

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 81



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THE RISING

When the Provisional Committee of the Irish Volunteers was started they met in Wynn's Hotel and used my office at 12 D'Olier Street as an address. Very early in the year 1914 they took two rooms on the first floor of No. 206 Brunswick Street, which was subsequently re-named Pearse Street. In August, or possibly September, 1914, these rooms proving inadequate, I rented a house, No. 41 Kildare Street, as Headquarters. We were in this house quite a short time when it was condemned as unsafe by the Dublin Corporation and we had to move. Offices were then taken at No. 2 Dawson Street, which remained as Volunteer Headquarters until the Insurrection in 1916.

The Provisional Committee in December 1913, in order to publish the manifesto appealing for funds and instructions for forming Companies, published a four-page paper called "The Volunteer Gazette". There was only one issue and there was no intention of continuing it as a periodical.

Towards the end of January, 1914, the proprietors of the "Enniscorthy Echo" proposed that they should start a weekly paper to be called "The Irish Volunteer", and to serve as an organ of the movement. The proposal was made to us by William Sears, who was the editor and one of the Directors of the "Enniscorthy Echo". The editor of the new paper was to be Laurence De Lacy, who was an active Volunteer and a member of the I.R.B. This had the advantage of giving us a paper in which we could publish documents of all kinds, but it had the disadvantage that it

was a commercial venture of the "Enniscorthy Echo" and that we had no control over what else went into the paper. In fact it often took a narrow and partisan attitude that we did not like. This continued until November, 1914, when the proprietors of the "Enniscorthy Echo" decided to discontinue the paper.

I was then acting as Honorary General Secretary and offered to run the paper, as our official organ, from Headquarters. A sum of £100 was advanced from Volunteer funds as working capital for the paper, and no further subsidies were required, as the paper paid its way.

MacNeill expressed a desire to have his name on the paper as editor, and he wrote the notes on Page I each week, but actually I edited and managed the paper, and MacNeill never saw what was going in, or took any part in it, beyond the notes which he had written himself.

The two most valuable contributors to the paper were J.J. O'Connell, afterwards Colonel O'Connell of the Irish Army, and Eimer O'Duffy, who won distinction as a playwright and novelist. The military articles in the paper were written by these two men. Both men had a great interest in, and a natural aptitude for military things. O'Connell had been a student of Military History and Strategy for many years, and O'Duffy's interest in the subject apparently started when he was a Cadet at Stoneyhurst.

After the departure of the Redmondite nominees from the Provisional Committee in September 1914, there

succeeded a period of slow but steady growth and of incessant work for many of us at Headquarters.

I became Honorary General Secretary, and was usually busy in the office from 10 a.m. until midnight. MacNeill was Chief of Staff, and Kettle had gone out with the Redmondite nominees.

As Honorary General Secretary I ran the organisation, edited and managed the official organ, managed a small factory for the manufacture of equipment, haversacks, tents, etc., and tried to make a living as a free-lance journalist in my spare time.

The first Convention was held in the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, on 25th October, 1914. An account of this Convention appeared in the Irish Volunteer paper on 31st October, 1914.

A number of names were put forward for election to the Executive Committee, but somebody in the Hall proposed that all the members of the old Provisional Committee who had stuck by the Irish Volunteers when the Redmond nominees were expelled in September, 1914, should be re-elected en bloc as the new Executive. This was carried unanimously.

The growth of the Volunteers continued steadily between the First and Second Conventions, the Second being held in the Abbey Theatre on 31st October, 1915. The following members were elected at this convention to form the Central Executive:-

Eoin MacNeill : President

Thomas McDonagh Joseph Plunkett

Sean Fitzgibbon P. H. Pearse

Seán MacDiarmada Eamonn Ceannt
Liam Mellows Seamus O'Connor
J. J. O'Connell The O'Rahilly, as Treasurer
and myself, as Honorary General Secretary.

It was towards the end of 1915 that talk of insurrection began to be heard.

My recollection of most of these events is now vague, and I do not claim for it any particular validity as historical evidence. As far as I can recollect, Connolly, towards the end of 1915, decided to have a little insurrection with the Citizen Army.

