

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
P.C. W.S. 89



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ROINN COSANTA.

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

(Bureau of Military History 1913-21).

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(Dublin).

DOCUMENT W.S.89

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Dated:- 29th December, 1947.

On: National Activities, Cork,
1911-1916.

8 pp. typescript - foolscap.

File No. S.

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STATEMENT OF MICEAL Ó CUILL, MIRIAM, HARTLAND'S
ROAD, THE LOUGH, CORK.

PERIOD: MAY, 1911, TO MAY, 1916.

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BURO STAIRNE MILEATA 1913-21
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UNITS: CORK BRIGADE I.V.
'A' AND 'B' COMPANIES, CORK CITY.

When I came to Cork in May, 1911, I got into touch with the South Parish Branch of the Gaelic League which was then in the Grínán, Queen Street. I was anxious to make contact with An Dún, which was better known in the country. Very shortly afterwards I met Harry Lorton who told me he was going to a meeting of a Vigilance Committee which had been set up in An Dún to endeavour to prevent the presentation of loyal addresses by public Boards to the King on the occasion of his forthcoming visit. There I met Tomás MacCurtain for the first time and became associated with these activities.

Terence MacSwiney had about that time been appointed Instructor in commercial subjects by the Technical Instruction Committee, and was one of those most active in the literary and dramatic phases of national revival. I do not remember him being present at Vigilance Committee meetings; he may have been present once or twice, but he was out of the city a good deal at the time. Other men I remember being there were Seán MacSwiney, Con Doran, Diermuid O'Donovan and Denis O'Mahony.

Propaganda was carried on to prevent the Cork Corporation from presenting an address to the King. Posters were got out and members of the Corporation canvassed. The only firm who would agree to undertake the printing was Blairs in Rutland Street, although they were Protestants. In June the matter came up for decision by the Corporation. The decision to present an address was carried. I was in the vestibule. A number who were in the balcony over the vestibule hung a black flag over it. A black flag was put also on the National Monument on the Grand Parade.

The Gaelic League were tenants of An Dún. They sub-let rooms in it to various National organisations. The Post Office employees had a room there, the Fianna, which was going at this time, used the premises, and the Dramatic and Literary Society with which Terence MacSwiney and Daniel Corkery were associated had a room there also. The large room or Hall was used for concerts, plays and ceilidhes, and the Fianna drilled there. The O'Growney Branch of the Gaelic League was there. They were regarded as the rebels, and, in fact, that Branch included most of the men who were Republicans and who were most active in national and anti-British activities. Tomás MacCurtain was the principal figure in the O'Growney Branch. Frank Daly, the O'Neills, Martin Donovan and Paddy Corkery were members also. Seán O'Sullivan was actively associated with the Fianna and was a member of the O'Growney Branch also.

From the time I became associated with An Dún there was continuous propaganda against recruiting for the British Forces. This was inspired and largely carried into effect by the I.R.B. circle of which Seán O'Hegarty was centre. In August or September, 1912, I went to Kinsale with Tomás MacCurtain and

some others who were organising the Fianna there. Seamus Breathneach was active in Kinsale. I had been reading "Irish Freedom" and the idea was suggested in one issue that a number of men armed with revolvers could rush a British Military post and capture it. I suggested to Tomás that we should try something like this. He said nothing definite at the time, but later came to see me, referred to our conversation and asked me to hold my hand, that he would explain later. I think it was in January, 1913, that I met him by appointment in An Dún one night and we went for a short walk. He asked me if I would be prepared to join the I.R.B. I agreed; he brought me back to the O'Growney rooms in the Dún where Seán O'Hegarty swore me in.

I had been a member of the A.O.H. for a time, but had left it. I was never a member of the A.O.H. AMERICAN ALLIANCE, though I was asked to join. I was then a member of the I.R.B. and had decided before that not to join any sectarian national organisation any more. Tomás MacCurtain was a member of the A.O.H. American Alliance but he was not enthusiastic about it. It was not a revolutionary organisation, though it had some members who were active Republicans.

One event in the anti-recruiting campaign that I remember was a protest against the showing of a recruiting film at the Palace Theatre. A few of us with some members of the Fianna made a protest the first night by throwing eggs at the screen. We all got away that night, but I went back the following night, continued the protest, got a black eye and was summoned and fined.

