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26 RAEDH NA NÍARTHARACH,
(26 Westland Row),

BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH,
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Statement by:

Bulmer Hobson,
Mill House,
Whitechurch, Rathfarnham,
Dublin.

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On The Gun-running at Howth
and Kilcoole.

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STATEMENT BY

MR. BULMER HOBSON

ON

I.R.B. AND IRISH FREEDOM.

A copy of this statement was sent at Mr. Hobson's request to each of the following, and any comments received in the Bureau as a result are registered and filed, as indicated hereunder:

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BURD STAIRS MILEATA 1913-21
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The Gun-running at Howth and Kilcool

July, 1914.

When the Volunteers were started in 1913 we very rapidly got an enormous number of members, variously estimated to be between 100,000 and 150,000. It was this fact which probably impelled Mr. Redmond to seek control, but, while we had this vast membership, we had very little funds, and virtually no arms.

In order to try and end this deadlock, which was endangering the whole Volunteer position, Casement, on his own initiative, went to London in the early part of 1914 and got together a few friends who between them advanced £1,500. Mrs. Alice Stopford Green was responsible for about half this amount; Erskine Childers, his wife, the Honourable Mary Spring Rice, Captain Berkeley and Casement himself subscribed the rest of the money. With the exception of Casement, none of the subscribers had had any previous connection with the Volunteers. The idea was that the money should be used to purchase arms, to bring them to Ireland, to sell the arms to the Irish Volunteers and to reimburse the subscribers. The subscribers took a very uncommercial risk, and I think they must have been very astonished when they did subsequently get their money back.

This London Committee selected Darrell Figgis to go to Antwerp to purchase rifles, and Erskine Childers and Conor O'Brien volunteered to bring the guns to Ireland in their yachts. Darrell Figgis had no previous connection with the Volunteers.

Figgis purchased 1,500 rifles and 45,000 rounds of ammunition. I think he got excellent value for the £1,500. He was also to hire a tug at Antwerp and bring the guns to meet the two yachts at an appointed time and place in the North Sea. The guns were Mauser rifles, old-fashioned and heavy,

but were in perfect order. They were, I believe, the rifles with which the German Army re-armed after the Franco-Prussian War.

The first I heard of this project must have been in June, 1914, when Casement asked me if I could make arrangements for the landing of the two cargoes. He had already seen ^{MAC} O'Neill and O'Rahilly, ^{but} and so far no working scheme had been framed. I agreed with the suggestion, on condition I was not to be hampered by any Committee, and I agreed to meet him and Childers in Dublin within a week and have some practicable plan ready.

On thinking the matter over I decided that 1,500 rifles would not go very far in solving our problem, but that if we could bring them in in a sufficiently spectacular manner we should probably solve our financial problem and the problem of arming the Volunteers as well.

With this in mind I decided to bring the guns in in daylight, in the most open manner and as near to Dublin as possible. I personally examined every harbour between Greystones and Balbriggan, cycling the whole way, and only turned down the North Wall in Dublin because I thought that we might not get time to unload before the authorities would appear.

I decided that Howth was the best harbour, and that the best method was to march a large number of Volunteers to meet the yacht, to arm them on the spot and march them back. I felt that this could be done, provided the movement was executed with sufficient rapidity to enable us to get back past the narrow neck of land at Sutton before the Castle could intervene, and I felt that the task of seizing so many guns from so many individual Volunteers, who would be

scattered over a wide area, would be beyond the powers of either police or soldiery.

Pádraig Ó Riain was the one man with whom I discussed all these arrangements in complete confidence.

I met Casement and Childers at Boswell's Hotel, Molesworth Street, Dublin, one Sunday about the end of June, and proposed my plan, with which they both agreed. Childers and I went out to Howth next day and looked at the harbour, and settled just where he was to come in. At that meeting it was fixed that Childers should sail into Howth harbour at twelve noon on 26th July and that I would have the Volunteers there to meet him.

Childers then went off to keep his appointment with Figgis in the North Sea, and I did not see him again until he brought his cargo of guns into Howth harbour on 26th July.

