

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

NO. W.S. 82



ÉIRE

Telefón 61018.

ROINN COSANTA.

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

(Bureau of Military History 1913-21),

26 RAEDH NA NIARTHARACH,
(26 Westland Row),

BAILE ATHA CLIATH,
(Dublin).

DOCUMENT W.S. 82.

Statement by:

Bulmer Hobson
Mill House,
Whitechurch,
Rathfarnham, Dublin

Dated: 26th January, 1948.

On: General Activities
1900 to 1911.

12 pp. typescript - foolscap.

File No. S.530.

STATEMENT BY

MR. BULMER HOBSON

ON

I. R. E. 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:

<u>Name.</u>	<u>Relevant Register No.</u>
Dr. P. McCartan	S. 63
P. S. O'Hogarty	S. 49
D. McCullough	S. 62
P. O'Riain	S. 32
S. O'Connor	S. 53
S. Fitzgibbon	S. 54
Captain R. Mentzith	S. 50

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BUREAU STAIRS MILITARY 1913-21

No. W.S. 82

General Statement

by

Bulmer Hobson

In 1900 I started, in Belfast, the first national organisation with which I was connected. It was a Nationalist Club for boys, called the Ulster Debating Club. It held both private and public meetings and lectures, but its principal value to me was that it brought me in touch with a number of like-minded people. One of these, William McDonald, helped me to start another Society called the Protestant National Society, the object of which was to try and convert young Ulster Protestants and to recruit them into the National movement.

I had long known Alice Milligan, the poetess, and, as a schoolboy, had subscribed to the "Shan Van Vocht", the paper which she and Ethna Carbery conducted in Belfast.

I was tremendously influenced by Ethna Carbery (Johnston) and met at her house the local leaders of the Gaelic League, as well as many well known people, like Douglas Hyde, Maud Gonne and John O'Leary.

I joined the Tír na nÓg Branch of the Gaelic League in Belfast, which at that time consisted of a lot of young people working very enthusiastically together.

Michael Cusack came to Belfast to spread the Gaelic Athletic Association in Ulster, and, representing the Tír na nÓg Hurling Club, I became a member, and shortly afterwards Secretary, of the first County Antrim Board of the Gaelic Athletic Association. I left this position because the Board refused to do anything for the junior Hurling Clubs, a refusal which induced me to

leave them and start na Fianna Éireann. Also as a representative of the Tír na nÓg Branch I became a member of the Coisde Ceanntair of the Gaelic League in Belfast, and after some time I took on the Secretaryship of that as well.

At this time, between 1901 and 1903, I was employed in a Belfast printing house from 8.30 a.m. until 6.30 p.m., and so had only the evenings, and sometimes a good part of the night, to attend to these various activities.

The Protestant National Association had a brief and unimportant life, but it did bring in a group which subsequently formed the Ulster Literary Theatre, a body which exercised considerable influence on the mental development of the North of Ireland. It was started by David Parkhill and myself, with the definite intention of writing and producing distinctively Ulster plays, which would be a commentary on the political and social conditions in Northern Ireland. In the meantime I had also joined Cumann na nGaedheal in Belfast. This body was founded by Arthur Griffith and William Rooney in 1901 in Dublin, and largely became an open propagandist movement for the I.R.B. For some years Griffith was a member of the I.R.B., but resigned from the organisation over some point of difference with which I am not acquainted. That all happened before I came to Dublin.

As representing Belfast Clubs I came to Dublin to annual Conventions of Cumann na nGaedheal, and became a member of the Executive of that body.

From 1904 onwards a series of annual Feiseanna was held in various parts of the Glens of Antrim. At

the first of these I met Roger Casement (1904) and formed an intimate friendship with him, which lasted until his death. He was not a member of any of these bodies, although he supported the Gaelic League generously with funds.

At this time Casement was a distinguished member of the British Consular Service, and was home on holidays in the Glens, where his people had lived since the middle of the eighteenth century. He spent his boyhood at Magherintemple, outside Ballycastle, County Antrim.

Casement was much away from Ireland in the succeeding years, but, in whatever part of the world he was, we corresponded regularly and frequently, and I still have many of his letters.

