

W.S. 945

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 945

ROINN  COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 945.....

Witness

Sorcha Nic Diarmada,
Glenkeel Cottage,
Kiltarnan,
Co. Dublin.

Identity.

Secretary, London Branch of Cumann na mBan, 1913 - ;
Social Secretary of Gaelic League, London, 1913 - .

Subject.

- (a) Provision of arms, London, 1914 - ;
- (b) Cumann na mBan and "Irish Ladies Distress Committee", London, 1920-'21.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY MISS SORCHA McDERMOTT,

Glenkeel Cottage, Kiltarnan, County Dublin.

I was born outside Leeds and trained as a Teacher. I am the last surviving member of a family of ten. My father was a Fenian and had to leave Ireland in the sixties. The family came from Glenkeel, Kiltyclogher, County Leitrim. I had the same great, great grandfather as Seán McDermott who was executed after the Rising of 1916.

I was trained as a Teacher in Leeds and got an appointment in London.

I was appointed Social Secretary of the Gaelic League in 1913 and helped to organise all the concerts and ceilis. The central branch of the Gaelic League was in Fulwood House in Holborn. It was very new in Easter Week and it was there we heard the news of three executions after Easter Week.

Desmond Ryan's father, W.P. Ryan, was literary editor of the Daily Herald and he was there on that occasion and he cried. Larry Ginnell who was also present cried. It was he brought us the news and also told us that the Irish Members of Parliament cheered when they heard the news. Pearse, MacDonagh and Clarke were executed on the 3rd May. I said, "They are in Heaven". But Ryan said, "It is the quality of the men who are shot I am crying for".

We used to dance in the Chandos Hall. That is near the Strand. Eamon Tierney, a member of our branch of the Gaelic League, was in the Easter Rising. So was Seán McGrath. At least the latter was over here for it. Diarmuid Ó Laoghaire and his brother David and Liam Kelly came over for the Rising. There was also a boy who was killed whose

name I cannot recall. Diarmuid O Laoghaire who is at present an inspector of factories would be able to give an account of the founding of the Volunteers in London as he and Eamon Tierney took part in it. Joe Cassidy also took part in it, and Liam Bartels (alias Kelly) whose father was a naturalised German. His mother was Kelly and he changed his name during the war. His body was afterwards cremated and the ashes were shaken over the Sugarloaf Mountain. His wife was a sister of Mr. Gorham the present Director of Radio Éireann.

In the spring of 1914 Mrs. Stopford-Green supplied £100 for the purchase of arms and simultaneously a branch of the Cumann na mBan was founded and its chief purpose was to provide arms and also, of course, to collect money for the purchase of arms. It was intended that in due course Mrs. Stopford-Green would be reimbursed. Each member would provide the cost of one gun. It happened that I was in Dublin in July when the guns were landed in Howth by Erskine Childers and his wife and Mary Spring-Rice in the yacht "Asgard". Most of the girls who were concerned in this came to live in Ireland during the war. The particular branch of Cumann na mBan which was founded for this purpose lapsed because the principal people had left at different times. Min Ryan (now Mrs. Mulcahy) was one of those members. Others were Dill Smith, Margaret Cole, Grace O'Sullivan and a lot of other girls whose names I cannot recall.

Two weeks before the Rising in 1916 Grace O'Sullivan brought over to Dublin the accoutrements for a wireless apparatus. These were wrapped round her body. When crossing to Ireland she could neither sit nor sleep and as it happened the boat could not leave Holyhead because of submarines in the Irish Sea. She delivered her message and went straight back to London to her job. She was a teacher. She came over again for the Easter Rising and she and Diarmuid Ó Laoghaire, David Ó Laoghaire, Eamon Tierney and Liam Bartels Kelly all brought arms and ammunition for the fight.

The gun that I purchased I brought myself in 1915 to Tom Clarke. I saw him in his shop but he was about to go down to Limerick and I had to keep the gun until after Christmas when he came back.

