**Roger Casement Lecture**

**‘Realities and Illusions of Colonialism’**

**John Gray**

**[John Gray is a widely published historian, and former Linen Hall Library in Belfast librarian, specialising in the dissenting tradition throughout Ireland.**

**SDLP Causeway Coast and Glens is delighted that he will deliver a Roger Casement Lecture entitled '*Realities and illusions of colonialism*' on Thursday 28th July 2016 at 7.30pm in the Corrymeela Centre, Ballycastle.]**

Casement can easily be viewed as one of that small minority of Anglo Irish figures who crossed communal boundaries to support the struggle for Irish freedom. He is better seen as an insecure figure on the margins of that privileged caste, and there are parallels here. Look back to the United Irish era and consider Wolfe Tone, son of a bankrupt, or his friend Thomas Russell, whose family had converted to Protestantism but gained no fortune, and hence his dispatch to ‘that sink’, the Indian Army.

There were wings of the Casement family that had prospered and notably his uncle, John Casement, with his 3,300 acres and gentrified house at Magherintemple in the Glens and close to Murlough Bay, but this was in stark contrast to the fortunes of Roger’s own family.

By the time he was born in 1864 they had already fallen on hard times and his place of birth was a humble working class terrace house in Sandycove on the outskirts of Dublin. His father, also Roger, had served in the Indian Army and in the North Antrim Militia but subsequently failed to find regular employment. As Casement approached his teenage years the family was moving from poor lodging house to poor lodging house in London and just ahead of the bailiffs, a trajectory recorded in his father’s abject and begging letters to John Casement. Casement’s mother, Annie, died in 1873 and ostensibly in child birth, but her death certificate described cirrhosis of the liver which implies another disabling problem. Roger’s father died in 1877 leaving the four Casement children as orphans and when the younger Roger was just twelve.

For all the disorder and degradation there was some legacy here. Annie had converted to Catholicism and Roger was accordingly baptised into that faith. His father for all his fecklessness does seem to have been something of a radical posturer. He had assisted Kossuth in his unsuccessful struggle for Hungarian independence, something that Casement was to write about later, he had wielded his sword prepared to go out and do battle on behalf of the Fenians, though wisely dissuaded by his wife, and he had greeted the formation of the Third Republic in France because he supported republics everywhere.

Following the death of his father, Casement was rather unwillingly adopted by the Casements of Magherintemple indeed they may have cared for him as early as 1874 after the death of his mother. In so far as he had a home this was to be it and yet there were no great signs of affection there, though his spiritual welfare was provided for when he was confirmed at the age of 16 into the Church of Ireland, an allegiance that was not to survive. In fact he lived there for no more than six years, and homelessness was to be a feature of his subsequent life: he never had one.

He dwelt in County Antrim long enough to prove an able pupil at the Diocesan school, now Ballymena Academy, although he was there as a boarder for perhaps as little as three years. He was later to deplore the lack of any Irish element in its syllabus, an irony because the principal, the Rev. Robert King, was a Gaelic scholar.

Casement identified rather with the common people of the area, some of whom still spoke Irish. Perhaps under this influence and in the residual tradition of his father he wrote poetry focussing on the heroic days of the old Irish chieftains.

Yet he had to be found a living. His two older brothers, Charlie and Tom, were hurried off to sea. Now a Liverpool uncle was to help determine Casement’s destiny. Edward Bannister was involved in the shipping trade to West Africa and was also to serve as a British consul out there. He was able to wax eloquent on the opportunities involved and helped Roger secure a first job as a shipping clerk with Elder Dempster in 1880. He was soon enough sailing to West Africa as a purser on one of their ships.

The timing was opportune. The race for Africa was on. In 1884 an international conference was held to determine the future of the area and in effect to carve it up between the European powers ostensibly with the objective of civilisation, but more certainly in the interests of trade. One decision had profound consequences for Casement. The major powers allocated the huge area of the Congo to Belgium, and much of it as a private fiefdom under the control of King Leopold.

