

Casement, Sir Roger David

by Michael Laffan

Casement, Sir Roger David (1864–1916), humanitarian and Irish nationalist, was born 1 September 1864 in Sandycove, near Dublin, youngest child among one daughter and three sons of Roger Casement, retired army officer, and Anne Casement (née Jephson). His elder brother was Thomas Hugh Casement (qv). He was brought up as a member of the Church of Ireland, although his catholic mother arranged for her children to be baptised secretly in her own faith. After her death (1873) the family moved to Co. Antrim, where Roger was educated in the Ballymena diocesan school. When his father died (1877) the children were left in straitened circumstances and became wards in chancery. Roger was cared for by relatives in Antrim and Liverpool. As an adolescent he admired and identified with Irish rebels of the past, and he remained a romantic idealist all his life.

Africa At the age of 15 Casement began work as a clerk in the Elder Dempster shipping company, and four years later this led to a post as purser on one of the company's ships bound for West Africa. From 1884 to 1891 he lived in the Congo, which became a personal colony of the Belgian king, Leopold II. His occupations included those of surveyor, explorer, and (briefly) assistant in a Baptist missionary station. From 1892 to 1895 he was employed as a surveyor and customs official in the Niger Coast protectorate, after which – because of his extensive African experience – he was absorbed into the British consular service. Joseph Conrad was impressed by him when they met in the Congo, remarking that ‘he could tell you things! Things I have tried to forget, things I never did know’ (Reid, 14).

Casement was a tall, handsome man of considerable charm. During his time in Africa he was efficient and energetic, he was ‘brave, diplomatic and usefully observant’ (Sawyer, 26), but he was also frequently bored, irritable, and depressed. He suffered from malaria, jaundice, and other illnesses, and throughout adult life was often debilitated. He veered rapidly from enthusiasm to anger and despair, showing signs of bipolar disorder. He hated routine and disliked most of the places where he lived. Early in his career he was an imperialist, believing that colonialism was a force for enlightenment and that it eliminated abuses such as slavery. He supported the British war in South Africa at least partly because of the Boers’ maltreatment of the black population. (In later years he became a harsh critic of British policy towards the Boers.) He could be snobbish, and at times displayed some of the racist views characteristic of the period, but he liked Africans and they reciprocated his affection. He was a warm-hearted man who sided psychologically with the underdog or the oppressed. On two separate occasions the consular service provided him, improbably, with a challenging role in which he could display his initiative, independence, and courage.

After serving in Luanda and Lourenço Marques (later Maputo), Casement went back to the Congo as British consul. The turning point in his career came in 1903 when he was ordered to investigate reports of atrocities carried out by Leopold's agents. He rented a steamboat and travelled to remote areas of the Upper Congo, remarking that he was ceasing to be a consul; he had become a criminal investigator (Ó Siocháin & O'Sullivan, 37). In the course of his journey he encountered plentiful evidence that the collection of rubber was associated with forced labour, extortionate taxes, mutilation, murder and depopulation; he observed colonialism in its most brutal form.

In February 1904 Casement's report on the Congo was published as a sixty-page government white paper. It was well structured, solidly factual, and detached in tone – in contrast to the intemperate and emotional style that characterised much of his correspondence. It was a formidable indictment of a system based on oppression and cruelty. He was aggrieved when the Foreign Office watered down his original version, describing the final result as 'cooked and garbled' (Inglis, 86), and felt that he was inadequately supported against Leopold's counter-attack. Nonetheless his findings were confirmed by an international commission appointed by the king, and his report was one of several pressures that led the Belgian government to take over the administration of the Congo in 1908. His achievements were recognised by his inclusion as CMG in Edward VII's 1905 birthday honours list, but this gave him no satisfaction; he never opened the parcel containing the insignia of his award. More significantly, they also led him to establish a close working relationship with E. D. Morel and other critics of colonial abuses.

South America Partly for reasons of ill health Casement interrupted his consular career in 1904–6 to spend eighteen months in Ireland and Britain, and for most of this time he was seconded without pay. In Ireland, as abroad, he was peripatetic; he had no home or base, and he stayed in lodgings, hotels, and the houses of friends. He became a committed Irish nationalist who supported the ideals of 'Irish Ireland', and in particular the revival of the Irish language. He excused his continuing membership of the consular service, which he loathed, by the fact that he could (and often did) give away much of his salary. While he was parsimonious in small matters he was always extravagantly generous in his financial assistance to individuals or groups that won his sympathy – such as wayward members of his family, Morel's Congo Reform Association, and an Irish-speaking community in Co. Galway.

He was a difficult subordinate and the Foreign Office was reluctant to reemploy him, but in 1906 he rejoined the consular service and took up the first of a series of postings in Brazil. These culminated in his appointment as consul-general in Rio de Janeiro. Although he continued to be efficient in the conduct of his duties, he became increasingly frustrated, and disliked the Brazilian people. During this 'exile' his commitment to Irish causes deepened. But he was aroused by a new challenge: he was directed to investigate reports of atrocities in the region of the Putumayo, a remote tributary of the Amazon. In its collection of rubber the Peruvian Amazon Co.

was accused of exploiting not only local Amerindians, but also some British subjects from Barbados. This new task seemed to replicate his experiences in the Congo.

