

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1550

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1550.

Witness

John Macken,
Milltown,
Castlepollard,
Co. Westmeath.

Identity.

Company Quartermaster, Castlepollard Company,
Irish Volunteers.
Officer Commanding, 2nd Battalion, Mullingar Brigade,
Irish Volunteers.

Subject.

Sinn Féin, Irish Volunteers, I.R.B.
and I.R.A. activities, Castlepollard,
Co. Westmeath, 1918 - 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S.2869.

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY JOHN MACKEN,

Milltown, Castlepollard, Co. Westmeath.

I was born and reared in this locality and received my education at the local schools, and I also attended school at Castlepollard for some time.

I joined the Irish Volunteers in 1913 while still a very young lad. There was a local company of Volunteers and it was this unit I joined. A man named Duffy was in charge of the local company at that time. The company had no arms of any sort and used to drill and exercise with wooden guns. When the 1st World War started and John Redmond, who was then leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party in the British House of Commons, offered the services of the Irish Volunteers to the British Government to defend the shores of Ireland, a large number of the pro-British aristocracy joined the Volunteers. These men, a number of whom were ex-British army officers, had no sympathy with Irish nationality and mostly came of the landlord class.

When eventually the split occurred in the Volunteers, all of the company took the National or Redmond side and gradually the organisation died out. The 1916 Rebellion by the Irish Volunteers and kindred associations came upon us in this locality as a big surprise. We were quite unaware that there was anything like an Irish Volunteer force or strong separatist movement in existence.

Mr. Joseph Kennedy of Castlepollard was organising Sinn Féin in Co. Westmeath in 1917 and I joined

that organisation, becoming a member of the Castlepollard branch. About the end of 1917 a company of Irish Volunteers was started in Castlepollard and I joined this company. Joe Kennedy was the Company Commander of the company, which had a strength of about twenty-five. Joe Kennedy did the training and instruction we received. We had no arms - at least no rifles or other service weapons - but there were, as far as I can remember, a few small type revolvers which were held by some of our members. Around this time I also joined the I.R.B., being enlisted into the organisation by Joe Kennedy, who administered the I.R.B. oath to me.

When conscription threatened the country in the early part of 1918, there was a wholesale race by the young men to join the Volunteers and our strength went up quickly to well over one hundred. Little or no restriction was placed on the type of men now taken into the force. Previous to this it had been on a very selective basis. Drilling and training were now nearly a continuous occupation. We had route marches and marched in formation to the various anti-conscription meetings. All such parades were held openly and I think our authorities were anxious to demonstrate the strength and solidarity of the opposition to conscription.

The Volunteers collected for the national anti-conscription fund, the trustees for which were the Catholic clergy. The Volunteers were also responsible for ensuring that every citizen in the area signed the anti-conscription pledge, or was at least asked to do so. Nearly everyone did. The arms position, of course, was just the same - we had none - but there were quite a number of shotguns in the area which were held by farmers

and others and we counted on having them available if needs be.

When the danger of conscription had passed, our membership also rapidly dwindled and we were back, with a few exceptions, to the position we were in before the crisis started. The monies collected for the anti-conscription fund were now returned to the subscribers. On the day that the money was being returned we made a collection for Sinn Féin funds, and quite a big number of the people handed over their subscriptions to us.

The Great War came to an end a few months later and Sinn Féin now tried hard to have Ireland's case for independence put on the agenda for the peace conference to be held in Paris. Towards this end a national plebiscite was held, and here again the Volunteers took a major part in this work. Needless to say, Ireland, through the influence of the British Government, was denied admission to the peace conference.

The British Prime Minister, Lloyd George, making good use of political tactics, now decided to hold a general election while his stock was high after his great war victory. This was called the "khaki" election and took place at the end of 1918, voting taking place in December. Sinn Féin, although as yet only poorly organised in the country districts, decided to contest all the parliamentary seats against the Nationalist party and the Unionist party which was mostly domiciled in the north east part of Ireland. Here again the Volunteers did the greater part of the work in connection with the elections. They were busily engaged in canvassing voters on behalf of Sinn Féin and in collecting for the election

funds and organising transport of all types to take the supporters of Sinn Féin to the polling stations. There were numerous election meetings and the Volunteers kept order at those meetings that were run by Sinn Féin. The election went off quietly, however, and there were no serious clashes between the Volunteers and the R.I.C. or the supporters of the Parliamentary Party. Laurence Ginnell was the Sinn Féin candidate and he was returned at the head of the poll. Personation on his behalf was rife.

