

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 729

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 729

Witness

Right Rev. Mgr. Patrick Browne, B. es Sc.,
University College,
Galway.

Identity.

Close friend of Sean MacDermott,
who was executed in 1916;

President of University College, Galway,

Subject.

His visit to Sean MacDermott in Kilmainham
Prison, on 10th May 1916, i.e. two days
prior to MacDermott's execution.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S. 243

Form B.S.M. 2

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Statement by Monsignor Patrick Browne, B.-és-Sc.,

President, University College, Galway.

I got to know Seán MacDermot in the house of Miss Mary Kate Ryan, who was then a Lecturer in French in the National University and lived at that time at 19 Ranelagh Road. She lived earlier in Leeson Park Avenue and I used to meet Mr. Seán T. O'Kelly there, who subsequently became her husband, but I don't think I ever met Seán MacDermot there. That was in the years previous to 1914. When I came back from Germany just before the outbreak of the War in 1914, I am nearly certain that she had moved at that time to 19 Ranelagh Road. At any rate, it was in her house in 19 Ranelagh Road that I first met Seán MacDermot. She used to have parties on Sunday nights when a lot of people used to turn in. Mr. Seán T. O'Kelly used to be there very frequently, Liam Ó Briain (now Professor of Romance Languages in University College, Galway), and Senator Michael Hayes. Charles Wyse-Power - afterwards Judge - was very frequently there and his sister, Nancy.

I frequently met Seán MacDermot in the office where he was working for the paper, "Irish Freedom". It was in D'Olier Street and it was in that office - and not at Miss Ryan's - that I met Tom Clarke and John McBride who used go there when he came to town. I met him a few times there, and I met Tom Clarke a few times there also. I would not say I had any conversations of any import with Tom Clarke or John McBride.

I was completely without any knowledge of the coming of the Easter Week Rising all that time. Seán MacDermot used to be at Kit Ryan's pretty frequently. I used not

come to town on Sunday evenings but on Wednesday evenings. He used be there then. At that time the German attack at Verdun was going on. Nearly all the people there were strongly pro-German. They used very frequently to have maps following the movements at Verdun and various places. Apart from their interest in the war and apart from general talk about the Volunteers, I did not hear anything that could be regarded as news about the coming Rising or that would be in any way sensational. It was generally about the war and about the coming German victory. There would be no secret meetings that I knew of anyway. Certainly there were not while I was there, though I suppose there might have been at other times as people used to gather there.

I became very friendly with Seán MacDermot. I used to go to his office and I used to meet him in the smoke-room in The Bailey. He would just turn in there like anyone else, just coming for a drink or a smoke. His conversation was of a general nature and had absolutely nothing to do with the Volunteers. Of course, we talked about the war and generally about England, but nothing about the party. At no time did he give me any inkling that there was anything serious in the wind. There was a feeling, generally voiced by Seán T. O'Kelly and other people, that they would not like to let the world war pass by without a blow being struck, but it remained on a general level all the time.

Easter was late in 1916. Easter Sunday was the 23rd April and I was on holidays down in Co. Tipperary in my mother's house when the Rising broke out, which meant I went down from Maynooth on the Tuesday or the

Wednesday of Holy Week. I had not the slightest notion that anything was going to happen. I did not know anything about despatches going around the country.

About a fortnight before I left Maynooth on holidays, Seán MacDermot and Charlie Power visited me in Maynooth. They stayed the night. We played bridge - Dr. Donaghy being the fourth player - for the most of the night and they did not leave until the next morning by the early train. On that occasion there was no talk, as far as I can recollect, no mention of the Rising. That was certainly within three weeks of the event.

The only thing really that I have to tell would be my visiting Seán MacDermot in prison in Kilmainham. Seán was not executed until the 12th May. Pearse was executed on the 3rd of May, I think. The reason that is important is this. I came up to town on my bicycle. I got back to Maynooth, I should say, very early in the week following Easter Week. There were no trains until Monday. I drove into Kilkenny and I remember well meeting Dr. Walter McDonald who was profoundly against the Rising. We came up together in the train from Kilkenny to Kildare. We stayed the night with the Parish Priest of Kildare and there was a good lot of argument there on the Rising. He was unsympathetic to the Rising itself but sympathetic to the men in the Rising, because he had been a strong supporter of Dr. O'Hickey and all the people who had fought for Dr. O'Hickey. I think we got a train on the Tuesday from Kildare to Sallins and we took a side-car there and drove from Sallins to Maynooth. Monday was the 1st May and Tuesday was the 2nd. Pearse was executed on the 3rd May and I think it must have been that day that I rode up to town on my bicycle. The first place I made out was 19 Ranelagh Road.

