

Tralee Whistleblower SPECIAL

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A TRIBUTE TO SIR ROGER CASEMENT (1864-1916)

EDITOR'S NOTE: *In this special edition, the Tralee Whistleblower attempts to provide an insight into Sir Roger Casement who on Good Friday, 1916 was arrested in Banna and was subsequently hanged for High Treason in London and supports the idea that a Summer School should be set up in his honour in Tralee.*



On Good Friday Morning, 1916 three men came ashore at Banna Strand some 6 miles to the west of Tralee. Within a number of hours, one of the men was apprehended by police from the nearby Ardferf village, brought to Tralee RIC station that afternoon and was arraigned under the supervision of District In-

spector John A. Kearney. Thus began the tragic journey of Sir Roger Casement to the gallows at Pentonville Prison in London.

Following his detention he was brought to Dublin, dispatched into the hands of the intelligence services, and subsequently spirited to the tower of London. He was tried for high treason at the Old Bailey and on June 29th, 1916 Casement was condemned to death by hanging. A subsequent appeal failed and Casement was informed that he was to be hanged the following day. His body was buried in quicklime at Pentonville Prison. In 1966 the remains of Roger Casement was repatriated to Ireland and were re-interred at Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin.

To those readers who have a meagre knowledge of Sir Roger Casement and his significance at that time in history it is perhaps useful to give a brief glance at the gentleman's curriculum vitae. For the more assiduous it is perhaps useful that they refer to works completed by Angus Mitchell and Donal O'Sullivan and T. Ryle Dwyer who have studied accounts in their various works (*see next page for details*).

Who was Roger Casement?

Roger Casement was born in Sandycove, Dublin into a Protestant family. Following the death of his mother he was reared by his uncle in Antrim. After school he joined a shipping company which provided him with his first experience of Africa which was being explored at the time by Livingstone among others. He became much in demand as a lecturer as a result of his travels in the Congo and was later appointed as a civil servant later becoming Consul to the Portuguese East Africa and later the Congo Free State and subsequently Capetown.

Following the Boer War he was transferred to Kinchasa in the Belgian Congo where his concern for the plight of the working classes became a major issue for him. He reported his investigations to the British Foreign Office which were such a matter of concern to King Leopold of Belgium that he invited Casement to Belgium in an effort to dissuade him from this work. A subsequent appointment to Brazil provided Casement with insight into the harsh treatment of its indigenous people in various rubber plantations which he reported as part of a Commission set up by the British. This led him to meet President Taft in Washington in an effort to secure the appointment of an American Consul to Inquitos.

Casement's final report on the atrocities won widespread praise and his outstanding work won him a knighthood in 1911. In 1913 Sir Roger resigned from the Consular Service on the grounds of ill-health. He returned to Ireland where he became one of the first members of the Irish Volunteers inspired by a hatred of colonialism. In July 1914 he went to the USA where he met John Devoy and through Devoy came into contact with the German Ambassador with a view to soliciting support for the arming of the Irish Volunteers.

In the USA he issued a statement saying that Irishmen should not join the British Army in the war against Germany. This apostasy progressed to the point that Casement travelled to Germany and became involved in a plot to smuggle some 20,000 rifles and an assortment of other weapons to assist in the planned Rising of Easter Sunday. However the ship carrying the weapons arrived in Tralee Bay on Holy Thursday, was not met by a pilot boat as anticipated. The ship which was disguised as a Norwegian timber ship was intercepted by the British and was finally scuttled when it arrived at Queenstown (now Cobh). Casement and his two companions, Monteith and Bailey made their way from a German submarine to Banna Strand on board a small craft. While his companions walked towards Tralee, Casement—being weak and sickly—remained in the shelter of a local ringfort and was later arrested. Bailey was arrested in Abbeydorney while Monteith was spirited to safety in the furthest recesses of Ballymac—not far from where the Earl of Desmond had lost his life in Elizabethan times.

Sir Roger Casement was taken to Tralee RIC Barracks and placed under the supervision of one District Inspector John A. Kearney. Being well-read, Kearney recognised the exhausted and sickly prisoner as Casement and treated him with the utmost hospitality. Not only this but he introduced his family to Sir Roger, had a local doctor—Dr. Shanahan - and a local Dominican priest—Fr. Ryan—both Republican sympathisers visit him. In so doing Kearney provided every opportunity for Casement to be apprehended from the barracks. Quite extra-ordinarily the local Republican leader at the time visited the RIC station with some 18 letters which incriminated him as being involved in the Volunteer movement and was subsequently arrested.

