

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BUREAU STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21  
No. W.S. 331

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 331.

Witness

Dermot Murtagh,  
Oaklawn,  
Athlone,  
Co. Westmeath.

Identity.

Solicitor, Partner in the firm of "Fair & Murtagh",  
Athlone.

Subject.

Formation of the Midland Volunteers,  
Athlone, September, 1913.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S. 1454.

Form B.S.M. 2

# ORIGINAL

13th Dec 1904

My dear Joe,

The statement is correct. There was a parade of Nationalist Volunteers in Athlone prior to the Rotunda Meeting. The story is well known to all old natives of the town. I remember the details particularly well. In the first place it all took place outside my house. I was then living at Garden Vale. In the second, my father was a violent Nationalist, and a devoted follower (and personal friend) of John Redmond. He took the keenest interest in the whole Home Rule controversy and was the Captain of the Athlone Company of the Volunteers when they were ultimately formed.

Here are the facts:

The Westmeath Independent had an Editor at that time named McDermott Hayes. He was also Press Association Special Correspondent. He was a drunken fellow and very foul mouthed to his subordinates. He was away in Castlerea one day, reporting a District Council meeting at which John Fitzgibbon was raising Cain, and when he returned to Athlone somebody sold him the yarn that there had been a Great Parade of Nationalist Volunteers held in the Fair Green and that 2,000 Volunteers had paraded. Hayes swallowed the story, and came in to the Reporters Room of the Westmeath and cursed the two reporters for not reporting it. He abused them foully, and would not listen to them when they said no such parade had ever taken place. He wired the whole story to the Press Association, and it appeared the following morning in all the Newspapers of Britain.

I have particularly bitter recollections of that, because the father of a little boy with whom I played, jokingly asked me had I seen the parade, and as of course I had not, I felt I had missed something. (My house looked out on the Fair Green.) I was greatly mollified when I returned home and asked my father about it, and he told me it had never taken place.

Well, somebody wrote to the Press and contradicted the story and the P.A. came down on Hayes threatening to sack him. In an attempt to justify himself and give barren verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative, Hayes got out a few hundred Handbills summoning a Meeting for the Fair Green. He broached a barrel of porter among the ex-soldiers, gathered together a few band instruments, and got a crowd into the Fair Green. The ex-soldiers and corner boys formed up behind the band and a body of about 200 marched round the Southern Station and back to the Fair Green, much to my delight, and you can take it I had a front seat view, for I was let out and got into it all.

When they got back to the Fair Green Gate (near where the Crescent now stands) I was standing on the kerb, near where stood two British Tommies keenly enjoying the affair. Somebody wanted a bugle call blown. There was only a cornet and nobody

knew how to blow a call. One of the Tommies, in a strong Cockney accent, said "Give it to me and I'll blow one." They gave him the bugle, and he blew "Come to the Cook-house door boys, come to the Cook-house door." In those days everybody knew the calls and this produced a cheer and much laughter and everybody went home chuckling.

I think this would have been in the month of September. It was still broad daylight at about eight o'clock anyway. For that was the time of the parade and I was allowed out to it. I would not have been if it were dark.

We had almost forgotten about it when the Rotunda Meeting took place; and at least one paper (I believe it was a Dublin paper; for I remember my father saying the Editor must have been a pal of Hayes) came out with a headline "Dublin follows Athlone's Glorious Lead".

Thus is history made.

I think you will probably find that the conveners of the Rotunda Meeting were influenced by the Athlone story. If so it is an amusing fact that the whole Volunteer Movement originated in the drunken brain of a newspaper correspondent.

Anyway that is the true story of this famous Corps and if truth is not stranger than fiction it is at least very strange.

With kindest regards,

Sincerely yours,

*William Clarke*

*I saw your Grace the other day, began showed it to me. I came up there after the funeral his lord.*

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C. House,  
Fortobello Barracks,  
Dublin.

10th. Dec. '49.

Dear Dezmott

In the course business up here, I have come across a reference to Athlone in connection with recent history that is news to me, and I wonder if by any chance you could enlighten me further on the matter, or perhaps you would enquire into the matter on the spot, and let me know the result.

The matter in question is this: - It is stated that a Corps of Volunteers had been formed in or about Athlone for some time prior to the inaugural meeting of the Irish Volunteers at the Rotunda, on the 25th. Nov. 1913. A press item dated 22nd. Oct. 1913, refers to a Manifesto issued by Midland Volunteer Force - formed to repel Carson's Army, and pledged to a united Ireland."

If you can find out any of the names of those who were connected with this effort I would be glad to learn of them; and if any of the chief lights are still alive, perhaps we could get a written statement from them for historical record.

Nothing else strange or startling up here at the moment. I saw Coogan the other day, and he told me the Grace picture was almost complete; so I will get in touch with him early next week and will let you know when it is going down.

Give me a call if you should happen to be in town.

Sincerely yours

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