

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

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NO. W.S. 472

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 472

Witness

T.J. McElligott
(Pro Patria),

Easton House, Leixlip, Co. Dublin.

Identity

Sergeant, R.I.C.,
1918-1921.

Subject

(a) Anti-Conscription Resistance Movement
in Police Force, 1918;

Plans for organised resignations of R.I.C.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

File No. S.1599

Form B.S.M. 2.

STATEMENT OF MR. T. J. McELLIGOTT

Easton House, Leixlip, Co. Dublin

Effect of Sojourn at Police Depot:

I did not know I had a country until I joined the police force at the age of nineteen, and six months in the Dublin depot made me a rebel. On leaving the depot in May, 1908, for posting to Crosshaven, Co. Cork, I stood outside the gate and swore to play a man's part in bringing that institution to an end.

The Anti-Conscription Campaign:

The anti-conscription movement, which united the people of Ireland in a solid phalanx of resistance, offered the first and greatest opportunity. The Conscription Act was passed on 16th April, 1918, but, before it could be enforced, an Order in Council was to be laid on the table of the House of Commons for fourteen days. The British Government relied on the police force of Ireland to enforce it with the military. They forgot, evidently, that two members of the D.M.P., A. O'Neill and Gleeson, had set a new headline for the police force when they resigned after the Howth gun-running on the 26th July, when soldiers of the Scottish Borderers Regiment fired on the crowd in Bachelor's Walk.

On the 18th April, 1918, the Anti-Conscription Conference assembled in the Mansion House, Dublin, and the hierarchy met in Maynooth College. During that time, as a Sergeant in Trim, I had access to confidential documents and, in particular, to documents outlining the method by which

conscription was to be enforced. I took copies of all these secret documents; as well as the secret document dealing with conscription, there were half-a-dozen other secret documents I copied. All these documents I sent to the Mansion House Conference. The method of transmitting them to the Mansion House was as follows:-

Mr. Harrington, the editor of the "Independent", who knew me well, sent a confidential reporter to meet me in the Ormond Hotel. His name was Spillane. I asked him to go to Tim Healy's house in Glenaulin, Chapelizod, and to give a message to Mr. Healy from me. I had previously been in correspondence with Mr. Healy regarding questions which I wanted raised in the British House of Commons. I requested that Mr. Healy would remain indoors on the following Sunday evening to receive a message from me by hand. The man who took the documents to Mr. Healy was Volunteer Michael Hynes of Trim. I was going to Kerry on a holiday when I met Spillane, and I asked him to go back to Mr. Healy on Monday to enquire if he had got the documents; if he had, I asked Spillane to send me an open postcard to my address in Kerry, saying, "Glad you have fine weather for your holiday". The postcard duly arrived during the week.

Now, I must digress here for a moment. I know the documents were sent to the Mansion House, but I was alarmed, some weeks or a month afterwards, to find that Jack Morrow, the artist, was arrested in the city and charged before a

court-martial with having possession of seven highly secret and confidential documents. The dates of these documents were read out at the court-martial trial. Morrow's defence was to have the documents read out. As they were highly confidential, the court refused to read them.

When I saw this report in the Dublin evening papers, I knew they were the seven documents, or copies of them, which I had sent to Mr. Healy. I was very worried as to whether these documents were manuscript or typed. The documents, which I had sent to Mr. Healy, had been copied in manuscript by two married R.I.C. men, Constables Meehan (now a Superintendent of the Guards in Longford, I think) and Austin McHale (now residing in Athboy, Co. Meath). I wrote to Mr. Healy, guardedly, asking about the documents. Mr. Healy replied, saying he could not understand my letter and asking me to come and see him. I went to Mr. Healy's house in Glenaulin, Chapelizod. Mr. Healy informed me that the documents were typed in his house, that he himself burned the original manuscripts in the grate in the diningroom, that he took the copies to the Mansion House, that he gave them to Dan McCarthy, and that he did not know what became of them afterwards. (Copies of these secret documents were sent to Dermot Lynch in America for the Friends of Irish Freedom, who made full use of them.)

Further light can be thrown on this incident of Jack Morrow's trial by Tom Johnson (member of the Labour Court), who was also a member of the Mansion House Anti-Conscription Conference.

