

WS 750

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21  
No. W.S. 750

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 750

Witness

Mrs. Bernard O'Donnell, (Eithne Coyle),  
26 Barton Drive.  
Rathfarnham,  
Co. Dublin.

Identity.

Member of Cumann na mBan, Donegal, 1917 - ;  
President of Executive of Cumann na mBan,  
1926-1941.

Subject.

Work of Cumann na mBan,  
1917-1941.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No S.2074

Form BSM 2

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STATEMENT OF MRS. BERNARD O'DONNELL  
(EITHNE COYLE)

26 Barton Drive, Rathfarnham, Co. Dublin.

At the end of 1917 I joined a Branch of Cumann na mBan in Falcarragh, Co. Donegal, where I lived with my family. A few of us got together to form a branch in Falcarragh but that fell through, and early in 1918 I succeeded in organising a Branch in Cloughaneely where there had been an Irish College for a number of years. Pearse, Douglas Hyde, Agnes O'Farrelly and Lord Ashbourne were associated with this College.

There were roughly twenty girls and women in our Branch, and I organised and conducted for a while the various activities required by headquarters, such as, First-Aid, courier work, the making of equipment and the collection of funds. There was a Company of Volunteers in the district which was organised and captained by Bernard O'Donnell, whom I married in 1935. O'Donnell more or less trained our members, drilling them and teaching them First Aid, and we remained closely associated with the military organisation.

Our Branch took part in the anti-conscription campaign, holding protest meetings and getting the people to sign their names to the document of protest.

We took part in the general election campaign of 1918, canvassing for votes, providing transport, etc. Joe Sweeney was the Republican candidate in our constituency.

I was appointed organiser for the Gaelic League in Co. Longford in April, 1919, and founded Branches in

various towns in that county. I was the teacher in all these Branches and the pupils were mostly members of Cumann na mBan and the Volunteers, the classes being generally held in the local schools and halls. In this way I came into close touch with the members of Cumann na mBan and Volunteers of the area. In some of the towns where there were not yet any branches of Cumann na mBan, I got the girls to form one and informed Miss McKeon of Longford, who was the Provincial Executive member of the organisation. She followed up the work by visiting the branches periodically. In this way the Gaelic classes became a cover for the work of the Volunteers and Cumann na mBan. My salary was paid by the local Volunteers and Cumann na mBan.

Towards the end of 1919, Father Michael O'Flanagan and the leaders of the I.R.A. decided that my services were more urgently needed in Roscommon, and I was brought there in February, 1920. My official capacity was still that of a Gaelic League teacher, as that organisation was the only one not banned by the British authorities. I was already in touch with Pat Madden who was the O.C. of the area. I was not long there when I became suspected by the R.I.C. The District Inspector visited many houses in my district and warned the people to have nothing to do with my Irish classes. From the early summer the police made my work difficult and hazardous. I took a little house in Ballagh in the postal district of Kilrooskey. It was raided by the police and I was frequently stopped and questioned by the police on my various journeys. These attentions of the enemy reached a climax when, as a reprisal for my activities, the little house was burned to the ground by a mixed party of police and military on the 17th July, 1920, while I

was away on holidays. In 1925 I was awarded £100 compensation under the Act for the destruction of my personal property. I did not own the house; it was lent to me, rent free, by a Republican sympathiser.

My courier work for the I.R.A. involved travelling on a bicycle over the greater part of Co. Roscommon. I organised Féiseanna to raise funds for them. I visited Co. Longford frequently with messages and parcels. My intelligence work covered the reporting of movements of enemy forces, their disposition and strength in various centres and their methods and times of patrol. I prepared sketches, plans and maps of various barracks, places and buildings. I wrote articles for the 'Irish World', New York, describing police atrocities, including statements from the victims of these atrocities. I took care of the arms of the I.R.A., moving them before and after the operations. My sketches and maps were used by the I.R.A. in the successful operations at Beechwood R.I.C. Barracks and the ambush at Four Mile House, otherwise known as Ballinderry.

