

**ORIGINAL**

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BUREAU STAIRS MILITARY 1913-21  
No. W.S. 181

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 181.....

Witness

Robert Kelly,  
16 Mary Street, Newry.

Identity

Member of I. R. B. Newry 1903 - and I. V. 1914-'16.

Subject

I. R. B. and I. V. Newry district up to 1916.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil.

File No. .... S. 1054.....

Form B.S.M. 2.

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Statement by Robert Kelly, 16 Mary Street, Newry.

Seamus O'Hanlon, a carpenter from Lislea, Co. Armagh, had been working in Dublin City. He was a member of O'Dwyer hurling team in Dublin and through them had become a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood.

I met O'Hanlon when he returned from Dublin in 1903. At this time Newry was from the separatist viewpoint rotten. We formed a local club, calling ourselves Cumann na nGael. We got a membership of about 20. We met twice per week for debates, songs, dances, etc. After the club was got going O'Hanlon suggested starting the I. R. B. organisation and he found by inquiry that there were some members of the I. R. B. in Newry. How many I don't know. However he got a circle started of which I was a member and we had at least two other circles in the Newry neighbourhood in South Armagh.

I am a stonecutter by trade and after the circle was started I was forced to go to England to look for work. When in England I found that I could not get on with the people there and after a few months I returned again to Newry. When I returned I found that the club had dissolved.

I got in touch with O'Hanlon and some others and we decided to join the Gaelic League and also join hurling clubs. O'Hanlon got a hurling club going in Camlough, South Armagh, which is still in existence. We got a hurling league going for a short time but the overhead expenses of the venture put the league out of existence. We had a few members of the I. R. B. in each hurling club and hurling activities were looked upon as a convenient means for the I. R. B. members to keep in touch with each other and useful in getting in touch with prospective recruits.

In 1905 we formed a club calling it the Irish Ireland

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Society to replace the defunct Cumann na nGael Club. This Society had the same cultural programme as the Cumann na nGael Club. At about this time the Dungannon Clubs were in existence in Belfast. Our Irish Ireland Society was fairly successful for a time. We got Denis McCullough, Bulmer Hobson, Seán McDermott, P. T. Daly of Dublin to give lectures. Seán McDermott stayed around Newry for months. He was then connected with a little paper published in Belfast "The Republic".

In Newry we concentrated on an anti-recruiting campaign for the British Army. P. T. Daly was manager of "An Clo Cumann" and we could through him get anything we required printed. We also attacked the policy of using anything of foreign manufacture. Townspeople awoke some mornings to find the town posted all over with our propaganda. All this activity meant much expense and the members of the I. R. B. had generally to provide the money to cover our propoganda activities. We purchased and organised the sale of shares in Arthur Griffith's paper "Sinn Féin" and "The Peasant" published in Navan. We got a request that our club should join Sinn Féin. We formed a Sinn Féin Club in Newry which remained active up to 1933. As a result of converting our Irish Ireland Society into a Sinn Féin Club we were evicted from our club premises and for a time we could not get a suitable place to hold club meetings and where members could hold concerts, lectures, dances, etc. From the time Sinn Féin got going it drove foreign dancing completely out of Newry and district.

#### 1907.

Sinn Féin activities and Gaelic League classes were carried on. There was a hurling club in town "Fag an Beallach Gaelic Club". Nearly all the club members were supporters of the Irish Parliamentary Party. A few of us joined the club. Previous to our joining it, the club usually paraded at all the Parliamentary

Party meetings. I remember discussing the matter of attending those meetings with Pat Lavery and asked him why he attended as a club member, meetings for which he had no use and with whose policy he disagreed. He told me that he believed the club members were not all rotten from our point of view. Some were good honest fellows, badly misled, and that by hanging on it would be possible to rescue the best of them. After our joining the club we made it impossible for club members to be represented as a club at the Parliamentary Party meetings.

1908 - 1915.

During these years in Newry we carried out the work that Griffith preached. I became chairman of the Down County Board of the G.A.A. and also chairman of the Newry Trades Council. In G.A.A. circles I found some very good lads whom I knew would make good soldiers of Ireland-and they did give their best in the fight later-but very few of them would join the I.R.B. As for labour it was not very hard to get to be chairman of the local Trades Council. All that was necessary was to play a straight game with the worker and when you did so - even the worker did not agree with you politically - he would not let you down. As a trade unionist I did not go out to condemn the worker who joined the British Army. Most of the men I knew who did so were starved into it. My attitude to the war was that England's only right to rule this country was based on a successful series of murder campaigns and it was not an Irishman's duty to support murders.

When the Loyalists in Newry decided to organise a recruiting committee they found that the chairman of the local Labour Council was opposed to them. They could not do anything about it as any action taken against him would give him the opportunity of publicly opposing them.

We joined the Volunteers in 1914 believing that if we got

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guns it would not be long until a good few who joined would want to know when they were going to use them. However, when Redmond made his Woodenbridge speech we could do nothing except leave the National Volunteers. We had not got much more recruits into the I.R.B. but a number of the men in the Volunteers were thinking that the Irish Volunteers were right. Pat Lavery and a few others came out openly against the Parliamentary Party's policy in the war. Pat, however, would not join the I.R.B. He held that all that was necessary could be done through the Irish Volunteers.

In August or September 1914 a meeting of the Ulster Council of the I.R.B. was held in Belfast. I was a delegate at the meeting. It was decided that unless Germany could supply at least 100,000 men and 300,000 rifles we would not attempt a rising.

#### 1916.

Immediately before Easter Week I understood from the Ulster Secretary of the I.R.B., Seán Southwell, that the Newry Volunteers were for Dungannon at the start of hostilities and that we would get our orders through the I.R.B. No such order came when the time for action arrived but we got an invitation from the Irish Volunteers in Louth to join up with them. This would have been a convenient arrangement as Dundalk was a much nearer mobilisation centre for us than Dungannon. There was, however, a crux in the matter of the invitation as the man who invited us to Dundalk - Paddy Hughes - was not himself a member of the I.R.B. and refused to join the organisation. We sent a man to Dublin to arrange that we be allowed to travel to Dublin for Easter Sunday. He came back and told us that we were to await orders in Newry.

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After Easter Week 1916, a number of us were rounded up and interned. I was sent to Frongoch Camp in Wales. A meeting was held in the South Frongoch in June 1916. I think nearly all counties were represented at the meeting. It was decided that when we got home we would all do our best to reorganise the Irish Volunteers.

After our release we discussed the prospects of the proposed reorganisation in Newry locality. A few of us believed that unless we got more of the ordinary people behind us that any attempt to reorganise an army would be a failure. It was decided that as I was popular with the working people I should stick to the labour organisation and identify myself with the Sinn Fein organisation. Paddy Rankin was to see to the Army. As a result of this policy a public meeting was held in the Marches, Newry, under the auspices of Sinn Fein to get our young men into the Sinn Fein organisation and later to use the best of this material as recruits for the I.R.A. I think most of the men forming the companies around Newry were recruited in 1917 and 1918 from members of the Sinn Fein organisations.

Signed: Robert Kelly

Date: 12. October. 1948.

Witnessed: John Mc Coy.

Date: 12<sup>th</sup> OCT 1948