Connolly's attitude towards the Irish Volunteers, and particularly towards some of us on the Executive, was one of persistent hostility. The Supreme Council of the I.R.B., from which I had resigned, took alarm at Connolly's attitude. Some time towards the end of 1915, the Council, or possibly some members of the Council, acting without the knowledge of the others, actually kidnapped Connolly and held him a prisoner for several days. While a prisoner, Connolly had several discussions with his captors, and apparently he succeeded in capturing them and committing them to a definite insurrection in 1916. McDermott and Clarke were the principal movers in this, and appear to have been joined by Pearse, McDonagh and Plunkett.

As I was the officer in charge of the I.R.B. in Dublin, and had to be kept in ignorance of these proceedings, extraordinary precautions and a great deal

of duplicity were practiced. Such a policy was, of course, a violation of the Constitution of the I.R.B. I do not think that all the members of the Supreme Council were a party to it, or were even aware of much that was happening. It is undeniable that a vast majority of the members would have refused to have been drawn into such a venture had they known what was taking place.

The policy of the Irish Volunteer Executive, for which MacNeill and I were mainly responsible, was to prepare for a defensive struggle using guerilla tactics, and the military training in the Volunteer paper and in the Companies was directed to this end. I had suggested to O'Connell and O'Duffy that, in writing for the paper, they should specialise on the development of guerilla tactics suited to the Irish terrain, and O'Connell's series of articles on hedge fighting developed training in this direction. McDermott and Pearse, and those who thought with them, finding it utterly impossible to persuade the Volunteer Executive to abandon this system for their policy of an insurrectionary demonstration, entered into a secret agreement with Connolly to bring the Volunteers out in an insurrection, unprepared and unaware of what they were being let in for.

While I had little specific knowledge of what was taking place, I had a good deal of suspicion, and some time about March, 1916, O'Connell and I, as members of the Military Staff at Headquarters, demanded a special all-day meeting of the Military Staff in order to make a final effort at a clear understanding as to the policy which was to be pursued by the Irish Volunteers.

At my request, MacNeill prepared a statement on Volunteer policy, which it was proposed to ask everybody present to either assent to or dissent from. The original of that document, in MacNeill's handwriting, is in my possession.

The meeting was held at Woodtown Park, Rathfarnham, where MacNeill was then living, in order that we might have uninterrupted discussion for as long as was necessary. Pearse and McDermott at this meeting specifically disavowed any intention to land the Volunteers in an insurrection, and reproached the rest of us for our suspicious natures.

There was no actual subscription to MacNeill's memorandum, and the discussion ended with a complete denial on the part of Pearse and McDermott that they had the remotest intention of committing the Volunteers to any course not decided on by the Executive committee. O'Connell, ~~Fitzgibbon~~, MacNeill, O'Rahilly, McDermott, Pearse, myself, and others whom I do not remember, were present.

I remember having a discussion with Pearse in a Dublin restaurant about this time, which ended with Pearse saying, as he rose from the table, "I cannot answer your arguments, but I feel that we must have an insurrection".

About the same time, and in another Dublin restaurant, I had a similar conversation with James Connolly. His conversation was full of cliches derived from the earlier days of the Socialist movement in Europe. He told me that the working class was always

revolutionary, that Ireland was a powder magazine and that what was necessary was for someone to apply the match. I replied that if he must talk in metaphors, Ireland was a wet bog and that the match would fall into a puddle. I thought of this later as I watched the Dublin mob, not joining Connolly in the Post Office, but looting the shops in O'Connell Street, and I thought of this again when I read in the press how the British soldiers after the surrender had to protect their prisoners from the violence of the Dublin mob.

In the early months of 1916 there was a feeling of growing tension, and, as far as I was concerned, of growing disbelief in the protestations of Pearse and McDermott. This was greatly heightened when, about a week before the insurrection, MacNeill brought me in a document, which purported to be secret orders issued by the British authorities for the suppression of the Irish Volunteers, and desired me to have it circulated throughout the movement. I read this document with considerable doubt and asked MacNeill where he got it. He said that he was not at liberty to tell me. The document did not appear to me to be authentic on the face of it, and, unable to get any information as to where it came from, I finally said to MacNeill "Are you completely and absolutely satisfied as to its authenticity?" "I am", he said, and on that assurance I circulated it all over the country.

