

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 320

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 320

Witness

Mr. Thomas Harris, T.D.,
Caragh,
Naas, Co. Kildare.

Identity

Member of Irish Volunteers
1913-1916.

Subject

- (a) National associations 1911 - 1916;
- (b) Exchange Hotel, Parliament Street,
and G.P.O. Dublin, Easter Week 1916.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

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STATEMENT BY DEPUTY THOMAS HARRIS,

Garagh, Naas, Co. Kildare.

About 1911 I was living in Prosperous. There was a branch of the Gaelic League started in that area and I became a member. In North Kildare there were about five or six branches of the Gaelic League. There was one in Maynooth, one in Celbridge, one in Naas, one in Newbridge, one in Brownstown, one in Athgarvan and one in Rathangan. An Aeríocht was held in Prosperous. Other branches usually held Aeríocht also. An Aeríocht was always held during the summer months. At this time I was not in the I.R.B., but at the Aeríocht we always had men whom I afterwards knew to be associated with the I.R.B. One of these was Peadar O'Brien. I think he is dead. There was also a Seán McGlynn who is still living. All that sort of thing gave us a patriotic outlook.

Our Gaelic League organisation was pretty weak at this time, with the result that our Irish teachers did not remain long with us. About 1912 we had an Irish Teacher, named Seán O'Connor. He was married and had five or six children, and I think he came from Limerick. He took up residence in Celbridge. I don't think O'Connor was a member of the I.R.B. when he came into the county. He began by bringing "Irish Freedom" and other national papers around to his classes. We would read these papers in the class-room and discuss the political situation of the time. In this way we became more absorbed in political discussion than in our pursuit of the language.

Around the end of the summer of 1915 O'Connor spoke to me of the I.R.B. He told me of the organisation and its aims and the names of a lot of people who were in it. I agreed with him about it. I came to Dublin to see Liam Mellows. I think it was in the Irish National Volunteer Headquarters in Brunswick Street I saw him. He was Secretary to the Volunteers. There were Priests and members of all parties calling at Headquarters of the Volunteers. I sized up the organisation and observed that the purpose of the I.R.B. element was to get the Volunteers going everywhere and to get control as much as possible.

O'Connor took me into the I.R.B. We never got any centres going because we did not consider it wise to take too many into the organisation down there. Our object was to have a couple in each place or district. There were a few in Naas and a few in Kilcock and Newbridge - just one or two in each - but it was never fully developed in the county.

The Volunteers were started in the county and we had a hectic time travelling around from centre to centre, organising them and getting them going. This work we carried on until the split came. We were never supplied with any arms by Headquarters but there were a few rifles scattered throughout the area. At this time the Irish Parliamentary Party became very alert and their influence amongst the people had grown much stronger - at least that was the position in the County Kildare. After the Woodenbridge speech by John Redmond when he asked the Volunteers to join the British Army and to go out and fight, the Volunteers ceased to exist in the county.

The Gaelic League broke up then and O'Connor went to

live in Inchicore. I think he got a job on the railway and gave up his Gaelic League activities. That would be around the end of 1914. I left home and went to the Agricultural College at Ballyhaise, Co. Cavan. I was there for one year, from 1914 to 1915, returning home about October 1915. While in the College I was still keenly interested in the I.R.B. and the Volunteers. While in Ballyhaise I came up to Dublin occasionally and would call to Tom Clarke's place to find out how things were going.

In 1915 I called in on my way home and he (Clarke) told me that Ted O'Kelly was trying to organise Kildare and that he would call on me. I was only about a fortnight at home when O'Kelly did call on me and told me he was trying to build up the Volunteers again. I attended a meeting at 4 Dawson Street, Dublin, and there met O'Kelly again. Seán Boylan from Dunboyne was there and Jack Fitzgerald from Newbridge and I think Smith, now a Senator, and Donal Buckley from Maynooth. This was about November. There was a kind of preliminary meeting in the Kildare district with a view to seeing what could be done to build up the organisation. Arrangements were made to hold a further meeting in Naas.

