*Roger Casement: The Black Diaries - With a Study of His Background, Sexuality and Irish Political Life*

By Jeffrey Dudgeon

Roger Casement was born in County Dublin in September 1864. Because both his parents died young, he was raised by his uncle, John Casement of Magherintemple, near Ballycastle, County Antrim, and was educated at the Diocesan School, Ballymena (now Ballymena Academy). Casement had a life-long affection for north Antrim, especially the Glens. If he was not one of the founders of **Feis na nGleann, he certainly was an enthusiastic supporter.** He was one of the principal speakers at the celebrated anti-Carson demonstration held in Ballymoney Town Hall on24 October 1913. His dying wish was to be buried at Murlough Bay.

Casement has two principal claims to fame. First, on account of his role in highlighting the cruel exploitation of native peoples in both the Congo and subsequently in the Putumayo River region in Peru, for which he enjoyed an international reputation. His second claim to fame is as an Irish republican and revolutionary.

When the war broke out in August 1914 Casement was in the United States fund-raising for the Irish Volunteers. A year earlier, in July 1913 he had written an article in the *Irish Review* identifying Germany as a potential ally. By now he was passionately pro-German and idealised Germany as the deliverer of small nations.

Casement arrived in Berlin on 31 October 1914 and optimistically imagined that his task was simply one of opening German eyes to reality and telling them where to send military aid. What Casement did not appreciate was that von Jagow, the German Foreign Minister, had already decided that ‘the military results would be small, possibly even negative, and it would be said that we had violated international law’.

On 20 November the German government did issue a statement that should Germany invade Ireland, it would do so with ‘good will towards a people to which Germany wished only national welfare and national liberty’, a statement which fell significantly short of what Casement wanted to hear.

Casement put three demands to the German government. He wanted arms, German officers to lead an insurrection in Ireland, and the formation of an ‘Irish Brigade’ consisting of Irish prisoners of war in Germany.

The Germans promised only a relatively small quantity of arms (20,000 fairly obsolete Mosin-Nagant rifles, ten machine-guns and the appropriate ammunition) and no German officers and no military support. Furthermore, Casement managed to recruit only 56 P.O.W.s for his projected ‘Irish Brigade’.

Casement needed an armed escort to protect him from his ‘countrymen’. It would seem the German were seriously vindictive towards P.O.W.s who refused to join Casement’s ‘Irish Brigade’. Their rations were reduced. Two men were reportedly shot and some were sent to coal and salt mines. An Irish soldier – Corporal Dempsey – who had served with the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Scots Fusiliers was tied to a post in the snow for an hour and a half and subjected to significant abuse.

On learning that an insurrection was planned for Easter 1916, Casement was determined to return to Ireland to prevent it because he believed it was doomed to failure without substantial arms and German support. The German consignment of weaponry did not figure prominently in the thinking of those who had planned the rising in Dublin. At best the guns were going to arrive extremely late in the day. No serious thought was given to their distribution. Nor was any thought given to training Volunteers in their use.

Casement was arrested on Banna Strand in County Kerry on Good Friday 1916, having been put ashore by a German submarine. The *Aud*, the German ship transporting the German rifles, was intercepted by the Royal Navy off the south coast and scuttled by her captain. Casement was taken to the Tower of London and tried for high treason at the Old Bailey.

The Government privately circulated pages from Casement’s ‘Black Diaries’ (as opposed to his ‘White Diaries’ recording the respectable and professional side of his life), detailing his homosexual activity. The intention was presumably to discredit him and either to silence the clamour for clemency (spearheaded by W. B. Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, John Galsworthy and Arthur Conan Doyle) and/or to ensure that he did not achieve the status of martyrdom (which his speech from the dock reveals he clearly sought). He was found guilty of treason and, objectively, no other outcome was possible. Before his execution, he was received into the Roman Catholic Church. Roger Casement was hanged at Pentonville Prison on 3 August 1916.

W. B. Yeats wrote a poem demanding the return of Casement's remains to Ireland, with the refrain, ‘The ghost of Roger Casement/Is beating on the door’. In 1965 Casement's remains were repatriated to Ireland by Harold Wilson’s Labour government. After a state funeral, Casement was buried with full military honours in Glasnevin cemetery

During the greater part of the twentieth century most Irish nationalists, almost as an article of faith, believed that the diaries were forgeries but in 2002 forensic examination of them vindicated their authenticity to almost universal satisfaction. Audrey Giles, the leading forensic handwriting examiner, concluded that ‘the handwriting, ink, paper, pen strokes and pencillings were all genuine’.

The first edition of this book appeared in 2002. This greatly expanded second edition is compulsory reading for anyone interested in this intriguing figure.

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