

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 232

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S.232.....

Witness

Mr. Thomas Hamill,
37 Broughton St.,
Dundalk, Co. Louth.

Identity

Member of Sinn Fein Dundalk from 1904;
" " I.V's. 1914-16.

Subject

- (a) National activities Dundalk from 1904
- (b) Activities during Easter Week 1916.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

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STATEMENT BY

THOMAS HAMILL, ³⁷~~34~~ BROUGHTON STREET, DUNDALK.

* I am now 75 years of age. I joined the Gaelic League shortly after its organisation in Dundalk about 1898. When the Gaelic League first started it did not interest itself in any way in matters outside the study of the language and lectures on Irish history and the works of Irish poets and scholars.

About 1904 I joined the Sinn Fein organisation at its inception in Dundalk. Amongst its early members in Dundalk were Paddy Hughes, ^{JH} Park St.; James Coburn, ~~Kilmorey~~, ^{Dundalk}; and Thomas Hearty. Paddy Hughes was, even then, looked upon as the leader in Dundalk in everything that tended towards the complete independence of this country from outside influences. Thomas Hearty was a much older man whose background in his youth connected with older men of the Fenian days from whom he became associated with the Irish Republican Brotherhood. I believe that his connection with the I.R.B. influenced him in supporting the Gaelic League as a movement that could be used to spread republican ideas amongst people who took an interest in the language revival, especially the youth.

I was never a member of the I.R.B. I was asked to join the organisation which I refused on conscientious grounds. My father had been a member of the I.R.B. in London where he worked for a time and when I was offered employment in Dundalk he warned me against joining up with any secret societies.

Paddy Hughes was President of Sinn Fein in Dundalk district. He was also from the start a member of the National Executive of Sinn Fein. About 1906 we had about 200 members enrolled in Sinn Fein in Dundalk and surrounding districts.

About the time Sinn Fein was started in Dundalk the Orangemen of Newry and district usually held 12th July celebrations in Newry, and the residents of the districts around Kilkeel in Co. Down had been in the habit of marching past the village of Rostrevor by the

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Shore Road, thereby bypassing most of the village. In 1903 or 04 the Orangemen decided to march through the village. This departure of the Orange processionists from the usual route alarmed the Catholic population of Rostrevor, as they feared that the Catholic Church and Convent would be in danger of desecration if the Orangemen were allowed through the village. The Catholic population of Rostrevor made an organised effort to direct public attention to the danger to Catholic institutions in Rostrevor and asked for help from outside districts to protect local Catholic property. As a result of this appeal a meeting was held in the Town Hall, Dundalk under the chairmanship of John Connick, Chairman of the Harbour Commissioners. Some men from Rostrevor attended the meeting and explained the position and the danger of the Orange threat. At this meeting Paddy Hughes took the initiative of proposing to send a body of men from Dundalk to help in preventing the Orangemen departing from the Shore Road Route and passing through the village. The meeting decided to send support to the Catholics of Rostrevor. The Dundalk and Newry Steampacket boat, the Earl of Erne, on arrival in Dundalk on Sunday morning, was boarded by 700 to 800 men mostly armed - some with revolvers, others with hurley sticks and various other weapons. I travelled on the boat and we sailed to Warrenpoint without any opposition. At Warrenpoint we disembarked and marched to Rostrevor and took up defensive positions there. After we were in position for some time a conference was held at which Canon Lynch and Fr. McGivern, C.C. of Rostrevor, and the officers in charge of the military and police forces negotiated. The officers in charge of the military and police guaranteed that the orange parade would be compelled to travel by the Shore Road route. Both Canon Lynch and Fr. McGivern thanked the Dundalk men for the support given the people of Rostrevor and asked the Dundalk men to return home quietly. We returned home on Monday - the day the Orange demonstration was held. Paddy Hughes took a very prominent part in organising the expedition and acted as the leader of the men who travelled by boat.

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There were two parliamentary elections held in Louth in 1910 - one in January and the other in December. Tim Healy was a candidate in both elections. Healy won the first election and was defeated by Richard Hazleton in the second election. Paddy Hughes ordered the Sinn Fein organisation to abstain from participating in the elections as a boycott of the British parliamentary system in Ireland.

