

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILIETTA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 259



BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 259.....

Witness

Dr. B. Thornton,
41 Fitzwilliam Place,
Dublin.

Identity

Connaught Representative
on Executive of Cumann na mBan;
Officer in Oglaih na hEireann.

Subject

- (a) On duty in Four Courts Easter Week 1916;
- (b) Election Duty 1918 and 1921;
- (c) Procuring arms for Volunteers Longford and Galway 1919-21.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil.

File No. S.1365

Form B S M 2

ORIGINAL

STATEMENT OF DOCTOR THORNTON (BRIDGET LYONS,

NIECE OF JOSEPH McGUINNESS, SINN FEIN T.D.

ELECTED FOR LONGFORD - MAY, 1917).

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

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I was educated at Ursuline Convent, Sligo, 1911-1915, and Galway University College 1915-1920. My earliest recollection of association with things national was my father's account of his period in Sligo Gaol for his connection with the Land League. He joined the Volunteers after their foundation in Roscommon, although he was 65 years of age. When I was 8 I went to live with my uncle on my mother's side, a brother of Joe McGuinness, in Longford.

One of my most vivid recollections before the Rising was a journey to a meeting in Athenry on an outside car. I was accompanied by M. Allen and the Nicolls. The meeting was addressed by The O'Rahilly.

With my uncle, Frank McGuinness and a man called Tom Bannon, a National Teacher, I motored up to Dublin on the Tuesday or Wednesday of Easter Week to take part in the Rising. We had made various efforts on the Monday when we heard the Rising was on to procure a car, but the drivers and owners would not undertake the risk. My cousins could scarcely forgive me for being in the Rising when they were not. It was a glorious summer day for our trip, the peace of the country was as remote as possible from the conflict taking place in Dublin. There was no sign of disturbance anywhere. We had no incident until we came to the city. When we came to what is, I think McKee Bks. we were not able to bring the car any farther. Whether the man refused to take the risk or whether the military held us up I cannot now state. We certainly had an argument with the military, I remember my uncle brandishing his warrant as a J.P. and saying he had been summoned by the Castle authorities to attend a meeting. I think his position as J.P. had also been instrumental in getting him out of Longford. We had to leave the car and walk by a roundabout way to my uncle Joe's address, 41 Up. Gardiner St. He was not there. He

and my cousin, Rose McGuinness, the daughter of another uncle, were in the Four Courts. My uncle was the first to enter the Four Courts I remember him describing how he and another, Sean Flood, I think, burst open the gate.

We arrived at 41 Gardiner St. in the afternoon. My aunt was in a great state of distress. She was in Cumann na mBan and had been mobilised and gone to Blackhall St. She had seen her husband in the Four Courts and had taken in messages and supplies there. Miss McMahon was also in my uncle Joe's house. My uncle Frank went down to the Four Courts and came back. I was dying to get in somewhere. My cousin Rose McGuinness was in the Four Courts also, but she fell and cut her hands with a lemonade bottle she was carrying, so she was going around all the week with bandaged hands. She was then detailed for dispatch work. When my uncle Frank came back he had messages and the password "Antonio". So I and Mr. Bannon went down Bolton St., Church St. etc. hiding in doorways to escape the snipers' bullets. At the first barricade we were challenged and, having given the password, were allowed to pass through the cab that formed the centre of the barricade.

Then I remember getting into the Fr. Matthew Hall which was in darkness. I saw somebody lying on a pillow covered with blood. I was welcomed by Eamon Duggan whom I met for the first time. I cannot remember anyone else. I hastened on to the Four Courts and got in through a hole in the wall. Somebody may have come with us from Church St. My uncle Joe was delighted to see us and brought me to Ned Daly. I was thrilled with him and felt that although he was quiet he was very forceful. What I felt about him the first time I met him the previous summer, and also about Seamus Sullivan - they probably would not care to be told this - was that they were the nearest approach to British officers in appearance and inspired us girls with feelings of enthusiasm and caused us many heart throbs. I met Frank Fahy and Peadar Clancy. He was fascinating and epitomised for me all the attractive heroes in Irish history.

I think I met Barney Mellows and many others. I saw Mrs. Fahy and the two Sullivan girls, sisters of Seamus. I went to the big kitchen. There were piles of silver and plate. The only lights were candles on the floor. There was a great deal of noise of fighting, rumours and reports. I think it was the next day that Miss McMahon came with the news that the Germans were marching in on the Naas Road and that there was a big naval battle in the Bay.

