

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BUIRO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1029

ROINN  COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,029.....

Witness

Miss Moira Kennedy O'Byrne,
31 Lad Lane,
Dublin.

Identity.

Member of Cumann na mBan, Dublin,
1916.

Subject.

National activities, Dublin,
1916-1923.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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31, Lad Lane, Dublin.**ORIGINAL**

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When I was born the house of the maternity nurse where my mother was being cared for was surrounded by the police who were on the look-out for my father. He was first employed in Wellington Darley's Brewery, but on account of his ideas on temperance, he threw up that good job and after a number of years he was nominated for the Civil Service. His brother Garrett O'Byrne, M.P. for Co. Wicklow, was a member of Parnell's party. My father, of course, was an enthusiastic Nationalist and all his life anti-British, attending political meetings, Land League meetings etc. They were all interested in such activities, and were associated with Maud Gonne in her Land League work.

My father was a direct descendant of Raymond, the second son of Fiach McHugh O'Byrne, and would have been his heir, if there had been any patrimony to hand down, as the eldest son who was unmarried, was killed in battle. I had a quantity of family papers, old wills and faded documents, some of them dating as far back as 1790, that showed the genealogy of our family. Unfortunately during the Black and Tan period in one of the raids on our house in Highfield Road the raiders filled a sack with these papers, took them away and we never saw them again. After the Truce Erskine Childers gave me an introduction to Alfred Cope who introduced me to the Castle officials who carried out a search - or so they said - but there was

no trace of the papers to be found.

When my father was in the Civil Service he was one of the speakers at a meeting in the Rotunda - I can't now say what it was about, it might have been to do with the Land League - and the Castle authorities demoted him on account of that and his political leanings and he was transferred to Edinburgh, where two of the family were born and another died. As a consequence of this death my mother disliked Edinburgh so much that she wrote to Gladstone asking him to transfer my father back to Ireland and leave him there. Gladstone did that.

When father first joined the Civil Service he signed all the necessary documents with his correct name - O'Byrne, but the British authorities refused to accept it, saying the name should be Byrne. After a long correspondence with the Home Office during which he claimed to be descended from Fiach McHugh O'Byrne, they asked him to prove it. He did so with the aid partly of the family papers I have already referred to, and some papers that were in the British archives in London and eventually the government had to accept the name O'Byrne.

Of course we were all brought up very Irish - that was the atmosphere at home, as my father despised everything English. In the course of the war my brother John was a doctor in a big hospital in London. He was brought before a board for conscription. He said he would not put on a British uniform as his father would despise him. He said he was willing to join the French army, but when he went to France they refused to take him as he was a foreigner. I should mention that some time after that that law was revoked and some Irishmen were accepted in the French army.

When John came back to London he told them they could do what they liked with him, but he would not wear a British uniform. They then sent him as a civilian doctor backwards and forwards to France with convoys of wounded whom he looked after on the way. In the intervals he was stationed in London in the hospitals for wounded soldiers.

When the Rising started here my father was very excited and he went down town to see what it was about. He came back in a great state, saying "This is a fight for Ireland and there is no son of mine in it. It is the first time that none of our family is in such a fight".

After the Rising I joined Cumann na mBan and we were doing the usual work that they engaged in, drilling, parading, attending funerals, meeting the men when they came out of gaol etc. From the foundation of the Dependants' Fund we were active in that work.

One day, I can't say when it was but things had begun to be active and it might have been 1919, I got a pencil note in the handwriting of Mick Collins whom I had frequently met in connection with the National Aid Society, telling me "stop the blasted forming fours, get out of Cumann na mBan and do some work". He must also have sent word to the authorities of Cumann na mBan, because my name and those of a few others, such as Mary Comerford, were erased from the records.

From that on we were recognised as belonging to the I.R.A. I was asked to carry arms for ambushes. We had a secret room in our house in Highfield Road where these things could be hidden and it was never discovered. On

one occasion I was told to fetch two rifles from a house that was to be raided and to dump them in some safe place. I was puzzled as to how I could carry the rifles from

Leinster Road to Highfield Road, so I enveloped them with branches and flowers and carried them in my arms to Highfield Road where we put them in the cache.