Casement served with a variety of expeditions and enterprises in the interior, including a Baptist mission – with them he apparently underwent ‘conversion’ and ‘found the Lord’, but he also worked for one of Leopold’s subsidiary companies. Along the way he made the acquaintance of explorers such as Henry Stanley, later a main apologist for Leopold, and Joseph Conrad, author of *Heart of Darkness*, who thought highly of him at the time.

Casement had an appropriate spirit of derring-do, the necessary stamina, and a great competence in all that he did. He naturally had an eye for British interests, thus in 1890 he wrote to Stanley suggesting that there were good potential prospects ‘for an English trading company on the lower Congo on a fairly big scale.’

In 1892 he was appointed by the Colonial Office to act as an agent in the then Oil Rivers Protectorate and now Nigeria. By 1895 he had so impressed his superiors that he secured a Foreign Office appointment as full consul in Lourenco Marques in what was then Portuguese East Africa, and then in 1898 to Sao Paulo de Loanda with charge of all British interests in Portuguese West Africa.

Part of his role in these postings was to provide intelligence on the covert operations of the other great powers and notably France, and when he was posted back to Lorenco Marques in 1900 it was partly to seek to interdict arms supplies to the Boers.

Casement was later to suggest that while on home leave in July 1900 he became pro-Boer and that the subsequent use of internment camps by the British accelerated his disillusion.

Yet at the time he was demonstrably hostile to the Boers arguing that ‘we should have cleared the country of every male inhabitant as we moved on… You can’t make war and peace at the same time.’ It was precisely this kind of thinking that led to the internment camps!

In 1901 as a true British patriot Casement genuinely mourned the death of Queen Victoria.

He was all the time on the edge of the nightmare arena of the Congo. There the Belgians, and in particular their King, were seeking to exploit a rubber boom and secure the maximum revenue from it. In brief their system involved seizure of land from the natives, forced labour, torture if production quotas were not met including the chopping off of hands, and outright massacres.

In April 1900 Casement wrote to the Foreign Office about the need for ‘putting an end to the veritable reign of terror which exists on the Congo.’ His voice merely joined a chorus of others, indeed his uncle, Edward Bannister, as Vice Consul in the Congo from 1893 provided graphic evidence of abuses but was dismissed by 1895 because of his bitter disputes with the Congolese administration.

In May 1903 Herbert Samuel forced a debate in the House of Commons and the government, bereft of first hand evidence on the situation, felt bound to act. Casement was the best man on the spot and was ordered to gather ‘authentic information’.

Over a period of three months Casement inspected conditions in the Congolese interior, and in particular those under the direct control of King Leopold. He had been familiar with the area since 1887 and could make then and now comparisons, and was able to report on the devastating depopulation, the torture and killings that were prevalent, the neglect of the basic needs of the native population, and the Belgian exercise of a complete monopoly on trade.

Casement’s report, completed at breakneck speed, was a model of measured prose and argument. To his fury its immediate impact was diminished by the Government’s decision to omit all names of people and places, yet it was enough to force Leopold II to set up his own independent commission – an own goal because it largely confirmed Casement’s findings.

In the meantime Casement engaged in covert operations at home. In January 1904 he met Edmond Morel, already an active campaigner on the issue, at the unlikely venue of the Slieve Donard Hotel in Newcastle. In 1908 he reminded Morel of ‘How we planned and plotted – and I said that if the Congo question was to be made a living one it must be taken out of the hands of the Foreign Office and Government and made a people’s question.’

Hence the foundation of the Congo Reform Association which rapidly became the most effective opponent of colonial oppression of the era. Morel noted that Casement’s key advice and support had to be given ‘necessarily under the restrictions which his official position imposed upon him.’

Eventually in 1908 the Belgian government itself took over their King’s private fiefdom, but the terms of the annexation remained contested. It was only in 1913 when Belgium finally recognised a range of humanitarian responsibilities that the Reform Association was wound up.

It has to be said that the Congo under direct Belgian rule had at best a mixed record, but Irish involvement there ended until Irish troops serving in the UN were killed in 1960 in a post-independence conflict which was again propelled by the struggle to control the country’s rich resources.