One evening after a football match there was a meeting held in Mick O'Kelly's, Naas. As far as I could see the organisation was very weak in numbers and members in any area were very few. As a result of that meeting I arranged to try and establish a company in Prosperous and O'Kelly was to come out and drill them. We called a meeting one night and got 12 or 14 to attend. We had now a company in Prosperous. There was also one started in Maynooth about the same time. We had a small group in Rathangan. There would be about

seven or eight in Naas - Tommy Patterson, Traynor, O'Kelly, Nicholas ^{Byrne T.H.} ~~Burke~~ - a teacher. In Newbridge we had Jack Fitzgerald. He was the only one I knew there. Athgarvan would have had about a dozen or so. I think Brownstown was the furthest south that the organisation extended to. ~~My Company at Prosperous was the principal one. We did the usual training.~~ ^{T.H.} O'Kelly gave instructions on a few occasions and I tried giving it as best I could. ^{Co. Prosperous Company T.H.} I attended a few parades in Maynooth and Leixlip and gave drill instruction there. This was around the end of 1915 and early 1916. At that time I had a .32 automatic. I think O'Kelly had also a gun of some sort. Most of the principal men had small arms of different types and a very limited amount of ammunition. There were a few B.S.A. miniature rifles in the area with which target practice was carried out. ^{O'Kelly T.H.}

There was no Battalion organisation in the county - just isolated groups in the various centres mentioned. That took us up to 1916. I used to meet Tom Clarke occasionally - also Liam Mellows. I met the latter when he was available up to the time he was deported. From reading the newspapers I knew the position was gradually working towards a climax. I was frequently with O'Kelly and from our conversations I concluded that it was intended to have a rebellion in the none too distant future. We would often talk about Casement being in Germany and I was not surprised when the rising did take place.

On Spy Wednesday of 1916, a young fellow named Sweeney came out from Naas with a dispatch to tell me to go to Newbridge that Lieutenant O'Kelly wanted to see me there. I was in Newbridge about 12 or 1 o'clock. That was the

first time I met Tom Byrne. Tom had fought with the Boers in the South African War. They informed me that the rising would take place anytime within the next week and that arms were on their way from Germany. They said the arms would be landed in the south, off the Kerry coast and that the rising would take place in Dublin first. Byrne had been sent down from Dublin to us because he had a good knowledge of the use of explosives. His task was to blow up the railway lines and cut off communications with the Curragh. We were to mobilise around Bodenstown and to cut the railway there and then to go into Dublin and join up with the insurgents there. We got nothing in the way of arms from Dublin that week. Byrne brought explosives with him. I was to be ready when called on and have the Prosperous men available too.

On Holy Thursday Byrne called to Prosperous on his way to Maynooth. I think it was then Byrne met Buckley. Byrne told me he was on his way to Maynooth - whether he arrived there that evening or not I do not know. When Byrne called to me on Holy Thursday he had no further news for me only to be ready. He told me we were to blow up the bridge over at Sallins. Our numbers were very small and Byrne told us to retreat back into Dublin and to block the way as well as we possibly could.

On Easter Sunday I went out of my house before dinner, which was about 1 o'clock, and on returning I was told that Byrne had called to the house and that he had left word that I was to be in Bodenstown that evening at 6 o'clock, accompanied by all the men. I had not got this message very long and I did not see Byrne as he had gone. O'Kelly arrived and he was very excited and said something went wrong. He said he had got the Sunday paper where MacNeill had issued the countermanding order. He did not

attach any importance to MacNeill's order because he said he was not a member of the I.R.B. He added that MacNeill had sent out dispatches stopping the rising and the Kildare dispatch went to Moran of Ballysax in the Brownstown Company and that Moran had no authority to act as he did - that he should have come to him. It appears that Moran had a motor bicycle and went around to the others to tell them the mobilisation was off. O'Kelly was not pleased with this action. Moran had no authority to act thus and he said he would shoot him if he got him. O'Kelly was aware that MacNeill was not trusted as he changed his mind so often. He said then we would have to find Byrne. Byrne thought the affair was on at 6 o'clock and O'Kelly was anxious to see Byrne to know what they should do, whether to obey the first or second order. I went out with O'Kelly and we contacted Byrne at Bodenstown. We had a chat there about what was the best thing to do. This was about 4 o'clock and Moran's prior activities had ensured that we would not have anyone there. The three of us proceeded to Naas. The problem then was where to get a 'phone to Dublin or a car to get up there. Dick Stokes came along on a motor cycle; he recognised Byrne and O'Kelly, stopped, and said he had a dispatch from Pearse that it was at 12 o'clock the next day the rising was to take place.