Another day Constance Markievicz called to our house to say that "Mick" had sent her word that her place - Surrey House - which was also in Leinster Road, was to be raided that night. She had a quantity of small arms and ammunition which she wanted to bring to safety. We could not take it in but I went with her to see where we might take it to. We packed it all into a big trunk and we called a cab. We put the trunk on top and we went inside. The cabman asked "Where to maam". "To Terenure" said we. When we arrived there, he asked "What address". We told him to drive on. When he asked us again we said "To Rathmines". I said to Constance we could not go on driving round like this all night. She suddenly remembered a second-hand furniture shop in Rathmines. We told the cabby to stop there. She went in and told the owner of the shop that she had a good second-hand trunk for sale and she wanted a good price for it. He took it and cleared a space for it in the window at her request. He put a placard on it "For sale, £5". He told her she would never get that price for it. She said "Then I won't sell it for a penny less". The trunk which was locked, was in the window for days. Finally she took it away and probably the arms were distributed. This happened some time before the Truce.

One night I got an S.O.S. from Headquarters to go up to Eccles St. In the stables at the back of a house "cheddar" was being made and it was packed in boxes and tins. I was asked to remove it. I got an old taxi and myself and the boys who were working there carried the stuff into the taxi and I took it up to a house in Glencullen where also explosives were being made. Up there also the I.R.A. who were there helped me to take it in. The stable in Eccles St. was raided shortly after but nothing was got. I distinctly remember my repugnance in handling those boxes of explosives because they were covered with hens' droppings. The place was used for poultry. The house in Glencullen was a big empty one that was supposed to be haunted. That rumour was possibly spread by the I.R.A. who were using it for their own purposes. It was in a lonely place covered with trees. It was the stable that was used for making the bombs and the I.R.A. lived in the house in great discomfort. I fancy O'Connor, the sculptor, lived in that house afterwards. I went later to see it out of curiosity and it had been done up beautifully and looked very habitable. Andy McDonnell would be able to tell you all about the I.R.A. activities there.

The Countess who was Minister of Labour in the Dáil and for whom I worked, was arrested twice during her term of office. On the second occasion about November 1920 Joe McGrath took over as Minister of Labour but he too was very shortly after arrested and Joe McDonagh took up the work. Early in 1920 it had been decided to carry out a boycott on all Belfast goods and certain items

coming from Britain. This was evidently organised from Mick Collins' Headquarters but the Labour Ministry were nominally responsible and the Countess took it up enthusiastically.

On the day of Archbishop Walsh's funeral an I.R.A. captain and four I.R.A. men arrived in our office in North Frederick St. with four bags of British cigarettes which they had confiscated during a raid on some of the shops. The routine was that all shops suspected of dealing in Belfast goods or the prohibited goods from Britain were warned in the name of the I.R.A. to cease selling these goods. If the shops did not comply with the order a raid was made by the five men of the I.R.A. and the goods confiscated. This action usually had the desired effect. But in a few cases the firms continued the breach of the boycott and a fine sometimes amounting to £100 was imposed on them. The success of this boycott was remarkable.

In the case I have mentioned the sacks of cigarettes were sealed by the captain, placed in the basement of the offices in Frederick St. and after a few days distributed to the various public hospitals in Dublin. The Union hospital in James St. always got the largest share for its patients.

I mention this incident to illustrate the extraordinary discipline and principle of the I.R.A. who were at this stage unpaid Volunteers. While these men were in the office that day, all armed, the archbishop's funeral began to pass and as it took three hours to pass Frederick St. to Glasnevin they were obliged to stay in the office all that time until the streets were clear, as the captain was afraid suspicion would be aroused about

the office and the dumping place in the basement if they were seen coming out.

They sat on boxes in the office waiting for the funeral to pass, very weary and bored and longing for a smoke. They had not a cigarette between them and they asked the captain might they take a packet out of one of the sacks. He said "No" quite firmly. Then they said they would put back exactly what they would take out but he still refused in spite of all their pleadings. He said quite firmly and angrily "Army orders are that none of this confiscated stuff is to be touched and you have got to obey them". I believe myself he would have shot any one of them who touched the contents of these sacks. I was immensely impressed by the discipline of those I.R.A. men who were dying for a smoke during three hours and did not question the order.

Another day an order came in from the I.R.A. that a shop opposite Castle Yard where the Black and Tans were parading up and down, had transgressed the boycott order and that it was to be raided and the prohibited stuff confiscated. The instruction included the words "Care to be taken, position dangerous right opposite Castle Yard". The order came to the office and then Con (the Countess) sent for the Captain and the raid was discussed and organised. I was present when he came. The matter was put before him and we stressed the dangerous position. He said it would be dangerous, that it probably meant a shoot-up and some of his men might go. Con chipped in saying "Is it worth losing even one soldier's life for a few British goods? I think we can do it some other way".

