



- 3.0 **Those who Set the Stage**
- 3.1 **Those concerned with Home Rule (for and against)**
- 3.1.2 **Augustine Birrell, Chief Secretary for Ireland, 1907-1916**

Birrell contributed indirectly to the Rising by failing (together with Asquith) to confront the Ulster unionists and by failing to take action against the republicans planning the Rising.

Augustine Birrell (1850-1933) was from Liverpool. His father was a Baptist minister and his maternal grandfather a Free Church of Scotland minister; in later life he became an agnostic, but maintained a Liberal nonconformist outlook. A legacy enabled him to study law at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, following which he practiced as a barrister and gained recognition as an essayist and literary critic of distinction. Elected as the Liberal MP for West Fife in 1889, he served as a minister under Campbell-Bannerman, becoming Chief Secretary for Ireland in 1907, an office which he held until May 1916 when he resigned under a cloud in the aftermath of the Rising.

The Chief Secretary was the official responsible for formulating and administering government policy in Ireland. Birrell was one of the most humane, committed and productive ministers ever to hold the office. He was well disposed towards nationalist Ireland, his ultimate objective being Home Rule. In the meantime, he had a total of fifty-six pieces of largely beneficial legislation enacted. These included acts for the establishment of the National University of Ireland and Queen's University Belfast, and the 1909 Land Act, which accelerated the purchase of land by tenants and reduced agrarian strife.

3.1.2 Augustine Birrell, Chief Secretary for Ireland, 1907-1916

Birrell certainly played a significant role in the eventual enactment of Home Rule. He was, however, culpable in allowing the Ulster unionists to change the nature of Home Rule to an extent that it was unpalatable for most nationalists, including as it did provision for partition. He was also responsible for failing to control the Ulster Volunteer Force and was negligent in allowing the mutinous army officers and those responsible for the Larne gun-running to go unchallenged. At the time, nationalists contrasted this apparent lack of concern with the authorities' stance towards Jim Larkin and the trades unionists in 1913 and the shooting of civilians in 1914 following the Howth gun-running.

In relation to the 1916 Rising, Birrell failed to appreciate the threat posed by the physical force faction within nationalism, considering that the numbers so inclined were too few to constitute a threat. He ignored the possibility that they might stage an insurrection regardless of the certainty of failure in order to become martyrs in the cause of Irish freedom and so awaken latent aspirations for national independence. Finally, he failed to realize that the executions would be counter-productive, provoking a reaction that would eventually take Ireland out of the Union.