On March 4th, 1899, Arthur Griffith started the "United Irishmen", and it was read by all the younger Nationalists and profoundly affected them.

Griffith was an excellent propagandist, but was extremely dogmatic and I found him difficult to work with. He did not appear to want co-operation, but obedience. I had many differences with Griffith, but there was no man more sincere, or more completely and disinterestedly devoted to the country than he.

About 1904 Griffith published in the "United Irishmen", and later as a pamphlet, "The Resurrection of Hungary", in which he described the Hungarian National movement under Kossuth and Deak. The Hungarians had refused to send representatives to the Imperial Parliament in Vienna, and, by means of an abstention policy and active agitation at home, had succeeded in getting the restoration of the Hungarian Parliament.

X
Griffith's writing was fresh and vigorous, and these articles made a great impression, and for a short time the policy which afterwards became Sinn Féin was described as the Hungarian policy. I first heard Griffith expound his policy at the ~~Fifth~~ Annual Convention of Cumann na nGaedheal on 30th October, 1904. Griffith, however, was dissatisfied with the inactivity of Cumann na nGaedheal, and founded a new body, called the National Council, to push his new policy.

Dissatisfied with the lack of activity of both groups in Dublin, Denis McCullough and I started the Dungannon Club in Belfast in March 1905. We were at a loss what to call the new organisation, and the name Dungannon Club was reminiscent of the Irish Volunteer movement in 1782. The name was suggested by Pádraig Colum, the poet, who at that time was on a visit to me in Belfast.

The Dungannon Club was in many ways a remarkable body. It consisted of thirty or forty young men at a white heat of enthusiasm. They undertook anti-recruiting activities on a large scale, and, as it was easier to print illegal literature in Belfast than in other parts of Ireland, we printed anti-enlistment leaflets wholesale, and retailed them at so much a thousand to people all over the country. The Club published many post-cards and pamphlets, and in 1906 I founded and edited a weekly paper called "The Republic". After six months "The Republic" was overwhelmed by its financial difficulties and was merged with "The Peasant" in Dublin.

The principal writers in "The Republic" were James W. Good, Robert Lynd, P.S. O'Hegarty and myself.

Denis McCullough and I started the Dungannon Club and were shortly joined by two men who played a prominent part in the National movement in the following years. One was Dr. Patrick McCartan, then a medical student in Dublin, and soon after he got in touch with us he started a Dungannon Club in Dublin among his fellow-students. The other was Seán McDermott. McDermott was a native of Glenfarne, in County Leitrim, and he began his career as a pupil teacher in the local National School. A quarrel with one of the clergy led him to emigrate to Glasgow, where he worked as a bartender. Shortly afterwards he came to Belfast, where he first worked as a bar-tender, and then as a conductor on one of the city trams. When I first met him he was an enthusiastic member of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and he never quite got over their habits of intrigue and wire-pulling behind the scenes.

About the end of 1906 I started a small fund, mostly subscribed to by men who could only afford a few pence per week, and made McDermott the whole-time organiser for the Dungannon Club. He established a number of Clubs in various parts of Ulster. P. S. O'Hegarty also started a Club in London, of which the other principal members were Robert Lynd, Herbert Hughes, the musician, and George Gavan Duffy.

In the Dungannon Clubs we advocated the policy of abstention from the British Parliament, on the same lines as Griffith in Dublin. We were violently attacked by Tom Kettle and other parliamentarians, who accused Griffith of falsifying Hungarian history. I was much too busy to find out whether Griffith's account was entirely accurate or not, but I declared at public

meetings that the issue was not one of accuracy or inaccuracy about Hungarian history, but whether the policy of abstention was the right one for the Irish people to pursue. Griffith was very indignant at my taking this line.

The movement in Dublin got wrapped up in local politics, and, in trying to get members elected to the Dublin Corporation, neglected to organise the country, which was very largely left to the Dungannon Clubs, with the result that we were constantly overwhelmed with demands that we should go to meetings. At this time I was employed by a Belfast firm from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., and often left my office at one o'clock on Saturday, addressed a meeting in Cork, or London, or Glasgow, and was back at work at nine o'clock on Monday morning.

One of the earliest meetings I went to was at Maghera, in County Derry, ^{which} ~~and~~ was arranged by Richard Bonner, the local schoolteacher. As a result of this meeting Bonner was dismissed by the educational authorities.

