

# ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

NO. W.S. 325

ROINN



COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 325

**Witness**

Very Rev. Eugene Canon Coyle, P.P.,  
Devenish,

Co. Fermanagh.

**Identity**

Associated with Irish Volunteers and  
I.R.B. Co. Tyrone 1914-1916;

Member of Sinn Fein 1918-1921.

**Subject**

- (a) Growth of Irish Volunteer Organisation  
in Co. Tyrone 1914-16, and preparations  
for Rising of Easter Week 1916;
- (b) Miscellaneous events of national importance  
1916-1921.

**Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness**

Nil

File No. S.1049

Form B.S.M. 2.

**ORIGINAL**STATEMENT OF REV. EUGENE CANON COYLE, P.P.,  
DEVENISH, CO. FERMANAGHA. POSITION IN CO. TYRONE 1914-1915.

1. I was a curate in Fintona Parish, Co. Tyrone, in 1914. Sir Edward Carson's Ulster Volunteers were well organised in Fintona and paraded the town carrying arms two or three times a week. Fintona is a Catholic town and I felt that the arming of the Ulster Volunteers was a great danger to the safety of the Catholic population. It struck me forcibly that if the Carsonite section of the population could with impunity ignore the law, the Catholic section should take similar action and provide the means to defend themselves against the organised and armed force brought into existence by the Carsonites.

2. At this time the Irish Volunteers were being organised over a great portion of the country north and south. The split between John Redmond's political followers and the section of the Nationalist opinion who were Sinn Fein in outlook had taken place. The position in the north of Ireland where the population include large percentages of Unionists made this split in the Nationalist forces a matter of grave danger to the Catholic population especially when the Unionist supporters predominated. I decided that the time had come when I should take definite steps to insure that the Catholic young men in Fintona would be equipped to defend themselves against the Orange threat.

B. VISIT TO THE O'RAHILLY AND PURCHASE OF RIFLES, 1914.

3. I went to Dublin and called on the O'Rahilly and explained to him my people's situation in Fintona and my determination to help, as far as I could possibly do it, in getting our people armed. I gave him a cheque out of my private means, which at the time were limited, for £150 for rifles for my parishioners. He supplied me with 60 rifles, a bayonet for each rifle and a supply of suitable ammunition. Those rifles etc. were packed in cases and were put on the train. I returned from Dublin and all

arrived safely in Fintona. There did not appear to be any danger at this time of arms or military equipment being searched for or seized during transit. Handling and shifting of war material was quietly carried out and, if the British authorities knew of it, they did not interfere. A few nights afterwards I had all the 60 rifles and equipment disposed of to the Fintona Volunteers at the price I paid for them and so got back my £150.

4. Shortly after this 60 young Fintona Volunteers paraded on the streets of our town all armed with serviceable rifles, each rifle having attached a fixed bayonet. At the time we got the rifles the Unionist Volunteers had only 40 rifles in Fintona and they had no bayonets for them, so they ceased parading on the streets.

C. MEETING WITH DR. P. McCARTAN AND THE START OF FRIENDSHIP - 1914.

5. My mission to the O'Rahilly in Dublin and the immediate success of my mission to him was responsible for Dr. McCartan coming to see me. Dr. McCartan was then medical officer of Gorteen Dispensary district. Dr. McCartan and I became great friends. I had great admiration for the work he was doing in organising the Volunteers and the I.R.B. all over the north of Ireland. In the peculiar situation of our Irish people in those early war years of 1914-15, I believed that defensive military preparation by our people was the keystone of our national wellbeing. I attended with Dr. McCartan all the principal meetings of the I.R.B. in Co. Tyrone. I was not an official member of the organisation; my priestly calling would not allow my joining an oath-bound secret society. I attended those meetings and in this way I hoped to give the country boys the feeling that they were working on the right lines by organising, arming and training for the defence of our country.