I think at that time Mary Kate had been taken prisoner but Min and Phyllis were still there and they were the only two inhabitants of the place. Often if I was coming off and on from Maynooth, I would stay the night.

I think Seán MacDermot was to be executed the day before he was actually executed. He was to be executed on the morning of the 11th. His sentence was read to him and he was to be executed on the 11th. As far as I recollect Min had gone to see him and when I came to the house she told me then that it would be a good thing if I went to see him, that he was to die the next day.

I cycled over to Kilmainham and asked for the Commanding Officer, who was Major-General Lennon, an Irishman. He was quite nice and made no difficulty about my seeing Seán MacDermot for about a half an hour or so. It was dark at this time. It would have been about eight o'clock. I was brought up then. A soldier led me up and opened the cell door. I went in and he locked the door. He was passing up and down outside. He left me alone.

The queer thing about my visit there was that I was to be left for a half an hour and a man would come and take me away at the end of half an hour. I don't know was he Major Lennon or Major-General Lennon, but he was in charge of all the prisoners in Kilmainham. It must have been while I was there that the telephone wires got busy as a result of John Dillon's speech in the House of Commons, and it must have been Asquith got the military authorities in Ireland to stay their hand and postpone the execution. It must have come during that half hour. The result was Major Lennon completely forgot about me and sent nobody to

take me out. It was the small hours of the morning when I left. I was about five or six hours there. This was the night of the 10th-11th May. It was only when he came up to tell Seán MacDermot that he would not be executed until the following morning that Major Lennon realised I was still there. He said, "This is most irregular". I said, "I know nothing". He said, "I would take it as a favour if you would say nothing about being left here so long". He brought me down, going into his office, and he told me to be on my guard during curfew while cycling home and to be sure to stop any time I was challenged by the sentries. I had a drink with him and left on my bicycle. He did not think there would be any more executions and showed great relief at that.

About my visit to Seán MacDermot, we talked about everything, largely about the visit to Maynooth and the evening we were playing cards, about Kit Ryan's arrest, one of the things that was bothering him most. He was afraid that she would suffer in her position. He was terribly concerned about it. We talked also about the Irish Volunteers and about the question of how I did not know anything about the Rising. He was absolutely certain that I would know and that sufficient hints had been dropped in conversation all the time for anyone to pick up. I said I did not, that my mind had not turned on it at all.

Another thing he told me - and I don't know whether he was deceived about it or not - was about the document that was published in Paddy Little's paper and given out at the Corporation, about certain houses being cordoned off and the leaders of the Volunteers to be arrested. He said that it was an absolutely genuine document. Although it was his last night on earth and he spoke with

great conviction, I found great difficulty in believing it. That would have been about the most important item of our conversation, as far as history is concerned. Otherwise it was just as any conversation we might have had in Mrs. O'Kelly's or the night he was in Maynooth.

That night Seán thought he was going to be executed on the 11th and it was only when Major Lennon came along and told him that he knew he was not be executed the next morning. So it must have been in the small hours. I cycled back to Ranelagh Road and stayed there the night again. We talked it over.

During that visit to Seán, we talked about the McNeill affair and the countermanding order. He was rather severe against it, in his condemnation of McNeill, because, he said, that in his opinion it would have been a really formidable Rising with a much better chance of world reverberation than that week's fighting in Dublin. I think he felt very bitter about the calling off. As a matter of fact, he was not wasting time talking about that. He said what a pity that it prevented the Rising being a respectable rising, that it would have been over a considerable part of the country, employing a lot of British troops, and that, as far as the Germans were concerned, it would have been a more valuable thing than the mere flash in the pan it was. I don't think he even referred to McNeill as a person beyond the fact that he considered it a shocking disappointment that it had not come off as a Rising.

I regarded Seán MacDermot as a marvellous young fellow. It was the case of a man who lived for that idea of an insurrection.