As a result of subsequent investigations in

1917, I discovered that MacNeill had got this document from P.J. Little, who had got it from Rory O'Connor, who had got it from Joseph Plunkett, a member of our Committee, who was actively associated with Pearse and who had taken, apparently, elaborate precautions to plant the document on MacNeill. The document was printed for Plunkett by Colm O'Loughlin, who will probably be able to supplement my statement.

Most of us were bending all our energies to outwitting the common enemy, but Plunkett devoted his talents to outwitting his friends. It must, however, be remembered that he was in a very advanced stage of T.B. and that his condition was far from normal.

There was a concert organised by Cumann na mBan and held at 41 Parnell Square on Palm Sunday, 16th April. Someone, whose name I do not remember, was to have given an address but did not turn up, and I was asked to fill the gap. On the spur of the moment I made a speech in very guarded language, so as not to excite the suspicions of the authorities, and yet sufficiently definite to be intelligible to the many Volunteers who were in the Hall. I warned them of the extreme danger of being drawn into precipitate action, which could only have the effect of bringing the movement to an end, and I said that no man had a right to risk the fortunes of the country in order to create for himself a niche in history. The great majority of the audience seemed to be in agreement with what I had said. There is a reference to this speech in R.M. Fox's

"Green Banners". I have no quarrel with his very brief account of this speech.

The great majority of the Irish Volunteers, and the great majority of the members of the I.R.B. would have been definitely hostile to a demonstration like the 1916 Insurrection had it been possible to consult them. An overwhelming majority of the Irish Volunteer Executive supported MacNeill and me in our design to build up the Volunteers into a powerful organisation, and to resort to guerilla tactics if and when we were attacked. The 1916 men were unable to challenge this policy successfully in the Executive Committee and were, therefore, driven to misuse their position as officers in the Volunteers to order men into action in pursuance of a policy different from the one they were publicly pledged to maintain.

After the pitiful demonstration in 1867, when a handful of Fenians were marched out to Tallaght and Stepaside, the I.R.B. had to re-organise in 1873 and specifically inserted a Clause in the new Constitution designed to prevent a recurrence of the futile demonstrations of the kind they had seen. They, therefore, inserted in the I.R.B. Constitution the following sentence:-

"The I.R.B. shall await the decision of the Irish Nation as expressed by a majority of the Irish people as to the fit hour of inaugurating a war against England....."

It was not the Supreme Council of the I.R.B. who organised the Insurrection, but a small junta of the I.R.B., acting without the knowledge of some members of the Supreme Council, acting with the utmost irregularity

and ignoring the Constitution, who joined with Connolly and organised the Insurrection. I had resigned from the Supreme Council in 1914, but I had retained the office of Chairman of the Dublin Centres Board and was the officer in charge of the I.R.B. in Dublin in 1916. It was this fact, and the fact that they could not hope to get the majority of the Volunteer Executive, that compelled the people organising the Insurrection to deny their intentions to act with the greatest irregularity, and to embark on a policy of widely organised deception in order to prevent the Volunteer Executive and me, as the I.R.B. representative in Dublin, from knowing what they were up to.

Pearse had always had a curious belief in the necessity for a periodical blood sacrifice, and this belief was shared by a number of others. On the other hand, I and those who thought with me wanted to build up a real strength in Ireland, which would be sufficiently powerful to wrest control of the country from the British Government, and I fully expected that the English Government would take the opportunity of dragooning the country and introducing conscription if they were given that excuse by a little abortive Rising in Dublin.

There were no plans, and there could not have been plans which could seriously be called military.

The tactic of locking a body of men up in two or three buildings to stay there until they were shot or burned out of them was nothing but a demonstration, and one which would have been completely disastrous to this country had it not been saved by the ^{and} consequent mishandling

of the situation by the English Government.