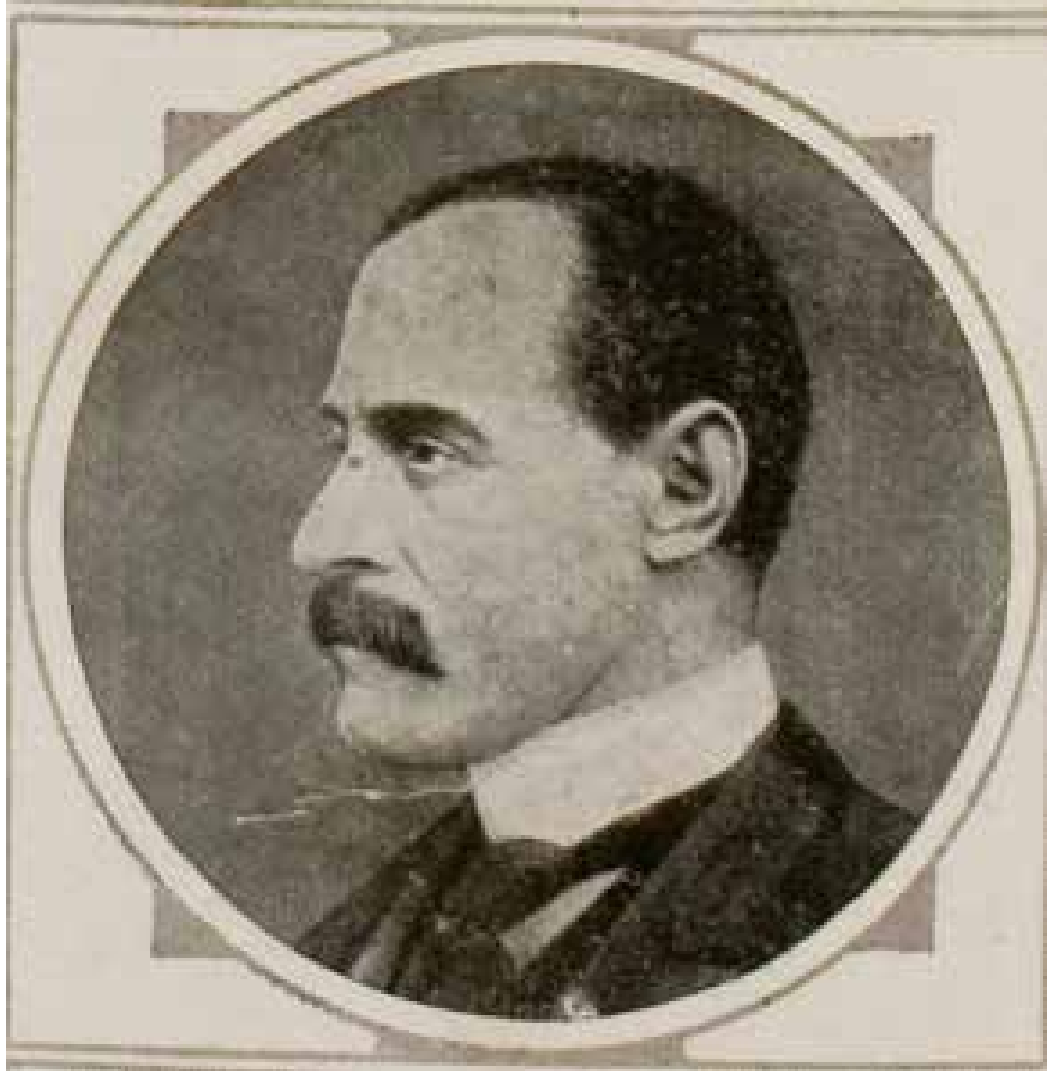
On his resignation in May 1916, Birrell accepted most of the blame for allowing the preparations for the Rising to go ahead unchecked. While his inaction in respect of the Ulster unionists was partly due to Asquith and the government as a whole, the official commission placed the blame for the Rising primarily on Birrell, as the minister with direct responsibility.

3.1.2 Augustine Birrell, Chief Secretary for Ireland, 1907-1916



The Right Honourable Augustine Birrell MP, Chief Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in the period 1907-16. The Chief Secretary normally spent much of his time in parliament in Westminster, leaving routine administration to the Under-Secretary. Birrell was in England when the Rising took place. (Illustrated London News, 6 May 1916).

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Lieut. Col. Sir Matthew Nathan, Under-Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland was the chief permanent official of the government in Ireland in the period Sept. 1914 to May 1916. He was aware of Roger Casement's attempt to procure German arms; when he learned that the German ship bearing the arms had been scuttled he knew that a successful Rising could not succeed and felt that the crisis had passed. He does not seem to have considered the possibility that the Rising could still take place regardless of the virtual certainty of failure. (Illustrated London News, 6 May 1916).

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Ivor Churchill Guest, 1st Viscount Wimborne, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland since 1915. The day before the Rising Wimborne was alarmed but Nathan tried to allay his fears, arguing that there was no immediate danger. (*Illustrated London News*, 6 May 1916).

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Photograph

"Sport & General."

LORD WIMBORNE, WHO TOOK THE OATH AS LORD LIEUTENANT LAST FRIDAY, INSPECTS THE GUARD OF HONOUR IN THE CASTLE YARD.

Lord Wimborne inspecting a guard of honour at Dublin Castle following his arrival as Lord Lieutenant (New York Times, Magazine Section, 30 April 1916).

