

## Bureau of Military History witness statements as sources for the Irish Revolution

By Eve Morrison

Since March 2003, when the Bureau of Military History (BMH or Bureau) collection was officially opened, Bureau testimonies or ‘witness statements’ have become one of the most widely consulted and used sources for the 1916 Rising and War of Independence. Over 1,600 individual veterans of separatist military (and to a limited extent political and cultural) organisations discuss what had occurred, how and why events took place, and what happened afterwards.<sup>1</sup> The often scant descriptions of incidents during the Easter Rising and War of Independence in newspapers, British records and IRA brigade and battalion reports can now be fleshed out with personal accounts of ambushes, engagements, arms raids, assassinations, imprisonment, organising and intelligence gathering. Some witnesses also relate vivid memories, recollections of their families, childhood, working lives, and occasionally give a potted history of their county, town or area, making the statements a rich source for social historians. Memoirs that previously dominated public perceptions of Ireland’s revolutionary period such as *Guerilla days in Ireland*, *On another man’s wound*, *My fight for Irish freedom* and *With the Dublin brigade*, while still classics in their own right, are no longer the only personal accounts of the separatist experience generally.<sup>2</sup>

### **Part I: The Bureau of Military History in context**

The BMH needs to be understood within the general historical context of the 1940s and 1950s. Developments in historical writing, interviewing and document collecting both internationally and in Ireland influenced the way it operated. The interwar and post-Second World War eras in Europe and the United States saw an explosion of government-sponsored initiatives to gather material for the production of ‘official’ military histories, and a revival of oral history generally. The Bureau was not the first attempt by the Irish army to collect personal accounts of the independence struggle. From within a few years of the civil war, but particularly after Fianna Fáil came to power in 1932, various government representatives and departments began suggesting, and sometimes taking the first steps to implement, proposals to collect personal narratives from veterans of the 1916-1923 period for planned official histories. Like their European counterparts

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<sup>1</sup>For a more detailed description of the organisations and individuals represented in the collection see Jennifer Doyle, Francis Clarke, Eibhlís Connaughton and Orna Somerville (2002) *An introduction to the Bureau of Military History 1913-1921* (Dublin, 2003).

<sup>2</sup>Tom Barry, *Guerilla days in Ireland* (Dublin, 1949;1981); Ernie O'Malley, *On another man's wound* (London, 1936); Dan Breen, *My fight for Irish freedom* (Dublin, 1924;1981); Charles Dalton, *With the Dublin brigade (1917-1921)* (London, 1929).

in Poland and Czechoslovakia, where after the Great War struggles for national independence had also taken place, the generation of Irish separatist revolutionaries who took power were anxious to preserve a record of *their* war – in this case Ireland’s fight against British rule.

By 1936, Maurice Moynihan, secretary to the President of the Executive Council ( Eamon de Valera) had begun directing enquiries about the War of Independence to the Department of Defence.<sup>3</sup> In the 1930s, the Departments of Education and Defence both initiated schemes to collect personal testimonies through the medium of the Irish army, which was considered a natural choice to collect material and administer such a project. Earlier efforts were less inclusive than the Bureau, concentrating primarily on army officers with pre-Truce service. In this respect, the various configurations of the army schemes reflected changes in the political atmosphere and ethos of the times, as independent Ireland moved gradually away from the political hostility of the 1920s and 1930s spawned by the civil war.

### ***An t’Óglach* and the Second Bureau**

Among the earliest efforts by Defence to assemble material relating to the Easter Rising and War of Independence were those arranged under the auspices of *An t’Óglach*, the IRA’s newspaper during the War of Independence. Under the control of the Irish army from 1922, it was administered by army intelligence (the Second Bureau, later G2). The general staff hoped that *An t’Óglach* would assist the army in maintaining ‘its rightful position in the national life of the country.’<sup>4</sup> The journal eventually fell foul of the government in 1930 due to the forthrightness of its political and analytical contents as well as its association with the National Defence Association.<sup>5</sup> Attempts by the army to collect historical material continued, albeit unsystematically, through the historical section of army intelligence. JJ ‘Ginger’ O’Connell became director of army intelligence in 1929. Colonel E.V. O’Carroll, the assistant director of the Second Bureau, approached Chief of Staff Michael Brennan in October 1933 about the possibility of gathering personal narratives from veterans ‘before the sources are dead & gone’.<sup>6</sup> Brennan immediately agreed, as Eamon de Valera, President of the Executive Council since Fianna Fáil’s election in 1932, had already been in touch with both him and the Minister for

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<sup>3</sup>J.J. O’Connell to Dept. of the President, 24 Apr. 1936 (NLI, Collins papers (CP), Pos 915, A/0396/VIII/I).

