

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1569

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1569

Witness

George Hewson, F.C.S.,  
Ballina,  
Co. Mayo.

Identity.

Member of Sinn Féin.

District Leader, Local Defence Force,  
1939-1945.

Subject.

I.R.A. Activities, Ballina, Co. Mayo,  
1917-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S.2881.

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY GEORGE HEWSON,  
Ballina, County Mayo.

Looking back over my boyhood years, I remember, next to Christmas and Easter, a most important day for our family was the Parnell Anniversary. The former Irish leader was not long dead and a National Committee arranged for an annual pilgrimage to Dublin to pay honour to his memory. At least one of our family travelled from the beginning because the household, to a man, were Parnellites. There was a strong Nationalist tradition in the family and my uncle John Hewson was a Fenian who escaped to Australia.

As time passed on and coming to later years, it was clear that John Redmond was gradually losing the position he had held after Parnell's death as the Irish leader. The 1914-'18 War saw his eclipse, chiefly because the people had lost confidence in his policy. During that time, no less than 800 men joined the British Army from the town of Ballina "to fight for small nations"; but when the Irish people realised that Ireland was not considered "a small nation", the change to the Sinn Féin movement was complete and dynamic. The former Constitutional means were discarded and the I.R.A. soon became a virile striking force. Young men accepted the military way as the only way to achieve freedom for our country and commenced to drill and organise openly. "The Rising", of course, had left its imperishable mark and for those who fell, others came forward to fill the breach.

In the National Schools boys were told of the heroic deeds of Ireland's leaders, both past and present, and in this way the Irish Teacher contributed much to the building of a fine national outlook among our youth.

When the real trouble started in the fight for freedom, the war (for such it was) spread in guerilla fashion all over the country. County Mayo was involved in no small way and North Mayo produced many Volunteers who risked all for the Cause. The writer was not a member of the I.R.A. but, like all the members of the family, was sympathetic. So far the town of Ballina was comparatively quiet. The procuring of arms was very difficult but occasionally small arms, some rifles and ammunition came via steamers coming to Ballina Quay and by rail, camouflaged.. About November, 1919, a Captain Craig, an officer in the Welsh Regiment, arrived in town and stayed in the Moy Hotel. He moved freely among the people, apparently an inoffensive man who had a duty to perform and did it, as far as externals were concerned, in a very quiet way. But that Captain Craig was in receipt of information - local political information. I have no doubt of this as the following will prove.

One evening I was proceeding after tea to my pharmacy when Captain Craig halted men in Knox Street and said, "There are four Hewsons in town - Parson Hewson; Hewson, undertaker; Hewson, Post Office and Hewson, chemist: which of these are you?" I told him and he warned me to "watch my step". It so happened that that night at ten o'clock Hewson's undertaking workshop was raided by the R.I.C. Now the late Mr. Anthony Ruane, a well-known painting contractor in Ballina, had access to these premises for the purpose of storing paints, varnishes etc., and it was a suitable place to hide small numbers of arms in coffins. But Mr. Ruane's sons, Thomas and Joe, were members of the I.R.A. (incidentally Thomas is now a Senator, a former Commandant in the North Mayo Brigade, and Joe is dead - R.I.P. -). But, good as the information was that the rifles were there, the R.I.C. arrived too late because the

rifles were transferred to Shannon's garden just over the wall due to information given to the I.R.A. By this time the I.R.A. was developing fast and, in addition to those 'on the run', others were joining up. Big man, of course, was the late lamented Patrick J. Ruttledge who sacrificed a splendid practice to fight for Ireland. He had willing Volunteers in Dr. John A. Madden, Dr. D. Rowland, Phelim Celleary, Thomas Ruane, Michael O'Clery, Dr. Crowley, Seamus Kilcullen and his brother, Vincent Calleary, Joe Doherty, Tom Ormsby, Johnny Morrison, Jack Jordan, Willie Lydon and others whom I cannot recall at the moment. As the months passed and the fight became more intense, the Auxiliaries arrived. They were preceded in Ballina by a few Black and Tans some months earlier. The former, however, came in force and certainly they took over Ballina, making the Imperial and Moy Hotels their Headquarters. People moved about their business in fear and trembling as the "Auxies" went here and there with revolvers 'at the ready'.

During their sojourn in Ballina, Martin McGrath called one Saturday evening after alighting from the 8.30 p.m. Dublin train and handed me a parcel, a bag, stating that "P.J." (meaning the late Mr. Patrick J. Ruttledge) told him to leave it with me. That night the Auxiliaries raided the house next door (the late Mr. Eddie McLoughlin's shop) and ransacked it from top to bottom. It was fortunate that they did not come into my pharmacy because I knew that the bag which Martin MacGrath left into me for safe-keeping from the late Mr. P.J. Ruttledge contained nothing else than "War Flour" or "Cheddar" - an explosive made and used a lot by the I.R.A. On Monday morning one of my first clients was an Auxiliary. I have never experienced such a feeling of such

sheer terror, for surely here was a man come to take away the explosives and probably shoot me. Suddenly my fear was eased somewhat when the Auxiliary enquired about a V.P. Kodak camera in my window. While he examined it, I saw Mr. James Ruane, brother of Senator Thomas Ruane, pass the door and I at once called him and asked him to take a parcel of Laundry (The "Chedder") elsewhere, actually to Mr. Thomas Coen, up the street.

Earlier on I should have referred to the ambush of the R.I.C. night patrol at the Moy Hotel lane. The men (five in number), four Constables and a Sergeant, returned to barracks at midnight. They were Sergeant Armstrong, Constables Regan, Nangle, and a Black and Tan named Barnes, an Englishman. I forget the fourth policeman's name. When the patrol reached the Moy Lane the I.R.A. called (from what was then a ruin and now Messrs. Archer's, Knox Street), "Hands Up!" Barnes ran to a nearby telegraph pole, took cover and fired his revolver. The I.R.A. replied and in the subsequent shooting Sergeant Armstrong was killed. It was the aim of the I.R.A. to disarm the patrol but Barnes, it was stated, panicked and commenced to shoot and what was intended to be solely a capture of arms and ammunition, resulted in the death of Sergeant Armstrong and the wounding of Constable Regan.

One of the many exasperating deeds which occurred in Ballina during the Auxiliaries' overlordship, was when they gathered in the main street, in front of the Moy Hotel, a number of most respectable citizens and men who were whole-heartedly Sinn Feiners - Pat Beirne, John Moylett, Martin Corcoran, Michael Moylett - and after handcuffing them, the Auxiliaries tied the Tricolour to the last prisoner, trailing it in the mud of the streets and with an itinerant musician marching in front, took them to the Market Cross where the prisoners

were beaten and kicked to their knees in an effort to make them kiss a Union Jack placed on the roadway. They refused and were kicked and beaten and ultimately allowed to go free. This action caused a feeling of revulsion and bitter hatred in the populace against the Auxiliaries.

SIGNED: G. G. B. [Signature]  
DATE: 24<sup>th</sup> Jan.  
1857.

WITNESS: [Signature]

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