**CASEMENT AND ITALY MENTIONS IN DIARIES – BOOK EXTRACTS**

In his extensive trawl of the Casement papers, B.L. Reid discovered another spontaneous expression of frustrated love, this time about a holiday romance in Italy. Given Casement’s gargantuan output of correspondence and other writings, it is perhaps surprising that more such expressions of private feelings do not crop up. They do in his poetry but lack the names of those he loved. Reid wrote of “An incoherent note scribbled at the end of two pages of drafts of verses, also incoherent, treating of unhappy love”:[[1]](#endnote-1)

“Casaldo’s friend – R.C.

Naples, 3 September 1900

Written going to lunch at Naval & Military

on Saturday, Sept. 22 1900

‑ Oh Sad! Oh! grief stricken.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Reid took this to mean “that before going to lunch on 22 September 1900 at the Naval and Military Club in London (Cambridge House, Piccadilly) Casement tried to versify his feelings about an unsuccessful amorous event of three weeks earlier in Naples. It seems to me to express homosexual feelings about a homosexual relationship. That neither the poem nor the affair came off makes no difference as evidence.”[[3]](#endnote-3) The poem on which Casement inscribed this *cri de coeur* is titled *The Unforgotten,* and although a rough draft, could well apply to Casaldo. Rather than being incoherent, it reads tolerably well, and seems another forerunner to *The Nameless One*:

*Beat on sad heart O beat thyself away*

*I would not loveless hold my life a day*

*Yet never may thy willing hand seek mine*

*Yet never may the tumult of my heart*

*Beat to a rhythm caught from pressing thine*

*O thou art everywhere save in my arms.*

On 7 September 1900 Casement was in London writing to Dick Morten from the Wellington Club, telling him he had taken a friend’s studio or rooms at 12 Aubrey Walk, Campden Hill Road, in Kensington, for two months. That friend was Count Blücher. The address was to figure later in 1916. It is therefore likely that 3 September 1900 was the date he parted from Casaldo. Not that Casement was averse to taking his pleasure in Italy whenever he was able. This is best illustrated by his 1903 diary where, on 1 August, he recalls with pleasure a successful encounter three years earlier with a soldier called Fortunato in the Coliseum.

The manuscript of the poem *Love’s Awakening*, published in Mackey’s 1958 anthology, is also to be found in this batch of papers at the NLI.[[4]](#endnote-4) Its first verse could well be a poem prompted by Casaldo or any number of Italian boys met in Sicily or Naples, or in Dublin, boys who had brought Casement to life emotionally. The probable first draft however was written on “19th May 1895, Sunday on Rathlin Hills”:

*O! God of love, how can it be accurst -*

*This love that wakes, that thrills me thro’ the night?*

*This love that fills my being with delight ‑*

*Of all the ills that stamp man’s lot the worst?*

He then crossed out:

*Why were we given hearts to pant & thrill*

*And eyes to blaze & soften at a touch?*

From diary evidence, by the early 1900s, Casement had long been sexually active, but rarely permitting a relationship to develop beyond a quick encounter: these Italian affairs or romances taught Casement that there could be joy in living out what is now (and may even then have been) called a gay life, but as ever the relationships would be uneven. The circumstances of the time, and the age and income disparities meant his partnerships would be largely commercially based, incapable of being integrated into his political or consular life. But they had one great advantage over the loves of so many of his English contemporaries who were stuck in a form of arrested development, panting over boys in their early teens, or even younger: these relationships could be consummated, and Casement undoubtedly did so. References to love in Italy, both in the diaries and in his other writings, abound. That country had a profound impact on him, as it did on so many other of his contemporaries.

The southern Italy of that time was becoming something of a Mecca for gay men and other literary and bohemian types. The key character was Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden of Mecklenburg who by the early 1890s was firmly established in the area as a purveyor of pictures of nude adolescents. His business was selling “to connoisseurs, photographs of the local male youth, unclothed or archaically draped in home‑made togas and wreathed with laurel crowns.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Another writer tells how von Gloeden “posed his models in intimate situations allegedly representing classical ideas of friendship or fraternity, but his depiction of brotherly love, two boys holding hands and looking into each other’s eyes” could plainly be taken as one of lovers. If a harder presentation was required, a range of his studies of naked and sexually aroused youths was also available “under the counter.”[[6]](#endnote-6) These pictures are still being reprinted.

