

W.S. 825

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRS
No. W.S. 825

ROINN  COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 825

Witness

Leopold H. Kerney,
5 Merton Road,
Rathmines,
Dublin.

Identity.

Irish Trade Representative in Paris,
1919-1922;

Irish Minister to Spain, 1935-1946.

Subject.

Appointment as

Irish Trade Representative in France, 1919.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.1621

Form B.S.M. 2

ORIGINAL

STATEMENT OF
LEOPOLD H. KERNEY

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAMP INLEATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 825

former Consul of the Irish Republic in France.

5, Merton Road, Rathmines, Dublin.

July 1919 - December 1922.

In 1919, when Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh came to Paris as Delegate of the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic, I was Cashier and Chief Accountant in one of the leading dressmaking firms in Paris at that time; I had settled down in that city in 1912, having spent the previous ten years in Germany, England, France, Belgium and Italy. I knew only one other Irishman then living in Paris, the late Michael O'Carroll of Borrisoleigh, Co. Tipperary, and he accompanied me when I went to pay my respects to the Delegate of the Irish Republic and to meet Sean T. for the first time.

Michael O'Carroll had lived in Paris since the year 1900 and, being of a thrifty disposition and not afraid of hard work, had established a successful tailoring business in the Boulevard Haussmann, not far from the Gare St. Lazare. I called in at his shop one evening when my day's work was done. Shortly afterwards Sean T. dropped in for a visit; he asked me whether I would be prepared to deal with any enquiries of a commercial nature which might be addressed to me from Ireland; I replied that I would be very pleased to do so and that, if I were not competent to deal with them myself, I would put my correspondents in touch with those who could do so.

I had already arranged to spend a holiday in Ireland. I was convinced of the soundness of Arthur Griffith's policy of direct trade between Ireland and other countries and of the desirability of eliminating the control exercised by English intermediaries over all trade between Ireland and countries other than England. Inspired by my faith in direct trade, I arranged with a friend of mine who was a

"commissionaire" (importer and exporter) to pack a large trunk which I put at his disposal with samples of various kinds; he asked me what classes of goods I was interested in; I told him that I had not the faintest idea, and that it was purely a venture on my part; so I left the choice of samples to him. The venture was a successful one; it paid for my holiday in Ireland.

I attach a letter written to me by Sean T. O Ceallaigh on 7th July 1919, referring to my willingness to give information and assistance in the matter of promoting commercial relations between Ireland and France.

On my arrival in Dublin, I called at 6 Harcourt Street, where I met for the first time Bob Brennan, Desmond Fitzgerald and others. Desmond Fitzgerald arranged an appointment for me with Ernest Blythe, Minister for Industry and Commerce, who was "on the run"; he accompanied me one morning to a house in Pembroke Road, where he introduced me to Blythe, who had certainly not had a shave that morning. I learned from latter that the Cabinet was considering the question of appointing me as part-time commercial representative in Paris, on a salaried basis, and not, as I had anticipated, in a purely voluntary capacity. I think it was the following day that Blythe's hiding place was raided, and I well remember feeling some concern at the thought that that raid might somehow or other be associated with my previous visit, seeing that I was a comparative stranger.

Desmond Fitzgerald left the accompanying undated note for me at the Hotel Pelletier, Harcourt St., where I was staying, asking me to call in at No. 6 the next day, as Art O'Briain would be there and wanted to meet me.

On Tuesday, 29th July, Mr. Blythe posted me the attached letter informing me that Mr. Griffith would see me the

following day. At the same time I received a scribbled pencil note (attached) from Arthur Griffith, dated 29th July, the letter-heading being "NATIONALITY", 6 Harcourt St., Dublin, fixing an appointment for 4.30 p.m. the following day. When I met him, our conversation ranged over many topics; I remember him referring to Michael MacWhite, whom I had just recently met in Paris, and saying that he had more or less anticipated that he would enlist in the French Foreign Legion; he also commented on the scuttling of the German Fleet at Scapa Flow, saying that the English were aware in advance of the German intention.

