

W.S. 925
ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 925

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COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 925

Witness

Mairead Ni Cheallaigh,
49 Mespil Road,
Dublin.

Identity.

Member of Cumann na mBan, Dublin, 1913 - ;
Sister of President Sean T. O Ceallaigh.

Subject.

- (a) Cumann na mBan duty with "F" Coy. 1st Bt'n.
Dublin Brigade, Easter Week 1916;
- (b) Visit of Padraig and Willie Pearse to her
home, Holy Thursday to Easter Monday, 1916.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.2232

Form B.S.M. 2

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8. 925.

STATEMENT BY MARGARET O'KELLY,

49, Mespil Road, Dublin.

My brothers Michael and Matthew were members of "F" Company, 1st Battalion, Dublin Brigade, and they had their own arms and ammunition, including the horrible Howth guns, at our house. On Holy Thursday these were removed for safety as, apparently, they had received information that there was going to be a raid by the Castle Authorities. They brought them to McCabe's of North Circular Road. One of that family, Kevin, was in the Volunteers and in the I.R.B. and all the family were friends of ours. I was told there was a 'stand to arms', and four boys, my brothers Michael and Matthew, Kevin McCabe and Tommy O'Connor guarded the arms from that Thursday until the Rising. These four were always close friends from childhood, having been at school together. Tommy O'Connor became a seaman to carry despatches to and from America.

I am not aware that he did this work before the Rising, but then there is a lot that I did not know. For instance, I did not know there was going to be a rebellion though I was mobilised for Easter Sunday. I thought it was for the 'stand to arms' I was mobilised. I did not go on Sunday, because I got a countermanding order - I don't know who brought it but it said I was to go to Palmerston Place near the Broadstone on Monday at 11 a.m. I came with my attaché case containing First Aid dressings and one day's rations. No one else turned up there - I don't know why - and I walked towards Berkeley Street and met half a dozen other members of Cumann na mBan. I'll tell you later what we did. I want to record something a good deal more important first.

My brothers before mentioned were at Pearse's school and the Pearse family was always very friendly with us especially Padraig and my mother.

It must have been on Spy Wednesday that Seán T. gave instructions to my mother that he had arranged that the brothers Padraig and Willie Pearse would come to stay at our house and would probably require meals at irregular times. They turned up on Holy Thursday in the late evening - as far as I can recall between 6 and 8 o'clock. They arrived together on bicycles wearing raincoats to cover their full military uniform. They were sticking out in bumps because of all the equipment they were carrying. Mother put twin beds for them in the drawingroom and they laid down all their stuff on the hearthrug, their haversacks, ammunition, wire-cutters. I also noticed they had bracelets containing revolver ammunition on each wrist. I did not see the revolvers which must have been in the haversacks which were buckled up and were never opened in my presence. Pádraig asked my mother would their stuff be safe there. My mother reassured them, saying no one would enter the room without their permission. My brother Michael and I were thrilled with their full military appearance. Pádraig Pearse looked wonderful. Michael drew my attention afterwards downstairs to their yellow tabs and explained to me the significance of the ornaments on their epaulettes.

They had no meal that night. They told Michael who was in civilian clothes to hold himself in readiness to run messages for them. Michael felt honoured to be asked, as he was rather afraid of Pearse who was his master at school. Michael asked me for his dancing pumps which he used to wear at ceillis so that he could run fast and noiselessly to Liberty Hall. I remember him afterwards coming in breathless, probably from Liberty Hall, but he would never tell me what messages he was carrying. I was so busy round the house that time that I don't know how many times he went on messages.

After they had disposed of their gear to their satisfaction the Pearses left on their bicycles and did not come back that night at all. I can't recall about Friday night but I don't remember their being there.

If anybody says they were I would not contradict them. I have a very vivid picture of their first arrival and final departure. They used to come in and go out again. My mother was worried to death because she had laid in a lot of food and she would press them to have a meal. But they would say they had just had one and rush out again.

