

Re-Viewing Casement

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Re-viewing
Casement

BARRA Ó SÉAGHDHA

The May 27, 2004 issue of the *New York Review of Books* carried a review-essay on Roger Casement by Colm Tóibín. It offered a sympathetic and to a degree illuminating portrait of Roger Casement as Irish Protestant, as crusading colonial official, as homosexual, and as patriot/traitor. Though Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* may have brought him to the attention of many unfamiliar with Irish history, Casement is still a relatively obscure figure.¹ It is not surprising, therefore, that Tóibín should lead his readers towards the complexities of this story by way of *The Rings of Saturn*, in which W G Sebald muses over the meeting between the young Casement and Joseph Conrad in the Congo in 1889 or 1890. In Tóibín's words, 'Conrad found inspiration at that time for *Heart of Darkness*; Casement was beginning on the road toward becoming a hero, a martyr, and a traitor.'

Years later, when Casement was working to expose the atrocities routinely committed in the Belgian Congo, he visited the Conrads. Tóibín quotes Jessie Conrad's memories of that visit: she describes him as 'a fanatical Irish protestant' but she is greatly impressed by his personality. Tóibín also quotes a letter Conrad had written earlier to his friend R B Cunningham Graham: 'He's a protestant Irishman, pious too. But so was Pizarro. For the rest I can assure you that he is a limpid personality. There is a touch of the Conquistador in him too [. . .]' Tóibín presents the passage without comment, but the anecdote that follows – in which an almost superhuman Casement wanders off into the wilderness with calm self-assurance, returning several months later 'quietly serene as though he had been for a stroll in the park' – allows Conrad (sounding uncannily like one of John Banville's narrators) to present himself as merely human and thus to deflect some of

Ó SÉAGHDHA, 'Re-viewing Casement', *Irish Review* 33 (2005) 85

the force of the moral challenge posed by Casement: 'I would help him but it is not in me I am only a wretched novelist inventing wretched stories, and not even up to that miserable game.'

This may be so obvious a case of the classic tension between, as it were, the promiscuous sympathies of the creative imagination and the monogamous devotion of the crusading reformer that Tóibín is justified in letting it speak for itself. But can the same be said of a later quotation from Conrad (a letter written to John Quinn in 1916 after Casement's arrest) which appears towards the end of the essay? Conrad writes that Casement 'was a man, properly speaking, of no mind at all. I don't mean stupid. I mean that he was all emotion. By emotional force (Congo report, Putumayo etc) he made his way, and sheer emotionalism has undone him. A creature of sheer temperament – a truly tragic personality: all but the greatness of which he had not a trace! What is striking, however, is that Tóibín feels no need to contextualize Conrad's statement. This is, after all, a writer whose personal history and political loyalties were at least as complex as Casement's. Each man was an outsider of a kind; each was horrified by the atrocities committed in King Leopold's Congo. Each in his own way would write about what he had seen; but while Casement would go on to extend his criticism to the British Empire, and then seek to challenge it in arms, Conrad was to become a (sometimes critical) supporter of the Empire.

If discomfort can already be sensed in Conrad's 1904 letter, it is hardly going to be absent in 1916, when Britain is at war with Germany. Conrad has to explain how his friend, the idealistic British consul, could have ended up conspiring with Germany against the state of which he had been a servant. Tóibín chooses to take Conrad at face value, as if he were engaging with the objective summing-up of a life, when it must be obvious that we are dealing with a writer who is negotiating between profound and conflicting loyalties. Having contrasted Casement's moral courage with 'the slyness of, say, Joseph Conrad' in an essay in the *London Review of Books* (2 October 1997), Tóibín would be very naive to exclude the possibility that, as most of us do, Conrad was rewriting history a little under pressure of events. As quoted by Adam Hochschild, Conrad's diary of 1890 reads, 'Made the acquaintance of Mr. Roger Casement, which I should consider as a great pleasure under any circumstances. . . . Thinks, speaks well, most intelligent and very sympathetic.'² That in 1916 Conrad should belittle the intelligence he had once admired is understandable. That Tóibín should largely endorse Conrad's view is another matter. Casement's emotional response to cruelty is undeniable, as is the intensity – or the obsessiveness – with which he pursued his causes. But in the care with which he investigated abuses of power, in the clarity with which he wrote his reports, and

