

Casement's Black Diaries: Closed Books Reopened

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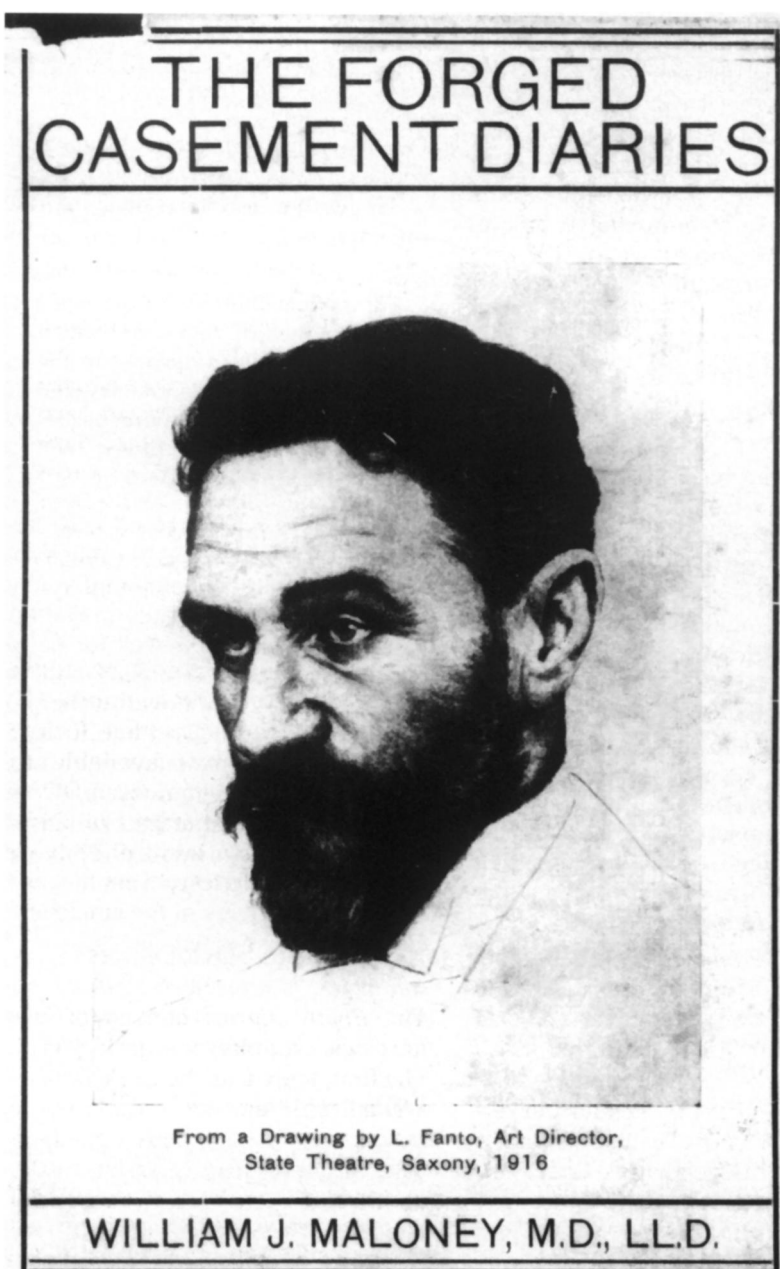
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Casement's Black Diaries closed books reopened

by Angus Mitchell



Sir Roger Casement (1864-1916), humanitarian and Irish revolutionary, was put on trial at the end of June 1916 on a charge of high treason against the British Crown which he had served as a conscientious consul in both Africa (1895-1904) and South America (1906-1913), until his resignation from the Foreign Office in the summer of 1913 when he began to devote his energies to the cause of Irish freedom. At the end of October 1914 British intelligence services got wind of Casement's efforts to bring about a German-Irish alliance and despite efforts to undermine his activities, it was not until April 1916 that he was eventually arrested on Banna Strand, County Kerry, just hours before the outbreak of the Easter Rising.

