

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURU STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 330

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 330.....

Witness

Mrs. Batt. O'Connor,
37 Eglinton Road,
Dublin.

Identity

Member of Gaelic League 1913 -;

Subject

Notes on meetings of I.V. leaders at her home
and other incidents of national interest
1913-1921.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

File No. S.1456.....

Form B.S.M. 2.

ORIGINAL

STATEMENT OF MRS. BATT O'CONNOR,

37 EGLINTON ROAD, DUBLIN.

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1. The full account of our early association with the national movement is in my husband's book. I had my domestic occupations of course, looking after my house and children and was not directly associated with any movement except the Gaelic League, which I joined shortly after I came to Dublin. My husband was already in it, being a member of the Keating Branch and I also became a member. We regularly attended the classes and other functions together.

2. We all know that, as well as for the teaching of Irish, the Gaelic League was used for other purposes, especially political, and the volunteers were to a large extent recruited from its members and also the I.R.B. It was through that I got to know all the fighting men. Sean T. O'Kelly was, I think, President of the Branch at that time, and Fionan Lynch, Gearoid O'Sullivan, Piaras Beaslai, Diarmuid O'Hegarty and his brother were members too. These men were all visitors to my house before things assumed the serious aspect they afterwards did.

3. After the inception of the Volunteers there were often very important meetings held at my house. During these visits on their business matters I naturally became acquainted with them and friendly with many of them.

As the Volunteer movement developed and became serious, I became acquainted with dozens more. Coming on towards the fight numbers of men came to the house for meetings &c. Amongst them were Sean McDermott, Con Collins and Cathal Brugha. Charlie Monahan used to come. He was a great man in connection with arms and ammunition.

4. In preparation for Easter Week a large quantity of arms and ammunition, mostly ammunition, was brought to our

house at Brendan Road and hidden in a building plot at the end of the road. Two boxes of cartridges were brought to the house and the cartridges were hidden in every available spot including the hollow kerbs on the fireplaces. During the days preceding Easter Week the Volunteers came singly, in pairs and in groups, to fetch the cartridges and ammunition. Not all the ammunition in the building plot was removed before the Rising. On the Monday after the surrender the house was raided; it was raided many times after, but this was the worst raid we ever had. The military evidently expected to find men and arms, but they found nothing. They were so disappointed at getting nothing in the house that they asked me to come down and show them what was down in the building yard. I walked them round the plot, actually over the places where the stuff was stored but they got nothing. The officer said "I am sorry, Mrs. O'Connor, for this disturbance, but we must do our duty". I said "it is all right, you got nothing anyway". I felt very much alone, with my five young children, having no sympathy from any side in Donnybrook except from the O'Rahilly's who lived in Herbert Park. My husband was away and I was uncertain of his fate. I felt great satisfaction in being able to say "you got nothing". The officer was very polite and shook hands with me and apologised again before going away.

5. I am recounting these facts which probably are not very important. But now in my old age I like to recall them. It gives me great solace to remember that I had the privilege of cooking, washing for and putting up all those great men who sacrificed themselves for Ireland and I would be very happy to do it all over again.

6. One of these especially I was very glad to be able to help because he was suffering great pain. That was Sean McDermott. Some months before the Rising he got a breakdown and had to go into the Mater Hospital with neuritis in his leg. He almost

lost the use of it. My husband brought him out to our house for Christmas - this must have been the Christmas before the Rising.- against the advice of the doctor. Sean took it on himself to leave the hospital because he was determined to be in the fight. He was five weeks with us and during these weeks there was not a day some of the leading men did not come to see him. It was then I met Thomas McDonagh, Major McBride and many others whom I did not meet again as they lost their lives in the fight.

7. I was in great anxiety during and after Easter Week because I did not know where my husband was. I did not see or hear from him since he left home for Kerry on Good Friday.

8. A message was brought to me a few days after the surrender by a released prisoner that my husband was detained in Richmond Barracks. The message - that I could come to see him - was written on the flap of an envelope in Batt's handwriting and signed by him. The messenger looked like a G-man and, therefore, I did not give him too friendly a reception. He was a traveller for a builders' providers firm and he understood my frame of mind. He was very sympathetic and told me that my husband was in great form. I'll never forget the relief that was to me - to learn that he was alive.

9. I went to see him the very next day. When I went in there was an officer in charge. That was my first meeting with Robert Barton. He was awfully nice. He had an office in the gymnasium building. He brought me along to the prison buildings - N. Block - and there I met Batt. The visitors were ranged up outside a barbed wire fence. The prisoners were in fours with a soldier at each side and we got so many minutes - I forget how many - to talk to the prisoners. He was in good form but looked a bit unkempt, having slept on the floor for several nights. He was with Sean T. O'Kelly, Hugh O'Hare and Douglas French-Mullen whose arm was bandaged,

He was the only one of the four who had a Volunteer tunic on. We had not time for anything except a few details of business. Back in the office Mr. Barton, who treated me very kindly, handed me a parcel with the prisoner's effects. The next time I saw Batt was by chance on the street when prisoners were being marched along the street. Mrs. O'Keeffe saw me and asked me to come along down, that these prisoners were being deported and perhaps Batt and Paddy would be among them; and so they were. The soldier who was near Batt was decent and allowed me to walk beside him and I was able to ask him some questions about business matters. He was away for four months, first in Wandsworth and then in Frongoch. I still have a small copy of an Imitation of Christ given to Batt in Wandsworth by Gearoid O'Sullivan with the date of his release inscribed in it.

