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DIARIES OF ROGER CASEMENTMemorandum by the Secretary of State for the  
Home Department and Lord Privy Seal and the  
the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations

Diaries kept by Roger Casement, which came into the possession of the police in connection with his trial for treason in 1916, have been in the custody of the Home Office since 1925. Successive Home Secretaries for the last thirty years have refused to say whether the diaries were or were not in existence or allow any access to them. The questions on which we now wish to consult our colleagues are:-

- (a) should the existence of the diaries now be disclosed; and
- (b) should research workers and journalists be allowed access to them.

2. The history of the diaries is set out in Annex A to this memorandum. They belong to the years 1903, 1910 and 1911, and were found by the police in a trunk handed over by Casement's landlord after his arrest in 1916. Typescript copies of the diaries were made at the time, and in 1922 a set of these copies came into the hands of a journalist, Mr. Singleton-Gates, who has recently published them in a book called "The Black Diaries". The New York edition of this book contains the diaries for 1903 and 1910, both of which contain indecent material indicating that Casement was a practising homosexual. A few copies of this edition have reached this country. A limited edition, published in Paris, is said to contain also one of the diaries for 1911 described in the introduction as "the cash register". It is possible that the book will also be published in this country.

3. The official policy of silence about the diaries was adopted, and has been adhered to in the face of increasing difficulties, in the hope of limiting controversy both about the character of Casement and about the use made of the diaries, and in the belief that if the existence of the diaries were acknowledged the Government would be compelled to allow access to them and would be accused by the Irish Government of further blackening Casement's name. In recent years this policy has exposed the Home Secretary to considerable criticism in and out of Parliament, and has not prevented a lively controversy about the authenticity of the diaries, which Irish nationalists believe to have been forged. It has been freely suggested that the policy of silence is designed to cover up evidence of the forgery. We believe that the publication of the diaries has removed the last justification for this policy and has provided a means of escape from a position which had become untenable; and we think that the Home Secretary must now admit that the diaries exist and are in his custody.

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4. If this is agreed, it is for consideration whether the Government should itself take the initiative in seeking to establish the authenticity of the diaries by appointing a committee of enquiry or should simply allow access to them by historians and others who can form their own conclusions. We do not think it would be possible simply to admit the existence of the diaries and refuse to do one or other of these things.

5. In our view a committee of enquiry would do no good and might do harm. It is unlikely to be possible to assemble a committee whose findings would be accepted by Irish nationalists; the committee might comment adversely on the use made of the diaries in 1916; and it might refuse to conclude categorically that the diaries are not forgeries.

6. We accordingly recommend that the diaries should be placed in the Public Record Office and that access to them should be allowed to bona fide research workers and journalists. [We do not think, however, that the relevant Home Office files should be made available, even to this limited extent. They belong to a class of documents which will not be opened to the public for 100 years after their creation, and though there is discretion under the Public Records Act, 1958, to allow individuals to have access to the files at any time, it is not proposed to exercise this discretion in relation to files about capital cases. Refusal to open the file may be regarded by the Irish nationalists as confirmation of their belief that there is something to hide, but the diaries speak for themselves and are likely to convince all but fanatics of their genuineness. The file shows that some official use was made of the diaries after Casement's conviction to prevent his being regarded by public opinion, particularly in America, as a martyr. This is already apparent from extracts from a Cabinet memorandum quoted by Mr. Montgomery Hyde, M.P. in the House of Commons on 3rd April, 1956, and reproduced in "The Black Diaries"; but to provide confirmation from official sources that the diaries were so used might, we think, do harm to Anglo-Irish relations.] We suggest that if it is decided to give limited access to the diaries a statement should be made in the House about their history in order, among other things, to refute the story which has gained some currency that they came into the hands of the police long before Casement's arrest, and that there was, therefore, ample opportunity for indecent matter to be interpolated in them. This statement might be on the lines of the draft at Annex B.

7. It is possible that the disclosure of the diaries will produce a protest from the Irish Republican Government. The Ambassador can, however, point out that for many years Her Majesty's Government have preserved a policy of silence in the face of great difficulty in their anxiety to do nothing detrimental to Anglo-Irish relations; that the hands of the Government have been forced by the publication of the diaries; and that it would be absurd either to continue this silence or to admit the existence of the originals but refuse to allow access to them.