D. ATTENDANCE AT I.R.B. MEETINGS, TRAINING  
AND EQUIPPING VOLUNTEERS.

6. The principal places where I.R.B. meetings were held in Co. Tyrone were Omagh, Dungannon and Strabane. The R.I.C. were soon getting suspicious of our movements. Fr. O'Daly and I generally went together to those meetings and we were being 'shadowed' by R.I.C. men on most occasions. The police never actually interfered with us but when we travelled to any of those towns mentioned above, they would pick us up and keep us under observation until we would leave. Our whole routine from 1914 to 1916 was recruiting for the Volunteers, the procuring of arms and the training of the men in the use of arms. Dr. McCartan had a big practice as a doctor. He spent a lot of his own money in the purchase of arms and other military equipment. He used his motor car for Volunteer purposes. On 4 or 5 occasions I travelled with him to Dublin in his car and on each occasion he conveyed arms home with him.

7. During the years 1914-1916 I met Denis McCullough occasionally when he came to Co. Tyrone. He was generally accompanied by Dr. McCartan and Fr. O'Daly when I met him. He was very active in organising the Volunteers and was present I think at nearly all the I.R.B. meetings I attended in Co. Tyrone.

(D) INFORMED OF THE RISING BY DR. McCARTAN.

8. Some time before Easter Sunday 1916, Dr. McCartan told me that a Rising was contemplated. He had attended a meeting in Dublin at this time and was made aware of the exact date of the Rising. He told me that at the meeting where he got this information of the date of the Rising there was a difference of opinion. A small minority of the delegates expressed the opinion that the Rising should be postponed until the country was better organised, as in many counties there did not exist any organisation whatever. The date was however fixed.

9. Dr. McCartan on his return home from the meeting in Dublin at which the proposal to postpone the Rising was raised told me that the leaders in Dublin seemed to imagine that "Dublin was Ireland" - that if Dublin was well organised, their opinion was that all Ireland was likewise. The position in the north then was that in all areas except East and South Tyrone and Belfast city there was no organisation. In the south, with the exception of Dublin, Galway South and Wexford, there was little evidence of any effective organisation.

(E) COUNCIL OF WAR HELD AT BERAGH - EVENTS OF HOLY WEEK, 1916.

10. About Tuesday or Wednesday of Holy Week a Council of War was held at Beragh. D. McCullough, Dr. McCartan, Fr. O'Daly, myself and some others - I knew them by eyesight, I never was anxious to know men's names - attended. All the leaders were there. A document from P.H. Pearse was read to us setting out the plans for Belfast and Co. Tyrone Volunteers for the Rising during Easter Week. Our orders, as outlined in Pearse's document, were that the Belfast and Co. Tyrone men were to mobilise in Co. Tyrone and then "to march to the line of the Shannon with full equipment and commissariat and hold the line there". All the leaders there were strongly in opposition to this plan as it was considered not practicable or possible to carry out those plans. The country over which the Volunteers were ordered to march was not organised and was strongly held by hostile forces. The question of providing funds to sustain our forces on the march was overlooked. We had about 700 men available in Co. Tyrone in districts where the Volunteers were organised. All those boys were poor farmers' sons with little spare cash available to them, but ready - if properly led - to give a good account of themselves, and were prepared in 1916 to do their bit for Ireland.

12. I remember at this meeting an important officer whose name I can't now remember suggesting that all trains from Derry

to Dublin passing through our area carrying British military should be blown up. It was pointed out to him that such action would endanger the lives of innocent civilians travelling on the trains carrying the military. This suggested action was abandoned as it got no support from the other leaders.

On Saturday of Holy Week the Belfast men arrived in Co. Tyrone by train. Denis McCullough was also in Tyrone. On Sunday morning it was debated the possibility of taking the Belfast men home again. I remember a discussion taking place at which the proposal to march the Belfast men to Cookstown to entrain there for Belfast was discussed, and at which Mr. McCullough stated he would refuse to take the Belfast men to Cookstown except a priest accompanied them. Fr. O'Daly and I tossed up as to which of us would accompany them and I did so. This incident often amuses me when I think of it, as it proved that the spiritual precautions for the men during anticipated danger to their physical welfare was not being overlooked. Easter Week in Tyrone passed without any incident worth recording.

