

Casement's End

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In the ongoing history war concerning the life and reputation of Roger Casement the main battles are now fought in the archive, *Angus Mitchell writes*. Throughout his life Casement left a labyrinthine trail of papers: some official and classified, others private and seditious. Control of those papers has been critical to his interpretation, the framing of his public understanding and the enduring academic disputes about his relevance to the 1916 Rising.

In 1908, as King Leopold II handed over control of his African colony to the Belgian parliament, he burnt a huge number of papers to do with his terrorising rule over the Congo Free State. The chimney-stacks of the Royal Palace in Brussels billowing smoke from the document-fuelled furnaces was one of the haunting images of Adam Hochschild's bestseller *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998). It can be assumed that much of the incinerated writing related to Casement. The archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brussels, where Belgium's colonial archive is kept, has redacted almost every trace of Casement's script. Fortunately, Britain's National Archive at Kew kept copies of much of his official correspondence directed to Leopold's administrators. So we still know much of what happened.

But in 1914, when the British authorities were faced with Casement's treason, and the inconvenient truths it revealed, they adopted the same method. A few days after his execution, a large body of papers was burned by Britain's most senior police officer, Basil Thomson, one of the three intelligence chiefs, was assigned the task of planning Casement's capture, interrogation and public downfall. Other collections of papers have been seized, intercepted or simply disappeared. An inventory of Casement papers drawn up in the 1950s appears to show that official Casement correspondence to do with his trial was still being sanitised forty years after his execution. Those who sympathised with Casement held onto his papers hoping that a different political climate would eventually allow the man to be understood in a less toxic atmosphere.

Recently, an antiquarian book dealer in London placed the papers of Robert Lynd up for sale. Lynd is considered to be one of the finest Irish essayists of the twentieth century. He was also a leading organiser of the Gaelic League in England. This work brought him into contact with Casement and the two men corresponded for many years. Lynd and his wife, Sylvia Dryhust, were part of that productive group of progressive writers and artists based in London who tied their flag to the mast of Irish cultural nationalism in defiance of British imperial tub-thumping. The Casement-Lynd correspondence demonstrates how busy the group were in promoting the cause of Ireland abroad. For many years afterwards the Gaelic League and Sinn Féin Club in London were named in Casement's honour.

On December 21st, 2012, the National Library of Ireland decided to release in open digital format a file of Casement papers that had sat for over sixty years on the "Not for Consultation" shelf [available at <http://bit.ly/Tut6Ud>]

There was some material already familiar to those who know their way around the Casement archive. His "Brief to Counsel", dictated over two days while a prisoner in the Tower of London,

was the nearest Casement came to writing a biography. A long statement detailing yet one more version of the shenanigans in Norway in October 1914, when the British minister attempted to buy the loyalty of Casement's companion, Adler Christensen, and have the Irish rebel assassinated. Parallels with the recent official inquiry into Pat Finucane's murder would suggest that a culture of officially denied assassination has been part of British policy towards Irish troublemakers for at least a century. There is also an interesting note on John Philip Holland, the Fenian inventor of the submarine. Casement's own return to Ireland was an intentional reference to this product of Irish ingenuity.

The most personally revealing documents are the four last letters addressed to his beloved cousins Gertrude and Elizabeth Bannister [August 2nd] "It is the women who have saved me and made me happy," he wrote in a final reflection on his trial. The emotional charge belongs at times to another dimension. He speaks at length about various spiritual questions, the loyalty of his friends and his last appearance in the court of Criminal Appeal. Two of the letters are written on the blank sides of correspondence received from friends, as the prison authorities severely restricted Casement's access to paper after his conviction for treason at the end of June.

My regards to Eva too - it was kind of her to come - and I hope she did not get ill. She looked ill I thought. I am so sorry for her, for her sister's sake and her own grief. Who was the lady who sat near the painter in the jury box? ... I thought I knew her face, it was very sad and I keep on trying to remember. [July 18th, to Gertrude Bannister)

Eva Gore Booth was one of many women who stood loyally beside Casement and wrote poetically of his end. The mystery face referred to was Hazel Lavery, wife of the painter John Lavery.

In another letter he categorically expressed a wish to be buried in Murlough Bay, in the Glens of Antrim, and not in Glasnevin, where he was reinterred in 1965.

Don't let my body lie here - get me back to the green hill at Murlough, by the McGarry's house, looking down on the Moyle, that's where I'd like to be now, and there's where I'd like to lie. [Elizabeth Bannister, July 25th)

In 1928, a stone Celtic cross was erected to Casement in Murlough Bay, by the McCarry family, but over the years it was regularly vandalised by paramilitaries and the B-Specials. When I visited Murlough in 1998 only the stub of the plinth was still visible, but that too was blown up in about 2002. Casement's bones will probably never make it back to Murlough, but surely it would be fitting to remember his human rights work with some kind of appropriate memorial in Ulster, the part of Ireland to which he felt the greatest loyalty. This could be justified in the current climate as an instance of "shared history"; one that Loyalists and Republicans might jointly remember. It is often forgotten that Henry Grattan Guinness, the evangelical divine involved in Ulster's Great Awakening of 1859, and a lifelong hero of Ian Paisley (Lord Bannside), was closely involved in the founding of the Congo Reform Association. Casement always saw the bigger picture for humanity and fought against the bitter pettiness born of sectarian posturing.

In two of these last letters, he refers to a large archive of papers left with Joe McGarrity "at St Joseph's" - this included many of his propaganda writings, the seditious papers brought from William Joyce and his poems.

In a letter of July 30th, where several names are encrypted, he categorically asks to have his writings *The Crime against Europe and other essays* collected and published posthumously. Casement believed that his political writings would ultimately vindicate his action. "Remember it is *The Crime against Europe* that is the key to all recent doings in Ireland," he claimed with some

justification. Certainly, the essays make a convincing case as to why Irishmen should not fight in defence of the British Empire.

Read today, a hundred years on, the essays still cut against the grain of public and academic consensus and those devoutly held myths about the justice of a war that united us in nothing but a sense of tragic waste. In 1914, Casement believed that the conflict was less a consequence of Prussian militarism and a psychologically unstable Kaiser, but more the outcome of years of British diplomatic duplicity and a sustained propaganda campaign in Britain intended to stir up anti-German feelings in the press. His perspective shifts the blame from a German-centred culpability towards a view that the war was a counter-revolutionary strike fought for British imperial interests and to escape a rapidly deteriorating domestic state of affairs in Ireland.

Over the next few years we can expect a deluge of studies on the causes of the First World War. Most of these will continue to overlook *The Crime against Europe* and ignore the place of Ireland in the wider scheme of European relations in 1914. Historians writing from national perspectives have never been comfortable about including Casement in the political narrative of 1914-18. Irish historians too have kept him on the periphery of most analysis of the Rising.

Will this now change?

In recent years, Casement has been deservedly recognised as a critical voice in the forging of a language of human rights that now informs our world. Will his intervention in the First World War in due course allow for his inclusion as a truly European intellectual?