

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BUREAU STAIRS MILITARY 1913-21  
NO. W.S. 167

STATEMENT OF CHRISTOPHER BYRNE

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There was a branch of the old Cumann na nGaedheal in a house in James's Street, opposite the South Dublin Union, called "The Crimean House". Mike Mullen, Pat O'Loughlin and a crowd of them used to hold dances and Irish classes there. Pat O'Loughlin lived near it, over Earley's shop. This man was an old Fenian, and an I.R.B. man, and we often got chatting and talking, and he said that if we wanted to free Ireland we would have to fight for it. That was our attitude when we were young. That would be about 1908 or so.

I joined the I.R.B. about 1908, through my associations with the old Cumann na nGaedheal and the Gaelic League. I joined the Lord Edward Circle in 41 Parnell Square, and Pat O'Loughlin was the Centre. I was sworn in by Pat O'Loughlin in his own home. We met in Parnell Square every month, we called it our "Sodality"; we would say "Tonight is our Sodality night". Joe McGrath of the Sweep was in our Circle, so were Frank Gaskin, Paddy McCarthy, Tom McCarthy, McNamee and Seamus Kenny. Paddy McCarthy is dead now. Altogether there were about thirty of us in it at that time. I think Gaskin was sub-Centre then; he became Centre later on.

I remained in that Circle until after 1916. Nothing noteworthy happened from my joining it until the Rising. We used drill for a long time before the Rising was thought of; we were drilling for a couple of years before it. Eamonn Martyn and Con Colbert drilled us at 41 Parnell Square, as the North City Gymnasium Club. They were I.R.B. men and they were in charge of the Fianna.

I joined the Volunteers in 1913, when they were formed in Inchicore. There was a Battalion there in that year. We had ex-British Army men as instructors, and we used train under them in the Phoenix Park and in the fields. A Captain Jack Hunt - later Major Hunt of the Defence Forces - was one of the instructors. I think these instructors were Volunteers but I am not sure. They were not paid men.

The strength of the Battalion was 500 or 600 men before the split. After the split only 14 or 15 of us remained with the Irish Volunteers, the rest of them joined the Redmond crowd, and so we proceeded to elect our own officers. Con Colbert was elected Coy. Captain, Larry Murtagh was elected 1st Lieut., and I was 2nd Lieutenant. Con, Larry and myself were the only three I.R.B. men in the Company, and the three of us were elected officers without any "wire-pulling" because, I suppose, we had a fairly good knowledge of drill. That is probably how it happened. At that stage the men of the Company had practically no training in musketry. The back of the Workmen's Club in Inchicore was our usual meeting place.

Con Colbert suggested, when he saw the crowds changing, and the small number that remained, that we should go over to Larkfield, the Headquarters of the 4th Battalion, and join forces with some of the Companies there. I said we would stay on where we were and we did. Later on some of the men who left the Company came back to us and so we mustered between 40 and 50 in Easter Week. Peadar Doyle was our Company Quartermaster.

Eamonn Ceannt brought all the Company Officers of the Battalion to Muldoon's of Tallaght a Sunday or two before the Rising, and he as much as told us that the Rising was coming off. He did not tell us definitely that it was coming off, but he gave us a few hints about it, and I had an idea that

something big was at hand. Ceannt was on the Battalion Council and he was always saying that something would have to be done before the war between England and Germany ended; that we would have to have a "show-down".

Nothing very important happened before the Rising except that the I.R.B. supplied us with rifles and ammunition. There was a rifles' fund in the I.R.B. and we paid one shilling per month for rifles and ammunition. They were British pattern long Lee-Enfield rifles. We did not get the short Lee-Enfield. Small arms and ammunition were also supplied by the I.R.B.

We got instructions one night to go to a house somewhere near Mary's Abbey - off Capel Street. I had to bring a fellow called Joe Gorman, a member of the Circle, with me. We did not know what we were going to get because the message I brought was in cypher. This message was given to me by either Sean Tobin or Sean Murphy, both were on the Centres' Board, I.R.B., at this time. We got a lot of small arms and ammunition and we did not know what to do, so we employed a jarvey to take the lot at once. He did not know what the boxes contained. We drove the whole lot up to my home and it was kept there until distributed amongst the men a week or two before the Rising. There were about 50 revolvers and a couple of cases of revolver ammunition. There were a few automatics, with ammunition to fit them, in the consignment.

George Irvine came to my home on Good Friday morning at four o'clock and informed me that he was out all night delivering the same dispatch that he gave to me. The dispatch summoned me to a Centres' Board meeting at twelve noon on Good Friday. The meeting was held in No. 2 Dawson Street. At that stage I was sub-Centre of the Circle, as Pat O'Loughlin was either dead or had resigned, and Frank Gaskin was Centre. When George Irvine mobilised me I said to him, "You are wrong, it should

"be Gaskin". Irvine said, "No, it is you should come". I went along to the meeting. Before I left home Mick Liston of the I.R.B. - we always referred to the I.R.B. as "The Organisation" - called to my house. He was then employed as an apprentice fitter in Inchicore Works. I informed him that I was going to a meeting in No. 2 Dawson Street, and I invited him to come along with me, and he did.