I returned home in the Summer of 1913. While there I was in touch with Seán O'Sullivan, who was working an Insurance Agency in the Macroom district. He brought out anti-recruiting handbills which I distributed at night in Carriganimma by putting them under doors and so on. I returned to Cork in September or early October.

For some time before the actual start of the Volunteers the idea was in the minds of many people in one form or another and was discussed amongst groups such as those who were associated in the Dún. The Ulster Volunteers and the Citizen Army were in existence. Something was done about forming Volunteers at Athlone, and finally articles appeared in An Claidheamh Soluis. The leading article in that journal was then usually in English. There had been a decision that these leading articles would not be written by the Editor, but would be contributions invited from men prominent in any phase of the Irish Ireland movement. An article by Pearse had appeared suggesting a Confederation of Irishmen. This was followed by McNeill's article advocating the formation of a Volunteer Force.

The men in Cork immediately fell in with the spirit of the time. They began preparation for the setting up of an armed force. Some air guns were procured, and some drilling took place in the Dún before the formal inauguration of the movement in Cork. Seán O'Sullivan, who was closely associated with the Fianna, was one of the principal figures in this early activity. Con Twomey was in it also.

I do not know how the Provisional Committee which made the preliminary arrangements for the public meeting was got together, but before the meeting Tomás MacCurtain, J.J. Walsh and Seán O'Sullivan appeared to have done most of the work. Admission cards and forms of application for membership were printed. The Committee was obviously selected with care, for although it was representative of the A.O.H. American Alliance, the Industrial Development Association and the G.A.A., as well as

the Gaelic League and the I.R.B., its personnel were a group of men whose national opinions were well known to each other, and many of them had worked together for years in various organisations. Later of course, when the movement was well established and when Redmond was seeking control the A.O.H. (B.C.E.) people came along - some of them to prove themselves subsequently sound and national-minded men. Others of them, of course, as is well known ("Enough said.") How far the selection was influenced by the I.R.B. I do not know. In the result they were strongly represented on the Committee and it would be in accord with the normal I.R.B. policy to place their men as far as possible in positions of influence and responsibility. Of course, the I.R.B. men on the Committee deserved their places because of their personal character, their known integrity, and their work in the national interests.

I was at the inaugural meeting in the City Hall, but I have no recollection of a formal resolution appointing this Committee having been passed. They carried on the work and some time later, but before the Redmond followers came in in large numbers, there was an election of an Executive Committee which replaced the Provisional Committee. The election made little or no change in the personnel of the Committee.

The first drills were held in the Dún. Attendance was small - not more than 50 to 60 at the start. Goodwin, an ex-soldier who worked in Suttons, was the first drill instructor. A little later ex-Sergeant-Major Donovan came to us. He had been in the British Army later than Goodwin and was an excellent instructor. Attendance at drills improved rapidly. At the end of January, 1914, there were probably about 500 Volunteers parading in the city. The Cornmarket became available for drilling in March or April and the first public parade took place from there to Blarney on April 5th. Efforts had been made to mobilise for training all those who signed the forms of application for membership at the City Hall meeting. I got a batch of notices to deliver to some of these. I did the Peacock Lane district. Most of them never turned up and they were probably no loss.

Rumours were in circulation that the Redmondites would endeavour to get control of the Volunteers. Numbers of them joined in the Summer of 1914 and were given representation on the Committee. Most of these left again at the Split, but a few stayed on. Captain Talbot Crosbie came to us at this time. The first parade he attended was to Rafeen in the Summer of 1914. He was on horseback that day.

X At a parade in the Cornmarket on 4th August, 1914, Talbot Crosbie announced that on that morning he had offered the services of the Cork Volunteers to the War Office in case of war, and he read the reply he had received. There was no discussion of the announcement at that parade. The proposal that the Irish Volunteers should join with the Ulster Volunteers in the Defence of Ireland was mooted at the time and it is hard to say if many of those on parade fully understood the nature of Crosbie's offer. On the 5th the Committee passed a resolution approving of the proposal that the Irish Volunteers should act with the Ulster Volunteers in the defence of Ireland. X

I was not in Cork for the parade of 30th August at which the actual split took place, but I know that most of the serviceable arms were retained by us. All the A.O.H. element did not approve of offering the Volunteers to the British War Office. One of them came to me to help distribute handbills prepared by Pat Ahern. These were against enlistment in the British Army. The Cornmarket was closed to us from the date

of the split, but we retained the Hall in Fisher Street.

