

BOOKS IRELAND

Not Proven

Roger Casement in Irish and World History by Mary Daly; That Day's Struggle: A Memoir 1904-1951 by Seán MacBride; Boer War to Easter Rising: The Writings of John MacBride by Anthony J. Jordan; John MacBride

Review by: Rory Brennan

Books Ireland, No. 286 (Summer, 2006), pp. 143-145

Published by: [Books Ireland](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20632925>

Accessed: 29/03/2013 19:50

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way to Boots' Lending Library because "the librarian has promised to save me the latest Kate O'Brien".

That Kate O'Brien was undoubtedly lesbian no longer matters in the tolerant Ireland of today, unlike the Ireland of her lifetime that banned her fine novel *The Land of Spices* because of a single sentence which the narrow-minded censors held to be 'indecent'.

Not proven

Rory Brennan

IT IS NOT JUST that the ghost of Roger Casement is still knocking at the door; the problem is he won't stop banging. Casement is an enigma and that's what enigmas do best: refuse to go away, like the unwelcome guest. But who set him a-knocking? None but that old sage and mage, W. B. Yeats. He had a line or two for everyone and they stuck like harpoons. No wonder the old Gaelic chiefs feared the bards. Certainly Yeats left a barbed posterity. Is there any poet writing now who could fillet a politician with a bitter couplet? Yeats traded in the key names of his time, harnessing his name to theirs, and not by accident. These ranged from gallant gentlemen to drunken, vainglorious louts. The first refers to Casement, the second to John MacBride. Both manifest themselves here in new books, books being themselves revenant type of things that we readers feel compelled to revisit. Though the figures of his day helped to make Yeats famous, it is now he who confers fame on them, which is another indication of his stature.

The title of this collection of essays has a popular ring to it and describes well the seventeen contributions it contains, most of them originating from a symposium organised by the Royal Irish Academy (RIA) who published this volume. The editor is Mary E. Daly, a professor of history at UCD and author of a rather dull book on Dublin social history. Her introduction is a touch lacklustre too and begins with the dubious contention that Casement is 'probably' the best known of those executed in the aftermath of 1916. Better known than Pearse? Really? Pearse and 1916 are probably the best examples of stimulus-response in Irish history and there is a plethora of these. I suggest Connolly for number two, with the big wind of the trade union movement at his back. Casement third then, hotly chased by MacDonagh but beating MacBride. Keyword searches of library catalogues are scarcely an indication of recognition, popular or otherwise. I suggest Casement Park in Belfast has done more than scholarship to spread his name; the GAA versus the RIA is no contest. In the second paragraph Daly says that Casement's sexuality and the Black Diaries have "undoubtedly added to public interest".

This may be ranked as understatement of the year. Indeed without the homosexuality and the diaries there is almost no Roger Casement: he is simply too good to be true, selfless humanitarian crusader, brave rebel in the nobly-bungling if unfairly judged Robert Emmet tradition, the martyr-hero par excellence. How could such an idealist be a sexual predator? How could a champion of the oppressed flirt with the warmongering Kaiser? How could an Irish nationalist accept a feudal-relic title from the English king? Riddle all

that and more and you have a more fascinating subject than a romantic nationalist or a revolutionary working class socialist. But that does not mean more popular or renowned. We like our heroes to be one-dimensional. Enigmas by definition are multifaceted.

Margaret O'Callaghan covers Casement's ideological formation as a young man in Antrim in the 1880s when he was drawn to Parnell and moved by the struggles of the Land League. She examines his early attempts at verse which were competent at the very least, if in the mannered conventions of the period. Mangan is cited as an influence. They concentrate on the Gaelic resistance to Elizabethan conquest and robustly portray the spirit of "a hunted people", what we might term the dispossessed today. In these poems lay the seeds of his scathing exposure of colonial abuse in the Congo and Brazil.

