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**ORIGINAL**

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21  
No. W.S. 902

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 902

**Witness**

Miss Mary MacGeehin,  
5, Wellington Road,  
Dublin.

**Identity.**

Member of Cumann na mBan, 1917 - ;  
Secretary of Gaelic League, London, 1920 - .

**Subject.**

- (a) Plan for shooting of Sir Henry Wilson, 1922;
- (b) Reggie Dunne's family background.

**Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.**

Nil

File No. S.2170

Form B S M 2

# ORIGINAL

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BURO STAIRÉ MILICIA 1913-21

No. W.S. 902

STATEMENT BY MISS MÁIRE McGEEHAN,

5, Wellington Road, Dublin.

I went to London in the autumn of 1919 and in May 1920 I was made secretary of the Gaelic League. In that way I made contact with most of the prominent nationalists in London although on account of the Gaelic League being non-political according to its rules I was particular not to be openly identified with the military movement and devoted myself more to the forwarding of the language movement. Art O'Brien was President then as always, Brian Brooks was treasurer and C.B. Dutton assistant secretary.

Reggie Dunne was a member of the Gaelic League - the branch at Stamford Hill where his home was. He was attracted to it by the music and dancing more than by the language. He was an only child and with his father and mother formed a musical trio, his father playing a wind instrument, his mother the piano and Reggie the violin. Incidentally his instrument was given after his death to his solicitor, Mr. McDonnell.

Reggie was passing along by the London County Council schools at Stamford Hill one evening when he heard music and dancing. He became interested at once and went in. He was amazed to find a large crowd of people organised for the fostering of Irish culture, and he was immediately interested in the dancing and music and asked to be allowed to join the club. From that time onwards he never severed his connection with the

Gaelic League. He or his family had known absolutely nothing of Ireland or the Irish language although Reggie spent some time in Dundalk, as his father was a bandmaster in the British Army all his life. He had retired a good while before 1916 and was at Reggie's death in receipt of a pension of £120, which the British continued to grant until his death. They even paid the widow 11/- a week after the father's death, and this was her sole source of income except what was provided by contributions of half a dozen or so persons, most of whom made her acquaintance through the tragedy of her son. These were Mr. and Mrs. O'Keefe - they were the only ones who knew her before Reggie's death - the others were Miss Constance Burke, Miss Rose Killen, the Walsh brothers of Clerkenwell and myself. All of us were in London at the time of Reggie's death.

Reggie was educated with the Jesuits at Stamford Hill where he distinguished himself in English essay writing. His mother had a gold medal that he won for that in his last year at school. He was then trained as a primary teacher in the Catholic Training College run by the Vincentian fathers in S.W. London, but he never taught.

When he came out of college he turned his mind entirely to Irish matters - both military and cultural.

After his training he was in the British Army, being, no doubt, conscripted at the age of 18. He soon got invalided out of the army owing to his knee bone being fractured by a shell. It was during the period of his

convalescence that his interest in Irish and Irish culture was aroused as I have already described.

He must have joined the I.R.A. when his knee was sufficiently healed to take part in their activities. He became O/C London but I can't say at what time. The first occasion on which I saw him was during the hunger-strike at Wormwood Scrubbs prison. I think that was in the early summer of 1920. He was O/C then I think, because he seemed to take a very active part and a directive part in dispersing the crowd of hooligans who came to attack the London-Irish sympathisers who collected every evening outside the prison walls to sing songs and cheer up the prisoners. The tactics used by the I.R.A., which proved very effective, were to form mobile groups at the centre of trouble almost instantly. The hooligans who did not want to take any punishment did not stand up to the resistance and fled.

Reggie as well as attending his own branch of the Gaelic League at Stamford Hill also came regularly to the Monday night meeting at the Central Branch. His interest was not really the language but the music and dancing and the chance of meeting Irish people from all over London with whom he could transact Volunteer business. We were all aware that he was head of the Volunteers in London and that it was he organised all military activities.

Reggie was a very silent, reserved type - a born leader and both boys and girls would have done anything for him and were very loyal to him and very fond of him. He was not a bit conceited and at the meetings on Monday

nights avoided attracting any special attention. I cannot remember any special incident in which he was concerned.

The girls of Cumann na mBan constantly acted in close conjunction with the Volunteers carrying messages, small arms and acting as decoys with individual Volunteers who were sent out on dangerous duties, such as starting fires on the perimeter of London, annoying the police stations, seeking out and warning the relations of Black and Tans.

On one occasion when I was coming home on a holiday I was asked to bring over some revolvers to Dublin. I handed them to P.S. O'Hegarty in his bookshop at the corner of Duke St. and Dawson St., and I still remember my disgust at his gruffness and complete lack of appreciation of the risk I had run.

On another occasion I met a man at King's Cross railway station. He arrived by train and was dressed as a labourer and carried a little tin trunk such as a labourer might have for his clothes. He laid the trunk which I knew was filled with guns and ammunition, at my feet. We pretended to be lovers and we stuck close together until we got to Euston-by train I think. Not knowing the way into the station he laid down the trunk on the side walk and went over to ask a policeman the way. At Euston I saw him into the train where he placed the trunk under the seat. We parted affectionately and he arrived safely in Ireland with his luggage. I may add that he was not a bit perturbed

but I was. All the girls did jobs like that.

