

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1919-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1919-21

No. W.S. 645

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 645

Witness

Nora Aghas,
156 Rathgar Road,
Dublin.

Identity.

Sister of Thomas Ashe, who died in 1917.

Subject.

Biographical note on Thomas Ashe.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness:

Nil

File No. S. 1757

Form B.S.M. 2

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Statement by Miss Nora Aghas,

156, Rathgar Road, Dublin.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
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NO. W.S. 1245

I was born in 1882 and my brother Thomas on 12th January 1885 in Kinnard, Dingle. We were a family of ten, seven boys and five girls. Tomás was the seventh child. There were three brothers following him. My father was a farmer. He died at the age of 73. My mother who died at 58 was dead some years before Tomás.

I was at school in Loreto Convent, Killarney, and when I finished there I taught for two or three years in the Mercy Convent, Kilrush. I went to train in Carysfort from 1907 - 1909. I taught in Cappamore, Co. Limerick for 10 years. I was there when Tomás died in 1917. I then came to teach in the Model School. When the Irish Speaking School, Scoil Mhuire, was established, I was put in charge of it. Both Irish and English were talked in our house. My father was a great Irish Scholar and learners of Irish used to come to listen to his stories.

N.A. Tomás was a monitor in the local National School and went to training in 1905. He taught for a few months in ^MKinnard near Dingle and then went to Corduff, Lusk. Fr. Byrne was the Parish Priest and Fr. Hoey was Parish Priest at the Rebellion time when Tomás was dismissed by the Board of National Education.

He taught Irish in the Corduff school. He was fond of the language and started branches of the Gaelic League in Skerries and other neighbouring villages. In the school when the children marched out to recreation he used to get them to march over a Union Jack which he had provided for the purpose.

He always went home for holidays. He always had nice setters and a good gun and he used to range the mountains - himself and Padraig Aghas (now Senator), a second cousin who lived next-door - after game of all kinds, woodcock, snipe etc. He also had a set of bagpipes and used to go up on Kinnard hill which belonged to our farm and walk along it playing the pipes. The neighbours all over the parish used to love to listen to the music and missed it greatly when he was dead. He had a beautiful voice, both for speaking and singing and a wonderful collection of ballads and songs. He loved Kerry and was never tired describing it to his fellow prisoners in England after the Rising. All of them said they would have to go to Kinnard for a holiday when they were released, so much did he glorify the place to them. He applied for an assistantship in Ventry School but did not get it.

He joined the Volunteers after their foundation. He was always a member of the Keating Branch of the Gaelic League and was a member of the Coisde Gnotha who sent him to America with Diarmuid Lynch to collect money for the League. They got beautiful new kilts for the occasion.

While they were there the war broke out and they were recalled before their work-which was successful as far as it went-was finished.

He praised the Irish American women without stint especially those of the generation who had left Ireland. Jack Dineen did substitute for him while he was away.

Tomás was a great friend of the O'Rahilly who spent a lot of time in Ventry.

We and the neighbours had launches and we used all to go out fishing and Tomás would bring the bagpipes and play and sing his ballads. I remember him often singing among other songs, The Flower of Finéa, the whole twenty four verses.

Tomás was also a great friend of Sean McDermott, Tom Clarke and all those who knew that a Rising was coming and he spent 1915 preparing for it.

He was in the Lusk Company of the Volunteers I'd say he founded the Volunteers there and he also started the Lusk Piper's Band whose emblem was the black raven.

Before the Rising Dr. Hayes was - I have been told - in command of the Lusk Company but Tomás was asked, a few days before the Rising started, to take command and he was in command from that on. He got orders for the Rising from Pearse and it was to him Pearse sent the order to surrender. Tomás who could not believe that the news of the surrender was true because he thought the rest of the Volunteers had been as successful as they themselves had been, sent Dick Mulcahy to Pearse to have it verified.

Desmond Ryan in his recently published book has not been fair to Tomás. I say this not because I am Tomás's sister but in the interest of truth. He gives all the credit for the action at Ashbourne to Dick Mulcahy. The fact is that Tomás had sent a despatch to Lieutenant Mulcahy with instructions as to where to place his men and outlining his own position, "I will defend from the Cross". I have a photo of that despatch which I got from a Mr. Quilty of Clare who had it written into his autograph by Tomás himself. This was on the occasion of the East Clare election the news of which Tomás brought into

Limerick by car.

