

W. S. 1,089

DUPLICATE

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURD STAIRS MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1,089

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,089

Witness

Bulmer Hobson,
Errisbeg,
Roundstone,
Co. Galway.

Identity.

A founder member of Fianna Eireann;
Member of Executive of Irish Volunteers
pro 1916.

Subject.

Theft of Crown Jewels, Dublin Castle,
1907-08.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

H11

File No. S.8

Form B.S.M. 2

DUPLICATE

W.S. 1089
BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
DUBO STAIRS MILEATA 1913-21
STATEMENT OF MR. BULMER HOBBSON
NO. W.S. 1089

Errisbeg, Roundstone, Co. Galway.

I want to say, in the first place, that I am recording events of over forty years ago, relying entirely on memory, and there may consequently be a number of inaccuracies, although I don't think they will affect the sequence of the story.

There used to be Crown jewels in Ireland. They were sent over here in the eighteenth century, and they were used for ceremonial occasions, such as royal visits and installations of the Knights of St. Patrick. They were kept in a handsome little jewel-case, which was lodged in a safe in the Office of Arms in the Castle, under the custody of the Ulster King of Arms who, at that time, was Sir Arthur Vicars.

Most people did not know of the existence of the jewels until, about the end of 1907, or possibly early in 1908, it was suddenly announced that they had been stolen. Immediately the Press and Parliament and everybody else were talking about the Castle jewels and there was tremendous interest, and the Government was pressed for a public inquiry.

In common with other people, I was extremely curious, and I thought there might be a good story behind it and that it could be used to discredit the Castle. At that time, I was working with W.P. Ryan on "The Peasant". The manager of "The Peasant", Joe O'Beirne, was an old Parnellite and an I.R.B. man, and he told me that he knew Pierce O'Mahony of Grangecon in County Wicklow, who afterwards became known as The O'Mahony. O'Mahony had been a Parnellite M.P., and he was also a half-brother to Sir Arthur Vicars who was the custodian of the jewels, and, in order to defend his half-brother, had gone to a very great

National Archives Act, 1986, Regulations, 1988

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- (i) Reference number of the separate cover under which the abstracted part has been filed: WS 1089/A
- (ii) How many documents have been abstracted: 2 pp.
- (iii) The date of each such document: 10 Feb 1955
- (iv) The description of each document:
WS 1089 Bulmer Hobson p 2-3 (incl)
details of a personal return

(Where appropriate, a composite description may be entered in respect of two or more related documents).

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J. Moloney
Name: (J. Moloney.)

Grade: Col.

Department/Office/Court:

Date: 7 March 2003.

deal of trouble to get all the facts he could, and he had access to many places where a person like myself could not get access. So O'Beirne wrote to O'Mahony, and he invited us both to pay him a visit.

O'Mahony was a charming and courteous old man and very ready to give us all the information that he could. The story that O'Mahony told me was very much as follows:-

There was not any mystery about the theft of the Castle jewels. In fact, the authorities knew all about the thieves, but they were two quite remarkable criminals with a very curious history.

One was a Mr. Shackleton, the son of an Irish doctor in London and a brother of Sir Ernest Shackleton, the explorer. Mr. Shackleton had come to Dublin and he had been employed as Sir Arthur Vicars' assistant. His office was that of Athlone Pursuivant, a job which was extremely difficult to fill. It required a man of education, with some knowledge of heraldry, who was prepared to undertake light duties for the privilege of being allowed into all Viceregal functions. There was no salary attached.

The other thief was a Captain Gorges. The first of the Gorges family in Ireland came over as clerk to the Council in Cromwell's time, and they had been Castle officials and respectable citizens in Dublin ever since. This Captain Gorges was a native of Dún Laoghaire and, as a boy, he was the terror of all the other boys in that district. At the age of about eighteen, he had to clear out of Dún Laoghaire because the police were after him.

