



ROGER CASEMENT

# Single minded

Born in Dublin and schooled in Ballymena, Sir Roger Casement had the history of Ireland at his fingers' ends, writes **Donal Fallon**

**O**F Roger Casement, Bulmer Hobson would recall that “in over 50 years I have met many of the well-known figures of our time. I have known no one who was more single minded, and more unselfishly devoted to the causes he believed in.”

Born in Sandycove in Dublin in September 1864, he was the son of Captain Roger Casement, a veteran of the Regiment of Dragoons who had served in the 1842 Afghan campaign. Casement's father would sell his commission in 1848, and biographer Angus Mitchell has noted that “stories relate of how he held strong Fenian sympathies, identified with the Paris communards, and expressed beliefs in the principles of universal republicanism”.

By the time Casement was only 13, both of his parents were dead, and from this young age he and his siblings were dependent on supportive relatives such as their uncle John, who lived near Ballycastle, Co Antrim.

Casement was educated at Ballymena Diocesan School, where he excelled as a capable student who developed a keen interest in poetry. But in 1912, when approached by its headmaster for a financial donation, Casement complained of learning little of Ireland there, and outlining a belief that the educational system should be “designed to build up a country from within, by training its youth to know, love and respect their own land before all other lands.”

Regardless of school curriculum, his own passions and interests led him to learn all he could of Irish history and culture. Ada MacNeill, a contemporary of the young Casement, remembered walking endlessly among the Glens of Antrim with him, and that “Roger had the history of Ireland at his fingers' ends”.

Young Roger's existence was nothing if not nomadic, and from Ulster he was destined for Liverpool, where he secured his first job as a clerk with the Elder Dempster Shipping Company, though as Stephanie Millar has noted, “Office work upset Casement and so he became a pursuer



**Donal Fallon photographed beside a monument on Parnell Square to mark Rotunda Rink, the place where the Irish Volunteers were formed.** DAMIEN EAGERS

on board the SS Bonny. It was his short time with Elder Dempster that initiated his consuming love of Africa.”

From 1884, Casement was working in the Congo for the International African Association, which has been described as an “anti-slave-trade front group” of the Belgian King Leopold II, who envisioned himself as an Empire builder. In spite of this, Casement would later come to detail the “wholesale oppression and shocking mismanagement” in the Congo on the part of King Leopold, having joined the British Foreign Office and being appointed British Consul in the eastern part of French Congo in August 1901.

Casement's report on King Leopold's gross mishandling of the Congo has been described by Michael

Laffan as “a formidable indictment of a system based on oppression and cruelty”. Published in 1904, the Casement Report proved crucial in mobilising international forces which ultimately forced Leopold to relinquish personal holdings in the region. Casement would later detail abuses against Putumayo Indians in Peru, and he was awarded a Knighthood in 1911, something which “turned him into an internationally respected figure and a household name throughout the empire”.

A member of the Gaelic League from 1904, he became increasingly involved in nationalist life in Ireland in the years that followed. He was present in October 1913 at an important meeting in Antrim, which aimed to mobilise Ulster Protestants against the anti-Home Rule sentiment in the northern province, which was being actively fostered by the Ulster Volunteer Force. Several hundred people listened to him denounce that movement, stating that “the enemy they are being led against is no enemy at all; in very truth he is their own brother.” Like Alice Milligan, Captain Jack White and other contemporaries, he demonstrated clearly that there was another Ulster Protestant tradition in the politics of the time.

Much of the discourse around Casement, both within academia and in a broader sense, has centred on the so-called ‘Black Diaries’, copies of which were circulated during his trial to show “sexual degeneracy”

on his part. The contested authenticity of these documents has dominated Casement studies.

Yet beyond this, he is also studied as an important critic of Western imperialism. As Colm Tóibín has noted, “While his bones were laid to rest in Glasnevin in 1965... it is likely that his legacy will remain turbulent and open to debate.”



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**Far left: Roger Casement's infamous ‘Black Diaries’.**

**Above left: Casement's last letter to his sister Nina, July 1916.**

IRISH MILITARY ARCHIVES

**Above: a letter from Casement to Captain Hans Boehm, during Casement's stay in Germany in 1915.**

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**Main: Roger Casement, by artist Sarah Purser.**



The boat (inset) Roger Casement used to come ashore at Banna Strand on Good Friday in April 1916. IRISH MILITARY ARCHIVE

# Casement's final voyage

His dalliance with the Germans and the ill-fated journey of the Aud led to the hangman's rope, writes **John de Lacy**

**O**N All Saints Eve 1914, Sir Roger Casement arrived in Berlin. He had travelled from America, via Kristiania (now Oslo) and has been variously described as an ambassador, emissary and representative of the Revolutionary Directory of Clan na Gael in New York.

