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Roger Casement versus the British Empire

The story of an Irishman with two diaries – one for his sex life, and one for his humanitarian campaigns

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In 1915, a year before the Easter Rising in Dublin, Augusta Gregory wrote to W. B. Yeats enquiring who Sir Roger Casement was. She would not remain in doubt much longer. By that stage of his eventful life, he was well on his way to becoming a fully accredited Irish revolutionary, and he would be executed for high treason on August 3, 1916. His offence had not been to take part in the Rising of a few months before; in fact, he had been landed secretly from a German U-boat with the intention of trying to stop what he saw as a doomed venture. But he had spent the previous months in Germany, attempting unsuccessfully to raise a rebel brigade from Irish prisoners-of-war in German camps. Patriotic British opinion might consider this bad enough; it was all the more glaring an offence when carried out by a charismatic ex-consular official, invariably described as looking like a princeling painted by Velázquez or Van Dyck. Even more nobly, he had been knighted for his heroic services in exposing the savage exploitation of African and Amerindian workers in the rubber industry. As far as Casement was concerned, his commitment to Ireland's independence made a charge of treason to Britain irrelevant; like many before and since, he laid great stress on the claim that the King of England was not legitimately the monarch of Ireland. But his death sentence, in time of war, was almost inevitable.

What was surprising was the hopeless failure of the campaign for a reprieve, even though its supporters included Yeats, G. B. Shaw, Cardinal Logue, Timothy Healy, Douglas Hyde, George Russell and Lord French. The clincher in stiffening opinion against it was the discreet but widespread circulation of diaries allegedly discovered among Casement's possessions, detailing with unashamed relish his obsessive sexual exploits with boys and young men picked up in the streets, at home and abroad. Accompanying cash-ledgers recorded the payments usually (though not always) involved. These diaries, as much as the manner of his death, have ensured that Casement's posthumous existence was as vigorous as his sex life. It has been sustained by publications trying to prove the forgery of the "Black" diaries (notably in the 1930s), or their authenticity; by Yeats's platform poems on the issue; by a rather slapdash 1959 edition of some of the diaries by the louche Olympia Press; by negotiations to return the martyr's remains from the prison lime-pit for a state funeral in Dublin, finally accomplished in 1965; by the release of enlightening Home Office files throughout the 1990s; by a slap-up conference in May 2000 attended by Irish government dignitaries; and, most recently, by a detailed forensic analysis of the disputed diaries in 2002. Casement has been honoured with far more biographies, articles, plays, poems and Letters to the Editor than all the 1916 leaders put together: scholars of the cult ("Casementalists") tend to become even more obsessive, territorial and petulant than most historical niche specialists.

Séamus Ó Síocháin's biography, the result of twenty years' patient trawling through a growing if scattered archive, is the latest manifestation. It is not particularly Casementalist. Given all the history, Ó Síocháin has made two major decisions: not to survey Casement's posthumous life (the subject of entertaining analysis by Lucy McDiarmid and others), and to accept the authenticity of the diaries as a matter of course. The latter decision seems obviously the right one; even before the 2002 examination, it was becoming increasingly hard to take the forgery thesis seriously – if only because the vast length of the documentation, and the almost total lack of anything in them contradicting the picture given in Casement's other, less controversial, records, which indeed in many ways they bear out. (He apparently kept parallel diaries, one set detailing the events of his campaigns to uncover the horrific conditions of the workers in the Congo and the Amazon basins; the other intermingling everyday observations with sexual and financial transactions, as well as the details of his partners' appearance and genitalia.) Roger Sawyer's 1997 work on the 1910 diary and Jeffrey Dudgeon's massive and closely footnoted edition of all the "Black" diaries in 2002, accompanied by a perceptive and empathetic biographical treatment, went a long way towards integrating Casement's nationalist, humanitarian and gay lives. Even Angus Mitchell, the most loyal adherent of the forgery theory, who produced ten years ago a valuable and deeply detailed edition of Casement's Amazon journal, may now accept that the diaries are genuine.

