

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILÉATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 184

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 184.....

Witness

Alfred Cotten, 172 Home Farm Road, Drumcondra,
Dublin.

Identity

Organiser I. R. B. 1911-1916. Organiser and
Training Officer in I. V.

Subject

- (a) National activities Sligo, Dublin, and
Kerry, 1911-1916.
- (b) Preparations for Rising 1916.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil.

File No. ... S. 564.....

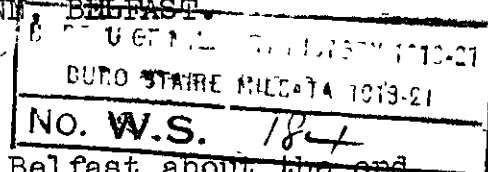
Form B S.M. 2

ORIGINAL

STATEMENT OF ALBERT W. COTTON, 172 HOMEFARM ROAD,
DRUMCONDRA, DUBLIN.

PERIOD : 1909 to EASTER, 1916.

UNITS : I.R.B., BELFAST, SLIGO, KERRY.
I.V., BELFAST, SLIGO, KERRY.
FIANNA ÉIREANN, BELFAST.



I became a member of the I.R.B. in Belfast about the end of 1909 or early 1910. There was only one circle in Belfast at the time. Denis McCullough was Centre at first; later Ernest Blythe was Centre. The other members, whose names I can remember, were Bulmer Hobson, Cathal O'Shannon, Sean Lester, Joe Robinson, Harry Shiels, Michael Shiels, Art Lavery, Sean Peyton, Joseph McCullough (a brother of Denis), F. Wilson, T. Wilson, ~~A~~ *and* J. O'Donnell and Sean O'Sullivan. There may have been one or two others whose names I cannot recall.

It was Sean O'Sullivan who approached me and got me to join the I.R.B. He was a native of Kealkil, Co. Cork, and taught Ulster Irish to a Gaelic League Class which I had joined a few years earlier. He was himself a native speaker. The younger element in the Circle were pressing for more forward activity, and three aspects of their activity developed; they formed Fianna Eireann and recruited a junior I.R.B. Circle from its older members; they organised a Literary Club in Donegal St, and they purchased some arms.

The I.R.B. members associated with the formation of Fianna Eireann were Cathal O'Shannon, Joe Robinson, Sean O'Sullivan and myself. Rooms were taken in the old military huts off the Falls Road, and two Sluaighte of Fianna were formed. I had been appointed Treasurer to collect for an arms fund. Out of the proceeds of the collection we purchased some revolvers and a B.S.A. air rifle. There was then no restriction on the purchase of arms. The Fianna Rooms were used for target practice by the boys. It was intended that the place should also be used by the

members of the Circle for shooting practice, but that did not develop before I left Belfast.

In 1911 I left Belfast to take up a post, as Assistant Book-keeper at a mill in Keady. There was no I.R.B. organisation in Keady at the time, but Denis McCullough told me there was one or two members of an old Circle there and advised me to get in touch with them. I was not there long enough to do so.

I was called for a Board of Trade examination. I consulted members of the Belfast Circle as to whether I should sit for the examination. They saw no objection and I did so. I became a Civil Servant and came to Dublin to take up duty in May 1912. In Dublin I got in touch with Bulmer Hobson who was then there, and through him, with Sean McDermott. I first got to know McDermott in Dublin, although he had been in Belfast some years earlier.

I was only a week in Dublin when I was transferred to Sligo Labour Exchange. When leaving Dublin Sean McDermott appointed me I.R.B. organiser, with instructions to get in touch with Paddy McHale who was Centre of Sligo Circle. After contacting McHale and showing him my authority I got him to call a meeting of the Circle. It was more or less moribund. Paddy McGowan and ... Harte are the only names I can remember. There were four or five others. All except McGowan were elderly men. I suggested we start recruiting. They agreed to hold regular meetings and see what possible people we could get in.

