

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 323

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 323.....

Witness

Commandant Liam O'Brien,
4 Hampstead Avenue,
The Rise,
Glasnevin, Dublin.

Identity

Member of "E" Company
2nd Battalion Dublin Brigade Irish Vol's. 1916;
Printer of Proclamation of Easter Week 1916.

Subject

Arrangements for and printing of
Proclamation of Easter Week 1916.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

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File No. ...S:333.....

Form B.S.M. 2.

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STATEMENT BY COMMANDANT LIAM O'BRIEN,

4, Hampstead Avenue, The Rise, Glasnevin, Dublin.

The Setting up and Printing of the
Proclamation Easter 1916.

As a preliminary to recording an account of the actual printing of the Easter Proclamation, it may be appropriate to make some reference to circumstances connective to my being associated with it. These began - directly about one year and indirectly some six years - previous to Easter Sunday, 1916.

Direct connection may be said to have opened in 1915 when I met James Connolly for the first time. This introduction to the labour leader and head of the Citizen Army was arranged by Madame Markievicz from whom I received a message requesting me to call on him at Liberty Hall. I was then a member of "E" Company, 2nd Battalion, Dublin Brigade, Irish Volunteers, and had just finished my apprenticeship as a compositor.

Indirectly membership of Na Fianna Eireann which I joined in 1910 and through which I became acquainted with Madame Markievicz connects. This may be accounted for in relating, incidentally, that the Fianna held week-end camps in the grounds of her residence at Belcamp Park, Raheny, County Dublin. Also that on one of those occasions "Madame", (we always referred to her and addressed her as "Madame") on learning of my form of employment, mentioned that she had in her possession a small letterpress printing machine with some
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type, which, she suggested, might be used in the production of propagandist literature for the Fianna. As a consequence to this suggestion more type and some other small requisites were purchased on her instruction, by me and aided by two other boys we spent week-ends in turning out hand-bills, etc. urging the youth of Dublin to join our organisation. We printed, as well, what, at the time, might be termed as seditious literature such as that, calculated by us, to dissuade young Irishmen from joining the British armed forces. How or where this printing was being done was known only to about half-a-dozen people in the Fianna although the members in general helped in the distribution and fly-posting that followed.

It was, therefore, as a result that those earlier activities led to my meeting with James Connolly on a Saturday afternoon in April 1915. Unfortunately, I arrived one and a half hours past the appointed time and on entering his office, Room No. 10, Connolly, being direct in everything, reminded me icily and tersely that I was late. I murmured my apologies and an explanation and in a few moments was made aware that both were accepted and that I was absolved. He then told me he was preparing to produce a weekly newspaper for which purpose he had procured type and a printing machine and that he wanted to secure the services of some trustworthy persons in its production as there might be other work, too, of confidential and possibly dangerous nature. It was under those conditions that he offered me employment which I accepted and commenced working for him on the following Monday.

Later the printing staff was increased by the inclusion of Michael Molloy, Compositor, and Christopher Brady, machine
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printer, and in the ensuing twelve months, in addition to the production in print of the "Workers' Republic" (the name of the paper), other odd jobs of printing were done which appeared to be of commercial description but were, in reality, for use by the revolutionary movement.

During that period we considered our employment uneventful until about a month before the Rising when on an afternoon towards the end of March the Dublin Metropolitan Police were raiding newspaper shops for copies of one of the separatist weekly papers being published at the time. In this pursuit they, in due course, arrived at a shop on Eden Quay, trading as the "Co-Operative Stores", owned by the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union and structurally connected with Liberty Hall. On his being notified of the raid Connolly proceeded to the shop and immediately ordered the police off the premises and on their showing some reluctance to do so he produced an automatic pistol following which they soon withdrew. In consequence of the raid and without delay a large proportion of the Citizen Army was mobilised and from that date until Easter Monday a substantial armed guard was maintained throughout the buildings. The weeks that followed this incident were exciting enough as we daily expected at Liberty Hall further development of a serious situation which fortunately ended with the events described.

