

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21  
No. W.S. /30

*Sean Fitzgibbon*

*1913-21*

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. /20

Ref.No. S.54.

Statement by Mr. Sean Fitzgibbon

dated 20th June, 1947.

The attached statement, covering fourteen pages of foolscap typed in double spacing, was dictated by Mr. Sean Fitzgibbon to a stenographer from the Bureau in my presence on 20th June, 1947.

His memory was extremely clear, and he dictated his story in an orderly and unhesitating fashion, adding to or extending it from time to time as I drew his attention to the desirability of developing certain points. Occasionally he asked that the stenographer should read the text back to him, and when he had approved it he passed on to the next stage.

The work proceeded in this orderly fashion right through, and when it was complete he was satisfied that it represented exactly what he knew.

On page 5 the following paragraph appears:-

S.425

"Some years ago I was asked by Commandant Joseph O'Connor of the 3rd Battalion, Dublin I.R.A., to give him a brief statement of the organisation of the original 3rd Battalion as the Old I.R.A. Organisation in Dublin was asking him to gather particulars of the growth of the movement from the surviving members. I append a copy of the statement which deals very briefly with the early history of the 3rd Dublin Battalion.

"(Note: Statement to be attached at this point)."

Mr. Fitzgibbon could not find the statement referred to at the time of my visit, but said that he would look it up and attach it when signing the draft with which we were then dealing. Unfortunately he died before completing the statement, and this page, therefore, remains incomplete as regards the enclosure.

S.53.

I understand, however, that Mr. Seumas O'Connor, a colleague of his, is in possession of Fitzgibbon's papers, and the missing statement may possibly be traced. If so, I will attach a copy to this statement.

As already indicated, the attached statement was not signed by Mr. Fitzgibbon, as he died before he could finish it, but I am satisfied from what he said in the course of the meeting at which he dictated it, and on subsequent occasions when I spoke to him on the telephone, that it represents exactly what he wished to place on record, and exactly what he remembered as the facts within his own knowledge.



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DIRECTOR.

18.6.48

STATEMENT BY MR. SEAN FITZGIBBON, 20TH JUNE, 1947.

Three main organisations were concerned in the Rising of 1916, - The Irish Republican Brotherhood, the Citizen Army and the Irish Volunteers. There were other auxiliary organisations, such as Cumann na mBan, na Fianna.

The Rising was not planned, organised, or even discussed by the Executive of the Volunteers, which was the governing body of that organisation. This is made clear in letters that Professor McNeill wrote to the Irish Press Newspaper dated 28th and 31st May, 1935.

I was never a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood although I was asked on numerous occasions to join. As a schoolboy I joined the Irish classes in the Celtic Literary Society, Lower Abbey Street, under the late William Rooney. I used to attend their literary meetings on Friday nights, and there I first saw and heard Arthur Griffith - that would be about 1899. I bought the first issue of his paper "The United Irishman" and I became a staunch supporter of his policy and remained so to the end.

I was one of the founders of the Gaelic Athletic and Literary Clubs in Rathmines, which subsequently became the Eire Óg Branch of Sinn Féin.

Early on I became aware of the existence of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and that suitable young men in the Gaelic and similar movements were being asked to join. My views on secret societies were largely those of John Mitchell, namely, the futility of a home organisation in Ireland.

I, however, always maintained friendly co-operation with I.R.B. men, but when I found that they were trying to force Griffith to adapt his policy to theirs and that I.R.B. men in the Sinn Féin movement were forced into a position of

opposition in their own organisation, I concluded that it would be better if I retained my own freedom of opinion and not be subject to the dictates of the Supreme Council of a secret organisation.

The last time I was asked to join the organisation was at the outbreak of the 1914/1918 war by Sean McDermott.

The main argument he mentioned was that in our day the national movement was kept alive by memory of the sacrifices of the Manchester Martyrs, and that the national sentiment voted by that act should be reinforced by action in our day. The idea that the national movement in my time should be merely one to provide further martyrs instead of being directed to a successful termination of our struggle for independence, did not appeal to me.

Another argument which, of course, was of a more practical nature, was that when men were wanted to take part in the gun-running for the Volunteers, it was only necessary to apply to the I.R.B.

