

Unframing the Black Diaries of Roger Casement

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“Of course there are lots of people in the world who will defend anything that exists merely because it exists, and they are so mentally constructed that they cannot imagine another state of things.”

The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement (176)

Abstract: For a century now, the disputed frontier region of the upper Amazon? bordering Brazil, Peru, Colombia and Bolivia? has been the subject for one of the most persistent controversies in Irish history. In 1910 and 1911 the British Consul, Roger Casement (1864-1916) undertook two separate voyages up the Amazon to investigate crimes against humanity: the decimation of people and environment resulting from the extractive rubber industry. These investigations ultimately helped the South American rubber boom go bust and persuaded international investors to switch interests to the new Anglo-Dutch rubber plantation economy of Southeast Asia. But since Casement’s execution in 1916 for his part in the Easter rising, a bitter controversy has raged over his reputation and the authenticity of the so-called Black Diaries. Three of these contested records configure with his Amazon voyages and are sources for analysing an important socio-economic tipping point in Latin American history. In 1997 & 2003 I edited two volumes of documents relevant to his Amazon investigations which formed part of an on-going methodological inquiry enabling a new and alternative textual reading of the Black Diaries and the re-evaluation of Casement as a critical voice in Irish and World history.¹ The publication of these edited volumes reawakened a long-standing argument suggesting that the diaries are forgeries. In 2008 a comprehensive new biography was published on Roger Casement, which went to some length to discredit my nascent argument. This article is the first part of my response to the biographer, Séamas Ó Síocháin’s *Roger Casement: Imperialist, Rebel, Revolutionary*.

This subtitle of Ó Síocháin’s biographical reconstruction of Roger Casement’s life? “Imperialist, Rebel, Revolutionary”? is a descriptive triptych few figures in history

might claim, but it accurately captures his epic trajectory. In 1884 and still a teenager, Casement left a world of relative security in Liverpool to take part in the European annexation of sub-Saharan Africa. He quickly ascended through the ranks of the colonial hierarchy, impressed his seniors, and travelled widely through unmapped areas of the African interior. In 1892 he took on the first of a series of appointments with the British Foreign Office and ended twenty years of service in Africa with his damning report exposing the barbarities of the administrative system imposed by King Leopold II in the Congo Free State. After a brief retirement from the Foreign Office in 1905, Casement was appointed to a series of consular positions in Brazil and in 1909 was selected to be Consul-General in Rio de Janeiro. The following year he made a journey into the Upper Amazon to investigate reports which had reached London of crimes against humanity committed by the British-backed Peruvian Amazon Company in the Putumayo river valley. Building on his reputation as a fearless interrogator of injustice, this inquiry propelled Casement to the heart of imperial affairs and landed him a knighthood in 1911. Yet, despite his imperial credentials, Casement had for many years been subverting his official position and discreetly encouraging and funding nationalist causes in Ireland. Two years later he resigned from the Foreign Office and threw himself openly and wholeheartedly into the political maelstrom of Irish independence. He was instrumental in the founding of the Irish Volunteers (later renamed the IRA) and organised and partly financed the running of guns into Ireland, a week before the declaration of the First World War. In 1915, his efforts in Germany to recruit an Irish Brigade from among captured Irish POWs were largely unsuccessful and he returned to Ireland on the eve of the Easter rising on board a German submarine. Shortly after landing, he was captured and spirited off to London to be interrogated by the intelligence services and imprisoned in the Tower of London. After a show trial at the Royal Courts of Justice he was found guilty of treason, but efforts to force the government to reprieve the sentence were undermined by the rumours of the discovery of “a diary”, which sensationally revealed Casement’s double-life as a sexual deviant. Rumours were quickly spread with the aid of a tightly controlled press and Casement was hanged.

This biography is the latest in a long line of historical reconstructions into a man now considered to be the most complex Irish rebel ever to stand up to the British Empire. But what is the continuing fascination for Roger Casement? In an age where tabloid history prevails and scholarship happens in the often inaccessible, academic sanctuaries of seminar rooms, international conferences and peer reviewed journals, Casement straddles all sorts of contradictory positions. He belongs to no single historical domain but manages to both bridge and divide the centre and the periphery, the popular and the academic, the British and the Irish, and the colonial and the postcolonial. His life has just the right concoction of rebellion, betrayal, intrigue, conspiracy and sex to make it appealing to many different constituencies for a spectrum of different reasons.

