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The Secret History

... OF THE ...

Irish Volunteers.

By THE O'RAHILLY,

Treasurer of the Irish Volunteers.



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The Secret History of the Irish Volunteers.

BY THE O'RAHILLY, Treasurer of the Irish Volunteers.

IRELAND has no longer a Press. The majority of the newspapers which are now printed in Ireland, and which unfortunately still retain their Irish names, have been sold bodily to the British Government in exchange for quarter-page advertisements. I refrain from saying that they were sold "body and soul," because there is not sufficient evidence to show that they ever possessed any souls to sell.

On the other hand, the Government has, with refreshing frankness, suppressed practically every Irish journal that refused to be either bribed or bullied into allowing its editorial policy to be dictated by the War Office. It is true that Eoin Mac Neill's organ, "The Irish Volunteer," after two attempts to suppress it, is still appearing. The fact is worth noting, and may indicate that even the British Government realises the unwisdom of exasperating men who mean what they say and who have arms in their hands.

But one swallow doesn't make a summer, and since the Irish Press as a whole is either defunct or devoted to the publication of romance, it is desirable that the public should have an opportunity of hearing some of the real facts with regard to the Irish Volunteer Movement. Hence this pamphlet.

The Irish Volunteers (as distinct, of course, from the Ulster Volunteer Force) were started in Dublin in November, 1913, by a dozen men who came together at Wynn's Hotel to discuss with Eoin Mac Neill the formation of an Irish Volunteer Army. Previous to this, indeed, a journalist in West Meath, who is said to have conceived the possibility of a "Midland Volunteer Force," had published a report of the inception of such a body in Athlone. Whether the Midland Volunteers had any real existence except in the news columns is much debated, and seems open to doubt, but there is no doubt at all that the organisers of the Irish Volunteers absolutely failed to discover any Volunteers either in Athlone or the Midlands until long after the Wynn's Hotel meeting.

As the invitations to that meeting were written and issued by myself, I am in a position to know something of the personnel of the original Committee; and I say now that the men invited were deliberately selected not on Party, Political, or Sectarian lines, but solely because they were amongst the sincerest Nationalists of my acquaintance in Dublin.

They included, besides Mac Neill and the writer, Bulmer Hobson, P. H. Pearse, Sean Mac Dermot, W. J. Ryan, Eamonn Ceannt, Sean Fitzgibbon, J. A. Deakin, Pierce Beasley, and Joseph Campbell, and, in view of the repeated assertions of certain eminently truthful orators and journalists associated with Parliamentaryism, it is worthy of note that of the twelve invited only two others and myself were then members of the Sinn Fein Party. Lest it might savour too much of Sinn Fein, Arthur Griffiths' name was deliberately not included, while Mr. D. P. Moran, the Editor of the *Leader*, and a consistent supporter of the Parliamentary Party, was asked to attend.

As a tribute to the efficiency with which the autocrats of Dublin Castle scrutinise our movements and correspondence even in peace time, it should be recorded that within an

hour of our first meeting, two police detectives called at the hotel for our names and the details of our business. Ingeniously asserting that we were sporting men who had met to pull off an illegal sweep, they interviewed the hotel people, obtained all the information that they could give them, and retired after cautioning the management against allowing us to use the rooms again.

As we were all in agreement that the movement must be broadly National, and not confined to, or controlled by, any particular party, our first effort was to secure the co-operation of men prominent in existing organisations such as the Parliamentary Party, the United Irish League, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the Gaelic Athletic Association, the Foresters, &c., and each of us was told off for special duty in this connection. But we found that the task was one of considerable difficulty, and refusals were the order of the day. I, for instance, was deputed to secure Lord Mayor Sherlock, whom I found was unwilling, and Professor Kettle, whom I was informed was unwell. It will be remembered that Mr. Sherlock, who refused our invitation to join the Committee when it was a week old, became later one of Mr. Redmond's nominees on that body, and that Professor Kettle has since recovered sufficiently from his indisposition to take quite an active part in the Volunteer Movement.

In these early days, however, we secured the assistance of several of our best men and hardest workers, but we also got hold of a few others who have since caused us rather to regret our success.

The new Committee at once decided to place their policy before a public meeting at the Rotunda; and they modestly began by hiring the Small Concert Room. As the public interest grew they decided that it was wise to secure an option on the Large Concert Room; and as the day of the meeting approached they found that they would need still more space, and took the Rink in addition. As it turned out, the crowd not only filled the Rink and the

Room but overflowed into the grounds, where a meeting of several thousand people was also held.

