

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 263

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S.263.....

Witness

Mr. Thomas Slater,
38 Offaly Road,
Cabra, Dublin.

Identity

Member of I.R.B. Dublin, 1905 -

Subject

- (a) National activities 1905-1916;
- (b) Howth Gun-Running 1914;
- (c) Funeral of O'Donovan Rossa 1915;
- (d) Jacob's Factory, Easter Week 1916.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

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BUREAU OF MILITARY INTELLIGENCE 1913-21

BURO STAIRS MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 263

STATEMENT BY THOMAS SLATER.

38 Offaly Road, Cabra, Dublin.

I joined the I.R.B. in 1905. I was attached to the Croke Hurling Club at the time. A brother of mine, Michael, was taken into the organisation about 1904, and it was through him that I first made contact with Peadar Kearney. During a conversation about nationality with Peadar and a few others he tried to find out exactly what my opinions were on national matters. I gave them to him as best I could, and eventually about August, 1905, he approached me through my brother Michael and asked me would I be prepared to join the I.R.B.

There was one peculiar difficulty about my joining the organisation, i.e. I was not quite 18 at the time, and furthermore I was not born in this country. Neither was I the son of an Irishman as my father was Scotch and I was born in Edinburgh. Those points were brought up, but as my brother was well known, they eventually decided that they could take the risk of my joining the organisation. I was sworn in by Mick Costelloe and joined the Henry Joy McCracken Circle. The Centre of the Circle at that time was Seumas Doyle. After about a year or two the Circle split up and Peadar Kearney became Centre of the new Circle.

I am not certain whether it was this new Circle was the Henry Joy McCracken Circle or the former one.

Other members of this Circle were - Comerford;

Jack MacArdle; A number of men from the Broadstone Station who were railwaymen. O'Neill was one of them.

The organisation started an intensive campaign about that time in recruiting members. The principal places from where they got them were from hurling and football clubs.

One of the principal ways of recruiting was to get talking among two or three who were members with another fellow to see what he was like. After that his background and all that could be found out about him was thoroughly investigated before he was even approached. Before a man would be approached he had to be proposed at the Circle and if anybody had any objection he nearly always was dropped for some time anyway until other arrangements had been made. This was carried out in a very thorough manner - there was what was called a Secretary's Board. Each name was proposed at the different Circles, was brought to the Secretary's Board and was read out there. The Secretary was usually a man who knew a good deal about the hurling clubs and whose duty it was to see whether that name should be circulated to the Circles or not. His name was then circulated. If he was a well known

man he was accepted; in nearly all other cases his name was circulated through the Circles to see if there was any objection to his coming in.

There was one definite rule in the organisation, i.e. no person from one Circle could approach a person of another Circle and discuss any matters in connection with the organisation with him. There was one other rule in the organisation which at a later date, appears most extraordinary, nobody was allowed to have in his possession any arms. It was an old rule agreed in 1882, as far as I could ever gather, and it was to prevent the authorities if ever they found a man with arms in his possession from being arrested. It was really a safeguard for the organisation. This rule continued up to about 1910.

About 1910 there was a big meeting held in the Clontarf Town Hall at which there were delegates from America and other Centres of the organisation present. It was the only big meeting that I had ever been at. All the members of the Dublin Circles were there.

The purpose of the meeting was for a lecture by a priest who had come from East Africa. I cannot remember his name, but he gave a short lecture on republicanism. At that meeting Tom Clarke, Red Jack O'Hanlon, Fred Allen, Pat Daly and others

whom I did not know were present. This may have been a stimulus to what was going to happen in a very short time. At this time the organisation was being more or less re-juvenated, young men were becoming Centres. Men like Seán MacDermott were coming to the fore; Bulmer Hobson, Cathal Brugha - they were becoming very active. All these men were more or less vetted by the head Tom Clarke and he found out exactly what each man was worth. Tom Clarke was the driving spirit all through of the new movement in the organisation. About this time an order came out for the purchase of arms. Everybody was to pay a certain amount per month to purchase revolvers and any other kind of arms.

It was about this time that a split occurred. The older people in the movement like Red Jack O'Hanlon, Fred Allen and others of the older men resigned from the organisation, and it is my considered opinion that this split was caused because of these men not agreeing with the policy of the new younger element in the organisation. There were a couple of men like Mark Cummings and someone else came over here at this time as delegates from Clan na Gael in America. The police were very much upset and wanted to know exactly what they were doing here, and they actually followed them everywhere they went. Another man named Keating came over from America too. These men came for the purpose of seeing how far the organisation of the I.R.B.

had progressed.

