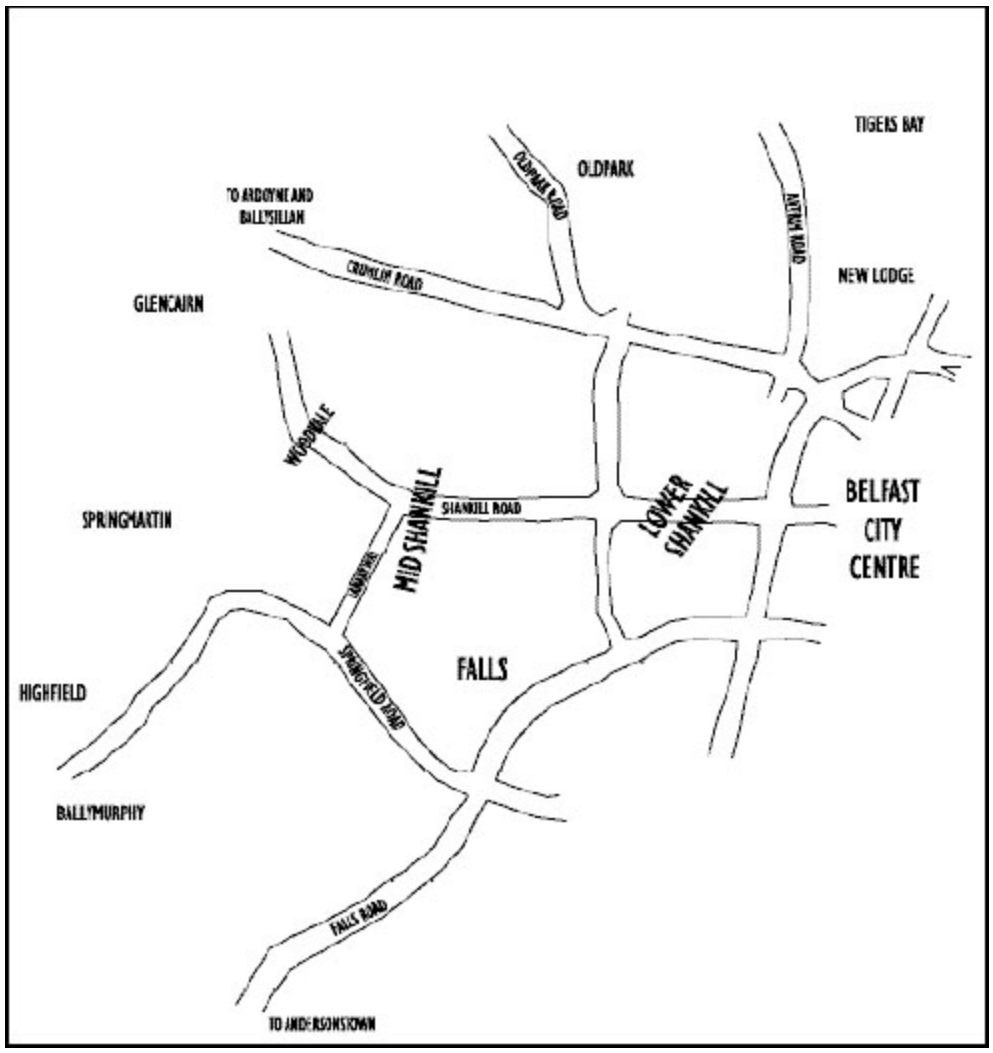

Mad Dog: His Friends and Enemies

A LIST OF MAIN CHARACTERS AND THEIR NICKNAMES

Mad Dog – Johnny Adair. Also known as ‘Pitbull’, ‘the Wee Man’ and ‘Red Adair’.

Mad Bitch – Gina Adair, maiden name Crossan.

Skelly – Sam McCrory, Adair’s closest friend and a C Coy gunman. Skelly is gay, a fact that has led to constant speculation about Adair’s sexuality.

Big Donald – Donald Hodgen, one of Adair’s oldest friends and a senior C Coy figure.

Fat Jackie – Jackie Thompson, a C Coy gunman in the early 1990s and, like Hodgen, formerly one of Adair’s closest associates.

Sham – James Millar, also known as ‘Boss Hogg’ after the money-grabbing villain in *The Dukes of Hazzard*, the American television series. A former C Coy driver and gunman and a major drug dealer.

Winkie – William Dodds, a veteran C Coy gunman and for years one of Adair’s closest allies.

Moe – William Courtney, a C Coy gunman and, like Winkie, formerly one of Adair’s closest allies.

Top Gun – Stevie McKeag, Adair’s most prolific gunman, who died of a cocaine overdose in September 2000.

