

W.S. 914

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILÉANTA 1913-21
No. W.S. 914

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 914

Witness

Denis McCullough,
 12 Oakley Road,
 Ranelagh,
 Dublin.

Identity.

Member of I.R.B., 1901 - ;
 Member of Supreme Council of I.R.B., 1909 - .

Subject.

His associations with the I.R.B. Organisation,
 1883-1916.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. 9.62

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY MR. DENIS McCULLOUGH,

12, Oakley Road, Ranelagh, DUBLIN.

This is an entirely personal narrative; it purports to give my own recollection of the events and people of the period it covers. As I have not a good memory, I do not vouch for the chronological correctness of the events as they are entered here and am quite satisfied to have them checked and corrected, if it is found necessary and of sufficient importance to have this done.

I was born in 1883 at number 12 Dicks St., Belfast. My home was a meeting place for the I.R.B., which had been re-organised some years previously. My grandfather and father were Fenians and my father was later Treasurer of the Parnell Leadership Committee, so that I was brought up in a Nationalist and Separatist atmosphere. My first personal contact with the movement was when I joined a branch of the Cumann na Gael organisation in Belfast - the organisation established some time previously in Dublin by William Rooney and Arthur Griffith and their friends. A short time later I joined the Tir na n-Óg branch of the Gaelic League, composed largely of young Civil Servants, many of whom had been my school-fellows at the Christian Brothers Schools. It was this branch that later launched the

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Gaelic Athletic Association in Belfast and was it's backbone for many years. About this time, as I was approaching 18 years of age, my father suggested that I should join "the Organisation", meaning the I.R.B. Accordingly he brought me to the side door of a public-house, owned by a man named Donnelly - it was afterwards called 'The Republican Bar', on the Fall's Road, and I was duly sworn in by a large, obese man, a tailor by trade, named Ibbotson, evidently a good and steady customer of Donnelly's. I was disappointed and shocked by the whole surroundings of this, to me, very important event and by the type of men I found controlling the Organisation; they were mostly effete and many of them addicted to drink. In a year or two, after I had organised one or two new Circles of young men to support me, I got most of these older men retired out of the organisation, which had been split up into about three factions, by *about a year previously, a man name Brookes, from the Clan na Gael in U.S.A.* their personal squabbles. About 1908 or 1909 P.T. Daly had come to *had come round on a visitation to the Districts* Belfast, on behalf of the Supreme Council, in an endeavour to patch up these squabbles. He arranged a meeting in the Stephen's St. club, to which I was summoned. Robert Johnston took the chair, despite the protest of my friends and myself that there were no active Circles of the organisation in Belfast, outside our group, and that he therefore represented nobody. We subsequently withdrew from the meeting. I believed then and I believe now, that that was a true statement of the position. Our group had, as Chairman,

Duce

Paddy Russell, who kept a shoe-repair shop at the corner of Barrack St. and Durham St. He was a very decent man, but also past any usefulness and addicted to bouts of drinking. Shortly after this meeting we got rid of him and I was elected Chairman of the Centres Board in Belfast. I have always held it to the credit of P.T. Daly, that although he disapproved of my protest and withdrawal, he called on me the day following the meeting referred to above to express his belief in my sincerity and honesty of purpose and to beg me to be patient and tactful in my desire to reform matters in the I.R.B. in Belfast. He reported the position to the Supreme Council, of which he was then Secretary, and when the next elections for the Supreme Council took place, I was co-opted a member. I was elected a member of the Supreme Council, representing Ulster, at the following election, in succession to Neal John O'Boyle, of Staffordstown, Co. Antrim, who had represented Ulster on the Supreme Council for many years. He either retired or died about this time, hence my election. I retained the positions of Chairman of the Belfast Centres Board and representative for Ulster, on the Supreme Council, until the Rising in 1916. After this date, and the subsequent re-forming of the Volunteers and their translation into the I.R.A., on the formation of the First Dail, I could see no further use for the I.R.B. and severed my connection with it.

Daly

The preceding narrative deals in a sketchy way with my association with the I.R.B., the organisation which was responsible for most of the activity which led up to the Rising, which itself was organised and planned by the Military Committee set-up by the Supreme Council, and particularly, as I now firmly believe, by Sean McDermott, Secretary of the Supreme Council and Joseph Mary Plunkett, both members of this Military Committee, which also included Jos. McDonagh, Jas. Connolly, Eamonn Ceannt, Padraic Pearse and perhaps one or two others, whose names I cannot now remember. The I.R.B. worked through Sinn Féin, the Gaelic League, the G.A.A. and eventually through the Irish Volunteers, having key-men in each of them, to influence their policy in the direction required. Sean MacDermott was very skillful at this work and being a man of magnetic personality, the large measure of success achieved in it, may be attributed to him.

