

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILITÁIRÉ 1913-21

No. W.S. 171

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 171

Witness

Peadar ~~MacDon~~ Mac Cana

Identity

Member of I.R.B. and I.V., Newry, 1916.

Subject

National activities in Newry district,
1905-16.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

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STATEMENT BY PEADAR McCANN, 25 MARY STREET,
DROGHEDA.

The National Movement in Newry & District,
1905 - '16.

I first became associated with the "advanced" National Movement when, in September 1905, with a companion named Patrick Boyd, I joined the Irish Ireland Society, Newry. This Society had been established early in 1905 or late in 1904, and held its meetings in a large room underneath the St. Joseph's Club in Kilmorey St. As far as I remember the principal members of the Society when I joined it were Rob Kelly, Patrick Hughes (an overseer in Dromalane Linen Mill), George Cahill (a cabinet maker who went to Belfast in '06 or '07), Joseph Connellan (afterwards editor of the "Frontier Sentinel"), Patk. McShane (also an overseer in the Linen Mill), Patrick Curran (a grocer's assistant, native of Oldcastle, Co. Meath), John Southwell and Seumas O'Hanlon who was not then living in the town but visited us at frequent intervals. At least half the membership consisted of young women and girls and nearly all were, I should say, under 25 years of age. Of those I have named, Rob. Kelly, Seumas O'Hanlon, John Southwell and Patrick Hughes were, I learned later, members of the I.R.B. some of the others may also have belonged to that organisation. Joseph Connellan, however, had never any connection with it. The professed aims of the Society were in essence like those of the Gaelic League - cultural and educational. The activities of the members centred round Irish language classes, lectures, debates and discussions on Irish history and economics. The Society ^{made} war on all manifestations of "seoininism and West Britainism" and attendance at a foreign dance or a soccer football match would have entailed expulsion. Most of the members thought it a violation of principle to attend any form of entertainment that did not conform to the Irish Ireland ideal

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I may mention that some of the members also attended the language classes of the Newry Gaelic League, whilst others were members of the Fag-an-Bealach Hurling Club. I became a member of the Gaelic League in 1906 and of the G.A.A. about two years later. But whilst to an outside observer the Society was merely a cultural organisation it was in reality violently political in its debates and discussions and still more so in its hidden activities. Home Rule was considered as worse than useless and attendance by Irishmen in the British Parliament a betrayal of the National cause. On several occasions in 1906 the members covered the town with handbills denouncing enlistment in the British Army, whilst on special occasions large posters were put up denouncing some particular manifestation of West Britainism in the town or advocating an Ireland totally free from British control. By implication, if not directly, "moral persuasion" was condemned and physical force advocated in these posters. During 1906 lecturers of advanced views visited the Society amongst whom were Bulmer Hobson, Sean McDermott and Denis McCullough of Belfast. The latter, I think, did not lecture, but took part in the discussions. All the members were, of course, readers of "The United Irishman" and later of "Sinn Fein" and when Arthur Griffith launched his organisation in November 1906(?) most of the members of the Irish Ireland Society became enthusiastic advocates of his policy. Early in 1907 (I think) Sean McDermott was appointed organiser of Sinn Fein and visited Newry in the spring of that year. A Branch of Sinn Fein was formed in Newry and several branches in the district particularly in South Armagh. Most of the members of the Irish Ireland Society joined the Branch (which held its meetings in a loft on the Mall behind Cahill's Drapery Store) but I was the only one who held office therein, having been appointed Treasurer. Its Chairman was (I think) James Morgan who owned a small shop in Catherine St. and the Secretary was James Donnelly, Monaghan St., who was then still at school. Later he became a post office

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official and was killed in the 1914-18 war. Daniel Keating of Cecil St. became a member and from that time for many years afterwards performed most useful national work in the town. The Sinn Fein Branch was not very long-lived and had ceased to exist (I should think) before the end of 1908, but the members were all known to Bob Kelly, John Southwell and myself, and formed, as it were, a kind of cadre or framework through which an efficient organisation could be formed at very short notice.

In 1909 the Irish Ireland Society, ceased to exist as we were evicted from the room in Kilmorey St. because of our close association with the Sinn Fein Movement. The founders of the St. Joseph's Clubs had been ardent Parnellites and were now enthusiastic followers of John Redmond. Their action was quite natural and was not resented by us, the wonder being that they had borne with us so long. By this time some of the most prominent members of the Society had fallen away or had left the town and from henceforward our public activities were largely confined to the Gaelic League and the G.A.A.

During its existence the Society had exerted a very strong influence on National opinion in the Newry area and had won over many adherents to the Irish Ireland and Sinn Fein ideals. For several years afterwards all the most hard-working and enthusiastic members of the Gaelic League in the area were the young men and women who had been trained in its ranks. The outstanding exception in this respect was Pat Lavery, Secretary of the Fag-an-Bealach Hurling Club, who joined the Gaelic League in 1907 and who had not been connected with the Irish Ireland Society or Sinn Fein.

