

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. / 330

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,330

Witness

John D. Costello,
Killoower,
Belclare,
Co. Galway.

Identity.

Director of Organisation
North Galway, 1913-1921.

Subject.

National activities, North Galway,
1913-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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330

STATEMENT BY JOHN D. COSTELLO,

Killower, Belclare, Co. Galway,

I.R.B. Centre for Belclare, Cumber, Kilcomly, Kilbannon, etc.,

Hon. Sec. first North Galway Board I.R.B., Hon. Sec. first

North Galway Comhairle Ceanntair Sinn Féin, Director of

Organisation North Galway Brigade I.R.A.

It was in 1913 I first became a member of the I.R.B. and this is how it came about. I held "extreme" views politically since my early childhood. About this time (1910-1913) political corruption was evident everywhere and Colonel Maurice Moore made speeches deploring the state of national affairs. I wrote Colonel Moore asking if he would consent to stand for North Galway at the next general election. He replied promptly, stating that the country was not yet well enough organised to try conclusions with the Irish Parliamentary Party. I had Colonel Moore's letter on me one day when I came across Liam T. Langley, whom I knew to be bitterly opposed to the then Irish Party. I showed him the letter, and after reading it he asked me if I would join the I.R.B. I consented immediately. After being sworn in I was forthwith appointed in charge of aforementioned Circle.

I proceeded to swear in some young men and soon became a marked man. The 1st World War broke out and we intensified our activities, and so also did the R.I.C. We first discovered that a few of the I.R.B. of the area were being watched, from a post office official, Martin Mannion, who told us that when certain of our members travelled by train our description was wired to Athenry or

Claremorris, as the case might be. Martin Mannion covered his tracks so well that he was never discovered as our source of information, although the authorities had some suspicion about him as evidenced by this incident. (By the way, Martin Mannion became Postmaster under the native government). He was one Sunday evening walking up Dublin Road, Tuam, when he observed Tommy Burke, an I.R.A. man, coming in the opposite direction. He looked about to see that no one was watching and when passing by Tommy Burke he muttered that Fr. Griffin was found buried in a bog in Barna. When Tommy Burke was arrested some time afterwards he was asked what Martin Mannion told him on this particular Sunday evening, so "walls have ears"! We continued to drill, arm and equip and we captured all the key positions in the Volunteers.

In 1914 we brought Major John MacBride to Tuam to deliver a Manchester Martyrs' Anniversary oration. We marched in military formation to meet him a few miles outside the town and escort him to the Town Hall, where he delivered a spirited oration to a good audience. I travelled the following day to Athenry with Major MacBride to attend a meeting of the County Board I.R.B. The Major had two detectives watching over him all the time.

The split in the Volunteers came next and, of course, we stood firm with the Irish Volunteers. We captured any arms or equipment the National Volunteers had got. On Easter Monday, 1915, I smuggled a rifle from Dublin. I had the rifle sandwiched between two strong pieces of cardboard, neatly papered and tied up, with a fictitious label from Thompson & Sons, Dublin, for Mr. Henry Jones, Galway.

I will now skip on to early 1916. We were getting things in readiness. We didn't know definitely the date of the Rising but knew it was fairly soon and that Athenry were to send a dispatch to either Liam Langley or myself a few days in advance. That dispatch never came and the first intimation I got of the Rising was a dispatch from Liam Langley after he had returned home from Galway, where he went for a day on Easter Monday. It was at Galway he met George Nicholls and a few of the boys. I met Langley and we decided to take the field on Tuesday night, march on to Tuam and thence to Athenry to join forces with Mellowes's men. I mobilised all available forces at a wood near the town and sent a man with a dispatch to Langley to know if everything was in readiness. This man returned sometime afterwards with the information that Tuam was occupied by Northern R.I.C, fully armed, and that it was impossible to do anything under the circumstances but to await further orders. No more orders came on Tuesday night. I dismissed the men but told them to hold themselves in readiness. I travelled to Tuam early on Wednesday morning to get first-hand information and narrowly escaped being arrested. All this time Sam Browne, a railway inspector, had an engine and two carriages ready to fetch us to Athenry, but as Mellowes's men were cut off it was decided not to attempt going. The failure of our not taking part with Mellowes was entirely the fault of the Athenry I.R.B.

To hark back to 1915. An after Mass meeting was held in the Square, Tuam, on May 18th. The meeting was addressed by Seán McDermott and Liam Mellowes. Liam Langley presided. When Seán McDermott said "England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity" D.I. Comerford and

Sergeant Martyn mounted the platform, which was a bråke or long car, very kindly supplied by I.H. Corcoran. The D.I. caught McDermott by the arm and told him he wanted to arrest him. "What for?" said McDermott. "Under D.O.R.A." replied the D.I. Then Seán said, "Let go my arm, I'll go with you". The D.I. let go his hold and, turning around, pointed to Sergeant Martyn, who was busy picking up seditious literature, to go down. I was sitting near the speaker and I heard Mellowes whisper "don't fire" as Seán's hand darted ominously to his hip pocket. Quick as lightning Seán McDermott made a left turn and Mellowes a right turn, and in the movement McDermott's automatic passed into the hands of Mellowes and thence into Willie Stockwell's pocket. When Seán McDermott had gone about 20 yards he stopped suddenly and told the D.I. that he wanted a few words with Eiam Mellowes regarding his business in Dublin. A policeman approached the platform where Liam Mellowes was now speaking from and Liam went at once to where McDermott and his escort of several R.I.C. men stood. The two distinguished patriots had a hurried conversation, during which a note-book containing the names of all western I.R.B. Centres passed unnoticed from Seán to Liam. Seán then went with his escort to the barracks. After the meeting Liam Mellowes called at the barracks to make final arrangements regarding Seán's business. On entering the day-room Liam spotted a piece of paper jutting out from under Seán on the form where he sat in front of a fire. Liam took out his pipe and then asked the Sergeant of the Guard for a match, but immediately remarked that there was a piece of paper here, which by this time he held in his hand. He lit his pipe and flung the paper into the blazing fire. The paper was an anti-recruiting leaflet.