Frank Callanan gives us a compelling, insightful and finally very sad account of Casement's trial after his famous landing on Banna Strand in Kerry and subsequent rather passive arrest. Most memorable perhaps is the evocation of the ill and frightened - who would not be? - Casement in prison. His defense by the ineffective Serjeant Sullivan must have added to the agony of his ordeal. There are many other excellent offerings on such topics as the Belgian reaction to the Congo revelations, the episode in Brazil, British intelligence files, a recent forensic report on his disputed writings, his relations with the Volunteers 1913-14 and so on. But it is those diaries, their sexual obsessions, their very authenticity that still provide material for habitual and rather sterile debate that can be tiresome, even if it is far above such questions as was-Hamlet-mad or UFO sightings. There is something of an unhappy hunting ground about it. Today the accepted view seems to be that they were the work of Casement. One of the arguments put forward is that the forging of a manuscript of such size was beyond the capacity of the short-staffed British Intelligence at the time. Even the CIA, not exactly short of a bag of tricks or two, never attempted a forgery on such a scale. This volume reevaluates Casement from a variety of perspectives and is unquestionably useful to someone of my generation whose 'essential Casement' was Brian Inglis's 1973 biography. I can locate no biographical list of contributors so one has to guess who is an academic, a barrister or even a mere 'writer'. Also there are too many typos for a government-sponsored scholarly publication. The most hilarious is sumposium. The shades of Myles and Joyce will have a good day.

Seán MacBride is best known for being the founder of the 1940s party Clann na Poblachta, for becoming Foreign Minister at the end of that decade and for being the only ex chief of staff of the IRA who won both the Nobel and Lenin peace prizes. Top that,

That Day's Struggle : a memoir 1904-1951. Seán MacBride. *Currach*. 238 pp + 16 of photos €24.99 £17.50 hb 23 cm

as they say. He was of course the son of John MacBride, executed in 1916 and his mother was 'the beauty' Maud Gonne.

The awkwardness and flatness of the style MacBride employs throughout the memoir is the first hurdle the reader has to face. Happily it is not insurmountable. His early years were French-speaking and his English can often be strangely off-key and his tense sequences are not quite

in order. An example of all this might be his use of 'mad hat'. We do refer to mad hatters but we say a plan or project is 'madcap'. Once the first few pages are diligently if remorselessly turned the reader is captured and the labour is over. We start in Paris where the rector of his school breaks the news that his father has been shot "fighting for the freedom of his country". After a short spell in London, where Maud had to spend time as she was excluded from Ireland, we find the young Seán at UCD and in the IRA with Ernie O'Malley. Already he had met Casement who visited Maud when passing through Paris. So the list of the renowned expands, Constance Markievicz included, but there is no air of name-dropping to all of this. The unsung are recorded as unflappably as the famous. Lennox Robinson and Thomas McGreevy get a mention. The next section covers IRA activity and touches on the prevention of the execution of a mentally deficient 'spy'. The names of Michael Collins and Cathal Brugha come on the scene. MacBride was given the task of organising forces in the Wicklow-Wexford region on the eve of the ceasefire. Next to London where he was given a significant security role by Collins during the Treaty negotiations, then we are into the appalling waste of the Civil War when the unreconciled MacBride was frequently imprisoned. All the time there is plenty of cloak-and-dagger stuff, narrated in the same unadorned style and possibly more credible for that. And all this is combined with study for the bar!

We must fast-forward to the middle years of constitutional politics and MacBride's crucial role in the founding of the Clann and his time as Minister of External Affairs, as the appellation then was. MacBride reveals himself to have been a very capable, informed, versatile, industrious minister and party leader. Here is a world of intrigue, anecdote, judgment and ambition. Perhaps the most significant event at that time was the declaration of the republic, and MacBride has his own convincing slant on that. Noel Browne of course appears and is judged by MacBride as a politician capable of creating an issue with brilliance and then mishandling it with utter folly. In economics MacBride was highly progressive in the face of reprehensible torpor from public figures and public servants alike. The appointment of an economist to his staff was frustrated by the civil service when the candidate, already in situ, was dismissed for failing his Irish exam. Language policy and economic stagnation went hand in hand. MacBride fought hard for other extra staff. In the end he got ten from the Department of Lands or wherever. All were superannuated 'quill pen' wielders. MacBride, needing the dynamic and gifted young, just sent them back.