I should mention that, after the burning of my house at Ballagh, the I.R.A. procured another for me at Kiltreevan. This was raided on 12th October, 1920, after the Four Mile House ambush, in which four R.I.C. were killed and others wounded, by a mixed party of R.I.C., Black and Tans and military. They ransacked the house and demanded of me the names of the men who ambushed the police, stating that I had been seen leaving the scene of the ambush that morning. I knew the names of the men, although I had not been at the scene of the ambush. I refused, of course, to give the names in spite of the threats used by the police. They then piled all my

belongings and furniture in the middle of the floor and poured paraffin oil and petrol over them. When I remarked that they were going to burn the house of a good loyalist, they withdrew without setting fire to it. The house did belong to a loyalist but had been commandeered for me by the I.R.A. who depended on me a good deal for courier and intelligence work.

I was out at all hours doing this work and frequently met the Black and Tans in lanes and by-roads, swinging their guns in a threatening fashion. I was always very glad, especially late at night on lonely roads, to get safely past them. My knees often trembled as I pedalled along on my bicycle. I was often held up and questioned, but it always happened that these particular groups of Black and Tans did not know me by sight.

On December 31st, 1920, my house was again raided by a mixed party of police and military, numbering about 25, who carried out a most exhaustive search. They spent the whole day there, digging up the garden, going through the turf rick and ransacking everything in the house. They kept asking questions, which I would not answer, such as, "Who was in charge of the local I.R.A.?" They went away without having found anything. They returned in the middle of the night, breaking in the door of the house, and immediately arrested me. They evidently had found my notes and plans of Roscommon R.I.C. and military barracks. I had made these plans and notes following my visits to some I.R.A. prisoners who were held there and whom the local O.C. had intended to rescue. The plans and notes were not produced during any of the raids on my house, and I can only assume they

found them in a raid on some other house. They must also have found copies of some of the letters I sent to the 'Irish World', New York, because these, with the plans, etc., were afterwards produced at my courtmartial.

I was taken to Roscommon R.I.C. Barracks and put into a cell which was used for the drunks. It was filled with tins of petrol and paraffin and very dirty. They thought to prepare it for me by throwing buckets of cold water on the floor and sweeping it out with the yard brush. The result was that it was very damp and I did not undress that night, although there was a bunk. A Black and Tan was put on guard over me when I was brought in early that morning. He kept abusing me all day. He was plucking an old hen that he had probably stolen and throwing the feathers in the fire, producing an awful smell. He used to say, "You Shine Finers make me sick". I said, "You'll be much sicker after you have eaten that old hen". However, during the night he opened my cell door, gingerly carrying a cup of tea in one hand and a piece of bread in the other. His mood had changed. He said he had to take up this work because he had a mother and a sister and had no job since the war was over. He had become quite human in fact. That was the only food I got during the twenty-four hours I was in Roscommon Barracks. The local people did not know of my presence there; otherwise, they would have been in with food.

Although physically I was not in any way ill-treated, I was on this and on previous occasions threatened to be shot if I did not give the information the Black and Tans were looking for, that is, the names of the men I was working for. Of course, I gave them no satisfaction.

I was brought on an open lorry filled with military, Black and Tans and police to Athlone military barracks. I was put into an ordinary cell. In this, as in all those old barracks, there was a pretty big opening in the wall beside the door. I tried to keep it covered with papers, but every time I did that the sentry outside stuck his rifle through the opening, so that I was not able to undress. I was held there for six weeks, having only an old plank bed to sleep on. While there, I met a lot of the men prisoners from the west. They were acting as orderlies and used to bring me my food. They supplemented the prison fare by anything they could get hold of.

From Athlone I was brought to Mountjoy by lorry. There I met some other women prisoners. Eileen McGrane was there before me. Miss Keogh, Miss Rigney, Annie Cooney - who was awaiting sentence - came a short time after me. Madame Markievicz was there too, serving a sentence of two years' hard labour. We could only communicate with her by signs through the window and at Mass on Sundays. Linda Kearns came to Mountjoy much later - from some prison in England. About June three very young girls from Cork arrived in Mountjoy. They had been arrested after some ambush in Cork, in which a bridge was blown up, and they were accused of complicity in it. Two of them were sisters named Cotter and the third was their cousin. They were weeding turnips in a field nearby when the lorry load of Black and Tans was blown up by the I.R.A. They were sentenced to penal servitude for life. Frank Brady of Belfast, who was a worker in the Belfast boycott, was brought in later and sentenced to two years' imprisonment. Bridget Brady from Leix came in also while I was in Mountjoy and was

