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**The Tragedy of Roger Casement**

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[**Colm Tóibín**](http://www.nybooks.com/contributors/colm-toibin/)

[*Roger Casement: The Black Diaries*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0953928721?ie=UTF8&tag=thneyoreofbo-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0953928721)**
by Jeffrey Dudgeon
Belfast: Belfast Press, 659 pp., £25.00

*Sir Roger Casement’s Heart of Darkness: The 1911 Documents*
by Angus Mitchell
Dublin: Irish Manuscripts Commission, 816 pp., £75.00

[*The Eyes of Another Race: Roger Casement’s Congo Report and 1903 Diary*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1900621983?ie=UTF8&tag=thneyoreofbo-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1900621983)**
edited by Séamus Ó Síocháin and Michael O’Sullivan
Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 366 pp., $74.95; $34.95 (paper)

[*Roger Casement in Death, or Haunting the Free State*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1900621770?ie=UTF8&tag=thneyoreofbo-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1900621770)**
by W.J. McCormack
Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 240 pp., $54.95; $27.95 (paper) (distributed in the US by Dufour Editions)

In *The Rings of Saturn* W.G. Sebald finds himself in an English seaside town falling asleep during a BBC documentary about the life of the Irishman Roger Casement, who was executed by the British in August 1916 for high treason. Afterward, when Sebald, intrigued by his own vague and twilit memories of the program, sets about finding out what he can about Casement, his imagination is fired by the relationship between Casement and Joseph Conrad, who first met each other in the Congo in either 1889 or 1890, when Casement, then in his mid-twenties, was working for the Congo Railway Company. For a number of weeks the two men shared a room. Conrad found inspiration at that time for *Heart of Darkness*; Casement was beginning on the road toward becoming a hero, a martyr, and a traitor.

On Casement, Conrad wrote that “the work he was busy about then was recruiting labour. He knew the coast languages well. I went with him several times on short expeditions to hold ‘palavers’ with neighbouring village-chiefs.” Later, in 1904, when Casement had become impassioned about atrocities being committed in the Congo and had written a report for the British government on the matter, he went to see Conrad. Jessie Conrad, the novelist’s wife, remembered his visit:

Sir Roger Casement, a fanatical Irish protestant, came to see us, remaining some two days our guest. He was a very handsome man with a thick dark beard and piercing, restless eyes. His personality impressed me greatly. It was about the time when he was interested in bringing to light certain atrocities which were taking place in the Belgian Congo. Who could foresee his own terrible fate during the war as he stood in our drawing-room passionately denouncing the cruelties he had seen?

Conrad had already written to Casement when *Heart of Darkness* was published: “I am glad you read the Heart of D., tho’ of course it’s an awful fudge.” At the time of Casement’s report on the Congo, Conrad also wrote to his friend R.B. Cunninghame Graham:

He’s a protestant Irishman, pious too. But so was Pizzaro. For the rest I can assure you that he is a limpid personality. There is a touch of the Conquistador in him too; for I have seen him start off into an unspeakable wilderness swinging a crookhandled stick for all weapons, with two bulldogs, Paddy (white) and Biddy (brindle) at his heels and a Loanda boy carrying a bundle for all company. A few months afterwards it so happened that I saw him come out again, a little leaner a little browner, with his stick, dogs, and Loanda boy, and quietly serene as though he had been for a stroll in a park…. I would help him but it is not in me…. I am only a wretched novelist inventing wretched stories, and not even up to that miserable game…. He could tell you things! Things I have tried to forget, things I never did know. He had as many years of Africa as I had months—almost.