Smickers – Gary Smith, also known as ‘Chiefo’. Took over as C Coy’s leading gunman following McKeag’s arrest and imprisonment in 1993. Known for his unquestioning loyalty to Adair.

Spencer – Jim Spence, Adair's erstwhile 'brigadier' in west Belfast and for years a close friend.

Legs – Jackie Robinson, Adair's former girlfriend and fiancée, known for her slim figure and long legs.

King Rat – Billy Wright, the founder of the LVF. Shot dead inside the Maze Prison in December 1997. Loathed Adair with a passion.

Swinger – Mark Fulton, Wright's successor as head of the LVF and a friend of Adair. Found dead in his cell in Maghaberry Prison in June 2002.

The Mexican – Billy McFarland, the UDA's 'brigadier' for Co. Derry and north Antrim.

Doris Day – Jim Gray, the UDA's 'brigadier' in east Belfast. The derogatory nickname comes from his bleach-blond hair. His men, known for their chunky gold jewellery and extravagant lifestyles, are known as 'the Spice Boys'.

Grug – John Gregg, the UDA's former 'brigadier' in south-east Antrim. Shot dead in February 2003.

The Bacardi Brigadier – Jimbo Simpson, the UDA's former 'brigadier' in north Belfast.

Coco – Nickname given to John White, Adair's former spokesman, though used only occasionally (after Coco the Clown).

The only major character not to have a nickname is Jackie McDonald, the UDA's 'brigadier' in south Belfast and currently the most powerful figure on the organisation's ruling 'inner council'.

Prologue – An Audience with Johnny Adair

‘SO YOU’RE HERE TO SEE OUR JOHNNY?’ THERE IS A FRISSON OF excitement in her voice as the prison warder utters her welcome. Prisoner A4544 has already been on the phone to find out if his visitor has arrived. ‘He doesn’t get many visits. All he does is clean the landing,’ she says with a look of concern. ‘But Johnny gets on with all of us. You couldn’t ask for a better prisoner.’

Just after 3.30 p.m. on a Friday in July 2003, Northern Ireland’s most notorious living terrorist, six months into one of his many spells in prison, strolls into the private booth that has been booked for the visit. The man known as ‘Mad Dog’ has a flask in one hand and a notebook and pen in the other. ‘I brought these for you,’ he says, putting the notebook on the table. ‘They probably took everything off you when you came in. There’s a number in there – speak to him, he’ll tell you the truth about Johnny Adair.’ On the first page of the notebook is a telephone number with the name ‘Mr X’ written next to it. ‘Do you want some tea?’ he asks as he unscrews his flask and pours away.

It has taken months to persuade Adair to agree to an interview. In May 2003, during the first of many telephone conversations from the jail, he said he wanted to write his autobiography and offered to do this with the authors. When told that this wasn’t our plan, he asked for a slice of any profits from this book. ‘What’s in it for me? What am I going to get out of this?’ he demanded. Several days later, he again asked for money. ‘See, why should you be able to talk to the horse’s mouth, and have all this, and have it for

nothing? Can you not give me, you know, a couple of quid? I'm sitting in here with not a single "d" [penny] to my name so why should I help you?'

The minute Adair realised there was no money in it for him, his interest died. It was not until 8 July, after several letters to him in jail, that he got back in touch. He said it would put his mind at rest to let him know we were talking to 'the right people'. Referring to his enemies as 'gangsters' and 'silly cows', he bragged, 'Facts speak louder than words. They know what Johnny Adair sweated, what Johnny Adair came through, but they've poisoned people to hate me. I could show you the cards and the letters in this cell, all of them sent to me without names because they're too afraid to say they're supporting me. There have been hundreds of cards and I'm only in here a few months.'

The Johnny Adair who walks into the visiting room at Maghaberry Prison is hard to reconcile with his public image as a ruthless terrorist and a mass murderer. Wearing a baggy white jumper and jeans, he is far more subdued than he has been on the phone. At 5 ft 3 in. tall and with his tattoos covered by his pullover, he almost looks harmless. He is courteous and polite, but not really interested. Every now and then his piercing blue eyes dart around the room and glance down at his watch. He looks tired. He has never adjusted easily to prison life, but this time he has found it particularly hard. His life is considered to be in such great danger that he is kept in isolation in 'D' Wing of Mourne House, the women's accommodation block at the jail. He is on a landing by himself, in a cell with a built-in wardrobe, a television (which costs 50p a week to rent), a video, a desk, a chair, an armchair and a cordoned-off toilet and washbasin. He has his own kitchen and his own multi-gym. He is allowed out into the yard but has to be on his own.

