

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILITAIR 1913-21

NO. W.S. 1214

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,214

Witness

James J. O'Connor,
34 Upper Ormond Quay,
Dublin.

Identity.

Special Constable, R.I.C. 1916 -

Subject.

Irish national events, 1916-1919.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY JAMES J. O'CONNOR, SOLICITOR,

34, Upper Ormond Quay, Dublin.

My uncle, James O'Connor, started life as a solicitor in Wexford with my father, the late Michael J. O'Connor. He came to Dublin later, practised as a solicitor in Dublin and then went to the Bar, becoming first a Junior Counsel, later a K.C., then Solicitor-General for Ireland. Attorney-General for Ireland, a Judge of the High Court, a Judge of the Court of Appeal for Southern Ireland, a Judge of the Court of Appeal for all Ireland, retired about 1922 on pension. He then went to England, becoming a K.C. at the English Bar, and later returned to Ireland where he practised as a solicitor. I heard recently that when he was Attorney-General he was strongly opposed to Conscription in Ireland. The British Government got rid of his opposition by making him a Judge. But whether this is true or not I cannot say. He was the man who wrote the two-volume history of Ireland.

My aunt, Mrs. Maud Walsh, was married to a solicitor in Tralee, the late Henry Walsh, in whose office, I think, Austin Stack was a clerk at one time. He died many years ago and my aunt Mrs. Walsh came to live in Dublin, later becoming a member of the Dublin Corporation, of which she was a member for some years. She was the first woman ever to sit on a public Board in Ireland, as a member of the Tralee Board of Guardians.

On Holy Thursday in 1916 I went to London for holidays with a friend. On Easter Monday we were having lunch in one of the restaurants in the West End. I sent

up a note to the leader of the orchestra to play some Irish airs, which he did. There was tremendous applause by those in the restaurant at the very moment the Rebellion was breaking out in Dublin.

We left London on Easter Monday night from Euston, crossed by Holyhead to Kingstown (as it was then called). When we arrived at Holyhead we found that there was no boat as a rebellion had broken out in Dublin. We remained there for two days, crossing on the following Thursday, arriving in Kingstown that morning.

My friend lived in Dublin. I told him to go on into Dublin and that I would wait to see if I could get the train home to Wexford. As there were no trains later that day I walked a good way into Dublin. I was standing at a crossroads near Monkstown Church talking to some British officers when a number of staff cars passed in the direction of Dublin. One of the officers said, "There's Maxwell; there will be trouble now!"

I proceeded to Dublin on an outside car. The man refused to drive me into the city. So I got off and walked to the corner of Stephen's Green near the Shelbourne Hotel. Not realising what was going on in the city I would have walked further were it not that a civilian stopped me and said that I would be very foolish to go any further into the city.

I went back to No. 77 Merrion Square where my friend Mr. Leo Smith, who had been in London with me, lived. I stayed with him until early the next week.

One day early the next week I went into the Castle

to try and get a permit from the British Provost Marshal to go home to Wexford. I met my uncle, James O'Connor, who was then Solicitor General, in the Castle yard. He stopped me and said, "Jim, you can drive a Wolseley car". I said that I could; my father owned one at the time. There was a Wolseley car in the Castle yard and he told me to get in, that he wanted me to drive him to Armagh to see the Cardinal. I said I wouldn't, that I wanted to get a permit from the Provost Marshal to go home to Wexford. He said, "I'll get you the permit". He went away and came back with a permit but it was not a permit to go to Wexford. It was a permit to drive to Armagh and back.

I got into the car. He then said, "Before we go to Armagh drive me down to Monkstown, I want to see James McMahon". James McMahon was then Under-Secretary. I drove him round the outskirts of the city to Monkstown. I stopped the car outside James McMahon's house. He went in and I remained in the car outside.

The idea of my Uncle James wanting to go to Armagh was to get the Cardinal to come down to Dublin to use his good offices to stop the Rebellion.

When he came out after some short time he said, "We are not going to Armagh. Take the car back to the Castle yard and leave it there". He altered the permit into one enabling me to go to Wexford.