Writing to Alice Stopford Green in 1907 Casement was to say of this period in his career;

I had been away from Ireland for years… trying hard to do my duty and every fresh act of duty made me nearer the ideal of the Englishman. I had accepted Imperialism – British rule was to be extended at all costs, because it was the best for everyone under the sun, and those who opposed that extension ought rightly to be “smashed”, I was on the high road to being a regular Imperialist jingo…

His frustrations with the Foreign Office over the Congo report and subsequent inertia compounded the disillusion.

I knew that the Foreign Office would not understand the thing – or that if they did they would take no action, for I realised that I was looking at this tragedy with the eyes of another race – of a people once hunted themselves…

The alternative pole of his loyalties sprang explosively into place when he returned to Ireland on leave in 1904 and in time to play a considerable role in the celebrated Glens of Antrim Feis. He ‘got to find the Gaelic League at once – and all the old hopes and longings of my boyhood have sprung to life again…’

It was at this time that Casement made the acquaintance of Francis Joseph Bigger, a key organiser of the Feis. Bigger, a wealthy Belfast solicitor had renamed his Antrim Road house Ardrigh, the seat of the high kings. Casement nicknamed him ‘An Biggerac… not a chief merely but an emperor! Kilted.’ Ardrigh had become a virtual university of separatism on both the cultural and political planes, and it became Casement’s main base on visits to Ulster.

Amongst the more political acquaintances he made there was Bulmer Hobson, a young Quaker who had founded the Dungannon Clubs, a forerunner of Sinn Fein, with whom Casement was to have a particularly close association and Denis McCullough. Both were already busy rejuvenating the IRB. It was probably there that he first met the Nationalist historian, Alice Stopford Green; certainly she was a correspondent by 1907 when he told her that, ‘It is a mistake for an Irishman to mix himself up with the English. He is bound to do either one of two things – either go to the wall, if he remains Irish – or become an Englishman himself.’ Her *The Making of Ireland and Its Undoing* (1908) was to provide something of a bible for him on the fate of Gaelic civilisation in the face of the English onslaught.

In 1904-1905 Casement contributed largely anonymous and pseudonymous articles to a variety of Irish language and separatist publications and also gave them financial support. His most controversial intervention was the co-authoring with Bulmer Hobson and Alice Stopford Green of a pamphlet, *Irishmen and the English Army* which sought to discourage enlistment. When a distributor in Ballycastle was prosecuted, he financed the defence. His largesse also extended to Irish language colleges in Cork and Donegal.

All this patronage came at a price. As a matter of financial necessity he had to return to the consular service. When he set sail for Brazil in September 1906 he was reading John Mitchel’s, *Jail Journal*, the ultimate Irish separatist thriller.

It was at Para at the mouth of Amazon that he found himself at the epicentre of another rubber boom. In June 1908 he reported atrocities on the Peruvian Columbian border and by November was questioning ‘whether the universal subjection of this population to the spell of rubber production is altogether good for the people or the future of their country.’

While these reports aroused misgivings it was the arrival of an American railway engineer in London in the autumn of 1909 with a dossier of statements alleging atrocities in the Putumayo area of Peru, and carried out under the auspices of a British owned company that precipitated action. A commission was established to investigate, and once again Casement was the man on the spot, and was appointed as the government representative on the commission.

Casement found conditions if anything even worse than in the Congo, and on his return to London delivered two reports in early 1911. That summer he was rewarded with a knighthood for his endeavours. It gave him some additional authority on a further visit to Putumayo and in lobbying the United States government to put pressure on the Peruvians. The British government sent a further commission out to Putumayo to check whether reforms were being implemented, and launched a parliamentary enquiry into the conduct of the Peruvian Amazon Company. This found against the company. Over the next year the slavery laws were amended to make it a crime for a British company to plead ignorance in defence of the acts of its agents, and hence to close the loophole which had enabled the Peruvian company to engage in slavery.

By then this was no longer Casement’s business. He had achieved his long held ambition of retiring from the Foreign Office and just in time to campaign for the relief of impoverished Irish speaking areas in south west Connemara.

