

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURÓ STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1484

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1484

Witness

James McCaffrey,
Creelough,
Co. Donegal.

Identity.

Company Captain and O/C, 3rd Battalion,
No. 1 Donegal Brigade.

Subject.

Irish Volunteers and Sinn Féin
activities in Creelough area,
Co. Donegal, 1918-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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STATEMENT BY JAMES McCAFFREY,
Creelough, Co. Donegal.

I was born in Drumharvey, Co. Tyrone, in October 1898. In my boyhood there, I became acquainted with Sean B. McManus, a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood from an early date. He aroused my interest in Irish political affairs when I was about seventeen years old. I was then too young to take the I.R.B. oath and, losing touch with Mr. McManus, I never became a member of that organisation. Another great Irishman who helped to arouse my interest at a very early age was Rev. Matthew McGuire, Parish Priest of the parish of Kils Kerry. He organised an Irish class in the parish which I attended, commencing there in 1909. Apart from his great interest in the Irish language, he was very interested in the national outlook generally, and encouraged every young man, with whom he came in contact, to make an effort to free Ireland from British rule. Fr. McGuire was one of the founders of Cloughineely Irish college.

Notwithstanding the fact that all my energy, physical and mental, was directed towards the achievement of complete freedom for the country, with the primary object of ousting the nation's enemy, now, after so many years have elapsed, it is rather difficult to pick out any event worth recording. Yet, here are some particulars which might be worthy of note.

I left Drumharvey and came to live in Creelough early in 1918. I joined the Irish Volunteer

organisation shortly after my arrival. James McNulty was my company captain. McNulty had been in America prior to this date and was a member of Clann na Gael while there. He was sent home to Ireland on organisation work by a man named McGarrity, a close associate of John Devoy. I would say that McNulty was primarily responsible for the organisation of the Irish Volunteers in this area. I was also a member of the local Sinn Féin club.

In 1918, a general election was about to be held, and the Sinn Féin executive nominated Joe Sweeney (now Major General) as their candidate for West Donegal. Joe Sweeney had fought in Dublin during the Rebellion in Easter Week 1916 and, after the surrender, was interned in Frongoch prison. As a result, Volunteers and members of Sinn Féin had a very high respect for him, and we were determined to do everything in our power to secure his election. In my area, I was responsible for the financial end of the campaign. In the county of Donegal, the Ancient Order of Hibernians had a very strong organisation, and the members were very bitter opponents of Sinn Féin. As a result, every member of the Volunteer organisation, in addition to members of the Sinn Féin clubs, were obliged to turn out on election day to ensure that our supporters got to the polling booths and recorded their votes without hindrance. Anyhow, General Sweeney was elected with a large majority, and I would say that he was the youngest member of Dáil Éireann in Ireland at that time.

While on the subject of elections, I would like to record an event in a Local Government election of 1919 which stands out in my memory. Firstly, may I

state that intimidation of voters and impersonation in those days were really looked upon by all as a patriotic action, and what I am going to say now cannot be gauged by present-day standards of judgment?

I secured the position of poll clerk at a polling booth in Creeslough in 1919, purely in the hope that, by some manner or means, I would be able to enhance the chances of the Sinn Féin nominee. For reasons which will be easily understood as I unfold the story, the name of the presiding officer at the booth, who was sent from Lifford, must be omitted. I arrived at the booth at 8 a.m. Polling, in those days, was from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. The Nationalist or Parliamentary Party, as they were sometimes termed, did not have any personating agent at the booth, and the Sinn Féin party, who knew beforehand that I would be poll clerk, deemed it superfluous to waste a man's time doing personating agent, as they were well aware that I would be able to look after their interests.