The Baron’s fame spread far and wide, and Taormina in Sicily became a point of pilgrimage for enthusiasts, including Oscar Wilde who visited after his release from Reading Gaol. Other visitors reputedly were both Kaiser Wilhelm’s son Friedrich and his doomed favourite Prince Philip von Eulenburg. They were able to purchase pictures for their collections, and, at a cost, partake of the favours of some of the models. Rival photographers both in Taormina and in Rome entered the same lucrative market which was just beginning to emerge from under, and detach itself from, health and fitness publications. By publishing prominently a von Gloeden study of Sicilian boys bathing, a German *Korperkultur* title had opened the door for the Baron. The pictures were so great a hit with readers that it provided him with the incentive to concentrate on what would become his life’s work. Before his arrival in Taormina there was apparently not one villa or hotel but, in time, he made the town’s fortune, rather than his own, as he was wont to say. He wanted to be happy not rich. Through the pictures of his ephebes he managed both.

Casement was apparently in Taormina as early as November 1890, when he was twenty‑six, according to a note inscribed on one poem. And he was to be back a decade later. Writing to Francis Cowper on 5 November 1900 from G. Floresta’s “Hotel Timeo” in Taormina, Sicily he was excusing himself for failing to make a promised visit to Lisbon: “I find I can get from Genoa to Cape Verde by excellent Italian steamer…the Genoa alternative is so much nearer and gives me so much more time with my friends here,” he dissembled.[[7]](#endnote-7)

As stated, he had inscribed “Lines written in Very Great Dejection at Genoa, November 15 1900, before sailing on ‘Sirio’ for Barcelona.” He was in Barcelona by 26 November 1900, describing a bullfight he attended there in a letter to Dick Morten. This was a spectacle which he abhorred, writing off the Spanish as “ineffable swine” for their cruelty to animals. Given that he was in London in late September 1900 yet in Naples earlier that month when he was emotionally involved with Casaldo, it appears he had swiftly returned to Italy by November with a view to re‑establishing this love affair – only to find it blocked for some reason. The most likely cause of his dejection has to be the fact that Casaldo was indifferent or unfaithful; probably both.

While he awaited his trial and execution Casement never stopped writing. His solicitor’s papers are stuffed with pages of text from various gaols, so much that Serjeant Sullivan pleaded on 6 June “There are parts of his notes that should be burned. Tell him he must stop scribbling. Papers get mislaid, overlooked and spied upon sooner or later. He has told us as much as can be of use – and everything else that is worse than useless.”[[8]](#endnote-8) A wise warning since a mislaid file of incriminating papers did end up with the prison authorities and thence the Home Office. The description of the novelist Anthony Trollope who overheard his own publisher saying he had “the fecundity of a herring” might be also be thought applicable to Casement. The problem of his incriminating papers and especially the fear of his erstwhile friend Herbert Ward ending up with his picture collection of Italian boys, prompted one particular note from Casement to his solicitor. It of course revealed his appreciation of unclothed lads of Sicily, but on balance he seems to have reckoned it was better for Gavan Duffy to be aware of their existence and to take the heavy hint to get rid of them.

“There are a great many photographs scattered thro’ all my belongings some of my travels of African types etc. Many of these are in the trunks at Allisons in London (and were originally, the Sicilian ones bought many years ago) in a package addressed “to be given to my friend Herbert Ward at my death.” Don’t give them to him now. He has turned against me and would only insult me now. They are mostly Sicilian types that I intended for his studio – or mine, when I lived at Campden Hill with Count Blücher. They might be destroyed now I think by my solicitor unless he cares to keep any of them. There are other Italian and Sicilian photos that used to be on the wall of my studio at C. Hill Gdns (with Count Blücher) I should like Mr Gavan Duffy to accept.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

It seems Casement was carefully trying to shift some of the responsibility for possession of these Sicilian photographs to his old friend Count Blücher who was safely out of range in Germany. Earlier he was writing about Scotland Yard having “no right to retain any papers or documents of mine – diaries, books or anything not used at the trial against me” so his concerns about these documents were growing. His problem was to get them back from the police but not to appear so keen as to draw attention to them, nor to seem too eager to have them destroyed in case it looked like his ownership of them was suspicious. The trick was to suggest that if they were not to be binned, or burned, as surplus to requirements, his solicitor, a man known to be of great piety and impeccable propriety, might be happy to take them.

