

**ORIGINAL**

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 632

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COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 632

**Witness**

Miss Elizabeth Bloxham,  
43 Garville Avenue,  
Rathgar,  
Dublin.

**Identity.**

Member of Executive of  
and Organiser of Cumann na mBan.

**Subject.**

- (a) Her national associations 1911-1921;
- (b) Political feelings, Co. Down, 1911;
- (c) Foundation of Cumann na mBan, 1914.

**Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.**

Nil

File No. S.1847.....

Form B.S.M. 2

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# ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1013-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1013-21

No. W.S. 632Statement by Elizabeth Bloxham,43 Garville Avenue, Rathgar, Dublin.

### Early Background.

I was one of the younger members of a large family living in the West of Ireland. Being Protestants, we were, as a matter of course, Unionists. I have no recollection of any political discussion in the family; it was just taken for granted that we joined in the singing of "God save the King" at the end of our concerts and temperance meetings just as we took it for granted that the local brass bands played "God save Ireland" and "A nation once again". I suppose we Protestants were about 3 or 4 per cent of the people amongst whom we lived and I cannot recall that any of us ever felt that our religion made any barrier between us and our neighbours. Looking back on these bygone times my heart warms at the thought of the kindness of these neighbours and their helpfulness in times of difficulty and trouble. It wasn't as if we were ascendancy Protestants of the class in whose power it then was to use their influence for or against the common people. We had neither influence nor power and as little of this world's goods as had the people amongst whom we lived.

### How I came to be interested in the National Movement.

Among my friends were two brothers, Martin and John Moran, who were boat-builders. As children we watched them at their work on the shore mending and repairing boats and they allowed my little brother to imagine he gave them great help in caulking the seams of a boat; as proof of his skill he used to show us the tar on his hands.

The brothers were remarkable-looking men. They were lightly built and very tall. They had dark skin and eyes and black beards. They wore wide-brimmed soft felt hats and blue pilot coats (as they were then called). No other men wore similar hats so that both their appearance and their garb were distinctive. Martin, the elder, was both humorous and witty and John looked up to him. I remember them jokingly trying to irritate me by saying that anyone of my name must be English. My reply was that anyone who looked at the two of them would be sure they were Spaniards descended from the sailors who swam ashore after the wreck of the Armada, and they enjoyed my youthful attempt at repartee.

When I began to grow up I realised that the brothers were inveterate readers but found it hard to procure books. I lent them such books as I could lay my hands on. As the years went by Martin's health failed (I now realise he had contracted T.B.). I was then in my teens and had fallen under the spell of George Eliot and thought they might like to read "Adam Bede". I remember how courteously they thanked me but explained that it wasn't the sort of book they really enjoyed for it was only about a carpenter like themselves and "You know", said Martin, "it's the nature of a man to like to read about Kings and princes". I instantly realised that what they wanted was high romance and heroic stories and that above all they thirsted for hero tales of ancient Ireland and I did all in my power to supply their need.

I had been calling regularly to see Martin who had become unfit for work. One evening I found the brothers pleasurablely excited because they had found in a paper a poem which they thought I would like. It was "Clare Coast" by Emily Lawless. They asked me to read it and beamed with

pleasure when they found I was as moved as they were by its poignancy. I remember them calling my attention to the stanza which begins, "Fool did you ever hear of sunshine which broke through rain?". "We'll give you the poem" said Martin, "get the scissors John and cut it out". I demurred at the cutting out. I said I'd take the whole paper and return it safely to them. They looked at each <sup>other & B</sup> questioningly and then Martin said, "I think we'd better cut it out because this is the sort of paper ye wouldn't like in your house". The paper was Griffith's "United Irishman", so they were showing delicate consideration for the susceptibilities of our household. I laughingly said I thought we could stand it and took the paper home with me. It was the first copy of the United Irishman which I had seen. In a very short time I was writing articles for it which seems to justify Martin and John's conviction that it was an unsettling paper to let loose in a Protestant household.

It would, no doubt, be of interest if I could recall a struggle before accepting the outlook of such a paper. The fact is that I had no such experience.

That one's first loyalty is to one's own country seemed to me then, as it does now, to be unquestionable.

#### Literary Activities.

I have said that shortly after my friends had given me a copy of the United Irishman I began to write for it. On looking through old papers I can only find articles which appeared in Sinn Féin so I assume that the former paper must have closed down about that time. Very few of my articles were in the strict sense political but the fact that Griffith published everything I sent him is evidence that their tone was national. I can recall James Stephens telling me that when discussing

them with Arthur Griffith the latter said that he could guarantee that my sense of humour would come through everything I wrote. I think I felt that a leaven of humour was needed to prevent us from becoming constricted by our intense seriousness.

In case it is of any interest the following is a list of the articles I wrote of which I have any record. They appeared in Sinn Féin between the years 1906 and 1912. They were signed 'Eilis' or occasionally 'E.B.'

1. The sorrows of an excellent young man.
2. Earnest Women.
3. The soul of Ireland - a reaction.
4. The Pilgrimage.
5. Good and Evil.  
(A reply to an article by James Stephens).
6. Another.
7. My first pantomime.
8. An apologia.
9. Noble women.
10. The placating of the North.
11. Freagra Eilis do Roisin.
12. Eilis in search of a blouse.

In the "Irish Review" for November, 1912, I wrote a signed article on North East Ulster. I was employed in Newtownards at the time of publication.

In the first number of "The Irish Volunteer" there was an article of mine. I have no copy of this number. In the same paper dated 15th August, 1914, there was a report of a speech I made in Galway shortly after the Bachelor's Walk incident when British soldiers fired on a crowd of people. This speech was copied into the "Newtownards Chronicle" the following week and had repercussions to which I shall refer later.

