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**Casement: Letters from the TLS**

In one of my first [posts](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/09/26/roger-casement-1916-and-modern-ireland/), I discussed Roy Foster’s review of Séamus Ó Síocháin’s biography of Roger Casement, and what it might have told us about modern Ireland’s relationship to Easter 1916 and sexuality. One of the most disreputable parts of the whole Casement issue has been the need many have felt to deny that he was a homosexual, resulting in the denial that the Black Diaries are genuine (some years back, scientific tests as part of a project direct by Professor W.J. McCormack proved beyond reasonable doubt that they were). We should not be surprised, therefore, that Foster’s review has provoked an exchange of letters in the Times Literary Supplement ([here](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/the_tls/article4946743.ece) and [here](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/the_tls/article4991080.ece)).

The first, and more serious response, came from Dr [Angus Mitchell](http://www.history.ul.ie/content/view/27/30) of the University of Limerick, who has published extensively on Casement, and who has been the most sophisticated modern exponent of the theory that the Black Diaries are forgeries. Mitchell argues that Casement’s real legacy comes from his exposition of the nature of imperialism, and that this discomforts the self-image of the British Establishment, as it did in Casement’s day. “To this day, Casement’s name works mnemonically: a perpetual reminder of imperial criminality, disrupting the sanctity of the national archive, the repository of the nation’s historical identity.” This seems to me to perhaps inflate Casement’s importance somewhat, but to be a reasonable point.

Mitchell rejects Foster’s suggestion that he now accepts the diaries as genuine, instead saying that he accepts “that the diaries are required sources for analysing Casement’s official investigations of 1903, 1910 and 1911.” It is unclear to me precisely what this means, but I take it to mean that no historian should ignore them in future, but instead should compare them to what is indisputably Casement’s work, and then come to a judgment on where interpolations may have been imposed, in order to get a fuller picture of how Casement saw the places and people in which the diaries were written.

Mitchell then broadens the context of the discussion to the debate over revisionism in Irish history, and Foster’s role within it.

In Ireland’s troubled history wars, those who camp with Foster use the Black Diaries for the very same purposes that sexual rumours were circulated at the time of Casement’s trial. They are of interest as instruments of propaganda and as symbols to devalue his humanity to a level of tabloid history and triviality. Foster understands and engages with this controversy not on the level of a detached scholar, but as a polemicist and a gatekeeper.

This seems to me to be very tendentious. Are those who accept the Black Diaries as genuine really only interested in them as a way of devaluing the separatist project for which Casement gave his life? I don’t believe so. Certainly there may be some who wish to smear his character with insinuations of child abuse or sexual imperialism and by extension his politics. But it seems to me that those who take the diaries to be genuine are overwhelmingly trying to treat Casement as a human being rather than as a demi-god in a pantheon of infallible heroes as was the case among nationalists for so long. Foster is certainly a polemicist, but it seems to me his judgment on the diaries is on empirical grounds. While I would disagree with Mitchell on this issue, I would agree with his concluding argument that the Black Diaries should not be the prism through which all of Casement’s actions are judged. Especially when some of those so harsh on Casement, or Pearse or Connolly are so understanding of men like O’Duffy and other Blueshirts and fascists, and keen to make excuses for them.

If Mitchell offers a nuanced and balanced argument, that of Tim O’Sullivan’s letter is much less convincing. He argues that Casement had made enemies among those oppressing Amerindians in Peru, and that they would have had him under surveillance, and would have used the rampant and blatant homosexuality detailed in the Black Diaries against him at a time and place when homosexuality was illegal. That they did not do so, he insinuates, means that the diaries are forged. He also argues that for Casement to have behaved the way the diaries suggest in such circumstances would have meant he was insane, and that there is plenty of evidence for his sanity, so therefore the diaries cannot be true. “An explanation for the contradiction is that the character who indulged in the wild sexual behaviour was fictitious; compromising sexual material was interpolated into the real diaries which Casement had kept.” This type of argument strikes me as stretching logic well beyond breaking point.

So too it seems Roy Foster, who opens his letter in response with a characteristically witty and biting putdown: “No pleasing some people, especially Casementalists.” Foster says that Mitchell’s own review of Ó Síocháin’s book in History Ireland did not dispute the authenticity of the diaries, says he gave due attention to Casement’s anti-imperialism which he says emerged late in his life, and professes to be at a loss at the references to polemics and gatekeeping. Whereas I regard Mitchell’s letter as nuanced, Foster sees it as “muddled”. His parting shot is worth quoting.

But if he intends to insinuate lack of detachment and tendentiousness, he might look closer to home.