Pearse was full of notions drawn from the Old Testament about being the scapegoat of the people, and in Nevinson's Recollections Connolly is quoted as having said to William O'Brien "We are going out to be slaughtered".

Speaking from memory, my recollection is that, taken by surprise, the British Government spent Monday and Tuesday in bringing up reinforcements. The serious attack began on Wednesday morning and the surrender occurred on Thursday afternoon. This was what might have been expected.

The first definite information I had that an insurrection was to occur in the immediate future was late in the evening of Holy Thursday, when J.J. O'Connell and Eimer O'Duffy came into my office and told me that an insurrection had been planned for the following Sunday. With them I went immediately to MacNeill's house at Rathfarnham, arriving a considerable time after he had gone to bed. We got MacNeill up and hastened then to St. Enda's to see P.H. Pearse, arriving about 2 a.m. knocking Pearse up. MacNeill, O'Connell and I went in to see Pearse, leaving O'Duffy, who was not a member of the Executive, outside. Pearse then admitted that an insurrection was to take place, and told us that nothing we could do could prevent it. This was in striking contrast to the assurances which he had so recently and so frequently given, that he was acting loyally with his colleagues on the Executive Committee.

MacNeill, O'Connell and I then returned to MacNeill's house, where MacNeill, as Chief of Staff, wrote an Order authorising me to take complete charge in Dublin, and to take all necessary steps to prevent the Volunteers being drawn into taking the initiative in an offensive action against the Government.

MacNeill wrote a second Order directing O'Connell to proceed to Cork, and to take complete charge there, with the same object in view.

I arrived early on Good Friday at the Volunteer office after this night-long activity, and immediately my office staff arrived, I set them all to work burning correspondence and lists of names, so that, whatever happened, the authorities should not come into possession of the names of our members throughout the country, and this is one of the actions which contributed to the absence of information on the part of the police during and subsequent to the Insurrection. Barney Mellows and Seamus Cooling were members of the staff at that time.

Apparently after we had left him, Pearse communicated with some of his friends, because, quite early on Good Friday morning, McDermott and McDonagh went to MacNeill's house. They appear to have told him that the Rising was inevitable, and to have convinced him that he could do nothing. It was often easier to convince MacNeill that nothing could be done, than it was to spur him into positive action.

MacNeill thereupon sent me an Order countermanding the Order which he had given me a few hours before, and

stating that he was on his way in to the Headquarters office. I waited for him in vain for several hours, and spent the time in hurrying on the destruction of our papers. I realised, by this vacillation on MacNeill's part, that it was impossible to take further definite action, and at any rate, events by then had got completely out of our control.

That afternoon I was asked by Seán Tobin, who had succeeded me as Chairman of the Leinster Executive, to attend a meeting of the Leinster Executive of the I.R.B. at Martin Conlon's house in Phibsboro. I was reluctant to go, and did not see any purpose to be served, and at the same time I had a suspicion that this was a ruse to get me out of the way. I yielded to the importunities of Seán Tobin to attend, as I was impelled partly by my curiosity as to whether my surmise that the meeting was a ruse to get me away from Headquarters was correct.

I was, therefore, not surprised when, as I entered the house, some members, who were armed with revolvers, told me that I was a prisoner, and could not leave the house. I felt that I had done all I could to keep the Volunteers on the course which I believed essential for their success, and that there was nothing further I could do.

On Easter Saturday, while I was still a prisoner, MacNeill was again galvanised into action by Sean Fitzgibbon and Colm O'Loughlin. Both had been induced to go on journeys to Kerry in connection with the projected landing of arms from Germany, and Fitzgibbon,

at any rate, undertook this because he had received explicit assurances, I think from Pearse, that I was enthusiastically in favour of the project.

Fitzgibbon's recollections of this, and his subsequent efforts to prevent the insurrection in conjunction with MacNeill, will corroborate and amplify my recollection.

I was released from Martin Conlon's house on Easter Monday evening about 6 or 7 o'clock, and my first object was to get in touch with MacNeill and find out what the position was.