Conclusion

8. We accordingly recommend:-

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- (i) that the existence of the original diaries should be admitted in a statement in the House before Easter on the lines of Annex B;
- (ii) that the diaries should be sent at once to the Public Record Office and made available to bona fide research workers and journalists authorised by the Home Secretary to have access to them; and
- (iii) that the relevant Home Office files should remain closed.

R.A.B.  
H.

13th March, 1959

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ANNEX A

HISTORY OF THE CASEMENT DIARIES

The documents described as the Casement diaries consist of five books:-

- (a) an Army book 153 (a field service pocket book);
- (b) a Letts' pocket diary and almanack for 1903;
- (c) a Dollards' office diary for 1910;
- (d) a Letts' desk diary for 1911;
- (e) a ledger containing accounts relating to dates in 1911.

The Army book contains a few jottings apparently relating to 1901 when Casement was H.M. Consul-General in the Congo. The Letts' Diary for 1903 also relates to Casement's work in the Congo and contains a few entries indicating his homosexual proclivities. The Dollards' Diary for 1910 and the Letts' Diary for 1911 both relate in part to Casement's investigation of the atrocities which were alleged to be committed against the natives of the Putumayo region of South America by the employees of the Peruvian Amazon Company. Both diaries contain indecent material interspersed among normal entries, that for 1911 in greater quantity than that for 1910. They leave no doubt that Casement was becoming increasingly obsessed by his perversion. The ledger is principally devoted to notes of personal expenditure, but also contains notes about homosexual activities and payments made to homosexual partners.

2. Casement was arrested in Ireland on 21st April, 1916, and arrived in London on 23rd April. On 25th April the landlord of his lodgings in Ebury Street handed over to the police, at their request, certain property which Casement had left in his charge in 1914. This property included a trunk in which the diaries were found. Typescript copies of the diaries were made at Scotland Yard for transmission to the Director of Public Prosecutions. The copying of those for 1911 was completed on 24th June.

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3. Casement was convicted on 29th June and the appeal was dismissed on 18th July. The next day the Cabinet considered the question of reprieve. They had before them memoranda by Sir Ernley Blackwell, then Assistant Under-Secretary of State at the Home Office, dated 15th July, 1916, in which he described the nature of the diaries and which contained the following passages:-

"There are obviously grave objections to any sort of official or even inspired publication of such facts while the man is waiting trial or appeal, or even waiting execution."

"So far as I can judge, it would be far wiser from every point of view to allow the law to take its course and by judicious means, to use these diaries to prevent Casement attaining martyrdom."

(The second passage was quoted by Mr. Montgomery Hyde in an adjournment debate in the House of Commons on 3rd April, 1956, and is reproduced in the recently published book "The Black Diaries".)

4. Rumours of Casement's depravity were by then already circulating in London. It appears from a Press report that before he landed in Ireland a story had been current that he had been arrested in Germany for an offence of indecency. The first Press reference to the diaries and their character appeared in the Daily Express the day after his conviction. There is no record on the Home Office papers of the diaries or the copies having been shown to anyone outside the Government service before Casement's trial. After the trial extracts were shown to two alienists, who were asked to express an opinion on the mental condition which they disclosed; the possibility of a reprieve on grounds of insanity was then under consideration. After the dismissal of the appeal a typescript copy was shown, on the Home Secretary's instructions, to Mr. (later Sir John) Harris, whose personal knowledge of Casement in the Congo the Archbishop of Canterbury had commended to the Home Secretary's attention. Either copies or the diaries themselves were also shown by Mr. (later Sir Basil) Thomson, Assistant Commissioner, Scotland Yard to the United States Ambassador, apparently at the Ambassador's request. The Ambassador was given photographs of two passages. Telegrams from the British Embassy in Washington, of which there are copies on the Home Office papers, suggest that the Embassy had copies or extracts from the diaries but did not refer to them until after Casement's execution. Five days after the execution the Embassy reported "We are using the journal, not for publication, but to warn politicians, the Press and the Church against running Casement as a martyr".

5. Casement's biographers have stated, on the authority of Casement's Counsel, Serjeant Sullivan, and his junior Counsel, Artemus Jones, that the Attorney-General offered copies of the diaries to the defence as a possible basis for a plea of insanity. The Home Office papers contain no reference to this.

