

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 591

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 591

Witness

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Identity:

Director of Organisation and Recruiting,
Fianna Eireann, 1915-1916;

Commandant Dublin Battalion Fianna Eireann 1915-1916;
Chief of Staff " " 1917-1920.

Subject.

Fianna Eireann, 1909-1916.

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STATEMENT BY ÉAMON MARTIN

4 The Rise, Mount Merrion, Dublin.

NA FIANNA ÉIREANN

A Brief Outline - 1909 - 1916.

I had left school for about two years, in 1909, but I had continued to pay a weekly visit to the home of my former schoolmaster. It was he, Mr. William O'Neill of St. Andrew's National School, Brunswick Street (now Pearse Street) who informed me of a new organisation which was about to be launched. He told me he had been approached by a Countess Markievicz, who had asked him to recommend the organisation to his pupils and explaining that it was to be national in outlook and purpose. He told me that he had been very much impressed by the Countess - who was an Irish lady - and he thought I should go along and find out more about the organisation for myself. Accordingly, I went to the meeting which was held in what I learned later was a small Theatrical Hall at 34 Lower Camden Street. I was accompanied by a comrade, Paddy Ward, who later became Treasurer of the organisation. At the time we were attending the Gaelic League together and were also members of the same Hurling Club. As the meeting had been advertised in the columns of "An Claidheamh Soluis" there was a fairly large attendance, I would say about one hundred boys. I met there, whom I knew already, the Fitzgerald boys from Brunswick Street and the nephew of my schoolmaster, a lad named Paddy Walsh. Paddy Walsh is the son of the late George Walsh, the Builder of Harold's Cross, who was later a member of the Provisional Committee of the Irish Volunteers, and who was, I think, associated with the Home Rule Party.

Of those present at the meeting, whom I met for the first time, I remember most distinctly, besides the Countess, Bulmer Hobson and Pádraic Ó Riain. I do not remember Con Colbert from this first meeting but I am told he was there. There were some older men whom I got to know later as being connected with the I.R.B. It has been stated in many written accounts that Casement and Pearse were present. This is not correct as I distinctly remember when later I met each of them for the first time. While later on they both took a keen interest in the organisation, neither of them was ever associated with it in any official capacity.

The Chair was taken by Bulmer Hobson who opened the meeting and explained the purpose of the organisation. It was to be national in character and having for its ultimate object the complete independence of Ireland. It would be organised on a semi-military basis, following the pattern of the Baden-Powell Scouts which had been founded the year before, and one of the immediate aims would be to counteract the influence of this pro-British body. Madame Markievicz also spoke - in a patriotic strain - and she laid particular stress on the point that the organisation would be governed by the boys themselves who would elect the Executive Council at a general meeting.

The name by which the organisation was to be known, "Na Fianna Éireann", was proposed and adopted. This, as is well known, was the name of the Army of ancient Ireland, commanded by Finn Mac Cumhail and it had been chosen by Hobson for a somewhat similar association which he had organised seven years before in Belfast but which had not survived.

The meeting then proceeded to elect the Executive Council. Bulmer Hobson was elected President; Madame,

Vice-President, and Pádraic Ó Riain, Hon. General Secretary. A few weeks later Hobson had to go to Belfast, where he lived for about a year - with only occasional visits to Dublin - and Madame was elected President in his place.

As I have said, I had not previously known Pádraic Ó Riain. He appeared to be little more than my own age, but it was quite obvious that he was well used to meetings and their procedure, by the manner in which he set about the arrangements for this one. His capacity for orderly organisation, which was exercised to such advantage to the Fianna in the succeeding years, was very closely demonstrated at this first meeting. His selection as Secretary was the obvious one.