The Committee appealed to the manhood of Ireland to enrol and arm themselves in order to secure and maintain the rights and liberties of the Irish people. The manhood of Ireland responded to the call, and enrolling in thousands, proceeded to arm themselves.

Within a week the British Government, which held office by virtue of Mr. Redmond's vote, issued a Proclamation prohibiting the importation of arms into Ireland. The first blow had been struck at the Irish Volunteers; and it could not have been struck without consultation with, and *the consent of*, Mr. Redmond.

But, thanks to the spirit of the men of Dublin, the Volunteers survived the blow. We assured our men that, Proclamation or no Proclamation, we would procure arms for them; and the men accepted our assurance. For months we drilled our recruits in halls shadowed by those broad-shouldered and dignified gentlemen of leisure whom Dublin Castle dresses in plain clothes and apparently expects us not to recognise as policemen. For months we preached the doctrine of Irish self-reliance in the teeth of the open hostility of the professional politicians, their organs, their organizations, and their supporters. Men who were elected by Irish voters to free their country from British domination, and who are paid by the British Government £400 a year to stimulate their enthusiasm, publicly denounced Volunteering as a muddle-headed policy which their supporters should avoid. Orthodox Hibernians and United Irish Leaguers were directed to leave the new movement severely alone. The Press, although then in the hands of its original proprietors, boycotted the Irish Volunteers nearly as completely as it does now under its new management. The coercion of Ireland under the Arms Proclamation provoked no protest from the stalwarts at Westminster. The machine was working smoothly in the effort to stifle the movement.

And still the Volunteers grew. They grew in numbers, in strength and in self-confidence till it became no longer safe for their enemies to display their hostility openly; and a more subtle course had to be adopted to destroy as promising an organization as ever strove for Ireland's freedom.

All this time we had been busily working to surmount the greatest of our problems, the problem of securing arms. With the ports closed, money scarce, and the Government, the Party, and the Press alike opposed to us, it wasn't easy. Curiously enough our utmost efforts failed to secure any assistance from the Irish people on the Continent, the very people who could most easily and effectively have helped us. Unable to telegraph or telephone, and compelled to use the post with the most extreme discretion, it was after prolonged negotiations that we came into touch with a lot of 11 m/m Mauser Rifles, samples of which we got despatched to London, where I inspected them and found them satisfactory. Our resources were still insufficient to pay for any quantity, and it was only by an individual guaranteeing the cost of a cargo that we got the work of arranging for a shipment under way.

It was while we were busy with this work that we learnt of a new development. We were told that the Hibernians had received secret instructions to form Volunteer Companies, to affiliate with Headquarters, to secure control of the movement in their districts, and, in fact, to take the very steps that would enable them to control the coming Convention and to swamp the original Volunteers. That this was not *bona fide* recruiting became apparent when the two Johns and Joe, as they are playfully called by an affectionate electorate, publicly announced that they had been converted to the Volunteer idea, and secretly requested that they should be given control of the movement.

All the insidious influences known to the politicians' art were immediately brought into play inside as well as

outside of the Committee. The primrose path to place, power and profit was temptingly displayed to Eoin Mac Neill and his associates, but it was in vain, and the request to hand over the Volunteers, wrapped in brown paper and tied with a string as it were, to the very men who had till then been engaged in an effort to strangle them, was gracefully and politely declined.

The attempt to capture the Volunteers by stealth had failed.

Then came the last and most brilliant coup, the master stroke, to wit, Mr. Redmond's public announcement that the Provisional Committee was not sufficiently representative, and that he should be allowed to nominate twenty-five additional men to make it so. The reply was an offer by the Committee to have a new representative elected by each of the thirty-two Counties in Ireland, and Mr. Redmond's answer was a candid and undisguised threat that if his Party were not permitted to nominate twenty-five representative men from different parts of the country he would proceed forthwith, by establishing a rival authority, to disrupt the movement. Now as the public were at this time keenly interested in the fate of the Home Rule Bill, which had not yet been shelved, it was quite possible that Mr. Redmond could have done this, and since his purpose was palpably, then as now, to emasculate the movement, it was certain that he would have done so.

