

W.S. 1, 179 ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURD STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1, 179

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.
STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1, 179.....

Witness

Andrew Kirwan,
Dunabrattin,
Annestown,
Co. Waterford.

Identity.

West Waterford A.S.U. Transport Officers.

Subject.

Bonmahon Company Irish Volunteers,
Co. Waterford 1918-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No.S. 2473.....

ORIGINAL

W. S. 1179

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| BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21 |
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STATEMENT BY ANDREW KIRWAN,
Dunabrattin, Annestown, Co. Waterford.

I was born in Bonmahon, Co. Waterford, in 1902.
My people were in the grocery business there.

I went to school to the Cistercian monks in Mount
Melleray Seminary, where I was during the Rising of 1916.

When in Mount Melleray, I became acquainted with
a man named Jim Connolly, the electrician at the Seminary.
One day, I saw him with a revolver which he was mending
for one of the professors in Melleray. When I got an
opportunity, I took the revolver and, when I eventually
left the Seminary in 1917, I brought the gun home to
Bonmahon with me.

In 1918 I joined the local Volunteer Company (the
Bonmahon Company). James McKeown was Company Captain,
and we were about twenty strong. I had my revolver and
a few rounds of ammunition, but, for the remainder, they
had only a few shotguns amongst them, ~~was~~ that was all.

During the year 1918, my main activities were
confined to training and election duty on behalf of the
Sinn Féin candidate in our area. There is nothing much
else to say about that year.

In 1919 I took part, with a few others of the
Bonmahon Company, in daylight raids for mails at Piltown,
Kilmacthomas and on the route between Bormahon and
Kilmacthomas. We were armed with revolvers on those
occasions. Any letters we found addressed to the R.I.C.

or to the Coastguard Station at Bonmahon were taken by us and sent to Battalion Headquarters at Comeragh where they were examined by Pat Keating, the Commandant of our Battalion.

During late 1919 and the first half of 1920, we had instructions to raid the houses of certain people, known to be unsympathetic to us, and take anything we could get in the way of guns and ammunition. These raids took place at night and were carried out by four or five of us, most of whom were armed with revolvers. We got in quite a good number of shotguns and some ammunition as the result of these raids. The following are the names of a few houses of people living in the Kilmacthomas district which we searched and in which we got some guns:-

George Brown, Postmaster, Hill's, Flahavan's, Hunt's of Rockmount, Kilrossanty.

Raid on Bonmahon Coastguard Station:

In August, 1920, I took part, with some members of the West Waterford Flying Column, in an attack on Bonmahon Coastguard Station. George Lennon, O/C of the Column, was in charge and I remember Pat Keating, Commandant of the Kilrossanty Battalion, and George Kiely of Kilmacthomas being there. Both the two latter were Column men.

There were about a dozen of us in the attack which took place about ten o'clock at night. Scouts from the local Company were on duty in the vicinity.

We crept up to the wall of the Coastguard Station and, climbing quickly over, we held up the coastguard who was walking up and down on sentry duty. He put up no resistance. George Kiely and I were first over the wall

that night. We carried revolvers.

Our lads next spread out through the buildings and made a thorough search for arms, or anything which might be of use to us in the way of signalling apparatus or equipment. I think we did get a carbine, but there were no guns there apart from that. We took away signalling equipment and binoculars.

It was about this time that I joined the West Waterford Flying Column as transport officer, my main job being to commandeer and drive motor cars for use by the Column whenever they might be required.

Kill R.I.C. Barracks attack:

In late September, 1920, I was one of a party of about a dozen West Waterford men who went to help the East Waterford Brigade in an attack on Kill R.I.C. barracks. Kill is about eight miles east of Bonmahon.

The barracks was occupied by about a half a dozen R.I.C. men but it was strongly fortified with steel shutters and was built of stone and slated.

I reached Kill with our party on bikes about nine o'clock on the night of the attack. The roads were being blocked by fallen trees and other obstructions to prevent a surprise by enemy forces. There was a large contingent of men there from East Waterford under their Brigade O/C, Paddy Paul of Waterford. I have no idea of the number.