I next went to McNeill and asked him to propose at the next meeting of the Provisional Committee that all the Volunteer Companies in Dublin should have a joint route march every Sunday morning. The first march, I think, was to Lucan, another to Dun Laoghaire, and another to Clondalkin. The police were enormously interested in the first and followed in strength. At the second they were not so active, and the third week they were indifferent, and when we finally marched to Howth on the 26th July they assumed that it was just another route march and were not present at all. They did not suspect that anything unusual was on hand and neither did the general body of Volunteers who marched to Howth.

In preparation for the gun-running, I got the carpenter members of the I.R.B. to make about two hundred oak batons which were to be used in case we were attacked by the police, as the Volunteers, although they were being given rifles, were far too raw and undisciplined to be entrusted with ammunition on that occasion.

As the day when Childers was due to come to Howth approached, one apparently insuperable difficulty arose. There had been a lot of talk following the Carsonite gun-running at Larne as to the probability of similar gun-running exploits being carried out in other parts of the country, and the British authorities as a precaution sent H.M.S. "Panther", which anchored in Dublin Bay. In the last week before Childers was due to arrive, I went out and looked anxiously at the "Panther" every morning, but she showed no signs of going away. Eventually on the Wednesday of that week I went to see John Gore, who was an elderly solicitor, and was one of the Treasurers on the Volunteer Committee. John Gore was a charming old man, but he was an inveterate gossip. I told him in strict confidence that we were bringing a cargo of guns into Waterford on the following Sunday, and I expected that he would be unable to refrain from giving this news in strict confidence to every client who came to see him. Whether this calculation was correct or not, it is a fact that two days later H.M.S. "Panther" steamed South. When the "Panther" got to Wicklow, apparently doubts began to occur, and the anchor was dropped, and

on Sunday, when we were engaged in bringing in the guns at Howth, the "Panther" was immobilised at Wicklow because they had given shore leave to the crew.

About twenty members of the I.R.B. under the command of Cathal Brugha were sent to Howth early on the morning of Sunday, 26th July, with instructions to disport themselves about the harbour, hire boats and generally look as much like tourists as possible. Their business was to receive the yacht, help to moor her, and in the event of any police interference they were sufficiently numerous to deal with it.

It was my intention to bring the ammunition away from Howth in taxis and distribute it at several points in the city. For this purpose several members of the I.R.B. were each instructed to invite a lady friend out for the day. They were to go by taxi to Howth and order lunch at the hotel, keeping a close watch on the harbour. When they saw the yacht coming in they were to abandon both the ladies and the lunch and bring their taxis up the harbour ready to carry their appointed loads to their appointed destination.

The Volunteers met on Sunday morning at Father Matthew Park in Fairview, probably about eight hundred in all.

It was the practice on the route marches that the command was taken by one of our ex-Army paid instructors, and on this occasion a retired Sergeant named Bodkin was in charge. Just before we marched off, MacNeill instructed Bodkin to carry out any instructions which I gave him throughout the day.

When we got near Howth I told Bodkin what was about to happen. *MacNeill did not go to Howth with us as he had to go to the Irish College at Omeath.*

It was difficult to get started in good time, with the result that we had to march at a fast pace, and without a stop, to Howth, a distance of between seven and eight miles. Protests came from various parts of the column that the pace was too fast, but we had no time to lose and paid no attention.

Fortunately we reached Howth just as the yacht sailed into the harbour. When we got to the harbour we put a strong guard at the entrance.

In order to expedite the unloading, I had asked Childers to take the guns out of their packing while at sea and lay them in layers on the floor of the cabin, so that the moment the hatches were off the guns were passed from hand to hand down the column, and the whole unloading of nine hundred guns took, approximately, half an hour. When the last gun came ashore, the ammunition was already on its way - before the column left - the bulk by taxis, and some 2,000 rounds remained with the Fianna, who were the only body on whose discipline I could count.