He came with a letter of introduction from Heinrich von Bernstorff, the German Ambassador in Washington, to the Imperial German Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, and a shopping list.

John Devoy the Clan na Gael leader in the US, claimed the supply of arms and a number of capable officers from Germany would "make a good start", towards an insurrection in Ireland. Official German recognition of the Independence movement in Ireland was also requested, as was the raising of an Irish Brigade from Irish prisoners of war.

Casement was not fully successful in completing these objectives. Germany did finally consent to send an arms shipment to Ireland; it was however, based on the insurrection plans submitted by Joseph Plunkett. Casement's agreement to return to Ireland with the arms is somewhat ambivalent.

On 20 June 1915, Casement wrote to Joseph McGarrity, a senior Irish republican in America, regarding his failure to raise an effective Irish Brigade (of the 2,200 Irishmen in Limburg POW camp, just 56 signed up): "without the Brigade there is nothing between us [Casement and the German government]... I tried all I

could... we have failed... let me go back."

However, shortly before he left Germany, Casement wrote to Count Georg von Wedel, claiming he was travelling under duress, the mission was at odds with his, "reason, judgement and intelligence".

To von Wedel, Casement explained: "I had always been greatly opposed to any attempted revolt in Ireland unless backed up with strong foreign military help." Casement did suffer regularly from both physical illness and depression during his stay in Germany, as witnessed

by his comrade Robert Monteith in the spring of 1916.

By this time Casement's only attachment to Germany was his concern for the members of the Irish Brigade left behind in Germany; his final letter to the German Chancellor bears

witness to his concern. It could be argued that he was privately happy to leave Germany, clandestinely seizing this opportunity to prevent what he considered a futile insurrection. In a letter to his sister after his capture he claimed: "When I landed in Ireland that morning... I was happy for the first time for over a year."

Casement, Monteith and Daniel Julian Bailey, (alias Beverley) departed Wilhelmshaven on 12 April 1916, on the submarine U-20. The SMS Libau, masquerading as the neutral Norwegian ship Aud, sailed on 9 April, from Lubeck, carrying 20,000 rifles, 10 machine guns and over a million rounds of assorted ammunitions.

The objective of the mission was for Casement's party to

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## Fateful voyage

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rendezvous with the Aud one sea mile north-west of the most northerly of the Blasket Islands between 20 and 23 April. The Irish Volunteers were to supply a pilot to take the Aud into Fenit and disperse the cargo.

The journey was ill-fated; after 36 hours sailing, the U-20 had to return to Heligoland for repairs and the three Irishmen were transferred to U-19. The tragedy of this enterprise was that due to a combination of circumstances the Irish pilot never made the rendezvous with the Aud or the U-19.

Early on 21 April, Casement and his comrades rowed two miles in a small boat from the U-19 to Banna Strand. They capsized twice, and would have drowned were it not for the foresight of Monteith's request for lifejackets and the strength of Bailey and Monteith in rescuing Casement. The three half-drowned, exhausted and hungry men made their way inland. Bad luck dogged the party; Monteith recalled that they were observed by a local girl, Mary Gorman. Their boat was discovered by farmer John McCarthy and the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) at Ardfert was informed.

The subsequent RIC search resulted in the arrest of Casement at McKenna's Fort with incriminating evidence about his person. Bailey and Monteith had walked into Tralee, trying to get assistance from local volunteers. Bailey was captured and turned King's evidence, but Monteith managed to evade capture and returned to America. The Aud was captured, her captain, Karl Spindler, scuttled her in the approaches to Cork Harbour on 22 April.

The 1916 Proclamation contains the clause: 'supported... by gallant allies in Europe', this oblique reference to Germany was repugnant to millions of British subjects. The manifestation of that indignation would be suffered by Sir Roger Casement as he was hanged for treason on 3 August 1916, in Pentonville jail, the last of those executed following the Easter Rising.

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John de Lacy photographed in the Military Archives.  
MARK CONDREN



AMONG PRISONERS OF WAR IN GERMANY, 1914

Roger Casement (white suit) walking freely among Irish prisoners of war in Germany in his attempt to recruit them to come home.