About 1911 the Fianna came into being and the I.R.B. organisation took a great interest in it. They ordered as many of the younger members ^{as possible/} to attend classes in Camden Street where the Fianna were in existence, for the purpose of learning drill. The Instructors at those classes were, Con Colbert, Éamon Martin and Seán Heuston. The younger members of the I.R.B. attended those classes fairly regularly, and in 1913 when the organisation of the Volunteers was formed, those men were ordered to hand in their names to the Volunteer Organisation, and being well up in drill, were given positions of authority in the Volunteers.

The organisation of the Irish Volunteers was formed on 25 November, 1913. All the I.R.B. were instructed to be present at the meeting and to sign the enrolment forms. Tom Clarke signed the enrolment form of the Volunteers at the meeting. Eoin MacNeill was also present.

I joined "C" Company, 2nd Battalion. The first officer was Tom MacDonagh. I was 1st Lieutenant and Bob Price was 2nd Lieutenant. The drill was held in 41 Parnell Square. The first Commandant of the 2nd Battalion was Tom MacDonagh. The Vice-Commandant was Tom Hunter. I was Adjutant when the Battalion was formed. Michael O'Hanrahan was Quartermaster.

The next thing was to get an outdoor drilling place, and through the good offices of the Capuchin Friars, Father Matthew Park was made available for outdoor drilling and for learning to shoot.

About this time or a little later it was decided to form a miniature rifle club and under the auspices of the Lord Roberts - and I think Eamon Ceannt was Secretary, I am not sure - it was decided that an application should be made to the Miniature Rifle Association of Great Britain to have the club enrolled and ask for some kind of a shield for competition. This was sent on with a very nice letter.

After the War broke out a letter was sent by the Association asking how the competition was getting on and hoping that the members would volunteer to fight for the cause of small nations. This was replied to in a letter by the Secretary. There was no indication that this would be complied with as all the members were too willing to fight for the right of small nations. What happened the trophy I cannot say, but it certainly never went back.

In 1914 it was decided that the Volunteers would try to get in some rifles and arrangements were made after a lot of heartbreaks. Erskine Childers agreed to bring them in his yacht. He would be on it himself, accompanied by his wife and

somebody else.

On July 25, 1914, I was sent for by Bulmer Hobson who was at the time Secretary of the Irish Volunteers. He was also Secretary of the I.R.B. He told me that there were rifles expected at Howth the following day and I was to get a car and round up four or five in order to get a boat to bring in the yacht. This was about 7 o'clock on Saturday evening.

I asked him was this an order from the I.R.B. or from the Volunteers as I definitely was I.R.B. still. He said it was a definite order from the Supreme Council and that I was to do it.

He asked me whom I could get. I told him I was not quite certain that I would let him know, as arrangements had to be made to get a taxi to bring us out. I got my brother Michael, Dinny O'Callaghan, Barney Mellows, and I think Cathal Brugha, who was in charge of us. We were to proceed to Howth on Sunday morning starting about 8 o'clock by taxi to contact some boatman who would bring us out to the yacht to Ireland's Eye. We got to Howth alright but to get a man to go out was impossible. There was only one of us armed with a .32 revolver and that was Cathal Brugha. When after a lot of persuasion we did succeed in getting a man to bring us out, just as we were getting into the boat the engine broke down and we were left on the pier. Nothing could be done only wait and see what Providence would

provide. We remained there then until about 11.50 when a contingent which had come out from the city by train, by order, came along the pier. I think it was about 12 o'clock at this time. The Volunteers had been ordered to proceed on a route march to Howth that morning and when the head of the column was seen coming into Howth the yacht appeared as if from nowhere from around the bend of the island and came in on its own power to the harbour.

When the yacht appeared the Volunteers were ordered to clear the pier immediately. Just as the column came on to the main street of Howth the yacht just came in to the harbour, and turned round. The coastguards came out to examine the yacht but they were held at bay. The Volunteers were ordered to come to the double to surround the pier in proper formation. The hatches were stripped and the rifles handed out one by one to the Volunteers. The ammunition was put on trucks and motor cars and taxis and driven in to the city. I marched back with the Volunteers, carrying a rifle.

When the column reached the corner of Malahide Road they were met by the military who ordered them to lay down their arms. A parley was immediately ordered by the officers, Commandants MacDonagh and Judge and one or two others, I think Commandant Daly ^{was one of them.} went up to the officer in charge and asked what

authority they had to stop them. They said they were ordered by the Castle to stop them; they wanted the rifles. They were told they would not have them. The Volunteers formed right across the road. While the parley was going on the Volunteers were ordered to go down the side roads and disappear. That was carried out until there was only about a company of the Volunteers left. These were ordered to clear away and not to let their rifles be taken.