Unfortunately owing to the confusion caused by the split, of those men only the two Ó Laoghaires took part in the Rising. The others were not even able to deliver the arms brought by them and most of these were left in the confessional boxes of the Churches. The men were all arrested in the general round-up but the girls went back to their jobs. Liam Kelly who put on his strong English accent went up to the officer in charge of the cordon at the entrance to the boat and asked why they were being held up, and he was let through. Sheila Connolly - I think she was from Skibereen and she is now a John-of-God nun in Wexford - came over from London for her Easter holidays and Michael Collins sent her back to London to tell the Volunteers that the Rising was taking place after all. They had been informed previously that it was all off. That is why those I have mentioned came over on the Saturday. It happened that Michael Collins' right thumb was injured and Sheila bandaged it for him. Therefore he was not able to use a weapon during the Rising.

I was in Yorkshire recuperating after an operation but I had intended to come over if David Ó Laoghaire would let me know the time the Rising was to take place but he never did.

There was a small club which used to meet in Chandos Hall. It is off the Strand. We were asked by Art O'Brien to come down to re-form it because there was no life in it. He proposed that it should be called "The Sir Roger Casement Sinn Fein Club". This was in 1917. Someone else wanted it to be called "Thomas Ashe Club". It was an irritation to the British to call it The Sir Roger Casement Club. Seven of us from the Gaelic League joined it - Art O'Brien Tomás Martin, Joseph Cassidy, Mrs. Lally (mother of Grace Lally) and her other daughter Katty; also Sean McGrath and myself.

Seán McGrath and myself were sent over as delegates to the 1917 Sinn Féin Convention in Dublin. We were instructed by the Committee who to vote for. I arrived late having come straight off the boat and I could only find a seat among a big crowd of priests. One of the priests got up and proposed that the Sinn Féin organisation would never become a physical force organisation. I was seated near him and I said this was an insult to the men of Easter Week and our Fenian dead. At this point the priest told me to get up and say it to the meeting. I was just about to do so when a tall, white-faced form stood up on the platform and said, "As Irishmen think fit they'll win their liberty". It was De Valera whom I now saw for the first time. The whole house received his statement with acclamation and the priest's resolution was not even discussed. Seán Noonan told me afterwards that the Easter Week men did not mean to have any priests in the management of the organisation. I still remember Arthur Griffith's proposal to have De Valera as Chairman instead of himself. This was received with great applause and they all stood up to cheer. His words were something to this effect, "For the first time since the time of Parnell we have a statesman and in addition a soldier".

When I was appointed delegate I had two days leave from my school for half-term and in addition I asked for three days without pay, which was granted.

When I went back to London, Tomás Martin and I were asked who we voted for. Martin answered "By ballot" and would not give any further information. I said I voted for all those who got in except one, but I did not mention the name.

Money was rolling in at that time. You could get money for anything. People had not yet got over the feelings inspired by the Rising. We used to collect 3d. a week from everybody. This was for

the prisoners' dependants. This branch remained in existence and I remained a member of it all the time. It increased in strength in the twenties. I never joined the Self Determination League.

The Cumann na mBan was completely in abeyance from that on and when the re-arming started here and the fight broke out again Cumann na mBan was resuscitated in London in 1920. We called ourselves "The Irish Ladies' Distress Committee". A few members of the old body got busy with a view to getting money and helping the Volunteers.

