

ROINN  COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 861.....

Witness

Miss Geraldine O'Donel,
174 Upper Drumcondra Road,
Dublin.

Identity.

Proprietress of O'Donel's Nursing Home,
Eccles St.,
Dublin,

1920 - .

Subject.

- (a) Historical background of her family;
- (b) Care of wounded Republicans, 1920 - .

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.2162.....

ORIGINAL

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174, Upper Drumcondra Road,
D u b l i n.

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I was at school in Eccles Street, but after one year I was sent to Lubeck, near Louvain, where I spent five years. My three sisters in turn were also sent to Lubeck.

I was at home for some time and when my uncle, Monsignor Coghlan, came home on a holiday from America he took me back with him. He gave a similar trip to my sister, Josephine. Neither of us wanted to stay in America, but I went back several times on visits.

My father as a very young man was a Fenian and was second in command of the movement in Mayo under P.W. Nally of Balla. The latter was arrested about 1882, but he had time to send a warning by a policeman to my father, who removed all his incriminating papers, and when the police came to raid the place they found nothing and my father was not arrested. Nally died in prison, probably from ill-treatment. I knew a brother of his, Dr. Nally of Balla, who was a constant visitor at our house.

My father was also a follower and great friend of Parnell and after Parnell's death used to come up regularly for the annual commemoration of his death, as long as he was able. It was a ritual with him.

97.90. Our ancestors claimed direct descent from Calvagh O'Donel, ^{elder} son of Manus O'Donel of Lifford. Calvagh was an uncle of Red Hugh. The first of our ancestors who was transplanted south to Mayo was Hugh O'Donel. He was married to Margaret McSweeney of Fanad. They were

dispossessed of their lands in Donegal and were given some land in the wilds of Mayo somewhere near Ballycroy. Their son, Hugh, married Margaret O'Neill, daughter of Terence O'Neill of Oldcastle. Terence had been obliged to flee from the Fews in Tyrone and he also got a great tract of land in Oldcastle in the neighbourhood of Meelick, near Swinford in the barony of Gallen. The property in Oldcastle was confiscated because of Terence O'Neill's support of James II. Hugh and Margaret had only one son, Calvagh Dubh, and he got back the Oldcastle lands on a 90 years' lease. In the meantime he was acquiring lands elsewhere in Fahyness, about 8 miles from Meelick. It was 2,321 acres of absolutely virgin soil. The lease of that was for 3 lives. Our family actually retained that property until 1913 when it was sold to the C. D. B. ~~during my~~ ^{g. 7.00,} ~~father's minority.~~ It was a man called Palmer who was their head landlord. The same Calvagh Dubh acquired lands in Murrisk on lease also. These were Protestant Church lands and Palmer must have had something to do with that because his name is on that lease too which, as far as I can remember, was for three lives also. ^{g. 7.00} My father had a copy of ~~that~~ ^{the dated 1701} lease. It was taken in the raids during the Civil War, with many other important papers. I never lost a paper during the Black and Tan War.

I have a copy of a lease dated 1801 between Hugh O'Donel of Fahyness and Roger Palmer. It is a renewal of the original lease of 1701 and names all the townlands that were included in the letting.

In 1913 I went to train as a nurse at the Mater and finished in December, 1916. After my father's death in 1909 we came to live in Dublin in 44, Oakley Road.

My sister Josephine trained in St. Thomas' Hospital, London. My sister Lil - now Mrs. Peadar O'Donnell - became a member of Cumann na mBan before the Rising. I was advised not to join as I was told I would be more useful if I did not.

Immediately after the Rising Micheál Ó Foghludha, who escaped from the British, came to our house in Oakley Road for refuge. His feet were in a bad condition, absolutely numb and I massaged them for him. When the British started raiding houses for Volunteers they came to ours. The officer asked my mother was she related to Ignatius O'Donel - that was my father - she said yes, and when she told him she had no one in the house, he took her word for it. The military came back that night but in the meantime Micheál had left. We got an anonymous message that they were coming. It was a neighbour opposite who had informed the British about Micheál's presence in the house.

I met a great many of the 1916 men in Gothic Lodge, North Circular Road, the Foleys' house. Then all three of us were actively interested in everything that took place. Lil went down to help at the Longford election.