We had regular drill, mostly in the Catholic halls belonging to brothers or priests. Members of the Volunteers drilled us. Other members of the Cumann na mBan occasionally did so. There were some funny incidents during our drilling operations. We were all terribly green.

There were no outstanding incidents that I knew of until the Treaty. We, Cumann na mBan were all anti-Treaty and it was a shock to us when we discovered that Reggie Dunne was pro-Treaty. It was common gossip that he had come over to Dublin - probably on more than one occasion - and was in close touch with Michael Collins and other pro-Treaty people. We assumed from that that he was out to support the Treaty. The story we heard at the time was that he was arranging with the Treaty people in Dublin at the highest level to get rid of Wilson who was torturing the Catholics in the North, and that he would come over to Ireland immediately after and get a high position in the Free State Army. There was a great crowd of London Irish arrested during that time and brought to Mountjoy, but Reggie was not among them. I was very much afraid I would be arrested myself as I was as well known at least as many who were. We all had the impression that it was at the instigation of the Free State authorities here that the arrests were made.

Naturally I did not know the details of the arrangements that were made for the execution of Sir Henry

Wilson though I think some of the Cumann na mBan did.

Reggie and his companion gave wrong names to the police and it took the authorities 24 hours to establish their identity, which gave time to Reggie's mother and father to clear out of their house in Stamford Hill. She told us afterwards that although there was a false name given, she recognised that Reggie was one of the people concerned. She knew he was in some organisation that was interested in the fight for Irish freedom, but did not know what position he held and he never spoke to her of his activities. She stayed up each night until he came home and she got him his supper. She absolutely worshipped him. On the night in question he did not come home at all and when she saw the news in the paper next day she at once connected her son with it. She burned all his papers and anything else she considered incriminating, turned the key in the door and they went to her sister's house. Fortunately they were never traced. They never went to see him in prison, but they sent messages to him through Mr. McDonnell, his solicitor.

The story as it circulated in Volunteer and Cumann na mBan circles in London was that Reggie himself brought over the order for the shooting of Wilson from Michael Collins. We understood that it was not necessarily Reggie who would perform the deed but that he was to call a meeting of the officers of the Volunteers - or it might indeed have been the I.R.B. - and lots were to be drawn for two people to do the deed.

This is the way we heard it. The two people who drew the lots refused - their courage failed. Then Joseph Sullivan announced that he would go alone. But Reggie, knowing the disability that Joseph Sullivan suffered from - he was very lame, said he would go with him. Nobody else volunteered. I never heard the names of those two who refused to carry out the order. If the arrangements made had been strictly carried out the task need not have been such a desperate one as it turned out. There were nine chances to ten that they would have escaped. A motor car driven by another member of the organisation was to trail the two and stop at the nearest point possible to the scene which took place in a practically empty street. The sound of the shots immediately brought a crowd of spectators to the spot and the man with the motor car got the wind up and his nerve failed him at the last moment and instead of driving up a little bit nearer he drove away, with the result that the two were held by the crowd. I should mention that Reggie had actually escaped, but he saw the crowd around Joe Sullivan and came back to his rescue. They were both captured by the mob and held until the police came along a minute or so later.

Among the English feelings about the whole matter were very mixed. They were very embarrassed by the pogroms in the north of Ireland which had been ordered by Wilson. Also the Irish feeling was strong over there and the authorities were afraid of arousing deep anger among them. The expectation was that the two boys would be let off with a life sentence. But the bigoted anti-



Irish crowd would not be satisfied with anything less than their execution and the government yielded.

All our sympathy and affection were turned towards the family of the two boys, especially the Dunnes who were then alone in the world. The Sullivans were a big family and sustained each other.

We got hints that a rescue of the two boys was being planned but we knew nothing of the details. I went to see Reggie several times in prison. The prison officials were very courteous and they thought no end of the two boys. They had been used to criminals of course. One day that I visited him Reggie told me about a book he had been reading and when I came out I bought a copy of it. It contained a description of an escape from prison and I was wondering was he thinking of attempting to escape from Brixton. I passed the idea of the escape on to the Volunteers but evidently it was not pursued.

Poor Mrs. Dunne's mind was practically unhinged by her loss and one of the effects was that she could never settle for long in one place. In accordance with Reggie's wishes written for them from prison, the father and mother came over to live in Ireland. They rented a little house in a terrace in Bray. I came over to work in Ireland about the same time, and whenever I was in Dublin I went out to see them. They were now intensely interested in Ireland and everything Irish.

I think it was inside the first year of their

residence in Bray that two men, friends of Reggie and of Michael Collins too, called out to see them. As far as I can remember one of them was Tom Cullen, the other might have been Tobin. They handed to the Dunes the deeds of the house they were living in as a gift, with many regrets that nothing public or governmental could be done for them in the circumstances. Mrs. Dunne told me this story over and over. During the 17 years that she lived she never ceased talking of Reggie. She never got over the tragedy.

