<http://www.drb.ie/essays/proof-or-imagination->

**Proof or Imagination?**

**Frank MacGabhann**

**Dublin Review of Books**

**January 2017**

*Roger Casement: The Black Diaries – with a study of his background, sexuality, and Irish political life*, by Jeffrey Dudgeon, Belfast Press, 728 pp, ISBN: 978-0953928736

Roger Casement was the sixteenth and last Irishman executed by the British following the Easter Rising in 1916. Casement’s reputation as a humanitarian and as a critic of imperialism has been overshadowed since the British government, concerned over the effects of an international campaign for clemency as he awaited execution, showed versions of what they claimed was his diary to journalists. These Black Diaries, which contained a record of predatory homosexual activity, were finally produced and made available for examination in 1959. Many believe that the Black Diaries are forgeries. Many, including Jeffrey Dudgeon, do not. Dudgeon states at the beginning of his book: “Of course the diaries are genuine and authentic.” He does not, however, offer much in the way of proof apart from reliance on questionable handwriting analysis.

My own view is that the authenticity question could have been settled when the diaries were first revealed through the use of readily available fingerprinting technology. Addressing this question previously I wrote:

Fingerprinting in criminal trials in England began in 1902. By 1916 it was well established there. In fact, fingerprinting in 1916 was the DNA of its day. Why did Basil Thompson and Reginald Hall, spymasters that they were, not test the Black Diaries for Casement’s fingerprints? If they had found Casement’s prints on the Black Diaries, it would have been game, set and match for them. The clear inference to be drawn from this failure (and what any defence lawyer would be delighted to put to a jury) is that they knew that Casement’s fingerprints would not be on the Black Diaries – for the simple reason that they were forgeries – their own forgeries.

The unbiased reader might feel, as this reader did, that Dudgeon allows too much scope to his imagination. The entry for October 22nd, 1903 in the Black Diaries has Casement writing, after dinner, “I left at 11. Straight home.” Dudgeon comments “that going straight home was worthy of comment indicates a cruise around Loanda before turning in was Casement’s norm.” Really? Maybe he just said he went straight home the way another person might say they went straight to bed.

In the chapter entitled “Millar Gordon”, Dudgeon contends that Casement had a “boy friend”, Millar Gordon, who was tracked down by the British shortly before the execution. If it were true, it would have been the final nail in the coffin for Casement. The British could have charged this man or just leaked the story to the press. They chose not to. Why not? Basil Thompson, of the London Metropolitan Police, had statements taken in Norway and went to the trouble of bringing a hotel clerk from there to London. Why not use Gordon to finally silence the Americans and Irish who were protesting vociferously? It seems more likely that Casement was not in a relationship with Mr Gordon.

Dudgeon admits that there is absolutely no record or even whiff of homosexual activity on Casement’s part during his German sojourn, either where he was with Adler Christensen or alone and obviously lonely during eighteen months there. Had there been even the slightest whiff of gay activity, the Germans, who were growing tired of him, would have gladly seized on it as an excuse to expel him from the country. The whole tenor of the book is that Casement was unable to contain his sexual impulses. So why the sudden change during that time? Despite Dudgeon’s firm attachment to the idea that Casement was gay his sexual orientation seems to me an open question.

It might be suggested that one shouldn’t be overly concerned by a self-published book which is the work of an author under the influence of something approaching an *idée fixe*. However, Dudgeon’s take on Casement has leaked into mainstream discourse and thinking, contributing to the loss of perspective on the man and to a downplaying of his powerful and admirable political principles.

In his very interesting and readable book *Vivid Faces*, Professor Roy Foster has unfortunately repeated many of the unproven allegations about Casement. Of all the sub-entries under Casement’s overall entry in the index of names in *Vivid Faces*, the largest number of sub-entries by far are the sub-entries for “homosexuality” and “diaries”, which have seven and six pages, respectively, of reference listed. The sub-entries for “human rights and Casement” and “Easter Rising” each get two pages of reference.

In 2002 WJ McCormack, a long-time believer that the diaries were authentic, asked Dr Audrey Giles to determine whether the handwriting on the Black Diaries was Casement’s. She found “conclusively” that it was Casement’s. McCormack to his credit arranged for the peer review of Giles’s analysis. Dr James Horan, attached to the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, who undertook the peer review, stated:

As editor of the *Journal of Forensic Sciences* and the *Journal of the American Society of Questioned Document Examiners*, I would not recommend publication of the Giles Report because it does not show how its conclusions were reached. To the question, ‘Is the writing Roger Casement’s?’, on the basis of the Giles Report as it stands, my answer would be, ‘I cannot tell’.

He also remarked tellingly that no chemical analysis was done on the ink or pencil marks and that such tests are available. Despite all this, advocates of the diaries’ authenticity continually represent the Giles Report as “conclusively” establishing the authenticity of the Black Diaries. Even Professor Foster appears to tacitly endorse it.

In response to Horan’s peer review, Dudgeon claims on page 645 of his book that Horan’s report establishes that the authenticity of the Black Diaries “[cannot] be proved by science, only by historically-based evidence and the application of common sense”. In my opinion this runs counter to the plain meaning of Dr Horan’s words. What is “chemical analysis” if not science? Having eschewed science Dudgeon relies on colourful speculation which, as I have suggested, fails to convince.

On the positive side this expanded edition is well-written, very detailed and is obviously the product of many years’ research. The reader coming to Casement for the first time will find an enormous amount of information to digest. Readers familiar with Casement will find many contentious passages. It has very good genealogical information on a number of different people and very useful insights into Casement’s early family life. Dudgeon has done some interesting new research into Casement’s mother. The pictures are probably the best that I have ever seen of Casement in one book. But the refusal of the author even to contemplate the possibility of the British secret services forging the Black Diaries severely compromises his ability to sift through the evidence and weigh it. It is a polemic mixed with facts, ideas and many extrapolations. I believe that the book suffers from a lack of detachment and intellectual rigor as many conclusions cannot be deduced from the facts.

Casement, the fighter for justice, the Irish revolutionary, the cultural revolutionary, the defender of indigenous peoples, gets lost in a miasma of sexual activity and predatory paedophilia. Even assuming, for the sake of argument, that he wrote the Black Diaries, it beggars belief that he would leave them behind while going off on a treasonable expedition to Germany in 1914. Casement knew the vital importance of documents for evidential purposes.

If all involved in this debate were to call the British government to allow the White and Black Diaries to be tested by chemical analysis in order to determine if they are genuine or forgeries it would settle the question once and for all.

1/1/2017

Frank Mac Gabhann is a lawyer and commentator working in Dublin and Barcelona.