In 1905 I went to Newcastle-on-Tyne to preside at a public meeting, under the auspices of the Dungannon Club, addressed by O'Donovan Rossa. It was attended by all the old Fenians in the North of England. Rossa was seventy-two and I was twenty-two. I subsequently arranged a meeting, which he addressed, at St. Mary's Hall in Belfast.

Perhaps the most notable meeting I attended was at Finea, on the borders of Westmeath and Cavan, in 1906. I was accompanied to this meeting by Robert Lynd and Brian Donn O'^{Byrne}Beirne, who, some years later, became

famous in America as the novelist Donn Byrne. Lynd and I were in the hotel at Granard, when O'^{Byrne}~~Beirne~~, returning from Mass, told us that the local M.P. was in town. I did not even know who he was, but a few minutes later he turned up in person and proved to be Laurence Ginnell. He invited us out to dinner, and, as we drove some miles into the country, I quickly saw that Ginnell wanted to speak at the meeting, but was too decent to butt in unasked. Thinking it better tactics, I asked him to speak and he readily agreed. After dinner we drove to the bridge of Finea, where it had been customary for generations for the whole countryside to assemble on the 15th August to commemorate the famous Myles O'Reilly, who had defended the bridge after the manner of Horatius against a considerable English force in the seventeenth century. There were about five thousand people present. Laurence Ginnell spoke first, and said that, although he was a Member of the British Parliament, he had no ill-will to any body of Irishmen who thought they could help Ireland by any other means. I followed, but after a few complimentary remarks about Mr. Ginnell, I branched into an exposition of the Sinn Féin policy, which was received with considerable enthusiasm.

I formed a friendship with Ginnell, as a result of this meeting, which lasted until he died.

In the early days of the Dungannon Club we found the utmost difficulty in getting people to come to our meetings, so McCullough, McDermott and I decided that if the people did not come into our hall we would go out into their streets, and we organised a series of meetings at street corners, mostly on the Falls Road. I remember

the three of us going for a walk just before the first meeting, and it must be admitted that we were frightened out of our lives. We borrowed a four-wheel cart from a small coal merchant called John Quigley, who had been a Fenian all his life. He was willing to lend us the cart but not the horse, for fear the latter should receive injury. Consequently we had to pull the cart ourselves down the Falls Road to the place of meeting. I went up and persuaded Francis Joseph Biggar to part with his magic lantern and we prepared a number of slides containing statistics about emigration and the general decline of Ireland, and some made from cartoons drawn by Jack Morrow and other artists among our friends. We put up the lantern at one end of the cart and a screen at the other, and putting statistics and cartoons alternatively on the screen we spoke on these subjects. The lantern was often battered with stones thrown by hostile crowds, but was never put out of action. When one has learned how to handle a hostile mob in Belfast, other audiences seem pretty easy.

McCartan, McCullough and I addressed many meetings in various parts of Ulster, and on one occasion when the three of us were spending the night in McCartan's father's house at Carrickmore, County Tyrone, McCartan suddenly said, "What about arranging an American tour for Hobson?". I did not take this very seriously, but said I would certainly go if I were asked. I was greatly surprised, however, to get a wire at the end of 1906 from John Devoy in New York asking me if I would be ready to sail in a week. A week later I started off on ~~another~~ American tour.

In the beginning of 1907 I set sail for New York

to introduce the Sinn Féin movement to America. On my way through Dublin I called to see Griffith and was surprised at the coldness and hostility of his attitude. When I told Devoy in New York about this he showed me a letter from Griffith, suggesting that he himself should be invited to America, and I regretted that I had inadvertently spoiled his chances.

At this time Griffith and his National Council had declared as their aim the Repeal of the Union and the Establishment of the King, Lords and Commons of Ireland as the Irish Government, on the lines of 1782, and he laid great stress on the Act passed by the British Parliament in 1783, in which they formally renounced their right to govern this country.

In the Dungannon Clubs we were not so impressed with formal renunciations by the English Government, which, in any case, had not been carried into practical effect, and we set as our aim an independent Irish Republic, not because we were doctrinaire Republicans, but because we did not see how complete independence could take any other form in Ireland.