In any case, even the attitudes of biographers who accepted Casement's homosexual nature have moved with the

times. Brian Inglis in 1973 saw Casement's obsessional recording as mildly pathological; B. L. Reid, in an underrated study of 1973, portrayed him as a liberated sexual radical. A decade ago, Cólín Tóibín wrote irreverently that during his cruising expeditions Casement was "having a whale of a time", which is a far cry from the 1966 conclusion of Herbert Mackey, a proponent of the forgery thesis: "it would be fantastic to suppose that any human being except a criminal lunatic would attempt the enormities mentioned here, let alone record them". (Mitchell adds another view: given the enervating Brazilian climate, "to have one partner [a night] is heroic – five would be downright impossible".) Though the fact that most of his partners were teenage native boys might suggest something like the sexual colonialism of Caryl Churchill's play *Cloud Nine*, Casement's own remarkably anti-racist attitudes towards Indians and Africans have helped absolve him on this score – though not with everyone. The ex-Taoiseach John Bruton, reviewing the Dudgeon edition, threw baby and bathwater out with a fine abandon when he remarked that "these diaries have no literary, and now little historical value, and should not have been given so much space in an otherwise stimulating, fair and well-written book". Analysts of Edwardian sexual history would dispute that they have little historical value: as Dudgeon and others have pointed out, they provide a rich source of first-hand material from the sexual underground. Most Irish commentators have finally caught up with Yeats's view, expressed to his (lesbian) friend Dorothy Wellesley in 1937: "If Casement were a homo-sexual, what matter!".

Yeats added that the really important point concerned the British Government's use of the material in order to blacken Casement's name: "no unpopular man with a cause will ever be safe". Never mind about Casement's private passions, the cause was the thing. This latest and largest biography is free to concentrate on other aspects of Casement's life, particularly his experiences in Africa from the 1890s, which are illuminated in a new way. Indeed, Ó Síocháin sometimes goes so far as to demote Casement's sexual life very low indeed. His subject's actions, thoughts and public humanitarian campaigns are traced in great detail, almost day-to-day, and a great deal of valuable and suggestive material is brought to light. There is an admirable appendix stating at length the case for believing the "Black" diaries to be authentic – though after Dudgeon's work, this must be a given. But in the main text, there is little or no discussion of the pressures and stresses which a secret homosexual life must have brought to an Establishment figure, and which may have had something to do with the recurrent death-wish expressed by Casement during recurrent bouts of *Sturm und Drang*. His violent objections to having his picture published in newspapers, which Ó Síocháin records, may have had something to do with his fear of recognition and blackmail. As Dudgeon pointed out, the obsessive detail of the diaries, sometimes interpreted either as evidence of a forger's interpolation or as signs of an exceptional pathology, may have been a therapeutic form of expressing a life that had to be kept deeply secret. Nor does Ó Síocháin speculate much about the two sexual relationships which lasted beyond the pick-up stage, with a fellow-Northern Irishman called Millar Gordon, and with the repellent and disloyal Norwegian sailor Adler Christensen, who accompanied him back from America on his voyage to Germany and later offered to testify against him – incidentally offering independent evidence about his sexual orientation.

Most of the "personal" material comes near the beginning of the book, with a full treatment of Casement's background and family. Despite his aristocratic appearance and acquired title, he was not a grandee. His immediate family were from Northern Irish middle-class stock, recently elevated to gentry status, and possessing very little money. His father was a peripatetic ex-army remittance man, and his mother died in her thirties from cirrhosis of the liver. "Roddy" was orphaned at twelve and looked after by relatives. After a good education at Ballymena Diocesan School, he went to work as a clerk in a Liverpool shipping company at the age of sixteen. He also worked as a ship's purser until gaining employment with the International African Association in 1884, when he was twenty. The Association, whose sole stockholder was King Leopold of Belgium, was engaged in opening up the Congo basin – an area with which Casement would become closely connected, and where he first met Joseph Conrad, who left a famous description of him. It would also bring him into the rapaciously exploitative world of rubber production. When the Association became a recognized government in 1886, Casement left it for a series of posts in expeditionary and trading companies active in West Africa, a period of his life newly illuminated by Ó Síocháin. By the early 1890s he had become a civil servant, working for the Survey and Customs departments in the Niger Coast Protectorate, and holding consular posts in Angola and Mozambique; by 1900 he was back in the Congo, and something of an old Africa hand.