The first group, called An Cead Sluagh, was formed from this gathering and met at the Camden Street Hall. It is from the formation of this Sluagh I have my first distinct recollection of Con Colbert. He was our first Instructor in the elementary drill formations, and I am afraid he was no great expert at this time. By intense swotting, however, he improved as the weeks went on, and, consequently, so did the Sluagh. We then secured the voluntary service of Kavanagh, who, I believe, was ex-British Army, and an excellent instructor. Then too, among the young men who had joined, it was soon discovered we had a natural instructor in the person of Micheál Lonergan from Tipperary, and at this time working in Clerys of Dublin. Micheál had the figure and walk - the dapper style of dress, the typical crisp voice of command and all the mannerisms, without the slightest sign of embarrassment, which add up to the making of the perfect officer.

In a comparatively short time we had left the "form fours" stage behind us, and had advanced to section and

company formations, to signalling and all the rest of a fairly comprehensive course. First aid was added and for this we were fortunate to secure the services of an excellent teacher in Dr. Dunlop of Harrington Street. Route marching and camping followed in due course, and as a corollary to scouting we had instruction in map-reading, path-finding by day and night, with elementary astronomy and generally all those subjects and recreations calculated to hold the interest of boys.

Special attention was given to the language. The officers attended a class in the *Árd Craobh* taught by Pádraic Pearse and they in turn taught the boys in their respective *Sluaighte*, and from early 1911 all the commands were given in Irish. Irish history was also a special feature and particularly the phases recording Irish battles and the many insurrections against the British occupation. In this way the boys were being given a reason for their own military training.

Between 1909 and 1913 the *Fianna* grew slowly but steadily. By 1910 *Sluaighte* had been formed in other parts of the city and county and the organisation had extended to Cork and Limerick (where Seán Heuston joined) and to Belfast and Derry. The first *Árd Fheis* (Annual Convention) was held this year. By the next *Árd Fheis* in 1911, *Sluaighte* had been formed in Clonmel, Waterford, Dundalk and Newry.

It was towards the end of this year that Liam Mellows joined *An Cead Sluagh* and at his next attendance he brought with him his brothers Barney and Fred. Fred died shortly afterwards. Garry Holohan and his brother Paddy also joined this year. It was during this early period that the *Fianna* had been attracting to its ranks the many young

men who were later to become prominently identified with the struggle for Independence.

In 1913 Liam Mellows, now holding the rank of Captain, went on the road as a full-time organiser, and, in the short space of six months, by the time the Irish Volunteers was founded, he had covered almost every city, town and village in Ireland, and I believe there was no county that was not represented in the organisation.

A short time before this the I.R.B. had decided upon the military training of its younger members and four senior officers of the Fianna - Pádraic Ó Riain, Con Colbert, Micheál Loneragan and myself - were assigned as instructors. Needless to say these officers were themselves members of the I.R.B. The training was carried out, in secret of course, at various halls, but principally at the Foresters' Hall, Parnell Square.

In his "Life of Michael Collins", Piarais Beasley refers to this. He writes :-

"Up to this the principal task of the I.R.B. had been to exercise influence on other organisations. The drilling of the members of military age was now introduced. It was from young men trained in the Fianna that the I.R.B. secured instructors for its own organisation. Prominent among those were, Liam Mellows and Con Colbert".

This is a very generous and deserving tribute and it becomes all the more creditable to the Fianna when it is realised that the military knowledge, of its officers, was self acquired. The senior officers were obliged to and did studiously cull from, the British Army Manuals, and from these Manuals stencilled sheets were issued to the Company and Section leaders of every Sluagh. This work was undertaken by Pádraic Ó Riain, who, I might mention here, was also

responsible for the compilation of the Fianna Handbook which was published a little later.

With the founding of the Irish Volunteers in 1913 the contributory value of the Fianna was immediately recognised. Wherever a Company was formed the Fianna was in a position to, and did, supply an officer as Instructor. The four officers previously referred to in connection with the training of the I.R.B., together with Liam Mellows, became members of the Provisional Committee, and were elected to the Executive Council at the first Volunteer Convention. They were also attached to the Military Sub-Committee and having been given the rank of Captain, they went around the various halls night after night to instruct the N.C.Os. and generally to direct the course of training. It was only to be expected that the members of the I.R.B. who had received the earlier training were, for the most part, selected as N.C.Os. It was not unusual for these five officers to find themselves in some or other part of the country during the week-ends getting newly formed Companies into shape. Liam Mellows was loaned to the Volunteers as Organiser and he repeated his Fianna successes in this work.