Eiam Langley, Tom Kilgarriff and McGill were interned in 1916 and I took over charge in North Galway. I received a letter from Langley from Reading Jail. This letter was smuggled out by Mrs. Darrel Figgis. We kept the organisation going and continued to swear in more members.

In 1917, with the threat of conscription hanging over, the people - young and old - began to flock to the reorganised Sinn Féin movement. We in North Galway decided to start Sinn Féin clubs in every parish, making sure that the I.R.A., which was growing rapidly, would hold all key positions. I presided at the first Sinn Féin meeting in the Town Hall, Tuam, which was also attended by three R.I.C. men.

When North Galway was well organised we formed a Comhairle Ceanntair and I was appointed Hon. Sec. Sometime afterwards a convention was held in Galway for the purpose of starting an arbitration court. During the proceedings I remarked that an arbitration court shouldn't interfere where the I.R.A. had already taken action. Fr. Griffin, C.C., who was afterwards murdered by the Black and Tans, who sat in front of me, turned back and said: "Don't say much about the I.R.A. You cannot trust everybody here". The arbitration courts were soon functioning in every area and their decisions were enforced by the I.R.A. In May, 1918, a notorious thief and raider named Martin Connolly, Milltown, Tuam, was arrested by the Sylann Company, I.R.A. He was brought to Belclare by A.F. O'Dea, M.R.C.V.S., in his car but made a sensation escape from his "prison" a week afterwards. Two brothers named Hussey and a postman named Higgins, whom he identified, got jail sentences.

The conscription crisis having passed over by now, the milk and water Sinn Féin element hurried back to their original political affiliations. The general election was approaching and the two opposing parties worked very hard to win a victory at the polls. Dr. Brian Cusack, who was in jail, was the Sinn Féin candidate and he had a majority of 3,999 over his opponent, Thos. Sloyan.

The year 1919 was not over-eventful in North Galway except for some raids by the R.I.C. and a few arrests. The I.R.A. were very busy organising and drilling and raiding for arms here and there.

On the 8th January, 1920, the R.I.C. barracks at Castlehacket was attacked by the Sylann Company with a few men from Tuam and Togher Companies. Paddy Conway (afterwards Brigade Q/M) had all the home-made bombs, with a light overcoat of mine wrapped around them, at my home on the eve of the attack. It was raided by three R.I.C. men, and although they went several times within a foot of the bombs they found nothing. Shortly afterwards I had a visit from Conway to see if everything was all right. This was the first barrack attack in Connaught and the fifth in Ireland. The attack wasn't a success because two policemen who were guarding the D.I.'s broken-down car about two miles away, attacked the I.R.A. from a hill overlooking the barracks so they were caught between two fires.

The Castlegrove barracks was attacked six weeks later but wasn't captured. Shortly afterwards a building contractor named Dwyer went to repair Castlehacket barracks. For this act he was subsequently expelled from the I.R.A. by Fr. Tom Burke, C.C. Later in the year two R.I.C. men were killed in an ambush at Gallagher, Tuam.

I was arrested in November and brought to a military camp at Earl's Island, Galway, where 33 of us were given 32 blankets and herded in an old hut without glass in the only window, and never got a cup, knife or fork during our 13 days. It was in this camp that Commandant Moran was murdered. We heard his every defiant, dying shriek as his torturers broke every joint in his body. We were transferred from Earl's Island to the Town Hall. It was here the English tried another stunt. The dressing-rooms at either side of the stage were grandly prepared for two priests to hear our Confessions on a Saturday evening. The floors were covered with army blankets and a chair was placed near the steps leading to the stage. A few days afterwards a prisoner named Tommy O'Grady from Newtownsandee, Kerry, was searching for some timber for a fire. He came across some wires and, as he was an electrician, he became suspicious. He traced the wires under the flooring to the door leading to the day-room and also to the dressing-rooms, where dictaphones were hidden with an iron bar. Tommy smashed them into smithereens.

Fr. Considine used to celebrate Mass for us on Sundays, and as he was intimate with many of the Galway City prisoners he usually, whilst pretending to the guard to be praying and arranging the altar for Mass, told those standing near all the latest developments from outside. One Sunday he said we would all be released before Christmas as negotiations were going on for a truce. The following week the Galway Co. Council passed their infamous Haverty resolution. The next Sunday Fr. Considine's first words were: "Ye 'll have to suffer on lads on account of the

Haverty resolution." That same week a soldier named Gates, who appeared to be always very friendly, told Tommy Burke, Tuam, that he had seen a dispatch from G.H.Q. ordering the army to intensify their campaign against the "Shinners", as they were now caving in, as evidenced by the Galway resolution, and if they, the "Shinners", were not beaten before six months, they, the British, would call a truce. A month later we were transferred to Ballykinlar Camp, where we were held until December, 1921.

During the election campaign of 1918 the North Galway Comhairle Ceanntair Sinn Féin got a subscription of £100 from a Cork constituency where there was no contest.

The Dáil Éireann Loan was well subscribed in the Tuam area. I remember subscriptions amounting to £610, of which £100 was in sovereigns, being put for safety into the safe in Guy's Hotel, Tuam, pending its lodgment.

Signed:

John D. Costello

(John D. Costello)

Date:

21st December 1955

21st December 1955

Witness:

Con Moynihan

(Con Moynihan)

