**Writing Roger Casement - the long and winding road to McKenna’s Fort**

**Arnold Thomas Fanning, author of the play McKenna’s Fort, explores the many sources he drew on to paint a full picture of one of Irish history’s most controversial figures**

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**Michael Bates as Roger Casement in Arnold Thomas Fanning’s play McKenna’s Fort**

I stand in the centre of the ancient rath of McKenna’s Fort near Banna Strand in Co Kerry.

It is dusk, and rain sweeps in sheets across the flat expanse of fields that lie between the dunes of nearby Banna Strand and this sudden obstruction in the landscape. Trees and overgrowth obscure the rath’s form, but the banks are clear as is the circular outline made by the dip of the fosse.

In the centre is a small monument: a memorial to Sir Roger Casement, who was discovered hiding here, waiting for help after a failed mission to intervene in the Easter Rising, and was arrested on Good Friday, April 21st, 1916.

There is a hollow where it is said he spent his last moments of freedom: it is a cramped space for such a tall man. I imagine the hours he spent there in darkness before being ordered out and taken away a few hours after daybreak. The end of his journey as humanitarian, as revolutionary, as would-be rebel. An undignified end, leading to the gallows a few months after.

It is the end of my journey of research into Casement’s life also, which I undertook so as to write my play *McKenna’s Fort*, an exploration of his life as humanitarian, revolutionary and lover.

For a moment, the desolation of this spot – an exposed rath in the Kerry countryside – and the thought of him here alone awaiting the end a century before overcomes me. I feel close to him. Moved by the thought of his fate. The rain and wind do not abate, the dusk develops to darkness. It is an apt place to end this journey, before the next one begins: bringing McKenna’s Fort to performance.

**Origin story**
The journey of researching McKenna’s Fort had begun in earnest a year before the trip to the rath itself. But my interest in Roger Casement had begun a long time ago, when I first came across a paperback edition of his journals, *Roger Casement’s Diaries: 1910: The Black and The White* (ed. Roger Sawyer, Pimlico, 1997).

Not only do these contain accounts of his travels reporting on humanitarian abuses in South America; they also recount his gay encounters, pursuits, and conquests in a detail that is unabashed for the time they were written. I was intrigued by both: the adventures of an Irishman in South America, and the frank, confident account of masculine sexuality. It took me a lot longer to decide to write a play about Casement however.

One impetus came during the 2014 Theatre of Memory Symposium at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. I was fired up by the many contributors who encouraged writers to engage with the Decade of Centenaries: and in particular by the words of President Michael D Higgins, who said in an address that “we need new myths that fly from history”, by which I felt he meant artists need not be confined to follow the letter of history as academics must, but rather use it as inspiration to create something compelling for audiences through their imaginations. I determined to write a play for the next significant anniversary in the Decade of Centenaries, 2016, and began to cast about for a subject.

**Aligned in age**
Late 2014 found me travelling in Peru and there I recalled my reading of Casement’s journals, and on rereading them on my return to Ireland I was reminded that they specifically covered the Putumayo region of Peru; moreover he was the same age that I was the first time he went to the region. My earlier interest was revived and I decided to explore Casement further. I had found my subject. Now the journey of research began in earnest.

I dove fully into it. My main source was *Roger Casement: Imperialist, Rebel, Revolutionary* by Séamus Ó Síocháin (The Lilliput Press, 2007), to my mind the definitive biography of Casement, an exhaustive and scrupulous account of his life. Moreover, it uses the *Black Diaries*, which recount the gay life of Casement, as a main source, so is a complete picture of the man, including, for example, not only his casual encounters but his relationship with his Irish lover Millar Gordon.

Not all biographers, I was to discover, accept the veracity of the *Black Diaries*. Another source, for example, was the thorough biography *16 Lives: Roger Casement* by Angus Mitchell (The O’Brien Press, 2013). Thorough in many ways – the account of the development of Casement’s political thinking is exemplary, for instance – but notably deficient in one: Mitchell regards the *Black Diaries* as being forgeries, created by the British to undermine Casement’s campaign for clemency after his trial found him guilty of treason and he was condemned to be hanged. So nothing on the gay private life of Casement here, no encounters, fleeting or otherwise, and no Millar.

A good overview of Casement, Mitchell’s biography does not compare in my mind to Ó Síocháin’s in terms of presenting the complete and necessary portrait. But both Ó Síocháin and Mitchell do give full accounts of Casement’s work in Africa and South America and his achievements in the area of championing human rights in those regions, as well as detailing his important political and intellectual relationships with key thinkers and activists of his day, not to mention of course his life as an Irish rebel.