The 1st Dáil met in Dublin early in 1919 and, having renewed its allegiance to the Irish Republic, set up a Government and appointed Ministers of departments. One of the first acts of the Dáil was to float a loan to provide funds for its undertakings. Here again the Volunteers did a big job in canvassing and collecting for this loan. In this area the loan was pretty well supported. I collected this locality and received quite a good sum of money. Most of the subscriptions were in £1 notes and in one case I received £5. In all, I received over fifty pounds. Every subscriber was given a temporary receipt and later on they received an official receipt from the Dáil Department of Finance, of which Mick Collins was head at this time. I think Joe Kennedy acted as receiving agent for the Castlepollard area. Every subscriber who claimed it, was later repaid his subscription with interest when the Irish Free State was established.

The Dáil now took over the Volunteers as the army of the Irish Republic and each officer and man was required to take an oath of allegiance to the Dáil

as the representative of the Irish Republic. All our members took this oath without even one defaulting.

In 1919 the British authorities banned the playing of the game of hurling or the carrying of hurling sticks. This came after a D.I. of the R.I.C. had been killed in Tipperary by a blow of a hurling stick. This ban was openly defied by the Volunteers and the Irish people, and we, in common with the rest of the country, organised and played hurling matches. The R.I.C. did not attempt to enforce the ban, as they realised they were powerless to do so as matches were held in practically every parish.

An aeriocht was organised to take place in Castlepollard and Mrs. Skeffington and Jack O'Sheehan were to speak at this meeting, also a Mrs. Freeman who was an American. The R.I.C. banned this assembly and a party of military were drafted into Castlepollard to assist the R.I.C. in enforcing this ban. The speakers arrived in Castlepollard on a Saturday night and were escorted to Kennedy's Hotel, where they were to stay overnight. The Volunteers were on parade and carried a tricolour, and there was a big crowd present. Jack O'Sheehan and others addressed the meeting. The D.I. of the R.I.C. passed through the meeting and rushed down to the R.I.C. barracks, and while Jack O'Sheehan was speaking the R.I.C. rushed out from their barracks, led by the D.I., Foley, and attacked the people with their batons and there was a general melee. The police tried to seize the tricolour and I made to prevent them doing so. A policeman hit me on the head with his baton, knocking me down and making me dizzy. I was taken to the hotel by someone. The police broke up the meeting. This was an illegal act, as the meeting was not banned.

A council was held in the hotel and I suggested that Mrs. Skeffington should come out and stay in our area with another American lady who was staying there and who was a great friend of the late John Devoy. At this council it was planned to go ahead with the aeriocht at a different venue. I knew the R.I.C. would be watching for Mrs. Skeffington the following morning. We took Mrs. Skeffington out of town by a back way and she stayed overnight with our American friend. The following day we held our aeriocht in Johnstown, beyond Fore, in the hills. The military and police scoured the roads around but failed to locate us, and all our speakers were present. The people from Castlepollard and surrounds attended in large numbers, avoiding the watching military and police in getting to the venue. We could see the military on the roads from the hills where we were.

A battalion and brigade organisation had come into being by this time in the County Westmeath and we were now a company of the Mullingar Battalion. The battalion comprised a big number of companies, all very small and scattered over a big portion of the county. Seán Hurley of Athlone was the Brigade O/C, and Joe Kennedy of Castlepollard was our Battalion O/C. Ned Whelehan, I think, was Vice O/C. I cannot remember now who the other members of the brigade or battalion staff were. Patrick McCabe was our Company Captain in Castlepollard and I was Company Quartermaster at this time. We still had no arms except what I have already mentioned.

In the summer of 1920 we started making an occasional raid for arms and collected some shotguns. I was given a very nice Winchester repeating shotgun by a man who was friendly to us. Sinn Féin was pretty well organised by now. Joe Kennedy was the leading light in Sinn Féin in the Castlepollard area; Patrick Brett in Mullingar, Thomas Noonan in Tyrrellspass. Nicholas Crosby was secretary for the county. Dr. O'Byrne of Ballynacargy was also a prominent member.