<sup>4</sup>Adjutant-General to Chief of Staff, 16 July 1925, quoted in Eunan O’Halpin, *Defending Ireland: the Irish state and its enemies since 1922* (Oxford, 1999), p.100.

<sup>5</sup>O’Halpin, *Defending Ireland*, pp.98-102.

<sup>6</sup>O’Carroll to Brennan, 31 Oct. 1933 (MAI, 2nd Bureau, A/0001/IV).

Defence Frank Aiken about the possibility of commissioning a history.<sup>7</sup> The Second Bureau had only limited success, but its terms of reference and stated purpose would be re-stated almost exactly by the BMH over a decade later: 'It is not intended that the Second Bureau will write this History, but merely that the information collected will be catalogued for the use of future historians.'<sup>8</sup>

### **Military Service Pensions**

By 1947, Defence had become the most significant single repository of available material relating to the revolutionary period in Ireland because of its voluminous files relating to the 1924 and 1934 MSP applications, and by 1943 had agreed to allow those still confidential records to be consulted for historical purpose.<sup>9</sup> The Bureau project was seen as a means of complementing and expanding on the MSP material, and it was an early attempt to employ the pension records as an aid to historical research.<sup>10</sup> These crucial files became the Bureau's most important guide when locating potential interviewees and identifying topics for discussion. It is unlikely that the project could have collected statements on the scale that it did without access to the pension records. Key Bureau staff - John McCoy and Seamus Robinson - were former members of the pension Referee's advisory committee, and they directed investigators in the field to collect details about separatist military organisations (but chiefly the IRA), and to concentrate in particular on subjects and periods of time where MSP material was lacking or incomplete. The Bureau collection is therefore an important complementary collection to the MSP records, which are due for release in the near future.

### **Official histories and the international context**

The Bureau project operated within a much broader framework of official history writing and government-sponsored initiatives to collect personal testimony in Europe and the United States. There are a number of comparable projects, some of which can be accessed online. The idea of collecting information about the revolutionary period in Ireland was not generated directly as a result of these broader political and historical conditions, but it was certainly influenced by them. Irish historians and archivists in particular, and to some extent the government, were keen to

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<sup>7</sup>Brennan to O'Carroll, 1 Nov. 1933 (MAI, 2nd Bureau, A/0001/IV).

<sup>8</sup>O'Carroll, circular letter 'History of the Anglo-Irish conflict - 1913-1921', 8 Nov. 1933 (MAI, 2nd Bureau, A/0001/I).

<sup>9</sup>Bureau journal I, 8 Sept. 1945 (NLI, Florence O'Donoghue papers, Ms 31, 355/1); Moran to Finance, 21 Dec. 1943 (NAI, DT, S 13081/A).

<sup>10</sup>Memo by Moynihan, 25 June 1946 (NAI, DT, S 13081/A); Moran to Dept. of Finance, 21 Dec. 1943 (NAI, DT, S 13081/A).

align themselves with international developments in history-writing and document collecting. The precedent for government involvement in the compilation of source material for historical purposes, including individual narratives, had been set early in the U.S.A. Between 1864 and 1901 a massive 128-volume series of documents and first-hand accounts relating to the civil war, *The war of the rebellion (official records)*, was published by the Department of War. In many respects, it remains the single best primary source for studying that conflict.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, in the 1930s, the Federal Writers' Project conducted hundreds of interviews.<sup>12</sup> Those conducted with former slaves, the 'Slave Narratives', can be consulted online via the American Library of Congress website.<sup>13</sup>

The collection of first-hand accounts when compiling 'official' military histories became an increasingly significant feature of initiatives by the U.S.A. and several European states as time went on. In terms of interviews with veterans and participants, it was the Second World War that ushered in an unrivalled period of collecting, with some of the largest and most significant attempts to gather first-hand accounts from combatants for historical use initiated in this period. The *Commission d'Histoire de l'Occupation de la Libération de la France* (after 1951 the *Comité d'Histoire de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale*) was founded by Charles de Gaulle's new Fourth Republican government in October 1944. Under the control of the Ministry of Education, over the 1940s and 1950s (in conjunction with other corollary organisations) it collected some 2,000 interviews with resistance fighters and thousands of written documents.<sup>14</sup> In 1943, the US army employed 'combat' historians to interview officers and soldiers, material which was used in compiling the official US histories of the conflict, the 'Green Books.'<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Richard A. Sauer, 'The War of the Rebellion (official records)' in David S. Heidler, Jeanne T. Heidler, David J. Coles (eds) *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: a political, social and military history* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2000), pp. 2061-5; For enquiries made by the Bureau about this project see BMH, S 923.

