***16 Lives: Roger Casement*, by Angus Mitchell (O’Brien Press)**

**Review by Michael Carragher in Living History**

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<http://livinghistory.ie/viewtopic.php?f=18&t=2111#p15583>

This book describes in detail the work of a great humanitarian. It gives a very moving account of his trial and last days, but all told it is far more hagiography than history, and ultimately proves disappointing.

It contains a number of “terminological inexactitudes” and misunderstandings: Churchill’s famous retort to Baldwin, “I shall write ... history” (p. 366) has a double meaning that Mr Mitchell misses. Edward Carson never prosecuted Oscar Wilde (p. 84), and the “parallels” Mr Mitchell sees between Casement’s and “the trial and public humiliation of both Charles Stewart Parnell and Oscar Wilde” (p. 330) are hard to find. Wilde brought his trial and humiliation on himself by his hubris, and it was Parnell’s arrogance that led to his humiliation by his own party after he was cited in a civil divorce court. There is no evidence of British state machinations in either of those cases, unlike in Casement’s.

We find more such inexactitudes: the “letter of sympathy [the Kaiser sent] to Kruger, which aroused fierce reaction in England” was in fact a telegram of congratulations on the defeat of the Jameson Raid “without appealing to the help of friendly powers”, and the reason it aroused reaction was because of its implicit offer of German support for the Boers. Winston Churchill’s “support for the leaders of the Ulster Volunteer Force” will raise the chuckles if not the hackles of historians who know about his support for Home Rule—albeit qualified and conditional—and the physical attack made on him by Loyalists because of his speech to Nationalists in Celtic Park. Perhaps Mr Mitchell was thinking of Sir Winston’s long-dead father?

Perhaps, too, concerns other than historical exactitude may exercise Mr Mitchell. His presentation of Carson as persecutor of another Irishman may constitute deliberate “poisoning of the well”; later an “associative fallacy” implies that somehow Carson was engaged in the Crown’s prosecution of Casement. Indeed every well from which any of Casement’s opponents might drink is subtly poisoned. That IPP members refused to condemn the King of the Belgians on religious grounds may well be right; but did all of them do so? And why no end-noted source for this claim? Mention of “Britain’s lucrative slave trade” in the eighteenth century has no more relevance to Casement’s concerns with humanitarian horrors in the twentieth-century Belgian Congo than the fact that Leopold II was “a first cousin of Queen Victoria”. Such nugatory sly remarks evoke an intelligent reader’s distrust of their author.

It is not at all clear why the Putamayo atrocities would destroy Casement’s “beliefs in the ‘civilising’ potential of the British Empire”. Putamayo was far from any British colony, and run by South Americans. The Peruvian Amazon Company was registered in London, and British venture capitalism had recently been invested in it, but how many investors know where their money goes? Even if they did, they could not have known the conditions in Putamayo until Casement exposed them; and the result of that exposure was a British parliamentary investigation that led to tightening of anti-slavery legislation across the Empire. A rather civilising measure, any reader might be excused for thinking.

Two pages after making this odd assertion (of the alleged destruction of Casement’s beliefs), Mr Mitchell acknowledges the advocacy of the British ambassador in Washington’s efforts to “apply pressure on the Peruvian government” to end the abuses (p. 148); and elsewhere (p. 110), he quotes Casement’s “appeal to the humanity of England” to end the Congo atrocities.

Given many and various inconsistencies and contradictions, it becomes hard not to suspect that Mr Mitchell is using the life of an admirable man to advance some agenda of his own. My own reading of Casement’s work is regrettably quite limited, but I find nothing to support the notion that he was an “internationalist” in the sense that Mr Mitchell imputes; rather, internationalism of such a flavour would have been at odds with the views of Advanced Nationalists. If Casement perceived an independent Ireland better served by links with Continental Europe than with Britain, he did so on different ideological grounds than Mr Mitchell’s: “early Europe was very largely Celtic Europe, and nowhere can we trace the continuous influence of Celtic culture and idealism, coming down to us from a remote past, save in Ireland only” (“The Romance of Irish History”). It would seem from this that Casement looked on Ireland as setting a standard for the rest of Europe, not toward the philosophy of a German refugee who had beavered toward the betterment of mankind in the safety of a British library.

