

W. S. 1,242
ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1242

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,242

Witness

Mrs. A.K. Wordsworth,
"Cherryfield",
Kerrymount Ave.,
Foxrock,
Co. Dublin.

Identity.

Niece of the late Mrs. Stopford Green,
the historian.

Subject.

Visits of I.R.A. leaders
to her home in Leinster Road, Dublin,
1918-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.2566

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY Mrs. A.K. WORDSWORTH,
"Cherryfield". Kerrymount Avenue, Foxrock,
..... Co. Dublin.

I returned to Dublin in 1918, living in Leinster Road, Rathmines, with my 8-year old daughter and my sister Dorothy Stopford, afterwards Doctor Dorothy Price who was then a medical student at Trinity College, Dublin.

I had heard very little of the Irish War for Independence while living in England and had taken no very great interest in the question, but on my return to Dublin I was very soon "in it up to the neck", as was once said to me. Of course, one had to keep one's own council about such things then, both for one's own sake and for the safety of those one was trying to help.

I knew my sister was greatly interested in the Movement and involved to a certain extent. Robert Barton was a constant visitor to the house at that time. My first step was when Maire Comerford came to me one day and asked whether I knew of anyone who could take in two men who were "on the Run" and were walking the streets with nowhere to go. I said "Send them to me", and they came that evening and stayed for a fortnight, and came many times afterwards; Liam Mellows and Sean Etchingham. Maire Comerford was then Secretary to my aunt Mrs. Stopford Green so I had many opportunities for providing shelter etc. given to me. I was always willing to take in wanted men but steadily refused to house arms or ammunition as I was asked to do more than once. This was absolutely agreed to by the men themselves.

On one occasion a member of the R.I.C. who had led the party of police when they laid down their revolvers in Listowel Police

Barracks, refusing to carry arms against their fellow-countrymen, arrived on my doorstep for sanctuary. He said that Miss Spring Rice had told him to come to me from Foynes. The only clue to his identity was an empty envelope with my address on it written in my sister's handwriting. I knew she was staying at Mount Trenchard with Lord Monteagle at the time. Of course, his life was in danger from both sides then, for being an ex-R.I.C. on the one hand and for refusing to carry arms on the other. Fortunately, after a few days I was able to find him a job with Mr. Neill Watson in the Court Laundry, in charge of all the horses and stores, a job which he holds to this day. Of course, no names could be mentioned: Donovan was known as "the parcel". When he called once to see me long afterwards and I was out he left a message to say the parcel had called, much to the mystification of my maid.

After another visit from Liam Mellowes and Sean Etchingham, when they were moving on elsewhere, my sister and I had to take them in by separate train routes to the "Brown Bread Shop" which was a well known meeting place.

President De Valera's secretary, Miss O'Connell, was in the habit of leaving an extra suitcase belonging to the President with me, and one evening just before Curfew I heard a ring at the hall door bell, and opening the door I saw two figures standing on the steps, one of whom I recognised as Miss O'Connell. She murmured "The President" and ran down the steps into the waiting car and drove away. Apparently a warning had been received that the place where he was staying was to be raided that night, and my house was chosen as a reasonably safe alternative. The President explained all this when he got in and I hastily got a room ready, which he inhabited for a week.

The next morning at breakfast there was an account in the paper of an ambush on the Military by the I.R.A. at Kilbrittain. My daughter said, "I think Kilbrittain is a very good name for a place in Ireland". The President was much amused, saying, "Do you think we want to kill all the Britains, Mary?" He had to stay mainly upstairs as I had to negotiate the child's daily governess, a charwoman etc., as well as chance visitors, but he said he was quite happy with his suitcase of books and papers which was already in the house. When I looked into his room during the morning he was seated on the floor with all his papers strewn round him. Miss O'Connell used to come in every day and work with him. I came in one day to find a small Fianna boy in the hall raising the seat of his bicycle to accommodate the President, on which he rode away.