But not alone did the Fianna supply the officers and instructors it also augmented the rank and file of the new organisation. Here I quote a rule which was introduced at this time :-

"All Fiannaidhe on reaching the age of 18 years and who have not attained the rank of Lieutenant shall automatically be transferred to the Irish Volunteers".

This arrangement was very successful. It gave to the Volunteers recruits who were already fully trained and for

the Fianna it solved the problem of the young men of 18 years and over, for whom there were not sufficient officer positions.

From a "Manifesto to the boys of Ireland" issued on behalf of the Fianna in 1914, but written by Pearse, I quote the following extracts :-

"We believe that Na Fianna Éireann have kept the military spirit alive in the past four years _____ In a sense then the Fianna have been the pioneers of the Volunteers and it is from the ranks of the Fianna that the Volunteers must be recruited _____ It may be _____ that when men come to write the history of the freeing of Ireland they shall have to record that the Fianna stood in the battle-gap until the Volunteers were formed".

From the formation of the Volunteers, the Fianna, while it retained its separate identity, worked in close union with this new body, and no step involving policy or action was taken by either without consultation with the other. The Howth and Kilcool gun-runnings - to mention but two examples - were among the operations upon which the two organisations collaborated, and in connection with which the Fianna officers were given important assignments. Hobson was in charge of the landing at Howth, and, anticipating police interference, he decided that the ammunition should not be issued but should be taken back to Dublin by the Fianna, in their trek-cart, because he said "they were the only body with sufficient discipline to be entrusted with ammunition".

From now on co-operation between the two organisations was very close. Joint parades, route marches and camps became a normal feature, and it was at this time the Fianna Commando was formed. This was an Active Service Unit designed to operate in conjunction with the Volunteers and

comprising selected officers and specially picked boys. I think Hugo McNeill was in charge of this unit, but I am not sure.

It can be seen from what I have said that the formation of the Composite Council in 1920 - composed of I.R.A. and Fianna G.H.Q. personnel - was merely a formal recognition of a condition which had, for all essential purposes, existed since the foundation of the Volunteers.

As the range of training in the Volunteer organisation extended beyond that which had obtained in the Fianna, thanks to the services of men like J.J. O'Connell, Sgt. Major Kerrigan and Captain Bob Monteith, the Fianna were enabled to attend all the "specialising" classes now being formed and they availed particularly of the musketry instruction.

I have nothing out of the ordinary to record until 1915 when the Fianna re-organised the Sluaighte into Brigade and Battalion formations to bring the organisation more into line with that of the Volunteers. The change over had been gradually taking shape of its own accord and it was ratified at the Árd Fheis held in July of that year. The Árd Fheis was followed by a meeting of the newly elected Árd Choisde (Executive Council) which proceeded to appoint a Headquarters' Staff, thus departing from the former practice of electing the Departmental Directors at the Árd Fheis. Pádraic Ó Riain was appointed Árd Fhéinne or Chief of the Fianna, and Bulmer Hobson was appointed Chief of Staff. To anyone knowing the two men, and not knowing of the friction which had been developing for some time with Madame, these two appointments were quite out of line. The title of Árd Fhéinne was really no more than an honour and would in the normal course have been a fitting tribute

to Bulmer Hobson's service. On the other hand, Pádraic's forte was organisation, a fact well known to the Executive. He had the technical knowledge to direct and co-ordinate the courses for the various Departments and in fact he did this, thereby assuming the office of Chief of Staff. Besides, a Chief of the Fianna, when we already had a President, was quite anomalous. However, while Madame might feel hurt because she herself was not given the title of Árd Fhéinne she would tolerate it going to Pádraic, but by this time she would never have stood for it going to Bulmer. Therefore, these two positions were filled in this way because it was still considered expedient that Madame should not be too openly antagonised. Incidentally, as the President was still elected by the Árd Fheis, and as it had been arranged that Madame should be re-elected to this position, she was thereby voided for any appointment on the G.H.Q. Staff.