10. There is not much of any importance that I remember during the remainder of the year. I know that my husband and the others of the Volunteers who were free were doing their best to keep the movement alive while the leaders were in prison.

11. Tomás Ashe, of whom my husband always had a great opinion, came to stay with us for a week and he was coming back here after some meeting in the country where he expressed himself very strongly against the government, when he was arrested. He was walking along the street with Micheál Ó Foghludha on the Saturday when the detectives - Hoey and Smith walked up beside him and said they would have to arrest him. It was during that week that he sang for us the song he had composed and set to music himself, "Let me carry your cross for Ireland, Lord". He never sang it for anyone else; he said he never had an opportunity. His death was the greatest tragedy of all. On the morning before his arrest he apologised

for the trouble he was giving me. That day I stood on the doorstep and watched him go down the road till he got on the tram. I shall always remember him as I saw him then. He was a beautiful man with his tall noble figure and lovely wavy hair. I still have a letter that he wrote to me from Mountjoy a short time before his death.

12. As time went on meetings began to be held again in our house. Harry Boland, Cathal Brugha, Mick Collins, Austin Stack and several others used to come, and I knew them all intimately. Mick Collins was the one of those four that I knew the least because he was always too engrossed in his important occupations to take part in small talk. But the women who worked for him and with him overlooked that characteristic in him and did not expect anything different from him because they knew how much he had on his mind.

13. One morning when I had finished doing my door-brasses and was coming in I saw a small man coming up the path. He was slightly lame and had a green shade over one eye. He asked was Mr. O'Connor in and I said "Yes, Cathal". He laughed and took the shade off his eye and said "That is bad; I thought nobody could recognise me in this disguise". He had just come by the boat from England where he had spent several months. I called out my husband who failed to recognise him as he had put on the eyeshade again. I gave him a cup of coffee and he said he would go to bed for a couple of hours until his wife got his message and came to see him. When my husband went to Mrs. Brugha's house with the message, Mick Collins happened to be there as he occasionally spent a night there, if it was convenient. Mick called at our house shortly after and asked to see Cathal, but as Cathal had told me that he was to be disturbed by nobody until his wife came, I was very firm and refused to let him up to the bedroom. About 11.30 Mrs. Brugha came and

Cathal, who had not slept, although he had lain down, got up and dressed to go out. It was their son Rory's birthday and they were going into town to buy a present for him.

14. When Harry Boland came home from America, his first meeting with the leaders here was at my house in Brendan Rd. It was on a Friday and I had to provide lunch for 11 men. I went for the fish. I was told there was none, but a man in the shop - Jimmy Dunn, he is now dead - recognised me and gave me the fish. I cooked it and gave it to the men with tea and bread and butter. I had to do everything myself because I could not, for reasons of security, keep a maid in the house, or even a daily woman.

15. Mick Collins slept at our house on only two or three occasions - it was too dangerous a place for him. On one of those occasions Mick, Harry Boland and Batt sat in the kitchen talking and enjoying a pleasant evening; I think it was after a meeting. They were discussing the life they had seen in various places. Mick Collins was describing the life he led in London and Batt was giving his experiences in America. Harry Boland, who was very gay and lighthearted, said there was no place like Dublin. He asked me was there anything as enjoyable as getting on an outside car on a bank holiday with a few friends and driving to the strawberry beds or some such place, singing the good old Dublin songs like "Cockles and Mussels". When at last they decided to go to bed, Harry and Mick slept in the return room in the one bed, with the window open at the bottom so that if there was a raid they could slip out easily. I did not dare to go to bed, as I was always uneasy when any of the leaders was sleeping in the house. In the course of the night I opened the door of the bedroom gently and saw the two men sleeping quietly. Mick had his arm resting on the little table by the bed, with his revolver lying beside it.

16. I knew Austin Stack very well. He stayed often at our house in Bréndan Road and I got to like him very much. He was very gentle and kind. Afterwards when the unfortunate split came and many people became very bitter against their old friends, he never did. I did not meet him for a long time but when I did - on the street - he greeted me as affectionately and warmly as ever. Miss O'Rahilly also has always remained very friendly.

17. De Valera joined the Volunteers the same time as my husband and they drilled in the same company in Donnybrook and Batt had a very high opinion of him. I knew his wife, Sinead Ó Flannagain very well even before she married. She was a very pretty girl. She used to take part in the competitions that were held at the aeridheachta given by the Gaelic League and Batt often told me about the look of satisfaction he saw in de Valera's face on one of those occasions when she came in first in the girls' race. He was then interested in her but not engaged to her.

18. Sinead Mason - now Mrs. Derrig - was a very capable girl who worked for Mick Collins and some of the others. She never talked about what she was doing and there was no fear that she would betray any of their secrets.

19. At a later stage the leaders used to hold their meetings elsewhere than in my house and and I don't seem to remember so much about those years as I do about the time before the Rising. When I have an opportunity I shall go over my papers and see if there is anything of importance that I could give or lend you to copy.

Signed: Bridget O'Connor

Date: January 2, 1950

Witness: Joe Curran

