

## Fortnight Publications Ltd.

---

The Casement File

Roger Casement by Brian Inglis

Review by: Michael McInerney

*Fortnight*, No. 62 (May 21, 1973), pp. 17-18

Published by: [Fortnight Publications Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25544590>

Accessed: 29/03/2013 19:39

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*Fortnight Publications Ltd.* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Fortnight*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# Books

## The Casement File

Michael McInerney

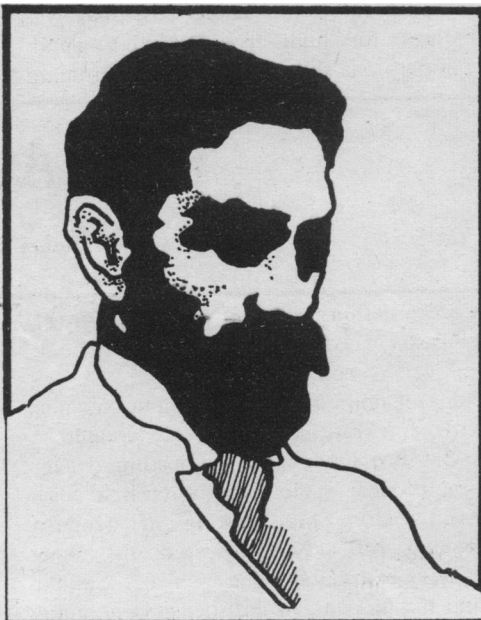
**Roger Casement, Brian Inglis** (Hodder and Stoughton, £4.50).

This is reading, both compulsive and fascinating, and leaves one with an intense compassion and admiration for the wayward genius who climbed the height of fame with achievement but who, yet, in his last years, descended to depths of loneliness and despair, and died on a hangman's rope, a fate from which through his work in the Congo and Putumayo he had saved perhaps thousands of others. Perhaps he gave us his own epitaph: "the best thing was the Congo", he wrote in his last letter to a friend, and he added: "it was only a shadow they tried on June 26th (1916) the real man was gone."

His life was a story of paradoxes. He was knighted and otherwise honoured by a Queen and a King but later hanged by the King's hangman. Even his arrest, trial and death were paradoxes for he was captured and tried because, with real courage he had returned to Banna Strand, in Kerry, not to order the Easter Rising of 1916, but to cancel it as an act of idiocy. "It was doomed," he judged, because the Germans were sending only 20,000 rifled and ammunition, but no officers, while he himself refused to order the small brigade of Irish prisoners of war to be sent to Ireland. "Their inevitable fate would have been to face treason charges and a firing squad," he believed. But, he was determined that if the Rising could not be called off then he should go: "I must be with the boys," he said, refusing entreaty to stay in Berlin.

With this book Brian Inglis has given us everything there is now to know about Casement. His research is most comprehensive, his approach sympathetic yet penetrating, his painting of the Irish and British political and social background adequate and his portraits of Irish leaders and the Republican movement full and shrewd.

There is no shred of condescension or moral chauvinism in Inglis about Casement's homosexual history. Indeed



the poems of Casement which the author selects are both compassionate and also revealing:

"No human hand to steal to mine,  
No loving eye to answering shine,  
Earth's cruel heart of dust alone  
To give me breath and strength  
to groan."

"I only know 'tis death to give  
My love, yet loveless can I live?  
I only know I cannot die  
And leave this love God made, not I.

God made this love; there let it rest  
Perchance it needs a riven breast  
To heavenly eyes the scheme to show  
My broken heart must never know."

Dr. Inglis's judgement is against the forgery of the famous diaries. "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 was 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 . . . Why should they (Government) pay a forger to do more than was strictly necessary for the immediate requirements?" But Inglis does not allow that judgement to cloud his estimate of Casement.

He comments that it is not given to many men, outside the ranks of statesmen, to become internationally celebrated on three distinctly separate occasions during their lives as Casement did. First there were his campaigns in the Congo and in the Putumayo. About the Congo Morel (his friend and fellow-campaigner) felt: "Historians will cherish these occasions as the only two in which British diplomacy rose above the commonplace." Not only did he expose the brutalities there, but when the Government let him down in pursuing a solution, he himself helped to organise a campaign that deprived King Leopold of Belgium of an Empire. Inglis says that in one respect Casement did more for the African natives than anybody, not even himself, realised; the natives suffered far less from exploitation than they would have done but for Casement's work in his report on the Congo. But he accomplished less in the Putumayo because "he tended to forget the lesson he taught endlessly: that what mattered was not the individuals who were responsible for the treatment of the natives, but the system which they operated—or which operated them."

But what did Casement do for Ireland? There was misunderstanding and he was blamed for Eoin MacNeill's cancellation of the Volunteer mobilisation on Easter Sunday morning, 1916. His capture, of course, was a signal to MacNeill. To many Irish eyes he was an eccentric figure, "his eyes sad with memories of unforgettable horrors witnessed in the forests of the Congo and Putumayo (Eimar O'Duffy 'The Wasted Island'). But Inglis also says that what has not received full recognition was the influence which Casement exerted on the national movements from his return from the Congo in 1914. "He provided funds, sympathy, enthusiasm at a time when the men and women in that movement were much in need of them; and from genuine love, not from a superfluity of wealth seeking an easy outlet. In return he inspired love." He was more valuable in the rapid recruiting of Irish Volunteers than anyone else in the early months of 1914. It was he who laid

the plans and secured the funds for the arms (for the Irish Volunteers) landed at Howth in July 1914 without which the Easter Rising could not have taken place."

