

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 104

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

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Witness

George Lyons

Identity

Member of I.R.B. and 3rd Battalion

Subject

I.R.B. 1900-1901

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

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THE I.R.B. - 1900 - 1901.Statement by Mr. George Lyons, 16 June, 1947.

I joined the I.R.B. on 12 August, 1898. I had been an associate for six months at least before that. The centre of my Circle - the Emerald Circle - was Patrick Flood. He was brother of James Flood who had been adjutant to Old James Stephens. The Executive of that Circle consisted of the centre and sub-centre, John Flanagan who married Joe Brady's sister; Secretary was Patrick O'Shea, the Treasurer was John Hayes, the father of the present Senator Professor Michael Hayes. The centre was elected every two years with the Secretary and Treasurer. They formed the Executive of the Circle *but the sub-centre who was chosen by the Centre.*

Every circle of the I.R.B. was organised in this manner and ultimately spread to over twenty circles in the county and city of Dublin. *The provinces were similarly organised*

A circle could consist of 100 men and when it exceeded 100 men the measurable amount was divided.

The Centres Board was established of all the centres of the ~~Dublin~~ *Provincial* district. Dublin counted as a province, the rest of the provinces were represented in this manner except Leinster which had a council of its own, called the Leinster Directory. It was elected every two years on oath of secrecy by an assembly of all the Dublin Centres.

That Directory assembled in secret and elected a representative for the Supreme Council. The Supreme Council then consisted of a representative of each province of Ireland, a centre for Great Britain, and the Supreme Council had power to nominate from amongst the ranks, any man of particular standing ability or whose particular training might be of use to the Supreme Council. All elections were made by ballot after the electors were sworn to probity and secrecy.

In 1899 Patrick Flood resigned the centreship of the Emerald Circle in favour of youth. He nominated Patrick T. Daly who was duly elected. Patrick Daly continued in office till 1900. I was elected to succeed Daly as centre of the Emerald Circle and successively re-elected every two years until 1910 with an interregnum of three years when I was in Belfast from 1910 to 1913 when I returned to Dublin I was re-elected and held the centreship till 1921, having been preceded by Sean Milroy.

In 1902 Griffith formed his Sinn Fein policy called "The Hungarian Policy".

I organised the first public debate on the Hungarian policy, in the Oliver Bond 98 Club, 75 Aungier's Street. Griffith could not attend owing to some domestic upset. Nominated me to open the debate in defence of the policy. Before the close of 1902 the I.R.B. approved of the Sinn Fein policy as a bridge between London and the Irish Hillside and frequently had to finance the Sinn Fein candidates for local bodies. It was considered at this time that open advocacy of Republicanism would cause suppression by the English Authorities.

The old men in the I.R.B. were gradually replaced by the recruitment from the young men who were noted for their sobriety and enthusiasm.

The '98 Centenary Movement had been started under the inspiration of the I.R.B. and a meeting was arranged of a composite personnel, (i.e. not exclusively men known as I.R.B. Men) on the 6th January, 1897, in the rooms of the Young Ireland Literary Society in D'Olier Street. Fred Allen was the principal driving force in the I.R.B. at this period.

During the visit of Queen Victoria to Ireland on April 4th, 1900, a crisis arose in the Supreme Council of the I.R.B. Mr. Fred Allen was Secretary of the Supreme Council under John O'Leary's chairmanship. He was also Secretary to Lord Mayor Pile by which means he earned his livelihood.

Fred Allen came to his colleagues in the I.R.B. and told them that Lord Mayor Pile was going to welcome Queen Victoria to Dublin. He had sufficient majority in the Corporation to carry "a loyal address". He (Allen) asked the Supreme Council for directions with regard to his position and his colleagues took the view that he would be in the capacity of Peadar Macken, who worked at the Vice-Regal Lodge under orders of his employer, as a housepainter. Some members of the Supreme Council, however, a minority, took the view that Fred Allen had pronounced himself as a Republican and was recognised as a publicist generally that he would ~~con~~ *con* *promise* the movement if he carried out instructions to appear at the reception of Queen Victoria. Fred Allen acted in accordance with the majority's instructions, carried out his functions even to the organisation of a "Children's Fete" for Queen Victoria in the Park. This caused considerable misgivings in the I.R.B. and elsewhere. James Connolly published severe comments on secret Republicanism and open ~~leg~~ *leg* *ality*.

"The Transval Committee" in support of the Boer cause was started by Griffith. Griffith was Secretary, I was Assistant Secretary, William Redmond, afterwards Major Redmond was Chairman. A private conference was convened with James Egan, *an old Fenian,* City Sword Bearer, a member of the I.R.B. at the rooms, Celtic Literary Society, 32 Lr. Abbey St. Griffith, J.W. O'Beirne, P. Lavelle and myself were at this conference.

Griffith said, "Mr. Egan, what are you going to do about Queen Victoria's visit?"

"I don't know, I don't know," replied James Egan. "What is Fred Allen going to do?" turning to me.

"Never mind anyone but yourself just at present", said Griffith. "Your reputation is higher than any of us. You have spent ten years in the jails of Queen Victoria, you have a long life's record of service and sacrifice for Ireland. You will surely not undo all your work at the end of your career."

