

## Books

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## The gay smear hurt the British more than it did Casement

The notorious diaries are irrelevant to Roger Casement's role as humanitarian and, later, 1916 hero but were used to discredit him, writes **Donal McCartney**

### Roger Casement in Irish and World History

ed Mary E Daly  
Royal Irish Academy, €30

WAS Roger Casement homosexual? Those who argued that he was said that the evidence was in his diaries. Those who claimed he wasn't said that the homosexual entries in the diaries were a forgery perpetrated by British officials. Since 1916, Casement has remained an unsettled issue in Anglo-Irish relations. The question of Casement's sexual leanings aroused such bitter controversy because homosexuals were seen as "perverts". And a "pervert" like Casement was considered a

hypocrite behind a humanitarian front; and besides, he only brought disgrace on the patriotic cause he embraced. The *Black Diaries* account in part for the hitherto cautious attitude to Casement by the general public. Of course times are changing. And the "unspeakable" gay dimension has now become more fashionable. Or as Yeats would have it:

*But this is not the old sea  
Nor this the old seashore...  
The ghost of Roger Casement  
Is beating on the door.*

And in ways perhaps that Yeats never dreamt of, for Casement has been adopted by gay and lesbian would-be participants in New York's St Patrick's Day Parade. And for the gay and bisexual group of Sinn Féin he has become an icon of Irish republicanism.

Not until 1994 were the diaries released by the British public record office for public inspection. Speaking at Arbour Hill in 1999, the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, asked the Royal Irish Academy to organise a seminar so that any new evidence and conclusions could be debated. Taking part in the subsequent symposium were scholars and experts from abroad as well as from Ireland. Casement's humanitarianism while serving as a British consul in the Congo and in South America; his evolution as an Irish nationalist; his trial for high treason; his place in historical memory; as well as the question of the authenticity of the homosexual entries in the diaries were examined in papers and panel discussions. These commentaries now form the core of the present handsome volume.

Its importance for the subject can hardly be exaggerated. It is disappointing, therefore, that neither index nor biographical note was included. And the proof-reading could have been better. Casement's reports on the forced labour and atrocious brutalities carried out by the European rubber plantation lords on native Africans and indigenous South American Indians created a sensation and led to international intervention. "Probably the bravest, most selfless, practical humanitarian of the day," is the verdict passed on Casement by Roger Sawyer. The campaign he waged for the basic human rights of oppressed and exploited people on two continents led to his knighthood. And because of Casement's contribution to this area, Martin Mansergh sees him as the forerunner of Ireland's later choice for the independent foreign policy and of our commitment to human rights at the UN.

Difficulty has arisen, however, in trying to comprehend how someone who for 20 years had served loyally in the diplomatic service of the British Empire should end up as a 1916 rebel and martyr seeking to destroy that empire. The essays in this book go a long way towards explaining that apparent contradiction. One contributor argues that Casement's nationalism, prominently on display in his association with the Irish Volunteers from 1913, can be traced back to his teenage admiration for Davitt and Parnell and their struggle on behalf of the peasantry. Meanwhile an essay by Margaret O'Callaghan, making excellent use of the largely neglected poems which Casement wrote as a young man, shows him already an incipient anti-imperialist. These ballads highlighted the brutalities of the Tudor conquest of Ireland and proclaimed his pride in the resistance offered by the Ulster chieftains. In Casement's mind, the savagery of the English expansion in 16th-Century Ireland became a model that could be linked to the atrocities committed by 20th-Century colonialism in Africa and South America. But was Casement

homosexual? A forensic examination of the diaries was commissioned. The detailed report by a handwriting expert, published in this collection, concludes that the disputed entries were indeed made by Casement's hand. Many of the contributors add the rider: "So what? Does it really matter any more?" Christopher Andrew, a leading British authority on spying and British intelligence, is one of those convinced of the authenticity of the diaries.



ROGER CASEMENT: Bravest humanitarian of his day

British intelligence, he asserts, did not then have the capacity to produce a forgery on the scale that would have been required.

Whether authentic or forged, the diaries are irrelevant to Casement's role as humanitarian or his part in the preparations for the Rising. They are also irrelevant to the charge of high treason for which he was hanged.

But they were deliberately used by British officials to discredit Casement; to counter the widespread campaign for his reprieve; to ensure that any sympathy for him did not stand in the way of America's entering the war on the side of Britain; and to prevent his assumption into the pantheon of Irish heroes and martyrs.

It was a smear campaign that now, ironically, reflects adversely on the British authorities and not on Casement or his humanitarian and nationalist causes.