Polling in the early part of the day was very slow, with nothing worth recording until about twelve noon. I had been looking over the register, and found the name of one man that I was aware had left the district and would not come back to record his vote. His name was John Doogan. I immediately left the booth and went out to the roadway. A middle-aged man, a staunch Sinn Féiner and one who had every confidence that whatever I would suggest would be perfectly safe, was passing. His name was Charles McFadden, Gortnalake; the voters from his townland were not voting in Creeslough, and McFadden likewise had no vote there. I instructed

him to follow me into the booth and ask for a ballot paper in the name of John Doogan, Killoughcarrow. I wanted him to give me a few minutes inside before he followed me in. He carried out my instructions rather too well, for he went over to a licensed premises in the village for a drink, probably to strengthen his nerve, for the coming episode, to him, was really a serious matter. About half an hour later, Charles marched into the booth, if not inebriated, at least fairly well "lit up". He approached the presiding officer's table and demanded a ballot paper. The presiding officer very courteously asked him for his name. Charles drew himself to his full height and, in a loud, independent voice, said, "Charles McFadden, Gortnalake". The presiding officer informed him that he was in the wrong booth, that his polling booth was at Massinass school, about a quarter of a mile down the road. It was really humorous to see how deflated and crestfallen poor Charles became when he realised the faux pas that he had made.

The workers outside the booth on behalf of Sinn Féin - all members of the Volunteer organisation - called into the booth on several occasions and offered the presiding officer some liquid refreshment in the form of whiskey and stout, but he firmly refused to partake of the offer. At one period, when the booth was clear of voters and we had the place to ourselves, I asked the presiding officer, apparently very innocently, if he had ever tasted poteen. He said that he never had, and he often wondered what it was like. A few minutes later, I took out a cigarette packet, put the cigarettes loosely in the pocket, and wrote inside the flap, "Get poteen!". A little later, a sister of my battalion

quartermaster came in to vote. She was impersonating an old woman whom we knew would not come to vote. As she was leaving the booth, I handed her the empty packet. She never "batted" an eye, but left the booth at once. Termon parish was then rife with poteen. Termon is about seven miles from Creeslough, and we had no motor cars in those days, yet, within an hour, one of my helpers arrived in with a bottle of poteen which he had cycled to Termon to secure. This time, we were able to persuade the presiding officer to taste the stuff and, by degrees, we got him so muddled that I was able to record what must have been a record poll for the Sinn Féin candidate.

To get back to my Volunteer activities, I had a clear recollection of the first duty I was called on to perform. Count Plunkett was a prisoner in Derry gaol. He sent out a despatch to be delivered in Dublin through our line of communications. I was one of the men in the communication chain. When the despatch reached me, I took it to Frank Duffy, Enniskillen, who carried it to the next man in the line.

Early in 1919, an order was issued for a general raid for arms in the area. James McNulty, our company captain, together with myself and some other members of the company, set out to comply with the order. All went well until we reached the home of Andrew Wilkinson, a Justice of the Peace for Donegal under the British administration. When we knocked at the door and told Wilkinson our mission, he retreated upstairs and opened fire with a .32 revolver, wounding James McNulty in the shoulder, the bullet lodging there. We succeeded in disarming Wilkinson and taking the arms in the house.

No further action was taken against Wilkinson. We managed to convey McNulty to Carrigart where he was examined by Dr. McClusky who told us he must be removed to hospital to have the bullet extracted, as he could do nothing for him. I immediately reported the incident to General Sweeney who came over and instructed me to accompany McNulty to Dublin. General Sweeney gave me a note which I was to deliver to Gearoid O'Sullivan at an address in Parnell Street. I contacted Gearoid O'Sullivan as instructed, and he arranged to have McNulty admitted to the Mater hospital where he was operated on and detained for a considerable period, and preventing his participation in further activities in his area. He was only a short time home from hospital when he was arrested.

In a bed beside McNulty in the Mater hospital was a Volunteer named Bernard Molloy from Newtownsteward who was wounded on the same night, but in a different engagement. Two years afterwards, James McNulty, his brother and myself were arrested and eventually conveyed to Derry prison. One of the first prisoners to welcome us with sarcasm was the afore-mentioned Bernard Molloy.

Around this time, the Volunteers, who up to now were organised on a company basis, were organised into battalions and brigades. A battalion was organised in the Creeslough area and was known as the 3rd battalion, No. 1 brigade. Major General Joe Sweeney was then brigade O/C, James McCole was vice O/C, Patrick Breslin was adjutant, and Patrick O'Donnell was quartermaster. I was appointed O/C of the 3rd battalion, in the absence of James McNulty. Bernard McGinley, Creeslough, was vice O/C, Patrick McGinley, Kilmacloo, Creeslough, was

adjutant, and Charles McGinley, Creeslough was quartermaster. After my arrest in May 1921, Bernard McGinley was appointed battalion O/C.