Casement’s return to Ireland co-incided with the rising tempo of events related to the Home Rule Crisis. In September 1912 hundreds of thousands of Unionists had signed the Ulster Covenant and in January 1913 the Ulster Volunteer Force was formally launched.

Casement appeared in the public arena at the well known meeting of Protestant Home Rulers held in Ballymoney on 24 October 1913. He was engaged here in no more than a defence of Home Rule and a plea for ‘common goodwill among all our people.’ He viewed the occasion through decidedly rosy tinted spectacles and looked forward to other similar meetings in Ulster. They were never held.

In November he played a key role in the formation of the Irish Volunteers with Bulmer Hobson. He helped draft its manifesto which aimed ‘to secure and maintain the rights and liberties common to all the people of Ireland.’ Its role was to be ‘defensive and protective, and [it would not] contemplate either aggression or domination.’ Hobson became secretary of the new organisation and Casement treasurer. He embarked on a whirlwind tour of mobilisation.

Initially Casement and others sought to suggest that there was a potential affinity between the Irish Volunteers and the UVF, as when Eoin McNeill called for three cheers for Carson in Cork in December 1913. Casement himself for some time thought that if only he could meet Carson all could be resolved. It never happened. Casement in particular was afflicted with wishful thinking in this period.

At the New Year Casement was at Ardrigh when there was still an element of play acting:

All the boys were present – some in kilts, others in old (1782) Volunteer uniform, fully equipped with rifles and pikes. They played *A Nation Once Again* from the pipes – then a quick march in fully drilled ranks down the (Antrim) road… in tense excitement.

Bigger also noted, ‘the local police are very interested but come in for refreshments.’[[1]](#endnote-1)

By 1914 more serious business was at hand. At Ardrigh Casement and Hobson waited until Bigger had gone to his office in town before discussing their plans. These included seeking German aid in the event of war. Hobson went to the United States with a memorandum written by Casement and for the Germans.

Now in March 1914 speaking in Dungannon Casement was no longer under much illusion with regard to the UVF but joining the Irish Volunteers had been ‘made lawful by the actions of their enemies.’ The Curragh Mutiny in the same month, when British cavalry refused to move north, amounted to the preamble to a ‘coup d’état’ and the Union with Britain now meant ‘the military occupation of Ireland as an occupied country’.

The Larne gun running by the UVF in April 1914 upped the stakes still further. Casement was present at the crucial meeting in Alice Stopford Green’s London house in May at which the Howth gun running was planned. Hobson was a key organiser of the actual landing of the arms.

As Volunteer recruitment exploded a crisis of control arose. John Redmond, on behalf of the still politically dominant Irish Parliamentary, demanded 25 places for his representatives on the governing council. Casement was centrally involved in these negotiations and eventually along with Bulmer Hobson gave in. The decision was tactically wise but led to a breach with absolutists such as Tom Clarke.

In June Casement sailed to America, partly to explain developments to the Irish Americans, but also with a view to pursuing the German avenue.

Shortly after his arrival news of the successful gun running at Howth strengthened his credentials. With the outbreak of war in August 1914 he re-acted persuasively to events. In September in ‘An Open Letter to Irishmen’, and prior to John Redmond’s commitment of the Volunteers to the British war effort, he opposed any such engagement ‘in a war against a people who have never wronged Ireland.’

In July the British government while proceeding with Home Rule and immediately suspending it, had also legislated for the temporary exclusion of Ulster. Casement was now scathing about Home Rule itself. ‘What was on offer now was only, ‘a wholly hypothetical and indefinite form of partial internal control of certain specified Irish services, if in return for this promissory note (payable after death), the Irish people will contribute their blood, their honour, and their manhood, in a war that in no wise concerns them.’

He met the German ambassador and secured a letter of introduction to the German chancellor. He aimed to secure acknowledgement of Ireland’s rights from Germany, and to organise a brigade of Irish prisoners to fight for Irish independence.

