**TRALEE CASEMENT CONFERENCE ‘THE GLOCAL IMPERATIVE’**

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***Casement and the Easter Rising: Berlin, Dublin and British Intelligence***

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The story of who knew what in April 1916, and why pretty well all parties failed in their allotted tasks is worth retelling[[1]](#footnote-1), even if it deromanticises many of the players, and diminishes some of their reputations.

The main political question is why did British Intelligence fail to avert the Easter Rising, given their intimate foreknowledge, allied to why, if Casement was so determined to get the rebellion, at least, postponed, did the Germans let him go to Ireland at all, knowing what they did?

Failure of course also bred success in revolutionising southern Ireland and developing its founding myth. Without Easter 1916, an Irish Free State would still have been born, but separatism might not have been so radically successful and for so long.

There are a number of other Casement mysteries, or disputed facts in 1916, over and above the authenticity of the diaries. Many questions also surround the second rank players. Some have recently been solved – at least partially.

I instance the increasing information that has come to light on Casement’s four key colleagues in Germany and in two cases on the submarine – Adler Christensen (his Norwegian companion and erstwhile lover), Robert Monteith, John McGoey, and Daniel Julien Bailey (with the nom de guerre of Beverley and a Dubliner with a French mother), all of whom ended their days in north America. Living as they did along the edge of legality, their stories have not surfaced easily.

In Christensen’s case, the mystery has been advanced to 1929 when – as recently advised by a relative – he was in Vancouver, and shortly to desert Hedwig, his third wife. She was a German girl he had married a year earlier in Winnipeg. The first two wives Sadie Weaver and Margarette or Margarethe (Verschmidt) were probably concurrent as Adler did not seem to bother with divorce.

[Where and when he died was unknown until a Norwegian writer told me it was in a Paris prison in 1935.]

Sergeant Bailey of the Irish Brigade – a man captured in Tralee a day after the landing[[2]](#footnote-2) – entered the Old Bailey’s dock after Lord Chief Justice Isaacs passed sentence of death on Casement. At the surprising request of the Attorney General, F.E. Smith, Bailey was duly found not guilty by the jury. After recall to the British Army and serving in former German East Africa and Egypt, he emigrated to Canada, dying in Ontario in 1968. First however, in London in 1917, he had married a widow, Katerina O’Dea, née Friedrich. She oddly was born in Germany in 1865, he in 1887.

It would be wrong to say Bailey betrayed Casement, not least because Casement was informing the authorities in Tralee, and most everyone else, of the imminent Rising. (Neither did he give ‘King’s Evidence’ in court.) Indeed Bailey was far from frank with his local interrogators about the details and purpose of their mission, despite his, not unreasonable, efforts to escape the gallows. His motives seem mixed, much as McGoey, although he was no sociopath like Adler.

Captain Monteith, a Connolly socialist, having escaped capture in Kerry, and after a lengthy period in hiding – an adventure story well told in his book and as thrilling an account as many of those recently revealed in the Bureau of Military History – made it back to the US, dying in 1956 in Detroit.

He remained a faithful admirer of Casement, telling of a meeting in New York in 1917 where he disputed with John Devoy of Clan na Gael: *“*When I made the statement that Casement did not sail with the intention of stopping the Rising, Devoy interrupted me with a vehement and vicious denunciation of Casement, charging him with selling-out and unspeakable crimes on the unsupported word of Adler Christensen, whom Devoy himself described as: “One of the worst I ever met and who was in the pay of the English all along.””[[3]](#footnote-3) However Monteith is simply wrong about Casement’s intentions.

This is a misinterpretation of Casement’s motives by Devoy, while his view that the raid on the New York offices of the German spy Wolf von Igel on 18 April yielded the information to enable Casement’s capture was also erroneous, as intelligence derived therefrom only reached London after that event.

The greatest mystery surrounds John McGoey, a Scots-Irish man based in the US, who could have changed history had he followed Casement’s orders. His mission was to go to Denmark, and thence Dublin to warn Tom Clarke and Bulmer Hobson of the lack of German support for a Rising.

