Military Archives Cathal Brugha
BKs Rathmines Dublin 6
ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1,342

ROINN COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,342

Witness

Seamus Doyle,
21 Parnell Avenue,
Enniscorthy,
Co. Wexford.

Identity.

Adjutant, Wexford Brigade, 1916;
Member of Second Dail Eireann.

Subject.

His imprisonment in England,
1916-1917.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.386

Form B S M. 2

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2nd STATEMENT BY MR. SEAMUS DOYLE,

21, Parnell Avenue, Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford,

formerly of Tombrack Wood, Ferns, Co. Wexford.

After thirty-nine years, memories become blurred, and things which loomed large in one's life at the time seem trivial in the light of much that happened during the ensuing years. However, some incidents and conversations, because of the actors or speakers or the conditions under which they were spoken, become permanently fixed among one's recollections. These I will set down unhesitatingly, the others as memory serves me.

Sometime about the middle of May, 1916, a group of us was brought from Mountjoy Jail to the North Wall and put on board a cattle-boat for Holyhead en route for Dartmoor Convict Prison. We had an escort of the Notts. & Derbyshire Regiment (The Sherwood Foresters), and although they had their baptism of fire at Mount St. Bridge, they were kind to us.

In the group of prisoners were Tom Ashe, Frank and James Lawless, Robert Brennan, Seán R. Etchingham, Seumas Rafter, Michael de Lacy, Richard F. King and myself. The last six were Wexford men, and of the nine, six are dead. Trócaire Dé ortha.

We Wexford men had been tried by courtmartial, in common with all the convicted prisoners, and sentenced to death, commuted to five years' penal servitude. My recollection of the proceedings is that the officers constituting the court were weary of the job. Anyway, the result was a foregone conclusion - guilty.

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Ashe's fine physique and winning personality captivated the Tommies, who were superior, in every sense of the word, to those we met in ~~1921-22~~. 1920-21 A.D.

We arrived in Dartmoor late in the evening, and, strange to relate, I believe we were glad to have reached journey's end. Anyway, we slept the sleep of the weary that night.

We were housed in a very old wing of the prison, near a boundary wall, in which was an oblong granite block bearing the inscription: Henri Journéé, 1803. Dartmoor Prison was built during the Napoleonic Wars to house French prisoners. The warders' children often passed along by this wall in the summer evenings, and prisoners in the cells near it could hear them chanting "beastly rebels" as they passed.

Prison life, with its rule of perpetual silence, was drab and dreary, and prisoners who had been engaged in outdoor occupations must have found it hard to bear; those of us whose work had mostly kept us indoors fared better. However, memories of the famous felons, whose successors we in some measure were, helped us to endure it. Memories of home often brought loneliness and longing, and many a time in the exercise yard, with our eyes on the hills of Devon, which we could see over the confining walls, our thoughts and hearts were far away with Bán Chnuic Éireann Ógh.

As the warders came to know us, they seemed to realise that we were not of the type to which they had been accustomed, and, with few exceptions, they did not seem to persecute us. We discovered, too, that it was possible to carry on snatches of whispered conversation during exercise and in the workshop. Our occupation was mostly

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making mail-bags. During one of these snatched conversations Eoin McNeill told me that he was impelled to issue the cancelling order on Easter Sunday morning by a report which he received from The O'Rahilly on the previous evening. The O'Rahilly had driven round the country on Saturday and reported all quiet everywhere. McNeill thought that it would be possible to tide over the crisis caused by the happenings of Good Friday and issued the order. "Now", he said, "I almost believe Patrick Pearse was right". News occasionally filtered in; we heard of Casement's execution - the chaplain read the war news to us in the chapel on Sunday afternoons after Benediction. Home news scarcely ever reached us. Our letters in and out were censored, but letters were few and far between and if a prisoner received a visit he lost a letter.

The cells in Dartmoor, as in all prisons, are tiered three or four storeys high. On the upper storeys there is just a gangway in front of the cell doors. The space between these gangways is filled with strong netting wire, presumably to prevent prisoners from committing suicide by jumping down. As a result of this arrangement, the last prisoner to come in was the last down on the following morning. Professor Eoin McNeill was the last prisoner to arrive, and the following morning the rest of us were standing in two lines on the ground floor when he came down the iron stairs. Commandant de Valera, who was standing at the end of one of the lines, stepped out on our front and gave the order: "Irish Volunteers, eyes left". We gave the salute. There was commotion among the warders and Commandant de Valera was taken away. I do not remember what happened afterwards.

