

W.S. 725  
ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 725

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

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**Witness**

Desmond Ryan, B.A.,  
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**Identity.**

Lieut. Dublin Brigade, Irish Vol's. 1916;  
Author and Journalist.

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- (c) Manufacture of munitions, 1916.

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Statement of Desmond Ryan, Author and Journalist,  
'Oulart', Forrest Road, Swords, Co. Dublin.

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STATEMENT OF DESMOND RYAN, AUTHOR,  
"Oulart", Forrest Road, Swords, Co. Dublin.

I was born in London on 27th August, 1893. My father was W.P. Ryan, Newspaper Editor and Journalist. He returned to Ireland in 1905. He then went to Navan and took over a paper called "The Irish Peasant" which he changed to "The Irish Nation". It was one of the Sinn Féin papers of the day. He told the story of that particular paper in a book called "The Pope's Green Island" and then in a novel called "The Plough and the Cross". He was connected with all the leading Gaelic League figures like Hyde and Ceannt, etc. I came to Ireland with my mother and sister in 1906. I was then 13. Then he went back to England in 1910 and I stayed on with Pearse in Pearse's school where I had been educated. It was at Cullenswood House and was later changed to St. Enda's in Rathfarnham about the end of 1911. I taught in St. Enda's from the time my father went back to London and I was Pearse's secretary for a while. During this time I was actively and intimately associated with the leaders of the Separatist Movement. Con Colbert was our Drill Instructor and eventually through his influence a number of us joined the I.R.B. Con Colbert was the Centre for the Circle, which included Liam Mellowes, Eamon Martin, members of the Fianna. Bulmer Hobson was also present and was a great influence at that time. Of course the Fianna used to come to St. Enda's for drill exercises. Colbert and the others used to come there. There were about a half dozen of us belonging to that Circle and as Pearse was not in the I.R.B. at that time he could not understand why we disappeared at certain times and actually scolded us about this. Hobson was sounding us about Pearse and he eventually approached

Pearse about the matter with the result that Pearse joined the I. R. B. and was sworn in by Hobson between July-December, 1913. Pearse was very much amused when he found out what our disappearances were connected with. Pearse had been previously black-balled by a certain group of people including Tom Clarke and Piaras Beaslaf, because they thought he was too moderate and he himself was very critical of the I. R. B. He thought they were a lot of old Fenians who had run to seed or were dotting and used to talk in public houses. He had, at the same time, a certain tolerant respect for them. But he never regarded them as a serious threat to British imperialism.

Pearse always attended the meetings of the Wolfe Tone clubs which were a cover for the I. R. B. I remember on December 28, 1910, Seán Gall was giving a lecture "On the Eve of '98", so Pearse attended and he attacked the meeting. He said they were always talking and doing nothing and that if he could get hold of 100 men who meant what they said he'd guarantee to take Dublin Castle. Anyway there was a man there - P. J. Devlin - who was quite riled by Pearse's speech and he answered him very brusquely. I was at that meeting with Pearse and Pearse muttered to me, "I am the only revolutionary in this room". Anyway Devlin was sorry afterwards and sent an apology to Pearse. That was his outlook and he used to say that there was too much talk; that there ought to be a definite policy of using any Home Rule parliament that came and then in ten years there would be a really republican movement. He added, however, that the movement would always end in force. He only spoke in these terms to the senior pupils in the school and did not mention these things to the juniors. That was his general policy.