In the last decade many antagonists have joined the Casement debate and there has been an extensive production of some very sound and commendable scholarship

which sits starkly beside some wildly confused and second-rate work masquerading as erudition. Ó Síocháin's contribution belongs to the first category. He has put in the hours, patiently working his way through large sections of Casement's widespread and scattered archive, and has brought useful new material to light. This hugely informative biography, supplemented by extensive bibliographical references, is a resource of great value which will sit alongside other weighty biographies intermittently published over the last century.

However, to capture Casement's world in a single volume is a hard task. His conflicting networks of supporters, the different colonial and national contexts in which he operated and the battle he fought against secret diplomacy makes his meaning and personality fragmentary, obscure and elusive. On reaching the end of this biography, as Casement's body hangs on the scaffold in Pentonville prison, some readers may be forgiven for feeling that here is a life that defies straightforward reconstruction. There are too many embodied conflicts and contradictions, too much vested interest in the interpretation of his life while too many significant dimensions of it remain obscure. His life cuts against the grain of established narratives and his end, as described by this work, is humiliating for everyone: for the British, for the Irish and for Casement and his supporters. When Eamonn de Valera commented cryptically in the 1930s that "a further period of time must elapse before the full extent of Casement's sacrifice can be understood" was he referring to this tangled web of hostile vested interests undermining his hero's reputation?² The steady stream of work – memoirs, diaries and biographies – which have helped keep him in the public imagination is evidence of his intricate entanglement and what Lucy McDiarmid has called his over-remembered state.

Ó Síocháin constructs the narrative of his life by transcribing plenty of long quotations which help elucidate a few key themes: his emerging identity as an Irish separatist extending from his concerns about the destructive capacity of empires and his identification with those dispossessed by modernity. He contributes towards a wider understanding of Casement in both sub-Saharan Africa and Brazil confirming Casement's place within the genealogy of anticolonial activism and postcolonial thought. Casement's efforts to defend the rights and lifeways of indigenous people places him alongside the protestations of Bartolomé de las Casas, while aspects of his critique of colonialism foreshadows the later analyses of Franz Fanon and Mahatma Gandhi. Furthermore, Ó Síocháin's knowledge of the Irish language helps us navigate this understudied and neglected aspect, which Casement supported so passionately.

But in the final chapter – describing his capture, trial and execution, when so many strands of his life converge and the implications of his earlier action is transformed by his treason – the interpretation follows a well-worn path of earlier psychological biographies, and makes a confused association between disloyalty, insanity and sexual difference. Ó Síocháin accepts without question the official line circulated by the authorities at the time, and repeated ever since, that Casement lost his mind. As a consequence of his disloyalty, and his commitment to Irish independence, his character

fragmented and disintegrated. His actions were not the logical steps of a man who believed the First World War was an illegal crime against humanity, but of someone who had gone insane. When press rumours began to circulate in the days immediately after his trial claiming that diaries had been found which revealed Casement as “addicted to sodomitical practices” few people in Britain were surprised. A man capable of treason was capable of anything. The efforts to save him from the noose were quickly confused. The clusters of supporters, who rallied from different areas of Ireland, Britain and the rest of the world to try and persuade the government to spare him, fell away. Casement was railroaded to the gallows, but in death proved just as subversive as he had proved in life.