I saw a great opportunity for defeating conscription

by organising the police not to enforce it but to resist it, and that they should become the spearhead of the resistance movement. The old Dublin Metropolitan police were highly organised at the time. I think John D. Nugent, M.P., had a hand in it. In County Meath I organised the police to resist it, and all members I contacted subscribed generously to the Anti-Conscription Fund.

I submitted a document to the Anti-Conscription Conference in the Mansion House, outlining the steps I was taking to have the police resist conscription and asking for national co-operation behind the movement. The Mansion House Conference heartily thanked me for my efforts, and they sent Mr. Tom Johnson to meet me in a house in Kildare Street. Mr. Johnson told me that the Conference were delighted and that they unanimously accepted my proposals, but asked me to keep them informed daily and if I could give any estimate of how the police, who would be victimised, would be dealt with.

In the meantime, I contacted I.R.A. leaders and told them of the movement to resist conscription. I said it would be the greatest opportunity they could get of seizing arms in the police barracks, where they would be handed over by most men if conscription was to be enforced.

Somehow, the police authorities in Dublin Castle got knowledge of this organised resistance to conscription on the part of the police, and I believe that it was mainly responsible for the withdrawing of the Conscription Act, so that conscription was not enforced.

About this time, unfortunately, J.J. Walsh in a public

speech said to police, who were in the outskirts of the crowd, that they had a man to speak for them now - "Pro Patria". It was my non-de-plume when writing to the papers for some years before that. In these letters to the "Irish Independent", I demanded disarmament of the R.I.C. and "Catholic Emancipation" in the higher ranks, as nearly all County Inspectors and Headquarters Officers were non-Catholic.

As the Church and the people were united and organised to resist conscription and as the British Government relied mainly on the police force to enforce conscription, it is a matter of extreme regret that they had not made the attempt. The highly disciplined police force would have been broken up in a few weeks, if the attempt had been made. I suggest that, in connection with these facts on conscription, Mr. de Valera, Mr. Tom Johnson and Mr. William O'Brien be interviewed to check up on it. I think William O'Brien has some documents in connection with that event.

In connection with those seven secret documents which were sent to the Mansion House Conference by Mr. Tim Healy, some months earlier I had got John D. Nugent to put a question in the British House of Commons about one of them. The document was an order from the G.O.C., Midland and Connaught District (I think Lieutenant-Colonel Curtis was the name), in which the G.O.C. stated that, in the matter of cattle driving "it was essential that people should be roughly handled". The Chief Secretary denied any knowledge of such instructions being sent to the police. I re-drafted the question, embodying the actual words used in

the G.O.C.'s. order and giving the date on which it was issued, and the Chief Secretary's reply was: "I do not know how the Honourable Member became possessed of secret documents". Incidentally, John D. Nugent's house at 272, North Circular Road, was raided a few days afterwards.

The Hierarchy Are Asked To Make A Pronouncement:

When I saw the I.R.A. active and the police resisting attacks on barracks, I suggested to Michael Collins that copies of these secret documents be sent to the hierarchy meeting in Maynooth and that they be asked to make a pronouncement, not on the laws but on the secret orders under which British laws were administered in this country; orders, like that contained in the document of the G.O.C., Midland and Connaught District, which suggested that people should be roughly handled, could not be justified from a moral standpoint, and that advice be sought from the hierarchy on the morality of these secret orders and whether or not the police would be justified in refusing to enforce them.

I know the secret documents were sent to Maynooth, and Michael Collins told me afterwards that it was left to each bishop in his own diocese to deal with it. In particular, he mentioned the name of Archbishop Harty of Thurles as being very strongly in favour of defining the morality of these secret orders by the hierarchy.

The matter arose again in another form after the murder of Lord Mayor MacCurtain of Cork, when the Bishop of Cork issued a public letter to the press, which included the following remarkable paragraphs:-

"The Bishops of the country are asked to denounce crime, singly and collectively. There is a question which I, as an individual Bishop, do not undertake to answer, but I submit that it might be a question, a moral question, for the general body of the Bishops.

The question is this: should the Bishops tell the police that they are not bound in conscience to perform the many acts of coercion which are goading the people beyond restraint; that there can be lawfulness and unlawfulness in executive government; that, when that mode of government has no sanction in the moral, its execution has no sanction in the moral law. The position in regard to the police, to the civil peace force is now of extreme difficulty. It must be made secure again. Nothing should be left undone to re-establish confidence and to restore friendly relations between the people and the police."