On the fourth and last day of his trial, in an exchange in court between the Attorney-General, Sir F.E. Smith—leading the prosecution—and the Chief Justice, reference was made for the first time to 'Casement's diary'. When rumours began to percolate among newspapers, politicians, ambassadors and gentlemen's clubs in July 1916 about Roger Casement's 'sexual degeneracy' those who had known him most closely found it hardest to believe. But in that dark apocalyptic summer of 1916 it was doubtless reconciled in the minds of most, that if a man was capable of co-operating with Germany—and had himself admitted to treason—then he was capable of anything.

In the month between his trial and execution, as the battle of the Somme raged on the Western Front, no less than six petitions were raised urging the government to grant a reprieve. But on 18 July a cabinet memorandum made reference for the first time to the *Black Diaries*. It alleged that the documents clearly showed that Casement 'had for years been addicted to the grossest sodomitical practices'. Material circulated at the highest government level in both Britain and the United States, wholly undermining the campaign for clemency and successfully preventing Casement attaining martyrdom. Early in the morning of 3 August 1916 Roger Casement was hanged.

The secret life of the *Black Diaries*

In 1959 the veil of secrecy over the contents of the *Black Diaries* was finally lifted with

Dr William Maloney, an Irish-American academic, was one of the first to claim that the Black Diaries were forged in this 1937 work.

their lavish publication in Paris, outside the jurisdiction of the British Crown, by the Fleet Street newspaperman, Peter Singleton-Gates and the publisher of censored material, Maurice Girodias. In his foreword to the book, Singleton-Gates related how:

In May 1922 a person of some authority in London presented me with a bundle of documents, with the comment that if ever I had time I might find in them the basis for a book of unusual interest. The donor had no ulterior motive for wishing such a book published: his gift was no more than a kind gesture to a journalist and writer.

Two years ago the declassification of 170-odd Casement-related files revealed that Singleton-Gates had acted as a 'front' for the head of Special Branch, Sir Basil Thomson, the man credited with discovering the *Black Diaries*. It was Thomson who handed Singleton-Gates the typescripts of the *Black Diaries* following his dismissal from New Scotland Yard after a breach of public decency laws.

But at the time the act of publishing the *Black Diaries*, as they were now christened, seemed to endorse the genuineness of the documents. From 10 August 1959 the Home Secretary permitted historical researchers to see manuscript material which generally corresponded with Singleton-Gates's faulty published text. Despite considerable interest in the British and Irish press the only effort at anything near a scholarly analysis was a short essay by an Irish academic, Roger McHugh, who cast doubt on the serious discrepancies between the PRO diaries and eyewitness accounts of material exhibited in 1916 as Casement's diary. He showed suspicious internal discrepancies and contradictions. He demonstrated how the chronology of the diary campaign, establishing their alleged discovery, was part of a wartime propagandist intelligence initiative against Casement launched well before his arrest. Finally he analysed how official accounts of the provenance of the *Black Diaries* were mutually contradictory.

Although McHugh's arguments were never properly refuted, once access to the *Black Diaries* had been granted, there followed several biographies of Casement. Each one accepted almost without question the authenticity of the *Black Diaries*. As the social taboos about homosexuality began to break down following the sexual revolution of the sixties, Casement's 'treason' and 'homosexuality' were attractive

merit a place in twentieth-century homosexual literature. Whoever wrote the diaries portrayed homosexuality as a sickness and perversion and crime for which a person should suffer guilt, repression, fantasy, hatred and most of all, alienation and loneliness. These are not the confessions of a Jean Genet or Tennessee Williams, W.H. Auden or Oscar Moore. Rather than sympathising with the struggle of the homosexual conscience they are clearly homophobic documents.