Casement had had a long standing and overwrought sympathy with Germany. Extraordinarily, writing in South America in November 1910 he argued, ‘No sight could be pleasanter than the flag of Teutonic civilisation advancing into this wilderness… Germany with her 70,000,000 of virile men has much to do for mankind… Let loose her pent up energies in this continent.’ By August 1914 these sympathies had reached a crescendo:

Germany fights today as the champion of Europe, nay more, as the champion of Christendom [against] the hordes of Russian barbarism, the sword of French hatred and the long purse of British greed… as an Irishman I say… God save Germany.

Casement was not the only Irish leader to reveal German sympathies. Connolly did so but in a much more analytical way.

It should be noted by way of an almost farcical symmetry that Ulster Unionist leaders including Carson, Craig and Fred Crawford had spoken of seeking a German alliance before the First World.

John Devoy of Clann na Gael saw Casement’s mission as a chance to put into practice the old Fenian adage, ‘England’s difficulty is Ireland’s opportunity’ and accordingly provided Casement with $3,000 dollars.

Casement departed in October 1914. En route he was betrayed by his ill-chosen companion, Adler Christensen, who, when they reached Christiana in Norway, promptly went to the British consulate and betrayed the entire mission.

Casement did achieve an early success when he got the Germans to agree to a treaty supporting Irish self-determination. But disappointment and disillusionment were to follow.

Casement failed to make significant headway in recruiting Irish prisoners-of-war for an Irish Brigade. The prisoners of 1914 and early 1915 were still largely regular soldiers, and thus strongly infused with British Army culture. They were hardly easy recruits to an exactly opposite and desperate venture led by a strange gentleman adventurer.

A tour to the Belgian front, including to a site where 350 Belgian civilians had been executed, disillusioned Casement about war generally and the Germans in particular.

Casement hoped to secure guns, artillery, and trained men. As he told Joseph Mary Plunkett in 1915 no rebellion could succeed ‘of its own unaided effort’ and that it would be ‘a criminal stupidity, an act of idiocy, the wildest form of boyish idiocy.’

The Germans took the stance ‘No revolution, no guns.’ When in February 1916 the plans for an Easter Rising reached Berlin that stance altered somewhat. They would send 20,000 rifles. For Casement this was inadequate.

As he climbed aboard a submarine, and largely demoralised, he hoped to reach Ireland in time to persuade the leadership to abandon the rebellion. Yet he ‘could not, in honour refuse to stand beside them, since however vain and futile their fight might be, it would be a fight, an act, a deed, and not talk, talk, talk.’ He reckoned he was travelling ‘to an almost certain death’ but he thought that ‘an English jail or scaffold would be better than to dwell with these people [the Germans] longer.’

His most militant Irish protégé, Bulmer Hobson took a similar view of the prospective rising. For his pains he was kidnapped by the inner cabal to prevent him from interfering with mobilisation. His reward was to be removed from the Republican pantheon for life. The difference was that Casement felt ‘honour bound’ to act.

He got no further than immediate arrest on Banna Strand on 21 April 1916. Meanwhile the steamship Aud with the 20,000 rifles was scuttled to evade capture. Casement was then propelled on an extraordinarily rapid trajectory beyond the Irish justice system – colonial justice might have served him better - to London and execution on 3 August.

Casement’s trial opened on 26 June. He was charged with high treason under a statute of 1351 and with levying rebellion in the King’s realm. His counsel, Sergeant Sullivan, relied on the technical defence that Casement’s treason had been carried out in Germany and outside the realm. The interpretation of the relevant clause in Norman French revolved round the possible existence of a comma. The court ruled against him. As Casement wryly wrote to a friend it was as if ‘to hang a man’s life on a comma, and throttle him with a semi-colon.’

None other than George Bernard Shaw advised him to emulate Robert Emmet’s speech from the dock. Casement himself drafted a possible defence along the lines that he was seeking peace. None of these approaches was used. It was almost a foregone conclusion that he would be found guilty and sentenced to death.