Then I volunteered to carry out the raid unarmed. The men protested but Con backed me. I said they would never shoot a woman, "I may be successful or I may not. Let me try". Con prevailed on them and they gave in.

Next day Con and I planned that I would go to the shop and explain to the owner that they had broken the boycott and would have to surrender the goods. The next day I arrived at the shop in the early afternoon. I went by taxi but let it some distance away. I went into the shop and asked "May I telephone, it is urgent?". They brought me to the telephone. I took the telephone in my hand and I asked to see the manager. He came and said he was the manager. I handed him the official slip and said the place was to be raided. All the time I held the instrument in my hand. I said "I am unarmed but I am going to raid the shop for the goods. Will you get your men and tell them to pack up all the boycotted goods. I have a taxi outside". He called the assistants and they got to work packing the stuff into three sacks while I stood at the telephone. When I look back they must have been very simple, but they were terrified of the I.R.A. I remember there was a lot of boot polish in the sacks. I gave the manager a receipt for the goods - that was our orders and I asked him to send one of the boys to ^{call} ~~go to~~ my taxi to the door. I did not budge from the telephone. He sent the boy for the taxi and the assistants put the goods into the back of the taxi. I threatened the manager that if he phoned or gave any information to the British authorities, he was a marked man and the I.R.A. would take action. I added "This is true". He said nothing but helped me into the taxi and said goodbye.

He was dumbfounded all through but I would say the assistants were enjoying it. They had a twinkle in their eyes.

I had no dump to put the sacks of stuff in, so I decided to go to Harcourt St. station. I got a porter to carry the sacks to the cloakroom. I told the clerk I would not be travelling till next day. He gave me three twopenny tickets - in a wrong name of course.

I returned to the office and wrote my report, sent it on to I.R.A. headquarters, enclosing the three tickets and asking them to call for the sacks next day and distribute the goods. In a day or so I got word that the goods which chiefly consisted of boot and floor polish, matches and some other household articles had been handed over mostly to Temple St. hospital, which was very glad to receive them.

I remember well Con's remark to me as I was setting out on the raiding expedition: "Goodbye, I'll call to see you in the 'Joy'".

I also remember describing the whole episode on the same evening to Erskine Childers in his office. He was delighted. His remark was "The people are with us, isn't it great!"

At some stage during the trouble - I can't remember the date - the Dáil Cabinet got uneasy about keeping large sums of money in the banks because the Black and Tans had been making investigations in the different banks about I.R.A. funds. Most of the money in question - as far as

I remember - came from America, brought in by friendly members of ships' crews. I got a letter from Mick Collins's headquarters to call. I did so and there was a large sum of money - £10,000 - given over to me to put in safe keeping until it would be called upon. About the same time Mrs. O'Callaghan of Limerick whose husband had been murdered, got an even larger sum. The money was in packets of crisp new notes. I disposed of them around my body under my clothes. At every movement I made I thought everybody could hear the crackling of the notes. I was walking around most of the day wondering where I could dump them. Most of the houses I knew were liable to be raided. At last I decided to go to the Munster and Leinster Bank in Rathgar where I had a small account. Mr. Fuge was the Manager. But first I went home and made up the packet of notes in a brown paper parcel and brought it to the bank. I knew of course I could not lodge this large amount to my account, so I asked the Manager to take the parcel for safe keeping. I did not tell him what was in it, but I know he guessed, because he said "I suppose this is some more of your devilment". He sealed the parcel in my presence and marked it "contents unknown". He was very decent and I am sure he would have allowed himself to be shot rather than break his trust. The money remained in the bank for a considerable time. I imagine it must have been after the Truce when I went to collect the parcel, because I have a distinct recollection that when I was bringing the money to the bank I had been very nervous and uneasy and when I took the parcel away from the bank I had no anxiety. I thanked Mr. Fuge for his kindness and loyalty.

Another of the jobs given to Lily O'Brennan and myself to do was to find safe houses for men on the run and for offices.

