

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO. STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 176

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 176.....

Witness

Thomas Wilson, Old Mill House,

Identity

Member of Executive Committee I.V. Belfast.

Subject

- (a) I. R. B. Belfast 1908.
- (b) Formation of I. V. Belfast.
- (c) The Split - Belfast.
- (d) Easter 1916 - Belfast.
- (e) Frongoch.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil.

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ORIGINAL

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STATEMENT

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I was born in 1890. About 1908 I joined the Gaelic League, the old Craobh Oisín, which was the leading Branch of the Gaelic League in Belfast at the time. After being a short time in the Gaelic League, I was approached by Henry Heaney to join the Irish Republican Brotherhood. The first meeting of the Irish Republican Brotherhood that I attended was in Denis McCullough's workshop. There were about eight or nine men at the meeting, including Denis McCullough and Bulmer Hobson. To the best of my knowledge, this was the principal circle working in Belfast at that time. I think a few other circles were working in Belfast in 1909. One comprised the older boys of Fianna Eireann, and another organised by Peter Burns.

The main objects of the Irish Republican Brotherhood at this time were recruiting of suitable candidates for membership, collecting of funds for arms for use against the British Government in Ireland, and the propagation of papers and literature containing Republican ideals. A campaign was also carried on against recruiting for the British Army, and anti-recruiting propaganda was posted on the walls. There was also a considerable amount of propaganda literature sent to us from Dublin for distribution, with which we dealt. The majority of the Nationalists in Belfast were indifferent, if they were not hostile. All Irish-Ireland

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movements were, in those years, at a very low ebb. The people working on Separatist ideas were small in numbers, and, if a person was known to be active, the authorities would detail a detective to watch his movements. Even in those early days I had my special detective watching my movements. Our numbers were so small, it was easy for the police to have a man on each of us.

After I joined the I.R.B. a Dungannon Club was formed in Belfast. This Club was run exclusively by I.R.B. members and afforded an opportunity of providing rooms in West Street for I.R.B. meetings. The I.R.B. was responsible for the formation of the Club. The idea behind its formation was to start an open organisation on the lines of the organisation subsequently known as Sinn Féin. Lectures and debates were held in the Club, and an effort was always made to instil the doctrine of physical force as a means to freedom and to shatter the confidence of people who had belief in the constitutional methods of the Irish Party. The overwhelming majority of the Nationalists in Belfast were good supporters of Joe Devlin. It was also hoped that the formation of the Dungannon Club would secure contact with young men who could be taken into the I.R.B. organisation. The I.R.B. contacts with the Gaelic League were also used as a means of obtaining recruits. The I.R.B. encouraged the furtherance of the Gaelic Athletic Association, and its members were in all above organisations.

Some time after the formation of the Dungannon Club, an organisation known as the Freedom Club was formed. A club premises was obtained in Berry Street. A paper, "Saoirse na h-Eireann" or "Irish Freedom" was being published. As the I.R.B. in Belfast got instructions to

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organise the Freedom Club, and was the backbone of its organisation, I looked upon this move as having the support of the Supreme Council of the I.R.B. in Dublin. There was only one Branch in Belfast, to my knowledge. Denis McCullough was President, Joe Connolly, Secretary for a time, and myself, Treasurer. The following were members: Sean Lester, Sean O'Kelly, Archie Heron, Sean O'Sullivan, Alf Monaghan, Alf Cotton, Henry Shields and Thomas Wardlow.

The Freedom Club was in existence when Fianna Éireann was started. Archie Heron and Seán Kelly were the principal boys at the start of the Fianna. Seán O'Sullivan, a native of Cork, was sent by the I.R.B. to the Fianna to keep a fatherly eye on the boys.

Another event of importance which took place about this time was the move to erect a memorial in Miltown graveyard in Belfast to the older Fenians. Although I am not sure, I think that old Robert Johnston was the man who started the move to erect the memorial. The Freedom Club helped in the task of collecting the money for the memorial. The I.R.B. also assisted in the work of collecting funds.

When the proposal to start the Volunteers was mooted, the matter was discussed at the Freedom Club, and it was decided to issue a circular, addressed to all Nationalist organisations in the city. Seán Cusack put his name to the circular as an Irish National Forester. Frank Booth signed as Ancient Order of Hibernians, American Alliance, Joe Connolly as Freedom Club, and my name was on the circular as a member of the Gaelic League. There were names on the circular from the United Irish League, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, Board of Erin, and Gaelic Athletic Association.

Those circulars were distributed to all members of the above organisations, asking for attendance at a meeting arranged in the Minor Hall, St. Mary's Hall, Belfast. There was a good attendance of delegates from the different organisations at the meeting to start the Volunteers, and Denis McCullough was moved to the Chair.