He responds to O’Sullivan’s letter by pointing out that risky sexual behaviour is common in those in prominent positions, and so his argument leaves him unconvinced.

Pleasingly both Mitchell and Foster make clear that homophobia has no part to play in the debate on Casement. But I am still left with the feeling that the refusal to accept the authenticity of the Black Diaries is rooted ultimately in irrationality, and a feeling that their being genuine would be a slur on the character of a national hero, and possibly on the character of the nation itself. It leaves me slightly uneasy.

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Tags: [Irish history](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/tag/irish-history/), [Roger Casement](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/tag/roger-casement/)

This entry was posted on November 8, 2008 at 4:26 pm and is filed under [Culture](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/category/culture/%22%20%5Co%20%22View%20all%20posts%20in%20Culture), [History](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/category/history/%22%20%5Co%20%22View%20all%20posts%20in%20History). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/11/08/casement-letters-from-the-tls/feed/) feed. You can [leave a response](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/11/08/casement-letters-from-the-tls/%22%20%5Cl%20%22respond), or [trackback](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/11/08/casement-letters-from-the-tls/trackback/) from your own site.

**10 Responses to “Casement: Letters from the TLS”**

1. *Dunne and Crescendo* Says:
[November 8, 2008 at 10:40 pm](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/11/08/casement-letters-from-the-tls/%22%20%5Cl%20%22comment-193%22%20%5Co%20%22)

I once attended a symposium on Casement at which MItchell and other Casementalists spoke. Mitchell reacted to criticism very defensively buy clearly was not concerned with Casement’s sexuality per se. However many of the audience were; one literally foaming at the mouth shouted that there was no evidence ‘that Casement was a pervert!’

1. *[Garibaldy](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com)* Says:
[November 8, 2008 at 11:18 pm](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/11/08/casement-letters-from-the-tls/%22%20%5Cl%20%22comment-194%22%20%5Co%20%22)

Thanks for that story D&C – it’s great. At one level, I find it quite comforting to see some of the old verities hold true for some people in a changing world.

1. *Starkadder* Says:
[November 10, 2008 at 2:25 pm](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/11/08/casement-letters-from-the-tls/%22%20%5Cl%20%22comment-195%22%20%5Co%20%22)

Garibaldy,

The Roger Casement Foundation seems to be run by conservative Roman Catholics who object to Casement being gay. They are on record as calling for the diaries to be destroyed after they are “disproved”.

<http://archives.tcm.ie/breakingnews/2006/08/03/story270587.asp>

This strikes me as very insecure-surely if they were confident they were fakes, they wouldn’t need to be destroyed.
Aslo, Sinn Fein uncritically accepts the RCF thesis, judging by the number of columns in An Phoblacht they give the RCF,with no space for the
pro-diaries side.

1. *[Garibaldy](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com)* Says:
[November 10, 2008 at 3:29 pm](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/11/08/casement-letters-from-the-tls/%22%20%5Cl%20%22comment-196%22%20%5Co%20%22)

Hi Starkadder,

Thanks for that information. I agree that the calls for the diaries to be destroyed are utterly ridiculous. I am surprised that the Provos give this argument space in their newspaper in this day and age, but I guess it shows the extent to which their supporters remain locked in the traditional narrow and sectarian nationalism, whatever about the liberal language of the upper echelons. I remember that they did not campaign much on the divorce referendum.

1. *Dunne and Crescendo* Says:
[November 10, 2008 at 4:51 pm](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/11/08/casement-letters-from-the-tls/%22%20%5Cl%20%22comment-198%22%20%5Co%20%22)

To be fair to SF, their gay and lesbian group did run a Roger Casement school during the 1990s and AP/RN did seem to suggest that Casement was a ‘gay republican icon’. I would think the space given to RCF might be because some of the same people are involved with the Aubane society and Irish Political Review who are a bit of an uncritical Provo ginger group now and a lot of their stuff on revisionism gets published in AP/RN. But again I think Eoin O’Broin and others would not only accept, but actually positively promote the idea of Casement as a gay republican.

1. *[Garibaldy](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com)* Says:
[November 10, 2008 at 5:13 pm](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/11/08/casement-letters-from-the-tls/%22%20%5Cl%20%22comment-200%22%20%5Co%20%22)

Thanks for that info too D&C. Fair point. I was suprised that they would give the RCF space given that they make much of their pro-gay credentials. Sometimes this gets silly – I don’t read AP much, but one time I did read it I saw an article by O Broin blaming the British for introducing homophobia into Ireland. Which struck me as just bonkers. On the Aubane people in AP, the struggle against revisionism does make for some strange bedfellows. If that isn’t a poor choice of words.