If he did extract and retain Casement’s Italian boys, Gavan Duffy, a man who combined compassion with common sense, certainly never displayed them. As someone who was generally punctilious about following legal etiquette and instructions, it is likely he did go through the returned property and remove them. He may also have given advice on disposal of the framed pictures of young men and the many photograph albums which were never seen again after their return from Scotland Yard in early 1917[[10]](#endnote-10) although he may have left that task to Gertrude Parry.

Casement’s infatuation with Italy and Italians, and the influence they had upon him, is revealed in another defining note: “I love Naples. It has all its sins and all its beauties upon its face; it hides nothing; it is the most human town in Europe. People there do what they think and as they are in the privacy of their own room (if they are among the fortunate Neapolitans who possess separate rooms) so they are in the streets…Whether it is better to hide our hearts to muffle up our lives and to live the truer part of our lives in secret as we do today, the future only knows. For my part I cannot help feeling that the world lost something when discretion became the first of the ten commandments.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

His visiting the city of Naples is confirmed in a letter to Gertrude, dated 31 January 1902, when he enclosed “a present from Rod from Naples.”[[12]](#endnote-12) It is further borne out by a gift to his fellow consul in Loanda, the German Dorbritz in whose company he chose frequently to be. On 2 November 1903, Casement recorded in his diary, after a farewell dinner, “Gave him my last neapolitan pin as a keepsake.” The 1901/2 winter visit was to be described as “my long Italian spell” when Casement came to make his now traditional excuse to Cowper (from Ballycastle) on 17 February, “I had as I wrote you, intended going to Portugal but fate took me to Italy instead. I have just got back.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

Casement had the habit of obtaining addresses of young men and sending on photographs he had taken of them, and there is mention of someone in Rapallo being such a recipient in one of his letters. The habit crops up in South America particularly in relation to the much sought‑after Ignacio. Mr D. Brown of Booth & Co. writing from Iquitos in April 1911 dutifully reported to Casement: “I have delivered the photographs to Perez [Antonio Cruz Perez, a Booth’s customs’ clerk] on the Muelle; but up to the present I have not been able to find the boy Ignacio Torres. Some of our men are looking for him and as the Steward of the “Liberal” informs me that the boy is somewhere in Iquitos we should be able to find him.”[[14]](#endnote-14) Back in Iquitos himself, Casement twice records in the 1911 Black Diary, in December, further attempts to get such photos to Ignacio.

Alongside the poem *The Nameless One* and outside of the diaries, the remarks about the freedom Casement felt in Naples are the most interpretable as a defiant exposition of a homosexual orientation. There is simply no other way they can be read except relating to sexual acts of a homosexual kind; no matter how easy-going Naples was, it certainly did not permit its girls the freedom that some of its boys took, and still do take, even if they are now too worldly‑wise to let themselves be photographed in such poses.

However on three occasions when Casement came tangentially to discuss homosexuality, twice in the Black Diaries; the suicide of General Hector Macdonald (on 17, 19 and 30 April 1903), and on native boys playing sexually with each other in public (on 4 October 1910), and once in a letter to Dick Morten, he took what appears at first sight to be an, at least distant, if not disapproving view of the matter.

In that letter, dated 2 January 1905, discussing the introduction of Chinese labour to South Africa he wrote: “No man who has travelled but knows that Chinamen hold views on sexual intercourse not in favour in Europe since the days of Greece and Rome. They come from their country without their womenfolk and they are enclosed in compounds for three years. It is not difficult to imagine that, with such men, with such natures, the results are not entirely healthy and charming to contemplate.” He further described the system as “slave labour pure and simple.”[[15]](#endnote-15) No evidence for this supposed Chinese predilection was provided.

