

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILITAIRA 1913-21
No. **W.S. 414**

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 414.....

Witness

Sr. Eithne (E. Lawless).
Convent of Our Lady of Refuge,
Gloucester St. (Sean McDermott St.)
Dublin.

Identity

Secretary to Ml. Collins 1918-1920;
Sister of Colonel J. Lawless.

Subject

- (a) Sinn Fein Offices 1918-1920;
- (b) Arrest of E. Blythe and P. O'Keeffe, Sept. 1919;
- (c) Raids on Sinn Fein Offices in search of
Collins 1919.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

File No. **S. 942**.....

Form B.S.M. 2.

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STATEMENT OF SISTER EITHNE (Eibhlin Lawless)

Convent of Our Lady of Refuge (Gloucester St)
Sean McDermott Street.

Late in 1917 or early in 1918, having finished my course at Skerry's College, Harcourt St., I was given a job in the Sinn Fein Offices at No. 6 Harcourt St. At the time, the Sinn Fein Clubs were being organised and my job was doing the typing and keeping in contact with the organisers through the country.

I knew Joe O'Reilly since 1916 when I met him in Frongoch where my brother Joe was interned. At this time my father was at Dartmoor, having been sentenced to death for his part in the fighting at Ashbourne. The sentence was, however, commuted to 10 years' penal servitude. My sister, Kathleen, and my mother visited him there at a later stage when visits were allowed.

It was through Joe O'Reilly I got to know Mick Collins who procured the job for me at No. 6 Harcourt St. At that time Harry Boland was in charge of the office. At least I understood that I was to go and work for him. Some time after that Paidin O'Keeffe took charge of the office; whether Harry Boland had to go on the run or whether he was arrested in connection with the German Plot, I cannot remember.

I continued that work until the setting up of the Dáil when the various departments were officially established and I was allocated to Diarmuid Ó hÉigeartaigh, who was Secretary of the Dail. He had got rooms on the second floor of No. 6. for the special work in connection with the opening of the Dáil. Mick Collins was officially Minister for Finance; unofficially, he was generally organising various departments of the Dail, especially the army. Our staff was at first quite small.

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I remember Mick Collins, Diarmuid Hegarty, Fintan Murphy, Bob Conlon, the office messenger; Joe O'Reilly was constantly there, having to convey confidential dispatches to and from Mick Collins. He was attached personally to him.

While we were in No. 6 the police and military made a raid on the premises, looking, I suppose, for wanted men. We had no warning of this raid at all. Mick Collins was in our room, also Fintan Murphy, Diarmuid Hegarty, Jenny Mason and myself and, possibly, Kitty O'Toole, who joined the staff with Fintan. Bob Conlon was there definitely.

Ginger O'Connell had come into see Mick and as he left the room he forgot to close the door, which Mick remarked on sarcastically. I was getting up to shut it when I saw a policeman standing on guard outside. I shut the door and told Mick it looked like a raid.

At that stage we discussed what we were going to do. I think only Mick was armed. If any of the others were the girls took the arms from them. I stuck Mick's revolver down my stocking and anything else incriminating we girls took charge of. The police seemed to start the raid systematically from the bottom up thus giving us time to take these precautions. When they arrived, we had disposed of everything and they found nothing of any importance. They searched the men but not us.

We had contemplated every possibility of escape for Mick whom we thought they were looking for, as it had been published that there was a large reward for anyone who helped to find him. There was no means of escape, however, as the military had occupied the narrow entrance in the back as well as the front. Mick said: "We are caught like rats in a trap and there is no escape". He remained seated at his desk, quite calm and collected until they came in.

One of the police inspectors - I think Love was his name - had a special commission to capture Collins, but it was Inspector McFeely who came to our rooms, looking a little bit frightened. He went round searching the different desks and seemed desperately anxious to finish his task and get out. Mick sat very casually on his desk with one leg swinging and told him in no measured terms what sort of work he was engaged on. He was scathing in his remarks about it. "What sort of a legacy will you leave to your family, looking for blood money. Could you not find some honest work to do, &c.?"

The Inspector was writhing under the attack. At that stage they left the room, to our great relief, and passed on up to the caretaker's room overhead. Frank Gallagher's room on the same landing as ours was being examined the same time as ours. It was there that Ernest Blythe was arrested. He happened to be visiting Frank, probably on Dáil business. Frank, assisted by Michael Nunan, was engaged in propaganda work at the time. Blythe, when he heard a raid was on, hid in a small storeroom and was found there. If he had not done that, he might not have been arrested. The only other person arrested, as far as I remember, was Paidin O'Keefe. Seemingly it was Mick's coolness that saved him from being recognised.

From time to time the girls would take a peep out at the corridor to see if the coast was clear and, as soon as we got word that the police had all left the caretaker's room, Mick managed to slip up the stairs, which were now empty. We suspected, however, that the police might come back. Sure enough, in a short time they came up again. This time, Inspector Love, who seemed to be in charge of the raid, was with them instead of Inspector McFeely. They took a general survey of the room without questioning anybody and left again.