Another evening a fire station ambulance drove up, containing a very badly wounded young man who had had a bullet through his brain in an ambush, and his friends were afraid to take him to hospital, so he was brought to me. Hospitals were liable to be raided by the Crown Forces after an ambush and anyone with a recent bullet wound taken prisoner. Fortunately my sister and another medical student were in the house and attended to him, and we took it in turns to sit up with him all night, but it was obviously essential to get him into hospital for an operation without delay, so as soon as it was light and curfew was over my sister bicycled into the Mater Hospital and arranged with them to send an ambulance and take him in. I heard afterwards that he made a complete recovery and was not concerned in the ambush at all, being merely an unfortunate spectator.

It used to alarm me considerably to see Cumann na mBan members cycling casually over the cobbles with loaded revolvers stuck in their belts. I always insisted that the revolvers should be unloaded before sitting down in my drawing-room to chat with their owners.

One night when Liam Mellows and Sean Etchingham were staying, I was wakened up about 1 a.m. by the sound of a lorry coming up the road. I went to my window which looked to the front of the house and saw a lorryload of military driving slowly along. My heart sank when it stopped outside the house, and I was just going to rouse the sleeping men in the back room when I realised they were stopping immediately under a street lamp in order to repair the engine. They were there for perhaps twenty minutes and the soldiers came into my front garden and lay down to rest on the grass while they were waiting. I remained glued to the window for one of the longest twenty minutes I have ever spent, thinking all the time, "Supposing they were suddenly to decide to come in." When I told the story next morning at breakfast all that my lodgers would say was, "Thank goodness you did not wake us unnecessarily".

The same two spent Christmas 1920 in my house and I shall never forget how much they frightened me by not getting in until after Curfew on Christmas Eve because they had been buying presents for my daughter's Christmas stocking.

On another occasion my aunt, Mrs. Green, was crossing to London where she was meeting General Smuts, an old friend of hers, and she sent a message to the President asking him if he would arrange a time and place to meet her and give her any message he might wish her to carry from him to General Smuts. He sent a message back to her appointing my house as a meeting place the

following Sunday afternoon, much to the astonishment of Mrs. Green as I had said nothing of my doings, even to her. I was ~~so~~ ~~u~~ ~~t~~ when the message was brought to me and it was all arranged by my daughter and the Fianna boy who carried it.

Dr. St. John Gogarty also turned up that same afternoon by chance and, in the course of conversation, he said he wanted very much to have a message delivered to the President, and had I any idea of how he could set about a possible contact. I said that was a difficult task but I had a visitor in the house who might possibly be able to help and that if Doctor Gogarty would give me the message I would pass it on. I got the message by heart (I quite forget now what it was about) and went into the next room where the President was talking to Erskine Childers. I delivered the message and he said, "Is Doctor Gogarty there? I should like to see him". I returned to the next room and said, "The President would like to speak to you". Dr. Gogarty was completely speechless and I felt I had scored for once!

In the early summer of 1921, it was becoming more and more difficult for organisers of the Movement to find meeting places, and even to get meals. Offices were being raided and prisoners made and the net was being drawn together on all sides. Early in June of that year I was asked by Phyllis Ryan (Mrs. Seán T. O'Kelly) if the Army Council could meet the following Thursday afternoon at my house. I said yes, and made my preparations by providing tea for them.

First to arrive was Dick Mulcahy who examined the house for any means of escape if the necessity arose. But the front and back doors were the only exits. There was not even a skylight. Then came 'Ginger O'Connell and two or three others. They all came singly on

bicycles and I opened the hall door to each in turn, mentioning my name to indicate that they had come to the right house. I saw an active figure dump his bicycle in the garden and run energetically up the steps, and when I opened the door saying "Good afternoon, I am Mrs. Wordsworth", the reply was, "Pleased to meet you Mrs. Wordsworth, I am Michael Collins". I was much interested to see for myself that all the stories I had heard of the various disguises adopted by Michael Collins were completely without foundation and that he never took any precautions of that sort, or indeed of any other as far as I could learn. Presently I glanced out the window and there were five bicycles stacked up in the front garden. I went to the door of the room where they were all sitting, put my head in and said, "Are you all quite mad?" They looked up in surprise and I said: "All those bicycles standing in the garden. They are just asking for trouble". Michael Collins sprang up exclaiming, "A brain wave!" and dashed down the steps and up again carrying a bicycle in each hand and deposited them in the hall. The rest followed suit. This is just an illustration of how careless of danger they had grown. When they were going Dick Mulcahy said they would like to come again the next day but one at the same time. This was arranged and they said good-bye and went off one by one.

