

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY
BUIRO STAIRÉ MHEATA
No. W.S. 549

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 549

Witness

Robert Kelly,
16 Mary Street,
Newry,
Co. Down.
Identity.

Member of I.R.B. Newry, 1903 - ;

Member of Irish Volunteers, Newry, 1914 - .

Subject.

Nationalist activities, Co. Armagh and Co. Down,
1916-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No.

Form B.S.M. 2

STATEMENT BY MR. ROBERT KELLY,
16 Mary Street, Newry, Co. Down.
(Deceased)

I got a statement from Mr. Kelly about two years ago. When I took down the manuscript notes for Mr. Kelly's statement, he was in bad health and confined to his bedroom. He promised then to make notes of his recollections of the years, 1916-1921, which he could later amplify for me in the form of a supplementary statement. Before he got as far as completing the making of his notes, he died suddenly.

Mr. Kelly was a most important key-man in both the Sinn Féin organisation and the Irish Republican Army. He was also a prominent Newry Trades Unionist, and his influence in nationalist activities in Newry was powerful.

SIGNED: John McBoy

DATE: 2nd July 1951

ORIGINAL

STATEMENT WRITTEN BY ROBERT KELLY,
 16 Mary Street, Newry, Co. Down,
 BEFORE HIS DEATH IN 1949.

We held a meeting in 1917. The main objects were to form Sinn Féin Clubs and use them as a recruiting ground for the Irish Volunteers; but we had not got more than started when the South Armagh election came on. A Committee from Headquarters arrived to run the election (no local men, as far as I know). They started off by making Dundalk their headquarters, forgetting that part of Newry was in (Co.) Armagh. After spending the best part of a week in Dundalk, they discovered that Newry was the right place. Frank Aiken gave us a house in Monaghan Street for Committee rooms, in which the Election Committee met during the day and arranged for meetings, etc.

Pat Lavery and myself went in at eight o'clock in the evening; took charge until eight next morning. Of course, we had to make out parcels of leaflets, posters, to the different areas for polling day.

Irish Volunteers were taken in from all over the country and were very useful in maintaining order but a lot of things were done that we, locals, never knew of. For instance, neither Lavery or myself heard that the meeting, at which the egg was thrown at the Countess, was taking place. If we had, there would have been no egg thrown.

I think about the dirtiest element I have ever seen came from Belfast to help the Irish Party. They suggested to the Newry Party (Hibernians) that our rooms should be raided at night and all our election work destroyed. Newry (Sinn Féiners) told them that they could bloody well go and do it themselves, that there were two fellows over there who would shoot. That ended the raid.

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Shortly after the election, we were threatened with conscription. There is no doubt it brought a lot of members both to Sinn Féin and the Irish Volunteers. We held a number of meetings here and formed the usual all-party committees with Dan Sheridan, secretary, between Irish National Foresters, Hibernians, business and clergymen. We were a small minority but I had both labour and Republican associations with Dublin - Dublin, seeing that I attended all conferences there. We had the two days' strike as ordered, and a good few workers were victimised by the Unionists, and nearly all who lost their jobs were Irish Party supporters. Of course, we had to support the victims or get them jobs. We, the Republican members, never believed that the local committee would ever do anything effective.

The Irish Volunteers and Sinn Féin made their own arrangements. I remember one evening I attended an anti-conscription committee meeting. They (committee) were making arrangements as to what action they would take if conscription came into force. They started off with appointing men to be in charge in different areas, taking good care that all (Irish Parliamentary) Party men would be officers. Some fellow was to blow a whistle at a certain street corner and another a bugle at some other place. When I thought it was time to talk, I simply said, "Rev. Chairman and members, I don't think it will be necessary to make any arrangements for Republicans, as I think they are making their own". You should have heard the howl going behind backs, etc. I (then) simply said, "In God's name, who are you, or who do you think you are? You are no good to England. She doesn't want you. It is the youth of Ireland she wants and, if they are not to be taken, they will have to fight. They might need a gun or maybe a dinner would help, but no young fellow is going to follow you".