She was a very beautiful woman with the fairest skin, pink colour in her cheeks and white hair that made a perfect frame for her face. We used to call her the Gainsborough. She had had beautiful bronze hair, but she told me that she had got white in one night at the time of Reggie's arrest. They were all very good practical Catholics and now the parents got their only consolation from prayer.

She told me once three or four years after Reggie's death, when she was still mourning his loss as keenly as the first day and I think maybe her mind was in a precarious state - that she had a dream that she saw Reggie grown up and turned to profligacy. He had joined a band of something like tramps or tinkers and nothing was too hot or heavy for him. His appearance was evil. She thought she must die of sorrow when she saw him like this and suddenly he changed back to the boy she knew and he spoke to her, saying: "Mother, you have been grieving too much for me. After all

death is preferable to an evil life and imagine now that if I had lived I might have turned to evil." This dream consoled her immensely and she felt that the message came from him. She always felt that he was still very close to her and never ceased to speak of him.

After three years at the outside she became unsettled again, sold the house and bought one in a village about 20 miles out of London where she was completely cut off from everybody. She realised her mistake in less than a year and set about looking for a house again. This time she got a cottage in the town of Howth. She left this again and went back to her sister in London. She and her husband came back to Ireland and lived in Havelock Square, Sandymount, and it was there that Mr. Dunne died.

After his death she went to live with some friends at Stillorgan with the idea of staying there permanently. This arrangement lasted only a matter of months. She went again to live with her sister in London and finally came back and bought a beautiful stone-built cottage on top of the Hill of Howth. I got the water and electricity put into it for her. It was there she was struck by her last illness, but her friends Mrs. and Mrs. O'Keefe brought her to their own house in Sandymount where she died three weeks later.

Shortly after Mr. O'Keefe died and Mrs. O'Keefe went to live in the cottage at Howth Head, pending the

settling up of Mrs. Dunne's affairs. By her will which was drawn up by herself on one of these printed forms, she left everything she had to the six of us who had befriended and supported her after her husband's death. It was properly witnessed but no executor was appointed. Our solicitor suggested it would save a lot of trouble if a clause was added appointing an executor. This was done and again the codicil was properly witnessed.

When the will was submitted to probate the judge rejected it on a technical point and the assets could never be realised. The only one who gained anything was Mrs. O'Keefe who remained in occupation of the Howth cottage and her continued occupation of it for 12 years gave her a squatter's rights to ownership.

Mrs. Dunne's sister - who was married to an Englishman - died before Mrs. Dunne. Indeed they were not too friendly as the sister and her husband were very frightened and anxious on account of the relationship with Reggie and totally out of sympathy with anything Irish. The sister's husband was at Mrs. Dunne's funeral. He expressed regret that he had paid over a sum of £100 to Mrs. Dunne's account which his wife had instructed him to do. This sum was in settlement of a family dispute about the house belonging to the mother of the two sisters from which Mrs. Dunne had previously obtained no financial benefit. The £100 is still lying in some bank in College Green. Neither Mrs. Dunne's brother-in-law nor his son gave any further sign of life, although the solicitor for

the deceased' had the son, as next of kin, summoned in the usual way to attend the proceedings for probate.

Mr. Dunne was descended from a Lord Dunsander who had his estate in County Galway. I imagine the name was derived from some place. About 5 generations before Mr. Dunne's time the heir to Lord Dunsander, a boy of about 18, married a Catholic girl in the local village. They were married in a Catholic church, though the boy was a Protestant. It must have been before Catholic Emancipation because the fact of the marriage taking place in a Catholic church made the marriage null and void in the eyes of the law. The boy was disinherited immediately but he seems to have continued living in the district, and Mr. Dunne who was descended from this pair, referred to his people as Westerns. My recollection is that his father was a seaman in the British service. Around about 1930 Mr. Dunne discovered - I don't know how - that there was no legal heir to the Dunsander estate, but the late Lord Dunsander had recognised a man who was said to be his illegitimate son and as far as it was in his power to do so he left everything to this man. He had no legitimate issue. On the advice of legal friends Mr. Dunne made a search of wills of the Dunsanders from the time his ancestress married one of them. He was told by one solicitor that if there was no entail, he had the better right to the property than the man who was then enjoying it. Unfortunately he discovered an entail which took place about the middle of the 19th century, so that ruled him out. He lived about 5 years

after that and he was not worried about his failure to establish his claim.

Mrs. Dunne often stated that she was descended from the O'Neills but she was never able to give any historical proofs. Her own name was Fitzsimons I think, and she claimed to be related to Mrs. John Desmond Sheridan.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Dunne are buried in Deansgrange in the Republican Plot.

Signed: Mary MacGeekin  
(Mary MacGeekin)

Date: 14<sup>th</sup> Nov 1953  
14th Nov. 1953.

Witness: S. Ni Chiosain  
(S. Ni Chiosain)