In the past few months Adair has betrayed almost all his old friends, including members of the clique he grew up with and who became the core of his C Company on Belfast's

Shankill Road. Most of his former colleagues despise him and believe he is an egotistical maniac. The only people who visit him are his daughter, Natalie, and occasionally his wife, Gina. He has become an emotional wreck. One minute he is too depressed to speak; the next he is back to his old self, cracking jokes with prison staff and doing his best to live up to his reputation as a ‘messer’ – Belfast-speak for somebody who loves playing practical jokes. ‘This man wants me to tell him all the military stuff we did,’ he tells a warder as he suddenly perks up. ‘Has he paid you yet, Johnny?’ asks the warder with a grin. ‘How much are you going to get for this?’

‘It’s not just the military stuff, it’s your early life we’re interested in. It’ll all be in the book – the band you were in, the riots …’

‘Five-a-side football.’

‘You played football, Johnny?’

‘All the time.’ He grins to the prison officer. ‘With taigs’ [Catholics’] heads.’

Another warder interjects. ‘Johnny, there’s some taigs through there,’ she says, pointing to the main visiting area.

‘Through there?’ he asks, sensing he now has an audience. He performs an exaggerated swagger as he walks towards the hall, playing along with the game for a few more seconds before turning back.

Northern Ireland’s most notorious terrorist is doing what he does best: being a caricature. Everything he does – whether it is playing the role of the mafia godfather, the sectarian bigot or even the loving father – he does to extremes. As he turns to go, he shakes hands and promises to be in touch. He has arranged for somebody else to meet us, a man who, like him, ‘fought the war’. Although he has done little to help, he is desperate to maintain an input. He is worried that we have discovered his secret, a piece of information so sensitive that, until recently, even his closest

friends did not talk about it. We have. And it is right at the heart of this book.

1. Made in Ulster

> ‘The most shining example of a skinhead has to be Johnny. After shaving his head he sprayed Mr Sheen on his smooth-top and marched out into the sun. “I did it for a laugh but it actually worked. It made my head really shine,” he said.’ – *Interview with* Sunday News *(Belfast), January 1984*

MABEL ADAIR WAS GIDDY WITH EXCITEMENT. IT WAS FRIDAY, 25 OCTOBER 1963 and she had just found out that Belfast was about to receive a special visitor. On Monday, no matter how she felt, she would be wearing her best outfit and her smartest hat to mark the guest’s arrival in Northern Ireland. On Tuesday, when the visitor was expected in Belfast, she would be up extra early and do her best to make it into town. It would almost certainly be raining but she was not going to let this opportunity pass her by. Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother was coming to Belfast. She ran over the sentence again in her head and smiled with childlike delight. Every summer she followed the Orangemen as they paraded up and down the road, waving her flag proudly and displaying her favourite Union Jack socks. Nothing, she told herself, would stop her joining the tens of thousands outside the city hall to welcome their royal guest.

That was the plan, but as she stood in the living room and rubbed a damp cloth over a portrait of the Queen, she knew it was ambitious. A decent, strong woman with a solidness about her that was typical of many Belfast women, she leant against the wall and took a few deep breaths. The baby inside her was almost due. Two days later, on the eve of the Queen Mother’s visit, Mabel Adair gave birth to her

seventh child at home in Fleming Street off the Shankill Road. John James Adair, or Johnny as he would become known, was born on Sunday, 27 October 1963. He was his mother's second and last son, though a third would follow later but die at birth. Of all her children Johnny would cause her the greatest pride but also the greatest heartbreak. Much as Mabel wanted to see the Queen Mother she could not, in truth, have picked a happier date for the birth of her son. It could only be a blessing, she thought, that his arrival came as Belfast was preparing to embrace a woman adored by Protestants and who symbolised everything their community stood for.

While the rest of the world was trembling under the shadow of the Cold War, the Northern Ireland into which Johnny Adair was born was enjoying an era of unprecedented peace and happiness. Although the threat of violence remained, the IRA's border campaign had fizzled out without support a year earlier. A vibrant music scene was taking off in Belfast, with jazz clubs and dance halls attracting both Catholics and Protestants. The biggest stories had nothing to do with politics or murder. On the same day that the Queen Mother opened Northern Ireland's new airport at Aldergrove on the shores of Lough Neagh, the *Belfast Telegraph* carried a story on its front page under the headline 'Charm of coloured child wins hearts'. It told of how six-year-old Manuel Godfrey Martin had been left £6,000 in the will of a Belfast woman and quoted one admirer as saying, 'He is a charming little fellow and very bright.' Its readers were clearly supposed to be astonished by the good fortune of this foreign rascal. On the same day, the nationalist *Irish News* ran a lengthy report under the title, 'The Catholic Nurse must be inspired by a high motive'. It began, '"To fulfil her vocation as a Catholic nurse, a girl must be unselfish and inspired by a high motive," said Rev. Father Sean Horgan, CSSR, Clonard, Belfast, when he spoke

at the annual consecration ceremony of the Irish Guild of Catholic Nurses in the Mater Infirmorum Hospital yesterday.'

