

The Casement 'Black Diaries' Debate: The Story so Far

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Sources

The Casement 'Black Diaries' Debate *the story so far*

by Angus Mitchell

Following the publication, in October 1997, of two versions of diary material relating to Roger Casement's activities in the Amazon in 1910, there resurfaced one of the longest running controversies in Anglo-Irish relations: the dispute over the authenticity of the Alleged Casement Diaries or so-called Black Diaries as they are more popularly known. Since Casement's execution for high treason on 3 August 1916, two different views about those diaries have evolved. One view considers the diaries to be genuine; the other that they were forged by British intelligence during the First World War as part of a co-ordinated propaganda campaign carried out against Casement when he began to openly conspire against the British Empire.

After decades of denial by the Home Office as to their existence, the five diaries (PRO HO 161/1-5) were partially released on 10 August 1959. Historians wishing to see them were obliged to obtain written permission from Britain's Home Secretary and there was strict prohibition of photographic reproduction of the material. It was not until their release under the Open Government Initiative in March 1994 that the documents were given unrestricted access and copying of pages was finally permitted. Eighteen months later, the London Public Record Office declassified all remaining Home Office files on Casement. The release included his surviving prison papers; transcripts of his interrogations, trial and appeal; an important RIC intelligence file showing Casement's pivotal role in the first recruitment drives for the Irish Volunteers; and the series of memoranda placed in front of the cabinet on 18 July 1916, when a deeply divided Liberal government decided to use the diaries to undermine the campaign demanding a reprieve and prevent Casement attaining martyrdom.

Interest in Casement re-awakened

Since the resurfacing of the controversy, there has been a gradual



(National Library of Ireland)

reawakening of curiosity in Casement. This interest has gone in several directions. At an academic level, it began in 1998 with the first Roger Casement Colloquium at Goldsmith's College in London organised by the professor of literary history, Bill McCormack and the Amazon anthropologist, Steve Nugent. The colloquium gathered together forty leading academics and experts who spent a day discussing aspects of the dynamics of the debate. It became clear then that 'authenticity' was accepted on a very limited knowledge of the disputed documents and only five

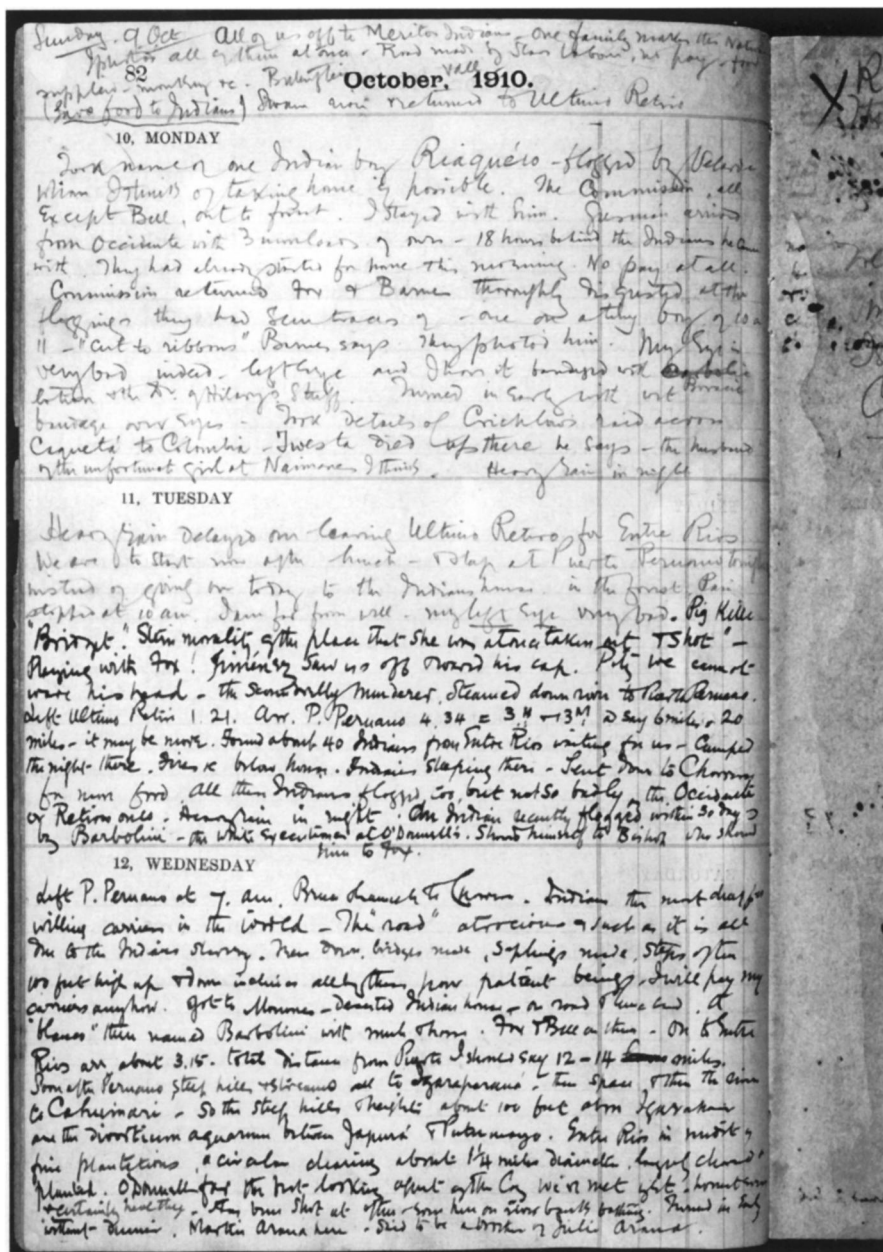
participants had actually read the 1911 Letts' Desk Diary (HO 161/4), the most sexually explicit diary of all.

