

ROINN



COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 363.....

Witness

Maire Ní Bhriain,
38 Upper Fitzwilliam St.,
Dublin.

Identity

Associated with Cumann na mBan
1915 - .

Subject

- (a) Biographical note on her father;
- (b) Her national activities 1915-1923;
- (c) Publicity work for Ireland in Spain and Italy post 1916.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.1490.....

STATEMENT OF MISS MOLLY O'BRIEN,
Máire Ní Breáin

38 Upper Fitzwilliam Street, Dublin.

My father was James Francis Xavier O'Brien. His people were ship owners in Dungarvan. The Inchiquin records show that my father's branch of the family left Co. Clare about 1368. As a youth he joined the James Fintan Lalor movement and used to go with other students to bring pike-heads from Carrick-on-Suir. He then met T. Clarke Luby. His next meeting with him was in Portland Prison in 1868. Being warned that a warrant had been issued for his arrest, he got away in a small vessel belonging to his father which happened to be in the Bay, ready to sail for Cardiff, and remained on that coast for some time.

After his return to Ireland he decided to study medicine, matriculated, and took a scholarship at Galway College.

Learning that John O'Leary and his brother, Arthur, were going to Paris to study, my father resolved to go also and continued his medical studies there. He attended lectures at the École de Médecine, visited hospitals, such as La Pitié, La Charité, Hôtel Dieu. A few weeks later John and Art O'leary arrived, bringing with them to the Hotel Corneille, James McNeill Whistler, an art student. My father stayed at a 'pension' in the Rue La Cepède. In the same street lived John Martin and

Kevin Izod O'Doherty and his wife "Eva" of the Nation. Visiting them was a great pleasure for my father and the two O'Learys.

My father's health broke down. He returned to Dublin where a Dublin consultant, Sir Dominic Carrigan, advised him to knock about for a while. Being very desirous of acquiring some military experience, he decided to join General Walker's expedition to Nicaragua, and he sailed for New Orleans in 1856. Pierre Soule, then Attorney General for the state of Louisiana and active in Walker's interest, had been appointed to the latter's staff. After a month's progress they reached Fort San Carlos and advanced to attack, but Walker made terms without fighting.

When the American Civil War broke out he was appointed Assistant Surgeon with the rank of Captain in the ^{Confederate} American Army on the strength of such medical and surgical knowledge as he possessed. His knowledge must have been fairly good because on the journey to America a sailor having fallen from the mast of the sailing ship, ⁷ my father who was the only person on board with any medical experience was able to carry out the necessary amputation of the limb.

His purpose in joining the Confederate Army was to acquire such military experiences as would be useful to him later in a fight for Ireland. He was now a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Probably if he had been living in the Northern States he would have joined the other army.

In America, he married a widow, an Irish woman from Co. Wexford, already a Mrs. O'Brien. They had one child, a son, who became a priest and died in Wicklow town as the result of a cold caught while out with the local Volunteers before 1916.

When the Fenian Rising was fixed he came home to take part in it and was appointed Colonel. He had his own arms and was surprised at the lack of arms and equipment of the Brotherhood who were to take part in the fight. I believe the engagement he was concerned in was in Ballyknockane.

After the Rising he was caught and tried by Judge Keogh for high treason. He was sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered; he was the last person on whom this sentence was passed by the British. The sentence was commuted to penal servitude, ^{probably} for life. He was imprisoned in Cork, Limerick, Mountjoy, Millbank and Portland. At Portland he lost the tip of one finger at his work dressing the Portland stone. He was released with two others from Portland Prison. When he was being taken to the Governor's office he managed to whisper to the other two not to show any feeling of joy. Therefore, when the Governor announced the glad tidings, he was surprised to see the absence of all enthusiasm on the prisoners' faces.

My father came back to Ireland and settled in Cork. He was now a widower. He was a great friend of Fr. John O'Malley (later famous in connection with Captain Boycott) and he married his sister. He was

managing a wholesale tea and wine business in Cork. During the Parnell Movement he joined the Party at the request of Joseph Biggar and became member for South Mayo. Ten years later he became member for Cork City and remained one of the city's representatives until his death in 1905.

