

W.S. 1,014

**ORIGINAL**

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1014

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. **W.S.** 1,014.....

**Witness**

Christopher M. Byrne,  
 Ballykillivane,  
 Glenealy,  
 Co. Wicklow,

**Identity.**

Quartermaster Wicklow Brigade, 1917 up  
 to date of Truce.

**Subject.**

Irish Volunteers, East Wicklow,  
 1913-1921.

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

Nil

File No. **S.2333**.....

# ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

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STATEMENT BY MR. C.M. BYRNE,  
Ballykillivane, Glenealy, Co. Wicklow.

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After the Irish Volunteers were organised in Dublin in October, 1913, I proceeded without any authority from anyone to organise Wicklow, but could make very little headway until January, 1914, when I got Companies in Ashford, Glenealy and Roundwood. I continued the efforts during the Spring of 1914, but it was not till April and May that my efforts produced any great results. Then Companies sprang up all over East Wicklow, from Arklow to Bray. All during the Summer there was continuous marching and drilling in every town and village. Wicklow town had a fine Company trained by an ex Sergeant-Major of the British Army, and the village of Rathnew, which had always sent a number of men to the Wicklow Militia, stepped out and had perhaps the finest Company in Ireland, trained and drilled by Boer War veterans. The movement was now spreading like a prairie fire all over the County - Arklow, Avoca, Rathdrum, Glendalough, Barndarrig, Newtown-Mount-Kennedy - and, though not directly connected with my end, there was a very big Company in Bray. Newtown-Mount-Kennedy, which I have already mentioned, was somewhat similar to Rathnew in that a number of men regularly joined the British Army. At this period all those types of men gave us every possible help, and after Redmond's nominees entered the Provisional Committee, the great majority of the male population in East Wicklow was either in the Volunteers or supporting them, and after his declaration in the House of Commons even the Unionists were friendly disposed to join up, while the genuine Volunteers, who had no

intention of joining the British Army, were dispirited. East Wicklow, needless to point out, had a big Unionist population, being the most planted part of Ireland outside Ulster, and those who were not definitely Unionist were for the most part Shoneen, and, when the split came in September-October, the whole movement collapsed and there wasn't an Irish Volunteer Company active. A few Nationalist Volunteer Companies held together but did nothing. A handful went to the National Volunteer parade in Dublin, Easter, 1915. Those of us who put Ireland first brought contingents to O'Donovan Rossa's funeral in August the same year.

In the Autumn of that year all Volunteers had "died" so far as Wicklow was concerned. Tom Fleming of Shillelagh (Dia trocaire ar a anam!) suggested to me that our best move was to form some kind of organisation outside the Volunteers, and so we formed what was known as the Co. Wicklow Rifle League. It never caught on, but it enabled us to have a few men here and there throughout the County practising rifle shooting. In early 1916 it was obvious that there was a change of thought and the pro-Allies menace was falling flat. In the end of January that year I was approached per Michael Fleming of Drumcondra to start buying rifles from the National Volunteers for supposed Companies of this organisation. I agreed to do so and, gathering up our friends here, there and everywhere, I succeeded in getting a list of Companies and names of officers, etc., with which the officials of the National Volunteers were delighted and received with great pleasure. The man who was actually doing all the work in the office was an old G.A.A. friend of mine who is now in America. I was fortunate in getting between

thirty and forty Martini Henry rifles. Fleming always turned up with the money, and my friend asked no questions so long as I paid him. These rifles never left my home and I had them in readiness for the emergency I knew was coming, though I knew not when nor what.

On Good Friday, 1916, M. Fleming arrived to tell me the rifles would be taken up from me on Easter Saturday night. He told me nothing but I guessed there was something on. He afterwards told me he knew but was pledged to secrecy. He always regretted he had not confided in me. Perhaps it was all for luck. I might not have been writing this now.