Roger Casement was born in Sandycove, near Dublin, in 1864 of a Catholic mother and a Protestant father; his father’s family had roots in Northern Ireland, and, once he was orphaned in his early teens, Casement and his siblings were brought up by an uncle in a large house in the northeast of Ireland. He worked at first for a shipping company and then for various trading interests in the Congo and what later became Nigeria before joining the British Consular Service. His report on the atrocities committed by the representatives of King Leopold of the Belgians in the Congo was thorough and well researched and conscientious. He had, as Séamus Ó Síocháin and Michael O’Sullivan point out in their judicious introduction to the meticulously edited *Eyes of Another Race: Roger Casement’s Congo Report and 1903 Diary*, developed a legalistic language in his reports on the rights of British citizens in the areas of Africa where he was consul. He had become skilled at taking detailed depositions. “What he did in his Congo Report,” they write, “was to transfer these skills from British subjects to natives of the Congo Free State.” Casement was personally responsible for the decision of the Foreign Office in London to take diplomatic action, at times faltering, at times effective, against Belgian cruelty in the Congo.

In 1906 Casement was transferred to Brazil where he worked as British consul in Santos, Rio de Janeiro, and Pará at the mouth of the Amazon. These years when Casement worked in the Congo and the Amazon were the years of the rubber boom. Rubber, as W.J. McCormack writes, “possessed a dizzying flexibility in its potential for industrial, medical, military and recreational uses.” In 1888, with the invention of the rubber-coated wheel, rubber became, in the words of Angus Mitchell, “in advance of oil…the defining product of the imperial economic strategy.”

In 1876 seeds of the rubber plant were taken from the Amazon basin, and some were successfully germinated at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew. “Over the next three decades,” Mitchell writes, “through a gradual process of trial and error, a new plantation economy would be nurtured in the British and Dutch colonies in Asia.” This would cause the collapse of the Amazon rubber market, in which prices reached a peak of fifteen *milreis* a kilo in April 1910; fourteen months later they were less than half that. Between 1888 and 1910, however, as demand was urgent, rubber had to be extracted quickly from the remote places where it naturally grew. Since there were no roads and railways, it had to be literally carried on the backs of the native population, including young children, who were effectively enslaved by European interests, which made vast profits. In 1895 a missionary reported from the rubber-producing area of the Congo:

Each town and district is forced to bring in a certain quantity to the headquarters of the *Commissaire* every Sunday. It is collected by force; the soldiers drive the people into the bush. If they will not go, they are shot down, and their left hands cut off and taken as trophies to the *Commissaire*…these hands, the hands of men, women and children and placed in rows before the *Commissaire*.

Roger Casement would discover that such activities were widespread in the Congo.

Later, Casement also became involved in the campaign to stop the cruelty in the Putumayo district of the Amazon, encouraged to some extent by the British government since British companies and British citizens were involved in committing it. His accounts of what he witnessed and heard in the Putumayo is chilling. “Some Indians,” he wrote, “would lie down of themselves and take the flogging, others would struggle and have to be held by the arms and legs, laid flat on the ground, and flogged.” Those flogged included young children. The agents of the rubber companies had complete control and exercised it with astonishing brutality. “Martinengui had an Indian girl—one of several he kept,” Casement reported,

and one night when with her he discovered she was sick with venereal disease—so he said. So in the morning he had her tied up and flogged in the station yard, and then made one of the young Indians…insert burning firebrands into her body. Bishop [his informant] did not like to say where, but indicated with his hand. I said, “Did you actually see that?” and he replied, “Yes, sir, I saw that done with my own eyes.”

The foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, wrote: “Of all the things I have ever read that have occurred in modern times, in or out of office, the accounts of the brutalities in Putumayo are the most horrible.”

By the time Casement was knighted for his report on the matter in 1911 he had also become deeply engaged with the Irish question, having befriended a number of people involved in Irish cultural nationalism, especially in the movement to revive and preserve the Irish language, and subsequently supported militant separatism. His years as a British consul in the darkest places of the earth had not endeared him to Britain or its government. With Erskine Childers, he was a key figure in organizing the importation of arms into southern Ireland in 1914. He realized, as war with Germany loomed, that England’s difficulty was Ireland’s opportunity. He traveled to Germany and spent the early years of the war there, drumming up support for the Irish cause, to the consternation of his former employers in London. Finally, on Good Friday 1916, some days before the Easter Rebellion broke out in Dublin, Casement, in a failed attempt to import arms from Germany, disembarked from a German submarine on the west coast of Ireland and was arrested. He was taken to London where eventually he was charged with treason.