I was also at the Kilcoole gun-running. We went out in motor lorries. I and Liam Clarke were detailed as outposts on the road leading to Ballygannon Strand where the rifles were taken out of the vessel and brought on motor lorries into town. The operation lasted until about 7 or 8 o'clock in the morning as it was an all-night affair.

The next thing of note was the split which occurred in the Volunteers in 1915. After the foundation of the Volunteers the Parliamentary Party of the United Irish League were very much upset over the developments, and decided that they would have to be given representation on the Volunteer Executive. This led to a great deal of discussion as the I.R.B. were definitely opposed to the United Irish League or any of their representatives being on the Executive of the Volunteers. However, as they did not wish to antagonise the

people, who at that time were great supporters of the United Irish League, the I.R.B. decided to sanction a certain number of nominees of the Parliamentary Party of the United Irish League to be admitted on the Volunteer Executive. This was early in 1916.

When the War broke out John Redmond and his party supported a recruiting campaign here for the British Army and wished to bring pressure to bear on the Volunteers to join. This was opposed strenuously by the original Volunteers who were the I.R.B. mainly, and as no compromise could be agreed to on the issue they organised a split from top to bottom. In Dublin we lost sixty per cent and in the country about seventy-five per cent. My own Company, i.e. "C" Company, 2nd Battalion, was not greatly affected by the split; in fact we only lost about a dozen men. The split was one of the greatest blessings because the Executive knew exactly where they stood and on whom they could rely if, and when, any call to arms was decided on.

The main activities during 1915 were drilling, manoeuvres, and learning the rifle. Some time after the split, I do not know how long, Battalions were formed. I was appointed Adjutant of the 2nd Battalion.

The outstanding event in 1915 was the funeral of O'Donovan Rossa. The Volunteers took charge of the funeral

arrangements. He was lying-in-state in the City Hall. An all-night guard of honour was put over his remains. I was in charge of the guard of honour on the night before the funeral.

The next item of interest was a parade of all Volunteers in College Green at which Eoin MacNeill took the salute. This was, I think, a prelude to 1916.

The first indication I got that something was going to happen was a kind of a warning that things were beginning to move very rapidly. This was about January, 1916.

Peadar Kearney, who at this time was fairly high in the I.R.B., hinted to be prepared for eventualities as things were beginning to get hot with the police. The Citizen Army were becoming very active and Jim Larkin had taken a place just at the back of Father Matthew Park as Headquarters, and had erected a rifle range where ball ammunition could be fired. The Volunteers were determined to use this rifle range. Ammunition and rifles began to come in in great numbers.

About a fortnight before Easter Week, 1916, Tom MacDonagh at a Battalion Officers' meeting mentioned casually that things were beginning to look up and told us to be prepared for any eventuality.

About this time a seizure of arms took place which made the police very active around Father Matthew Park, i.e. a week

before Easter Week, 1916. MacDonagh gave a warning that no action whatever was to be taken against the police at the time. The Volunteers remained in Father Matthew Park but the police did not persist in raiding it.

There was an ordinary mobilisation order issued for Easter Sunday. All units of the Volunteers in the city and country were ordered to parade.

Rumours started flying around on Good Friday that something was happening. There was a great feeling of anxiety around Good Friday and Easter Saturday as to what was going to happen. On Sunday when the "Sunday Independent" appeared, the bomb-shell burst.

On seeing MacNeill's order in the paper I immediately contacted Tom Hunter, Vice-Commandant, at Father Matthew Park. This was about 9 o'clock in the morning. Hunter said, "the best thing we can do is to wait for orders. Come down and we'll try and contact MacDonagh". MacDonagh came down to Father Matthew Park before we had left and said there was to be a meeting of the Executive to be held in a short time in Liberty Hall, and that meanwhile to remain at home and await instructions. That, of course, was a great disappointment to a big crowd, but it was the only solution at the time.

Tom Hunter said the moment he got any instructions he would let me know. About 7 o'clock that night Hunter came to my house and said he wanted me to go for a bit of a stroll with him. We went out and by appointment we met Leo Henderson and the three of us went over to Jacob's Factory. During our journey across - we walked across - Tom Hunter informed us that there definitely would be something doing on the next morning, that instructions would be issued, and that we were to hold ourselves in readiness, that he knew we would have something to do with that portion of the city and he was going over to have a look at it.

We got over to Jacob's, had a walk round and a look round. We left Jacob's and came home to contact MacDonagh as MacDonagh had told Hunter to do. Hunter got in touch with MacDonagh. I went home.