Early the second day we heard that the building was to be bombarded by British guns and the women were made take shelter under the stairs. We spent a lot of time making tea and sandwiches. I remember Frank Fahy drinking tea and wondering politely how he was going to get it down. When we investigated the reason we discovered that the tea had been made with the turnip water that was left from the dinner. I saw Sean Flood appearing with sides of bacon and mutton. He was a great provider. These things were got from the hotels and shops around.

Four or five of us went upstairs that - the second - night and we found the judges' robes and we lay down in the ermine for a few hours. Then Barney Mellows came in and woke us - this is my most vivid recollection - and said that Lt. Clancy had taken over a post - this was why he got promoted Lieutenant - and two girls were required to go over to him and his men. Somebody said "call that fat girl that came up from the country". I resented the slight, but my patriotism asserted itself. I went with Miss Derham, escorted by a Volunteer, I think Barney Mellows. It was a hazardous expedition over broken glass and with bullets flying; taking shelter from time to time, to No. 5 Church St., the home of a Mr. Michael Lennon. This was just before daybreak and we were barely able to make our way in the grey dawn. We got a fire going in the house. Mr. Lennon was there, but the family was gone. He did all the chores, bringing coal, etc. He was, of course, a Volunteer himself. All this time the fighting was intensifying and I felt that the enemy was closing in on us. Mr. Lennon said "I think we should have a stretcher" - somebody was wounded. He

took a step ladder, nailed a hearthrug to it and showed me where he was leaving it in case it should be required. Within half an hour he was on it himself with a bullet near the liver I dressed his wound in a summary fashion and sent him off to the Richmond Hospital, or perhaps it was the Father Mathew Hall. We stayed there - No. 5 Church St. - till Saturday. During all those days the fighting was terrifying, the activities were unceasing; the Linenhall Bks. which was quite near was taken by the Volunteers and set on fire, and the British military seemed to have arrived in force and were heavily engaged by the Volunteers. There was deafening firing also from Ganly's and the Mendicity Institute. The sniping was uninterrupted. The only argument I had with my colleague, Miss Derham, was when I threw some tealeaves into the fender. She said it would bring crickets. This did not seem important to me with the Germans on the Naas Road and the might of the British Empire ranged against us. We cooked joints of meat, tea, and fried potatoes for constant relays of men, Sean Flood again being the provider. We cut up the meat with bayonets. I think that Mr. Lennon had stored water in various vessels in case the water might be turned off. Miss Derham and myself lay down on a bed for a couple of hours, and the men also went to bed from time to time in relays.

I remember my uncle Joe often spoke about a Charlie Lyons, a small sized Volunteer who broke into the Bluecoat School and obtained a uniform. It proved very useful in getting him through the enemy line with messages. Another good messenger was a young boy called Fox or Reynard.

The first night I was in the Four Courts I watched the Vols. taking over the Bridewell. On one occasion - it might have been the Friday - I went back from No. 5 to the Four Courts and I saw a large number of D.M.P. men. There were so many of them that I thought they must be the Germans that we heard about on the Naas Rd. My uncle Joe was very excited about these and I think they did not know what to do with them. I think it was on Saturday in the late

afternoon the atmosphere seemed to change and things grew quiet. A Volunteer rushed in and asked me for a hatchet - we had been using it for chopping wood - and he started to hack the butt of his rifle rather than surrender it. Some others of the Volunteers tried to cut a hole through the wall of the backyard, though I don't know where that would have brought them to. Tom Walsh was among them and he and others cried bitterly. Three fellows came to me and gave me their revolvers to keep for them, thinking that I would get away. Eventually, quite suddenly, I found myself alone. Miss Derham said she was going home. Two old men - evidently inhabitants of the street - came in and asked me had I any food. They and their families had not had food for days; they were very poor people. I gave them ham, bread and butter. I remember I took back a loaf, a piece of butter and a large piece of ham from one of them. I shall never understand why I did that. I took up an oil cape that was lying there, went out and pulled the door to. I went back to the Four Courts to the hole in the wall. I met Peadar Clancy coming towards me and, very politely, in spite of his distress, he helped me through the hole in the wall. I asked "what is happening?" He said "There is talk of surrender and they are all being taken to the Castle. He came back with me to No. 5 Church St. in the deep dusk and there I made sandwiches for him with the food I had taken back from the man, and wrapped them up for him. When I met him after his release in 1917, he told me they saved his life and those of some of his comrades who spent the night in the Rotunda Gardens, where I think they were taken. I was profoundly impressed by his chivalry and although I met him altogether only five or six times, I thought he was one of those who would have an irresistible attraction as representing any girl's ideal of a courteous, chivalrous gentleman. I was deeply touched by the fact that in all the stress of his grief in that terrible moment he was as thoughtful and kind and courteous as any knight leading his lady through the steps of a minuet in a stately drawingroom.