The Sinn Féin Courts were now well established and functioning. The local judges were Joe Kennedy, Thomas Clinton and Christopher Halpin and Patrick Galligan. The people reacted well to the courts and very few people were having recourse to the British Courts which were almost idle. Yet the British magistrates used to attend regularly. The Sinn Féin Courts were at first held in the hall in Castlepollard openly, but later on, when they were outlawed by the British, they were held in secret places. During this time they were held openly; the R.I.C. did not interfere with them. The people abided loyally by the decisions of the courts generally, and the Volunteers made those who were not inclined to do so face up to the facts. The Volunteers were now doing police work of all sorts and soon had the confidence of the people in their capacity to do so. In this respect they were far more successful than the R.I.C., as they had the co-operation of the people which the R.I.C. never had. A few arrests had to be made in the area. Those arrests were in connection with "land grabbing". We had a place of detention or "unknown destination" in the Ballymanus area, and the detainees were kept there

under Volunteer guards until such times as they promised to keep the peace. This mode of dealing with the matter generally worked out satisfactorily and they did not cause any more trouble. We employed Volunteers who would be strangers to them to go to the houses of individuals who were inclined to give trouble, and to talk to them and threaten them of the consequences if they did not behave themselves. This was far more effective and safer from our point of view than having local Volunteers to do it.

In 1920, local government elections were held throughout the country. Sinn Féin contested all the seats on the different councils and succeeded in gaining a majority on such councils, including the County Council. There were a few Nationalist and other candidates elected, but they were a small minority. There was some trouble in Castlepollard at this election and a section of the crowd who were hostile to Sinn Féin engaged in stone throwing and rioting, but the R.I.C. never interfered with them although they were quite well aware of what was happening. The Volunteers did duty at the polling stations and in the town, and it was principally against them the hostile demonstration took place.

Around the harvest time of 1920 a general raid for arms was ordered by G.H.Q. This was, I believe, to forestall the police and military who had orders to collect all arms in the country. The raid provided us with an assortment of shotguns. They were of various types - single and double barrel - and quite a lot of them were unserviceable. We got no revolvers or service weapons of any type in the main raid. We did not

encounter any serious trouble in collecting the guns, and in the great majority of cases it was only a matter of pointing out to the people that we were acting under official orders and they handed the weapons up. In a few cases a little display of force had to be used. However, in no case had shooting to be resorted to. There was a Miss Hempenstall who lived in Ballinacarry and who was reputed to have a couple of revolvers. She was of the aristocracy and very pro British. She had sworn she would shoot anyone who came to raid her place, and everyone who knew her believed that she would. One of our Volunteers, Dobson, suggested a plan to us to deal with Miss Hempenstall without shooting. Being a lady, any shooting on our part would have caused a very adverse feeling against us by the people as a whole. Dobson had a brother who had served in the B.A. and his old uniform was still in Dobson's house, and he proposed dressing in this uniform and assuming a cockney accent to visit Miss Hempenstall. She would fall for the B.A. uniform, and meanwhile other Volunteers would be concealed in the vicinity. There were military stationed in Oldcastle at this time and he assumed she would believe he was one of them calling on her. He would seize Miss Hempenstall and hold her while the guns were being procured. Dobson went to Miss Hempenstall's residence and spoke to her. He told her he was a truck driver and that his truck had broken down and requested the loan of a jack and some tools. She opened the door and came out. Dobson then seized her and held her. His comrades, who were five or six other Volunteers, now came forward, and having searched the house they found two or three revolvers of a service type and a small quantity of .45 ammunition.

They all then made off. The shotguns were placed in dumps where they would be safe and available to us when required. We had about fifty shotguns and a small amount of shotgun cartridges.

Early in 1920 the R.I.C. had evacuated their stations at Collinstown, Coole and Finea, the garrisons being withdrawn to Castlepollard. On Easter Saturday night, 1920, on orders from G.H.Q., those evacuated premises were destroyed by burning them. This was a countrywide operation. I was at the burning of Finea, which was well sprinkled with paraffin oil and then set alight. It was totally destroyed. At Collinstown one of our men - John Gannon - got badly burned. Here they used petrol, which was a very dangerous substance - it was so highly inflammable. Gannon was laid up for some months before he recovered.

By now Mullingar area had been organised into a brigade. Mr. David Burke had been appointed Brigade O/C. He only carried on for a short spell as he was in bad health and then resigned. A meeting of brigade officers was held in Mullingar which Fionán Lynch and, I think, Tom Cullen attended as representing G.H.Q. Dublin. At this meeting Patrick McCabe of Castlepollard was appointed Brigade O/C and Seamus Maguire Vice O/C. I think Patrick Byrne was Brigade Adjutant. I cannot remember who was Brigade Quartermaster. I think it was Terence Smith, who was a baker in McDonald's of Mullingar.

