

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21  
No. W.S. 1488

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1488. . . . .

Witness

Mrs. Bridget Ryan,  
Ballynonty,  
Thurles,  
Co. Tipperary.

Identity.

Member of Cumann na mBan, 1917-1921.

Subject.

The Rescue of Seán Hogan at Knocklong, May,  
1919, and subsequent events.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No . . . . . S.2825.

Form B S M. 2

MS 1488

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STATEMENT BY MRS. BRIDGET RYAN

Ballynonty, Thurles, Co. Tipperary

After a lapse of so many years it is now rather difficult to recall how I first became associated with the national movement during the years from 1916 to 1921, but certainly after the Rising of 1916, my political sympathies were wholeheartedly with the Irish Volunteers and with Sinn Fein. At the time, I held a clerical position in the business establishment of Mr. Bernard Fitzpatrick, Liberty Square, Thurles, and amongst Mr. Fitzpatrick's other employees was a Mr. John McCormack, who is now in the U.S.A. and who later became quartermaster of the 2nd or Mid-Tipperary Brigade.

Miss Maura Comerford of Dublin came to Thurles in 1918 to organise Cumann na mBan in the area. I gave her what help and assistance I could and I became a member of the local branch of that organisation.

Early in 1918, John McCormack told me that I had been appointed dispatch centre in Thurles and from then onwards I received a steady stream of dispatches from G.H.Q. for distribution to Volunteer officers in various places. The dispatches came to me under cover through the post. They were invariably from Michael Collins, or from another man named Collins who may have been Maurice Collins. Those for local Volunteer officers I generally delivered myself and ones which had to be sent on a distance I either handed over to John McCormack or, at the earliest opportunity, took them to Michael (Mixie) O'Connell who, in turn, arranged to forward them to their destinations. The only danger about the arrangement was that, as I was then Miss Bridget Fitzpatrick, and as I lived indoor on my employer's premises, letters addressed to Miss B. Fitzpatrick could easily be opened in error by the

proprietor who, as I have said, was Mr. Bernard Fitzpatrick, and whose political views were different from mine. McCormack, however, kept a good eye on the post and ensured that no such complication arose.

Later, Miss Leslie Price, (now Mrs. Tom Barry of Cork) came to organise other dispatch centres and lines of communication and I was associated with her in this work while she was in the Thurles area.

On the morning of 19th May 1919, I received through the usual channels a dispatch from Michael Collins with a covering note addressed to me personally, telling me that the dispatch was extremely urgent and requesting me to have it forwarded to its destination at once. I have an idea that the dispatch was for Sean Treacy, but of that I am not now quite certain. I immediately gave it with the covering note to McCormack who took it at once to Mixie O'Connell's shop.

What transpired in O'Connell's shop, or who besides Mixie O'Connell and McCormack met there, I do not know, but, on his return, McCormack told me that Sean Hogan, who was wanted by the R.I.C. in connection with the Soloheadbeg ambush, had been arrested in the early hours of that morning at Maher's of Annfield and that he (Hogan) was a prisoner in the R.I.C. Barracks in Thurles. Continuing, McCormack told me it was expected that Hogan would be sent to Cork Prison under escort by some of the trains during the day, that arrangements had been made to watch the barracks, and that if Hogan was being sent to Cork it had been decided that Mixie O'Connell would send a code telegram worded "Greyhound on train" and giving the time of the departure of the train to Shanahan, Coal Stores, Knocklong. McCormack asked my permission to use my name as the sender of the telegram which I readily and

willingly gave. I did not at that time know Shanahan's of Knocklong, nor did it occur to me at the time to suggest to McCormack to use a fictitious name, and I expect in the hurry and with all McCormack and O'Connell had to do that day it did not occur to them either.