On Saturday night they must have come in very late. I was in bed and probably asleep. I imagine it was on Sunday morning that a knock came to the door and I went to open it and I saw Seán T. - it was his key that was given to the Pearses. At the same time Padraig descended the stairs towards the hall and Seán ran up halfway to meet him. Pearse must have been shaving because he had a towel in his hand - it was a nice linen one that my mother had specially bought for these important and distinguished guests. While shaving he must have seen Seán crossing the street because the dressing table had been fixed up in one of the three long windows of the drawingroom. He seemed excited - the only time I ever saw him like that, for he was always so calm and dignified. I heard him distinctly shout in a loud voice, "Damned cowardice". He may have said more. Seán said "Sh!" and rushed up towards him and brought him back into the drawing-room where they remained some time, how long I can't remember. Seán did not want me or anyone else to hear what was being discussed. I don't know what hour of the morning that was - probably early, and I must have gone out to Mass after that. Probably my mother was downstairs preparing breakfast. I don't know whether Pearse ate breakfast in our house at all that morning; I do remember being surprised and rather intrigued at Pearse's strong language. I would never expect it from him and I was speculating in my own mind who was the coward.

When I came back from Mass all three had left and I have often wondered since where they went to Mass. It might have been Gardiner Street which was the nearest church to our house.

I have no recollection of their coming to the house during the rest of Sunday. They must have come very late that night while I was asleep because I remember my mother bemoaning on Monday morning that they had been out so late and were not so long in bed and she warned me when she called me not to waken them. During the whole time since they first came she had commented on the fact that they ate and slept so little. When they did sleep it must have been in their uniforms because it was I made their beds and the bedclothes had never been turned down but were tossed a little as if slept on. I remember these things so clearly, because they were the biggest events I ever took part in. I have kept the table and tablecloth that were used by the Pearses at the last meal they ate in our house. That was on Easter Monday morning. My mother who was going out to Mass - probably the 9.30 Mass - called me to give me instructions about the breakfast for the Pearses. She said she had prepared a tureen of bacon and eggs which she had left on a trivet in front of the dining-room fire. She had also a tureen of mutton chops. She said they must be very hungry and God knows when they will get a meal again. She must have known more than I did. She went out and I went into the dining-room where the table was set. Shortly afterwards I heard the Pearses come down stairs. They stood shyly outside the door until I called them in. I informed them that my mother had been worried about their taking so little food and had prepared their breakfast herself. I said I hoped they would enjoy it. I placed the two tureens on the table and they ate every bit of the food on the table including a whole loaf of bread. They had probably lived on snacks of tea and bread and butter for days. I am almost sure it was on Sunday morning that Seán T. and the Pearses met in our house. The two incidents - the heated conversation and the big breakfast enjoyed by the Pearses seem widely separated in my mind.

After breakfast they went upstairs again and apparently started to collect all their equipment. They arrived down fully dressed appearing as when they came to the door on Holy Thursday night. Their uniforms were covered by the gabardine raincoats without belts and they had the same lumpy appearance. They asked for mother to thank her for her hospitality. I explained that she was still at Mass. I should imagine it was then about 10 o'clock. They mentioned that they had left a haversack in the centre of the floor upstairs and that a man would call for it and would I please see that it was handed to him. I was delighted to help in any small way and assured them that it would be quite all right. They took their bicycles which were in the hall, wheeled them down the four steps. They mounted the bicycles and turned to wave to me. I can see them still. They rode down along Upper Rutland Street in the direction of Liberty Hall. Our house was at the corner of Rutland Street and Charles Street.

I started tidying the table and was dumbfounded to see all they had eaten. When I told mother after she came in she was delighted.

A man wearing a cap and civilian clothes came half an hour or three quarters after they left. I went upstairs and as well as the haversack I saw a suitcase containing a couple of pair of socks and shirts and hanging on the knob of the bed a rosary beads belonging to one of the brothers. Somewhere on the floor was a wire cutter which I kept as a souvenir and still have. I gave only the haversack to the messenger as the suitcase had not been mentioned. Soon after the Rising mother sent all the other things in the suitcase by a messenger to Mrs. Pearse and I heard much later that they never reached her.