Instead McGoey somehow reached England and, of all things, joined the Royal Navy while managing to marry within six months of leaving Berlin.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Casement wrote at the time on 18 March 1916: “McGoey was brought in next day – I explained all the situation to him very fully and pointed out the imperative need of trying to get some one into Ireland to warn them there of the wholly inadequate help being given and to say that I strongly urged no “rising.” He (like Monteith) was with me here. McGoey said it would be criminal and that he had long suspected the Germans of playing a double game. He would do anything I asked him to. I told him it was necessary for me to keep silent as to my real opinions before the G.G.S. [*Grosser Generalstab*] and that when I took him to the Admiralty he must do the same.

We went at 11.30 o'clock and found the three Captains again – all was explained to John McG. He is to go as an added string to our bow (in addition to the telegram to Devoy) to tell the Dublin Council to have the pilot boat ready at Inishtooskert &c. &c. – but he goes really to try and get the Heads in Ireland to call off the rising and merely try to land the arms safely and distribute these.”

Ten days after McGoey left Berlin on 19 March, Casement was cross-examined by the GGS. He then diaried:

“Their fear was that I had sent John McGoey to stop the rising! They asked again and again if I had given him instructions to that effect. I said I was not the master of the Irish Revolutionary body and whatever I might say would only be advice or suggestion. I avowed that John McGoey himself was dead against a rising, and the fury was uncontrolled.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Whether McGoey was too late getting out of Denmark or decided to disobey Casement’s orders remains unclear. He had the power to stymie the Rising but didn’t. Which is not to say he couldn’t be a quick worker. Last recorded in late March en route to Denmark, by September, in Essex, he was marrying a Miss Ethel Wells having already joined the Royal Navy. He was serving on HMS Kildonan, an armed merchant cruiser.

So what happened to him between April and September, when, despite Casement’s notion and that of many Republicans, he had obviously not been executed by the British in Kirkwall in the Orkneys?

Did the Germans prevent him leaving mainland Europe before the Rising? This was something I reasonably assumed, not believing the secret hanging theory, especially as the German Military knew that Casement had despatched McGoey to sabotage their efforts, soon after they discovered the Admiralty had enabled him to travel.

Did he decide not to jeopardise the Rising and ignore Casement’s orders? Did love of an Englishwoman get in the way of his duty?

Perhaps he decided to switch sides after experiencing the Germans close at hand.

We can deduce his loyalty to Irish separatism must have been – or have become – sufficiently shallow for him to join the Royal Navy although he was plainly not averse to military involvement.

People are less ideological, more changeable, and more buffeted by events than we give them credit for.

McGoey died in Chicago in 1925 in a building accident, taking his story to an early grave.

However the key question remains, knowing of his mission, and once the GGS knew Casement had been granted by the Admiralty on 7 April, his repeated request for a submarine, why did they allow it to proceed or at least, ensure the orders about the timing of the landing were not tighter to minimise his ability to thwart matters? Indeed why did the Admiralty give in to Casement’s request for a submarine at all?

Was it a desperation to get rid of him or did Casement pull sufficient of his many strings in Berlin? Séamas O Síocháin in his biography suggests, “They may have felt, though, that he had a better chance of evading capture in travelling by submarine.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

We do know that the orders for U20 included: “Headquarters attach importance to getting the Irish ashore at the last possible moment.” Karl Spindler indeed emphasised this, remarking: “Worthy of special attention is Paragraph (5) [of the Captain’s orders] according to which no matter what happened, the landing of Sir Roger much in advance of the outbreak of the revolution was to be prevented.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Was the reason a lack of imagination or Prussian blockheadedness, something Casement came to acknowledge within so much of the German High Command, or the fog of war? This question is one that might be answered by closer inspection of the German-language archives.

Another mystery is the precise origin and family of Casement’s mother Anne Jephson (or Jepson), a north Dublin Protestant from Portland Street (and a parishioner of St George’s Anglican Church in Hardwicke Street), but that must be left to another day. Instead I turn to British intelligence.

The events in the week before the Rising took place on the Monday, and the consequences of each change of mind or plan are involved and convoluted. But they all served unexpectedly the interest of the inner junta of the IRB who were determined on a Rising except, initially, for Casement’s capture.

It was London’s intelligence mishandling that in the event minimised the harm his capture was going to do. Hindsight is of course a clear guide.