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Sometime later, Most Rev. Dr. Kiely, Bishop of Plymouth, in whose diocese we were, came to the prison and saw us individually in the sacristy of the chapel. He seemed distressed at our situation and advised us, for our own sakes, to obey the prison regulations. The interviews over, he came out on the altar and said he would give Benediction if we would sing the Tantum Ergo. Gerard Crofts led off, singing the hymn to the air Deutschland Uber Alles. Those of us who knew the hymn and air joined in. The prison officials apparently did not notice that we were singing the air of the German National Anthem, or if they did they took no notice.

In late summer, 1916, Rev. P. Murphy of the House of Missions, Enniscorthy, who was completely in the confidence of the Enniscorthy Battalion Irish Volunteers, paid us Wexfordmen a visit, and, despite the fact that a warder was present during the interviews - he saw us separately in a room - he was able to give us heartening news of the changing conditions at home, as well as news of relatives and friends. We heard later in Lewes that he had been black-listed by the Home Office and would not be allowed to visit us again. He is now the revered Pastor of Glynn, Wexford, and a national figure because of his untiring work to perpetuate the heroism of the men of 1798.

Miss Margaret Pearse also came to see Conor McGinley, who had been at school in St. Enda's.

Although there was no overt act of revolt on our part in Dartmoor, the situation was always tense. The prison authorities apparently thought that Commandant de Valera, Dr. Richard Hayes and Desmond Fitzgerald were responsible for this state of affairs, and when we had been

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some considerable time in the prison these three were taken away, to Maidstone, as we afterwards learned. They remained in Maidstone until the Portland and Dartmoor prisoners were brought together in Lewes Jail.

There was an extensive library in Dartmoor; it had been catalogued and occasionally we were fortunate enough to get a copy of the catalogue. On these occasions it was customary to make a list of books for a period of reading. Each prisoner had a slate and pencil in his cell. I made the list on one side of the slate and kept the other side for casual scribblings. On book changing days we put the book we were finished with, together with our slate bearing the title of the book we wished to have, outside our cell doors. More often than not, when we returned we found a bound copy of The Strand or some other magazine awaiting us instead of our choice.

The Catholic chaplain was allowed to give books to Catholic prisoners. These were presumably from a Catholic section in the library. We got some good reading from him.

As well, if a prisoner was pursuing a course of study in a particular subject, he was allowed to get in text books, on condition that such books became prison property on his discharge. Under this regulation some of us got in Irish texts, but in our case these books were returned to us on our release, as it took place under amnesty.

In December the British Home Office decided to bring the Irish prisoners, convicts and short-term men together in Lewes Jail. There were about sixty of us in Dartmoor and about the same number in Portland. Before we left

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Dartmoor the Governor told us that, if we pledged ourselves not to try to escape or to communicate with any person during the journey to Lewes, we and our warder escort would be allowed to travel in civilian clothing, otherwise we would travel as ordinary convicts in convict dress, handcuffed to lengths of chain. Practically all of us refused to give any pledge and so we made the journey handcuffed to the lengths of chain - a length to every five men. The first man's right hand was bound to the chain, the second man's left hand, and so on until the chain had its full complement. Such was the prisoners' progress across the south of England - in chain gangs.

We travelled in relays from Portland and Dartmoor, and, as we arrived, cells were allocated to us in such a manner that no two prisoners from either jail were side by side - a Dartmoor man between two Portland men as far as the prison accommodation allowed it. Apparently the prison authorities expected this disposal of prisoners to make control easier. If this was their idea they were disappointed.

We all arrived in Lewes shortly before Xmas, Commandant de Valera, Dr. Hayes and Desmond Fitzgerald being the last in. The short-term men were safeguarded from us in a different wing of the prison.

Christmas Day fell on a Monday in 1916, a fact which I recall not from a recollection of the calendar but because of the menu - two ounces of fat bacon, some beans and potatoes. The regulation tin knives had not been issued to us and we had to make do with spoons and forks. A small portion of alleged pudding was added to each man's ration in honour of the day.

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However, there was a slight improvement in the food, for Dartmoor prisoners anyway. We got tea in Lewes, which we had not got since the preceding May. Our breakfast in Dartmoor was a pint of very thin porridge and some bread. The food all over was bad; sometimes it seemed that the bread contained chopped straw.

In Lewes we were permitted to talk during exercise; before we were there very long we talked when we chose, the warders seldom interfering.