With the war raging and brave young soldiers dying every day, it was clear that there would be great support for hanging Casement, who had betrayed what was officially his country. But the execution some months before, after a perfunctory court-martial, of the leaders of the Easter Rebellion in Dublin had caused widespread revulsion in both Ireland and the United States. Casement had been a brave and outspoken supporter of difficult causes. His supporters argued and he himself believed that he was an Irishman caught up now in the cause of Ireland, rather than a British citizen who had betrayed his country. Many powerful voices were raised in support of clemency.

Once he had been found guilty in July 1916 and sentenced to hang and a campaign began for a reprieve, a number of pages of diaries, which the authorities claimed were Casement’s, were passed around, shown to figures such as the archbishop of Canterbury, the American ambassador, John Quinn, and Count John McCormack. (“You need not be particular about keeping it to yourself,” the prime minister told the American ambassador.) One Home Office official noted at the time: “I see not the slightest objections to hanging Casement and afterwards giving as much publicity to the contents of his diary as decency permits.”

The diaries described his sexual activities in the Congo and the Amazon in the same years (indeed, sometimes the same days) as he was involved in his humanitarian work. He seems to have had sex with many teenage boys and young men. He seems also—and this detail was discussed with great disapproval by the entire British cabinet—to have been the passive partner, so to speak, in some of these activities. He had not gone out to the remoter parts of the universe to lord it over the natives, as it were, but to have them lord it over him. This was hardly in keeping with the aims of empire. A number of Casement’s supporters withdrew their support when they saw the diaries. Casement was hanged on August 3, 1916, and buried in quicklime in the yard of Pentonville Prison.

Casement’s legacy quickly became a complex one. Because he had been out of Ireland for most of his life, he had no close friends among the new leaders of the separatist movement or the new state. He was an enigmatic hero, a distinguished outsider who had given his life for Ireland, converting to the Catholic Church shortly before his death. Nonetheless, the rumors about the diaries were insistent enough for the Irish leader Michael Collins to ask about them during the treaty negotiations in London in 1921. With a colleague, he was shown the diaries, and he believed them to be genuine. He and his friend were disgusted by them.

Slowly, however, a movement began in Ireland which suggested that the diaries were, in fact, forged to blacken Casement’s name. Some of this was for old-fashioned Catholic nationalist reasons: an Irish patriot had to be pure and holy; only the British could think of such perversions. Others, who had known Casement, believed that it was impossible that he had lived a double life, or that he would be foolish enough to chart it in all its detail day after day and then leave the diary for his enemies to find. It seemed too unlikely. “There was,” Jeffrey Dudgeon writes, “no middle way between seeing him as a treasonable pervert or as a Catholic nationalist saint.” W.B. Yeats in 1936 became convinced that the diaries were forgeries and wrote two poems on the subject:

*Afraid they might be beaten
Before the bench of Time,
They turned a trick by forgery
And blackened his good name.*

Slowly, also, books about Casement began to appear, each book seeming to map the author’s prejudices and preoccupations as much as the subject’s. While many of these books were strange and eccentric, the most startling of all appeared in 1959 from the Olympia Press in Paris, and quickly became a collector’s item. It was called *The Black Diaries of Roger Casement*. The authors were Peter Singleton-Gates and Maurice Girodias. It is still unclear where they got their hands on the diaries which purported to be Casement’s for 1903 (written in the Congo) and 1910 (written in the Amazon). Once Casement was safely hanged, the British had kept them locked away. The Olympia Press printed the diaries which had explicit sexual content on the right-hand pages, while on the left-hand pages they printed Casement’s “white” diaries, which dealt only with his travels in the Congo and Brazil, the atrocities he was witnessing, and his plans to combat the cruelty he saw.