I was not a member of Cumann na mBan although I wished to join it. ~~My wife when I knew her~~ ^{My wife when I knew her} ~~reminded me that it was~~ ^{was} advised me not to, as I might be found more useful if I was not openly identified with the organisation. I was always at their disposal and gladly did anything they asked me to do, such as carrying despatches, etc. ~~Unfortunately as my wife~~ ~~for some time became very ill~~, I cannot exactly state what year I began to work in this way but it might have been as early as 1915. ~~I cannot remember whether it~~ ~~was that year I came back from Barcelona.~~

~~My first trip abroad was to~~ ^{It was in} Majorca ^{I learnt Spanish} ~~before the war.~~ ^{that was} I went there partly for ~~health reasons~~ ^{a holiday} ~~to a family that lived there and who had a house in~~ ~~Barcelona.~~ ^{Barcelona} ~~I spoke English to the daughter of the~~ ^{Barcelona} ~~family.~~ ^{My wife} I spent a winter in that town and then went back to Majorca. I came home, spending a short time at Barcelona on the way. My journey was eventful. I had been warned by several Irish girls that whenever they went on business to the British Consulate at Barcelona, they had been frequently asked about me by an English gentleman who was a member of the staff. They were fully convinced that he wanted to make trouble for me. I afterwards made the acquaintance of this gentleman in Dublin. He was Mr. Ernest Boyd and when

I told him the ~~original~~ ^{my} colored tales I had heard about him, he was much amused. He assured me he had only wished to be of assistance to me in getting home.

When I got to the frontier - Portbou - I think, I was asked for the keys of my trunks, which I gave. I was led off by two women who stripped me naked in case I had any hidden messages. Needless to say, I had not. They were furious when they found they could not open my trunks. The train was waiting and they could not hold it up any longer. There were no seats available in the packed train. The passengers were all aware of why it was being held up, and a French officer who was indignant at the treatment I had received, insisted on giving me his seat. When we reached the port - Havre - I think, everybody had to show passports before leaving the train. The English official who examined mine, turned to his file and took out a card. He asked had I any sisters and what were their names. I told him. He then asked had I a sister called Molly. I truthfully answered 'no'. When we got to Southampton I was put into a room with various foreigners and waited my turn to be stripped again. It was a cold March day and I was shivering and when they got me naked except for my shoes and stockings, the women asked me if I had anything there. I replied "nothing but a pair of very cold feet", which ended that episode.

All the travellers before boarding the train had to pass before a table at which was seated a red-faced choleric British gentleman in uniform who asked each one questions. He asked me on which side my sympathies were in the war. I replied, "on the side of whichever country

is likely to benefit my own". He nearly burst a blood vessel. He pounded the table: "Do you mean to say that if Germany was likely to benefit Ireland, you would like Germany to win", said he? I replied, "naturally". He shouted, "I'd give her five years for that".

However, he let me go. Two gentlemen who were at the table accompanied me to the train. They were Scotland Yard men. One of them told me his name which I now forget, and that he was from the County Clare. He said, "Miss O'Brien, I must congratulate you on the way you spoke up to that fellow". The porters, too, who had heard the altercation couldn't do enough for me. The man was evidently disliked. I was under open arrest.

I was told to go to a certain hotel - the name escapes me at the moment - and to go to Scotland Yard next day. I did, and was shown into a room where a policeman in plain clothes questioned me about my whole life.

My replies were taken down in shorthand by another man. Before I left, the famous Scotland Yard official, ^{Supt Quinn} who accompanied the king everywhere - ~~has regained my memory~~ ^{myself} ~~asked me about his name~~ - he was an Irishman and I think from Kerry - came and shook hands with me. He knew some of my relatives very well. Before leaving I was told Captain Holland wanted to see me. He was a very smartly dressed cavalry man. He asked me was he right in believing that I was responsible for certain articles appearing in an Irish-American paper. I assured him with regret that I was not, but I did not tell him that the author was a well-known Irish priest in Rome.