in the awareness of the power of public opinion he displayed in his crusading – all acknowledged by Tóibín – we can see an active and constructive intelligence at work. Tóibín must also know that it is typical of imperial thinking to ascribe emotionalism, irresponsibility and lack of intelligence to the ruled or to those who resist imperial power. Many argued against Home Rule for Ireland on these very grounds. Tóibín is not far from agreeing with them, suggesting that Conrad's view may help us 'to understand his [Casement's] response to Ireland in the early years of the twentieth century.'

Tóibín supplements Conrad's insight with two considerations of his own: the special insight conferred by Casement's position, firstly, as sexual outsider and, secondly, as Irish Protestant. Concentrating on establishing a perspective different from that of Tóibín and others, this essay does not enter into examination of the authenticity of the diaries or concern itself with the precise nature of his sexual life. It is assumed that Casement was homosexual. Tóibín wonders whether Casement's sympathies with the oppressed may not have been reinforced by his sexual attraction to them as individuals: 'it is possible that his nocturnal activities with the very people he was trying to save gave him tenderness for them.' This is indeed a possibility worth considering. Some of Casement's comments on particular races or mixtures of races would get him into trouble today, but to deliberate cruelty of any kind he always responded with passion. Whether or not he regarded native peoples as his equals, whether or not his attitude today might be described as paternalistic, his behaviour from his earliest years in Africa was based on earning trust: he demanded of himself the standards of behaviour he sought from others. If European civilisation was to present itself as more advanced than the societies it was seeking to rule, it could not possibly behave with systematic cruelty and violence towards the ruled. Casement was anguished by the marks of cruelty on the bodies of children, women and men. It is possible that erotic feeling accentuated his anguish and made him more vehement and courageous in pursuit of justice. Others in the Congo or Brazil exercised power in the sexual field as they did in the political or commercial – with a lack of respect for the human integrity of those they used sexually that went as far as murder. Here, it is less the homo- or hetero- nature of the sexuality that matters than the fact that for Casement sexuality seems to have been a field of delight and mutual exchange of pleasure. There is no necessary correlation between sexual interest and tenderness, nor between homosexuality and idealism. Would a heterosexual Casement have been less outraged by the pain inflicted on the human body? Does it matter in this regard whether it was the male or the female body that attracted him personally? Circumstances brought a

sensitive and idealistic young man into contact with a world of horror. Unlike others, he did all he could to stop the horror. How much this had to do with his sexuality is a matter of speculation.

When Tóibín looks to Casement's sexuality and particular form of Irishness to explain his courage and persistence against indifferent officialdom, he makes no reference to E D Morel, his friend and ally, who tirelessly led the campaign against King Leopold in Britain and further afield. If Casement was one young colonial administrator who showed more courage than his fellows, E D Morel was just another shipping company official who found in himself unexpected courage and resourcefulness when it began to dawn on him that he was indirectly connected to a massively corrupt, evil enterprise. In Hochschild's words:

Brought face to face with evil, Morel does not turn away. Instead, what he sees determines the course of his life and the course of an extraordinary movement, the first great international human rights movement of the twentieth century. Seldom has one human being – impassioned, eloquent, blessed with brilliant organizing skills and nearly superhuman energy – managed almost single-handedly to put one subject on the world's front pages for more than a decade.³

Morel did not need to see the brutal slave regime of the Congo in order to become impassioned. His heterosexuality was hardly relevant to his idealism. Nor would having one French parent necessarily have induced moral courage. Casement's greatest contribution to history lay in gathering essential testimony that helped to undermine a regime based on slavery and genocide, in articulating the rights of the powerless, in insisting that his own government should do more than voice polite disapproval, and (curbing his vanity) in putting his resources in the service of an international crusade led by Morel.