When the Chairman started the discussion on the business of the meeting, an Hibernian representative raised the question as to whether it was an opportune time to start the formation of the Volunteers. He read a letter addressed to him by Joe Devlin, M.P., expressing his approval of forming the Volunteers as a protection against Carson's Ulster Volunteers, but he did not approve of the time or place of forming them. It struck me at the time that this was a political move by Devlin to interfere with our effort to start the Volunteers and to influence his supporters not to get mixed up with our formation of them. The reading of this letter would have had a big effect on the delegates to the meeting, who were supporters of the Parliamentary Party, had not another Hibernian delegate from a different Branch risen and spoken strongly in favour of getting a start made at once. This man's action saved the situation at the meeting and gave us the necessary support to get a start made. I cannot remember this man's name. The organisation of the Volunteers was started that night.

After the initial meeting we formed a Committee, the majority of which were Republicans and the few others on the Committee were men of sound National ideas. All were very enthusiastic in getting the Volunteers going. The majority of the men who joined the Volunteers at the start were men of good National background, who looked upon the

Volunteer organisation as an essential safeguard for all Nationalists against the attentions of the Carsonite Volunteers. The welding of all the men who joined the Volunteers in the direction of extreme Republicanism was the task undertaken by the small number of I.R.B. men in Belfast.

The Committee formed in St. Mary's Hall was the Governing Committee, and it had supreme authority over the organisation afterwards.

A short time after the formation of the first Committee two Committees were formed to take control. The main Committee was the Civil Committee. Denis McCullough was Chairman of the Civil Committee and the members, as far as I can remember, were: Joe Connolly, Dan Dempsey, Frank Booth, Timothy Smyth, Tom Clear, Sean O'Kelly, Cathal O'Shannon, another man whose name, I think, was O'Callaghan, and myself.

-the Military Committee -
Another Committee/was formed, comprising at least the following: Sean Cusack, Peter Burns, Joe Burns and Rory Haskins. There may have been a few others on this Committee whose names I have forgotten.

Denis McCullough's election as Chairman of the Volunteers gave him the status of being in supreme command. His appointment was sanctioned by the Irish Volunteer Executive in Dublin. The Irish Volunteer Executive was not entirely in the hands of, or controlled by, the I.R.B. but I believe the I.R.B. had sufficient influence on the Executive to have their reliable men appointed in charge of each important country district.

In Belfast, before the split took place, the I.R.B. had

virtual control of both the Volunteer Committees, and were able to exercise control in matters of policy without question from the Volunteers who were non-members of the I.R.B.

From the start of the Volunteers up to July, 1914, about 500 men joined the organisation. These men were all of a superior type and came to us from the different Nationalist organisations in the city with the sincere conviction that the political situation in the country demanded personal sacrifice in the matter of time and hard work.

Some time after the start of the Volunteers a Colonel Berkeley arrived in Belfast from Dublin. He was one of a number of ex-British Army Officers who had come to us to train the Volunteers. My knowledge of this man's activities is limited. I saw him once or twice at Committee meetings. His main contact with the Volunteers in Belfast was through Denis McCullough. He disappeared from Belfast about the time of the split.

About mid-July 1914 Mr. John Redmond's nominees were admitted to the Irish Volunteer Executive in Dublin, and immediately following this a move to admit nominees appointed by Mr. Joseph Devlin was made in Belfast. When I heard of this move I advised Denis McCullough to have nothing to do with the Devlin nominees. My idea in offering this advice was that the Volunteers in Belfast were good material and the admission of Devlin's followers would weaken instead of strengthen the morale of the organisation. As far as the Executive Committee was concerned, the admission of Devlin's nominees would not have been carried if the matter had gone to a vote. Mr. McCullough was in favour of their

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admission. Perhaps he had instructions from Headquarters in Dublin to admit them. He proposed their admission and it was agreed to without a vote. I think it was three of Devlin's nominees who came on the Committee. Martin Burke was one, and I do not remember the names of the other two.

When Mr. Devlin's nominees came on the Committee we were practically swamped with recruits. New Companies were formed. The original Volunteers lost control, or had their authority weakened in the appointment of Company Officers. The Executive Committee remained soundly Republican. Friction started on the Executive Committee with Devlin's nominees, which did much harm but did not effect any change in policy.