Persons I was associated with in the  
Sinn Féin Movement.

I was employed as Domestic Economy Instructress in Newtownards from January 1911 until my dismissal in 1916. I spent my summer holidays in Dublin. I was a foundation member of Cumann na mBan. My most intimate friends at that time were Mrs. Wyse-Power and Molly McGuire, now Mrs. Padraig Colum. I was regarded as a suitable person to found branches of the women's movement. I have kept no record of the various towns and villages to which I went but I know that each year my holidays were spent on this work.

The actual founding of Cumann na mBan was the result of a conversation with Mrs. Wyse-Power and I think Molly McGuire (later Mrs. P. Colum) and some others, whose names I don't remember, during one of my holiday visits to Dublin. I cannot even remember where the conversation took place. It may have been during the Easter holidays of 1914. Mrs. Power spoke of an executive and I asked how is an executive elected - She said, "We elect ourselves; that is the way an executive has to be elected". I knew nothing about such matters. I was never at the foundation of any movement. She jotted down a number of names. Apart from the three already mentioned and that of Mrs. Tuohy I cannot recall them. I rarely met any of the members of that executive because I was straight away chosen as an organiser having some experience as a public speaker at literary and suffragette meetings.

This organising work was done entirely during my holiday periods. I started branches at various places among them the following: Carrigaholt, Kildysart, Kilkee, Tipperary town, Clonmel, Galway, Athy, Maryborough, Athenry.

There would be some contact before I would visit these places. A Volunteer might be up in town and ask Mrs. Wyse-Power to form a branch. I would always have some place to go and someone to meet me when I arrived at the town. We appointed a president and a secretary from among the women or girls who attended. The meeting would be in a room off some hall perhaps.

Shortly after I came to Dublin first in 1908 <sup>1908 & B</sup> I met Arthur Griffith in his office. In discussing his paper we talked of James Stephens and I said how strongly I disagreed with what the latter had written in a recent article. Griffith was amused; he wrote down James Stephens' address <sup>and E.P.</sup> or begged me to write to him in the terms of my talk. He said James would enjoy it. I did so and thro' these letters became acquainted with the poet. Shortly afterwards I wrote the article on "Good or Evil", strenuously refuting his views on the subject. We both enjoyed this passage-at-arms seasoned in our letters by absurd jokes.

I found Griffith kindly and human. I was a newcomer to Dublin and he went to some trouble to get me into touch with friends of his to whom he commended me. Griffith was so wrapped up in his work that he rarely had time for such small amenities. I remember cycling with him and some friends to Enniskerry and we joked gaily as we rode along. I found later that this was a facet of his character which was not often in evidence.

I can recall going to Maryborough with Mrs. Colum, Thomas MacDonagh, Seán McDermott and the brothers Mellows. Mrs. Colum and myself were organising a branch of Cumann na mBan and the others were organising the Volunteers. Seán joined us at some station down the line after we had left Dublin. At the time I happened to be fooling with MacDonagh



by acting the part of a mild, characterless woman who took all her light and leading from the superior male, (on the lines of "What you say, Mrs. MacDonagh, must be right") and for a short time - a very short time it was - we had the pleasure of observing Seán McDermott's mystification at the type of woman who was sent out by Cumann na mBan to address an outdoor meeting.

When we arrived at our destination the men went to their gathering of Volunteers. They returned to hear the end of an address of mine which Seán thought very forcible. He was the next speaker. I can recall his whispered joke to me about my change of character. On our return journey Seán managed to get and keep a carriage for ourselves. He achieved this by sitting near the window and play-acting a repellent and haughty gentleman on whom no ordinary passenger dare intrude. To our delight the ruse worked; the Mellows sang comic songs and we were full of high spirits. I have sometimes wondered if an invisible onlooker could have realised <sup>that</sup> underneath our gaiety we were all in such deadly earnest. I often met Seán afterwards as Cumann na mBan had an office at his headquarters. The key of my office was mislaid which meant that I had to reach it through the room where Seán worked. I asked him more than once to procure the key but Seán was a busy man and asked me why I minded coming through his room. I said there were always men coming in and out and that I was shy. He laughed hilariously at the word "shy". Of course my "shyness" was due to the fact that I felt I was interrupting very important discussions between him and the men. And then one day I felt sure that I had interrupted a very serious colloquy and I reddened with natural embarrassment. The next day Seán quizzed me with laughter. "I wouldn't have believed it", he said, "but you are really shy. I saw you blushing to the roots of your hair when you were passing the young men".

It was there that I met Terence MacSwiney for the first and only time. Seán introduced us. I was talking to Terence for only a few minutes but long enough to give me the impression of the sort of man he was. After the Rising I was in a house where there was discussion about those who felt it their duty to obey MacNeill's order that the Rising was off. MacSwiney was found fault with because he obeyed the order. I remember the indignation with which I repelled the disparagement. I was as sure then, as the whole world is now, that the calibre of the man was heroic, for I had once met him.

Years afterwards when I was working in the County Wexford and driving on a side-car to one of my classes, I passed Liam Mellows on the road. He had recognised me and afterwards told a man with whom I was acquainted that one of the most enjoyable days he remembered was when the party of us journeyed together to Maryborough. Anyone who remembers that time will also remember the elation of spirit which buoyed us up during those years.