That ended the officer job.

Of course, conscription failed but then England started banning football and hurling matches. That was an easy matter; too many turned out for England to deal with.

Sinn Féin then issued a manifesto which was to be read publicly at meetings to be held on the 15th August. I read the manifesto and got six months (prison sentence). Pat Lavery did his best to get the copy from me, so that he would read it, knowing that there was jail for whoever read it. We both thought that an election was about to take place, and I believed that Pat knew more about elections than I did.

The election took place. Sinn Féin made agreements with the Irish (Parliamentary) Party on certain seats in the North. The (Parliamentary) Party broke the agreement. We lost South Down, which we could easily have won. Pat did his best to have the seat contested.

I was released from Belfast Jail on Ash Wednesday, 1919. On the following evening, Stephen Gwynn held a meeting in Newry to launch a new Party, which he called the Centre Party. The meeting was broken up. That ended that Party but, a few weeks afterwards, a number of our members were arrested and were sentenced to six months but were released for Easter. Lavery was to have been arrested but escaped.

Next to this came the Ballyedmond raid. From the point of view of arms, it was not much of a success. We next had the Custom House raid and later a couple of raids for arms.

About this time we had an organiser from Dublin to teach us all about proportional representation. At this

time I was made Chairman of the South Down Chomairle Ceantair (Sinn Féin) which meant more work by giving one a great opportunity of organising the Irish Volunteers but also made you responsible for getting every one of our way of thinking on election lists (voters lists). We, at least, taught the Unionists a lesson in this respect. Our claims were objected (to) wholesale, but according to law

.....

all objections must be served personally or by registered post. The Unionists used ordinary post. We sat tight and, at the Registration Court, had to be allowed all our claims.

About this time I was asked to take charge of the B---- I.V. I refused. Lavery agreed with me, as there was no one to hold the people.

I next got the job of raising money for the railway men who refused to carry troops or munitions. Was also -- pushed in organising Sinn Féin Courts and helping in the (Dáil) Loan. The Courts were a success. P. Lavery did nearly all the work on the Loan himself. We next had the Boycott Committee, representative of all so called national sections. I don't think they would have done anything as times were getting dangerous. Meetings were dropped for a few weeks. A new Committee was then appointed. I knew Joe McDonough personally. This was the most successful committee in the North.

1920 - Returned majorities on the two Newry Rural Councils and got over one third of Newry Urban.

There was also a post office raid, a Head Constable shot and an ambush at the Egyptian Arch. We sent Volunteers to the attack on Newtownhamilton R.I.C. Barrack.

1921 - Police Barrack attacked in Newry. Corraghs ambush, two of our best men arrested and interned, P. Lavery and D. Sheridan. Train derailed at South Armagh border. There were three trains. We were to get the last one. The Prince of Wales was in the second (train) and we could have got it. We got ours (train). The other two (trains) got through to Dublin.

We had an ambush of the Tans on the Quays - only a few of them escaped.

De Valera returned at General Election, May, 1921, for Down.

Murder Gang out for me but I just didn't happen to be at home.

Some of the Tans shot in Hill Street.

The treaty came on. I was in Dublin that night. There was a meeting held in Omagh (Co. Tyrone) a couple of weeks before. J.H. Collins, Solicitor, came to me and asked if I was invited. He wanted to know what he should do I said that was his own job, I knew nothing about it and that he did not represent anyone other than himself. I would call a public meeting in Newry and repudiate anything that was done at the meeting.