I should like to see both Desmond Ryan and Joe Lawless to discuss this matter as the latter too has given a wrong impression on every occasion he has spoken of it. Not indeed that Tomás did not give full credit to Dick Mulcahy for what he did because he liked him and always praised him. Tim Hurley told me that Tomás had sent for Dick to help in the cutting of the telephone wires and work of that sort.

I had very little conversation with Tomás himself after the Rising. I saw him in Mountjoy before he was deported. I saw him in Lewes with Frank Fahy and Austin Stack. He gave me a message for Michael Collins. I went down to Kerry with him for a few days after his release from Lewes in June 1917. He spent only one night at home when he was called to take part in the East Clare election. The next and last time I saw him alive was in Mountjoy surrounded by warders just before his hunger strike. He was looking extraordinary well and handsome that day.

Tomás went to Co. Longford in August 1917 with some other Volunteers from Dublin. I think Mick Collins was of the number. There was some sort of political meeting at Ballinalee and Tomás made a speech for which the police were after him. When he came back to Dublin he went on the run. He stayed at Batt O'Connors for six weeks, I think without going out. At last he could bear the confinement no longer and he went into town one night. He was arrested immediately at the Pillar. Mick Collins informed me by wire.

He was brought to the Curragh for a couple of weeks. I was going to come up to see him when I got

another wire from Mick Collins to say he was removed to the Bridewell. He was tried and was sentenced, I think, to ^{two} a year's imprisonment with ^{M.A.} hard labour. I should have mentioned that after the Rising Tomás was courtmartialled the same day as De Valera and condemned to death but, as in De Valera's case the sentence was commuted to penal servitude for life. I think at that stage as the executions had aroused such indignation the government did not dare execute any more.

Tomás was in the I.R.B. at an early stage, as he was very great with Tom Clarke, Sean McDermott and that crowd. Austin Stack often said that if Tomás had lived, Mick Collins would never have gone the way he did about the Treaty, he had such respect for Tomás who was his superior officer in the I.R.B.

At the O'Donovan Rossa funeral Tomás was in charge of the gate at the entrance to Glasnevin. He was in Volunteer uniform that day. He always wore his kilt at Gaelic League functions and with the Lusk Band.

He was not long in Mountjoy when he and the other prisoners started the hunger strike. I have all their names written by themselves in an Irish Grammar which I sent in to the prisoners to enable them to continue their Irish studies. They sent out the book to me after Tomás' death. Again Mick Collins wired the news of his death to me. Micheal O'Foghluaaha also wired me. Tomás had asked that Micheál be allowed to visit him but he was refused.

On the very day I got the wire I had got permission from my manager to visit Tomás but it was now too late. It was the last thing we expected to hear - that he was dead.

I came up to Dublin by the 12 o'clock train which crawled and did not arrive till 5.30 or 6. The account of his last struggle, the funeral and the inquest will be found in the newspapers of the time. Tim Healy during the inquest presented me with a copy of his own book which he autographed. It was called "The Great Fraud of Ulster".

I have another interesting memento from Tom Clarke which I value very much. It is a copy of the commemoration book of O'Donovan Rossa's funeral. It has an inscription written by himself "To Miss Nora Ashe in appreciation of patriotic services done."

I did a number of odd jobs for Tom Clarke and the others although I was not in the Cumann na mBan. During the Black and Tan period I took messages to the Dalys of Limerick from Dublin. I had a narrow escape from arrest one day when the train was held up at Boher or some place and a woman searcher was among the raiding party. By good luck the raiders were busy examining the Pay Order belonging to some teacher on the platform and when they resumed the search of the carriages, mine which was the next was overlooked and they passed on next door. I saw a girl who had been in my carriage and had moved out of it being carried off in the lorry by the Black and Tans. I had found out that she too was carrying a despatch.

My oldest brother John is now living in Kildare where he got a farm in exchange for his own. There is none of our family living in the old home in Kinnard. Jack has a much better memory than I have of what Tomás told about the 1916 Rising. He could repeat the story word for word. Tomás drew a map of the battle of Ashbourne on the hearthstone in Kinnard the night he

went home and another night at Micheál O Foghludha's he drew the plan on a piece of paper and when we had all seen it he gave it to Diarmuid O'Hegarty's wife. She was a Miss Archer. She might have it still.

Tomas said the police who took part in the fight at Ashbourne were not a bad lot at all. One of them asked permission to go home to his sick wife and Tomás gave it. They would do anything for him afterwards. While he was in prison in England the police kept his gun and sword polished and in good order for him until he came home.

Nora Aghas
(Nora Aghas)

6. 2. 1952.

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