The next morning, about 9 o'clock, Tom Hunter himself called at my house. He had written instructions from Tom MacDonagh to mobilise the Battalion at Father Matthew Park and that the men of the Battalion were to get to Stephen's Green before 12 o'clock. They were not to march there as a unit but to proceed individually and in groups. Hunter left immediately and I proceeded to Father Matthew Park where I was to meet him as soon as I could. I then went round and mobilised the

Battalion and gave them the instructions I was given.

When I got to Father Matthew Park between 10.30 and 11 o'clock Tom Hunter was there, and as the men of the Battalion began to arrive they were sent to Stephen's Green. This, of course, led to confusion. Hunter and I had definite instructions to be at Stephen's Green at 11 o'clock. We remained in Father Matthew Park as long as we could. We then took a hackney car to my house, took the stuff from my house and brought it over on the hackney car to Stephen's Green, leaving instructions in Father Matthew Park that the balance of the men were to follow us on as soon as they arrived. As far as I remember, Tom Weafer was left in charge at Father Matthew Park when we departed.

Except for the senior officers, nobody was made acquainted with the plans. I was definitely told on Easter Monday, however, by Thomas MacDonagh at Jacob's, that the Bank of Ireland was not to be entered on account of its sentimental associations.

When we arrived at MacDonagh's Headquarters at Stephen's Green he informed us of the general plan, which was for the main body to take over Jacob's Factory with outposts

in Fumbally Lane and Camden Street, presumably to link up with the Citizen Army who appeared to be trying to get to Portobello Barracks or to prevent anything from coming down.

He told us one of the places which we were to occupy was Trinity College, and an officer named Paddy Walsh of "D" Company was detailed for this job. As, however, the numbers which could be spared from the main body at Stephen's Green were so small, Tom MacDonagh decided to call off the taking of Trinity College as it would have meant a heavy loss of life with no hope of getting in. All that we could have spared for this job would be about twenty men.

We were told at MacDonagh's Headquarters that the Telephone Exchange was to be taken over. Unfortunately this operation was not carried out and when other arrangements were made to take it, it was too late.

On arrival at Stephen's Green we contacted Tom MacDonagh at Headquarters and he gave us the general outline of the plan as I have mentioned above. When we arrived there were five men of the Battalion there.

Between 11 and 11.30 the Volunteers started to arrive in good numbers until the number reached about 100.

About 11.45 a gentleman came down from the city and stood

looking on. He was at once recognised as Major McBride. He was not in uniform. He approached Tom MacDonagh and asked him could he join up with them as Tom Clarke had sent him across. Tom MacDonagh was only too delighted to have a man of his experience with him and told him so.

According as the Volunteers arrived they formed into their own Companies under their officers. They carried ammunition with them as they arrived. Volunteers from other Battalions who did not appear to know where to report and were in uniform or otherwise and had rifles or shotguns, were told they could fall in with us. At about seven minutes to 12 we marched off and arrived at Jacob's Factory at 12 o'clock.

On arrival at 12 o'clock MacDonagh gave the order to get into Jacob's. As they knocked on the door no one answered. There was only one alternative, that was to break in. A sledge was procured by some means or another and Mick McDonnell and one or two others proceeded to break the lock. When we had broken in some of the employees who appeared to be on duty at the time, asked us what authority we had for breaking in and he was told very gently and politely that the best thing he could do was to put on his hat

and coat and get out as quickly as he could and anyone else in the building to get out also as there might be trouble with the military and nobody except Volunteers were allowed to be in the factory.

About half a dozen Cumann na mBan girls accompanied us from Stephen's Green to Jacob's, including Sarah Kealy, Mrs. Maud Price (Máire Ní Síbhlaigh), Kathleen Lane and a Miss Conroy. I forget the rest of the names.

We got into Jacob's and immediately we were set to barricade ourselves at the windows. That was very easy on the upper portion because there were flour bags, but the other portion where there were stained-glass windows, had to be broken. MacDonagh had his office on the main floor. Tom Hunter and a detachment was ordered to go down to New Street and Fumbally Lane to hold that portion. That was the only outpost we put out on that day.

Shortly after 3 o'clock a military detachment came down, presumably from Portobello, along Camden Street. When they arrived at the top of Bishop Street they were fired on by the Volunteers from Jacob's and they promptly retreated.

Nothing else of importance happened on Monday evening or Monday night except the arrival of Volunteers from time to time. We did not hear much firing going on.

Tuesday morning was just a matter of posting the men to the different posts and assigning them to their duties. That morning a check was made on the provisions and it was found that there was plenty of flour and ordinary provisions which would last. There was no vegetables or meat. A party was detailed to go and get meat and vegetables which were very easily procured because the majority of the people in the shops around were only too willing to give them.