So far he neatly fits the mould of many bright Irish middle-class boys (Catholic as well as Protestant) who turned out to be good at running bits of the Empire. He followed another classical trajectory of Imperial careerism, moving from commercial activity to a government connection in an era when the two worlds often elided into one another. Ó Síocháin, whose subtitle is significant, shows that many of Casement's early opinions were conventional: approving of Joseph Chamberlain's South African strategy, apparently sharing the implicit racial assumptions of his kind, and sentimentally mourning the Queen-Empress's passing in 1901. Ó Síocháin also demonstrates Casement's discreet work for British intelligence agencies during the Boer War and the Fashoda crisis in Sudan. But by 1907 he would credit the South African War with instilling his doubts about Empire and its methods. Well before that date, his humanitarian instincts, and his refusal to see the natives of the Congo and Amazon as anything less than fellow human beings undergoing a species of slavery, marked him out. Early on, he developed a robustly defiant attitude to those in

authority and a critique of the way colonial commerce worked which set him apart, and he was bitterly critical of the expropriation of African land by foreign governments like Leopold's: "an act of deliberate theft, and one the wickedness of which I believe will yet be startlingly demonstrated by the retaliation of the natives who have been robbed of their rights".

Casement was not, of course, unique in having these beliefs; curiously his uncle, Edward Bannister, had in the early 1890s also tried to expose the horrific treatment of the natives of the Congo Independent State, and not been thanked for it. His nephew's efforts a decade later to expose forced labour and violent coercion by the rubber companies were greeted with warmer official support, for reasons of realpolitik, as well as altruism. He indefatigably cultivated journalistic and political backing, and deliberately transgressed the boundaries of his job: the campaign against Leopold, pursued across Europe, climaxed with the creation of the Congo Reform Association in 1904. His new friend and ally, E. D. Morel, bore the brunt of the battle over the next decade, as Casement's attention was directed towards Ireland and South America. But his investigations and publicizing of conditions there had been instrumental in starting a major humanitarian movement and exposing what he called "a gigantic infamy – a fundamental invasion of primitive humanity and its rights".

He was to find an even blacker heart of darkness in Peru. The American Walter Hardenberg's 1909 investigations into the London-based Peruvian Amazon Company prompted questions in Parliament. Casement, who had spent a more or less unhappy time in Brazilian postings from 1906, was detailed by the Foreign Office to join an investigative team sent out to the Putamayo region of the Upper Amazon in 1910. What he found there eclipsed even the Congo: floggings, torture and murder, together with blatant economic exploitation, had created a situation which Casement thought approximated to genocide.

Alas! Poor Peruvian, poor South American Indian! The world thinks the slave trade was killed a century ago! The worst form of slave trade and slavery – worse in many of its aspects, as I shall show – than anything African savagery gave birth to, has been in full swing here for three hundred years until the dwindling remnant of a population once numbering millions, is now perishing at the doors of an English Company, under the lash, the chains, the bullet, the machete to give its shareholders a dividend.

The cruelties and exploitation perpetrated by the Company's employees were appalling, and Casement's campaign against them is given its full due in this book. He also, it is clear, found his co-commissioners too credulous of the line peddled by the Company employees, and he put their pusillanimity down to their nationality. "The world, I am beginning to think – that is the white man's world – is made up of two categories of men – compromisers and Irishmen. I might add, and Blackmen."

His experiences in the Congo and the Amazon had begun a long process of disenchantment with the operations of Imperial commerce; they had also provided a network of radical allies working for humanitarian causes. This helped swing his attitude to Britain around to a point on the political compass very distant from Unionist Ballymena. By the time he set off to investigate the conditions of the Amazonian rubber-workers, his opinions contradicted those he had held at the time of the Boer War a decade before. "He will always be a source of trouble", Louis Mallet had minuted at the FO a few years before. Battling ill-health, and running considerable personal danger, Casement published a sensational report on the iniquities carried out by the rubber companies in the Putamayo region, publicized it tirelessly in London and Washington (not always to official pleasure), and was instrumental in bringing about an influential Select Committee to investigate the matter, set up in 1912. His position in the consular service was complicated by his campaigning involvements, his histrionic and sometimes hectoring dispatches, and a notable urge to self-dramatization, evident from his youth; he was also continually racked by financial worries. At the same time, he was widely admired in Liberal circles, and had considerable social success. But his interests were already directed elsewhere. In the summer of 1913, aged forty-eight, he retired from the Consular service, with ill-concealed relief. The rest of his life would be dominated by his commitment to radical Irish nationalism.

