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***Getting Casement right: the early influences***

**by Jeffrey Dudgeon**

To know why Casement became a revolutionary Irish separatist requires learning as much about his family’s dynamics as about Irish history. Indeed knowing a person’s parental history and their early upbringing, explains more than most political analysis.

Roger David Casement was born in Sandycove near Dublin, the son of Captain Roger Casement of the 3rd Light Dragoons and the youngest of four children. His father served in the 1st Afghan War, and was for three years, until 1858, a Captain in the North Antrim Militia – not a force with a kindly reputation when dealing with the 1798 United Irish rebellion. The Captain was from Belfast, his own father, Hugh, having a shipping business in the city until it failed in 1842 when he emigrated to Australia. Casement’s great grandfather, a solicitor, also Roger, who had been the land agent for Lord Massereene, lived at Magherintemple in Ballycastle while the family also had Ballymena connections.

The boy's mother, Anne Jephson, contrary to widespread belief, was a member of the Church of Ireland. She was baptised in St George's Church in Hardwicke Place under the spelling ‘Jepson’ which has misled and confused researchers. Her own mother, Jane, was something of a progressive and for many years ran a Ladies Seminary in the north of the city. Anne did later convert to Roman Catholicism and had her three boys secretly baptised as such in north Wales in 1868. Roger's upbringing however was Anglican and largely in London, and it was not the best.

Its dysfunctional nature is highlighted by the appearance in court in 1876 of Thomas aged 13 and Roger aged 11 on a charge of book stealing from a newsvendor in York Road, Lambeth. The boys had admitted “they took the books to make money of, as they had none.” As the Morning Post reported on 26 January, “The prisoners’ father, a respectable-looking man, here came forward, and said he could not account for the lads taking the books unless it was to pay for the loan of them some other day. They were inveterate readers of juvenile literature…He allowed his boys money to buy books and would have paid for them. He believed that the showy covers and sensational titles attracted their attention and desire to read them. He assured his worship that they were not thieves.” Their father, described as a captain in the militia residing in South Lambeth, was ordered to enter into recognisances for their future conduct.

The family’s perpetual moving resembles in many ways the upbringing of an Irish contemporary, James Joyce, for whom such instability was to work its way through, and out, in his writing. Without such a problematic family background, complicated by the early deaths of his parents it is unlikely Casement would have become a rebel who was searching for a better and different background, and a new family, nor indeed have been a homosexual. And it was the fact of him being gay and having no children of his own that enabled him to be a campaigner of such note, and an enthusiast for Irish separatism.

Anne died of liver disease in Worthing when he was nine and the boy was an orphan by twelve when his father, who had returned, penniless, to live in Ballymena, died of TB in the town’s Adair Arms Hotel. After little or no formal education in London, Roger started at the Diocesan School in the town (now Ballymena Academy) and was cared for by a number of distant relatives, including two John Youngs, one of Galgorm Castle where he spent his holidays, the other of Wellington Street, Ballymena where he stayed.

His uncle in Ballycastle, John Casement, was his formal guardian and it was that town (and the house, ‘Magherintemple’) which Roger saw as his home, and his Irish inspiration – certainly not Ballymena – and to which he regularly returned. None the less, no money was found to educate him further, despite his academic prowess and at the age of 15 he was sent to Liverpool to the home of his mother's sister Grace.

Her husband, Edward Bannister, worked for a shipping company, and was a merchant and later a consul in Angola and the Congo. His nephew, eerily, followed exactly in his footsteps in both Africa and Brazil. Indeed they had the same outlook and campaigning zeal although Edward lost his Congo job when he took on King Leopold’s regime where Casement prospered.

Roger was initially a purser with the Elder Dempster line. He worked in the Congo for Leopold, then for the Sanford Exploring Expedition where he came into contact with Joseph Conrad, and even on a Baptist Mission. In 1892, he joined the staff of the Survey Department at Old Calabar and became assistant Director of Customs in the Niger Coast (Oil Rivers) Protectorate, and then an acting vice-consul. This was his first employment in the consular service and led to his celebrated career as the Foreign Office’s special investigator.