The decisions of Captain Reginald ‘Blinker’ Hall, head of Naval Intelligence in Room 40, aided on the day by Basil Thomson of Scotland Yard and Frank Hall of Narrow Water Castle in Warrenpoint (M.I.5’s ‘Q’ and former military secretary of the UVF) ensured the Rising happened and ultimately succeeded. In essence, London denied Dublin the necessary knowledge that should have made them take effective precautions against the imminent outbreak of rebellion.

Blinker Hall knew through the decoding of German cables going from their Washington Embassy to Berlin the fact of a rebellion, its date, the despatch of Casement, and of an arms shipment to be landed in the Limerick area.

By taking him immediately to London, Dublin Castle was again deprived of an opportunity to hear of the plans for a Rising.

David Ramsay in his hagiographic biography, *Blinker Hall – Spymaster* wrote, “The inept Chief Secretary for Ireland (Birrell), who had held the post for far too long (nine years) and who reputedly seldom visited Dublin, lost his job. But Hall as the de facto co-ordinator of intelligence and Thomson must share some responsibility for the failure to pass intelligence to the RIC, one of the most serious intelligence breakdowns in British history.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

That Ramsay wrote such searing criticism proves Hall was far from flawless and when he worked with Thomson and Frank Hall – three good old boys and very much of a kind – the danger was compounded.

Eunan O’Halpin tells much the same story writing, “Hall was anxious above all to avoid disclosing his source, decrypted German messages; in so doing he jeopardised the security of Ireland.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Hall’s secrecy in relation to the Rising had another cause – his view that “politicians were as leaky as sieves”. He thus restricted the details he had gleaned to naval personnel, in particular.

We have recently learnt that Margot Asquith and of course her husband, the Prime Minister, were aware of the intelligence.[[10]](#footnote-10) Indeed the whole Cabinet may have been informed by Arthur Balfour, the First Lord of the Admiralty, his source being Sir Henry Oliver, the Naval Secretary.[[11]](#footnote-11) This however has not been confirmed, and seems unlikely in that Birrell was plainly not *au fait*. Asquith discounted the intelligence, apparently as he had heard so much of a similar nature.

But why bother with intelligence if you simply ignore it? Stopped-up sieves are more useless than leaky ones. And Asquith was notoriously averse to action.

George Dangerfield catches it well from the view of a Liberal apologist, “Captain Reginald Hall, possibly deep in Room 40 of the Admiralty may have permitted himself a twinge of uneasiness. If he had allowed Mr Birrell and Sir Matthew Nathan to know what he knew, and by what means he had come to know it, things might have gone differently. But Captain Hall, even if he had wished to speak, was obliged for security reasons to remain silent. And so the Birrell administration was thrown to the wolves.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Dangerfield adds that Birrell and his deputy Nathan, “pursued their policy – on the whole a very sensible one – of “minimum action and maximum inaction” Why stir up trouble in that excitable land?”[[13]](#footnote-13) This masterly inactivity some called appeasement, and, as it always does, leads in time to a crisis.

Blinker Hall was a very political intelligence chief, as many are or become. He also lacked common sense and was possessive of his secrets. There is a pattern of him keeping them too secret as at the Battle of Jutland. The one occasion where he broke his own rule was after the deciphering of the Zimmerman telegram, which, by drawing the US into the war, changed everything, and ensured victory for the Entente powers. Blinker knew well this one secret had to be distributed even at the risk of alerting the Germans to his code breaking.

The informational cascade and its variations is complex, with many names and dates.

Hall told General George Macdonogh, Director of Military Intelligence on 22 March of a rebellion due to start on 22 April (Saturday) and of an arms landing. He in turn advised Lord French, Commander in Chief of the Home Forces, citing only “an absolutely reliable source”.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Dangerfield writes, “Lord Wimborne and Mr Birrell, who met with French in London that day, were not told anything at all…On the whole, Captain Hall would have chanced a rising all over Ireland rather than give the Germans an inkling of the truth – that their coded messages were being read.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

General Lovick Friend, the Army Commander in Chief in Ireland, was then advised on 23 March, a month in advance of the rising, but not of the unimpeachable source.

