ORIGINAL

ROINN COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 303

Witness

Mrs. Josephine MacNeill,
3 Fitzwilliam Square,
Dublin.

Identity

Member of Cumann na mBan
1917 - 19 21.

Subject

(a) National associations and activities 1914-1921;

(b) Duties as member of Executive of Cumann na mBan 1918-1921.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

File No. S.1421.

Form B.S.M. 2.

ORIGINAL

Statement by Mrs. Josephine McNeill,

3, Fitzwilliam Square, Dublin.

I came to University College about 1913. I was living at Dominican Hall and attending lectures at University College, Dublin.

One day in 1914 coming out of lectures I remember seeing a man older than ourselves with a wide round hat. It was 'Ginger' O'Connell. I made his acquaintance and on a subsequent occasion he informed me that on the outbreak of war he had deserted from the American Army as he felt that the time was opportune to return and help organise resistance against the British in his own land. At this time he was an organiser for the Volunteers and was constantly at No. 2 Dawson Street. I remember he was frequently followed by detectives with whose faces I became very familiar. We became very friendly and I saw a lot of him during 1914-15. He talked to me about the Volunteers and he frequently spoke to me about the two tendencies that prevailed among the Executive of the Volunteers. He wished that Eoin McNeill would attend more frequently so as to counteract the influence of a small section that had the definite purpose of rushing a Rising which he felt militarily could have no success. He was afraid that their mystical view of the need for a blood sacrifice would bring about a premature clash with the English which would be futile and disastrous as it would waste this opportunity for advancing the cause of Irish freedom while England was at war and would cause the Volunteers to be disbanded, the leaders to be executed and would put a premature end to the military movement for resistance in that generation. His

/was

was essentially a military mind. He was a convinced revolutionary, but he thought always on technical lines and militarily speaking he could only sympathise with a policy that offered a reasonable prospect of success. 'Ginger' with McNeill, the O'Rahilly, Hobson and others were opposed to the idea of a blood sacrifice as such. They were of the opinion that the Volunteer movement was growing stronger every day and that they should continue to build it up and let circumstances develop before adopting an aggressive policy. 'Ginger' used to talk of that section half banteringly and half ruefully as the 'Army of Destiny'. He had a great admiration for the character and ideals of the individuals who held these views and never criticised them adversely as men, but he thought that from the practical military point of view their ideas offered no prospect of success. There was, therefore, apparently a fundamental cleavage in temperament and point of view. Pearse, McDonagh and Plunkett were the names he mentioned in connection with the other point of view which he looked upon as a sort of mystical patriotism. He never mentioned the name of James Connolly or the Citizen Army nor did he at any time previous to Easter Week refer to the I.R.B. I was always struck by his remark that "When Eoin McNeill came he was always head and shoulders above the others in debate and the arguments he put forward had a steadying effect and seemed to unite the Executive on the lines of building up the Movement on national lines and to restrain the impetuosity that was leading the more advanced section in the direction of a premature Rising. All through 1915 these ideas were exercising and worrying him and in

/conversation

conversation with me he adverted frequently to the divided outlook as he feared that the good work achieved would be undone. His was not a poetic temperament and to him the mystical idea of patriotism was antipathetic.

Although we discussed all these things in a general way, he was really very reticent about details. About ten or twelve days before the Rising I went to stay with my friend, Mrs. Joseph Connolly, in Belfast and I was quite out of touch with 'Ginger' during that time. It was in Belfast I became aware of the sharply mounting tension - I had felt nothing of this before I left Dublin. There was great excitement, confusion and bewilderment in Belfast. People seemed to be lacking in precise knowledge of what was to happen. They discussed what was the significance of the Sunday Parade; the consensus of opinion was that it meant a Rising. There was constant coming and going to the house of Dinny McCullough. I also remember excited discussions on the whole situation and wondering what was taking place in Dublin and the South; it was expected that something would take place. At no time was there any suggestion of military action in Belfast. The places mentioned as centres of action were Dublin and Dungannon.