On one occasion Pearse appeared with John Redmond, Joseph Devlin and Professor Kettle on a platform in March, 1912, in which he advocated the expediency of a measure of Home Rule as it would give a national centre, and control our education. He was very critical of Griffith, saying he was too bitter and too narrow-minded. And he fearlessly defended the Irish Party as they were in their best times - the time of Davitt, Sexton and Parnell. As a matter of fact he'd never allow you to criticise the Irish Party at all. He was very friendly with John Dillon and had a great regard for him. Miss Pearse told me that some one who knew Dillon never saw him in such a towering rage as the day Pearse was executed and never so downhearted as the day that Willie Pearse was executed. Dillon had an interview with Miss Pearse after the Rising and told her that he warned MacNeill that revolution was not his job and he ought to stay with the Irish Party crowd. Dillon also said he was very sorry that he had not agreed to the deportation of the Volunteer leaders which he had opposed; if he had he would have saved their lives. The British Government were pressing upon the Irish Party to agree to the arrest and deportation of the separatist leaders. Dillon also asked Miss Pearse if she had any evidence that the Dublin Castle Order was genuine. She said she had; that there was a man in Dublin Castle who knew about it. Dillon said he doubted that very much as the British Government and military authorities had strongly denied the fact. The gist of this famous Castle Order was briefly - "Arrest of leaders, isolation of certain Volunteer centres and seizure of Volunteer drill halls". The order contained the names of the prominent leaders who were marked down for arrest. I discussed the

genuineness or otherwise of this order with Mrs. Tom Dillon in 1949 after my book "The Rising" was published. Her story is that it was really based on the information that came out from a sympathiser in the Castle. Le Rous, in his book, said it was based on a code that Joseph Plunkett had obtained. Mrs. Dillon admitted more or less it was a reconstruction from information received from Dublin Castle sympathiser. She said that it came out in scraps. Among the scraps that came out was a statement that the Archbishop of Dublin's house was to be isolated and I think she said having laughed at that he just let it go. The real snag about the whole thing is that in the printed order the name of Cardinal Logue's house was given. Colm O'Loughlin detected this at once and protested to Rory O'Connor and Jack and George Plunkett. Colm told me this several times after 1916. Anyway when Colm protested Jack Plunkett interviewed Joseph who was in Miss Quinn's Nursing Home in Mountjoy Square, and in about an hour Jack Plunkett came back with the message from Joseph Plunkett, "Make it Archbishop's house" instead of "Ara Coeli" which is the residence of the Cardinal-Archbishop of Armagh. This was published in or about 19th April, 1916, and its effect was to send the temperature up. The military denied it. They first tried to censor it and then they released it. Pearse would never commit himself on the matter although he showed it to Liam Mellows, saying, "Look what they are going to do" or words to that effect. So Miss Margaret Pearse told us at the time. Some of us were very sceptical of it. Peter Slattery asked Willie Pearse jocosely, "Whoever forged that?".

The war broke out in the summer of 1914. I came

back from holidays with my people who lived in London. I discussed the war and how it would affect the Volunteers and Ireland with Pearse and his whole attitude was, "We just have to go ahead and build up the organisation and the Lord knows what will happen us all". He was quite definite because he immediately made his Will and put his affairs in order and recommended his mother to the Clan na Gael. I have given those details in my first book, "The man called Pearse". Here is something more definite. I was always very puzzled about this particular incident. In the summer of 1915 I went on a holiday to Rosmuck with Pearse and his brother and I had a good many conversations with him. He was more open in his speech then, than I had ever known him to be. He was getting ready for the O'Donovan-Rossa funeral. Anyway we went back to Dublin and were at this funeral. He knew I was going on to Donegal so he asked me how long I'd be away. This brings me to the autumn of 1915. So he told me that if I got a message from him or from his sister or from Eamon Ceannt asking for a certain book I was to return at once because there would be a fight in Dublin that day. That is the autumn of 1915. Well I got no order and Pearse never referred to that again.

You are aware, of course, that Connolly was pressing Pearse very hard for action and that he was very worried about Connolly though he said afterwards to John Kilgannon and Peter Slattery who had been talking to him, "The trouble is I have been holding people in that I really agreed with". That was his attitude. The nearer it got to 1916 the more cute and careful Pearse became. We all felt there was a Rising coming. The nearer it got the more he shut up.

