

W.S. 1,022

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILÉATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1022

ROINN  COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.
STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,022

Witness

Sean Matthews,
16, The Mall,
Waterford.

Identity.

Member of I.R.B. Waterford, 1910 - ;
" Irish Vol's. " 1914 - ;
Coy. Captain and later O/C. Waterford Batt'n.

Subject.

National activities, Waterford City,
1910-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.1339

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1919-21

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Statement by Seán Matthews,
Parnell Street, Waterford.

I was born in Kilmacow, Co. Kilkenny, in 1886, and from an early age was identified with the Gaelic Athletic Association in the county.

I came to Waterford City in 1902 and became apprenticed to the firm of Messrs. John Egan and Sons, Wholesale Grocers and Spirit Merchants, Barronstrand St., Waterford. I am still a member of the same firm.

Sometime during the year 1910 I remember going for a walk with the late J.D. Walsh of Waterford and a man whose name, I think, was McNamee and, so far as I can remember, an official of the Board of Education. The Irish Republican Brotherhood was discussed, and following that conversation I became a member of the I.R.B. in the same year. I was sworn in by Liam Walsh of Waterford up in the Gaelic Sports' Field, Waterford. Liam Walsh was Head Centre of the I.R.B. here at that time, and M.F. Crowe of Limerick, a prominent G.A.A. man, was I.R.B. organiser. I subsequently became head of an I.R.B. Circle in this city.

The I.R.B. used to meet in the house of the late J.D. Walsh in John St., Waterford, and also in a house in Henrietta St., Waterford. We had about thirty members altogether, who were mostly all associated with the John Mitchel Hurling Club in the city. This

hurling club was really used as a cloak for I.R.B. activities here.

Late in 1911 I became aware of a split in the I.R.B. movement. The official organ of the I.R.B. at the time was called "Irish Freedom". Sometime about the date of the visit of King George of England to Dublin in July, 1911, two issues of "Irish Freedom" appeared one week, simultaneously. One bore the heading, "Irish Freedom, published by the Wolfe Tone Clubs"; the other was the ordinary number, edited by (Dr.) Patrick McCartan and sponsored by Tom Clarke, Seán McDermott and Bulmer Hobson. I wondered what all this was about and, when in Dublin, later in the same year, I met Seán McDermott and Con Collins, I inquired what was the reason for the two issues of "Irish Freedom". McDermott told me that there was a split brought about by Fred Allen, a Dublin member of the I.R.B. Seán McDermott said that Allen, who was secretary to the Lord Mayor of Dublin at that time (Pyle was the name of the Lord Mayor) went in his official capacity when the Lord Mayor paid his respects to the British king, George, when the king came to Dublin in July, 1911. The I.R.B. heads were against Allen in this matter, so he (Allen) broke with the movement in company with others, whose names I can't remember.

When I mentioned the matter to Cathal Brugha, he at first denied that there was a split, and inquired where I got my information. I told him that I was aware of what happened but refused to say where I heard it. He subsequently admitted that a split had occurred.

On the formation of the National Volunteers in 1914 in Waterford, I joined up. The head of the

Volunteers here at the time was Robert Kelly.

In September, 1914, John Redmond, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, who, by the way, had very strong support in Waterford, called a parade of National Volunteers for Woodenbridge, Co. Wicklow. We heard that he was to address us on the advisability of joining the British Army to fight in the war between Britain and Germany. At a parade in Waterford myself and about thirty other Volunteers stepped out of the ranks and refused to go to Woodenbridge. I severed connection with the National Volunteers then and, with the thirty or so other men who would not side with Redmond, we formed an Irish Volunteer unit in Waterford.

The key positions in the newly formed Irish Volunteer force were held almost entirely by I.R.B. men. I was Adjutant of this battalion when the 1916 Rising broke out.

