



Dykes Rising
Lesbians on the
1916 frontlines

Awards Season
The GALAS Winners 2016

Senatorial Race
The Lesbian and gay
Seanad candidates

CASEMENT

and the Queering of 1916



THE BLACK STAIN

Roger Casement's Black Diaries were published while he was in prison after his role in the 1916 rising. Full of salacious homosexual detail, they succeeded in blackening his name before his execution for treason. Were the diaries faked by the British authorities so Casement could be robbed of the martyrdom for Ireland he so desired? **Angus Mitchell** believes so.

In August 2001, I wrote an article for GCN where I set down some of my general arguments as to why the Black Diaries, attributed to Roger Casement are forgeries. My timing couldn't have been worse. The article appeared just as Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim Two Birds* was launching in Dublin to wide acclaim. In New York, the clock was ticking towards the decimation of the World Trade Centre. Ireland was in the thrall of a whole new layer of interpretation to do with her revolutionary heritage. Gay rights were finally on the national agenda and those associated with armed insurgency were deeply out of favour.

In the intervening 15 years, I have continued to build on my argument. I have published much additional material. This includes somewhat impenetrable edited volumes of Casement's writings and plenty of articles that enter into the forensics of an argument that remains unfashionably tied up with the textual rather than the sexual.

The ins and outs of the Casement debate and his associated diaries have remained a source of deep fascination and controversy. I have mapped recent contours of the polemical twists and turns in an article – 'Phases of a Dishonourable Phantasy' – published in the *Field Day Review* 2012 and available through my academia.edu site. Consensus still resides with those who believe the diaries are genuine, but there are now serious cracks appearing in the foundations of that consensus and the centre may well not hold.

On an academic level, Casement's recognition as an early advocate of human

rights is dwarfed by those who claim him predominantly as a sexual liberator – although this is not to argue that these positions are mutually exclusive. But the relatively recent arrival of Gender and Sexuality Studies and Queer Theory into mainstream Irish academics has unleashed a stream of academic writing on the question of Casement's sexuality, frequently sidelining his work for human rights.

What is striking is that those academics who claim a kind of emancipated right to speak about all things sexual have no time for arguments that deal with anything except the 'dark gods that lurk beneath the belt', as DH Lawrence quipped. In other words, the creation of consensus over the diaries has required a remarkable intolerance towards anyone who contests their authenticity.

Casement's story is profoundly toxic and deeply unsettling to the reassuring narratives celebrating the triumph of white, western civilisation. It is not hard to work out why most people steer clear of this subject.

At the dark heart of his story is an immense and ongoing crime against humanity (some have termed it genocide) that claimed the lives of millions, possibly tens of millions of rainforest people of the Amazon and communities living across sub-Saharan Africa. Between 1880 and 1914, latex rubber was extracted with untold violence from those tropical regions, before the economy of plantation rubber took over. This seemingly innocuous substance was vital to the birth of mass produced motorcars and electrification. Casement was a unique official witness to this crime. He became the moral standard bearer of the empire in an age of excess. In 1911, aged 46, he was knighted.

In today's language, Casement was a whistleblower, no different to Chelsea Manning or Ed Snowden, although a lot better connected. But his experience of violence on distant frontiers turned him into a virulent enemy of empire and gave him the insight to see Ireland's long colonial relationship with England as an association of abuse and exploitation. He took up the Irish cause from his deep-rooted sympathy for the Irish struggle, but he also used it as a way of articulating the outrage he had witnessed.

Following his capture shortly after disembarking from a German U-Boat, his interrogators were well aware of a long list of treasonable offences that he had committed: gun-running, fraternising with the war-time enemy, engaging in conspiracy to subvert the British government, forgery and revealing official secrets. The problem was not finding Casement guilty, but finding a punishment that fitted his crime. In his particular case, the problem was that he wanted to die for Ireland. Hanging suited him just fine. He wanted the martyr's crown and in his wartime diary – *One Bold Deed of Open Treason* – published this month, he explains the clear logic behind that treason.

It is in the face of this legal and public relations dilemma and the protean power of martyrdom that the Black Diaries were conjured up and provided another way of controlling knowledge about the traitor, while simultaneously denying him martyrdom by shrouding him in a sexual mantle that was deeply damaging at that time. In 1916, homosexuality was still punishable under English law by execution; as the popular adage of the day went: a dishonouring stain is worse than death.