We were divided into two categories for work - the indoor men who made mats on crude looms and wove rugs etc. on a very different type of loom; the outdoor men dug the garden and were known as the "garden party". Any prisoner showing signs of delicacy was relegated to this group, which provided an excellent opportunity of learning Irish from native speakers from Munster and Connaught. I had two teachers, both Galway, Colm Ó Gaordha from Rosmuc, and Pádraig Ó Fathaigh from near Gort.

The grow-more-food campaign was in full swing and we dug up every suitable patch in the prison grounds in preparation for a crop of potatoes. I don't think the portion of the crop sown by us was very successful. I saw Tom Ashe and Phil McMahon operate a plan which could hardly be described as good husbandry: The seeds were sown on the flat, lines put down, one prisoner equipped with a dibber and another with a basketful of seed. Ashe drove the dibber into the earth as far as possible, worked it round and round and, when the hole was as big as he could make it, McMahon filled it up with seed potatoes. Ashe drove the dibber down through them and McMahon covered the lot with soil. The strike came off before the crop was

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finished planting. The warders finished the job. We were gone before the result of our part of the grow-more-food campaign became visible.

In Lewes we were able to get a good deal of news from home by means of the poetic names of Ireland - Kathleen Ní Houlihan, The Poor Old Woman etc., but one day a Dublin prisoner named Murray was summoned to the Governor's office, where the following dialogue took place:

Governor: "Who is Miss Houlihan to whom you so frequently refer in your letters?"

Murray: "She is a girl I met in the Gaelic League".

Governor: "Has she ever been in jail?"

Murray: (By a supreme effort keeping a straight face) "No".

Governor: "Is she a bad character?

Murray: "No".

Governor: "Well, there must be something wrong. The Home Office has directed me to expunge all references to her in letters in or out of the prison".

We heard later that an Irish literary man, who was acquainted with Caitlín and her numerous aliases, was brought in to the Home Office to censor our letters in and out.

To pass the dreary days we studied Irish and other languages. Professor McNeill gave a series of peripatetic lectures on the Celts to a group during exercise-time. Tom Ashe wrote his prophetic poem "Let me carry your cross for Ireland, Lord". At the request of Commandant de Valera, we wrote accounts of our activities during Easter Week on toilet paper, which we duly delivered to him. Gerard Crofts sang inspiringly when opportunity arose. Seán R. Etchingham, who saw humour in every situation, evoked frequent laughter with topical verses. We established a

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branch of the Fáinne; members proclaimed themselves by displaying a tin button the left breast of their tunics. Doubtless these activities helped to lighten our lot, but the convict garb, with its benumbered cap and sleeve, quickly brought us back to reality.

In late spring William Partridge, who was in bad health, was released, and later Gerard Crofts was released for the same reason. When the news that Gerard's release was pending became known, the advisability of staging a strike in the prison was discussed by our leaders, who decided that Gerard would put the matter before our people in Dublin, whose decision we would abide by. If Dublin decided that the strike should take place, a telegram announcing the death of an aunt was to be sent to Harry Boland. In due course the telegram arrived and was brought by the prison chaplain, Rev. Dr. McLoughlin, to Harry. Dr. McLoughlin told Harry that he would offer the following morning's Mass for the repose of her soul. Harry became scrupulous and confided in him. He understood and at the time, approved of the decision. Later he changed his mind about it. This fact came to my knowledge through the following circumstances: Sometime previous to the strike a sister-in-law of mine sent me a Catholic Truth Society booklet and asked me to get the prisoners' autographs on the margins of the pages. I had not succeeded in getting all the names when the strike took place, but I decided to ask the chaplain to send the booklet to her with the names I had got. I asked to see him. He came into my cell in an angry mood and told me that he had been instructed to withold absolution from us while we persisted in our present attitude to the prison regulations. However, he took the booklet and sent it to my sister-in-law.

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The strike was fixed for Whit Monday, May 29th. On that morning, as we were lined up as usual, Commandant de Valera declared that we would no longer consent to be treated as criminals, and we took orders from him instead of the warder-in-charge. We were marched back to our cells, locked in and kept in solitary confinement, except for necessary occasions, for some weeks. Meanwhile we broke everything breakable in our cells.