He also spoke fairly bitterly about the Church in spite of my being present - about the Church and the Fenians. He said he had made his peace with God and had received the Sacraments but that he had kept away for a considerable time. He said that the thing in Fenian history that moved him most of all was the refusal to admit Charles Kickham to the Church in Thurles, that he regarded it as a most frightful thing that was done and that the people were there waiting for Charles Kickham. I do not know if Kickham had not received the Last Sacraments in Dublin. It was the local clergy who would not admit him to the Church in Thurles. The people waited in the Square in Thurles and brought him to Mullinahone next day and buried him without any clergy.

I should say that Seán MacDermot was very well read, as far as Irish history was concerned, and he had a fair knowledge of the Irish language.

One thing I recollect very distinctly about the visit. There was not a bed of any kind in the cell. He slept on the floor of the cell and when I was going away, he was arranging his coat on his boots to make a pillow for his head. There was some kind of a stool that he insisted I should sit on, and he walked around. I think there was a gas light. During the time I was there he got some kind of supper. He ate some. He was not in a tragic mood. There was not any regret for the Rising. He was really glad to be dying as he was going to die. I could say that with the greatest certainty. At the same time, when the news came that the execution was to be postponed, he said, "It's only going to be postponed, but you never know! Life is sweet". He was a T.B. case,

of course, and then he was lame. I don't know if it was a tubercular disablement. Anybody meeting him that time would not say he was a man doomed to die soon. He spoke about Min Ryan. She was his sentimental attachment - seriously. I think that was definitely serious. I parted with him.

Then the news got out the next afternoon that he was to be executed on the morning of the 12th. I went to Major Lennon that afternoon in the light and he admitted me again to see Seán for half an hour. Then, of course, we just spoke about the thing that was coming. While I had hopes that he was not going to be executed, he had said, "I don't believe that I am to get out of it so easily as that". We spoke for about half an hour, much in the same strain as the preceding night. He was in much the same form as the previous night. We talked a good deal about Charlie Power, as I often met him in Charlie Power's company.

Arthur Griffith was not notified about the big Rising. I used to meet him at that time fairly frequently, generally in the Bailey smoke-room and sometimes in the office of Sinn Féin, No. 6 Harcourt Street. I was not ever at this house before 1916. I was afterwards when he came back. My recollection about meeting Griffith before 1916 is hazy. Noyk, Seamus O'Sullivan, Oliver Gogarty and various other friends of Griffith - I certainly did not meet these until after 1916. Seán T. O'Kelly used to meet Griffith in the office after the Rising. I would say it was after the Rising that I began to meet Griffith fairly regularly. If I met him before, as I probably did, they were meetings that were unimportant and casual.

This is a certainty. In fact, Griffith spoke to me about it before the 1917 Árd Fheis. He spoke with considerable distaste of the Resolution to proclaim the country independent and follow a Republican policy. He certainly wanted to continue the old Sinn Féin policy at that time. Even then, at that time, and before the meeting of Dáil Éireann in 1919 which proclaimed the Republic, I think there was a rule that Sinn Féin should work for the Republic. He spoke with considerable distaste about that and also with a considerable disbelief that the Irish people would continue it.

It was on Griffith's proposal that De Valera was made President. He did confidentially say to me that the resolution of Sinn Féin to pledge itself to an Irish Republic was a foolish one.

The Convention, 1917 - I was not a member. I only came in for a bit of it. When I came in, De Valera had been made President of Sinn Féin.

Of course, as time went on, Griffith fell in with the policy and, when De Valera was in America, he was Acting President.

The only other thing, Griffith was put into Mountjoy in the autumn of 1920 and I went in to see him in Mountjoy. It might have been November or December. There was a warder present. We talked about mutual friends and how everything seemed to be getting on. When I was going away, Griffith said, under his breath, "Would you be able to get in touch with M. C.?" I said, "I probably will if I take the necessary steps to do it". He said, "I want you to bring a message. I had told him

beforehand there was not any purpose in having any more interviews with Archbishop Clune, but now there is a possibility and I think he should see Clune once more". Michael Collins had been seeing Dr. Clune and Griffith had come to the conclusion that it was not much use. Now he had communicated it to me that Collins should see him once more. I don't know what could have happened to make him think so. It was just as I was slipping away and the warder had his back turned. He just whispered that - two sentences. My time was just up and I was going out. There was nothing else of significance in that conversation. There was nobody there but Griffith and myself and the warder.