A couple of days later I met some man and between us we hired a car to go to Wexford. When I arrived home I found that my father's office in which I was a solicitor at the time was closed. I had nothing to do and though while I had no particular association with the British

or the R.I.C., I joined the latter as a Special Constable. That night two R.I.C. men and four civilian Special Constables armed with rifles were sent out to guard the tunnel at Ferrycarrig, about a mile outside Wexford. One R.I.C. man and two Specials went to the far end: I and another civilian and one R.I.C. man remaining at the Wexford end.

After about $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours we saw lights coming down the tunnel. We were prepared to fire and the R.I.C. man who was with us said we had better wait. Fortunately we did because it was the other party who, having got too cold to stay where they were, decided to go home. We all went home and the next day I resigned from the Special Constabulary.

There was a Rising in Enniscorthy in Easter Week, 1916. The British War Office sent a wire to a Lieutenant-Colonel G.A. French, a retired British Army Officer who then lived at Newbay about two miles outside the town of Wexford, to take over command of the British Forces in Wexford, informing him that they were sending him reinforcements from Waterford plus an armoured train with a field gun and that he was to take the town of Enniscorthy. Colonel French was a Protestant - a man whose family were very highly respected in the County Wexford. He sent up word to the Administrator of Enniscorthy, a Protestant clergyman and a Doctor Furlong suggesting that they should see the leaders of the Insurgents in Enniscorthy town, telling them that they had no hope of holding the town against the forces that he was bringing against the town, that there would be a considerable loss of life and considerable damage done to

the town if he had to shell it, and to tell the leaders that if they surrendered to him when he marched in with his forces they would be allowed to leave and no one would be arrested. The Administrator, a Protestant clergyman and Dr. Furlong consulted with the leaders, as a result of which a surrender took place and all the leaders and all the men were allowed to walk out of the town. Colonel French was a gentleman and kept his word. But what explanation he gave to the British War Office, I do not know.

On one occasion Sir James Craig and Mr. de Valera met in the house of my uncle, James O'Connor, in Northumberland Road during the Tan War.

The British Government sent over to Ireland one Alfred Cope as a special representative of the British Cabinet in Ireland to act as an Assistant Under-Secretary, the Under-Secretary then being Mr. James McMahon. While here Mr. Cope became very friendly with Mr. Eamon Duggan, a solicitor, who was later one of the signatories of the Treaty and was a very active man in the Republican Movement.

Cope, of course, knew this but when he met Duggan in the Dolphin Hotel or other places socially he never asked him any questions. One night Mr. Eamon Duggan arrived home about 12 o'clock and just as he was going to bed the telephone rang. At the other end of the telephone at a place about nine miles outside Dublin was a man who was high up in the Republican Army, who told Duggan that he and two others were on a very important mission into Dublin and that their car had broken down at this place, asking Duggan if he could do anything to get them into the

city which was at that time surrounded by sentries, curfew being imposed. Duggan asked him for his telephone number and said he would ring back in a few minutes. He rang Mr. Cope and said, "My dear Cope, there are three friends of mine stranded at a village about nine miles outside Dublin. Their car has broken down. Could you do anything to get them into the city?" "Where are you?" said Cope. "I am at home". "I will be with you" said Cope "in about twenty minutes". Mr. Cope rang up one of the British military barracks, ordered out a staff car which, of course, in view of his position was always at his disposal. The staff car driven by a British Staff Officer arrived at Cope's house, collected him and drove to Mr. Duggan's house, collected Mr. Duggan and drove out through the sentries to the village about nine miles outside Dublin. Here they met the other three men in a licensed premises. They had a drink, as men do on these occasions, drove back into the city, again passing the sentries on the outskirts.

When the car got to College Green Duggan said to Cope, "Now my dear fellow, you have done all I asked you to do, stop the car here and let these three men out. They can walk the rest of the way home and you and I will go down to the Dolphin and have a drink, which they did.

The next day Cope went into his office in Dublin Castle. He went into James McMahon, the Under-Secretary, who told me the story. He related to him the events of the night before and said "I am very worried. I know, as you do, all about Duggan's activities. I know most of the officers who drive these staff cars but I don't know the Captain who drove me last night. I don't know

the three men whom he met or who they may be. They may be all right, but they may be associates of Duggan's and the other men who are in this movement. If this Captain goes to Macready who is the G.O.C. of the Forces I may have some difficulty in explaining my conduct."