Casement was one of the very few Irishmen who ever seemed to have grasped the reality that "if Ireland was ever to be united, it could only be by winning the trust of the Ulster Protestants." Inglis says by the way that de Valera believed that force would be morally justified to restore unity, but perhaps Brian Inglis missed the recent publication of the Secret Debates of 1921 in which de Valera says that: "for us to use force against the North would be to commit the same crime that Britain committed against us." The pity was that de Valera did not consistently keep that policy in view, in the political wilderness of the Republic afterwards when the North was a Southern issue. Casement also believed, however, that Catholic leadership alone could never win the North. It would be too much dominated by the Catholic Church. But even Casement, Ulster 'Protestant' background though he had, still failed to grasp the kernel. He believed that Britain—"external forces"—could deliver a united Ireland if they would "leave us alone". It is hardly a policy. And Brian Inglis concludes: "It has been the final irony of Casement's career that he . . . should have been the one who tried hardest to prevent those 'external forces' from fulfilling their destructive destiny." Is there a romantic Irishman in that apparently cynical Inglis heart?

Thinking about Brian Inglis's work one is left with the deep impression that the historic accident of the first World War beginning while he was in the United States, decided Casement's fate. There was then no real purpose in his going to Germany. It too was almost an accident. It was unplanned, something to do when his return to Ireland was blocked by his letter to the Irish Independent on Irish neutrality. It was an accident, however, which determined his doom. But secondary to that was his naive trust of people, though coupled also with suspicion. His trust of Christiansen, an accidental acquaintance who betrayed him as his fellow-conspirator in Germany, was the judgement of an amateur, not a professional revolutionary, the romantic, the unworldly, the opposite of the tough John Devoy, the Fenian in New York. But there was something of that also in Erskine Childers, his friend, who sailed his yacht with guns to Howth.

Mention of Childers recalls similarities. Both were of Irish Protestant Imperialist and Unionist background and origin, both took part in the Boer War, on the same side, both were involved in the Howth Gun-Running. Both were executed for being Republicans, one by the British and the other by the Irish. Both were decorated by the Queen and both renounced those decorations or were shorn of them. Childers earned his decoration fighting for Britain against Germany. Casement lost his seeking German aid for Ireland. Casement was hanged for high treason by England. Childers was shot by an Irish Government

firing squad just after the sunrise he had asked to see for the last time. Both died bravely. Perhaps a fundamental difference was that Casement died a Roman Catholic (in both religion and politics). Childers remained a Protestant in his religion but was an Irish Catholic in his politics. Both reached the heights of triumph and their opposite and yet there is an unmistakable dignity and grandeur about these two romantic Irish patriots whose love for Ireland was so deep but whose knowledge about its division and bitterness was not quite profound enough to leave us with the road to reconciliation.

## For & Against

Henry Heaney

**Confrontations: Studies in Irish History**, J. C. Beckett (Faber, 1972, £3.00).

James Camlin Beckett, for whom the chair in Irish history in Queen's was created in 1958, has long been the leading Ulster practitioner in the field of Irish history. Even before his *Making of Modern Ireland 1603-1923* appeared, his *Short History of Ireland* made his name familiar and his thought an indispensable stimulus to generations of students. The present volume of collected essays, gleaned from over thirty years of journal publication, ranges over three centuries and the themes of constitutional and religious history which have been the author's particular preoccupations.

Ireland has seen confrontations in plenty. Those selected by Professor Beckett are, however, more varied than might be imagined. They include seventeenth century Irish and Scottish reactions to developments in church and state in England, attempts by the native Irish and old English through the Confederation of Kilkenny to cope with the changing fortunes of Charles I, the effects of Irish administration of court politics under Charles II, the readiness of Westminster to listen to the Church of Ireland demands during the reigns of William and Anne, links between British and Irish parliamentarians in the later eighteenth century, rival traditions of revolutionary and constitutional movements for reform after 1800, contentions between ecclesiastical and political considerations affecting church disestablishment, and Carson's transition from Irish unionist to Ulster leader.

All but one of the essays have already appeared in print. The exception, 'Swift: the priest in politics' is, however, a development of thought already evidenced in 'Swift as an ecclesiastical statesman' which Beckett contributed to the James Eadie Todd Festschrift in 1949. The earlier essay abounded in footnotes and it is rather a pity that this reworking should lack all references. The Carson essay, similarly, is alas devoid of references, because, perhaps, of editorial policy on its first appearance. In general one might have expected more updating.

Nevertheless, the volume as here assembled deserves a wholehearted welcome especially for the chance it affords to reconsider the first essay, Beckett's thought-provoking inaugural lecture, 'The study of Irish history', now out of print in its original form.

In that lecture, the new professor examined the context in which Irish history should be studied. The problem, in his view, is the lack of a recognisable pattern—the confusion, the cross-currents, the apparent inconsequence of events, the regional isolationism. Where is there a theme leading from one process of development to the next? More succinctly, what is Irish history about?

For Beckett, a discernable pattern of development can be found in the centuries before the Anglo-Norman invasions. Since the twelfth century, all is seemingly hopeless confusion. He agrees with Tierney that the Gael-against-the-invader pattern is too highly coloured by nineteenth century nationalist sentiment to be historically acceptable. Beckett finds the necessary element of continuity in the