Northern Ireland was in its own little bubble and nowhere more so than on the Shankill Road in west Belfast. A poor neighbourhood but thriving with life and industry, it was enjoying the last few years of a golden era. Some 76,000 people were packed into the endless maze of streets stretching from the edge of the city centre to the foothills of the Black Mountain above Belfast. The majority lived in tiny two-up, two-down terraced houses that were up to 120 years old, constituting some of the worst public housing in the United Kingdom. But there was also an intense vibrancy. The Shankill was home to 86 pubs, one for almost every corner (there are just four today). Thousands worked in the Harland and Wolff shipyard three-quarters of a mile away and just as many were employed in the linen mills even closer to home. Within the space of one square mile there were 36 mills, where 9,000 people worked, and the famous Mackie's engineering factory, where 7,500 were employed. Most of the mills were on the Crumlin Road or the Catholic Falls Road. Sandwiched in between was the Shankill, Belfast's second busiest shopping street after Royal Avenue. According to Jackie Redpath, a community worker who has spent all his life in the area, 'It was a place that had this amazing amount of employment opportunities, where a lot of skilled tradesmen lived, where you could shop for everything you needed and with a population that was bigger than Ballymena or Bangor [two Protestant towns]. It had very strong and vibrant politics and was known commonly to people who lived there as the heart of the empire. That's what people called it. In the '60s the empire was still about and it was the sort of place that symbolised all that there was about Unionism and loyalism.'

It was not obvious at the time, but this age of prosperity and opportunity was about to end. The industrial era that had given birth to the Shankill more than a century earlier

would shortly grind to a halt. By the end of the decade most of the mills were gone and the once-mighty shipyard, where the famous *Titanic* was built, had entered terminal decline. In 1966, on the 50th anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising, sectarian riots broke out in Belfast and the newly re-formed Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), Northern Ireland's first loyalist terrorist group, murdered three civilians. In west Belfast, where the differences between the Province's two communities were starkest, a battleground was opening up between working-class Catholics from the Falls and Protestants from the Shankill. For well over a century, trouble had sporadically flared on the faultline between the two districts, and in the late 1960s it returned with unprecedented fury. In an area where young school leavers had always been guaranteed jobs, the sudden arrival of an economic crisis made the Shankill jittery and insecure. 'Those first five years of the '60s were the end of the good old days – they were the last years of what the industrial revolution created,' said Redpath. By the end of the 1960s, large parts of the Shankill were being rebuilt and many families moved up the road to the new housing estates of Springmartin and Glencairn. The re development caused massive disruption in the area, adding to the economic upheaval that was starting to tear it apart.

Beneath the camaraderie of the Shankill, there was a rough sectarian sub-culture. One teacher who taught on the Shankill in the 1960s and 1970s remembers having to patiently explain that Catholics were people, just like Protestants. 'I remember a wee boy in my class, he was a very nice little boy with curly hair,' she said. 'We were talking about the importance of dogs having collars on their necks with their names on them and he said, "Miss, a taig [Catholic] dog came into our estate last night," and then went on to tell me about how some woman had risked life and limb to take this dog back because it had its name and address on its collar. And I said to the children, "Put down

your pencils for a minute," and I tried to explain to them – I said, "These people you are speaking about, they just go to another church."' The curly-haired eight-year-old was Curtis Moorehead, who in time became a senior terrorist colleague of Johnny Adair. The teacher also remembers a five-year-old boy being caught smoking in the school toilets. The child was Lenny Murphy, who went on to become the leader of the infamous Shankill Butchers.

The Adair family lived in the heart of the lower Shankill in a small street of terraced council houses with outside toilets. Fleming Street was off the Old Lodge Road, which ran from St Peter's Hill at the bottom of the Shankill through to the Crumlin Road, the main artery into north Belfast. Their neighbours included the White family, one of whose nine children, John, would commit one of the most brutal double murders of the Troubles and eventually stand shoulder to shoulder with Johnny Adair as his political mouthpiece. Like Adair, John White was born and brought up in Fleming Street, though his future colleague, some 13 years his junior, knew him only vaguely as a child.