In May 1998, following a question in the House of Lords by the Irish peer Lord Kilbracken to the Home Office minister, Lord Williams of Mostyn, the PRO released the names of the interrogation officers whose identities had initially been withheld in the release of the Home Office files on Casement on 18 October 1995. A further release of intelligence material relevant to Casement took place on 27 January 1999, with the declassifying of the first KV2 files (Security service personal files) at the PRO. The files classed Casement as a 'First World War renegade'. A number of documents allowed a far better understanding of the intelligence priority Casement became before and after his capture. From 1914 the highest-ranking intelligence chiefs and government ministers were kept informed of Casement's closest movements and the files confirmed, from the perspective of intelligence, that Casement was the most significant revolutionary involved in the move towards rebellion in Ireland in 1916.

Taoiseach calls for enquiry

While Britain's Open Government Initiative certainly contributed towards a revising of views in Britain, an equally significant change happened in Ireland. On 25 April 1999 at the annual Fianna Fáil Arbour Hill commemoration service in honour of the 1916 dead, Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, made a public statement on the controversy:

A number of historians working in the field have now compared the so-called 'white diaries' with parallel 'black diaries' and have come to the renewed conclusion that the latter were forged. Others over the years have argued they were genuine. But I think in justice to the memory of Sir Roger Casement there is now a compelling *prima facie* case for a new and rigorous enquiry into the provenance and genuineness of the so-called 'black diaries'.



A page from one of the [Dollard's 1910 Office Diary] *Black Diaries*. (Public Record Office, London: folio 32, HO 161/3)

This statement abandoned the position laid down by Séan Lemass and Éamon de Valera in the 1960s that discussion about the diaries should cease. But in a more tolerant Ireland, Casement's sexual status was no longer the issue. The dynamics of the debate in both Britain and Ireland had changed, as had the intellectual environment. Ahern 'proposed in the first instance to ask the Royal Irish Academy to organise a seminar on the subject, so that the different conclusions can be debated'.