I was in the Macroom district from September, 1914, to January, 1915. The position in Macroom was that there was only a Company of Irish National Volunteers. I was in touch with Seán O'Sullivan and I asked his advice as to whether I should join this Company. He advised me to do so and I did. Dan Corkery was in it then. This was in October, 1914.

In September, 1914, I had, as a result of a suggestion from Seán O'Sullivan, visited Seán O'Hegarty at Ballingeary. Some time in October I came in to Cork on a Saturday and attended an Irish Volunteer parade on the following day. I met Tomás MacCurtain and many of the city officers. Tomás arranged with me that I would come in again for a rifle for Seán O'Hegarty. I went homethat Sunday night, but came back one day soon afterwards and picked up the rifle and a small quantity of ammunition at Phillips in Douglas Street. I had a few hours sleep and left between 2 and 3 in the morning with the rifle tied on to the crossbar of the bicycle and wearing a Union Jack badge which Mrs. Phillips gave me. A policeman near St. Augustine's Church looked hard at me but did not stop me. I got to Mullinrue before daylight and hid the rifle. I am not sure if it was the same night or soon afterwards I got a carbine for myself and brought it out.

Next night or a few nights afterwards I started in the middle of the night to walk across the mountains from Mullinrue to Ballingeary with the rifle. Daylight overtook me before reaching Reinaree and from that to Tuirindubh I had to avoid the houses and keep out of view as much as possible. I delivered the rifle to Seán O'Hegarty at Tuirindubh. He had the intention to fight if an attempt was made to arrest him. Soon after that I came in to Cork again to bring out the ammunition. In Cork I got a loan of a bicycle from Miceal O Dubhda and with the ammunition in a basket started off for Ballingeary in the beginning of the night. The weather had been frosty and this night turned foggy. I intended to go by the road south of the lakes from Inchigeela but took a wrong turning in the fog, got lost and had to return to Inchigeela. It was then so late that there was no reason to anticipate danger from the Ballingeary R.I.C. Barrack and I went on the main road, arriving at Tuirindubh about 1.30 in the morning.

About this time Seán Murphy told me it would be useful if I could pick up some dynamite. I got some from some farmers in my own neighbourhood who were not Volunteers but were reliable. I went to Seán the Bard, an old moonlighter. He had a bit of land between Keimcarriga and Millstreet. He gave me some dynamite also and I think I got some from the Twomeys at Tuirindubh. I brought it all into Cork to Seán Murphy, who was Brigade Quartermaster. He told me I had given the case away by going through the country looking for it. I was quite satisfied that those from whom I got it were entirely reliable, and so they were.

I returned to Cork in January, 1915. There were then four Companies in the city, with a strength of 20 to 25 in each. 80 would be a good turn out on a route march. Headquarters were moved from Fisher Street to Sheares' Street about March and the strength of the Companies began to increase steadily. I was in 'B' Company at first, transferred to 'A' Company on changing my lodgings, but was back in 'B' Company again before Easter, 1916.

Between Christmas, 1915, and Easter, 1916, James Connolly delivered a lecture in the Grinán. His subject was the tactics to be employed in a rebellion. I do not know who organised it, but Tadg Barry was prominently connected with it and Seán O'Sullivan approved. I do not think either Tomás MacCurtain or Terence MacSwiney was present. My recollection is that the attendance was comparatively small. In his lecture Connolly commented on the traditional idea in a Rising of taking to the hills and maintained that it was wrong and bad tactics. By adopting such a course the insurgents cut themselves off from supplies. He was in favour of the occupation of towns and cities and of street fighting. He realised, he said, that he was speaking to men imbued with the idea of an insurrection, but that perhaps they had not a full realisation of the difficulties. It would, he said, be very much a matter of doing things first and seeking permission afterwards. He recommended the occupation of entire blocks of buildings. Tools should be available to make boring possible between all buildings in the block so that the defenders could pass easily from one building to another and have a covered line of retreat when things got too hot at any point. Crowbars and pickaxes were essential. In cases of this kind, occupation of the buildings should come first, explanation and payment afterwards if they were possible.

