

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21  
No. W.S. 589

ROINN



COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 589

Witness

Rev. Fr. J.M. Cronin,  
St. Joseph's School,  
Ferryhouse,  
Clonmel,  
Co. Tipperary.

Identity.

Friend of Fr. Alfred Knight, Chaplain  
of Usk Gaol, 1920.

Subject.

- (a) The Chaplain of Usk Gaol, 1920;
- (b) Shooting of James Coleman, Cork, by Tans,  
November 1920.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.1845

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY VERY REV. J.M. CRONIN

St. Joseph's School, Ferryhouse,  
Clonmel, Co. Tipperary.

The Chaplain of Usk Gaol.

Father Alfred Knight was Chaplain of Usk Gaol during the imprisonment of a group of Irish prisoners - I used to see him regularly when he came to our house, St. Peter's, Cardiff. He was a Father of Charity - a Rosminian - an Englishman, a native of Leicestershire, who was educated and ordained in Italy and Germany. He was somewhat a reserved man and it was occasionally when he was teased that we got information about his spiritual charges in Usk Gaol.

Here are a few memories of his that I elicited some time after the Usk escape.

He was much edified by the conduct of the prisoners. With delight, he would relate how at Christmas, they were allowed to erect a crib in one of the cells, he finding all the necessary figures for it - the Governor was impressed by their conduct. The doctor was a Cork man, a Protestant doctor named Hackett, son of a city merchant in Patrick Street. He was very friendly with the priest. He told me that rather than allow one Irish prisoner who died in Usk gaol to be buried in a prison uniform, he had him clothed in an old cassock of his. Father Knight got very attached to the men by reason of their exemplary conduct and religious observances.

When Father Knight retired from Usk through old age and an incipient attack of creeping paralysis, I was instructed to take him to Upton, Co. Cork, in which house he requested to be placed rather than any English House of the Order. In Dublin, or rather at Dunleary, he begged of me to go on to

Cork and Macroom to see my people as I was due back in Cardiff on Saturday, it being Tuesday a.m. He disappeared for a fortnight and it is an "open secret" that the "boys" <sup>must have</sup> looked after him and escorted him after a fortnight to Upton where, after several years of illness, he died and was buried.

We used to tease him that he must have had a "hand" in the escape. He used to smile, but we never got an answer. Once, however, he explained to me that the Gaol Authorities were completely mystified by their disappearance or the way of exit. It was only many months after, that on adjusting a window in the governor's quarters, it was discovered that the outside grill (iron) embedded in the brick surround of window had been carefully removed and put back into its place again. The cement or mortar of the bricks, that held the outside metal bar window-guard, had been carefully removed at the various points where it was embedded, and so the iron grill became removable. It is probable that the escapees got through the window in this way and replaced the grill on leaving. . . . .

..... I got to Cork on the Tuesday and spent the few nights (of Tuesday and Wednesday) with my sister, Mrs. James Coleman (now Mrs. Jack Crofts - brother of the famous leader of the name). James Coleman saw me off late Wednesday night when I motored home by back roads to Macroom, saying goodbye to me on the doorstep. During the night he was shot dead on that doorstep by a Tan, who returned a second time with a gun. Some thought, though I do not think so, that he came back for me. I need not enlarge on all that followed when I returned next morning to Cork, and the great anxieties over my sister. There was the official military inspection of body and hall by a British officer; the Republican inquest in the front/<sup>room</sup> of the house before a jury (Liam de Roiste and Barry Egan, old friends of James Coleman among others, were there) and police from the barracks on the Mall patrolled outside!! Bishop of Cork, a

friend of our family, insisted on accompanying us to the cemetery and to read the prayers at graveside so as to allay the fears of my sister, who had seen the big military display at it. After the funeral, J.J. Walsh, a leading member of the I.D.A. with James Coleman in Cork, appeared at our carriage outside the cemetery gate, dressed as a tramp and approached us begging for alms; telling us of his sympathy and sorrow over his friend. He instructed us in his begging attitude how to act with him so as not to give away his disguise and presence. The pretence of the Court of Inquiry at Cork Barracks of course was a "sham"; it confined itself to cause of death most strictly and would not allow any incriminating evidence against the man. The lawyer who represented the Crown, on my return to Cardiff, I found to be "a robber of widows and orphans." He had asked after a Liverpool friend in Cardiff when he found that I came from Cardiff. When I mentioned his name to her in Cardiff, she remarked: "What! Is that what that villian is at in the King's uniform and Brass Hat," and then she gave him the bracketted title I have just given.

Signed: John D. Cronin

Date: 7th September 1951.

Witness: Sean Brennan. Bondt.

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