

W.S. 924

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 924

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

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Witness

Mrs. Michael Cremen ("Cis Sheehan"),
128 Lower Kimmage Road,
Dublin.

Identity.

Secretary, Cumann na mBan,
London, 1913 - .

Subject.

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STATEMENT BY MRS. MICHAEL CREMIN (Cis SHEEHAN)

128 Lower Kimmage Road, DUBLIN.

I was born in London although my father and mother were Irish and lived here until after the birth of their first child. They then emigrated to London.

Over there we always associated with Irish people and we came to Ireland on holidays every year. My father was from Tipperary and my mother from Wexford, so we visited both these counties.

While I was still at school I used to go to the Irish National Club in Chancery Lane. We used to have all sorts of lectures and debates and lessons on Irish History. Michael McWhite was Secretary. They used to have a social on Saturday nights. The aims of the club were chiefly cultural. They had only one room then. Later they took a larger place in Bloomsbury. Robert Lynd, P.S. O'Hegarty and plenty of people of that kind used to go there and take part in the discussions.

We lived in Regent Street which was then a residential quarter, so I was able to attend various branches of the Gaelic League - the Central Branch, Highgate Branch, the West London Branch of which Mick Collins was also a member.

There were a lot of what we used to call Irish boy cops in London at that time. They were the boy clerks in the Post Office Savings Bank, earning very little money and they had no amusements such as the cinema as they have nowadays, so they were welcomed in many Irish homes like ours in the evenings, and we got to know many of them intimately. They were members of the G.A.A. and the Gaelic League and were to be found in all the branches of those organisations throughout London.

We used to have Gaelic League outings that took us to the outskirts of London. We played camogie in Hampstead Heath and attended the boys' football matches at Leebridge Road and elsewhere. On Sunday nights we had céilís or parties in houses which were attended by some of the boys and girls who were members of the Gaelic League or G.A.A.

One evening I met one of the Gaelic League teachers, Maurice Sheehan, who was on his way to a meeting in the North of London. I and a couple of other girls walked with him part of the way. It afterwards transpired that the North London Company of the Volunteers originated from this meeting. That was probably in 1913. About the same time or perhaps before it Joe Cassidy and others started the South London Volunteers at some public baths.

Shortly after we began to run céilís and other things to collect money for guns and at a later period to help the boys who refused to join the British Army after the war started. Some of these went to America and others suffered imprisonment for refusing to join.

There was a priest, Father McKenna, in the East of London who loaned us a room where we members of Cumann na mBan, which was founded some time after the Volunteers, drilled. We got some drill books from the Volunteers we knew and practiced the movements. There would be 20 to 30 girls present. We only drilled for a short time and then took up the social side of Cumann na mBan work, running céilís and concerts. We did First Aid in a Council School which we were able to rent and a doctor, whose name was McDonnell, gave us instruction free, when he heard what we wanted it for, as he was a Republican. This lasted for one winter and we got no certificates.

It was probably early in 1914 - it was definitely before the war - that we used to attend lectures at a place called the Bijou Theatre, somewhere off the Strand and members of the Volunteers and Cumann na mBan were present. Word went round that money was needed for arms, the

strictest secrecy was observed but the money flowed in. We understood that Mrs. Stopford Green had guaranteed to provide a certain amount of money for the purchase of arms and we all subscribed a monthly sum to reimburse her.

Padraig Pearse came over to London for the inaugural meeting of the Gaelic League - I think in 1915 - and made a wonderful speech. We listened to him breathless and spellbound and when he had finished we remained silent in the hope that he would go on. He spoke like an inspired man and practically without a gesture. You could nearly feel the people becoming Irish as well as Gaelic under his influence that night. It was great to have seen him. I had already seen him at the O'Donovan Rossa funeral. I used to come over a couple of times a year on holiday.

The 1914 war disorganised the movement a lot. Many of the boys had to go home or to America. A number of them went to Dublin and took part in the Rising. In the second and third year of the war all the young boys who came to the age of 18 were expected to join the army and, of course, those of Irish descent who stood out against it were imprisoned. So we used whatever funds we were able to collect - secretly at this time - to help them to get away. Many of these went to America. Before the ban was put on emigration, I remember collecting the fare for a boy who wanted to avoid the army and he got away just in time.

Some of the London Irish joined the Army in many cases unwillingly and they continued to do anything they could for the Republican cause, such as contributing funds. I knew one boy called Coffey who regularly sent 10/- a week to a member of the Sinn Féin club to help the boys who needed it. He was a clerk in the Post Office and later when the war was over and he was back in his job, he was useful to the Republicans. We used to take some of the code letters

that were addressed to certain Republicans in America to him and he saw to it that they got through without any further scrutiny. We in London did not know the Rising was coming off, but we were not surprised when it did.