Long before that - before 1911 in fact - Connolly had lectured in the Dún on Socialism, a policy which was then regarded as being even more disreputable than Communism is regarded now. It created a considerable row. Canon McNamara, in whose parish the Dún was, protested very vigorously indeed. The Gaelic League had given the use of the Hall for the lecture.

In regard to the attitude of the Gaelic League to the Volunteers, it was that generally of not interfering with the freedom of decision by the members individually. All branches had members who favoured the Volunteer movement and participated in it from the start. They had also members who did not take a physical force movement seriously. Individual members held different views and were free to hold them. The matter never came up in any official way in Cork. If it did, I would know about it.

For some time before Easter, 1916, it was becoming clear that some action would be taken soon by the Volunteers. I suggested to Tomás MacCurtain that the Autumn would be a most suitable time for a Rising as stocks of food would be then available in the country. He told me he would convey my suggestion to the proper authorities. Later he told me he had done so. While he did not say so definitely, the impression I got was that the suggestion was not accepted. I remember at a Ceilidhe organised by Cumann-na-mBhan in the Grinán, Seán O'Sullivan said to me that I should not be away from home or have any other engagement on a certain Sunday which, as far as I can recollect, was Easter Sunday. When there was a question of arranging another Ceilidhe for the same Sunday night, he said, (indiscreetly, I thought) in the presence of a number of people, that he hoped to be dancing on the plains of Kildare by then.

On Easter Saturday practically all the Volunteers went to Confession. I do not think this was done on instructions. There were vague stories about but no definite news. I paraded on Sunday with 'B' Company, went to Macroom and returned the same evening by train. Many of the Volunteers were disappointed when we were ordered to return home. I am not sure if, on being dismissed that night, we got orders to stand

to, but I know I received a stand-to order the following day (affecting that day only).

I was staying at Phillips in Douglas Street. Donal Óg O'Callaghan was staying there also. On Easter Monday Donal Óg went to the Hall. I was going there later when I met him in Mary Street. He had the news that the Rising had started in Dublin. We went back to Douglas Street, filled bandoliers and got ready for a call. None came that night. I went to work on Tuesday as did most of the Volunteers. On Tuesday or Wednesday I met Tomás MacCurtain. He was very disappointed and seemed to blame the Dublin men. They did not seem to have acted in accordance with the arrangement made with Cork as he understood it.

I was then employed at the Goods Yard in G.S. & W. Railway in Cork. Up to Wednesday there had been orders not to accept goods for stations further north than Athenry. On Wednesday evening there was an order not to accept goods for anywhere north of Limerick Junction. At the same time there were rumours of fighting in Tipperary. I threw down my truck, went to the time office and said I was leaving. I had formed a resolution that if Cork would not fight I would go to the nearest place where a fight was taking place. I think I went back on Thursday morning to draw whatever wages were due to me. A head porter named Bill Murphy who knew why I was going said "God speed you."

I went to Seán Murphy, who was working in Suttons, and asked him if they intended to do anything in Cork. He told me that it wasn't any of my business. I went to the Hall. There I saw Tomás, Terry and Seán O'Sullivan. It was with Tomás and Terry I had the conversation that followed. I said I was going to Dublin if there was to be no fight in Cork. They said everyone had the right to do what he thought best. They had decided to stand to arms and defend the Hall if it was attacked. They advised me to stay with them. Tomás referred to the confusion that had arisen over the orders they had received from Dublin and said that he had told Pearse that they in Cork would obey any order issued by McNeill as Chief of Staff. I decided not to stay.

That evening, armed with a revolver and some ammunition, I took a train to Limerick Junction and another from there to Tipperary town. Everything was quiet there. I returned to Limerick Junction. On Friday I got a train to Sallins and walked from there to Inchicore. People coming out from Dublin had various accounts of the fighting. One young man told me the Volunteers were winning everywhere. This put me in great heart, and I did some of the best walking I ever did in my life. It was late at night when I got to Inchicore; the sounds of the firing and explosives were audible and the sky was lighted up by the fires. I stayed in Inchicore that night.