Casement’s brother Tom, when a commissioner of mines in the Transvaal, is said to have campaigned to abolish indentured Chinese labour in the Rand, which may have prompted discussion of the issue.[[16]](#endnote-16) The question was agitating London anti‑slavery circles, with allegations that “the Chinese were teaching sodomy to the blacks.”[[17]](#endnote-17) After two (unpublished) enquiries the first which reported in 1906 into “the prevalence of unnatural vice among Chinese indentured labour” and secondly in 1907 into such vice “among the natives in the mines of the Witwatersrand” the Chinese were unsurprisingly exonerated. Sodomy was apparently already common among east coast immigrant miners. It was however noted that some of the most enthusiastic participants in the ‘boy wife’ system were Portuguese soldiers and police.[[18]](#endnote-18)

What Casement actually wrote to Dick Morten was couched in an arch and knowing manner despite his recorded knowledge of matters Chinese being sparse to say the least. It was not condemnatory as such, merely observing that heterosexual men without women, will in time, and especially if with such “Chinese natures” descend into some form of primitive and unregulated homosexual behaviour. Of course being gay at this time and doing same‑sex sex did not guarantee guiltlessness, still less admiration for such activity, as is illustrated by the lives of other contemporaries who practised what they did not preach; and preached against what they practised.

A notorious example of such contradictory, or mixed, attitudes comes from the most prominent Uranian writer after Baron Corvo, the teacher John Gambril Nicholson (1866‑1931), author in 1911 of *A Garland of Ladslove.* He penned a pamphlet for his pupils, to instil into them “an awareness of the dangers of homosexual affection.”[[19]](#endnote-19) Entitled *A Story of Cliffe School,* and probably written when employed at Rydal School in Colwyn Bay, it enjoined boys “swamped by the waves of sin” to leave “behind you those terrible habits which would work your eternal ruin.” Nicholson, later a teacher at Stationers’ School in London until his 1925 retirement, unlike many of his Uranian contemporaries was not chaste and was plainly a shameless hypocrite. Corvo, writing in 1908, was amazed that Nicholson despite the matter of his sonnet publishing, “held his mastership in a big school for quite a dozen years, and still holds it”; he being someone who wrote to Corvo of his own experiences “in a style precisely like that of the storiettes pencilled up in the jakes at the Marble Arch.”[[20]](#endnote-20)

Casement’s poem *The Streets of Catania* has previously figured in the controversy about his sexuality. According to the copy he wrote out for Father Murnane in Pentonville on the day before his execution, it was originally composed in Sicily in that finest of years, 1900. One stanza – that after the first – he said he had forgotten but his memory appears to have been faulty as it all appears present. Casaldo may well have prompted the poem, for a number of people see it as decidedly homosexual. It has been suggested that the gift to Father Murnane of such an otherwise inapposite poem was an attempt to validate a lifestyle that may just have been revealed to him, for it was this Bermondsey priest who had taken Casement through his intellectual doubts and brought him through his conversion:

*All that was beautiful and just,*

*All that was pure and sad*

*Went in one little moving plot of dust*

*The world called bad.*

*Came like a highwayman, and went,*

*One who was bold and gay,*

*Left when his lightly loving mood was spent*

*Thy heart to pay.*

*By‑word of little streets and men,*

*Narrower theirs the shame –*

*Tread thou the lava loving leaves, and then*

*Turn whence it came.*

*Aetna, all wonderful, whose heart*

*Glows as thine throbbing glows,*

*Almond and citron bloom quivering at start,*

*Ends in pure snows.*

Casement’s own less than enlightening commentary on the poem, reprinted in Mackey’s *Crime Against Europe* was: “The streets of Catania are paved with blocks of the lava of Aetna.” In a letter in the *Irish Times* of 21 April 1956, Monk Gibbon, who was a cousin of W.B. Yeats, joined the correspondence that was raging in the wake of René MacColl’s recent biography[[21]](#endnote-21). He wrote that he believed Casement was homosexual, in particular because of his failure to state to his barrister Serjeant Sullivan, simply: “This is false. The diary is a forgery.” Furthermore, he stated “a poem by Casement…entitled if I remember rightly, ‘Catania’ is bound, to those who know the reputation of Capri and Sicily in this respect, to suggest that it was written by a homosexual. It is a remarkably fine sonnet, and I suppose I am starting another argument now which can be carried on till doomsday. I can only say that in my opinion that sonnet was written by a homosexual.”