In the forty years following his trial the very existence of the Black Diaries was denied by the British Home Office. When they were partially revealed in 1959, the diary entries were shown to coincide with the moments when his actions were most accountable to the Foreign Office and when he made his most heroic investigations of the colonial encounter and the atrocities extending from the violence underpinning colonial rule. The earliest diary of consequence deals with his journey up the Congo in 1903 and the three other diaries cover the days and months of his two voyages up the Amazon in 1910 and 1911. As sources, the documents belong less in the snarled demesne of Irish history but more appropriately in the emerging arena of postcolonial studies and the history of the global South. In terms of their meaning in Irish history they have been loosened from their historical moorings and are merely of interest for their symbolic requirements in obscuring the intellectual move towards rebellion and helping isolate a traitor who has always been awkwardly included in the narrative of the time. However, more recently, Casement’s internationalism has started to be revisited by non-Irish historians and his works in Africa and South America have been reconsidered. Adam Hochschild’s bestselling book *King Leopold’s Ghost* (2006) partly retrieved Casement’s importance as a pioneer of human rights. Other works were published in Argentina, Colombia and Brazil which acknowledge Casement’s significance.³ But confusion continues to reign over the value, meaning and legitimacy of the Black Diaries.

Since the existence of these diaries was first rumoured, various claims have been made about their authenticity and the forgery debate has endured for over ninety years. In the appendix to the volume, Ó Síocháin goes to some length to refute those who still argue the case for forgery. Much of this is taken up with a specific attack on my argument, which has been published regularly over the last sixteen years in edited editions, journal articles and journalism. My curiosity in Casement was awakened during a period of residence in Brazil in the 1990s when, like many others, I grew concerned with the fate of the Amazon rainforest. Various histories and novels about the Amazon make reference to Casement’s investigation of the Putumayo atrocities. As I delved deeper into the vast and dislocated archive of material detailing this outrage, it became clear that there had been a tremendous level of cover up and deliberate forgetting of the tropical apocalypse caused by the few decades when rubber was extracted violently

from the tropical regions bordering the Atlantic. The Black Diaries, which cover the first two years of Casement's investigation and his two principal voyages up the Amazon, present an obviously distorted account and my own approach was largely concerned with retrieving not merely the investigation but a methodology that could enable a more informed reading of the Black Diaries. Unfortunately, my alternative reading of the diaries caused indignation and a defensive response rather than curiosity, transparency and a desire to enlighten public debate.

Over the last decade, as debate over the diaries has raged, Ó Síocháin (1998) has preferred to stay out of the diaries controversy. His only refutation of my argument was made in an Irish language publication. In 2004, partly in response to my own archival work, he co-edited a volume containing the uncensored version of Casement's 1904 report exposing King Leopold II's regime in the Congo Free State alongside the Black Diary for 1903. The introduction gave a good overview of Casement's consular work in Africa, but he ignored deeper questions about the internal and external dynamics of the documents. In the appendix to his biography, however, he expands on earlier arguments and takes a more deliberate and antagonistic line to the present revival of the argument for forgery.

What this biography reveals is the analytical tradition and methodologies, borrowed and refined since 1916, determining authenticity. Ó Síocháin accepts uncritically the arguments defending authenticity which emerged from 1956, following the publication of the first biography of the post-war period by the *Daily Express* journalist Rene MacColl. These arguments were subsequently elaborated and endorsed by Casement's later biographers: the newspaperman-spook Peter Singleton-Gates, the television personality Brian Inglis, the literary historian B.L. Reid, the school master Roger Sawyer, and the activist for Gay Unionism Jeffrey Dudgeon. Those arguments, however, were not rooted in any recognisable methodology for determining the legitimacy of suspect documents but belong to the embedded propaganda war fought between British intelligence and Irish republicans over Casement and his meaning. While Ó Síocháin's biography adds significantly to the overall knowledge about Casement and does much to draw together the traces of his life and his scattered archive, it does little to alter his traditional interpretation. The overarching argument is co-dependent on existing viewpoints and contains various ideological biases and unexamined assumptions inherited from earlier approaches. His interpretation also ignores the political aftermath of Casement's life and the continuing history wars surrounding his reputation.

There was a dilemma facing the authorities in 1916, which helps explain both the riddle guarding Casement's secret and the presence of the Black Diaries. In delivering a verdict of guilty and pronouncing a sentence of death, the judicial process played directly into Casement's hands and enabled the traitor to achieve the martyrdom he so fervently desired. It was therefore necessary to seek another means of punishing the felon: a punishment which vitiated the possibility of martyrdom. The overarching thesis presented in the introduction to *The Amazon Journal* argued that, beyond their immediate

use fostering a whispering campaign, the Black Diaries had taken control of Casement's historical reputation and had successfully airbrushed him from the historical accounts where his name should be remembered. The evidence for this is apparent from his marginalisation and silencing in the writing of the history of both colonial Africa and the Amazon and in the scripting of Ireland's own revolutionary history.