(F) NORA CONNOLLY'S VISIT TO CO. TYRONE.  
REMARKS ON HER BOOK.

13. I am aware that Nora Connolly O'Brien was in Co. Tyrone during part of Easter Week 1916. I don't remember that her activities there at that time had any special significance worth recording. I have read her book in which she deals with her visit to Co. Tyrone and in which she goes very far in casting blame on Dr. McCartan for what she calls the failure of the Rising in Tyrone in Easter Week. I consider her references to Dr. McCartan most unfair and uncalled for. Dr. McCartan, to my knowledge, and I knew him intimately all during the years 1914-1916, was a man who made great sacrifices, in money, physical hardship, loss of his time and opportunities, in his work of organising and preparing for the Rising. He was untiring in his efforts. He did everything he was asked to do willingly and I can safely say that all his thoughts during

those years were concerned with how best to prepare his area for the fight. Why specially condemn him for inactivity when in areas like Cork and Kerry with friendly populations, with better organisation, more men, more arms and better equipment, no action took place.

14. Dr. McCartan was entrusted by the Dublin headquarters with the job of taking the Republican <sup>Proclamation</sup> // to America. In order to do this, as he described to me on his return to Ireland after the successful carrying out of his mission, he had to travel to Liverpool and there have the proclamation sewn into the back of his shirt. He got papers forged for him as a seaman and joined an American boat as one of the crew. It was a sailing vessel and during the voyage a rope high up on one of the masts broke and he was ordered by one of the ship's officers to go up the vessel's rigging and splice the rope. The prospect of carrying out his orders was terrifying to a person not trained as a sailor and to refuse the officer's orders would entail suspicion and might endanger the safe custody and safe delivery of the document he carried. He forced himself to conquer his fear and did the job to receive the officer's compliments on its completion.

(G) GENERAL MAXWELL'S DEMANDS ON BISHOP OF CLOGHER.

15. Almost immediately after Easter Week 1916, General Maxwell, Commander of the British forces in Ireland, got in touch with Rev. Dr. McKenna, Bishop of Clogher, and demanded that Fr. O'Daly and I should be transferred by Dr. McKenna from our parishes in Co. Tyrone and sent to other parishes in Co. Monaghan. Dr. McKenna refused. Another insistent demand was made and he again refused. He only reluctantly transferred us when General Maxwell threatened our arrest. Fr. O'Daly was transferred to Ballybay, Co. Monaghan, and I was transferred to Clontibret, Co. Monaghan.

(H). ACTIVITIES IN SINN FEIN ORGANISATION IN  
CO. MONAGHAN, 1917-21.

16. When I got settled in my new parish of Clontibret I got active in the Sinn Fein organisation. I was not alone amongst the priests in Monaghan in this work. There was a great enthusiasm shown for the Sinn Fein policy in the political ideas of the Ireland of those days. The Redmondite party were slipping down the slope and losing the supporters all over the country during the year 1917-1918. From 1917 to 1920 there were 5 or 6 priests in the Clogher diocese who were most active in working for the Sinn Fein organisation, addressing public meetings, organising collections for funds and in every way trying to build up an efficient organisation.

(I) ARREST AND IMPRISONMENT IN 1921.