<sup>12</sup> Jerrold Hirsch, *Portrait of America: a cultural history of the Federal Writers' Project* (Chapel Hill, N.C. ; London, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> .

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/anparis/chan/pdf/72AJ\\_2009.pdf](http://www.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/anparis/chan/pdf/72AJ_2009.pdf). Julian Jackson, *France: the dark years 1940-1944* (Oxford, 2001), pp.6-8.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Lofgren, *U.S. Army guide to oral history* (Washington DC, 2006), p.5; A guide to the US army's World War II combat interviews can be downloaded from [http://www.lexisnexis.com/documents/academic/upa\\_cis/3172\\_WWIICombatIntervs.pdf](http://www.lexisnexis.com/documents/academic/upa_cis/3172_WWIICombatIntervs.pdf). The Liddel-Hart Centre for Military History also holds a microfilm copies of the interviews <http://kingscollections.org/catalogues/lhcma/collection/a-e/xa80-001> .

## **Part II: Using and interpreting witness statements for historical research**

The witness statements were collected decades after the events described in them took place. Retrospective testimony of any kind –including other recorded interviews, Ernie O'Malley notebook interviews, or MSP testimony– has to be consulted in conjunction with contemporary sources and, where available, other interviews. Concordances with and deviations from both contemporary records and other accounts in witness statements are often deliberate and highly significant. Memories also have what oral historian Luisa Passerini describes as a 'multiplicity of layers', and part of the process of interpreting them is identifying and considering the influence of these various contexts in the texts.<sup>16</sup> Personal testimonies, like oral history and folklore generally, have far greater interpretive possibilities than is often recognised. Witness statements are uniquely versatile sources that impart an enormous amount of new detail about the events of the revolutionary period of 1913-1923 and also reflect the concerns, attitudes and mentalities at work when the witnesses were interviewed in the 1940s and 1950s.

In short, the greater the reader's knowledge of the surviving documentary record, and the factors influencing and informing the witness's attitude and experience, the better able the reader will be to accurately interpret the full significant of the information Bureau interviewees impart.

### **Bureau methodology**

The administration and methodology employed by the Bureau remains one of the least understood aspects of the project. Negative assessments of the Bureau and its Director Michael McDunphy by historians such as Evi Gkotzaridis are based primarily on the private papers of two of the Bureau's Advisory Committee of historians' most recalcitrant members who had hoped to control the Bureau themselves - Robert Dudley Edwards (the UCD historian) and Major Florence O'Donoghue (an IRA veteran).<sup>17</sup> However, when the arguments between McDunphy and his adversaries over the value of oral testimony as a source for history and the best way of collecting it are examined in conjunction with Bureau records, it becomes clear that it was in fact McDunphy's approach which was the most consistent with modern practice. McDunphy's 'Instructions to Investigators' drafted in May 1948, for instance, was obviously

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<sup>16</sup>Luisa Passerini, 'Memories between silence and oblivion' in Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, *Memory, history, nation: contested pasts* (New Brunswick, N.J., 2006), p.238.

<sup>17</sup>Evi Gkotzaridis, 'Revisionist Historians and the modern Irish state: the conflict between the Advisory Committee and the Bureau of Military History', *IHS*, XXXV, no. 137 (May 2006), 99-116 and *Trials of Irish history: genesis and evolution of a reappraisal 1938-2000* (London, 2006), pp. 81-101.

influenced by Sean O'Sullivan's *Handbook of Irish Folklore*.<sup>18</sup> One of the most crucial methodological decisions made by McDunphy was that, while investigators should question witnesses closely, there should be no attempt to reconcile conflicting accounts: 'If one honest story conflicts with another, or even with several others, it is not for the investigator to decide which is right.'<sup>19</sup> The Bureau also resisted attempts by individual veterans or veterans groups to vet the incoming material.