Many of the girls had been secretly active as individuals helping the Volunteers in London to provide and carry arms and ammunition from place to place chiefly for the purpose of transmission to Ireland. They ultimately brought the stuff to Ireland. We were all very cautious and never confided our activities to each other. For instance, Mrs. Cremin, then Miss Sheehan, would not know what I was doing and I would not know what she was doing but I knew generally that she was very active and came to Ireland very frequently where she deposited money and guns very often at various places. Openly we worked as the Ladies' Distress Committee. We were sewing and collecting garments. Mrs. Fintan Murphy was very prominent in that. She saw to the packing of the garments, 150,000 of which were sent to Ireland, cleaned, mended and packed and forwarded to various places in the country. That system passed the English eye. We were at ceilis every Saturday to provide the money for the garments and the arms. We were really Cumann na mBan all the time but if we used that name we could not get halls to hold our ceilis so we always advertised ourselves as "The Ladies' Distress Committee". But on certain official occasions such as Terence MacSwiney's funeral we had docketts officially printed under the name of Cumann na mBan. I was Secretary of both

societies and I kept a separate book for each of them. I had to give the Cumann na mBan book into the custody of my sister so that it would not be found in raids. Since she lived in an hotel it was not likely that she would be raided. We remained active until the Truce.

It was actually this position that caused the split in Cumann na mBan. Some of the members did not like us masquerading as The Ladies' Distress Committee. They wanted us to do what the Cumann na mBan did here openly such as marching in uniforms openly in military formation. It was ridiculous in a foreign country. About twelve left on this account. These included Grace Lally and her mother Mrs. Lally, the two Anglim sisters and Margaret Cole. This trouble took place about September, 1921 and we did not try to come to an agreement as we felt we were in the right.

In the meantime those who broke away used the name of Cumann na mBan in their dance advertisements.

Myself and Mrs. Eady (née Connolly) were delegates to the Cumann na mBan Convention in October, before which we placed our case. I knew Mrs. Wyse-Power and Mrs. Leslie Barry (Price) and I reported the situation to them. The minority wanted to form a separate branch calling themselves openly Cumann na mBan. They had written to this effect to Mrs. Wyse-Power, the letter being handed to her while I was present, by Mrs. Jack Sheehan (née Cole). Mrs. Wyse-Power told me that this letter dealt with the problem that I had just reported to her. She said - and so did Mrs. Leslie Barry (Price) - that there should be no question of forming another branch, thus giving the decision in our favour. I reported this back in London and as Secretary ordered them to take down the Cumann na mBan notices and not to use that name openly. Then in December Phyllis Ryan, who was in London for some months, was drawn into the controversy. In the meantime the

Cumann na mBan had grown to such an extent that we were forming new branches in different parts of London and we left the dissident party to West London where most of them lived. Phyllis Ryan gave them authority to work again and expressed disapproval at our attitude.

I then became the Captain of the northern branch (Highgate) and Cis Sheehan took my place as Secretary in the central branch and all the branches had to report to her. Meanwhile the Treaty was signed and everything was in the melting pot again.

After the Treaty was passed we continued to meet in central London, I have forgotten where, about once a month; in fact until Wilson was shot.

I knew Reggie Dunne slightly. He praised the work I did but did not like me personally because on some occasions I refused to take his orders. On one occasion we held a ceili and he instructed me to hand over the money to him for the Volunteers and I refused. It was a consequence of the assassination of Sir Henry Wilson that four of our members were arrested and one of them, Mrs. Eady, kept in Holloway gaol for two years. The other three were Grace Lally, Rosie Killeen and Margaret Killeen. It was a cousin of Rosie that verified to her that the assassination of Sir Henry Wilson was on the orders of Michael Collins given many months before the Treaty. The order was given to Reggie Dunne as O/C., London, to kill him when he could. This order was given long before the Treaty and was apparently never rescinded: Billy Ahearne, O/C., Britain, confirmed this to me this year. When news of the assassination of Wilson came through to Cork where Michael Collins happened to be in connection with the general elections, Eamon de Barra, who happened to be present looking after the Republican interest in connection with the elections, heard Paddy O'Keefe say to Mick, "I suppose these men will hang?" Collins replied with an oath,

". . and they bloody well deserve it, they have got me in a nice fix". Eamon de Barra told me this himself.