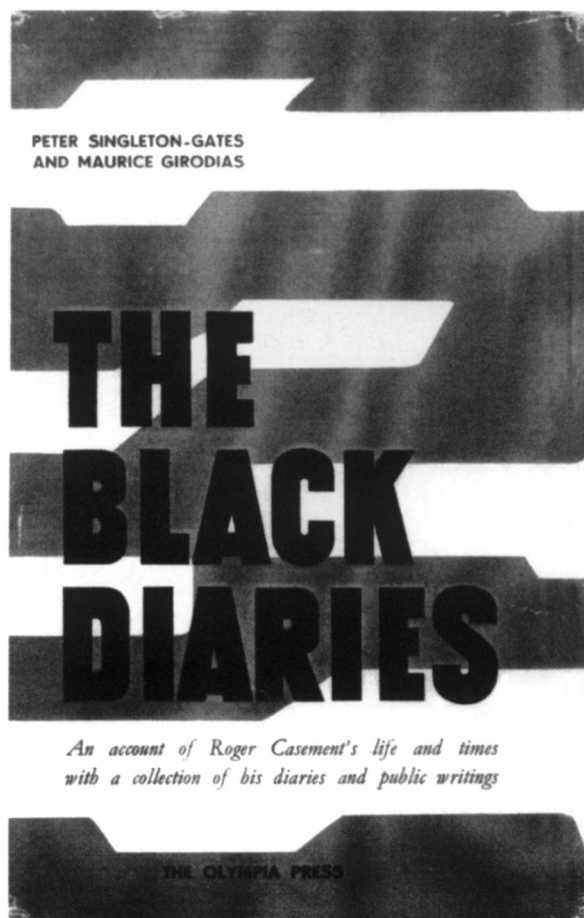
Brian Inglis's *Roger Casement* (1973) placed his subject in the context of other well-known homosexuals—André Gide, Marcel Proust, Oscar Wilde. His argument against the forgery theory was brief but adamant:

Nevertheless the case against the forgery theory remains unshaken. No person or persons, in their right mind, would have gone to so much trouble and expense to damn a traitor when a single diary would have sufficed. To ask the forger to fake the other two diaries and the cash register (and if one were forged, all of them were) would have been simply to ask for detection, because a single mistake in any of them would have destroyed the whole ugly enterprise. Besides, where could the money have been found? Government servants may sometimes be unscrupulous, but they are always tight-fisted.

Following the release of the *Black Diaries* in March 1994 and over 170 previously closed Casement files in October 1995 (now available to readers at the Public Record Office, London) the whole matter of 'Casement's diaries' was effectively deemed to be history.

What are the Black Diaries?

The *Black Diaries* consist of five hard-back books of varying size. The first, known as the *Army Book*—a small field service notebook—is an apparently innocuous document with the first entry referring to the death of Queen Victoria and brief entries between 6 and 13 February 1902 and short accounts of Case-



characteristics for biographers and publishers anxious to sell books.

Casement's life was interpreted in terms of paradoxes—he was seen as a 'fragmented and elusive' character, but nevertheless a man capable of protecting native peoples on one hand whilst quietly 'perverting' them to satisfy his mounting sexual libido. His sexuality mirrored his treason and his ambivalent and contradictory character—extending from 'emotional deprivation, religious uncertainties, the duality of his political commitments'—was bound up with his 'sexual perversion' and homosexuality. No longer the 'sexual degenerate', Casement was now transformed into the 'gay traitor'. But in no way do the *Black Diaries* serve the gay community or



ment's movements on 20 and 21 July 1902 when he was travelling in the Belgian Congo. It holds no obvious sexual references and is filled with a few abstract notes about distances and railway times, transcriptions from foreign newspapers and two rough sketch maps.

The first sex diary, as such, is a small *Letts's Pocket Diary & Almanac*—covering the months of Casement's investigation into the Congo from 14 February 1903 to 8 January 1904 with a few notes added on at the beginning and end. The diary records sexual acts in London, Congo, Madeira, Canary Islands and Sierra Leone, mainly with native boys.

The next is a *Dollard's 1910 Office Diary*, most of which coincides with Casement's first voyage to the Amazon at the end of July 1910 and continues uninterrupted until the end of the year. Sex or sexual fantasies occur in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Mar del Plata, London, Belfast, Dublin and with most frequency up the Amazon at Belém do Pará, Manaus, Iquitos and in the Putumayo.

