**Casement, 'Black Diaries' and black arts**



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The commemoration held at Banna Strand, Co Kerry, to mark the centenary of the capture of Roger Casement. Photo: Domnick Walsh

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The word 'black' is often linked with Casement, apropos the disputed 'Black Diaries' containing sexually explicit material. But black can also be taken to refer to the black arts from which he suffered - a smear campaign to tighten the noose at his neck. And here's another black: the deliberate steps taken by his interrogators to blacken his reputation internationally.

After his conviction for treason in June 1916 - a capital offence - diaries said to be Casement's were shown to opinion-formers by senior members of British intelligence. The purpose was to undermine the campaign for clemency. Various explanations have been given regarding how the diaries came into his interrogators' possession. There is no clarity. However, one aspect of this murky business is crystal clear: their gratuitous and underhand circulation had support at the highest levels of the British government. This was a dirty tricks strategy.

The diaries had nothing to do with the charges against Casement. And everything to do with ensuring his execution. In the process, the intention was to muddy the reputation of a man admired on the world stage for his Congo and [Amazon](http://www.amazon.co.uk/) reports, by portraying him as a degenerate sexual predator.

If the diaries were authentic, his private life was used as a weapon against him so that Britain - aware of outside eyes watching the show trial - was not troubled by pressure to cancel his execution. If the diaries were forged, it was yet another turn of the screw. Either way, Casement was treated exceptional callousness.

Diplomats, newspaper editors and reporters, especially American journalists, were shown pre-selected pages. Associated Press journalist Ben S. Allen was invited to publish extracts, but refused because he was not allowed to put the allegations to Casement. However, the smear campaign did succeed in checking support for commuting the death sentence. Then US President Woodrow Wilson did not lend his voice, for example.

Regrettably, the diaries eclipse Casement's exceptional achievement in pointing up the connection between imperialism and human rights abuse. He recognised that imperialism was not a benign institution sharing the benefits of civilisation, but a force for exploitation which choked native cultures.

He could have looked the other way, as others did before him. Instead, he used his influence, his voice and his pen to insist on the intrinsic human rights of oppressed peoples.

There are five diaries in the Black Diaries cache, covering 1903, 1910 and 1911, with the 1911 'Letts' Desk Diary' containing the most candid details of alleged homosexual encounters - consensual, it should be noted. Homosexual practices were criminalised at this time.

For more than 40 years, Britain denied the existence of the diaries, until they were partially released in 1959. It was 1994 before unrestricted access was given, and pages could be copied.

Some insist on the authenticity of the diaries and others suggest they were falsified as part of the propaganda war. Journalists, academics and poets have weighed in on opposing sides. However, 100 years on, we still don't know for sure. There has been no conclusive, impartial, forensically tested study of the material.

In 2002, a test was conducted by Dr Audrey Giles, a forensic handwriting examiner, but she had a long employment history with the Metropolitan Police. She did not carry out ink and pencil analysis and the test was not conducted to forensic standards. Her view was that Casement wrote the diaries with no additions by other hands. But it was only an opinion. It would never be accepted in court, where professional experts must demonstrate how their conclusions are reached.

The diaries simply haven't been studied closely enough, yet people continue to believe - mistakenly - that their authenticity was proven by the 2002 report. Remember 'The Hitler Diaries'? Three respected historians, plus handwriting experts, authenticated them before the fraud was uncovered.

It is unfortunate that Casement's private life has become part of the debate about his legacy, but Britain's black arts practitioners made that inevitable. Even in the war context, it was a nasty business. They had Casement in their power already. He had been tried and convicted by the time the controversial diary entries were leaked.

Of course, Casement's behaviour in seeking help from Germany for Irish independence was regarded as inexcusable in Establishment eyes. But isn't it time Britain owned up to some reprehensible conduct of its own?

It was encouraging to see British Ambassador Dominick Chilcott present at Banna Strand this week, when President Michael D Higgins praised Casement's "passionate empathy for the hopeless and the oppressed". Casement wrote of his joy at being back on Irish soil, but it is also where he was handed over to British authorities with the assistance of locals. Perhaps they did not understand what they were doing. Yet it remains a rather unhappy episode.

In 1999, then-Taoiseach Bertie Ahern said "in justice to the memory of Roger Casement, there is now a compelling, prima facie case for a new and rigorous inquiry". It has never happened.