On Easter Saturday I went to Dublin on the evening train to attend the G.A.A. Congress next day, but before leaving I told one of my employees, in whom I had implicit confidence and who proved worthy of it during the subsequent years and is just as loyal to-day, to give the guns to the Volunteers when they would arrive later that night. // I had given M. Fleming 300 rounds of .303 ammunition when I put him on the train for Dublin at Glenealy on Good Friday evening. He asked me to get him a bayonet and he would meet me at Wynn's Hotel on Saturday (Easter Night). He met me as arranged but told me nothing even then, though he was hinting very mysteriously. Next morning he came to the G.A.A. Congress looking for me and informed me that Eoin MacNeill wanted to see me and that it was imperative for the nation's sake to go immediately to MacNeill's house. I asked Tom Kenny of Craughwell, Galway, to accompany me and he did. Seán Kennedy, Captain, Wexford G.A.A. All-Ireland Champions, also came along. (Dia trocaire ar a namnaibh!)

We arrived at MacNeill's house by taxi and, going in by the gate, I saw Paidin O'Keefe sitting in a taxi. In the room with Eoin MacNeill were Seán Fitzgibbon and Alderman Tom Kelly. Kenny, Kennedy and Michael Fleming entered with me. MacNeill explained from his point of view. He said he knew nothing of the Rising until Thursday and he decided that, so far as he was concerned, now that the arms would be landed on the next day, the only thing was for the Volunteers to go into it. But, owing to the events since on the coast of Kerry, it would be sheer madness to go out - we had not sufficient arms to beat the R.I.C., never mind the British Army. Eoin said, "If you go out this evening, your own people will be worse on you than anyone else, and you will only succeed in making John Redmond "king" of the country". He mentioned a number of men who were disobeying him - P.H. Pearse, Thomas McDonagh, Joe Plunkett, Eamon Kent and Seán Mac Diarmada - and he wanted us to use any influence we possessed with them to see things as he saw them and to abandon the Rising for the present. (This was the first I heard of the actual Rising.) I replied that I knew all of the men mentioned but feared that I could not influence them in a matter of this kind. Tom Kenny said he would see Seán Mac Diarmada. Alderman Kelly made a reply similar to mine. A general discussion ensued, but nothing of any importance resulted, nor was any decision of any kind suggested. We left, and Kennedy and I got out of the taxi and went back to the Congress in the City Hall. Kenny went on with M. Fleming to look for Seán Mac Diarmada.

I picked up Harry Boland immediately I got back to the Congress and told him all I knew. He listened attentively and said, "It's the same old story all

through history - men of action versus men of inaction". I met him later that night, and he told me that "all was off" and added that, as things worked out, it was for the best. Meanwhile I had met Seán O'Hanlon, a former I.R.B. chief. Tom Clarke had sent for him on Good Friday and told him about the Rising coming off. With O'Hanlon when I met him were Major McBride, Mick Crowe, the famous G.A.A. referee, and Paddy Ryan, who told us the Volunteers had arrested Bulmer Hobson and had him in his (Ryan's) house. There was a lot more talk, whether it should be put off or not put off, till eventually Jack McBride turned and bade each of us good-bye, shaking our hands, calling us by our Christian names and saying, "It's all the same whether we put it off for six months, six weeks or six days. All we can do is have a scrap and send it on to the next generation". It is strange, but true, that everyone I have mentioned as having talked with that day is dead except M. Fleming who was the youngest of the lot. I heard from M. Fleming later that he got Seán Mac Diarmada for Tom Kenny and he summed up that meeting for me in MacDiarmada's words, "If Eoin is right, Ireland is lost, but I think Eoin is wrong. They will shoot us and then Ireland will be saved".

I returned home and late on Easter Monday night I heard a rumour that Dublin "was out", but I wasn't sure if the Volunteers were out as I believed James Connolly and the Citizen Army would probably go out whether anyone else did or did not. On Tuesday I heard Dublin "was out". Wednesday and Thursday I spent trying to get some information but failed. On Friday I heard that Wexford was out. It was too late then for us to do anything as

the R.I.C. arrived while I was away and took all the rifles. But as the rifles had been secured from the National Volunteers I could do nothing but wait and see.