The *1911 Letts's Desk Diary*—never published and the most explicit and pornographic in content—follows on directly from the last entry for 31 December in the *1910 Dollard's Diary*. After day-by-day entries for the first eighteen days of January, as Casement spent New Year in Paris before returning to London after his first Amazon voyage there is a rough sketch (unidentified) covering a page in February, and a very untypical signature 'Sir Roger Casement CMG' opposite May, the month Casement received news of his knighthood. After that the diary is blank until 13

August when the entries resume and detail the movements that coincide with his second voyage up the Amazon to Iquitos and into the Brazilian-Peruvian frontier region of the river Javari. During this journey the sexual references are almost of daily occurrence and of the most plainly explicit nature. Long, cryptic entries of fantasy mix with nights of exceptional sexual athletics and endless descriptions of cruising along the waterfronts of Belém do Pará, Manaus and Iquitos. The most explicit entry takes place on Sunday 1 October, the start of the pheasant shooting season in England. By this account the diarist did little on this journey except fantasise and seek out willing sexual partners or seduce underage boys at every opportunity. After a short stay in Iquitos and an expedition to try and arrest some of the fugitive slave-drivers, the document details the return down the Amazon to Belém do Pará and then north to Barbados. At the end are a couple of pages of figures detailing expenditure during the voyage.

The last diary, known as the *Cash Ledger*, is a record of daily accounts written in a blank hard-back cash book. It briefly records 'expenditure' for February and March 1910 and then begins a day-by-day account of financial out-goings for 1911 from 1 January to 31 October. At the end there are a few more brief entries about 1910. A number of sexual references look as if they have been interpolated into the text.

The Putumayo Journal

The physical characteristics of the *Black Diaries* vary significantly from the journal that Casement kept

during his 1910 Amazon voyage (both manuscript and typescript versions are held by the National Library of Ireland) and whose authenticity has never been doubted. This document is written on 128 unbound loose leaves of lined, double-sided foolscap and covers the period from 23 September to 6 December 1910, the seventy-five days that Casement spent travelling through the Putumayo and his return to and departure from Iquitos. It is the document that is variously referred to as the 'white diary' or 'the cleaned up version', since it does not contain any sexual acts or fantasies. For the purposes of clear identification in this argument it is referred to as the *Putumayo Journal*.

Other important documents are Casement's *German Diaries* (National Library of Ireland). Beginning on 7 November 1914, they record his efforts to recruit an Irish Brigade from amongst captured prisoners-of-war in Germany. They throw revealing light on how conscientious Casement was about his diaries and on the form such journals or diaries took. Before leaving Munich at the end of March 1916 Casement entrusted to his German solicitor, Charles Curry, 'all he possessed in this world, his personal effects and writings and left various instructions chiefly regarding his diaries and their publication upon the close of war'. From looking at the nature and provenance of the various diaries it becomes clear that Casement conscientiously kept diaries or journals during large parts of his life and that these were most detailed during the more momentous occasions, either during his humanitarian investigations or his last adventure as a leader of the 1916 Rising. It also seems probable that a large number of these personal notes fell into the hands of British Intelligence when Casement's London rooms were raided and his possessions seized sometime during the eighteen month period between the realisation by British Intelligence that Casement was a dangerous traitor to the moment of his arrest in April 1916.