Tóibín sees Casement as representative of a particular form of Irishness:

Casement was brought up as an Irish Protestant. Even though he was neither landed nor wealthy, he belonged to a ruling class and inherited his class's great confidence, which served many of its members well when they arrived in England. Figures such as Oscar Wilde, W. B. Yeats, and Lady Gregory belonged to various facets of Irish Protestantism. All of them formed a habit, unusual in England, of doing what they liked and, mostly, saying what they liked. They could be Irish nationalists in London, while losing none of their ruling-class status or rent-collecting habits in Ireland. [. . .] They had a habit also of pleasing themselves sexually.

There may have been a touch more eccentricity, arrogance and wilfulness to the Irish Protestant gentry than to their British equivalents but too

much can be made of this. It is easy to take a few strong characters among the Protestant Irish and compare them with stolid British counterparts (for present purposes, the term British will be used to refer to the people of Great Britain, rather than as a mark of allegiance.) But there were thousands of Irish Protestants who led conventional lives in the army, in the church, in administration, in business, just like their British counterparts. And, conversely, British society was not so straight jacketed that the voices of straight-talking labour, feminist and other agitators did not make themselves heard; nor would Prince Edward and his circle have needed tips from Lady Gregory on pleasing themselves sexually.

Tóibín goes further than this, however:

For more than half a century, culture had come to represent a politics in Ireland more powerful than either militarism or parliamentary activity. Oscar Wilde's parents, for example, had become involved in antiquarianism and archaeology and Irish literature, and had both come to love Ireland and want independence from England, while Sir William was also prepared to accept a knighthood from the Queen; his wife, a rabid Irish nationalist, thereafter enjoyed being called Lady Wilde.

More than half a century takes us back to the early 1860s, when the Fenian movement was gathering force. A military failure, the movement nonetheless bestowed a political language on a generation. In the decades that followed, the relentless campaigning of the Land League wrested power from the landlords and won basic rights for tenant farmers. As a result, in an attempt to defuse Irish social and political agitation, the British state was forced into extraordinary measures, decommissioning a whole section of the ruling-class by over-riding their property rights and distributing much of their land to their tenants. During those same decades, the discipline of the Irish Parliamentary Party not only carried the demands of the Land League into Westminster, but it dramatically reshaped the British party system, induced a major British party to pay attention to the wishes of the majority of Irish people, threatened to collapse one of the pillars of an empire then at its height – and, in highlighting the repeated sabotaging of Irish democracy by the forces entrenched in the Lords, demonstrated how selectively democracy was respected in the United Kingdom, thus setting many of the following generation on their way to separatist culture and politics. Just why all this should be outweighed by the activities of a pair of eccentric antiquarians and their friends is difficult to decipher.

No-one would deny the importance of cultural movements in the 1890–1916 period, but these involved everything from popular sport to literary translation and activated people of all classes, from labourers to lords

and ladies. It is the privilege of literature to survive the period of its creation, and it is a permanent temptation for writers to overvalue the importance of their own profession. When dealing with history rather than literary history, the lives and activities of writers – including such creative spirits as Yeats and Synge – have to be weighed on the same scales as those of ordinary human beings. A disappointment with Irish democracy; a failure to think through the idea of a republic; an embarrassment at emerging from a peasant society; a sophisticated version of the impulse among those of us without servants and gardeners to turn the pages of *Country Homes* and *Interiors*; a feeling that one's writerly graces should be reflected in a gracious social world; a social language that forms a bridge to British society: one can only speculate as to what draws an element of each generation of Irish artistic life to love a lord or head up the tree-lined avenue to that imposing front door which was generally closed to their forebears. It is precisely because he occludes (or simply fails to grasp) the political dimension that Tóibín has to treat the Casement story as a puzzle.