Immediately, those who believed that the diaries were forgeries had a problem. The diaries describing Casement’s sexual adventures were cryptic and complex; they recorded his travels and what he witnessed and many random details, often in one-sentence notes. There was no evidence of a howling error, despite the huge amount of detail and number of proper names, which would make clear that a forger had been at work. While a few forged letters or a couple of explicit diary entries would have been enough to destroy Casement in 1916, these diaries would have taken years to forge. Over many entries there was no mention at all of sex. And then sometimes toward the end of a diary entry the following, for example, would appear:

Arrived Pará at 3. Alongside 3.30. Tea and at 5 with Pogson to Vaz Café. Lovely moço—then after dinner to Vero Pesa. Two types—Also to gardens of Praca Republica. 2 types—Baptista Campos one type —then Senate square and Caboclo (boy 16–17). Seized hard. Young, stiff, thin. Others offered later. On board at 12 midnight.

This entry from the Black Diary for August 8, 1910, is rather typical. It was printed first in the 1959 edition, and then, with footnotes, by Roger Saywer in his *Roger Casement’s Diaries: 1910: The Black and the White*,[1](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2004/may/27/the-tragedy-of-roger-casement/?pagination=false&printpage=true" \l "fn1-49726395) and once again in Jeffrey Dudgeon’s *Roger Casement: The Black Diaries*, which also includes the 1911 Black Diary, the most explicitly sexual, for the first time.

On the opposite page in the 1959 edition, Casement’s report, written in 1911, to Sir Edward Grey at the Foreign Office in London was printed. The tone was sober and detailed and contains serious evidence of torture, floggings, murder, and forced labor, all in the name of the rubber trade, with British companies and British shareholders implicated. As Casement was compiling this report, he was being closely watched by the very figures whom his report would set out to destroy. He was immensely conspicuous, being over six feet tall. For some commentators, it seemed impossible that he could have slipped away so often in cities and towns in Brazil and not been followed and noticed and caught. Hardly anyone, it seems, had the slightest suspicion of him at the time.

Angus Mitchell, who has edited Casement’s Brazilian writings and written a brief biography,[2](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2004/may/27/the-tragedy-of-roger-casement/?pagination=false&printpage=true#fn2-49726395) reprints in his *Sir Roger Casement’s Heart of Darkness: The 1911 Documents* an account of Casement by Dr. Herbert Spencer Dickey, who traveled with him to Manaus in 1911; Mitchell also quotes from a letter which Dr. Dickey wrote to Denis Gwynn[3](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2004/may/27/the-tragedy-of-roger-casement/?pagination=false&printpage=true#fn3-49726395) in 1936:

It is too bad that I did not earlier know of the conspiracy which had for its objective the formation of an “Oscar Wilde” case against the tragic Irishman. But I didn’t learn of it until I read your book…. I am a physician with thirty years experience behind me. I have encountered many homosexuals. But if Casement was one of these unfortunates, I am a rotten diagnostician and I shouldn’t be. Casement, when we consult his diaries, seems to have been rather skilled at giving his friend the diagnostician the slip. In the entry for October 18, 1911, he mentioned having dinner with Dr. Dickey and then outlined a meeting afterward with a boy seventeen or eighteen with a penis as “thick as wrist” who “admitted his wish at once and so I took it. First spittle but so big could not get in—then glycerine honey and in it went with huge thrust and he suck on me and worked hard.”

Jeffrey Dudgeon, whose book on Casement is perhaps the most complete and interesting so far (while also rather startling at times in its use of present-day slang to describe Edwardian experience), co-founded the Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association in 1975, and in 1981 won a landmark case against the British government at the European Court of Human Rights. While changing the laws on homosexuality in Britain, the British government had caved in to pressure from the religious right in Northern Ireland (“Save Ulster from Sodomy” was one of the slogans) and excluded Northern Ireland from the new freedoms. Dudgeon forced them to extend the new legislation to Northern Ireland.