We sat in silence for about half an hour in No. 5 and then we

went back to the Four Courts where I met my uncle Joe who said goodbye to me and gave me messages for my aunt. My uncle Frank, as far as I remember, and Tom Bannon had left the previous day to reconnoitre the lie of the land outside to see what chances there were of making contact with other places so to find out what was happening. My uncle Frank got a bullet in the leg somewhere in the Bolton St. area and that ended his activities. It was a flesh wound and he was lame for some time. He went home and was arrested at Longford station when he arrived. Tom Bannon was arrested and brought to Richmond Bks. but was released in a few days. He had no money and he met Miss McMahon whom he recognised and asked her for some. She gave him a threepenny bit which enabled him to get as far as my aunts. He went back to Longford. Uncle Joe was sentenced to 3 years.

When I had said goodbye to Peadar Clancy and my uncle they were taken away and I was preparing to leave too, but I was stopped by a British Officer, Lieut. Lindsay. Ned Daly came up to me and told me to stay till morning and that Lt. Lindsey had given his word that all of us girls must stay the night but would be allowed to go home in the morning. I still had the three revolvers and was determined to keep them, hoping to be able to take them home with me. On the following morning when we found we were under arrest, the other girl advised me to leave them in the Four Courts as we would be surely searched. It turned out that I never was searched and I was afterwards very sorry I had left them behind me. We slept again in the judges' ermine, with a big guard outside the door. We had chocolate and cream crackers before we went to sleep. One of the Church St. priests, Fr. Columbus, stayed in the room with us till morning by way of protection. We were only allowed to the bathroom in twos and threes under escort. Two were allowed to the kitchen to make tea, also under escort.

About 10 a.m. we were all brought downstairs and herded into a lorry and brought to Richmond Bks. I met Lt. Lindsay again and told him he had broken his word. He did seem distressed about it. About

eight of us were thrown into one room, the two Sullivan girls, Pauline Morkan, Flossie Mead and Carrie Mitchell - she was not Cumann na mBan. Winnie Carney was in the room with us too. The sentries outside threw us a few dog biscuits through the fanlight. That was all the food we had that day. During the day we were brought out one by one and interviewed by a couple of officers. About 7 p.m. we were all marched down to the barrack square where we found the Countess and a number of others lined up. During that day also we had had glimpses of Volunteers lined up there too. We were marched out the gate to Kilmainham and the crowds outside along the route gave us a mixed reception, cheering, jeering, boozing and making remarks, mostly uncomplimentary. The Countess was the only one in uniform and she attracted most of the attention. We were all a bedraggled lot after the week and certainly did not look our best. I'll never forget the dreariness, squalor and sordidness of Kilmainham when we came in there that lovely summer evening - Richmond Barracks had been bright. The only really brutal individual we met during the whole time was a warden called Beatty. We were left standing in the hall for a time while he ranted and raved at us. Somebody directed him to take us to certain floors and he said "Bring them down this way first" and he marched us down an old corridor and held up his lantern and said "Read that" and I read out "Sin no more lest a worse thing come unto thee". I said "We have not committed any sin". He said "Shut up, its to the 'drop' you should be taken, every one of you". We were put into cells four in each. No beds, just the bare floor, but we did sleep. Towards morning two wardresses who had come from Mountjoy, looked in at us. One of them, in particular, was kind. We were there for all the executions. We used to hear the shots in the mornings. Every day fresh contingents of women were brought in and we used to see them when we were brought out for our short morning and evening exercise. The food was awful - a tin of slimy cocoa and a hunk of bread in the morning, the same tin with a sort of greasy stew and bad potatoes for dinner, the same tin with porridge in the evening. We got no implements of any kind to eat with. When we complained they told us

they were not expecting so many visitors. We all got sick on the second or third day and the doctor ordered that we be put only two in a cell and we were given bed-boards and a blanket. Then Carrie Mitchell was released. I was assigned to a cell in which a street woman was huddled in the corner. I refused, young as I was, to stay in it and I was put in with a Miss Mulhall. She was a Town Councillor. I was alone a couple of nights. The Countess Plunkett, who got in a meal from outside, sent me in tea and an egg one night. That was the high light of my stay. We were interviewed a couple of times with a view to extracting any information we had about the Volunteers. We refused, of course, to give any. They were interested in the fact that I was a student in Galway and plied me with questions about it. On the Sunday we were let to Mass in the gallery with a heavy escort of soldiers. The Volunteers were downstairs and we saw Kent, Colbert and Heuston going to Communion. These were executed the next day.