"I am not responsible for what is taking place these times, and surely history will not judge of me for what I may have to do in the course of my daily employment or in my private capacity," replied James Egan.

"A man like you has no 'private capacity', said Griffith.

"If I don't act in accordance with orders," replied James Egan, "Pile will sack me."

"Pile can't sack you", one of us suggested. "You are an employee of the Corporation".

"Well, the Corporation will," protested James Egan.

"Look here," said Griffith, "if you really think the Corporation of Dublin would have the cheek to dismiss you for your nationalism, we will guarantee to get up a public testimonial to you that will be worth twenty years' purchase of your present position."

Egan agreed to "consult his friends", and next day he showed Griffith a draft letter he intended for the Press. It was rather a crawling document, full of polite excuses and apologies for his inability to be present at the State reception of Queen Victoria into the city of Dublin. Griffith altered this letter out of all countenance and got "James" to sign it. It appeared in the Press in the most spirited form next day, and "James Egan"

was covered with glory, whilst unfortunately some of his colleagues, including Fred Allen, were covered with such odium that they never quite forgave Griffith's interference when they learned the secret story of the case.

Fred Allen turned out and assisted Pile in every way in the functions concerned with the Queen's visit. Fred Allen was Pile's personal servant.

This was the genesis of the split between Allen and Griffith. Griffith was at this time a member of the I.R.B. but not a prominent one.

As a result of Fred Allen's action in connection with the Queen's visit, a crisis arose in the I.R.B. John O'Leary and other members of the Supreme Council suggested to him that he should resign. His ardent admirers pressed him to retain his position. The Supreme Council was consequently unable to meet and the circles were called upon by individual centres and some members of the Supreme Council to offer fealty to the Centres Board governing each district. One of Fred Allen's supporters was, I believe, John O'Hanlon.

In 1901 the Supreme Council was rehabilitated. Fred Allen was not elected but shortly afterwards was co-opted under pressure of his admirers. He laid low and never appeared in public for many years until action in support of the Wolfe Tone Memorial was organised by the "Shears" Circle of the I.R.B.

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Fred Allen gave ~~this~~ lecture and to his surprise the lecture was a public lecture held in 41 Parnell Square. The public were admitted. *Miss Alice Milligan and others raised the whole charge about the Queen's visit & attacked him. Bulmer Hobson for the first time learned of this story and he at the Teeling Circle created almost a mutiny in the I.R.B.* *on charge for admission*

Allen

It was surprising that Allen who was a non-Catholic was always attacked by non-Catholics. There was no personal question in these attacks. It was a question of sincerity. It came up at the Centres Board and was discussed.

P. O'Loughlin and I gave our views of it as the oldest members of the Centres Board. We asked the Supreme Council for directions. The Supreme Council sent down an explanation of Allen's attitude which was not quite accurate. It was

not necessary at the Emerald Circle because I could give my own views, but it was necessary at the Teeling Circle and others who were always asking questions, of an awkward kind. Hobson and Sean McDermott were members of this circle but were never friends of Allen.

The explanation given by the Supreme Council was inexact and was accompanied by a personal letter from John O'Leary to Fred Allen, written in 1898, refuting some old-time American allegations made against Fred Allen in connection with some other matters. This was really ~~of~~ a personal testimonial of character but was seized upon by Bulmer Hobson as an attempt of the Supreme Council to ~~camouflage~~ *mask* the whole issue.

This increased trouble in the I.R.B. and Fred Allen was again forced to retire from public activities.

Griffith was never enthusiastic over the I.R.B. owing to his belief that it was being run by Fred Allen.

On one occasion Griffith was ordered to submit his articles in "The United Irishman" to the censorship of a committee appointed by the I.R.B. in return for a subsidy to keep the paper "United Irishman" going.

Griffith refused because he believed it was submitted to his old enemy, Fred Allen. It was moved at the Centres Board that Griffith, ~~a member of the Teeling Circle,~~ should be expelled for insubordination I strongly opposed it. Michael Crowe was at this time Secretary of the Centres Board. I declared that Griffith's expulsion was merely *asked for* ~~done~~ under the influence of Fred Allen's friends, rather than of a desire to save the organisation. Michael Crowe rose, threw up his books and the meeting dissolved in disorder.

1910.

After that I came under the notice of the British Police and it was decided to get me out of Dublin for a time. I went to Belfast and lost touch with all further meetings of the I.R.B. for some three years.

Oct 1910.

At a meeting of the Emerald Circle of which I had been Centre, held immediately after my departure, Mr. Crowe came with a message from the Centres Board that the office of Centre, which was then my position, was declared vacant and that an election was called for. The members were warned not to vote for any man who had outside public political,

responsibilities. This was directed against my sub-Centre, Aindrias Mór O Broin, who was General Secretary of Sinn Féin, who was nevertheless elected to succeed me but was called upon to resign the post forthwith by a representative of the Centres Board, which he refused to do. He was suspended and a man named William Chase of Parnell Street was elected. The favoured nominee of the "upper powers" - Sarsfield Lyons (No relation of mine) failed to get elected.