The publication of the surrender was in the Post Offices on Saturday night. The executions followed quickly. I could do nothing but lie low and gladly watch the rising temper of the country at the executions, deportations, etc., which incensed people who were opposed to the Rising.

In June the R.I.C. Sergeant in Rathnew informed me that the D.I. would like to have a chat with me, so I thought it better to go see him. I found him a reasonable kind of man, by name, O'Hara. Countess Markievicz told me afterwards that she knew his family in Sligo and that they were a good type of people. He put me "through it" but I bluffed him and turned the tables by telling him he had no authority to take National Volunteer rifles. I contacted John T. Donovan, M.P. for West Wicklow (who thought I possessed a lot more influence than I had) and told him if he and his colleagues allowed National Volunteer rifles to be taken from me, he would lose a lot of support in Wicklow when the next election would come. The result was that after a month or so I got the rifles back.

Now it was 1917 and things were looking up, especially after the Roscommon election, and I realised I must do something with the rifles if they were ever to be used, or the police would take them again. After consultation with Tom Cullen (architect) who was O.C. of one of the Dublin Battalions, I decided to bury the rifles. This was duly done. I got the local Volunteers from Glenealy and we buried them in an old farmhouse that was on part of my land. I know it was some time between the

Roscommon and Longford elections we put them underground. We took them up the following autumn. I might explain here that there were 24 ~~Lee-Enfield~~ <sup>Martini-Henry</sup> and one large German rifle which held nine rounds of ammunition. In the meantime I reported to the police that I had sent the rifles back to the National Volunteer Headquarters. The National Volunteers were near a finish at this time and their staff consisted of only one man in the office, George Redmond, who played full-back for Ross's Hurling Team (Harry Boland's Club), and when Inspector Lowe called to the office and enquired if a man named Byrnes from Wicklow sent back rifles there (I in the meantime had warned George), George coolly answered, "Yes. They are over there in that box if you want to see them". Lowe replied, "I don't give a d---. I only wanted to find out if they came back".

Then the Split in the National Volunteers started with Colonel Moore going out and forming his own Volunteers. Subsequently there was a fight over the houses. Colonel Moore has written his version of it. He was strongly supported by Tom Cullen, Larry Nugent and a crowd, and I saw that my rifles went over to the Irish Volunteers via Micheál Staines and Michael Collins.

I started off again organising both Sinn Féin and the Volunteers. In every district where I got a Sinn Féin Cumann, I saw that I got a Company of Volunteers and vice versa. We soon had sufficient Companies to form two Battalions, one operating from Wicklow town known as the East Wicklow Battalion with Tom Cullen, afterwards so well known as an I.R.A. man in Dublin, as Commandant of this Battalion. Tom was a Cullen from Blessington and was



managing a business house in Wicklow town. And another Battalion with Headquarters in Rathdrum was known as the South Wicklow Battalion with Seamus O'Brien, a Rathdrum business man, who had been out with the boys in Enniscorthy in 1916, as Commandant. Subsequently we had a Brigade with O'Brien as Commandant, T. Cullen Vice Commandant, myself as Quartermaster, and L. Daly of Wicklow as Adjutant. (The Conscription Bill had just been introduced in the House of Commons.) We had a man named Kennedy, who had been out in Dublin in 1916, and he took O'Brien's place as Commandant of the Battalion, with Jim O'Keefe of the Forestry School at Avondale as Adjutant.

For the remainder of 1918 things went on fairly well with activity everywhere. We had all the old Companies over East Wicklow which I have mentioned, except Rathnew from where most of the male population went into the British Army. The few who did not go joined my own Company - Glenealy.