In August 1910 Casement joined a commission of inquiry established by the company. Once more he was a diligent and persevering investigator, interviewing victims and witnesses, keeping detailed records, and taking photographs. He discovered that many of the indigenous population of the Putumayo were treated as slaves, and that practices such as flogging, rape, starvation, mutilation, and murder were commonplace. He wrote a second report for the Foreign Office, which he completed in March 1911, and then returned for another visit to the Amazon. His report attracted widespread publicity and praise when it was eventually published, but in practice it did little to improve the conditions of the inhabitants of the Putumayo. Ultimately they were saved not by the intervention of foreign consuls and governments but by the collapse of the market for wild rubber.

Casement had become a dissident within the consular service and (despite his graceful acknowledgment) was embarrassed by the award of a knighthood in 1911. He became even more committed to Irish causes and advocated a fully independent Ireland – which he believed could be achieved with German assistance. In August 1913 he retired at last from the Foreign Office. Until then he was better known abroad than at home, having spent more than thirty years in Britain, Africa, and South America; only now, aged almost 49, did he begin to play a significant role in Irish affairs.

Nationalist and rebel At first Casement tried to win over Ulster protestants to Irish nationalism, and his predictable failure threw him into one of his many fits of depression (although to the end of his life he persisted in his belief that unionists and nationalists could join forces). But the formation of the Irish Volunteers in November 1913 provided him with a new role and a new crusade. He became a member of their provisional committee and travelled around the country, organised paramilitary units, made speeches, and relished what he described as intrigue and gross sedition. He believed that not merely would the creation of a Volunteer force strengthen the hand of Irish nationalists, but it would also provide the Irish people with much-needed discipline.

Casement took the initiative in the Volunteers' most spectacular exploit, the Howth gun-running of July 1914. In contrast to the inactivity displayed by most members of the IRB, he and a small number of friends decided to follow the example of the Ulster Volunteers and to import guns from Continental Europe. Together with Erskine Childers (qv), Alice Stopford Green (qv), Bulmer Hobson (qv), and a few others, he organised the purchase of 1,500 rifles and ammunition in Belgium and their transportation to Ireland. Some of these weapons were used two years later in the Easter rising.

Casement was always impatient and impetuous, and by the time that the arms were delivered to Howth he had already arrived in the US with the aim of raising funds for the Volunteers. The success of the gun-running made him a hero among Irish-Americans, but the outbreak of the first world war a week later soon distracted attention from Irish affairs. The results of his campaign were disappointing. He wrote an incautious letter to the *Irish Independent* in which he claimed that Ireland's real enemy was Britain and not Germany, thereby ruling out his return to Ireland. Instead he travelled to Berlin in October 1914 as the envoy of Irish-American leaders. He persuaded the German government to declare that if its forces landed in Ireland they would do so as liberators. Later he had a friendly interview with Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg – but he was already accustomed to the company of the powerful, having met King Leopold in Brussels and President Taft in Washington. His actions disconcerted the British authorities, and he was flattered by reports that a substantial sum of money would be paid in return for information leading to his capture.

Otherwise the eighteen months he spent in Germany were a failure. He tried to induce captured Irish prisoners of war to change sides and to join an 'Irish brigade' which would support the central powers by liberating Ireland – or, alternatively, Egypt. His methods were clumsy and the response was disillusioning: he secured only fifty-six recruits from a total of about 2,300 prisoners. Casement's communications with friends and allies in Ireland, Britain, and the US were equally inept. He encouraged the Germans to assist an Irish rebellion but he became dismayed by what he saw as their inadequate commitment, describing their plans (almost prophetically) as 'practically three men in a boat to invade a kingdom' (Reid, 335). He denounced them with the same fervour with which he had earlier abused Belgians, Brazilians, Americans, Irish unionists, home rulers, and various others. His health was wretched, and he was often lonely and depressed.

Casement believed that an Irish insurrection would be crushed unless it received substantial assistance from Germany, and when it became clear that adequate help would not be forthcoming he decided to travel to Ireland and try to prevent the planned rebellion from taking place. The Germans obligingly sent him there by submarine, and it was intended that he would arrive on Good Friday, at the same time as a ship carrying a modest supply of arms. The two vessels failed to rendezvous in Tralee Bay, but Casement, accompanied by Robert Monteith (qv) and Daniel Bailey, set off for the shore in a dinghy. It capsized, and Casement landed on Banna Strand ill, drenched, and exhausted. He hid and waited for his companions to return with assistance, but was soon captured. He persevered with his original intentions, and while under arrest he tried to send a message to Dublin, warning that the rebellion should be aborted. He was brought to London, and during his interrogation in Scotland Yard on Easter Sunday asked to be allowed to communicate with the rebel leaders to persuade them to call off the insurrection. This was not permitted.