The Black Diaries Described

Ó Síocháin opens his defence of the Black Diaries by briefly describing the physical nature of the documents and making some reference to their provenance and to my public disagreement with Roger Sawyer (1997), which inaugurated the latest phase of the controversy. He recognises that the survival of two diaries for 1910, with parallel entries for the same days, is the principal point of difference in the dispute. Comparison of these documents is where the crux of the disagreement lies. Here the most important textual interrogation can be made about the internal dynamics of the documents and the essential questions asked. What is the textual relationship between these two documents? Which came first: the longer version or the shorter one? Did Casement keep two diaries and, if so, what were his possible and probable motives?

In 1997 I took issue with the fact that the three biographers who had the greatest influence in accepting and endorsing the authenticity of the Black Diaries and privileging them as the principal source in the narrative of his life had selectively suppressed *The Amazon Journal*. Instead they had legitimated the sexualised narrative without any recognisable explanation for the silencing of this source. Brian Inglis (1973) failed to mention the manuscript in his biography.⁴ B.L. Reid (1976) included a few short quotations but cited an incorrect archival reference number.⁵ Roger Sawyer (1984) also chose to overlook both the manuscript and typescript versions in his bibliography which was otherwise quite comprehensive with regard to Casement's South American archive.⁶ More recently, Jeffrey Dudgeon (2002) ignores the version in pursuit of his high-camp re-writing of Ulster's most notorious sexual anti-hero. Ó Síocháin, by contrast, refers to *The Amazon Journal* at length, but he fails to engage in any meaningful intertextual analysis. While acknowledging the importance of the journal, he is oblivious to how its presence destabilizes the argument concerning the authenticity of the Black Diaries. His own position remains firmly rooted in various discredited and obsolete lines of reasoning established by earlier biographers, upon whose shoulders he stands.

The document variously termed the "Amazon Journal" or "Putumayo Journal" or "White Diary" has a well documented provenance. It was used at the Parliamentary Select Committee Inquiry in 1913, when two copies were typed up for circulation.⁷ Later on, it was referred to by W.J. Maloney in his study on *The Forged Casement Diaries* and quoted by de Valera in his Casement oration at Murlough Bay in the Glens of Antrim in 1953.⁸ Biographers were clearly aware of the document, but in pursuit of their sexualised and psychological narrative they suppressed it, because its presence

provokes awkward questions about the parallel Black Diary and enables some very detailed intertextual analysis to be undertaken. Comparative and forensic analysis between the two texts exposes the processes of suppression and revelation, distortion and exaggeration at play. It is misleading to suggest, as Roger Sawyer does, that the Black Diary entries for 1910 are the “unedited” source for the writing of the longer entries. There is no evidence whatsoever for supporting this supposition. His defence of the Black Diary as the master-narrative is itself indefensible:

Their value here lies in the fact that they are first impressions, gathered whilst investigations are actually going on, and are wholly unedited. The White Diary is almost as good value as far as historians are concerned; they just have to remember that their author is slightly modifying his impressions and experiences for the benefit of future readers.⁹

My disagreement with Roger Sawyer extended from my deepening concerns with his misreading of the textual contradictions. To believe in the veracity of both versions is to believe in a man with a completely paradoxical character. The author of *The Amazon Journal* is someone who clearly empathises with the Indians and is eager to alleviate their suffering resulting from the slavery, brutalisation and violation imposed by the rubber system. The narrator in the parallel diary, in contrast, is deeply exploitative and fixated with the native body for his own sexual gratification. Ultimately, these two figures are irreconcilable and while there is temporal and spatial configuration (but not exactitude) between the parallel texts, there is a spectrum of difference and dissimilarity which should make us cautious, if not suspicious. Quite simply, it is impossible to believe in both versions detailing the same days.