At home Mabel Adair ran a tight ship and her children were regularly smacked for misbehaving. Johnny, who was the youngest, lived in a family dominated by women. Of his five sisters, Margaret was the oldest and most sensible. Next came Mabel Jnr and Jeanie, who we re easily led and prone to tantrums. The youngest were Etta and Lizzie, both of whom suffered from severe learning disabilities and were relentlessly teased by children in the street. From an early age Adair played the fool in front of his older sisters and they adored him for it. Adair's father, Jimmy, who worked in the timber yard in the docks, was constantly playing practical jokes and Johnny quickly became his sidekick. His brother, Archie, was quieter and more withdrawn. Two years older than Johnny, he would achieve notoriety in his own right when in 1992 he was found guilty of attempted murder after attacking a Catholic with a hatchet. He was sentenced

to 12 years in prison but was released early, like his brother, under the terms of the 1998 Good Friday peace accord.

Adair's mother and father were simple people who sent all their children to Sunday School. 'Johnny's was not a loyalist household. His was just like any other house – they were an ordinary family and they were not sectarian,' said one childhood friend who moved away from the Shankill. Margaret, his older sister, recalls, 'To us, he [Adair] was just an ordinary kid growing up and knocking around. He wasn't a bad kid at all. The fact was that he was just like everyone else. He went to Sunday School, worked hard at school and would run about on the streets with his friends. He was no different from any other kid in our neighbourhood.'

In 1969, the year the Troubles erupted, Adair started at Hemsworth Primary School around the corner from his house. Known simply as the 'Hen House', by the late 1960s it had a reputation as a rough school. The young Johnny Adair did not stand out, taking little interest in either his studies or his classmates and preferring the company of his sisters and brother. He had one or two friends in the neighbourhood, and occasionally they would tour the streets on a rusty old butcher's bike, taking it in turns to pedal and to ride in the basket. His only real hobby was helping his father with the homing pigeons they kept in the small yard at the back of the house. His father, ironically, was for years a member of a pigeon club in the republican New Lodge area of Belfast. He was frequently invited to tea by some of his nationalist friends but felt embarrassed that he could never return the favour. 'I've got two boys who are bad bastards,' he told one member. 'Their mother made them like that.'

It was not until he started at secondary school in September 1975 that Adair fell in with a proper circle of friends. Within days of starting at Somerdale School on the Crumlin Road he had met the three individuals who would change his life: Sam 'Skelly' McCrory, Donald Hodgen and

Jackie Thompson. The four caught the bus together every morning, taking them past the republican Ardoyne district up to Somerdale, whose pupils were almost exclusively Protestant. It was a school with notoriously violent pupils, and many of Adair's contemporaries, including a teenage Ken Barrett, went on to become leading terrorists or victims of the Troubles. As one of them explained, 'The four of us would have went up to school together and that in the mornings and you'd have always got fighting and that on the buses. You got stone throwing as we passed the Ardoyne shop fronts every day. The police used to have to sit there and the bus would be stoned coming down.' After class there would also often be fights with boys from the local Catholic secondary school, St Gabriel's, 200 yards up the road.

Of the four friends, Adair was by far the smallest, though his short red hair and raucous laugh made him stand out. He was the hyperactive one, always dancing around and trying to be the centre of attention. 'Big Donald', the oldest and quietest of the four, was already 12 when he started at Somerdale and a giant compared to the other schoolboys. Although he was not quite shaving, his voice had already broken, a fact that made him seem years older to Adair. Not far behind in size was 'Fat Jackie', who was just two weeks younger than Adair and fast becoming a chubby, well-built young man. His parents owned a sweet shop off the Shankill Road and he greedily ate everything he could lay his hands on. He already knew Skelly, having mucked about with him on the streets of the mid-Shankill. While Thompson lived in Snugville Street, Skelly's family were just around the corner in Jaffa Street. Soon the two would have an opportunity to get to know each other even better, as within weeks both were put in the same class of troublemakers where their behaviour was closely monitored. It did little good. Within a few years, Skelly, a tall, gangly boy, was causing so much

trouble that he was sent to the Rathgael Young Offenders Centre in Bangor.

Back at Somerdale, Thompson and the others became increasingly bored with school and frequently skipped class. Instead of going to school they would travel out into the country on the buses, scraping together what money they had and sharing it around. By the time Adair and his friends were 15, ‘riding the buses’ had become a regular pastime, made more amusing by a few bottles of cider. Thanks to his size and appearance, the job of buying the drink invariably fell to Hodgen. ‘Whenever there was any money we’d all ride the buses,’ recalled one friend. ‘We’d get on the buses with a load of drink, sit at the back and go to places like Millisle or Ballyhalbert out on the sea. You’d just sit there all day and wait for it to bring you home. If you were lucky, there’d also be a fight on the bus on the way back.’