After the suppression of the Easter rising Casement was tried for treason in the Old Bailey in June 1916. The case against him was based on a statute of 1351 which, in translation from the original Norman French, defined treason as 'levying war against the king or being adherent to the king's enemies in his realm, giving them aid and comfort in the realm or elsewhere'. He was accused of having tried to recruit Irish prisoners of war to form an Irish brigade which would fight the British, and of having participated in a German expedition to Ireland. His counsel, A. M. Sullivan (qv), argued that any treason of which he was guilty had taken place *outside* the realm, but this plea was not allowed. Sullivan also failed in his more reasonable effort to link Casement's actions with the plans for rebellion made by the Ulster Volunteers – in which they had been supported by F. E. Smith, who was now attorney general and counsel for the prosecution. Neither side mentioned the fact that Casement had landed in Ireland in an effort to prevent the rising. The prosecution remained silent because such evidence would complicate its case for treason, and the defence because Casement did not wish to repudiate the rebels. In any case, he was obviously guilty of treason while in Germany. Among the witnesses were some of the prisoners of war whose loyalty he had tried to subvert and who had (foolishly or cynically) been returned by the Germans as part of a prisoner-exchange.

After a trial lasting four days the jury took less than an hour on 29 June to declare Casement guilty. Following an old Irish tradition he made an eloquent speech from the dock. He ridiculed the 1351 statute, claimed that he should be judged only by an Irish jury (particularly since he had landed in Ireland rather than in Britain), praised the Ulster Volunteers, and argued that Irishmen should fight for their freedom at home rather than abroad. His knighthood was cancelled the day after his conviction. An appeal against his sentence was rejected on 24 July, and Casement was hanged on 3 August 1916, a day after he had been received into the catholic church. He was buried in Pentonville jail, and his remains were returned to Ireland only in February 1965. After an elaborate state funeral they were reburied in Glasnevin cemetery.

The diaries Even before Casement's trial British officials circulated portions of diaries, supposedly written by him, in which the author described homosexual encounters with young men and adolescents. They contained numerous accounts of partners' physical details and of payments made. Their circulation to journalists and to influential figures in Ireland, Britain, and the US was designed to blacken his reputation and to undermine any movement for clemency. In the probable event of his execution they would also help to prevent his being viewed as a martyr. The tactic succeeded in the first of these objectives. At a time when homosexual tastes and practices were widely loathed, several among those who were shown the diaries chose not to involve themselves in the appeal for a reprieve.

Over many decades some of Casement's supporters claimed that the diaries were forged. There were strong arguments in favour of such a view: none of his friends and acquaintances suspected he was a homosexual; accounts of the diaries' discovery were inconsistent; the 'black' or compromising diaries related to the years

in which he made his two river journeys, when his movements were uniquely well recorded; and some of the entries for 1911 indicate rash behaviour at a time when Casement was under constant surveillance by his enemies.

On the other hand it was argued that the diaries were preserved carefully by the British government (although access to them was denied until 1959), and that this would have been self-defeating if they were forgeries; F. E. Smith clearly believed they were genuine and offered them to Casement's counsel for inspection – an offer which was wisely declined; the diaries contained inconsistencies (such as criticism of homosexuality) which seemed to weaken their impact, and which a forger might sensibly have avoided; the sheer volume of material was superfluous, increasing the risk of incriminating errors; and any forgery had to be carried out in a hurry, since there had been no need to produce the diaries until Casement was captured a mere five weeks before his trial.

Eventually in 2002 scientific examination vindicated their authenticity to general (although not universal) satisfaction. But in contrast to the long-standing disagreement over whether the diaries were genuine, the unscrupulous use that was made of them in 1916 – to smear the reputation of a condemned man and thereby help ensure the failure of his appeal against his death sentence – has met with nothing but embarrassment and distaste.

The diaries have provoked understandable controversy, but this cannot obscure Casement's importance. He was a humanitarian who fought with bravery and determination against the enslavement of indigenous peoples in the Congo and Amazonia. He was the principal organiser of the Howth gun-running, without which the Easter rising might not have taken place. Despite his attempts to prevent what he believed would be a doomed insurrection, he was also the last victim of the executions that followed the Easter rising, and thereby became a nationalist martyr.

Brian Inglis, *Roger Casement* (1973); B. L. Reid, *The lives of Roger Casement* (1976); Roger Sawyer, *Casement, the flawed hero* (1984); Reinhard R. Doerries, *Prelude to the Easter rising: Roger Casement in imperial Germany* (2000); W. J. McCormack, *Roger Casement in death* (2002); Angus Mitchell (ed.), *Sir Roger Casement's heart of darkness: the 1911 documents*, IMC (2003); Seamas Ó Siocháin and Michael O'Sullivan (ed.), *The eyes of another race: Roger Casement's Congo report and 1903 diary* (2003); Mary E. Daly (ed.), *Roger Casement in Irish and world history* (2005)