In January, 1916, - 22nd and 29th - Pearse asked me one night in the Hermitage "Had I got it?". This was in reference to the Workers' Republic which he knew I got. Then he read it very carefully. He said to me, "That is dangerous enough". Then he told me that he had not been able to sleep for a week; the Citizen Army were threatening action and that he and Seán MacDermott had gone to Connolly, told him they were going to have a Rising, that he was ruining their plans and would he hold his hand. Finally Pearse persuaded Connolly. He said there seemed to be a terrible mental struggle going on in Connolly at the time and then with tears in his eyes he (Connolly) grasped Pearse's hand and said, "God grant, Pearse, that you were right", and Pearse said, "God grant that I was". Pearse added to me, "Perhaps Connolly was right; he is a very great man". He said nothing about kidnapping or anything like that. I have covered this fully in my book on the Rising on the Connolly kidnapping in the appendix to the second edition.

In the spring of 1914, Pádraig Pearse and Bulmer Hobson visited the United States with introductions from Clarke and MacDermott recommending Pearse. Pearse made a tour for the school as well as for his other work. He was helped very much by Devoy and the Clan and Irish organisations generally. Devoy said if he had stayed he would have raised all the money he wanted. Another point on that which worried Pearse very much: there was a kind of conflict between sacrificing the school for his Volunteer principles and ideals. He said the only time you can rise is in a time similar to the Boer War when there were few troops in the country and the enemy was otherwise engaged. On a couple of occasions in 1915-26 we did discuss the question of a



Rising or not. "Consider how would we look", said Pearse, "and what would the people think of us after all our talk and promises if we said, "Well, after all the British are too strong and we don't feel like fighting them". The people would just laugh at us and our movements would collapse in laughter". Pearse thought his speeches and conduct had committed him to action. In 1913 when the Volunteers were founded, he said to me, "We started a Rising to-night".

Pearse had a great respect for MacNeill but complained that he was "a Grattan come to life again". He could never make up his mind. Pearse thought Connolly was unjust in some of his criticisms of both MacNeill and Hobson but said neither of them was revolutionary. His relations with Hobson from 1912 down to the acceptance of the Redmond ultimatum in June, 1914, were friendly and he always spoke with respect of Hobson's motives. He was quite prepared, to my mind, to fight Redmond on the nominee question but was relieved when it was decided to give way to Redmond for the moment. He later blamed Hobson for the admission of the nominees, and their relations were not so friendly from that time.

I did not know Hobson was arrested until I heard it during the Rising but there was a great friend of Hobson, Seán Lester - later prominent as a League of Nations officer - who told me the story too, that Hobson was summoned to a meeting in Martin Conlon's house in Phibsboro' and when he got there he met some "friends" of his who produced revolvers and arrested him. I think Hobson was not really surprised. Pearse once told me that he sent for the Germans, that they were bringing arms and ammunition. I think that may have been in

March 1916 or perhaps late in 1915. He said in a kind of gay manner, "I have sent for the Germans". "Are they sending troops?" "Oh, no, they are coming in aeroplanes and sending arms and ammunition".

In regard to a general plan for the Rising in Easter Week, I heard Pearse say, "Plans were concealed in the form of a novel". I identified that novel for some reason or other with Joseph Plunkett. I did know there were certain documents in St. Enda's which Pearse was very worried about. One day he went out with his brother and all the boys and he asked me, "Are you stopping in?" So I was and he said, "If any "G" man comes, shoot him; fire a shot and kill him". Miss Pearse talked about certain documents which were there and if discovered would lead to people being hanged. I asked her about that when I came back to Ireland in 1939 and she said she had completely forgotten.