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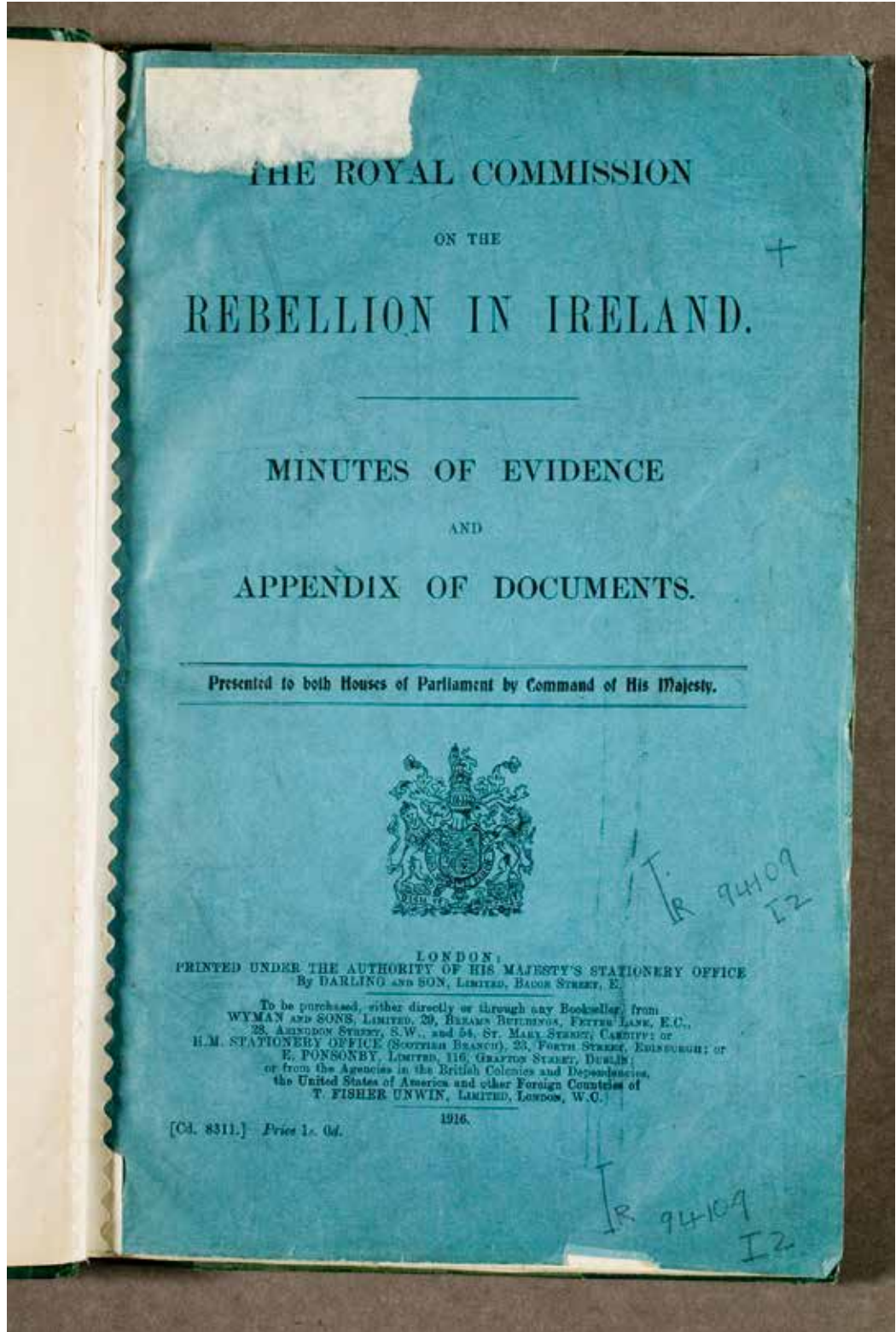
General Sir Lovick Bransby Friend, commander of the forces in Ireland. He was on leave in England when the Rising occurred. (Weekly Irish Times, Sinn Fein Rebellion Handbook, 1917).