I opened a Nurses' Home in January, 1917, at 24, Eccles Street. We had a raid there in 1918 or 1919 by the military. The officer in charge was called McDonnell. I told him that with a name like that he was on the wrong side. He was going through Lil's papers and started to read one of her letters. I said it was not a nice thing to read a lady's letters. He put them down and read no more, nor did they take any papers away. They were not bad at all.

Early in 1920 I opened the Nursing Home in 62, Eccles Street where the whole top of the house was occupied by

wounded Republicans. Among those who were there were Mickey Gormley from Ballinalee who was in Seán McKeon's column. It took five weeks to bring him up to Dublin and when he arrived his wounded leg had gangrene and it had to be taken off above the knee. It was Charlie ^{Joe} McAuley operated on him. Gormley was a long time with us. He would not let anyone touch him but my sister Lil. He used to curse like a trooper. He often said to her "Am I talking to you or to myself." Some of his pals brought him up. Two of them were Cooney and Sheridan and when at last they reached Dublin, Mickey Gormley said to them "Hurry home now, boys, and knock the divil out of them."

The day Seán McKeon was let out of prison he came to visit Mickey.

We were not raided at that time although the houses on each side were. What saved us I think was that we had also a British officer who was being taken care of by both Surgeon Charlie McAuley and Dr. Gabriel Ryan, and his orderly used to come in to him every day. These two doctors also looked after the I.R.A. wounded on the same floor, numbering, I think, seven. There was a big burly man, a docker, from Tipperary who threw a bomb into a lorry of Black and Tans in Parnell Square and got a bullet which passed right over his heart. Mr. McAuley said it was a miraculous escape. We had all these patients registered under false names. That is why I can't remember their real names now. When this patient was coming out of the anesthetic he kept repeating, "Ears have walls." He was afraid of divulging any of the I.R.A. secrets. Mr. Twomey, a chemist in Denmark Street, was the liaison between all the I.R.A. patients and General Headquarters. He was very good.

Another patient we had after the Custom House affair was Tom Ennis. His hip was shattered. I believe he was in charge of the operation and was the last to leave the Custom House. Mr. McAuley threw up his hands in the operation theatre when he saw the condition he was in. But he made a remarkable recovery.

We always attended ourselves to the I.R.A. patients. All the other nurses except Miss Macken were unaware of the fact that these wounded were I.R.A. men. They were visited by members of their units. Headquarters paid the expenses of these wounded whom, of course, we kept at a very reduced rate.

The military looked everywhere except in our house for Tom Ennis. They knew he came that way. He must have been at least two months with us. He went into a convalescent home then. The two doctors thought of the idea of bringing in the British officer as a patient, as it would serve as a good blind for the seven Republican wounded we had. He was Dr. Ryan's patient and had appendicitis. Dr. Ryan asked Mr. McAuley to operate on him. After a while this man got quite friendly and told us he had been in France, India and other countries. He described the system of espionage the British had in India. They would employ the crossing-sweepers and people like that who passed on information to each other. He said he had no difficulty in getting on in those countries, but he was only a fortnight in Ireland and he was terrified.

One of my nurses, Miss Macken, who was also trained in the Mater, was very good about looking after the I.R.A. wounded. She was the only one of the nurses who was in the secret. Another patient from Clare was called, I think, Seán O'Connell. He was active in Dublin. His

arm was badly wounded and it had got septic. For weeks we did not know whether the arm would have to come off or not. Mick Collins used to come to see him. We also nursed a man called O'Brien. That may not have been his real name. As I have already said, all the I.R.A. patients went under assumed names.

I had kept on the Nurses' Home after opening the nursing home. My sister, Lil, under my supervision, used to look after the Nurses' Home while Joe and I were building up the Nursing Home, 62, Eccles Street. My mother, who was very active, looked after the ^{domestic} staff, *by J.W.R.* having given up her home in Oakley Road. It was at the Nurses' Home, 24, Eccles Street, that the couriers from Headquarters used to leave all the despatches to and from the prisoners in Mountjoy. These were taken over and dealt with by Lil. She was not then married. She had not even met her husband, Peadar O'Donnell. She knew him well by correspondence. He wrote his first book in prison and sent it out to her. She typed it all and it was ready for publication when he came out.