17. Early in the year 1921 a few priests and I were returning from a Sinn Fein meeting by car when we were held up by a party of military who were engaged in searching all persons and vehicles passing on the road. When we saw the soldiers searching other cars we decided that as each of us were carrying papers relating to the business of the meeting from which we were returning one of us should take possession of all the papers, and thus minimise the danger of a search of the persons of the others and in the event of the papers discovery, only one might be liable to suffer consequences. It was decided that I should take the risk of carrying all the papers during the ordeal of the search. The military felt the pockets of all the other priests and found nothing suspicious. When it came to my turn one of the military asked me what it was he felt in one of my pockets. I told him some papers. He then asked me to hand them over and I refused. He then told me that he did not like the unpleasantness of searching a priest and that I should take off my coat in which the papers were, so that he could examine them. I also refused to take off my coat as I held that by doing so I was helping him in carrying out his search of my person to



which I strongly objected. He then told me he was arresting me which he did. I was conveyed to the military barracks. When we arrived there the soldier reported on the incidents on the road during my hold up and his attempt to search me to the major in charge at the barracks. The major appeared to me under the influence of drink and he asked me for an explanation of my conduct. I told him that as a priest I objected to being searched by either military or police officers and that my refusal to hand over my coat to the soldier was consistent with my refusal to submit willingly to a detestable thing. The major then said he considered I was right in my attitude and ordered that I be released from custody promptly.

(J) AUXILIARIES ATTEMPT ASSASSINATION.

18. A short time later a party of R.I.C. called at my house about 9 a.m. one morning and started to search the premises. I was taken out by them on to the road and kept there whilst the search was in progress. When on the road I inquired if I was under arrest and was told I was. I was taken into the R.I.C. Barracks in Castleblayney and put into a cell about 10 a.m. This cell in a R.I.C. Bks. was then generally known as the "black hole" or "lock up". About 12 noon an R.I.C. Sergeant came to the cell and told me that he did not consider the "lock up" a proper place for detaining me and he suggested that I would be more comfortable in the guardroom. He then took me to the guardroom where there were a number of R.I.C. and Black and Tans moving about, coming in and going out. I noticed eight Tans sitting at a table playing cards, the game was Nap, and I moved over near the table to watch them. None of the men in the guardroom gave me the least notice. This game of cards started about 2 p.m. and about 4 p.m. a lorry arrived near the door of the guardroom. The arrival of the lorry occasioned a lot of commotion and excitement outside and a Tan came in and spoke to the card players who then went out to the lorry. They immediately rushed back into the guardroom with their guns in

in their hands and attacked me telling me that one of their pals was taken in in lorry, that he was shot in an ambush and that I was responsible for his death. A number of R.I.C. who were in the guard room rushed towards me in an effort to protect me from the Tans. A violent scene took place in which blows were freely exchanged and the R.I.C. put me hurriedly back into the lockup, and placed a strong guard of their own men on the door. The time this happened would be approximately 4.50 p.m.

(K) INCIDENT WITH DRUNKEN R.I.C. MAN.

19. About 8 p.m. the door into my cell was opened and an R.I.C. man came in to me. He was under the influence of drink. He told me he was from Co. Kilkenny and that he was a Catholic. He produced a bottle of whiskey which he said he purchased for me. I refused to take it from him and I gave him a lecture on the evils of excessive drinking. I asked him why he was drinking and he told me that he did not care what he did as he would be shot if he remained in the R.I.C.; that if he asked to leave, the Tans would shoot him, and if he deserted and went home to Kilkenny, his neighbours there would shoot him. I insisted that he should go down on his knees and take the pledge from me. He did so and I heard later after my release that he kept the pledge.

(L) REMOVAL TO AUXILIARIES' HEADQRS. CASTLERLAYNEY.

20. About 12 p.m. that night a Sergeant of the R.I.C. came into my cell and told me that the R.I.C. in the barrack had sworn an affidavit to the effect that it would be impossible for them to save me from being shot by the Tans if I was detained in that barrack and that he was removing me to the Auxiliaries' Hqrs. in Lord Hope's Castle near the town. He stated I would be safer there than in their barrack. The Sergeant took me to the Auxiliaries Hqrs. in a car.

(M) ATTEMPT TO EXTRACT INFORMATION ABOUT OWEN O'DUFFY.