According to prison regulations we were mutineers and had incurred the penalty - the cat - usually meted out for this offence. However, we were not subjected to this cruelty. The Governor had us brought individually to his office. I forget what he said to me. I told him that I regretted any trouble caused to him personally. I believe we all shared this regret, because he treated us as well as the prison regulations allowed. Indeed, in some cases he exceeded them in our favour. In order to break out of the close confinement, Commandant de Valera, by means of notes distributed by prisoner orderlies, ordered us to refuse to return to cells on the following Sunday morning after Mass, when we should be assembled together. Unfortunately, one of these notes was lost by a prisoner in the bath-house on Saturday. It was picked up by a warder and so the plan was upset. We were asked to promise to return to cells after Mass, otherwise we would not be allowed to go to chapel on Sunday morning. We refused to promise and were kept locked in. Rev. Dr. McLoughlin said Mass in a loud voice, and, as the chapel was on the same level as some of the cells, the occupants of these cells were enabled to join in the Holy Sacrifice.

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After some weeks the British Home Office decided to separate us. In consequence, we were broken up into small parties and distributed over a number of jails in the South of England. On this occasion there was no question of travelling in civilian clothing. We travelled as we had travelled from Dartmoor.

Commandant de Valera was, I believe, the first to go. Harry Boland wrote three letters before his turn came. These he brought with him. He dropped the first one in Lewes and the others at various points during the journey, all of them without the knowledge of the escort. One, addressed to his mother, reached her.

The group of which I was a member, (Dick King's is the only name I remember) arrived at Maidstone in the evening of June 9th. The following morning (Sunday) we were brought out for exercise preparatory to going to Mass. We were mixed up with the English prisoners, but we refused to move and were brought back to cells and lost Mass. We felt justified in not allowing our religion to be used as a means to degrade us.

In the afternoon we were brought out for Benediction. Commandant de Valera, who had apparently finished the three-day period in the punishment cells, appeared. He and I approached each other, shook hands and carried on a conversation. We were ordered to be silent and paid no attention. He was locked up again. I was allowed to go to Benediction. Next morning as King and I were standing in a corridor (outside speaking distance) awaiting our turn to have my charge of insubordination tried by the Governor, we saw Commandant de Valera being brought in. A moment and he was out again, having his

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tunic buttoned by a warder. Apparently he had gone in with swinging open, and as a convict, like a soldier, must be properly dressed, he was ordered to button it. He refused and a warder had to do it for him

I was duly tried and sentenced to three days' solitary confinement. This meant that I was put in a punishment cell in which there was nothing movable except a vessel made of papier maché. The seat was a block of wood fixed in the floor. The bed-board and bed-clothes were handed out each morning when the prisoner had risen. His clothing, which he had to hand out the previous evening, was given back to him. When the bed was in the cell the prisoners' clothing was outside, and when he was dressed the bed was outside. I got ordinary prison food during these three days. The materials for a mail-bag were given to me on the first day. I refused to stitch it. My three days ended on the following Thursday, but I was before the Governor again on Friday and this time he lectured me on the foolishness and gravity of my offence, and told me that he would confiscate the note-book given me in Lewes as well as cancelling all my remission marks.

I got the customary three days on bread and water on this occasion. Commandant de Valera was in a cell beside mine, and each night we beat a tattoo on the dividing wall to let each other know that all was well.

I had asked to see the prison chaplain. He came into my cell on Saturday morning. He told me that an act of amnesty had been passed in Westminster the preceding night and that we would soon be going home. He told me, too, that he did not know how we stood with regard to absolution,

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(I had asked him to hear my Confession) as we were deprived of it in Lewes, that we were now in a different diocese and that he did not know if the prohibition held there. In Lewes we were in the Diocese of Southwark. I don't know what diocese Maidstone is in. During the Clare election of 1917, I understand that Most Rev. Dr. Amigo, Bishop of Southwark, wrote to Commandant de Valera, stating that he did not issue any ruling depriving us of absolution. Since the chaplain in Maidstone, as well as the chaplain in Lewes, was aware of the deprivation, it seems that the latter chaplain was duped by someone. Was it the British Home Office?

After dinner on this day we were brought to the Governor's office. We were grouped outside it waiting to be brought in. Commandant de Valera told us that we would probably be told of our pending release by the Governor. He ordered us to display no emotion on hearing the news - an order which we carried out to the letter. The Governor (his name was Cavendish) told us that one half of him was Irish, and that that half appealed to us to work for peace and order in Ireland.

Later we left Maidstone in Black Marias for the railway station en route for London. We were twenty-two all told - the number was fixed in my memory by an incident which occurred in the Black Maria. Harry Boland commenced to sing a rebel song. Somebody said: "Shut up, Boland, do you want to get us mobbed?" Harry said: "It is a queer state of affairs if twenty-two Irishmen are not able to mop up this town".