On the Sunday of the Howth gun-running, 26th July, 1914, a mobilisation of Volunteers was ordered for Clonard picture-house, Falls Road. As far as I can remember this mobilisation was not ordered or sanctioned by the Belfast Executive Committee, but may have been ordered or agreed to by the Military Committee. I went to the picture-house for the mobilisation. I was met at the door by four men in charge of admission to the hall. I was refused admission. These four men on the door were from Devlin's crowd, and were British ex-Servicemen. I had to force my way in. When I got inside I saw Denis McCullough on the platform. A man with an American accent was addressing the meeting at the time. He was speaking in a bombastic manner of the Howth gun-running - this was the first I heard of it - and was promising that a lot more arms would be imported. I mention this incident to show that there was friction between the two elements in the Volunteers and that the Devlin partisans were endeavouring to control or to smash up the organisation.

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At the start of the split in the Volunteers a meeting was convened in St. Mary's Hall by the Military Committee. I, and many others, had trouble to gain admittance to this meeting. The men doing duty at the doors were Devlin supporters. When I arrived inside the Hall I saw Joe Devlin sitting on the platform. Martin Burke was sitting near Devlin. Denis McCullough and, as far as I can remember, all other members of the Executive Committee were on the platform. I made my way to the platform.

Joe Devlin opened the proceedings. He made a recruiting for the British Army speech, mainly on the lines of John Redmond's address at Woodenbridge. After Mr. Devlin's speech it was evident that the majority in the Hall were supporters of Devlin's policy.

Denis McCullough then rose to speak. He defined what he considered should be the proper policy for the Volunteers to adopt, which was diametrically opposed to Mr. Devlin's ideas. He stated that as his proposals seemed to have only minority support from the people there that he was withdrawing from the meeting. Mr. McCullough and his supporters immediately left the Hall.

This meeting in St. Mary's Hall had all the appearance of being well organised as a means of smashing the Volunteer organisation in Belfast. It looked as if it was the men who organised the Volunteers who got expelled from that body. The Devlinite section at the meeting had a great majority.

The original organisers of the Volunteers had control of the Volunteer Headquarters offices in Davis Street, and after the meeting in St. Mary's Hall retained control.

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We immediately started to re-organise there. We found that our numbers were reduced to about 120 to 130 men, which meant that by the split we had lost many good genuine men who had been good Volunteers before the Devlinite supporters came into the organisation.

The funds available to the organisation before the split were lodged in the bank, and the Devlinite section had power to block our use of the money, so we were deprived of financial resources.

I do not think we lost much arms by the deflection of the Devlinite element. The I.R.B. influence in the Volunteers took particular care all along that the arms got into proper and reliable hands.

Our efforts to increase our numbers after the split met with little success. The strength immediately after the split was about the same number and the same men that went to Tyrone on Easter Saturday 1916.

I feel particularly sore against Mr. Devlin. His deliberate action in splitting the Volunteers was unpardonable, as he knew as well as I knew that the result of such a split in the city's Nationalist population would put the unfortunate Catholic minority in most Orange districts at the mercy of Orange fanatics. These men would be liable to murderous attack when going about their business. This state of affairs was brewing at the time of the split and Mr. Devlin knew it. He knew that the results of the split would ginger up the morale of the Orange mobs and make the divided Nationalists their easy prey.

On the 10th July, 1915, Denis McCullough, Ernest Blythe, Herbert Moore Pim and Liam Mellows were served with deportation orders by the British Government, which were not obeyed. The night before the orders expired Denis McCullough told me to take charge of the I.R.B. in Belfast. He gave me his business card with a message on it, to introduce me to Tom Clarke. I travelled to Dublin, called on Mr. Clarke at his business premises in Parnell Street, and handed him the card. He told me to call at his residence the next day. When I called he was waiting for me and took me into his garden. He told me to stick strictly to the principles of the I.R.B. and to carry on as best I could until Denis McCullough was released.

Close on Easter Week, 1916, Denis McCullough attended a meeting in Dublin, and on his return informed me that something serious was contemplated, that the idea of armed camps during the Easter Week period in Tyrone for training purposes was only part of the contemplated programme. He gave orders for iodine and first-aid equipment to be procured. Any person connected with the Volunteers should know that a Rising was imminent from the preparations being made.

Mr. McCullough told me that the Belfast Volunteers were to mobilise in Coalisland in County Tyrone, and from there make our way as best we could across the Shannon to join up with the Connaught men. Most of the rifles and ammunition in the hands of the Belfast Volunteers were sent on to Tyrone early in Holy Week. I have myself no idea of the exact number of rifles and ammunition sent to Tyrone.

On the Saturday of Holy Week three batches of Volunteers moved from Belfast by train for County Tyrone. The early

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batch was made up of men whose work ended early on Saturday. The second batch was made up of men who were not ready to go in the first batch, and the last batch was made up of men who worked late on Saturday evening.

I went with the last batch. As far as I remember I was working that evening up to 8.30 p.m. and contacted a train afterwards. We arrived in Dungannon about midnight.