I cannot recall what time I left home but I left very shortly after the man had collected the Pearses' things. As I said before there were no other girls at Palmerston place although I waited a considerable time there.

When I and the other girls reached J.J.Walsh's shop at the corner of Berkeley Road and Blessington Street, we decided to turn the drawing-room over the shop into an emergency hospital as most of us had brought field dressings and other Red Cross essentials.. There were forms there and we turned them into stretchers by covering them with blankets and sheets. While we were engaged at this work we heard the prancing of horses' hoofs on the cobblestones of the streets. We rushed to the windows and we saw a troop of Lancers with pennants flying and carrying carbines galloping down Blessington Street into Frederick Street. We could not see them past the turn of the street but we still heard them galloping. Presently we heard gun-fire, but we did not see them return.

We spent a long time at Walsh's waiting for something, but when we realised that the fighting was not likely to come our way and that we were wasting our time we decided to leave the place. We collected our dressings etc. and decided to scatter. The only people among those girls that I remember now were Mrs. Martin Conlon and Flossie Meade (later Mrs. Gerald Griffin). I was uncertain what to do. I went home to see how mother was getting on as I knew none of my brothers was at home. I think I must have slept there that night. The next morning I made up my mind to go where I guessed my brothers were, down in the North King Street area. As far as I remember I went down along Bolton Street, North King Street into Church Street and then one of the first I saw was Tommy O'Connor, his brother John and my own brother Michael. I also saw Piaras Beaslai and Eamonn Martin. They were all in very high spirits, laughing and joking and there did not seem to be any fighting. There were five or six strange girls there co-operating with the Volunteers, always dying to be told to do something. They were under orders of the Volunteers. It was the "F" Company, 1st Battalion. I decided to stay there and help

those girls and the Volunteers. We cooked meals, potatoes, meat and vegetables in one of the houses near Halston Street.

I think it was on Wednesday the Volunteers started to burrow through the houses and after that they did not let us go on the street at all. The Volunteers made an attack on the Broadstone on that day as far as I recollect and we followed them with dressings but we were not let go too near them. The exciting thing for me was the burrowing through the houses. Some of the men, of course, had to man the barricades. There was a boy called Reynolds killed in the Church Street area, but we did not see that happen. We saw various civilians being killed. They would not stay indoors. We had instructions from the Volunteers to see that all civilians got food. This we gave them - mostly uncooked. They were always coming looking for tea and we made cans of it for them until the Volunteers stopped that, as the civilians took unnecessary risks coming looking for it. Also the tea was getting scarce. I should mention that Mr. Reynolds, a brother of the boy who was killed in the fight in the Church Street area, was afterwards Curator of the Museum and he and my brother Michael made out a plan and description of the fighting in that area, with detailed maps. It was published in pamphlet form and I had several copies of it, but they all disappeared in raids and otherwise. Perhaps there is a copy in the Museum.

That sort of thing went on with the fighting getting hotter. All the fighting was done with the Howth guns. None of the boys I knew had revolvers.

As it came towards the Friday I was getting restless, especially as I did not appear to be doing work of any great value. There were plenty of girls and I began to worry about mother. Michael kept telling me that I ought to be at home with her as she was quite alone. Four of my brothers were in the fight all in different areas. Mattie, the youngest

since dead - had gone into the G.P.O. and was in it for a day when Pearse saw him and took his gun from him. He looked young and was small and Pearse said there were enough of his family fighting. Mattie left the G.P.O. and went home but he went out again and remained with the boys in the Earl Street area, probably doing the kind of work I was doing as he had no gun. He did not come home until Sunday.