In the Bishop's public letter to the daily papers, these quoted paragraphs were censored by all editors except P.J. Hooper, editor of the "Freeman's Journal". I saw Mr. Hooper on the same day, and he said he had not noticed it. Next day, the northern papers cried out that the Bishop of Cork should be tried for treason. Those who had not read the "Freeman's Journal" could not understand for what.

I discussed the Bishop's letter with Michael Collins, and I said it offered an opening for the Church to call on the police to refuse to obey orders "goading the people

beyond restraint", as outlined by the Bishop. He asked me to go to Cork and see Terence MacSwiney, to find out what could be done. I saw Terence MacSwiney and Florrie O'Donoghue in the City Hall, Cork. They were most enthusiastic about my going to see the Bishop of Cork, but they said, very definitely, that I would be far better to go alone. Terence MacSwiney rang up Farranferris and was informed that, unfortunately, the Bishop was away and would not return for a couple of weeks.

Police Union:

When the Black and Tan War became aggressive and when the resistance organised to meet conscription became unnecessary, there was no leadership to prevent the police being used to suppress our struggle for independence. Earlier, I had got the police organised into a Police Union, which was simply a branch of the Police and Prison Officers' Union in England and affiliated to the Trade Unions. At a public convention in London, I attended and advocated a resolution from that body demanding the disarmament of the R.I.C. I was serving in Trim at the time. I got the resolution unanimously carried at that convention, which had the full support of British Labour, demanding the disarmament of the R.I.C. in Ireland.

There was real consternation in Dublin Castle when they read of an R.I.C. resolution on disarmament being carried in London. I had made contact with a lot of members of the British Labour Party. The British Government and Dublin Castle publicly denied that there was such a thing as a Police Union in Ireland, although their office was clearly lettered

in a room in D'Olier Street. The "Daily News" correspondent, Hugh Martin, came to me in the Union office with a copy of the statement by Dublin Castle, and asked me what I had to say about it. I told Hugh Martin, who was a great friend of this country and who had been himself on the run from the Black and Tans, that I would put my cards on the table, on condition that he would not betray a confidence. I asked him what was the strength of the police force here, and he answered: "About ten thousand". I immediately handed him over the record of members for two counties in Ireland, Co. Cork and Co. Galway, and in these two counties alone I had over a thousand men in the Police Union. This record contained the names of the individual members and the stations to which they were attached. I asked Mr. Martin if he wished any further proofs, and he said: "No". He said he would deal with the Castle statement in the "Daily News" of the following day. Hugh Martin wrote a very strong article, repudiating the statement of Dublin Castle, on the following day in the "Daily News".

A very promising situation was developing in connection with the Police and Prison Officers' Union in England. They were organising a strike for improved conditions of service, and I wanted them committed to standing out, if they struck, for disarmament of the R.I.C.. A number of men struck in London and Liverpool, led by Jack Hayes, a Sergeant in the London Police who later became Labour M.P. for Edgehill Division in Liverpool and was Vice-Chamberlain to the Royal Household in the first Labour Government. He was a great friend of mine, and a great friend of Ireland.

Later, I brought three members of the British Labour Party to this country, and I took them all over the south and

and west of Ireland to show them the effects of British rule. (Wilson, O'Connell and, I think, Sells were their names.) I also took one of them (O'Connell) to the Trades Union Congress in Drogheda (or Dundalk), with a view to appealing for support from Labour for the principles of disarming the police. During the conference, the standing orders were suspended while I made my case to the meeting. It was carried.

Dublin Castle exercised a strict censorship of any letters, dealing with the police, for publication in the press. In particular, the "Irish Independent" was told never to publish any letter, signed "Pro Patria".

I was under suspicion for a long time and, in particular, for one secret document which was published or handed out but, as it was an exact copy of the original document issued by Dublin Castle, this document could not be traced to me. At that time, original secret documents were not communicated fully to the rank and file; the County Inspectors had to issue their own versions of them to their districts; and the District Inspectors had to make their versions for the Station Sergeants; but, in this particular case, the County Inspector in Navan sent out the secret document as he received it.