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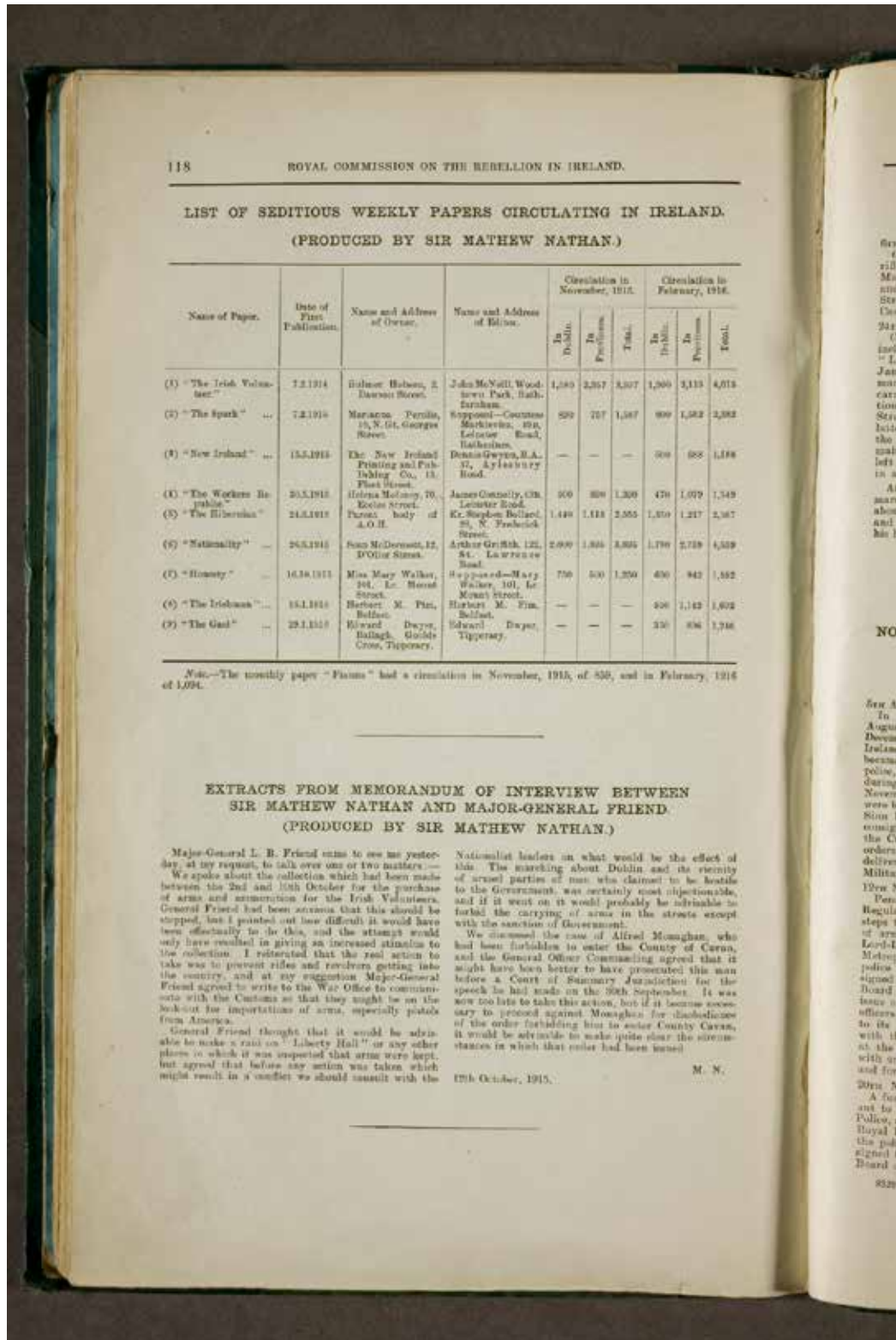
General A.E. Sandbach, Commander of troops in the Dublin area. (Weekly Irish Times, Sinn Fein Rebellion Handbook, 1917).