Contradictions

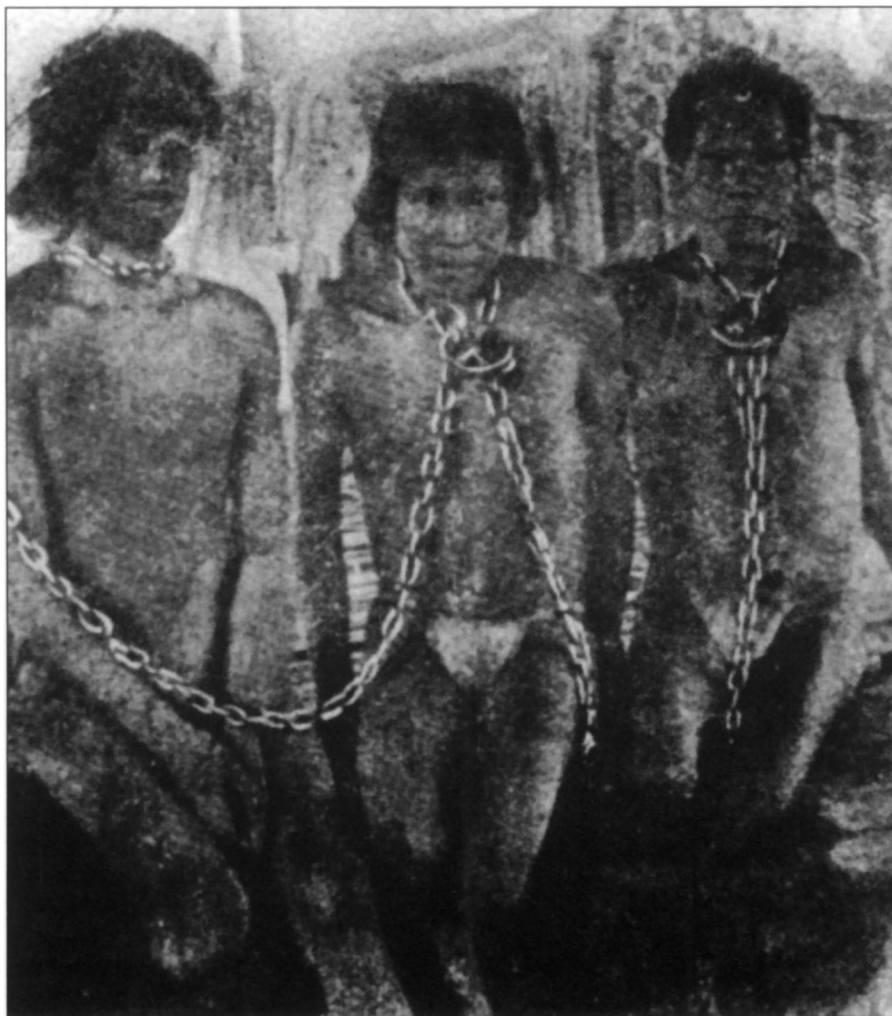
Through constructing a narrative of Casement's 1910 Amazon voyage from undisputed documentation, whether journals, fragmentary entries or letters, it is possible to

compare it with the narrative of his trip as told in the 1910 *Black Diary*. It becomes clear that the *Black Diary* is riddled with inaccuracies and inconsistencies that describe events in a completely different way. There is no information contained in parallel entries of the *Black Diary* that could not have been copied from the *Putumayo Journal*. Besides sexual references, the only information contained in the *Black Diary* and not included in the *Putumayo Journal* regarded general matters such as water levels, the climate and descriptions of flora and fauna. It also becomes impossible to contend, therefore, that Casement used a shortened *Black Diary* to write subsequently his *Putumayo Journal*.

Those who wish to continue believing in the genuineness of the *Black Diaries* should ask themselves why Casement should have kept such an incriminating document about his person when he realised that in South America his every step was being watched and he was moving through an atmosphere of fear, suspicion and death. Indeed why should he leave such personally-damaging material behind him when he defected to Germany at the start of the war. The figure of Roger Casement who emerges from the *Putumayo Journal* is so different in general attitude and moral values from the Casement portrayed by the *Black Diaries* as to be totally irreconcilable.

The *Putumayo Journal*, fragmentary diary entries and Foreign Office dispatches are all written in Casement's clear and succinct English prose. Throughout he is lucid, emotional, direct, structured and thoughtful. It is filled with intelligent comments by a man with a highly active, inquiring mind and touches on a number of different subjects—including botany, ethnology, anthropology, history, politics, race and religion—whilst keeping its eye firmly on the matter in hand: compiling a case against perpetrators of atrocities in the wild rubber trade. It is arguably the most important surviving document Casement wrote and shows what a remarkably controlled and clear mind he possessed even when he was physically suffering and under enormous danger.

The *Black Diaries* by contrast have been written to mystify, befuddle, confuse and conceal. More often than not they are utterly misleading



in their meaning. Far from appearing as a serious minded figure, they portray Casement as a perverter of the innocent, a corrupter and indecent fantasist. The language is charged with innuendo and exaggeration. The genuine phraseology Casement adopts to describe the 'noble savage' as a handsome, strong and innocent human being has been twisted to give it an ambiguous sexual connotation. Sense has been confused, truth obscured. Characters have been extracted from their genuine context and given new roles as sexual partners or objects of fantasy. Recently, using detailed computerised analysis of key-words and expressions, Eoin Ó Máille and Michael Payne have shown that the linguistic finger-print in Casement's undisputed writings is completely at odds with the linguistic finger-print of the *Black Diaries*.