At the time of the censorship, the Inspector-General, Brigadier-General A. Byrne - the first Catholic Inspector-General ever to be appointed in the police force - started to tour the country to hear police grievances. Through the Union, I issued instructions that the men should keep silent. This was carried out to such an extent that, when General

Byrne came to Trim, he addressed the men on parade and asked to hear their grievances. They all remained silent. After the parade, I asked for an interview. In the District-Inspector's office, we had a full and frank discussion. I told him that there was no use in his touring the country at public expense to find out grievances, which were already censored in the public press. I mentioned two matters that created grave discontent in the police force, one, in particular, that they were an armed semi-military body, and that, in a force ninety-five per cent. Catholic, there were only one or two Catholic County Inspectors and he himself was the first Catholic Inspector-General that was ever appointed. He waxed indignant and said he refused to hear me on these matters. I said alright, that I had asked for an interview which he had granted, that on two vital points he had refused to hear me, that I was going out, and that I reserved to myself the right to communicate the refusal both to the press and the public in whatever way I considered fit. He suddenly apologised and said he did not mean to hurt me, but he could do nothing.

Incidentally, I had previously discussed one of these points with Mr. Tim Healy who wrote me a letter, giving me authority to state that Mr. Duke, when Chief Secretary, had promised Mr. Healy to remedy this grievance of Protestant ascendancy in the police force in Ireland. I showed Mr. Healy's letter, there and then, to the Inspector-General. Brigadier-General Byrne was shortly afterwards retired. I must certainly say he was a very honourable, decent man. After the interview with him in Trim, he told me that any time

I wanted to talk to him, I was to seek leave from nobody but to go up to see him myself.

After this interview, it became clear that I was the organiser of the Police Union and the Anti-Conscription resistance movement. I was obviously marked out, and I was transferred from Trim to Belmullet, the nearest point in Ireland to America. There and then, I tendered my resignation. I went straight across to London to attend a meeting of the Executive of the Police and Prison Officers' Union, of which I was sole Irish representative.

Immediately after my resignation, an order was made for my internment - to live within a five-mile radius of Newbridge. I knew this order had been made, because I had many friends in the Castle. I was told also that Brigadier-General Byrne, the Inspector-General, said he would not be responsible for the discipline of the force if I were interned.

Incidentally, at that time I spent three weeks in London, and I was particularly shadowed by James C. Byrnes (alias Jameson), who was subsequently shot as a spy in Ballymun Road, Dublin. Byrnes was seeking an interview with me, through Jack Hayes, and at twelve o'clock one night I met him in Bishopsgate, London. When the interview commenced, Jack Hayes forewarned me by going behind Byrnes' back and putting his finger to his mouth. Byrnes' real interest was to find out my connection with the I.R.A. leaders in Ireland and what co-operation there was between the I.R.A. and the police. I lied very frankly and told him I had no connection whatsoever with any of the leaders, and I did not

know any of them personally. I gave a full report to Michael Collins of J.C. Byrnes when I returned to Dublin, where he became known to the Volunteer Intelligence as "Jameson".

Murder Clubs:

Murder Clubs were formed by the Black and Tans in this country. As far as I know, the first was formed in Dovea Barracks, near Thurles. A great friend of mine, Constable Bratton, a very decent man and a good Irishman, was present and heard the whole outline of the Murder Clubs. He immediately left Tipperary and came to see me in Dublin. He told me the story, and he was positively alarmed about the consequences. He wished to make an affidavit about it before a Justice of the Peace or a Magistrate. I asked him to remain with me for the day until I got in touch with some of the leaders. I saw Arthur Griffith in the American Consul's Chambers in O'Connell Street that day, and I told him the whole story. Mr. Griffith was very worried. I asked him would I get a sworn affidavit from the man, and he said that, if I knew and trusted him, it was not necessary and to let him go home. Constable Bratton, a married man, was stationed in Navan in 1918 and 1919. I would like a statement to be taken from him, if he is still alive. I cannot now remember the details of the Murder Clubs, as I passed all the information I had taken down to Arthur Griffith.

Resignations in R.I.C.:

After the failure of the British to attempt to enforce conscription, which was a tragedy that they did not, and the

failure of the Church to make a pronouncement on the morality of the secret orders, under which British laws were administered, and on the lines laid down by the Bishop of Cork in his public letter after the murder of Lord Mayor MacCurtain, I saw that there was no hope but to call upon the police to resign. I discussed this matter with several of the leaders, and I outlined a programme of resignations with the co-operation of Sinn Féin and the I.R.A.. In particular, I discussed bringing about the resignation of the police with Michael Collins several times. I knew the majority of the young men were prepared to resign, but I wanted the resignations to be organised and brought about in one day. Collins said to go ahead.