I started actively organising. The first thing I did was to join the Dramatic Society in the Temperance Hall. I thought there would be likely material there, but it was very poor - all Shoneens. I objected to the production of any but Irish plays, and I got the backing of Father Crehan, which was very useful. I was the only Protestant among them. Father Crehan had attempted to form a Pipers Band. He had got a tutor, practice chanters and music, and was trying to raise funds to buy pipes. I succeeded in getting him a

few good young lads. I got in touch with Seamus McGowan, a brother of Paddy McGowan, and with Joseph Neilon and also with a lad named J. Keaveny. He was not brought into the Circle at the time, but was ripening fast. These boys brought a few more along and we formed a Pipers' Band.

We also organised a Freedom Club, which was an open organisation. The members of the Circle were in it and dominated its activities, but it had some non-I.R.B. members also. A lecture which we arranged for the Manchester Martyrs' Anniversary in 1913 gave a much needed fillip to national feeling in the town. Father Gallagher of Mayo agreed to give the lecture in the Temperance Hall, and Father Crehan was responsible for the Hall. When the lecture was announced some people, who objected to the use of the Hall for a Manchester Martyrs' celebration, complained to the Bishop, with the result that Father Crehan was induced to get slips printed and pasted over the posters to the effect that the meeting had been postponed to the following Sunday night, and that Father Gallagher would give a lecture - no mention being made of the Manchester Martyrs.

awb. Through a man named O'Reilly, who worked with me in the Labour Exchange, I got the Hibernian Band for the night. I procured three small tea chests, brought them into the yard of the Labour Exchange, cut ~~out~~ a piece ^{out} of two sides of each of them and pasted over the spaces with mottoes "Allen, Larkin, O'Brien" on one side, and "God Save Ireland" on the other. On the Sunday night after devotions the Band paraded the town, headed by men carrying the three tea chests on poles with lights inside and displaying clearly the words "Allen, Larkin, O'Brien" on one side, and "God Save Ireland" on the other. The Band played national airs, and a big crowd gathered and marched to the Hall. Father Gallagher gave a splendid lecture on Allen, Larkin and O'Brien to a crowded audience, and, thanks to his cooperation, we succeeded in our object.

With the assistance of Father Crehan I got a Branch of the

Gaelic League organised in the town, with about 40 members. The previous Branch had fallen through. That was shortly before the formation of the Volunteers.

At the end of 1913 the Volunteer organisation was formed in Sligo. The Manager of the Labour Exchange, Mr. O'Toole, was an old Parnellite, and he gave me a good deal of liberty. I wrote and typed in the office a letter advocating the formation of a Volunteer Force, which appeared under the pen name "Northern Iron" in the "Independent" and, with splash headlines, in the "Evening Herald". We had copies of it made and distributed in the town. The I.R.B. Circle was the driving force in the organisation of the Volunteers in Sligo. Father Crehan came in and helped us considerably.

Just before that there had been a long and bitterly fought strike of Transport workers in the town. It created a lot of ill-feeling. There had been rioting and shooting. I got in touch with a number of the strikers who were mainly "Connaught Rangers" Militiamen. They were very sympathetic and got the full support of the local Transport Workers' Union. Lynch was one of the principal men who assisted us in getting the goodwill and support of the workers. All classes of people came into the Volunteers, including a great many Redmondites.

A Committee was formed which was representative of all shades of national opinion. We were well represented on it. I was appointed Joint Secretary with Hugh McGovern. The Market Place was secured for the first battalion drill. Father Crehan had to be very careful. He went to some Redmondite J.P.s. and ^{got} permits ^{awb.} for the meeting. He handed the permits to me, assuring me that in the event of inquiries by the police, which he anticipated, everything was now legal, and I could produce the Permits when the police called for our authority to drill. This I had no intention of doing, but said nothing to Father Crehan. I got the members of

the Circle together and put them on duty at the gates, with instructions to admit no one but Volunteers, and not to admit the police. We locked all the gates except one, through which the Volunteers passed. When the police came I had the keys and I could not be "found". I was not "found" until after all the Volunteers had been admitted and the gate locked. The police did not interfere after that.