sentenced to three months' imprisonment. Catherine Toolin, a lame girl, who worked in a post office in Co. Roscommon and was sentenced to six months, was also serving it in Mountjoy. May Burke from Co. Limerick got a two years' sentence also for giving information from the post office where she worked, as far as I remember, and was serving it in Mountjoy. Eileen McGrane's trial did not take place for months after her arrest. After conviction, she was transferred to a British prison. The two Sharkey sisters from Strokestown spent a few weeks in Mountjoy in my time.

There were also two old ladies from Ballinalee, both over eighty years of age, whose names I can't remember. Their house was used by Seán McKeon on the occasion of the big ambush, for which he was sentenced to death. They smoked pipes. They were brought with me in the lorry from Athlone Barracks and were released after a few days in Mountjoy, having refused to give any information.

Another person I should mention was Mrs. Llewelyn Davis who was also a prisoner in Mountjoy. I can't remember when she came in. As far as I remember, she was in the hospital most of the time, where things were pleasanter. I am very vague about her generally, except that Madame Markievicz expressed doubt about her bona fides and about the reason for her being in gaol. I spoke to her very seldom.

Patricia Hoey, whose house sheltered Michael Collins, was brought into Mountjoy during my period there but was released without trial. There were a few others, amongst them a Miss Kelly and Molly Hyland, similarly dealt with, also a Miss Moffatt and another



girl whose name I don't remember - both from Leitrim.

It was while I was in Mountjoy that Paddy Moran and the other five lads were executed. I remember that during exercise one day I ran away from the wardress and went over to the enclosure to wave to them. Thomas Trainor's execution also caused us great grief.

My trial by field general court martial took place on the 29th February, 1921. The charges against me were that I had in my possession a plan of Roscommon military and police barracks, a plan of the entrance to the barracks, a document prescribing the duties of the prohibited organisation, Cumann na mBan, and a letter to the 'Irish World' containing statements of atrocities alleged to have been committed by the British forces. One of the party who searched my house gave evidence that the plan indicated accurately where prisoners were being detained and he had personal knowledge that on October 12th a motor lorry of police was ambushed some miles from Kiltreevan, four being killed and a couple wounded. The prosecutor expressed the hope that the sentence would be one to act as a deterrent to people like me, engaged in the promulgation of what they knew to be absolute lies in connection with his Majesty's forces. There was no doubt the document showed the nature of the propaganda in which I was engaged. He said I had escaped suspicion owing to the fact that I was a woman.

I was reading a newspaper during the whole of the proceedings and I informed the judge in Irish that I refused to recognise the court. I was condemned to three years' penal servitude, mitigated to one year, without hard labour.

As I have already stated, the documents mentioned were not found in my house when the Black and Tans searched. If they had, they would have been only too glad to produce them to me.

During all the time, the sentenced prisoners had to undergo practically solitary confinement. We were brought out for exercise for a couple of hours each day. Madame Markievicz had a little garden and we potted in it to keep fit. We talked to each other, although we were not supposed to. The Black and Tans were guarding us.

Madame Markievicz, as a T.D., was released at the Truce but we remained. There was a certain relaxation of rules for all of us at that time. We were allowed to see visitors and to have Irish classes. We associated freely with each other and, of course, discussed the political situation. The leaders outside, or some of them, continued to make uncompromising speeches. I remember a meeting in Galway at which Dick Mulcahy made a real "die for Ireland" speech, which caused me to express the fear that the same leaders would let us down in the final analysis. I was nearly lynched by my fellow-prisoners for daring to express such doubts.

The advent of visitors was a God-send to us, as we were contemplating how we could escape from the prison. Linda Kearns was very enthusiastic about this. We managed to get a ball of wax and one day when the wardress left down her keys, a wax impression was taken of the key that fitted the door of the corridor leading to the compound. One of our visitors took out the impression and had a key made. We were not sure that it would fit, so one day we started to play football on

the corridor and forced the wardress out into the compound. She locked the door behind her, taking away the key. We tried out <sup>N</sup>key and were delighted to find that it fitted perfectly.

