

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S.

856

ROINN



COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 856

Witness

Miss Elizabeth M. Colbert,  
5 Dartmouth Road,  
Dublin.

Identity.

Sister of Con Colbert,  
executed 1916.

Subject.

Biographical note on her brother,  
Con Colbert.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S. 2161

Form B.S.M. 2

ORIGINAL S. Darbworth Road.

Dublin.

8<sup>th</sup> June. 1953.

Dear Miss Kivane,

I must have forgotten to mention that Con was a Total Abstainer. I presented Heroic offering certificate to North Richmond C.B. school museum.

Sincerely,

E. M. Edler

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Statement of Miss Elizabeth Colbert,

5, Dartmouth Road, Dublin.

My brother Con was always known to us as Cornelius. He liked his name Cornelius Bernard Colbert. He was born in Monalena, in the parish of Castlemahon, Co. Limerick. Our people had a farm there and my father lived there even after he was married. Most of my brothers and sisters were born there. There were thirteen of us and Con was the fourth youngest. I don't know how old he was when he was executed. Our mother was Nora Josephine McDermott, the daughter of a renowned national teacher, Conor McDermott, in the village of Cooraclare, Co. Clare. His reputation as a successful teacher for all the public examinations spread through the whole of the County.

While Con was still a child we moved to another farm owned by my father in Athea. It was called Gale View. A few years after the old farm at Castlemahon was sold. He, like the rest of us, went to the National School there for a few years. There was a Mass rock on this Gale View farm just off the main road on a high field where Mass used to be said in Penal times. It was not discovered until after 1916, when a Redemptorist priest was giving a mission there. For a few years afterwards the priests had an annual procession to that rock but that ceased later.

Our mother died at the age of thirty-seven and the large family began to separate in order to obtain a livelihood. My sister Katherine who was an enterprising

girl, came to Dublin to make her living and rented a house - 7, Clifton Terrace, Ranelagh Road - now it is all Ranelagh Road - and brought Con up to live with her. He went to the Christian Brothers' School in Richmond St. for about a year and a half. He then went to study for a while at Skerries College. My sister probably had the idea that he would get a good job out of it. He did not stay long at Skerries. He made up his mind very soon that he would not serve in the British Civil Service. He was enthusiastic about everything Irish and had now begun to study Irish. He acquired great proficiency in the language and spoke it fluently. He always bought clothes of Irish manufacture.

He commenced to earn his living as a clerk at Kennedy's Bakery in Britain St., now called Parnell St., and remained in the same job 'till 1916. After his execution a cap of his marked - Irish manufactured, Gleeson's a firm in O'Connell St., was found in his locker at Kennedy's. It is now in the Christian Brothers' Museum at Richmond St. Schools. My sister and I went to see it recently.

I know very little about his activity in connection with the Fianna, except that he was closely associated with Countess Markievicz in that movement, probably from its foundation. I imagine he must have been on the first committee of the Volunteers, because I heard that he was one of those who stood out against admitting Redmond's nominees.

I also lived some time in Clifton Terrace until

my sister Katty married in 1913 and went to live in Abbeyfeale where her husband, Dick Woulfe, set up as a chemist. The house in Clifton Terrace was taken over by a friend of ours and Con continued to live there until the Rising. I went in to other digs. Like most of the prominent Volunteers he did not spend the last few nights before the Rising at his ordinary lodgings. He stayed at the house of some cousins of his 1st Lieutenant, Christie Byrne. Their name was Cooney. I did not know this until long after his execution. When I stated in a letter to the Press that Con left his digs in Ranelagh to take part in the Rising, one of the Cooney girls replied saying it was from their house he left.

I went to a céilidhe with Con shortly before the Rising. There were a lot of prominent people in the movement at it and many of them have since become well known. In the course of the evening he said to me "I'll show you the nicest girl in Dublin". He introduced me to Lucy Smith. I think he was in love with her and would probably have married her if he had lived. She was a nice, gentle, refined girl, a member of Cumann na mBan and a great worker in the movement. She afterwards married Tom Byrne of Boer War fame who was also keen on her at the same time. He was Con's rival.

After Con's execution I got to know Lucy well and she visited us in my brother's place at Ballysten near Shanagolden. On one occasion when I visited her own house, she showed me the letters that Con had written to her. It was from reading them that I came to the conclusion that he was in love with her. I heard afterwards from

Fr. O'Mahony, a member of the C.S.Sp. order who was at that time at St. Mary's College in Rathmines, that Con handed him a bulky packet addressed to Lucy when he visited Marrowbone Lane during Easter Week. It was to be delivered to her. Lucy never got it and afterwards hearing about it from someone who was present when the packet was handed over, she went to see Fr. O'Mahony about it. I was with her. He told us that when he was taking the packet from Con one of the girls present, probably a member of Cumann na mBan - he said her name was McNamara - took it from him and said she would deliver it as she was going "there". I imagine she meant the G.P.O. where Lucy was, I think, during Easter Week. We went around to various places and people seeking information about the packet, but it was never located. We spent days and days at this and we were both very disappointed at its loss.