He was allowed the traditional speech from the dock, and was unrepentant;

I am proud to be a rebel – and shall cling to my rebellion with the last drop of my blood. If there be no right of rebellion against a state of things that no savage tribe would endure without resistance, then I am sure it is better for men to fight and die without right than to live in such a state of right as this.

Thus in his last public words he once again saw a parallel between the circumstances of the Congo, the Amazon, and Ireland.

An appeal followed on 17 July at which Sullivan pursued his original technical argument and lost again.

There was then the possibility of an appeal to the House of Lords on what was a significant point of law. This was rejected by the Attorney General, F.E. Smith, the self same F.E. Smith who had played a prominent role in supporting the arming of Ulster in opposition to Home Rule before the war.

The only possible route left was to mobilise a movement for reprieve. It was at this point that the notorious Black Diaries came into play. Even during the trial extracts from these were circulated, and this endeavour went into overdrive to disable the reprieve movement with considerable success.

It was a matter for the cabinet, at least three of whom were personally known to Casement, but since 1915 there had been a coalition government and Conservatives and Unionists were hostile. Predictably, F.E. Smith threatened to resign if a reprieve was granted. The Black Diaries certainly influenced others. Another argument was that they had already executed men less guilty than Casement after the rebellion. The backlash against those executions was already gathering pace, which might have suggested caution, but by late July another factor came into play as thousands of Irish soldiers died for the British in the disastrous Somme offensive. Could the man who had sought to betray them be reprieved?

Perhaps another critical factor was that Casement was one of their own, a traitor at the heart of the British establishment and knighted as recently as 1911. Voices in Britain arguing for peace were gaining momentum and could be offered no encouragement.

All that was left to Casement was to seek the consolation of a return to the Catholic faith. Although Casement had made much of a Protestant identity while mobilising the Volunteers and in America – what you might call playing the ‘tame Prod’ card, in private as early as 1911 he was happy to state, ‘I am not a Protestant.’

It was no easy matter to become a Catholic again. Cardinal Bourne, who had the interests of the church in England in mind, was hostile, and far less sympathetic than the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury who made efforts to save him, but 24 hours before his execution he received communion.

What then of those Black Diaries that helped propel him on his way. Controversy continues to this day about their authenticity. Angus Mitchell, a prolific writer on Casement, maintains that they are forgeries, while Jeffrey Dudgeon is a convincing exponent of their authenticity. Dudgeon, as a pioneer of gay rights in Northern Ireland, does have a particular insight into the dilemmas and secrets of gay life.

If I was to go into the ins and outs of the conspiracy theories involved we would be here all night. Put simply I believe the Black Diaries are genuine.

A couple of forged pages would have done the job. Why engage in the forgery of hundreds of pages? In fact the authorities initially used a few pages torn out of one of the diaries to undermine Casement

It would have been impossible to forge all the diaries between their discovery on 25 April and the trial.

The authorities did consider separately charging Casement with sodomy, and sought confirmatory evidence. They wouldn’t have done so if they had forged the originals.

There is sustainable evidence that there was another Black Diary left at Ardrigh, and that a horrified Francis Joseph Bigger consigned this to a fire.

This may make Casement a gay icon for today. That is an a-historical designation. Rather, like Oscar Wilde, he was a victim of homophobia, and of the sexual hypocrisies of the Victorian and Edwardian era and long after. Heterosexual peccadilloes were given a by-ball even if they could have other dire consequences – Randolph Churchill, he of ‘Ulster will fight, Ulster will be right’ probably died of syphilis.

In considering Casement’s sexual conduct his deeply dysfunctional childhood may have played a part, but perhaps he was a captive, himself, of the colonial experience. Young men went out for years on end to primitive societies in hugely challenging conditions with few personal consolations. One was drink and the other was sex. Usually fleeting liaisons with the native population were inevitable.

By strange co-incidence my younger brother sailed to West Africa as an apprentice officer in the 1960s and with Elder Dempster, the very company with which Casement had sailed. His other brothers back in prim Belfast were astounded by his account of the *a la carte* sexual opportunities available in every port and along the River Congo. It was ever thus, though with the distinction in Casement’s case of his sexual orientation.