On Saturday morning, to the best of my recollection, Joe Connolly set off for Dublin to get more exact information and to stay for the Rising if it should take place. From the discussions in Belfast I concluded, as an observer, that the policy of these in the Volunteer Executive in favour of an immediate Rising had carried the day and that it would be supported by all. We felt surprised and felt it was something of an anti-climax when Joe Connolly came back on the Sunday night and told us of

/the

the meeting in Seamus Ó Ceallaigh's house which showed that there was a sharp split among the leaders on the subject of the Rising and that Eoin McNeill had countermanded the parade. I cannot remember any further details of that meeting although he gave us a full account of it at the time. Colm O'Loughlin arrived, I think, on the Sunday and stayed during the week. He gave us a detailed account of the Ballykissane incident. I know he was a bearer of the McNeill message but I don't know whether it was to Belfast. There was a feeling of uncertainty as we realised that the split was definite among the leaders and that some would obey McNeill and some would follow the other leaders into a rebellion. There was a feeling of general sadness at the split in the ranks of what was already a very small minority in the country.. We feared that small isolated actions would take place and prove abortive. We were of opinion that in general the McNeill view would prevail.

During the fighting in Easter Week we had no more information than the newspapers could supply. The general feeling was one of great admiration and sympathy for those who had gone into the Rebellion. In the circle in which I was there was, however, no tendency to condemn McNeill's step as the circumstances seemed so much against a successful rising.

The next thing I remember is visiting the prisoners in Kilmainham where we were kept ages waiting before we were brought in to see them. We had all sorts of forms to fill and in the end the prisoners were marched down in military formation inside the high barbed wire on the outside of which

/we

we stood. They all came out and recognised their own visitors and there was a clamour of exchange of greetings and conversation. I have a distinct recollection of Terry McSwiney whom I knew only slightly. His was a beautiful distinctive face with a look as if predestined for some unusual fate. There was an oldish bearded man from Kildare, I think, who evidently had no visitor. I spoke to him. He told me that when the tea was brought in a bucket no vessels were given to drink from and they had to plunge their heads in the bucket to drink. After some efforts on my part and the co-operation of a decent English officer, whose name I can't remember, I was allowed to see 'Ginger' O'Connell separately in some sort of barrack room. The officer sat there the whole time. When 'Ginger' had gone the officer, in showing me out, spoke with the greatest respect of the men of Easter Week. He understood from the quality of the prisoners that they were men of high character and motive and many of them of superior education and not the riff-raff ... they were represented by the English and Irish press. In some way I find a persistent association in my mind between this officer and Robert Barton and I am inclined to think that he mentioned his name and his reactions at the time.

Somehow or other we got wind of the hour the prisoners were to be taken to the boat and groups of sympathisers, including myself, waited for ages on the Quays. After some hours our patience was rewarded by seeing the prisoners march down - at least a few hundred of them - strongly guarded by soldiers with fixed bayonets in front, in the rear and at each side. I recognised 'Ginger' and many others.. We ran along beside the line

/of

of soldiers guarding them on the outside and kept up a continuous conversation with the prisoners in the ranks. All - both prisoners and their sympathisers - were in the highest spirits and only the soldiers looked a little nervous and depressed owing to the surge of popular sympathy. When the prisoners were embarked, we stood on the Quayside and sang patriotic songs.

I remember 'Ginger' told me that in Richmond Barracks he saw the detective Hoey, who had been constantly stationed outside No. 2 Dawson Street and regularly tracked him - frequently when in my company - crossing the Barrack Square. He called out to him - "Damn you, Hoey, didn't they get you? They will yet."

I was teaching in a Convent in Kiltimagh, County Mayo, when he was released and came home to Sligo. He came to see me and spent the day. Next day, a burly policeman from the local barracks, called to see the Reverend Mother. He was inquiring about the movements of Mr. O'Connell and asked to see me. He wanted information about him but I had none to give. I stated it was a private visit. I was lucky that the Reverend Mother was a broad-minded woman. When she was told I was in the company of a dangerous man and asked/could she give any infomation about our movements, she replied that she never concerned herself with the movements of her teachers outside school hours.

As 1917 went on I assumed that we had heard the last of the resistance movement in our generation and that we had no alternative to accepting military defeat. Therefore, when I heard that the Volunteers were again drilling under Dick Mulcahy I felt wonder and awe that they had the /courage

courage to begin their activities again after the exemplary punishment given to the leaders and in view of the strong military occupation.

My next job - in the autumn of 1917 - was in the Ursuline Convent, Thurles. By this time things had reached a point between 'Ginger' and myself that we had either to marry or break. Marriage was impossible as there was nothing to marry on, although 'Ginger's' father was well off. He completely disapproved of 'Ginger's' patriotic activities. 'Ginger' had sometimes very strong personal idiosycrasies which could be trying to a woman's taste. We agreed amicably to let things drop.