In February 1914, I was peremptorily transferred to Dublin. I was called before Major Fuge, Officer i/c. of Irish Division of the National Health and Unemployment Insurance, who lectured me on my political activities and reprimanded me. I reported to Volunteer Headquarters when I came to Dublin, joined a Company at Fairview and paraded at Croydon Park. I was staying with Bulmer Hobson at Terenure. One night he arrived home and said he had a job for me next day. I was to go to Howth and collect information about the depths of water at various points in the Harbour at different states of the tides. I cycled to Howth next day and on the pretext of being interested in swimming and diving I got the required information from a coastguard and had it confirmed by some local fishermen. On the basis of this information I made a map of the Harbour and marked the deep channels on it. (From quite young I had been studying map drawing and military books and I had been teaching map reading to the Fianna in Belfast. There was one British manual which I found particularly useful. It was one issued specially for the officers of the British Territorial Force and was an excellent training manual). I gave the map which I had made and the information I had collected to Hobson.

I went with the Cycle Corps on a test march to Howth some Sundays before the Sunday on which the arms were landed. I found that the Cycle Corps had no knowledge of cycle drill. I gave them some instruction that day. During the following week some Volunteers asked me to take over the drilling of a Cycle Corps at Croydon Park, but on the following Saturday I was transferred to Tralee. That was at the end of June, 1914.

I had the same instruction from the Supreme Council to carry on I.R.B. organising in Kerry as I had had in the case of Sligo. I was myself anxious to get to the Gaeltacht for Irish, and McDermott wished me to organise Galway. That became impossible when I was transferred to Tralee.

On arrival in Tralee I contacted Austin Stack, was transferred to the I.R.B. Circle of which he was Centre, and joined the Volunteers. There was one Circle of eight or ten in Tralee at the time. The names I can now remember are Austin Stack, Joe Melim, Jim Galvin, Eamon O'Connor, M.J. O'Connor and Mick Fleming. After a while there was fairly rapid expansion of the I.R.B. organisation by the recruitment of men from the Volunteers, and a Circle developed in each Company. In the remainder of Co. Kerry, efforts were made to get a Circle going, or at least get a few men in, in every place where a Volunteer Company was got going. But the principal expansion of the organisation was in Tralee itself. So long as the right men were in charge of the Volunteer Companies in the country districts we were satisfied to leave development to local initiative. By March 1916, the I.R.B. position in Kerry was, as far as I know, that there were three Circles in Tralee, one in Listowel, one in Castleisland, which included Currans and Cordal, one in Killarney, which included Beaufort, one in Dingle, and one in Caherciveen.

In Tralee I organised and trained a Cycle Corps and took an active part in all Volunteer activities and in organising the I.R.B. during the Summer of 1914. When Redmond caused the split in the Volunteers by calling for recruits for the British Army the Tralee Volunteers sided with the original Provisional Committee. The decision was taken in October 1914 and only about 20 men sided with Redmond. I had taken an active part in the decision and my activities were reported to Dublin Castle. As a result an inquiry was held by the Civil Service authorities and I was transferred to Belfast, at my own expense, and threatened with dismissal. if I

"Is there anything doing?". Our long interview had aroused his curiosity. I was evasive and refused to give him any information as to the purpose of the meeting. Pearse definitely made us promise that we would tell no one the information he had given us. I think he wanted to be sure I would give no hint to Hobson, with whom he knew I was friendly. Hobson was opposed to the plans for a Rising which Pearse entertained. He wanted a fight conducted on guerilla tactics, and he was largely responsible for that trend in training which was evident from the articles by O'Connell and O'Duffy appearing in the "Irish Volunteer. Hobson has told me that he and Pearse had had hot arguments about the matter. On one occasion Pearse had admitted that he could not deny the soundness of Hobson's arguments, but stated that "we must have a sacrifice". Hobson's main argument was that gambling everything on one throw was not good tactics, and that the adoption of guerilla fighting would enable us to make a more sustained effort with better prospects of success.

