

W. S. 683
ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 683

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 683

Witness

Hugh Hehir,
500 North Circular Road,
Dublin.

Identity.

Member of I.R.B. 1911 - ;
Member of 'C' Company 2nd Battalion,
Dublin Brigade, 1913 - .

Subject.

- (a) National associations 1901-1921;
- (b) Growth of Sinn Fein Organisation;
- (c) Establishment of Sinn Fein Courts.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S. 1445

Form B.S.M. 2

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	<u>Pages:</u>
1. <u>Sinn Fein</u> - Funds for establishment of Sinn Fein Paper	1 - 2
2. I. R. B.	3
3. Volunteers established - Howth Gun-running - Result of Rising reviewed by leading personalities in Richmond Barracks.	3 - 7
4. East Clare By-Election. Volunteers organised in Clare	7 - 9
5. Volunteer Company organised in parish of Ballycorick - Agitation over division of land. Pikes to resist Conscription	9 - 10
6. Election work in County Mayo	10 - 11
7. Petition for Peace Conference	11
8. Rates collected by local I.R.A.	12
9. British armed party disarmed at Ennis	12
10. Republican loan floated	13
11. Military reprisals	14
12. Sinn Fein Courts.	14 - 17

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STATEMENT BY HUGH HEHIR,

500 North Circular Road, Dublin.

SINN FEIN:

I was born near the village of Ballinacally, County Clare, and early in 1901 I entered the British Civil Service. I spent about a year in Dublin but at that time the only national contact I formed was membership of Thomas Davis Hurling Club though I lived in the same house as Seamus Hughes, who was then an enthusiastic Gaelic Leaguer. He subsequently fought in 1916 and later on occupied an important post on the staff of Radio Éireann.

In March, 1902, I went to London and there resided with two friends I had known in Clare named John O'Brien and Thomas Flynn, both of whom belonged to the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Irish National Club, Chancery Lane, which bodies I joined also.

The President of the Irish National Club was Dr. Mark Ryan (an old Fenian) and one of its Vice-Presidents was Dr. Anthony McBride (a brother of Major McBride).

Prominent members were Mr. Michael McWhite, subsequently Irish Ambassador, and Sam Maguire, who in later years did so much for the Republican movement.

This Club stood for the cause of Irish Independence. The Irish Language and Irish History were taught, and social activities were engaged in. The following year I returned to Dublin where I formed contacts with the Gaelic League, the Gaelic Athletic Association and with Sinn Fein. At that time Sinn Fein was a very weak organisation. I attended many meetings of its Central Branch at Lower O'Connell Street and subsequently at No. 6 Harcourt Street.

In addition to the Central Branch there were several local ones, and I was a member of the Robert Emmet Branch, Drumcondra.

At that time the Dublin Corporation was at a very low ebb from the national standpoint, and when King Edward VII. of England visited the City, an address of welcome to him was very narrowly defeated.

Sinn Fein set to work to nationalise the Dublin Corporation and the following were some of the members it elected to that body, viz:-

Alderman Tom Kelly, Alderman Walter Cole, Councillor Seán T.O'Kelly, Councillor Denis Healy, Councillor W. T. Cosgrave, Councillor Dan McCarthy, Councillor P.T. Daly and Councillor Peadar Doyle.

About the year 1907, a young member of the Irish Parliamentary Party named Charles Dolan decided to resign his seat and declared his allegiance to Sinn Fein. He represented the constituency of North Leitrim and although the Sinn Fein organisation was well aware of the hopelessness of doing so, it felt in honour bound to contest the seat. As was expected, the Irish Party candidate was elected by a large majority, but the contest had a certain value from the point of view of propaganda.

A fatal handicap which Sinn Fein suffered from was the fierce hostility of the Press and in order to combat this it was decided to make an effort to establish a Sinn Fein Party newspaper.

The policy of this newspaper was to preach the doctrine of national self-reliance, to advocate the policy of abstention from the British Parliament, and to establish a body in Ireland somewhat similar to what Dail Eireann became at a later date.

Funds were to be raised by shares in £1. shares which were taken by ourselves and as many others as we could induce, but finance was always the main difficulty as only about £3,000 or £4,000 could be raised. The paper was duly established, however, but it had only a precarious existence and it had to be wound up after less than a year.