Here I would like to put on record an interesting event which took place in the days immediately prior to the Howth gun-running on 26th July, 1914. On the Friday before the Howth gun-running, the late J.D. Walsh of Waterford brought me a letter which he had received from Robert Kelly, head of the National Volunteers. It came from the Irish American Society, Bristol Branch. The envelope was post-marked, "British", and marked, "Private and confidential". It was heavily sealed at the back. The letter stated that the schooner, "Naraganses", would arrive at "The Island" with a cargo of arms and instructed that a body of men were to be there to take delivery of the arms. "The Island" in question lies in the harbour, about a mile downstream

from the city of Waterford. The Volunteer officers got in touch with Mr. Purcell Fitzgerald, himself a Volunteer, the owner of the island, and asked for permission to use his yacht, the Grace Darling (to enable them to go and meet the "Naraganses"). We got the yacht and searched down the river and down to the sea as far as Craden, about ten miles south of the city on the coast, near Dunmore East, but failed to find any trace of the schooner. In the meantime another party of Volunteers went by row boats to the island to help us, should we contact the schooner. We failed to locate her. On our return journey up river to the island, we noticed the head-lights of cars on the river bank and, in the light of the cars, saw R.I.C. Inspector Rigg. He came aboard our yacht with other R.I.C. men and searched for arms but, of course, he found none. When we reached the island, we found more R.I.C. there. We subsequently disembarked at the Adelphi Quay, Waterford, and disbanded without interference by the police.

The following day, which was Sunday and was the day the guns were landed at Howth, I decided to go on my own down to Dunmore East, which is about twelve miles south of Waterford City and on the sea coast, to see J.D. Walsh and Robert Kelly who had stayed there on Saturday night, to see if they had any information about the arms cargo. I could see no sign of the "Naraganses" but what I did see was the British gunboat, "The Heather", patrolling the approaches to Waterford Harbour. "The Heather" was used by the British at the time as a patrol boat on the east and south-east coasts of Ireland.

When news did eventually come through of the landing of the guns at Howth, it confirmed our suspicions

that the letter from Bristol was a decoy to put the British off the track of the Howth landing to to keep "The Heather" engaged on a fruitless mission down Waterford way while the guns were being safely put ashore at Howth. I never found out who sent the letter from Bristol.

On November 21st, 1915, we had a visit in Waterford from P.H. Pearse, who came down to give a lecture on the occasion of an anniversary commemoration for the Manchester Martyrs. In company with the late J.D. Walsh I had a private chat with Pearse when the lecture was over. He asked me what was the strength of the Irish Volunteers in Waterford City and how were we armed. I told him we were about thirty strong and that we had only two Howth rifles, a couple of revolvers and a few shotguns. Pearse then told me that the Rising would probably come off in the Spring of 1916. He gave me a code word which would be sent to me telling me that the Rising was on, but I can't remember what the code word was. He then said to me: "Ye have nothing; ye can put up no fight. The best thing ye can do is to go to the General Post Office (Waterford) when you get word of the Rising, break up everything you can, particularly the telegraph and telephone installations, and then go into Wexford and join up with the Wexford Volunteers, but only bring with you such men as are armed." I have a very clear recollection of this conversation with Pearse in November, 1915.

We continued to drill and train the few Volunteers we had in the city until the Rising of 1916 broke out.

On Easter Saturday, 1916, a dispatch, cancelling general orders which had been issued during the week for

general manoeuvres on Easter Sunday, was received by P.J. Brazil, an I.R.B. man and Adjutant in the Irish Volunteers here. I can't remember how the dispatch arrived here. On the same day, Ginger O'Connell came up to Waterford from Cork with the cancellation order for the Easter Sunday manoeuvres.

On Easter Monday, 1916, about 2 p.m. a message came to me, telling me to call at once to the Metropole Hotel, Bridge Street, Waterford. When I called, I met Miss Maeve Kavanagh from Dublin who handed me a dispatch which, she said, was given to her by James Connolly in Liberty Hall, Dublin, the previous day. The dispatch read: "Carry out orders. Dublin strikes at noon". It was signed, "P.H.P.". I have a very distinct recollection of that meeting.