Casement's recent biographers have explained the existence of these two parallel diaries in terms of a sex diary and a 'cleaned up version'—a 'black' and a 'white' diary—as if Casement was a Jekyll and Hyde character. The argument can appear

Chained Indian rubber gatherers in the stocks on the Putumayo River.

convincing if it is put in the context of the fact that for most of this century, certainly during Casement's lifetime, homosexuality was driven underground, and homosexuals until recently were forced to lead double lives. But such an argument fails to take into account the incredibly small and hostile world in which Casement moved in South America and the fact that his every move, whilst investigating in one of the most wild, dangerous frontier regions of the world was being watched by enemies who wished him dead.

Analysed as texts, once Casement's undisputed narrative is compared to corresponding *Black Diary* entries it becomes impossible to believe in the authenticity of both. The genuineness of the diaries has always depended upon the argument that they were factually fool-proof. The most blatant inconsistency concerns Casement's eyes. On re-entering tropical climes Casement



In his German Diaries Casement recorded his efforts to recruit an Irish Brigade from amongst captured prisoners-of-war, depicted here in a painting by W. Hatherell. (Mansell Collection).

started to suffer a desperate eye infection. The eye problem followed him from Iquitos to La Chorrera, the capital of the Putumayo district and the base from which Casement began his investigations. His sick eyes dogged him constantly for the next month and the *Putumayo Journal* has a string of references to his eyes until the night of 12 October when the problem reached a climax and Casement was forced to bandage both eyes when he went to bed. He had effectively realised his worst nightmare and gone blind in the depths of the Amazon forest.

Despite over fifteen separate mentions of his eyes between 11 August and 12 October in the *Putumayo Journal* the first mention in the *Black Diary* is on 10 October—fully two months after Casement had first mentioned the problem and just two days before both his eyes broke down and he was rendered tem-

porarily blind. Casement's eye infection was so bad that it forced him to use pencil; it also forced him to be as economic with his writing as possible and to avoid unnecessary strain. Why then is it supposed he was keeping two separate journals repeating the same information? A harder question to answer is why at the very moment when his eyes were at their worst and clearly affecting his script in the *Putumayo Journal* is the *Black Diary* entry for 12 October written in small and deliberate well-formed black ink?

According to the *Black Diary* and Casement's two most recent biographers, on arriving at Iquitos on 31 August he took up residence at the Hotel Cosmopolite. Yet there is no record of this in the expense accounts Casement subsequently submitted to the Foreign Office. The claim is flatly contradicted by Casement's own reports to the Foreign Office that he stayed with the British vice consul David Cazes.

Another point that makes little sense is an uncharacteristically personal comment made by Casement about his sexuality on 29 September,

after he had witnessed, in the company of the perpetrators of atrocities, his first Indian dance at the rubber station of Occidente:

I swear to God, I'd hang every one of the band of wretches with my own hands if I had the power, and do it with the greatest pleasure. I have never shot game with any pleasure, have indeed abandoned all shooting for that reason, that I dislike the thought of taking life. I have never given life to anyone myself, and my celibacy makes me frugal of human life, but I'd shoot or exterminate these infamous scoundrels more gladly than I should shoot a crocodile or kill a snake.

Exactly why Casement should have made such a direct statement about his celibacy whilst keeping a parallel sex diary is a contradiction which has yet to be explained by those who still find it possible to believe in both 'black' and 'white' diaries. There is not a single witness to Casement's alleged sexual antics on the Amazon as detailed by the 1910 and 1911 *Black Diaries* and certainly South America was the main theatre for his alleged sexual degeneracy if the documents are believed genuine. Moreover Casement's principal enemy on the Amazon, the Peruvian rubber baron, Julio Cesar Arana, knew all about Casement's 'secret' activities, such as recruiting labour for the Madeira-Mamore railway and trying to organise an anti-Aranista party during his second voyage to Iquitos in 1911. In December 1911, when Casement made a hasty exit from Iquitos, the local newspapers were accusing him of being a 'British spy' and 'secret agent', but all such suggestions are edited out of the *Black Diary*. Eighty years on these documents continue to confuse and confound.