It was on Thursday, 31st July (to the best of my recollection) that Arthur Griffith again met me in a back parlour of a shop in Parliament St. where Mr. Loughlin had an outfitting establishment. It had been decided to pay me at the rate of £200 p.a. for my assistance in a part-time capacity. Arthur Griffith produced from one of his pockets £50, representing the first quarter's payment in advance, in £1 notes, the dirty appearance of which struck me very much; he also handed me my Credentials as Trade Representative to France from the elected Government of the Irish Republic; these Credentials (attached) took the form of three separate sheets attached with green tape, the text, in very neat and carefully written script, being in French, Irish and English respectively; they were dated 31st July 1919; they were signed by Arthur Griffith as Acting President of Dáil Éireann (de Valera being in the U.S.A. at that time), although this description is omitted (possibly as a result of uncertainty as to the correct wording) in the French text.

Although these Credentials described me as "Trade Representative", I became known, before many months elapsed, as Irish Consul in Paris, and was so described in official documents.

Before leaving Dublin I spent an evening in the house of Thomas Loughlin, 16⁴ Botanic Road, for the purpose of meeting Michael Collins; he was in good humour because, he said, not even half-a-crown had been found in a raid which had just taken place at his offices; I remember him refusing to have anything to drink that evening. I think Arthur Griffith was also present.

From the beginning of May 1920, I became whole-time trade representative and worked openly as Irish Consul in Paris; my salary was now, as well as I remember, £700. I established myself at 4, rue de la Terrasse. By this time George Gavan Duffy was our political and diplomatic representative in Paris, and I considered myself as being immediately responsible to him; before deciding on the new premises, I secured his approval.

Thenceforward, up to December 1922 (when the agreement with England of the previous December was finally approved and became effective), I continued my labours as Irish Consul, devoting myself to the trade matters which were within my province.

The archives relating to my work from July 1919 till December 1922 were deposited many years later, at the request of Mr. de Valera, with the Irish Legation in Paris, where Art O'Briain was then Minister Plenipotentiary. I doubt whether they contain anything particularly worthy of note, although they may be interesting in a general way.

All my efforts tended towards the development of direct trade between Ireland and France; by articles in trade publications and otherwise I encouraged French exporters to enter into direct relations with Irish importers and to put an end to the deeply-rooted practice of trading with Ireland through firms in England. When the decision was taken in

Dublin to institute a progressive boycott of English goods, nothing gave me greater pleasure than to translate and circulate as widely as possible the successive Boycott Orders which reached me from Mr. Blythe, Minister for Commerce. Many French firms availed themselves of the opportunity thus presented to them. My work attracted the attention of the French authorities, and I received notable assistance from the Office National du Commerce Exterieur. I received many visits from Irish exporters and importers. I remember having Irish toilet soap put on sale in Paris, and, at the same time, French household soap imported into Ireland. I helped to establish a trade in rabbit skins with France. I met with some success in having "jambon de York" retailed to the public as "Irish ham". I visited sugar factories in the north of France and made reports on that industry with a view to its introduction into Ireland. I made efforts to bring about a direct shipping service between France and Ireland.

I find a note made in a pocket diary under date 11th August 1920 - "Bottin includes Ireland under Great Britain - see to this". I did see to it and eventually persuaded the publishers to put Ireland under a separate heading - no small achievement at the time. "Bottin" is the name of the famous French commercial directory.

I was present as Consul at the sessions of the Irish Race Congress held in Paris in January 1922, and gave lectures on trade at one of its meetings. I met de Valera there for the first time; Art O'Briain introduced me to him; his first remarks were in praise of the work which I was doing; having a poor enough opinion of it myself, I demurred somewhat, but he brushed aside my protest saying that his information came from those who were in a position to know.

In February 1922, I paid an official visit to Dublin, for the purpose of meeting Irish exporters and importers and discussing matters with them. The offices of the Minister for Commerce were then in Grafton St. and I kept numerous appointments there. I remember that I was the first to turn up in the morning and the last to go at night. It occurred to me then for the first time that I would fix definite office hours on my return to Paris. It seemed to me at the time that the strenuous life which had been lived by all at home right up to the truce with England had given way to a period of relaxation, and that the volunteer spirit which had previously animated every man's thoughts and actions was on the wane. That was inevitable, but the realisation of the change caused me regret when I first became aware of it.