I. R. B.

Shortly after my return from London I became aware of the fact that there was such an organisation as the I.R.B. in existence and that a great many members of the Irish National Club, London, belonged to it.

I was asked to join a circle, which I did, but found that its business was done in a very careless and slipshod manner. Therefore I left the organisation after an attendance at a couple of meetings, and did not again rejoin until about 1911 or 1912 when I was prevailed upon to do so by the late Donnacha O'Callaghan, who subsequently fought in 1916 and was sentenced to death.

The circle which I joined on this occasion numbered amongst its members such enthusiastic Irishmen as Cathal Brugha, Con Collins, Diarmuid Hegarty, Piaras Beaslai, etc., etc., but my previous experience made me somewhat chary of secret societies and I only attended meetings occasionally.

I knew, however, that the I.R.B. always strove to have its members exert influence in other societies such as the Gaelic League and Gaelic Athletic Association and that when the Volunteer Executive was formed in 1913, its members had a controlling influence on that body.

Volunteers Established:

The English Liberal Government/^{promised} to enact Home Rule for Ireland, and although the proposed measure did not give control of the Army, Navy, Customs & Excise, the hostility towards it in the North of Ireland was so strong that a military organisation known as the Ulster Volunteers, led by Sir Edward Carson, was formed in order to resist that measure.

This proved a blessing in disguise, as the more nationally-minded people of the south saw that it was a favourable opportunity to start an Irish Volunteer force.

This idea was originally put forward by Eoin McNeill in a letter published in the Gaelic League organ, An Claidreamh Soluis. It was

enthusiastically taken up by prominent Republicans and Sinn Feiners and the more nationally-minded supporters of the Irish Party.

As a result an overflow public meeting was held at the Rotunda Rink in November, 1913, when the organisation was formally launched.

I became a member at this meeting and was attached to "C" Company, 2nd Battalion. The Company Captain was Thomas McDonagh, who was in 1916 a signatory to the document which proclaimed the Republic.

I was an active member of this Company up to March, 1915, during which period I attended for drill, parades, lectures, etc.

I took part in the Howth gun-running which took place in July, 1914. As you have doubtless received many reports on this, it will suffice to say that I paraded with my Company on the day in question and marched out to Howth where the rifles were passed to us from the yacht by a party of Volunteers who were on the Quay. On the way back we were held up by police and military on the outskirts of the city. The party I was with got to Croyden ^{Dink} where they dumped their guns and from there they were subsequently taken to a place of safety.

Shortly after the Howth gun-running the whole situation in Ireland was transformed by England declaring war against Germany.

It is a matter of history how the Irish Party helped the British Government to raise recruits and how this led to a split in the Volunteer organisation. The majority broke away from the Irish Volunteers and formed a new organisation known as the Irish National Volunteers.

The Company to which I belonged remained practically intact and continued to carry on as hitherto.

Early in March, 1915, I received a document from the Secretary, Irish Land Commission, which stated that information had been received by that Department of my being an active member of the Irish Volunteers,

and conveyed a warning that unless I immediately severed my connection with that organisation I would be dismissed from the Civil Service without further notice. A few others in the Civil Service received similar notices - one was Páidín O'Keeffe, who subsequently fought in 1916 and later on was Secretary of Sinn Fein.

This matter was put before Seán McDermott who advised me and the others to sever all public connection with the Volunteer movement, as he did not wish that we would lose our employment at that time.

I may add that although we attended no further public parades the Land Commission shortly afterwards attempted to transfer a number of its officials (of whom I was one) to London, so that we could be conscripted there, but the attempt did not succeed as our transfer would be a flagrant breach of Civil Service regulations.

About six months later I became one of a small group who attended on Sunday mornings at 25 Parnell Square, where we were instructed on the use of the rifle. Amongst those who occasionally visited us were Dermot O'Hegarty and Dick Mulcahy.

Not being in close touch with Volunteer headquarters I was not made aware of the arrangements for the Rising in 1916. During the Easter holidays I went down to Clare to my home place and here on Easter Tuesday I heard for the first time that a Rising had taken place. On my return to Dublin, however, I was taken into custody. I was detained in Richmond barracks for three weeks and subsequently transferred to Wandsworth prison and eventually interned in Frongoch.

