

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

NO

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BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

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Statement by:

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on:

THE I.R.B.

1904 - 1914

"IRISH FREEDOM"

Nov. 1910 - Dec. 1914

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THE I. R. B.

After the failure of Fenianism the I. R. B. were re-organised in 1873, and I hold a typescript copy of the constitution of that body as adopted in that year. It is copied from a print in the possession of P. S. O'Hegarty. I have given a copy, certified by me as correct, to Mr. M. McDunphy, Director of the Bureau of Military History 1913-1921.

As far as I am aware, that constitution remained virtually unchanged until 1917, when, I understand, it was revised. I have never seen, however, a copy of the revised constitution of 1917, if, in fact there was any such revision.

I do not think there were more than a dozen copies of the constitution in existence at any one time, and copies were only in the possession of officers of the Supreme Council or occasionally an organiser appointed by them. When copies were worn out or disappeared there was a fresh printing from time to time and the copy which I most frequently saw and of which I subsequently made a typewritten copy was, I understand from P. S. O'Hegarty, printed about 1910 in Glasgow, at the instance of John Mulholland, who at that time was chairman of the Supreme Council.

Although the numbers of the copies of the constitution were so restricted, members were entitled, on request, to have the constitution read at their Circle meetings, and in practice this took place fairly frequently. The members were thus familiar with the constitution.

It should be noted that the constitution specifically forbade an insurrection such as had taken place in 1867 when there was no ^{public} possible support, no adequate organisation and no

chance of success. In swearing in men into the I.R.B. I was often asked if there was any assurance that their oath of obedience would not land them into a futile insurrection, and I frequently had to assure men that the constitution specifically forbade such a development.

I joined the I.R.B. in Belfast in 1904 as an ordinary member. I was introduced by Denis McCullough and sworn in by the then Belfast Centre, Patrick Dempsey.

At this time, 1904, the I.R.B. in Belfast consisted mainly of older men and it was quite inactive. McCullough and myself tried to infuse new life into it by recruiting young members, and in this we were fairly successful.

About 1908-1909 Denis McCullough became Ulster Centre in succession to Neil John O'Boyle of Randalstown, Co. Antrim, who had held that post for years, probably back to 1873, and became ex-officio Ulster representative on the Supreme Council.

In 1908 I came to Dublin, went back to Belfast in 1909, and back again to Dublin in 1910, where I was transferred to the Teeling Circle of the I.R.B., the Centre of which was Michael Cowley.

In 1911 I succeeded Michael Cowley as Centre of the Teeling Circle, and when I attended the Dublin Centres Board ^{shortly after} ~~the same week~~ was elected Chairman ~~as Dublin Centre~~. ^{thus} I became a member of the Leinster Council, and at my first meeting was elected Chairman of that body and ex-officio member of the Supreme Council.

This followed the disappearance of Allen and O'Hanlon from the I.R.B. to which I refer in another part of this statement.

The membership of the whole I.R.B. at this time, 1911, was, I think, about 600-700 in Dublin and about 300-400 elsewhere, the total being probably about 1,000 and certainly not more than 1,500.

The Teeling Circle, of which I was a member and subsequently Centre, was very active and had among its members many who were very active in the Gaelic League :

Micheál Ó Foghludha,
 Diarmuid O'Hegarty,
 Fionán Lynch,
 Micheál Ó Loingsigh (now dead),
 Patrick McCartan,
 Seumas Deaken (later co-opted member of the
 Supreme Council).

Deaken resigned from the Supreme Council and from the I. R. B. about August, 1914.

A Circle went on recruiting and the practice generally was that when it exceeded fifty members it was divided, and a new Circle started.

The method of recruiting was as follows. When a member became acquainted with someone who was likely to prove a good member he was not at liberty to approach him until he had obtained permission. He proposed the name at his Circle meeting. The names proposed were taken by the Secretary of the Circle to a meeting at which all the Secretaries of other Circles attended. The Secretaries exchanged the names and came back and read the list of men proposed in all the other Circles at their next Circle meeting so that every name proposed was open to comment in every Circle meeting, and any opposition which was not frivolous was sufficient to prevent the matter being proceeded with in any particular case. Only after a prospective candidate's name had survived this scrutiny, was permission given to the man who originally proposed him to speak to him on the subject. This made recruiting slow, but it also made it virtually certain that undesirable people did not gain admission into the I. R. B., and it ensured that the police had not the remotest chance of getting people introduced into the organisation. We never had any worry about police spies, which in any case were always more important in Irish fiction than in Irish political organisations.

After the co-option of the Redmonite^d nominees on the Provisional Committee of the Irish Volunteers in June 1914, and owing to the violent hostility expressed by some members of the Supreme Council, particularly Clarke and McDermott, regarding my action in connection with that development, I resigned my office as Leinster Centre and, of course, as a member of the Supreme Council, but retained the position of Dublin Centre.

I insisted on my resignation as Leinster Centre in spite of the protest of all the County Centres who had elected me, and any statements that I was at any time deprived of office by the Supreme Council or anybody else are not true.

I retained the chairmanship of the Dublin Centres Board until after the insurrection in 1916.

In 1911 the I.R.B. in Dublin was practically controlled by three members of the Supreme Council - Jack O'Hanlon, Fred Allen, who was Secretary of the Supreme Council, and P. T. Daly, and their influence almost stifled all activities. Other members of the Supreme Council were, P. S. O'Hegarty from London, South of England representative, and Denis McCullough from Ulster. John McBride was representative for Connaught, in which capacity he was later succeeded by Seán McDermott. Tom Clarke returned from America to Ireland in 1908, and was co-opted a member of the Supreme Council some time after. He always demanded a more active policy and supported the younger men.