This difference, of course, added to Griffith's annoyance that I had been asked to explain the Sinn Féin policy to America.

In New York I addressed a meeting of about four thousand people in the Grand Central Palace, and then followed a series of meetings in Brooklyn, Cleveland, Chicago, St. Louis, Indianapolis, Boston and many other towns. These meetings were reported in "The Gaelic American" at the time.

After three months Devoy wanted me to lecture

in the Pacific slope towns, but I was anxious to get back to work in the Dungannon Clubs and to prevent "The Republic" from collapsing. It was always in financial difficulties, and was financed by the shillings and pence of our members, by a few pounds from Roger Casement, and several larger sums which were presented to me personally in various American cities.

In America I renewed my acquaintance with O'Donovan Rossa, became friendly with Devoy, and met many others who had taken a prominent or active part in the old Fenian Movement. Amongst these was Ricard O'Sullivan Burke, who, at that time, was Harbour Master in Chicago. Burke was the organiser of the Manchester rescue in 1867. I also met P.J. Tynan, who was connected with the Invincible Movement. I would have liked to have talked to him, but saw at once that he was not persona grata with Devoy and the others who were acting as my hosts, and I had no further opportunity.

While I was in America the Sinn Féin League of America was started, although it never grew to any size or importance. Our friends in America felt strongly that it was absurd to have three small organisations in Ireland all advocating the Sinn Féin policy, and, as I agreed with them, I endeavoured on my return to arrange for an amalgamation.

We arranged a meeting in Dundalk in the autumn of 1907. Arthur Griffith and Walter Cole represented the National Council, Denis McCullough and I represented the Dungannon Clubs, and I do not now recollect the representatives of Cumann na nGaedheal.

Cumann na nGaedheal were quite ready to join in

an amalgamation, but Griffith and Cole would not agree on any conditions. As a result, the Cumann na nGaedheal and the Dungannon Clubs amalgamated and became the Sinn Féin League, and in the following year we out-voted Griffith in the National Council and the resultant union of the three organisations became known as Sinn Féin. As far as I recollect, the membership of the different organisations overlapped a good deal. For instance, P.S. O'Hegarty and I were members of the governing body of all three and Denis McCullough of the Dungannon Club and Cumann na nGaedheal. John O'Leary was not a member of any of these organisations. Edward Martyn was President of the Sinn Féin organisation, and John Sweetman and Griffith two Vice Presidents. Shortly afterwards, Martyn, who was really not very much interested in politics, retired, and Sweetman became President, and Griffith and I the two Vice Presidents.

In the following two years we were busy with meetings in various parts of the country, forming new Branches of the Sinn Féin organisation, and had endless Committee meetings which went on night after night, but a good many of us were very dissatisfied with the progress we were making, and we felt that many of the Committees in Dublin were far more interested in winning a few seats in the Dublin Corporation than they were in getting the country organised. In 1910, feeling that these endless Dublin Committees were becoming more and more futile, a number of us, including O'Hegarty, McCullough and myself, decided to quietly drop out of the Sinn Féin organisation, and as we could not run it with Griffith we thought he had better try and run it alone. When

we left there were about 135 Branches in the country, in the following year there were six, and a year later there was one.

Cumann na nGaedheal and the Dungannon Clubs were frankly separatist, but although most of the members were Republicans and many were members of the I.R.B., their stated aim was to win the independence of Ireland, and they did not want any narrow definition that would exclude anybody. Griffith and the National Council, on the other hand, definitely wanted the Repeal of the Union and the re-establishment of the King, Lords and Commons of Ireland, and they were very reluctant to give this up, but in the Sinn Féin organisation we kept the winning of the independence of Ireland as the stated aim and left the Repealers and the Republicans each to take their own meaning out of it.

After we had left the Sinn Féin organisation, I devoted my energy to the I.R.B. and the Fianna, and formed a number of Clubs, which were called Freedom Clubs, and subsequently, at the end of 1911, started the paper "Irish Freedom". I have dealt with "Irish Freedom" in a separate statement.

Bulmer Ashton
26-1-48

26 January, 1948.

Witness:

Wm. Dunne

Director, Bureau of Military History

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURÓ STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 82