Donal McCartney is former emeritus professor of modern Irish history at UCD

## THE SUNDAY POEM



PATRICK Pearse was the finest of the three poets who were executed for their part in the Easter Rebellion. He was also, for his time, a modern poet, who would have understood better his position in the poetic scheme of things if he had considered more deeply the problems of poetic utterance.

This is Whitmanesque and it is rhetorical; but the note of Whitmanesque egotism is bravely and successfully struck. And there are truths at the heart of it.

ANTHONY CRONIN'S PERSONAL ANTHOLOGY

### The Fool Patrick Pearse

Since the wise men have not spoken, I speak that am only a fool; A fool that hath loved his folly,

Yea, more than the wise men their books or their counting houses, or their quiet homes, or their fame in men's mouths;

A fool that in all his days hath done never a prudent thing Never hath counted the cost, nor recked if another reaped

The fruit of his mighty sowing, content to scatter the seed; A fool that is unrepentant, and that soon at the end of all Shall laugh in his lonely heart as the ripe ears fall to the reaping-hooks

And the poor are filled that were empty, Tho' he go hungry.

I have squandered the splendid years that the Lord God gave to my youth In attempting impossible things, deeming them alone worth the toil.

Was it folly or grace? Not men shall judge me, but God.

I have squandered the splendid years: Lord, if I had the years I would squander them over again! Aye, fling them from me! For this I have heard in my heart, that a man shall scatter, not hoard, Shall do the deed of today, nor take thought of tomorrow's teen, Shall not bargain or huxter with God; or was it a jest of Christ's And is this my sin before men, to have taken Him at His word?

The lawyers have sat in council, the men with the keen, long faces, And said, "This man is a fool," and others have said, "He blasphemes"; And the wise have pitied the fool that hath striven to give a life In the world of time and space among the bulks of actual things, To a dream that was dreamed in the heart, and that only the heart could hold.

O wise men, riddle me this: what if the dream come true? What if the dream come true? And if millions unborn shall dwell

In the house that I shaped in my heart, the noble house of my thought? Lord, I have staked my soul, I have staked the lives of my kin On the truth of Thy dreadful word. Do not remember my failures,

But remember this my faith.

And so I speak.

Yea, ere my hot youth pass, I speak to my people and say: Ye shall be foolish as I; ye shall scatter, not save; Ye shall venture your all, lest ye lose what is more than all; Ye shall call for a miracle, taking Christ at His word. And for this I will answer, O people, answer here and hereafter,

O people that I have loved shall we not answer together?

# Pile 'em high and sell 'em cheap

Are we all reading the same six books that we first saw recommended on Richard and Judy? asks **Alison Walsh**

I Sit my imagination, or do all dinner-party conversations these days revolve around who has read *The Time Traveller's Wife*, or *The Kite Runner*, or *Ladybird*?

Even bookish sorts, who pride themselves on their ability to unearth some undiscovered gem translated from Serbo-Croat, are now simply queuing to read the latest in a long line of *Curious Incidents*. Is it just as, or are we all reading the same six books?

Just as in other media, it seems that the book world is increasingly dominated by a handful of blockbuster titles. Somehow, over the last 10 years or so, certain books have lodged in our consciousness: piled high in the front table of every bookshop, with a large sticker proclaiming "£14.99" on the front, or that golden ticket to year-long bestsellerdom — whisper it — "As seen on Richard and Judy". And the rest are placed politely and unobtrusively on the bottom shelf safely out of the view of even the most intrepid reader.

It would be easy to attribute the "six books" phenomenon to Richard and Judy. In fact, as Jane Morpeth, publisher at do all dinner-party conversations these days revolve around who has read *The Time Traveller's Wife*, or *The Kite Runner*, or *Ladybird*?

Most publishers and retailers point to the demise of the Net Book Agreement (which gave books a fixed price which retailers had to observe) as the point where the rot set in. Publishers still set a recommended retail price and sell to retailers at a discount of this sum — but retailers are free to cut prices. Quite naturally, they don't do this for their charming little first novels by unproven writers, but instead aim for the latest Maevie Binchy or Dan Brown.

DBC Pierre's 'difficult second novel' left **Des Traynor** less than breathless, but how do you follow up a Booker winner?