On the night of Monday, 8th May, we were lined up and told we would be released the next morning. We were solemnly warned against taking part in any subversive activities. If we were caught again taking part in anything against the Government we would be treated with the full rigour of the law. I said "We were promised release on another occasion and we know how you kept your word. We are going now". They opened the gates and let us out. That was only our group. Pauline Morkan invited us to spend the night at her house at the corner of Queen St.. We were challenged at every street corner, the city being under martial law. It was after eleven and when we reached her house the military were in it and had made a shambles of the place. I asked them then to come with me to my aunt's. A sentry kindly volunteered to escort us and said if we could not get in there he would bring us to his sister's in Mountjoy Square. He was Irish, I think. When we reached my aunt's it was after 1 o'clock and we produced a frightening effect on another aunt who opened the door and saw us all and our escort with a fixed bayonet. Oh! the relief to take off our clothes and get into a real bed and drink a hot cup of tea.

The police had been inquiring about my whereabouts in Longford and I had to get a permit from the military headquarters at Trinity College to return to Galway to resume my studies. I still have it in my possession. The reception I got there was somewhat sceptical as my fellow students and friends did not believe that I had taken part in the Rising in Dublin at all, although during my period at the College I had been actively associated with the Volunteers. In fact I had attempted to found a Liberty Club on the receipt of a request from Count Plunkett. I had also organised a raffle for a revolver and many people who had bought tickets from me were afraid that the counterfoils might have been found in my possession and would bring them undesirable attention from the authorities. It was not until the publication of the Irish Times Handbook that my friends were at last convinced.

The late Dean Hynes was very friendly and sympathetic and, I think, secretly proud that a student of Galway had figured in the Rising. There was, of course, an undercurrent of anxiety in his mind as to the ultimate result of the movement. I gathered this from his questions. He and Canon Farragher from the Aran Islands, who came over to get first-hand information from me, invited me to lunch at the Railway Hotel. I was, of course, quite ignorant of the things that immediately preceded the Rising and was unable to give them the enlightenment they had hoped for.

Things followed a normal course for some time and I was taken up with my studies. When the prisoners were being brought in from the outlying villages we went to the station and cheered them on their journey. When I went home to Longford in June I was thrilled to see that everybody - men and women - were sporting tricolour badges.

At Easter 1917, the famous Longford election took place. My uncle Joe, then a prisoner in Lewes, was selected as candidate in the Sinn Fein interest. I took a very keen interest in it and acted as Secretary. Sympathisers came by car, train, bicycle and foot,

pouring into the town from all over Ireland. They slept in barns and everywhere as the number of visitors and helpers far exceeded the available accommodation. The counting of the votes was a tense affair. We were beaten. A recount was called for and we won by 37 votes. The rejoicing was uproarious. Bonfires blazed all over the country as the result showed that the tide had definitely turned. My uncle was released in June with all the others. They got wonderful receptions all over the country.

I also went to Clare to help de Valera's candidature.

From the beginning I took part in organising plays, aeridh-eachta, raffles, ceilis, concerts and functions of every kind to raise funds for the National Aid. We had to get permits for all such functions from the police authorities and we had to submit the text of plays for their censorship. I have still a lot of correspondence with the Inspector of Police on these matters. We organised a branch of Cumann na mBan, Sinn Fein and the Volunteers. We paraded out whenever there was a meeting or an aerideacht. We took part in all the activities that Cumann na mBan sponsored, visiting prisoners, making bandages, making and selling badges.

I worked in the 1918 election in Longford and fell ill immediately after. Both my uncles were again arrested in connection with the German Plot.

During the activities in 1919 I carried revolvers out to three students in Taylor's Hill. I was procuring arms for the Volunteers I have a letter from a student called O'Donnell asking me to get him a Thompson machine gun. All this time I was living with George and Peggy Nicolls, whose house was being constantly raided. I was associated a good deal with Seamus Murphy in all his activities. He had been appointed editor of the "Galway Express" which was bought over with Sinn Fein funds.