Dudgeon, in one way, is the biographer Casement has been waiting for. He knows, as no biographer before has known, how easy it is for gay men—even tall Edwardian ones—to slip away from company in any city in the world to find sex. He is shocked by nothing Casement wrote or did. He considers the diaries “an almost unique record of one homosexual’s sexual life over three years in the early part of the twentieth century.” He is especially well informed about Casement’s background in Northern Ireland and his activities in Belfast. Dudgeon’s analysis of why someone as secretive and vulnerable as Casement would keep an explicit diary is astute, perhaps the only explanation which makes any sense. Dudgeon’s gloss on the entry for 3 o’clock on Saturday, October 21, 1911 (“Waiting for José my fly open”), for example, reads:

This entry is further and conclusive evidence that Casement wrote up his personal diary, on occasion, as the day went along especially when he was using the process as an anticipatory erotic aid. In other words, writing down what he was doing, thinking about doing, and hoping he would do, was itself a turn on.

Casement, it is clear, wrote the diary for his own erotic use, to remind himself later. He “could no more stop writing than he could stop cruising,” as Dudgeon puts it. The entries are, Dudgeon writes,

written conversations with himself…. There is no-one else he can confide in except his diary which serves now [1903], and again in 1910 and 1911, more as a friend than an aide-memoire. Writing-up a diary may in fact have become part of a release technique to make up for not sharing the great secret with anyone from his daytime world.

Brian Inglis, in his sensible and serious biography, first published in 1973,[4](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2004/may/27/the-tragedy-of-roger-casement/?pagination=false&printpage=true" \l "fn4-49726395) agrees with Dudgeon. He writes that

sexual encounters were not for [Casement] a form of release, to be indulged in furtively, and recollected in shame. They were a delightful pastime, which it was only fair to pay for, as he would pay for a game of billiards. And he used the diary to record his experiences, so that he could again savour the pleasure when re-reading them (he would sometimes add an exclamation of delight in the margin, later).

In 2001, the Irish academic and writer W.J. McCormack commissioned a handwriting expert, Dr. Audrey Giles, to examine the Casement diaries and other work in Casement’s handwriting. Her report, McCormack writes, “simplifies matters by proving beyond all reasonable doubt that Casement wrote all of the material” in the Black Diaries of 1903, 1910, and 1911. This conclusion concurred with earlier studies of the handwriting by other experts. W.J. McCormack went on then to wonder if the events described by Casement actually occurred:

It is too simplistic to conclude that Casement wrote about a blow job on such-and-such-a-day because he experienced one then. (The crudeness of my language is designed to reflect the crudeness of such conclusions.) The issues of desire, of voyeurism, of recollection, day-dream, fantasy and delusion cannot be eclipsed by a notion of diary-as-report.

This assertion is an interesting example of how we all bring our own concerns to Casement’s story: Sebald is interested in the literary connections; Dudgeon is interested in the gay Casement; McCormack entertains the idea of the text as shifting and unstable. McCormack’s version seems to me a new Casement heresy. When, as a gay reader, you study the hastily written diaries, full of shorthand, full of the strangeness of the night on the edge of a park in an old city, you know, as a non-gay reader might not, that most of the time these ring true and are probably what Casement actually did on the day, unlikely as this may be to those of another sexual persuasion. This, in turn, may in the future become another Casement heresy, much reviled for its crudeness. It may also be worth pointing out that there is no evidence to disprove this view.

At the moment, in the light of Dr. Giles’s examination, the greatest heresy is to believe that the diaries are still not genuine. Angus Mitchell is an Englishman in his early forties who has become a significant Casement scholar. In the mid-1990s, while working with Roger Sawyer on an edition of the diaries, Mitchell disagreed with him about their authenticity. Sawyer, who believed them real, published his edition alone. Mitchell has gone on to edit two large volumes of Casement’s South American writings. He has worked with enormous zeal and attention to detail on Casement’s humanitarian work, believing that all the “controversy [about the diaries] continues to obfuscate Casement’s lasting significance.” As usual, he has brought his own concerns to Casement’s story: an interest in human rights, Irish history, and the fate of Brazil animates him, and thus he concentrates on these matters while considering the life and works of Casement.