I decided to go home on Friday afternoon. I said goodbye to the boys who advised me to take nothing with me. They gave me a present of a quarter pound of tea. I took off my nurse's apron and let down my hair in two plaits which must have made me look very young. I got my last look at the boys from the end of North King Street going into Bolton Street. It was a deserted city as I sneaked along from door to door, sitting down sometimes in tenement hallways. I saw several dead bodies lying in the streets in the broiling sun. Two of them had sacks over them. As I came towards Parnell Street I was halted by the British military. I was brought before an officer and interrogated. I had my story ready. I said I had come out on Monday to look for food and there were a lot shops down there and I got caught in the fighting and hid in the houses. I said my mother was alone at home and I was worried about her and she probably about me. Finally one of the officers wrote a permit with a pencil on a leaf out of his note-book. I went on my way which was by no means the direct route home because I eventually found myself outside O'Rourke's Bakery in Beresford Place. I may have been thinking it would be as well to take home some bread and I went in and got some. They were giving it free. I had no money.

The military had warned me when they let me proceed at my own risk that I would not have a chance of getting home alive if I walked the streets at night. So I tried several doors and found none open till I came to the Boilermakers' hall in Gardiner Street. I spent an anxious

night behind the bottom of the stairs sleeping and waking until the dawn came, always holding the bread in my arms. Strange to say, it was in this very building that we had our base hospital during the Civil War.

I started on my journey again when daylight came carrying the bread very openly in my arms. I got safely as far as Parnell Street. There I was again stopped by a line of military. This morning, although there was sporadic firing, was comparatively quiet. As I attempted to cross Parnell (Rutland) Street to get to Middle Gardiner Street I was held up by a very savage officer who refused to listen to my story. In spite of my permit I was kept under arrest for two hours. Eventually another officer came along and he decided to release me when he saw my permit, as he was acquainted with the officer who wrote it. As far as I can recall there was no further incident until I got to my own house. Right from it to the church was a barricade built by the British with the furniture of the church. It seems they came to take ours, but they decided the church pews would be more suitable for the purpose. The military refused to let me pass into the house where I told them I lived until they had knocked on the door and brought mother out. I kept calling mother which they repeated after me. They had been getting boiling water and other things from her during the last few days and she was quite friendly with them.

After the surrender, probably on the Monday, I went back to the King Street area in search of my brothers and friends, as I had heard a rumour that my brother Michael had been killed. It was there I first met Father Augustine who died this week. He told me that he saw all the boys from that area being marched off to the docks for deportation to England. When I described Michael he remembered him and said he was among those deported and that Seán was in Richmond Barracks with the leaders. I later heard that Michael had been wounded by a shell that burst near the barricade behind which he was fighting.

He later arrived at Stafford gaol where he remained nine days before his wounds were attended to. His mouth, face and chest had scraps of shrapnel which were eventually removed by a doctor in the gaol hospital. Jim Ryan, a medical student in his last year, had insisted that he should get proper treatment. Michael was altogether wounded five times, during the Rising, the Black & Tan and Civil Wars. He later developed an aneurism from which he died at the age of 34. During his period of suffering he qualified as an Architect and was employed by the Corporation. The best known work he did was the reconstruction and decoration of the Municipal Art Gallery in Parnell Square, Charlemont House. It was only recently that Vincent Kelly with whom he served his apprenticeship paid a high tribute to his talents.

Almost immediately the National Aid for Prisoners' Dependants was set up and I, like the other Cumann na mBan members, worked at that. We visited the homes of these Dependants, investigating their claims and bringing them weekly contributions. The White Cross developed from that, carrying on the same work on a better organised scale.

When the Civil War broke out I left home to join my comrades and see what I could do in the fighting area. I found Michael and Matthew were in Hickeys, Earl Street, where they had erected barricades. I met Kathleen Boland and we discussed what we could do about starting a base hospital. I remembered the Boilermakers' Hall and she agreed it would be a suitable place as it was so near the fighting. We were a week there and as the fighting progressed we had it well equipped for the wounded who were brought there. We used to go out under fire to carry in the wounded on stretchers, also to procure supplies from local chemists' shops.

(Signed)

Mairead Ni Cheallaigh

Date:

25-2-54

Mairead Ni Cheallaigh

25.2.54

Witness:

S. Ni Chiosain

S. Ni Chiosain.

