

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 240_n

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S.240.....

Witness

Mr. Harry Osborne,
Omeath,
Co. Louth.

Identity

Member of Freedom Club Belfast 1912;
" " I.R.B. Belfast 1912;
" " I.V's. Belfast 1914-16.

Subject

History of national organisations Belfast
1912-16.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

File No. S. 1319.....

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Statement by Harry Osborne.

About 1912 I was working in Belfast. The first National Organisation I joined was the Freedom Club about that year. Denis McCullough, Joe Connolly, Tom Wilson, Archie Heron, Sam Heron, Seán O'Sullivan, Alf Monaghan, Alf Cotton, Henry Shields were members also. The policy of the Club was anti-British propaganda and furthering of republican ideas.

I joined the I.R.B. also about 1912. I was approached as to joining by Denis McCullough. I was sworn in by him. I think at the time I joined Denis McCullough was head of our Circle. ~~There is a possibility that Seamus Dempsey might have been head.~~ ^{was} ~~of my circle later. I was head of the Circle in 1916.~~ As a member of the I.R.B. there was little we were asked to do except the spreading of republican propaganda. Our effort in the matter of recruiting for the I.R.B. was one of extreme caution. A person would have to be of trustworthy character and well recommended before he would be admitted to membership.

The policy of the I.R.B. was to support and help in every way the Gaelic League and G.A.A. Those organisations gave us contacts that might be expected to produce the right sort of recruits for the I.R.B. Amongst the men I knew in the G.A.A. was Seán O'Sullivan, a native of Cork, who was most active in the I.R.B. and all other organisations with good national outlook. The Republicans in Belfast at this time were very small in number.

At the formation of the Volunteers in Belfast the prime movers in the effort to get the Volunteers going were the I.R.B. and the Freedom Club. I can't remember now how the organisation was started but we got together a lot of representatives of other national organisations, such as, A.O.H., Forresters, G.A.A. and Gaelic League, and got recruits for the Volunteers.

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from each. Up to the time the Redmondite crowd came into the Volunteers the numbers in the organisation were not large. I can't make an accurate guess; some hundreds - nothing near the 1,000 mark. We trained in Willowbank Huts - a disused military camp. We also did tactical training in the country around Belfast. There was nothing much advanced in the training we did. I did some training at rifle practice at a miniature range at the back of Herbert Moore Pim's house.

About July 1914, after the Redmondite representatives were admitted on the central Executive of the Volunteers in Dublin, the Devlinite crowd in Belfast were admitted into the Volunteers. There was an immediate big influx of recruits into the Volunteers. Soon after this we got a few hundred Italian rifles. Those rifles were nothing much to brag about from a military point of view and were useless to us as there was no ammunition for them. They were useful for drill purposes and looked attractive to the men on parade. I don't remember seeing any of the Howth rifles in Belfast. We had an intensive effort in the procuring of rifles and revolvers. Our funds were limited and we had to strain our financial resources to purchase even our own personal rifles. We were forced to purchase the Italian rifles - any of us who fancied one. There was no free issue of rifles to the Volunteers. The collection of funds for arms was one of our main activities. We got great help in the procuring of funds from the Cumann na mBan and the Fianna Éireann. Seán Kelly of the Fianna was a very active young man at this time.

Around September or October 1914, the split in the Volunteers took place in Belfast. The members remaining loyal to the original policy of the Volunteers were reduced from thousands to hundreds, but as far as I remember a substantial number remained with us. I can't now even give a guess at the number. We continued our drilling, training and previous efforts in procuring funds, and purchasing such arms as we had funds available for. Pádraig Pearse came to Belfast a short time

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before 1916. He delivered an oration in St. Mary's Hall. I was an armed guard on the door of the hall for this meeting. A gentleman who had an office in the hall was refused admission by me and as a result I was summoned by the police for threatening this man with a gun. The hall was packed for this meeting. As I was on the door for the meeting I can't give any idea of what lines his oration took.

During Holy Week, 1916, I don't remember having heard anything definite of the contemplated rising. I knew that something was brewing, from the preparations I saw being made. Rifles were collected and my two rifles were taken up, and, I was told, were sent on to Coalisland in Co. Tyrone. I can't now remember anything definite except that we were told to hold ourselves in readiness to proceed to Coalisland. What day we were told this I can't remember. I did not get any orders for moving to Tyrone on Saturday. I was a barman at this time. I was working late on Saturday night and I had also to work on Sunday. I remember that my brother Paddy told me he was mobilised for Tyrone on Saturday and when he told me this I gave him a five-pound note and told him to be expecting me in Tyrone some time on Easter Monday. The Belfast Volunteers who went to Tyrone returned home on Sunday night as a result of getting MacNeill's countermanding order.

On Tuesday morning of Easter Week I was arrested. C. O'Shannon, Denis McCullough, Peter Burns and a lot of other Belfast Volunteers were arrested about the same time. A few days after our arrest we were removed to Dublin by I think, a special train.

In Dublin we were taken to Richmond Barracks. On the 8th May I was removed to Frongoch. Some of the leaders were executed whilst I was in Dublin. I don't remember seeing any of the executed leaders in Richmond. I was released from Frongoch about Christmas 1916.

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I regret I can't give any more details of the events in Belfast between 1913 and 1916. I have only recently returned to Ireland after 21 years in England. My association with my former comrades of the I.R.B. and Irish Volunteers has been broken for such a long time that it is only after extreme effort I can jog my memory and all the details are now a foggy memory to me.

Signed: J. O'Connell

Date: 3/12/48

Witnessed: John McBoy

Date: 3/12/48