Evidence of Casement’s simplistic understanding of history is never harder to find than his biographer’s endorsement of such understanding. Elsewhere (in this same essay) Casement claims: “[Sir Hugh] O’Neill would have driven Elizabeth from Ireland, and a sovereign State would today be the guardian of the freedom of the western seas for Europe and the world”.

The unromantic facts are that O’Neill was a warlord with no concept of Casement’s Enlightenment values or even nationalism, far less internationalism; that his concern was not for Ireland but personal hegemony of Tyrone, Ulster, or however far his might could reach; that until Elizabeth failed to appoint him Lord President of Ulster Sir Hugh fought *with* the English against his fellow-Irish and only fought against the English when that better served his personal ambition.

Casement’s misinterpretation of the Nine Years’ War (and his analysis of its counterfactual outcome) reveals both blind hostility to Britain and naïveté. His hostility as an Irish nationalist is of course understandable, but it nevertheless blinded him to modern reality, and Mr Mitchell, rather than applying an historian’s corrective analysis to such naïveté, blandly reports and implicitly would seem to endorse Casement’s views. Indeed he claims that the failure of Britain’s Continental enemies over the centuries was because “they underestimated Ireland’s significance” (p. 218). Defeat in military and naval engagements had rather more to do with things. Those enemies, no less than Britain, were very well aware of Ireland’s value as a “back door”.

Certainly Germany was; and one of the most perturbing mysteries of Casement’s life is his relationship with the Second Reich. In *The Crime Against Europe* he claims “We must find the motive for England allying herself with France and Russia in an admittedly anti-German ‘understanding’ if we would understand the causes of the present war”; he proceeds from there to “understand” the war in light of the Anglophobia shared by Germans and Advanced Nationalists and elsewhere he claims that “only a German victory could deliver a true balance of power in Europe”. Given that the Reich’s aim was European hegemony, not a balance of power, this is self-evident nonsense.

There is neither need nor room to itemise the mistakes in “understanding” here; but one might expect an historian, in a full-length book, to examine Casement’s beliefs and place them in a context of modern scholarship. Instead, Mr Mitchell just nods along. He claims that “a host of studies ... endorse several of Casement’s opinions and arguments articulated in *The Crime Against Europe*” (p. 368).

It’s true that in the interwar years of disillusionment some historians did indeed argue that Britain provoked the Great War. The best known was probably the flamboyant Harry Elmer Barnes, long since discredited. Like many others, Barnes was funded by the *Zentralstelle zur Erforschung der Kriegschuldfrage*, set up by the Weimar Republic to exonerate Germany of responsibility for the late war. Arthur Ponsonby, a colleague of ED Morel, proved a very “useful fool” (to borrow from Lenin); very old Germans may still be high-fiving each other at mention of *Falsehood in Wartime*. In recent years Niall Ferguson has blamed Britain too (though for different reasons than Casement), but Ferguson is hardly less flamboyant than Barnes, and seems to revel in being a contrarian; and while he has a great deal to offer any student of history, he is way off the mark, his main mark anyway, in *The Pity of War*.

Mitchell is closer to the mark when he says: “the First World War was a deliberate counter-revolutionary strike by reactionary ruling elements in Europe against democratic trends” (p. 368). Since 1912 the Social Democrats had been the largest party in the Reichstag, and a minor consideration in German war plans was to roll back this democratic “menace” and impose full autocracy on the Reich. However, it is hardly German worries about democracy that Mr Mitchell has in mind with his remark.

Nor was it with German domestic or imperial matters that Casement was concerned. He was aware of the “atrocious conduct of the Germans” in *Kamerun* (p. 53), and he cannot have been unaware of the far more extensive atrocities in *Südwestafrika* and *Ostafrika*. One of the great disappointments in an otherwise-admirable life is his failure to condemn what was deliberate genocide in German colonies. Again acknowledging that my reading of his work is far from comprehensive, he seems not to engage with these horrors at all.