He next appeared as a Lieutenant in the British army in Egypt, and he was cashiered from that - O'Mahony did not know for what reason. He then became a member of the Cape Mounted Police in South Africa and, as a policeman, he was suspected of at least one murder and one or two highway robberies. Then the Boer War started, and he became a

trooper in Thorneycroft's Horse.

and Thorneycroft refused to have him courtmartialled. So he lined the regiment up, in two parallel lines, and Gorges was, literally, kicked out of Thorneycroft's Horse. However, he returned to England and, apparently, was able to blackmail himself back into the British army, and he became musketry instructor at Portsmouth. As musketry instructor at Portsmouth, he was sent over for the annual militia training and, as a visiting officer, he had the entrée of the Castle.

So it was the conjunction of the black sheep of the Shackleton's and the black sheep of the Gorges' that set things moving.

Apparently, it had long been the practice to have drinking parties in the Office of Arms late in the evening. So, one night, Shackleton and Gorges plied Sir Arthur Vicars with whiskey until he fell, unconscious, under the table. They then took the keys out of his pocket, opened the safe, put the jewels in an attaché case, put the jewel case back in the safe, locked the safe and put the keys back in Sir Arthur's pocket.

When the thieves^{had} secured the jewels, Shackleton took them to Amsterdam and sold them for twenty thousand pounds. Their value was said to be about eighty thousand. He stipulated that they were not to be broken up for three years, probably with the idea that something might be made out of their recovery at a later date.

The authorities were not long in discovering who were the thieves. But these remarkable thieves did not run away. They dared the authorities to arrest them and said that, if they were arrested, they would uncover so many scandals that they would shake the Government. Apparently they had

moved in the shady side of the highest social circles in England, and they threatened that, if they were arrested, they would bring out into the light the discreditable doings of a considerable number of highly placed and aristocratic people in London, including the Marquis of Lorne, who was the King's brother-in-law.

The Government was faced with a demand for a public inquiry, but Edward VII firmly said that he was not going to have his reign ruined with a major scandal, and, as the English Government was never loth to cover scandals up, they appointed a public inquiry which had no power to subpoena witnesses and no power to examine on oath. This public inquiry issued its report, in which it said that Sir Arthur Vicars was the custodian of the jewels and that he had lost them, and that the blame was entirely his. At the inquiry, Sir Arthur Vicars said that the keys had never been out of his possession, and, so far as he knew, he was telling the truth. This inquiry was to satisfy public opinion.

But the real inquiry was held in the Castle, privately, behind locked doors, presided over by Sir David Harrell who was then head of the Dublin police. Harrell turned Shackleton's and Gorges' records inside out, but, as the Government would not prosecute, he ordered the two thieves to leave Ireland within twenty four hours.

Having got this story, mainly from Pierce O'Mahony, supplemented by one or two bits of information I managed to pick up, I found it was impossible to use it. No paper in Ireland dared print it, and would have been sued for criminal libel if they had. So, with the help of Dr. Patrick McCartan, we had the story written out and sent to the "Gaelic American". I don't think Devoy quite believed our story, and he edited our manuscript in a manner which

did not improve it. Having got it off to the "Caelic American", I thought that I was finished with the Castle jewels. But I was wrong.

In 1912, I was editing "Irish Freedom", and a young man, called Jocelyn O'Hehir, brought me several articles which I liked and used in the paper. One day, in "Irish Freedom" office, O'Hehir said that a man he knew, called Gorges, was very anxious to make my acquaintance. I said: "Who is Gorges?"

"Well", he said, "when I was a boy in Dún Laoghaire, I knew him; and he has been abroad and I have not seen him since, till I met him a couple of days ago."

I looked at O'Hehir and rapidly came to the conclusion that he was innocent of any guile and, being curious to know what Gorges wanted with me, I told O'Hehir that, if Captain Gorges would be good enough to come to my office at No. 12 D'Olier Street, the following afternoon, I would be there to meet him.

I had no doubt that this was one of the Castle thieves, and, having heard his history from Pierce O'Mahony, I thought it would be a wise precaution to have somebody within call when I saw him. So I asked Pádraig Ó Ríain to take the afternoon off and spend it on the stairs leading up to my office.

Gorges came in, a tall, military figure, with a face like Mephistopheles in Faust, and the manners that a duke might envy. As my main interest was to see if I could get any more information, I decided to take the offensive at once. So, when Gorges came in and shook hands, I said: "You know, Captain Gorges, your name seems quite familiar".