Among the leading personalities that I met in Richmond barracks were Sean T. O'Kelly, Darrel Figgis, Henry Dixon, William Sears, the Labour leaders - William O'Brien and Thomas Foran - Batt O'Connor and big John O'Mahoney. During my association with these men they discussed the Rising in all its aspects. The general view, as far as I can recollect, was that Eoin McNeill's countermanding order was all for the best as the country was not sufficiently organised at that time to

engage in an insurrection with any reasonable prospect of success and that the protest made in Dublin would have the affect of arousing the nationalist spirit.

At that time Robert Barton was an officer in the Dublin Fusiliers and in the course of his duties he visited our block daily and got very friendly with a group of prisoners there owing to the fact that he had known Darl Figgis previously. I think his associations at that time with the prisoners were responsible for instilling in him the very national outlook that he later displayed.

I was one of a party that left Richmond Barracks at the end of May, 1916, and after a short term of imprisonment at Wandsworth Prison I was interned at Frongoch.

German prisoners of war had been interned here at an earlier date. There were two camps, north and south. The latter was an old distillery and in this most of the prisoners were interned. The entire internal administration of the camp was in the hands of the internees and it was run on the lines of a regular military camp. Companies were formed, drill was carried out, lectures were given on various subjects of national interest and the Irish Language and Irish History were taught. The result was that in a great many cases, men who had hitherto but vague national ideas, became Volunteer organisers in their districts after their release.

The period of my interment came to an end in August, 1916 and as I was dismissed from the Civil Service shortly after my release, I returned to my home in Clare.

Up to 1916 that County was a Redmondite stronghold, but after the executions this feeling gradually changed over and men, who had previously followed the Irish Party, were beginning to lean towards Sinn Fein.

The return of the Sinn Fein candidates at the Roscommon and Longford elections created a great wave of enthusiasm throughout the County and in my native parish of Ballycorick near Ennis we celebrated the Longford victory by bonfires at night. Out of this arose the founding of a Sinn Fein club in the parish. I was instrumental in forming this club, which was one of the first in Clare. I got in touch with the local Parish Priest, Very Rev. Canon Clancy, who I knew was sympathetic to our cause, and I asked him would he give us his patronage, which he gladly agreed to do. This was a good start, and a friend and myself travelled round the parish and canvassed. The result was that we had a meeting called which was attended by about thirty or forty young men. Canon Clancy and myself addressed those present and said that it was proposed to establish a Sinn Fein club and asked them for their support. The Club was formally established, and very shortly afterwards William Redmond, the sitting Member of Parliament for East Clare was killed in France. His death caused a bye-election and Sinn Fein decided to contest it.

East Clare Bye-Election:

When the news was received in Ennis of the death of William Redmond an informal conference of people with Republican ideas was held and it was unanimously decided to put forward the name of Peadar Clancy, a Clare man who had fought in 1916, for the bye-election. It was decided, however, to hold a more representative conference, and this was done the following week at Ennis. Sean Milroy of Dublin presided at this convention. A great many names were put forward including Dr. Hayes of Limerick, Arthur Griffith, Eoin MacNeill, Peadar Clancy, and even my own name was mentioned, but eventually the name of Eamon de Valera was proposed by Rev. Father Moloney who, as far as I can recall, was then a Professor at St. Flannan's College. This name was received with acclamation, due to his prominence in Easter Week and resulted in all the other names being withdrawn. The local paper, The Clare Champion, at the outset took an extremely non-committal attitude on the issues of the election but after the convention and all through the election it strongly supported Sinn Fein.

Clare Election (Contd.)

It may not be out of place to recall that in those days the franchise was very restricted, none of the young people having votes and that polling booths were few and far between. Nevertheless the result of the election exceeded the utmost expectations of Sinn Fein. De Valera got 5,010 votes and Patrick Lynch, who was the Irish Party candidate, got only 2,035 votes.

This victory was all the more remarkable when it is borne in mind that Mr. Lynch belonged to a family who had wide connections throughout the county and who personally had defended Land League prisoners on various occasions. At the time of his selection, De Valera was in penal servitude but during the contest he and the other prisoners were released and most of them came at once to Clare to help in the election work.