The Easter Rising took place the following Easter Monday. Casement was accompanied on foot and without handcuffs to Tralee Railway Station by a single policeman and was brought to Dublin. He was later brought to London, was charged with treason, condemned to death on June 29th - his co-accused Bailey having given incriminating evidence against Casement. On August 2nd, having failed on appeal, Casement was informed that he would be executed the following day. Having been received into the Catholic Church, he was hanged, his body was dumped in the prison. His remains were later repatriated and interred in Glasnevin Cemetery in 1966. .

Before his condemnation Casement made one of the most extraordinary speeches in Irish history (*see excerpts overleaf*).

Historical accounts reveal that the local volunteers were given every chance to free Sir Roger Casement. It is clear that District Inspector Kearney provided no obstacle for his taking from the Barracks and indeed on Good Friday night moved his family upstairs in anticipation of an incident that would have secured Casement's freedom. On his transfer to Tralee Railway Station, Casement was under no strict police supervision. It has been established that Casement sent word to the Volunteer leadership in Dublin that the Rising should not go ahead as German support was a failure. Nonetheless the Rising went ahead.

Sir Roger Casement was an international figure of huge stature. He passed through the hands of locals much like the sand of Banna Strand would do. The hospitality he received at Tralee RIC Station was the beginning of his tragic end at Pentonville Prison—this despite the appeals of many such as Sir Aurthur Conan Doyle, G.K. Chesterton and George Bernard Shaw. Sir Roger Casement's body now lies in Glasnevin in a simple grave.

The presiding judge at his trial commissioned Sir John Lavery to paint the scene (*see overleaf*). This was eventually completed in 1931 and although the property of the British government, it hangs in Kings Inn away from public view on loan from the British authorities. Only one known copy of the painting exists (*see below*).



As a footnote it would be remiss for this writer not to mention the case of the Black Diaries. These surfaced during the course of Casement's appeal and reputedly confirmed that he was a homosexual so as to weaken the resolve of advocates who pleaded for clemency for Casement. They were leaked to among others the Pope, President Taft and the Archbishop of Canterbury. It was clear while this was the placing of the cold hand of death on Casement by the British authorities, the diaries subsequent authentication in recent years merely confirm that the stellar patriot was a human like the rest of us.

CASEMENT SUMMER SCHOOL

Dr. Angus Mitchell of the University of Limerick recently provided an illuminating insight into the educational philosophy of Sir Roger Casement. This presentation was in the form of a lecture given in honour of the 30th anniversary of the foundation of Scoil Mhic Easmainn. As a direct result of this lecture the idea of a Summer School dedicated to the life and work of Sir Roger Casement was mooted. The *Tralee Whistleblower* suggests that such a concept is highly appropriate for many reasons—not least Casement's huge stature in Irish

TRIBUTE EDITION OF *TRALEE WHISTLEBLOWER* TO SIR ROGER CASEMENT WHO WAS ARRESTED AND BROUGHT TO TRALEE THIS DAY. GOOD FRIDAY, 93 YEARS AGO AND WAS LATER HANGED IN LONDON FOR HIGH TREASON

revolutionary history and his irredeemable concern for the marginalised and the oppressed internationally. The location of the Summer School would also go some way to address the imbalance of the statement by F.E. Smith at Casement's trial when he is reported by Mr. Mitchell as saying the people of Kerry should be applauded for displaying their loyalty to the Crown by helping to turn Casement over to the authorities. The time is not a moment too early for a Summer School in honour of our dead patriot Casement and the causes he cherished.



DRAMATIC CASEMENT TRIAL

Describing the tense scene in the court room at the conclusion of Casement's trial, the *New York Times* reported that 'a rumour went about the court that the jury had reached a verdict.

Almost at the same time a clergyman quietly stepped in through a side door. This was taken by the spectators as a sign that the jury had come to a death verdict, for it is custom to have a clergyman present in English Courts when the death sentence is pronounced....the justices resumed their places on a bench amid a tragic stillness...Casement entered with his jailers. Those who had been present from the start were startled by the pitiful change in his appearance. His bravely defiant air had given place to a sort of doze. Underneath his eyes dark rings had come since he had left the courtroom and his forehead was lined with deep furrows... he looked up suddenly and regarded the jury fixedly as the clerk asked 'How say you?' while the foreman in a loud voice replied 'Guilty!'



At that moment he seemed to be in a dream as if the verdict of death were something apart from him. But it was only for a moment. As soon as the echo of the foreman's words had died down Casement in the absolute silence that prevailed turned toward the well below him waving a hand at his counsel, while a sickly smile flitted across his pale face.'