If we weave together the personal and the political, and treat Casement as a normal, fallible human being, we may discover not a puzzle but a fairly coherent story. An idealistic boy of Ulster Protestant background discovers, in rather romanticised form, the history of Ireland and writes some verse in a similar vein. As a young man in Africa, he sees the horrors of Belgian colonialism; a pioneer in forging a language of human rights for the native population, he is still a man of his time in certain of his beliefs and prejudices. As he tries to interest officialdom in his crusade against cruelty, he begins to reflect on empire and power, and to relate his thinking in increasingly concrete fashion to the history of his native country. Later, in the Amazon, he sees that British companies ruthlessly exploit the native population. Over the years, he becomes more critical of Britain's role in the world and its assumption that it has an automatic right to control the seas and, thereby, international trade. He sees Germany as a rising power that is being prevented by the older players in the game from taking a role on the world stage. An international arms race is under way and jingoism is rife in Britain. In a manner that places him in the thin but often admirable stream of Ulster Protestant political culture that flows from the United Irishmen, Casement becomes increasingly sympathetic to militant Irish nationalism. He sees how the Conservative Party under Bonar Law (and its allies in the Lords and the British Army) encourages unionist sedition and makes it clear that even limited autonomy within the United Kingdom cannot be granted to Ireland. Taking the hint, unionists import large quantities of arms from Germany – unimpeded by police and army. Casement's anti-Britishness is often expressed intemperately. (Like many nationalists, he

underestimates the resistance of unionism to being incorporated into a Catholic-dominated Home Rule administration, even one with only county-council type powers within the United Kingdom.) When war breaks out, and Redmond throws nationalist Irish youth into the cause of Empire, Casement does not see where British moral superiority over Germany might lie and, given his past experience, is hardly to be swayed by the notion of gallant little Belgium. He goes to Germany in order to seek armed assistance for the cause of Irish independence from Britain, but is frustrated in his plans – and increasingly with the German authorities. Returning to Ireland with the intention of deferring insurrection, he is captured and charged with treason.

At this point a parallel private story (a secret and, it would seem, unabashedly active homosexual life, never articulated in public or political terms, never till then part of Casement's public reputation) takes a sharp turn and joins the main story. Evidence of the private life is used by the British authorities to silence or frighten off British and American figures who might have campaigned for a reprieve, thus ensuring that Casement will be hanged as a traitor. This story is incomprehensible only if one assumes that Britain's actions are always reasonable, that British power does not need scrutiny, and that violence committed by Irish people in a British uniform is entirely different from violence committed by those not in such a uniform. That disgust with IRA violence of recent decades should lead to the widespread adoption of these naive notions, rather than to a thorough-going critique of all violence and justificatory ideologies, is an indictment of the quality of contemporary intellectual life in Ireland. Seeing Irish political nationalism as inherently narrow and anti-cosmopolitan, and unable or unwilling to see the internal logic of Casement's politics, Tóibín's interpretative framework breaks down when it has to deal with a man who read Irish politics into the world and world politics into Ireland. At one point in his essay, Tóibín notes 'how we all bring our own concerns to Casement's story'. This is as true of Tóibín's own reviewing, as of the present essay. The focus here has been on interlinking the Irish with the international dimension and in putting power – as exercised and as resisted; as taken for granted or as highlighted – at the centre of the story. Little attention has been paid to Casement's private life and writings. It is entirely understandable – setting aside for the moment questions of fact and political disagreements – that Tóibín should weigh the elements of Casement's life differently. For some years now, Tóibín has been exploring gay identity and experience in both fiction and essay form. In so doing, he has become part of a movement to recover lives that were deformed by the dictates of a sexually repressive society and to tell the stories that previously could only be hinted at or left

entirely untold. As the diaries are frequently composed of brief, often coded, jottings, they are of little interest to the general literary reader. For those like Tóibín who have the patience to work through these diaries in order to discover the daily texture of homosexual life in that period, the same material may be of absorbing interest.