I performed one foolhardy action during the whole period of activities. Very early in the struggle, the British had a section of troops billeted in Dungloe. On a certain Sunday as we were coming from Mass, a special train, packed with British troops, passed on the line en route for Derry, and stopped at Creeslough station to refill the engine with water, which caused some delay. I cycled past my place of residence and went direct to the station, as I was most anxious to find out if there were any prisoners on the train. Two armed sentries were guarding the entrance gate to the station. They halted me, and told me that they could not allow me to pass. I told them that I was a porter at the station and that it was my duty to be in attendance when all trains were passing. This, of course, was a lie as I had no connection with the railway company. I was then allowed to pass in. I walked the full length of the platform, and saw that there were no prisoners on the train. I then lifted a hand truck that was lying on the platform, and pushed it into a shed. The station master, one Mr. McCann, a staunch supporter of the Irish Parliamentary Party, was talking to an officer. I walked up to him and asked him, "Is there anything more for me to do, sir?". He answered very gruffly, "No, you can go now". I left without further ado.

At this period, I worked for the firm of P. Harkin and Company, Massinass. An order had been issued to our organisation to enforce a boycott on the R.I.C. Traders were instructed to refuse to supply them with

goods of any description. It was difficult to enforce this where the traders did not co-operate, and now, when I look back, I can see the difficulty for any trader to comply with the order. In Harkin's store where I worked, the R.I.C. came in and weighed up their own requirements.

The manager of this store, one Edward Mullen, now deceased, was, to give him his due, a very sincere Irishman, but by no means an advocate of physical force. Overcoats in those days were not as plentiful as now, and it was often necessary to resort to borrowing. Mullen had a very good gaberdine overcoat and, as we were nearly of a size, his coat was used indiscriminately by both of us. I had been out one night on some duty, particulars of which slip my memory, and was wearing Mullen's overcoat. On the following morning, Mullen put on his overcoat - it was his custom to walk to the railway station at 10 a.m. to collect the daily papers. On this particular morning when he arrived, there was a Crossley tender at the station and the platform was crowded with R.I.C. They had called specially to collect their mail. We had held up the mail car en route to Dunfanaghy, a few days previously, and seized their mails.

Mullen had no fear whatsoever as it was well known by the local R.I.C. that he took no part in what they would term illegal activities. As a matter of fact, one of the R.I.C. shook hands with him, and, characteristically, Mullen put his hand in his overcoat pocket to take out a packet of cigarettes, only to discover some hard objects in the pocket. Wonderingly, he took them out, to discover six .32 revolver bullets. I had left them in the pocket on the night previous. I need hardly record that he put them back again quickly, and then coolly

produced his cigarettes and passed them around to a few R.I.C. men that he knew. He then got on his bicycle and started back for Massinass. His courage failed him before he arrived back, and he threw my bullets across the hedge. I cannot now say which of us was the more angry, he, for the danger into which I had undoubtedly placed him, or I, for the loss of my bullets.

The same overcoat, could it only speak, would be able to relate events which happened to Treaty and Anti-Treaty supporters. The two McNulty brothers were arrested on the same day as myself by British forces. While a party was searching my room after my arrest, Mullen, who was perfectly safe, saw Sean McNulty in the tender and noticed that he had no overcoat. Very generously, he took out the afore mentioned coat and handed it to him. That was in 1921, and in 1923, when Mullen was going as usual to Dunfanaghy road station for his morning paper, he again got his overcoat, lying on the wall beside Cloone bridge which the anti-Treaty forces had been endeavouring to blow up when they were surprised by a patrol of National Army forces. Apparently, Sean McNulty was one of the party at work on the bridge, and he left the overcoat behind, in his rush to evade arrest.

Early in 1919, I received instructions from Joe Sweeney to burn the evacuated R.I.C. barracks at Creeslough, Glen and Kilmacrennan. This operation was carried out without incident. All that time, we were very poorly armed. With the exception of some shotguns, our armament consisted of four rifles and one Colt service revolver which was got by Bernard McGinley from a soldier in the Australian army who was on holidays in the area. I could say it was the only really

serviceable weapon we had.