Bureau statements often have a narrow, 'operational' focus (very common to military history in the 1940s and 1950s) and are primarily concerned with how military actions were organised: when, how and why ambushes and engagements were carried out, and what happened during them. Nonetheless, the Bureau accorded witnesses remarkable freedom in what they wished to discuss. Despite the official chronological cut off point of the Truce of July 1921, for instance, statements and documents dealing with the civil war were accepted almost from the beginning. About seventeen percent of the statements covering the period after 1917 discuss the civil war, though not always in much detail. The various controversies surrounding pension administration sometimes had a negative impact on the attitudes of some of the veterans approached for interview. Over eighty percent of applications under the 1934 legislation were unsuccessful, leading to widespread bitterness and allegations of favouritism among separatist veterans. One of the most common reasons for refusing to cooperate with the Bureau was not, as has often been assumed, the civil war, but dissatisfaction with the outcome of a MSP pension application. Unhappy pension claimants who did give statements sometimes used them to air their discontent with the army, the pension referee or the government. While witnesses themselves sometimes retracted or modified their statements before signing them, the Bureau did not censor the testimonies.<sup>20</sup>

## Oral Sources

One of the most important things to bear in mind when using witness statements is that they are essentially oral sources. Strictly speaking, they do not conform to oral history as it is practiced today because they take the form of testimonials rather than transcribed question and answer sessions. However, the vast majority of witness statements were derived from some kind of interview process, and they bear all the hallmarks of oral testimony. So a useful first step when

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<sup>18</sup> 'Instructions to Collectors', Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* (Dublin, 1942), p.xi;

<sup>19</sup> 'Taking of evidence. Instructions to representatives of the Bureau', 10 May 1948 (BMH, S 851).

<sup>20</sup> However, some fifty five redactions were made by the Military Archives before their release in 2003.

using them is consulting works about oral history such as Paul Thompson's *Voice of the Past*, *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History* (ed. Donald A. Ritchie) or Lynn Abrams' *Oral history theory*.<sup>21</sup> It is also important to establish, as far as is possible, how the statements were compiled and the circumstances in which interviews took place.<sup>22</sup> The relationship between interviewer and interviewee and the former's role in shaping the text is an important one. Consulting the investigator's notes associated with each statement and the witness's correspondence file can answer vital questions: Was the statement written by the interviewee and submitted without changes? Was it compiled by the investigator from his notes? Did the interviewee refer to a diary or notes when they gave their statement? Is there anything they were unwilling to discuss? Did the investigator consider the interviewee to be reliable? How did the investigator rate the interviewee's general demeanour and credibility? Was the individual referred to the Bureau by someone else? Did the interviewee revise or retract any part of their statement?

Assessing statements also involves taking into account a whole series of relational factors. Bureau witnesses are frequently saying far more than is obvious from a casual examination in even the most straightforward set piece descriptions of ambushes. An awareness of individual allegiances and conflicts between different groups of veterans either during or subsequent to the revolutionary period is not just helpful but obligatory for researchers, as is a familiarity with surviving contemporary Irish and British records. Interviewees sometimes comment on what had been written or said in relation to their actions and discuss the extent to which they felt their contribution to the independence struggle had been subsequently valued by pension boards or fellow veterans. The statements provided a kind of running commentary on how the independence struggle was written and spoken about at the time, so readers should also be familiar with previously published accounts.

### **Autobiographical memory**

A basic familiarity with the nature of autobiographical memory is also helpful. Memories are not literal representations of events. Remembering a two hour bus journey literally would take two hours. Memories are better described as interpretations of experience in which the most important facts and details of an event are retained. The essential facts do not change, but over time the meaning and connotations of those events often do. So the way individuals relate events in their lives can change over time. In an interview situation, interviewees are responding to the

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<sup>21</sup>Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford, 2000); D. A. Ritchie (ed.) *The Oxford handbook of oral history* (New York ; Oxford, 2011); Lynn Abrams, *Oral history theory* (London, 2010).

<sup>22</sup>Thompson, *The voice of the past*, p.127.

questions asked and the subjects raised by the interviewer. Witnesses tend to recount not just what happened, but also the significance of these events, calling on a range of circumstances and associations from their lives. A good example of this can be found in this passage from the statement of Josephine Clarke, an anti-Treaty Cumann na mBan member in which she recalled an incident during the civil war. Liam Tobin, a Free State officer, secured her release from custody so that she could continue her search for the anti-Treaty column in which her husband served:

We were brought to the Aerodrome in Tallaght which was filled with Free State troops and while we were waiting there who should come in but Liam Tobin all decorated with stars and stripes. He and I knew each other in Kilkenny and played together as children - he was Billy Tobin then. He got an awful drop when he saw me and said, "For God's sake, Josie, what are you doing here." "You see I am a prisoner" said I. He took me aside and asked me where was Liam. I told him he was with the Column around Rathfarnham. He said, "You had better get in touch with him. I'll have you sent in the first car that leaves here, and tell him I have orders to get all those fellows, dead or alive." I'll remember that to Billy's credit as long as I live.<sup>23</sup>

This fusion of facts and representation and chronological fluidity are hallmarks of personal testimony.