At Xmas. 1920 I was sent up by Brigadier Reddington with £50 to buy all the equipment and ammunition I could, as the Longford Flying Column was running short. I met Sean McMahon and the

Fitzgeralds in Pearse St.. I made my appeal and was told that whatever could be spared would be taken to the train to me the following morning. I sent a wire in cypher to Edgeworthstown giving the hour I would pass through there. I went to the station, took my seat and then stood at the carriage window expectantly. One of the Fitzgerald boys arrived accompanied by a small man carrying a heavy suit case. Immediately the case was put into the carriage a couple of lorries of auxiliaries dashed up to the station and the occupants entered brandishing revolvers and ordered all men to the waiting room. My heart stood still. I told young Fitzgerald to leave me. I was very concerned for the 4 country boys in the carriage. If I admitted ownership of the case they would be exonerated. As on many previous similar occasions I had recourse to a prayer and to a piece of feminine guile. I appealed to an officer and in all innocence and apparent anxiety I inquired what was all the commotion about. He replied "we are searching the train for arms and ammunition, but you don't have to worry." The four men were let back to the carriage and I drew a sigh of relief./but was again held up while the auxiliaries made a detailed search of the carriages starting at both ends. When they came to mine they took down what was on the racks. I was paralysed with anxiety. They gave the suitcase which had been put underneath the seat a jab. At that moment the officer came along - this was about the fourth time he came to reassure me - and said to the soldiers "Don't disturb the lady's luggage". When I got to Mullingar I found I was in the Galway part of the train and I had to carry the heavy case to another platform. I was afraid to ask a porter for help. I hoped my wire had arrived and that I would be met at Edgeworthstown, but my luck was out. It had been a routine procedure to search my luggage and that of my cousins, the three McGuinness girls, any time we travelled down as it was known that the family were actively engaged in distributing arms and such activities. One of these girls, Margaret, served four months in jail for these things. I prayed as never before and our manservant was unexpectedly at the station and boldly carried the

suitcase past the sergeant who, for once, did not interfere. There was then great commotion in Longford, because my wire had arrived in Edgeworthstown after the train had passed. It had evidently been held by the police for examination. My cousins had to set out that night for the country by devious routes to distribute the contents of the case. The stuff was only gone when one of the numerous raids on the house took place. Nothing was found.

Early in March Sean McEoin called at my uncle's with Martin Conlon. That was the first time I met him. I was the only one there and I made them tea. He left me certain instructions which I cannot now remember. The next evening I learned he was arrested on his return home. As he was wounded he was transferred immediately from Mullingar to George V Hospital. I was allowed to write to him and receive a note from him, but not to see him. After a few days he was transferred to the hospital in Mountjoy where I was allowed to visit him. Plans were immediately set on foot to effect his rescue and it was a very proud moment when Mick Collins sent Joe O'Reilly to say that he wanted to see me at 5 or 6 Parnell Square. I spent my morning at a clinic in Mercer's Hospital, but my mind was entirely absorbed by the thought of the coming interview. He was his usual bright rollicking self but very much concerned for the safety of McKeon. He was glad to hear I had seen him and found him so well despite what he had gone through. He asked me all details of the plan of the prison, the number of sentries, the number of locked doors, etc., the situation of the room where I saw him, who were present at my interviews, etc. At subsequent visits I took in and brought out messages safely, although I was searched each time. While they were searching my clothes I managed to transfer the message to my hand or the finger of my glove and passed it quickly to him when I greeted him. As soon as he was able to be on his feet I used to see him in the Deputy Governor's office where there was always an Auxiliary present. It was not there I saw him after he had been tried and condemned to death. It was from the Deputy Governor's

office, I think, he was to be rescued. I took what he thought was his last letter addressed to me to his comrades. It was open. One Sunday before the Truce as I was going in Mr. Cope, whom I had met previously in the Castle when seeking permits, was coming out. I had been refused admission on this occasion, but he was most gracious and friendly and he escorted me back and gave instructions that I should be admitted. The final effort made for McKeon's rescue was on 14th May 1921, when an armoured car was used, but unsuccessfully. A few hours later I received a note, which I still have, from Mick Collins expressing his grief at the failure of the attempt. In another letter he thanked me for my co-operation and the accuracy of the details I had given.

On the Wednesday after the Truce Mick Collins and I visited him together; Mick under an assumed name for which I had got a permit. You may be interested in taking a copy of the letters I refer to.

Among my many activities during this period, I was sent to Sligo in connection with the 1921 election. I went also to Belfast with despatches. I think I had funds to take. When I came back from there I had to see Mrs. Sheehy-Skeffington.

In 1918 I was appointed by Brigadier O'Mullane as Connacht Representative on the Executive D.C. na mban but owing to serious ill health I was unable to attend any meetings

Signed: *Brigadier Denis Thornton*

Date: 4th June 1949.

Witness: *Sam Cossins*

