ORIGINAL

ROINN COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 509

Witness

J.J. McConnell,
Creevagh,
Orwell Park,
Rathgar,
Dublin.

Identity.

Member of R.I.C. Dublin, 1907 - ;
Sergeant and District Inspector later.

Subject.

(a) R.I.C. Dublin and the North 1907-1921;
(b) Conscription Threat 1918;
(c) Coming of Black and Tans to Ireland.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.1773

Form B.S.M. 2

ORIGINAL

STATEMENT BY Mr. J.J. McCONNELL,

"Creevagh", Orwell Park, Rathgar, Dublin.

I joined the Royal Irish Constabulary in October, 1907, at the age of twenty, and realised my childhood ambition. Indeed, it was the dream of all my boyhood pals to join the Force that was generally admired and respected throughout the country. My Parish Priest gave me a character and his blessing, the former being essential.

When I left my home for the Depot in the Phoenix Park, I carried with me the regards and good wishes of all and sundry. It never occurred to anyone that I was doing anything unpatriotic - not even the old Fenians and Land Leaguers who still survived, amongst them my father - a veteran of both organisations.

Those were carefree, peaceful days in Ireland and a policeman's life was then a happy one. Duty consisted of maintaining peace at fairs and race-meetings, supervising licensed premises, and generally preventing and detecting ordinary crime. Whiskey was popular, cheap and deadly. A man with a shilling in his pocket could quickly get fighting drunk, and, if arrested, was in honour bound to resist to the limit, so the police had their hands full at every public gathering. This routine was punctuated by duty at elections and political meetings and celebrations. For the Orange celebrations on the 12th July and 12th August, detachments of R.I.C. were brought to the North from the southern and midland counties and, particularly in the counties Armagh, Tyrone and Derry, their presence often prevented bloodshed.

In 1910 I was one of a party sent to Lurgan, County Armagh, to assist the local police in protecting a Catholic Temperance Society passing through the town on an excursion

to Warrenpoint. It was Sunday and this violation of the Sabbath was not to be tolerated in Lurgan. We were hard pressed to ward off repeated attacks on the excursionists, but we succeeded. Party feelings had been aroused and it was decided that we remain in Lurgan until it subsided. On the following evening an Orange mob paraded the streets and inevitably attracted a turbulent following which proceeded to wreck the houses and shops of Catholics and Nationalists which were, of course, synonomous terms. Our small force, armed only with batons, was hopelessly outnumbered by hundreds of fanatical rioters inflamed with looted liquor. Time and again we were forced to the barracks carrying our wounded but as often returned to the attack and brought prisoners back, not before leaving marks on others by which we could identify and arrest them later on. A local Magistrate, Dr. Deeney, was called out to read the Riot Act. He stood under a gas lamp surrounded by R.I.C. with drawn batons, but he had scarcely read two lines when the mob rallied and attacked. The police charged the mob, forgetting the magistrate, and I can still see him charging for his door which, fortunately, was nearby and open. At dawn a special train arrived with a detachment of the R.I.C. Reserve from the Depot in Phoenix Park under the command of an Assistant Inspector-General. Only six out of thirty of us who had entered the fray were then on our feet and some of our wounded never recovered sufficiently to resume their service. About thirty of the more prominent rioters were subsequently rounded up and most of them were convicted at the next Assizes when the Lord Chief Baron, Palles, imposed uniform sentences of twelve months' imprisonment with hard labour. Since that day there has never been a riot in Lurgan.

The South provided its own peculiar problems for the R.I.C. at that time, for party feeling between the Redmondite - O'Brienite factions often led to bloody clashes.

The tact, firmness and impartiality with which the police handled dangerous situations may be judged from the fact that rarely were their efforts to preserve the peace subjected to criticism by either section.

From 1912, the policeman's life in Ireland was not a happy one. The formation of the Ulster Volunteers and toleration by the Government of their illegal and rebellious activities had a demoralising effect on the Force. No serious steps were authorised or taken to prevent gun running in the North, but there was no lack of activity on the part of the military when the Irish National Volunteers brought guns into Howth. True, no acts of violence could be attributed to the Ulster Volunteer Force, but then, they were allowed a free hand. The police had instructions to report their activities but to take no action without further orders. No further orders ever came.

The 1916 Rebellion took the R.I.C., like the country in general, by surprise, but the authorities at Headquarters must have got some inkling of it at the eleventh hour. On Easter Saturday a communication was sent by "line of stations" to each barrack to the effect that the Rising had been planned for Easter Sunday. We were ordered to search all motor cars and to stop and detain, if necessary, all suspected persons. I can recall how I laughed when I read that "Secret and Confidential" document, but orders are orders - I had the roads of my district patrolled. Nothing happened for a few days, but, when no newspapers or letters arrived, the wildest rumours began to circulate. Then, on my way to inspect a patrol, I stopped two motor cars, the foremost of which carried a coffin. I apologised to the occupants of the second car for halting them and inquired the name of the deceased and was informed that he was a young constable, a native of Tory Island, stationed at Dundalk. He was cycling

with a dispatch to Castlebellingham, unarmed and alone when he was held up and shot by a party of Sinn Feiners, as they were then known. Then I knew that something momentous had happened and I was no longer amused.