Not all memories are this significant or retained with the same degree of accuracy or vividness. What seems to be a key factor in determining how well an event is remembered is its importance for the individual. It is this quality of autobiographical memory that is virtually impossible to test in a laboratory. A few Bureau witnesses could remember very little: some witness statements are so vague as to be virtually useless for anything but as examples of how memory can deteriorate, though even these have their moments: 'I am sorry I could not furnish fuller particulars', spoke P.J. Dennehy, a veteran from Cork,

but after a period of 32 years, having gone through seven or eight ambushes in Cork, Kerry, Limerick & Waterford and in six different jails - needless to say-my 'old nut' can't be very sound.<sup>24</sup>

The majority of Bureau witnesses fall somewhere in between, combining the stylistic elements of an adjutant's report, fighting story and sentimental memoir which, due in the main to the many years which had passed between the events and their retelling, often paint in broad strokes rather than fine detail.

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<sup>23</sup> BMH WS 699 (Josephine Clarke), p.16.

<sup>24</sup> BMH WS 67 (P.J. Dennehy), p.2.

## Reliability

An important question for anyone reading witness statement is, of course, their reliability. Dismissing personal testimony as, by definition, less dependable or more biased than other sources is problematic. Historians like Rod Kedward and Stathis Kalyvas, for instance, who use oral evidence relating to extremely controversial and contested subjects such as the French Resistance or the Greek civil war found that evidence from interviews was generally confirmed by archival records; Kedward observed: 'Realities are fractured and pluralized, but they are rarely eclipsed.'<sup>25</sup> Bureau testimony can be formulaic and uneven in quality, and statements sometimes (though not always) gloss over or omit less salubrious aspects of the military campaign. However, those aspects of the witness statements should not be over-emphasised or exaggerated. As oral historians have been at pains to point out, lies, distortions, bias and misrepresentation can be found in all sources, written or oral. Surviving 'documentary' sources are generally better for certain kinds of information, while oral history interviews and personal testimonies frequently contain insights and information that are not captured in other records.

In reality, outright liars and conscious distorters are encountered in oral history far less often than has sometimes been suggested.<sup>26</sup> It is not always possible to get to the root of errors, omissions and contradictory accounts but it is not necessarily the case that people are deliberately lying. Identifying silences, fantasy, deliberate omissions, evasions and occasionally, blatant untruths in witness statements is necessary and important. However, as the work of oral historians such as Alessandro Portelli demonstrates, these instances have much wider-ranging interpretive possibility than mere exposition of personal failings or individual weaknesses.<sup>27</sup> Establishing the reason for the error or the motivation behind re-telling of events in a certain way can lead to greater insight and a more nuanced interpretation of complex historical circumstances. The most commonly cited dilemma experienced by witnesses making statements was difficulty in getting such details as dates and the precise sequence of events right, and the minor 'reconstructive errors' and omissions often found in witness statements are a feature of

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<sup>25</sup> H. R. Kedward, *In search of the maquis: rural resistance in southern France, 1942-1944* (Oxford, New York, 1993), p.vii; Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war* (Cambridge, 2006), p.410.

<sup>26</sup> Anthony Seldon and Joanna Pappworth, *By word of mouth: 'élite' oral history* (London, 1983), pp.19-22.

<sup>27</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The order has been carried out: history, memory, and meaning of a Nazi massacre in Rome* (New York ;Houndmills, 2004).

oral history generally.<sup>28</sup> For the most part such errors do not compromise the general truthfulness and meaning of the events described. Stories that seem far-fetched, or exaggerated for dramatic effect, often turn out to be true. Even when they are not, those telling them for the most part genuinely believe what they say.

Finally, and though it may seem an obvious point, it is not helpful to view Bureau witnesses as embodiments of specific political traditions, or to assess their recollections on the basis that a former member of the IRA, Royal Irish Constabulary or the British army, or a pro- or anti-Treaty veteran, is more or less likely to be honest or accurate. Bureau witnesses were ordinary, fallible human beings who lost friends and family members to the conflict, and who had themselves taken part in extraordinary, and often highly traumatic, events. It was not always easy for them to remember, for all sorts of reasons, and sometimes it was painful. Their recollections play a key role in making Irish revolutionary studies an exceptionally rich field of research.

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<sup>28</sup>Seldon and Pappworth, *By word of mouth*, p.17.