A matter that could not be understood at the time, but which must be remembered in connection with the crisis that resulted, was that the Provisional Committee had on the high seas at that very period their secret shipments of arms; and were already arranging those elaborate schemes for landing them which afterwards materialised at Howth and Kilcool. They knew that any division in their forces such as would certainly result from the disruption threatened by Mr. Redmond would inevitably lead to the miscarriage of their plans and the probable loss of their arms. Realising the superlative importance of safe-

guarding the guns, and confronted with the alternatives of either making terms with Mr. Redmond or of splitting the Volunteers, probably losing their arms, and certainly furnishing Mr. Redmond with something that he sorely needed, namely, an excuse for losing Home Rule, they agreed to permit his nominees to sit on the Committee without co-opting them as members thereof.

The nominations were published, and the list was in itself an absolute breach of faith with the Committee and with the public. It was not a list of "representative men from different parts of the country," as had been publicly promised. Eleven of the nominees were from Dublin City, the over-representation of which city on the Original Committee was Mr. Redmond's alleged reason for interfering with it.

Most of them were not "representative men" in any sense, or rather they represented fields of activity which well-wishers of the Volunteers would prefer not to be represented. Not a single military man secured the Party's nomination to the Volunteer Committee. However, the nominees took their seats, and we patiently awaited developments.

Now I should dislike to malign the Nominees, but if the object of the great majority of them was not to keep the Volunteers unarmed then they were the victims of a chain of circumstances and coincidences that was, shall I say, most unfortunate.

We were given to understand, for instance, that Mr. Redmond at this time had also on the seas a cargo of magnificent rifles destined for the Volunteers, and never was there keener interest in a regatta than we had as to whether Mr. Redmond's steamer or our "White Yacht" of Howth fame would first reach the shores of Ireland. Mr. Redmond's boat, I am told, was called "L'Avenir," which means in French "The Future," and it was a singularly appropriate title, because she never came.

Having left Antwerp and come within sight of the Irish

coast, she, for some mysterious reason, which we were not allowed to learn, changed her mind about the Volunteers and returned to Belgium.

The enlarged Committee, however, did not concern itself unduly with the contraband arms traffic. It had other activities which kept it fully occupied. It appointed a Standing Committee with a solid reactionary majority; it passed a delicious resolution demanding that all rifles already secured by the Volunteers of Munster, Leinster and Connaught should be "loaned" to safe men in Ulster, and it gravely went through the form of requesting Mr. Redmond to hand over the Volunteer funds that had reached him, a request which Mr. Redmond, with becoming dignity, ignored. Things were comparatively quiet at Headquarters, and there being neither any quantity of arms available nor any apparent prospect of them, it looked as if the work of turning the embryo army into a political machine could be accomplished without a hitch.

But when on July 26th the White Yacht, harbinger of Liberty, suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and, on the stroke of the appointed hour, landed her precious freight at Howth, history was in the making.

Twenty minutes sufficed to discharge her cargo; as many motor cars flew with the ammunition to prearranged caches; and for the first time in a century one thousand Irishmen with guns on their shoulders marched on Dublin town!

The asinine interference of the garrison, the bayonetting at Clontarf and the massacre of women and children at Bachelors' Walk that followed, are incidents which are familiar to all whose memories are not exclusively occupied with the woes of Servia. A week later we landed our second cargo at Kilcool, and it was when we had thus placed arms in the hands of the Dublin Volunteers that the real activity of the Nominees on the Committee began.

The cry was now, "Send all the guns to Ulster," and this when analysed was found to mean, "Divide all the

guns between the more truculent of the Ulster Nominees."

Insult, abuse, table-thumping and miniature riots became the order of the day. Those who opposed the shipment of the rifles secured by the Dublin men's efforts were denounced in unmeasured terms. Those who suggested that the guns should go to the men who had paid in advance for them were howled down. Ulster had to be defended from the Carson Army, though, curiously enough, its defence was to be conducted with empty rifles.

Indeed, we might have been convinced of the sincerity of this Ulster frenzy had the Nominees in their anxiety not forgotten to demand from the Committee a single round of ammunition!

However, numbers triumphed, the majority was solid, and without a smile they solemnly voted that the guns should not go to the men whose money had paid for them, but that all the available weapons should be "sold" at 25/- apiece to certain of the Ulster Nominees.

Will it be believed that for these "sales" the "purchasers" have not paid us one penny of the price to this day. As it turned out, it was not the rifles but the men who imported them that were "sold."