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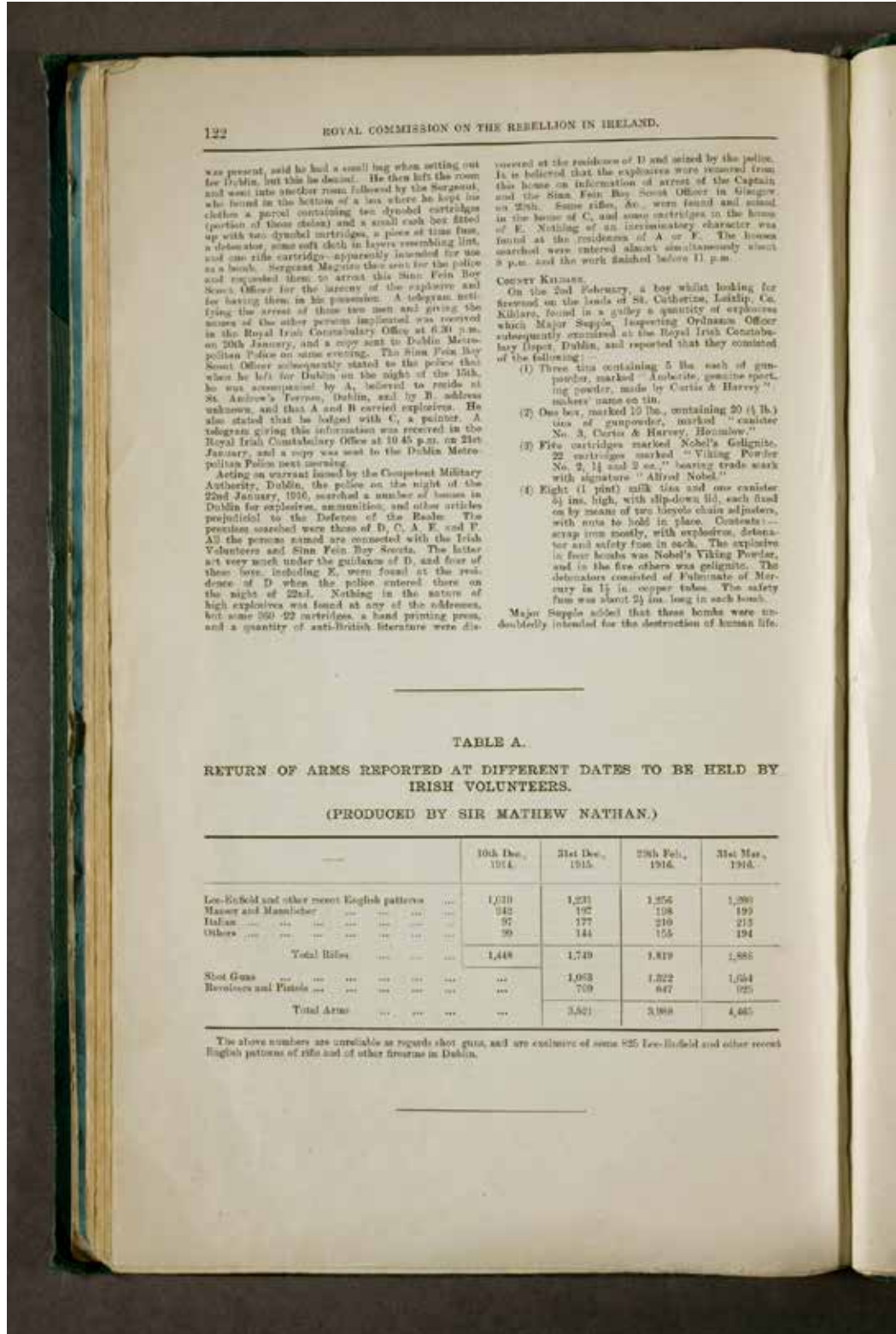
Pages from the minutes of evidence of the Royal Commission on the 1916 Rising. They illustrate aspects of the Dublin administration under Birrell and Nathan.