21. When I arrived at Auxiliaries' Hqrs. I was put into a big

room. There was a man lying on a bed in the room and when the Auxiliary who took me to the room went away this man addressed me saying "I suppose you are another victim like myself". He told me that he had been captured by the Auxiliaries when carrying a dispatch from Dundalk to Owen O'Duffy, that he was a native of Dundalk. I asked him what he worked at and he told me he was a dock labourer. He stated that he had been taken around by the Auxiliaries as a hostage in their lorries when raiding the country districts and that he expected to be kicked out the next morning. He told me that he wanted to get in touch with Owen O'Duffy as he had an important message for him. I told him I knew nothing of O'Duffy's movements, that I had not seen O'Duffy for months and that I did not know where he could be found. He then told me that he felt I could not trust him and that my attitude was strange seeing that he had suffered so much from the Auxiliaries. When he told me he was a dock labourer I noticed that his hands were white and smooth and did not appear to be used to hard manual labour. I was convinced he was an Auxiliary spy. The Auxiliaries came into the room next morning and roughly threw him out and told him to clear off. I saw him later dressed in Auxiliary uniform going out in lorries on raiding expeditions.. After the man was removed I was taken by two armed Auxiliaries into another room. There two Auxiliaries were detailed as my armed guards. This room was used by other Auxiliaries ; there were 18 to 20 men billeted there. They were constantly coming and going. They carried their food into the room and ate it there. Their feeding times were most irregular. They were regularly going out on various raiding parties and when they returned they took in the food and partook of it. The food usually consisted of beef, bread and beer.

(N) BEHAVIOUR OF AUXILIARY OFFICER.

22. When night came I was told I could lie on a stretcher bed. The bare spring of the bed had no mattress on it. I objected and told my guards that I would prefer to lie on the floor and,

as they and all other Auxiliaries did, on mattresses. The guards told me that their orders were that I should lie on the bed. I asked to see their commanding officer.

23. The commanding officer came along. He was a Captain Wilkinson, a native of Derry, and the only Irishman I knew amongst the 80 odd Auxiliaries then serving in Castleblayney. All the others were Englishmen. I explained to Captain Wilkinson what the trouble was. He attacked me in a vile manner, called me a d....d rebel and said I must sleep on the wires.

(O) DR. MCKENNA'S VISIT TO AUXILIARY H.Q.

24. Some days later Dr. McKenna, Bishop of Clogher, came to the Castle and requested an interview with me. I was taken out to another room for this interview accompanied by my two Auxiliary guards. The Bishop told the guards that he required a private interview with me and asked them to leave the room. They informed the Bishop that they could not disobey orders to the extent of leaving me alone with him. The Bishop then asked for the officer in charge to be brought in as he wished to discuss the matter with him. Captain Wilkinson and his Adjutant came along and when the Bishop made his request for a private interview Captain Wilkinson replied in a most offensive manner. The Bishop was noticeably affected by the officer's insulting attitude towards him. He, however, coolly explained that as he was my Bishop he was merely requesting the usual facilities that civilised society afforded to Bishops in their relations with their clergy. I then interjected a remark to the effect that Captain Wilkinson was the only officer amongst the Auxiliaries who would refuse the Bishop's request. I said I had found Captain Wilkinson most vindictive during my intercourse with him. I then asked the adjutant if he saw anything wrong in the Bishop's request, and he stated that he considered there was nothing improper in it and that the request should be granted. Capt. Wilkinson then agreed and the 2 guards left the room.

25. The Bishop told me he had come to see me to get the truth about my activities previous to my arrest. He had a long list of meetings which he said he was informed that I had attended. He had also a list of names of other priests who had also attended those meetings with me. He told me that the British authorities held that some at least of those meetings were I.R.A. meetings where the plans for attacks on Crown forces were made.

26. I gave the Bishop a complete history of all the meetings and I also gave him the names of other priests I met at those meetings. I told him that all the meetings I attended were held under the auspices of the Sinn Fein organisation and that the question of attacks on Crown forces were never mentioned at any of the meetings, much less the planning of attacks. The interview ended and I was returned to my billet.