Rather, he claims (in *The Crime Against Europe*) that “German Militarism ... has not been employed beyond the frontiers of Germany until last year [1914]”. His complaint of “atrocious conduct” in *Kamerun* directly contradicts this assertion. Was Casement a brazen liar—or did he have a psychological problem, the possibility of which sometimes worried him? (Fear of the family strain of madness is something else that Mr Mitchell fails to address in his biography.) Joseph Conrad’s assessment that Casement was governed by emotion rather than intellect would seem to be shrewder than Mr Mitchell credits (pp. 47-49). Casement’s embitterment by his experiences in Germany, his complaint to his diary in early April 1916 “that Germany tried to incite a revolt ... in Ireland by a paltry gift of second-hand rifles put in the hands of excitable young men”, are inconsistent with his reversion to support for the Reich.

It’s difficult not to conclude that Casement’s refusal to condemn Germany was rooted in sheer Anglophobia. Quite apart from what he attested to in *Kamerun*, he saw too much of the Rape of Belgium to pretend that it did not happen (“a gruesome sight, and ... a horrible story”), yet his response is downright disquieting: “I feel there may be in this awful lesson to the Belgian people a repayment” for what was done in the Congo (pp. 237-38). In his essay, “The Far-Extended Baleful Power of the Lie”, he rightly denounces the risible Bryce Report, but fails to denounce the war crimes he himself had witnessed; rather, he justifies them.

If he merely sought to equate two wrongs as a right it would be morally bad enough; but Casement, more than any other man, knew that “what was done in the Congo” was not done by the Belgian people, or even in their name, but by a private autocrat who deceived his subjects; the purchasers of his monopolies; private colonial police; and native mercenaries. Absolutely not by the thousands of old men (one over eighty), women and children (one under three weeks) murdered by the Germans.

Instead, Casement justifies the Reich’s invasion of Belgium, violation of a neutral country, breaking of an international treaty, because “[Germany] only asked for a right of way”—as if, to borrow from King Albert, Belgium were merely a road and not a nation; a small nation whose rights Casement, one might expect from his extensive writings previously, ought to have been defending, not whose invasion and rape he was downplaying and excusing.

How could such an otherwise great humanitarian, such an admirable, heroic and self-sacrificing human being, justify such outrages?

One looks in vain for hard questions such as this in Mr Mitchell’s hagiography, far less for satisfactory answers.

Instead Mr Mitchell prefers to prove that “the Black Diaries are indeed forgeries” (pp. 17-18). He abjectly fails. Indeed, he doesn’t even argue his case directly, but at best marshals circumstance and innuendo to constitute an army of “faulty generalisations” to fight his case. Protestations of innocence by obviously vested interests do not constitute persuasive argument. And why does Mr Mitchell so studiously evade examination (even mention) of the scientific analysis he ostensibly sets out to disprove?

No fair-minded historian would argue that Dr Audrey Giles’ analysis of the Black Diaries is beyond criticism; but no critical reader of a book that would dismiss those Diaries as forgery can fail to wonder at the evasion of that book’s author to engage with the Giles analysis; especially an author whose thesis is flatly contradicted by that analysis.

How eloquent can elision be? Mr Mitchell would seem to have set an unenviable standard.

Mr Mitchell’s fixation on the forging of the Black Diaries distracts him from the fact that whether forged or not, it was the unscrupulous use to which the Diaries were put—poisoning any well from which Casement and his supporters could have drawn—that is of far greater import. The British were utterly set on seeing Casement swing, and a strong case can be made that by their use of the Diaries they compromised British justice. This is a more important and disturbing matter than whether the Diaries were forged or not. Mr Mitchell does eventually address this issue, but he might have said more had his focus not been distracted from the outset.

The hanging of such a humanitarian as Roger Casement can be regarded as an outrage even by those who take issue with some of the things he did and the disastrous foolishness of his alignment with the Second Reich. His appeal was badly bungled by his own counsel, but had the Diaries not been deployed by his enemies, his life might have been spared.