Pearse told Stack and myself that night, under promise of absolute secrecy, that -

- (1) The date of the Rising had been fixed for Easter.
- (2) That a cargo of arms would arrive at Fenit pier from Germany, and that we had to make arrangements for their reception and distribution, and
- (3) That we were to arrange for a message to be sent from the Cable Station at Valentia announcing that the Rising had taken place, so as to broadcast the news through America.

There was, of course, considerable discussion of the problems which tasks 2 and 3 raised for the Kerry Volunteers and, in giving my recollection of what emerged from that discussion, I am unable to attribute specific statements to Pearse except where so stated, and can say only that I gathered the following general impression of what the plans for the Rising were.

In regard to the arms ship, the impression remains in my mind that the date given to us was Good Friday. There was a discussion

continued my association with the Irish Volunteers. On arrival in Belfast I joined a company of the Irish Volunteers and the local Circle of the I.R.B. Following a further report by the C.I.D. I received an ultimatum to sever immediately ^{my} ~~my~~ ^{own} connection with the Volunteers or else I would be immediately dismissed. I refused to leave the Volunteers and was dismissed from the British Civil Service on 3rd March 1915.

I immediately left Belfast and returned to Tralee where, through the influence of A. Stack and others, I obtained a temporary post in the Kerry Co. Council Office. This lasted only a few weeks and then I was appointed full-time organiser and instructor to the Kerry Brigade. I visited the various Battalions and Companies throughout the county to give instruction in drill, scouting and Company, Battalion and Field training, etc. I had organised the Cycle Corps attached to the Tralee Battalion and was in charge of it. Stack was O/C. of the Battalion. I was acting as second in command to him and as Brigade Adjutant. I did not wish to take any position of command over the heads of the local men except for training purposes. When the British Army reservists who had been instructors, were called up, I took over most of the training in the Rink and ran an officers' class there also. Ned Leen had been the principal instructor until he was compelled to sever his connection. Paddy Cahill did most of the clerical work and acted as Brigade Adjutant when I was away from Tralee on training duties. I visited companies in many parts of the county, sometimes remaining with them for several weeks, and attended the Training Camp in Wicklow in August 1915.

At a date which I am unable to fix definitely, but which may have been at the end of 1915 or early in 1916, Austin Stack and I visited Pearse at St. Enda's. I cannot now remember whether we were sent for specially or were in Dublin on some other business. Sean Lester was at St. Enda's the same night. Coming down the road after we left, Lester said to me "What's the big secret?"

on the question of signals to the ship or by the ship, or both, but I do not remember if any specific signals were stated to have been agreed upon, or were there and then decided on. The difficulties of the ship in running the British blockade were discussed, the risk of delay by storm or fog, and the uncertainty of the ship arriving at Fenit on time. I suggested the possibility of landing smaller quantities at various points or by Zeppelins, but Pearse said the plans already made were final, and Germany would not agree to a change.

In regard to the distribution of arms, I understood that the bulk of them were to go to the West where there were more Volunteers than there were arms available. Some part of the cargo was to be distributed to the Cork, Kerry and Limerick Brigades. Trains were to be used as far as possible. We were to arrange to have a goods train ready to proceed to Fenit. Part of the cargo would be detached at Tralee for the Cork and Kerry Brigades, the remainder would be taken by goods train towards Limerick for distribution amongst Volunteers in Limerick and the West generally. I have no recollection that actual points of distribution were fixed, either on the line running North from Tralee through Listowel or on the Tralee-Mallow line.

