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The row over the authenticity of the Casement diaries continues with the publication of two rival editions, reviewed by Paucic Travers

Not so black and white

**Roger Casement's Diaries.
1910: The Black and The White**

Edited by Roger Sawyer

Pimlico, £10

The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement.

Edited by Angus Mitchell

The Lilliput Press, £20

Roger Casement was tried for high treason and executed in August 1916. A campaign for a reprieve was fatally derailed by the selective leaking of incriminating diaries, subsequently known as the Black Diaries, which purport to show that he was a rampant homosexual with particularly depraved appetites. The authenticity or otherwise of these diaries, which probably cost Casement his life, has been a matter of periodic debate for over 80 years.

Until the 1930s, it was widely assumed in both Britain and Ireland that the diaries were authentic. Casement's early biographers tacitly accepted as much. While Dr William Maloney's *The Forged Casement Diaries* (1936) set the pendulum swinging in the opposite direction, at least as far as Irish opinion was concerned, the publication of the Black Diaries in Paris in 1959 helped reverse that trend.

The weight of academic opinion since then has been that the diaries are indeed genuine. The publication now of two rival but overlapping editions of Casement diaries has revived the saga and added an almost pantomime dimension. O yes they are genuine, says Roger Sawyer. O no they are not, retorts Angus Mitchell. Neither proves his case conclusively. We are left with the balance of probabilities still pointing towards authenticity but rather more precariously than before, thanks particularly to some considerable scholarship from Mitchell. If the Black Diaries are genuine, then Casement, in the course of demanding voyages to the Amazon during which he wrote extensive reports for the Foreign Office, also maintained two diaries, one intimate and frequently pornographic (the Black Diaries now in the Public Records Office) and the other more detailed but not incriminating (the White Diaries or Amazon Journal now in the National Library of Ireland). Sawyer and Mitchell were jointly commissioned by Pimlico to publish an edition of both diaries.

In the course of the project, Sawyer, who earlier had been sceptical, became more convinced that the Black Diaries were authentic. Mitchell journeyed in the opposite direction, concluding from his examination of the National Library material that the Black Diaries were forged at the behest of the unscrupulous Sir Basil Thompson, Assistant Commissioner of the London Metropolitan Police and Captain Hall of Naval Intelligence. Convinced that no useful purpose could be solved by publishing a new edition of the Black Diaries, he withdrew from the joint project. Sawyer's edition consists of the

Diary for 1910 covering Casement's first voyage to the Amazon and an edited version of the White Diary.

Mitchell's *Amazon Journal* consists of the full text of the White Diary with some additional material, but not the Black Diary. This, we are told, is available on the publishers web-site. Whatever the prurient interest in the Black Diaries, Sawyer has done a service by proceeding with publication of a corrected version. It is less easy to defend his decision to include only an abridged version of the White Diary. True it is rambling and repetitive but, as the comparison of the two texts is critical, it would have been better to publish them both in full. Although they are based on diametrically opposed assumptions, Sawyer and Mitchell's editions complement each other.

In the circumstances, it seems a pity that an agreed version could not have been produced. This might have been more authoritative.

Even a cursory comparison of the two texts shows numerous differences and mis-transcriptions of Casement's handwriting. For example, Sawyer's version of the White Diary entry for Thursday 10 November 1910 includes the following: "I got lots of letters from Monn [E.D. Morel] from Moulle] and many others" whereas Mitchell renders the same entry more plausibly: "I got lots of letters from home, from Morel and many others". Casement made his reputation as a defender of the rubber-gathering slaves in the Congo and later in the Putumayo region of South America. In the meantime he had converted to the cause of Irish separatism which led to his ill-fated mission to Germany to enlist support for an Irish rebellion. The case against Casement was clear-cut and indisputable, and in the circumstances of 1916, with Britain engaged in a life and death struggle with Germany and rebellion on its backdoor, the sentence of death was hardly surprising. What was unusual was that the sentence was not commuted, given his undoubtedly distinguished humanitarian career, that he had not actually participated in the rebellion and that by the summer of 1916 order had been restored in Ireland.

Whatever the authenticity of the Black Diaries, there is no doubt that they were used in a cynical and unprincipled fashion to blacken his name both before and after his death. This was done with the knowledge and approval of the Cabinet. Casements' fractured upbringing (child of a mixed marriage; secretly baptised a Catholic; orphaned at the age of 12) has been seized on in explaining some of his later actions. Sawyer argues that Casement's 'problems' resulted from a combination of emotional deprivation, religious uncertainties and the 'duality of his political commitments'. There is much here, he says, that could be of interest to a psychiatrist, and 'not merely the ambivalence of expression that is likely to be found in the writings of a man who crosses from one cultural tradition to another'.

It is precisely this kind of Ladybird-Freudianism which made the diaries such a devastating weapon. As Bernard Shaw commented later, the trial came at a time



Roger Casement on the deck of an Amazon river boat in 1910

when Freud's writings had made psychoanalysis grotesquely fashionable. Everyone was expected to have a secret history 'unfit for publication except in the consulting rooms of the psychologists'. Shaw thought that if it had been announced that a secret diary had been found among the papers of Queen Victoria revealing that her 'severe respectability' masked the 'day-dreams of a Messalina', it would have been received with eager credulity. Mitchell argues plausibly that the Amazon Journal is a major primary source for the history of the Amazon in the most decisive moment of its destruction, and deepens our knowledge of both European and U.S. foreign policy in South America. Its publication now should result in an enhancement of Casement's humanitarian reputation and at the same time broaden our understanding of his political development.

However, his Casement is too much of a late 20th century man. In his concern for the people and environment of the rainforest, Casement was a pioneer but there is a danger of overlaying one shade of green with another. Casement was not the prototype

friend of the earth. His experiences in Africa and South America did persuade him of the destructive influence of imperialism, including British imperialism, but the argument that the diaries were forged partly to undermine Casement's South American work is totally unconvincing. The twists and turns of the forgeries saga serve almost as an index of national feeling in Ireland and a barometer of the state of Anglo-Irish relations.

After reading Maloney's *The Forged Casement Diaries*, W.B. Yeats wrote two poems, one a ballad lambasting those responsible for the 'forgeries', the other a blacker piece with the refrain "the ghost of Roger Casement is beating at the door". One might have expected that the repatriation of his remains to Glasnevin in 1965, (assuming of course that they were his remains: that is another story), Casement's ghost might have finally been laid to rest. With the appearance of these two books, the beating at the door has become more insistent. Paucic Travers teaches history at St Patrick's College, Drumcondra.