After that, they cleared off finally, taking the two prisoners with them.

Our relief this time was intense. Mick came down, sat at his desk and refused to leave in spite of our protestations. We all remained at our work until the normal time for our departure.

After a short time we moved to No. 76 on the other side of the street, which is now the Sancta Maria Hostel. It was Cosgrave carried on the negotiations for acquiring the house. It had been a dentist's house. We immediately started to organise the loan issue. The large back room on the ground floor was devoted to this work. Dan Donovan was in charge of it, working for Mick Collins. Diarmuid Ó hEigeartaigh, as Secretary of the Dail, for whom I still worked, occupied the room on the left which had been the surgery. The 'phone was in it. The front drawingroom was Collins' room. Jenny Mason, who had been secretary to de Valera, came back to Mick Collins when de Valera went to America. Mick always kept the door locked.

My work consisted of typing and sending out reports of all sorts, notifying members of the Dáil about meetings, and some correspondence in connection with the organisation of the army.

Dick Mulcahy had a room on the next floor and I think Austin Stack had rooms in that house too.

All our staff migrated to that house and there were some additional members, probably people who had been working in scattered offices throughout the city.

This was a determined effort to take a public stand to establish the Republican government as the recognised authority in Ireland. We procured officially headed paper which was printed secretly by Dollard's. I think it was

a Mr. Short that Mick Collins negotiated with about this.

Collins and his colleagues watched closely the reactions of the British to this move. There were a lot of visitors coming in and out openly; T.Ds. from the country to consult the heads of the departments, and many others.

Most of the correspondence that reached us was not addressed to the office. It was addressed to private addresses in various parts of the city which we called covering addresses. Joe O'Reilly, myself and some other people called daily to these addresses to collect the correspondence which was then taken by Joe to Mick, who was seemingly the key man for all activities connected with the Dail and the Volunteers. His ability to deal with them was recognised by all. A man called Flanagan - "The Rabbit" Flanagan - in Camden Street was one address that I called to regularly. Keogh's, the photographers, in St. Stephen's Green, where Miss Quim, a sister-in-law of Diarmuid Lynch, worked, was another.

We did not expect to be left long undisturbed in 76.

One morning not very long after we were established in 76 Harcourt St., on the ^{11th StC} 13th November 1919, the staff had only just arrived when a number of T.Ds. came for a meeting connected with Dail business. This meeting was summoned fairly openly, probably with a view to asserting their right to meet as a government and legislate for the country in spite of the fact that the Dail had been declared an illegal organisation a month or two previously. Three T.Ds. had come in when the military and police arrived and started to raid the premises. They arrested the three T.Ds. and rounded up the male staff.

Mick Collins was in his own office upstairs and Diarmuid O'^{h. Egan}~~Hogarty~~, on hearing the raiders coming, had rushed up the stairs to warn him. What happened up there I don't know except that he got out through the roof by a pre-arranged method while we delayed them as long as possible downstairs. We afterwards heard he had succeeded in getting into the Standard Hotel over the roofs of the intervening houses. It did not seem as if the raid was directed against Mick Collins on this occasion, but rather for the purpose of enforcing the proclamation declaring the Dail illegal. Hence the staff came in for attention and arrest as well as the T.Ds.

There was nobody now left but Jenny Mason and myself. Mick returned about 5 o'clock and immediately set to work to reorganise the offices. He transferred the bulk of the work to No. 5 Mespil Road, where he already had an office. Miss Mason went with him and I stayed on in 76, working directly under the instructions which reached me daily through Joe O'Reilly. Mick used to write out in his methodical way a list of instructions regarding the correspondence or any other work he required to be done, as he did not come in regularly during working hours.

One evening about 6, when we were preparing to leave the office, Mick had come in about 5 that evening - Bob Conlon answered a ring at the door and found a man inquiring for Mick. Bob went upstairs to inquire whether Mick would see him, leaving the man, who was a doubtful looking character, standing on the steps outside. I had a glance at the man. He was of medium height, looked fairish in complexion - not in any way impressive or good-looking in appearance - rather mean-looking with shifty eyes. He looked like a 'toucher'. He said in an impudent kind of way: "I want to see Mick". Contrary to advice and our expectations, Mick said he would come down and see him. He knew who he was - an ex-British

soldier whom he suspected of double-crossing. He may have been Quinlisk or one of the men executed later at Ballymun. The name may have been Straw or something like that.

Mick brought him into the hall and told him what he thought of him. He gave him the chance to clear out before appropriate action would be taken, adding "If you don't get out quick, I'll kick you down the steps".

The following evening at about the same time, when there was no one in the office except myself who had remained to fill in cheques that had already been signed by Mick Collins, and Sean Hyde, who had come in with Loan Certificates for registration, Tom Cullen arrived, saying: that he had imitated the "big fellow's" walk coming across from the lane into Harcourt St. as they suspected there would be a watch placed by the British near the house at the same hour as Mick had been in the office the day before. This was intended to be a test of the ex-British soldier whom Tom said he had seen standing about the Standard Hotel corner.