Mitchell believes that the diaries “do not serve the gay community or merit a place in twentieth century homosexual literature.” (George Bernard Shaw also believed that if the diaries were Casement’s, then they proved him to be “a disgustingly unpleasant person.”) Mitchell has produced some textual evidence to support the forgery theory, none of which is convincing or conclusive. Dudgeon, as we have seen, takes the opposite view. At times, Dudgeon and Mitchell differ on the most basic matters. For example, Dudgeon has done exhaustive research on the life of a possible lover of Casement’s in Belfast called Millar Gordon. For him, this is pure gold, and he mines it with care and conviction. He dismisses Angus Mitchell’s view that Gordon was merely a supporter of Casement’s nationalism and ran errands for him and was from a humble background. To read Dudgeon’s and Mitchell’s accounts of Gordon’s connection to Casement, different not only in their analysis but in their version of the facts, is to realize how disputed every facet of Casement’s life has become.

Mitchell’s work is invaluable because he shows Casement’s utter fearlessness when the cause of the Indians of the Amazon basin became his own cause. Casement worked for the British Consular Service, lower in importance than the Diplomatic Service, for almost twenty years, yet he dealt with government ministers and senior officials with an hauteur, a moral superiority, and, at times, an impatience that suggested, in an age where class was central, that he came from a higher caste than they.

As indeed he did. Casement was brought up as an Irish Protestant. Even though he was neither landed nor wealthy, he belonged to a ruling class and inherited his class’s great confidence, which served many of its members well when they arrived in England. Figures such as Oscar Wilde, W.B. Yeats, and Lady Gregory belonged to various facets of Irish Protestantism. All of them formed a habit, unusual in England, of doing what they liked and, mostly, saying what they liked. They could be Irish nationalists in London, while losing none of their ruling-class status or rent-collecting habits in Ireland. They could ally themselves with socialism, nationalism, and the people, while moving easily and casually in the great drawing rooms of London. They had a habit also of pleasing themselves sexually, Lady Gregory, ostensibly most demure, having an affair with Wilfred Scawen Blunt within a year of her marriage; Yeats writing poems of unrequited love while having many lovers in London; Wilde having a wife and two children, a male lover of his own class, and many lovers of working-class origin.

Had Casement been English, with no money of his own and no powerful friends, he would have known his place. He would have served his masters faithfully and humbly, as his colleagues did, in the Consular Service. Britain’s interests would have been his interests, and his letters to his masters would have reflected this. As soon as he saw what was happening in the Congo, however, Casement showed enormous determination and confidence. His letters to his masters in London are detailed, hectoring, at times, highly emotional, and often very long. (“We might give him a hint not to make them too long,” one Foreign Office official wrote.) The atrocities he outlined included mass murder and mutilation and enslavement. He was capable of a measured tone, outlining his evidence with care and precision. But he was, in the words of Brian Inglis, “filled with rage and compassion.”

In London on leave, he sought support everywhere, getting journalists and writers on his side, insisting that the British government, under the terms of the Berlin Agreement of 1885, had duties and responsibilities in the Congo. From the Putumayo, he could write up to five thousand words a day to the authorities in London, describing what he saw. One official in London commented: “Sir Roger Casement’s despatches make one’s head go round.” As early as 1903, a Foreign Office official had written of Casement: “We ought to have as British representative someone not harder hearted but harder headed.” Later, when he was in Brazil, another commented: “He will always be a source of trouble.” Even when speaking to Irish patriots on the matter of Ireland, Casement’s vehemence could be tedious. One of his closest Irish friends, the historian Alice Stopford Green, had to admit: “Sometimes when I listen to that man I feel I never want to hear the subject of Ireland mentioned again.”