My job at Kill was to spray petrol on the barrack roof after mud bombs, thrown by our lads on the roof, had exploded. It was then intended to set the building on fire and force the garrison of about half a dozen R.I.C. men to surrender. I took up position in the rear of

the house where Joyce, one of the local R.I.C. men, lived. There was a wall between Joyce's house and the barracks, low enough to enable the petrol to be sprayed over it.

We were in position for probably about fifteen minutes or so, when a shot rang out in the village of Kill, about fifty yards away, and then the R.I.C. garrison commenced sending up Verey lights, at the same time opening rifle fire through the steel-shuttered barrack windows which had loop-holes for this purpose. The police also flung out a few grenades. Our lads replied to the fire of the police with rifles and shotguns. This was going on for about twenty minutes, so far as I can recollect now, when word reached me that the petrol sprayer could not be operated because the handle of the pressure pump was missing. We tried to improvise a handle but it was no good. We could not get the pump to work.

My next recollection of the affair was being told by Pat Keating (deceased), who was then Commandant of the 2nd Battalion, West Waterford Brigade, and a member of the Active Service Unit, to leave the position I was in and move back into Kill village. In company with others of the West Waterford men, I did so, and was then told (by Pat Keating, I think) that we were to break off the engagement and retire westwards towards Comeragh. This we did.

A general order to retire was, I understand, given by Paddy Paul who was present with a fairly large party of the men under his command from East Waterford, i.e., from Waterford city and Dunhill. Paul was the officer-in-charge of operations that night. He was informed by

some of his men, in position near Kill barracks, that a force of British military was coming up from a north-easterly direction and was close to the I.R.A. positions. On hearing the news, Paul called off the attack and ordered a withdrawal.

From what I learned afterwards, it was clear that Paul's information about the approaching British forces was all wrong. As a matter of fact, I remember saying to him that night, "How could the British come on, and all the roads to Kill blocked by trees?" At any rate, I can say definitely that neither I nor any of the West Waterford men came across a single British Tommy on our way back to Comeragh - about eight or nine miles west of Kill. It should be remembered too that we used the roads that night, as we had bicycles, and we had to pass over the road-blocks made by our men but we met no military lorries on our route back.

Piltown Cross Ambush:

It was, I think, early in November, 1920, when the West Waterford Flying Column under George Lennon staged an ambush at Piltown Cross which is about mid-way on the road between Dungarvan and Ardmore, Co. Waterford. As I have previously stated, I was then attached permanently to the Column as, what I might call, "the Column driver".

As far as I can remember about the Piltown affair, the details are as follows. About twenty of the Column took up positions behind hedges and on some high ground overlooking the Cross on the particular night. They were armed with shotguns mostly. There were possibly three or four rifles also.

A barricade was laid across the road at the point

of the proposed attack and, sometime about the ten or eleven o'clock mark, a lorry of troops came along from the direction of Youghal-Ardmore. When the lorry reached the road block, it had to pull up. Immediately our lads poured in shotgun and rifle fire. Some of the British soldiers got out of the lorry and returned the fire but, in a very short time, it was noticed that the British firing had practically ceased. George Lennon, Pat Keating and Mick Mansfield and all of the Column then came out on to the road with some of their men and ordered the British to surrender. The latter did so. About sixteen or eighteen, so far as I can remember, surrendered. Their rifles and equipment were collected by our lads and the British were allowed to remove their wounded men to Youghal for treatment. They lost at least two killed as well. These, together with the wounded soldiers, were taken away in a farm cart provided by our lads. The military lorry was burned. There were no casualties on our side.

After the Piltown fight, I had a busy time getting the captured arms and equipment back to Comeragh, about eight miles to the east, in the mountains. I remember using what was then known as a Model T Ford car and, with Eddie Power, a Column man, made a couple of trips to and from the Piltown district, carrying arms and men in the car. We succeeded in getting the stuff safely away notwithstanding intense activity on the part of the British when they learned what had happened to their troops at Piltown. About eighteen rifles were captured at Piltown.