I passed down O'Connell Street and saw Volunteers standing on guard at the Post Office, and on the other side of the street the Dublin mob, not joining Connolly but systematically looting the shops.

I stayed in Dublin on Monday night and on Tuesday went out to Rathfarnham, where I got in touch with MacNeill at his home in Woodtown Park. I had a long talk with MacNeill that night, but there did not seem to be anything that we could do at the moment. I stayed with MacNeill that night and for a fortnight afterwards.

On Wednesday Arthur Griffith and Patrick Bradley turned up at Woodtown Park to discuss the situation. They had cycled from Clontarf, keeping on the outskirts of the town. Griffith had received a mobilisation order and had disobeyed it, as he shared our view as to the danger and the futility of the Insurrection.

Towards the end of the week, when the surrender had taken place and most of the fighting had ceased, MacNeill drafted a letter addressed to General Maxwell, a copy of which I still have, in which he asked for an

interview with the object of preventing further bloodshed. MacNeill urged me to join with him in this letter, but I refused, because I regarded it as useless, and as a mere invitation to Maxwell to have us arrested by disclosing where we were. MacNeill told me that we would have no political future if we were not arrested, but I replied that, while I was to a certain degree indifferent as to whether I was arrested or not, I was not going to ask for it. The letter was taken in to the Military Headquarters by his eldest son, Niall, and almost immediately an officer came out in a car, ostensibly to take MacNeill in to see Maxwell, but when MacNeill arrived, instead of Maxwell he was confronted with Major Price, the head of the Dublin police, who placed him under arrest.

The officer who came out to arrest MacNeill was a Belfast man called McCammond, whom I had known fairly well. He saw me at MacNeill's but made no sign of recognition.

I have heard it stated that there was a proposal made by Arthur Griffith and John MacNeill to issue a proclamation during Easter Week, calling on the whole country to rise. I was in the closest touch with MacNeill and spent the whole of that week in his house. On the Wednesday of that week I had a talk, which lasted for several hours, with Griffith and MacNeill together. No such move was ever suggested or discussed, and I do not for a moment believe that such a move was contemplated.

I think it was on the Wednesday morning when I came down to breakfast that I found that John MacNeill was getting ready to go down and to join in the Insurrection, and intended to take his young sons with him. I asked Mrs. MacNeill not to disturb us, and I went into the study and pointed out to John the sheer folly of his going in at this stage, and that the fact of his so acting would place all the men who had obeyed his orders in an impossible and false position. After a few moments John abandoned the idea.

John and James MacNeill, a younger brother, were at that time living together in Woodtown Park, as were John's family.

It was stated in the Harding Commission Report that on the 30th May, 1915, at a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Irish Volunteers, I proposed an immediate insurrection and was defeated only by the casting vote of the Chairman, MacNeill. This is a completely fantastic story, invented by some policemen and retailed to the Commission. MacNeill and I never had any major disagreement on policy. I did not at any time propose an insurrection to the Committee, and, consequently, was not defeated by the casting vote of MacNeill.

Immediately after the surrender I arranged with a friend of mine, Frank Long, Solicitor, of Ormond Quay, to pay all the debts of the Volunteer organisation out of Volunteer funds in my possession, and to hand over possession of the premises to the owner. I also got Long to get a firm of furniture removers to go in to the

Volunteer offices and take all the furniture and every scrap of paper of every kind which had survived numerous raids by the police and military. This was stored until I was able to sort them out about eighteen months afterwards, and I recovered many documents of value for the history of the Volunteers.

When the men came out of jail in 1917 and the Volunteers were re-formed, a Convention of the Irish Volunteers was held. It was presided over by Mr. de Valera. On behalf of himself, Fitzgibbon, J.J. O'Connell, me and other members of the old Executive, MacNeill wrote to Mr. de Valera demanding that the surviving members of the old Volunteer Executive should attend the Convention. This they had a clear right to do under the Constitution of the Irish Volunteers, but Mr. de Valera flatly refused to have us admitted. This ended my active participation in Irish political movements.

Bulmer Ashton

17-12-47

Witness:

W. S. Murray

Director, Bureau of Military History

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