On one of my journeys ~~back~~ to Barcelona I spent some time in London with a cousin, Dr. Henry O'Brien, for the marriage of his daughter. That was the time

Terence McSwiney was on hunger strike in Brixton and Fr. Dominick who was a friend of my cousin's frequently visited the house and brought us news of him regularly. I reached Spain (Barcelona) before Terence died. In Barcelona and in Catalonia generally there was the deepest sympathy for Ireland and when Terence died the papers were full of articles about him and Masses were offered for him in ~~all the~~ ^{most} big churches which were crowded to the doors. The University students and shop assistants all wore green ribbons in their buttonholes. There was a huge meeting in the beautiful club hall of the shop assistants, with the tricolour at the end of the hall facing the platform. I was made sit on the platform beside the President and he called on me in Catalan to make a speech which I did in French as I did not know Catalan sufficiently well and I asked the President to be kind enough to translate my speech into that language for me. The Catalans always cherish the desire for separation from Spain and their aspiration for independence is the bond of sympathy between them and us. All the speeches that evening were in praise of Ireland and expressed sympathy for our objects in our fight for freedom. The ladies of Barcelona dressed with the greatest care and artistic finish a beautiful doll in the Catalan costume and sent it to Terence McSwiney's widow for their little daughter. Similarly when Kevin Barry was executed the students of Barcelona University had Mass celebrated for him in one of the biggest churches there and had a wreath made with specially waxed flowers so that they would remain fresh until it reached his grave in Dublin.

When Dr. O'Dwyer of Limerick organised a special collection for the prisoners' dependents, ^{Miss} Madge Barry, an

Now in Cork 1936
~~British Government~~, and I thought we should do something to help. We went to the leader of the Catalan party, Senor Rusinpol, a brother of the famous painter of that name, and he gave us his willing co-operation. He presented us with a number of his visiting cards and told us to call on all his friends and supporters. We also got articles published in the two principal papers. We collected about £120 and sent it to the Bishop of Limerick.

While in Barcelona that autumn I was busily engaged with a few others, mainly Madge Barry, in distributing propaganda for the Irish Republic through newspapers mostly and on our own initiative. Round about this time Gavan Duffy who had evidently been paying visits to the Irish publicity offices abroad, came to Barcelona, and asked me if I would go to Madrid as publicity agent. I agreed and went to Madrid at once. I took a flat and had my office there. I got together a staff of three boys who were very good. We got the Irish Bulletin regularly and at first we roneoed Spanish translations of it, but as the Spanish are not great readers, I suggested to the people at home and to Bob Brennan who visited us too, that it would be more effective if we had a few of the more-telling paragraphs picked out and printed in leaflet form. We did that and sent the leaflets every week to a large list of persons that we wanted to interest in our cause.

Bob Brennan was visiting the various foreign representatives of the Irish Republic and he had been asked when in Madrid to invite Juan O'Donnell, Duke of Tetuan, to preside at the Irish Race Congress which was to take place in Paris the following January. At this time the Duke was Military and Civil Governor of Madrid and his office was in

the Ministry of War. Bob, who did not know Spanish, asked me to accompany him there and on reaching the Ministry we found the place in darkness, the electric light having failed. Eventually a lamp or candle was produced and we were shown to the Duke's office. He was pleased and touched beyond words when he heard the reason for our visit. He assured us that he would be indeed proud to accept, but he would first require the permission of the King - Alfonso XIII - and he promised to let me know as soon as he had word. A few days later he drove in full regimentals to the block of flats where I lived and had my office. There was no lift and you could hear the clanging of the sword against the steps of the stone stairs. He informed me with joy that he had obtained the consent of the King. He said when he had asked the permission the King had said, "Que fais-tu dans cette galère?" (What business have you there?). Then suddenly realising the Duke's origin he added, "Oh yes, of course, you are Irish. Certainly you may go". He took me to his home and showed me some of his Irish treasures. The one he appreciated most was a newspaper cutting with a picture of Donegal Castle, the home of his ancestors. He also showed on the wall of his sitting room an oil painting of his family tree, *which was hung behind his Presidential chair during the Congress.* He had several children, but ~~as far as I remember~~ ¹⁹⁰⁷ only two ^{of} were alive at this time, a son and daughter. He wanted his son to join the Army - he could not imagine an O'Donnell following any other profession, and when the boy who was not very strong and in any case had no taste for the military life, refused, he turned him out, and the boy made his way to America where he suffered untold hardships. I heard from an Irishman who got to know him later that he sold newspapers in New York and endured real poverty, sleeping under arches, etc. Eventually he got a job as a lift boy in a well-known New York hotel, I think the

Waldorf-Astoria, and when De Valera was staying there, he tipped the lift-boy a half dollar, not knowing who he was. I was told that later on when he lost that job he was often in dire need of food, but nothing would induce him to part with that coin which he looked upon as a mascot. ~~I am almost certain that~~ He inherited the title after his father's death and came back to Spain, but he did not live long.