There are many vignettes of mid-century international figures, Churchill, Attlee, Robert Schuman etc. He gives us a comic portrayal of the pompous British minister Sir Stafford Cripps in Paris where he turned up in tweed plus fours, demanded raw carrots at a gourmet dinner and declared his hobby to be knitting! More seriously, MacBride remained steadfast in his opposition to partition and its degrading persistent abuse of the Northern minority. In the end what threatened to be a dreary read turned into a fascinating and very significant one. There are many other sides to MacBride to be explored, including his rumoured fictional role as the model for Mr Gentleman in an early Edna O'Brien novel. What is certain is that this memoir will endure as a crucial

historical document. The editor Cairiona Lawlor is to be congratulated on her preparation and presentation of the final version.

Who is better known today, MacBride père or fils?

Boer War to Easter Rising: the writings of John MacBride. ed. Anthony J. Jordan. *westportbooks@yahoo.co.uk*. 192 pp €14 pb 0-9524447-6-3.

Perhaps the son pips it in the reputation stakes as the father's name has been sullied by serious charges. The first few words in this book, namely the foreword by Mary MacBride Walsh refute the

allegation of sexual molestation. She points out that twenty-five men marched through Westport, John MacBride's town, in protest against his execution and were imprisoned for it. They were unlikely to do this in favour of a sexual molester. The capacity of a small town to assess character is well known and the status of a molester is always the lowest. His family clearly reject the suggestion and any response that they-would-wouldn't-they seems a particularly mean one.

This book is presented in three sections by its editor Anthony J. Jordan. The first concerns the Irish Brigade in the Boer War, the second the MacBride-Gonne divorce case, the third covers 1916. This seems an appropriate division and frames the book well. The general format is a passage of narrative or a letter with commentary below by Jordan. There are plentiful photographs, those from the Boer War resembling ones from the American Civil War or the Wild West. The cover shows a be-sashed MacBride striking a pose in a wide-brimmed hat and holding what appears to be a spur, though it looks a little like a corkscrew, which should please those wishing to hone in on the 'drunken' part of the 'vainglorious lout' swipe. In others he looks rakish, with a riverboat gambler air typical of the time. Though I am normally the most systematic of readers, a beginning-to-end slogger, I do not adopt this approach with anthologies or volumes of letters. Indeed I doubt if it is a sensible method, never mind a pleasurable one. Here I have dipped, perused, recapped, read many passages more than once and this has provided a rewarding experience.

Three things are immediately striking about this account of the Irish Brigade. First is the gung-ho up-and-at-em language, which has itself an imperial jingoistic ring to it. Next is the frequent denigration of British military courage and competence. Last is the almost total lack of interest in the fate of black Africans, though two feature in one photograph in the role of grooms. It will of course be pointed out that such was the overwhelming attitude of the day. Nearly thirty thousand Irish fought on the British side, a tiny fraction of that against them, but composed of both Protestants and Catholics. An Irish-American soldier of fortune actually commanded the unit, a true swashbuckler called Colonel Blake. No recruit served for money. Early on they captured some Dublin Fusiliers and old schoolmates on both sides cannot have had a very happy reunion. MacBride took over from Blake after the latter was wounded and disputed the casualty-sparing tactics of General Joubert. Names crop up that are familiar from that war, Ladysmith, Colenso, Spion Kop, though the Brigade did not participate in the last of these. There are many sharp skirmishes, sieges, heavy shelling, hard riding as well as celebrations such as Christmas Day and even sports events.

Whatever may be said of MacBride he cannot be accused of lacking courage.

Jordan has written before on the triangle of Yeats, Maud Gonne and MacBride. Hence the point again that Yeats is hardly the most disinterested reporter on these matters. Jordan challenged his version of things in conversation with his authorised biographer, Roy Foster. Jordan may be a voice in the wilderness on this and other points but it should be remembered that voices carry far over lone and level sands. MacBride took part in the Rising by pure chance, bumping into Thomas MacDonagh in Grafton Street, who swept him off to Jacob's factory and appointed him second in command! His typed field commission was on him when he surrendered and the priest who gave him the last rites reported his dignity and equanimity before the firing squad. The jury may still debate the good, the bad and, yes, the ugly about MacBride but the verdict at this stage seems to be the Scottish one of 'not proven'. Jordan has done us a service by bringing these remarkable documents to our attention. □

Over here

Tony Canavan

THE CONNECTIONS between Ireland and America are well known and have played a crucial part in Irish history as the three books reviewed here

The American Presence in Ulster: a diplomatic history 1796-1996. Francis M. Carroll. *Catholic University of America Press.* 295 pp \$29.95 pb 22 cm 0-8132-1420-3.

illustrate. Carroll's book shows that the connections predate the establishment of the United States and that the large presence of Ulster-Irish in America had a lot to do with the establishment of its first Irish consulate in Belfast in 1796. It also had much to do with political considerations since Newry and Derry were bigger ports but the Belfast population had made a name for itself as being radical in politics and a supporter of the American Revolution.