As we in Maidstone were nearest London, ours was

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the first group to arrive in Pentonville. We were brought into a room in the prison and there awaited the arrival of the Governor. He arrived, a tall, spare figure of a man, in a state of obvious agitation evidently. He was aware of our activities in Lewes and expected the worst. He said: "I had not the honour of belonging to an Irish Regiment, but I often dined in the mess of the Royal Irish - jolly fine fellows". He then asked Commandant de Valera for a guarantee that we would not make any trouble during our stay in the prison. The guarantee was given. He then said: "I expect all you men are Roman Catholics?" We assured him we were. "Would we like to have a Mass all for ourselves in the morning?" We said we did not mind who was present with us. He seemed to have the idea of a special Mass for us fixed in his mind and he said: "Fortunately the chaplain is in the prison; I'll bring him in and see if it can be arranged". He left us and returned accompanied by the chaplain, who stood in the doorway, drew himself up to his full height and said: "Is Éireannach mise". I cannot describe the effect these three words, spoken in this place, had on me. I thought them as splendid a declaration of faith as I had ever heard. We commenced talking to him in Irish. The Governor took him away and returned alone, still doubtful of our intentions. However, he brought back the chaplain, whom we could hear saying to him as they approached the room in which we were: "That is an Englishman's mistake, these men fought for an ideal, not for their pockets". It was obvious that the Governor had angered him. He said to Commandant de Valera: "Can I not promise for your men who are here and for those of them who are still to arrive that they will not cause any trouble?". He was assured he

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could. He then said: "You will not know the Ireland you're going back to, and you have done as much for the faith as you have done for the national cause". This time the Governor swept him out of the room and the rank and file of the prisoners saw him no more. He was Canon Carey, who became Roger Casement's intimate friend in Pentonville. He is now gone to his reward. His memory should be revered by all who love Ireland.

On that Saturday evening I prepared my bed and went to rest at an early hour, as, although we had not been told when we were to be released, I thought we might be crossing on Sunday night, June 17th, 1917, and I determined to get a good rest on my last night in prison. Just as I lay down I noticed a large insect crawling across my pillow. I brushed it off, but in a moment I saw another one. I then noticed a faint, musty smell, which, I had read somewhere, was always caused by bugs. I dressed myself, threw the bed-clothes on the floor and lay on the bed-board all night. I wondered if the whole prison were infected by bugs and if Roby of the Gael had been subjected to this mean form of degradation. Pentonville was the only prison in which I saw vermin of any kind.

Sunday was spent in providing us with civilian clothing. This was of the hand-me-down variety, popularly known as Martin Henrys. It provoked much laughter. (Our uniforms were destroyed sometime after our arrival in the prison, but not before we were photographed in cap and tunic. These photographs were probably for display in the "Rogues Gallery").

Some prisoners saw Casement's grave. It was identified by a patch of cement on the wall at the end of

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the grave on which the letters R.C. and the date 1916 were inscribed.

Before leaving we were given a packet of cigarettes (no matches) and five shillings each, as well as a ticket to our home towns. At least my ticket was from Euston to Enniscorthy and so was that of Tom Doyle, the only other ex-convict now living in Enniscorthy. We were hurried to the station in Black Marias. Occasionally a green handkerchief was waved by a man on the side-walks as we passed through the streets of London. Two nuns on the railway platform gave us "welcome home, welcome home" as we arrived. Of the train journey to Holyhead I only remember that Eoin McNeill had a telegram of welcome from the people of Aran delivered to him on the train, that Fionán Lynch recited Stephen Gwynn's poem "A Song of Defeat", and that we sang and talked and planned.

On the boat there were some British soldiers coming home on furlough. One of them hurled some sentences in Irish at us. I forget what he said, probably that he was as good an Irishman as any of us. They were not to be seen when we arrived in Dúnlaoghaire.

On catching first sight of Ireland, Harry Boland sang:

Ho, Conn, light up your fires to-night
On Hungry's towering crest,
For ships will come e'er morning's light
With brave news from the west;
Then, boy, farewell the wake, the fair,
And your sweetheart's cheeks of bloom
Till freedom shines on the conq'ring lines
Of the boys who're coming home.

Dublin's tumultuous welcome and Enniscorthy.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE [illegible] 1913-21
NO. W.S. 1,342

Signed: Seumas Doyle.
(Seumas Doyle)
Date: 25-1-56
25.1.56

Witness: Seán Brennan Lieut-Col.
(Investigator) (Sean Brennan) Lieut.-Col.