I joined Cumann na mBan in Thurles at the time of the conscription crisis. The Movement was again gathering strength amongst the young people. Both Griffith and Sean T. O'Kelly came to deliver lectures to overflowing meetings. Griffith's was a cold patriotic speech full of logic that gave us little chance to applaud until the burst of enthusiasm that broke out at the end. Noel Lemass too, I think, came and addressed a meeting.

Volunteers and Cumann na mBan demonstrated in military formation in the public square.

At the height of the conscription scare Pierse McCann, with whom I had become friendly, proposed to me and after a period of indecision I accepted him. It was clear that if England insisted on imposing Conscription there would be a fight and in that case we would marry immediately. They would take to the hills and fight a guerilla war. That crisis passed and we were engaged.

/On

On the 10th May, 1918 I promised to marry him. Some time after this I heard a woman on the road say that De Valera was arrested and later in the day the Archbishop of Cashel came to the Convent and broke the news to me that Pierse had been arrested. These arrests were in connection with the German Plot; the men were never brought to trial. Lord Wimborne denied all knowledge of such a plot. Pierse's brother and father came to bring me out to the house. This was the first time I met his mother as Pierse's fiancée. She was weeping. She told me that Pierse had tried to escape. When the police came to arrest him early in the morning, he asked leave to go upstairs to dress. He got out of the window and ran up the wooded hillside and got up in a tree with thick foliage. As soon as he was missed the police ranged about the grounds looking for him. Unfortunately Pierse's dog leaped and barked about the tree, which called the attention of one policeman who located him. Pierse appealed to him as an Irishman to go his way and not pretend to see him. But the policeman blew his whistle and the others came and arrested him. He was in his stockinged feet, not having had time to dress properly. He was brought to Gloucester gaol and when the bad flu was raging several of them caught it. About 7 or 8 of them were brought to a Nursing Home. In March one evening we got a wire that he had got pneumonia and his father and mother and I decided to travel immediately. We went to see him in the Home but were allowed to stay only a short time. He was conscious. In the middle of that night a call came to the hotel to come at once to the Nursing Home.

/We

We found him delirious and he did not recognise us again. 'Ginger' O'Connell, Desmond Fitzgerald and others were next door and listening to him raving all night. One of the Doctors in the Home was, I think, Dr. Bell, a brother of Alan Bell, who was afterwards killed in Dublin. He called me apart and said the Government was as responsible for Pierse's death as if they murdered him. He said he had warned the Authorities that after such long confinement these men would offer no resistance to this dangerous germ and that there would be deaths. He was a singularly fair-minded man, without bitterness, very kind and sympathetic unlike the senior prison doctor, named Ahern who must have been of Irish extraction. He was forbidding, showed no sympathy, and was disliked by the prisoners. Pierse died that night and was brought the next night to Ireland. At Crewe, when we changed trains, we found a crowd of prisoners who had been released from other prisons. They were greeting each other and rejoicing in their release. When they found we were there they came up to us, their moods changed and they were full of sympathy for us. Next day, 7th March, there was High Mass at the Pro-Cathedral which was crammed with people. As we emerged behind the coffin there was a murmur of mingled indignation and grief from the crowds in the street. The air seemed to vibrate with the surging sympathy of the people. Father Michael O'Flanagan travelled down to Thurles with us in the carriage. The McCanns, who were very orthodox and conservative Catholics, were a little reserved with him because he was at logger-heads with his Bishop. I found him a congenial and comforting companion and chatted with him. One of his

/remarks

remarks during the journey in reference to his own difficult position was "I feel something of the elation of the martyrs." Though I was very conscious of his charm and agreed with his political convictions, I sensed a slight lack of balance and a touch of exaggeration in his attitude.

The coffin was placed in the Cathedral at Thurles and there was an immense funeral which went past his house to the family grave in Boherleahan Churchyard and about four miles from Cashel.

Pierse was a most devout Catholic with the intense and simple faith of a child. Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin had as much reality for him as his father and mother. His faith was reminiscent of the religious poems of the people that have come down to us in Irish. When he proposed to me, which he did in Irish, he said he had always prayed to the Blessed Virgin for a wife and he hoped I was the answer to his prayer. He had learnt Irish, having been stirred to an interest in it by a remarkable man called Victor Collins who used to come and stay with him in Ballyowen. His mother told me how Pierse used to stay up at night listening to him talking about Ireland, its history, language and traditions. This was, of course, utterly foreign to the people he associated with up to then, who were the well-off landed class and very anglicised and seóinín in their outlook, the fringe of the garrison. When Pierse associated himself with patriotic activities he was frowned on by these and socially boycotted, but this did not worry him. He felt he had

