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STATEMENT BY

MR. BULMER HOBSON

ON

I. R. B. AND IRISH FREEDOM.

A copy of this statement was sent at Mr. Hobson's request to each of the following, and any comments received in the Bureau as a result are registered and filed, as indicated hereunder:

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D. McCullough	S. 62
P. O'Riain	S. 32
S. O'Conner	S. 53
S. Fitzgibbon	S. 54
Captain R. Mentcith	S. 50

W.S. 56

JOHN REDMOND AND THE IRISH VOLUNTEERS

APRIL - SEPTEMBER 1914

I went to the U.S.A. in January 1914 and returned to Ireland in April of that year.

Either before my departure or immediately after my return I became aware that Eoin MacNeill was in touch with the Irish Parliamentary Party through its leader, John Redmond, or other important representatives, with a view to getting their co-operation in the development of the Irish Volunteers.

John Redmond was then the political leader of the majority of the Irish people, and with the country behind him he was apparently on the verge of securing the passage of a Home Rule Bill for Ireland. The Irish Volunteers was a new national organisation and McNeill and others thought it important that it should have the benediction of the country's leader, or at least that it should not have his opposition.

John McNeill was an adherent of John Redmond and it was probably only natural that he should seek to bring about this co-operation.

McNeill, however, did not at any time either discuss this matter with the Provisional Committee of the Volunteers or seek the Committee's authority. Anything he did was entirely on his own initiative and on his own responsibility.

I was aware that some contact between McNeill and Redmond was taking place, but I was not informed as to its exact nature, nor was I consulted as to any of the correspondence or conversations, but as long as there was

no attempt to place these contacts on an official basis, I was satisfied to wait to see if McNeill's discussions would produce results beneficial to the Volunteers and to the country as a whole.

Others who appear to have known what was happening, but in more detail, were Casement and Colonel Moore.

From the manner in which matters developed - and the correspondence quoted in Denis Gwynn's "Life of John Redmond" is presumably authentic - it is possible that McNeill did not make it clear to Redmond that he was acting in a purely personal capacity, and that he had no authority whatever from the Provisional Committee of the Irish Volunteers, either for his approach to John Redmond, for his own proposals as to the control of that body, or for his acceptance of proposals put forward by, or on behalf of John Redmond.

John Fitzgibbon was a close friend of McNeill's and could possibly throw light on the happenings of this period.

I wish to make it clear that I do not suggest for a moment that McNeill was in any sense working behind anybody's back. In his conversations with myself and with Fitzgibbon, McNeill made no secret of what he was doing, but he never brought any phase of it before the Committee until forced to do so by Redmond's Press ultimatum of 9th June, 1914.

McNeill was a straight-forward honourable man, incapable of deliberately deceiving anybody, whether his own Committee or John Redmond. But it is possible that John Redmond believed that John McNeill, who was Chairman

of the Provisional Committee, was acting with the full approval of that Committee, and that McNeill failed to make the true position clear.

On the 9th May the Provisional Committee decided to call a National Convention of the Volunteers at an early date, and instructed companies to affiliate for that purpose with the Provisional Committee on or before 10th June, 1914. This decision was made with a view to creating a National Executive which would forestall any attempt by Redmond to get control. It was made at the suggestion of McNeill, but it certainly did not arise out of any report by him on his discussions with Redmond, for he did not make any such report, and the majority of the members remained in ignorance of what was happening until Redmond's ultimatum appeared in the Press on 9th June.

It will be realised that I am speaking entirely from my memory of events of over thirty years ago. John Fitzgibbon is probably the man still living who would have most knowledge and the best recollection of these events.

On page 311-2 of Denis Gwynn's "Life of John Redmond" there is quoted a letter from McNeill "on behalf of the Volunteer Committee" to Devlin suggesting an executive of six as follows:

Four members of the existing Committee, viz., McNeill, Gore, Kettle and O'Rahilly, with the addition of William Redmond, M.P., brother of John Redmond, and possibly Casement.

This letter was certainly not written on behalf

of, or with any authority whatever from the Provisional Committee, nor was I aware at the time that any such proposals were made or contemplated by McNeill.

The very composition of the Committee suggested would have condemned it with me and with the Provisional Committee. Not a single member of it was a member of the I.R.B. McNeill, Gore, Kettle, and, of course, W. Redmond, were followers of John Redmond, and neither O'Rehilly nor Casement was a member of the I.R.B. at this time. Such an executive would have been subservient to John Redmond and completely under his control.

McNeill at this stage was going much further than was likely to meet with the approval of the Provisional Committee of the Volunteers, but his realisation of this did not seem to come until later.

As to why McNeill suggested William Redmond, I can only conjecture. William Redmond was a sincere congenial man who was not rigidly bound to his brother's policy, and would probably have worked in harmony with the Provisional Committee, and McNeill probably put forward his name in order to please John Redmond.

In all these things McNeill was never authorised by the Committee to negotiate on their behalf, he did not report to them, and our attitude, knowing that he was conducting these negotiations, was that we were not bound by anything unless it was formally reported to and accepted by us, and that if in the meantime McNeill could maintain contacts or look for a particular understanding at least no harm was being done.