I also recall meeting Seán Treacy. I had been organising in County Clare and arrived in Tipperary town in the evening and was feeling rather tired but the girls told me there was to be a procession through the town and they were to march with the Volunteers. I, of course, joined in and I can still see the blazing torches and hear the brass bands. I was spending the night with a member of Cumann na mBan - I think her name was Ryan. We had entered her shuttered shop and had lit a candle when Seán Treacy arrived. He had heard I had worked in the North and wanted to meet me. I sat on the counter and Seán on a packing case. He was full of enquiries about the Ulster people. He felt sure

that, ~~at~~ at heart, they must be national. He was sure there was fine stuff in them and if only they were not kept in the dark about the history of their country they would feel as we did. I had lived nearly six years in the North and could not share Seán's idealistic opinions, but I hadn't the heart to disillusion him. Doubtless he associated them with Wolfe Tone and his type who had fought and died for their country and he linked up this memory with the present time. I mentally contrasted his outlook with what I had been familiar with in the North. Seán wanted to hear good of them, but, with rare exceptions they only wanted to hear such things of the South as would justify their prejudices and confirm their belief that Protestants lived in fear of persecution.

One person stands out in my memory as an exception. She was a Scots woman who on hearing my Connaught brogue asked me of the people among whom I had lived. When I told her of them her face lit up. "I hear nothing here but what is bad of them", she said, "but I've always believed in my heart that they must be like my own people - the Highlanders".

The girl in whose house I was staying reminded Seán of the lateness of the hour but Seán talked on. So that was the young fellow with generous impulses and high ideals who later on became the ruthless soldier and ended by being shot in Talbot Street. Alas and alas! for the bitter ending.

The effect on Protestant friends and relations of open association with such an unpopular Movement.

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My elder brothers and sisters had left home and were married at the time when I got in touch with the National Movement. I remember a brother of mine telling me of a friend of his who expressed disapproving surprise that I should be "mixed up" with "Sinn Fein". My brother's reply was, "Hasn't she as good a right to her own opinions as we have". That was the general attitude of the family. Later on when I was dismissed from my position in Newtownards none of them thought it a disgrace as I have reason to suppose did some of my in-laws in the North. The members of my family had their own interests and preoccupations. I was fending for myself and they were in no way accountable for me. They just thought that to risk my job for the sake of my convictions showed a bit of pluck.

I had an elder sister to whom I gave an outline of what had happened to force me to make a public protest. To her it seemed perfectly simple - I just did what I thought was right and she was glad that I had the nerve to do it (her own nerves were not strong), and she understood my indignation at hearing our friends and neighbours in the West aspersed.

Before I left home I met two women from the North with whom I got on friendly terms. I met them some years after I had come to Newtownards. They had again visited the West and they told me how sorry they were to hear unkindly criticism of me. This surprised and hurt me and for the moment I couldn't think why I should be spoken of in this manner. But when I found that it was because of my politics I was relieved for, of course, the Protestant community would deplore my defection from the Unionism which was so

closely linked with our religion. The Northern ladies rubbed it in with the hope that I would be deterred from straying further from the paths of respectability.

These ladies were by way of having a great liking for me and indeed I, too, liked them. When I was working in the North they invited me to their home and received me with great kindness and hospitality. When we were parting they said, with tears in their eyes, that everything would be so happy between us only for the One Thing. I'm afraid I was quite unmoved for I answered them gaily, "I could not love thee dears so well loved I not Ireland more". I think they then decided that I was incorrigible.

On looking back I am inclined to think that a good deal of the Unionism in the West is largely due to an invincible ignorance of the history of their country and for that form of ignorance allowance is always made. The poorest and least educated Catholics had their symbols of nationality. At that time you rarely entered a house that had not a picture of Wolfe Tone and Robert Emmet. "Speeches from the Dock", in its green paper cover, was well thumbed by some member of the family. There was talk of the Land War and of "old unhappy far off things and battles long ago" and there was the telling of folk tales. The Protestant mind had no such hinterland.

When I was a little girl there seemed nothing anomalous in a recitation which began,

"The stately homes of England  
How beautiful they stand."

The Board of Education at that time was wise in its generation in not allowing history - English or Irish - to be taught in National Schools, for if we had been taught Irish History it would have broken through the crust of our

conventional Unionism and even if we had read English history some of us with enquiring minds might have wanted to know "the other side of the story".

It was thus with Lecky whose study of English history led him to write, "Ireland in the Eighteenth Century". He did so because he felt he had to refute Froude whose single object, according to Lecky, was to blast the character of the Irish people.

The circumstances under which I lived  
and worked in Newtownards.

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When I finished my training as a Domestic Economy Instructress I was anxious to get employment. The Fates brought me to Belfast Technical School where I had been told there was a vacancy for a teacher. Such was not the case but I was interviewed by the Principal, Mr. Forth, and he suggested that I should accept the position of Housekeeper while I was waiting for an appointment as teacher. Mr. Forth was a courteous Englishman and during the few months I worked in his school he was considerate to me in every way. He had somehow heard that I was interested in Irish literature and the Irish language. I remember that on a Sunday morning when I was walking along a country road in the suburbs of Belfast he saw me in the distance and waited for me. He wanted to ask me why I was interested in things Irish. I suppose he knew the trend of thought and feeling among the staff of his school and wondered how I came to be an exception.

Some time later there was a vacancy for a teacher in Newtownards. I applied for the position and was appointed as teacher there in January 1911. My credentials were sound

and it did not, of course, occur to the Committee that a woman with my name who applied from Belfast could possibly be of the "wrong colour".

I protest against pulpit attack  
on Catholics.