The following Headquarters' Staff were appointed by the Árd Choisde :-

Chief of the Fianna	Pádraic Ó Riain
Chief of Staff	Bulmer Hobson
Adjutant	Percy Reynolds
Director of Training	Seán Mac Aodha
Director of Organisation & Recruiting	Eamon Martin
Director of Equipment	Leo Henderson
Director of Finance	Barney Mellows

In a brief sketch of Seán Heuston - an admirable appreciation - "John Brennan" refers to Madame as Commander-in-Chief in 1913. I have shown, however, that the Constitution did not at that time provide for such a title or position and when it did make such provision it was Pádraic Ó Riain who got the appointment.

Perhaps it might be as well if I should digress here, as having a bearing on what I have just said, to explain the relationship of the I.R.B. to the Fianna. While it is true that there was no positive directive there was unquestionably I.R.B. influence. I believe that the possibilities for the I.R.B. were very much in Hobson's mind when the Fianna was launched. At that time besides Hobson, Pádraic Ó Riain and Con Colbert were already members of the I.R.B. In 1911 Paddy Ward and myself were sworn in. Liam Mellows was sworn in at Easter 1912, Lonergan the same year, Garry Holohan in 1913, his brother Paddy a few years later and by this time I would say every senior officer throughout the country had become a member. Of the Headquarters' Staff, seven in number, all were members. In 1912 a separate Circle for the Fianna, known as the John Mitchell Circle, was formed with Con Colbert as Centre and Pádraic Ó Riain as Secretary. The officers from the country who were members of the I.R.B. attended this Circle when in Dublin. The practice was to hold a meeting of this Circle with the country delegates attending on the eve of the Árd Fheis and at this meeting all matters of policy were decided. The agenda of the Árd Fheis was examined and discussed and decisions were arrived at before the Árd Fheis met. Certain resolutions of no great importance were left open for free voting but apart from the discussion arising out of these the rest was all so much eye-wash. It can be seen, therefore, that while, as I have already said, it was expedient to leave Madame as President, she really had no voice in shaping policy and was overruled or out voted whenever her ideas ran counter to the decisions of this group. Let me say that I entirely approved of this caucus control.

I have mentioned that Liam Mellows went on the road as a Fianna Organiser in 1913. While the growth of the

organisation throughout the country from this time onwards; is testimony to his splendid and untiring work, the fact is that Liam was essentially an organiser for the I.R.B. Only a person entirely without guile, like Madame, could believe that Liam could afford to give up his job, and keep himself on 10/- a week - which was the munificent wages he received from the Fianna.

Let it not be thought that I am detracting from Madame's part in the founding and development of the Fianna. While it is true she was "used" it is nevertheless true I believe that without her it is doubtful if Bulmer Hobson or anyone else would have embarked upon the project. I believe it needed Madame's enthusiasm, her tremendous energy and above all the abiding faith of such a noble character to have brought the dream to fruition.

In recording this inner history I find I have destroyed two myths - one that the organisation was governed by the boys themselves, and two, that Madame Markievicz controlled the organisation.

But, to return to the sequence of events. By this time - 1915 - training had been greatly extended and intensified. During the next few months while on the surface things seemed to move along in the normal way, it was felt by many that we were moving rapidly towards a climax. It may be that the weekly writings of Connolly in the "Irish Worker" disclosing a divergence of opinion between the Citizen Army and the Irish Volunteers on the question of military action created this impression. There was also Connolly's lectures to the Irish Volunteers dealing with the tactics of street fighting. But certainly the thoughts of many of the senior officers in all the armed organisations were occupied at this time with an approaching clash of arms with England.

It was not until the Sunday, a week before Easter, that I got definite information. Colbert, who was still my "Centre" in the I.R.B., came to see me, and, giving me a hint, asked me to meet him on Monday evening at Dawson Street. I also knew that arrangements had been made, by Connolly, with whom I was in fairly close contact, to bring Liam Mellows back from England, where he had been deported a month previously. I should mention that in the August previous I had been appointed O/C., Dublin Brigade, with the rank of Commandant.