On St. Patrick's Day, which fell on a Sunday in 1918, there was a big Sinn Féin meeting in Rathdrum which Seán Etchingham, Robert Barton and I addressed. The whole Brigade marched from all centres to Rathdrum that day, some of the officers as well as O'Brien and myself wearing full uniform.

I had to go to the Waterford election the next morning and when I got back a week later I found everything still in order. On Monday, April 15th, that year (1918) Tom Cullen was arrested and we decided to make a demonstration. The Volunteers, followed by half the town, marched to the Station with Tom and his R.I.C. escort. When the train came into the station, the vacuum brake was cut and the engine driver refused to drive the train -

said he couldn't under Board of Trade regulations - so the train remained in the Station all day. Bob Brennan who was travelling from Wexford to Dublin was amongst the people who were held up. All business was at a standstill in Wicklow town that day and it was an illustration to the British of the difficulty they would have enforcing conscription on an united people. The R.I.C. were chasing round, sending wires and running to and from the Station all day. Eventually they got a train with at least 200 soldiers to take one man. They brought this train to the goods station and from there took Tom Cullen to Dublin where he was handed over to a few more soldiers and Detective Johnny Barton in a cab. In the meantime I went back to the passenger station and told the engine driver and guard to go on with their train which they did, despite the fact that they had refused the R.I.C. earlier in the day on the grounds that it was against regulations to proceed with a defective brake. There was an enquiry held into this by the D.S.E.R. Company. Apparently these men came out of it all right as they were left in their positions and continued to play their parts in the movement right up to July, 1921, and always refusing to carry British soldiers.

Shortly after that I was called to Headquarters where I met Michael Collins, Micheál Staines and Austin Stack, and they told me to go to Mountjoy and get Tom Cullen to come out on bail. This I did, having wired Cullen's boss to come up to bail him. He did so but Cullen refused to come out. I came back and found Stack and told him of Cullen's refusal. He said he would have to come out. I said, "Very well, but I am going home. I have business to look after and I also want to see what the Volunteers are doing. Meanwhile Cullen was transferred to

Belfast from where they took him out on bail. He returned to Wicklow but was recalled to Dublin where he was kept for the rest of the struggle. His loss to Wicklow was very serious especially to the town. I suggested bringing Tom Cullen back to Wicklow. There were a number of Wicklow men in Dublin who had fought in 1916 and I wanted a couple of them sent with him. They would have roused the whole County and Wicklow would have been as good as in Fiach Mac Hugh's or Michael Dwyer's times, and especially did I want them in East Wicklow which, as I stated earlier, had been more planted than any other county (outside Ulster) and also had a modern plantation of Unionists who had made money in Dublin and had come to live in Bray, Greystones and Enniskerry districts. This was the area under the East Wicklow Battalion. We had no farmers' sons, or very few/ <sup>in the Volunteers,</sup> and the working lads we had were depending on those employers; at that time there was no one else to give them employment.

It must be remembered too that Wicklow was the last County in Ireland that was <sup>added to the Pale.</sup> ~~made~~. They hadn't got our people out till after 1700 and they weren't safe in the hilly districts till after 1800, and further let it be noted that Wicklow was divided into several outside brigades. Tinahely, Shillelagh and, in fact, south from Aughrim was in Wexford Brigade. Baltinglass was in Carlow Brigade and all the rest of West Wicklow was in either Kildare or Dublin Brigades. Bray also was in South Dublin Brigade, so that our entire territory was from Delgany to Arklow taking in Roundwood, Laragh, Rathdrum, Avoca, Ashford and Glenealy; and in that area we had the two villages which sent the most recruits to the British Army from any village in the British Empire during World War I, viz., Rathnew

and Newtown-Mount-Kennedy. Also strong military forces were entrenched in Hollywell, Kilpedder, Wicklow town and Avondale House, Rathdrum, and augmented police forces in Wicklow and Rathdrum where they commandeered premises. So the idea of carrying on a brigade had to be abandoned and we formed the East Wicklow Battalion and tried to carry on as best we could.