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was present, said he had a small bag when getting out for Dublin, but this he denied. He then left the room and went into another room followed by the Sergeant, and found in the bottom of a box where he kept his clothes a parcel containing ten dynamite cartridges (portion of those stolen) and a small cash box fitted up with two dynamite cartridges, a piece of time fuse, a detonator, some soft cloth in layers resembling lint, and one rifle cartridge, apparently intended for use as a bomb. Sergeant Maguire then sent for the police and requested them to arrest this Sinn Féin Boy Scout Officer for the larceny of the explosive and for having them in his possession. A telegram notifying the arrest of these two men and giving the names of the other persons implicated was received in the Royal Irish Constabulary Office at 6.30 p.m. on 20th January, and a copy sent to Dublin Metropolitan Police on same evening. The Sinn Féin Boy Scout Officer subsequently stated to the police that when he left for Dublin on the night of the 15th, he was accompanied by A, believed to reside at St. Andrew's Terrace, Dublin, and by B, address unknown, and that A and B carried explosives. He also stated that he lodged with C, a painter. A telegram giving this information was received in the Royal Irish Constabulary Office at 10.45 p.m. on 21st January, and a copy was sent to the Dublin Metropolitan Police next morning.

Acting on warrant issued by the Commanded Military Authority, Dublin, the police on the night of the 22nd January, 1916, searched a number of houses in Dublin for explosives, ammunition, and other articles prejudicial to the Defence of the Realm. The houses searched were those of D, C, A, E, and F. All the persons named are connected with the Irish Volunteers and Sinn Féin Boy Scouts. The latter act very much under the guidance of D, and four of these boys, including E, were found at the residence of D when the police entered there on the night of 22nd. Nothing in the nature of high explosives was found at any of the addresses, but some 250-22 cartridges, a hand printing press, and a quantity of anti-British literature were discovered at the residence of D and seized by the police. It is believed that the explosives were removed from this house on information of arrest of the Captain and the Sinn Féin Boy Scout Officer in Glasgow on 23rd. Some rifles, No. 1, were found and seized in the house of C, and some cartridges in the house of E. Nothing of an incendiary character was found at the residence of A or F. The houses searched were entered almost simultaneously about 8 p.m. and the work finished before 11 p.m.

On the 2nd February, a boy whilst looking for freestone on the lands of St. Catherine, Lixfield, Co. Kildare, found in a gully a quantity of explosives which Major Suggie, Inspecting Ordnance Officer subsequently examined at the Royal Irish Constabulary Depot, Dublin, and reported that they consisted of the following:

- (1) Three tin containing 5 lbs. each of gunpowder, marked "Amberite, genuine rocketing powder, made by Curtis & Harvey" (makers name on tin).
 - (2) One box, marked 15 lbs., containing 20 (4 lbs.) tin of "gunpowder", marked "candler No. 3, Curtis & Harvey, Hounslow."
 - (3) Five cartridges marked "Nobel's Gelignite, 22 cartridges marked "Viking Powder No. 2, 14 and 2 oz." bearing trade mark with signature "Alfred Nobel, Hounslow."
 - (4) Eight (4 pint) milk tins and one canister 5 1/2 ins. high, with all-down lid, each fixed on by means of two bicycle chain adjusters, with nuts to hold in place. Contents:—scrap iron mostly, with explosive, detonator and safety fuse in each. The explosive in four bombs was Nobel's Viking Powder, and in the five others was gelignite. The detonators consisted of Fulminate of Mercury in 1 1/2 in. copper tubes. The safety fuse was about 2 1/2 ins. long in each bomb.
- Major Suggie added that these bombs were undoubtedly intended for the destruction of human life.

TABLE A.

RETURN OF ARMS REPORTED AT DIFFERENT DATES TO BE HELD BY IRISH VOLUNTEERS.