The Giles Report cannot be called a rigorous inquiry. Peer-reviewed by US document examiner James J. Horan, he said he could not recommend the report's publication. Nor is it widely available. (I read it in the Royal Irish Academy's 'Roger Casement in Irish and World History', edited by Mary E. Daly, which also carries Horan's review.)

So, a century has passed. We are on a welcome footing of friendship with our nearest neighbour. In a spirit of transparency, I urge Britain to make an official apology to Roger Casement for deliberately attempting to sabotage an honourable man's reputation by leaking those diaries, authentic or otherwise.

He is someone both countries, and both traditions on this island, can take pride in - a man with ideals and integrity who served the Empire loyally, but humanity more faithfully again.

*I am indebted to books and scholarship about Roger Casement by Angus Mitchell, and to Paul Hyde for an excellent piece on the 'Black Diaries' in the online academic journal 'Breac', A Digital.* *Journal of Irish Studies*

**Jeffrey Dudgeon response (unpublished):**

25 April 2016

Dear Editor,

Martina Devlin in her article 'Casement, 'Black Diaries' and black arts' (*Irish Independent* 23 April 2016) moves the argument on by calling for the London government to apologise for their misuse in relation to his execution. However she is under informed about the origins of the diaries as there is now clarity on how they came into London’s hands. The release in 2001 of Scotland Yard documentation told of them being handed in by a Mr W.P. Germain, keeper of Casement’s belongings at 50 Ebury Street, shortly after his capture in Kerry.

Use of the diaries did not seal Casement's fate, but shows London was nervous that the reprieve campaign might gather pace, especially in America, and that he could well become a martyr figure. At the height of the First World War, it was hardly surprising evidence if illegal homosexual activity was used to blacken someone’s character. You only have to look at what happened to David Norris in his campaign for the Presidency in 2011 when opponents dredged up remarks he had made in public a few years earlier on the age of consent, and others in mitigation for a former boyfriend.

It was indeed “a nasty business” in 1916, and some in London tried to stop the diary spread while the British Ambassador in Washington, Cecil Spring Rice, himself Irish, used every diplomatic device to encourage a reprieve. The US President, Woodrow Wilson, declined to intervene. It was however Casement's recently exposed link to German sabotage in America that ensured his silence.

It was also politically impossible for London in July 1916, so soon after the Somme, to reprieve him - at least until several more months passed. Had he been kept in Dublin rather than whisked to London in April, he might have been spared the firing squad on the grounds that he landed to stop (and to arm) the Rising, as President Higgins remarked at Banna Strand last week, but his self-admitted treason in relation to Germany made this highly unlikely.

Martina Devlin argues that the diaries “haven’t been studied closely enough,” as some still suggest they were falsified. However she references one particular campaigner and a website writer as her forgery sources while ignoring the only book that has them all, including the unseen 1911 journal. That is my 700 page 'Roger Casement: The Black Diaries - with a Study of his Background, Sexuality, and Irish Political Life' which was published in a second, paperback and Kindle, edition earlier this year.

The evidence for authenticity has to be the facts in the diaries themselves which can in many cases be cross-checked against other records, never in London's hands. Readers can see this detailed at length. Significantly too, there is no documentary trace of the forging of the diaries, which would have been a mammoth task.

It is true to say that confirmation of Casement being a homosexual or gay (neither were words he used) is sparse, aside from the diaries themselves. However historians can only make reasonable deductions from what is available. Casement's other papers in Ireland were destroyed by his friends so much of his more personal documentation was lost.

Yours sincerely

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[Notes - despite relentless radical separatism, when his revolutionary rhetoric led to a rising he got cold feet and came ashore at Banna Strand to stop it. Like Eoin MacNeill and Bulmer Hobson, he believed a rebellion without hope of success should not proceed. His humanitarian side had come again to the fore, along with disillusionment over Imperial Germany.

The question that remains to be answered in these changed times, is why so many deny that Casement could have been both gay and a sexual being. Conspiracy theories do not convince more than a few diehards.

Cultural opinion expressed recently like the play 'McKenna's Fort' by Arnold Thomas Fanning (attended by President Higgins), Patrick Mason's RTE radio play 'The Dreaming of Roger Casement', and Alan Phelan's film 'Our Kind' playing at the Hugh Lane Gallery, not to mention Colin Murphy's RTE radio documentary 'Roger Casement's Apocalypse Now - Africa & 1916' tell a different story, one of modern Ireland's acceptance of diversity.]