

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILITARA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1,050

ROINN  COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,050.....

Witness

Miss Vera McDonnell,
1 Upper Ely Place,
Dublin.

Identity.

Stenographer in Sinn Fein Office,
1918 - .

Subject.

Sinn Fein Organisation,
1918-1922.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.2375.....

Form B.S.M. 2

ORIGINAL

STATEMENT OF MISS VERA MacDONNELL,
1 Upper Ely Place, Dublin.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 1050

In 1917 I came up to town to study shorthand and typing in the Underwood School of Typing in Leinster Street. Joe Begley was the teacher.

One day Fr. Michael O'Flanagan came to the School for someone to do some typing. Although I was only a beginner, Joe Begley recommended me because he knew my background and thought I would suit. He said he would help me at the typing. I worked partly in Margaret Browne's flat in Pembroke Road, taking down the shorthand and typing it in the School. It was after the East Cavan election in which Fr. O'Flanagan took an important part, and he had hundreds of letter to answer, some of them private.

And.

At the end of 1918 I went to type for the Sinn Féin Organisation in 6 Harcourt Street. I continued there for some time, with breaks to go back to Fr. O'Flanagan. I remained in that office until about the middle of 1920 when I went down to Roscommon to Fr. O'Flanagan. He was Vice President of Sinn Féin at the time.

During most of that time at the office I worked with Bob Brennan, who was in charge of Propaganda, and Desmond Fitzgerald who was also on Propaganda. I cannot say what was the relative position of these two. They both worked in the same room on the third floor, the inside office. Michael Nunan, who also worked in the office, might be able to give more information about that. Desmond Fitzgerald seemed to be dealing more with foreign correspondents, and his wife, Mabel, used to help him at that. She had been private secretary to one of the Cabinet Ministers in England.

I remember the arrests in May, 1918, in connection with the so-called German Plot, but I was not present at any of the meetings before or after. I think it was Paddy Sheehan used to do the reports of the meetings.

I was not at the Annual Convention of Sinn Féin in the Mansion House in 1917. Mick Knightly was the person who took verbatim reports generally of such meetings. Miss Anna Fitzsimons was in on them too, and she may have been at that particular one. She is now Mrs. Kelly and working on 'The Irish Press'.

From time to time I typed stuff - memoranda, etc. - for Larry Ginnell on Lands, Bob Barton on Finance, in connection with the Agricultural Land Bank, Liam Cosgrave on *stet* Local Government - ~~I used to go up to the pub-house in James Street to take down the shorthand. I used to do the cablegrams and codes for the Dail Éireann Loan to the U.S.A. for Daithí Ó Donnchadha and Mick Collins.~~

Arthur Griffith was in 6 Harcourt Street with his paper, 'Nationality', in the annexe or return room, but we had nothing to do with him. I think it was Seamus Burke and Bill Murray that worked for him.

In the front office off the hall was the Sinn Féin Bank where Davy Kelly, a brother of Alderman Tom, was in charge. We used to cash our cheques there.

There was a Miss White working with us also at a later period, but I have lost sight of her. She married someone called Nolan - an I.R.A. man. Barney Hellows was on the staff and Anna Fitzsimons and Frank Kelly, whom she afterwards married. Joe O'Reilly, who was right-hand man to Mick Collins, was constantly in the office. Brian

Fagan was one of the clerks. ~~He looked after money under the direction of Charlie Murphy.~~ *fm*

We used to have a visit every evening from Rory O'Connor after his day's work in the Corporation, but this was after the Treaty. George Nesbitt, who was I think at one time Treasurer with Mrs. Wyse-Power of Sinn Féin, and Con Collins were regular visitors. Every day we had some people from the country too, paying subscriptions or looking for some information.

On Armistice Day, 11th November, 1918, there was an attack, mostly by Trinity College students, on No. 6 Harcourt Street. They broke every window in the building. There were a lot of our people there that day - Harry Boland, Frank Gallagher, Barney Mellows, Desmond Fitzgerald, etc. They defended the offices with any weapons to hand - chairs, etc. - and the attackers moved off after a while. It took some days to repair the damage and we were sitting in the cold offices in the meantime.