The general plan for the Rising was not given to us in detail only its general outline. A general mobilisation of the Volunteers throughout the country would be ordered, ostensibly as an ordinary exercise, but the various Commandants would have received instructions as to the points at which mobilisation would take place, and these points were selected with a view to placing the different Commands in positions from which they could move rapidly to their ultimate objectives. Pearse specifically mentioned the intention to hold the line of the Shannon. As I recollect it, there was to be an extension of that line from some point near Limerick, through County Limerick and East Kerry southwards to the positions to be occupied by the Cork men.

The Cork Brigade was to move to the North Western side of the county, where contact would be made with elements of the Kerry Brigade not engaged in the unloading of the arms or duties in connection therewith. I have since been informed by Sean Fitzgibbon, who was sent from Dublin to see Comdt. Collivet in Limerick and Comdt. Stack in Tralee in connection with the final details for the reception and distribution of the arms, that the Limerick Volunteers were to move towards North Kerry, and that the Clare men were to cross the Shannon to Listowel. The Clare and Listowel Volunteers would take over the town, capture and disarm the police and occupy the police station and the railway station. When the train with the arms and Volunteer guard from Tralee arrived at Listowel the Clare men would join it and proceed north to contact the Limerick men. In this way it was hoped to be able to fight off successfully any British forces which might attempt to seize the train and capture the arms. The Volunteers from Ulster would move to positions on a line running from the Shannon along South Ulster. The Rising was to begin in Dublin and the Arms ship was to arrive on the evening or night on which the Rising commenced

I cannot state precisely what plans were finally made by Stack for carrying out the duties which fell to the Kerry Brigade, but they would be somewhat as follows:-

- 1) Simultaneously with the Rising in Dublin, the Volunteers mobilised in Tralee would seize the Post Office so as to control telephone and telegraph communication; they would seize and hold the Railway Station and have the train ready to proceed to Fenit. Members of the R.I.C. on duty outside their Barracks would be captured. An attempt would be made to rush the Barracks and if the failed men would be placed in positions to immobilise it by fire and force its surrender, if possible. Similar action would be taken to deal with the small force of British troops in Ballymullen Barracks. All roads leading from the town would be closed to prevent any British adherents carrying information to Cork or Limerick.

It was anticipated that when news of the happenings in Kerry reached the British Authorities, forces would move out from Cork and Limerick towards Kerry. The South Kerry, Cork and Limerick men would by then have moved to positions in which they could intercept these forces by holding positions on the roads and destroying the railway lines at suitable points. When the arms reached Tralee, some would be sent at once to the Volunteers holding these positions. The explosives brought by the arms ship would be used to reduce Ballymullen and such police stations as had not surrendered.

Pearse was insistent that there must be the utmost secrecy in all our preparations. Only the very minimum of information considered necessary was to be given to men selected for any special work, and these men were to be carefully selected for their particular jobs. That secrecy was to be preserved up to the last minute. Much depended on the element of surprise, both for our local activities and for the larger project.

Stack and I returned to Tralee to carry out arrangements for the landing of the arms. I accompanied Stack to Caherciveen where he interviewed some persons in connection with the task of having a cable announcing the Rising sent from Valentia Cable Station. I cannot, however, at present state who the men Stack saw were - I think it was Ring or Keating - nor the result of their conversation beyond the fact that everything was arranged.

Because of the probability of delay or difficulty in having the ship arrive at the rendezvous at the time arranged I had certain plans in mind, as I had previously held a few weekend camps for Volunteers at a spot on the shore near Banna Strand and convenient to Fenit. I intended that on Good Friday a small but effective armed force of Volunteers would be encamped there to deal with any emergency which might arise and to have men on the spot when the arms ship arrived. However, these plans did not

materialise as I had been deported from Kerry before that time.