I was regarded as a successful teacher and all went well until February of the following year when in the Church which I attended a bitter and envenomed political address was given in the guise of a sermon. It was in every way calculated to stir up party strife and religious bitterness. The preacher asserted that his political opponents were actuated solely by a desire to crush the Protestant religion and to take from the Protestants their way of living. The whole tone of the sermon was on these lines. I felt it was my duty as a member of the Church to protest against a pulpit being made the venue for such statements. I decided to write a signed letter to the local paper - the Newtownards Chronicle. I well remember giving the letter to the editor. He read it with amazement and gave side glances at me as if questioning my sanity. He asked me if I was aware that the publication of the letter would not increase my popularity in Newtownards. I was amused at his understatement of what would ensue from the publication of the letter and said that of course I knew they would all be out for my blood but, being anxious that he should print it, I pointed out to him that it would likely increase the sale of his paper for a few weeks to come. (This actually happened). It must be remembered that this occurred a couple of years before the First War so the letter created a sensation and many letters of protest appeared in the Chronicle (all of them anonymous). I attach copy of my letter and a subsequent one on the same subject. (Appendices A and B).

A few of them gave me rather ineffective support but none of the letters was on a level to which I felt I could reply. I thought the writer, who accused me of cowardice, was a little wide of the mark.

Shortly after this I had to listen to a sermon of the same sort and when the preacher told of the terror in which Protestants lived in the West, I knew I had to protest again. I felt a surge of anger at hearing the people, amongst whom I had lived so happily, defamed, and when the preacher began to read Kipling's infamous verses I stood up and walked out of the Church. I had read them the previous day in the Belfast "Evening Telegraph". I quote from memory but the tone of them was :-

"We know the war declared on every peaceful home;  
We know the hell prepared for those who serve not Rome".

Later A. E. denounced the verses and expressed his shame that a brother poet could sink to such a low level.

I then wrote another signed letter which appeared in due course in the local paper.

When, on listening to the first sermon, I instantly decided to make a protest, I felt quite sure I would lose my position, for the members of the local Committee under which I worked, consisted of Orangemen and Freemasons. Knowing their point of view I thought dismissal was inevitable and that all my students would desert the classes. But things did not just happen that way. I continued to teach. I noticed a reduction in the number of students and decided that when the classes became so small that I felt I was not legitimately earning my salary



I would resign. However, I held on and to my surprise the reduction in numbers was not greater than might be the case in the usual ups and downs of attendances at such classes, so my work in the Technical School continued in its usual pleasant atmosphere. I felt no resentment towards the girls who stayed away. I knew strong pressure was being brought to bear on the students and that by leaving they felt they were being loyal to their own side but I felt sorry that when I met them they averted their heads and would not reply to my "Good day". I became accustomed to hearing children shout, "No Home Rule and to hell with the Pope", as I passed by. I think they regarded it as fun. The Rector and his wife, as might be expected, cut me dead. I felt that my hand was against every man and every man's hand against me and I could not help feeling that even the apparent loyalty of my students was diluted by self interest for they enjoyed the evenings at the Technical School and learned a good deal and besides, many of them were Presbyterians between whom and the Church people there was not a very kindly feeling.

I find some sympathisers.

It was at this time, when I was feeling outlawed, that one day I went into a hardware shop to make a purchase. There were some men in it and when I was crossing the street one of them overtook me. He said, "Excuse me but are you the lady who wrote the 'Letter'?" I felt my backbone stiffen and replied as if in answer to a challenge, "Yes, I wrote the 'Letter'". "Well then", said the man, "I'd like to shake hands with you if you don't mind". My backbone relaxed and I stammered with surprise, "But-but", said I, "I thought no one approved of it". "I do", said he, gripping my hand, "and it's the sort of letter I'd like to have written myself but I wouldn't be able". I went on my way

trying to adjust my mind to the strange fact that someone approved of my action. In a country town news travels fast and when I reached my lodgings the woman of the house (with whom I was on good terms though she thought my public activity meant "flying in the face of Providence") met me exclaiming, "So yourself and Mr. H. were seen shaking hands with each other in the middle of the main street!". I asked her who the man was. He was a very well-to-do farmer who lived a considerable distance from the town, a man of standing and a Justice of the Peace. They said he was always a Radical. In the West we were Unionists or Nationalists. I had never heard the word Radical applied to anyone.

There was a nice girl with whom I was friends. She was a Presbyterian and was not interested in politics and continued to be friendly with me in spite of public opinion. She invited me to her home in the country and I was surprised when she said her father wanted to meet me because of "the letter". He also was a Radical. So we cycled to her farm house one day and I was entertained hospitably. Her father wanted to hear of Sinn Fein. He said he knew nothing of this new movement but he did know that the South fought manfully for land reform and that the farmers in Ulster were the first to benefit by the agitation. It seemed to him that they were always right and he thought it likely they would be right again. He then said he'd like to take me for a drive so the pony was yoked and we set off for Grey Abbey. He brought me to a graveyard to read on a tomb stone that an ancestor of his departed this life in Ballinahinch in June '98. "They say", said he, "that it should be 'died' in the battle of Ballinahinch", but his reply was, "Any fool would know it wouldn't be picking daisies he'd be in Ballinahinch

on the 13th June, 1798". So I could no longer pose to myself as an Ishmael. Every man's hand wasn't against me. But alas! the younger men showed no inclination to meet me, the bulk of them were in Carson's army and those who weren't were very cautious and discreet.

But I was actually on sparring terms with a young fellow who was in Carson's Army. I knew him through his sister who was a pleasant girl who attended my class and through her we used to send provocative messages to each other. I remember telling her to ask Johnny who they were going to shoot with their wooden guns. (They were drilling with wooden guns before they got rifles). She said she did not like to give me his reply but I insisted on hearing it. He said to tell me the first ~~thing~~ they would shoot would be the rotten Protestants - their name for any Protestant who was a Nationalist and of course I knew I came under that heading.