A very prominent part in preparing the way for the De Valera victory was played by Dan McCarthy of Dublin, a veteran of Easter Week, and an expert at electioneering work. The recent victory at Longford was largely attributable to his organising ability. His help was very much appreciated by the local men. On the whole the election was conducted in a very good spirit. The main exception was at Clarecastle where the vast majority were opposed to Sinn Fein. This area included a number of people who were relatives of Irishmen serving in the British Army. Quite an amount of money was in circulation from the British Exchequer by way of separation allowance and it was obvious from the start that the people were afraid of losing this source of income. For that reason they were very hostile to Sinn Fein. Another reason for this hostility was the fact that Mr. Lynch was born and reared within a few miles of Clarecastle. As his family were very popular it was natural that his candidature would receive a good deal of local support.

After the election immediate steps were taken to organise Sinn Fein Cumann and Irish Volunteers throughout the county. In East Clare the Brennan brothers of Meelick played a big part in organising the Volunteers. On the political side we had the East Clare election

committee which practically became the first Sinn Fein Executive. The only notable change was that Canon Clancy, who had been President of the East Clare election committee, was replaced by Mr. T. V. Honan who held the office all through the troubled period.

Sinn Fein Convention 1917:

The first Sinn Fein Convention was held in Dublin in October, 1917. Representatives from practically every parish in Clare attended. I was there as a delegate from my local parish. At that Convention Sinn Fein was definitely established on a Republican basis. De Valera was unanimously elected President of Sinn Fein, with Arthur Griffith as Vice-President. It is difficult for me to recollect all that transpired at that convention. One thing that I can recall very clearly concerned the opposition to Eoin MacNeill's election to the Executive. He had been nominated and De Valera and Arthur Griffith both spoke eloquently in his favour. He was strongly opposed by Countess Markievicz and Dermot Lynch. The chief reason for the opposition was because of his action regarding the mobilisation orders for Easter Week, 1916. My recollection is that a vote was taken at that convention and that MacNeill headed the poll for the National Executive.

Volunteer Company organised in parish of Ballycorick:

Following that convention a Volunteer Company was started in my parish, the officers of whom were :- Thomas Cusack, Captain; James McNamara, 1st Lieutenant; John Moran, 2nd Lieutenant, and I became Adjutant. The Company was very weak at the outset, but shortly after its formation, conscription rumours filled the air and the membership rapidly increased.

During the year 1918 there was a good deal of agitation over the division of large estates. When nothing was done about the matter, cattle were driven off the lands in broad daylight and a number of arrests followed. This started in the Newmarket area and eventually spread to all East Clare. Despite the arrests, cattle driving did not

cease and eventually Clare was declared a military area and citizens were not allowed to enter or leave the county without special permits from the British authorities.

During the year 1918 the Volunteer Company activities mainly consisted of drilling and preparing to resist conscription should it be forced upon us. We had no arms and each Volunteer equipped himself with a pike. The pikes were made by the local blacksmith. We realised, of course, that a pike would be of very little use against modern equipment, but it was the best we could do in the circumstances. We were instructed how to fell trees and block roads should the necessity arise.

When the conscription menace died out, the pikes were finally discarded and when, at a later stage, the struggle became more intense the Volunteers were organised into what was known as flying columns.

These consisted of a small number from each Company who went "on the run" and were armed with rifles or shot guns obtained either by purchase or capture.

The remainder of the Company remained at their homes and assisted when required as scouts, at blocking roads, demolishing bridges, etc. etc.

Election work in County Mayo:

The general election was held in December, 1918, and in Clare the Sinn Fein candidates, Eamon de Valera and Brian O'Higgins, were returned unopposed.

East Mayo was represented by the leader of the Irish Party, Mr. John Dillon and, as it was believed he would be a very formidable opponent, it was decided to nominate De Valera to oppose him.

As we were without a contest in Clare, a body of helpers, of whom I was one, was sent to Mayo to aid the local workers there.

I was placed in charge of the Kiltimagh area and, after a meeting had been addressed by the late William Sears and myself, I was left

behind but, through some misunderstanding, I was not put in touch with any of the local people. By a fortunate accident, however, I met a local school-teacher, Mr. Sean T. Ruane (now a Senator) who, though he could not openly take part, gave me the greatest possible assistance. He put me in touch with his brother, Seamus, who was a Volunteer officer, and a very enthusiastic worker. With his help, we had no difficulty in getting a good working committee together, which made an intensive and successful canvass of the area.