We had already decided what part of the wall we intended to climb and had made arrangements with our friends outside to throw a rope ladder over it at that spot when we would give the signal.

We had decided to make the attempt at Hallowe'en at 7 o'clock. At 6.55 I came out to look at the clock. The other girls who were not taking part in the adventure but wanted to help us arranged a football match for that time, while we four - Linda, Eileen Keogh, May Burke and myself - rushed to the appointed place and gave the agreed signal. Just then, to our horror, we heard two wardresses coming along. We held our breath, pressed close to the wall and they passed by without seeing us. After a short time a rope ladder was flung over the wall. We had decided that Linda Kearns, who was in poor health, should climb over first, which she succeeded in doing. The others followed while I held the ladder. Then my turn came. The climb this time was not so easy, as the ladder hung loose; but I managed it and I jumped down from the top of the wall into the arms of our waiting friends.

Among these was a man called Seamus Burke who had previously visited us in Mountjoy, bringing a letter from Fr. Dominic - who was in prison in England - congratulating us women prisoners on our work for Ireland. Burke told us he had been a political prisoner in England with Fr. Dominic and spoke familiarly about various people we knew to be connected with the movement.

We moved along arm in arm with some of the men, by the canal bank to Cross Guns Bridge where two cars, one belonging to Dr. St. John Gogarty and the other to Dr. Pat McLaverty, were waiting. A policeman on patrol there took no notice of us. Miss Keogh and I, accompanied by Seamus Burke, got into Dr. McLaverty's car and drove to his - the doctor's - house in Merrion Square. Mrs. McLaverty received us kindly but was immediately suspicious of Burke on account of his English accent. He explained laughingly that he had been to school in England and spent most of his life there; he went away almost immediately.

We lay low for about a week and then Mrs. McLaverty took us out for a walk. Very soon there was a G-man following us. It was Dr. P. McCartan, whom we met, that spotted him. He suggested that it would not be wise to go back to McLaverty's but that we should go by a roundabout way to Madame McBride's house in St. Stephen's Green. We did this. Dorothy Macardle and Madame's French maid, Marie, dressed in our clothes and went off with Mrs. McLaverty.

In a short time we had a visit from Madame Markievicz who lent me a £5 note to meet my immediate needs, telling me at the same time I need not bother about paying it back. I was greatly touched by her generosity and, of course, repaid her at the first opportunity.

We were not long at Madame McBride's when Seamus Burke, who had evidently found out where we were staying, called to say the house was not safe and that he had been instructed to take us to the Convent of the Cross and Passion in Kilcullen, where he had already

brought Miss Kearns and Miss Burke. He had a car waiting, but Miss Keogh who had gone into town could not be found, so I went off alone with him. On the way down, he was able to tell me about all the arms dumps in the whole of Ireland, so well had he succeeded in getting into the confidence of the I.R.A.

The nuns were very good to us and the curate, Fr. McAuliffe - he died in Harrington Street four or five years ago - who was a Republican, visited us often bringing us books and papers. One day he arrived in a great hurry and told us that Burke was a British spy who had taken in everybody, including Fr. Dominic. He had planned to bring the four of us together and have us re-arrested at the convent, but Miss Keogh's wandering habits had saved her from the trap.

Burke was courtmartialled by the I.R.A. It was decided that, if hostilities were renewed, he would be shot; otherwise he would be expelled from the country. When I was in Mountjoy again in 1923, I found him among the criminals, serving a sentence for swindling.

Fr. McAuliffe arranged to take us at once to an I.R.A. camp in Duckett's Grove in Carlow, where we remained until the Treaty was signed.

In fairness to Linda Kearns - who is now dead - in case it should be stated at any time in the future that she and I did not inform Eileen McGrane and the other women prisoners in Mountjoy at the time that we planned to escape, I wish to record that Linda and I discussed the matter some considerable time before our escape and we decided to notify the other women prisoners before we completed our plan. Eileen told us

not to proceed with it, that she had a better one, which was to get guns from outside and hold up the wardresses - and presumably the military. When we noticed that the time was passing without any progress being made about the escape, we pinned down Eileen and informed her that, unless the arrangements were completed within a certain time - which we named - we would proceed with our own plan. She said, "All right! Go ahead."