Fighting was a way of life for a teenage boy on the Shankill and Adair would not hesitate to take on people bigger than himself. In the dog-eat-dog world in which he was growing up, even neighbours turned on each other to survive. William ‘Winkie’ Dodds made a habit of stealing from the young Johnny Adair as he went from door to door delivering the *Belfast Telegraph*, a part-time job he had taken on to earn some money. Dodds, who would later become one of Adair’s closest allies, was 16. His unsuspecting victim was only 12 at the time. ‘He was a paper boy and I used to wait and take the money off him,’ he remembered with a laugh. ‘You would have just ambushed him anywhere, just jumped out and grabbed him. It was more for a laugh than anything else.’

To toughen them up, Adair and his friends went boxing at a local youth club, while they got plenty of real-life practice on the streets. ‘Johnny was streetwise – he wouldn’t back down in a fight,’ said one friend. ‘We all had to learn how to fight. When you were with a crowd of teenage boys like that, you also had to learn how to fight amongst yourselves.’

In the late 1970s and early 1980s there were regular riots with neighbouring Catholics, particularly during the summer. In August 1980, at the age of 16, Adair was found guilty of disorderly behaviour by Belfast Juvenile Court and fined £10. It was his second juvenile conviction, the first coming more than a year earlier in May 1979, when the 15-year-old was given a 12-month probation order for attempted theft. To be a teenager with a criminal record was nothing remarkable among Adair's peers, most of whom embarked on a life of crime whilst still at school. Over the next few years Adair would clock up a lengthy string of convictions. In January 1981, he was bound over in the sum of £100 after being found guilty at Belfast Magistrates' Court of behaviour likely to cause a breach of the peace. On three further occasions that year he appeared before the same court and was ordered to pay fines of up to £50 after being convicted of obstructing the police, disorderly behaviour and assaulting a police officer. In April and July the following year he was again fined after being convicted of disorderly behaviour and breach of the peace.

Adair and his friends lived within 300 yards of each other and about 500 yards from the frequent street battles between Catholics and Protestants. By his mid-teens his family had moved to Century Street, just across from the Shankill in the Oldpark district of Belfast. Hodgen's family were in Albertville Drive, which ran parallel to Century Street, while Skelly and Jackie Thompson lived in the rabbit warren of streets on the other side of the Crumlin Road. By this time the four friends were starting to pass their time by hanging around on the corner of Century Street, where they soon became the nucleus of a bigger gang. More than a dozen of them would stand outside the entrance to the 'Buff's' Social Club, where warders from the nearby Crumlin Road Prison came at lunchtime for a quiet pint and a bite to eat. As well as Adair and his three best friends, the gang included Bobby Harrison, Jackie Thompson's young uncle,

Mark Rosborough, Brian Watson and a guy called ‘Chimp’ from Sandy Row in south Belfast. The majority were from the surrounding streets of the lower Shankill and the Oldpark. William ‘Winkie’ Dodds and William ‘Moe’ Courtney also occasionally joined the crowd. In days when there was little by way of local entertainment, Adair and his gang revelled in the chaos they created. As well as taunting and fighting with police, they enjoyed nothing better than to ambush customers as they left the Buff’s Club.

‘John’, one of Adair’s closest friends during these years, remembers passing the summer evenings drinking outside the club: ‘In the summer we would have got the carry-out and we’d have stood in the street for hours. There was an old lock-up next to the chemist at the corner of Century Street and we’d wait for the old hands to come out of the Buff’s and we’d have just locked people up in there. There was one old hand we locked up for eight hours … About ten of us used to hang around there. Mark Rosborough would be up there now and again, and so would your man Chimp. Chimp was mad: he used to have tattoos on his face and eat pint glasses.’

The price for being released from the lock-up was normally a bottle of cider. According to Winkie Dodds’ wife Maureen, who lived in the mid-Shankill and knew her future husband even then, the gang was constantly harassing passers-by. ‘They used to hide behind the wall and wait for the wee men to come by and then lock them up and ask them for 50p. You could get a bottle of cider for 50p and a big, big bottle at that,’ she recalled.

But it was not all fun and games outside the Buff’s. On 14 September 1979, when Adair was just 15, a prison officer was shot dead as he and a colleague drove away from the club after lunch. He was barely 200 yards away from the Crumlin Road Prison, but as he clambered into his car an IRA active service unit was watching from across the street. George Foster, a 30-year-old with two children, was shot

dead as he drove down Century Street. He was hit in the head while a colleague, one of three other prison officers in the car, was shot in both arms. Adair and his friends were standing yards away as the shooting took place. One of the crowd tried to steal a packet of cigarettes from the car but Adair shouted at him and punched him. ‘I remember a car lying on its side in Century Street following an IRA attack,’ recalled one old friend. ‘Johnny saw another boy taking a packet of cigarettes, which was covered in splashes of blood, and he stopped him. I remember him going mad over that and telling him to have some respect.’