I contest the authenticity of the Black Diaries not because I doubt that Casement was gay, but because I don't accept that he would have left such self-incriminating evidence to be so conveniently discovered. The Black Diaries avert our gaze away from the inhumanity he witnessed and replace his clear, accusatory voice with ambiguity, exaggeration, innuendo and plenty of casual sex. All the talk about his 'sexual complexity' and 'doubleness' enables avoidance of direct confrontation with, either the colonial violence revealed by his investigations, or how the sexualised narrative

discredited his revolutionary networks. In the context of the oppressive moral structures shaping popular opinion in the early twentieth century, the fact that the diaries configure precisely with the moments when his moral authority was critical to the outcome of his investigations is the most revealing fault line in their fabrication.

In both the tragic overthrow of the anarchic heart of Oscar Wilde and the discrediting of the nationalist politics of CS Parnell, the weaponry of sexuality had been decisively deployed against Ireland to overthrow threats

to the political order of the union. But the real complexity of Casement's story and his legacy to history cannot be understood until the question of his sexuality is decoupled from the textual.

This requires hard and rigorous questions concerning the Black Diaries to be asked and answered about provenance, motive and probability. It also requires us to engage with the murky aspects of the 'Dark State', the role of propaganda during the First World War and the long conflict in both Britain and Ireland against republicanism. Arguments will continue to go

round in circles until these areas of fundamental confusion are grasped about an issue that still unsettles the compromising politics of Anglo-Irish history.

Angus Mitchell wrote the *16 Lives* biography of Roger Casement. His edition of Casement's *German Diary One Bold Deed of Open Treason: The Berlin Diary of Roger Casement 1914-1916* is published this month by Merrion Press. Much of his writing on Casement and the Diaries' controversy can be found at <https://limerick.academia.edu/AngusMitchell>



THE CASEMENT EVENTS

Among the raft of events commemorating Easter 1916, several centre on Roger Casement's role in the rising.

UNTIL OCTOBER 2

HIGH TREASON: ROGER CASEMENT

Hugh Lane Gallery

Sir John Lavery's monumental painting, 'High Treason: The Appeal of Roger Casement, The Court of Criminal Appeal, 17 and 18 July 1916' moves from Kings Inns to be the centrepiece of this historic exhibition, which includes artist Alan Phelan's film, *Our Kind*, which imagines a future for Casement had he not been executed in 1916 where he is in exile in Norway with partner, Adler Christensen.

UNTIL DECEMBER 31

SIR ROGER CASEMENT: A REVOLUTIONARY JOURNEY

Kerry County Museum, Tralee

Exhibition following Roger Casement's journey from servant of the Crown to humanitarian and Irish nationalist, which led to the Easter Rising and the gallows in Pentonville Prison.

MARCH 21 TO APRIL 2

MCKENNA'S FORT

The New Theatre, Dublin, 7.30pm nightly

Written by Arnold Thomas Fanning and drawing from Casement's infamous Black Diaries, this play explores the contradictory elements of Casement, including his much-disputed sexuality, and his commitment to humanitarian causes.

MARCH 22

ONE BOLD DEED

Gallery of Photography,

Meeting House Square, 5.30pm

Casement biographer Angus Mitchell reads from his edition of Casement's German Diary, *One Bold Deed of Open Treason: The Berlin Diary of Roger Casement 1914-1916*.

APRIL 5

THE SILENT SHORE

National Maritime Museum, 7.30pm

Dr. John Treacy addresses the role of the German submarine U-19 in the landing of Roger Casement on Banna Strand.

APRIL 21

CASEMENT'S CAPTURE

Ballykissane Pier and Banna Strand, Kerry

To mark the 100th anniversary of Casement's capture by the Royal Irish Constabulary on Banna Strand, two events will take place, the first on Ballykissane Pier at 8am to commemorate the tragic events that occurred there. The second event takes place at Banna Strand at noon and will feature a reading of the speech Casement made at his trial, an introduction to Casement the man behind the politics, and a performance by the National Folk Choir from Siamsa Tire. President Michael D Higgins will be in attendance.

MAY 20 TO AUGUST 28

THE HUMANIZER

Irish Museum of Modern Art

A new commission for IMMA by British/Japanese artist Simon Fujiwara explores Casement's contradictory life through the conventions of the Hollywood narrative, presenting a bizarre biopic of a perfect hero for our age.

JULY 23

FÉILE FÁILTE

Banna Strand, Kerry

Day-long festival re-imagining the Ireland, and the welcome, that Roger Casement might have dreamt of when he came ashore in 1916, featuring dance performances, an evening céilí, a night-time beach disco and a midnight spectacle to re-imagine Casement's ill-fated landing.