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***Roger Casement: 16 Lives by Angus Mitchell review: an excellent effort***

Angus Mitchell, the foremost authority on Casement, has written a superlative book about the humanitarian pioneer and Irish patriot, writes Frank MacGabhann

One of the treats of this book is that the inside front cover is a fold-out colour reproduction of John Lavery’s wonderful painting of the trial, High Treason, and the inside back cover is another foldout with a key to who’s who in the painting, as well as a reproduction of the 1916 Proclamation. Photograph: UK Government Art Collection

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Book Title: 16 Lives: Roger Casement

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Author: Angus Mitchell

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It goes without saying that Roger Casement, whose remains rest uneasily in Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin, is the most enigmatic of all of the leaders executed by the British in 1916. Born in Dublin but raised in Co Antrim, this Ulsterman was in 1916, apart from George Bernard Shaw and WB Yeats, the best-known Irishman in the world, eagerly received by heads of state and government.

The author, Angus Mitchell, is the foremost authority on Casement and has written a number of previous books and scholarly articles on him, including editing and annotating Casement’s own journals. This latest work is yet another excellent effort. He has been able to make use of material released by the National Library in December 2012.

Probably the first recognisable humanitarian organisation was the Congo Reform Association, founded by Casement and ED Morel in March 1904. It is no exaggeration to say that Casement and Morel practically invented humanitarianism. There had always been charity towards those affected by war, but this was different. This was a systematic attempt by citizens of one state to force a change in the policy of terror being waged by another European state against a defenceless people.

It seems difficult at this remove to believe, but in 1885 the European imperial powers met in Berlin and literally carved up the map of Africa. Even Spain, Belgium and little Portugal got in on the act, along with, of course, Britain, France. Italy and Germany. The United States attended as an observer, presumably to ensure that one of them would not annex the formally independent Liberia. Incredibly, the Congo was “given”, not to Belgium (unjustifiable in itself), but to King Leopold of Belgium himself in his personal capacity! By 1900 European powers occupied about 90 per cent of the continent.

One only has to read Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness to imagine what it must have been like for Casement, a young man from Antrim, to enter that world of the Congo in the 1880s. Initially working for an export company based in Liverpool, his conscience began to tell him that what was happening was wrong.

The author makes the point that as early as 1994, a full decade before the founding of the Congo Reform Association, Casement was supplying information on abuses in the Congo to incipient humanitarian initiatives. In 1903 as a consular official, he was directed by the British government to investigate the torture, bodily mutilation and enslavement of Africans forced to work on rubber plantations to line King Leopold’s pockets. At great personal risk to himself, he travelled deep into the upper Congo River basin to take statements and photographs. In exposing the reign of terror and murder there, he became Belgium’s Public Enemy No 1 and the object of a campaign of vilification. It would not be the last such campaign of vilification.

The book’s main thesis is that Casement saw and made clear in his writings that his engagement with Irish nationalism was “connected to a much wider understanding of human liberation based on internationalism and anti-colonial struggle”. In this respect Casement was closer to James Connolly (who respected Casement’s work) than to any of the other 1916 leaders or, indeed, to any subsequent Irish political leader other than Frank Aiken, who took the lead in the UN in respect of the decolonialisation of Africa and Africa many years later

One of the virtues of this book is that the author quotes extensively from Casement’s own writings, including:

“There are two ways of seeing the interior of the Congo State – either blindfolded or looking for the facts affecting the social condition of the natives under the veneer of European officialdom which had imposed itself upon them. I chose to look for the facts.”

The author also includes in an appendix Casement’s answer in its entirety to the report of the British historian, James Bryce, of German atrocities in Belgium, entitled, The Far-Extended Baleful Power of the Lie, published in Germany in 1915. Bryce had carried out his inquiry in England. Inter alia, Casement wrote: “I have investigated more bona fide atrocities at close hand than possibly any other living man. But unlike Lord Bryce, I have investigated them on the spot, from the lips of those who had suffered, in the very places were perpetrated, where evidence could be sifted . . .” Anyone who thinks that Casement simply got carried away with the romantic notion of nationalism should read his own words and, indeed, this book. His cold analysis is there for all to see.

According to the author, Casement was from his teens an Irish nationalist. At his trial, the British tried to portray his emergence as an Irish republican as a lunatic change of heart. This, according to the author, is at the heart of the British decision to blacken his name. It was too much for the British to accept that someone who was a world touchstone for decency and morality, someone who had accepted a knighthood from them, someone who was courted by world leaders, someone who knew the British imperial system from the inside with all its machinations, dirty and clean, could spit in their faces and use his huge prestige and knowledge to seek the independence of his country from them. From 1913 onwards, Casement was a marked man, followed and spied upon.

In particular, he was an Ulster Irish republican. He made a point of linking up with other Protestants from the north, including Jack White, Alice Milligan and Bulmer Hobson, to counter the introduction of partition. The author’s account of a republican meeting in Ballymoney in 1913 with Jack White and other Protestant republicans illustrates the difficulties that they had in this respect. He believed strongly that Ulster with its two traditions was central to the making of the Republic.

Republicans in Ireland could not believe their good fortune when it became apparent that Casement was just as serious about oppression in Ireland as he was about oppression in the Congo and in the Amazon. From 1904 until he was marched to the scaffold in 1916, Casement worked unceasingly for, and spent practically all of his spare money on, the separatist cause in all of its aspects: cultural, linguistic, propagandistic and, of course, military.

The author does not spare Casement criticism for his poor judgement at times, especially for choosing the Norwegian, Adler Christensen, to accompany him to Germany. He was a British agent, who would later squeeze money out of John Devoy while Casement was still in Germany.