There has been much criticism about Joe O'Sullivan, who had an artificial leg, being chosen as one of the people to take part in this action. I have heard it said that he was the only one who could really identify Wilson as he worked in the office as a clerk where Wilson worked. Wilson's maps and plans were there. I met Reggie's mother after this. She had a house in Bray. She told me that Reggie had expressed a wish that his blackthorn stick should be given to Michael Collins if anything happened to himself. She thought there might have been some message contained in the blackthorn stick which Reggie wished Collins to have if anything should happen to himself. This was done.

The original plan was that Sir Henry Wilson would be shot at Liverpool Street Station where he was unveiling a War Memorial. But there was such a crowd present that they were afraid many other lives would be lost, so they followed him to his home in Eccleston Square. He was putting the key in the door when they fired at him from the garden gate and he turned to fire back at them and he then received the fatal shot. There were some workmen digging the street nearby and they were having their lunch. These men prevented the escape of Dunne and O'Sullivan by striking them with milk bottles and holding them until the police came. There should have been a taxi to enable them to escape, but it arrived late. Brian O'Gorman was in this, and he was so upset by the whole affair that he decided to take an appointment in Spain where he spent a number of years.

When O'Sullivan did not turn up at his office after lunch a colleague of his, an Englishman, signed on for him and when an inquiry was instituted later he was dismissed from his office. As Reggie Dunne and

O'Sullivan gave false names their identity was not established for at least 24 hours or more which gave Reggie's mother an opportunity to destroy all papers or objects that might have incriminated him.

Reggie Dunne had been injured during the Wormwood Scrubbs hunger strike in 1920. It was our habit to go to the prison grounds every evening. This was a big open moor. We used to pray, sing hymns and wave Sinn Fein flags for the encouragement of the hunger-strikers. An opposing mob assembled encouraged by the daily press. They attacked us, throwing pieces of clay and other missiles. Reggie brought a strong contingent of Volunteers but in spite of that he received an injury to one of his eyes. When eventually the prisoners were released and transferred to a hospital the Cumann na mBan went to nurse them, taking nourishing food and other comforts to them. Lloyd George had said he would not guarantee that British nurses would take on the task of nursing these Sinn Feiners, and Art O'Brien said it did not matter, that he would provide nurses. Some of our members did go to nurse them and a couple of English nurses also undertook the task. We took the ex-prisoners out to a garden party in North London.

In December, 1921, we were having an Irish Week at Holborn Hall and it was that week the news of the signing of the Treaty came through. All of us Cumann na mBan crowd were furious. None of us was willing to accept the Treaty as a settlement of our claims. I remember the night of the Treaty when the news came through there were about 400 of us in the hall. Art O'Brien passed the word through as we were leaving the hall. We dispersed as we were surrounded by detectives.

Then after the shooting of Wilson in 1922 the detectives used to come to the Gaelic League. Quite a number of them were Gaelic speakers.

In March, 1923, I was in bed and at midnight three detectives and a policeman knocked at the door. There was a friend staying with me, Margaret Harpur of Wexford. She was over on a holiday with me for the Irish Week in London which we always celebrated by ceillis and a religious service in St. George's, Southwark. My landlady came up with them to my bedroom. "Some gentlemen to see you" she said. They asked me where I kept my correspondence and I said in the top drawer of the chest-of-drawers. They opened a letter from my brother telling me that his wife just had twins. It ended with the phrase, "God save Ireland and shades of MacSwiney and Pearse". They took the letter and an Irish notebook where I entered Irish phrases. I never saw either again. One of the Detectives said, "You will have to come away with us". My friend wanted to come with me but they wouldn't allow her. I thought I was being brought away for questioning. They went out of the room while I was dressing taking the notebook with them to read. I asked one of them why I was being brought away and I was told "When we get to the station we will tell you". When I got to the police station I was shown a piece of paper with my name on it for deportation to Ireland, no reason stated. This was not even signed but it bore an official rubber stamp with the Home Secretary's name. I said straight away "You can't do this". And I quoted the four Acts that are the cornerstones of liberty. "But we are doing it" I was told and I again said "You can't do it". Tom Brooks, whose sister Kathleen was with us in the police station, came in. He said, "What are you doing with my sister. Are we living among the bolshevists?" I said to Tom, "Ring up Martin O'Connor (B.L.) and tell him I am being deported to Ireland". Martin O'Connor used to visit the prisoners in hospital after the big hunger strike, and he contributed generously to their needs. Then I sat by the fire and fell asleep.