It might be mentioned that, at that particular time (November, 1920) and until the Truce, motor cars were very

scarce. A permit had to be got from the British authorities to use one, and driving a car without a permit was a very hazardous job. My main source of supply was the people of the so-called "gentry" class. These persons, being in general pro British in their outlook, had no trouble in obtaining permits to use their cars. Whenever, therefore, the old Model T Ford refused to function, I visited the house of one of these gentry, who I knew had a car, and commandeered it for the job in hands at the time. I had, of course, one or two of the boys with me on these occasions and we were all armed with revolvers, but it was never necessary to use guns. Indeed, we rarely had even to produce them. We requested use of the cars "for the I.R.A." and we got them. In every case, we returned the cars when their purpose was served except where exceptional circumstances prevented us.

Tramore Ambush:

On the morning of January 7th, 1921, I was told by George Lennon, the Column O/C, to get a few cars to carry men of the West Waterford Brigade to Tramore, Co. Waterford, where an ambush was planned to take place that night. The ambush position was in the East Waterford Brigade area under Paddy Paul, O/C, Waterford.

I commandeered three motor cars and had them ready for the men at Ballylaneen, a townland about twelve miles east of Tramore, that evening.

When our men, to be engaged in the ambush, came along, it was found that we couldn't fit them all into the cars, so I was told to go off and get another car. While I was doing this, the three cars set off for Tramore.

I succeeded in obtaining a fourth motor car. The boys piled into it and we headed for Tramore, arriving about half a mile north-west of that town at eleven, or, perhaps, half-eleven, at night. In my car was John J. Cummins of Stradbally, Co. Waterford, who was killed in action at Ballyvoile, Co. Waterford, a month or so later.

When we got near Tramore, I noticed Verey lights going up from the R.I.C. barracks in the town, and heard firing and explosions as from grenades. I was not acquainted with the country in the vicinity of Tramore and, as the night was very dark, I remember being at a loss as to where exactly I was to go. This applied also to the five men with me.

As we hesitated, discussing whether to go west in the direction of the town where the barrack was under attack, firing suddenly broke out on our left, i.e., in the neighbourhood of the Metal Bridge, a railway bridge spanning the main Waterford-Tramore road and about a mile east of Tramore. We heard the noise of lorries and heard volleys of shotgun fire. Moving in the direction of the Metal Bridge, we had reached the Tramore racecourse, which is on high ground and about a quarter of a mile north-west of the Metal Bridge, when we met some of our lads from Dungarvan, retreating. They told us that something had gone wrong with the plans for the ambush and that the order had been given to the West Waterford men to retreat, to avoid being cut off by superior British forces approaching from the north-east. Pax Whelan of Dungarvan was in charge of the West Waterford contingent that night. I got my small party of men into the motor car and we returned to Stradbally, Co. Waterford, about twelve miles to the east, where the men dispersed.

The fighting at the Metal Bridge, Tramore, that night was all on the eastern side of the bridge. This position was held by men of the East Waterford Brigade under Paddy Paul. The positions west of the bridge were held by our men from the West Waterford Brigade.

Briefly, the planned attack on the British was that a few shots were to be fired at the R.I.C. barracks in Tramore, to scare the garrison who would summon assistance from Waterford, eight miles to the east. The British relief party was to be ambushed when they reached a barricade erected on the west (Tramore) side of the Metal Bridge. No shots were to be fired by the East Waterford men until the military lorries ran up to the barricade and then came under fire from the West Waterford men. Actually, what happened was that British were fired on by some East Waterford men before they (the British) ran into the ambush position. The fighting then developed entirely on the eastern side of the Metal Bridge where the military got out of their lorries and engaged the men from East Waterford who lost two killed and two wounded.

After returning to Stradbally with my party of men, I met Pat Keating in the house of Ned Power, The Glen, Stradbally. Pat was a Column man and Commandant of the Kilrossanty Battalion. He was a fearless fighter and a great officer. He was also, as can be imagined, a man very much wanted by the British authorities. Talking to Pat in the early morning after the Tramore ambush, I remember him asking me to have him prayed for (as dead) in Kill chapel the following Sunday. He explained to me that his reason was that word would go around that he was dead (killed at Tramore) and that, when the British got

to hear this, it would cause them to ease off in their efforts to track him down. Pat seemed to have a presentiment of either being caught or killed in action in the near future. It was a little over two months later when Pat Keating was killed in action at The Burgery, Dungarvan.

