

Monteith, Robert

by Bridget Hourican

Monteith, Robert (1879–1956), soldier and nationalist, was born 1 March 1879 in Newtownmountkennedy, Co. Wicklow, one of nine children of Joseph Monteith, a protestant farmer from Cavan, and Mary Monteith (née Dillion). Robert went to school locally and at 16 left to join the British army, giving his age as 18. He served in the Royal Horse Artillery in India, and then fought in the Boer war, where he was at the relief of Ladysmith. He returned to India briefly (1902) before being discharged from the army with the rank of sergeant-major and returning to Ireland (1903) to work in the ordnance survey, first in Louth and then in Dublin. In 1909 he married (against the wishes of his family) Mollie McEvoy, a catholic, an actress, and a widow with three children, whose husband had been murdered in Quebec in 1907. Her father, Charles Burke, a Fenian, had earlier been murdered in Dublin and his body recovered from the North Wall docks, when she was still a girl.

On 25 November 1913 Monteith attended the meeting at the Rotunda in which the Irish Volunteers were established, and immediately joined up. At the outbreak of war in 1914 he was ordered by the war office to start recruiting for Ireland and given the rank of captain. He refused and was dismissed from his post in the ordnance survey and ordered to leave Dublin. After working briefly in Limerick as a drill instructor for the Volunteers, he was appointed by Tom Clarke (qv) to go to Berlin to assist Sir Roger Casement (qv) in recruiting an Irish brigade from among the Irish prisoners-of-war, although Casement had asked for someone with at least the rank of colonel, who could deal as an equal with the German officers. Monteith went first to New York to settle his family, and arrived in Berlin in October 1915, finding Casement ill and bed-ridden.

The two developed a close working relationship as Monteith was modest, able, and responsible, and revered Casement. He managed to form the Irish prisoners into a unit of fifty-six men whom he trained in machine-gun use. However, as foreseen, he had difficulties with the German general staff, who were now against deploying an Irish brigade. On 3 December 1915 they asked Monteith's unit to join the German army for the invasion of Egypt. About half the men agreed. In February 1916 the order for arms for the rising came from John Devoy (qv). The general staff agreed to send 20,000 rifles on the *Aud*, but refused to send any men. Casement decided the rising was doomed and prepared to go himself to counsel against it. On 12 April he, Monteith, and Sgt Beverley (later Bailey) of the abortive Irish Brigade set out by submarine. On 21 April the three arrived at Fenit pier in Tralee Bay to discover that neither the *Aud* nor the pilot boat they were expecting from the Irish side were there. They managed to land in Banna Strand, with Monteith pulling Casement to safety. He was later to say: 'Had I known the end of the chapter, I would surely have let him sleep into eternity in the foaming water on Banna Strand' (*Casement's*

last adventure, 154). After hiding Casement, who was too ill to travel, Monteith and Beverley journeyed to Tralee to contact Austin Stack (qv). Both Casement and Beverley were captured, and Monteith spent the next six months hiding in Kerry, Limerick, and Cork, where he was nursed through malaria by Capuchin friars, before travelling back to his family in New York (December), working in disguise as a fireman and coal trimmer on a merchant vessel.

He spent the next few years working in a succession of miserable jobs with a brief respite when de Valera (qv) appointed him organiser of the American Association for Recognition of the Irish Republic (1920–22). His job was selling bonds, first on Staten Island, where he sold \$48,000 worth, and then in Albany, where he sold \$45,000 worth. The national chairman, Thomas Gannon, said he was the best worker he ever had. Monteith then moved to Detroit, where he worked for various motor companies, eventually rising to the position of foreman in Ford, though he spent some years during the depression breaking up and remending roads. He retired in 1943, having bought a farm in Michigan. In May 1947 he returned with his wife to Ireland and settled in Kilcoole. De Valera tried to dissuade him from returning, stressing that it was hard to transplant the oak at 70, and he proved prescient. Monteith stayed six years in Ireland and saw Casement's boat retrieved at Banna Strand in 1950, but his health was poor and he was disappointed by the reception of his book, *Casement's last adventure* (1953). It received little proper advertising and did not sell well. He returned to Michigan in 1953 and died there on 18 February 1956. He left two daughters, two stepdaughters, and one stepson.

A monument to Casement and Monteith, erected at the fiftieth anniversary of the rising, stands at Banna Strand. Robert Monteith's papers are in the Florence Monteith Lynch collection in Ryan Library, Iona College, New York; they contain Monteith's diary for 7 October 1915–10 April 1916.

Robert Monteith, *Casement's last adventure* (1932; new ed. 1953); *Ir. Times*, 22 Feb. 1956; Florence Lynch Monteith, *Mystery man at Banna Strand* (1959); B. Reid, *The lives of Roger Casement* (1976); George Dangerfield, *The damnable question* (1977); Declan Kiberd (ed.), *1916 rebellion handbook* (1998); Reinhard R. Doeries, *Prelude to the Easter rising* (2000)