

Hangged

for the
Word

IF

The murder of
Lily Volpert and
the execution of
Mahmood
Hussein Mattan



Chris Phillips

HANGED FOR THE WORD IF

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Execution of Mahmood Hussein Mattan

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To the memory of Neil Sinclair,
the historian of Tiger Bay.

I am the first man to get hanged for nothing in this Country, and I don't think that anyone believe what I say right now but before long one time You do believe it. ... Suppose I got a whiter skin I don't be hanged today for this case. because nobody been hanged for the word "if" in this Country before. because the Government accept that word and I am telling lies & other people telling truth. I doesn't interfere with anybody else and I dont tell one word lie in my case. I was true all the way.

Mahmood Hussein Mattan

On doit des égards aux vivants; on ne doit aux morts que la vérité.
(We owe consideration to the living; to the dead we owe only the truth.)

Voltaire

If man will strike, strike through the mask!

Herman Melville

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Introduction

Mahmood Hussein Mattan, a Somali who had come to Britain as a merchant seaman, was executed on 3 September 1952 in Cardiff, for the murder of Lily Volpert, a Bute Street shopkeeper. He was convicted on circumstantial evidence, but few people expressed any doubts about his guilt. The judges who rejected his application for leave to appeal commented, "there was ample evidence upon which they [the jury] could convict if they chose." It seemed an unremarkable case. The Times didn't bother to report either Mattan's conviction or his execution.

Nevertheless, the case *was* remarkable. More than 45 years later, Mattan's conviction was quashed. It was the first time the conviction of a man who'd been executed had been overturned in the UK. In the Appeal Court, the Crown accepted that the evidence against Mattan was no longer credible. In fact, the documents discovered by his counsel left no doubt that he'd been convicted by false testimony, with the knowledge of at least one senior police officer.

Miscarriages of justice have formed the basis of a small literary industry. But the murder of Lily Volpert and the execution of Mahmood Hussein Mattan have been strangely neglected. The only book on the case is a slim volume in Welsh¹, which ends by questioning whether the wrong man was really hanged. Perhaps the reason the case has been neglected is that since the appeal it has superficially seemed straightforward, just as it did in 1952.

In reality it has never been straightforward. The truth about the case has emerged only gradually – sometimes over the course of decades – and the revelations have usually complicated things rather than simplifying them. Things that had seemed clear and obvious have been cast into doubt by awkward new facts. Theories have collapsed under the weight of their own contradictions, and judgments have had to be – almost literally – torn up and thrown away. This process has continued during my own research. It's only in the last few months that the final disclosure of the police records has provided a full picture of how the case against Mattan was concocted.

The present account is an attempt to tell the story of what happened in Cardiff in 1952 as accurately as possible, to understand how Mattan came to be "fixed" for the murder², and to consider the question of who really killed

¹ Roy Davies, *Crogi ar Gam?* (2000).

² To use his own word (see page 83).

Lily Volpert. I have tried to make it as readable as possible, though inevitably it is quite detailed. And inevitably, the conclusions suggested can be only tentative.

But I think we owe it to the two people who lost their lives – the victim of the murder, and the man executed for it and later exonerated – to try to find out the truth as fully and as accurately as we can, however difficult that may be after 67 years.

Note on Language

As far as possible, I've related the evidence of witnesses using their own words, even when not quoting them directly. One term calls for special comment. The word "coloured" is now associated with the unenlightened racial attitudes of the past, and many people don't consider it acceptable. But in 1952 it was a neutral descriptive term for people who weren't white. In fact, those in Tiger Bay who had mixed ancestry preferred it to undesirable alternatives such as "half-caste."³ Where witnesses used this word I've retained it, rather than trying to translate it into a modern-day equivalent.

The contemporary units have also been retained for distances and heights (miles, yards, feet and inches), weights (stones and pounds) and amounts of money (pounds, shillings and pence). In terms of purchasing power, based on the Retail Price Index, a shilling in 1952 was equivalent to about £1.50 in 2019.

³ Little, *Negroes in Britain*, p. 134.