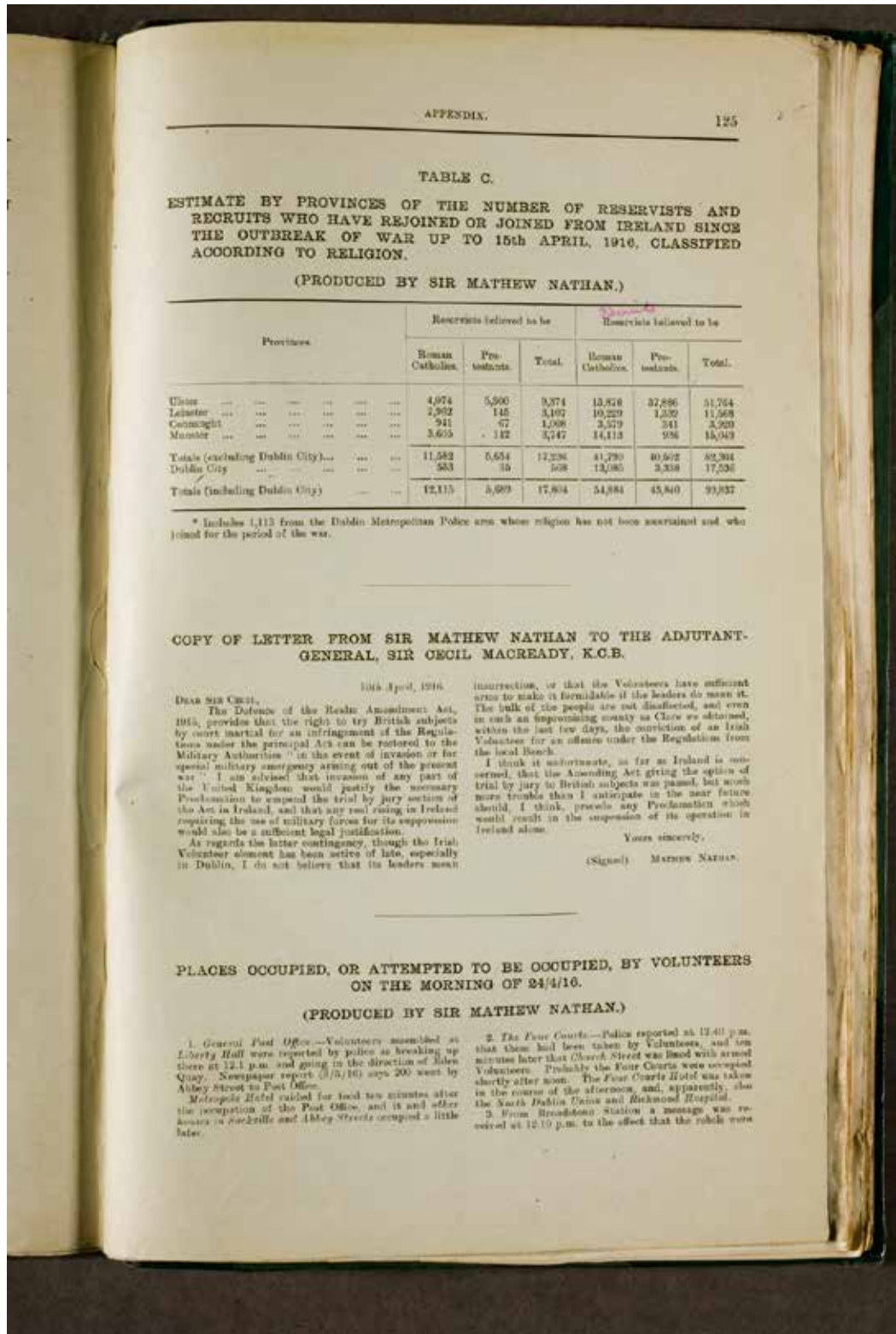
(PRODUCED BY SIR MATHEW NATHAN.)

	10th Dec., 1914.	31st Dec., 1915.	23rd Feb., 1916.	31st Mar., 1916.
Lee-Enfield and other recent English patterns ...	1,010	1,231	1,254	1,280
Mosses and Mannlicher ...	342	192	108	199
Italian ...	97	177	210	213
Others ...	39	144	155	194
Total Rifles ...	1,488	1,744	1,819	1,886
Shot Guns ...	...	1,053	1,022	1,054
Revolvers and Pistols ...	...	709	647	925
Total Arms ...	...	3,511	3,488	4,065

The above numbers are unreliable as regards shot guns, and are exclusive of some 825 Lee-Enfield and other recent English patterns of rifle and of other firearms in Dublin.