The next day I was sitting in my drawing-room about 6 p.m. writing letters when, on looking out of the window, I saw a lorryload of Auxiliaries jumping out and rushing up the garden and steps to the hall door, where they banged the knocker until I could get to the door to open it, waving revolvers about in what seemed to me a most dangerous manner and shouting for the owner of the house. I called a warning to Margot Trench who was staying with me at the time.

At the same time a lorry had come up the lane at the back of the house, the men climbing the wall and coming through the garden to the back door. They scattered all over the house, while their officer accompanied me to the drawing-room where he sat in front of my writing bureau, reading my letters, examining my cheque book etc. while he questioned me as to who lived in the house. Another man was questioning Margot in the next room.

He then asked, "You have a sister, haven't you, who is gone South. What is her address?" My sister had recently qualified and been appointed M.O. at Kilbrittain, Co. Cork. I replied that I never gave addresses, and then realised that I had been actually writing to my sister when they came and that an envelope addressed to her was lying beside me on the sofa. Of course, I had been careful to keep my daughter close to me and I now swept letter and envelope under a cushion and told the child to sit on the cushion where she remained during the raid, holding her small dog in her arms.

Just then one of the house searching party came down in great excitement, saying, "There is a man sleeping in the house". The officer turned to me and asked very sternly if this was true, as I had mentioned no man in my list of the house's inhabitants. I said, "Perfectly true" and that the things in the room belonged to a South African medical student who was staying with us as a Paying Guest but was at present doing a course in hospital, and as I never knew when to expect him back for the night I left his room all ready for him, pyjamas in the bed etc. I had not thought it necessary to mention him before as he was not in the house at the time. At this moment another man came in and said that he had found the student's South-African passport in a drawer, so what I had said must be true.

The only part of the story which I had omitted was that Liam Mellowes was actually sleeping in the room at the time and the pyjamas belonged to him, but fortunately they were not marked! The rest of the story was perfectly true.

I went upstairs to my bedroom while they were assembling in the hall preparatory to departure and found the room in an awful mess, drawers pulled out and turned upside down on the floor and a large revolver lying in the middle of the room. I knew enough about raids to recognise this device of leaving a gun behind, only to discover it on a future occasion and report that arms had been found in the house, especially when they had found nothing incriminating as was the case here. So I went down to the officer and said I would prefer not to have such an incriminating article left in my house and would he tell the owner to remove it; so it was rather sheepishly collected and returned to its holster. Then they all departed and I breathed again.

When I asked my daughter if she knew what was under the cushion her reply was, "I thought it was seditious literature of some sort". I must not forget to mention that a bundle of papers tied up in brown paper and string had been handed in for Liam Mellowes that afternoon and had been lying on the top of my bureau all the time, right under the nose of the man who was searching it. Liam Mellowes told me it was all to do with the smuggling of arms into the country.

When Liam Mellows returned that afternoon I started to tell him all about the raid and he said, "I was watching it all the time from a distance".

I wanted to have the members of the Army Council who were coming next day warned of the raid so that they could decide for themselves whether it was too dangerous to come, and Liam Mellowes

said he would have this done, but they all turned up as though nothing had happened, and got safely away again.

The Truce between Britain and Ireland was finally signed 11th July, 1921.

Signed: A. K. Wordsworth
(A.K. Wordsworth)

Date: Sep 9th 1955
Sep. 9th 1955.

Witness: Edith Mary Stopford (Edith Mary Stopford)
Michael F. Ryan Condit