While on a visit to Belfast in March 1916, I was served with an order under the Defence of the Realm Act forbidding me to return to the Counties of Cork or Kerry, and confining me strictly to the city of Belfast. On the following morning I went to Dublin and reported to Sean McDermott. I showed him the order, stated that I proposed to ignore it, slip off to Limerick and remain under cover in the Limerick and Clare district so as to be on hand when the arms ship reached Fenit. I mentioned the weekend camp and explained my plans. McDermott discussed the position with me for some time and finally refused to agree to my proposals. He argued that I was a marked man and that such action on my part would immediately arouse the suspicion of the British Authorities. Their attention would be directed to Kerry, and hue and cry would be raised and an intensive search to discover my whereabouts would ensue. Every movement of the Volunteers in Kerry would be watched and the whole plan of operations might be endangered. He ordered me to return to Belfast and sever all connection with Kerry until the Rising took place. I could then make every effort to reach Kerry and take my place with the Volunteers. In the meantime I was not to make any move. I was, in fact, kept under the closest police observation while in Belfast up to Easter Sunday.

On Easter Monday morning I slipped away to Dublin and got to the G.P.O. just as the windows were being broken. I saw Connolly and Sean McDermott. I mentioned to Sean McDermott my desire to join the Kerry Volunteers. as my training would be more useful there than as a mere unit in the G.P.O.. He said he thought I would find it difficult to reach Kerry, but could try if I wished, or, if I preferred, I could stay in Dublin. I decided to try and get to Kerry, following the plan I had laid out to proceed down by the Shannon. I proceeded north and hoped to contact the Volunteers along South Ulster, but on finding out that there was no general rising I turned back and stopped at Drogheda. I understood the

Volunteers there had a special mission in connection with the Boyne Bridge. After arriving in Drogheda I discovered that no action was taking place there and tried to get back to Dublin. Railway services had by then been suspended. I made contact with a sea captain whose ship was lying at Dublin and who also wished to get there. Between us we succeeded in hiring a car to drive us to Dublin. Shortly after starting we were held up by an armed body of police and all three of us were taken to the police station. We were detained there for some time, interrogated separately, and finally, the sea captain and I were released and the driver arrested. Later on, we succeeded in hiring another car which brought us to the outskirts of Dublin. I succeeded in getting in on the north side of the city on Thursday night, but when attempting to get through the British cordon I was discovered and fired upon. However, I escaped and, dodging the patrol, got refuge in a house a short distance from the Canal bridge. On the Friday I made contact with two Volunteers ^{Ardee, named Donnelly and Ferguson} from ~~the North~~ who had been in the fight in Louth. Three of us made our way northwards to Co. Dublin and, not meeting with any Volunteers and hearing of the surrender, we pushed on north and I finally arrived home in Belfast late on Monday night. On the Tuesday I was taken into custody and later on brought to Richmond Barracks with other Belfast Volunteers. I was identified by Detective Hoey and taken away to another room to await court-martial (Hoey had spotted me at the G.P.O.). Before my court-martial, however, Mr. Asquith arrived and stopped them. Finally, after all the others had been deported, Sean Milroy and I were left. Shortly after we were deported.

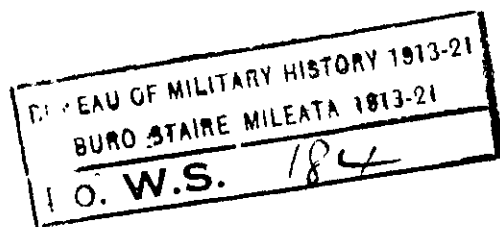
Where anything in this statement conflicts with an article published under my name in "Kerry's Fighting Story" (The Kerryman Ltd. 1947) I desire that this statement should be read as the authoritative document. Since the publication of the article

I have been enabled to check certain points in it and all the facts, to the best of my recollection, which came within my knowledge, are recorded as accurately as possible in this statement made for the Bureau of Military History.

Signed: A. W. Cotton

Date: 24th January, 1949.

Witness: Malcolm J. Bond



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