I did not know the city except a little of the North side, and I was on the South side. I had learned somehow of Jacob's factory being occupied and determined to try and reach it. In the morning I approached a picket and was interrogated by an oldish man in plain clothes. I told him a story about trying to find a sister of mine about whom our mother was anxious. He enquired where I wanted to go, and, not knowing anywhere on the South side, I said "Queen Street." He ordered me to be allowed to pass. I was naturally reluctant to make direct enquiries and was handicapped by lack of knowledge of the city. I was misdirected and did not get to Jacob's Factory. I heard that permits were being issued at the City Hall. I went there but the crowd awaiting permits was so large I decided

not to wait. I went back towards Inchicore with the intention of crossing the river and coming in on the North side. I was held up but after a good deal of hesitation and questioning allowed to pass. I went through Castleknock and into the city from the North side.

The surrender had then taken place. I was caught out in the 7 o'clock curfew, put under arrest and my revolver and other effects taken from me. I was brought to a stable in the North Circular Road and held there for the night. On Sunday morning I was taken to a tram station by a detachment of Dublin Fusiliers, where I was interrogated by a very aggressive Officer. He ordered that I be put in a tram under guard. After a while he came back and asked me if I would join the Army if released. I said "No; you either let me go a free man or do whatever else you wish." He said, "You may be shot." I then said, "Go ahead as soon as you like." (Meaning having me shot or whatever they wanted in the way of punishment.) "You will let me see a priest?" I enquired. He said "Yes, alright." Of course whether they would let me see a priest or not would make no difference to my attitude if matters had come to a point. We became more friendly after that. Another prisoner and myself were taken along the banks of the canal on foot. The soldiers got tea and coffee but there was nothing for the prisoners. In the afternoon we were brought into the parlour of a private house. The other prisoner was allowed to go. The Officer questioned me again about the revolver and other effects he had taken from me. He left them on a window in the room. Two men, evidently residents of the house, asked for permission to give me something to eat. Permission was granted and I got tea. After curfew the room filled up with other prisoners. It was like a wake. Story telling began and I fell asleep.

In the morning the other prisoners were released. The people of the house again gave me food. That morning I was brought up to the Broadstone and handed over to an English Regiment. From there I was taken with other prisoners across by Kilmainham to Richmond Barracks. The crowds on the streets hissed and called on the soldiers to shoot us.

At first the conditions in Richmond were terrible. I was in the Gymnasium. We were given no blankets and slept huddled together in bunches to try and keep warm. A tin of bully beef between two; hard biscuits and buckets of tea - that was the fare. There was only one serving of three or four biscuits per man, in the morning, some more buckets of tea but no food was given in the evening. That was all for the day. I was three weeks there. On the Saturday evening of the first week after the Rising conditions began to improve slightly. After Asquith's visit there was a further improvement - in some ways considerable - but conditions all the time remained far below satisfaction.

Three times during the three weeks I was sent out for deportation and twice brought back. One day a detachment of Dublin Fusiliers came to the Gymnasium, formed us into a semi-circle, and looked carefully at each man. I was picked out, put under escort and taken outside. One of the escort immediately began to question me. "You were sniping at....." An Officer came along and said to the soldier, "You are evidence; you cannot escort the prisoner." I was taken to a yard. I was prepared for death and expected it then. An Officer of the Dublin Fusiliers passed with my effects in a large envelope and went into an Office. The Officer of the Dublin Fusiliers into whose custody I first came after arrest had made some notes on my case, which I saw him put into this envelope then with my effects. He was not present at this time, but after a

while the other Officer came back and I was ordered back to the Gymnasium. My theory is that whatever the first Officer had written on the notes saved me.

The next time I was taken out was for deportation with a large number of other prisoners. Going through Dublin to the boat just the same kind of crowd that had hissed us three weeks before cheered us now.

I was taken first to Lewes Detention Barracks, then to South Camp, Frongoch. From there we went to Wandsworth to appear before the Committee investigating the cases of the internees and afterwards back again to Frongoch. About the 14th July a number of us, including some Cork men, were set free and I returned home.

SIGNED:

Michael O'Connell

DATE:

29-12-1947

WITNESS:

Florence Donoghue