Whether Adair and his friends had any political thoughts at this time, IRA incursions into the middle of their neighbourhood were guaranteed to push them in one direction only. Five days later, Edward Jones, the assistant governor at the jail, was gunned down by the Provisionals as he waited at traffic lights at the junction of the Crumlin Road and Cliftonpark Avenue. He was murdered 50 yards from the Buff’s and just 100 yards from the prison. Aged 60 and with 10 children, he had been awarded the British Empire Medal after serving with the Irish Guards during the Second World War. He had worked in the prison for 33 years. Three months later the IRA killed another prison officer at the end of Adair’s street. On 17 December, William Wilson was shot in the back as he was walking into the Buff’s Club. The 58-year-old was killed by a lone gunman who followed him up the pathway to the building and shot him on the front steps as he was going in for lunch.

By the time he was 16, Adair had left school and joined his father as a wood machinist in the Ulster Timber Company in Duncrue Street in Belfast docks. Although the work was menial it gave him enough money to buy drink and to finance his new hobby: music. With their dark suits, pork pie hats and shades, the ska band Madness caught the imagination of many British teenagers and Adair was no

exception. In 1979, the ‘nutty boys’ from Camden in north London released their first two singles, ‘The Prince’ and ‘One Step Beyond’. Adair and Skelly were hooked. Through their friend Brian Watson, who lived off Manor Street in the Oldpark, they started to listen to other ska bands including UB40, Bad Manners, The Specials and The Beat. But Adair’s love of ska was only a warm-up to a style of music that was far more direct and aggressive. By 1980, the skinhead revival was in full swing. On street corners across Britain, shaven-headed young men and women, angry at rising unemployment and immigration, stood in packs drinking and sniffing glue. Their music, known as ‘Oi!’, was as blunt as their image. Among the bands Adair enjoyed and admired were The 4-Skins and Infa Riot (pronounced ‘In For A Riot’), but the one he and Skelly listened to most was Skrewdriver. A neo-Nazi group that openly proclaimed its support for the National Front (NF), it was so right wing that its lead singer, Ian Stuart, made speeches between songs attacking immigration. A leading member of the Blackpool branch of the National Front, Stuart was even pictured on the cover of one album shaking hands with a Ku Klux Klan grand master in full ceremonial dress.

The anti-immigration outbursts meant next to nothing to Adair and his friends in Northern Ireland, where there were hardly any black faces. But for Protestants living under the shadow of the IRA, there was one message above all that hit home with a vengeance. ‘It was the Britishness thing,’ said one former skinhead. ‘The first song I ever heard was “The Voice of Britain” by Skrewdriver. The Britishness, the whole red, white and blue thing, was easy to pick up on. It gave you a sense of pride, that you were a British skinhead, that you were proud to be a Protestant.’ Like many other Shankill Protestants, Adair and his friends were swept up by the skinhead scene. As well as shaving their heads, they sniffed ‘Evo Stik’ glue from plastic bags and listened to Oi! music in a community centre on the lower Shankill estate. Called The

Ultimate, it cost £1 to get in but you were allowed to bring your own drink. According to one skinhead who hung around with Adair and his friends: ‘There used to be a disco called The Ultimate and they used to have skinhead dos in it. All the skinheads would have went there and we used to then go into the town and fight with the fenians [Catholics] outside Lord Hamill’s [a chip shop on Wellington Place in central Belfast]. We all used to go to the YMCA after coming out of the chippie. You were guaranteed good craic because there would always be a fight coming out of it … You used to get fenian skinheads and you all knew each other’s names. There was one called Art with a wooden leg – we used to love to see him trying to chase after us. There was another one called Ghostie; I don’t know where he came from. There was one called Marty who used to set his two Rottweilers on you. Sometimes you’d get lucky, one would have broke free from the crowd and he would have got a big beating.’

Another old Shankill skinhead recalls: ‘The Catholic skinheads would have held anti-National Front gigs. Sometimes the rival crowds would have crossed in the town and there was a good old digging match with the taigs. Everybody looked forward to that. If you’d have got one you’d have danced all over them. You have to remember at that time there was coffin after coffin going down the Shankill Road and that’s what did it for a lot of these people.’

Like his friends, Adair was often getting into fights and to this day his head bears a number of scars that date back to these years. More often than not knives were produced and bottles thrown. On one particular night, Winkie Dodds recalls being with Adair when he was badly cut after a bottle came flying out of the night sky and landed on his head. Though he knew how to fight, he was small and less physically intimidating than Skelly and Donald Hodgen. As one former Shankill skinhead recalls, ‘I can’t really remember Johnny. I remember Skelly and big Donald more.