I was again surprised when later on this girl invited me to tea with them on a Sunday evening. She had other brothers as well as Johnny and I felt they wanted the fun of fighting with me and had a wild hope that they would show me the error of my ways. Before I went I decked the lapel of my coat with any badges I possessed - the Sinn Féin colours, a Gealic League button, etc. I can remember how pleasantly we all sat round the kitchen table. The girls had made the scones and sweet cakes that I had taught them to make at class. When I arrived the boys had not come in and the father asked me diffidently if I'd mind telling him what the badges were for. I explained to him that I only put them on to tantalize the boys so as to make them feel I was going into battle with all my colours flying! The boys were a little shy at first and then the talk grew fast and furious. The father rebuked them for their heated talk reminding them that

I was a visitor to their house, but I reassured him. I felt I was fair game and was interested to hear an unvarnished expression of their views and needless to say I did not remain silent during the discussion. Johnny reproached me vexedly for having been the cause of a rebuke from his officer in Carson's Army. One day when they were marching through the town (with wooden guns) I caught his eye and we both grinned and Johnny so far forgot himself as to touch his cap in salute. It made matters worse when I wickedly agreed that of course no soldier (even if he had only a wooden gun) should salute a woman while he was on the march. However, when we adjourned to the parlour we forgot our acerbities and a younger brother in his teens told me he was learning to be a signaller in Carson's Army. He showed me his flash lamp and explained how it was used. Now I happened to know the Morse code Alphabet and suggested I'd give him a little practice. He was very pleased and wrote each letter as I very slowly signalled "Ireland a Nation". So absorbed was the boy in trying to get each letter that it was not until I asked him to read what he had written that he got the gist of the words. I pretended I had put a spell on the flash lamp and that when later on he would mean to signal "Ulster will fight and Ulster will be right" or some such thing my spell would make him flash "Ireland a Nation" over the hills of Ulster. The youth turned on me with vexation which was heightened when his brother, seeing the joke, threatened to report him for having let the property of their Army into the hands of a Rebel! We had all enjoyed the evening and parted on the friendliest terms. Before I left the father took me aside to ask how a Protestant could hold such views as mine. I was not in the mood for a fresh discussion so I only pointed out that I was the best Protestant of them all - for I

was protesting and we left it at that.

I get Police protection.

But these pleasant little interludes were exceptional. The tom toms were sounding in the background. I was made aware that I was in danger of being stoned from some of the side streets as I walked home from my late night classes. I refused to take the warning seriously but apparently the local police thought otherwise. They escorted me very discreetly and it was only by a fluke that I discovered I was under police protection. There was also a suggestion that I should be attacked by mill girls who would tear the clothes off my back and thus save the men from the ignominy of attacking a woman, but none of these threatenings eventuated, and of course one must remember that in every community there are the elements of a brutal mob. Curiously enough I never felt afraid and perhaps it is true that "Where there is no fear there is no danger". All this angry feeling was the result of my letters to the paper in 1912.

I am dissuaded from taking a new job.

When my next session opened in the autumn my classes, which seemed to be popular, were full. The girls who had deserted them returned and all was for a time plain sailing. This being so I felt I was free to apply for a position in Kildare which I saw advertised. The Head Inspector in the North came to see me. He had heard of my application and was greatly perturbed at the thought of my leaving the Newtownards school. He asked me sympathetically if I was in any trouble with my Committee.

I was glad to be able to say that everything was going smoothly. He then explained that, owing to an extreme shortage of teachers, the school would have to close down if I left. He was very complimentary about my work and promised that if I stayed in Newtownards for the present he would see to it that I got a much higher position in Belfast later on. I explained that I was quite satisfied with my position and that my only reason for wishing to leave was to be near my relations who were then living in County Dublin. He told me he was quite sure I would get the position for which I had applied but was equally sure that the school in Newtownards would have, for a time, to close down if I left. I asked for a day or two to make up my mind. On thinking the matter over I decided on a point of honour to remain. I did not wish to injure the school in which I had worked successfully for a couple of years. My committee were very grateful and in the printed report of their meeting I was extolled for my teaching ability and for the sacrifice I had made in not taking a better position. The chairman with members of the committee came to my class room to thank me personally and my salary was increased to the amount I would have got in the school to which I could have gone. The chairman hoped I would never have any cause to regret my decision. I mention these details because it was from the same chairman and committee that I received notice of my dismissal in 1916.

Reaction to my article in Irish Review  
and Galway speech.

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In November of the same year a signed article of mine on "North East Ulster" appeared in the "Irish Review". I did not speak of it to anyone in Newtownards for I knew that sooner or later it would come to their knowledge and I felt

a certain mischievous anticipation of its effect. When it became known that I had written such an article there was no copy of it left in Belfast. A Presbyterian Minister who was very prominent in the Carson movement asked the daughter of the house in which I lived if she knew that I had written the article. She knew nothing about it. He said he had searched through the Belfast book-shops but could not procure a copy of the "Review" and asked her if she thought I would lend him my copy. I did so and I think he felt that I was supplying him with ammunition for an attack. He returned the Review, his only comment being that it was a very carefully written article, which I took to mean that though it contained much that he must have objected to he could find no glaring inaccuracy to give him a handle against me. Rumour said I had written a terrible article but as shortly before this I had been lauded in the local paper for staying in Newtownards at a sacrifice no overt action was taken about it.

