**NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS**

**The Myth of Roger Casement**

[**March 21, 1974**](http://www.nybooks.com/issues/1974/mar/21/)

[**Noel Annan**](http://www.nybooks.com/contributors/noel-annan/)

*Roger Casement*   
by Brian Inglis   
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 488 pp., $8.95

The troubles in Ulster during the past five years have produced a crop of books about Ireland and her struggle to obtain independence from England. Many of these books have owed much to those historians, some of the most talented of them working in Dublin, who have been demythologizing the past. The great revolt against British rule which ended in Irish independence was both heroic and successful. But it was also tragic in its incompetence and self-destructiveness, and resembled much more the operations of a small and indomitable guerrilla group than the spontaneous rising of a nation in arms throwing off the yoke of a tyrant.

The Irish had a greater talent for political than for revolutionary action. But for the First World War they would have gained their independence that way—though at the cost of the partition of Ulster. The Easter Rising of 1916 in Dublin was a tale of disasters and errors of judgment. The majority of Irishmen—like humble people all over the world—wanted to be left alone and were curiously mixed in their loyalties. They volunteered in their thousands to fight in the British army in the war against Germany: few of them wanted a republic. There was no puppet regime or alien apparatus of government, not even a language barrier always present to remind people that a foreign tyrant was on their necks.

The police force was Irish, the executive was Irish, and the Victorian abuse of an absentee landlord class exploiting a starving peasantry had been mitigated. It was precisely the absence of that sense of acute, grinding repression, which galvanizes a campaign for independence, that was so awkward for the new Sinn Fein which formed after 1916. As late as May, 1919, Michael Collins wrote: “We have too many of the bargaining type already…. It seems to me that official SF is inclined to be ever less militant and ever more political and theoretical….”

Collins was a leader of genius. He recognized that the revolutionary movement would have to offer itself as a rival government and that it could operate only through terror. The early killings evoked horror everywhere: for terror meant not only the systematic killing of policemen, soldiers, and officials but the intimidation of the population itself. Collins was determined that apathetic creatures or decent men sickened by violence should at the least help the Republicans and at the worst be shot if they hindered them.

There was nothing new about Collins’s methods: summary execution, assassination, mutilation, boycott, threatening letters, and firing into houses had been used off and on for two centuries in the Irish countryside. But Collins’s efficiency and organizing ability was new. In spite of the lamentations of the Catholic Church and the revulsion from the campaign of killing, it gradually became difficult for people to trade or buy the necessities of life if they did not go along with Sinn Fein. After two years of executions of so-called spies and traitors by Sinn Fein on the one side, and on the other by the Anglo-Irish authorities backed by the British army and their auxiliaries, the Black and Tans, who shot hostages in reprisal indiscriminately, Collins forced negotiations which led to the Treaty of 1921 and the establishment of the Irish Free State.

But the euphoria of the rebellion and the chiliastic, conflicting ideals of the revolutionaries now left Collins with a civil war on his hands in which he and the moving spirits of the rebellion lost their lives fighting each other. In six months the Free State Government executed seventy-nine Republicans: more than three times the number executed by the British during the two and a half years of the Anglo-Irish war. It was the culminating horror of the civil war which hardened the determination of the Protestant Ulstermen to cut themselves off from the rest of Ireland. With the collapse of the Boundary Commission the last chance of a gradual unification of Ireland disappeared—a defeat which the new Irish government had to accept to escape national bankruptcy and financial chaos.

The process of rewriting Irish history (a notable product of which is Robert Kee’s *The Green Flag*) in no way alters the role of the British in the story. They remain stupid, callous, insensitive, as insular as any Irishman, and in their own way as euphoric as Sinn Fein. That lack of historical perspective, which a conquering nation never acquires and a defeated race never loses, that refusal to recognize the emergence of a genuine Irish voice, characterized the English reaction to events. The distended patriotism, which was one of the most squalid by-products of World War I, hardened the hearts of the British government; Lloyd George was a prisoner of the Conservatives and now preened himself on stopping Woodrow Wilson or anyone else at Versailles from allowing Ireland to be considered under the doctrine of self-determination. The British adopted that rigid position which was to become so familiar in their dealings with their colonies: nationalist groups are a despicable unrepresentative minority, and the people of the colony are fundamentally “loyal.”

But the politically active (like the Bolsheviks) are always a minority: what matters is their cohesion and ability to gain sympathy. The IRA could not “defeat” the British: they could not even capture a barracks. But in the end the British had to acknowledge that they would have to draft a quarter of a million men to pacify Ireland and, exhausted by the losses and anguish of World War I, quit with bad grace.

One of the heroes of the revolution was Roger Casement. Born an Ulster Protestant, he exposed atrocities in the Congo and in South America while in the British consular service. Yet he never doubted his duty as an Irish patriot legally to turn traitor to the Crown, and he was hanged for high treason after he sought help in Germany for the rebellion of 1916. Brian Inglis tells the old romantic tale again, but he is no demythologizer and for that reason this biography is a good deal less interesting than it might be. He starts with an odd idea about personality. Casement, Inglis declares was,

…a split personality, not a Jekyll and Hyde, a schizophrenic; but in the sense that his personality was compartmentalized. There was the Arthurian Knight, there was the Casement revealed in his correspondence with the Foreign Office: calculating as well as honorable. There was the poet…. And there was also, as the diary daily and incongruously reveals, the Edwardian masher—except that it was youths rather than girls who caught his eyes.