This brings me to the week before Easter and, as a further preliminary, to some preparatory arrangements for our most important assignment. On the evening of Spy Wednesday, April 19th, I attended the weekly parade of my Volunteer Company at Father Matthew Park, Fairview. It seemed to be a muster gathering and in attendance was

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Thomas McDonagh, Officer Commanding 2nd Battalion, who addressed those present. The terms of his address were mostly concerned with arrangements for a big parade ordered to take place on the following Sunday and his remarks left no doubt in my mind as to the importance of the event. On the following day (Holy Thursday) I was sent for by Mr. Connolly who asked me; "Are you going anywhere on Sunday next?" In reply I told him that I was parading with the Volunteers. He then said; "Will you come to see me here on Sunday morning at 9 o'clock?". I replied that I would do so and this brief interview ended with his saying; "Inform your Commanding Officer that you are coming to me, otherwise he may think you a deserter." Michael Molloy, who was also a member of the 2nd Battalion, Irish Volunteers, and senior to me in printing experience, was sent for and spoken to in similar terms by Mr. Connolly. In addition, whilst not being made aware of the actual project, he was told that the work to be carried out was secret and important for which additional type would be required. He was, at the same time, requested to arrange for the loan of the extra equipment from some Dublin printing firm. Molloy proceeded at once with his quest and after experiencing several refusals reported back to Connolly. Following a consultation with the latter, Molloy set out again accompanied by a man pushing a handcart, and directed his steps to Mr. West, an Englishman and a printer whose place of business was located in Capel Street. Molloy stated his requirements and Mr. West agreed to loan the material, provided that it was returned to him intact or in lieu compensated for any loss involved. Two pairs of cases filled with type were accordingly loaded on the handcart and pushed back to Liberty Hall by a man, whose real name I never knew, but who, known to his intimates as "Dazzler", was employed as a messenger on the "Workers' Republic".

On Easter Sunday morning at about five minutes to nine I arrived at Liberty Hall and looked around for Molloy and Brady. As they were not to be seen I lost no time in seeking to gain admission, the uppermost thought in my mind being the necessity for punctuality, influenced no doubt, by the still vivid recollection of the frigidity of my reception by the man I was now going to meet, on my late arrival for an appointment with him just twelve months before. Answering my knock one of the double-doors was opened by a couple of armed members of the Citizen Army and, on being identified, I was just entering the building when Brady arrived. We were evidently expected as we were both immediately conducted by the man in charge of the Guard (Kain by name) to room no. 10.

On our entering the room Connolly, looking pleased, remarked to Thomas MacDonagh (the only other person with him) "Here are our friends to do the printing". They both moved towards us and Connolly said - "I know you sufficiently well to save the need of swearing you in", and as he handed me two sheets of paper, added - "This is what I wanted you to do which, of course, you need not if you do not wish". On looking at the upper sheet of paper, one glance at the five lines of the heading - "Poblacht na h-Eireann - To the people of Ireland" inclusive, prompted me to say, without delay, "I'm not backing out now" on which I handed the papers to Brady for him to see. I then found myself listening to Thomas MacDonagh (who evidently had been speaking to Brady) and heard him say, as if continuing a conversation, "If we can continue fighting for three days, being a uniformed force, we may be able to invoke the terms of the Geneva Convention". What words preceded these I cannot say, as

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they were obviously said whilst my attention was occupied in glancing at the papers. This all took place inside the space of a minute or two and just then Molloy entered the room whereupon I recovered the papers from Brady and handed them to Molloy. In the meantime Joseph Plunkett passed in from, and back to another room joining no.10 in which there appeared to be some other persons. There seemed nothing more to be said and after the briefest delay we dispersed, the two leaders remaining where we met them, Brady going to the machine-room, in rear of the "Co-Operative Stores" already mentioned, whilst Molloy and I proceeded to the case-room located in the basement on right of the main entrance to Liberty Hall.

As our job was to set the type, Molloy and I proceeded to examine the "copy" and in that process we could not fail to appreciate that the manuscript was entirely legible, the script being upright and almost perfect without any changes or corrections. In referring to this it may be of interest to add here that our "copy" consisted of two sheets, sized about 10 inches by 8 inches, the paper being of a texture as used, say in ordinary personal correspondence. Also that the names of the signatories to the document were in the same handwriting as that throughout. As to the writer, I formed the opinion, at the time, that it was P.H. Pearse whose handwriting I had previously seen.

Such details were, of course, not our concern at the time as our object in examining the papers was to plan the division of the "copy". This was not easy as the majority of the type to be used was that borrowed from Mr. West and not having worked with it previously we found difficulty in estimating how far it would take us. It was obvious, the copy

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In any event the copy would have to be divided into two "takes" and our division was that my colleague would set the heading and all that followed down to the last word in third paragraph and that I would work on the second "take", viz. from the beginning of the fourth paragraph to the end including the names of the signatories.