No unbiased member of the Committee has any doubt that it was also the deliberate intention of at least a section of the Nominees, by a studied policy of innuendo, of offensiveness, and of open personal insult, to force the resignation of Mac Neill and other members of the Original Committee. "Scenes" were of nightly occurrence, revolvers were drawn, challenges to personal combat not infrequent, accusations of treachery, falsehood and dishonesty were commonplaces, and I personally had the honour of being charged by Mr. Nugent with having forged during a certain week a book which I was fortunately able to prove had been steadily in use for seven months previously.

All this, of course, meant the total neglect of all constructive work, including the arming of the Volunteers,

which now was no longer difficult, since the public horror at the Bachelors' Walk assassinations had forced the British Government to withdraw the Proclamation and to open the ports.

The circumstances that prevented us from purchasing at this period twenty times as many rifles as we did purchase were either a series of amazing coincidences or were a deliberate and damnably efficient plot to keep the men unarmed.

Without money we couldn't buy arms. The acceptance of the Nominees had largely killed off the American supply of money, and out of what money we had got from America Mr. Lawrence Kettle had insisted on securing a sum of £320, ostensibly to buy arms, but for which we have never yet received either a single gun or an account of its expenditure. The money that we had expected to get from the sale of the Howth and Kilcool guns was buttoned in the pockets of the Ulster Nominees. Of the money that we might have received from public subscriptions at home, Mr. Redmond had secured £6,000, Mr. Dillon £250, and so on.

The £500 subscription that Mr. Richard Croker had personally promised to me and to Eoin Mac Neill was, I am told, collected, unknown to the Committee, by one of the Nominees and sent to Mr. Redmond, where it was safely out of our way.

The personal subscriptions of several of Mr. Redmond's adherents on the Committee, which they had publicly announced in the press and on the platform, were never paid to us, and were found to be uncollectable.

Finally, not a single penny piece reached the Provisional Committee either from any of the Nominees or from any of the eighty Members of Parliament, who had received from the British Treasury during the lifetime of the Provisional Committee the sum of £32,000.

Was this a coincidence?

There remained for us—the men who wanted the Volun-

teers armed—only the monthly affiliation fees and a few other sums that it was impossible to prevent from reaching us.

This source of income was the more precarious as the Joint Committee was daily authorising expenditure with an enthusiasm that would make the Rothschilds look cheap.

The organisation that we had successfully run from two rooms had now to occupy three different office buildings, rent had to be paid twelve months in advance; £40 a month had to be spent on an Inspection office which provided thirty-two Unionist Militia officers to patronise the Volunteers in each county, and which was staffed by the Nominees of Sir Horace Plunkett and the acquaintances of the Commander in Chief of the British Forces in Ireland.

Is it any wonder that money to buy arms was scarce?

On the outbreak of the war Mr. Redmond made his famous declaration about our defending the shores of Ireland if the British troops were withdrawn. Taken in connection with the proviso that accompanied it, the offer seemed reasonable enough, none of us quarrelled with it, and the Committee endorsed it.

Soon after, Mr. Redmond announced the arrival of his Italian rifles, of which he had thousands ready for "distribution," and he made the further remarkable statement that the Government would provide the remainder of us with arms.

The Italian rifles are, as far as we can ascertain, for *not one of them was ever allowed to reach the Committee*, similar to those which Mr. Bannerman of New York sells retail for \$1.48, and the "distribution" of them was proceeded with, as fast as fools with money could be found, at the modest rate of one pound sterling per gun.

For the arms which Mr. Redmond said the Government would provide for us we are still waiting.

But Mr. Redmond's dual announcement was not without

its effect, for it immediately and definitely put an end to public subscriptions to the Arms Fund.

This may not, of course, have been its intention, but *this is what it did*. However, let us be charitable and assume that this was only another of the unhappy coincidences.

Then the "War Office proposals" came before the Committee. There were several of them, and they were complicated; but since they are now happily dead, it is not necessary to discuss them.

Suffice it that they meant practically handing over the organisation, and the men who had trusted us, to the British Government as an auxiliary Imperial force.

Nearly all the Original members opposed them *in toto*, and although Mr. Redmond approved of them, only a section of his Nominees spoke in their favour. Their warmest advocate, I think, was Mr. Burke of Belfast, who has since obtained a Government appointment with a salary of about £1,200 a year.

As Treasurer of the Volunteers I was considerably worried about the lavish expenditure of the Joint Committee, coupled as it was with the stoppage of subscriptions, and in view of the curious reluctance of certain Nominees to comply with my request for an audit of the books, the possibility of an intention to bankrupt and so discredit the Organisation suggested itself.