They had the tattoos on their heads and all. Donald had a Union Jack on his head and used to have a red, white and blue mohican. On the other side of his head he had another tattoo that said, “Oi Skins!”’ But although Adair was not the biggest or the strongest, his friends looked to him as their leader, largely because he was always daring them and egging them on. ‘He would say and do crazy things,’ said one old friend. ‘You’d all be starting to walk home from the town and it would be Johnny who would suggest going up the Falls Road and cutting across rather than walking back up the Shankill. At that stage you would never have thought about walking up the Falls but because Johnny suggested it, you did it.’

As well as going into Belfast, the skinheads would travel to other loyalist towns and estates. Every Easter Monday, hundreds from across Northern Ireland converged on the Co. Antrim town of Portrush, while there were also regular skinhead discos in Rathcoole and Monkstown on the outskirts of north Belfast. Whenever they could, Adair and his friends still enjoyed travelling out to the coast.

Adair was often accompanied by his girlfriend, Gina Crossan, a slim, dark-haired girl from Manor Street. Three years younger than him, they started dating in 1980 when Gina was just 14 and would stay together on and off for the next two decades. Gina, too, was a skinhead, sporting just a tiny tuft of hair at the front of her shaved head. But by far Adair’s best friend was Skelly. By now the pair were extremely close, and throughout their youth they would often hug and hold each other, provoking constant speculation about the nature of their friendship. To this day Skelly remains a complex personality. A thug and a bully, he also has a soft side and is openly gay. Even by his late teens the contradictions were glaringly obvious. One moment he was in the thick of a skinhead brawl and the next he was going to bingo, as he did every week, with a bisexual man

who was later driven off the Shankill for allegedly molesting children.

Skelly could not bear anything bad to happen to his best friend and he blamed himself for an incident during one of their excursions. The pair were on a train coming back from a drunken day out in Bangor when they had an argument and Adair kicked the door shut. Before he had time to pull his hand away, the door slammed against one of his fingers and cut it clean off at the tip. As Adair screamed in agony, Skelly scooped it off the floor and put it in the top pocket of his denim jacket. The pair rushed to hospital, where Skelly rummaged around in his pocket and, like a best man producing a ring at a wedding, eventually pulled out his friend's fingertip. It was covered in blood and greasy black oil. Although the doctors tried, they were unable to reattach it. As a result, to this day Adair has a slightly deformed right index finger.

By 1980, Adair had to be careful with his fingers. He and Skelly had formed a skinhead band together with Brian 'Watsy' Watson, who lived around the corner from Adair, and Julian 'Tarzan' Carson, whose father ran a tattoo parlour on the Shankill. Although Adair likes to claim responsibility for founding and naming Offensive Weapon, in reality the idea came from Watson. The only talented one among them, Watson played the lead guitar and wrote most of Offensive Weapon's songs. He also taught Adair to play the bass guitar, on a distinctive-looking instrument that Johnny had sent away for from a catalogue. 'I'll always remember that guitar,' said one former skinhead. 'It was light brown with black strings. I thought it was a fucking cracker.' Until he parted with the band in 1983, Carson played the drums. He was a year and a half younger than Adair and looked like a baby. Although Adair would later claim that he was the band's lead singer, he only ever opened his mouth to back up Skelly, who shouted and spat into the microphone and delivered the band's incomprehensible lyrics with a growling

rage. On stage, the four would hit, kick and spit at each other. Their dedicated followers were known as the ‘Offensive Weapon White Warriors’. They were led by Donald Hodgen, the band’s unofficial roadie, and a Skrewdriver bodyguard called Matty, who came across for the concerts. At the end of almost every gig, the pair would jump up onto the stage, punch and kick their friends and roll around on the floor.

‘They were mad,’ recalled one Shankill woman who went to several of the gigs. ‘They were mustard, cat [rubbish]. You couldn’t make out a word Skelly was singing, it was just like a blur. At the start it used to be OK but the more drink that got into them the more outrageous it became. They would stand up on the stage and do dancing and trying to sing. They would be kicking their legs and kicking the fuck out of each other on stage. And on the floor you’d be standing and kicking your legs out and hitting each other. You used to come out black and blue all over.’

Between 1981 and 1984, Offensive Weapon played around 20 concerts. The venues included the loyalist club in Romford Street off the Shankill, the Buff’s Club, the White Cross Inn in North Street and the Times Bar in the loyalist Tigers Bay district. They practised at the Cairn Lodge youth club – where Adair also went boxing – the YMCA and a converted church. Several of their songs were borrowed from English bands, including ‘Sorry’ and ‘Evil’ by the 4-Skins. Skelly’s rendition of the latter went down especially well:

I like breaking arms and legs
Snapping spines and wringing necks
Now I’ll knife you in the back
Kick your bones until they crack
[chorus] Evil, evil, evil, evil [x4]
Jump up and down upon your head
Kick you around ’til you’re dead