None of this should detract from his other major roles.

Back in his death cell the unsullied romance of Ireland remained vividly in view for him. Writing to Bigger’s housekeeper, Biddy Matthews he touchingly managed ‘a glimpse of the garden, with the wallflowers and the Japanese cherry’ at Ardrigh. Then he reminisced;

Do you remember the cradle song I liked so much? [by Padraic Colum] Get Cathal [O’Byrne] to sing it for me, and give him my love and thanks from my heart, also to Colm if he is near you, and Dinny [Denis McCullough] and *Seaghan Dhu* [John Campbell] whenever they come back to you and the old room again. I dreamt last night I was lying before the fire in it and the boys were there telling stories.

But this was already history. After 1916 the gathering was scattered to the four winds.

As it was at Ardrigh, so it was in the Glens. Despite the ideals of that pioneering Glens of Antrim Feis the Irish language was irrevocably dying and not as a result of any overt act of colonial oppression. Rather because of the decline of the farming and fishing communities and de-population. Michael McLaverty’s, *Call My Brother Back* (1932), eloquently described the pull of Belfast for Rathlin islanders.

It was an irony that could not have been imagined by Bigger or Casement that the renewed vigour of the Irish language in the latter part of the twentieth century was to depend on its revival in a modern city rather than in peasant cottages. Yet to the last Casement’s emotional heart was to remain in the Glens. He wanted to be buried at Murlough. That was not to be either. When his body was eventually repatriated to Ireland in 1965, he could get no further than Glasnevin.

Casement was hardly original in his romantic vision of a revived Gaelic Ireland. It was one shared by virtually all of the participants in the Irish revolution, even if it was to prove unrealisable. In Casement’s case the vision was all the more powerful because so much of his limited Irish life and experience was played out in those deprived Gaeltacht areas of the far west. There it was possible to see parallels with the circumstances of the Congo or of Putumayo, no matter that the rest of Ireland lay in a more ambiguous middle ground.

It was a colony, yes, and a colony denied self-government, and, yes, one ultimately subject to military rule. Yet at the same time it now spoke English, and in parts, and notably in the north, was a beneficiary of empire, and a provider of imperial careers such as the one Casement himself had enjoyed.

What is certainly true is that he played a key role in forwarding the Irish revolution whether in the formation of the Irish Volunteers, the organisation of the Howth gunrunning, and the mission to seek German aid. Although the German venture failed to provide a single bullet, without the possibility there would almost certainly have been no Easter Rising.

Where Casement becomes uniquely interesting is in his switching between multiple identities, from gung ho servant of empire to Irish patriot, and even in his advice to counsel at his trial saying ‘I had come to look upon myself as African’ – how many other Irish patriots actually took on the mantle of the black?

He was certainly a true pioneer of human rights in the third world and combined the rare qualities of empathy, courage, and great forensic skills in producing his devastating reports on the consequences of colonialism and capitalist exploitation in Africa and South America. While he displayed great diplomatic tact in pursuing these causes through official channels, he simultaneously, and covertly, helped mobilise an international people’s movement that helped effect actual change.

Apart from West Africa and South America, his sympathy with native peoples was wide-ranging, whether for the Indians of North America, the Asian Indians, or the Maoris. There was, however, the anomaly of South Africa. While he had opposed the Boer rebellion, by 1914, as with other Irish Nationalists, he was holding up Boer resistance to British rule as an example. The South African blacks had vanished from sight.

Nor can it be said that he charted a post-colonial future. His support for German colonial expansionism belied that. Equally, although at the last gasp he became anti-war, it can hardly be said that he was an architect of the European Union.

We should nonetheless credit him with what he achieved in his own time. His clarion call echoed internationally as much as it did in Ireland. When his body was returned there in 1965, Kwame Nkrumah, the future President of Ghana, was amongst the many strugglers for colonial freedom who paid tribute to his importance.

John Gray

1. Critique from Pat Walsh: <https://drpatwalsh.com/2016/08/27/casement-weekend/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)