We had something to eat and Stokes started back for Dublin and our object then was to cover the whole area to tell them all to be ready next day at 12 o'clock in Bodenstown. Byrne took Athgarvan, Newbridge and Ballysax area. O'Kelly and myself did Naas, Prosperous and Rathangan, arranging that we would all meet in Newbridge that night. At this time we were not thinking of Maynooth. We did our tour and saw our men in the different places but most of them had some excuse that they would not be able

to turn up. We told them the plain truth that the fight was starting in Dublin and that we were joining in it. We told them as much as we knew ourselves. We called at Kenny's, Rathangan, that evening. Kit Kenny was there. He is now dead. We had tea there. We did all this on bicycles. In Rathangan there were 16 Lee Enfield rifles in the possession of T.J. Murphy of Rathangan who had bought them for Rathangan National Volunteers. I think the Volunteers had lapsed there and O'Kelly asked Kenny to get control of these rifles and take them with him to Bodenstown for 12 o'clock. Kenny agreed and gave us the impression that we would have him and the rifles and some men. We started back then to Newbridge from Rathangan and we arrived in the Prince of Wales Hotel (now the Central Hotel) where we had tea. Byrne arrived; he had been out in Athgarvan where he had met them all. He thought they would all co-operate. We remained talking and went to bed in the hotel.

Next morning O'Kelly sent me down to Jack Fitzgerald who had not got word, to tell him to be ready to come with us and that we would be going in about a half hour to Bodenstown. When I got there, his sister told me he was in bed and he came down to me and told me to tell O'Kelly that he wouldn't turn out until the bungle of yesterday was set right. O'Kelly sent me back to get his revolver and to tell him that the first duty of a soldier was obedience. Jack said he had not his gun. We started out on three bicycles and called at the Dominican College where we got gellignite. It had been brought down from Dublin and placed in the laboratory at the College. Father McCluskey was sympathetic and was probably in the "know" of what was going to happen. The three of us started for Bodenstown - a Captain,

Lieutenant and a Private. On arriving at Bodinstown there was no one else there. We got there about 11.30. In order that there would be no mistake about the thing, O'Kelly and Byrne went in one direction and I went towards the Clane road to wait until they made preparations for the explosion. The only one to pass was an R.I.C. man who said nothing. The trains were passing in and out and we were anxious to know if there was another hitch. We remained until about 1.30 and the railway line seemed to be normal. No one turned up. We dumped the explosives and started for Maynooth. One of the bicycles got punctured around Straffan. We stopped at Pili's house to see if there was any news. We learned nothing further there. Having fixed the bicycle, Byrne went ahead and we were some time in getting into Maynooth after him. Donal Buckley had just arrived from Dublin and had the information that the rising was on in the city. The Maynooth Volunteers were coming in at this time. I think Colgan in the articles he has written, covers the rest very well.

We had something to eat in Maynooth and Jack Maguire was sent across to Dunboyne to contact Boylan and the Volunteers there and inform them that we would join up with them at Leixlip. Donal Buckley had a service rifle and the remainder had shot guns and ammunition. After a period of delay we fell in and marched to the College. We had about 14 or 15 men. There was great excitement in the College when we got there. The Rector gave us Unconditional Absolution and advice and his blessing. He informed us he was not in favour of our enterprise, but once we had started we had his blessing. By now the people were returning from Fairyhouse Races and there was great excitement in the town. We started for Dublin, marching sometimes along the railway and other times

along the canal bank. We failed to contact the Dunboyne men at Leixlip. We continued via Blanchardstown and reached Glasnevin Cemetery after having waded through the Tolka. It was then about 2 or 3 a.m. on Tuesday morning but I could not be certain. When the cemetery opened, Byrne went out and found that the way was open into the city. We took our guns and marched into the G.P.O. We did not meet anyone except a few Volunteer outposts around Blacquiere Bridge which passed us through. We got into the Post Office. Every place was quiet at that period. Numbers of people were on the street looking around. We had tea and eggs, and cigars. I thought we should have got a rest. Connolly paraded us and said, "it ~~doesn't~~ ^{didn't} matter a damn if we were wiped out now as we had justified ourselves". I thought this was a bit rugged.