Arthur Griffith finally severed his connection with the I.R.B. in protest against the veto exercised upon the election of Andrias Mór O Broin. This was in 1910, and the appointment of my successor was the cause of a serious secession of important members.

which he held of an unwarranted encroachment upon the freedom of elections.

Collins/Brugha Fued.

Michael Collins during his internment in Frongoch Camp at Easter Week, believed there were special opportunities for reorganising the I.R.B. in that place and proceeded to do so. He established what he called a 'Supreme Council' which, of course, was only supreme in Frongoch.

from Frongoch, however, assembled in some way an all-Ireland convention

When the bulk of the members returned to Dublin in 1917 it was found that the threads of the I.R.B. were easily pulled together again and the whole position was regularised. Cathal Brugha, however, was of opinion that Michael Collins ruled the Supreme Council already. He refused to return to the I.R.B. as he stated that the I.R.B. had not fulfilled its purpose and its men had not turned out at Easter Week. I was personally engaged on a census of the turn out of the I.R.B. from the Volunteers in the Dublin area. I showed that all the men executed were I.R.B. men. Over ninety per cent of the I.R.B. men turned out on Easter Sunday, and in spite of the confusion caused by McNeill's countermand seventy-five of the I.R.B. men turned out on Easter Monday, whereas only about twenty-five of the other Volunteers turned out.

I moved at the Centres Board that Cathal Brugha's expulsion be published round the Circles. Collins opposed this as he thought the organisation would lose its prestige by expelling a man like Cathal Brugha. It was generally believed what Cathal Brugha mooted to De Valera that he should leave the I.R.B. as he might have to take orders from Michael Collins instead of being able to give orders.

I pointed out that the probability of De Valera being elected Chairman of the

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Supreme Council of the I.R.B. was in theory the same as that as a President of the Republic.

At a meeting in August, 1917, a message came to the Centres Board that De Valera wished to be relieved of his oath and resign the organisation as he had conscientious scruples with regard to an oath and had never slept easily since he took the oath of the I.R.B. This was a constitutional objection provided for by the organisation that any member who had conscientious scruples with regard to the oath at any time could resign, so that De Valera did not leave as a mutineer, he resigned in the constitutional manner Collins declared his belief that De Valera would never hurt the I.R.B.

Membership of the I.R.B. was in itself confined to men of strict sobriety, probity of character and established national record.

A council of every Circle in addition to the Executive of the Circle (Centre, Sub-Centre, Secretary and Treasurer) had five Sergeants, who alone had authority to approach or propose new recruits.

All proposals were made at the Circle meeting. The Secretary took a note of all available particulars about the nominees for recruitment and the Secretary then attended a meeting every month of all the Secretaries of the Circles who performed their duty in a similar manner at their own Circles. The names were so read out; information called for or against the nominations. Reports were tendered from the Secretaries' meeting to the Centres Board before authority was given to swear in the nominees. In this regard there was great caution but it was necessarily very slow organisation. It may be said that coming up to Easter Week there was a hand-picked organisation behind the Volunteers and the Executive Committee of the Volunteers, with the exception of McNeill and Fitzgibbon, was entirely composed of members of the I.R.B.

Members of the I.R.B. had their own armament formed and were the first to be armed in the Dublin Volunteers. The I.R.B. borrowed a sum of money from the Wolfe Tone Fund in 1914 for the purchase of arms. This sum of money (I am not sure of the amount) was ultimately repaid to the Wolfe Tone Fund.

Before the Volunteers were started some time in 1909, the Emerald Circle was drilling its men in batches and conducting route marches in military

formation over the Dublin Hills. The principal Drill Masters were Andrias O'Byrne and Liam Cullen. Strict notice was taken of absentees from those deputed to attend the drill, and men over forty years of age were excused from the long marches.

All this drilling, however, was done unofficially. The general atmosphere reigning in the higher authorities of the I.R.B. was rather unfavourable to drilling. However, many circles followed the example of the "Emerald Circle" and a strong military atmosphere was ultimately developed.

FOUNDATION OF VOLUNTEERS.

In 1911 was started "The Young Citizen Volunteers" in Belfast, founded by Lord Mayor MacDonrdy.

They were declared to be non-political and non-sectarian, and I joined this force against the advice of my Catholic friends in Belfast. I tested the non-sectarian element by asking my District Commander Councillor Finnegan, if the young citizen Volunteers might be extended outside Ulster and if it were really to be non-political and non-sectarian. He replied in the affirmative.

I asked him for a scheme of organisation and initiation forms and I would get my friends in Dublin to co-operate.

He gave me a bundle of papers, some of which I sent to Peadar Macken, Bulmer Hobson, Padraig Pearse and Aindrias Mór Ó Broin. At this date the "Unionist Clubs" began to show themselves and ultimately became the Ulster Volunteer Force.

I returned to Dublin early in 1913 for the purpose of assisting at the founding of the Volunteers. The I.R.B. already had a number of drill masters and when the Volunteers were ultimately launched, these men were capable of immediately taking up the starting of drill without any further meetings of an organising nature.

(Signed)

Rev. A. Lyons

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