From his lowly position as a consul, Casement set out fearlessly to save the world. “Being Irish,” Jeffrey Dudgeon writes, “and becoming Irish Irish… gave him an effortless sense of superiority over mere Englishmen.” Casement felt at times enormous affinity not only with those with whom he had sex, but with the others who were being brutalized by the rubber industry. But he was also an Edwardian colonial official, with the views about race that did the Empire proud. In 1894 he wrote from the Congo: “Our ways are not their ways. They have made evil their good; they cling to their cruelties and superstitions, their idion [*sic*] crowns, and symbols of fetish power, to their right to buy and sell men.” Later he wrote:

The African savage…delights in bloodshed, whether it be on the field of battle or in human sacrifice. To him the purpose of killing lies in the act of killing…. He is not content with merely getting his adversary out of the way but he wishes to shed his blood, hack his limbs and rejoice in a gory triumph.

When he arrived in Brazil, he developed views on the Brazilian character: “The ‘Brazilian’ is the most arrogant, insolent and pig-headed brute in the world.” In 1910 he had more to say on the matter: “Heavens! what loathsome people they are! A mixture of Jew and Nigger, and God knows what; altogether the nastiest human black pudding the world has yet cooked in her tropical stew pot.” He also, complicated figure that he was, had views on the homosexual question as though it had nothing to do with him. When Sir Hector Macdonald, once his homosexuality was discovered, shot himself in Paris in March 1903, Casement wrote in his diaries: “The reasons given are pitiably sad. The most distressing case this surely of its kind and one that may awake the national mind to saner methods of curing a terrible disease than by criminal legislation.”

Joseph Conrad, in a letter to John Quinn in 1916, wrote that Casement

was a man, properly speaking, of no mind at all. I don’t mean stupid. I mean that he was all emotion. By emotional force (Congo report, Putumayo etc) he made his way, and sheer emotionalism has undone him. A creature of sheer temperament—a truly tragic personality: all but the greatness of which he had not a trace.

This is an interesting version of what set Casement apart, but it is only partly true. The power and influence Casement had arose from his status as both outsider and insider. He looked like an Englishman and spoke like one. None of his colleagues behaved the way he did.

His Irishness alone cannot explain his confidence and tenacity, or his emotional response to atrocity. It is possible that his nocturnal activities with the very people he was trying to save gave him tenderness for them. In the Amazon, when he describes the torn or scarred flesh of the natives, he writes with great hurt, love, and sympathy for them, including women and children. Touching young men at night, being held by them and deriving the pleasures as described in his diaries, seems to have made him feel the locals’ suffering all the more and become determined to help them. For some of the young men in question, including the ones he paid, being propositioned by a tall bearded man from Northern Ireland might not have been the happiest experience of their lives. He was, to use a modern term, an Edwardian sex tourist. But it was more complicated than that. He was one with a mission.

Conrad’s view that Casement was “all emotion” may help us, however, to understand his response to Ireland in the early years of the twentieth century. For more than half a century, culture had come to represent a politics in Ireland more powerful than either militarism or parliamentary activity. Oscar Wilde’s parents, for example, had become involved in antiquarianism and archaeology and Irish literature, and had both come to love Ireland and want independence from England, while Sir William was also prepared to accept a knighthood from the Queen; his wife, a rabid Irish nationalist, thereafter enjoyed being called Lady Wilde. Figures in Yeats’s circle, who belonged to the landowning ruling class, such as Lady Gregory and Constance Gore-Booth, became converted in the early years of the century to the idea of Ireland as an ancient culture that now could be revived and a nation that needed to become a state.

In these same years, Roger Casement also took to Ireland. He began to feel the fierce emotion that was second nature to him about his native country, which he barely knew and hardly ever visited. And he began, especially when he was in Brazil and in correspondence with many of the new leaders in Ireland, to hate Britain, which paid his salary and gave him a knighthood. A journalist who met him in these years wrote: “Unusually sensitive to any form of beauty, he was bewitched by the beauty of his own country; unusually compassionate of all who suffer cruelty and wrong, he was consumed with indignation at his own country’s history.” In 1914, Casement wrote to an Irish friend of Sir Edward Grey, the foreign secretary: “Sir E. Grey should be hanged…of all the villainous fools British greed of Empire has yet produced that wicked, stupid, obstinate fool is the worst.”