The brigade area was also organised into battalion areas. Mullingar and surrounds was the 1st Battalion area. The 2nd Battalion was the Castlepollard area, the 3rd Battalion the Kinnegad area, and the 4th Battalion

was the Loughnavalley area, including Ballynacargy and Castletown Geoghegan.

I was appointed O/C of the 2nd Battalion (Castlepollard). James Devitt was Battalion Adjutant. The Vice Commandant was Henry Lestrangle of Boherquill. The Quartermaster was Patrick Smith of the same area. The companies comprising the battalion were Castlepollard and Glenedon. There were also strong sections in Whitehall, Coole and Ballycomoye which became companies later. We had no rifles in the battalion - just shotguns and a small number of revolvers of different types, only a couple of which were service weapons.

In October, 1920, it was decided to kidnap the Resident Magistrate for the area - Maxwell Moore - who was still holding the British courts there. We held a meeting at Fore which Patrick McCabe, the Brigade O/C, and Seamus Maguire, the Vice O/C, and I attended, and here the plan for the affair was threshed out. It was decided to do the kidnapping on the Castlepollard side of Crookedwood. Here the road ran up a steep incline and the magistrate's car would be travelling slowly up this incline at the point selected. The sides of the road here were overgrown with brushwood which would provide concealment. Maguire was to bring three men from Glenidon and I was also to bring three men, one of which would be a motor driver. The magistrate always drove his own car.

We met at the appointed place and awaited Mr. Moore's arrival. We had a man placed on the hill overlooking the road to signal to us when the magistrate's car was approaching. There were other cars travelling

the road at this time. We took up a position of concealment on the roadside. Several cars passed and eventually we got the signal that the one we wanted was approaching. We now ran a ladder, which we had available, across the road. This obstacle was out of sight of the car until it was almost upon it. The magistrate's car came up the hill slowly and pulled up at the ladder, and we jumped from our position and held up the occupants. The occupants of the car put up no resistance. The car was being driven by Moore and it also had another man as passenger. The passenger was a Justice of the Peace from the Mullingar area whom Maxwell Moore was apparently taking with him to sit on the bench. The British authorities were getting it very hard to get the local Justices of the Peace to attend courts at this time.

They protested at being held up very strongly. They had no firearms on them. We blindfolded them and put them in the back seat of their own car and put women's hats on them to disguise them in case we met police or military en route. Our driver took over the driving seat. The car, which, I think, was a French make, was strange to him and he could not get it started. Seamus Maguire tried to make Moore tell our driver how to start the engine, and although Maguire threatened to shoot him, Moore was not very helpful and the only information he would give was that the starter was on the steering wheel. Eventually the car started and Maguire and his men and prisoners departed and the rest of us made ourselves scarce.

Moore and his companion were taken by a roundabout way to Ballymanus area, where they were lodged in a disused house under Volunteer guard. The police and

military now threatened to burn Castlepollard if they were not released. It never was the intention to detain them more than a few days, and after a lapse of three or four days they were released. When they were released they made their way to Castlepollard and reported to the R.I.C. there.

There now ensued a wholesale search and round-up of the area by military and police and several arrests were made. Moore and his companion, during the few days they were detained, had made secret marks on the premises at which they were held so that they were able to identify it again. The Brigade O/C was arrested in Castlepollard, although he was not at the scene of the kidnapping. I had to go 'on the run' now, as they were looking for me and had raided my home for me.

In their round-up the British had picked up a lot of our officers who were key men, and this threw our organisation into a bad state and we were at sixes and sevens for the time being. One night they raided the premises where I was staying. I was sleeping in a barn across the yard from the house, out of which I could not escape, but fortunately they did not come into it. They threatened the owner of the house and his son, who was a mere boy at the time. I could hear them asking the boy if he had seen me, and he replied that he had seen me going towards Mullingar a few days previously. He was well aware I was in the barn at the time. They went away, saying they would be back, and that night I moved to another house.

About a fortnight later I was in the Finea area when I received a message from the Brigade O/C to come back to my own locality, which I did. On a Monday

morning I came to my own home with the intention of assisting my father with some work on the farm. This was a fair morning in Castlepollard and I reckoned that I would not be disturbed by the enemy during daylight hours that day. I was in the house when a lorry pulled up at the gate. My first impulse was to try to get out the back window, but then I realised they had seen me and would shoot me as I was trying to do so, so I decided to stand my ground. They were a mixed party of military and police. They took me to Mullingar and that evening I was transferred to Mountjoy Jail, Dublin. I arrived there about a week after Kevin Barry was hanged. Maxwell Moore and the D.I. from Castlepollard arrived in Mountjoy and I was placed on an identification parade. Moore did not identify me, but he did identify a man from another part of the country who had nothing whatsoever to do with the kidnapping. The D.I. shoved this man back into the ranks.