Sure enough, before 10 minutes had elapsed, the cars drove up and the military who were accompanied by Inspector McFeely started hammering at the door. I opened it and McFeely asked me in a very truculent way where was Mick Collins, I replied that I did not know, adding: "Wouldn't I be likely to tell you". He replied: "He is in this house and I know it and I'll get him too this time". This was evidently a reference to his failure to recognise Mick at the previous raid at No. 6. I may as well state that it was my personal opinion that Inspector McFeely did recognise Mick on that occasion, but that out of fear or pique against Love who led the raid, he was unwilling to arrest him. I thought it strange that he did not accompany Love on the second inspection of our room. It was said he was demoted for failing to capture Mick in that raid. Another explanation of his failure might be that he was secretly sympathetic.

The Inspector came into my room first. He took a glance round at everything and saw the cheque book on the desk. Pointing to the signature he said: "And who signed that?". I replied: "Surely you know how to read". He said: "And then you tell me he is not in the house". Sean Hyde, who had remained in the room while I was in the hall, had stuffed all the certificates into the fire, so that the names of the subscribers would not fall into the hands of the police. The Inspector accepted Sean's story that he had come to take me to a dance.

Tom Cullen had rushed down to the caretaker's quarters in the basement before I admitted the military. The caretaker's name was McCluskey. He was afterwards caretaker and porter in the Land Bank. Tom threw off his coat and took one of the caretaker's children on his knee, pretending he was just visiting the family. He got away with it. Seemingly, the sole object of the raiders was to get Mick. They went away, telling me that they would get him yet.

That was fairly conclusive proof against the ex-soldier who was some time after executed as a spy.

About ^{four}~~seven~~ weeks after this raid, on ^{December 1919}~~9th January 1920~~, we arrived at the office to find that the military and police had been there before us. We found the doors and windows barred and sealed. The caretaker, who had refused to leave, was undisturbed. The entry to the premises in the basement was still open, but we did not go in, there was no need. It was not my habit to leave any important papers in the office. I took anything which would give clues of addresses in the country, and all the files we were working on, away with me each evening in an attaché case.

Joe O'Reilly was awaiting me outside 76 with instructions from Mick to go to Mrs. O'Keefe's house, the "Farm Produce"

in Camden Street, where I continued my work for Mick.

The different departments split up again then and went underground. I was alone in Camden St. with a messenger. My work was very varied in accordance with the various activities of Mick Collins who came irregularly to work there. Camden St. was a busy centre and it was easier to escape attention there than in residential quarters such as Mespil Road. Therefore, Mick made many appointments to meet people there for his purposes such as planning the escape of prisoners, &c.

From there I went occasionally to Mespil Road to take notes or instructions from him about the work. It was at that time that Harry Boland returned secretly from America for a few weeks. I'd say he came to report progress to Mick about the success of the Loan in America and to get the Cabinet sanction for continuing their activities in America. Correspondence would be liable to be censored or confiscated.

The first intimation I had of Harry's return from America was an instruction I got from Mick to go to Mrs. McGarry's in Fitzwilliam Square to take down and type Harry's report, which was duly accomplished. It was a long account of his entire mission up to that date for the benefit of the Dáil Cabinet. His departure for America was very secret and I did not see him again.

One day we got word that the office in Camden Street was to be raided and we transferred everything down to Corrigan's Undertakers' premises a little further down. We stayed there for a day or so and then we went back.

Shortly after that, in the first week of June 1920, I gave up the work to make preparations for entering a convent. Before I left, Mick - who did not feel secure in Camden St. - (I am not sure whether it was not even raided sometime we were

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not there) - was preparing offices in Mary St. over Robinson's, the Seed Merchants. It was also a busy thoroughfare and therefore also likely to be free from observation by the military authorities. I never worked there, but I paid a couple of visits to it as I kept in touch with Mick Collins until the date of my entry into the convent. When I was leaving, he sent me a cheque for £25 and wrote me a letter expressing his good wishes and his appreciation of my work. My sister says she has that letter and I shall try and get it for you.

I went to London on a holiday and Mick asked me to take over some stuff to Art O'Brien. It seemed to be a parcel of documents, possibly connected with the loan or foreign contacts that were being worked from London.

After much difficulty I got in touch with Art in his offices off the Strand. He seemed reluctant to entrust the replies to me in spite of the fact that I had several letters from Mick to show him. He seemed to be annoyed by whatever message Mick had sent him and unwilling to carry out the instruction he had received. Eventually he did give me some papers to bring back and Mick was displeased to find that they were not what he expected.

The night before I entered, on the 14th August, our house was raided and the military took everything from the drawers in the way of documents or books, emptied them into sacks and took them away. My father, who was in bed, had barely time to escape out the back. We were so concerned for his safety that we did not try to save any of the papers among which were many of mine which would now be of interest. We had letters from Mick Collins and other people connected with the movement.

Signed:

(Evelyn Layless)
Sister M. of St. Eithne

Date:

17th May, 1951.

Witness:

S. M. Collins