Tony Blair replies

On 23 December 1999 Ahern wrote to the British Prime Minister Tony Blair asking his government to release any further material from British archives which might shed light on the authenticity or otherwise of the

diaries. Blair replied on 11 February 2000 and the letter was made available under Ireland's Freedom of Information Act:

I have looked into this carefully with the relevant departments and agencies. They have been over their archives extensively. But I am afraid nothing has been unearthed which sheds any new light on the subject. The Home Office and Security Service have both released their files on Casement with only minor excisions, principally details which would have revealed the identity of informants. SIS [Secret Intelligence Service] (whose papers in any event are not released in accordance with government policy) have told me that they hold very few papers on Casement and none of these contain any reference to the authenticity of the diaries.

Royal Irish Academy Symposium

The Taoiseach's challenge was taken up efficiently by the Royal Irish Academy. On 5 and 6 May 2000, they organised a high profile symposium: Roger Casement in Irish and World History. Historians, diplomats, barristers, academics, journalists and document examiners gathered to debate the matter. The event was successful because it brought the complexity of Casement's life, death and afterlife into focus and included the first open discussion on Casement's complex relations with both British and German intelligence departments. Apart from the vigorous debate, the occasion was a peculiarly reconciling moment. Despite the vast differences in beliefs, it was conducted with dignity and understanding by almost all of those in attendance. It also brought a number of important new matters into focus.

A former Belgian Ambassador in the Congo, Jules Marchal, admitted to the existence in Afro-Belgian history of a 'Morel-Casement' myth. E.D. Morel collaborated with Casement in the founding of the Congo Reform Association (CRA) in 1904. Over the next decade the CRA successfully galvanised the Foreign Office and British government to bring about an end to the disgraceful atrocities committed against the African people forced into rubber extraction. The movement for Congo reform became the most effective human rights campaign of the pre-First World War period. Marchal, who has published extensive material from Belgian archives on Leopold II's Congo Free State, revealed that a new generation of historians in Belgium have challenged the myth and 'are convincing the public gradually of the absolute honesty of Casement and Morel and King Leopold's villainy'.

Besides discussing Casement's importance within the realms of both African and South American history, the event also highlighted the need to set up an independent forensic examination of the contested material. A long-serving forensic document examiner with the New York Police Department, John J. Horan, criticised the most recent examination of the handwriting undertaken by Dr David Baxendale for the BBC. Horan was puzzled by the fact that the most rudimentary analysis on inks and paper had still not yet been carried out. In his defence, Baxendale stated

that before undertaking the examination in the Home Office he had to sign a 'secrecy declaration'.

The failure to create a sufficiently 'transparent' and independent environment to examine the diaries against other manuscript material or publish the findings of the forensic tests carried out since 1959 brings into question the value of all tests carried out on the contested material. Several historians feel that there has been an effort to enforce authenticity. One unanimous conclusion deriving from the symposium was the need to set up an independent international inquiry, which would include examination of material held between the London PRO and National Library of Ireland. This view was shared by Britain's most conspicuous historian of twentieth-century intelligence and counter-intelligence history, Christopher Andrew. During an interview with John Bowman on *Any Other Business* (RTÉ radio, 9-30 July 2000) he concluded:

In my view the way forward now and the way forward which should have been followed many years ago, is for there to be an international commission: British, Irish and some other nationality, let's say American—to go over the diaries using all modern forensic tests and arrive at a conclusion.

Possible forgers named

Among the more sensational revelations thrown up by the symposium were the identities of intelligence operators quite possibly involved in different stages of the alleged forgery. Owen Dudley Edwards (University of Edinburgh) speculated that one likely candidate, capable of constructing the text of 'typed matter' and reworking the Black Diaries from original diaries, was the Cambridge historian, Sir F.E. Adcock OBE (1886-1968). In 1915 Adcock was recruited into intelligence by Sir Alfred Ewing and served in the intelligence division of the Admiralty (Room 40) until 1919. There his mastery of the German language, retentive memory and cryptic mind proved invaluable in the daily task of deciphering German intercepts. Adcock idolised the director of naval intelligence, Captain Reginald Hall, whose portrait hung on the walls of Adcock's rooms at King's College, Cambridge beside that of his close friend, the poet A.E. Housman. After the war Adcock edited the *Cambridge Ancient History*, and as a historian had a close affinity to the histori-

cal approach of Thucydides. He wrote a number of important papers on source-criticism and was conscious of how a number of accepted classical sources 'must be suspected as fictitious'. On the outbreak of the Second World War, Adcock was active in recruiting a new generation of intelligence operators to both Bletchley Park and other war-time Foreign Office intelligence departments, including the brilliant but doomed, Alan Turing, responsible for breaking the Nazis' Enigma codes.