While we were in Duckett's Grove and after Eileen's release, I received a letter from Madame Markievicz to the effect that we were to be court-martialled by the Executive of Cumann na mBan for escaping from Mountjoy without informing the other women prisoners.

I had returned to Donegal at the time fixed for the courtmartial, which was much later, and did not turn up for it, but Linda did. Eileen McGrane, the plaintiff, did not appear to make her charge against us and the whole matter dropped.

I resumed my work organising for Cumann na mBan after the Treaty. I was appointed to Donegal, Derry and Tyrone. The disunion caused by the Treaty had greatly disorganised both Cumann na mBan and Volunteers. This was accentuated by the Border which had been established by the setting up of the new government in Belfast. The Treaty played havoc with some of the branches of Cumann na mBan. I had to scrap many of them and build up others.

One of the tasks given us to do was to intensify the boycott of Belfast goods. Cumann na mBan Headquarters had issued a statement that, if any more

pogroms against the Catholics took place, our organisation would take action. I watched the papers for the Belfast manoeuvres and, as soon as I saw there was another outbreak, I decided to take action. I was staying at the time at a hostile little hotel in Strabane and I decided to hold up the mail car that was bringing newspapers from the Six Counties. I got up at 5 a.m., waylaid my man who was driving a side-car. I had an old revolver which had no trigger, but it did the trick. I burned all the papers and went back to the hotel to my breakfast. The news spread quickly and the people in the hotel were naturally suspicious, on account of me being out so early. It was a Sunday morning. There was a little preacher staying in the hotel. He sat at the table next to mine. He got up at last and produced a little tract from his pocket. He left it on my table. It had a picture of a shoemaker hammering a terrible old shoe. He said, "There is a wee tract for you". The caption under the picture was, "It is never too late to mend". He went out then. I left Strabane after breakfast and went into Donegal. This would have taken place about the middle of March, 1922.

I held up trains that carried Belfast goods. The following extracts from newspapers give an idea of this sort of activity:-

BELFAST TELEGRAPH, April 12th, 1922.

"The now customary burning of Belfast newspapers was again carried out at Creeslough on the Derry and Lough Swilly line. On the arrival of the evening train, armed women removed all the parcels from the train and set them alight on the platform."

LONDONDERRY SENTINEL, April 22nd, 1922.

"On the arrival of the 12.15 train at Letterkenny from Strabane on Thursday, a woman armed with a revolver seized from Patrick Cullen a bundle of Belfast newspapers and burned them. She then proceeded up the town and, entering the different newsagents, seized all Belfast papers and, taking them to the market square, destroyed them."

LONDONDERRY SENTINEL, April 27th, 1922.

"A slight change of programme took place at Buncrana yesterday. The woman who had hitherto undertaken the burning of the parcels left for Derry, with the intention, it was stated, of going to Falcarragh. But she assigned the work of destruction to a young man of the town."

LONDONDERRY SENTINEL, April 18th, 1922.

"A correspondent of the 'Daily Mail', who witnessed one of the exhibitions of newspaper burning on the Lough Swilly line, gives the following story of his experiences:-

'Presently we drew up at a one-platform station in the heart of the mountains.

"This door is locked, porter!" It was the voice of a girl. ... A few yards from my carriage, revolver in hand, stood a slim neatly dressed girl, and a bewildered porter was eyeing her with ill-concealed nervousness. The guard hurried up - no questions were asked - the doors of the van were simply thrown open.



"Those things are in my way", she said. The cool decided tones and a slight flourish of the revolver made the guard and porter hasten to obey.

A few large boxes were dragged out and laid on the platform. The girl stepped into the van, and in a few minutes emerged with a large bundle of newspapers in her arms.

"You may put these boxes back now and proceed!", she said.

Laying her revolver on the ground, within easy reach, she began stacking the newspapers in a neat little pile; then producing a box of matches from her pocket, she proceeded to set them on fire and, as the train steamed out, the bonfire was blazing merrily."

As you will see, I carried out most of this work alone. The I.R.A. were not a bit keen on it. A little later I took a few Cumann na mBan girls with me and an odd I.R.A. man, so that they could carry on the work when I should leave the district.