*16 Lives: Roger Casement* is not at all a bad book but it has significant shortcomings, so many that it is surprising to find its publication associated with the University of Limerick. It would never get the imprimatur of a university press in Britain or the USA. It constitutes a blatant endorsement of the “agreed version” of the Irish Revolutionary years, and while there always must be room for anti-revisionism in scholarship, all scholarship must be grounded in the historical method if it is to earn its name.

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**Review by Matthew Erin Plowman in Dublin Review of Books**

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<http://www.drb.ie/essays/loyal-servant#sthash.lVLmunya.dpuf>

**Loyal Servant**

Angus Mitchell, author of *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement* (Dublin 1997) and *Sir Roger Casement’s Heart of Darkness* (Dublin 2003), has erected an essential pillar in the pantheon series 16 Lives, which explores sixteen individuals who were executed after the 1916 Easter Rising with an eye on the guideline of the prompt “Who were these people and what drove them to commit themselves to violent revolution?” The series is edited by Lorcan Collins and Ruán O’Donnell.

Many biographers, after studying so much of the hands and mind of their subjects, often fall into the trap of using intuition to construct a living being out of the numerous artefacts they have found. Mitchell avoids such speculation by following Casement’s exact methodology. In the manner of the latter’s reports on injustices and exploitation in the Congo and Amazon, the author humanises his subject but allows the evidence itself to make the case. Just as Casement’s damnation of the imperial and secret state stands valid today, the evidence for Mitchell’s critique of the historiography and especially of the so-called “Black Diaries” (depicting alleged homosexuality) is too compelling in its primary evidence for any to ignore. The reader enjoys rich testimony from Casement and his contemporaries, whether it is official or unofficial correspondence, diary entries, government reports, newspaper coverage, or courtroom statements. This is both a narrative and a sourcebook for understanding Sir Roger Casement.

The author accepts the complexity of the human mind in all of its dynamic change, inconsistency, and even hypocrisy without grasping for exceptional or situational explanations. For instance, this biography accepts Casement’s confluence or even double-think on Irishness through nationalism and internationalism as two lobes of the same mind. This goes beyond those who have judged Casement as simply non-sectarian when landing in 1916 Ireland with the spirit of 1798 for a White, Green, and Orange Ireland. As Mitchell explores more globally than ever before, Casement was cosmopolitan Irish, who not only saw Irishness in the Loyalists he opposed but also saw Ireland in the Congo, the Amazon, Egypt, India and wherever there was unjust imperial rule. Yet one might judge after reading Mitchell’s description of the strong support that Casement gave to Irish schools, on the provision that they taught Irish only so as to expand the Gaeltacht, that this might make him guilty of the very same cultural chauvinism (coercion trumping choice) that imperial powers were imposing on Africans and Amazonians. But the author is right that the stronger interpretation remains that Casement, along with others, showed nobility in his efforts to save a dying language, envisioning parallels such as the Mayan language of Central America. Again, this biography allows for the complexity of the human mind. This is likewise true in Mitchell’s rendering of Casement’s relationship with the missionary fields in colonial Africa. While he valued and even relied upon the good intentions and actions of missionaries in the field, Mitchell shows that he was quite aware of the devil’s bargain present in imperial Christianity where the church and state often colluded in power and control.

In this biography, Casement appears as more linear and more focused in his attack upon unrestrained capitalism as the cause of suffering in imperial domination. Mitchell traces the moment of his epiphany in the Congo and shows how the suffering there was connected to that in Ireland; the epiphany and the report are convincingly compared to the work of the Spanish Dominican Bartolomé de las Casas who documented imperial exploitation in Spanish America in the sixteenth century. Casement did not live long enough to make a comparison between the later Black and Tans in Ireland and the Belgian Force Publique in the Congo, that is to say the placing of guns in the hands of the undisciplined and peace imposed through state terror. Yet he was present to make a personal assessment of the scale of German atrocities in Belgium during the First World War and to compare it with the much larger scale of Belgian atrocities that he witnessed in the Congo. This account, better than any other, shows the development of Casement’s acceptance of the right to resist terror. This philosophical breakthrough began in Africa and Casement was a revolutionary by the time he left the Amazon. Mitchell presents this as an evolutionary path, although there is also the theory that evolutionary change does not occur through slow incremental change but through radical moments of redevelopment and survival in crisis. Casement’s mental redevelopment and the survival of his conscience through what he observed along the banks of the Congo and the Amazon are processes that are paralleled in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Mitchell explores well the cross-influences between the two men.