Attempted Ambush at Carrickmourn:

It was sometime in February, 1921, that the Column, under George Lennon, O/C, and Pat Keating, Vice O/C, lay in ambush at Carrickmourn, a district about two miles west of Lemybrien and about eight miles east of Dungarvan, on the main Dungarvan-Waterford road. I remember being sent down to a farmhouse, to take the steel ropes off the drum of a threshing machine which was on the farm. We got the steel rope, brought it on to the road and fixed it to two trees on either side of the road at a sharp bend and at a height of about six feet or so from the ground. Scouts were placed on high ground overlooking the road to Dungarvan, to signal the approach of British lorries. There were about twenty of us, all told, there. We had about fifteen rifles and some shotguns. I myself had one of the Lee Enfield rifles, captured from the British at Piltown in the previous November.

Several false alarms were given but, when darkness came on, we pulled out and moved back to Kilrossanty, about two miles westward.

Next day, we again returned to Carrickmourn, took up the same positions and waited developments. During the day, a message was received from Dungarvan to the effect that the military had been tipped off as to our position and were getting ready with a large body of

troops to carry out an encircling movement. We, thereupon, retired to the Comeragh mountains and across them into the Nire Valley, between the Knockmealdown and Comeragh mountains, where we remained until the British had finished their round-up.

Attempted ambush at Killongford:

A week or so after the Carrickmourn affair, word was sent to Captain Marshall, O/C of the unit of the British regiment known as "The Buffs", stationed in Dungarvan, Co. Waterford, that Cathal Brugha was in hiding in Ring Irish College. This was just a ruse to draw the British out from Dungarvan to raid Ring. It was intended to ambush them at Killongford, about three miles west of Dungarvan, on the road to Ring.

I left Comeragh with the Flying Column and made across country, about twenty miles, until we reached Killongford. It was dark on our arrival. The Column was marching in file along the roadside and had reached the ambush position, when George Lennon decided to push on a bit further up the road where the terrain was more suitable from our point of view. We had not quite reached the new position when three military lorries, with headlights on, came tearing up from the direction of Dungarvan. They came so quickly that the rear portion of the Column was almost caught in the headlights of the first car. We had just time to throw ourselves over the bank on each side of the road, to escape being spotted, and there was no time at all to get a shot at the raiders.

George Lennon then selected a position for attack on the military convoy on its return journey from Ring. We waited for a couple of hours and then saw the lights of

the lorries returning to Dungarvan by another road, about six hundred yards from where we lay. The British were out of range and we watched them, with disgust, as they made their way safely back to Dungarvan. We pulled out then and marched across-country in the direction of Kinsalebeg which we reached just after day-break. We billeted in that district, having walked about thirty-six miles with no sleep for a day and a half.

Only a few days afterwards, the Column again set out on foot from Clashmore, Kinsalebeg, to Ardmore, a village on the sea-coast nearly midway between Dungarvan and Youghal, about ten miles to the west. There was a party of British Marines stationed in Ardmore.

When we reached a place near Glen William (a suitable ambush position on the main road), we sent word to the Marines that Mick Mansfield, our Brigade Engineer and a Column man, was in a house nearby. Mick was one of the best known men in the Brigade. He was a native of Old Parish, Dungarvan, and was a man much wanted by the British.

Our ruse to draw the Marines out from Ardmore failed. We waited two days and nights, hoping to have a crack at them, but they were getting cute now and didn't "fall" for the story we sent them.

It was, I think, late in the month of February, 1921, when I went by car to Ardmore, with the few other men of the Column, to shoot a particularly obnoxious R.I.C. man who used act as spotter for the British military parties in the Ardmore area. I cannot remember this man's name.

I remember we went into Ardmore late on a Saturday night and contacted Lieutenant Bill Foley of the local Company. It was arranged to shoot the R.I.C. man as he left the church after Mass the following morning.

Three of us waited outside the chapel next morning. We were lounging against the sea wall opposite and carried revolvers. The R.I.C. man was to be pointed out to us by one of the local I.R.A. men.