I destroyed the dispatch, met J.D. Walsh and went towards the General Post Office on the Quay at Waterford. When we got there, we found that the building had been occupied by British troops who had obviously got word of the Rising in Dublin before we did, so nothing could be done about destroying telephone and other installations in the Post Office as suggested by Pearse in November, 1915.

Due to the lack of arms and ammunition, no military action was taken by the Volunteers in Waterford City in 1916. Some men were arrested, including Liam Walsh on his return from Dublin shortly after the Rising ended, but I was not one of those arrested.

Later in the year 1916, I remember well Cathal Brugha coming to Waterford. He was lame as a result of wounds he received in the Rising. In conversation with

him about the general position and about the I.R.B. in particular, I have a clear recollection of his telling me that he had left the I.R.B. for good and all, as he could see no use for it. When I asked him his reasons, he replied: "All that the I.R.B. in Dublin wanted was to pull their caps over their eyes, pull up the collars of their coats and be shadowed by detectives." Brugha also said to me that the only two men who could keep that organisation free from graft and corruption were Tom Clarke and Sean McDermott, and they were dead.

Early in the year 1918, I was arrested by the R.I.C. at the funeral of a Waterford Volunteer at whose graveside we had a firing party. I was sentenced to three months' imprisonment, which I served in Ballybricken Gaol, Waterford. I was asked to sign a document promising to be of good behaviour, which would permit me to be released, but I refused to sign.

Some time about the middle of 1918 or a little later, Cathal Brugha was in Waterford and I met him. Shortly before he left, I chanced to ask him: "When will we see you again?" Brugha replied: "I'll tell you now, I don't know. I'm going to London if there is an attempt to enforce conscription. I'm going to London in charge of a party to shoot the British Cabinet". I asked him what he thought of his chances and he replied: "I'll do one of them anyway". I well remember him saying that. I then said to him: "What do you think will be the reaction of the Church?" - and he replied: "There are clever men at the head of the Church; if we bring this off, we'll bring the people with us and then the Church will come in". Brugha mentioned the name, MacNamara (I think), as his second-in-command. My

recollection is that this man worked in Findlater's, Dublin. He was arrested for being in the shooting of spies on Bloody Sunday, November, 1921, in Dublin but he proved an alibi, although he was in it, and was let off. He was interned after that and I believe went to America on his release, but I am not sure about the facts of the case. I heard afterwards that Brugha and his party were recalled from the London job.

Following the 1916 Rising, the Volunteers were reorganised in 1917 by the I.R.B. men in Waterford City and by the senior members of Fianna Éireann. I acted as Company Adjutant and then Captain of "B" Company, 4th Battalion, and became Battalion O/C later on. Although there was a big influx of recruits during the period of threatened conscription in 1918, their numbers subsequently fell away when the threat of conscription passed.

Before leaving the year 1918, I would like to comment on the political situation in Waterford and the part the Irish Volunteers in the city played. The opposition to the Sinn Féin and Irish Volunteer movements here at that time came from supporters of the British garrison and was blackguardly in every sense of the word. Assaults on Volunteers during election work for Sinn Féin candidates were very frequent, and bottles, stones and sticks were used to break up Sinn Féin meetings. To meet this, we had to get in Volunteers from other counties - Clare, Cork, Wexford, Tipperary, Kilkenny and Limerick - to help to keep some sort of order and save our supporters from grievous assault. The attitude of the R.I.C. was to look on and do nothing to help us. They made no attempt to keep the peace. On the contrary, they seemed to

encourage violence by the Redmondite mobs - composed of drunken ex British soldiers and their wives. Frequent attempts to smash up meetings were eventually broken up by the Volunteers, who were armed only with sticks, and by the time the elections were over in December, 1918, we more than held our own in spite of the odds against us.