As I was afraid of the authorities cutting us off before we got past Sutton, no rest was given to the men and no halt was permitted until we got to Raheny. As we were approaching that village, a special tram filled with police passed us on their way from the city. We had a number of cycle scouts scouring the country in every direction and we had not long left Howth when I was aware that the authorities were sending out, or had sent out, soldiers and

police to intercept us.

I asked Lawrence Kettle, who had a car, to take me down to look at them. I went to Clontarf in his car and looked at the police, and re-joined the Volunteers before they got to Raheny. They were halted there.

The question then presented itself as to how we should get past this barrier. The men had already marched from Fairview to Howth and back to Raheny without time for rest, and many of them showed signs of exhaustion. I decided that it was quite impracticable to ask them to approach Dublin by longer and indirect routes, and that the only thing was to go right on and deal with the police and soldiers when we got that far.

Just before we left Howth I had instructed the officers of each Company to make a careful note of the names and addresses of the men who had rifles, and to tell them that they would have the option of either delivering them at their Company meeting the following week or of retaining them and paying for them by small weekly instalments.

When we approached Clontarf we saw the soldiers drawn across the road, and, in order to avoid them and to give them an opportunity of avoiding us, we turned sharply to the right on to the Malahide Road. The police and soldiers came at the double round to the Malahide Road and confronted us again.

While I expected that the authorities in

Dublin Castle would attempt to prevent the landing of rifles, I knew that the Liberal Government in England, having already remained inactive on the occasion of the Carsonite gun-running at Larne, would find it very embarrassing to take active measures against us, and I rather expected, what was afterwards established as a fact, that the local police or soldiers were acting without orders from their superiors.

When we approached the opposing Forces, the soldiers were drawn two-deep across the road, armed with rifle and bayonet. About eighty policemen, standing two-deep, occupied the foot-path at right angles to the soldiers.

When we came up to the police, Assistant Commissioner Harrell, who was in charge, stepped forward, and as he did so I halted the column. I was marching at the head of the column with the instructor, Bodkin. Immediately, Harrell said that we were an illegal body, illegally importing arms which he was about to seize, and before I had time to reply he turned to the police and ordered them to seize the arms. A considerable number of the police did not move and disobeyed the order, while the remainder made a rush for the front Company of the Volunteers and a free fight ensued, in which clubbed rifles and batons were freely used. This fight lasted probably less than a minute, when the police withdrew to the footpath of their own accord and without orders. Meanwhile I had been standing with Mr. Harrell and was a spectator of the melee.

At this point I told Mr. Harrell that these men, although they had rifles, had no ammunition, that they were peacefully going to their homes, but that there was ammunition in the column and that if he attacked again I could not prevent the distribution, that a great many of his men and my men would be killed, packed in that narrow road, and that the sole responsibility would be his. I had already suspected that he might have gone out without orders, and I rapidly saw that his nerve was visibly ebbing and that he realised the impossibility of taking rifles from nine hundred men with eighty reluctant policemen.

At this stage Tomás McDonagh and Darrell Figgis came up and entered into an argument with Mr. Harrell. Either of them could have talked him blind, their combined effort was overwhelming. I decided that this colloquy would last for a considerable time, so I ran to the back of the column and ordered the men to disperse across the fields and through the grounds of the Christian Brothers in Marino, to make their way home as quickly as possible and avoid any conflicts or anything which would cause them to lose their rifles. I saw Company after Company disappear through the hedges and did not ^{return} turn until all but the last Company was left when I found Mr. Harrell, looking rather dazed, still listening to Figgis and McDonagh. Just as I approached, the Sergeant spoke to Harrell and drew his attention to the fact that the Volunteers had nearly all gone. Mr. Harrell then told the soldiers that he did not require them any further and they marched off towards Dublin, where

they got into conflict with a crowd of civilians at Bachelor's Walk. This episode had no connection whatever with the Volunteers or with the gun-running.

Captain Michael Judge, who got wounded at Howth Road, left his Company without orders and went and abused some of the soldiers. One of them gave him a poke with his bayonet, which grazed his arm. Much publicity was given to this supposedly dangerous wound by Mr. Judge, but none was given to several men who, in the melee with the police, received considerable injuries. (See footnote at end of this statement.)