Some of us determined, therefore, to secure at once at least as many rifles as would meet the claims of those Companies who had sent money to Headquarters for them.

To get authority to do so required some finesse, but it was accomplished in this way: Having got the Arms Committee together for the purpose of adopting a standard bore, one or two of us recommended .303, which is the bore of the British Service Rifle. British Service Rifles, in consequence of the War were, then as now, practically unprocurable. .303 bore was adopted, and I then enquired of the Committee whether we were thereby

authorised to purchase any available rifles that would take this cartridge, to which the Chairman, with the consent of the Committee, replied that we were.

Armed with this authority I went privately to Birmingham and purchased the entire output of a firm of gunsmiths who made, specially for our order, a Martini-Enfield .303, a very serviceable weapon, which they continued making and supplying to us until the Friendly Government raided and closed their factory last November. When I reported the Birmingham trip to the Committee, those of the Nominees who were present at both meetings repudiated my action, declared it to be entirely unauthorised, *and solemnly entered on the minutes their protest against my having bought arms with the money sent to the Committee to buy arms with.* This, at any rate, is not the sort of thing that happens by coincidence.

It was in September that we learnt accidentally how Mr. Lawrence Kettle had, immediately after the withdrawal of the Arms Proclamation, refused, without even consulting the Committee, the best offer of arms that we had ever received. This was a proposal to sell us up to 29,000 modern magazine rifles with 600 rounds of ammunition for each, the price for rifle and ammunition complete being only £4.

From what I have written, the reader will understand that we of the Original Committee had no hallucinations as to the possibility of our continuing to co-operate with Mr. Redmond's adherents. We understood the importance of an unbroken front. We were proud that it was the Volunteer Organisation that for the first time in centuries had brought together all sections of Nationalist Irishmen. We maintained unity as long as it was humanly possible to do it. But we foresaw that a cleavage might become inevitable. And Mr. Redmond's Woodenbridge declaration about our double duty was a clear challenge on a definite issue.

We know of only one duty, our duty to Ireland.

We are Irish Volunteers, not pawns upon the chessboard of British Politics. We told Mr. Redmond so, and we ceased to admit his Nominees to our Councils.

And then came the avalanche. An avalanche of vilification, of scurrilous personal attack, and of patent, obvious, and grotesque falsehood from every source that could be swayed either by a contract from the Government or a job from the Party.

We, who had hitherto been petted, cajoled, canvassed, caressed, wined and dined, we, whose presence on a platform was nearly as desirable as that of an M.P., we, whose postbags had hitherto bulged with invitations to the functions of the elect, suddenly became nobodies, cranks, frauds, factionists, traitors, disruptionists, pro-Germans, cowards, embezzlers, and lunatics.

At one bound, in fact, we had become bounders!

We made no reply to this campaign of personal vilification, nor do we propose to do so. We regret that any Irishmen should descend to such methods of controversy; but as one section has adopted them, we propose that they shall have a monopoly of them.

We put the situation before a Convention of the Volunteers, who endorsed our action, and we are now going ahead with the work of organising, arming, and training our men.

Meantime the subsidised Press campaign continues, and is made easier since the Friendly Government is suppressing every journal that it fails to buy. The kept press is now engaged in felon-setting us by name, in pointing us out to the Friendly Government as the dangerous men who are opposed to benevolent assimilation. Our private correspondence is published by "National" papers to prove that we are not devoted to the Imperial idea, and the good work has already borne fruit in the opening of our letters, the pilfering of our correspondence, the shadowing of our movements, the confiscation of our property, and the dismissal, deportation and arrest of our associates.

Faithful to the traditions of British Naval heroism, as expressed in the order "Women and children first," the searching of houses in Dublin began with a police raid on the residence of my sister. She was threatened with arrest, her house was searched, papers were ransacked, private letters (utterly unconnected with the movement) were abstracted, and a small quantity of revolvers and ammunition, the property of the Irish Volunteers, were seized and confiscated.

Many similar raids have followed, but the Irish Press is too busy dealing with the murders in baths to have found space to report them.

However, our losses have been trifling, and we are not disheartened. We are consoled by the fact that the country and the future are with us, and that our men possess *real* arms and ammunition.

A prostitute Press, a Heaven-sent Leader and a Friendly Government are undoubtedly a fairly strong combine; still, it will take more than that to smash the spirit of the Irish Volunteers.

Ua Rattaille.

40 HERBERT PARK,
DUBLIN, 8th April, 1915.