**Essential reading**
The final source I used was Jeffrey Dudgeon’s monumental *Roger Casement: The Black Diaries: With a Study of his Background, Sexuality, and Irish Political Life* (Belfast Press, 2002, paperback re-issue 2016). This extraordinary book is a minute dissection and decoding of the Black Diaries, and the fullest and most thorough exploration of Casement’s private life as a gay man. As such, it is essential reading to get the full picture of who Casement was and how he thought, and became a key text in my journey of reading so as to prepare for writing my play.

But writing the play was not as straightforward as preparing to write. Through the Irish Arts Council, I secured a Travel & Training Award that allowed me to be a resident writer at the Sachaqa Centro de Arte artist’s colony in the northern highlands of Peru. I wanted to get away from all distractions, and immerse myself in a key place in the Casement firmament – the region where the 1910/11 *Black Diaries* were written and where he pursued one of his most significant humanitarian missions: to expose atrocities against the indigenous population in the Amazon Basin of Peru.

However, once settled in the residency – a very rudimentary affair of barns and outbuildings perched on a hillside on the edge of the selva (jungle) – and with my desk set up and ready to go, I encountered a problem: on my first day I experienced a debilitating writer’s block and was unable to begin.

My mind was overwhelmed by one question: ‘How do I write a play about Casement?’ I had read the biographies and diaries, I knew about him: but how to create a character to be performed in a theatre? It seemed to daunting a task, so that first day I closed my notebooks, packed away my notes and simply gave up on the idea of writing anything.

**Mode of being**
The second day I tried something different: I tried placing myself in Casement’s mode of being, in a small way, by doing some of the things he used to do: walk in the selva and swim in the rivers.

So after a long walk up through nearby forest tracks, I took a swim where the river wound past a waterfall and then under a bridge just by the little village of San Roque De Cumbaza, imagining as I did so how Casement would have experienced this, thought about this, and wrote about this in one of his journals: and then, on returning to my desk in the artist’s colony studio, I wrote this account in Casement’s voice as it now came to me.

Repeating this daily, I built up a notebook of such little monologues, then used the diaries, both the Black and the White as jumping-off points, prompts or inspirations to write further monologues.

Slowly an account of his life, written in the first-person in the character of Casement, began to take shape: in a very rough form. By the end of the residency, I had created a monologue play. I called it *McKenna’s Fort* after the place he had been arrested, set the play in that location, and decided the action of the play would end there too, on the night he waited in vain for rescue, feeling that all that would come after in his life – arrest, detention, trial, and execution – could be an implied presence of tragedy hanging over the action.

Along the way I travelled further, so as to follow in Casement’s footsteps and see Peru through his eyes - to Iquitos and its famous riverside walkway the Malecon, where he spent so much time in pursuit of young men while working off the stress of his humanitarian investigations; and further upriver in the Amazon jungle itself, there to experience the smells, sights, sounds, of heat, sun, humidity, flora, and fauna as he experienced them- though he did so of course in a far more extreme way- as he pursued those investigations. All these experiences went into the play, and I returned to Ireland with a draft I felt did my subject justice. **Starting from scratch** Except there, I ran into another issue: what I had written was not performable as a one-man show. It was simply too dense, too detailed, to prosaic, too long, and not dramatic enough to work as theatre. A week-long intense workshop with director Paul Kennedy and actor Michael Bates followed, during which we collectively took the play apart, discussed it, analysed it, brainstormed ideas for it, and figured out what worked and what did it.

During the process, Michael improvised scenes and I absorbed all that went on in the workshop space. I went away with a wealth of new notes, a brain buzzing with ideas – but no play yet. I had to start from scratch to create something that was performable. This I did in an intense period of rewriting, creating scenes that, when we reconvened and workshopped them again, finally worked as theatre: the play, *McKenna’s Fort*, was now ready for performance. But there was one thing left to do. And so the pilgrimage to the rath, McKenna’s Fort itself, was decided upon.

A short time later, Michael and I drove to Kerry. We stood in the fort where Casement had been arrested and felt profound connection with this man whose life we were bringing to stage. We went to Banna Strand, where he had come ashore in the early hours of Good Friday, 1916; we saw the monument built nearby in his memory.

We felt privileged to be involved in a project that brought this extraordinary individual’s life to wider awareness, and felt moreover we were doing it in a way that did our subject justice, dealt with him truthfully, and with a respect and dignity he deserved.

We drove away from the strand, from the rath, from Kerry, and headed back to Dublin: the journey to bring Roger Casement to life on stage was nearing completion: it was time to perform *McKenna’s Fort*.

- McKenna’s Fort runs as part of the 13th International Dublin Gay Theatre Festival 2016 at The Teachers Club (Studio), Parnell Street West, Dublin, from May 2nd to May 7th at 7.30pm. Additional Performances: May 2nd at 2:30pm and May 7th at 2:30pm. Tickets: €10-€15

For more info, see [gaytheatre.ie](http://gaytheatre.ie), or phone +353 89 202 9673