McMahon thought a bit and said, "I will tell you what you will do. Get out another staff car as quickly as you can. Go up to French (who was then Lord Lieutenant in the Vice-Regal Lodge), tell him that you are associating with Duggan for the purpose of getting information from him". "But, of course, that's not true" said Cope, "I never ask Duggan any questions". "It doesn't matter" said McMahon. "Tell French also that you use some of the Secret Service money which you always carry in your pocket to give Duggan drink and that you used more of it last night to give the three men, whom you met out in this village, drink and that you got some useful information from them."

After some hesitation Cope rang up the military barracks, got out another staff car, drove up to the Vice-Regal Lodge and asked to see the Lord Lieutenant, whom he saw. He told him all about the incidents of the night before and about the information he was supposed to be getting from Duggan and about the information he had got the night before. He also told the Lord Lieutenant that he was sending a report over to the Prime Minister which was so secret that he could not even show it to His Excellency. He went away and that forenoon General Sir Neville Macready arrived at the Vice-Regal Lodge to see the Lord Lieutenant. He told him that the Captain who had driven Duggan and Cope the night before

had reported to him (Macready) the events of the evening and that he was going to have Cope arrested as a traitor and that, were it not for his important position, he would have had him arrested but did not like to take any steps without the approval of the Lord Lieutenant.

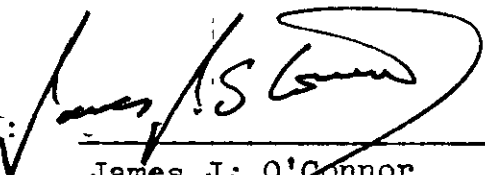
"You will do no such thing" said French. "Mr. Cope has already been here this morning and has made to me a full report about the incidents of last night and in my opinion he risked his life to get some important information for His Majesty's Government. I have just dictated a letter to my Secretary addressed to the Prime Minister recommending that some suitable honour be conferred on Mr. Cope by His Majesty the King in the next Honours List".

After the Sunday when a number of British Intelligence Officers were shot in Dublin and a number of civilians were shot in Croke Park by the British military, a young man named Potter was arrested, charged before a British Courtmartial with being concerned in the shooting of the British Officers, found guilty and condemned to death. His defence was an alibi. There was considerable doubt as to his guilt. A deputation from the Dublin Corporation went to see General Sir Neville Macready, who was then G.O.C. of the British Forces in Ireland, to intercede on this young man's behalf and to ask that he be reprieved. Alderman McWalter, who was a member of the deputation, dropped dead that day. Mrs. Maud Walsh was another member of the deputation. Sir Neville Macready gave the deputation no hearing at all and refused to intervene. A day or two afterwards Mrs. Walsh telephoned her brother, Mr. James O'Connor, who was then

Attorney-General, and asked him could he get her an interview with Lord French, the Lord Lieutenant, which he did.

Mrs. Walsh went to see Lord French alone, told him all about the Potter case, informing him that there was great doubt about the young man's guilt. Lord French told Mrs. Walsh, "I know little about this case. I will have the papers sent to me; whether I will read them myself or not I do not know, but they will be read by someone of my choice and if there is any doubt about this young man's guilt I give you my word that he will not be executed". Potter was later reprieved and I saw a letter from his mother thanking my aunt, Mrs. Maud Walsh, for what she had done.

On the day when an attempt was made to assassinate Lord French at the Ashtown gate, Phoenix Park, a young man named Martin Savage was shot dead by the British escorting Lord French. As the young man's body lay on the road one of the soldiers went over and kicked the body. Lord French got out of his car, ordered the young British soldier away and said "That young man is a soldier just as you are; leave his body alone". The plainclothes detective who was in one of the cars and who was present on the occasion told me of this incident.

Signed: 

James J. O'Connor

Date: 27/7/55

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Witness: Mrs. Ryan Connolly

(Investigator)

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