The reputation of Catania, in particular, was described by the journalist Michael Davidson some thirty years later in *Some Boys*. He was a notorious pederast who also authored the infamous *The World, The Flesh and Myself*. In a chapter about Catania, a town that might not have changed much in this respect between the turn of the century when Casement visited and Davidson’s time, he wrote: “Were a trophy to be offered for competition among all the municipalities of the world for the most unashamed, ingenuous and confiding display, open to the public gaze, of juvenile eroticism, I believe it would be easily won by the city of Catania.” Along a line of rocks below the harbour wall of this eastern Sicilian city, he reported that boys will unblushingly indulge in a “marathon of masturbation.” Prizes, he felt, ought to be awarded for their tireless interest in sex. Davidson also suggested, not entirely tongue in cheek, that the proximity of Mount Etna, Casement’s “Heaven attesting hill”, might be the cause of such “lubricious exuberance.” Catania he felt could not be recommended for friendship but was certainly “a wonderful place for sights to see.”[[22]](#endnote-22)

Other occasional verse of Casement tells the tale of a man of strong passions, one emotionally labile and keen to justify himself to himself. In this 1899 jotting there is again little doubt as to why he feels it necessary to explain how love can transform what would otherwise be seen by his fellow men as degraded behaviour:

*Were it not that the lowliest act can be*

*Stripped of unworthiness by love, and made*

*One tiny wave of a heaven reflecting sea…*[[23]](#endnote-23)

The “Malay Love Song”, so entitled by Casement, and written, as he noted, on 9 April 1900 at the “Capetown CS Club” is an anguished response to an apparently unrequited adoration of a Malay boy, from whom he was separating. Casement was leaving South Africa for a new appointment in the Congo State:

*There’s a star that set for ever,*

*when I said farewell to thee*

*There are joys that live for ever;*

*there are joys that last a day;*

*There are hopes that blossom never*

*on life’s slowly dying spray ‑*

*Tho’ I die ‑ and Death’s hereafter*

*hold no promise of the Dove*

*O! I’d sink with lips of laughter*

*for one moment of thy love.*[[24]](#endnote-24)

It would be inconceivable in the South Africa of those days for the object of this affection to have been a woman; not least because he would not have been allowed into a position of proximity with a Muslim girl, let alone develop an acquaintance with her that could be publicly observed. His lover was probably a servant or waiter, possibly at the same Capetown Club where he may have been staying. The evidence of later passions suggest a pattern of infatuation with young working men met on board ship or in the course of the business of his consular activities. Lovers taken or wanted, and replaced, but not forgotten.

1. B.L. Reid p. 482 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. NLI 13082/2 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. B.L. Reid p. 482‑3 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. NLI 12115 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. d’Arch Smith p. 62 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Gardiner pp. 69 & 72 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. NLI Acc 4902 Folder 5 (now in MSS. 36199-36212) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. NLI 10763/7 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. NLI 10764/1 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. NLI 13075 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. NLI Acc 4902 Folder 20 (now in MSS. 36199-36212) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. NLI 13074/1 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. NLI Acc 4902 Folder 6 (now in MSS. 36199-36212) [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. NLI 13073/2 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. NLI Acc 4902 Folder 17 (now in MSS. 36199-36212) [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Redmond Howard p. 9 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Hyam p. 99 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. PRO CO 537/540 & 542 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. d’Arch Smith p. 131 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. d’Arch Smith p. 131‑2 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Other literary figures have expressed views on Casement and the diaries: Hilaire Belloc recorded in June 1916, “I had an instinctive repulsion for him when I met him years ago”, adding that he had a “sudden unbalanced enthusiasm about anything”. He also reported, wrongly, that he was a Freemason. Frank O’Connor wrote in 1957, it was “unquestionable that Casement was temperamentally a homosexual” while asserting Adler Christensen was both homosexual and a traitor. In 1961, Ethel Mannin recanted her previous view that the diaries were authentic. NLI 31741/3 & 4 [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Davidson p. 157‑162 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. NLI 12116 [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. NLI 12116 [↑](#endnote-ref-24)