But the calm was broken when during my holidays in 1914 I made a "stirring speech" at a public meeting in Galway under the auspices of Cumann na mBan. It was after the Bachelor's Walk incident when British soldiers fired on the people. A report of this address was given in the "Irish Volunteer" and the report in full was copied into the "Newtownards Chronicle" of the succeeding week. When I returned from my holidays the boycott was on. The Principal of the Technical School and his wife refused to speak to me. They were both English and, as I happened to know, had little if any sympathy with the political movement, but they bowed before the storm. About that time pressure was brought to bear on the woman of the house in which I was staying and she asked me to leave. I had lived on very friendly terms with this woman and her husband - indeed during my time in Newtownards I never had a

personal quarrel with anyone. She gave some futile reason for asking me to go but when, without any heat, I explicitly stated the true reason both she and her husband changed the subject. They knew denial was useless. I think they were relieved and somewhat surprised when I made no fuss about it but continued to be as genial as usual until I left their house. My manner must have misled them, for some days later they said they hoped I would come to see them often. I felt they wanted to have it both ways so I told them plainly that I would never cross the threshold of a house out of which I had been turned because of my political opinions. Indeed I was genuinely sorry that decent people like them were amenable to the pressure. I spent some time at the local hotel and eventually succeeded in getting comfortable rooms but after some time pressure was brought to bear on my new landlady. The house in which she lived was owned by a rich relation who lived in Belfast and was on intimate terms with the outstanding Unionists in Newtownards. This landlady cried bitterly when she was forced to ask me to leave. She was quite frank about the reason; she was in the power of the owner of the house financially. I explained that I felt no grievance against her and tried to reassure her but she refused to be comforted.

But I always managed to get some place to stay. I think I must have had the name of being a quiet unexacting lodger! and it certainly was true that my belligerency was confined to print and public occasions.

A would-be sympathiser suggested that I must have a grievance against the local editor for copying my address from the "Irish Volunteer" into his paper and thus getting me into trouble. But I explained that he was quite within his right to do so. A journalist's outlook is to print what his



readers regard as interesting and sensational and to seek copy where it can be found. I remember the side glance this editor gave me when I met him in the street and his apparent surprise when I bid him the time of day as usual. And still my classes went on successfully.

#### The Rising and my Dismissal.

Then came 1916. I was in the North when I read news of the Rising in the Evening Telegraph. Though I knew from a talk I had with MacDonagh the previous summer that things were coming to a head I was shocked into a state of unreality by the bald report in the paper. There was no one to whom I could speak of the matter. I remember meeting a man with whom I was acquainted; he stopped me in the street to say, "We all know you are a home ruler but of course we are sure you are horrified at what has happened in Dublin; you wouldn't have anything to do with the like of that". The surface of my mind knew that this man was sounding me, in what he thought was a cute way, so that he could report my reaction. I looked him in the eye - "You are one of Carson's men", I said "and you've often said that 'Ulster will fight and Ulster will be right'; if Carson ever fights would you go back on him?" "I would not" he said indignantly. "Well then", I said, "how dare you think I'll go back on my side; I only wish I had been in Dublin to give the Volunteers any help that was in my power". Another man approached me on the same lines and got the same answer. I was deeply preoccupied with the great and tragic event that was taking place and though, as I said, the surface of my mind was aware of their motives in speaking to me they made no more impact on me than does a stinging fly which one brushes aside and forgets.

In the house where I lodged there was no mention made to me of the Rising and I exchanged the usual every-day talk with the members of the household.

Then came the time when each day's paper brought news of the executions. I made what I thought was a successful effort to hide my feelings from people who I knew were unsympathetic. But later on the woman of the house told me that whenever she entered my room at that time she felt I was as one watching by the dead. I said I thought my manner to her was the same as usual. "It was", she said, "but I knew that the moment I closed the door you were again watching by the dead". There was great agony of spirit in Ireland at that time.

My teaching work went on as usual but when the session ended in June I got a notice of dismissal for which no reason was given. By the same post I received a letter telling me of the dangerous illness of a young relation of mine and the tears sprang to my eyes. I quickly remembered that I dare not cry; I had to do shopping in the town for I was leaving Newtownards for good the following morning and a tear-stained face might be misinterpreted as the result of my dismissal so with a resolute effort I shut away my private grief. I designedly went into the shop of a member of my Committee and made my purchases in the usual manner. The owner of the shop seemed ill at ease and became more so when I said conversationally, "Well, Mr. D., your committee have taken away my position but it isn't in their power to take away my principles and, of course, so long as I am true to them nothing else really matters, and I bid him good morning pleasantly. I knew what I said would be repeated as I meant it to be.

The chairman of the committee was an intelligent man of good education who, as I felt sure, did not share the narrow outlook of its members. I met him on the road as I was cycling back to my rooms. I dismounted and faced him. I told him I had received his notice of dismissal that morning. I reminded him that he was the man who had thanked me so effusively for my sacrifice in staying in Newtownards at a time when I could have got a more suitable position elsewhere, and I recalled to him his earnest hope that I would never regret the decision I had made solely in their interests. He had no defence except the foolish remark that that had nothing to do with my dismissal but I pointed out incisively that if I had taken the position which suited me it would not now be in his power to dismiss me, "but", I said, "I take this as a shining example of the Civil and Religious liberty which you in the North love so dearly", and I rode away without even saying "Good morning", from which it will be seen that I felt more hardly to him than to the shopkeeper, for he was an enlightened man (or so I thought) and I expected more from him than from the narrow-minded. I feel sure that my short conversation with him was NOT repeated to anyone.

In point of fact although I spoke so strongly I never felt any deep sense of grievance at my dismissal for I am sure that if one outrages popular feeling in any community as flagrantly as I had done some such repercussion is bound to ensue.

Later on I wrote to the head Inspector in the North asking him to investigate the cause of my dismissal. I did this merely because I wished it to be on record why I had to leave in case the Committee would frame up some bogus excuse for their action. His reply was most courteous and

complimentary to me. He praised my work and ability but said that a committee were within their rights in dispensing with a teacher without giving any reason and consequently the Department could not question their action. He assured me that neither he nor the Department regarded my dismissal as any reflection on my competence as a teacher. I then wrote to the Principal of the school for a reference and he sent one which bore testimony to my ability as a teacher, my power of organisation etc.