Colman O'Donovan, then working under Mr. Blythe, organised a farewell dinner in honour of Mrs. Kerney and myself; it took place on 2nd March at the old Gresham Hotel (burned down four months later in the civil war); the following is a list of those who were present in addition to ourselves:

Mr. and Mrs. Riordan
do. Blythe
do. Sean O'Shea
do. W.J. Kelly
do. O'Dowd
M. Blanche, French Consul
Mr. Dillon (from Ministry for Commerce)
Mr. Colman O'Donovan do.
Mr. Seamus Moore
Professor Tierney
Mr. Joe Aherne
Mr. Doyle
Professor Smiddy
Mr. O'Hanlon
Miss O'Grady (from Ministry for Commerce)
Miss McCarthy
Miss Somers

On my return to Paris I was officially invited, as "Consul General of the Irish Republic", to be present as one of the guests of honour at the inauguration of the Lyons Fair in March. On my arrival in Lyons, I was treated with every

courtesy by M. Edouard Herriot, Mayor of Lyons, and by the local authorities. My name was published in the press as that of a distinguished visitor, and I was given a prominent seat at the ensuing banquets. I gave an interview to one of the local newspapers.

I was in the happy position that my work was still confined to trade activities and was unaffected by the serious differences which had arisen in the political field at home.

On St. Patrick's Day 1919, the occasion was honoured by a dinner given at the Grand Hotel by Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh; he had invited an important American or Australian visitor - whose name I forget; Victor Collins, an ardent champion of Ireland's cause, was another of the thirteen guests; McInerney of the 'Irish Independent' insisted on sitting at a table apart when he discovered that we were thirteen in number. That was the first of thirteen consecutive St. Patrick's Day banquets in Paris, most of which were organised principally by myself, the guests (usually numbering about 100) consisting exclusively of Irish nationals and foreign sympathisers with the Irish movement for independence. Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh was again present at the banquet held on 17th March 1920, at the Palais d'Orsay restaurant; for that occasion my wife had made an Irish flag (which I still keep), but the colours are green, white and gold; at that early stage in our struggle, I think there was some uncertainty as to whether the third colour should be gold or orange. On St. Patrick's Day 1921, we celebrated the occasion at the Terminus Hotel, Gare St. Lazare, under the presidency of George Gavan Duffy.

From the time of my appointment I had always kept in mind the need of a direct shipping service between France and Ireland. I finally succeeded in interesting a number of Frenchmen in the matter. A company was formed; a ship was purchased and, on the evening of Tuesday, 26th September 1922, the S.S. "BANBA" sailed from Brest for Cork, with the fourteen

of us on board. Amongst the passengers were two ladies - the late Dr. Catherine Lynch and the Countess Kergueren, wife of a Breton who was interested in the venture, and M. Pierre Mocaer, still well known as a shipbroker in Brest. We were well received in Cork, although there was some suspicion as to the nature of the cargo we carried in those troublous times; we ran the gauntlet, as we berthed, of numerous loaded rifles carried, as it seemed to us, somewhat nonchalantly at disquieting angles. One of the first to greet us on landing was the ship's agent, Mr. George Heffernan (of whom one of my French friends expressed the opinion subsequently that - "celui-lá finira dans la peau d'un millionnaire!" - I hope a true prophecy. Photographs were taken of ourselves and the ship and published in the "Cork Examiner" the following day.

We left Cork at 4 p.m. on Friday, 29th September, arriving at Dublin at 8 p.m. on Saturday, 30th. I think Mr. Percy McGrath was the only one to greet us on arrival. There was a postal strike at the time and communications with Dublin were severed. I gave interviews to the "Freeman's Journal" and the "Irish Independent" for publication on Monday, 2nd October. Whilst in Dublin I saw Ernest Blythe, Desmond Fitzgerald, ... Charters, R.E. Whelan, Barry Egan, McGrath (the Accountant General) etc.

At 2 p.m. on Sunday, 1st October, we set out again for Cork, where we arrived at 8 a.m. next day. A banquet was given in our honour by the Cork Chamber of Commerce on Monday evening, 2nd October. We sailed for Brest at 4 p.m. on Tuesday, 3rd October, reaching the mouth of the Lee at 5.45 p.m., Bishop Rock at 6.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 4th, sighting Ushant at 3.15 p.m. We picked up a pilot at 5 p.m. and berthed at Brest two hours later.

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The last trip/the "BANBA" to Cork was in December I think. The tragedy of the civil war, however, had already demolished any prospects of success which the venture might otherwise have had, and that venture was the culmination of my efforts as Consul - or trade representative - of the Irish Republic in France. Thenceforward, until 1926, I was "Délégué Diplomatique & Consulaire de la République Irlandaise en France", but that is another story.

Signed: L.H. Kerney

(L. H. Kerney)

Date: 30th March 1953

30th March 1953.

Witness: Sean Brennan, Comdt.

(Sean Brennan) Comdt.

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