(P) REMOVAL TO CRUMLIN ROAD PRISON, BELFAST.

27. Some weeks after my interview with the Bishop I was removed by road to Crumlin Road Prison, Belfast, under heavy military escort. Capt. Wilkinson travelled to Belfast with me. He and his adjutant sat with the driver in front and I and my two armed guards occupied the back seat of the car.

28. The Auxiliaries stationed in Castleblayney came there from the south of Ireland where they had served for some time. On our way to Belfast we passed through Keady town Co. Armagh. A lot of the people in Keady knew me and when they recognised me they naturally saluted me as a priest. Capt. Wilkinson seemed very much pleased by the salutes of the various people who recognised me and he turned to his adjutant saying that he was delighted to notice such loyal manifestations in Ulster compared with the people's attitude in the South of Ireland.

29. When we were near the town of Portadown I was informed that my convoy were halting there for a drink. The whole convoy stopped at Quinn's Hotel. The Adjutant asked me if I would have

a drink. I told him I would, on condition that I would be allowed to stand them one in return. This, I understood, was agreed to and when we had the drink I was told that they could not drink with a prisoner. I said I should have been told so at first as, if I knew their attitude, I should not have accepted their treat.

30. On my arrival at Crumlin Road Prison I was met by the Governor and introduced to him. When I was being handed over to the prison authorities Capt. Wilkinson held out his hand to me when he was leaving me. I refused to shake hands with him and I said "If you were the last white man in the world I would not shake hands with you. You have treated me badly whilst in your custody and your attitude towards my bishop when you met him in my presence was unpardonable. I will, however, shake hands with your adjutant whom I found a decent Englishman". Later, the prison governor asked me what Capt. Wilkinson had done and when I explained all that had taken place the governor told me that Capt. Wilkinson deserved all I had given him.

(Q) RELEASE FROM PRISON - DR. MCKENNA EXPLAINS BRITISH ATTITUDE TOWARDS PRIESTS.

31. I was a prisoner in Crumlin Road for about 6 to 8 weeks. I was released a few weeks before the truce in July 1921. After my return home Dr. McKenna sent for me and we had a long conversation about my arrest and its aftermath. The Bishop told me that a few days after my arrest the Parish Priest of Portadown died and the Hon. James McMahon, who was then Under Secretary for Ireland, attended the funeral with the expectation of meeting Dr. McKenna there. Dr. McKenna was not at the funeral, but Dr. Mulhern, Bishop of Dromore, was present. In connection with my arrest McMahon informed Dr. Mulhern that at a British Cabinet meeting held some time previous to my arrest, Lloyd George informed the Cabinet that an examination of the reports from the Co. Inspectors of the Royal Irish

Constabulary indicated that the younger Irish priests were taking a leading part in the organisation of the I.R.A. and also in the direction of I.R.A. activities against the Crown forces. Lloyd George also stated that this position was particularly noticeable in the districts of West Cork and Co. Monaghan. Mr. McMahon stated that the Irish government had got instructions to deal with priests who were active in the republican cause and I was selected as a test case, and if the charges preferred against me were found sustainable, a number of other young priests from the districts of West Cork and Co. Monaghan were to be arrested and tried - and probably in other places.

32. Mr. McMahon also told Dr. Mulhern that he had seen a voluminous file of papers dealing with the charges which the government were preferring against me.

33. Mr. McMahon subsequently disclosed that before my release from prison the Irish Privy Council met in Dublin and considered the charges against me and decided there was no real evidence to convict me and that I should be released. When this decision was announced a member of the Privy Council suggested that I should be interned as a suspicious character and dangerous to the peaceful administration of British Law in Ireland.

34. I was released about a week before the official opening of the Northern Irish Parliament in Belfast by King George V.

Signature:

Seamus Cope

Date:

13<sup>th</sup> December, 1949.

Witness:

Seamus Cope,  
Secretary.

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