At this time we were in the throes of the election activities. We had the offices filled with voluntary workers, in addition to the staff. Madame Markievicz was a regular attendant, Dan MacCarthy, Liam Mellows and practically every one of the leaders. Mrs. Pearse came often. James O'Mara was Director of Elections, as far as my recollection goes. He was certainly most energetic. Piaras Beaslaf used to be there a lot. I don't remember Seán Milroy working in the office, though I knew him well, and I don't think I did any typing for him. Miss Fitzsimons or somebody else could have been typing for him. I remember working for James O'Mara and Mick Nunan, who was in the same room, did too. The work consisted of instructions to the

various directors of elections in the constituencies and the organisers throughout the country. I remember Conor Maguire was director of elections for Mayo. I think most of the forms would be printed, mostly by Joe Stanley's firm. No doubt we would type the drafts.

On the day of the poll the staff all went to vote. ~~Many of us voted several times in different polling booths,~~ ^{incl. Mrs} as the voting lists were very out of date. The presiding officers were mostly in sympathy with Sinn Féin.

There was great rejoicing over the result of the election, which we in the offices knew was a foregone conclusion.

I was at the opening of Dáil Éireann in the Mansion House - as a visitor, of course. I had no work to do in connection with it.

When de Valera escaped from Lincoln Jail and came back to Ireland, Seán Nunan was with him in 5 Fitzwilliam Place, and I went over a couple of times to take down some shorthand. ^{I typed} This was his address ^{for} the first meeting of Dáil Éireann that he was present at, ~~I think~~. ^{incl.} It was in April, 1919. I typed it at Fitzwilliam Place where he had his office.

I never did any work for Mick Collins. He had his own staff. Before he took them over to 76 Harcourt Street, he had assembled his own Dáil Éireann staff - Daithí Ó Donnchadha, Dan Donovan, Miss Toal, Jenny Mason (now Mrs. Derrig), Dermot O'Hegarty, and perhaps others. Old Larry Cinnell used to work in the room with them, but he was not on their staff. He was writing out something about land.

We had several raids during my time at No. 6. Mick Collins was there on one occasion when the D.M.P. raided the place. I was in an office on the third floor with Mick Nunan. Collins was in a back office on the same floor. The police came round to the desk to see what we were working at. As far as I remember, they arrested no one. We heard afterwards that Collins, whom they were probably after, escaped by going up to Joe Clarke's rooms on the top floor, and I have an idea that he escaped on to the roof and only came down when Joe O'Reilly went up to say that all was clear. I don't know who was in charge of the raid.

Paddy Sheehan, who was paid secretary of Sinn Féin, was working in a room on the first floor. I don't know whether Darrell Figgis, one of the honorary secretaries, was there that day. No one was arrested. I do not remember the raid on which Blythe and, I think, Paddy Sheehan, were arrested. I used to go off for long periods to do some work for Fr. O'Flanagan, first, at Margaret Brown's flat in Pembroke Road, then, at Parson's on Baggot Street Bridge, then, at Miss Noon's home in Commons Street, off the Quays. Miss Noone afterwards married Liam Paul, a member of the Corporation.

As I have already stated, I spent some time with him in Roscommon and later again I worked for him at Nugent's in Upper Baggot Street. In that way, I missed many of the interesting incidents in No. 6 Harcourt Street.

In Roscommon town, where Fr. O'Flanagan was curate, I was staying at Murray's in The Square. One morning shortly after the murder of Fr. Griffin, the Officer Commanding and another officer of the Auxiliaries, who had murdered Fr. Griffin - at least, they boasted to me that

they had - came to look for me at Murray's. They searched all my stuff there and then brought me to Fr. O'Flanagan's to get me to open up the place. On the way up, we collected two R.I.C. men and two more Auxiliaries.

The door of the Curates' house was opened by Fr. Carney, the other curate, and the Auxiliaries proceeded to search Fr. O'Flanagan's rooms. They pulled the place asunder and read all his letters. Fr. O'Flanagan was interested in the derivation of Irish place names and, for that reason, he used to buy old ^{ordnance survey} maps at auctions. He had shortly before bought some belonging to the County Surveyor who had died, and pieces of these had been cut out apparently by the Surveyor for his own purpose. The Auxies came to the conclusion that Fr. O'Flanagan had cut them out for the I.R.A. for the purpose of attacks on the Crown forces. They told me if they got Fr. O'Flanagan they would give him the same fate as they had given to Fr. Griffin. They also told me to leave the town at once, and that my being a woman would not save me from being put up against a wall and shot.

During all this time Fr. Carney remained in his own rooms and was not molested.