At that time most of the Sinn Fein leaders were in prison in connection with the so-called German Plot.

The principal leader who remained at liberty was Reverend Father Michael O'Flanagan, who travelled throughout the country during the election and did trojan work in East Mayo.

Although the Irish Party was on the wane, Mr. Dillon still enjoyed a good deal of personal popularity. Nevertheless, the result was an overwhelming victory for Sinn Fein, the figures being - De Valera 8,875 votes and Dillon 4,516 on a restricted franchise similar to 1917.

Throughout the country, the Irish Party contested only a few seats and the result marked their disappearance from public life.

Petition for Peace Conference:

The first Dail was constituted in January, 1919, and shortly after its formation it decided to prepare a petition for the Peace Conference, which was to be signed by sympathisers all over the country. Our local Cumann did its share of the work. Its members went around our area and interviewed everybody irrespective of political views with a view to having them sign this petition and met with very few refusals. In short, the petition was an appeal to the Peace Conference to establish an independent state in Ireland.

Rates collected by I.R.A.:

The next event of note was the election to local public bodies in 1920. In Clare, as in most of the other counties, the new County and District Councils were manned by Republicans and the first step was to sever all connection with the British Local Government Board and pledge allegiance to Dáil Éireann.

The first contentious matter was the collection of rates. In Clare, all the old Rate Collectors, with the exception of one who was a Volunteer officer, refused to serve under the Dáil Local Government Department, and the work was taken over by the Volunteers who performed the task most successfully.

The money so collected could not be lodged in the name of the County Council, but was lodged instead in the names of responsible and trustworthy private persons.

I had, by this time, become an official of the Ennis Board of Guardians and District Council, and in that capacity thousands of pounds passed through my hands. This money was withdrawn as required and paid over to officials and contractors without a hitch.

There was no difficulty in the collection of rates. Even people who were definitely opposed to us politically paid up without any protest. The work of the County Council and all the other public bodies was carried out with the utmost efficiency. As a proof of this I wish to recall that shortly after the Truce in 1921 the Local Government Department, which had been set up by Dáil Éireann, sent two auditors to audit the accounts of the Board of which I was an official. Despite the difficulties under which we laboured and for which those gentlemen did not make the slightest allowance, they were only able to surcharge one or two small items.

British Armed Party disarmed at Ennis:

When I became a public official and throughout the period to the Truce, my national work was mostly concerned with the civil and political

side, being also a member of Sinn Fein Executive, Secretary of Sinn Fein Cumann and Council Clerk. I had to relinquish my appointment as Company Adjutant, as I resided in Ennis except for week-ends. I did not altogether, however, lose touch with the military side of the Movement and in May, 1921, I was one of the party who disarmed a number of British soldiers in the town of Ennis. It was usual for the British to supply a guard to the home barracks at a certain hour each evening. This guard marched from its headquarters at a place called the Buttermarket and it was decided to disarm them. The time selected was the evening prior to a Fair when the presence of strangers in the town would not create any undue suspicion. I was detailed to act as a scout. My main job was to watch out for any additional troops or lorries that might happen to come on the scene. If I saw anything of this nature I was to give a signal to the other scouts nearer the town. Fortunately nothing of the kind happened and when the guard of British soldiers entered the town it was disarmed quietly by Volunteers.

Another task of a military nature which I performed at that period was the removal, with another Volunteer, of a quantity of ammunition from a house which was in danger of being raided, to a place of safety.

Republican Loan Floated:

The floating of a republican loan was also decided on by Dáil Éireann shortly after its formation and this work was taken up in Clare with the greatest enthusiasm. Each Sinn Fein Cumann made a collection in its local area and in our case even some ordinary workingmen took pound shares. The amount collected in the parish was in all about £400. From the autumn of 1920 until the Truce the campaign of repression was at its height and the holding of meetings, either of the Executive or of the local Cumann, took place under difficulties, but we still managed to carry on.

Military Reprisals:

In November, 1920, at a Sunday round-up by military at our local Church about half a dozen Volunteers were taken into custody. I had a narrow escape on that occasion and also subsequently when our house was raided. Fortunately, however, I remained at liberty until the Truce as I believed that a very humble worker who was free was of more service to the Cause than a prominent person under lock and key.