It may seem strange to the young people of to-day that the news of the Rebellion was received with horror throughout the country and was condemned in the Press and pulpit. When, in the course of a few short weeks, the signatories of the Proclamation of Independence had been executed there was a sudden revulsion of feeling. The threat of Conscription converted the youth of the country to Sinn Fein and made it a power in the land. That this was no empty threat was made clear to the Force when every officer in charge of a district and every Head Constable or Sergeant in charge of a station was called upon to furnish a report on the feasibility of enforcing Conscription in his area. I was stationed in Ulster at the time and reported that it would be resisted to the limit and by none more strenuously than the loyalists and members of the Ulster Volunteer Force. I also expressed the view that it would disrupt the Force as the majority of us could not coerce others to go out and fight in Flanders when we were not prepared to go voluntarily ourselves. I understand that most of the reports expressed the same views, and that was the last we heard of Conscription.

From 1918 onwards enforcement of the law became daily more difficult and even dangerous. Resignations from the Force grew from a trickle to a steady stream, the motives being genuine patriotism, pressure from terrified parents and wives, and sometimes personal fear, as shootings of police were of daily occurrence. Recruiting from the original native

source almost came to a standstill. The Force as a whole, officers and men, were opposed to the new policy of reprisals. Something had to be done to counteract the leakages and an auxiliary force was recruited from the workless ex-Service men in Britain. The only essential qualification for these men was military training - education, character or physique, so requisite in the R.I.C., being of no importance. Oil and water do not mix and these two bodies never did mix.

Supplies of Constabulary uniforms were not available for the first batches of the new recruits and they made their initial appearance in Ireland dressed in khaki trousers and black tunics. Some wag dubbed them "Black and Tans", an allusion to a famous pack of hounds in County Limerick, and the name stuck. As police they were untrained, undisciplined and irresponsible. Many had criminal records, but others were normal young men out for adventure. I was fortunate in not having any of them under my command, except for one short spell of two months. During that period I confined them to barracks and provided them with facilities for amusement, but never let them out on duty except when I was in personal charge. I was jealous of the good name of the R.I.C. and would take no chances.

Another military police force was later formed of ex-British Army officers and were known as Auxiliaries. They wore distinctive uniforms and operated independently of the R.I.C. They were well equipped with modern weapons and transport and had their own intelligence service. It was this body that did practically all the fighting that took place with the I.R.A. during the period 1919-21.

At no time did the Black and Tans or Auxiliaries operate in Belfast, where I was stationed during the years 1919-21 apart from a few weeks in the country. The Special

Constabulary was organised there in 1920 to aid in the maintenance of law and order. At that time political and religious feeling was at its highest in the city. Shocking crimes were committed by both Loyalists and Nationalists. Arming one lawless section of the community to suppress another is not the best way to maintain peace, and responsible R.I.C. authorities in Belfast were opposed to the step. The Specials were drawn from the Loyalist and Orange sections, the traditional enemies of the Nationalists. They regarded everyone who differed from them politically or religiously as an enemy and a rebel. Indeed they were less desirable allies than the Black and Tans or the Auxiliaries. As District Inspector I was responsible for the peace of the area under my charge, but my efforts to enforce the law impartially, irrespective of the politics or religion of its transgressors, were often foiled by those who were supposed to assist in the maintenance of peace without discrimination.

There was almost continuous rioting in Belfast from July 1920 up to the date of the Truce, 11th July, 1921. The Northern Loyalists were determined to ignore the Truce, which they regarded as a surrender to the rebels. During the week after the Truce the rioting continued. The shootings, burnings and lootings increased in intensity. On 14th July 1921 I was shot in the street by a Special Constable. This was the third attempt on my life within three days. I was severely wounded by a dum-dum bullet, but made a good recovery and was fit to resume duty after eight months.

I was recuperating in Paris when I read the news of the Treaty, and immediately crossed to London to hear the Bill debated in the House of Commons. When I returned to Belfast I was much surprised to find that official Unionist opinion was in favour of a united Ireland with Parliaments in Dublin and Belfast, but the subsequent Treaty debates in the Dáil

had the effect of ruining a great opportunity for unity.

On 17th March, 1922, I was transferred to Dublin Castle to assist in the disbandment of the Force.

A few weeks later the Irregulars occupied the Four Courts and a civil war was raging. When I doffed my uniform for the last time on 18th July, 1922, I was consoled by the knowledge that I had taken no part in that tragedy.

SIGNED J. J. McConnell

DATE 17th May 1951.

WITNESS John McCoy.
17/5/51.