At Easter 1921, I got hurried information that a trainload of British troops was returning to Derry from Dungloe where they had been engaged in a comb-out of that area in an endeavour to capture the flying column which, they believed, was located there. I hurriedly mobilised some Volunteers that were readily available and proceeded to a spot on the railway line where there was a sharp bend. We had just time to place some boulders on one track when the train came along. The engine and two carriages were turned over. So far as I am aware, there were no casualties. We did not have time to collect any arms beforehand. The time of the derailment would be around 9.30 p.m. The British forces remained on the scene until noon on the following day. They amused themselves by firing volleys at intervals. They also arrested a number of men in the village, but got no member of the Volunteers, as they had all cleared off beforehand.

On the 20th March 1921, I received instructions from Joseph Sweeney to report at Falcarragh with three or four armed men. I was informed that it was their intention to attack the R.I.C. barrack there. Accompanied by Patrick, Bernard and Charles McGinley, I set out for Falcarragh at 8 p.m., complete with rifles and ammunition. We travelled across the mountain, a distance of fifteen miles, to the would-be scene of activity. On arrival there, I was detailed, with some others, to guard a bridge on the Muckish side of the vallage. When the attack, which was not a success, was over, we tramped back via Muckish Gap to Creeslough.

I broke my journey to get some refreshment, in the

form of tea and oaten bread, from an old woman who, alone with her husband, lived in that mountainy district. I am a noted tea drinker, but I can safely say that, never in my journey through life, was a cup of tea so welcome or tasted better.

It was on a Saturday night when we left Creeslough for Falcarragh. On the following day, although very tired, I got up and went to 11 a.m. Mass in Creeslough. At that time, that was the only Mass on Sunday. I felt quite pleased with myself for making the effort, but was taken down a peg at Communion time to see Sean McNulty, who had been assigned the same duty as myself on the previous night at the other end of Falcarrach village, and who had covered the same mileage, rising from his seat and going to the Altar to receive Holy Communion.

I was arrested on the 6th May 1921. A party of British troops and R.I.C. made a surprise swoop on the village and surrounding district. Before I realised what was happening, I was picked up. I was not on the run at the time. I thought the British forces were not aware of my activities. The first two Volunteers to be arrested that day were John and James McNulty. We were taken to Letterkenny mental hospital, a wing of which had been taken over and occupied by British forces. From there, ^{I WAS} ~~we were~~ removed to Abington military barracks in Derry where we were detained for a week. ^{I WAS} ~~We were~~ then transferred to Derry jail and later sent to Ballykinlar internment camp where we were detained until the general release of prisoners on 9th December 1920.

During our stay in Derry jail, it was usual for the prisoners to shave their heads; this was done to

confuse the warders and to make identification more difficult. A brother of mine, who was working in Dungloe, was arrested and sent to Derry jail. This man was very particular about his personal appearance. After some time in Derry jail, he decided to have his head shaved. Imagine his chagrin when he was informed two days later that he was to be released on the following day. I can imagine that he would prefer to stay for a few weeks longer.

Earlier in this narrative, I mentioned meeting Bernard Molloy, first, in the Mater hospital, Dublin, where he was a patient suffering from a bullet wound at the same time that James McNulty was there for treatment, also suffering from a bullet wound. The second meeting was in Derry jail. McNulty, Molloy and myself were taking exercise in the compound a short time after our arrival there. Molloy suddenly spat out a drop of blood and a hard object, which he lifted to discover that it was a portion of the metal of his braces which had been driven into his body by the bullet on the night he was wounded. It seemed a coincidence to us that the three of us should be together again when this rather strange thing happened.

I, one of a family of seven, was always noted by the members of my own family for the brevity of my letters, but McNulty had a brother who, at least on one occasion, beat me to the ropes. The advent of a letter from the outside world was a big event in our lives. Any news, however trifling, was very welcome. McNulty's brother, Eamon, wrote to him, and his

letter went the rounds of all our fellow prisoners. Even now, after all those years, I can give it, verbatim. Here it is: "Seamus, a chara, I see that Sean and yourself are now in jail, but that now is nothing to an Irishman. Mise, Eamon".

The above is a record of my activities and events, so far as I can remember them from my first association in the national movement until my release from Ballykinlar in December 1921.

SIGNED: James McCaffrey

DATE: 17th August 1956

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WITNESS James Hourney