If the book had confined itself to a straight history of the consulate it would have been a short and dull read, no matter how historically important. However, Carroll fills out the book with general and family history as well as material that is not strictly relevant such as the experiences of Ulster people in the USA. As consulates for the most part dealt with commercial matters and only in more recent times developed a diplomatic role, this helps lengthen the book although in truth Carroll says little that cannot be found in other published works such as Jonathan Bardon's excellent history of Ulster.

Nevertheless we do get a detailed account of the consulate and consuls as they observed the great events of Irish history from the 1798 Rebellion through the Great Famine, the struggle for independence and so on up to the Troubles. It is interesting to see these events through the eyes of American officials and likewise to gauge America's view of Irish attitudes to events in the States such as the Civil War. Carroll makes good use of the archive material available and it is interesting to learn, for example, that the consular service was used by the First Dáil as a means of communicating with the US government. It also becomes clear, nevertheless, that the views of the consuls had little influence on government policy. Whatever about Belfast

supporting America in its struggle for independence, successive consuls were not much impressed by the Ulster establishment. From the Orange riots in the nineteenth century to Stormont's violent reaction to the Civil Rights Movement and beyond, successive consuls sent critical reports but, because of Britain's role as America's ally on the international stage, successive US governments (until Bill Clinton) uncritically followed the British line on Ireland, north and south.

Perhaps it was the nature of the job, but the consuls themselves do not come across as an interesting bunch. There were some exceptions such as James MacHenry (consul from 1841 to 1845) who was also a novelist inspired by his time in Belfast to write historical novels set in Ulster, most notably *The Hearts of Steel*. There are some other interesting characters who flit across the book like former President Ulysses S. Grant or Asenath Nicholson, a Protestant evangelical in the mid nineteenth century who campaigned on behalf of Ireland's poor irrespective of religion.

Carroll is on firm ground when dealing with the minutiae of consular activity but not so when dealing with the wider picture. His reliance on already published histories occasionally results in a sour note. For example, he happily buys into the backdating of an 'Ulster Scots' identity and the myth of 'God's frontiersmen' apparently oblivious of their contemporary political resonance. In dealing with reactions to the American Civil War he appears to be unaware of the differences between the Conservative and Liberal press, expressing surprise at varying attitudes. Another problem with the book is the struggle to keep on the Ulster straitjacket. It is somewhat lopsided in concentrating on the province in isolation and Carroll sometimes strains unnaturally against the constraints, for example in referring to Grant's visit to Ulster but revealing *inter alia* that it was a visit to Ireland. At other times too he (unwittingly?) reveals that Belfast was just one part of a consular network covering all of Ireland's major ports and did not exist alone.

Yet I do not want to be too harsh on a well-intentioned book into which a lot of effort has gone. A small voice in my head tells me that I am and so I want to say that while this book is not without its faults, it does fulfil its main intention of giving a history of the consular service in Ulster. It does manage to put this into the wider context of the key historical events in both Ireland and the USA. Added to that it is well written and manages to bring to life what otherwise might have been a dull read.

O'Donnell's book gives us a different view of our relationship with America, that of the emigrant. Irish emigration to the United States in the nineteenth century had one feature which

Your Fondest Annie. Annie O'Donnell. *UCD Press.* 158 pp €18 £13.95 pb 18 cm 1-904558-37-2. *Classics series.*

distinguished it from other European countries and that was the high percentage of women involved. In 1898, for example, the year that Annie O'Donnell left, there were 15,176 women and only 9,952 men travelling to America. Despite this, not much hard evidence has come down to us about the circumstances of their emigration and their new life there. This has been rectified to some degree with the publication of this book which contains all the letters written by one such emigrant to her friend, Jim Phelan, later to be her husband.