I first heard of the existence of the I.R.B. in 1907 when Sean McDermott was in the area organising for Sinn Fein. Sean explained the objects and methods of the organisation to my companion, Pat Boyd, who in turn passed on the information

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to me. However, I was not then invited to join nor do I think did Boyd join himself, as a year later (in 1908) he severed his connection with the Irish Ireland Society, Sinn Fein and the Gaelic League. It was just after the break-up of the Irish Ireland Society (1908) that Bob Kelly asked me to join and swore me in. Pat Lavery was then very closely associated with us but did not become a member of the I.R.B. He had probably been invited to join but had refused. It was then I came to know Paddy Rankin and his brother Owen (now deceased) and learned that they were also members of the organisation. As far as I can judge Bob Kelly did not approve of frequent formal meetings of the organisation, but relied on informal talks and the collection of subscriptions at regular periods. I can only remember a few formal meetings between 1909 and 1914 and none at all after that. The one meeting which stands out in my memory was held in a loft attached to James Morgan's shop in Catherine St. and was presided over by Denis McCullough. There were about a dozen members present and McCullough gave us some account of the state of the organisation in Ulster, but his information was of a very general character. He had had, I believe, conferences apart with Kelly and Southwell. Other I.R.B. organisers visited us from time to time but the talks were usually informal. At least I assumed that the strangers to whom I was introduced were I.R.B. men, though Bob Kelly never openly said so. One of these who visited us on several occasions was a commercial traveller, John O'Mahony (proprietor of Fleming's Hotel, Dublin), later very prominently associated with the post-1916 movement. It is now very evident that the I.R.B. had its members in every national organisation in the area (except, perhaps, the moribund United Irish League), and that, through Kelly, Southwell and Seumas O'Hanlon (till he went to America) it exercised a good deal ^{of CONTROL} of the Gaelic League and the G.A.A. and of the small Irish Ireland groups (mainly devoted to dancing and ceilidhthe) which existed in several

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parishes, especially in South Armagh. If Southwell had had his way the I.R.B. would have shown its hand more openly and Kelly had some difficulty in restraining what he considered the unwise activities of the former. However, when Southwell organised a ceiliadh, a lecture, a public meeting, or an aerideacht in his own area (Adavoyle and Foughilotra), Kelly and myself gave him every help in our power.

The outstanding event of the period 1909-14 was the establishment in 1912(?) of a branch of Fianna Eireann in Newry. Paddy Rankin took the initiative in this matter and in fact did all the organising and spade work without help from any one. The branch was well on its feet before he asked us for any help. His memorandum will, I am sure, give a detailed history of the Branch its progress and decay. Though it did not survive it implanted the tenets of nationalism in several young men who afterwards gave a good account of themselves in the national movement.

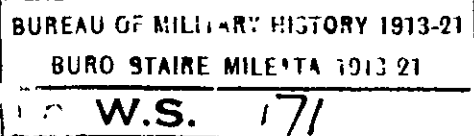
About 1913 a new Irish Ireland group appeared with headquarters in Catherine St. They were all very young men and women and had no association with the Gaelic League, though occasionally Bob Kelly and I attended their functions. I am not sure whether it was exactly the same group that later (about 1915) rented the old coach-building premises in William St. and that after 1916 became closely identified with Sinn Fein. William Grant, a builder's clerk, and Dominick McGuigan, an ex-post-office official, were prominent in this group. These groups were apparently non-political, but they had I.R.B. men amongst their members, though their leaders did not belong to the organisation.

The Irish Volunteers were first established in Newry in February or March 1914. All the Sinn Feiners of military age in the town immediately joined up and of course all the members of the I.R.B., but none of them, through deliberate policy (I think), took any prominent part in the organisation or administration of the corps. Pat Lavery, who was closely

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associated with us, but who was not a member of the I.R.B. was on the committee. I have a hazy recollection that Southwell did after some time join the committee, but if he did so, it was against Bob Kelly's wishes. After Redmond's Woodenbridge speech our group ceased attending the parades, and indeed the National Volunteers, as they were now called, soon ceased all activity in the Newry area. Our group, however, continued during 1915 to do a little rifle practice in the G.A.A. field in the Marshes with a small rifle owned by Paddy Rankin.

We first heard of the projected rebellion on Good Friday evening when Southwell informed us that he had heard through Patrick Hughes of Dundalk that a rising was to take place on Easter Sunday. Present at our discussion, besides Southwell and myself, were Bob Kelly, Patrick Lavery and (I think) Paddy Rankin, though I am not quite sure about the latter. Hughes (I believe) was not a member of the I.R.B. and it now seems strange that neither Southwell (who I now understand was Secy. of the organisation in Ulster) nor Kelly received any communication from the Supreme Council. We decided that I should go to Dublin on the morrow (Easter^{Thurs} Saturday) and get in touch with either Sean McDermott or Bulmer Hobson. I proceeded to Dublin on Saturday and visited the offices of the Irish Volunteers in Dawson St. and Tom Clarke's shop in Parnell St. but found no trace of either of the men I wanted to see. Finally I returned to the offices in Dawson St. and made inquiries in guarded terms of the young woman in charge there, who informed me that nothing unusual had happened or was about to happen. If I knew the young woman's name at the time (and I think I did) I have since forgotten it. I returned to Newry on Saturday night and informed the group of the rather negative result of my inquiries. We resolved to take no action till we had received instructions from an official source.



Signed: Peadar Mac Bana

Date: 25/10/48

Witness: John Meboy
25/10/48