I mention this matter of the I.R.B. to show that both in the Sinn Fein organisation and subsequently in the Irish Volunteers, while maintaining friendly relations with the Republicans, I at the same time was quite independent in the formation of my judgment on matters of national policy, and when at the first meeting of the Provisional Committee of the Volunteers I saw that nearly all those present were members of the I.R.B., I became more determined that even on matters of detail I would just act on my own judgment and even went out of my way at times to adopt a different line from that followed by Bulmer Hobson, whom I regarded then inaccurately, as I subsequently found out, as an extreme delegate of the I.R.B.

The formation of the Ulster Volunteers naturally enough set many nationalists thinking that a national volunteer organisation should also be formed, and I remember chatting over the matter one time with Ramon Ceannt who was a fellow official with me in the Dublin Corporation.

One evening in the autumn of 1913, Ceannt informed me that a meeting was to be held within a day or so in Wynn's Hotel of a number of people from national organisations to consider the advisability of starting an Irish Volunteer Force, and that I was invited to attend. I was verbally invited by Ceannt. That was the only invitation I remember getting that time.

In my position in the national movement I was Chairman of the Central Branch of Sinn Fein Headquarters at 6 Harcourt Street. I attended the first meeting and Professor McNeill was in the chair.

Bulmer Hobson, in his History of the Volunteers, gives the list of those who attended the first meeting, but through inadvertence, he omitted the name of Seumas O'Connor, otherwise the list, so far as my memory went, is complete.

After general agreement was reached on the advisability of the proposal, it was then pointed out by some of the members that all those present were, broadly speaking, of the one school of thought, i.e. Sinn Fein, Gaelic League, I.R.B., and it was agreed to by all that the basis of the Provisional Committee should be widened and suitable people, known as supporters of the Irish Parliamentary Party, should be asked to join the Committee. Ramon Ceannt suggested Lawrence J. Kettle, and S. O'Connor, John Gore, Solicitor, and some other names.

Kettle agreed to join and brought along with him a friend, George Walsh of Harold's Cross. Seumas O'Connor suggested John Gore and Peter O'Reilly, a member of the Ancient Order

of Hibernians. O'Reilly joined and brought in with him another member of the Order, Michael J. Judge.

Arthur Griffith was not asked on the Provisional Committee because his presence would be considered as linking the thing too definitely with the Sinn Fein organisation and with the opposition of Mr. Redmond.

The object of the Volunteers was, while securing that there should be a preponderance of men of separatist tendencies, at the same time the organisation should be sufficiently broad to include supporters of the Irish Parliamentary Party, otherwise it would lose its national appeal and become a sectional organisation.

I suggested Thomas McDonagh on the incorrect assumption that he was associated with, if not a member of the Young Ireland Branch of the United Irish League, which was largely composed of University men. I afterwards mentioned this to McDonagh who at once abused me that he had no connection with the party at any time.

Among the men who attended the first meeting was W.J. Ryan (who was a close friend of Tom Clarke), Chief News Writer in the Irish Independent, but he did not attend any further meetings. He was not a member of any organisation and not of the type to work on Committees. A journalist's duties would rather interfere with such work. The movement, however, had his blessing.

After the meeting in the Rotunda Rink which inaugurated the Volunteer Movement, the Committee set about the hard uphill work of organising and training the new recruits. This period is dealt with in Bulmer Hobson's History and in The O'Rahilly's Pamphlet entitled "The Secret History of the Irish Volunteers". It is unnecessary to go over that matter again.

Some years ago I was asked by Commandant Joseph O'Connor of the 3rd Battalion, Dublin I.R.A., to give him a brief statement of the organisation of the original 3rd Battalion as the Old I.R.A. Organisation in Dublin was asking him to gather particulars of the growth of the movement from the surviving members. I append a copy of the statement which deals very briefly with the early history of the 3rd Dublin Battalion.

(Note: Statement to be attached at this point).



The Admission of the Redmond Nominees.

From spring of 1914 the relations between the Volunteers and the Irish Parliamentary Party were critical and there had been discussions between Professor MacNeill and the parliamentary leaders which were subsequently reported on to the Volunteer Executive by MacNeill.

I cannot say who made the first approach, whether MacNeill through the parliamentary leaders, or they to him, but from a knowledge of MacNeill, I don't think it likely that he himself of his own initiative would go to the Party.