Redmond's ultimatum in the Press of 9th June was

the first, official intimation which the Committee had that discussions had taken place, and it came on us as a bomb-shell.

At this stage there were a few members who knew in a general way that some discussions had taken place, viz.

Sean Fitzgibbon

The O'Rahilly

Roger Casement

Colonel Maurice Moore

myself

and, of course, McNeill himself, but I neither knew, nor wanted to know, the details of anything which would commit me to any proposal which was not authorised by the Provisional Committee.

I believe that Redmond's press ultimatum came as a shock also to McNeill himself, who apparently did not expect Redmond to take the action he did.

In a letter from Casement to Redmond, quoted on page 320 of Denis Gwynn's book, Casement referred to proposals put to McNeill by someone called 'Nunan'. As far as I can recollect, Nunan had been a Judge or had occupied some legal position in the British Colonial Service. I believe that he was then in Limerick and that he ^{may have} acted as a go-between between McNeill and Redmond. He was not associated in any way with the Irish Volunteers, and was in no way important nationally. What part he played in the McNeill-Redmond negotiations I do not know. I believe that McNeill had not a high opinion of Nunan.

The Kelly-Kenny referred to by Casement in the same letter had been a General in the Boer War.

In this correspondence, Casement, like McNeill, acted entirely on his own, without any authority from the Committee.

On the 9th June Redmond's ultimatum appeared in the Press demanding acceptance of his proposal that 25 persons to be nominated by him should be added to the existing Committee.

Although I was in no way a party to McNeill's negotiations and had no desire to see Redmond in a position to control the Volunteers, I clearly saw that it was necessary to accept this ultimatum if the Volunteers were not to be split into two opposing camps.

I was as much opposed to this action on the part of Mr. Redmond as those who disapproved of my attitude, as I recognised even then that Redmond's aim was the destroying or curbing of a growing national organisation which he had hitherto bitterly opposed; but I realised equally that if his request, which was in fact an ultimatum, were not acceded to, it would lead to a disastrous and, indeed, a fatal split in the Volunteers and in the country as a whole.

For that reason I felt that the lesser evil was to accept his nominees for the moment, knowing that effective control was, and would remain, in the hands of the officers who were already appointed, the majority of whom were members of the I.R.B.

An immediate decision had to be made, and on the morning of the 15th June I went to see Casement who was staying in Boswell's Hotel. He was very unwell and in bed. After a lengthy discussion I persuaded him that

the acceptance of Redmond's ultimatum was the only alternative ^{to} ~~of~~ splitting the Volunteers and was a lesser evil. I then went to see McNeill and he returned with me to Boswell's Hotel. After further discussion he also agreed with my conclusion. During our discussion Colonel Moore came in and he was very definitely of opinion that Redmond's demands should be resisted and that we should fight them if necessary. Eventually we persuaded Moore that the fight would only result in bringing the career of the Irish Volunteers as an effective national force to an untimely end. We then proceeded to draft a document to be submitted by McNeill to the Provisional Committee. I remember that I insisted that we should explicitly state that we only accepted Redmond's terms as being the lesser evil.

Prior to my convincing them of the necessity of accepting Redmond's terms, both McNeill and Casement had decided to retire from politics.

McNeill presided at the Provisional Committee which met the same evening and proposed the adoption of a document which we had drafted a few hours before.

When we had anything important to discuss, McNeill, as Chairman, was in the habit of asking each member in turn to express an opinion, and at that meeting I deliberately occupied the position where I should be the last to speak in the discussion. I said that, while I completely sympathised with the point of view of the people who had spoken against the acceptance of Redmond's terms, I thought that our first duty was to preserve the Volunteers and to maintain as great a

measure of control as we could, in order to guide the movement to fulfil the purpose for which we had started it. I said that in the event of a split, Redmond would carry an enormous majority of the Volunteers in the country and we would carry a tiny minority, too small to take any effective part. I appealed to the members and even to those who had spoken against it to suppress their national indignation at the course Redmond had taken and to stand together to save the Volunteer movement from disruption or from being destroyed by a Redmondite majority.

The long conference in Boswell's Hotel with Casement, McNeill and Moore prior to the meeting, had taken the entire day and left me no time in which I could have discussions with any other members of the Volunteer Committee or with the I.R.B. The result of the meeting of the Volunteer Committee which took place in the Volunteer Office in Brunswick Street (now Pearse Street) is recorded in my book "A Short History of the Irish Volunteers".

Mr. Redmond's nominees included a number of people who had shown hostility to the Volunteers and who yet did not scruple to accept nomination to the governing body. With two or three exceptions the Redmondite nominees acted as a solid block and turned the meetings of the Provisional Committee into a faction fight. The exceptions particularly were James Creed Meredith and William Redmond.

As I had anticipated, the Redmondite control proved completely illusory. The work was carried on by the officers and people who had started the movement.

Except that the wrangling in the Provisional Committee was a waste of time and a nuisance, it had hardly any effect on the development of the movement.