After Mass, as the people began to leave, two R.I.C. men came out together but no signal was given to identify either as being the one we were to shoot. Shortly afterwards, another R.I.C. man came out of the chapel on his own. We got ready to let him have it, as we were sure this was the "bad pill". To our surprise, no signal was given to us and we allowed the R.I.C. man to go unmolested. We waited until all the congregation had left, but no other policeman appeared. As we were strangers in the locality and as there was no point in drawing suspicion on ourselves by hanging around any longer, we left the village with our mission unaccomplished.

I cannot give any explanation as to why the policeman we wanted wasn't pointed out to us that morning in Ardmore (for it was later ascertained he was one of the three we saw leaving Mass that morning). My own personal view, for what it is worth, is that the local I.R.A. man may have got "cold feet" at the last moment and refrained from identifying the R.I.C. man to be shot.

When we returned from Ardmore that Sunday night and met George Lennon, the Column O/C, at Ballyduff, he enquired how we had got on. We told him what had

happened, and he replied, "No matter! We got one in Cappoquin to-day". That same day, he and Mick Mansfield had gone by motor, driven by "Nipper" McCarthy, a Dungarvan I.R.A. man on the Column, to Cappoquin to shoot the District Inspector of Police, who was particularly hostile to the I.R.A. in that area. Lennon told me that he had information that the District Inspector was in the local hotel. Mick Mansfield and he went into the hotel but failed to find the D.I. there. Just as they were leaving, an R.I.C. man entered, apparently having seen them leaving the car and, noticing they were strangers, thought he would investigate. Lennon and Mansfield shot the policeman there and then made off in their car, being chased by Auxiliaries who were in Cappoquin at the time. The R.I.C. man's name, I remember, was Quirke.

It was, I think, about the same month - February 1921 - when Pat Keating and I went into Dungarvan to shoot Captain Marshall of "The Buffs". Benny McCarthy of the Dungarvan Company was keeping watch on his movements and tipped us off to come in and get him. We waited around for a few days and nights but nothing came of it. The Captain had "gone to ground".

On another occasion, Pat Keating came in to Dungarvan with me to shoot a Sergeant Liston, an R.I.C. man who was particularly active as a spotter for the British. I remember it was a fair day. We had just left the car and were having a look around for Liston when we noticed a soldier looking at our car and then returning quickly in the direction of the local barracks. We got back into our motor to await developments when suddenly we saw a military tender full of soldiers coming towards us. I

got going at once and headed out of town with the British in pursuit. The roads were frequently blocked up with cattle going in to the fair at Dungarvan, but I was more accustomed to this type of obstruction than the Tommies, so I was able to outmanoeuvre them and get away safely. As usual, we headed for Comeragh, in the mountains, where the Column usually rested up.

When things were getting very hot about this time and the Column was being hard-pressed by vastly superior enemy forces, I got a rather unusual job which might be of interest to record.

Being reared beside the sea and having a good knowledge of tides, winds and boats, I was commissioned to obtain a boat capable of accommodating about fifteen men in an emergency. The idea was to have this boat in readiness at sea but off-shore, about a mile from the West Waterford coast, between an area roughly Tramore-Ardmore. If the Column was so hard-pressed that it was forced towards the coast, this boat would be available to take them and would act as a sort of a hide-out for the time being.

I went across to Tramore with one of the boys and had a look around for a suitable boat. I spotted one alright, so we got into her and made for the open sea, in the direction of Ballinacourty. We weren't long out until the weather turned very bad and we had difficulty baling her out. During the night, the weather worsened and we were tired and very wet when the morning came..

We made for the shelter of Ballinacourty and proceeded towards Helvick. We were about four miles off Helvick when we saw a boat being put out from there.

When it came a bit nearer, we saw it was manned by British Marines who were stationed at Helvick at the time. The chase was on then and we tried every trick we knew to escape, as we guessed that the loss of the boat we had taken had been reported to Tramore and passed on to coastguards all along the coast. We ran out to sea, tacked suddenly and made for Helvick strand, hotly pursued by the Marines. We beached our boat about four hundred yards ahead of our pursuers, ran inland with all speed and, with the help of friends, got safely away. The boat was subsequently returned to its owner and the idea of using such a hide-out was abandoned.

Ballyvoile and Durrow Ambushes:

On March 3rd, 1921, I was with the Column in the neighbourhood of Ballyvoile, Stradbally, Co. Waterford, when word was received that a train had left Dungarvan, six miles to the east, with a number of armed military on board. Plans were laid to attack this train when it reached Ballyvoile.