Throughout the day the barracks was constantly watched by an elderly lady named Mrs. McCarthy, her daughter Margaret and a Miss Maher of Annfield (now Mrs. Frank McGrath of Nenagh) at whose house Hogan had been arrested and who had followed the police into Thurles. They made several efforts to secure a visit to the prisoner but without success. Mrs. McCarthy at different times during the day brought fruit, tea and socks to the barracks for the prisoner, each time pleading to be allowed to see him for a few minutes, but the R.I.C. were definite in their refusal. These visits, however, provided Mrs. McCarthy with the excuse which she required to remain in the vicinity of the barracks for long intervals. Eventually, that evening Mrs. McCarthy secured the information that Hogan was being taken to Cork by a train which left Thurles round about 6 p.m. and, when she reported this to Mixie O'Connell, Mixie sent what later became the famous telegram.

The rescue of Sean Hogan at Knocklong railway station on that evening of 19th May 1919, is now a wellknown episode of the history of those years, and we in Thurles who were in any way connected with it were, of course, elated at its success. I don't think I was even unduly worried when Mr. O'Carroll, the supervisor in Thurles Post Office, told me that the R.I.C. in the course of their investigations had taken from the post office the original copy of the telegram to Shanahan which bore my name as the sender.

About three weeks later, Tom and Mick Shanahan (owners of the Coal Stores at Knocklong), Patrick Maher, Edmond Foley (both from the Knocklong district), a man named Murphy, who

was a porter at Knocklong railway station, and Mixie O'Connell were arrested by the R.I.C. on suspicion of being concerned in the rescue of Sean Hogan. On the morning of Mixie O'Connell's arrest I had a visit from a party of R.I.C. men including District Inspector Hunt, who interrogated me and took a statement from me. He started off by taking down my name and address, but when he questioned me about the telegram I denied all knowledge of it. He then proceeded to question me about Mixie O'Connell and what I knew about his Sinn Fein and Volunteer activities. There was no point in saying that I did not know O'Connell as his shop was only a few yards up the street from Fitzpatrick's, so I told Hunt that I knew him as a neighbour in business, but beyond that I had no idea, good, bad or indifferent, what the man did or what he was interested in. Within a few weeks of his taking that statement from me, District Inspector Hunt was shot dead in Thurles.

Meanwhile, the six prisoners were taken to Limerick Prison where they were remanded in custody from time to time.

Nothing further happened so far as I was concerned about the Knocklong affair until the following January (1920). Then I was notified by the R.I.C. that I was to appear on a certain day (the date of which I forget) as a witness in the case when the prisoners were being tried in Limerick. The R.I.C. spoke about sending an escort for me, but when I told them that I would go myself as I would be disgraced if I was seen walking the streets of Thurles with them, they accepted my word for it. When, however, I went to the railway station to entrain for Limerick, a party of R.I.C. were already there and got into the same carriage with me. Arriving in Limerick, they escorted me to William St. R.I.C. barracks. There I was taken to a room where I was interrogated by three British military officers who took a fresh statement from me. Their

questions and my answers followed on the same lines as when District Inspector Hunt took the statement and, in this respect, I might mention that before going to Limerick I was well briefed by Jimmy Leahy, the brigade O/C., and by John McCormack, to say exactly what I had told Hunt and to add nothing further.

Having completed my statement to the three military officers, I was taken to another room, the only occupants of which was a number of R.I.C. men and there I awaited my turn to go to the Courtroom. When called to give evidence I was escorted into the Courtroom by the R.I.C. and, on my way to the witness box, I had to pass by the six prisoners who were seated on a long stool. As I passed, I remarked to Mixie O'Connell: "Poor show from Eallyhooly" which was a favourite saying of his. This led to some excitement and orders were shouted not to allow the witness to speak to the prisoners. The bench was occupied by three men in civilian clothes, presumably magistrates. In the witness box I was questioned by the Crown solicitor about the telegram and about my knowledge of the prisoners and I maintained that I knew absolutely nothing about the telegram and that I knew none of the prisoners except O'Connell whom I just knew as a business man in Thurles. I was then taken back to the room from which I had been called to give evidence and, in this way, I was prevented from seeing any other witnesses or hearing any other evidence which was given that day. The decision of this Court was to remand all six prisoners in custody for trial at a later Court. I was held at William St. Barracks until 6 p.m. that evening, when I insisted that I had to call to see a friend in Limerick, and the R.I.C. permitted me to go, on the undertaking that I would be at the railway station in time to catch the 7 p.m. train back to

Thurles. I went to the station in time to catch the 9 p.m. train in the hope that the R.I.C. would have left by the earlier train, but they were there awaiting me and I had to endure their company back to Thurles, which was reached about midnight.