There were no representatives from the U.S.A. The Clan-na-Gael organisation, the American prototype of the I.R.B., was an entirely separate and independent body, although there was a close connection between the two - the Clan being a source of funds for the I.R.B. The association between the two bodies was indicated by the fact that a delegate from the Supreme Council of the I.R.B. attended the annual conventions of the Clan-na-Gael in America, but the latter body made it clear that the policy in Ireland was a matter for the men in Ireland.

Clan-na-Gael contributed about £1,000 a year to the I.R.B. and that with the subscriptions of the members constituted the whole income of the I.R.B.

Towards the end of 1910, in order to infuse new life into the Organisation, I proposed that the I.R.B. should publish a paper, but was opposed by Allen, O'Hanlon and other conservative leaders in the Organisation. ^{stating that if they} On my ~~insisting~~ ^{would not start a paper & would start one myself they gave way,} however, ~~they allowed me to go ahead;~~ the result was that in November, 1910, the first issue of "Irish Freedom", a monthly, appeared.

The paper was the property of the I.R.B. and was financed by a monthly subscription of one shilling collected from ^{each} members in each I.R.B. Circle. It was printed by Patrick Mahon, Yarnhall Street, Dublin.

Allen and O'Hanlon, while being forced to agree to the publication of the paper, would not agree to my acting as editor. They were, however, prepared to accept Patrick MacCartan, but as he at that time was doing his final year as a medical student, he had no time to undertake work of this sort. I arranged with MacCartan that he should take the nominal editorship, and that I should carry out the work.

Seán McDermott was manager of the paper until he became ill, but he never wrote anything for it.

P. S. O'Hegarty, who was then in London, contributed a great deal, and the work was shared between us.

"Irish Freedom" continued up to December, 1914, when it was suppressed with other national journals by the British Authorities.

I continued to edit it up to May, 1914, when I resigned owing to the hostile attitude of Clarke and McDermott, my fellow members on the Supreme Council, following the admission of

Mr. Redmond's nominees to the Provisional Committee of the Irish Volunteers.

In 1911, on the occasion of a Royal visit to Ireland, I published in "Irish Freedom" an open letter to King George V in the hope that the authorities would suppress the paper and thereby give a fillip to national feeling. I did not succeed, however. All that happened was the prevention of display of the posters by newsagents under pressure by the police.

In 1912 "Irish Freedom" in an article written by P. S. O'Hegarty, welcomed the formation of the Ulster Volunteers by Sir Edward Carson, because P. S. O'Hegarty and I realised that if Carson succeeded in his organisation, it would soon be possible to establish a Volunteer movement for the rest of Ireland.

"Irish Freedom" represented the militant left wing of the Irish national movement, and advocated the independence of Ireland by every practicable means, including the use of physical force.

As already stated, the paper was financed by a subscription of one shilling per week collected from members of the I.R.B. Allen, who was Treasurer, and therefore in a key position on the Supreme Council got and kept control of this money, and delayed placing it at the disposal of the paper, of which he did not approve. The conflict was the recurring one between an older generation who wished to go slowly and quietly and the younger generation eager to get things done.

Finally, about the end of 1911, there was an open breach. Allen and O'Hanlon, and others who sided with them, got out a separate paper of the same name, so that for one issue there were two separate papers both entitled "Irish Freedom" for the month of December 1911. The original paper can be distinguished from the new one by the fact that it bore the imprint "Editor - P. MacCartan". The issue of a second paper brought

matters to a head. The Supreme Council met, and although I was not a member of it, I was present at their invitation. The result was that Allen and O'Hanlon resigned from the Supreme Council and from the Organisation.

Michael Cowley also resigned office and I succeeded him as Centre of the Teeling Circle.

Apart from myself and P. S. O'Hegarty, who between us, wrote all the editorials and a good many other articles, others who contributed from time to time were :-

Terence McSwinsky, whose "Principles of Freedom" first appeared in "Irish Freedom",

Pádraig Pearse, Ernest Blythe, Pierce Heaslaí,

Pat Devlin, Fred Cogley, J. W. Good, Roger Casement, and others whose names I do not recollect.

A selection of the articles which appeared in "Irish Freedom" were subsequently published in 1919 in a book entitled "The Voice of Freedom". It was promoted and financed by the Supreme Council of the I.R.B. and the material for it was selected by P. S. O'Hegarty and myself. It was sold for 1/- per copy.

Some years ago at the request of the National Library I wrote the names of the authors at the end of each article in their copy of the "Voice of Freedom".

Julian Wilson

17.10.47

October, 1947.

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Witness

Michael Cowley

Director, Bureau of Military History

ADDENDUM

The re-organisation of the I.R.B. took place on St. Patrick's Day, 1873, at a meeting held in the Brazen Head Hotel, Bridge Street, Dublin. This old Dublin Posting House was, I believe, much used as a meeting place for United Irishmen in the last years of the eighteenth century. I have met a number of men who were present at the meeting in 1873 and I am giving my recollections of things they told me.

Members of the I.R.B. were free to leave the organisation at any time. Few did so, and they were mostly men who developed religious scruples after hearing the annual denunciation of secret societies in the pastorals of some Irish Bishops. We made no effort to retain such men and their resignations were encouraged rather than impeded. They were tendered an oath on resignation, which pledged them not to reveal anything which they had learned as members of the organisation.

Bulmer Ashton

17 October, 1947.