No action was taken by the Provisional Committee on this matter, and we waited for direction by Mr. Redmond. That was disclosed at an early date by the appearance of his letter in the daily papers calling on the Provisional Committee to admit to its membership twenty-five nominees of his own.

I had to go down the country convalescing after an illness in the late spring of 1913 and when I came back I went and attended the next meeting of the Provisional Committee. MacNeill made a statement of these discussions. That was the first I heard of it.

Matters had not reached anything like a final stage for McNeill to consider it necessary to bring it before the Committee.

Redmond's Letters in the Papers.

This matter of the leader of the National Party had, of course, to be considered at the next meeting of the Provisional Committee.

I had a couple of interviews with Arthur Griffith whom I kept posted on the developments.

He strongly opposed the admission of the Redmondites and stated in his opinion that it was a manoeuvre by the British Government to render the Volunteer organisation innocuous. These views were expressed in his leading articles in his weekly paper "Sinn Féin" at the time.

The Provisional Committee met in a strained atmosphere. There was a full attendance with the exception only of one absentee, Thomas McDonagh, who was down presiding over a centre for the Intermediate Examinations which were at the time taking place, but who wrote a letter to the meeting expressing his views which were not favourable to Mr. Redmond's proposals.

MacNeill presided at the meeting in the Volunteer Office, Pearse Street, and the Committee were arranged around the table, Colonel Moore, Casement, being on MacNeill's left, followed by myself, Eamon Martin and Liam Mellows, who was Secretary of the organisation. The position on MacNeill's right was occupied by Hobson. He told me that he deliberately took up that position so that he would be able to wind up the debate, as MacNeill asked each member of the Committee in rotation starting on his left, for his views. MacNeill read a statement in which he proposed the admission of Mr. Redmond's nominees, but it was clear that it was with his reluctance and with the intention of avoiding a split at a very critical stage in the national movement. Colonel Moore and Casement followed with reluctant support. Then I spoke in opposition, followed by Eamon Martin and so on round the table -

Pearse, Ceannt, M.J. Judge (to our surprise he was a member of the Ancient Order of Hiberniana), Piaras Beaslai, Con Colbert, Liam Mellows, Sean McDermott. (We were scattered round the room). All these were members of the I.R.B. with the exception of M.J. Judge and myself.

These men opposed it. The vote was taken and the proposal passed by a large majority, Hobson, winding up the debate in a speech in which he made it clear their decision was being taken not merely for the purpose of avoiding a national split at this time, but leaving nobody under any illusion as to his views on Mr. Redmond's dictatorial attitude.

Within a day or two a meeting of the opposition members was called for Wynn's Hotel to decide their attitude towards the movement in view of the decision of the Provisional Committee.

Griffith, whom I consulted, was strongly of opinion that there should be no resignations, quoting the opinion of Joe Bigger "Never resign".

P.H. Pearse was not able to attend the meeting, but he telephoned before the meeting that he would act in common with whatever action the Committee took, but making a strong plea that there should be no recrimination in the way of upbraiding by the majority of our colleagues who had taken a different course and opposed us at the meeting. The conference issued a brief statement to the Press and we all signed, expressed our intention of remaining in the Volunteers in accordance with our original policy.

In subsequent months when I became more intimate with Hobson, we discussed the meeting and the whole position at the time. He told me that when Redmond's letter appeared, he made up his mind that the only sound policy to do was to accept, because refusal would mean a split in the Volunteers which would

be carried to the country, and as the position of the Home Rule Bill, then before the British Parliament, was critical, if through the operation of English politics was again defeated, the defeat would be ascribed to the split in our ranks at home. By accepting Redmond's proposals the national position was not jeopardised at the moment, and if Mr. Redmond failed in his policy of securing Home Rule, it would be his own responsibility. He had put these views in a private conference early that day, before MacNeill, Casement and Colonel Moore, and they reluctantly came to accept his views on the matter.

The statement that MacNeill read out that night to the Provisional Committee, if I remember rightly, Hobson told me, had been largely inspired by him. All was his own work.

I remember in 1915 at a route march of the Dublin Battalion of the Volunteers, I was walking beside Eamon de Valera, who was Commandant of the 3rd Battalion, of which at that time and for some months longer I was Vice-Commandant. De Valera said to me, apropos of our subsequent action in expelling the Redmond nominees and splitting the Volunteers, that the split had come in the right time and on an issue that was plain to the people, and he asked me did I not then consider that the majority of the Volunteer Executive were right at the time in admitting the Redmondite nominees.