Mr. Harrell then hastened along Fairview Strand to Phillipsburgh Avenue in the hope of intercepting some of the Volunteers who had gone across the fields. Several of us, seeing his object, went ahead and meeting a few of the Volunteers warned them not to go down to Fairview.

We took our stand on the roadway outside Father Matthew Park, and Mr. Harrell and his policemen halted on the footpath opposite.

The cycle scouts, of course, followed me throughout the day, and I told them, one after another, to ride at top speed out of sight and to come back in a minute or two and pretend to whisper a message. They went off in all directions and a scene of great activity ensued, which was further enlivened by the arrival of a gentleman, locally known as "the ^{Pope} Bird Flanagan", on horseback. Mr. Flanagan, at my request, galloped his horse off at a furious pace and added to the noise. Mr. Harrell stood for a considerable time before it happened to dawn on him that the object of

this activity was to keep him standing there while the Volunteers got safely home with the guns.

It subsequently transpired in evidence at the Royal Commission on the Howth gun-running that Mr. Harrell had gone out without orders.

The police captured nineteen of our rifles, all of which were broken in the struggle, but the authorities were in such consternation at the turn events had taken that Colonel Moore went up to the Castle the following day and succeeded in securing the remnants of the nineteen rifles.

While we were facing the soldiers at Howth Road, several of our men who had small arms fired at the soldiers and would have precipitated a catastrophe for us had the officer in charge of the soldiers not thought that the shots came from a hostile crowd assembled in a side street.

Some of the Volunteers made repeated attempts to rush the Fianna trek carts to get some of the ammunition with which to fire at the police and soldiers, but the Fianna, under the command of Pádraig Ó Riain, carried out their orders and no ammunition was distributed or used.

As soon as Figgis had handed over the guns to the two yachts in the North Sea, he hurried across to Dublin, apparently with the intention of taking charge of operations at our end. None of us had ever met him before, and I had to tell him firmly that the arrangements were made and were not going to be disclosed to anybody, unless such disclosure was

essential to enable him to play his part in the plan. As a concession I allowed him to accompany Cathal Brugha down to Howth early on the Sunday morning, and he was with the men who were there to receive the yacht when it came in. Further than that he had no part in planning or carrying out this operation.

Of the 900 guns and 26,000 rounds of ammunition landed at Howth, none were lost except the nineteen captured by the police and some which were abandoned by some of the Volunteers on their way across the fields and which fell into the hands of members of the Citizen Army, whose premises at Croydon Park were close by.

The Citizen Army did not take part in the Howth gun-running and knew nothing about it. The only two organisations which took part in the Howth gun-running were the Irish Volunteers and the Fianna.

With the Howth gun-running, we not only succeeded in landing a considerable number of arms but I also succeeded in my second objective of getting something done in a sufficiently spectacular manner to make people subscribe to our funds. We got £1,000 from America the day after, and thereafter we received help from different organisations in America at the rate of about £1,000 a month.

Money also came in from various parts of Ireland, and after the gun-running we never had any serious financial worries.

Of the ^{1,500}15,000 guns purchased by Figgis in Antwerp, Childers brought 900 to Howth. The other 600 guns and portion of the ammunition were placed on Conor O'Brien's yacht. Both yachts were loaded from a tug which Figgis hired in Antwerp, and which met them in the North Sea.

Childers and O'Brien were both first-rate seamen, but in other respects they differed. Childers was secretive and efficient. O'Brien was talkative to a degree that made him a dangerous colleague for anybody engaged on an enterprise of this sort. For this reason Childers flatly refused to have O'Brien come in to Howth with him as he felt that O'Brien's lack of reasonable precautions would endanger the whole enterprise.