When the time came for the Congress, as instructed, I engaged a pullman carriage for the Duke and we were joined at Salamanca by Dr. O'Doherty, Rector of the Irish College at Salamanca, and at Paris rooms were reserved for him at a first-class hotel and a car and chauffeur placed at his disposal. He presided at all the meetings of the Congress although he knew neither Irish nor English. I sometimes acted as interpreter for him.

After the young Duke died, his sister Blanca, who is married to a German and lives in Madrid, inherited the title. She is very interested in Irish affairs and would like to come here. I correspond with her. As she has no children, her uncle or one of his sons will be the next in line.

Daisy Cogley (Barnard) and myself went to Geneva to attend a world Congress of the Red Cross - unofficially. That is to say we were not invited although we were sent by our authorities here. ~~Do not tell her that you are - my money is so bad.~~ ^{my} But I am sure Mrs. Cogley would know, ~~or you might be able to find out~~ ^{my} the date of that Congress. Our object was to put the case of Ireland before the world. We had been told by Mr. Rutledge who was taking the place of Mr. De Valera - then in prison - as President of the

Republic, to contact the American delegate, - again I can't remember his name ^{my 20} This delegate assured us he would take the necessary steps to introduce us to the Congress and it must have been through him that we got an introduction to the President of the Swiss ^{Republic my 6} Government who invited us to tea in his home. Eventually the American delegation withdrew from the Congress owing to some difference of opinion.

We had brought the material for propaganda with us and we had copies multiplied by commercial firms in Geneva and distributed among the delegates of the various nations. We were invited to the meetings and on one occasion certainly we were allowed to speak and put our case before the members in French. We were listened to with attention and considerable interest was shown. We did a good deal of lobbying with the individual delegates. I think no one escaped without getting our propaganda leaflets.

We did not return together as I went on to ^{Geneva my 6} Geneva where my sister was living at the time. She introduced me to some well-known Italian friends of hers who, when they heard our story, insisted that Mussolini should hear it also. I went on to Rome and presented myself at the Governmental Bureau, through which access to him or any member of the Government could be obtained. I was informed that it would be practically impossible for me to get a personal interview with Mussolini, as there were thousands of people in Rome waiting to see him. I was promised, however, that an effort would be made to obtain for me an interview with some other member of the Government. I was told to come back that evening at 5 o'clock for a definite reply. When I came I was informed, to my surprise and joy, that Mussolini would see me the following day at 2 o'clock.

I was punctual at the interview at the Palazza Chighi. I think I must have left the letter of credence I had received by post from Mr. Rutledge, at the Bureau the evening before. Mussolini seemed quite familiar with the situation in Ireland and started firing rapid questions at me, to which he evidently expected equally rapid answers. The interview was conducted entirely in French, a language which Mussolini spoke with great fluency. He asked me to arrange for a member of the Irish Republican Government to go out to Rome to see him, but that whoever went should exercise the greatest caution as "there is a spy on every step of my stairs". I duly sent the message home but I do not know what happened. I came home after a short holiday in Italy.

Some time after the Treaty ~~was signed~~ Mrs. O'Callaghan of Limerick and myself were asked to go to Australia. ~~But~~ ^{the} object of our mission was to follow up the work being done by the two representatives of the Republic who were there - Sceilg and Fr. O'Flanagan. Although we went day after day to the Passport Office in London, the very polite official there kept putting us off and we never got the passports. Then Sceilg and Fr. O'Flanagan were arrested and one of the Misses Davin came over from Dublin to tell us to come home, which we did.

In London we first stayed at a small quiet hotel to evade unwelcome attention from the police. But the detectives were after us at once. Some London friends then advised us to go to the Regent Palace Hotel where there were such crowds of people that we would not be noticed. Unfortunately a terrible thing happened to me

while we were there. Mrs. O'Callaghan gave me a heavy gold chain which her late husband had given to her, to mind for her. I put it in my handbag. One day I crossed the room for a minute leaving the bag on the couch - there seemed to be nobody there - and when I came back the bag with my money and the chain were gone and was never recovered. I was in an awful state but Mrs. O'Callaghan was very nice about it.

SIGNED Maura O'Connell

DATE 9th March, 1950

WITNESS

Sgt. Cousins

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