I think it was after the Four Courts fight that the scrapping started in Donegal between the two sides. Unfortunately, quite a new lot of adventurers had crept into the I.R.A. at this time. Many of them came from Derry, Tyrone and Belfast. There was a Camp in Raphoe where these congregated and they carried out quite a number of discreditable operations which lowered the tone and the morale of the movement. This happened elsewhere too, for instance, in Sligo, and poor Seamus Devans was heartbroken over it. Personal jealousy and

greed were motives that inspired many of the actions. Houses and shops were raided and non-essential goods were taken. I remember one day when I was in Finner Camp the O/C. showed me a pile of new shoes and told me to take what I wanted. I was horrified.

Another Sunday morning I was waiting at a place called Tullaghan to contact Seamus Devans - I was <sup>despatch carrier</sup> liaison officer and ~~despatch~~ <sup>despatch</sup> carrier between the 1st Northern and 3rd Western Divisions - and I went to the I.R.A. camp there and found that not one of them troubled to get up for Mass. I was kept awake several nights by the noise of the carts carrying away the furniture from Tullaghan House. Bits of it were to be seen afterwards in many of the houses of the district.

Seamus said to me two days before he was killed: "We couldn't win; we are not in earnest". The situation was not very far removed from complete demoralisation. The decent men remained decent. It was the rag tag and bobtail that crept in when all danger was over, the "Trucers" as Páidín O'Keefe would say, that spoiled the movement.

Following the fight at Newtowncunningham, in which a number of Free State soldiers were killed and others wounded, feeling ran high in Donegal, for, on one occasion when I was returning from Arranmore Island where I was organising, a number of Free State supporters lay armed in ambush for me. I was saved by the local I.R.A. unit under the command of Neil (Plunket) Boyle, who were waiting at Burtonport Pier for me. They had heard that the other crowd were preparing the ambush.

The border warfare further increased my duties and responsibilities. I had to organise first aid posts at various points along the border and at Clady I participated while armed in an attack on a Specials' post. It was the I.R.A. from Donegal under, I think, Frank O'Donnell, who carried out the attack. Teigue Haughey and James Kelly, who was afterwards

blown up about 1939, took part in the action. They took the post and drove out the Specials, wounding a couple of them, as far as I remember.

That shows that at all times I worked in close co-operation with the I.R.A. and in June '22, following discussions with the Divisional officers, I was instructed to establish a Cumann na mBan headquarters at Glenveigh Castle about five miles from Kilmacrennan where Aodh Ruadh O'Donail took the oath of allegiance to Ireland. It belonged to Lady Adare. The Divisional Headquarters staff intended moving there from Raphoe and it was considered advisable that I, being a responsible officer in the county, should, in the event of hostilities breaking out, be at Divisional H.Q. in order to ensure the greatest possible efficiency of our forces with the minimum delay. So I established my headquarters in Glenveigh Castle about the 20th June and, on the outbreak of hostilities on the 28th June 1922, the 1st Northern Division established its H.Q. there, having cleared out of Raphoe.

From that on I worked solely with the Divisional staff on communications, courier and intelligence work, transporting of arms and equipment and publicity, which involved the issuing of a News Bulletin. It was Aodh de Blacam who lived near my mother's house in Falcarragh, who gave me the stencil machine for this.

In carrying out my task of securing communications between the 1st Northern and 3rd Western, I had to link up between St. John's Point in south west Donegal and Mullaghmore on the north Sligo coast, and this I had to do in an ordinary small fishing boat, as all the roads and bridges were held by the Free State army. On one occasion, with Roisin O'Doherty, I was sent by our Divisional O/C. to Dublin, with a duplicate dispatch to look for arms, typewriters and other equipment. At a point outside Bundoran, where we arrived by boat, we found ourselves within rifle range of an ambushing party of Free State troops.