On one occasion only, to my knowledge, was a gun used against the Redmondite mobs during the 1918 election, and the incident may be worth recording. Joe McGrath (Hospitals Sweeps), Dan MacCarthy (Sinn Féin Director of Elections then), Seamus Brennan, a Dublin man, and Seán Milroy were in the Sinn Féin Club in Colbeck Street, Waterford, on election work. I was with them there. We left to return to the Metropole Hotel in Bridge Street, about half a mile away, when we were set upon by a mob of Redmond's supporters in Broad Street, armed with sticks, stones and bottles. The situation, so far as we were concerned was very bad, the odds being very heavily against us. Seamus Brennan warned the crowd to keep back, at the same time drawing a revolver and firing over the heads of the job. (The revolver was a Smith and Wesson which I gave him). The mob still came on, so Seamus Brennan fired low and hit one of the attackers in the leg. That stopped them quickly enough. In the confusion following the shot, the party made its way back to the Metropole Hotel in safety. A raid on the hotel by the R.I.C. subsequently that night failed to find the revolver or the person who fired it.

During 1919 and up to my final arrest in November, 1920, we continued to carry out training routine in spite of great difficulties. We had very few guns, with the exception of a few revolvers which we bought from British

soldiers and, in some cases, from soldiers' wives. Fianna Éireann also got us a few revolvers. Cathal Brugha came down to Waterford in 1920 and impressed on us the necessity for complying with an order prohibiting any raids for arms except on definite orders from Headquarters. I remember him well coming about this.

I have anticipated things a bit and should say that I was arrested under the Defence of the Realm Act in

Sergeant Baldwin of the R.I.C. arrested me and I was sent to Cork Gaol, then on to Belfast Gaol and then I was shipped with others on the British destroyer, "Verity", and found myself in Wormwood Scrubbs prison.

When I got to Wormwood Scrubbs, I found that some of the Irish prisoners there had gone on hunger-strike for unconditional release. This, to my knowledge, was the first hunger-strike of prisoners (outside that of Terence MacSwiney, Lord Mayor of Cork) to back a demand for unconditional release. Previous strikes were merely to secure improved prison conditions. The strike was led by Frank McGrath, Nenagh, Maurice Collins and Joe McDonagh, the latter being brother of the executed 1916 leader. It was known as "the Munstermen's strike" because most of those taking part were from the Province of Munster.

Others, mostly Dublin men, led by J.V. Lawless and Henry O'Hanrahan (the latter a brother of the executed 1916 man), were dead against the strike and refused to take part.

In connection with the matter of hunger-strikes, it may be of interest to relate that, when Joe MacDonagh returned to Wormwood Scrubbs after his release for a while on parole, he told us that he had been speaking to Cathal Brugha who said that he (Brugha) never approved of hunger-strikes and that there never was an official order given for any hunger-strike. After some considerable persuasion by the

Munstermen, Lawless and O'Hanrahan eventually agreed to join in the strike and their men did likewise. I, too, went on hunger-strike with the men who accompanied me from Belfast Gaol. I was released from Wormwood Scrubbs where I resumed Volunteer activities.

In November, 1920, I was again arrested at my place of business - Egan's, Barronstrand Street, Waterford, and was imprisoned in Kilworth Camp, Cork, being subsequently transferred to Spike Island, Cork. I took part with the other prisoners in the smashing up of Spike Island, and was then transferred to Maryboro' Gaol where I was imprisoned until November, 1921, when I was released following the Truce in July of that year.

At the time of my arrest in November, 1920, I was Adjutant of the 4th Battalion, East Waterford Brigade, I.R.A. The normal company strength then was about thirty men, and the battalion strength about two hundred men.

SIGNED: John Matthews
DATE: Oct. 1st 1954

(John Matthews)

Oct. 1st 1954.

WITNESS: T. O'Gorman

(T. O'Gorman)

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