PRENTONVILLE PRISON, LONDON, 1916

Casement is escorted to the gallows of Pentonville Prison in London after he was found guilty of treason. He was later hanged. GETTY

ON 9 September 1914, the seven men who would ultimately be remembered as the seven signatories of the Proclamation attended a secret meeting at the Gaelic League headquarters at 25 Parnell Square. The seven were among those who determined that an armed rising against Britain would be staged before the end of World War I. Planning began in earnest, with responsibilities for planning being divided amongst the 'leaders'. Joseph Plunkett, the youngest of the signatories at 28, was chief military strategist.

According to his sister Geraldine, who acted as a messenger during the Rising, Plunkett 'probably got more fun out of the action than the others did', perhaps as a result of the chronic ill-health he experienced for much of his life. Somewhat ironically, it was his poor health which assisted Plunkett in playing such a high-profile role in the Rising.

In addition to his role as military strategist, Plunkett also travelled to Germany to join Roger Casement and assist him in his efforts to raise an Irish Brigade and garner German support for the insurrection. Plunkett was chosen as he possessed the necessary credentials for such a trip during wartime. Needing warmer climates for his health, Plunkett travelled widely with his mother in 1911-12, spending time in Italy, Sicily, Malta and Algiers.

With this cover, Plunkett set off in March 1915 on what was a circuitous route to Berlin, travelling through Spain, Italy and Switzerland.

Once in Germany he met with Casement, a former member of the British Foreign Office, who had travelled from America, funded by Clan na Gael under the leadership of John Devoy. Arriving in Berlin on 31 October 1914, Casement's

# Seeking aid from the Kaiser

Emma Lyons on Roger Casement and Joseph Plunkett's undercover operations in Germany



mission to Germany had three basic aims:

1. To secure German help for Ireland;
2. To educate the German people about Ireland's situation so as to gain support for the cause;
3. To raise an Irish Brigade from Irish Prisoners of War who had been captured during the war.

In his bid to achieve these aims, Casement travelled secretly — in the guise of an American, 'Mr Hammond' — to the German headquarters on the Western Front between 17 and 19 November. There, he met with senior representatives, including Count von Lüttichau of the General Staff and Wilhelm von Stumm, head of the Political Department at the German Foreign Office.

While Casement had some success, convincing the German government to declare that,

should their forces land in Ireland, they would do so as liberators, much of his time in late 1914 was spent distracted by the British authorities' efforts to discredit and capture him. This led John Devoy to comment on the success of the above aims as follows: 'Casement did his best in all these things, but did the first ineffectively, succeeded admirably in the second, and failed badly in the third'. Casement recruited only 56 of a possible 2,300 Irish prisoners of war for his Irish Brigade.

These views were not unique to Devoy, and it was for that reason that Plunkett travelled to Germany. It was hoped that he could negotiate with the German Foreign Office and convince them to support the planned Rising. Although he disagreed with Casement's belief that an armed German force was necessary for its success, Plunkett nonetheless

worked with Casement on 'The Ireland Report', an overly-ambitious plan for the Rising. While the plan was rejected by the Germans, Plunkett did succeed in obtaining agreement to send a small shipment of arms and ammunition in the spring of 1916.

Plunkett travelled to New York to update Devoy on the outcome of the negotiations and preparations for the Rising. When he returned home, Plunkett was based at the recently-purchased family home in Larkfield, Kimmage, which was also a Volunteer training camp and arms store, before falling ill again in April. Indeed, it was his poor health that led to the postponement of his marriage to Grace Gifford, scheduled for Easter Sunday 1916. His ill-health did not prevent him from participating in the Rising, however. Following his capture, Plunkett was executed by firing squad on 4 May, having married his fiancée just hours before his death.

Casement, in contrast, suffered from poor health while still in Germany, disillusioned at what he considered an unsatisfactory commitment to the Irish cause. Realising that the Germans would not provide additional assistance, he decided to travel to Ireland in a bid to stop the Rising. Landing on Banna Strand, Casement was arrested. Unable to contact the leaders, the rebellion went ahead. Casement was found guilty of treason in the Old Bailey and was hanged on 3 August 1916.

*Dr Emma Lyons (UCD School of History) was a researcher for the 'World War I Ireland: Exploring the Irish Experience' exhibition currently running at the National Library of Ireland, where she also held the Research Studentship in Irish History. Dr Lyons' research focuses on the experience of Irishwomen during World War One and Catholic landownership and education in 17th and 18th-century Ireland*