We were issued with two canister bombs each and instructed how to strike a match and light the fuse and then fire them. We went down Liffey Street out on the Quays and across the Halfpenny Bridge. The toll man demanded a halfpenny. We got into the Exchange Hotel in Parliament Street by the back door, one of our fellows using a pick-axe on it. We were the first to get in there. Two or three people were there but they cleared out. They were not Volunteers; they were probably commercial people and were surprised. There were no Volunteers in it before we entered. We were distributed all over it, putting up barricades, etc. I do not know how many hours we were there. Byrne used to take runs out to scout outside. I believe Colgan left it with a dispatch. It was a position we did not think we could maintain and we also did not think we could get out of it. We were there probably for four or five hours. One man was killed in it. There was a bit of a scrap there with some British troops and a number of them were killed - I do not know the number of casualties. We were sniped, probably from

the Castle. Our casualty was Walsh. We were called back to the Post Office that evening. We evacuated the hotel completely.

We went back to the Post Office and it was like one long day - I have no recollection of sleeping. On the first night I was at one of the windows; for another period I was on the roof. I remember being in the Instrument Room where it was first noticed that the Post Office was on fire. The ceilings were arched. You could hear the guns going and I saw a little hole, just a circle, which came in the plaster, about the circumference of a teacup, and I could see this growing larger. It was evidently caused by an incendiary bomb. We reported that the roof was on fire. I remember The O'Rahilly and a few of the heads coming along. They fixed up ladders to the roof and tried to put on the hose but there was no force of water, so that measure was ineffective.

Then they started to make preparations for the evacuation and what amazed me was the order that was maintained all the time. At no time was there panic. All was carried out in a routine way. They were lined up and given their orders and instructions and those who were not engaged in anything were also lined up. They commenced singing the "Soldiers' Song" but they were ordered to stop singing by the leaders as it was interfering with the orders which could not be heard. We were marched out then. I remember seeing a sketch of Connolly lying on a stretcher, with Pearse on one side. My impression of that sketch was that it got Pearse's position pretty correctly. Connolly, however, was not on a stretcher; he was on a bed. Pearse was in the attitude given in the sketch; he was not

exactly standing over Connolly. Pearse was issuing instructions that each man was to take 24 hours' rations with him. Lieutenant O'Kelly was standing close to him and he ordered O'Kelly to give out the rations. O'Kelly called on me to help him to give out the rations and I had not a dozen rations given out when I got a bang on the foot. I was wounded and O'Kelly got a slight wound. I think some fellow let off a shot and I got the most of it and that put me out of action. They all evacuated and I was carried out into Henry Street and down Moore Lane. Henry Street was then under fire but they got me through. I was on a stretcher. Two fellows carried me and I was in a stable in Moore Lane for that night and then I was taken into a house and into a Mineral Water Yard which was at the top of Moore Lane. Brian O'Higgins was with me and also a man named Murray who was also wounded in the leg. Jim O'Neill of the Citizen Army was also there. It was the latter who was responsible for making bombs previously.

On the surrender we were carried out and a number of other wounded too. We were placed at the side of Moore Street. The garrison were all lined up in front of us and they marched out of Moore Street. I think Mick Collins was in charge of them. He was fairly prominent. The street was deserted for a short while and then we noticed military appearing and we were carried down to the end of the street and into Parnell Street. The ambulances were waiting there and we were taken to the Castle Hospital. I was operated on in the Castle Hospital by Dr. *Haughton*. He is attached to the Orthopaedic Hospital. All the principal surgeons of Dublin came in that time - Sir William Taylor, Stokes, etc. We were well treated there and were all in one ward. Cathal Brugha was also there. I was amongst the last batch to be taken out of

the Castle. Cathal Brugha, Green, and I think, Cremin, were released from the Castle. I was deported to Frongoch and released from there. I was home around the 15th of August.

On our return there was a different outlook amongst the people.

Connolly was not with me in the Castle. There was a nurse - I think Clinton was her name - and she told us Connolly was in a room to himself there. One morning when she went in, the bed was empty and that was all she knew. She said she got a terrible shock, that he used to be joking her.

Before 1916 I had no contact with Pearse except to hear him speak a few times. I knew Seán MacDermott, Clarke and Mellows. I was not in their confidence.

SIGNED

Thomas Harris

DATE

10th Nov. 1949

WITNESS

Matthew Dwyer Capt

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