Tóibín is particularly warm towards Jeffrey Dudgeon's *Roger Casement: The Black Diaries*, with (as its jacket states) 'a study of his background, sexuality, and Irish political life.'⁴ A bright red strip in one corner also proclaims the book 'AUTHENTIC / A book of record including the never-before published 1911 Black Diary'. Dudgeon shows a refreshing enthusiasm for his subject and has clearly done a lot of research. Dudgeon was a courageous and pioneering activist for gay rights in Northern Ireland. His politics, favouring the full integration of Northern Ireland into the British political system, have seen him journey from the margins of the left to, at one point, the heart of the UK Unionist Party. Dudgeon is frank in outlining his own beliefs and background, and frank also in his judgements. He shares Tóibín's fascination with the details of Casement's private life; and he shares Tóibín's puzzlement at how such a sensitive humanitarian could become militantly republican. Tóibín acknowledges the editorial work of Angus Mitchell on the 1911 documents and of Seamus Ó Síocháin and Michael O'Sullivan on the Congo Report and 1903 Diary.⁵ Characteristically, he does not pick up on the kind of perspective first offered by Ó Síocháin in a paper given at Maynooth in 1997. Speaking from an anthropological perspective, Ó Síocháin suggested that much could be learnt by looking at the specific contexts of Casement's writings, by looking at the larger historical moments in which he lived, and by paying serious attention to the thinking revealed in his consular reports and published writings.

The fourth publication reviewed is W J McCormack's *Roger Casement in Death, or Haunting the Free State*.⁶ Tóibín is more interested in the life than in the afterlife of Casement; he therefore devotes little space to this book. He does make it clear, however, that where McCormack considers that 'issues of desire, of voyeurism, of recollection, day-dream, fantasy and delusion cannot be eclipsed by a notion of diary-as-report,' he himself is inclined to a more literal reading. If Tóibín is perhaps over-critical of McCormack on this point (though allowing that the question is ultimately undecidable), he gives no intimation of what an extraordinary work *Roger Casement in Death* is. It must be borne in mind that W J McCormack (whose learning and breadth of interest are unquestionable) has been the leading figure in the attempt to prove definitively that the disputed Casement diaries are not forgeries. He is therefore, in one compartment of his mind at least, committed to the notion of verifiable fact. Particularly where

Casement is concerned, it would therefore seem to be in the interest of his cause that he should curb any tendency to indulge in dizzy speculation and that he should instead concentrate on establishing verifiable fact, present as coherent a narrative as possible, ensure that the expression of his own beliefs does not lose him the trust of a reader of different opinions, and demonstrate that he is in command of his subject.

As writers and as public figures, Tóibín and McCormack are quite different, in ways that need not concern us here. They resemble each other, however, in their underlying attitude to modern Irish nationalism, to British power and to the independent Irish state. Bluntly summarized, their view would be that Irish nationalism is an unpleasant, irrational and inexplicably powerful ideological virus, that British power is a given factor rather than an active force in creating the conditions for the development of Irish nationalism, and that independent Ireland has been a disaster (until recently, at least). It may therefore be difficult for Tóibín to perceive the peculiarities of McCormack's book – though even a glance at the first paragraph would have stirred the critical faculties of most readers into some perfunctory activity:

John Bull and Sheelagh? The relationship between Great Britain and Ireland has eluded definition. Metaphor, racial and religious stereotypes, class analyses, theories of post-colonialism have all failed to pin it down. As seen on a map, the two islands have been compared to lovers, the one aggressive, the other disdainful. Before 1800, the two were sister-kingdoms – despite the 'gender' confusion. Ireland has successively been an Achilles heel, a Celtic Tiger, a flower in Blessed Mary's coronet, a granary, and a paean in the Erse. Meanwhile, the Grand Old Dame Britannia has now become the Sick Man of Europe. These tropes never satisfactorily account for the dynamic of attraction and repulsion which has characterised Anglo-Irish relations, at least since the sixteenth century. Occasionally, they are displaced by sudden eruptions or re-emergences of more concentrated material which defies linguistic tagging. One such occasion attaches to Sir Roger Casement (1864–1916).⁷

Why should it be assumed that a centuries-long relationship could be summarized in a metaphor? Why not summarise in normal English prose how the writer sees the unfolding relationship? Why 'successively' when the writer is hopping back and forth in time? Why the grinding display of untargeted irony and forced humour? In what coherent intellectual world are unsatisfactory tropes displaced by some kind of volcanic activity which defies linguistic tagging? Just how much more concentrated a piece of volcanic material is Roger Casement than the Land League, the RIC, the

All-for-Ireland League or George Moore, and precisely which tropes did he displace?