This was the climax of a development that had been happening for some time. From the early 1900s he had been involved in cultural revivalism, notably regarding the Irish language, though he never learned to speak it himself. Even before this, his boyhood in Antrim had infused him with some romantic Gaelicism, apparently shared by some other members of his generally Unionist family, and he saw himself (inaccurately) as "an implacable Celt". He was close to passionate revivalists like Alice Stopford Green and Ada McNeill, exchanging arch and rather camp letters which may have raised their romantic hopes, and heavily involved in attempts to set up Irish-speaking schools in Donegal and cultural jamborees in Antrim. Above all, he maintained a close relationship with Francis Bigger, a mother-fixated bachelor antiquarian who organized boys' nationalist activities in Belfast and designed Irish dance costumes for his "Neophytes". Parades of budding Republicans passed through Bigger's house on Cave Hill, "Ardriagh", fetchingly kitted out in Celtic dress. Casement frequently stayed there, and left incriminating possessions in Bigger's keeping, which his host later apparently burnt. He was also closely connected with Bulmer Hobson, the Quaker radical who helped revive

the Irish Republican Brotherhood in the north from 1904: Casement was involved in circulating anti-recruiting material as early as 1905.

An Irish friend, Lady French, thought he was “the strangest person imaginable to come out of Ulster”, but in many ways he fits the archetype of the romantic convert to nationalism, from a marginalized and fragmented background. The kind of nationalism he embraced gave him a new sense of community; a reaction against Ulster Unionism was followed by an even more violent repudiation of the British Empire in which he had once sought his destiny. When accepting his knighthood in 1911, he was uneasily conscious that some of his friends would see it as a betrayal. Ó Síocháin follows other authorities in judging that he was never actually a member of the IRB himself, but the company he kept, and the course he took, from 1913, might suggest otherwise. Certainly, his movements were monitored by the police from that year, when he took a forward part in the organization of the Irish Volunteers.

His emotional and indiscreet rhetoric, increasingly noted by friends and observers from this time, might not have endeared him to fellow conspirators, but the same was true of Patrick Pearse, whom Casement already knew. (In 1911, he wanted to place two Amerindian youths, brought to Britain to publicize the Putamayo atrocities, in Pearse’s school, St Enda’s, but nothing came of it.) In America during the summer of 1914, discussing the acquisition of arms for the Irish Volunteers, Casement alarmed the veteran Irish revolutionary John Devoy by his indiscretion. On the same visit he struck John Butler Yeats as “a very fine gentleman . . . a prince of courtesy”, who also resembled “a very nice girl who is just hysterical enough to be charming and interesting among strangers and a trial to his own friends”.

It was in America that Casement heard of the outbreak of war between Britain and Germany, and this was one of the primary reasons for his emotional state. “God save Ireland is now another form of God save Germany.” One of the most striking themes in Ó Síocháin’s treatment, echoing Dudgeon, is the emphasis given to Casement’s Germanophilia, from an early stage of his life. Even in his colonial days, he believed that what South America needed was a good dose of German Imperialism, and by 1912 he “longed for the sound of German boots keeping guard outside the Mother of Parliaments”. In the same year, despairing of Ulster’s resistance to Home Rule, he declared, “I pray for the Germans and their coming: Protestants to teach these Protestants their place in Irish life is needed”. He nurtured an unlikely admiration for the Kaiser, and fulminated against the victimization of Germany by the exhausted, “stagnant” powers of Britain and France. Like other middle- and upper-class Irish rebels from unlikely backgrounds, such as Maud Gonne, Constance Markiewicz and Erskine Childers, a violent reaction against British Imperialism accompanied *pari passu* an emotional identification with Ireland; idealization of the Evil Empire’s foreign enemies was part of the process. But it was especially important in Casement’s case, since it led to the actions that brought him to the dock. These included his plan not only to arrange for large-scale arms shipments from Germany to Ireland, started in 1914 and outlined in several documents from his American sojourn, but his subsequent scheme to organize Irish prisoners-of-war in Germany into an Irish Brigade within the German army, “whose specific purpose should be to aid in the restoration of Irish independence”. These policies were accompanied by public statements and letters urging support for Germany rather than Britain, and dissuading Irishmen from joining the British forces. Unsurprisingly, this provoked an ominous enquiry from his ex-employers at the Foreign Office. “As you are still liable, in certain circumstances, to be called upon to serve under the crown, I am to request you to state whether you are the author of the letter in question.” By the time it was sent, Casement (who now routinely referred to Britain as “the Bitch and Harlot of the North Sea”) was on his way to Germany.

