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GOD'S OWN BUGGER?

Roger Casement: The Black Diaries with a study of his background, sexuality and Irish political life

by Jeffrey Dudgeon

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There's more than a touch of the messianic in Roger Casement's story. The itinerant evangelist for humanitarian concern in the colonies is arrested on Good Friday 1916, delivered into the hands of his enemies on the word of a friend. Writing in the shadow of his impending execution, Casement encourages his supporters to 'roll away the stone from my grave'. At Mass in the prison chapel on the morning of his execution, he receives his first and only communion in the Catholic faith, then refuses breakfast because he wants the Holy Sacrament to be his final earthly meal – a gothic Last Supper. By legend he looks to heaven in his last words, pleading 'Lord Jesus, receive my soul.' Even his executioner, John Ellis, is impressed, later writing, 'He appeared to me the bravest man it fell to my unhappy lot to execute,' a faint echo of the Roman centurion's belated encomium to the dying Christ. And so to a quick-lime grave without the decency of a coffin, where Casement's body reposes until his political resurrection in 1965 and the re-burial in Dublin's Glasnevin cemetery, with all the spectacle of a state funeral.

Even the 82 year old President Eamon de Valera, an unlikely witness to the resurrection, is moved to testify in his graveside oration: 'I do not think it presumptuous on our part to believe that a man who was so unselfish, who worked so hard for the downtrodden and the oppressed and who so died, that that man is in heaven.' The Ascension is complete.

That's one approach to the Casement legend anyway, the path of hagiography. The other is the favoured approach of the tabloid exposé. It was a convention of Edwardian etiquette that well-bred conversation should avoid reference to religion, politics or sex. This requirement would have silenced polite England on the delicate matter of Sir Roger Casement, who embodied all three like an unholy trinity. But they knew how to whisper back then, and Casement was the talk of the town in 1916.

SECUROCRATS

By some accounts, the British securocrats of the day had instigated a whispering campaign of their own. They produced the so-called "Black Diaries": accomplished

forgeries whose erotically-charged content – explicit accounts which revealed Casement's self-assured homosexuality and detailed his many sexual encounters with young men and boys, some barely pubescent – guaranteed the Irish nationalist's eventual execution.

Politics and sexuality similarly collide in this account by Jeffrey Dudgeon, a former member of the Northern Ireland Labour Party, who made legal history in 1981 when his challenge in the European Court of Human Rights led to the decriminalisation of male homosexuality in Northern Ireland. A self-confessed "Casementalist", Dudgeon's interest stretches back to a 1984 *Fortnight* article that was prompted by the publication of a new biography by Roger Sawyer, Casementologist extraordinaire. With this, his first book-length contribution to the burgeoning field of Casement studies, Dudgeon has transcribed and generously annotated all five of the Black Diaries currently kept by the Public Record Office in London, including the most controversial (and explicit) of these, the previously unpublished 1911 diary. (Where the already-published diaries read like sexually explicit text messages, being essentially snatched comments briskly recorded, Casement allows himself more syntax, and full paragraphs, in the 1911 diary.) Thus, all the Black Diaries are now published together for the first time since 1959, the pivotal year in Casement studies when public access to the diaries was first allowed, and published in a study by a gay author who fully accepts their authenticity.

JUDICIOUS

While Dudgeon judiciously surveys those periods in Casement's life that have captured the attention of most previous studies – his work as a British consular official in the Congo and the Peruvian Amazon, his sojourn in the United States and his efforts in Germany to raise support for an Irish rebellion – this new work is noteworthy for throwing light on less well-known episodes: Casement's personal background in county Antrim, his early religious and political views, his first influential friendships (sexual and otherwise) and how these personal factors eventually converged in the imperial humanitarian turned Irish nationalist.

Dudgeon believes Casement is central to understanding the rise of 'romantic race-based nationalism' and how it eventually eclipsed 'radical democratic Republicanism' in the long war that followed the return in 1965 of Casement's remains to Irish soil. He describes this as

an event that 'was to spark off a renewal of nationalist fervour over partition and presage another round of conflict, starting in 1968.' Indeed he is convinced that understanding why 'the IRA's first arms were commissioned by someone also involved in the rebirth of northern nationalism is a necessary guide' to understanding 'how they might be decommissioned'. But, while the author proposes to offer a key to unlocking some of the dynamics of our contemporary political situation through a careful re-reading of Casement's diaried life, he does not fully turn the interpretive key in the historical lock. His explanations are disappointingly suggestive rather than the fully-developed argument one might have hoped for.

Nevertheless, Dudgeon manages to avoid both the rising incense of political hagiography and the engulfing steam of sexual exposé. He proposes not to bury Casement, nor even to praise him, but to simply understand this complex personality and his subsequent influence. The result is a fascinating introduction to a much-maligned political figure whose historical importance has been widely under-appreciated, partly because of the tabloid lure of the very diaries that are examined here in such plentiful detail. Jeffrey Dudgeon's study ultimately challenges a traditionally homophobic Irish political culture to accept that Casement is no less important in the history of this island for being both gay and the author of the so-called Black Diaries.