Casement’s final journey to Ireland is well known. Disillusioned by his time in Germany and intending to contact Eoin O’Neill to call off the Rising for lack of German arms, he was put ashore by a German submarine near Banna Strand in Kerry at 3am on the morning of Good Friday, April 21st and subsequently arrested. He would be in London when the Rising began. Not for Casement a summary court-martial that the other leaders got. This was a decorated officer of the British Empire turned traitor. Unlike Clarke and Connolly and the others, he was to get the full measure of British justice before the eyes of the world. And more.

Even though Devoy believed that Casement had exercised very poor judgement and become a liability since leaving New York for Germany in 1914, he paid Casement’s legal fees for the trial and appeal out of his own pocket. Casement broke down in tears when he was handed Devoy’s cheque for $5,000 in prison. Despite the strong criticisms he had about Casement’s actions in Germany and his contacting of O’Neill, Devoy never doubted his sincerity and, after calling him “one of Ireland’s noblest sons”, paid Casement a further moving tribute in his Recollections of an Irish Rebel: “He was one of the most sincere and single-minded of Ireland’s patriot sons with whom it was my great privilege to be associated. His name will ever have a revered place on the long roll of martyrs who gave their lives that Ireland might be free.”

And now, the Black Diaries. The author deals with these documents in a masterful final chapter entitled, History as Mystery: An Inside Story. In my opinion, this chapter is worth being published on its own. The author had previously published works that comprehensively and contextually examined the Black and genuine diaries and come to the firm conclusion on a textual analysis that the Black Diaries are forgeries. The current book (and especially that chapter) deals more with Casement’s position internationally at the time and why the British felt it necessary to invent the Black Diaries and blacken his name. The author then goes on to consider Casement’s legacy, particularly in the context of the struggle for decolonisation in the 20th century and human rights in this century.

The author writes: “Once Casement’s treason had been identified, the challenge to the British authorities was intricately bound up with controlling his narrative. In the century that has passed since his death, it is evident that an internal policy had evolved whereby Casement’s story was framed and manipulated for public consumption. Through a mix of officially agreed deception, the engineering of his archive, and the maintenance of a policy of confusion, his history was shaped in a manner that was amenable to a retreating British Empire and a partitioned Ireland.” In an even wider context, the author also makes the point in the Introduction that “[Casement’s] legacy also obliges us to think about the ethics of international trade, slavery and his relevance to the modern discourse of human rights.”

Any good lawyer can tell you that handwriting analysis is notoriously unreliable because it is ultimately subjective. Invariably, when used in court, each side brings in his own expert and swears to opposite conclusions. Add to that in Casement’s case, the British have never allowed any objective forensic or scientific examination of the paper or the ink. Why not? In 1916 the British showed pages of typescript purporting to be in Casement’s handwriting to journalists. They were not allowed to keep them. If the Black Diaries were genuine, why did the British not simply photograph the actual handwritten pages and give the journalists the photographs to keep?

Fingerprinting in criminal trials in England began in 1902. By 1916 it was well established there. In fact, fingerprinting in 1916 was the DNA of its day. Why did Basil Thompson and Reginald Hall, spymasters that they were, not test the Black Diaries for Casement’s fingerprints? If they had found Casement’s prints on the Black diaries, it would have been game, set and match for them. The clear inference to be drawn from this failure (and what any defence lawyer would be delighted to put to a jury) is that they knew that Casement’s fingerprints would not be on the Black Diaries – for the simple reason that were forgeries – their own forgeries. The one thing that Thompson and Hall have never been accused of is negligence in their work. Ask the suffragettes, Mata Hari, the Indian nationalists and the British leftists whom they pursued.

Even apart from the fingerprints, why would a diplomat who knew the murky world of secret agents and the importance of written documents for evidential purposes not destroy those documents before embarking on a treasonable expedition? It beggars belief that someone of Casement’s political acumen, as is evident in even the brief excerpts cited above, would leave such incriminating diaries in London for the police to find.

From a legal point of view the trial itself was a travesty of justice. Casement was convicted under the Treason Act 1351, an Act written in Norman French with no punctuation, as was the norm at the time. The Act had been interpreted for centuries as only applying to treasonable deeds carried out on English soil, not abroad. The English Court of Appeal called for an examination of the original parchment, then well over 500 years old, on which the Act had been written. A faint mark was found on the parchment, which was probably a bit of dirt. The judges somehow found that the mark was a comma, which enabled them to find that the Treason Act also applied to treasonable deeds carried out abroad. Hence the dictum that Casement was “hanged for a comma”. These days lawyers would call it a stitch-up.

The author also does his readers and the people of Ireland the service of introducing to an new generation the name of Alice Stopford Green, the “now-forgotten High Priestess of the Irish Revolution”, in the author’s words. The first female member of the Senate of the Free State, she was born in Kells, Co Meath where her father was the Church of Ireland rector. She was a historian, republican, political activist and Howth gun runner who deserves to be much more widely known. A loyal friend, she attended Casement’s trial and appeal.

One of the treats of this book is that the inside front cover is a fold-out colour reproduction of John Lavery’s wonderful painting of the trial, High Treason, and the inside back cover is another fold-out with a key to who’s who in the painting, as well as a reproduction of the 1916 Proclamation.

Angus Mitchell has written a superlative book that demonstrates, among other things, Casement’s generosity. Fifty years ago in 1966 the British government showed generosity in transferring his remains to Ireland. Now it is up to the British government to continue that generosity and admit the truth about the Black Diaries. In 2016 all the principals are dead, including all those who knew where the bodies were, and still are, buried. Is it not time to close this sordid chapter? Then all that would remain would be to re-inter Roger Casement’s bones where he in life wanted them to rest in death – in his beloved Antrim clay. I heartily recommend this book.

**Frank MacGabhann is a lawyer and commentator**