About May 1910, Edward VII was proclaimed King of England. A demonstration was held in Dundalk at which I personally was not present, being out of town at work at the time. All the prominent citizens of Dundalk, including the Sheriff and Grand Jury, the military forces in town and the officers and constables of the Royal Irish Constabulary attended opposite the Courthouse at the Market Square and a proclamation was read proclaiming Edward VII Emperor and King of Ireland amongst other places. Paddy Hughes and a small number of followers made a public protest and hoisted a green flag with harp on the '98 memorial which occupied a prominent position at the Market Square. There is a photograph of this scene still in existence. There are a few persons still alive who took part with Paddy Hughes in this.

At this period in North Louth the number of people interested in Republican ideals were few. Tim Healy and the Irish Parliamentary Party's candidates were using North Louth as a cockpit to fight out their political differences and the overwhelming majority of the people took one or the other side. Political feelings ran high and the Sinn Fein element were not able to make much headway. This state of affairs existed up to about the end of 1913.

When Sir Edward Carson started to organise the Ulster Volunteers in the North, Nationalists of every shade of opinion began to realise that a serious menace to the Nationalist position had come into being and the question of organising the Nationalists into a Volunteer force was mooted. In the Spring of 1914 Paddy Hughes and Joe Ward sent out circulars to a number of prominent people in

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Dundalk calling a meeting for the purpose of starting the Volunteers in Dundalk. I was not at this meeting and I don't now remember the exact date on which it was held. I, however, joined the Volunteers after they were formed - immediately after the above meeting. The first drill I attended at the Rink in the Athletic Grounds, there were about 60 men on parade. Very few members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (A.O.H.) joined at the start. Amongst the organisations who came into the organisation at the start were Sinn Fein, Gaelic League, Ancient Order of Hibernians - American Alliance and the Irish National Foresters. The principal activities at the start were recruiting, drilling and training. From the start Paddy Hughes was Chairman of the Volunteers and Joe Ward was Secretary. In about 4 months we had about 400 men enrolled in the Volunteers. When our numbers began to increase we divided up into companies and each company had one or more members on the Committee. There were 4 or 5 companies in existence when the A.O.H. came in an official way into the Volunteers. This development took place when the Volunteer organisation started to attract widespread support all over the country. John Redmond, leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party made an effort when he decided to support the Volunteer organisation to get his supporters into the organisation and to take control. Previous to this his attitude was antagonistic - he started negotiations with the Volunteer Executive in Dublin and as a result got some of his nominees on the Central Executive Council. Shortly after this his supporters in Dundalk joined the Volunteers. There was no effort made by the Redmondite Section in Dundalk. to get local control, although the Volunteer strength in Dundalk rose to over 1,000 men after the Redmondites joined up.

At the outbreak of the 1914-1918 war in August 1914 there were little arms available to the Volunteers in Dundalk. We got about 50 Belgian rifles, purchased through the Volunteer organisation. There were a good supply of shotguns and revolvers of various makes collected from friendly owners or purchased after the outbreak of the war. The Royal Field Artillery in Dundalk were moved to Belfast.

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The A.O.H. element in the Volunteers mobilised and paraded as an escort for the military marching from their barracks to the railway station. This action on the Hibernians' part caused friction at the time and the friction intensified as time passed. About the end of August 1914 or early in September a split in Volunteers took effect locally after Mr. Redmond's speech at Woodenbridge. At the time of the split Redmond's followers were a big majority in the Volunteers and they retained possession of all the rifles available in the local companies. The Republican element left the Volunteer organisation at the split which may appear now as bad tactics at the time. We sacrificed our supply of rifles for one thing and if we had hung on the Redmondite elements would have disintegrated in a short time as, after we left them, they slowly broke up.

From the split up to the middle of 1915 there was no active Volunteer organisation in Dundalk. I think it was Bulmer Hobson who came to Dundalk to help in the organisation of the Irish Volunteers about mid 1915. The number who rejoined them was small. I would estimate about 100. We had to start from scratch all over again. We formed a committee which included Paddy Hughes as Chairman. Some of the members were:- Sean McEntee, James Toal, .. Moore from Kildare, Vincent Hughes from Keady, who worked in the Home and Colonial Stores; Felix McQuillan was Secretary. We had practically no arms. We had, however, the hope of obtaining by some means the rifles held by the National Volunteers at the split. This hope proved unattainable as we never got possession of them.

We made our headquarters the Boyle O'Reilly Hall, Clanbrassill St. where we held our drill practice and meetings. We also used McDonald's Yard at the Square for drills. We were visited occasionally by prominent Volunteer officers from Dublin - Sean McDermott, Sean Tobin and Major McBride. Anytime an officer from Dublin visited us he gave a lecture on a military subject. I remember Major McBride lecturing on his experiences with the Boers in the South African War.

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During the year 1915 and early 1916 our efforts were mainly directed to recruiting, training and collections for the purchase of arms and equipment. On the eve of the Rising we had very few rifles. We had a fair supply of revolvers of miscellaneous make and bore, a good supply of shotguns, a few bayonets and a various assortment of ammunition. There was about 200 men enrolled in the Volunteers in the Spring of 1916.

The Cumann na mBan were organised in Dundalk in 1916. They were making bandages and first aid equipment. Miss Angela Mathews was in charge in Dundalk. There was also a slough of Fianna Eireann in Dundalk I think - but I am not sure - Vincent Hughes was in charge of the Fianna.

About 2 weeks before Easter Week 1916 Headquarters sent a man named Donal O'Hannigan to take over as Military O/C. the Dundalk Volunteers. He got us down to an intensive course of training and tactical exercises which we carried out each evening in the open air. He gave lectures in the Boyle O'Reilly Hall at night after the tactical work was finished.

About the end of Holy Week 1916 there was a discussion about what we were told was a route march on Easter Sunday. Both Paddy Hughes and Donal O'Hannigan stressed the importance of Easter Sunday's activities. They did not, in my hearing, mention the possibility of an armed rising, but I knew from the preparations being made that something serious was afoot. From the time O'Hannigan arrived in Dundalk we discussed amongst ourselves the trend of things and we had a pretty shrewd idea that matters were coming to a head.

On Holy Saturday evening we got orders to mobilise at 9 a.m. on Easter Sunday and take a day's rations with us, also all arms and ammunition of every description. Every Volunteer was expected to have a haversack in readiness for an occasion such as this and we were all equipped as far as haversacks went.

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On Easter Sunday we turned up at the Boyle O'Reilly Hall as ordered. When I arrived Paddy Hughes approached me and inquired if I knew the country roads around Ardee, Collon and Slane area. I said I did and he ordered me to procure my cycle and to get a gun that was in a house 3 doors from where I lived. The gun belonged to Peadar Murphy, a printer, who worked in Tempest's. He had previously worked in England and returned to Dundalk to evade conscription. Murphy in Holy Week was in Kimmage Camp, Dublin, and had not taken his gun with him. I procured the cycle and the gun. I gave the gun to Eddie Bailey who had none. I then got instructions to remain in the Hall for an hour after the Volunteer had marched off and, if any message came in the meantime, I was to take the messages with me when I followed them on their route to Ardee. No messages came. I overtook the main body on the Ardee Road about 2 miles from Dundalk. I think there were about 100 men taking part in the march towards Ardee. When I overtook them Paddy Hughes ordered me to cycle in front of the volunteers and look out for strangers and report back to him occasionally. No incident occurred until we arrived in the vicinity of Ardee where we were halted and after a short delay a car arrived containing Phil McMahon and others from Ardee direction. The car also contained about 40 rifles - I can't be certain of the number. The rifles were distributed to the Dundalk men. The rifles had been seized earlier that morning by Phil McMahon and a few others from Ardee. They were all serviceable Lee Enfield rifles in good condition. After the distribution of the rifles we marched into Ardee and had some refreshments there. When in Ardee we were joined by a number of men from Grangebellew in mid-Louth - Seamus Layng, ... Reynolds, 2 Butterlys, 2 Kellys and a few others.

We resumed our march, proceeded through Collon and on to near Slane. About a mile outside of Slane we were halted. I was ordered from there to cycle to the bridge across the Boyne at Slane to see if there was a man (answering a description given to me by Paddy Hughes) at the bridge. I waited at the bridge for

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some time and returned to the main body of Volunteers without contacting the man. I understood the man I was sent to meet was from Drogheda.

Before I arrived back to the Volunteers a message had been received by them from Dundalk containing Eoin MacNeill's cancellation orders for the manoeuvres on Easter Sunday. A consultation was being held amongst the officers and then Hennigan told any Volunteer that was anxious to fall out to do so. About 12 men dropped out and returned to Dundalk and the main body again resumed the march towards Slane. From the time we marched out of Dundalk we had two of the R.I.C. following us in a car. Sergeants Weymes and Connolly. Those men did not display any arms.

Before reaching Slane I was again sent to the Bridge - this would be about 8 p.m. I was to remain at the Bridge until after 9 p.m. awaiting the expected person to turn up. Whilst I was at the Bridge the Volunteers had taken up positions around the village of Slane. Their centre was based in a bakery on the Drogheda Road at a crossroad. I remained at the Bridge till around 9 p.m. and contacted no person. I returned to Slane about 400 yards from the Bridge and when I arrived there Paddy Hughes, Sean McEntee and Jemmy Toal had a talk with me. I was asked if I knew the road to Tara. I told them yes.