At 6 o'clock a van came for us and picked us up. Then they called at different police stations and picked up other women and we were all taken to the Euston Police Station. Here I again protested because opposite was the Convent and my Manager used to say Mass every Sunday morning for the nuns. The Chief Inspector of Scotland Yard thumped me in the back because I asked to go to Mass and a woman policeman said, "You can worship your God by yourself in the train".

We were brought by special train, 90 men prisoners and 10 women, and we were surrounded by a crowd of detectives. We recognised many of the detectives because they used to attend our Whist Drives. We were brought to Dublin, met by an armed guard at the North Wall and brought by van to Mountjoy and Cumann na mBan were waiting to cheer us when we got there. I kept shouting "Up the Republic!" We were received by Páidín O'Keeffe who was taking our names and addresses. He had been a sorter in Mountpleasant Post Office, London, and he had put "Whitechapel" after everybody's name with the idea of showing that we were all from the slums. Grace Lally, who was from Paddington West, fired this out at him to his discomfiture. I knew he was not the Governor because the previous Christmas I had been in Dublin and had seen him with Leo Henderson who had now become a General. At that time I visited the Prison and had seen the Governor who was Phil Cosgrave, a General also. I wanted to make my protest against being deported. So I asked to see the Governor and O'Keeffe said, "I am the Governor". I said, "You are not the Governor, I have not been introduced to you". He never forgave me for the whole thing. When I got in, a man whom I had known as a prisoner in London and to whom I had brought food and little luxuries said, "I know her; she is Sorcha McDermott." I said, "Oh, you do remember me". He said, "You want to die for Ireland". I answered, "There was a time when you did too and don't forget that you gave me your photograph with the words 'freedom or death' after twenty-three days hunger strike in Wormwood Scrubbs", and he went as

white as a sheet. We were in Mountjoy for three months after which we were taken to the North Dublin Union. In Mountjoy we were lying on oakum on the floor and eight of us in a cell which was only supposed to hold three. My sister, Mrs. Luxmore, whose husband was a B.L., was advised by him to get a writ of Habeas Corpus. I was brought to Holloway on a Saturday and on the Wednesday following I was freed.

All the other women prisoners were freed under the Habeas Corpus Writ issued in respect of Art O'Brien. But Art O'Brien and Sean McGrath were re-arrested on a charge of criminal conspiracy after their release at the prison door and they were sentenced to two years. They were freed under the Labour Government. I could not describe adequately the ill-treatment we got on the occasion of being brought from Mountjoy to North Dublin Union. There were women searchers there who were evidently drunk and the bottles of whisky were strewn all round the floor. Some of the whisky had to be used on me after two Free State soldiers twisted the palms of my hands from which I fainted. People can hardly believe that Irishmen would do these things.

My case was raised in the House of Commons. It is reported in Hansard. One of the items mentioned is that Dick Mulcahy accused me of threatening to murder five women, and the remark in the House of Commons was, "What pluck, five to one". They were obliged to indemnify us. The indemnity was paid by the British Government. I got £600, the highest amount paid to any woman because I was the worst treated woman. Some of the men got thousands.

These arrests and the compensation they entailed cost the British Government £600,000 and the Free State Government £250,000.

(Signed)

Date:

Sorcha Nic Diarmada
13-May 1954

(Sorcha Nic Diarmada)

Witness:

S. Ni Chiosain

S. Ni Chiosain.

13 May 1954.