Knowing that the boatman would be immediately searched, we took their revolvers, got safely through the cordon and arrived safely in Dublin. We each had the dispatch, but had them hidden away in different ways. We collected the material of which I took charge as we thought it wiser to go back to Donegal by different routes. Roisin travelled by the Six Counties and I by Sligo where I contacted Seamus Devans, delivering and collecting messages. This was two days before the 22nd Sept., the day on which he was killed. There was a round-up by McKeon's troops and the Free Staters from Sligo. There was a fight - I forget the name of the place; I think it was somewhere near Tullaghan; but I would not swear to that - and poor Seamus was killed.

In July 1922 I was asked to establish a hospital unit in Glenveigh Castle, Churchill, which is below Letterkenny. Any casualties we had were due to the scraps on the Border. There were a few sick men with ordinary diseases.

I should mention that sometime after the Treaty was passed and before the attack on the Four Courts Collins sent light German guns to the north which were unsuitable for guerilla warfare. These were to arm the northern Volunteers against the Orangemen whom they were to attack. The arms were withdrawn as far as I understand because they had a sharp reaction which knocked the wind out of the men who fired them.

I was the first woman arrested by the Free Staters. In my journeys between Donegal and Sligo, Omagh and Enniskillen, I was arrested about a dozen times. They would keep me for some hours and release me, perhaps in the middle of the night. My journeys to Omagh and Enniskillen were for the purpose of collecting arms from the dumps there. I was finally arrested on the 25th September 1922. I was kept in Ballyshannon Military Barracks for six weeks. The accommodation there was a cell off the guardroom where I had no privacy and no female attendant.

The noise and rowdiness were appalling and nearly drove me mad. The soldiers used to come into the guardroom beside my door and I had my heart in my mouth for fear they would break into my cell which locked from the outside. I recently heard from Mrs. de Blacam that she and my mother had sent a joint letter to the Parish Priest of Ballyshannon asking him to intervene and see that I would at least be given an opportunity of going to Mass. His reply was that if all he had heard about me was true he thought his congregation would be better without me. Some of the priests were very bitter against the republicans. I made a protest to the O/C. - MacGowan - and he replied that I had been doing a man's work and that I should put up with any treatment that would be given to a man in my position. At last I went on hunger-strike and remained on hunger-strike until I was brought to Buncrana military barracks. There was a woman attendant there and I did not take food until I got a guarantee that I would get proper treatment. After two weeks I was taken to Dublin by sea in a cattle boat. I was the only prisoner in it and had the whole boat to myself. They were afraid of another escape. I was taken to Mountjoy where, in the meantime, a few other arrested prisoners had been interned. Sheila Humphreys, her mother and her aunt, Aine O'Ranilly. After that, numerous women prisoners were brought in and the prison became crowded. Two and three prisoners were put into cells intended for one and we retaliated by throwing the beds out in the passage. Our cell doors were left open during the day until 9 o'clock at night, except when Páidín O'Keefe took a fit and locked us out. <sup>the three of us</sup> Following one of these occasions he locked <sup>the three of us</sup> us in our cell for two days.

By way of punishment for our resistance to the overcrowding and to the menial tasks we refused to do, Páidín O'Keefe, the deputy governor, arrived one night with a troop of soldiers and took away beds, stools, boxes that we had

fitted up as dressers &c., broke and kicked our delph leaving us only with mattresses on the floor. As it was winter, the weather was bitterly cold and it is astonishing that any of us survived the hardsnip. Some of the girls, especially the country girls, were afterwards sent to an early grave from T.B., stomach and nerve trouble as a consequence of this experience. There was a grand bunch of Kerry girls there, and an awful lot of those died early.

One night Páidin O'Keefe arrived accompanied by his usual troop of soldiers. He always carried two revolvers, one at his belt and another on his thigh, and was constantly warning us "You'll be shat". On this occasion he carried a list and, calling out the names of the prisoners, they were passed down the corridor until only twelve of us remained. We were put back and locked in our cells and the others transferred to Kilmainham.

After that we had a prison council and elected Mrs. Buckley O/C. We sent a demand to Páidin to have our beds returned and to be granted political status. We wondered why we were left and the others removed. I think it was probably to create a panic. Our letter was brought back by Páidin, who said that prisoners don't demand, but ask concessions. He wanted us to give a guarantee that no more destruction of prison property would take place. As well as pitching the beds out of the overcrowded cells, some of the girls who had no clothes had cut up the blankets to cover themselves.