I was kept in Mountjoy for about three weeks and then, with two other men, was released. I travelled back to Mullingar and then "phoned" to Castlepollard for a car to take me home. The car arrived and I travelled home. I got a severe wetting and developed a very bad cold and was confined to bed for a few days. I was at home for about four days when a party of military and police again arrived at the house and again took me into custody. Having been released earlier, this was a surprise to me and I had no idea that I was still wanted. I was taken to Castlepollard and from there to Delvin Workhouse where the military had a garrison. After a few days there I was brought to the military barracks in Mullingar.

I was ten days in Mullingar and was then transferred to the military barracks in Athlone. There were a large number of prisoners here. I was about a month in Athlone and was then picked out with a number of others and brought to Marlborough Barracks, Dublin, over night. I was now transferred to Kilmainham Jail, Dublin, and spent a few days there. In Kilmainham was Fr. Dominic, who had been chaplain to the Lord Mayor of Cork, Terence MacSwiney, also Frank Teeling and some others who had been arrested for the Mount St. shootings on Bloody Sunday. I was kept a few nights in Kilmainham, which was full of prisoners, and then transferred to Dublin Castle. The Castle was a collecting point for prisoners. We were now taken by a destroyer from the North Wall, Dublin, to Belfast. Here we were greeted by an Orange mob who threw stones and bottles at us and tried to get at us through our escort. We were now put on military lorries and driven to the railway station. En route to the station we passed through what was apparently a Nationalist quarter of the city, and it was very heartening the reception we got here from the people and to see them defying the British soldiers and walking up to the muzzles of the rifles despite the warnings of the soldiers. We were now put on a train and arrived at Ballykinlar, Co. Down, where we were again met by lorries and driven to the internment camp there.

I was in the camp at Ballykinlar until the general release on the 8th December, 1921. While I was in the camp a man named Tormey from Moate, whose brother was afterwards killed in an ambush on the Ballinasloe road, was shot dead by a British sentry for

talking across the barbed wire to prisoners in the other camp. On September 21st, Tadhg Barry was shot under similar circumstances by a sentry also. He was saying goodbye to some comrades. He was being released and was saying his last farewells.

The only attempt at producing munitions in the area was the casting of slugs made from lead and run through a mould and the filling of these into shotgun cartridges. We made the mould ourselves.

Up to the time I was arrested there was no one shot in the area for spying for the British forces. There were a number of people under suspicion but there was no definite evidence to prove they were doing so.

There were intelligence sections organised within the battalion and companies and these were useful for keeping watch on people who were suspected of collaborating with the enemy and in the detection of local crimes and so forth. From the purely military intelligence point of view, they were not very effective and had no contacts within the enemy forces in higher places. There was a Constable Guiney in Castlepollard who used to tip us off regarding pending raids and Volunteers who were on the wanted list whenever he could. The post ^{OFFICE} in Castlepollard was of no use at any time. It was run by a Protestant family who were loyalists. Communications within the area and with brigade were maintained by Volunteer dispatch riders who either travelled by bicycle or on foot.

When I joined the Castlepollard circle of the I.R.B., Joe Kennedy was the Centre and the membership

was about eight or ten - all Volunteers. We paid a small subscription every month. Meetings were held monthly. At these meetings we talked and discussed current events, but nothing concrete in the way of hostilities against the British was ever done. I am at a loss still to understand what real purpose the organisation served at this stage when we had an oath bound Volunteer force. To my mind it only led to dissension, as the ordinary Volunteers who were not members must have wondered what was going on behind their backs by what appeared to be a chosen few. When the Treaty with England was signed, the I.R.B. executive failed hopelessly to give any definite lead to its members.

Patrick Kiernan, now deceased, followed me as Battalion Commandant when I was arrested. Apart from the other activities mentioned, we were continually engaged in obstructing communications by cutting telephone and telegraph wires and in felling trees across the roads and cutting trenches in them, also the destruction of bridges. We also raided the mails several times. The letters were seized and opened and read by us and then reposted. We never found anything in them of any importance, but I am sure it had the effect of stopping individuals who might be so inclined from sending information about the Volunteers to the police or military. Once a doubt was established about the insecurity of the post office that was sufficient.

Signed: *John Macken*

Date: *Dec. 18 1956*

Witness: *William J. [Signature]*
(Investigator).

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