I drafted a circular which was to be issued through Sinn Féin Clubs. In that original circular, I called upon Sinn Féin to call for the resignation of all single men, under fifteen years' service. I brought the document to Michael Collins, and we had another discussion on it. I was not happy about it, and I suggested to him that I would see Erskine Childers, who was in charge of Publicity.

I saw Mr. Childers at his house on Bushy Park Road on the same day, and he disapproved of the document altogether. He said the nation was engaged in a struggle for freedom; the police, as a body, were the enemy sustaining British rule in this country; one could not, from a national standpoint, ask for the resignations of less than the whole body; it was a national movement; here was a force, organised on national lines, to resist freedom; and they should all be called upon to resign. The Circular calling

on the R.I.C. to resign was issued through Sinn Féin, was signed by Páidín O'Keefe and was sent to all the Sinn Féin Clubs in the country.

Mr. Collins was very busy at this time, and no other member of the Cabinet had taken part in this matter. I strongly urged that, as I had a representative in each county in Ireland, I should call a conference in Dublin of these county representatives which would be attended by Collins, that the delegates should be advised to return, organise the resignations in each county and report to me, after a month, giving the number of men in each county, their names and the stations to which they were attached, who were prepared to resign on a given date when instructions would be issued, and that also on that date the I.R.A. should be instructed to seize all the rifles in the country stations.

I did discuss this matter with Terence MacSwiney and, I think, Austin Stack, Cathal Brugha, Bob Barton and Arthur Griffith, and all agreed that there should be a Sub-Committee of the Dáil dealing with it. Harry Boland, who was in America, came over to Ireland and, in 44 Mountjoy Street, he begged me to continue the good work I was doing. As a matter of fact, he caught me by both hands and he appealed to me to continue the good work I was doing, as it was of more value to the movement than what the organised Battalions could do.

Unfortunately, during these two months, I had little contact with Michael Collins. The shootings became active, the war became more virulent, and men began to resign from

the police force all over the country, here and there. There were no organised resignations, which meant that the men were speedily replaced by the Black and Tans.

I desire to stress, from an historical point of view, that, if the resignations of the police were organised to take place on a given date, I am convinced that the whole police force would have collapsed in a week. It was part of the plan to publish in the "Freeman's Journal", which was going 'down the hill' at the time, a tabular statement giving the names and addresses of the first lot of men who were prepared to resign. After publication of this statement, which would probably contain six hundred or a thousand names, there would be no need for further publicity.

At the time and under the circumstances, I regard the conscription crisis as one of the most favourable opportunities for paralysing British rule in Ireland, if the attempt had been made to enforce it. I am equally convinced that, if the resignations from the R.I.C. were organised as suggested and brought about on a given date, it would have paralysed British administration in this country.

I was promoted after a Civil Service examination in 1913 and, a few months before my resignation was complete, I applied for permission to compete for examination as Head Constable, although I knew I was ineligible on the question of service. I sent my application through the County Inspector in Navan who strongly recommended it, and it was also backed up at headquarters but they pointed out I was ineligible as I did not have three years' service in the rank of Sergeant.

The reason I made this application was to prove that, as I had intended subsequently to resign, they could not say that I was a man of straw. I wanted it to be proved that I had a future in the police force.

On the day I tendered my resignation in May, 1919, I communicated the fact privately to the "Irish Independent" and asked them to announce the fact in the press, as I was afraid I would be compelled to give a month's notice. I went straight to London to attend a meeting of the Executive of the Police and Prison Officers' Union, as already stated, but, before leaving, I discovered from friends in the Castle that an order was being made for my internment in Newbridge. This order was not served on me.

On returning to Dublin, I became Inspector under the Irish White Cross, on the advice of Michael Collins, for the sole purpose of keeping up the contacts I had throughout the country, especially with the police and the Brigade police officers of the I.R.A.

I was on the run for six months after my resignation. The home in Kerry was raided for me but I never stayed at home.

I carried along with my White Cross authority. I also carried an authority from Simon Donnelly, Chief of the I.R.A. Police, which authorised or requested Brigade police officers to facilitate me throughout the country. I always consulted the Brigade police before I interviewed the White Cross Parish Committees. I continued at this work until

the Treaty, when I resigned from the White Cross.

SIGNED:

T. J. McElligott (Pro Patria)

DATE:

7: 2: 51

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