We proceeded thus: and had gone all too far before realising that the capabilities of the type was below our estimate. This caused considerable delay as all of the type which I had set had to be distributed back into the cases and a fresh division of the "copy" made. It also compelled us to decide on printing the Proclamation in two sections. We accordingly finished the type-setting of the first section which consisted of the heading and all the wording between that and the final word "nations" in the third paragraph. We got the forms ready for press and in this encountered more trouble and further loss of valuable time as the matter occupied less than half of the space in the chase containing it and in the absence of suitable spacing material to meet this emergency we had to resort to no end of improvisation.

This defect, moreover, contributed considerably in retarding progress when the printing began. The machine was old and staggered along well enough, from week to week, in turning out the "Workers' Republic". At its best it badly needed the services of a skilled technician and our improvisations in the format seemed to completely over-tax whatever efficiency it had left. As a result stoppages were compelled, among other things, through type rising and spacing rising and smudging, with Molloy and I helping Brady in the various remedies applied, some of which were old and

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others hitherto unknown. Eventually patience, I think, succeeded rather than skill and we were very much behind time when the printing of the first section was completed.

We brought the first forme back to the case-room, once more distributed the type and after this finished the setting of the second section in normal time. We, nevertheless, had the same trouble all over again in the machining. It was, therefore, well after 1 a.m. on Monday 24th when the last of the 2,500 copies was finished. We were, by then, so tired that we left the second forme in the machine, where, incidentally it was found by British troops later occupying the premises.

We then proceeded homewards and on emerging from Liberty Hall we noted that it was having the vigilant attention of representatives of Dublin Castle, as standing in pairs in the shadows of the Railway Bridge opposite and ⁱⁿ other sheltered spots in the vicinity could be seen members of the "G" Division. I can still recall, on passing these plain-clothes detectives, that, to allay suspicion, we made it a point to talk audibly and with feigned knowledge of the possible winners at Fairyhouse races due to take place later that day. Luckily, however, this precaution seemed subsequently unnecessary as we, with safety, reached our respective homes. For that reason, too, it afterwards seemed, on Molloy and I leaving Brady at the corner of Abbey Street and Beresford Place, that we could have spared ourselves the additional fatigue on proceeding home by a circuitous route.

I did not see Molloy again for about six weeks and our next meeting was in Knutsford Detention Barracks some miles from Manchester, England, whither we both had been deported

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after the Rising. This somewhat happy interlude succeeded a release from some four to five weeks of "solitary confinement" there. During that time, I had, not unnaturally, rather anxious doubts as to my future, being conscious all the while of the possibility of closer identification with some serious consequences to follow. In view of this, our meeting accordingly, and ^{the} resultant exchange of information was, to say the least, heartening to me, as all the circumstances seemed to indicate that our luck would hold, which it did, as the British military authorities, both at Knutsford and Frongoch (Wales) where we were afterwards interned, seemed unaware of our immediate pre-Rising activities. We, therefore, considered ourselves fortunate in being released from custody, without trial, some months later.

Before concluding I must intrude with a very personal note; this having regard to some newspaper articles on the subject of the setting-up and printing of the Proclamation. I quote as follows from the "Irish Press" April 24th., 1934:

"How faithfully these men had fulfilled their trust. They took the risk of setting up and printing what others who only posted up paid for with their lives. Having done the task assigned them, they returned to the quiet, unobtrusive work of earning their living. Their courage and their patriotism is, however, now part of our history, for they had a special part in ushering in the Irish Republic."

It would seem ungracious to deny that this quotation, in its entirety, is indeed very complimentary. The sentence underlined by me (also published in the Dublin "Evening Mail" a few days ago) is, however, the portion with which I

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am particularly concerned, as this would seem to imply, with our "special part in ushering in the Irish Republic" that our association with the period ended there. If such is intended it is not wholly accurate and it could not apply to Molloy and myself. As evidence of this I would like to record here that we both played a modest part in the further events of the week, he, serving with the garrison in Jacob's factory and I, in the St. Stephen's Green area, both of us to the end.

Finally, may I explain also in regard to those newspaper articles (despite my appearance in a photograph with Molloy and Brady in the "Irish Press") that I was not asked ^{for information/K.B.} in advance of the articles published and, for personal reasons, that I did not take any action to challenge the accuracy of the portion quoted and other details as they afterwards appeared in print. Some matters in these accounts will, on reference, be found to be at variance with what has been recorded here and as far as I am concerned I would like to add that in what I have set down I have been aided by some old notes and more so by an indelible memory of the events which it covers despite the lapse of thirty-three years.

Signed:

Liam O'Driscoll

Date:

19/11/49

Witness:

Wm. Davy Bond

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