How and why were the *Black Diaries* forged?

How and why did British Intelligence go to such complicated lengths to forge the *Black Diaries*? The strategy had both short-term and long-term objectives. The short term aim was to secure Casement's execution. They were an effective way to mislead his powerful lobby of supporters and officially to defame Sir Roger Casement—the humanitarian hero, knighted in 1911 for his epic jour-

neys in defence of tribal people on behalf of the British Crown. They are an example of a type of ruthless intellectual sabotage, which the British excel at when it is a matter of defeating the enemy. It was wartime and given the nature of Casement's 'treason', the *Black Diaries* were an exceptional means of destroying an exceptional enemy.

The process of forging the documents was comparatively easy although it undoubtedly required great expertise in its execution. When British Intelligence moved in on Casement at the end of 1914, among his confiscated papers they found genuine diaries and journals detailing his journeys into the Congo and Putumayo. Using this material they were able, without too much difficulty, to construct the *Black Diaries* with experiences, phraseology and impressions cannibalised from genuine writings. On the surface these documents appeared to be factually fool-proof and contained a host of references and indications to give the appearance of being genuine documents. Certainly the forging of the handwriting was carried out with great skill, although since there is no evidence that the *Black Diaries* held in the Public Records Office were described by anyone in 1916, it is probable that the forger had several years to perfect their look. Though the formation of letters and the style of the writing is often hard to distinguish from genuine material, it ultimately fails the test of authenticity for its total lack of fluency. All Casement's writings, whether notes, letters or journals contain a fluency of script—as if Casement was working under enormous pressure and at great speed. The *Black Diaries* completely lack this. The words seem to stutter out onto the page—they are deliberate and contrived.

The rumours of Casement's 'sexual degeneracy' that were circulated before and after his trial in 1916 confused almost everyone. Casement's powerful lobby of supporters retreated into silence. Casement's martyrdom was prevented and the clemency appeals thwarted. His Irish supporters were in retreat, devastated by the execution of the leaders of the Easter Rising. All were fearful of speaking out in defence of a man

whose treason was so clear, at a time when each day tens of thousands of British volunteers were being slaughtered on the front-line of the Somme. For the rest of this century the *Black Diaries* became the means by which Casement's 'treason' was explained and rationalised in public.

There was however a secondary motive for forging the *Black Diaries* that becomes clear once the documents are analysed outside the confines of the Anglo-Irish conflict and the First World War. His investigations into atrocities in both the Congo and Amazon are unique, officially-sanctioned sources in understanding the horror that underlay wild rubber extraction from tropical forests. In these investigations Casement collected the statements and oral testimonies that helped build a factual case supporting the historical heart of darkness that lay in the shadowy soul of euroimperialism and the white man's vision of civilisation. Although the *Black Diaries* make impressionistic references to the horror, they cleverly scale the horror down, Casement emerges as the 'degenerate' rather than the imperial systems he was investigating. It is no coincidence that the

Black Diaries coincide with Casement's main humanitarian investigations into rubber atrocities in both Africa and South America, and most specifically with the Putumayo atrocities where British financial influence was most active and direct.

Angus Mitchell is researching the history of environmental destruction and tribal extermination in Brazil.

This article is an extract from the introduction by the author to *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement* (Anaconda Editions and Lilliput Press, 1997).

Further reading:

R. McHugh, 'Casement: the Public Record Office manuscripts' in *Threshold*, summer 1960, No.4, vol.1.

E. Ó Máille & M. Payne, *The Vindication of Roger Casement: Computer Analysis and Comparisons* (Dublin 1994).

S. Ó Sochín, 'Roger Casement, Ethnography and the Putumayo' in *Éire-Ireland* XXIX, (2) 29-41.



Casement in the dock, 16 May 1916.