1. *Dunne and Crescendo* Says:
[November 11, 2008 at 10:30 pm](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/11/08/casement-letters-from-the-tls/%22%20%5Cl%20%22comment-222%22%20%5Co%20%22)

Have you seen the big biography of Casement by Seamus O Siochain (sic possibly)? It seems to be a substantial effort to understand the man in all his complexity, though I’ve only skimmed through it in the shops.

1. *[Garibaldy](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com)* Says:
[November 11, 2008 at 11:15 pm](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/11/08/casement-letters-from-the-tls/%22%20%5Cl%20%22comment-223%22%20%5Co%20%22)

I haven’t seen it yet myself D&C to be honest. I am looking forward to doing so. It seems to be really good from what I’ve heard. You seem impressed yourself.

1. *Kevin Mannerings* Says:
[November 22, 2008 at 11:19 pm](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/11/08/casement-letters-from-the-tls/%22%20%5Cl%20%22comment-257%22%20%5Co%20%22)

Hi Garibaldi,

Casement seems to be a figure to loathe for some people. They are happy to describe him as a compulsived pederast, as the Unionist gay rights supporter Montgomery Hyde did. Mary Kenny described Casement as a paedophile in the Irish Catholic, and Vincent Browne did the same in Village.

Back in the 1980′s I went in search of the gay Casement to be proud of, and found a portrait of Casement which does not fit my idea of Gay Pride.
It turns out Casement’s boyfriend Adler Christiansen was beaten and abused by Casement, who has been described as a sexual predator and a sexual pariah (Daily Telegraph & The Guardian).

While I was looking for, and not finding, the gay Casement to be proud of, I noticed a funny thing: There are thousands of documents about Casement scattered around the world, and all those suggesting he was a paedophile into sexual exploitation had passed through the hands of
MI5.

That made me suspicious, so I started to look at the diaries more closely.
Would you like some photos of the diaries to put up on your site?

I went to see them in Kew in 2002. I was very surprised to find some pages have been coated with polyvinyl acetate, which would cover up evidence of bleaching and interpolation.

My view is that there are forensic tests which could be done which would throw more light on this.

The idea of a 44 year old man grooming 10 year-olds for sex is not my idea of sexual liberation. Given the track record of Irish Catholicism in this area, I can understand why some are disgusted.

Apart from his sex life, there is a lot about Casement to be proud of. He was campaigning against rape in the Putumayo, he discusses the sexual politics of rape explicitly in his diaries. Once, he happened on a scene of devastation in the Amazon forests, where the rubber barons had arrived and raped and murdered all before them. The orphaned children were left sick and terrified in the forest, he organised help for them.

He was much against religious sectarianism: he wanted both Catholic and Protestant involvement in the Putumayo, and it seems he took his Presbyterian girlfriends to mass in Gortahork!

He went out of his way to meet political opponents from all sides of the Irish conflict, meeting John Redmond and seeking a meeting with Edward Carson.

All the best

Kevin Mannerings, Pforzheim
kevin.manneringsatvr-web.de

1. *[Garibaldy](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com)* Says:
[November 24, 2008 at 1:44 pm](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/11/08/casement-letters-from-the-tls/%22%20%5Cl%20%22comment-265%22%20%5Co%20%22)

Hi Kevin,

Thanks for this. Good to hear from someone who has actually seen the documents. Certainly Casement was as you say opposed to sectarianism, and the exploitation of indigenous peoples in all ways. I’m interested in what you say about the covering of the pages. I had forgotten about this. Are those pages that refer to his sexual behaviour or other ones? If you email me some photos, I’d be very grateful, and will put them up.

**Roger Casement, 1916 and Modern Ireland**

Roy Foster’s [review](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/the_tls/article4816124.ece) of Séamus Ó Síocháin’s new [biography](http://www.lilliputpress.ie/listbook.html?isbn=978%201%2084351%20021%205) of Roger Casement raises interesting issues about modern Ireland’s relationship with Casement’s sexuality and the Easter Rising itself.
Foster comments that:

“Until recently, those ecstatic descriptions of homosexual fondling and penetration in discreet public places throughout the world had to be eliminated from the hagiography of a secular saint. Nowadays, when an about turn in attitudes has made the law on same-sex relations more liberal in Ireland than most European countries (including Britain), Casement’s sainthood can be extended to represent the redemption of a whole new constituency of the once excluded and oppressed. But this approach may be as anachronistic as the most ingenious forgery theories of a half-century ago.”