Ó Síocháin freely admits that the Black Diaries are stylistically and aesthetically unlike anything else written by Casement. They are written in “jerky sentences” which carefully encode information in an obscure and often confused manner. If Casement did keep them then he interpolated them for himself adding information in order to improve their accuracy as historical documents and encode important official material into the narratives. Most people who try and read them find them unreadable and dull. As Oswald Blakeston commented in 1960, “the recent publication of his secret diaries has at last revealed the man as the worst of sinners, a bore.”(148) Ó Síocháin tries to rescue Casement from the sin of being a bore by claiming “whether genuine or forged, they follow the life of a British consul through the course of the three relevant years, incorporating a lot of detail on aspects of Casement’s Congo and Putumayo investigations.” (479).

But this approach glosses the deeper implications of his investigations and normalises the violence underpinning the texts in a very misleading way. The Black Diaries configure with 1903, 1910 and 1911: the very years when Casement undertook his most dangerous voyages into the interiors of central Africa and the upper Amazon to

investigate atrocities. Far from incorporating a lot of detail, as Ó Síocháin suggests, the Black Diaries do the exact opposite, they reduce the complexity of his investigations to a monotonous level, discreetly filter the trauma and undermine the moral high-ground he needed to occupy in order to give both impact and authority to his published reports. The man who emerges from the Black Diaries is neither “imperialist, rebel or revolutionary” but rather “sex tourist”, a man without either moral compass or ethical conscience for his actions. He is a man completely at odds with the Casement described and remembered by those who knew him until his treason was identified. If the Black Diaries configured with the more mundane years of Casement’s consular years, when he was performing his consular duties in Santos or Belém, then their plausibility would increase. However, the fact that they deliberately configure with the pivotal months of his official career may strike Ó Síocháin as “strange” but he makes no effort to explain what he finds “strange”.

On the surface, there is nothing really to arouse the suspicion that the diaries are forged, which is surely the hallmark of a good forgery. It is only when they are placed in different contexts, when they are scrutinised beneath their surface, when their silences are interrogated, and the politics of their representation questioned, does their architecture and form start to disintegrate and their coherence fall apart. More than a century on from his investigations, it is possible to deconstruct how the diaries have been adopted as instruments of archival control of Casement’s meaning and memory and have helped the narrative process of western historiography forget the crimes against humanity which he investigated and described, and which validated his transformation from imperialist to revolutionary.

In a world, where the certainties of history and claims to objectivity are challenged and where authentic pasts are contingent, the idea of value free history is untenable. The Irish novelist, Colm Tóibín’s observation of how we all bring our own baggage to the Casement controversy and how Casement himself used his own Irish alterity to investigate the colonial system is a valuable observation, but one which needs to be considered in terms of the readings and mis-readings of the Black Diaries.¹⁰ The analysis of Casement is now more than merely the story of an extraordinary life lived at the height of the British Empire, and at a crucial moment in Irish self-determination. In the wake of the postmodern turn it may now be deconstructed and re-remembered as a fascinating insight into the politics of historical knowledge, the authority of the archive and the instability of text.

History of the Controversy:

While Roger Casement’s place in the histories of the British Empire, Ireland, sub-Saharan Africa and the Amazon is incontrovertible, it is the controversy relating to the Black Diaries which has provoked the most sustained inquiry and interest in his life and meaning.¹¹ What this controversy reveals is not merely the complexity of the man but the frictions and troubles resulting from his inclusion within different national narratives. His executed cadaver became a *tabula rasa* upon which all sorts of different

political and cultural agendas were written and re-written: Irish republicanism and nationalism, gay and human rights, Catholicism, international socialism, anarchism, fascism and anti-fascism and, most notably, sexuality, have all inscribed their political and cultural significances onto Casement's body. The history of the controversy serves as a distinctive insight into the dynamics of power and how both the British and Irish states have used different strategies to control meaning and prevent ownership. If Casement is the most reconstructed figure in modern Irish history, it is through a process of deconstruction, which examines the politics of truth and knowledge and the changing value of the Black Diaries, where his meanings start to destabilise and unravel, and the disfiguring influence of propaganda becomes apparent.