The Dáil never met in either of our houses. It often did at John O'Mahony's in Gardiner's Place.

Our Nurses' Home had nineteen big raids during the Civil War. There were three people arrested on one occasion - one man called Leggett who posed as our gardener; a man from Bray whose name I can't remember, and a third called Jack O'Donnell who was not in the movement but was sympathetic. He was released after a short time.

When the Civil War started Lil went out to Blessington where she remained until the break-up. She was

accompanied by Nurse Madeline Byrnes from the staff of No. 62. They commandeered an ambulance and kept it with them. They used it to bring down reports to the Hammam. I went into the Four Courts, taking Nurse Kitty O'Riordan also from 62, and Nurse Mary McNicholas.

She is now dead. We went in an ambulance with Drs. Charlie McAuley and Jim Ryan. There were no preparations made in the Four Courts for an attack and there were no medical dressings or other equipment. The people in the Four Courts had no idea that they would be attacked. I volunteered to go to Fannins on foot. On the way there I had to attend to a woman who had got a bullet wound in the wrist. I kept my finger on the wound until somebody in a neighbouring house gave a clean rag to dress it. She was taken then by taxi to Jervis Street Hospital. I bought £30 worth of dressings at Fannins and phoned to the Fire Brigade for an ambulance to bring them back. By the time I got back Mattie McDonnell had been wounded on the foot, which had to be cut off at the ankle. Tommie Keenan was shot through the lung, but he did not die. We had to make pallets for them on the floor in the basement. There were two others wounded but they were got away to the Mater Hospital. Paddy O'Brien was slightly wounded in the head and was dressed by one of the doctors. He left the hospital and went down to take charge in Wexford. Fr. Albert of Church Street accompanied the wounded to hospital. There was another man wounded but I can't remember his name. A man called Cusack and another were killed by the cross-firing.

The Four Courts had its first attack at 4 o'clock in the morning and I had been trying from that time till

9 to go in. I had been with others on a drive to Glendalough the day before and had made a lot of sandwiches. After we came back I filled Andy Doyle's pockets with the sandwiches that were left over. It was lucky for him we did as he told us after he would have starved only for them. During that night Tom Reilly came in a motor car for him to bring him to the Four Courts, so we guessed there was something unusual on. I did not go to bed at all: I spent the night telephoning and collecting the nurses that were to come with me to the Four Courts and with Lil to Blessington.

Máire Comerford and a few others were in and out of the Four Courts as couriers. We were kept very busy looking after our patients and preparing for any others that might be brought to us. We had set up our emergency operating theatre in the basement. There were quite a number of Volunteers from Cork who came up to town at the invitation of Dick Mulcahy on the understanding that they were to attack the north. They had been told to stack their rifles in Portobello or somewhere and a young Volunteer named Hurley from Cork whom I afterwards met in Tipperary told me they never got them back; that the whole thing was a trick to get the guns from them. I can't say whether any of these Volunteers were in the Four Courts.

Very early in the fight our fellows started to make a tunnel as they were afraid we would all be trapped. There was some Headquarters conference in the Four Courts which was attended by the officers of the Brigades all over the country. Peadar O'Donnell was one of these, though I did not know him personally then. All of those who were still there had then to take part in the fight.

Just as the tunnel was practically finished the explosion took place that destroyed the dome. I don't know exactly what was the cause of the explosion but I always thought it was a shell from the guns of the attackers that touched off the ammunition stored in the Four Courts. It was by this explosion that Paddy O'Brien was wounded.

After the explosion there was a truce to evacuate the wounded who were brought to the Mater Hospital, accompanied by Father Albert and probably accompanied by a guard of Free State soldiers. We were brought to the Four Courts Hotel by the Free State soldiers. With us was a young medical student called Connolly who seemed to have got shell-shock after the explosion. We were offered dinner at the hotel, probably on the instructions of the Free Staters. I made them all refuse and to go on to 62, Eccles Street, and take young Connolly with them. By this time Father Albert came back and said that he had news that there were more wounded in the Four Courts building. I went back with him, but we found no more wounded. The men we now saw were Ernie O'Malley, Liam Mellows, Rory O'Connell, Dick Barrett and Peadar O'Donnell. There were a crowd of others in the basement whom we did not see. Some had already been arrested. The five I mentioned meant to make a dash for it. They were rounded up, however, and the only one who escaped the ring was Ernie O'Malley.