The author reveals the breadth and depth of Casement’s role in the development of British intelligence during the Boer War, observing and inhibiting German arms shipments. This network established between consuls and naval intelligence was the method by which German guns were observed and inhibited while heading towards Ireland and India during the Great War.

Casement’s interaction with WEB Du Bois and African-American civil rights, nationalism in India, and socialist and labour movements around the world reveal the wide network of connections that he made in his life. There is much of interest to social, economic, cultural, political, or military historians. Equally, the biography contributes to feminist history, with a concurrent exploration of the leadership and influence of women such as Alice Stopford Green. These parallel accounts allow Mitchell to examine Casement not in isolation, but rather as living within a community of activists, artists and thinkers.

With much evidence, and no small amount of venom, Mitchell explores the downfall Casement met at the hands of the growing and secret powers of the state executive, the state-manipulated press, and the imperial lion young Winston Churchill. Considering today’s controversies regarding state intelligence-gathering, the biography features some highly topical issues, revealing the extent to which Casement was a whistleblower – or more accurately a miner’s canary – regarding the powers of the secret executive and emerging intelligence communities. Yet, as Mitchell concludes, Casement still took certain secrets to his grave, leaving historians with the task of figuring out what might have motivated his silence.

In addition to a well-evidenced and passionate account of the intensity of the courtroom and execution, Mitchell debunks the legitimacy of the so-called “Black Diaries” which the state used not only to publicly defame and embarrass Casement during the trial but also to ensure his death sentence. The book does so by leaving the true nature of Casement’s private life aside, without speculation and instead concentrates on the state’s manipulation of evidence, the press, the public and even some of his own defenders. Given Casement’s contribution to humanity in the Congo and Amazon, Mitchell’s account brings to mind Alan Turing and more recent character assassinations that resulted in tragic death. The book’s strongest criticism is of the prosecution, defence, and adjudication of Casement. There were scarcely credibly conflicts of interest for judges and prosecutors, including the prosecutor as attorney general prohibiting further appeal of his own case. Casement’s barrister was more interested in disputing legal minutiae to advance his own reputation than in defending his client with substantive arguments based on evidence and motives. As Mitchell points out, this courtroom is easier to imagine in the Soviet Union than the United Kingdom.

Indeed, the book’s strength lies in its handling of the courtroom experience – namely, it puts aside the many peripheral personalities and injustices, of which there were many, to dissect the real reason why Casement was willing to take the actions he did and the reason he himself believed he was in the dock: loyalty. Mitchell shows that Casement repeatedly explained in his professional life that when he officially represented the Crown and the government of the United Kingdom, as well as in spirit during his unofficial duties, he was always serving his King of Ireland and the people of Ireland. In other words, Britain was not the same as the dominion of England, but included British interests as a whole and even Irish interests in the particular. George V (r 1910-36) was King of Great Britain and Ireland and was therefore the King of England, the King of Scotland, and the King of Ireland. For Casement, if there were first betrayals within the United Kingdom, it was England who had already betrayed Ireland. This constitutional distinction has never been so well explained in previous biographies, despite the obvious conclusion one can draw from Casement’s own final words. Too often historians focus merely on the Irish Volunteers arming as a result of the Loyalists or Ulster Volunteers arming first and do not consider Casement’s own explanation of his loyalty and actions. This is who Sir Roger Casement was and why he, along with the fifteen others executed who feature in the 16 Lives series, chose violent revolution.

This biography looks at the intersection of the various paths of Casement’s legacy in Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Rather than leave us lost at the crossroads, Angus Mitchell provides a thoroughly developed and detailed map to follow and understand Casement’s footprints in history.

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