The Headquarters of the Volunteers at the time was at No. 2 Dawson Street. Also present at the meeting were Frank Lawless, Con Colbert, Sean Murphy and most of the Centres. Bulmer Hobson, who was Chairman of the Centres' Board, came along and said, "The business we have been called together for is called off. Go home, and get in touch with the Units and get them to 'stand-to'." Those were his instructions. I knocked around with Mick Liston for the rest of the day. There were some small arms on the premises at the time of the meeting, and the "G" men were patrolling the streets, but we got through with about half a dozen revolvers and some ammunition which were left in drawers and around the office. We cleaned the place out completely.

At this time I resided at 16<sup>A</sup> Upper Basin Street, off James's Street. Con Colbert and I were intimate friends. After the meeting in Dawson Street on Good Friday he came to stay with me in my home. He remained with me until nine o'clock on Easter Monday morning, when we both left the house together. He told me that there was a "move on" to arrest all the officers and we had instructions not to surrender but to resist arrest. Con said if the police did come two of us together would put up a better fight than either of us could do single-handed. He did not tell me definitely until we were mobilised that there was to be a Rising, but I had already sensed it from the general atmosphere around us. I did not

know anything about the plans; I was only "small fry". Con was very good in that way, he would not tell his secrets even to his Mother. Another reason for Con coming to my home instead of going to his own home in Ranelagh was that mine was nearer our Company area. I had an idea that we would all be rounded up by the police beforehand.

Con Colbert went to the Altar on Easter Sunday morning to make his Easter Duty, and he came back and saw the notice in the "Sunday Independent" that the mobilisation was called off.

Larry Murtagh came in from Chapelizod to know if the notice was right, and Con, Larry and myself went to Dolphin's Barn to see Eamonn Ceannt; he lived beside the Church. Ceannt told us to "Stand-to" and await orders. We knocked around all day on Sunday in the vicinity of my home and Ceannt's but nothing happened.

While Con was with me, one of my Company, a chap called John O'Neill, came to my home at ten a.m. on Easter Sunday and said he was looking for Eoin MacNeill's address. Con knew it and he directed the man where to go. O'Neill told us that the reason for his visit was that he had a brother-in-law named Jack Byrne, an engine driver, who used carry dispatches, and he gave him a dispatch he got from Dr. Dundon of Borris for MacNeill. O'Neill went off then to find MacNeill, and that was the last we saw of O'Neill until after the Rising. I was questioning O'Neill afterwards about it, and it appears that when O'Neill got to MacNeill's house, MacNeill asked him who was his Company O.C. O'Neill told him Con Colbert was his O.C. MacNeill said, "Do you know that I am his superior officer, and you will obey my orders?" MacNeill gave O'Neill £5 and a dispatch, and told him to get a taxi and go to Dr. Dundon with it. Seemingly when O'Neill got to Borris Dr.

Dundon was not in, so O'Neill stayed around and went back some time later and Dr. Dundon was in. Dr. Dundon told him that he had got the same dispatch from The O'Rahilly in Limerick. Before O'Neill left MacNeill's house, MacNeill gave him the dispatch to read so that he could memorize it in case he would have to destroy it. As far as I can recollect O'Neill told me that the dispatch to Dr. Dundon contained an instruction "calling off" the Rising.

I cannot remember whether Con said anything about MacNeill's countermanding order; Con was full of fight.

I was 2nd Lieutenant. Eamonn Ceannt was my Battalion Commandant, Cathal Brugha was Vice-Commandant, Seamus Kenny was Battalion Quartermaster, and Phil Cosgrave was his Assistant Quartermaster. Seamus Murphy was Battalion Adjutant.

For Easter Week I was under Con Colbert's orders. At about nine o'clock on Easter Monday morning a man called Sean Ó Broin, a printer, came to my house with the mobilisation order for ten o'clock. Con got up on his bicycle and went to Bill Power, one of our Section Commanders, and got him to mobilise the men in Inchicore and bring them down to Emerald Square, which is off Cork Street. Con and I had only to walk across from our place to Emerald Square, but Bill Power's crowd had to pass the back of Richmond Barracks along the canal from Inchicore, and they arrived at Emerald Square without any of them being arrested.

We were detailed by Ceannt for Ardee Street Brewery. Con and I and about fifteen men went there. The rest of the Company, about fifteen men also, went to Marrowbone Lane. We stayed in the Brewery until six o'clock on Wednesday morning. Watkin's Brewery it was then called.