As an illustration of the ineffectiveness of the control by the Redmond nominees, I personally appointed members of the office staff without their ever being aware that such things had been done.

The Redmondite members were particularly anxious to get control of funds, but before admitting them we took the precaution of deciding at a meeting of the Provisional Committee that all funds, other than subscriptions received from Volunteer Branches, should go direct to McNeill and O'Rahilly and be used at their discretion solely for the purchase of arms, and not to be accounted for until some future unspecified date.

O'Rahilly was Treasurer and was assisted in keeping the books by Eamonn Ceannt, who was an Accountant in the Dublin Corporation. The books were in perfect order, and when audited by one of the best firms of auditors in Dublin, Stokes Brothers & Pim, were approved by them. When the Redmondites got particularly outrageous in the quest for funds, O'Rahilly would lay the books on the table and tell them to see for themselves, but they were never able to understand them.

Another cause of contention was the rifles landed at Howth. The Redmondites attempted to use their majority on the Committee to have rifles sent to the Hibernians in Ulster, and, while they fought bitterly for weeks about this, they never asked for a cartridge, and

we passed the word round among the non-Redmondite members that the word "ammunition" must never be mentioned.

The admission of Redmond's nominees on the Committee, and more particularly the outbreak of the European War, had the effect of bringing into the Volunteers all sorts of people who had never touched the National movement before.

Lord Powerscourt announced his adhesion to the movement and turned up at a parade of the Bray Company and tried to present them with a Union Jack. As the Volunteers declined to accept the gift his connection with the movement was brief.

Colonel Maurice Moore was head of our military staff and had the active assistance, for a brief period, of a large number of titled people, like the Earl of Meath, the Marquis of ~~Cunningham~~^{Cunningham} and many others. For a short period the Volunteers had the more or less enthusiastic support of a very large number of titled people, and many untitled, whose respectability and steady adherence to Dublin Castle made them strange colleagues for people like us.

Quite different, however, from these people, who all left us as soon as we parted from Redmond, was Colonel Edmond Cotter, retired Royal Engineers. Cotter was an Irishman whose people had been in the British Army for several generations. He had a great-uncle, I think, who had been executed in '98, and the Carsonite movement, which he regarded as a threat to the rest of Ireland, aroused his indignation.

Early in 1914 he borrowed a sum of money, came over to Ireland at his own expense and stayed in a Dublin hotel. He told us he had just enough money to last for about three months. He proposed to work for us in any capacity we liked until his money was done and he then intended to go home.

He was a delightful old man, a man of first-rate ability, and he settled in under the nominal direction of Colonel Moore to bring some order into our military organisation. The two old Colonels did not get on very well. I took on the delicate job of keeping the peace and at least succeeded in remaining friends with both of them. They were both elderly.

After about three months Cotter announced that he must go back home, as he had no more money. We would have been very glad, indeed, to have paid his expenses, and on behalf of the Committee I offered to do so, but he refused to take money and insisted that he had come to Ireland unasked, at his own cost, and would not be a charge on the movement in any way.

He contributed greatly to our getting some coherent organisation into the enormous mass of recruits which we had in every part of Ireland.

Even before the outbreak of the European War, there had been considerable talk about the Volunteers receiving arms from the British Government or becoming in some way attached to the British Command in Ireland.

Colonel Moore, acting entirely on his own initiative, had, I believe, a number of interviews

with General Paget, who was then British Commander in Chief in Ireland. I knew that such negotiations were going on, but was far too busy to bother much about them. My feeling was that if Moore was able to get any arms without our being committed to anything it was all to the good, and he was far too honourable a person to attempt to commit us to anything without our knowledge and consent.

Of course, we had not the slightest intention, at any time, of permitting the control of the Irish Volunteers to pass to the British Military authorities.

In any case, nothing came of these discussions.

When the European War came in August, 1914, and Mr. Redmond, without consulting anybody, declared publicly that the Volunteers should fight as members of the British forces, we decided that the time for a break had come.

I had taken the initiative, in the previous May, in admitting Redmond's nominees, because I knew that a split at that time would end volunteering in Ireland. McNeill and I took the initiative now when Redmond, without consulting the Volunteers, announced a new policy for them.

On the 24th September a majority of the original members of the Provisional Committee issued a statement to the press bringing their connection with Mr. Redmond and his nominees to an end. McNeill wrote that statement, which was signed by twenty members of the Committee. A copy of this is to be found in my History of the Volunteers.

Although I knew that the number of men that would adhere to us would be relatively small, I knew that we should hold the men throughout the country who were in earnest about maintaining an Irish Volunteer Force, and I was confident that we were strong enough to survive and to grow.

Following this expulsion the Volunteer Companies throughout the country decided to which party they would adhere. The vast majority followed Redmond, who formed an organisation which he called the National Volunteer Organisation, and only between two thousand and three thousand remained in the Irish Volunteers. Starting with that number, the growth of the Irish Volunteers was rapid and continuous, and in the early months of 1916 we were enrolling about six new Companies per week {in various parts of the country, as well as in Dublin}.

Palmer A. Stinson
5-11-47

Witness:

Wm. J. Murphy

Director Bureau of Military History