The second paragraph evokes nationalist refusal to accept the diaries as authentic, with a sarcastic deployment of religious imagery. Given that Parnell had nearly been destroyed by a forgery and that the Casement diaries were only briefly shown to a small number of people before all access was denied, it is not entirely surprising that conspiracy theories began to arise. The third paragraph further develops the religious theme, before concentrating on 1916. There is a dramatic leap to 1932 for the fourth paragraph, with the arch-conspiracy theorist W J Maloney making his first appearance. The fifth paragraph moves from Catholic/religious language to Yeats's poem 'Sixteen Men Dead' and the executions in 1916. The fifth paragraph takes us to Yeats's Casement poems of 1936:

The one Sinn Fein leader to die on the gallows now bade fair be [sic] the super-hero of a new republicanism, less political, more cultic; less proletarian, more übermenschlich. At the same time – and here is the genius of the scheme – Casement consolidates a reputation for humanitarian universalism, as a near-saint.⁸

It is not clear precisely how and in what time-scale the aged senator's poetic flirtation with the Blueshirts fits into a scheme to promote Casement as great humanitarian. The tone has been set for the book as a whole. McCormack does not outline Casement's life in any continuous fashion. He does not follow his political evolution. He does not analyse the nest of relationships involving Ireland, Britain and the Empire, nor does he take Casement's political thought seriously. A nervous breakdown is postulated as a possible explanation of Casement's activities in his last years. When McCormack seeks to demonstrate his un-insular vision, he chooses to focus on a set of dissident bohemians in Hampstead rather than on the heart of English power. German/British relations in the relevant decades are not analysed. Republicanism is assimilated to Nazism by virtue of its contacts with Germany, but not to communism by virtue of its involvement in the Spanish civil war. We are as often overburdened with irrelevant information and speculation as we are deprived of essential material. It is therefore with an element of bemusement that we read W J McCormack on W J Maloney, author of the *The Forged Casement Diaries*: 'the savage critic has become moiled in the wickedness or folly he seeks to denounce'; 'His individual and specific concern is constantly inundated with material [. . .] which actually detracts from the business in hand'; 'Influences are retained in the order of their occurrence rather than in any intellectual or logical coherence'; 'Maloney moves rapidly backwards and forwards to record incidents in

Casement's life, and occasionally drops into autobiographical mode.' As W J M meets W J M, one is almost tempted to believe that an elaborate literary game (some kind of post-modern mirroring or *mise en abyme* is being enacted for our delectation.

Extending the generosity already shown to Dudgeon to the very limits, Tóibín barely hints at the excesses and eccentricities of this book. We are often invited to bemoan the intellectual poverty of post-Independence Ireland, as if we had now entered on an age of enlightenment, but the failures of analysis and assessment outlined here suggest that condescension towards the past would be misplaced. It must surely be possible to depersonalize and close the authenticity debate – and to redeploy the energy and intelligence that has been spent on it in more constructive fashion. There will never be a magic moment when every last clinger to untruth has cried surrender or gone to a lonely grave. There is something to be learnt about both the British and the Irish states, and about the intellectual and political history of each, by looking at how the Casement question has been treated down the years. For the moment, unfortunately, we continue to neglect the bigger questions that Casement asks of us – questions about power, human rights, democracy and violence, about the legitimacy of the Irish state, and about Ireland's relationship not only with Britain but with the wider world.

Notes and References

- 1 Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's ghost: a story of greed, terror, and heroism in Colonial Africa*, (London: Papermac, 2000).
- 2 Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, p. 196.
- 3 Hochschild, p. 2
- 4 Jeffrey Dudgeon, *Roger Casement: The Black Diaries* (Belfast: Belfast Press), 2002.
- 5 Angus Mitchell, *Sir Roger Casement's Heart of Darkness: The 1911 Documents* (Dublin: Irish Manuscripts Commission, 2003); Séamus Ó Síocháin and Michael O'Sullivan (eds) *The Eyes of Another Race: Roger Casement's Congo Report and 1903 Diary* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2003).
- 6 WJ McCormack, *Roger Casement in Death, or Haunting the Free State* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2002).
- 7 WJ McCormack, *Roger Casement*, p.1.
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 3.