Politically Casement was very early a committed nationalist and a teenage Parnellite despite F.E. Smith describing it as “sudden in origin” at his trial. After the South African War, in which he served, and under the influence of Alice Stopford Green and other Africanists, this transmuted into separatism and anti-Anglo imperialism which fitted neatly with his own youthful, and his parental family’s opinions on Ireland.

Casement’s mother, Anne Jephson, being born a Roman Catholic had been a moot point. The notion of her cradle Catholicism – accepted and emphasised by Casement – was disputed by his cousin Gertrude Bannister who wrote that Roger’s mother “though brought up a Protestant became a Catholic when her children were still young”, and, revealingly, explained the reasons: “Her father was a Catholic and her mother a Protestant and as was usual in those days the daughter of a mixed marriage followed the religion of their mother. Anne was brought up a Protestant but the warmth of her nature and a certain emotional strain revolted from the coldness of the Protestant faith and shortly after her marriage she found the Catholic faith…The Casements had in all eleven children but only four survived infancy…Anne Casement’s nature was too expansive, too beauty loving, too vivacious to find consolation in a religion that cramped, that denied, that suppressed and so she joined the Catholic Church.” Gertrude’s memory was correct as recent evidence from digitised records show Anne was a Protestant.

When asked by his friends Col Berry and his wife Georgina Hannay in 1912 to become a godfather to their son Casement wrote, “With regard to the christening of the boy and your kind thought of me as godfather I fear it is not possible. I am not a member of that church to begin with – and I think that is essential. The only Christian Church in this country, in my opinion, is the Roman Catholic church.” After much more in the same vein, he continued “It is a horrid and silly sham…I mean the Godfathering and Godmothering of the English Protestant Churches in their various aliases I never set foot inside those Churches – and never will, please God, while they preach intolerance.”

Roger Casement wasn’t really an Ulsterman or indeed a Protestant, as he said himself. And he had no empathy for the Scots Presbyterian people of Antrim. He was a Catholic nationalist, in so far as he was a believer at all, and a separatist ideologue. His background explains the direction his political path took, the successes and failures, and his rebellious personality.

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Part II

***Roger Casement: Conspirator or Campaigner?***

Frank MacGabhann in his review of *Roger Casement: 16 Lives* by Angus Mitchell (*Irish Times* website 15 February) is uncontained in his enthusiasm for the biography. It is about the tenth on Casement to date, which indicates the public’s fascination with the man. Indeed, in the just-issued second edition of my book, *Roger Casement: The Black Diaries,* I list some fifty more items related to him, published or broadcast and that is since 2002.

There is no end to the torrent of writing, which is appropriate in one sense, in that Casement could not stop writing himself; something which led to serious reputational damage for decades. This failing was remarked upon, even in 1916, in a rare piece of humour, when Irish Brigade Captain Monteith, forwarding letters to Casement in his Munich sanatorium, cautioned him, “I am afraid you are going to start writing again and if I was sure of it, I would not send on these things – a spade and a garden rake would be better.” (NLI 13085/24, 1 February)

*Roger Casement: 16 Lives* is however marred by an emphasis on conspiracy, as the major force doing Casement down – then, and even now. For example, Mitchell writes (p. 192-3), that Casement “involved himself in various conspiracies against British administration in Ireland [which] would eventually leave him vulnerable to counter conspiracies. Fostering such nefarious intrigue merely antagonised his diminishing support in the British government and has alienated Casement from straightforward historical treatment because conspiracy is mainly unacceptable within the parameters of academic study and the history sanctioned at an official government level.”

This may indeed be a cry from the heart but it is so ill-grounded as to be risible. Casement was a campaigner, an activist in modern parlance, and an organiser. He may have worked in secret at times, but that is true of all campaigners. He certainly crossed the line, beyond what was acceptable as a Foreign Office employee, but he had permission from the advanced Liberal element in government to break the rules. His involvement in the commissioning of arms in 1914 and their importation by the Irish Volunteers at Howth was on the edge of legality – as were the Ulster Volunteer Force’s actions at Larne. However neither was a conspiracy in that they were policy decisions of public organisations. At the outbreak of war, Casement simply changed sides and worked openly for, and later in, Imperial Germany.