P.S. O'Hegarty has been good enough to lend me a copy of his personal story, written for the Historical Commission. I find myself in general agreement with the facts, as set out by him, there being only one or two points where his recollection of events does not agree with mine. It will be remembered that P.S. O'Hegarty resided in London and I resided in Belfast. We were not always as close to passing events, at the centre of things, in those critical and stirring years, as were those of our colleagues who

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lived in Dublin. P.S. O'Hegarty refers at length to the P.T. Daly incident and his removal from office and subsequently from membership in the Organisation. He describes the events accurately and mentions the rumour that P.T. was "in touch with the authorities" P.T. had taken to drinking and was otherwise behaving badly, for the last year or two of his connection with the organisation, but I do not believe that he was betraying it. It was a usual "gambit" of the 'G' men, all over Ireland, to endeavour to cast suspicion on any man who became prominent in the Separatist movement. It was for this reason that, when the I.R.B. was being actively organised, especially in the latter years/^{when}P.S., Tom Clarke, Sean McDermott and myself got into a strong position in control, we insisted that only men of known sobriety and character be admitted. Some time in 1918/19, P.T. Daly was arraigned before the Sinn Fein High Court, on some charge, largely inspired from Liberty Hall. Joe McGrath and Tom Foran came up to Belfast to induce me to give evidence against Daly. I undertook to give evidence, but would not promise that it would be against Daly. I would give the facts, as set out by P.S. O'Hegarty, but would also give the extenuating circumstances taken into consideration by the Supreme Council, which had been originally advanced by me in his defence and which I believed, justified their action towards him. Despite the fact that I had made a nuisance of myself at the meeting I attended when

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Daly came to Belfast to reorganise the I.R.B., and practically broke it up by withdrawing a big section of those attending, he nevertheless recognised that I was sincere and in earnest and must have reported accordingly to the Supreme Council because I was kept in contact and was co-opted on the Supreme Council some time later. If Daly had been a traitor he would not have wanted "earnest and sincere young men", but a type that he could use. However, Daly was too much involved in "local" politics to be of any service in a movement intended to organise for a fight on a national scale. It was only after the advent of Tom Clarke into the movement that it really shaped like taking serious action. His reputation enabled the younger men on the Supreme Council like Seán MacDermott, P.S. O'Hegarty, Diarmuid Lynch and Bulmer Hobson etc. to move forward with his backing in organising, preaching and teaching the value and necessity of a physical force movement. It protected them from the usual charges of youthful over-enthusiasm and of insincerity. I say with every confidence that Tom Clarke's person and Seán MacDermott's energy and organising ability were the principal factors in creating a group and guiding events to make the Rising possible.

In the half-dozen years before 1916, I was in continuous control of the I.R.B. in Belfast and indeed in Ulster, which I represented on the Supreme Council, in so far as it existed in Ulster, outside

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Belfast. I attended regularly all the meetings of the Supreme Council, many of them held in the early days in Marie's Hotel, in Gardiner St., and later some in Tom Clarke's shop in Amiens St. and finally in the Clontarf Town Hall, of which Mick McGinn, an Omagh man and an old member of the organisation, was caretaker. P.S. O'Hegarty has given a fairly accurate detail of the various changes in the personnel of the Supreme Council during the years of his membership of it, as well as a fair description of the state of the organisation throughout the country and in England and Scotland, except that it is inaccurate to say that it was not strong in Belfast. Belfast was one of the vital and continuing centres of the I.R.B. The fact that it gave Seán MacDermott and Bulmer Hobson to the movement, two men whose activities and influence had important effects on its progress and policy, during what I might call the formative years before 1916, is sufficient proof of the truth of this statement. As I have neither the time nor the means of checking P.S. O'Hegarty's statements on the personnel of the Supreme Council during those years, and aware that he has been at some pains to get them correctly, I am prepared to accept them and advise their acceptance.

Denis McCullough

11th Dec. 1953

(Denis McCullough)

11th Dec. 1953.

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(M.F. Ryan) Comd't.