Replying to General Friend on 10 April, but without being told of the intelligence, Matthew Nathan wrote, “I do not believe the leaders mean insurrection or that the Volunteers have sufficient arms if the leaders do mean it.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

This has the ring of a conversation with Alice Stopford Green, given her significant friendship with Nathan and Birrell. (They judged her low “in the hierarchy of treason.”)

Sir Matthew was not inclined to listen to southern Unionists who warned him of mounting trouble and advised of a need for drastic measures, as they would, he probably thought. In particular their leader, Lord Midleton, who wanted the Volunteers proscribed, was disregarded, yet his sister the Hon. Albinia Broderick (*Gobnait Ní Bhruadair*) lived in Kerry in a Gaelic League and Volunteer milieu and was to be shot by the Black and Tans.

Midleton therefore had to have had some better feel for what was developing than the Castle and its complacent or nationalist advisers. He was aware that an administration that permitted an alternative and opposing locus of military power was asking to be subverted.

Despite being the political head in Dublin, Nathan was not given direct knowledge of any of the key intercepts until 17 April, the Monday of Holy Week. General Friend, the top soldier in Ireland, showed him a letter that day which he had received from Brigadier-General Stafford in Queenstown on foot of a casual conversation with his naval counterpart Lewis Bayly, the Admiral Commanding the Western Approaches.

John de Courcy Ireland wrote in ‘The Sea and The Easter Rising’: “Of course, the British Admiralty did not necessarily always think fit or important to tell the British officials governing this country what it knew; though Admiral Bayly, British Naval C.-in-C. at the time at Queenstown Base, Haulbowline, writes on page 206 of his reminiscences *Pull together* that “other Government de­part­ments” refused to take seriously naval intelligence’s hints of coming trouble in Ireland and, on page 202, states that he knew in advance (unfortunately he gives no date) of the *Libau*’s de­part­ure and expected arrival on our coast.”

As Nathan recounted to the Royal Commission, it told of a “contemplated landing from a German ship rigged up as a neutral and accompanied by two submarines, of arms and ammunition on the south west coast with a view to their reaching Limerick and of a rising timed for Easter.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

The RIC chief was informed while Nathan and General Friend did agree to arrange for “armed pickets of 100 men to be nightly available at each of the four main barracks,” a contingency that seems to have provided no cover of any value, if it ever happened.” He was still so unconcerned he brought his sister-in-law Estelle and her children over for Easter. They were staying at the Under-Secretary’s Lodge in Phoenix Park (along with Dorothy Stopford, Alice Stopford Green’s niece. Mrs Nathan was to be trapped there and terrified for five days. General Friend notoriously went on leave.

The Royal Navy knowing more than the military and the Castle did take precautions although they were not effective. Here I particularly rely on Xander Clayton’s monumental book *The Aud.*[[18]](#footnote-18) Clayton who lives near Tralee has tracked down and published much original naval material, not least the secret orders from Admiral Bayly to the blockading cruiser squadron off the west and northern coasts of Ireland. These warned of “a rising which some say may be expected about Easter” and an arms landing.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The Navy’s alertness however was not so keen as to unmask the *Aud*. It was stopped early on Friday morning (21st) by *Setter 2* (or *Shatter* as Spindler wrote), an outpost trawler commanded by a civilian Aberdeen fisherman named John Donaldson. He and his, admittedly outnumbered, boarding party were tricked by Spindler, despite being several hours on the ship, even telling the supposed Norwegians that intelligence had them on the lookout. Drink was usefully provided. Spindler however realised then his mission was doomed.

This naval failure can be regarded as critical since it delayed knowledge of the ship’s German origins for twelve more hours. Indeed that certainty only came via the Fenit Base Officer, Lt. A.S. Holmes, after he visited the RIC barracks in Tralee. He, together with Commander Francis Spring-Rice RN (later 4th Lord Monteagle of Brandon and uncle of the gunrunner Mary Spring Rice), wired Queenstown to have the “Norwegian Steamer ‘*Aud’* […] rearrested and taken to port for examination” as they were sure Casement’s boat had landed from it.[[20]](#footnote-20) Details from the interrogations of Casement and Bailey filtered only gradually, and late, to Dublin Castle.