Some years later I received a form from (I think) a Sinn Fein body. This form was to be filled by stating if I had personal knowledge of anyone who was penalised for national activities. I searched my memory but could not recall any instances of which I had personal knowledge and, so far as I remember, I left the form unanswered. I do know that at the time I quite forgot that I belonged to the category of those who were penalised. This may seem odd but it must have been due to the fact, which I have already stated, that I cherished no sense of grievance, and at a time when men and women were risking their lives it seemed to me, as it still does, a trivial matter that one should lose one's job. I now write these details because I have been asked to do so in the interest of those who, in time to come, may wish to have sidelights on the great event which made a vital change in the history of our country.

During all the time I was in Newtownards there were only one or two small happenings which got under my skin. When I first went to the North I was very curious to get into touch with the mentality of the Orangemen of whom we in the West had tidings but failed to understand. It was the sort of interest one might have in a strange plant if one were a botanist. Could people really and truly believe that we in

the South and West would persecute them if we got the chance? It was unbelievable but I would try to fathom the mystery by studying the psychology of a people who were supposed to have this strange obsession. Luck was with me. The driver of a bread van called at the house in which I lodged a few times each week. He was an Orangeman and I got on speaking terms with him and we became friendly. He was shocked to hear I was a Home Ruler and he, being a religious man, wondered how I would dare to face my God if I died holding such opinions. I, of course, didn't try to reason with Johnny. I was too interested in glimpsing the strange convolutions of his mind. I found he visualised a scene in which a loyal Orange family were listening to a chapter of the bible being read by the father. Everything was orderly and peaceful until wicked Home Rulers came in the night and "waded knee deep in the blood" of these harmless folk. I was satisfied I had got a key to the outlook of Orangemen of his type and did not go out of my way to have further conversation with Johnny. But if I stayed in my room I could hear him asking, "Where is she to-day?" He said he liked my "crack". So friendly did we become that, in spite of my sinful politics, he avowed that he would speak to me whenever he met me. This amused me but I afterwards discovered that he was frequently reproached for saluting the like of me. But after the Rising I met Johnny driving his van and he averted his head and broke his knightly vow. That got under my skin.

The Principal of my school had a little son that I was rather fond of. One day in a lonely place I saw them coming in my direction. I knew the Principal would not speak to me so I turned to the little boy with a friendly word but the

child turned his head in the other direction and that too hurt me.

I get a job in County Meath.

I thought (wrongly) that I would not be able to get employment under the Department for at that time all Departments were under English rule. I, however, applied for a position in County Meath and was appointed a teacher in that county. I would like to place it on record that I was always treated with the utmost fairness by the Department. I remember seeing two posters outside the Courthouse in Trim where I was teaching. One of them announced my classes; the other announced that I was giving a lecture in the town hall on Sunday night under the auspices of Sinn Fein. I thought that the old rector of the parish must have felt disturbed that a member of his Church should be lecturing on Sinn Fein on a Sunday evening. But he and his wife invited me to tea and were very friendly. They showed great interest in my political opinions about which I would not have spoken until they began to question me for I do not like to disturb old people. When I was leaving I said, as a matter of courtesy to the aged parson, that I hoped I had not disturbed him with my talk. "On the contrary", said the courteous old man, "it has given me great pleasure to get into touch with one who holds your views", for, he said, he rarely had the chance of meeting those who differed from him. But alas, not many clergymen of the Church to which I belong were as tolerant as these old people. I remember when I was a student in Dublin meeting a clergyman who had known me as a little school girl in the West. He passed me with a cold greeting and a disapproving look. A fellow student who was with me was surprised. "That clergyman certainly doesn't like you", she said. When I shook with suppressed laughter

she was amazed and a little shocked. Not thus would she have reacted to the frown of a priest who had known her when she was a school girl. I felt I had to justify my unseemly mirth. "That clergyman", said I, "gave me a work-box for being able to prove that St. Patrick was a protestant, and he is now regretting it bitterly". She, too, shook with laughter though she didn't accept my explanation literally. It is true that I got the work-box as a prize for correct answering of a catechism the drift of which, to my youthful mind, was to show that we could claim that the Saint belonged to our Church. My free rendering of the work-box incident was true in essence. The cleric thought that he had grounded me in the type of protestantism which is entwined with loyalty to England. He was wearing a Union-Jack badge and his demeanour to me showed that he had become aware of my defection from Unionism.

I take up work in County Wexford:

The British raid my branch of Cumann na mBan.

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I left the pleasant pastures of County Meath to take up work in County Wexford. I still continued to organise for Cumann na mBan. I can recall a day (it must have been a Saturday the only day I was free from teaching) when I was reorganising a branch of Cumann na mBan in Enniscorthy. The girls had procured a quiet room in an empty house but the quiet was broken by the entry of two armed British soldiers. The soldier in charge demanded to be told what we were there for. I refused to tell him. Of course I could have invented some plausible reason (which likely would not have been believed) and anyway I had a prejudice against lying. The soldier tried to frighten the girls by shouting at them but I insisted that I was responsible for their presence there and that he must address me. He turned and pointed his gun.