Our home was, like many others, used by the boys for sending wires and other communications. Tom Donoghue, who worked in some government office in Whitehall, had gone over to Ireland to avoid joining the British Army. He was a great friend of ours and had been constantly in our house. He took part in the Rising. His brother, Paddy, who was a wireless operator, had remained in London. Early in Easter Week we got a wire from Tom to tell Paddy to go over to Dublin, that some relative was seriously ill. The illness was a fiction, but they wanted Paddy over to send wireless messages. Paddy travelled over and took part in the Rising. He was not arrested and succeeded in getting back to London. He was in a puzzled state of mind about going back to his job. He was advised to put on a bold front and go back to his job, taking the wire with him to explain his absence. I should explain that while he was away an Irish Detective in Scotland Yard whom he knew had inquired from a fellow-worker in Paddy's office, where Paddy was and whether he had gone to Ireland for a holiday. The other man said he did not know. This is why Paddy was a bit worried by the whole situation. He went back to his job but was suspended for a while. He was eventually reinstated and all the back pay was refunded to him. Tom was arrested and went through some awful experiences. They tried to make him join the Army, but he resisted all efforts and was very badly beaten up. He was held in the Tower for a long time. You should get a statement about his experiences. He was eventually released after the war was over. He came back to Ireland and was elected a T.D.. Later he was reinstated in the Civil Service and retired a year or two ago and is living in 101 Cabra Road.

He has completely lost the use of his legs, partly, no doubt due to the ill-treatment he got while in custody.

After the Rising a girl from London who had come to Ireland for holidays brought me a letter from an Irish friend who had worked in London, explaining the situation in Dublin on Easter Sunday.

Another man I knew in London was Dan Sheehan who was drowned at Ballykissane Pier in Kerry on the Good Friday before the Rising. He was a Limerick man and used to be in the Irish class with me in the Gaelic League. A week or so before the Rising he passed me a piece of paper at the class, saying "I am off to Dublin". That was the last time I saw him. He was a clerk at the Savoy Hotel in the Strand. He was a very quiet, reserved man with fiery red hair.

After the Rising we members of the Cumann na mBan were kept busy visiting the prisoners in the various gaols, Wandsworth, Woking, Wormwood Scrubbs, Brixton and Lewes, and when they were released they were welcomed and accommodated in our homes until they were ready to go home.

Mrs. James Connolly and her daughter, Ina, came and stayed in our house in 1918. Ina was on her way to the Continent to take a course, I think, in a dairy college and Mrs. Connolly was very much in need of a change and rest. This gave her an opportunity of meeting the London Irish, many of whom were sympathisers of her husband.

Later others passing through London called to our house for addresses of contacts in connection with various matters.

I carried arms and messages across to Dublin. There was a shop in Brunswick - now Pearse - Street where I used to deposit the arms and ammunition after I got off the boat train at Westland Row in the morning.

I always travelled back to London the next night as I would only take a day's leave from the office for this work. I did this also during the Civil War and then I also carried sums of money that were raised in America. I remember one or two occasions when my sister and myself brought large sums of money in attaché cases and left them at the address ~~S. R. H. Headquarters in Brunswick Street.~~ *M.A.C.* Billy Aherne who at that time was O/C. Britain would know all about this.

I remember another occasion when with some Volunteers and other Cumann na mBan members I went to Tilbury Docks to collect guns and ammunition off a boat from America. These were Thompson guns and we brought them by train to a London Station and then by taxi to a flat in Waverly Mansions which was used as headquarters by O/C. Britain. Three girls, one of whom was a teacher, Cis Gogarty, occupied the flat. Captain Maguinness was concerned in this undertaking as was my husband, Mick Cremin. The incident is described in Maguinness' book, 'The Nomad', as being one of the most dangerous he was mixed up in. We considered the affair a small one compared with some of the others described in his book.

During the Black & Tan war with other members of Cumann na mBan and I.R.A., I took part in raids on the houses of relatives of Black & Tans threatening them that if they did not get their Black & Tan relations to leave Ireland, their homes would be burnt down or other damage done to them. Mrs. Eady's house - she was a sister of Seán Connolly who was shot the first day of the Rising - was one of the places where these activities were organised and the participants met. The raid I took part in started from there. It was arranged that I would meet an I.R.A. boy at Notting Hill. He carried a gun and visited the house of a sister of a Black & Tan, who lived in that area to warn her to get her brother to leave Ireland or else she would have to suffer reprisals. I waited a little distance away while he went to the door. I watched the door

being opened and he went in. He did not stay long as the lady made no fuss, but quietly promised to do what she was asked. My function was to act as a cover and make it appear that we were just a boy and girl out for a walk and if he were attacked to help in his escape by taking his gun.

Mrs. Eady's house was frequently raided - in fact all ours were - but she was always very careful and discreet and made it a point that nothing incriminating would be discovered. Everything was hidden away in safe dumps. Unfortunately one night after a big céilí in Holborn Town Hall her house was raided and some ammunition which had probably only just been brought, was found. She was arrested, tried and got a three years' sentence. She served it in full except the period remitted for good conduct.