As his dislike of England increased, so did his admiration of Germany. He admired “the honesty and integrity of the German mind, the strength of the German intellect, the skill of the German hand and brain, the justice and vigour of German law, the intensity of German culture, science, education and social development.” When the war broke out, he had no difficulty supporting Germany:

England’s crime in this war is the most flagrant of all—she made it inevitable—she leagued herself with the Powers of Darkness against Teutonic commerce and industry…. I pray for the Salvation of Germany night and day—and God Save Ireland now is another form of God Save Germany!

Casement’s time in Germany between the outbreak of the war and his arrival in Ireland eighteen months later was deeply unhappy; he suffered a great deal from depression. “Much of the time,” Brian Inglis writes, “he was producing the kind of memoranda and letters that are familiar to editors and members of parliament, as well as to doctors, and which usually turn out to have come from patients in, or about to enter mental hospitals.” He had, by this time, developed views on the Germans. Their military officials, he wrote, “are swine and cads of the first water—not one of them with the soul of a rat or the mind of a cur…they are lower than the Congo savages in most things that constitute gentleness of mind, heart or action.”

When he was knighted in 1911, Casement, who had loved Queen Victoria and even written a poem to her, wrote in acceptance: “I would beg that my humble duty might be presented to His Majesty, when you may do me the honour to convey to him my deep appreciation of the honour he has been so graciously pleased to confer on me.” Casement could thus be deeply loyal and ingratiating while also planning to overthrow the very monarchy he adored. He was not alone in these passionately divided loyalties, but they also affected his judgment.

The Irish Protestants who turned against Britain, while holding on to their knighthoods, or their land, or their great confidence, were always in danger of pushing their luck and misunderstanding the boundaries. Their gnarled allegiances impaired their understanding of how England would react to them. Robert Emmet, for example, whose brother’s sedition had been leniently treated by the British, led a rebellion in Dublin in 1803. He tried to take Dublin with a small army and a dream of his own invincibility. The British hanged him. Charles Stewart Parnell, who led the Irish Parliamentary Party, lived in an adulterous relationship, misunderstanding what the Irish bishops and Gladstone’s Liberal Party would do to him when this became public in 1890. They ruined him. Oscar Wilde believed that his wit would save him. It did not.

So, too, Casement, when he was captured, did not believe that they would hang him. He had, however, many enemies among the ruling class and in the cabinet; they had tolerated him for years, just as they had tolerated Parnell and Wilde. When Casement was freshly hanged, they ordered a doctor to examine his rectum to see if there was evidence of the activities he had described in his diaries. The Empire tolerated deviant Irishmen up to a point; after that, it became implacable and savage.

After Irish independence, the British government failed to understand why the Irish should want the return of Casement’s body to Ireland. But eventually they relented and Casement was given a state funeral in Dublin in 1965, with an oration by President Eamon de Valera over his grave in Glasnevin cemetery, close to the graves of other Irish heroes, including Paddy Dignam from Joyce’s *Ulysses*. The Irish government, wisely, did not ask for his diaries to be returned. Casement’s bones offered no danger to anyone; the diaries remain a central and contentious aspect of his legacy.

1. 1

London: Pimlico, 1997. [↩](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2004/may/27/the-tragedy-of-roger-casement/?pagination=false&printpage=true#fnr1-49726395)

1. 2

*Casement* (London: Haus, 2003).[↩](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2004/may/27/the-tragedy-of-roger-casement/?pagination=false&printpage=true#fnr2-49726395)

1. 3

See Denis Gwynn, *Traitor or Patriot: The Life and Death of Roger Casement* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931).[↩](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2004/may/27/the-tragedy-of-roger-casement/?pagination=false&printpage=true#fnr3-49726395)

1. 4

*Roger Casement* (London: Hodder and Stoughton).[↩](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2004/may/27/the-tragedy-of-roger-casement/?pagination=false&printpage=true#fnr4-49726395)