at me with a hand shaking with anger, but I too was angry and told him he needn't think he could frighten me and ordered him to put down his gun. Surprisingly enough he did so! He then ordered me to open my hand bag and empty all its contents on to the table. I refused to do so. He ordered the private to search the bag and read all the letters that were in it. The first letter to be opened contained in it an appointment for holding a meeting of Cumann na mBan in Wexford town, but I got another surprise: the private glanced through it and all the other papers and threw them down contemptuously, saying, "Nothing there". Perhaps he could not read or maybe he found the job distasteful. I was then ordered to take off my coat which I refused to do and the angry soldier ordered his subordinate to "search this woman". These were the days when girls were roughly searched and had their hair cut off by British soldiers. I turned on him furiously saying he dare not search me, that according to his own British law he dare not lay a finger on me, but he again ordered the other soldier to "search this woman", but in a strong cockney accent the private said, "Oh, no!". Perhaps it was my apparent certainty about British law which deterred him! after which the two armed soldiers marched out. It sounds like a little bit of comedy and it ended with a human touch. At that time I happened to have a silver cigarette case. On the entry of the soldiers one of the girls in a flurry seized it and put it up the chimney for safe-keeping but the case must have fallen down and caught the eye of the private for the girls remembered having seen him stoop to the floor and I concluded he had taken what he regarded as a little legitimate booty and I did not grudge it to the soldier who refused to search me, but one of the girls thought otherwise.



She worked in a public-house much frequented by British officers with whom her employer was on good terms. She told the latter about the missing case and asked him to try to get it back. He spoke of the matter to one of the officers with the surprising result that it was returned to me after a few days.

#### O'Donovan Rossa's Funeral.

I shall finish this account of bygone times by one more reminiscence.

In August 1915 the members of Cumann na mBan marched in the funeral of O'Donovan Rossa. Mrs. Sheehy-Skeffington was beside me on the march. We were tired for we had been lined up for an hour or two before the procession was on the move. We were also very thirsty and when there was a pause in the tempo of the march we happened to be beside "a standing" on which glasses of water stood invitingly. The addition of a little powder made the water fizz. We paid for our drinks but did not quite finish them and then we saw the vendor fill up the glasses for the next comers and we became aware that we had drunk the dregs left by previous consumers. Mrs. Skeffington asked me if I was afraid of germs. I said I wasn't and fortunately neither was she.

We caught up with the Volunteers when we came to the gates of the cemetery. Thomas MacDonagh, who was in officer's uniform, saw us. There was a tremendous crowd but he so arranged matters that Mrs. Skeffington and myself were beside the grave when Pearse delivered his oration. As he spoke, a biblical phrase ran through my mind - "and he lifted up his voice and said unto them - ". Such uplift of voice and spirit I have never heard before or since. It swept

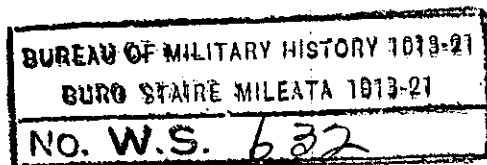
through the listeners so that for the time we were one with him. I am no sentimentalist but the tears stood in my eyes. I knew that we need no longer continue to look to the past for our great men for there was one in our midst who was aflame with the same passionate devotion as the heroes of old.

I wrote a short account of Cumann na mBan's part in the funeral procession for the Irish Volunteer, a copy of which I am giving to the Bureau. (Appendix C.)

Signed: Elizabeth Bloxham  
(Elizabeth Bloxham).

Date: 29<sup>th</sup> December 1951  
29th December, 1951.

Witness: S. Ni Chiosain 7.1.51  
(S. Ni Chiosain).



Copy of letter which appeared in  
the Newtownards Chronicle 3<sup>rd</sup> Feb 1912  
under the caption -  
Politics in the Pulpit.

To the Editor of the Chronicle

Sir,

As a member of the Church of Ireland I wish to protest in the strongest manner possible against the use of the pulpits for political speeches such as that to which I listened last Sunday in Newtownards Parish Church. A pulpit does not seem to me to be a suitable place for political discussion, even if it be fair discussion, but when, as was the case, the sermon was an appeal to party prejudice, and was calculated to stir up political bitterness the thing becomes intolerable to anyone who respects either religion or fair debate.

The preacher asserted that his political opponents were actuated solely by a desire to crush the Protestant religion and to take from Protestants their means of livelihood. Throughout the sermon the charges were rung on this statement. The Burke and Cavendish murders were referred to in a way calculated to mislead and terrify anyone who did not pause to reflect that dastardly murders repudiated at the time are in no way typical of Ireland. A piece of paper was made use of to bring more dramatically before the minds of the congregation the telegram which

(Letter to Chronicle continued)

conveyed to England the news of these murders. God was thanked for the recent humbling of the enemies of Protestantism — referring one presumes to the Blakey Hall episode. Taken on the whole the sermon was the strongest appeal to party prejudice to which it has been my lot ever to listen.

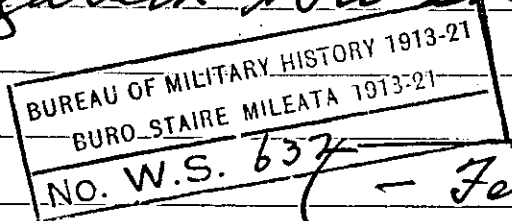
It is not my intention to enter into or to provoke political discussion. I hold that every man has a right to his political convictions, and that men can disagree strenuously and honourably as to whether any political measure may or may not benefit our country. But I also strongly hold that when a man distorts facts, political or otherwise, he ought not (if only as a matter of good taste) to invoke God's name, and that a man who is a professed teacher of the religion of Christ ought not to use his position to stir up party strife.

Any question that may arise as to the justice of these comments can easily be answered by the publication in full of the sermon to which I refer.

I am, Sir,

Yours faithfully  
Elizabeth Blocham.

27, Victoria Avenue,  
Newtownards



- Feb. 1912

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