I participated in Griffith's own election in May, 1918. That would be when the Conscription Act came in. Griffith was not in jail at first and he was a candidate for East Cavan against the Irish Party man, named O'Hanlon. The election meetings were in full swing. It was on at the same time as the meeting of the Bishops in Maynooth. The Bishops held a special meeting in May, 1918, to consider the question of what attitude they would take with regard to the conscription of Ireland becoming law. To that meeting came the members of the Mansion House Conference on Conscription. One of the results of that meeting was that the Bishops broke up Maynooth and gave holidays to the students. It looked as if there would be a fight. It was partly to give the students a chance to help.

I went up to Dublin. Margaret, my sister, was living in Pembroke Road at the time and I was staying in the flat. One morning George Gavan Duffy and others, who were working in the East Cavan election, came in

saying that East Cavan had been denuded of workers. Practically everyone connected with it had been arrested on Mr. Short's German Plot. Gavan Duffy asked me to go to Cavan and speak and canvass, which I did that evening. I went by train to Cootehill. That must have been towards the end of the week because there was a meeting in Cootehill on Sunday and I don't remember any big intervening time between my arrival and my speaking at the meeting in Cootehill. That would have been in May and I think the election was in June some time. I am nearly certain that it was on the 18th May that Gavan Duffy came in to me.

I spoke at a great many meetings there. Father O'Flanagan took part too in this election. I had a month's election work, part of it in Cootehill and three weeks in the neighbourhood of the famous Ballyjamesduff. My headquarters were Ballyjamesduff. I spoke at a lot of local meetings. Cootehill was the only big one. It was a very big one. Father O'Flanagan, of course, was a great draw. He was a great speaker.

During the time I was there I got a letter from the local Bishop, Dr. Finnegan. The clergy in East Cavan were nearly all sympathetic everywhere, young and old. In this letter the Bishop said he had written to Cardinal Logue as head of the Trustees, asking him to order me as head of the Trustees in Maynooth to quit the election. He got an answer from the Cardinal which said he could not take any action until the Trustees met the next month. Then he said, "If that is the case, I forbid you on pain of censure to take any further part in the election in my diocese". Of course, there was part of the district which was not in his diocese and

I left Ballyjamesduff and went to Kingscourt to finish my election work.

I was not summoned by the Trustees in Maynooth when I came back. Dr. Harty said I had not broken any clerical regulation at all and he thought there would be nothing further about it. Dr. Finnegan was there too and said, "You obeyed my order in the letter but not in the spirit. Anyway, as you won well, we will say no more about it".

The general feeling of the Bishops was to rejoice that Griffith, the Sinn Féin candidate, had been elected, on account of the conscription crisis, instead of the Party candidate. The Bishops behaved wonderfully at that time. Stephen McKenna said they behaved "like Irish gentlemen". The form of the Resolution was very strong.

That was my association with the election of 1918. I never spoke at any other election meetings. I did not get any further reprimand from the Bishops in any official way. They had nothing to go on. I had not really broken any rule.

I was at the opening of Dáil Éireann. I was in no way associated with the drawing up of any of the Resolutions. Father O'Flanagan was Chaplain there and he opened the proceedings with a prayer. I think I was asked by Harry Boland to write the declaration of independence. I did write one at the time and he gave me the line of it, but the one that was read afterwards was not mine. It was a joint one I suppose.

I had nothing to do with the legislation or the Courts or the Dáil Loan - except I bought some of the Dáil

Loan. I know nothing at all about the physical activities. Regarding Dr. Clune, that was all I knew, what Griffith told me to tell Collins. Griffith never discussed that afterwards. He always said that Lloyd George had to make a settlement. He was full of optimism that everything would work out alright. In fact, it did work out that way too, from his point of view.

I knew Michael Collins. Margaret knew him better. It was in her flat I met him, and of course, in Vaughan's Hotel. My estimation of Mick was that he was a terrific worker, extraordinary energy, skill for every kind of work and dealing with people. He could give a good account of himself in any company, as far as talking about things in general was concerned. He was very attractive, talkative, a nice smile, a humorous fellow.

SIGNED

Padraig de Bruin

(Padraig de Brun)

DATE

20 Meán Fómhair 1952

WITNESS

S. Ni Chiosain

(S. Ni Chiosain)

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