For some months before the Rising, I helped in the manufacture of tin-can hand grenades and the filling of shotgun cartridges in the Hermitage, Rathfarnham, a work which was spread over three months, to the best of my recollection. I believe we made about 500 canister bombs. This work was undertaken at the request of P.H. Pearse, and was done under the directions of Peter Slattery, then a Science Master in St. Enda's, and carried out by Eamonn Bulfin, 1st Lieutenant of E. Coy, 4th Battalion ; Fintan Murphy ; Joseph Sweeney ; Frank Burke ; Brian Joyce ; Connor MacGinley ; and for a fortnight before the Rising by Liam Mellows. Part of our work was the hiding of Mellows after his escape from internment in England. We saw him off from the Hermitage on the Thursday before Easter Week. We

were all trusted implicitly by P.H. Pearse, and as regards the Rising he told us everything except the date, although as I have said, he grew rather subtle towards the end, and we <sup>were</sup> never quite sure. Once we were visited by Seán MacDermott, and Pearse said, as apparently Seán MacDermott was visiting the place more or less secretly: "You can trust these. They won't talk". Pearse handed over Mellows to our care when Mellows came disguised as a priest. When raids for ammunition became frequent before the Rising about 1915, Pearse made us carry around several hundred rounds of 303 concealed on our persons all day, on trams, in the streets, everywhere till the alarm died down.

The grenades were stored in a room in the basement of St. Enda's, and our work on the bombs was carried out in our study room - we were all N.U.I. students in an upper room of the Hermitage. We did a good deal of breaking of scrap iron to fill the grenades, which were mainly canisters, a matchbox filled with an explosive made of permanganate of potash, phosphorus, etc., and ignited by a fuse. (This was all the work of Peter Slattery who injured himself once when an explosion occurred in the Science Lab. where he made up the explosive). Another part of our work was the making of batons for use against looters.

On Easter Sunday night the last load of these grenades were removed to Liberty Hall or Kimmage or both probably. Dr. Kathleen Lynn drove them in her car, accompanied by Eamonn Bulfin. Later the same night Pearse sent me with a written message to Connolly whom I met in his small room in Liberty Hall. He just nodded, said it would be all right as he would meet

Pearse later. There was an armed guard outside his door. Earlier on Easter Saturday I brought a letter to Seán T. O'Kelly from Pearse, asking whether Seán T. could put Pearse and his brother up for the night. (The text of this letter is given in Le Roux's Life of Pearse, pp. 366-7.) Seán T. O'Kelly read the letter, nodded and smiled, and told me to tell Pearse that "that would be all right". He may have written a reply too. Pearse and his brother left St. Enda's that evening.

They returned on Easter Sunday afternoon. I never saw Pearse so silent and disturbed. He simply could not speak to anyone. Willie Pearse told me the same thing. We had all spent a sleepless Saturday night, all ready for the events of Sunday, then came the news of the MacNeill countermand in the Sunday Independent. "That", said Willie, very sadly, "was a most dangerous hint to the military that something was in the wind". Then the two brothers went off quietly. We all felt it was a crisis; that the whole movement was in the balance; that everything might now collapse. It was a most extraordinary feeling, very strong, yet hard to define. Anyone who lived through the time must know it well, and it always comes back when arguments arise as to the rights or wrongs of the Rising of 1916. We felt that at any moment a spring, the spring of the whole Irish-Ireland movement might snap, and nothing would ever in our lifetimes mend it again. Yet it seemed as if the whole chance of striking first had gone, and we talked and talked round it. It was the beginning of a curious feeling that we were in a dream.

About ten o'clock on Easter Monday morning, Pearse sent special messages, scribbled on small pages of a note book to Eamonn Bulfin, to Joseph Sweeney and to me, telling us to inform all in St. Enda's - about eleven of us or so were concerned - to carry out the mobilisation order, and to remove all remaining guns and ammunition, etc. from St. Enda's. What followed then must be told at some length.

