



Casement, Roger (1864-1916)

by Linda Rapp

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Roger Casement (left) under arrest. Image © 2003-2004 Clipart.com.

Irishman Roger Casement was devoted to improving the lot of the oppressed. As a British public servant he exposed cruel and exploitative treatment of the indigenous peoples of Africa and South America, for which service he was knighted. He later joined the rebel movement fighting for the independence of Ireland, for which the British government tried and executed him.

Casement's "black diaries"--personal records that revealed that he was gay--were discovered and shown to selected individuals but never introduced during his trial. They were subsequently withheld from public inspection, which gave rise to decades of speculation over their authenticity. The debate continued even after their publication, but forensic analysts have been able to attest that they are genuine.

The use of the black diaries to expose Casement's homosexuality, and thereby discredit him and his ideas, is a telling example of the vulnerability of gay men in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Early Life

Casement's father, also named Roger Casement, was a Protestant, and his mother, Anne Jephson Casement, was a Catholic, although from a predominantly Protestant family. Casement, the last of their four surviving children, was born in Kingstown (now called Dún Laoghaire) in County Dublin on September 1, 1864.

Both of his parents having died by the time he was thirteen, Casement spent his teen years living with relatives. Although his mother may have had him secretly baptized a Catholic when he was small, he was brought up as a Protestant and confirmed in the Anglican faith.

When the time came for Casement to find a job, his family helped him secure work first as a clerk in a shipping company and then as a ship's purser. In the latter capacity he made several trips to Africa.

When the assignment as purser ended, Casement returned to Africa in 1884 as an employee of the International Association (later renamed the Congo International Association), an enterprise sponsored by King Leopold II of Belgium to develop the colony. Casement worked for a time as a surveyor for a railroad line and later directed construction on the project.

Member of the British Consular Service

Casement left the company in 1892 to work for the British Consular Service. Posted to Nigeria (then called the Oil Rivers Protectorate), he undertook several map-making expeditions.

After three years Casement's performance had so impressed his superiors that he was advanced from an employee to a member of the Consular Service without needing to take the Civil Service exam. He was stationed at various posts in southern Africa, eventually winding up back in the Congo, where he began reporting on the torture and mutilation of slaves used in the rubber trade.

Belgium--and in particular King Leopold--made efforts to deny the situation but admitted the truth in 1905. Shortly after the disclosures, Casement was honored by the British government as a Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George for his role in exposing the atrocities.

In a visit back to Ireland, Casement began to associate with people who favored national independence, and his sympathies were aroused. Nevertheless, he returned to the service of the British crown.

His new assignments took him to a number of posts in South America. The most important of his achievements as consul was the investigation of the enslavement and torture of native peoples in the Putumayo River area. For his humanitarian efforts he was knighted in 1911. The official government Blue Book of his report was published the following year.

Irish Patriot

The rigors of life in the South American wilderness took a toll on Casement's health. He retired in 1912 and returned to Ireland, where he soon became an active supporter of the separatist cause. In addition to organizing the Irish National Volunteers, he journeyed to the United States to try to enlist American aid for the independence movement.

When World War I erupted in Europe, Casement turned to Germany, hoping that the Kaiser's government would support freeing Ireland from the yoke of English rule. Casement's proposals included recruiting Irish prisoners of war to be freed and returned to Ireland to work for the nationalist cause, but few volunteered for the purpose. He also tried to enlist German support for the Easter Uprising of 1916, but they showed no interest.

Casement and the Germans became mutually disenchanted. The Germans may have been suspicious of Casement and his companion, a flamboyant Norwegian lover named Adler Christensen. In April 1916 Casement boarded a German U-boat to return to Ireland, where he hoped to dissuade rebel leaders from pursuing plans for the uprising since he had become convinced that it would fail--as indeed it did.

The British had been monitoring Casement's activities and were on hand to arrest him when he landed near Tralee in County Kerry on April 24.

Casement was immediately taken to London and tried for treason. He was convicted, stripped of his knighthood, and condemned to death on June 29. After his sentencing he gave an impassioned statement before the court, asserting Ireland's right to freedom and his right to be tried in an Irish rather than English court.

Casement's appeal of the verdict was dismissed, and he was hanged on August 3. On the eve of this execution he was baptized into the Catholic church.

The Diaries

After Casement's arrest, the British had seized some of his possessions including two sets of diaries that came to be known as the black and the white. Neither set was introduced at Casement's trial, but the British reportedly used the black diaries, in which he recorded homosexual activities, to deter potential sympathizers, including the American ambassador, from pressing for clemency after the sentence. In a real sense, Casement was hanged almost as much for being a homosexual as for being a traitor.

Following the trial British authorities sequestered the diaries, at times refusing even to acknowledge their existence.

The authenticity of the white diaries, Casement's record of his investigations of atrocities in Africa and South America, has never been doubted. Some have contended, however, that the black diaries, with their references to homosexuality, were entirely or in part forged. The secrecy in which they were held only fueled speculation.

The British use of the black diaries in order to discredit Casement certainly bespeaks homophobia, but so does the Irish nationalists' insistence that their hero could not possibly be gay and the diaries therefore must be forged.

The diaries were finally made public in 1959, but the controversy has continued in spite of increasing evidence that the writings are genuine.

During his lifetime Casement apparently concealed his sexual orientation quite successfully--which is not surprising since disclosure would have made him liable to criminal prosecution. Not even his family and close associates seem to have known of his sexuality--or at least they never acknowledged it publicly.

One of his republican compatriots, Michael Collins, did, however, state upon being shown a portion of the black diaries in 1921 that he believed them to be in Casement's own hand.

Experts who have recently examined the documents reached the same conclusion. In a study funded partly by the Irish government and partly by the British Broadcasting Corporation, Dr. Audrey Giles, one of Britain's most respected forensic analysts, called the black diaries genuine and free of interpolations.

Casement's grandnephew Patrick Casement, a psychoanalyst, expressed confidence in Giles's assessment.

Posthumous Honors

As part of a commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Uprising, Casement's body was disinterred from a grave at Pentonville Prison and brought home to Ireland for a full state funeral. The great Irish hero and first president of the Republic, Eamon de Valera, himself a veteran of the Rising, eulogized Casement. He praised his fallen comrade not only for his brave service in the cause of Irish freedom but also for his extraordinary humanitarian zeal in fighting for the dignity and human rights of all, declaring that Casement would have been "remembered by oppressed people everywhere even if he had done nothing for the freedom of his own country."

A martyr for the cause of Irish nationalism, Casement was also a gay martyr inasmuch as his death was at least facilitated by the homosexual scandal that the black diaries recorded.

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