I remember that on one occasion I was asked to get a safe place for one or two nights for Bob Barton. I went to Mrs. Dix's house on Highfield Road and interviewed the maid - Kate would do anything for us. She gave her own bedroom to Bob, whom she admitted late by the basement door. She sat up all night in the kitchen herself. Mrs. Dix knew nothing about all this. On another occasion Kate took in for a night a Volunteer from the country whose face had been blown out by an explosion on the occasion of an attack on a police barrack. I can't remember his name. We could not bring him to the Mater Hospital because the Tans were raiding it. I brought him there the following night but he could not be kept there because the Tans raided the hospital again. So the nuns moved him into a women's ward and the next day I brought him to a friendly house in Monkstown, where also I brought Dr. Cummins, the eye specialist who arranged to operate on him the next day. Dr. Clare McKenna gave the anaesthetic and I did the nurse's job under the direction of the doctor, using the kitchen utensils which I sterilised. The patient resisted the anaesthetic and bellowed like a bull, so that we stopped the gas and gave him chloroform.

We got several houses in Rathgar for offices and for safe keeping for the men. We rented some of them. There was one in Harold's Cross. There had to be a woman in the house as housekeeper. Lily and I took week about to sleep there, take in the milk and other supplies. This was Army H.Q. Rory O'Connor, Gearóid O'Sullivan,

Frank Thornton and men from the country stayed there. Eventually the house was raided, but no one was caught there. Mick Collins who had a very good spy system had warned us all in good time to clear out. When the house came under the suspicion of the authorities the Black and Tans inquired among the neighbours what sort of a house it was; they were informed it was a bad house, as men kept coming in at all hours of the night with latchkeys.

Lily got an office for Joe McDonagh in Harcourt St. when he was appointed Director of the Boycott and I went down to Lawlor Briscoe & Co. on the Quays to buy furniture for it. Safe houses were a constant pre-occupation with us. Our house in Highfield Road was out of the question at an early stage as it was published in the police gazette "the Hue and Cry", a copy of which was given me by Mick Collins.

a fortnight before the truce

The night before the Truce was declared there was to be a big engagement in Dublin and a few of us got word to go to a house in Peter's Place - it was not Ely O'Carroll's - and to prepare the premises to receive the wounded from the action, whatever it was to be. We were to have the instruments, hot water bags, beds and all ready at 7 p.m. when we might expect the wounded to be brought in. It was from the Army Headquarters that these instructions were sent to us. There were only three of us. I can't say now who the other two were - one of them might have been Lily O'Brennan.

Seven o'clock came - a quarter-past and half-past and nothing happened. We were to hear guns and explosions,

but we heard simply nothing unusual. Then about 7.30 two Volunteers came in panting. They looked around and saw everything prepared for action and one of them blurted out "I am sorry for disappointing yez. The action was called off by Mr. de Valera at the last moment". I wondered how de Valera came to do that. There was to be a big attack within the city boundaries and they with their company were to hold up the military at Portobello Bridge for as long as they could. Ten minutes' delay would be important. The company of Volunteers at Portobello had taken two trains off the rails and blocked the bridge. They had positions in tenement houses along the canal. There was not a shot fired, because just before 7 o'clock word came that the action was called off. It was an anti-climax, as we were keyed up all the afternoon. But we were very glad as there would have been great slaughter of the Volunteers who had only their rifles and home-made bombs against the machine guns and armoured cars of the military.

I was sent to London by the I.R.A. authorities with a despatch for Sam Maguire. Of course I did not know what was in the despatch and I don't remember where I met him. I may have gone more than once. I was certainly sent once before the Truce to London.

We kept the Labour office going during the Truce. When the Treaty negotiations were in progress at the end of 1921 Erskine Childers wrote to me through his wife to get him a very reliable Volunteer who would act as courier. I advised Micheál Markey who was working for us in the Labour office to take the job and I wrote to Erskine recommending him. He was appointed and went to London and he came back and forth with messages. Each time he

came to see us in the Labour office.

When the attack on the Four Courts started Constance Markeivicz was staying in our house. She had no notion that a fight was so near, though she knew that the situation was delicate. When she heard the bombs she called me and said "the fight is on. Go and tell Cathal Brugha". She went into the Four Courts without me. I followed after when I had warned Cathal. The gates were barred but the sentry recognised me and admitted me saying: "The women are with us, that's great". There was very little hospital equipment in the building. I am convinced they did not expect a fight and they were taken unawares. A man called Long was wounded in the leg and later it had to be amputated. I had to go to some hospital or nursing home to get a crate to protect the leg. We brought in bandages and lint too. Rory seemed distraught and haggard, though ready to carry on the fight.