In December, 1920, the British tried to capture the whole Battalion. Matt Kavanagh was now Commandant and Andrew Kavanagh (both of Arklow) was Adjutant. On receipt of an order from G.H.Q. to have a meeting of the whole Battalion, the Commandant and Adjutant were engaged in sending out these notices to the Companies for a meeting of the whole Battalion from an upstairs room of the licensed premises of Mr. Joseph Rafferty. (His business had been closed down by the Tans because he and his family were well known supporters of Sinn Féin and the I.R.A.) As a matter of fact, I had suggested to the Commandant that they should get out of this house and get to a boat on the Quay, if possible. However, auxiliaries and military raided the place and captured Matt and Andy and all their documents, including the notices for the meeting, but fortunately they got no names of Company officers. However, they proceeded to send out the notices for the meeting and apparently consulted the local police who gave them the names of prominent Sinn Féiners. The notices came to some officer of every Sinn Féin Club in each area and were delivered by two men, one of whom wore a Féinne.

This notice reached me by Diarmuid Ó Muirgheasa, who went to deliver it to the O.C., Glenealy, and failing to find him came to me. When I saw this thing I immediately became suspicious. Diarmuid knew nothing

except that these men had given it to the O.C., Rathdrum, P. Curran, a native Irish speaker, who was impressed by the fact that the man who gave him the notice wore a Fáinne and spoke a few words of Irish. Curran was a business man in Rathdrum and was Secretary of the Sinn Féin Club. I was not impressed and, thinking it out, reasoned thus: if they were British agents they would expect us, as military men, to be there on time, while if they were our own crowd they would not mind us turning up late. I accordingly instructed Morrissey to go late and send a message to our own crowd in Barndarrig to be on the alert, as I told Morrissey if they were our own people they would certainly have come to my house, as they would know if I were not at home my wife would be able to direct them to the right channels. Some of the Company O.C.'s came later to tell me of having received this notice and wondering if it was authentic.

In two instances woman's instinct pierced these masqueradors. Those two girls told their brothers that they did not believe they were I.R.A. men; they were, they suspected, either soldiers or police; and these women lived eight miles apart.

However, I managed to get messages all round to "go late", with the result that every man obeyed except Curran who insisted on Morrissey going with him punctually. They went by what is known as the back road to the hall. Curran saluted and gave the number of his Company. He was immediately taken and put in the lorry. Morrissey turned and made a race for it, but he was followed, caught and also put in the lorry. The rest of us came along when they cleared/ <sup>away,</sup> but held no meeting in case they returned.

They had a revenge of sorts that night when they went into Wicklow town and, getting the names of well known Sinn Féiners, W. O'Grady, U.D.C., and John Byrne, from the police, they beat them up and arrested the Chairman and Secretary of the local Sinn Féin Cumann. But their well laid plans fizzled out as they did not succeed in getting a single Volunteer outside, of course, the Commandant and Adjutant.

For my part, I had to start all over again. I got in touch with Headquarters and, after some time, it being the Christmas period, I could get no one down till the second Sunday in January when Frank Henderson was sent to me. We had a meeting in the wood overlooking Deputy's Pass and appointed James Gerrard of Wicklow as Commandant.

We carried on for another couple of months when I decided to look up Headquarters again. I was fortunate to find Michael Collins in a room in a Trade Union premises in Parnell Square and, in justice to his memory, 'he didn't kick me out' but was very nice and did all he could to help me. I explained to him that I was unable to carry the whole thing on my back as I was trying to keep the Councils up to scratch and to run Sinn Féin Courts and all the rest. I told him what I wanted was a military man to take over the I.R.A. and that I would help him in every way I could. He made an appointment for me with Seán MacMahon, Quartermaster General, whom I met next day and, as I anticipated, was told there was very little to get. However, he agreed to send me down a hamper which I got safely// and also a 1916 man who had been scrapping round Dublin, Mattie O'Brien, a typical Dublin man who made my home his Headquarters.