After arriving in Dungannon station Nora Connolly O'Brien appeared on the platform and shouted into the carriage where I was "You may go back, boys. Everything is called off".

We marched from Dungannon to Coalisland. Any of us who had small arms carried them. All the men did not carry arms. When we arrived at Coalisland we billeted in a Hall near the Square. I would estimate that the number of men who travelled on Saturday from Belfast to Tyrone was 120 to 130. After arriving in Coalisland we either lay or sat around in the Hall awaiting morning.

On Easter Sunday morning we fell-in in military formation and marched to the Chapel for Mass. Immediately after Mass we returned in military formation to the Hall. Mass was at about 10 or 11 a.m.

There was a Tyrone Sergeant of the R.I.C., and a few of his men, keeping an eye on us from the time we arrived in Coalisland. We had rations with us and we prepared a feed and took it. I cannot now remember when we had the feed on Sunday morning.

We awaited the coming of Dr. McCartan and Denis McCullough. A short time after their arrival we got an order to get our equipment, and to fall-in and march to

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Cookstown to catch a train there for Belfast. When we got this order we had barely time to catch the train. A section of the Tyrone Volunteers escorted us part of the way to Cookstown. These men were armed and returned to Coalisland after we had marched a few miles on the way.

On our arrival at the outskirts of Cookstown a man who followed us from Belfast and was not a member of the Volunteers fired off a revolver near some R.I.C. men who were marching at our rear. The R.I.C. made an effort to arrest him and he ran into our ranks. A scuffle took place and one of the R.I.C. went in front of us to the R.I.C. barracks and apparently reported the matter to the police in the barracks. A number of police were outside the barracks when we came up. We halted, and Denis McCullough had a discussion with them. As a result of this discussion the man who fired the shot was taken into the barracks.

Mr. McCullough travelled from Cookstown with us on the train, but I think he left at a station before we arrived in Belfast.

We arrived in Belfast on Sunday evening and dispersed to our homes. I do not recollect any police activity in Belfast on our arrival there.

On Monday morning I turned in to my work as usual and did not notice any particular activity by police or military.

All during Easter Week the Volunteers kept quietly in contact. Mr. McCullough was not moving about at the time, and his absence seemed to leave the Volunteers in a confused position.

A Feis was running in the Gaelic League rooms in

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College Square North, Belfast, all during the week, which I attended each evening. I had also several meetings with Sam Heron, Tim Smyth and Peter Burns. We usually travelled out of the city to the end of the tramlines, and there discussed the situation generally. There was no possibility of doing anything, and discussing matters did not seem to serve any useful purpose.

Early in the week following Easter Week there was a general round-up by the R.I.C. in Belfast. I was arrested at my work. I was taken to Newtownards Road police barracks. There I met a son of old Robert Johnston, a man I never previously met. He had been arrested and he and I were taken to Crumlin Road prison. I met there all the leading Belfast Volunteers, including Denis McCullough, Charles McDowell, Sean Kelly, Tom Clear, Tim Smyth, etc. After two days in Crumlin Road we were loaded into furniture vans and taken by train to Dublin. We were marched from Amiens Street station to Richmond Barracks. There was a big crowd of prisoners in Richmond when we arrived, a lot of them from County Galway.

When in Richmond I saw Sean McDermott being taken out for his Courtmartial. I also saw him later being taken away for execution.

I was a long time in Richmond Barracks. I think I was in about the second last batch which was taken across to England. In this batch with me was Joe Stanley of Drogheda. We were taken to Knutsford Prison, and after about a month there I was removed to Frongoch Camp in Wales. From Frongoch I was taken to Wandsworth Prison. There I was taken before the Sankey Commission and questioned on the Rising.

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During our stay in Frongoch there was a period of getting organisation of the prisoners into shape. The method of appointing officers seemed to cause friction. When new batches of prisoners came into the camp a change of officers generally resulted. In some instances important personages took control in an undemocratic way. In the end some of these men assumed control and ran the camp. For myself I volunteered as a hospital orderly and got away to some extent from the dissatisfaction felt by the majority of prisoners against a clique of men assuming control.

The main effort in the camp was to keep up our morale, and it was usual to hold sing-songs each night. The songs were selected for the purpose of keeping up our spirits.

I never heard of any effort to re-organise the I.R.B. in Frongoch Camp.

I was released shortly after returning to Frongoch from the sitting of the Sankey Commission. Sam Heron and Michael Carolan were released with me.

Shortly after I came home I had two serious illnesses, which kept me out of things for some time.

Thomas Wilson

19 / 10 / 48

Witness

John Mc Coy

19. 10. 48

BUREAU OF MILITARY VICTORY 1913-21
BUREAU STATE POLICE 1913-21
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