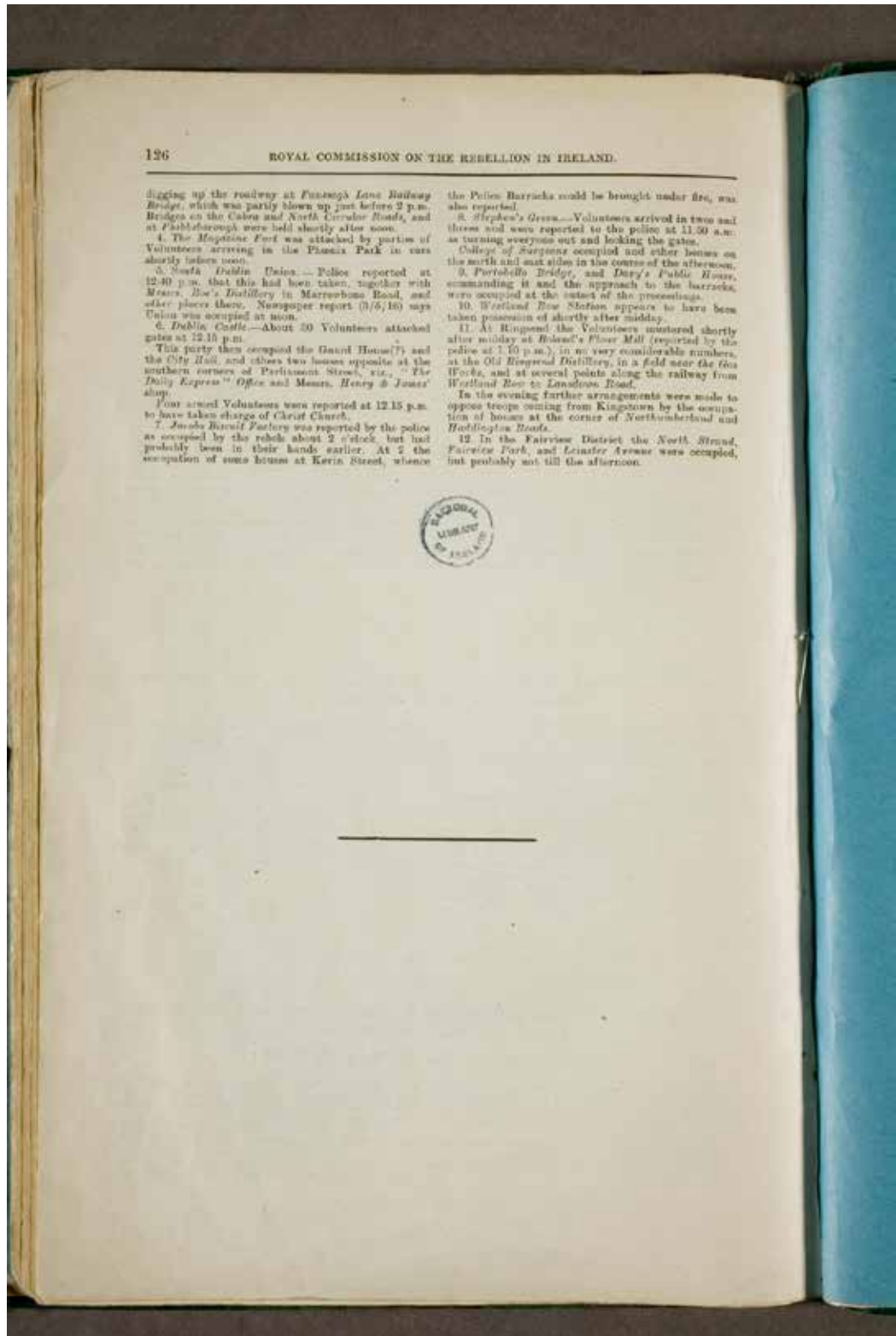
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