I replied that at that time we could not anticipate the events that had subsequently taken place and which enabled us to have the split on our own terms and at the proper moment.

HOWTH GUN-RUNNING.

The Redmondites took their place on the Committee at the next meeting, and subsequent meetings were of a friendly enough nature. The two elements on the Committee at the beginning worked in harmony. The energies of some of us in the Original Committee were then largely occupied with the landing of arms.

The landing at Howth was organised by Bulmer Hobson, who deals with that in his own book, but there were two cargoes of arms; the one which came in at Howth was in a yacht, owned and piloted by Erskine Childers; the second one was in Conor O'Brien's yacht.

O'Brien, however, before going off to take the cargo of arms, had mentioned his mission to a number of people, and as his sympathies had been very openly declared on the arming of the Volunteers, he then thought that it would be unwise for him to bring his yacht to the Irish coast. Then he asked some friends of his in Dublin, the late Cruise O'Brien and W.L.Lloyd to arrange for the landing. These men were not in the Volunteers and had no means of carrying out such a task and they approached the late James Creed Meredith (subsequently Judge of the Supreme Court), who had shortly before joined the Volunteers.

Meredith deals with the incident in an article which he contributed to the Redmondite organ "National Volunteer" on the 14th August, 1915. He states that he at once went to MacNeill who then put him in touch with me. Meredith had got the co-operation of Sir Thomas Myles, a prominent Dublin surgeon, well-known yachtsman, and a Protestant Home Ruler. Myles agreed to meet Conor O'Brien's yacht at a spot on the Welsh coast and to transfer the guns to his own yacht at the appointed places on the Irish coast.

I examined the possibility of various places on the Dublin coast and one Sunday Creed Meredith and I travelled down to inspect the coast at Kilcoole, Co. Wicklow; in a motor car placed

at our disposal by Mr. Rosenhall, K.C. We decided that Kilcoole offered the best opportunity of a landing on the coast near Dublin and that it would be done secretly. I know that Hobson was arranging for the Howth landing to take the form of a demonstration in force of the Volunteers.

Creed Meredith, in his article in the "National Volunteer", largely deals with the adventure of Sir Thomas Myles' yacht at sea.

I proceeded to select a number of assistants amongst the Volunteers whom I knew well, but I shortly found that I wanted many more men who were willing to help, and I then approached Sean McDermott with a view to getting trusted I.R.B. men for the task. (This incident was used, as I related earlier, by McDermott as an argument in favour of my joining the I.R.B.)

I carried out the subsequent landing arrangements then in close co-operation with McDermott and the men he picked from the I.R.B. Our plan was to bring a motor charabanc with Volunteers on a Saturday afternoon under pretence of an excursion party, and we were enabled through the good offices of Mr. Rosenhall's chauffeur, a relative of whom was a lodge-keeper in the Convent grounds in Kilcoole, to bring in the charabanc there late on Saturday evening and remain in seclusion until the word was brought to us from the watchers on the beach that the yacht had arrived. This was the Saturday before the first Monday in August, which was the 4th.

It had been originally intended to bring them in on the previous Saturday, i.e. the night before the day fixed for the Howth Gun-running, and all arrangements were made for that day, but I received a telegram from Creed Meredith at 2 o'clock that they had met with an accident to their yacht in Wales and their visit was postponed for a week. (This is dealt with in Meredith's article in the "National Volunteer").

In the meantime, through various contacts with Volunteer supporters, we had got promises of a large number of motor cars, and the plan was that when the cargo was loaded on the charabanc to drive with it to the Dublin Corporation Reservoir at Stillorgan, which at that time was in charge of the Jackson family, one of whom, Val Jackson, was a colleague of mine in the Corporation, had made all arrangements to have the cars parked in the grounds of the Reservoir, and the arms would be distributed amongst the cars and brought to various sources. At the last moment, however, we found a further hitch because the R.I.C. (evidently a move in anticipation of the outbreak of war) had set a party in to guard the Reservoir, and it was then decided that the motor cars should assemble in the grounds of St. Enda's College, Rathfarnham. In addition to the Volunteer parties who were on the charabanc, others made their way to Kilcoole by bicycle. These took up their position as scouts and sentries at various points leading to the beach, while still another party came by train from Dublin, which included in that party Mr. Joseph McGrath.