I remember it was about nine o'clock in the morning when the train approached the tunnel at Ballyvoile. The Column was ranged along the railway embankment and a red flag stuck on the line in front of the tunnel.

On reaching the red flag, the driver of the train pulled up and immediately we opened heavy rifle and shotgun fire on the troops in the carriages. A British officer put his head out through the window of a carriage and yelled at the driver to drive on. The train moved on into the tunnel and proceeded towards the next station, Durrow, about a mile away.

George Lennon and Pat Keating then led the Column

across country towards Durrow and engaged the military, who had left the train, there.

I am not too clear as to the sequence of events after this, but I remember being told of a further trainload of military which had arrived in Durrow from Waterford city. I remember being about a half a mile from Durrow at the time and, with a few others of the Column, returned towards the station from which heavy rifle fire was coming. We were crossing a field near the railway when I came under machine-gun fire from a Tommy who had mounted his gun on a little knoll at the edge of the field. He gave me the full pan of bullets and I dived for the nearest ditch, as did the boys with me. One of the latter got his rifle on to the machine-gunner and quickly silenced him.

The firing continued for almost an hour, and our lads had forced the British into the Co-operative Creamery which adjoins Durrow station. Unfortunately, due to lack of ammunition, the boys couldn't press home the attack. If they could have done so, there is no doubt that the British would have surrendered.

Meanwhile, I discovered my leg all sloppy and wet with blood which was pouring into my boot. I had been badly wounded in the leg by the machine gun fire. First aid was applied and the bleeding stopped, so I carried on with the Column. However, after a week or so, the leg swelled up and became very sore, so I had no option but to return home and have it treated. In about six weeks or so, the wound had healed sufficiently to enable me to return to the Column again which, at this time, May, 1921, was located in the Comeragh district.

I have mentioned Comeragh frequently because this district, from which the neighbouring range of mountains is named, afforded almost complete immunity from surprise attacks by the enemy. It was possible for us to see, from Comeragh, enemy forces moving down in the lowlands and, should they show signs of approaching our position in strength, we could cross the mountain range by paths, known only to ourselves, and shelter in the Nire valley which lies west of the Comeraghs, near the village of Ballymacarberry, Co. Waterford.

The arms dump at Comeragh was the one most frequently used by the West Waterford Flying Column. It comprised a cave in the mountainside, covered with bushes and well nigh impossible to find except by those of us who knew its exact location.

Due to the injury to my leg, my activities up to the Truce in July, 1921, were confined mainly to driving various members of the Flying Column here and there through the Brigade area, transporting arms and suchlike. I lived in billets with the Column so as to be on hand whenever my services were required.

The only other activity of mine worth recording was a hold-up of lorries, containing over fifty Black and Tans at Dunkitt, Co. Kilkenny, when the Truce was on. This was an unofficial hold-up.

The boys heard that the Tans were leaving for Dublin to be demobilised, and about fourteen or so of the Column lay in wait for them at Dunkitt, about three miles north-west of Waterford city, on the main Waterford-Kilkenny road. I had got hold of a van the previous night and had placed it across the road before the convoy came along.

The Tans pulled up when they reached the van, and we shouted, "Hands up!", from behind the hedge. We were ordered not to fire unless compelled to do so. The Tans got out of the lorries and surrendered all their arms and equipment. I drove one of the lorries with the captured stuff, rifles, grenades and ammunition, to our hiding place in Comeragh where it was dumped. Shortly afterwards, I returned to my home at Dunabrattin, Annestown, Co. Waterford.

SIGNED:

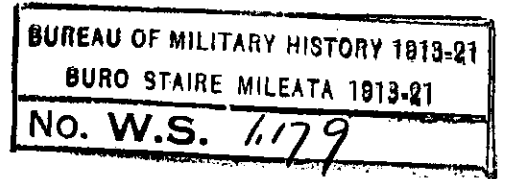
Andrew Kirwan

(Andrew Kirwan)

DATE:

6th June 1955

6th June 1955.



WITNESS:

T. O'Gorman

(T. O'Gorman)