Another 'name' mentioned, by Trinity College graduate, Kevin Mannerings, as a possible candidate for the calligraphic penmanship of the forgery was Donald Im Thurn. Despite his rather distinguished relatives, Im Thurn is a rather shady character drifting on the periphery of intelligence during and after the First World War. His name is most sensationally associated with the forging of the Zinoviev Letter. Mannerings had a number of well argued reasons for suggesting Im Thurn could be the 'genius' forger referred to by Basil Thomson. However, even if the diaries are ultimately exposed as forgeries, the exact identities of those involved will probably remain a mystery.

Forerunner of Ireland's independent foreign policy

In bringing the symposium to a close, the special adviser to the Taoiseach and historian, Martin Mansergh, commented that before progressing to a stage where expensive forensic testing could take place he wished to see more relevant material published and all remaining Casement files released into the public domain in Britain. Finally Mansergh paid homage to Casement's importance in defining Ireland's own independent foreign policy position:

The more idealistic side of Irish foreign policy at its best, the engagement in East Timor, Sean MacBride's engagement as UN High Commissioner for Namibia, the strong Irish support for the anti-apartheid movement and Mary Robinson's taking on the challenge of UN Human Rights Commissioner follows in a straight line from Casement's activities. I think it would be legitimate to co-opt him as a forerunner of Ireland's independent foreign policy tradition. Casement also pre-figured modern environmental concern.

In the wake of the symposium it was clear that the controversy was being approached from two sides in academic circles. On one side there were historians interested in the authenticity of documentation, regardless of the question of Casement's sexuality. On the other side were academics primarily interested in the dynamics of the debate itself and relatively unconcerned with the question of whether or not the diaries were forged. Many involved in this approach were really only interested in Casement as a sexual icon: the 'truth value' of the disputed documents was irrelevant except as a basis of debate and division. Others supported this position because they could not see that the dynamics of the controversy had changed. Biographers continued to rely on the authenticity of the diaries as a key to Casement's personality and refused to engage with the problems faced by historians in assessing contentious documents. Finally, there was a small group whose views were so contorted by the extremities of Anglo-Irish politics and sexual phobias that they were incapable of tolerating or, indeed, understanding any side of the debate, without their own apparatus of prejudice.

Remaining classified Casement files

On 1 December 2000, the debate moved on with the second Roger Casement Colloquium jointly staged by Goldsmith's College, London and the PRO. During her opening address, Sarah Tyacke, the Keeper of Public Records, gave more specific details about the declassification of the Special Branch files first mooted at the RIA symposium by Gill Bennett:

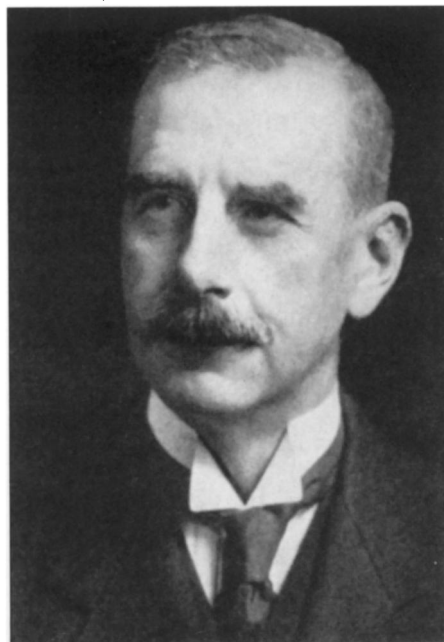
The Special Branch of the Metropolitan Police is not only releasing some material shortly but will also be releasing a further group of files in the middle of next year and will be referring the very small remainder to the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Council, chaired by the Master of the Rolls.