Whether Colbert asked me to bring Garry Holohan along with me on the Monday, I cannot now remember, but Garry was with me, certainly as far as the door, outside of which we met Pádraic Ó Riain. In his own record Garry has stated, and he ^{has} had a remarkable memory for detail, that Barney Mellows, who was employed at Headquarters at this time, came out of the office as I was going in, and said something to the effect that it was "all fixed".

However, I met Colbert with whom was Paddy Daly. I was informed of my own assignment so that I could start making the necessary preparations which involved the selection of about twenty reliable young men. We were to attack the Magazine Fort in Phoenix Park, which was to be the signal for the Rising, and it was to be an all-Fianna operation. I understand that this was Connolly's suggestion. Paddy Daly, who was at that time working as a tradesman in the Fort, had made a sketch plan. He was to be in charge of operations and had drawn up the plan of attack. Elsewhere I will deal with this operation in detail and hope to clear up many of the erroneous accounts which have been published from time to time.

We met again on the following three evenings, our

final meeting being on Thursday at 41 Parnell Square, by which time all the men had been selected and approved, and mobilised for Father Matthew Park for the following evening. Here those selected for the laying of "mines" were given a final lesson in the handling and detonating of the gelignite sticks by Frank Daly of the Engineers - a brother of Paddy. After every man was apprised of his particular duty, Tomás McDonagh who was present from the Volunteer Executive, delivered a heartening speech. Having been sworn to secrecy the men were dismissed - to meet again on Sunday.

On the way home from this meeting, Garry and I called to Pádraic Ó Riain's house on Clonliffe Road, where we saw Pádraic and learned that he had been ordered to proceed to Tyrone with Commandant Eimer O'Duffy who was to direct operations in that area. In view of the Military Council's attitude towards Hobson and its distrust of his close friends, it has often been asked why Pádraic Ó Riain, Hobson's closest friend, was allowed to know anything about the secret plans. I know that Connolly - and the members of his family - had a great regard for Pádraic and a high respect for his ability and my own view is that Connolly would not wish to deny to him the opportunity to participate in the Rising and his decision would be accepted by the other members of the Council. But, whatever the reason, he was not excluded and he duly proceeded to Tyrone with O'Duffy.

Hobson was at Pádraic's house when Garry and I arrived, and he made no secret of his attitude to the project, although it seemed to me that he was resigned to being "dragged" into it since the plans had gone so far. He has written and published his own account explaining that he had

his own military plan which had been made known to the Volunteer Executive. I did not know of this at the time; when I learned of it some months later, after the Rising, the plan seemed to be to be quite sound and practicable. This is not to say its soundness or practicability would have diverted my own course. I believe that Pearse's doctrine, no matter how impracticable from the military aspect, had a greater appeal for those who had become tired of waiting for favourable opportunities. And I think it was generally felt that the European War which had been going on for eighteen months might and without any attempt being made to take advantage of England's difficulty, that this would be shameful and disastrous, and that even a glorious failure would be better than no attempt at all. I am making no apology for Hobson, (he never made any apology for himself and he never wavered in his attitude), but I would like to make a personal comment. This man had devoted all his years to the promoting of national forces - political and military - with just one single object in view - the liberation of Ireland. To those, then, who have from time to time accused him variously as a traitor and a coward I would say :- "Please acquaint yourselves with all the facts before passing judgment". I would recommend to them "The Rising" - Desmond Ryan's factual recording of the events leading up to the Rising and the development of the differences between the leaders. I might add that it often struck me that it was Hobson's "misfortune" that he was not arrested after 1916 - an occurrence that seemed to give "absolution" to so many who did not participate in the Rising and who held no such moral convictions as his.