The Easter Rising bears closest comparison to a conspiracy, in that it was decided on by an unknown inner cell of the IRB, itself a secret, oath-bound group within the Irish Volunteers. But Casement was in neither the IRB nor its inner cell. The rebellion of course was the near-inevitable consequence of the organising and arming of the Irish Volunteers. The UVF was not to be tested in Ulster, rather along the Somme in July 1916 (and in the North in the early 1920s). Armies tend to go to war. It is their organisation in the first place that is the critical decision and Casement had a huge part to play in the formation of the Irish Volunteers (the first *Oglaigh na Éireann*).

Angus Mitchell is consumed by a mammoth sense of something Italians call *dietrologia*, that what matters is under the surface. No government employee or academic acts, except consciously and secretly, to serve their masters’ interests. This is how he can seriously suggest the shadowy forces around British Intelligence, and in key universities, did not just forge the diaries in 1916. Instead they worked at them for a further “forty-three years to perfect the look until they were suitable to be made available in the Public Record Office in 1959.” (p. 120, *Phases of a Dishonourable Fantasy,* Field Day Review 2012)

There is a better defence of Casement than endless recitation of conspiracy. It involves seeing him as a coherent, if Anglophobic, separatist who, for right or wrong reasons, and going with the grain of much Irish sentiment was able to warn of the coming clash of Empires in the First World War. He was also someone who foresaw, indeed argued for, a British Commonwealth and a different European balance of power, perhaps even a Union. And he organised resistance to the British Empire to the point of the Easter Rising, briefly regretted his actions, and then, at trial and after death, saw the project of an independent Ireland coming to fruition.

Casement’s diaries and the authenticity dispute are the source and origin of the mystifying tradition. To avoid attributing authorship to their hero, otherwise reasonable people felt obliged to buy in to a farrago of corrosive conspiracy theories. De Valera wisely tried to ignore the diaries. Casement’s solicitor, George Gavan Duffy, who knew the reality of Casement’s homosexuality, having disposed of trunks of his papers in 1915, worked tirelessly to damp down mention of the matter. Other, lesser, people chose a different path, one of diary denial. That, oddly, became the enemy of Casement’s reputation and of his key political work of deconstructing English imperialism. Even his humanitarian achievements in the Congo and Peru have been shaded by the dispute.

His worst error was in relation to Ulster where he persisted in believing the Protestant people were bluffing or even momentarily misled. This is exemplified by a particularly silly speech he made on 2 August 1914 when he told his Philadelphia audience, “Why a friend of mine, a Fenian, [Patrick McCartan] loaned his motor car eight weeks ago to help in the gun running from Larne, and he'll do it again when his Protestant neighbors ask the loan of it. One good turn deserves another, and I look to the day – and not far distant day – when Ulster Orangemen and. Munster Nationalists will run guns together for the common defence of the shores of Ireland, and when all Irishmen will march under one banner and show the world at length, that Thomas Davis’s words have been fulfilled and that Orange and Green have carried the day.” (NYPL Maloney IHP Box 2).

If he believed such, and he did at times, he was seriously deluded. The result of his separatist policies turned out to be a century of partition and a 26-county state called Ireland.

MacGabhann in his review calls Adler Christensen, Casement’s sociopathic companion who twice betrayed him, “a British agent”, as if he was London’s creature instead of someone who called in on British diplomatic missions unannounced, trying to make money out of his knowing Casement was gay, and then changing his mind about further betrayal. Adler certainly alerted London to the fact of his homosexuality but they made nothing of it until the diaries were handed in to Scotland Yard, after the Banna Strand landing.

MacGabhann argues that Mitchell has “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.” Well he hasn’t. He has simply picked holes in them by finding in the thousand daily entries a small number of peculiarities and inconsistencies. If the handwriting analysis has not silenced doubters, I doubt MacGabhann’s unlikely proposal of fingerprinting them will have any effect, whatever the result.

It is a matter of belief for deniers and nothing will change their mind although the total lack of evidence of their forgery should convince many. He also calls on the British government to “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?” MacGabhann is here guilty of Mitchell’s mistake of actually making Casement about the diaries, to the exclusion of discussion of his achievements and errors. The “sordid chapter” will therefore continue to be written.