The next trial of the six prisoners took place at Armagh Assizes in July 1920, but meanwhile I had an interesting visitor to Thurles in the person of Mrs. Philip Snowden, wife of Sir Philip Snowden, who was later Chancellor of the Exchequer in one of the British Labour Governments in England. She had come to Ireland as a member of the British Labour Party's Fact Finding Commission and, when she arrived in Thurles, she had a letter of introduction to me from Cumann na mBan Headquarters in Dublin. On the night prior to her visit, the R.I.C. and Black and Tans had run amok in Thurles and had done considerable damage to business premises. I showed her around and let her see the havoc wrought by the Crown forces and I took her to visit the relatives of James McCarthy, who had been murdered at his home a short time before by the R.I.C. murder gang. She appeared to be most sympathetic and made notes of all she had seen and heard.

b For the Armagh trial of the Knocklong prisoners, as they had come to be known, the R.I.C. served me with a summons to attend as a witness and told me to be in readiness to travel on a certain day. To avoid travelling with them, and without informing them, I left Thurles a few days in advance and went to Armagh via Dublin and Dundalk. In accordance with the instructions on the summons, I called to the Courthouse in Armagh on the day before the trial opened and, after waiting for some hours, I was interviewed by an official who just took my name and address. Accommodation was provided for me

in a hotel with other witnesses.

In Armagh the six prisoners were tried by a judge and jury and the trial lasted for two days. I was not called to give evidence until the second day and my evidence was exactly the same as I had given in Limerick and in the statements taken by D.I. Hunt and by the military officers. I was cross-examined for about 15 or 20 minutes by the Counsel for the Prosecution, but I stuck to my original story which, by that time, I could repeat like a parrot. The two Shanahans and Murphy were found not guilty and acquitted, but the jury disagreed in the case of O'Connell, Foley and Maher and the latter three were again remanded in custody to await a new trial which, as far as I can now recollect, was not to take place until March 1921.

Whilst on remand in Mountjoy Prison, Mixie O'Connell secured his release by going on hunger strike. He returned to Thurles but was only a few minutes back in his home when he learned that he was likely to be re-arrested at any moment and he then left Thurles and went on the run. Edmund Foley and Patrick Maher did not take part in the hunger strike with O'Connell for, being innocent of the charges which had been preferred against them, they felt confident that they would not be found guilty when their next trial took place.

In January 1921, Commandant Jerry Ryan (now my husband) was arrested in Thurles by the R.I.C. and taken to Limerick Prison. In a letter to me, which he got smuggled out of the prison, he told me to warn Commandant Small not to carry out two ambushes at two points which were marked on a map which had been captured on him. Having warned Small, I tore up that portion of the letter but retained the remainder of it as it contained some instructions about money matters which



Jerry wanted me to fix up between the quartermaster and the battalion vice-commandant, Shortly afterwards, I went to Limerick to visit him and on my way back I was met at Oola railway station by a Miss McCarthy (daughter of the Mrs. McCarthy to whom I have previously referred) who was teaching in Oola. She told me that she had received instructions from John McCormack to meet me and to prevent me from returning to Thurles as the R.I.C. were searching for me there. During my absence the R.I.C. had raided my room in Fitzpatrick's and had found in my trunk the portion of the letter from Jerry Ryan which I had retained. I stayed that night in Oola with Miss McCarthy and then went on the run, staying with friends in various places until after the Truce. in the following July.

In February 1921, the two remaining members of the Knocklong prisoners - Edmund Foley and Patrick Maher - were tried again, this time by courtmartial in Dublin. Before going on my visit to Limerick Prison, I had received the usual notice from the R.I.C. to appear as a witness, but as I was on the run when the courtmartial took place, I did not appear. Both men were found guilty and sentenced to death and both were executed by hanging in Mountjoy Frison on 30th May 1921.

Signed: Bridget Ryan

Date: 15<sup>th</sup> September 1956

Witness: J. Grace

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