Our demands not being heeded, we decided to go on hunger-strike; this would be about a week before Easter. The conditions were appalling and we were desperate with cold and misery. When we told Páidin what we had decided on he said: "Ye can plaze yerselves, but I can always go one better".

After about eight days the beds were brought back and letters and parcels were restored also, so we again took food.

About June - the second week - we were transferred to the North Dublin Union, as were the women prisoners in Kilmainham. Others will deal better with the awful search that took place at that time. The wardresses had refused to do this search. The women searchers were all drunk and the soldiers and C.I.D. present had their faces blackened so that they would not be recognised again. It was terrible. The screams and shouts of the resisting women and girls could be heard at a great distance. Some of those women searchers took off their high heeled shoes and banged the prisoners' heads with them.

The building was a workhouse which had been occupied by the Tans and again the overcrowding started. We used the same tactics. The bedding was all new and damp and we all got bad colds. The place was filthy after the Tans; it had not even been swept; there were no baths and no conveniences for washing or drying our clothes or ourselves and we were not allowed to send out our clothes. The conditions were appalling. The food was always short. I was vice-commandant and Sheila Bowen commandant. She had heart trouble and was in bed quite a lot, so I had to do most of the work. It would go to your heart to see the hungry look on the faces of those young girls. We had to organise a soup kitchen to try to supplement the rations. We used to go in the morning to check the rations which were always short. They were cheating us. The distribution of the food when cooked was done by ourselves to ensure that everybody got some. The young girls never had enough. There were about 300 women there at one time from all classes and from all parts of the country and I would like to pay a tribute to them. Nobody ever got the amount of loyalty and co-operation I got from them all. They obeyed me always and without hesitation when at 9 o'clock in the summer evenings, and about 4 o'clock in the winter I was compelled to call them back into that

horrible gloomy building. Many of them are now dead and I cannot recall their loyalty without a feeling of tenderness in my heart. We were not long in the Union when we tried to escape one night via the Broadstone Station. We thought that the market wagons would be stationary at the platform and our guide, a girl from Aughrim Street, told us she knew the way; but nothing turned out as anticipated and in the early morning when we expected to get the first passenger train into town, we were seen by some soldiers on the platform who gave the alarm and we were all rounded up and brought back to the Union. Two or three had escaped by this route on the preceding night. There was no change in our condition.

The hunger-strike in Mountjoy took place, I think, in the autumn of 1923, and the men prisoners were hosed in their cells to get them out into the yard. They were transferred to the different camps in the Curragh. There was a sympathetic strike among the other prisoners there and we women prisoners decided to go on hunger strike too. I think this lasted about sixteen days, at the end of which they decided to release us. Some of our fellow prisoners - three or four - who refused to take the nourishment that the medical men thought necessary for their own safety, remained behind for another fortnight. This was in November 1923.

I went home and was put in charge of Prisoners' Dependants' in Donegal, and to provide funds for this purpose I organised a dramatic society which toured different parts of Ireland and even visited Scotland. We raised quite a lot of money. The relief organisation was now called the White Cross which obtained considerable funds from America.

I was appointed to the Executive of Cumann na mBan in 1924, and was elected President in 1926, when Madame Markievicz resigned, which position I held till 1941. I had tried to resign before that owing to the bombing of women and children in England



by the I.R.A. (new section) which I could not approve of. The successive conventions refused to accept my resignation or to appoint anybody in my place.

In 1941 at a convention in 'lynn's Hotel we were hours arguing and they refused to nominate anyone else and I suggested by way of compromise, that if they would alter the Constitution to allow the resignation of the President before the calling of another convention, as required by the existing Constitution, I would hold on for a while. In the course of the year, when things got very bad in England, I felt compelled to resign. Sheila Humphreys, the vice-President, carried on for a little and the other members of the Executive maintained that my resignation broke up Cumann na mBan.

I was arrested again in 1925 and given a month for bill-sticking.

Signed: *Eithne Bean Uí Dhomhnaill*  
Eithne, Bean Uí Dhomhnaill.  
Date: *10<sup>th</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> 1952*  
10adh Mí na Samhna 1952.

Witness: *S. Ni Chiosain*  
(S. Ni Chiosain)

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1813-21  
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