To go back to the beginning of the distrust of Hobson, allow me to digress. When John Redmond issued his

ultimatum that twenty-five of his nominees be co-opted to the Volunteer Committee, and the majority, swayed by Hobson's appeal to accept the "bitter pill" and save the organisation, acceded to Redmond's demand, I was among the nine with our old friend Piarais Beasley who opposed it. I did so for the reason, which I stated at the meeting, that as the Home Rule Party was already fairly well represented in numbers on the Committee of thirty, a further twenty-five of Redmond's nominees would simply have meant out and out control. Hobson argued that Redmond wanted us to reject his demand - that he would be a very disappointed man if we accepted it and thereby kept the Volunteers intact. But his acceptance, and his persuading of the majority to accept earned for him very bitter criticism from Tom Clarke and McDermott and many others. But, thinking back, I have often wondered what would have happened had Hobson's view been rejected. There is, in my opinion, no doubt that the organisation would have been split from top to bottom throughout the country. I agree that the split was inevitable, but I cannot share the view that when it came it was only after irreparable harm had been done by the acceptance of Redmond's ultimatum. We have to ask ourselves: Could this young organisation - only eight months after its birth - have withstood the shock of a split at that date and upon that issue alone? It must be kept in mind, because it is a very important point, that when the split did occur it was on a more vital issue - one which was to favour and in time greatly strengthen the Sinn Féin element in the Volunteers and in the same due time was to almost completely wipe out the Redmondite faction which had carried on as a separate Volunteer body after the split. I am referring to Redmond's speech at Woodenbridge at which he told the young

men of the Volunteers that their duty lay in France fighting for England.

While this is strictly not Fianna history, I feel impelled to record my views on the matter because of Hobson's close association with the Fianna, and because it was his counsel and guidance which so impressed and influenced the young men of the organisation, all of whom held him in high esteem.

I am afraid I have indulged in many digressions throughout this narrative.

To get back to Easter Week. In the plan of campaign the Fianna officers were given certain assignments. The Magazine Fort, as it turned out, owing to the chaos arising out of McNeill's countermanding order for Sunday's "manoeuvres" was not an all-Fianna job. We had to borrow men from the Volunteers but the larger percentage were Fiannaidhe and after the attack they all returned and took up positions in the fighting areas. This group, in Commandant Daly's (Éamon) area was in the line of defence along the Quays and in the Four Courts - they participated in the attack on the Broadstone Station - and Captain Garry Holohan's part in the capture and burning of Linen Hall Barracks has already been recorded and is too well known for me to dwell upon here. His brother Paddy was by his side all during the week and his cousins Paddy and Hugh were with Tom Ashe at Ashbourne. Towards the end of the week Seán McLoughlin was given the command in the Post Office and led the retreat from that area after the burning of the buildings.

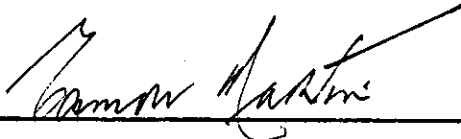
Commandant Seán Heuston's defence of the Mendicity with both Volunteers and Fianna under his command - and

Commandant Con Colbert's part in Watkins Brewery and afterwards at Marrowbone Lane Distillery have also been recorded elsewhere. Madame Markievicz, although fighting as an officer of the Citizen Army was still a member of the Fianna, and fought as second in command at the College of Surgeons. An order of the day signed by Commandant Connolly and dated 28th April states: "Captain Liam Mellows - in Galway - fresh from his escape is in the field with his men". Captain Séamus Kavanagh, who had been second to my own command in An Cead Sluagh fought in the Stephen's Green area. How many of the Fianna who were by this time in the Volunteers - ~~like our esteemed Chairman~~ - it would be impossible to name.

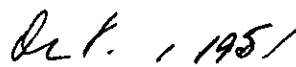
I could go on reciting name after name. It is sufficient, however, for me to say that there was not a single fighting post in the city or country which had not its quota of the Fianna.

Let me say in conclusion, partly paraphrasing Pearse's statement of 1914, that no history of the resurgent movement, which preceded and culminated in the Rising - and no history of the Rising itself can claim to be complete if it ignores or fails to adequately acknowledge the enormous contribution made by Fianna Éireann to the struggle for our country's freedom.

SIGNED



DATE




WITNESS



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