In these couple of sentences, Foster hits on many of the most important changes that have taken hold in Ireland over the last several decades (and analysed in his [Luck and the Irish](http://www.penguin.co.uk/nf/Book/BookDisplay/0%2C%2C9780713997835%2C00.html) ). The decline of the Catholic Church, the desacralization of Irish nationalism, and the rapid transition to a secular society in line with the rest of Europe, except on the question of abortion. However, the transformation of Irish nationalism has not meant it has slipped out of existence, as some have assumed as traditional Catholic nationalism waned. The popularity of the government celebrations of the 90th anniversary of the Easter Rising demonstrated that. (I have commented previously on the debates on Irish historical revisionism [here](http://cedarlounge.wordpress.com/2007/12/13/the-fight-for-irish-history/) .)

So what type of 1916 is being celebrated – and is it an anachronistic view as Foster suggests? The 1916 that people are increasingly thinking about and celebrating today is not the 1916 of blood sacrifice and anti-democratic militarism so beloved of Ruth Dudley Edwards and Eoghan Harris – instead it is presented as a blow for modern, liberal, democratic and secular principles. This was the 1916 described by Mary McAleese in 2006 (even if she couldn’t help emphasising the Catholicism of many of its participants), and it is the 1916 that Foster acknowledges will result in acceptance of Casement’s homosexuality. In fact, it seems not unlikely that far from being a cause of shame and denial among nationalists for much of the twentieth century, Casement’s homosexuality will become a cause for celebration; it will be used as “proof” that the leaders of 1916 were more enlightened than many of their contemporaries and descendants.

This is a view that I have some sympathy with. It is clear that Connolly was easily the most progressive and internationalist political thinker Ireland had seen since the United Irishmen, and that many of the other 1916 leaders also held extremely progressive political views. Pearse’s [The Sovereign People](http://www.ucc.ie:8080/cocoon/celt/E900007-013) represented his final statement on Irish freedom, and is infused with progressive politics, something ignored by those who seek to portray him as a suicidal nutter. At the same time, it cannot be denied that the refusal to face up to Casement’s sexuality spoke volumes about the reactionary nature of extremely significant sections of Irish society.

In modern Ireland then, the acceptance of Casement’s sexuality does speak well of the development of a more secular and liberal society. But at the same time, the tendency in much of Irish society to gloss over, ignore, and bury the nastier and more corrupt elements of politics and society must be resisted. While we celebrate Casement, we must also remember the lessons of Connolly, and seek to replace a social and economic system that abandons those at the bottom to inadequate healthcare, services, and to low paid jobs.

This entry was posted on September 26, 2008 at 11:56 pm and is filed under [Culture](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/category/culture/), [History](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/category/history/). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/09/26/roger-casement-1916-and-modern-ireland/feed/) feed. You can [leave a response](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/09/26/roger-casement-1916-and-modern-ireland/#respond), or [trackback](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/09/26/roger-casement-1916-and-modern-ireland/trackback/) from your own site.

**7 Responses to “Roger Casement, 1916 and Modern Ireland”**

1. [*Turgon*](http://www.sluggerotoole.com) Says:
[September 28, 2008 at 10:58 am](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/09/26/roger-casement-1916-and-modern-ireland/#comment-6)

Garibaldy,
Firstly congratulations on an excellent blog.
The issue of 1916 is difficult for unionists. At one level clearly it is the stab in the back etc. However, I suspect a lot of us can see (even if we rarely admit) that decent non terrorist supporting Irish people celebrate it: just as some unionists celebrate the ideals of 1798 and other (such as my self) have a sneaking quiet regard for “There is none King save Christ alone.”

I guess the problem is that for all the undeniably honourable ideals of some leaders of the ’98 as well as 1916 many of the foot soldiers were probably a bit close to yabba dabba do any Prod/Brit will do. I also wonder which sentiments were used to motivate many of the foot soldiers. Just as had we had war in 1912 I suspect many in the UVF would not have been rallied by explanations about protecting the very beginnings of a pluralist society.

I think distance from the event allows us to be more analytical but I think also allows people to forget the horror of violent death.

Anyhow excellent and thought provoking article.

Regards

1. [*garibaldy*](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com) Says:
[September 28, 2008 at 11:58 am](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/09/26/roger-casement-1916-and-modern-ireland/#comment-7)

Turgon,

Thanks for the good wishes. Unionism is rather noticeable by its absence from this article isn’t it? I hadn’t even thought about including unionism in this post until you commented. I do think it’s cheeky of a lot of unionists to complain about 1916 when – as you note – they had threatened war themselves in 1912, and given the fact that the overwhelming majority of Irish votes had gone in favour of Home Rule for decades. But I can understand why they think the way they do. To describe 1916 as terrorism though is something I simply cannot fathom. It was an open uprising by people in uniform. Not even guerilla warfare. If we see it as terrorism, why not the various uprisings against European governments in the 19th century, especially in 1848? It doesn’t hold water for me.