In terms of shaping and controlling his meaning, the most critical missing dimension has been the role of British intelligence in the long saga. Ó Síocháin's biography is the first study to make cautious reference to Casement's links with different intelligence agencies during his consular career. While working as a survey officer in the Niger Coast Protectorate for Claude Macdonald from 1892-95, his duties involved surveying and mapping areas of the Niger Delta for the War Office Intelligence Department.¹² During the Boer War he helped plan a covert expedition to sabotage Boer railway communication. At his three postings in Brazil, he had close contact with the Commercial Intelligence Department of the Board of Trade. More awkward is the plotting of his last three years which involved him in a Gordian knot of interlinking conspiracies leading to his interrogation by the three intelligence chiefs: Basil Thomson, Reginald Hall and Frank Hall. No biographer has yet engaged with the intelligence network Casement organised himself after the founding of the Irish Volunteers in 1913. Some information about this clandestine organisation is detailed in the unpublished manuscript by Sean Francis Kavanagh.¹³ After his capture, it was, of course, Basil Thomson's CID "Special Branch", which discovered the diaries and began the whispering campaign by selectively showing extracts to influential statesmen, churchmen and newspaper editors. His prosecutor, F.E. Smith was director of the Press Bureau on the outbreak of war in 1914 and was deeply implicated in the raising and arming of the Ulster Volunteers, which began the militarisation of politics in Ireland in 1914. The shadow of the intelligence world is cast over every path in Casement's career.

But the hidden hand of British state power can be traced forward beyond August 1916 to recent times. The National Archives (Kew, London) revealed in 1995 that the first editor of the Black Diaries, Peter Singleton-Gates, was a Fleet Street "spook" and had a direct line to Basil Thomson, a revelation which cast serious aspersions over his version of events and his reliability as a journalist.¹⁴ The poet Alfred Noyes, when working for the Ministry of Information during the First World War, was co-opted to spread the rumours about the Black Diaries. Later, once he realised that he had been duped, he wrote a book *The Accusing Ghost or Justice for Casement* where he attempted to explain why and how the forgery had been perpetrated. The most active figure involved in the controversy at a political and cultural level from 1954-65 was H. Montgomery Hyde, a former MI6 agent and colonel in the intelligence corps, who continued to serve after

1945 at the intersection between British intelligence agencies, the House of Commons, the British judicial system and the publishing industry. Montgomery Hyde was actively influential in raising the question of the Black Diaries in the British Parliament and helping to authenticate them in the public imagination. He also authored various works on homosexual history and persistently referred to Casement and the diaries in a way which facilitated the process of authentication.¹⁵

Rene MacColl, Casement's 1956 biographer, also worked for the Ministry of Information and was a special reporter for Lord Beaverbrook, the owner of the Conservative newspapers which first circulated stories about the Black Diaries. More recently, Adrian Weale (2001), the author of a malignant and shallow interpretation of Casement, was prepared to admit his former career working for "seven years in military intelligence, specializing in interrogation and psychological operations." (Dustcover). The failure to recognise the long arm of British intelligence reaching right through the narration of Casement's story is a significant omission. It is a concern, therefore, that Ó Síocháin's argument is dependent upon secondary sources authored by individuals closely connected with intelligence operations, propaganda and "Psyops" (Psychological Operations), and whose impartiality he accepts without the slightest suspicion of any hidden agenda.

Problematically, conspiracy is deeply entangled with Casement's life and legacy. He condemned both regimes in the Congo and Amazon as "conspiracies" against decency and humanity and used similar language later in his life to damn British rule in Ireland. In the mid-1990s, researchers who called up a Casement file marked "Irish conspiracy" at the Public Record Office (now the National Archives), were required to sit in a special room with a CCTV directly above their work station recording every page turned and every note taken by the reader.¹⁶ Casement involved himself in a series of conspiracies from 1913 onwards intended to tarnish the reputation of the government. His efforts to publicise the Findlay affair and British diplomatic efforts to have him assassinated is the best known but there were others (Leon O'Brion 1971). To write Irish revolutionary history is to engage with a live tradition of conspiracy reaching back to the Fenians and Clan na Gael and forward to the dirty war fought against the Provisional / Real / Continuity IRA. From 1914 when the intelligence agencies began to dig deeper into Casement's life they discovered how significant parts of his Foreign Office salary had for several years been channelled towards funding Irish revolutionary organisations: the Dungannon Clubs, the Irish language schools, and various organs of the radical press, which all contributed towards the insurgency (Hay 2009).

