**Roger Casement: A romantic defender of the oppressed**

**On the centenary of his tragic execution, it is worth recalling the rebel’s adventurous life**

**[My response letter below]**

<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/roger-casement-a-romantic-defender-of-the-oppressed-1.2743055>

See also: <http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/letters/roger-casement-s-schooling-1.2758217>

<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/environment/eileen-battersby-on-a-bid-to-halt-demolition-of-casement-s-school-1.2756140#comments>

**Irish Times**

**3 August 2016**

[Eileen Battersby](http://www.irishtimes.com/profile/eileen-battersby-7.1010655)



The funeral of Roger Casement in Dublin. Casement’s remains were removed from England where he was hanged for high treason and reburied in Glasnevin Cemetery. Photograph: McMahon/Getty Images

[Roger Casement](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_person=Roger%20Casement&article=true) endured a horrible death, disgraced and sordid. But most of all, it was unfair.

The executions of 15 of the leaders of the [1916](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_topic=1916&article=true) Rising were carried out between May 3rd and May 12th. Among the executed was [James Connolly](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_person=James%20Connolly&article=true).

Dying of wounds suffered during the rebellion, he was shot while tied to a chair.

[Ireland](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_location=Ireland&article=true) was shocked by the deaths, particularly his, as was the world. Largely unheeded by many Irish people, who regarded the rebellion as a skirmish staged by a small group of revolutionaries, the executions raised awareness of the bold intent behind the idealism.

Outrage increased and the republican dead became martyrs.

Yet there was a 16th execution and it took place 100 years today. Casement did not face a firing squad.

There was no glory and no pathos, although Sir [Arthur Conan Doyle](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_person=Arthur%20Conan%20Doyle&article=true), WB Yeats and [George Bernard Shaw](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_person=George%20Bernard%20Shaw&article=true) had tried to intervene.

Casement died aged 51, hanged as a traitor at Pentonville Prison in London.

The British government decided to have his anus and lower bowel examined for evidence of his homosexuality. His sexual orientation seemed to have a higher priority than his politics.

Somehow, his campaigning humanitarian work was forgotten as had his distinguished career in the British colonial service which he joined in 1892.

His 60-page report on the [Congo](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_location=Congo&article=true) published in 1905 detailed the inhuman treatment inflicted on native workers in the Belgian Congo under the harsh rule of King Leopold II.

Casement was later promoted to consular general and posted to [Rio de Janeiro](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_location=Rio%20de%20Janeiro&article=true). There he investigated the conditions prevailing in the Peruvian rubber plantations along the Putumayo river and their impact on the Putumayo tribe.

That report caused an international sensation on publication in 1912. Casement had been knighted the previous year for his achievements.

In August 1913 he retired from the service which he had previously resigned from in 1904 and then rejoined, encountering some official reluctance because of his personality, in 1906.

But this second leave-taking was final. His disillusionment was complete, as was his intention to join the Irish Volunteers, which he did in November 1913.

Irony undercuts Casement’s life: he was clever, impatient and unsettled. His restlessness made him subject to boredom and depression.

He had an obvious talent: a fearless curiosity which made him a natural investigator and a good reporter.

His writings on [Africa](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_location=Africa&article=true) prove excellent reportage; he saw, assessed and recorded with balance, not sensationalism.

**Vulnerable figure**

Whether he is seen as victim or tragic hero, he was certainly that most lonely and vulnerable of figures: a Victorian homosexual.

It is easy to romanticise him, but the fact is, he was a romantic. He was also a maverick, an Anglo-Irish Lawrence of Arabia.

Unlike TE Lawrence, also famed for an erratic personality, Casement did not die in a dramatic accident, as Lawrence would in 1935, following a motorbike crash.

Also, for all the ambivalence surrounding Lawrence’s sexuality, he was more usually regarded as asexual.

For Casement the existence of the Black Diaries, which may or may not have been written by him, in the form of five notebooks chronicling sexual encounters, the material proved damning and was used to condemn him. Were they forged? Why not?

A similar tactic had been used to destroy [Charles Stewart Parnell](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_person=Charles%20Stewart%20Parnell&article=true), another victim of his private life – in his case an adulterous relationship which did end in marriage.

Casement was not a traitor, he was an embarrassment, and not only to the British government, as he also exposed the evils of European colonialism.

He was born in [Sandycove](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_location=Sandycove&article=true), Dublin on September 1st, 1864, the youngest of four children.

His [Church of Ireland](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_organisation=Church%20of%20Ireland&article=true) father, also Roger, was a retired army officer, while his Catholic mother, Anne, had each of her babies secretly baptised into her faith. Money was scarce. After her early death in 1873, the Casement family moved to Co [Antrim](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_location=Antrim&article=true).

Casement attended Ballymena Academy and developed a love for Rathlin Island; the time he spent exploring it may have influenced his later love of wandering through the more dense jungle and riverscapes of Africa and [South America](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_location=South%20America&article=true).

When his father suddenly died in 1877, Casement was only 13 and dependent on relatives in Co Antrim and Liverpool.

He grew up quickly and began working as an office clerk in a shipping company in Liverpool when he was 15.

Not yet 20, he set off for Africa as a ship’s purser. As mentioned, he joined the British colonial service in 1892.

Initially opposed to the Boers for their treatment of the natives, he was later to denounce the British treatment of the Boer community.

His experiences soon opened his eyes and he met a young Russian-Polish seaman, just more than three years his junior. In common with Casement, Konrad Korzeniowski’s parents had died early.

The seaman would later become famous as the modernist writer [Joseph Conrad](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_person=Joseph%20Conrad&article=true).

**Irish republicanism**

Meeting Casement and listening to his observations would inspire Heart of Darkness (1902).

They were friends but when Casement needed his support, Conrad – who had become a British subject in 1886 and who was wary of jeopardising his life in Britain – refused to plead on his behalf.

On leaving consular service in 1913, Casement became involved in Irish republicanism, helping Eoin O’Neill to form the Irish Volunteers and eventually travelling to [Germany](http://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_location=Germany&article=true) to seek support and weapons for an armed rebellion against British rule.

On the eve of the Rising, aware that the German support was inadequate, Casement returned to Ireland by submarine and landed at Banna Strand, Tralee, Co Kerry. It all ended in a farce, with him convinced the rebellion should be stopped.

**[Irish Times letter - not published]**

From: jeffreydudgeon@hotmail.com

To: lettersed@irish-times.ie

Subject: Letter on Casement

Date: Thu, 4 Aug 2016 23:04

Dear Editor,

Eileen Battersby in her article Roger Casement: A romantic defender of the oppressed (3 August) reflects the growing view in the south that the Casement diaries are not authentic. She asks, "Were they forged? Why not?", adding, "A similar tactic had been used to destroy Charles Stewart Parnell, another victim of his private life."

This new orthodoxy may be temporary, required for patriotic purposes in the 1916 centenary year. However she repeats an inaccuracy, corrected in my second edition of *Roger Casement: The Black Diaries*, concerning his mother Anne Jephson or Jepson.

She was not born into a Roman Catholic family, being baptised in a Dublin Anglican church, St George's, Hardwicke Place. Hers was therefore not a mixed marriage.

She did convert, as an adult, for reasons that underline a 'different' almost radical outlook. Her own mother, Jane Ball, was a progressive educator of girls in north Dublin from the 1830s to the 1850s. The Mallow Castle Jephson connections, vainly sought out by Casement were therefore family fables.

These details matter when myths, big and small, get too easily repeated.

Yours faithfully

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