The Dublin meeting had been changed to a week later. Peter Murney, Paddy Hughes, J.H. King, J.H. Collins, Seamus McGuill and myself were present. None of us had an invitation except King and Collins. Eoin McNeill was in the chair. Most of those at the meeting I had never seen before. I asked McNeill who were they and what they represented. McNeill told me that this was a meeting of representative men from the Six Counties, that it was not a Sinn Féin meeting. I said I was Chairman of the South Down

Comhairle Ceantair (Sinn Féin). I or no other members were invited. Surely we represented some people. I said I knew who had been invited from Down and I wanted to know if the rest of the Six Counties were represented by the class of people who had been invited from Down - a class who did not represent the people who mattered.

I said he might not be annoyed about Down as it was represented by men who were trusted by the people - no thanks to those who convened the meeting. McGuill said Armagh agreed with Down. We then got to know that the treaty was signed and the meeting broke up discussing the signing of the treaty.

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About the month of September, a recruiting meeting was being held in Newry (Nationalist and Unionist hand in hand). It was broken up by our followers but a few days after 5 or 6 of our members were arrested and got 4 months each in Belfast Gaol.

This was the time we took the roof off the gaol under Stack.

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As I stated ^{by} we held a
 meeting in 1919. The main
 object was to form Sim-
 ilar Companies and use
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 but we had not got
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 from H. Q. ^{arrived} to run the
 election, (no local men as
 far as I knew). They started
 off with making Dardak
 their headquarters forgetting
 that part of Newry was
 in Armagh, after spending
 the spending the best part

of a week in Dundalk
they discovered that Newry
was the right place.

Frank Aiken gave us
a house in Monaghan for
our Committee Room. In which
the Election Committee met
during the day arranged for
meetings etc.

Pat Lavery and myself went
in at 8 o'clock in the evening
took charge until eight
next morning, of course
we had to make out parcels
of posters leaflets & the
different ones for following
day.

I have taken in from all

3,

over the country, and were
very useful in maintaining
order, but a lot of things
wouldn't, that we local
never knew of, for instance
neither Lavery or myself
heard that the meeting, at
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at the Countess was to
take place. If we had
known this would have been
no egg thrown.

I think about the district element
I have ever seen come from
Belfast to help the Irish party
The suggestion to the Fenian party
that our rooms should be raided
at night and all our election
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4.
Newry told them that the
could bloody well go and
do it themselves, that there
were two fellows over there
who would shoot.

That ended the raid.

~~The election.~~

Shortly after the election
we were ~~threatened~~ threatened
with conscription. There
is no doubt it brought
a lot of members both to
Sinn Féin and the I. V.
We held a number of meetings
here, and formed the usual
all party committee with Dan
Sheridan Secy between I. N. F.
Hibernian Business, and clergymen.

5.

we were a small minority, but as I had both Labour and Republican associations with Dublin, Dublin then that I attended all conferences there. We had the two days strike as ordered, and a good few workers were victimized by the unionists... and nearly all who lost their jobs were Irish party supporters. Of course we had support the victims or get them jobs. As the Republican ^{members} never believed that the local committee would ever do anything effective.

The J.U. and Sinn Féin made their own arrangements, I remember one evening I attended the anti-Conscription Com meeting

6.

~~and~~ the were making arrangements
as to what actions they would
take if conscription came
into force, they started off
with appointing men to be
in charge in different areas
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party men would be officers.
Some fellow was to blow a
whistle at a certain street corner
and another at ~~the~~ ^{high} some-
other place. when I thought
it was time to talk strong
I simply said Rev Chairman and
members, it ~~is~~ ^{will} ~~not~~ ^{be} necessary
for ~~Republicans~~ to make any
arrangements for Republicans
as I think they are making
their own.

7.

you should hear the house
going blind backs etc. I
simply said ~~was~~ ^{name} in God's, who
are you, or who do you think
you are, you are no good
to England, she don't want
you, it is the youth of
Ireland she wants and if
they are not to be taken
the will, ^{now} to fight, they might
need a gun, or maby a
dinner might help. but
no young fellow is going
to follow you, that ended
the officers job.