/gained

gained more than he had lost, especially the valued friends who worked with him in the National Movement. Pierse was a great rider to the hounds. He bred horses and at a time when Sinn Fein was regarded with contempt by the hunting and racing class who were closely associated with the English administration, he called a good horse bred by him 'Sinn Fein'. At the local hunt this horse ran away with everything and in due course Pierse entered the horse for Punchestown in April 1918, using the Sinn Fein colours, green, white and yellow. The horse was at the top of his form and the jockey appeared in his colours, but the horse was disqualified on a technical point by the stewards. They maintained that he was five minutes late in declaring him a runner, or some formality of the kind. Quite clearly they were determined that no horse with these colours would run. The race was won by a neighbour's horse which had on several occasions been left behind in the hunting field by Pierse's horse.

Pierse was a man of great gaiety and charm. His eye constantly twinkled. Prison life was like death to him as he told me himself. He was an outdoor man to whom freedom was the breath of life.

I stayed at home for a period after Pierse's death. At the end of 1919 or at the beginning of 1920 I came back to teach in Miss Gavan Duffy's school which was private and did not receive the benefit of the public grants. The school featured Irish very much and fostered a completely Irish outlook. This was a

/courageous

courageous undertaking on Miss Gavan Duffy's part and signified a new departure in Irish education. The Irish language was used, as far as possible, as the medium of conversation and, to some extent, of instruction. Our salaries were, of course, very small and Miss Gavan Duffy was at a serious personal loss. The capacity of the school was 70 - 80 day pupils and had to compete with schools that enjoyed the endowments from the Intermediate Board. The children of the leaders of the National Movement were well represented at the school. At that time I worked for the Gaelic League. I was a member of the National University Branch of Cumann na mBan. Working for the Prisoners' Dependants' Fund, I had charge of the collections in an area covered by the Stephens Green Parliamentary constituency. The contributions were generously given; they were the pennies of the poor in the tenements; there were weekly collections in shops; in fact we got regular support from the workers of all classes.

During the Black and Tan period I resided with Máirín McGavock at 51 Lower Beechwood Avenue. We had each a bedroom, but we gave one up to men on the 'run'. Máirín allowed me to share hers. Among those who stayed was Frank Gallagher who was at that time Editor of the Irish Bulletin, Desmond Fitzgerald who came to the house on 'Bloody Sunday' as his flat was near a house where a British officer had been killed. Desmond was working on the propaganda side and had nothing to do with the events of the day. His friends thought it advisable for him to get out of the area. The tension was extreme and he would undoubtedly have been in great danger. Ernie O'Malley also

/came

came at a later stage after his escape from Dublin Castle. He was in a poor condition of health and required nursing. Dan Donovan, who was Secretary to the Intelligence Officer, came to stay for some time. We were raided while he was there but we managed to bluff the raiders who had come on chance. My address had been found on a letter from some prisoner in Curragh Camp. Donovan gave a false name and produced a letter from the Prince of Wales. Máirín had compromising letters in her bag which she managed to conceal from the slightly tipsy officer. We also had a bit of home manufactured grenade buried in the garden. This had been brought by 'Ginger' after an ambush.

On one occasion when I was given despatches to carry to Dundalk and Belfast, to avert suspicion I dressed myself very grandly and took a first class ticket. In the carriage to Dundalk I got into conversation with a middle-aged man who assumed I must be on the English side. I glanced at some tin boxes he was carrying and saw they were addressed to the Governor of Mountjoy Gaol! When I arrived at Dundalk I found that the address I had to go to was in a humble quarter of the town where my smart attire made me conspicuous. However, I met the I.R.A. man and handed over my despatches to him and was hospitably entertained by him and his sister.

I heard it was likely I would be searched at Dundalk Station where there were women searchers. I was perturbed. However, I had the luck not to arouse suspicion at the railway station and got to Belfast. I went first to Mrs. Joseph Connolly's house which had been raided the night before and she was expecting another raid. It did

/not

not come off and I had the luck to hand over my despatches in safety.

Later on I was a member of the Executive of Cumann na mBan and co-operated in any way that was called for by the political and military machine. An important part of this was the propaganda work. We fed the men, and carried guns and ammunition occasionally for them. At no time was I involved directly in any violent action, as has sometimes been asserted about me.

This statement contains facts & opinions given faithfully by me as I remember them & set down in writing by Miss Kissane.

Signed: Josephine McNeill

Date: 15th October 1949

Witness: Sé Cuséin

Date: 15.10.49