

DUNDEE GYMNASIUM FIRE

Worker Charged with Incendiarism

HIGH COURT TRIAL

Considerable public interest was evinced at the resumed sitting of the High Court at Dundee yesterday, when James Weir, 105 Hilltown, Dundee appeared before Lord Ormidale charged with fire-raising. The indictment averred that, on 13th or 14th April the accused willfully set fire to the Public Gymnasium in Ward Road, Dundee, belonging to the Committee of Management of the Dundee Public Gymnasium. Mr J. C. Fenton, Advocate-Depute, assisted by Mr J. G. Wakelin, advocate, conducted the case for the Crown; while Mr R Macgregor Mitchell, advocate, assisted by Mr J. Grafton Lawson, solicitor, appeared for the defence.

William Maurice Burke, City Chamberlain, stated that the Gymnasium was not the property of the Town Council, but was managed by a separate body of trustees, to which he acted as Secretary and Treasurer. He explained how the unemployed were given the use of the hall. In the beginning of April the Gymnasium was wanted in connection with transport facilities arising out of the possibilities of a railway strike. Accordingly, on 8th April he communicated with a Mr Peters, through whom previous correspondence had been conducted by the unemployed for the use of the hall, pointing out that the building was required by the Government. In response to that letter he received a reply, headed "The Industrial Workers' Union, Dundee Branch," in which Mr Peters stated that he was instructed by his Committee to state that the matter had been considered at a special meeting of the Committee, when it was unanimously agreed that they were to retain the hall until such time as they received another hall from the Town Council. He (witness) replied on the 13th April, stating that the premises had to be vacated immediately and the keys returned to him. The following he read in the newspapers that the Gymnasium had been burned down. He had received no reply to that letter. The buildings were insured till Whitsunday 1921 for £4000.

Origin of Fire

Henry Thomson, architect, 11 Ward Road, stated that he examined the ruins very shortly after the fire, as he was appointed to assess the damage on behalf of the trustees. As the result of his examination he was of the opinion that the fire started at the south end of the building in a storeroom. He had estimated the damage at £7000.

John Thomson, labourer, 43 Cochrane Street, stated that he was a member of the Industrial Workers' Union. Dundee was the centre of the movement, and at that time their efforts were confined to the unemployed in Dundee. They obtained the use of the Gymnasium from January till April, holding their meetings in it. When they received the letter ordering them to quit the hall, the Union took up the attitude that they would not give it up until the Town Council gave them another hall. At a special meeting held on Sunday, 10th April, it was unanimously decided to appoint a deputation to interview the Lord Provost on behalf of the Council.

The next meeting held was on the 13th April, when he (witness) was present until about 7.45 in the evening, and then left to attend another meeting. There were about fifty to sixty present that night, and the business discussed was simply about the interview which the deputation had had with the Lord Provost regarding other premises. He (witness) acted as Chairman on that occasion, and the members agreed to leave that matter as it stood until such time as they would know the result of their interview with the Lord Provost. They did not consider at all that night the letter of the 13th which had been received from Mr Burke. After leaving the meeting he did not return to the Gymnasium that night.

Communal Shop

Cross-examined by Mr Mitchell for the defence, Thomson stated that during the time the hall was occupied it was very largely used by the men. They ran a sort of communal shop for their members, selling meat, repairing boots, doing tailoring, and even a barber's shop was conducted in the Gymnasium. In fact, they were doing everything to carry out the objects of the organisation. No one was prohibited from smoking and nearly everybody more or less did smoke.

David Peters, 41 North Street, stated that he acted as Secretary to the Union, which was divided into two sections, those who attended meetings during the day and others who attended at night. With regard to the final letter received from Mr Burke regarding the removal of the unemployed from the premises, that letter was discussed at a meeting held on the evening of the 13th when Thomson acted as Chairman. He left the meeting with Thomson about 7.45 in the evening, and did not return to the Gymnasium that night. They left to attend a Communist meeting in the Hilltown.

The Court adjourned at six o'clock in the evening, and the trial will be resumed again today.