Fr. O'Flanagan was due back that afternoon. He had been up attending a meeting of Sinn Féin, He was Vice President, and acted as Chairman in the absence of de Valera in America and Griffith in jail. I thought it best to go to meet him at Athlone to warn him that the Auxies had been looking for him and that they intended to kill him. I took a car and awaited his arrival at Athlone station. He showed no signs of fear and said he would go back to Roscommon. He told me to go to my own home in Co. Cavan and that he would contact me later. He went on to

Roscommon, using the car that had brought me. He wrote to me while I was at home that, when he arrived in Roscommon, he went straight to the R.I.C. barracks and asked to see the Officer Commanding the Auxiliaries. When the officer came, he told him who he was and asked him what he wanted him for. The officer thanked him for coming and said it was "quite all right". No attempt was made by the Auxies to pursue him further.

Fr. O'Flanagan was quite fearless and independent. He had got up against his Bishop long before this. When he was appointed curate at Crossna, the Bishop sent him to America to collect money for the building of a church. Fr. O'Flanagan refused to beg for money, but he took with him half a dozen of the skilled lace-makers of the parish and got them into some of the big shops in New York, where they worked at their lace and it was sold to the public who came in to see them at work.

It was after I left Roscommon and while I was at home that Fr. O'Flanagan sent his famous telegram to Lloyd George on the 5th December, 1920. I knew nothing at all about it.

I got a letter from Barney Mellows while I was at home in Virginia asking me why I had let him send such a telegram. Of course, my reply was that I knew absolutely nothing about it. My own opinion of it was, and is, that Fr. O'Flanagan thought that Lloyd George's offer of peace was a bit of bluff and that Fr. O'Flanagan decided that he would at once call his bluff. He never discussed the matter with me either before or after. I was only twenty-one at the time and was in awe of all those people.

I came back to town shortly after Christmas and went to work then for Fr. O'Flanagan at Nugent's in Baggot Street.

He had an awful lot of correspondence, such as a T.D. of the present day would have, except that the letters came from all over the country. Many of them dealt with land and turbary problems which necessitated his going a lot to the Dáil Department of Agriculture. In addition to that, he was writing his autobiography and was also writing lists of derivations of Irish place names. One book on the last mentioned subject was published in his life time.

It was in order to help the Nugent's who had a large family and lived over the dairy business in Upper Baggot Street that he got some people to put some money into the business, and he wanted me to look after the expenditure, so I spent a good deal of time examining and checking the accounts for him. The Nugent's themselves had no idea of money.

After a couple of months at this work, I again returned to Sinn Féin Headquarters in No. 6 Harcourt Street, where I remained until the Civil War. I was against the Treaty, but I was instructed to remain at Headquarters, although I had wanted to be transferred to Dáil Éireann staff.

One episode that I remember distinctly was the conference that took place in the Mansion House around February of 1922 after the Free State Provisional Government had been set up. There was a committee of the Dáil set up, consisting of Treaty and anti Treaty members, whose function it was to bring about a re-union of both parties. They met in the Round Room and I was appointed to act as note-taker, being looked upon as a neutral from Sinn Féin Headquarters. They talked and talked but came to no agreement. Among them were Mr. Rutledge,

Mr. O'Dwyer of Rathmines, Mrs. Tom Clarke and many others whose names I cannot now remember.

At the same time there was a similar committee of Army leaders held in, I think, the Supper Room of the Mansion House, discussing the same matter. I have a vivid recollection of General Sedn McKeon coming and going between the two conferences, dressed up in his new army uniform, with a revolver in his belt. As the Dáil committee felt, in my opinion, that the ultimate agreement would depend on the Army, they came to no decision. But General McKeon told them they could be doing something, that they had enough brains amongst them to discuss the situation, unless they cared to wait till he came back from the Army conference. I thought this funny. As far as I recollect, the Dáil committee simply disbanded without any final decision being arrived at, and I never attended any further meeting.

I did my part of the usual work in connection with the meeting of the Ard-Fheis held on the 22nd February, 1922. It was adjourned for three months pending the publication of the Constitution. It was to re-assemble on the 22nd May. The main business to be transacted was ^{following} the/resolution proposed on the 22nd February for an agreement between de Valera and Stack on the one hand, and Griffith and Collins on the other:-

"In order to avoid a division of the Sinn Féin Organisation and avert a danger to the country of an immediate election, to give an opportunity to the signatories of the London Agreement to draft a Constitution, so that when the people are asked to vote at elections to decide between the Republic and the

Saorstát, the constitution of the latter may be definitely before them."