As I wrote in my book, *Roger Casement: The Black Diaries*, sufficient material to alert Dublin Castle fully was being provided by Casement and to a lesser extent by Bailey.

“During the evening Casement began a series of self-justificatory conversations. Indeed before the night was out, first one and then another RIC man, Head Constable John Kearney and District Inspector Ambrose Britten respectively, became his confessors. They were responsive listeners, according to Casement’s Notes to Counsel,[[21]](#endnote-1) indeed to such a degree he was concerned not to have their nationalist views made known in court. There was apparently little left out: he spoke of the rising, the arms ship, who held his papers in Germany (posterity calling again), even of the messages he had now sent to Dublin through the visitors arranged by Kearney. It is unlikely by morning there was anything except formal doubt as to his identity.

Whether the two officers were as sympathetic as he reckoned can perhaps be deduced by what they reported to Dublin. If even half this information had been relayed the mystery man would surely have been kept in Ireland. Had they had just been stringing Casement along with remarks such as those he attributed to Britten: “I pray to God it won’t end the way of Wolfe Tone…We would be with you to a man if there was a chance of success,” then they were masterful. Perhaps they toned down what they told their superiors because of the confessional nature of the whole night’s talking or perhaps they believed in what they told Casement and left much information out; perhaps nobody at the centre bothered to ask for any detail once it was decided he was to be moved on, and out of Ireland.”

Taking Casement (captured on Friday 21 April) to London on Saturday was however the final mistake that ensured the Rising on Monday was not snuffed out in advance. This and his execution also ensured he would not end up disgraced within the separatist movement, as happened to his ally and fellow rising-sceptic Bulmer Hobson.

Some questions have been answered here. Other remain for further research, but the mysteries lessen.

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1. See also “April-August 1916: Easter Rising and Casement’s two trials” (chapter 16), in Jeffrey Dudgeon, *Roger Casement: The Black Diaries - With a Study of his Background, Sexuality, and Irish Political Life,* 2002 (2nd edition 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bailey is simply called “a third man” on the Casement memorial plaque at Banna Strand. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Robert Monteith, *Casement's last adventure,* Chicago, 1932; revised with a foreword by Franz von Papen, Moynihan, Dublin 1953, p. 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See David Grant’s Irish Brigade website for many intriguing details on this band and their backgrounds – <http://www.irishbrigade.eu/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. NLI MS 5244 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Séamas Ó Síocháin, *Roger Casement: Imperialist, Rebel, Revolutionary*, Lilliput Press, Dublin, 2008, p. 438. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Karl Spindler, *The mystery of the Casement ship* – *by its Commander*, with a foreword by Florence O’Donohue, Anvil Books, Tralee, Co. Kerry 1965 (first published by Kribe Verlag, Berlin 1931), p. 202-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. David Ramsay, *Blinker Hall – Spymaster*, 2008*,* Spellmount, Stroud, p. 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Eunan O’Halpin, *The Missing Dimension: British Intelligence in Ireland 1914-21*, 1984, ch. 3, p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. BBC Radio 4 *Document* programme, *The 'Easter Rising' - the Dublin Rebellion of 1916*, broadcast 11 March 2013 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01r55x9> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. David Ramsay, *Blinker Hall – Spymaster*, 2008, p. 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. George Dangerfield, *The Damnable Question,* 1976, p. 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., p. 161 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., p. 160 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., p.160-1 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Leon Ó Broin, *Dublin Castle and the 1916 Rising: The Story of Sir Matthew Nathan*, 1966, Helicon, Dublin and 1970, and Spindler*,* p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Royal Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland (Cmd. 8279, 26 June 1916) with Minutes of Evidence and Appendix of Documents (Cmd. 8311), p. 7 of the latter.

    See also *Documents Relative to the Sinn Fein Movement*, XXIX (Cmd. 1108, 1921) - intercepted and decrypted transatlantic messages and letters to and from the German embassy in Washington, on Ireland and Casement, during and after the First World War. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Xander Clayton, *Aud*, 2007 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., pp. 68 and 69 refer to Bayly’s orders of 14 and 16 April 1916 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., p. 656 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)