We were most fortunate in one respect. I had a good secret service which included one R.I.C. man who was

Clerk to the County Inspector of Police, and so knew everything about police and military activities. He always advised me of impending raids and arrests, with the result that we were always able to make an escape before a raid - which was a very frequent occurrence - took place.

We settled down, Mattie to train the boys and I to carry on my usual activities. We were getting things into active shape when Seán MacBride arrived and with him a very good chap named Seán Hunt, whom Sean called his orderly, and he proceeded to arrange ambushes and shooting of policemen - one in every district - for the following Sunday week. There were to be shooting in every district from Woodenbridge to Greystones. He advised me to get out as, if I got lifted, the whole thing would collapse again. However, the whole thing ended up in the shooting of one policeman. My wife had been requested to proceed to Dublin, meet the Sunday night train at Westland Row and relieve Seán <sup>MacBride</sup> for the time being of his gun. But no train from Wexford got to Westland Row that night.

During the next couple of weeks we got them formed into a kind of Flying Column, but our trouble then was that all the barracks were burned and we only had greatly reinforced R.I.C. and Tans in Rathdrum and Wicklow Barracks, and strong garrisons in Avondale House, Rathdrum, and in the old jail in Wicklow, and there was a continuous patrolling of the roads between both places and the surrounding countryside. As time went on, the Auxiliaries used to visit the area, firing in the air and pulling up at publichouses in both towns or at any they passed and, needless to add, getting drink for which they did not pay. Arklow was in the same position, having strong military and police forces stationed at improvised military barracks and

police barracks.

Seán MacBride put up impossible propositions, such as, taking Avondale House with less than 20 men and 15 rifles, and a garrison of at least 300 in the town. He had also advocated "taking" a big house in the Square, Rathdrum, into which the police had moved. If his other suggestions were impossible, this latter was utterly so, the military having nothing to do but commandeer the hotel in the Square and the publichouse opposite and capturing the lot of us. They attempted an ambush on the Glenealy road at a place called Cusheen, placing three or four men on the bridge with rifles. This is a very exposed place and, of course, the men could be seen by everyone, with the result that Dean's Saw Mills nearby closed down, and not only did pedestrians, cyclists, etc., but even motorists, make a quick getaway and people living in houses near cleared out. They laid a mine on the edge of the wood adjoining the road. A young man, named Liam Grant, from the Six Counties who was on the run and staying with Hugh Cooney at Deputy's Pass and who had a good knowledge of explosives, told me it was a very powerful mine. I knew nothing of all this until I happened to arrive home in the evening - it was just a week before the Truce - and found a crowd of the boys having a meal and most of them looking very scared. Whatever became of that mine I never could find out though I searched for it. It was a nightmare to me for years fearing it would go off and blow up innocent people. That was Wednesday, July 6th, and Mattie O'Brien who was really in charge began to growl and allege that Seán was overriding him. In the role of mediator I advised them to go to Rathdrum and try to get after the Tans, a big number of whom were knocking round the town, some of them being stationed there. They agreed and on Friday, July



8th, they shot one of them. An amusing incident is attached to this. When they did the last job, they made immediately for Glenmalure where Madame MacBride had a cottage. I had given my friege overcoat to one of them on the previous night as there was a frosty nip in the air. On Saturday the enemy, guessing their whereabouts, made a raid but the boys got clear across the hills, and the only thing got was my coat. My R.I.C. friend told me during the Truce that, in the pocked of my coat, they got a report written by me for Headquarters of the Wicklow shooting on the previous Sunday, and he added, laughing, "If the Truce breaks down, you are for it!".

○ Signed:

C. M. O. Brun

(C. M. O. Brun)

Date:

27-9-1954

(C. M. O. Brun)

(C. M. O. Brun)  
27: 9: 54.

Witness:

Sean Brennan Lt. Col.

(Sean Brennan) Lt.-Col.