"Oh!", he said, "That is odd".

"Well", I said, "I think I saw something about you in an American newspaper recently". He was full of interest

at that. I said: "In fact, I think I have a copy of the paper here" - and I laid a copy of the "Gaelic American" on the table.

So, full of interest, he began to read. After reading a few paragraphs, he jumped up and ^{he}walked about the office like a tiger in a cage, and he said: "My God!" If I knew who wrote that, I would murder him!" I did not think that he had much chance of knowing who wrote it, so was not alarmed.

After a while, he calmed down, and he returned and read the whole article through, corroborating it, point by point, and adding to my information in certain respects. There had been a persistent rumour associating the name of Lord Haddo, the son of the Viceroy, with the theft of the jewels, and, though nobody quite believed it, the rumour kept cropping up. Gorges told me that, at a drinking party in the Office of Arms about a year before, Haddo had taken the jewels, but, of course, in the morning when everyone was sober, the jewels were hastily returned; and this not only accounted for the rumour but showed Shackleton and Gorges how easy it would be to carry off the jewels. So, in general, I got a pretty complete corroboration of Pierce O'Mahony's story from Captain Gorges.

Having exhausted the Castle jewels, we came to what Gorges wanted to see me about. As the afternoon was then wearing on, he wanted me to dine with him in Jury's Hotel. I was not sure how far I could afford to be seen dining with Captain Gorges, so I refused his invitation, but I could hardly refuse to call on him the next afternoon at Jury's Hotel.

When I arrived at Jury's Hotel, Captain Gorges wanted me to accompany him to a private room. However, I firmly led him towards a large tea-room which, at that hour of the

day, was almost deserted. Captain Gorges ordered tea and proceeded to explain his business. He said that he wanted to help the Nationalists to start an insurrection and that he had a plan. So I asked him to explain the plan. He said that, on Sunday morning, the entire garrison of Dublin went out on church parade, leaving only half a dozen men in each barracks, and that, on church parade, they only carried side arms. He said that, with a hundred men, we could rush all the Dublin barracks, as the small guards left in charge would be quite taken by surprise and the great majority of the soldiers would be outside without arms, and we would be inside with all the arms and ammunition of the Dublin garrison. I had read about agents provocateur, but hardly expected to meet one, and certainly not one so formidable and so transparent as Captain Gorges. I saw, in a moment, that if I should walk into this trap, everything would go along till we attacked the barracks and that then those of us who took part in it would go to penal servitude, and Captain Gorges would rehabilitate himself with the authorities, if that were possible.

When we got so far, my only desire was to get away from Jury's Hotel as soon as possible. So I said: "Captain Gorges, I don't think you realise that all this talk of rebellion in Ireland is just talk. Your plan sounds ingenious and, if it were a surprise attack, might well work, but you must face the fact that these fellows who talk about an insurrection and Irish freedom don't mean a single thing. You could not get ten men for such an enterprise". He was very disappointed and rather shocked that I maligned the national movement so readily, but I stuck firmly to that point and, finally, as he could get nothing out of me, I left him in the hotel.

I may as well recount the subsequent careers of Shackleton and Gorges. Some time after the Castle jewels theft, Shackleton became the private secretary and confidential adviser of a very rich old lady in England who, apparently, was quite captivated by his charm. Her relatives tried to intervene and finally applied to the courts, but, by the time that they got control of the old lady's affairs, Shackleton had relieved her of eighty thousand pounds. He was prosecuted and got five years' penal servitude.

Shortly after Shackleton's arrest, the police came to arrest Gorges in his lodgings in London. I don't know what the charge was, but Gorges resisted arrest, with a gun in his hand, and he and a police sergeant, locked in each other's arms, rolled down a flight of stairs. The gun went off. The sergeant was wounded. Had the police sergeant died, Gorges would have been up for murder, but, as the wound proved not serious, he got twelve years' penal servitude for resisting arrest with arms.

Signed: Bulmer Hobson

Date: 10th February 1955.

Witness: P.J. Brennan

(Secretary of the Bureau of Military History
1913-1921)

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