Some others came direct to Kilcoole by motor car. One car bringing Eamon Ceannt and Sean McDermott; another owned and driven by Mr. J. O'Neill, the well-known industrialist, included Cathal Brugha and M.J. Buckley, at the time City engineer, Dublin Corporation. The party also included the present President of Ireland, Mr. Sean T. O'Kelly, and Bulmer Hobson.

The arms were brought from the yacht in a row boat which made several journeys to the land, the Volunteers going into the water and unloading them. During this operation two patrolling R.I.C. men came along and were promptly placed under arrest, they proving themselves quite willing prisoners. In due course the charabanc was loaded with hundreds of rifles and very heavy boxes of ammunition. (The single shot "Mauser" rifles, the same as those brought in at Howth).

The week's postponement was a fortunate event, because otherwise the British warship which was patrolling the coast to guard against the landing of arms, would probably have intercepted Sir Thomas Myles' yacht, but the grave war situation had caused the warship to be withdrawn and the coast was clear for our operation.

On top of the piled up rifles and ammunition the party of Volunteers who came out in a charabanc took their place the last minute and we packed them the best way we could. All went well until the early hours of the morning when the charabanc was going through Sunnybank (Bloody Bank), Little Bray, the axle broke. Fortunately the driver knew a resident of a nearby house. He was knocked up and we promptly transferred the contents of the charabanc under cover and sat waiting developments in the house. In the meantime I sent on Liam Mellows in a motor-cycle combination to some of the motor cars from St. Enda's, Rathfarnham. In an incredibly short time the cars came along, the first bringing as passenger Mr. Seumas O'Connor, a member of the Provisional Committee. The rifles were at once transferred to these cars which were rushed off to various places in Dublin with their cargoes.

The Howth landing was deliberately organised in a spectacular way to win the utmost publicity for the Volunteers and to wake up the country. The Kilcoole cargo, which was as big as the first one, was deliberately organised as a secret operation.

(Note: Omission of O'Rahilly and his motor car).

Then they went to their destination in Dublin.

The next day, Sunday, and the Monday (first Monday in August), I was busy checking up on the various places that the guns had been brought to and that Monday evening, 4 o'clock, a message was delivered to my home to attend a conference of prominent people in Creed Meredith's house. This was the day on which the war against Germany was declared in the British House of Commons.



The object of the meeting was to take urgent counsel as to how Ireland could profit from the situation. I understand the idea originated with Meredith. Seumas O'Connor had left word for me to be present. When I arrived I found Sean McDermott, Seumas O'Connor and, I think, Hobson. When I arrived I found that those present were just chatting and that there was no conference. O'Connor informed me that the whole situation had been altered by Redmond's statement in House of Commons aligning Ireland at once on the side of England, and Meredith was so annoyed that he could not discuss the matter.

Shortly afterwards Sir Thomas Myles arrived brimful of the idea that, now Ireland had her chance, as big a chance as in Grattan's day, and that the Volunteers should take over the defence of the country and re-create Grattan's Parliament.

Sir Thomas Myles said he had a leader for the Volunteers in the person of Kelly-Kenny, a retired General in the English Army.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 130

Copy.

18 Lúnasa, 1947.

Dear Seán,

I now send you a typescript of the notes made by our stenographer on the occasion of our visit to your house on 20th June, 1947.

I would like you to read it, revise and/or add to it wherever necessary and return it to me for final typing.

You will note that in page 6 reference is made to a statement of yours on the 3rd Battalion, the inclusion of which would undoubtedly add to the value of this general memorandum, and at the foot of page 16 to an incident connected with the use of The O'Rahilly's car, which you were doubtful about including.

Whenever you are ready I would like to call on you again to complete the balance of your statement. Your recollection of the events of and immediately leading up to Easter Week is, of course, of vital importance.

When completed, your statement could be signed as a whole or in sections, whichever in your opinion is the more desirable.

Yours sincerely,

(M. McDunphy)

DIRECTOR.

Mr. Seán Fitzgibbon,  
18 Park Avenue,  
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