

(1) A memorable Sunday afternoon

Fifty-five years as a servant of Empire, one afternoon as a murderer, eight years as a political cartoon. That was the life of Reginald Dyer.

The afternoon was 13 April 1919. It was a Sunday in Amritsar in the Punjab. At around half past 4, troops under his personal command opened fire upon a crowd at a protest meeting in the Jallianwala Bagh market square. They killed hundreds.

Of course, it is all too common for massacres to occur when soldiers come into contact with protesters. It is one of the stories that History wheels out time and again. It usually looks something like this: troops sent down to disperse the crowd; an unfortunate junior officer shouting himself hoarse against the din; the crowd surging; perhaps a bottle being thrown; the sweaty finger of a teenage soldier twitching on a trigger; a sudden pandemonium of movement, violence, confusion; a panicked order to fire; and when the dust clears, a dozen dead - shot or trampled.

But the Amritsar Massacre didn't happen that way. And it was Dyer's strange and determined personality which took the story out of its usual course. For Dyer had planned to open fire from the moment he left his headquarters. It was his *intention* to carry out a massacre.

It was an extraordinary thing to do. British India in the Twentieth Century was a colonial society with no shortage of injustices and wrongs, but it wasn't the sort of place where you could just go round shooting the locals. When Churchill described the massacre in Parliament as "*an extraordinary event, a monstrous event, an event that stands in singular and sinister isolation*", he was exaggerating as usual (for Amritsar was not the worst thing to happen in the history of the Raj): but he wasn't exaggerating by much. It is comforting to know that, if Dyer's actions seem monstrous to us, it is not because our view is distorted by peering back through 80 intervening years.

How do you come to do a thing like that? What happens to you when you do?