Once the release of the Metropolitan Police files has been carried out, the only Casement material to remain classified, according to the most recent official statements, are the MI6-SIS (Secret Intelligence Service) files and thirteen KV-2 files withheld under the Public Record Act (1958).

The release of hundreds of Casement files in Britain between 1994



At last year's Royal Irish Academy symposium possible forgers of the Black Diaries were named: Sir F.E. Adcock (left), who, according to Owen Dudley Edwards, was capable of constructing the 'typed matter' and Donald Im Thurn (below), who, according to Kevin Mannings, is a possible candidate for the calligraphic penmanship. Thurn is most sensationally associated with the forging of the Zinoviev letter and may be the 'genius' forger referred to by Sir Basil Thomson (right), head of Special Branch and 'discoverer' of the diaries.



and 2001 was reciprocated with the release at the National Archives of Ireland of extensive Casement files kept by the Department of An Taoiseach and initiated by Michael Collins in 1922. Besides revealing the changing attitudes to the diaries at a government level, the documents were mainly concerned with the lengthy efforts to get Casement's remains back to Ireland. Forty-nine years of negotiating ended with the mission by former Irish Ambassador, Seán G. Ronan to recover Casement's bones from Pentonville Prison in 1965. The final decision to allow this widely appreciated act of reconciliation was taken by Harold Wilson at a meeting in 10 Downing Street with Ireland's Minister of External Affairs, Frank Aiken, a few hours after the state funeral of Winston Churchill on 30 January 1965. Surely this is one of the most ironic conjunctures of Anglo-Irish history, rich in historical symbolism.

Casement's role suppressed

The deliberate policy pursued by history departments since 1965 has been to suppress Casement as a figure of British, Irish and World history. Casement's tireless humanitarian campaign in the Amazon was reduced to a one and a half-line footnote in *The Cambridge History of Latin America* (1992). He receives even more cursory treatment in *The Oxford History of the British Empire* (1999) and somewhat outrageously does not merit a single mention in the context of Europe's scramble for Africa or Britain's 'informal empire' in South America. Casement's treatment is evidence of how history is as capable of suppressing the truth as it

is of bringing the past alive. But perhaps historians can be forgiven since there has been so much deliberate manipulation and control of the story through the slow drip-feeding of documentation by the state since his execution.

The declassifying of so much new material is forcing historians to reconsider Casement in many different directions. His meaning, however, remains in a state of limbo. The Royal Irish Academy symposium successfully retrieved Casement from the margins of history, but there is a vast amount still to be done. The next stage must be the setting up of an international commission with the power to oversee any forensic examination, make rulings on existing controversies and define guidelines whereby authenticity can be established. There is an equally important demand to publish authoritative and academic reference sources of documents to allow a more informed level of research to begin. Casement remains fragmented as a figure of history because the documentation by and about him is so scattered. There is material relevant to his life and work held in archives and libraries between Ireland, Britain, Peru, Brazil, West Africa, Germany and America.

Since Casement's contribution to African and South American history is so significant, representatives from those regions should also sit on any eventual commission.

The current interest in Casement is causing repercussions in many regions of historical research and a number of other academic disciplines. His evolution from benevolent imperialist into humanitarian and finally anti-imperialist revolutionary is too complex an issue to be left to the sensationalising approach of biography. Although too much discussion still focuses on the diaries controversy, Casement is gradually being resurrected to his rightful place as one of the most dynamic and effective voices to speak out on behalf of 'people without history' whether Africans, Native Americans, Amazindians or, indeed, the Irish people as a whole. A rebel whose views and actions still resonate to this day: a rebel with a cause.

Angus Mitchell is currently editing Sir Roger Casement's *Heart of Darkness* for the Irish Manuscripts Commission.

Further reading:

Royal Irish Academy symposium programme, *Roger Casement in Irish and World History* (Dublin 2000).

R.R. Doerries, *Prelude to the Easter Rising: Sir Roger Casement in Imperial Germany* (London 2000).

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A. Mitchell, 'Casement's "Black Diaries": closed books reopened' in *History Ireland* (Autumn 1997).