Subsequent to the surrender I was deported to Stafford and Frongoch where I remained until I was released in, I think, August, 1916. On my return to Dublin I went back to Cullenswood House the military, in the meantime, having seized St. Enda's. I continued my studies and entered for the B.A. degree which I got. We re-organised the Rathfarnham Company of the Irish Volunteers which really did not get into its stride until the early part of 1917. The Company officers were: - Eamonn Bulfin, Fintan Murphy, Mick Cremin, Michael Boland, Charlie Donnelly and 1st Lieutenant Jimmy Kenny who was one of the most active officers of the Company with Fintan Murphy.

The most interesting thing in 1917 was getting in touch with Michael Collins who had an office in Cullenswood House.

About the German Plot, there was a piece of paper on the floor which I picked up and it was obviously a code message to Germany with reference to Irish military party and landing of arms. I said to Fintan Murphy's brother, Desmond, "You had better give this to Mick and not leave it around". Of course we had guns and revolvers and rifles hidden in the walls in Cullenswood House. Collins was at the time Director of Organisation

and I know that in his office were explosives, maps, etc. Unpleasantly so! Miss Pearse was a very determined woman and the military issued an order that no Tri-colours were to be flown. She put up the Tri-colour and when Mick Collins and Fintan Murphy saw it Mick exclaimed, "My God!" Miss Pearse was, however, unaware of the stuff that was concealed in Cullenswood House. It was really a kind of headquarters for the Volunteer organisation.

I was mainly engaged on journalism apart from my Volunteer activities and had several contacts with Arthur Griffith. Journalists always spoke very highly of Griffith. He was most approachable and kindly. There was a special correspondent of the Daily Herald at the time named W.N. Ewer whom I took to see Griffith. One of the questions put by Ewer to Griffith was about ( Dominion Home Rule. Ewer asked, "How would that appeal to people generally. Might it not split the country?" "Yes", said Griffith, "it might, and that is a danger we must avoid". Ewer took it from that, that Griffith feared such a crisis. Of course I saw Griffith and Collins during the Treaty debates.

I was a journalist on the Freeman's Journal from 1919 to 1922. There was the case of that shooting at the Exchange Hotel of Councillor John Lynch of Kilmallock, on 22nd September, 1920, and I was there with the police when the room was opened up. Murder was written all over the room. Lynch was unarmed, in his night clothes, lying across the bed with a bloody wound in his jaw. Seán Lester, then News Editor, told me to let rip in the story and say out that it was murder. I did. Then

there was the other shooting of two boys in Drumcondra. The Black and Tans put them in a field and put tin cans on their heads and shot them. The Castle authorities said they were released and could get home before Curfew and they were arrested two minutes before it. I also got into the prison, disguised, thanks to Miss O'Brien of Cumann na mBan, who had all the warders terrorized, as an "uncle" of one of the prisoners and saw the Cork hungerstrikers. I was present with the D.M.P. when they visited the Exchange Hotel where a Mr. Lynch, a Councillor from Kilmallock who had been staying there, had been shot by an Auxiliary Officer. He was lying dead across the bed and he had been shot in the lower part of the face and it was quite obvious that he was unarmed and had been shot as he opened the door. The first Castle statement described him as a dangerous gunman: that was too much and the second Castle statement, I think, said he was a moderate Sinn Féiner murdered by extremists. We printed this account in the Evening Telegraph at once and that spoiled the Castle statement, as we also did in the case of the two boys who had been shot by the Auxiliaries in Drumcondra who had placed tin cans over their heads before their execution. We gave the time of the arrests from the father's statement which made it quite clear that the boys were murdered in cold blood and not for an offence against the Curfew regulations. A Rathfarnham Volunteer officer was shot about the same time in somewhat similar circumstances to which we gave great publicity in the Freeman's Journal.

Signed:

Date:

Witness:

*M. F. Ryan Comdt.*

M. F. Ryan, Comdt.

*Desmond Ryan*  
*Sept. 5, 1952.*  
 (Desmond Ryan)  
 Sept. 5th, 1952