The building was burning all this time and belching smoke.

I came out by myself and feeling thirsty went towards a small public house in Chancellor Street. There was a Free State soldier there and he brought me

out a glass of lemonade. As I looked towards O'Connell Street I saw on the quays two armoured cars filled with British soldiers in khaki and I then realised that there was no chance for our fellows to escape. I went back and told them that. I came out again and there was another explosion which knocked down a house near me and I fell down covered with the debris. I was stunned for the moment and even after I was rescued by Free State soldiers I felt bad. When I came to myself a bit I appealed to them to use their ammunition on the enemy instead of on their brothers. At that time Mr. Connelly of the Fire Brigade came along ^{with an ambulance} and offered to drive me home. I got into it but I told him I would not go home: I would go into the Hammam Hotel to give my report to De Valera. Fr. Albert remained on with the men until they were all arrested.

While I was at the Hammam Charlie McAuley came along and brought me to the Gresham. Dr. Harry McAuley, Dr. P. J. Smith and Dr. Brennan were there too.

A few days after that I got a message from Dr. Lucey, D.M.S. at Headquarters of the I.R.A., asking me if I would go to Tipperary, so I took the ambulance that Lil had out at Blessington, the driver called Leggett, Dr. Mick Hardy and Dr. Seán Geraghty (he is now radiologist in the Mater), two Miss Bolands who were trained nurses and were sisters of Billy Boland of McDonagh and Boland. We went to Clonmel where Séamus Robinson was in command. It was then all the leaders turned up there, De Valera, Childers, Liam Lynch and others. I had my quarters in the Military Barracks where I set up my First Aid Station. All the leaders used to turn up there for meals. I organised Stations in Tipperary town, Rockwell College and Shanbally

Castle. Bill Quirk, Mick Sheehan, Denny Lacey, Martin Breen and Paddy Dalton were on Séamus' staff. Seán Rawley was the quartermaster and the boys used to come to me to intercede for them with him. We had two women prisoners who had been carrying despatches for the Free Staters. There must have been an awful lot of immoral people in the British Army. When we entered the Tipperary Barracks, part of which was burnt down, we found the standing part filled with supplies of salvarsan for venereal disease. In Clonmel Barracks, too, I would not let our fellows sleep in the beds until I had all the blankets washed. I got in about six women from the town to do this. We had a very big crowd there, a lot had come from Cork. We had a lot of people slightly wounded, torn with barbed wire, etc. Two men were killed and we could do nothing for them. We went round everywhere in the ambulance. A new engine had to be put in it. It was there that Séamus Robinson, who was married about that time, was presented with the Rolls Royce belonging to the former Lord Lieutenant, which had been commandeered some time before that.

Seán McKeon was in charge of the Free Staters in Limerick and it was thought he would bring about a truce between the two sides. That was the time the I.R.A. left Clonmel and went to Shanbally Castle. There was no fighting in Clonmel, but there was outside it. Cahir, too, was occupied by the I.R.A. It was there that Kathleen O'Connell, De Valera's Secretary, and myself were adopted members of the Tipperary Third Brigade. I still have the badge that was given to me.

It was at Shanbally Castle, Clogheen, that the Army broke up into columns and we could be of no further use, so we came back in the ambulance - that is the two Miss

Bolands, myself and Mick Hardy. We anticipated some difficulty on our journey and we decided that Mick should do all the lying. We stretched one of the Boland girls as an invalid in the ambulance and Mick, who had a charming manner, was able to get us through the Free State guards. He and Seán Geraghty had done wonders at Clonmel. The latter stayed on with the Republican columns.

Aodhagán O'Rahilly who was only about sixteen was with us and he did great work driving cars and anything else that came his way. He was about to blow a bridge and had placed the charge when a priest came along. The priest said to Aodhagán that he was doing the devil's work but Aodhagán made no reply. The priest who was carrying a message for the Free Staters repeated his remark. Aodhagán then told him that if he stayed there another five minutes he would be blown up with the bridge.

We got back safely to Dublin. It was then that all the raids by the Free Staters began. I have already referred to them.

Signature Geraldine W. O'Donel

Date 10th June 1953

Witness S. Ni Chiosain

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