About the time the White Cross organisation was set up in Ireland to relieve the poverty and distress caused by the destructive tactics of the Black & Tans throughout the country, the London Cumann na mBan formed a similar organisation and called it 'The Irish Women's Distress Fund'. They collected money to buy clothing and necessities and sent them direct to many parts of Ireland to the people whose homes had been ravaged by the Black & Tans. A room attached to the Presbytery in Underwood Street was placed at our disposal free by Father McKenna whom I have already mentioned to prepare the clothing and food for transmission to Ireland. I remember a very large consignment was sent to the Clifden district. We made most of the clothing ourselves. Father McKenna was moved from Underwood Street on account of his Republican sympathies.

On our various visits to Dublin there were certain houses where we could stay or leave messages or use for any purpose. One was 19 Upper Sherrard Street owned by a Mrs. Ward. The other was 500 North Circular

Road owned by a Mrs. Dunne. The boys used to stay at these houses at different times. One of those that stayed there and is still alive is Seamus Kavanagh, a cabinet-maker. He was in the 1916 fight.

After the shooting of Sir Henry Wilson I got addresses and accommodation for some boys who had come to London to raid a prison with a view to helping Reggie Dunne and Joe O'Sullivan to escape. This project fell through. The London people decided that the attempt would be futile and dangerous, as the prisoners were too well guarded and there would be a lot of shooting and very likely Dunne and O'Sullivan would get killed in the attempt. This must have been very shortly before the executions.

Mick Cremin - afterwards my husband - was in London at the time. I do not know whether he came over expressly for that purpose. He asked me to go to Fulwood House in Holborn where I would find Art O'Briain and Seán McGrath and ask for their co-operation. I saw Seán and told him that these boys were ready to attempt the rescue. The only name I remember is Denis Fleming from Liverpool. Either he or his brother was O/C., Liverpool. Denis had been with us on the visit to Tilbury Docks. Seán McGrath said that the matter had already been considered and abandoned, as I have already stated.

I reported the result of my interview with Seán McGrath to Mick Cremin who was at our house. He was very disappointed that nothing was to be attempted.

I can't understand how these two boys went out alone on that venture. It was rumoured afterwards that a car was to follow them and that it broke down. The boys were ready to do anything to carry out what they had been ordered to do. I do not know where they got their orders from or whether any convention or meeting was held to discuss the matter.

I had a conversation with Denis Fleming - I think it must have been the night before the execution of the two boys. He was very agitated that nothing was being done to rescue them. He had come up from Liverpool to take part in the rescue attempt that was to be made when the prisoners were being transferred from one prison to another.

I should mention that the London authorities were in a state of panic at this time and no doubt they increased the guards over the prisoners and took every precaution to prevent a rescue. It was a tragedy for us all, especially for those who had come from Ireland and parts of England to take part in the attempt.

I knew Reggie Dunne very well at the céllís, to which he came chiefly to contact other I.R.A. men.

After the Treaty most of the London Cumann na mBan remained Republican and we all started to be very careful on account of the big split in Ireland. We wished specially to make sure who among the I.R.A. were for the Treaty and who against and in most cases we were able to establish the position.

I was secretary just at that time and was instructed by the Committee to write to the Commandant of the I.R.A. - Reggie Dunne - to inquire how he stood in regard to the matter. We got no reply and soon after this Sir Henry Wilson was shot.

On the morning of the same day I got a personal note from Reggie and had it in my bag as I went along Whitehall, when I suddenly saw the placards announcing Wilson's death. It was in Whitehall he was shot and the newsboys were shouting out the news. I immediately destroyed the note and afterwards regretted it, as I felt I should have shown it to some of the Cumann na mBan. I have forgotten the exact words but to the best of my recollection it contained some remark about

an event that was soon likely to happen. When I heard about the shooting of Wilson, I felt convinced that it was the event he meant. The note was signed "Reggie" and would surely incriminate him if found in a raid. I expected that everyone connected with the movement would be raided after the shooting of Wilson.

There was a split in the Cumann na mBan in London. I think it happened after the Treaty but it had nothing to do with that as far as I know, as practically all the members were against the Treaty. I cannot tell you anything about it as I was not a member of the Committee at the time. It was after that I was appointed Secretary and acted as such for some time. Phyllis Ryan was sent over from Dublin to hold an inquiry and she fixed up matters. Sorcha McDermott whose address is 'Glenkeel Cottage', Kilterman, Co. Dublin, was ^{Secretary of Cumann na mBan} ~~on the committee~~ and would be able to tell you the story, if she has not forgotten it.

With many other London Irish I was arrested in the spring of 1923 because of activities against the Treaty and during the Civil War. We were sent to Ireland and imprisoned in Mountjoy. Legal action was taken in the British Courts for our release. We won our case and were awarded compensation for wrongful arrest and our liberty was restored to us after about three months.

(Signed) Mary A. Cremen
 Mary A. Cremen
 Date 25/2/54
 25/2/54.

Witness: S. Ni Chiosain
 S. Ni Chiosain.