X Childers told me that O'Brien wanted to bring his guns into his native County Limerick, so we agreed that we could tell him to go and make his own arrangements and to bring them in where he could. In the event O'Brien made no arrangements, and when it became time for him to leave Dublin to keep his appointment in the North Sea he went to Mr. ~~E.H.~~ Lloyd, Solicitor, and the late Mr. Cruise O'Brien, a Journalist, neither of whom had any connection with the Volunteers, and both of whom were active members of Mr. Redmond's organisation. They were not the sort of people likely to be mixed up in gun-running. Fortunately they went and told the late James Creed Meredith, later a Judge of the Supreme Court, what had happened. Meredith was one of Redmond's nominees on our Committee and one of the very few who co-operated with us and did not

behave like a mere partisan of the Committee.

Meredith realised that this must be some project of the Irish Volunteers that had got into strange hands, so he came at once to McNeill, and McNeill sent for me and said "Here is the cargo you refused at Howth come back again". I was much too busy with the arrangements for Howth, and with other work, to take on this additional responsibility, and besides there was the possibility that both yachts might come in at the same time. In fact, the Howth yacht came in on the 26th July and the yacht at Kilcoole on Saturday, 1st August. It was agreed, therefore, that Sean Fitzgibbon should take charge of ~~the~~^{that} landing.

Before he left Ireland, Conor O'Brien's reckless talk had roused the suspicion of the authorities and they started searching fishing and other boats all round the Irish coast, and it was felt that it was not safe to permit him to bring the cargo to Ireland. It was arranged, therefore, that he should lie off Bardsea Island, off the Welsh coast, and tranship his cargo to the yacht of Sir Thomas Myles, a prominent Dublin surgeon.

Before I retired from the scene, I went to Meredith's house at his invitation and met Sir Thomas Myles to discuss where the guns were to be brought in. I suggested Kilcoole, County Wicklow, and ~~if~~^{as} the water was too shallow there to enable the yacht to come close in, that the unloading should be done by a couple of motor boats.

Childers' crew, so far as I can remember,

consisted of himself, his wife, the Honourable Mary Spring Rice, a General Shepherd, who was afterwards killed in France, and two fishermen from Tory Island off Donegal.

Sir Thomas Myles' crew consisted of Sir Thomas, James Creed Meredith, Dermot Coffey, Captain Hervey de Montmorency of the British Army, a Kilkenny man.

At Fitzgibbons' request, I went to Kilcoole on the night of the landing of the guns. As he was not a member of the I.R.B. he thought that perhaps his orders might not be readily accepted by some of them. There was, however, no danger of this.

We arrived at Kilcoole about midnight, and the unloading was completed by 4 or 5 a.m.

The only policemen we met were two individuals who were patrolling the railway line. We put them under arrest and when we left they had several miles to walk to barracks before they could give the alarm. There was no other interference of any kind from the authorities.

I came back to Dublin on a large motor ^{charabanc} ~~caravan~~, which was so overloaded with men, guns and ammunition that it broke a back axle in the middle of the town of Bray, about 5 a.m. on Sunday, 2nd August. We sent a motor cyclist to Dublin, and in a surprisingly short time we had a number of taxis and a couple of lorries, and the guns and ammunition were safely taken to Dublin.

On Childers' way from the North Sea, he sailed

right through the great Naval Review at Spithead, where the King of England was reviewing his Navy at the outbreak of the Great War.

After the outbreak of war, I heard that Childers had been asked by the British Naval authorities to join because he had a more intimate knowledge than anybody they had of the islands and channels off the German coast, which figured in his novel "The Riddle of the Sands".

Conor O'Brien in one of his books complains of the ridiculous secrecy with which the Volunteers shrouded their operations, and we had cause to complain of his reckless talking. He stated that when he tried to get any information he was always referred to a mysterious John Dolan, but that he never could find out who Dolan was. In fact, John Dolan had no existence except as a name to which letters could be addressed to an office in College Street to enable Childers to communicate with me.

Although I make this criticism of Conor O'Brien he was a wonderful seaman, a charming person, and he rendered us very great service.

*To be
p. 10.*
A few of our men fired at the soldiers with small arms which they carried & nearly precipitated a catastrophe. I suppressed this as quickly as possible & the soldiers did not return the fire. *J. B. Samson* Kent was one of those who fired at the soldiers.

Witness: *Wm. Dunne*
Bureau of Military History

Bulmer Hobson
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