After a day or two I was sent down to Boyle to the Commandant of the West to tell him to get his men out. I went by car, having got the address of a house in the main street/ⁱⁿ which I could contact the Commandant. I travelled by car part of the way back and part by a train which I think I got at Athlone after a long wait. I reported back to the Four Courts shortly before the evacuation. I remember some of the women outside the Four Courts saying "Ye z are bet and ye z know - ye z are bet". Then we went on to the Hammam Hotel which was now the Headquarters. Holes had been bored between it and other buildings as far as the Gresham. We were very hungry and started looking for food. Some of the men said "Come on, we'll dine at the Gresham; follow me". It was

a long trek crawling on our tummies through holes in the walls at different levels. We arrived at the Gresham to my surprise and we found the tables in the dining-room laden with food which had been abandoned by the hastily departing guests. It kept us going while we remained in those buildings. The word to surrender came. We obeyed it and as we were marching out I passed through what had been the Turkish baths and saw Cathal Brugha kneeling on a mat and confessing to one of the friars. I shall never forget that sight. It was his last Confession. Shortly after he went out in the lane between the Cathedral and those buildings shouting "No surrender". He was a grand man. I used to see him going to daily Mass at Rathgar.

After that I was sent by the I.R.A. to the South to contact Liam Lynch in Fermoy. He sent me to Mallow where Erskine Childers was, and from there I went with Erskine to Macroom in a lorry packed with ammunition and explosives. We were sitting on top of all this and Erskine said in his quiet humorous way "If we are attacked we can't but go straight to heaven". We had to leave Macroom too and from that on we were on the run in the farmhouses, carrying on a sort of guerilla warfare.

I went to Cork City to do some propaganda for Erskine Childers. I met Lily O'Brennan there and we were to bring some of the propaganda literature and despatches back to Dublin. We came via Waterford by a train with corridor carriages, in one of which Lily recognised Charlie Wyse-Power who was pro Treaty and who also recognised her. Lily said "I hope he won't give us away". Between two stations on the journey the train was halted and some Free

State soldiers came to our carriage, saying "We are going to search this carriage and search you. Where are your cases?". We had disposed of the literature around our bodies. They opened the cases and found nothing. They then said they would not search us, as they had no women searchers. Ours was the only carriage searched. This would be the end of September or beginning of October.

We continued to work in Dublin getting safe houses for the wounded and offices.

I worked for Micky Carolan who was Director of Intelligence. He was arrested after some time.

After Christmas Kathleen O'Brennan a journalist and a sister of Lily's, and myself were sent to Geneva to an International Conference of the Red Cross with a view to getting them to restrain the Free State from ill-treating the Republican prisoners and to have them treated as prisoners of war. On the way we stopped at Paris to call on Mr. _____ a very influential banker, an Irish American, to get him to arrange the necessary introductions. Kathleen O'Brennan contacted some prominent journalists that she knew and gave them all the propaganda she could.

We put the case before the Conference in Geneva - it was Kathleen that spoke - but I cannot recollect that there was any result. It was Micky Carolan that handed us the money for our journey.

I was sent to London to lobby some of the Labour M.P.s in the House of Commons. While there I carried on publicity work from the Labour party secretaries' office in the House of Commons. I was appointed secretary to a

Labour M.P. so as to give me access to this room. Of course he was not aware of my actual work for publicity for Ireland. This work was the 'Bulletin'. I was in close contact with O/C. Britain, Billy Aherne, and I sent home his despatches from the House of Commons in envelopes marked O.H.S. Also as I passed into the House of Commons the policemen used to stop the traffic for me.

I returned to Dublin after a while, but I went back to London where I had a flat in Great Smith St. fairly near the House of Commons. It was a rendez-vous for the I.R.A. This place came under suspicion and I had to leave in a hurry, leaving my laundry bill unpaid. I put the money in a poor box afterwards.

I then went to Manchester where I worked for P.J. Little who was editing the "War News" there. We had to move from our first lodgings there because we came under suspicion and I took rooms in a working class quarter in the house of a postman's widow who was very kind to me. I went under the name of Miss Alexander there.

On two occasions my landlady told me the police were inquiring about me. After the second visit I went to the police station and asked an Irish policeman who interviewed ^{me} there why he was annoying my landlady in that way, that I was only earning my living. He laughed saying "Is that all?". They did not come again to bother us. I returned to Dublin after the "Cease Fire".

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1918-21 BUIRO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21 No. W.S. 1029

Witness: S. Ni Chiosain
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Signed: Moirá Kennedy O'Byrne
Date: 1st Nov. 1956
All Saints Day
(Moirá Kennedy O'Byrne)