6. After Casement's execution his solicitor pressed for the diaries to be handed over to the family, but was told categorically that "the prisoner's diaries and certain other papers which came into the hands of the police in connection with the criminal charge must be retained by them". Casement's executrix, Mrs. Parry, applied again in 1922 without success, but in 1924 obtained from the then Prime Minister, Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, a promise that the diaries should never be opened except by order of the Prime Minister of the day. Mr. Baldwin was advised by the Home Secretary in 1925 not to renew this pledge.

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7. In 1925 Mr. Singleton-Gates, then a journalist, proposed to publish a book containing bowdlerised extracts from the diaries. He has since claimed to have obtained typescript copies from "a person of some authority in London". He has never disclosed the name of this person, but it is believed to have been Sir Basil Thomson. He was seen by the then Home Secretary, Sir William Joynson Hicks, threatened with prosecution under the Official Secrets Acts and required to surrender those parts of his book dealing with the diaries and with the verbatim record of Casement's interrogation at Scotland Yard, of which he had also obtained possession. Neither the original copy of the diaries nor the record of the interrogation was asked for. Mr. Singleton-Gates has stated that a few days later he was shown the diaries themselves at Scotland Yard.

8. Mr. Ramsay MacDonald appears to have expressed a wish that the diaries should be in the custody of the Home Secretary, and after the Home Secretary's interview with Mr. Singleton-Gates the diaries were transferred to the Home Office, where they have remained. Since at least 1930 successive Home Secretaries have declined to say whether the diaries exist or not. After the war there was little interest in the subject until 1955, since when there have been several requests from authors and journalists for information about, or access to, the diaries. Questions have been asked in the House and the Government's policy has been questioned on the adjournment by Mrs. Montgomery Hyde. The interest has been maintained by two biographies of Casement and a stream of articles in the Press.

9. It was suggested as early as July, 1916, that the Government was circulating false information about Casement's character (by Mr. M.F. Doyle, an American barrister who had come over to assist in Casement's defence). About that time a note of the references in the diaries to Casement's visits to, and correspondence with, the Foreign Office was checked with the Foreign Office and found to be accurate. Since 1916 Irish nationalists have convinced themselves that the diaries were forged, either by representing as Casement's own a copy said to have been made by him of the diary of one of the persons whose activities he investigated in Putumayo, or by the interpolation of indecent material into a genuine diary. The first theory will have been demolished by the publication of the diaries, which both relate to the period before Casement went to South America and contained references to his activities in other places. The diaries have recently been submitted to examination by Dr. W.R. Harrison, Director of the South Wales and Monmouthshire Forensic Science Laboratory, an acknowledged handwriting expert, to see whether there is any evidence to support the theory of interpolation. Dr. Harrison reported:-

"I have compared the handwriting in the diaries and in the ledger with that of that attributed to Roger Casement in letters and documents in a Foreign Office file for 1911 and a Home Office file for 1916. In my opinion there is ample evidence to show that all the entries in the diaries and in the ledger were made by the person who wrote the documents attributed to Roger Casement referred to above."

Dr. Harrison has stated, however, that some of the entries in the diaries were added or amended at a later date by Casement himself. These entries include both ordinary and indecent material.

**SECRET**ANNEX BDRAFT STATEMENT

For some thirty years successive Home Secretaries of both Parties have thought it right, for reasons which were fully explained to the House in the debate on 3rd May, 1956, to refuse to say whether the Casement diaries exist or not. With the publication of the diaries abroad the policy of silence has ceased to serve any useful purpose, and I am now able to say that the original diaries are in existence.

The diaries consist of five books:-

1. a field service note book containing a few jottings apparently relating to Casement's service in the Congo in 1901 and 1902;
2. a Letts' pocket diary and almanack for 1903;
3. a Dollards' office diary for 1910;
4. a Letts' desk diary for 1911-
5. a ledger containing accounts relating to dates in 1911.

Casement was brought to London under arrest on 23rd April, 1916. On 25th April the landlord of his lodgings in Ebury Street handed over to the police at their request property which Casement had left in his charge in 1914. Among this property was a trunk in which the diaries were found.

The diaries were retained at Scotland Yard until 1925, since when they have been in the custody of the Home Office.

I propose now to place them in the Public Record Office and to allow research workers and others with legitimate reasons for studying them to have access to them.

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