Fr. Albert who I think attended Con before his execution came afterwards to me inquiring about Lucy for whom he had a last message from Con. She never told me what it was, nor did I ask her.

Con used to visit me, generally very late at night at my digs in 95, Haddington Road on his way home from his Volunteer activities. I had two friends sharing the digs with me, Nancy and May McDonnell. These are now married to my brothers. May worked with me at Lafayette's. Nancy and Con always carried on their discussions in Irish. The other two of us listened, <sup>9</sup> without understanding a word. I was never in any of the <sup>(SB)</sup>

national movements. I was entirely taken up with my work and I am afraid I had very little of Con's spirit. He was able to combine his work with his enthusiastic activities for Ireland. He was constantly telling us that there would surely be a fight but I don't think I ever took him seriously. He came to say goodbye to me before the Rising. I can't say what day. He was very solemn about it but I don't think I was.

I did not hear of his execution until late in the evening of 8th May. It was announced in the papers but I was working at Lafayette's, the photographers, as usual and my fellow workers kept the papers from me. I got a message that Fr. Albert wanted to see me and I went up to the Capuchin Friary in Church St. not suspecting anything tragic. He broke the news to me. He had no written message to me from Con. Afterwards I got a long letter from Con and his prayer-book as a token. I have a copy of that letter and of the others that he wrote to my brothers and sisters. The original of mine is in the Museum. I am giving the Bureau copies of all of them (Appendix A). To the best of my recollection the letter and prayer-book were sent to me with an accompanying note by some British Major.

I should mention that Con was up in court once about a flag incident. It seems there was a bit of a tussle up on the mountains between the Fianna and the British Boy Scouts and the Fianna took the Union Jack from the Boy Scouts who were all much bigger fellows than the Fianna. I can't remember how the affair ended.

Con was always full of life and fun. He was constantly making jokes, though he took his work for the Fianna and the Volunteers very seriously and spent all his spare time at it. He cycled all over Ireland organising Companies. I remember he inspected the Company at home in Athea and there is no fear that he showed them any more favour than he did to any of the others. He was very serious where work for Ireland was concerned and that is why I never thought he was taking an interest in girls. So I was surprised when I found out that he had been writing love letters to Lucy Smith and thinking very seriously about her. He also gave Lucy a copy-book containing several scraps of paper with poems scribbled on them. I don't know whether they are his own composition. They are all about Ireland and its struggle for freedom and the sufferings it endured from the English. Lucy gave the book to me and I have it still. I don't know what I shall do with it but I shall keep it for the present for the benefit of my nephews and nieces.

Con's earnestness was applied to every thing he did. When he was at school he felt he had to do his very best at his lessons. And when he worked at Kennedy's he thought he should improve his position in the best way possible, so he devoted himself to the study of accountancy. He did not waste a moment and no matter how late he went to bed, he would make sure to get up in time by tying the alarm clock to the head of his bed. He had to be at work at Kennedy's at 8 o'clock. He never wasted a moment. His favourite phrase was "for my God



and my country". He had unbounded energy and was very healthy. The only time I remember him being ill was when he had the measles at Clifton Terrace, when he was attended by Dr. Shaw. As he was grown-up he got them rather bad and was very ill.

Signed: Elizabeth M. Colbert  
(Elizabeth M. Colbert)

Date: 8<sup>th</sup> June 1953.  
8th June 1953.

Witness: A. B. Wolfe B.S.S.  
S. Ni Chiosain  
(S. Ni Chiosain)

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*Appendix A.*

COPIES.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
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No. W.S. <u>856</u>

Wilmmainham Gaol,  
7/5/16.

My dear Jim,

Don't fret when you see this. Believe me I have a good chance of dying well, which may God grant. I'll pray for you all, so also pray for me.

Goodbye,

I am,

Your loving brother,  
Conn.

My dear Nora,

Just a line to say goodbye to you and yours, and to ask you to say a prayer for my soul. Don't blame me, perhaps its God's way of saving my soul. Goodbye and God bless you and yours.

I am,

Your loving brother,  
Conn.

My dear Gretta,

Forgive the writer for his negligence and want of affection, for now he'll not see you again. Say a prayer for his soul, which he hopes will soon see Heaven, where he'll see those who are gone before, and where he'll be able to pray for you. Don't fret, for with God's help I'll die in His Grace.

With much love,

I am,

Your loving brother,  
Conn.

My dear Mack,

Just a line to say goodbye, and to ask you to pray for me. God has given me the grace to know when I am to die. May he grant I die well.

Goodbye,

I am,

Your loving brother,  
Conn.

My dear Lila,

I did not like to call you to this gaol to see me before I left this world, because I felt it would grieve us both too much, so I am just dropping you a line to say goodbye to you and all my friends, and to ask you and them to say a prayer for my soul. Perhaps I would never get the chance of knowing when I was to die again, and so I'll try and die well. Pray for me, and ask Father Divine, Father Healy, and Father O'Brien to say a Mass for me, also any priests you know.

May God help us - me to die well, you to bear your sorrow

I am, Your loving brother, Conn.

Write Nan, Jack & Willie, and ask them pray for me. I send you prayerbook as a