Of course conscription failed,
but ~~then~~ England started
banning football and harling

8.

matches, that was an
easy matter, ~~too~~ many
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Jim Flin then issued a
manifesto which was to
be read publicly at
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Aug. 18th. I read the
manifesto and got 6 months
Lavery, done is but to
get the copy for Jim so
as he would read it.

Knowing there was jail
for whoever read it, we
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9,

1918

about the month of September
a recruiting meeting
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This was the time we took
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19

than I did, ~~and~~ the election took place; Sinn Féin made agreements with the Irish party on certain seats in the North, the party broke the agreement we lost South Down which we could easily have won, Pat did his best to have the seat contested.

I was released from Belfort jail on Ash Wednesday, 1919 on the following evening Stephen Gwynne, held a meeting in Newry to launch a new party, which he called the Centre party.

The meeting was broken up and that ended that party, but a few weeks afterwards a number of our members were arrested and were sentenced to 6 months, but were released for Easter. Lavery was to have been arrested but escaped, next to this came the Ballyedmond Raid, from the point of view of arms was not very much of a success, we next had the Custom House Raid and lots a couple of raids got away.

about this time we had an organizer from London

to track on all about
Proportional Representation
By this time I was made
Chairman of the South
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We at least taught the
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respect. Our claims were
objected wholesale, but
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all objections must be served personally or by registered registered post the Unionist used ordinary post. We sat tight and at the Registration Court, had to be allowed all our claims.

About this time I was asked to take charge of the Navy Bill 1910. I refused, Lawry agreed with me, as there was no one to hold the people.

I next got the job of raising money for the Railway men who refused to carry troops or munitions, was also

worked in organizing
Sim. Fair Courts and helping
in the ^{fair} loan.

The Courts were a success.
Larry did nearly all the
work on the loan himself,
he next led the boycott
Committee, representative of
all so-called National
Sections, I don't think they
would ever have done anything
as as times were getting
dangerous, meetings were
dropped for a few weeks.
A new Committee was the appointed.
I know Joe McDonald personally,
This was the most successful
committee in the North.

1920, Returned majority on
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Newry Urban.

There was also a Post Office
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1921. Police Barrack attacked Newry
Congress ambushed, two of our
best men arrested and
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Train derailed South Armagh
border. There were three
trains, ~~we~~ we were to get
the last one, the Prisoner of
War was in the second and the
first was in the first. We got

ours, the other two got through
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We had an ambush of
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a few of them escaped.

De Valera returned at
General election ^{May 1921} for Dún.

Murder gang out for me
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Some of the Gang shot in
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The Treaty came on I was
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There was a meeting held
in Inragh some couple of
weeks before, J. H. Collins's
solicitor came to me, and
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The Dublin meeting had
been changed to a week later.
Peter Murray, Paddy Hughes,
J. H. King & H. Collins, Seamus
McGuill and myself were
present, none of us had
an invitation except King
and Collins.

Erin McNeill was in the
chair, most of those at the

meeting

I had never seen before, I asked Mr. Hill who were they and what they represented. Mr. Hill told me that this was a meeting of representatives men from the six counties, that it was not a Sinn Féin meeting, I said I was chairman of South Down Comhairle Ceantair, (Sinn Féin) I or no other member were invited, surely we represented some people, I said I knew who had been invited from Down and I wanted to know if the rest of the six counties were represented by the class of people, who had

a class who did not
remember the people who had
been invited from Down, a
class who could not tell the
wonder goes to things as the making
people to ~~returning~~ ~~the~~ ~~meeting~~ ~~locally~~
and would do ~~to~~ ~~to~~ explain things they
disagreed to. ~~later~~ I said he might
not be annoyed about Down,
as it was represented by men
who were trusted by the people,
as thanks to those who conceived
the meeting. McNeill said
the same answer
to ~~through~~ agreed with Down.
He then got to know that
the Treaty was signed and
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BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

NO. W.S: