

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 234

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S.234.....

Witness

Mr. James Smyth,
An Dunan,
Glen Road,
Belfast.

Identity

Member of Executive Committee.
Irish Volunteers Belfast 1914-16.

Subject

- (a) Led contingent of Irish Volunteers and I.R.B.
to O'Donova Rossa Funeral, Dublin, August 1915.
- (b) Preparations for Easter Week Rising 1916.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

File No. S.1315.....

Form B.S.M. 2.

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STATEMENT BY JAMES SMYTH, AN DUNAN,
GLEN ROAD, BELFAST.

I was a member of the Freedom Club when I joined the Volunteers in Belfast. I was present at the formation of the Volunteers. Denis McCullagh was the man mainly responsible for starting the Volunteers. I was elected on the Committee that was set up to control the Volunteer organisation.

When I joined the Volunteers I was a National Teacher. This fact made it desirable that I should be careful not to attract unnecessary attention by taking part in public Volunteer activities.

At the time of the split in the Volunteers in Belfast a meeting was held in St. Mary's Hall. I think that the purpose of the meeting was an effort by the supporters of the Irish Parliamentary Party to get the Belfast Volunteers to endorse the policy of Mr. John Redmond, M.P. as outlined by him a short time previously at a speech at Woodenbridge, Co. Wicklow. At the split about 80% of the Belfast Volunteers were supporters of the Irish Parliamentary Party. The Hall was packed to its full capacity for the meeting.

Mr. Joseph Devlin, M.P. started to make a speech and after he had been speaking for a few minutes a voice from the body of the Hall shouted to Denis McCullough - who had a seat on the platform from which Mr. Devlin was speaking - "Come out of that, Denis, that man is only twisting". Mr. Devlin immediately stopped talking. He seemed nervous as a result of the interruption. Uproar broke out amongst the crowd in the Hall. Mr. McCullough and some of his followers left the meeting and adjourned to the minor Hall adjoining the main Hall and I went with them. Amongst others at this unrehearsed adjournment to the Minor Hall were Denis McCullough, Cathal O'Shannon, Herbert Moore Pim, and, possibly, Joe Connolly. If Joe Connolly was there I don't remember him speaking. Cathal O'Shannon spoke and, in fact, every person present seemed to be speaking. This impromptu meeting decided unanimously to start the Irish Volunteers as distinct from any organisation including

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supporters of the Irish Parliamentary Party. After this meeting we took offices, I think, in a house where Archie and Sam Heron lived in Divis St. It was from this office that the work of organising the Irish Volunteers and their republican sympathisers was carried out.

After the split I suggested the printing of handbills containing historical matter that would be useful for propaganda purposes and have them distributed in Belfast. Those leaflets were printed in Dublin and were smuggled into Belfast as educational matter. The leaflets were designed to induce some of the people we lost at the split and other potential recruits to take an active interest in our work.

On one occasion the police were present when the leaflets were being distributed. They did not interfere with the distribution. I was taking an active part in this distribution on this occasion. Some time after this incident one of the Commissioners of the National Board of Education came to me and informed me that I had been reported on to the Commissioners. He told me that the Commissioners had examined a copy of the leaflet and as it did not specify for what particular brand of Volunteers support was solicited the Commissioners were not taking any action against me.

In August 1915, at the time of the O'Donovan Rossa funeral in Dublin, it was decided that the Irish Volunteers and their Republican supporters in Belfast should attend the funeral. I think that Denis McCullough and some others of the leading Belfast Republicans must have been in prison at the time as I had to take over the organisation of the journey of the Belfast contingent to Dublin. The organisation of a large party from Belfast to the funeral was looked on as good propaganda. When the idea was first mooted it looked as if the project was likely to be disappointing. However, it turned out a huge success as a very large party travelled.

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It was at the O'Donovan Rossa funeral that I was first approached to join the I.R.B. Cathal O'Shannon introduced me to a Dublin man named Stritch. ~~It was felt at the time that a lot of the success attending our efforts in Belfast in organising for the funeral was due to my hard work in the matter and during our conversation with this man Stritch I was asked to join the I.R.B.~~ I was sworn in as a member. I don't know much about the I.R.B. I was merely a member of the organisation and it did not appear to have much usefulness from my point of view.

About the end of 1915 or early in 1916 James Connolly came to Willowbank (Huts) to lecture the Irish Volunteers on street fighting. I remember I was in charge that evening and it was my duty to introduce Mr. Connolly. When I was doing so I expressed the opinion that we in Belfast had little to learn about the subject of the lecture. Mr. Connolly remarked that he was not proposing to lecture on the technique of stone throwing. I mention this incident as I believe that the main purpose of the lecture was to impress on the Belfast Volunteers the imminence of an armed rising taking place. I know that it looked so to me at the time.

Nearing Easter Week 1916, I felt like, I suppose, all other volunteers that something serious was afoot. Denis McCullough was in charge in Belfast and he was apparently in close touch with some headquarters. He did not give us any information as to the plans. I had no information as to the purpose of our journey to Co. Tyrone, on Good Friday 1916. We got orders to mobilise on Holy Saturday and and be prepared to take part in manoeuvres in Co. Tyrone over the weekend. On Holy Saturday I and a number of others took the train in Belfast for Dungannon and from there proceeded to Coalisland. We made ourselves comfortable in Coalisland on Saturday night in a big barn or outhouse. We seemed to be waiting for some orders or some person to turn up and explain what we were to do. I didn't see Denis McCullough there. I don't even remember going to Mass on Easter Sunday morning. I don't remember any Tyrone Volunteers

joining us on Sunday morning. There were rumours going around on Sunday morning fairly early that the Rising was being called off by Eoin MacNeill. We must have known at the time that we were mobilised for a rising. Looking back on the matter I now feel that we must have known from we got our mobilisation orders on Good Friday that a rising was planned in Co. Tyrone and on Sunday morning in Coalisland there was no doubt in one's mind that a rising was about to take place as part of a general plan. When the rumours concerning the calling off the rising became persistent I think we all felt that our proper course was to return to Belfast. I don't remember any meeting being held to decide that we should return. I don't remember seeing Denis McCullough in Coalisland. If there was a meeting called I was sufficiently important to be asked to it. If a meeting was held it was an informal one, held perhaps on the roadside, and if I was present I cannot remember it.

We marched from Coalisland to Cookstown. We took a train in Cookstown for Belfast. I can't remember if we left the train at some of the small stations near Belfast or not.

I remember seeing Denis McCullough with his hand bandaged where he had accidentally shot himself whilst cleaning his revolver. I can't remember if it was on Sunday or some days later I saw him.

I was arrested early in May 1916. I was taken to Crumlin Road Prison, Belfast, then to Richmond Bks. Dublin, and later sent across to Frongoch Camp in Wales. I was in Frongoch Camp up to ~~May~~ 1916. when I was released.

Signed: James Lynch

Date: 23.3.49.

Witness: John Trebov

23/3/49.

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