Having been asked by the Chief Justice if he had anything to say before sentence was pronounced, Casement proceeded to address the court 'in a soft, quivering voice'

"My Lord Chief Justice, as I wish to reach a much wider audience than I see before me here, I intend to read all that I propose to say. What I shall read now is something I wrote more than twenty days

ago. I may say, my lord, at once, that I protest against the jurisdiction of this Court in my case on this charge, and the argument that I am now going to read is addressed not to this Court, but to my own countrymen. With all respect I assert this Court is to me, an Irishman, not a jury of my peers to try me in this vital issue for it is patent to every man of conscience that I have a right, an indefeasible right, if tried at all, under this Statute of high treason, to be tried in Ireland, before an Irish Court and by an Irish jury. This Court, this jury, the public opinion of this country, England, cannot but be prejudiced in varying degree against me, most of all in time of war. I did not land in England; I landed in Ireland. It was to Ireland I came; to Ireland I wanted to come; and the last place I desired to land in was England. But for the Attorney General of England there is only "England"—is no Ireland, there is only the law of England—no right of Ireland; the liberty of Ireland and of Irish is to be judged by the power of England. Yet for me, the Irish outlaw, there is a land of Ireland, a right of Ireland, and a charter for all Irishmen to appeal to, in the last resort, a charter that even the very statutes of England itself cannot deprive us of—nay, more, a charter that Englishmen themselves assert as the fundamental bond of law that connects the two kingdoms. From this Court and its jurisdiction I appeal to those I am alleged to have wronged, and to those I am alleged to have injured by my "evil example," and claim that they alone are competent to decide my guilt or my innocence. If they find me guilty, the statute may affix the penalty, but the statute does not override or annul my right to seek judgment at their hands. This is so fundamental a right, so natural a right, so obvious a right, that it is clear the Crown were aware of it when they brought me by force and by stealth from Ireland to this country. It was not I who landed in England, but the Crown who dragged me here, away from my own country to which I had turned with a price upon my head, away from my own countrymen whose loyalty is not in doubt, and safe from the judgment of my peers whose judgment I do not shrink from. I admit no other judgment but theirs. I accept no verdict save at their hands. I assert from this dock that I am being tried here, not because it is just, but because it is unjust. Place me before a jury of my own countrymen, be it Protestant or Catholic, Unionist or Nationalist, Sinn Feineach or Orangemen, and I shall accept the verdict and bow to the statute and all its penal ties. But I shall accept no meaner finding against me than that of those whose loyalty I endanger by my example and to whom alone I made appeal. If they adjudge me guilty, then guilty I am. It is not I who am afraid of their verdict; it is the Crown. If this be not so, why fear the test? I fear it not. I demand it as my right. My lord, I have done. Gentlemen of the jury, I wish to thank you for your verdict. I hope you will not take amiss what I said, or think that I made any imputation upon your truthfulness or your integrity when I spoke and said that this was not a trial by my peers. I maintain that I have a natural right to be tried in that natural jurisdiction, Ireland my own country, and I would put it to you, how would you feel in the converse case, or rather how would all men here feel in the converse case, if an Englishman had landed here in England and the Crown or the Government, for its own purposes, had conveyed him secretly from England to Ireland under a false name, committed him to prison under a false name, and brought him before a tribunal in Ireland under a statute which they knew involved a trial

before an Irish jury? How would you feel yourselves as Englishmen if that man was to be submitted to trial by jury in a land inflamed against him and believing him to be a criminal, when his only crime was that he had cared for England more than for Ireland?" [edited]

The *New York Times* (June 30th, 1916) reports: Having concluded his valedictory, he bowed low to the justices who at once donned their black caps. Casement stood rigid as the sentence of death was pronounced, his lips firmly compressed, his head thrown back. His eyelids twitched slightly as the Lord Chief Justice uttered the words 'hanged until dead', but that was all. A moment later he looked again into the well of the court, waving his hand at his women acquaintances and nodding with a smile that seemed to say "Don't worry about me".

In a final letter written by Casement in August 1916 he writes:

"It is a strange, strange fate, and now I stand face to face with death I feel just as if they were going to kill a boy - and my hands so free from blood and my heart always so compassionate and pitiful that I cannot comprehend how anyone wants to hang me."

Casement's hangman Ellis is reputed to have said of Casement that he was 'the bravest man it fell to my unhappy duty to execute'.



The Grave of Roger Casement, Glasnevin Cemetery, April 2009

From the song: 'Lonely Banna Strand'

'Twas in an English prison that they led him to his death.
'I'm dying for my country,' he said with his last breath.
He's buried in a prison yard far from his native land.
The wild waves sing his Requiem on lonely Banna Strand.

For further reading on Sir Roger Casement see:
Ryle Dwyer: *Tans, Terrors and Troubles: Kerry's Real Fighting Story 1913-1923* (2001)
Angus Mitchell: *Casement* (2003)
Donal J. O'Sullivan District Inspector John A. Kearney (2005)