As to the politics of the 1916 participants, I would be more inclined to see the average person involved as politically conscious rather than baser instincts. I don’t think it can be plausible to view the Irish Citizens’ Army (about 20% of those who turned out) as anything other than socialist. The rest of the Volunteers had a long political apprenticeship over the previous two decades or so in things like the 1898 United Irish Centenary commemorations, the Gaelic League etc. I think they probably were more politically-aware than the average person during the Tan War, and certainly the various terrorists during the Troubles. On a personal note, I’ve always been a 1798 rather than a 1916 person, but a lot of nonsense has been talked about 1916 that needs challenged.

Finally, had I thought about unionism, I might have brought up Paul Berry. The allegations over his sexuality killed his career stone dead (and I was not sorry to see him go), but then again you have Steven King, though he was never elected. The near total absence of openly gay politicians in NI does suggest that homophobia remains a problem across the political spectrum.

1. [*Turgon*](http://www.sluggerotoole.com) Says:
[September 28, 2008 at 1:31 pm](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/09/26/roger-casement-1916-and-modern-ireland/#comment-8)

Yes sorry I did go a bit off topic.

Casement seems to have bee a rather interesting and complex character.

In terms of Berry, I wonder if his gay episode was used by the DUP to get rid of him in light of his utter uselessness and stupidity (I met him once and was singularly unimpressed).

Sorry we should stay off unionism: your post on Casement and the rising and the changes in it and Casement’s commemoration is much too good to be dragged down into an orange / green row.

1. *garibaldy* Says:
[September 28, 2008 at 1:50 pm](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/09/26/roger-casement-1916-and-modern-ireland/#comment-9)

Not at all Turgon. Debate should go where people want to take it rather than stay within narrow limits, and I was at fault for not considering NI and unionism in a piece of the understanding of Casement and 1916 in Modern Ireland.

I agree Casement was a fascinating man, and character. There were quite a few people from his class background who got involved in Irish separatism and left politics, but they have been understudied in the overconcentration on Yeats and his circle (most of whom would have benefitted from a good slap). If he’s looked at that way, he might seem less unusual.

As for Berry. Did they really see him as useless? He was on the media a hell of a lot, and I think they felt he had a good rapport with some of the more extreme elements of their electorate in his neck of the woods. The fact for a while he was the great young hope says a lot. I think I prefer Simon Hamilton.

Oh, and as the colour of the header is intended to convey, this is a red blog, not a green one. 

1. *Omar Little* Says:
[September 30, 2008 at 9:02 am](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/09/26/roger-casement-1916-and-modern-ireland/#comment-20)

Theres a lot to ponder there Garibaldy. But even say, the Citizen’s Army, are not the 100% socialist, radical force people might imagine. Have you seen Commandant Michael Mallin’s last testament? He explicitly cites Catholicism as part of his reason for fighting and Ireland for him, is expressly Catholic. Connolly implored his wife Lily to convert before his execution.
As for Turgon, the UVF and ‘pluralism’ there was nothing in the rhetoric of the Ulster Volunteers to suggest that they beleived that they were defending a more equal social order. In fact, backed by the money and power of the Tories, they were the sharp end of an attempt to destroy the Liberal’s first faltering steps towards a welfare state. To use possibly hackneyed language, they were counter-revolutionaries.

1. *garibaldy* Says:
[September 30, 2008 at 11:21 am](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/09/26/roger-casement-1916-and-modern-ireland/#comment-21)

I understand what you’re saying Omar, and agree that Catholicism remained an important part of the personal identity of a lot of ICA people. But I guess the difference I would draw is in what role the majority of them (and the organisation as a body) saw for the Catholic Church and religion generally in political life, and this separates them from much of what came later. I think this also holds true of people like Pearse. After all, IRB men were excommunicated.

1. [*Casement: Letters from the TLS « Garibaldy Blog*](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/11/08/casement-letters-from-the-tls/) Says:
[November 8, 2008 at 4:26 pm](http://garibaldy.wordpress.com/2008/09/26/roger-casement-1916-and-modern-ireland/#comment-192)

[...] Letters from the TLS In one of my first posts, I discussed Roy Foster’s review of Séamus Ó Síocháin’s biography of Roger [...]