What’s so odd? A characteristic young man of his age.

But Inglis’s account of Casement’s involvement in the Congo, exposing the atrocities of King Leopold’s regime, and Casement’s similar exposure of the persecution of the Indians in the Amazon (for which he strangely accepted a knighthood), is excellent. Perhaps it was Casement’s very nobility—his charm, dignity, and concern for suffering—that made him such an inept conspirator. Just as Arab and Indian nationalists in World War II were to fall into the error of allying themselves with Hitler in their struggle against British imperialism, so Casement was mistaken in arguing that Germany, already in those days inspired by the idea of the *Herrenvolk*, was the natural ally of Irish Republicanism. Casement believed in the myth; and his shock in discovering that the myth was not true was immense. When in Germany he tried to recruit an Irish Brigade from the thousands of Irish prisoners of war, he could get only fifty-five to follow him, of whom only eleven in the end could he trust. The Irish troops hooted him out of their camps.

Another myth proved to be false. Homosexuals eternally hope that their casual encounters will prove to be true loves. The Norwegian American sailor whom Casement picked up in New York he trusted implicitly. The sailor was to betray him to the British directly they arrived in Europe and to steal the notorious diaries which revealed Casement’s homosexual activities. Extracts from them were to be circulated clandestinely by the British authorities at the time of his trial. They were found deeply shocking because Casement often recorded how much he paid his pick-ups and how large was the size of their penises.

His trial was marked by the signal irony that F. E. Smith, who as Attorney General was obliged to lead the prosecution, had himself only two years previously organized armed resistance to the Crown in Ulster. Every incident in Casement’s trial and execution gives some fresh example of British callousness and insensitivity. Brian Inglis does a service in printing the text of Bernard Shaw’s fine letter arguing that Casement should not be hanged; and he is right to bring out the malignancy of Sir Ernley Blackwell at the Home Office—to this day a ministry infested with enemies of the human spirit—who was determined not to let ministers weaken and obtain a reprieve.[\*](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1974/mar/21/the-myth-of-roger-casement/?pagination=false&printpage=true#fn*-425772706) But the myth has cast its spell over him when he seems to suggest that Casement could somehow have been acquitted. He calls the trial a staged drama—which is what his account of Casement’s life is.

Casement did not die in vain. Fifty years after his death the British Labour government, which had returned his body to Dublin, showed that they would not endorse the repression of the Unionist government in Ulster. But though they did not move fast, or (as usual) imaginatively, enough, the British had come to recognize that, in G. M. Young’s phrase, Ireland was “the greatest failure in our history.” British guilt toward Ireland had risen to such a degree that Edward Health’s Conservative government dissociated itself from his party’s former allies, the Ulster Unionist party. There is today almost universal contempt for militant Ulster Protestantism and an adamant refusal to “integrate” Ulster within the United Kingdom as that ferocious servant of God, the Reverend Ian Paisley, demands.

Still less did Eire rise to support the old mythologizers. It is an odd spectacle to see Labour members of Parliament call for the withdrawal of British troops in Ulster and a Labour leader in Dublin, Conor Cruise O’Brien, plead for their retention. O’Brien’s courage and dedication to the politics of civility have in fact induced Eire’s governments to repudiate the Provisionals’ claim to be the heirs of de Valera or Collins or Casement: they seem to Irishmen on the contrary to resemble the terrible disintegrating forces of the civil war of 1921-1923.

I do not myself believe that the present governmental solution negotiated by Heath and Whitelaw has much chance of survival. Fundamentally, the struggle is between the Catholic and the Protestant working classes in Ulster, with the latter trying to protect their jobs and their fierce culture against the former, whom hitherto they have dispossessed by gerrymandering and beggared by discrimination. In the weak new-born child, the Coalition, the Catholic-based Labour party will in the end run into the difficulties that usually destroy all left-wing partners in a coalition—it will be unable to cure Catholic unemployment and disabilities, and will be outflanked and lose support.

The theory on which this arrangement is based is that the Council of Ireland will somehow act as a mediating force; but its effectiveness is likely to be destroyed by the old Unionist party. Strangely enough, the IRA and one faction of Protestant extremists, who are led by the young lawyer, Desmond Boal, seem to be moving toward the same objectives. They are both talking of a federal Irish Parliament with two provincial governments in Dublin and Belfast. Sooner or later the extremists of both sides, however much they are disowned in Dublin or London, will have to be brought together to join in the discussions because sooner or later they will have to agree how they are to live together. The British government’s absurd referendum settled nothing. So far therefore, it looks as if it will be another fifty years before the two cultures in Ireland and the remoter culture of Britain will find a stable relationship.

**Letters**

[*No Acquittal*](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1974/jun/27/no-acquittal/) June 27, 1974

1. \*

William Joyce, an Irishman who became notorious as Lord Haw-Haw and broadcast propaganda in English from Nazi Germany in World War II, had a far better legal claim than Casement to be acquitted as a traitor. But he was hanged just the same.[↩](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1974/mar/21/the-myth-of-roger-casement/?pagination=false&printpage=true#fnr*-425772706)