He arrived with high hopes, but saw them progressively dashed, and ended by turning against perfidious Germany almost as violently as against England – at least in as much as his plans were thwarted by the double dealings of German officialdom. He continued to exempt Germany from his denunciation of European colonialism, praising “the extraordinary liberty German imperialism accords in lately conquered territory”; Germany’s war aims were simply “to build a larger and loftier dwelling for a numerous and growing offspring”. Lebensraum was apparently all right for some, but by now, inconsistency hardly mattered. He was stuck in Germany from the autumn of 1914 until his clandestine journey to Ireland just before Easter 1916. His lover, Christensen, was assiduously betraying him to British representatives (while also involved in bigamy and blackmail on the side); Casement’s own indiscreet letters were ending up in the hands of the FO. Back in Ireland, friends such as Alice Green were alienated by his defection. As for the Irish Brigade, very few POWs took the Casement shilling, while some of those who refused would give damning testimony at his trial. By early 1916, the IRB’s plans for a Rising with German aid were well advanced, and Casement’s position in Germany was potentially vital; but Robert Monteith, sent from America to liaise with him, found him in a state of nervous breakdown. He finally had to recognize that the arms provided would be – in his view – hopelessly inadequate. The German military officials had proved themselves “swine and cads of the first water . . . lower than the Congo savages in most things that constitute gentleness of heart, mind or action”.

As usual, he reacted violently against the place he found himself in; as usual, the only refuge was Ireland. After sending endless violent protests to the German high command, much as in his old consular days, he embarked on a

U-boat for Ireland, timed to arrive just after the promised shipment of arms (which were in the event scuttled). As far as Casement was concerned, his mission was to warn the IRB plotters to postpone the now hopeless Rising; he was never an advocate of blood sacrifice. As Ó Síocháin points out, the timing arranged by the Germans made this impossible. Nonetheless, when Casement was dropped on a Kerry beach on Good Friday 1916, as far as his own fate went, his mood was already Christ-like: nearly all witnesses describe an attitude of sublime calm, generally sustained throughout his imprisonment, trial and even execution. He was arrested before the day was out. A letter sent from his prison cell, intercepted and later destroyed by British officialdom, instructed his friends to "roll away the stone from my grave".

To his later admirers, that last act in Kerry is his Gethsemane, followed by the trial at the hands of a whole court of Pilates: notably the Attorney-General, F. E. Smith, who disallowed an appeal to the House of Lords, though he was clearly (given his history of supporting Ulster's resistance to Home Rule) *parti pris*. Casement, who converted to Catholicism just before he was executed, clearly saw his destiny as an echo of Christ's. Lucy McDiarmid has wittily traced the litter of iconographic objects left behind him (the collapsible boat, the dish he ate from during his Kerry sojourn) and described their transmutation into sacred objects; others of his numerous biographers have presented him as Jesus betrayed, with Christensen just one of a number of Judases. The endless and often otiose discussion devoted to the provenance, analysis and manipulation of the Diaries also suggests the kind of exegesis devoted to the gospels, false and true. Until recently, those ecstatic descriptions of homosexual fondling and penetration in discreet public places throughout the world had to be eliminated from the hagiography of a secular saint. Nowadays, when an about turn in attitudes has made the law on same-sex relations more liberal in Ireland than most European countries (including Britain), Casement's sainthood can be extended to represent the redemption of a whole new constituency of the once excluded and oppressed. But this approach may be as anachronistic as the most ingenious forgery theories of a half-century ago.

I say that Roger Casement
Did what he had to do,
He died upon the gallows,
But that is nothing new.

When Yeats published his poem on February 2, 1937, the ex-revolutionary and 1916 survivor Eamon de Valera was the democratically elected Prime Minister of the Irish Free State. A few weeks before, he had taken advantage of the Abdication crisis to remove the British Governor-General from the Irish constitution. The replacement position of President of Ireland would be filled by another of Casement's old comrades: Douglas Hyde, founder of the cultural revivalist Gaelic League, which had changed the Ulster Imperialist's life. If Casement had, like de Valera, been spared execution and survived into the new dispensation, he would have been the inevitable occupant of the ex-Viceroyal Lodge, and an infinitely more appropriate figurehead than the canny but uncharismatic Hyde. It is easily imagined: his natural nobility enhancing the role, an easy way with foreign dignitaries, his sister Nina playing the part of hostess, and one or two handsome young ADCs to steer him away from those risky late-night strolls in Phoenix Park. But the British government and his own sense of martyrdom arranged a different and ultimately more glamorous destiny. Few people remember Hyde nowadays, or bother to research his biography. But it is a fair bet that, while Séamus Ó Síocháin's balanced, scholarly and rather laborious treatment is now the best summation we have of Casement's extraordinary life, it is far from being the last.

Séamas Ó Síocháin
ROGER CASEMENT
Imperialist, rebel, revolutionary
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