The other aspect of intelligence operations with obvious implications for the Casement story is propaganda. Casement was himself a skilful propagandist, who had used the press adroitly for his own campaigns to bring about Congo reform and to draw attention to the plight of Amazon Indians enslaved by the extractive rubber economy. In 1914, after his arrival in Germany, he contributed articles to *The Continental Times*, a newspaper with overtly anti-British and pro-Irish views. His trial became an extraordinary

exercise in First World War propaganda, which illustrates the supremacy of the state in controlling opinion and influencing due process.¹⁷ But propaganda, like intelligence history and conspiracy, is another area where biographers fear to tread. From early in Casement's career it is possible to see the mechanisms of censorship and propaganda vigorously at play. Both of his reports exposing crimes against humanity bestowed substantial leverage on the British government at a diplomatic level, and were used to influence public opinion and elicit promises of reform from the offending regimes. Similarly, these investigations empowered Casement and validated his own transformation from imperial servant into anti-imperial rebel. Many of those who accept the authenticity of the diaries are prepared to admit that the spread of rumours about Casement's sexuality by different agencies in 1916 was an underhand and deplorable action, but this action is never seen in the longer and larger context of the propaganda engagements extending from his earlier investigations which later merge into the writing of history about the period.

If arguments to do with conspiracy and propaganda are easily disregarded for how they allow unverifiable assumptions to be cast about the diaries, a new approach for interrogating the dynamic of the diaries is now possible, which is able to map the strategies used by the state to control information. The declassification and release of the diaries and the intelligence files in the 1990s coincided with what archivists describe as the "archival turn", a paradigm shift in professional understanding of how archives work, for whom and to what ends. The earlier questioning of the power / knowledge nexus by Michel Foucault (1972, 2001) and various Subaltern critics led on to the Freudian reading of the archive by Jacques Derrida in his seminal essay *Archive Fever*. Inspired by these works several progressive archivists began to rethink the archive as a locus of hegemonic control: not just a place for study but as a place worthy of study in its own right. The processes of archiving in terms of provenance, order and description were all deconstructed to reveal agency in the mediation and promotion of specific narratives and dominant memories. The old view of archivists as detached and neutral guardians of the "truth", and of documents as merely blameless by-products of action, was discredited. Documents had to be assessed for their power relations within the construction of social memory and considered less in terms of how they served the state, more in terms of their societal relevance.¹⁸

This fundamental alteration in understanding archives as an attachment to processes and structures of power has serious implications for the Casement story and the history of the Black Diaries. Ó'Síocháin's approach to the documents, in line with all previous biographers, is still rooted in an archaic, one dimensional and positivist tradition, which comprehends archives as unmediated and neutral spaces. His biography quotes at length excerpts from Casement's reports and extensive official and private correspondence without ever reflecting on the huge spaces and silences evident in the archive. Furthermore, Casement's own well-developed view of the undisclosed power of the archive is ignored. For the biographers, the story is nothing more or less than the

uncritical interconnection of all available documentation: a narrative which merely has to fit the documented facts.

Anyone who bothers to work their way through the vast and dislocated body of Casement papers will be struck by the way he is so conscious both of documents and the written word. Whenever he arrived at a new consular posting his first memorandum back to the Foreign Office always reported the state of the archive. In 1900, when he was sent by Prime Minister Lord Salisbury to establish a new British consulate on the Congo, his first duty was to reorganise the archive.¹⁹ Shortly after arriving as Consul in Belém do Pará he wrote a long letter back to Sir Edward Grey talking about the need to create a secret and confidential archive for sensitive documents which was separate from more run-of-the mill correspondence.²⁰ He was fastidious about dating, numbering and cross-references of official documentation. With his own revolutionary turn he became more concerned about the safety of his papers. It is inevitable that his paper trail would itself become a bitter scene for conflict. Shortly after his execution, Ernley Blackwell, the key Home Office official involved in the Black Diaries conspiracy, ordered the burning of Casement's prison papers (Dudgeon 8) and for the next fifteen years meticulously followed up every reference to Casement papers in an effort to control information about the man. In the *Archives Africaines*, held at the *Ministère des Affaires Étrangères* in Brussels, Casement's official missives with the Congo Free State administration have been erased from the state papers. Fortunately, copies have survived among British Foreign Office papers in the National Archives. The history wars fought over Casement's reputation have been largely about control of his archive.