On Tuesday also we sent out outposts to Byrne's and Delahunts further up Camden Street, the idea being to make contact with anybody who was holding Portobello Bridge as the Citizen Army were supposed to be in occupation of the houses in the vicinity of that bridge.

I forgot to mention that on Monday night it was decided to withdraw the outposts from Fumbally Lane because they were in a dangerous position and no useful purpose was being served; they were attacked on all sides by civilians.

Everything was quiet on Tuesday night. There were some alarms, all definitely false, because Volunteers were sent out, but not very far, as we did not know exactly what the position was outside. Couriers had been sent from a.n.d to the G.P.O., but the last message we got from the G.P.O. was on Wednesday.

On Wednesday the firing started in real earnest; I think it was about mid-day. Any other firing before this was really desultory. In the evening sentries were increased and the outposts were not drawn from Camden Street as it was thought that they could withdraw if they were forced to. Unfortunately that did not happen. Firing continued all through the night. During all this firing we were not engaged. A Volunteer came down to the Headquarters from one of the posts to say that there appeared to be a great fire raging somewhere on the north side of the city. Major MacBride was there at the time, and his reply was "I think, my boy, you better send for the Fire Brigade".

Another incident was - some time Major MacBride was told that a peculiar yellow smoke was seen over towards the Four Courts. Major MacBride immediately got up to the tower of the building to have a look to where this smoke could be seen, and turning to MacDonagh said: "My God!, they are firing lyddite shells". That was the only thing which seemed to upset MacBride.

Nothing of note took place on Wednesday or Wednesday night, but the firing was continuous.

On Thursday or Friday, I am not sure which, we sent out a patrol of about twelve men under the command of Lt. Denny O'Riordan to try and make contact with other units or find out exactly the disposition of the enemy. On returning, fire was opened on them from Harcourt Street and, I think, from Grafton Street, and a Volunteer named O'Grady was shot. They carried him into Jacob's, and on examination it was found that he was seriously wounded. He was brought over to the Adelaide Hospital and was taken in, but he died the following day. He was a young married man.

When the patrol arrived back they reported that they failed to make contact with any other unit of Volunteers, and they also reported that they were more or less compelled to come back as they were being fired on.

On Wednesday or Thursday a few Citizen Army men arrived in Jacob's having fought their way from Portobello Bridge. It might have been about this time that the outposts in Byrnes and Delahunts were caught. One of the outposts, a young man, I cannot remember his name, was shot right through the lung and left for death on the street. After some time military officers came along and ordered his removal to

Portobello. The wounded man was removed to Portobello and he recovered. This patrol of Citizen Army consisted of about ten.

On their arrival at Jacob's they were fed. They expressed a desire to get in touch with the Citizen Army who were holding Stephen's Green (College of Surgeons). The officer-in-charge decided he was not going to stay at Jacob's and I gather they actually succeeded in joining up with their comrades in Stephen's Green.

About this time word was sent from the College of Surgeons to us that they were very badly off for provisions. We decided to send round provisions and asked for Volunteers to bring them round as we did not know exactly how the situation stood at the time. They got through alright with the provisions. Among them was Jack Twomey.

On Thursday or Friday night there was a general alarm and everybody was rushed to the barricade where it was thought the attack would be made; that was one of the big gates of the factory, but nothing occurred.

Various rumours then began to trickle in. The people who had been very hostile at the beginning of the week had turned completely round and were giving us any information

they could get. The rumours were so prevalent that MacDonagh brought the officers round and told them not to pay any attention to them. It was fairly well known at the time that things were bad. The fires and firing had been fierce since early on Thursday and I think about Saturday morning the firing appeared to die down although the fires were still burning. A rumour came then that a surrender was being arranged but no confirmation came to Jacob's up to that day.

All day on Saturday rumours were continuing, and we had not been in action since Monday.

On Sunday morning Father Augustine and Father Aloysius came to Jacob's to inform us that Pearse had surrendered. MacDonagh decided to go with the two priests to ascertain the truth for himself. He would not surrender until he got definite orders. Meanwhile he told every man that could get away as there was no use of lives being lost. Everybody that could get out. There was a good deal of confusion and a lot of recrimination that we were surrendering without having been in action at all. MacDonagh left and a good lot of us cleared out and got away. That was the last time I saw MacDonagh.

Then the surrender came. I managed to get home and was never

arrested.

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NO. W.S. 263 SIGNED

WITNESS

M. Bonner, Capt.

DATE

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