Con sent a written message to James Connolly in the G.P.O. on Tuesday, to the effect that his men were not engaged and had nothing to do except erect barricades since they occupied their position at ten a.m. on Monday. They did not even see any enemy troops. A reply, in typescript, was received from Connolly about mid-day on Tuesday to the effect that the entire garrison of Ardee Street Brewery was to go to Marrowbone Lane to reinforce Seamus Murphy and his men who were being hard pressed by the military. I started off at the head of the column about six a.m. on Wednesday - the men were on each side of the road - and Con brought up the rear. We marched up Cork Street to Marrowbone Lane, and we remained there until the surrender.

Larry Murtagh was in charge of the Blanchardstown and Chapelizod section. He mobilised about twenty men, and he got them first to the brick-works on the canal and from there over to Larkfield in Kimmage. Other Volunteer stragglers joined Larry's men at the brick-works, and, under cover of darkness, the whole lot reached the G.P.O. safely. Part of the way there the men were ordered by Larry to walk in their stocking-feet, so that they would not make unnecessary noise to attract unwanted attention. I think it was while bringing a dispatch from Larry, or bringing one back from the G.P.O., that Jerry Keogh was killed outside Trinity, when the soldiers opened fire on him from Trinity College. The only danger Larry Murtagh seemed to meet on the way was when coming along at Stephen's Green, where the Citizen Army were going to open fire on his crowd because they thought they were British soldiers. Larry and his twenty men got through safely. He also had to pass by the rear of Richmond Barracks. When they got to the G.P.O. the men who had rifles were sent to the Four Courts and the men with shotguns were kept in the G.P.O. I do not know their names.

While we were in Marrowbone Lane one of our chaps, Paddy McGrath, was wounded in the hand. There was very little firing on our Post until the Thursday and Friday. We were so free from fighting that Seamus Murphy, the O/C., suggested that we should have a sing-song - to keep the fellows' hearts up.

At the surrender Tomas McDonagh, Major Rotherham and Father Augustine, a Capuchin, came along with a white flag. McDonagh told us that the men in the G.P.O. had surrendered and that Eamon Ceannt had also surrendered. Immediately they (the abovenamed) left, Ceannt came marching down towards us at the head of his men who had just left the South Dublin Union. This was at 3 p.m. He ordered us to surrender and we obeyed. We formed up in fours and marched to Bride Road, and at the north side, opposite the Iveagh Lodging House we laid down our arms on the road. The men from Jabob's came along and did the same.

When we came out of the Distillery the crowd was cheering us. I think it took Ceannt all his time to make up his mind to surrender when he saw the reception outside the Distillery, but we did surrender and we were marched to Richmond Barracks on Sunday evening. We were up all night in the Barracks and we were badly fed and badly housed.

Next day we were deported to Knutsford. I was a whole month there in solitary confinement being allowed out for only three-quarters of an hour every day. After a month in Knutsford I was sent to Frongoch in Wales, and I was released from there in August, 1916. Some of the men were kept until Christmas.

The night before Con Colbert was executed he sent for Seamus Murphy's wife, who had been in the Distillery with us and who was also a prisoner in Kilmainham at that time. He gave her a few letters. Annie Cooney, now Dinny O'Brien's widow, has one of his letters still, I am sure. He was just bidding her goodbye and asking us to pray for him. He cut all the buttons off his tunic

and gave them to Mrs. Murphy, and gave her his watch for me. Father Morrissey was with him up to the time he died. Con got a pin from the priest and scratched something in Irish on the watch and put the date on it. Con was a fluent Irish speaker.

Regarding rumours that went around concerning Con Colbert's execution instead of Seamus Murphy, I wish to record that Seamus Murphy was in charge in Marrowbone Lane and Con was second in command. The commands remained so until the surrender. After the surrender, when we were taken to Richmond Bks. (later Keogh Bks.) we were brought to the Gymnasium and put sitting down three deep along the wall. This was on Monday, the day after the surrender. A number of Dublin detectives, Bruton and Barton included, came along and picked out most of the leaders - E. Ceannt, Con Colbert, Phil Cosgrave, Willie Cosgrave; John McBride and Dick Davis were picked out of our batch, brought over to the opposite wall of the Gym. and marched away. That was the last of them we saw until our release and the last we saw of some of them for ever. Seamus Murphy was in our batch and in full uniform, but he was not picked out. The question of Colbert taking Murphy's place does not arise at all, it was just that good Luck favoured Murphy and he was deported with us to Knutsford. Colbert and Murphy did not, and could not, exchange uniforms, as Colbert was a very small sized man and Murphy was very tall and well-built. Murphy was a very manly fellow and certainly would not shirk facing a courtmartial and its sentence had he been picked out for it. In my opinion, what saved Murphy's life was the fact that he was not very prominent before the Rising and was not, as far as I know, known to the police. Against this, Colbert made himself very prominent during the anti-recruiting campaign for the British Army that was then in full swing before the Rising. He wore kilts and frequently pulled down Union Jacks and recruiting posters and helped to break up meetings. He also drilled the Fianna in the open.

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Signed: Christopher Byrne  
Date: 19<sup>th</sup> December, 1948.

Witness: Patrick J. MacNally Captain