**Ludmila's Broken English**  
DBC Pierre  
Faber & Faber, £12.99

AH, the curse of 'difficult second novel' syndrome. In the case of DBC Pierre, however, it is acutely exacerbated. For, while winning the Booker Prize with one's debut doubtless represents a massive vote of confidence (to say nothing of the welcome cash injection), it can just as easily become an albatross in terms of having to live up to unrealistic expectations. Which is, apparently, what has happened to DBC Pierre. First, the plot: he has a dual narrative, one about a pair of recently separated 33-year-old Siamese twins, Blair Albert and Gordon-Marie (aka 'Bunny') Heath; the other deals with the noble Ludmila Ivanova Derev, and her dirt-poor family of peasant grotesques, in the fictitious former Soviet Republic of Gnezavistansk.



RICHARD AND JUDY: A recommendation on their show is the golden ticket to year-long bestsellerdom

Then came the supermarkets, with their orders not in the polite tens and twenties, but in the thousands. Some UK supermarkets have been prepared to sell key titles for as little as €2.99, for which munificence they demand huge, sometimes punitive, discounts from publishers. As one Irish publisher sighed: "It's not a phenomenon, it's the way things are nowadays."

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in Ireland," he says. "Their stock mix hasn't been reflective enough of the Irish market to date, to pose any real threat."

Perhaps punters will flock to, say, Tesco, to get their latest Harry Potter for £12.99, and continue to frequent their local bookshops for books with a local flavour. As Liz Meldon says: "We couldn't possibly compete with the bigger chains on price, so we offer choice and variety."

So, the 'six books' phenomenon is a natural development and we'd better get on with it. But is there anything good to be said about it, or are we doomed to read new instalments of Jordan's autobiography for the rest of our lives? Quite apart from the fact that some books are so aggressively promoted these days that one feels bored by them before even reading them, it is tempting not to bother risking €19.99 on a new collection

of beautifully crafted short stories when one can read the novel of the moment for €12.99 — or even cheaper. read *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, will return for Mark Haddon's next book, rather than simply moving on to the hot new best seller of the week?

There's the inspirational upsurge in reading in general to cheer us. Cynics might say that next year we will all be buying cases of Richard and Judy chicken casserole instead of reading the books they promote.

But with energetic and enthusiastic readers groups springing up everywhere, the renaissance in children's writing and the plethora of literary prizes and TV book shows, perhaps, in the grand scheme of things, the 'six books' phenomenon matters a little less.

**Des Traynor's first novel, 'The Myth of Exile and Return', was published last year**

Des Traynor's first novel, 'The Myth of Exile and Return', was published last year. DBC Pierre interviewed, This Section, Page 4.

## Dirt-poor peasant grotesques and the best of British

Blair and Bunny have been suddenly sundered and released from an institution into a community care programme in London.

Blair falls back, line and sinker for the 'freedom' offered by rampant capitalism, though this manifests itself in his urgent desire to end his prolonged virgin state.

Bunny, an all-round gentler soul, can't be arsed with Blair's new food fads and wants nothing more exotic than a full English breakfast, a nice cuppa tea, and a one-way ticket back to residential care. Meanwhile, back in the (former) USSR, Ludmila is busy fending off a sexual assault by her grandfather, accidentally killing him in the process, which means he can't sign his veterans' pension

vouchers, which means the family will starve. So, despite her young girl dreams of running away to the west with her soldier boyfriend, she and her selfish brother are dispatched by their mother and grandfather to set the family tractor, and thence to a life of prostitution in the nearest town — instigating a further unfortunate series of events.

These overlapping stories eventually intertwine, of course, through Ludmila's adventuring into a Russian brides website, and the ever-priapic Blair spotting her.

Not having read the prize-winning predecessor *Vernon God Little*, I am not really in a position to compare and contrast both books, but the general impression to be gleaned is that it must have been better than this offering. Maybe last time the satire was sharper, the wit more incisive. Not that there aren't good things here. Only the most blinkered ideologue of market forces will not balk at a robust rationale for the triumph of capitalism. Similarly, Blair's 'scourge of terrorism' morphs nicely into Bunny's 'scourge of tourism'. Also, the empty rhetoric of phrases which have now passed virtually unnoticed into everyday media-speak, such as 'friendly fire' and 'collateral damage', are savagely lampooned in the Grand Guignol climax.

So, Pierre is clearly on the side of the angels, and his heart is in the right place. The world really has gone to hell in a handcart, and nice people are at a premium. The trouble is, the characters in his book are cardboard cut-outs, and the denouement is gratuitous in the extreme.

In short, when all those end-of-year 'Best of' lists are being compiled next December, it's unlikely that *Ludmila's Broken English* will feature prominently. Perhaps I should look for a copy of *Vernon God Little*! Either that or put my money on novel number three fulfilling another hoary old critical cliché — the welcome return to form.

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