About May, 1921, three houses were burned to the ground in our parish as a reprisal for an ambush which took place a short time previously. In this connection I may say that the ^{White Δ U} Red-Cross had been established in the county. This organisation was mainly manned by Sinn Feiners though in our parish and in others the co-operation of persons who had not been hitherto identified with the Movement was sought for and obtained.

Shortly before the Truce another general election was held and at this election the franchise was on a wider basis than in 1917 and 1918. Unfortunately by now the Partition Parliament had been set up in the Six Counties. Sinn Fein candidates were, however, put forward in that area but those returned naturally became members of An Dail and did not recognise the Partition of course.

In Clare, as in most of the twenty-six counties, there were no contests. The number of T.Ds. in Clare was increased from two to four, the new ones being Pdraig Brennan, T.D. and Sean Liddy, T.D., Eamon de Valera and Brian O'Higgins, who were already T.D.s. being naturally re-elected.

The Truce was called on the 11th July, 1921, and enough has already been said about subsequent events.

Sinn Fein Courts:

In the supreme effort to paralyse British rule in all its phases, both civil and military, the formation of district and parish Courts

was a most important step. The East Clare Executive of Sinn Fein formed a District Court, the most active members of which were the late Very Rev. Canon O'Kennedy, President of St. Flannan's College, Ennis, the late Mr. W. H. McFarland of Ennis with the late J.D. Maloney as Registrar. In each parish local Courts were established. In my native parish one of the Judges was the late Mr. Michael Griffin of Ballinacally, who had been a Justice of the Peace but who, at our request, resigned from that office. The other Judges were Very Rev. Canon Clancy, P.P. and Peter McInerney, County Councillor - both now deceased. I was Registrar of that Court. Each Volunteer Company selected a few of its members to act as Republican policemen. The British Courts continued to be held, but they were rigidly boycotted. On the other hand the Republican Courts were crowded with litigants but it was symbolic of the spirit of the time that there was practically no ordinary crime to be dealt with. In our local parish Court most of the cases were disputes between neighbours such as trespass, disputes about turbary rights, etc. The only criminal case I can recall was one where two men were convicted of raiding a dwelling which was unoccupied at the time. The persons charged were leniently dealt with, which was, perhaps, fortunate as they are both still alive and neither of them ever afterwards transgressed in any way.

Another unusual case was one where the wife of an R.I.C. man received a letter requesting her to leave her dwelling and this letter was supposed to have come from a Volunteer source. Fortunately, however, the woman suspected that the letter was not genuine and she brought it under our notice with the result that after a clever piece of detective work the real culprit was discovered and was dealt with.

In regard to the District Court, I acted as Registrar on one occasion in the absence of Mr. J. D. Maloney, and here again there was no ordinary criminal case. A land dispute of long standing

was dealt with, also a dispute about a Will and one or two other disputes between neighbours involving questions of title.

Looking back on these times there was a certain laxity in some instances in the enforcing of decisions, but the circumstances of the period rendered that unavoidable and on the whole these Courts were a great success.

The Courts in Clare continued to function until the outbreak of the tragic Civil War.

In conclusion I would like to pay a tribute to the help given by the ordinary civilian population during that trying period, as without their aid it would have been utterly impossible to carry on the struggle.

Their homes were liable to be raided at any hour of the day or night or possibly burned down, yet they never flinched. They gave shelter to the flying columns; acted as scouts, paid rates to Republican collectors, recognised Sinn Fein Courts and co-operated in every other respect.

I should have mentioned, as a matter of personal interest, that during my stay in London the Boer War came to an end and, needless to say, the Irish exiles were strongly pro-Boer and I fully shared that feeling.

Shortly after its termination three Boer Generals, viz. Louis Botha, Christian De Wet and General De La Rey came to London and stayed in a private hotel off the Strand.

One day, while passing the hotel, I noticed a small gathering assembled outside, and I managed to push my way to the front.

After a short visit, the three Generals emerged and I managed, without any difficulty, to approach them.

As I had read that General Botha could speak English I approached him and said I was an Irishman. To my great joy he shook hands and spoke to the other Generals who did likewise.

I have set down to the best of my ability my recollections and associations of the period during which this country was fighting for its independence.

Signed: *A. S. O'Hanrahan*
AODH O HAIGHIR.

Date: *28/5/52*
28/5/52.

Witness: *William Ivory Comdt*

(William Ivory), Comd't.

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