The Convention re-assembled as arranged on the 22nd May, and the agreement reached by the Dáil regarding the "Pact" election was the sole subject of discussion. The discussions were heated as the members of both parties were present in force. The Resolution proposed at the meeting of 22nd February was not opposed but, in fact, it was not put to a vote as the pact had been ratified by the Dáil. The feeling of the meeting was, in my opinion, definitely anti Treaty.

I continued to work at Headquarters in Harcourt Street until the outbreak of the Civil War on the 28th June, 1922. That morning I reported to Joe O'Connor in York Street. He told me to go home, that he would send for me when he wanted me. He never did, and I therefore took no part in the Dublin fighting.

I got in touch with the Dáil Éireann staff - one of them was Kid Bulfin. She told me that the engineering section under Power O'Hara was looking for somebody to staff their office. I reported to him at Vera Terrace in the Drumcondra, or Glasnevin, area. I remained with Power until some time in November doing ordinary office work. His work went on all that time, because he was personally not so well known to the Free State crowd. I was not allowed to go out in daylight for fear of being recognised. The office was eventually closed up and I went to Clare to my sister, whose husband was in jail.

At the beginning of January I came back to Dublin, and de Valera sent for me to ask me to go to Sinn Féin

Headquarters in 6 Harcourt Street to try and keep the Sinn Féin Organisation going. Mrs. Wyse-Power had closed it down completely, I think in December.

We were continually raided by the Free State soldiers but they had little to take. Many of the records, such as, minute books, etc., had been removed - possibly by the Free State members of the Standing Committee, such as, Mrs. Wyse Power, Paddy O'Keefe and Samonn Duggan. Mrs. Power had written to me in December, as the Treasurer of Sinn Féin, to say that the office at No. 6 Harcourt Street had been closed down and my services were no longer required. She enclosed a cheque for the period, June-November.

I tried to keep the office going, with the help of old Pat O'Hara, but I had to leave it eventually on account of the continual raids. The Republican Prisoners' Dependants Fund had rooms in the building too and one day, when the soldiers came to arrest me, I grabbed my case and walked down the stairs. The soldiers asked me what I was doing there and I said I was up doing business with the Prisoners' Dependants Fund. Another day I ran upstairs to Joe Clarke's wife, who was ill in bed, and, when the soldiers came up and asked who I was, she told them I was a "Jubilee" nurse who was looking after her as she had rheumatic fever.

I continued after this to work for the Republicans from my digs in Pembroke Road. ^{Street Lower. P.M.} They used to get in touch with me by despatches, and when the Free State in February, 1923, issued a proclamation stating that anyone who surrendered his arms to the Free State Army would be allowed to go free, I carried a letter, signed by Liam

Chief of Staff. I.R.A. memo.
Lynch, which was sent to me by Eamonn Donnelly, addressed to the Chief of Staff of the Free State Army, stating that they had no intention of giving up their arms.

I got into Portobello Barracks all right, although I had no pass, and succeeded in reaching the office of the Headquarters Staff. I asked to see the Chief of Staff, saying I had a letter to deliver to him in person. Emmet Dalton came into the office and recognised me. He went out then, and the next thing was that Dermot O'Hegarty came in. He demanded to know what I was doing there. I told him about the letter that I wished to deliver to the Chief of Staff in person. He demanded the letter and I gave it to him, asking for a receipt.

The letter, I think, was a statement that the Irish Republican Army had no intention of surrendering. *and setting out the rightful authority of the I.R.A.* A copy of the letter had been taken a few days previously by Dr. Margaret O'Doherty, wife of Joe O'Doherty, for delivery to the League of Nations at Geneva.

I was interrogated closely by Dermot O'Hegarty and Commandant Micky Love, and they sent me under escort to Kilmainham Gaol for internment. I was searched there and kept for a couple of hours, but released about 5 p.m.

I was afterwards told that the Free State authorities, on learning that a copy of the letter had been delivered already to the League of Nations Assembly in Geneva, decided that they would be violating one of the recognised rules of warfare by imprisoning

an official courier, and that was the reason I was set free.

From that on, I remained working in the Republican cause until 1932 when de Valera was elected to the Dáil and formed a Government. I was at once asked to report to the Minister for Finance for service in his Department.

SIGNED: Firinne Nic Dhonnaiill
(Firinne Nic Dhonnaiill)
DATE: 20th Nollag. 1954.

20adh Nollag, 1954

WITNESS: S. Ni Chiosain
(S. Ni Chiosain)

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MIL. TA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1,050