Sometime later it was apparently decided that, as a result of MacNeill's countermanding order, the original objective of the Dundalk Volunteers - marching to Tara - was being abandoned. I was told that Sean McEntee and myself were to cycle to Drogheda and contact the 3 a.m. train for Dublin on Monday. We met the train at Drogheda and travelled by it to Dublin. From Amiens St. Station we proceeded to a house in Dorset St. by different routes. Mr. McEntee knew the people in the house. He was admitted and remained in the house for some time. Whilst he was in the house I remained on the street. When Mr. McEntee came out on the street we both proceeded to Amiens St. Station. I bought a ticket for Dundalk.

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As Mr. McEntee was remaining in Dublin he told me that on my arrival in Dundalk I was to follow the route we took on Sunday morning from Dundalk until I regained contact with the Dundalk Volunteers and then to tell P. Hughes and D. O'Hannigan to continue on back towards Dundalk and that probably a message would arrive for them from Dublin, and when I rejoined the Volunteers I was to take my orders from P. Hughes and D. O'Hannigan.

I carried out Mr. McEntee's orders on my arrival in Dundalk. I proceeded to Ardee, then Collon. In Collon I found that the Volunteers had left Collon and were on the road leading to Dunleer. I cycled along until I overtook them about 2 miles from Dunleer and I delivered my message. Hughes and O'Hannigan inquired if I had seen anything unusual in Dublin. I said No, that Dublin seemed normal. Hughes and O'Hannigan told me to go back to Dundalk and inquire for messages at the Boyle O'Reilly Hall. I was also told to call at the residence of Jemmy Toal, Bachelor's Walk, and see if there were any messages there. I was instructed that if no messages had arrived I was dismissed and should have a rest. When I arrived at the Boyle O'Reilly Hall there was a message there for P.J. Daly, Carrickmacross. I took this message to Carrickmacross, delivered it and returned to Dundalk in the afternoon and went home and to bed. I didn't waken up until Tuesday morning.

From Sunday morning until the afternoon of Monday I had been without sleep or rest of any kind and had been cycling all of Sunday and a good portion of Monday. I estimate I cycled about 200 miles on Sunday and Monday, mostly on byroads as we were avoiding the main roads. I was soaked to the skin from the heavy rain from Sunday evening. I was completely "done in" when I got to bed.

When I got up on Tuesday the town was in a state of uproar. Some of the National Volunteers had been armed and were guarding the railway stations and the bridges. The R.I.C. were holding all the roads leading from the town. The main body of the Dundalk Volunteer had received Padraig Pearse's orders that the fighting was on in

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Dublin and had started again in the direction of DuÉlin from a place named Lurgangreen, 4 miles outside Dundalk. I heard on Tuesday that the military authorities had picked up the rifles held by the National Volunteers in Dundalk. I also heard that there were very little rifles in the military barracks when the fighting broke out in 1916.

When I got up on Tuesday afternoon there was little possibility of contacting the main body of the Dundalk Volunteers who were then on their ~~train~~ journey for Dublin, and the Volunteers who remained in town could not attempt anything owing to the intense military and police activities. They had to keep off the streets. There were no arrests made during Easter Week in Dundalk. The following week arrests took place. I was arrested at my work in St. Joseph's Convent about 2.30 p.m. on 4th May 1916. A number of others had been arrested in their homes on the same day. The R.I.C. who arrested me were decent and allowed me to go home for an overcoat. I was taken to Dundalk Jail and on Saturday a batch of us was removed to Richmond Barracks, Dublin, about 60 in all.

We were kept about 14 days in Richmond Barracks and during our period there some of the 1916 leaders were executed. We heard the fatal volleys a few times. From Richmond we were removed to Wakefield Detention Prison in England. We were served there with internment orders and removed to Frongoch Camp in Wales. In my room in the Camp were Sean McSweeney, Thomas MacCurtain, Padraig O'Malley, Michael Staine and many others. We were taken to Wormwood Scrubbs for examination by a Commission who questioned us about our part in the Rising. After being before the Commission we were taken back again to Frongoch and I was released in the late Summer of 1916.

Signed: Thomas Hamill

Date: 6 April 1949

Witness:

John McBoz
6/4/49.