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Casement's history wars can be conveniently divided into four specific engagements. The first phase extends from his execution in 1916 to the outbreak of war in 1939. Following the convenient discovery of the Black Diaries at the moment of Casement's capture, extracts were shown to influential statesmen and used to railroad him to the scaffold. During the 1920s and early 30s there appeared a series of conflicting statements by the intelligence chief Basil Thomson and other senior intelligence operatives. Both his cousin Gertrude Bannister and his biographer, Denis Gwynn (1931), approached the Home Office about the diaries but they were both stonewalled and the existence of the diaries was vigorously denied. In 1936, W.J. Maloney, a leading Sinn Fein propagandist published *The Forged Casement Diaries*, a work which deliberately named and shamed the politicians and intelligence chiefs involved in Casement's overthrow. The book provoked a bitter controversy involving the poet W.B. Yeats, the playwright George Bernard Shaw, the novelist Francis Stuart, and the socialist feminist Hanna Sheehy Skeffington.²¹

A second phase, from 1940 through to the return of Casement's bones to Ireland in 1965, saw the provocative appropriation of his meaning among nationalists in Northern

Ireland. In 1953, the opening of Casement Park in West Belfast and de Valera's unscheduled oration at Murlough Bay in the Glens of Antrim antagonised the Unionists. For Irish Nationalists, Casement became an emblem of resurgent self-determination. The about turn of Alfred Noyes and his condemnation of the diaries as forgeries compared to his defence of the documents in the 1930s was explained in his controversial book (1957). However, publication of the Black Diaries in Paris (Singleton-Gates, 1959) and their banning in Ireland merely excited interest and invested them with an illicit glamour. Printing them also helped authenticate them in the public imagination. Access, however, to the originals, could only be granted by the Home Secretary. The British and Unionist establishment had a wily defender in the shape of Montgomery Hyde. In Britain, Casement's name was discussed through the emerging discourse on sexual liberation. Through the early 1960s the controversy raged without end in the columns and letters page of the *Irish Times* and was only brought to an end with the return of Casement's body to Ireland in 1965. Behind the scenes, President de Valera closed down all official discussion of Casement. Talk of the diaries was silenced in the national press and the "forgery theorists" were driven underground.

A third phase can be identified from 1966 to 1993. This was the period when the Black Diaries were accommodated in to a series of psycho-biographies. Taking a lead from the Singleton-Gates volume, three biographers in turn (Inglis 1974; Reid 1976; Sawyer 1984) started to seamlessly incorporate the sexual narrative into Casement's life. It coincided with a moment when homosexuality was searching for new avenues for open discussion. Casement presented an ideal body upon which an experimental sexual language could be inscribed. The biographies also coincided with the mushrooming of violence in the North of Ireland but Republicans tended to instinctively distrust the Black Diaries as a work of "black" propaganda. Perhaps the most important publication came from the left field. In 1987, Michael Taussig's *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* introduced poststructural approaches into the analysis. By scrutinising the politics of factual production Taussig began to dissect the edifice of colonial reality. In a world where torture and terror rule, facts mutate and meanings and truths are rendered unstable and illusory. Taussig's work failed to attract a single reviewer in Ireland and his methodology adopted an epistemological approach which went over the heads of a conservative academy rooted in the certainties of archival infallibility and the empirical tradition. By 1993 Casement's relevance had been banished to the margins of history and memory. Only his sexuality was considered relevant as an emblem of modernity and as a means of showing the nationalist project as narrow in its outlook and homophobic. Significantly, this was also the period when Ireland's brand of "revisionist" history, often motivated by an anti-Irish Nationalist view of the past, became both fashionable and widespread.

The fourth phase from 1993 through to 2009 saw the unfettered release of copies of the diaries and a substantial declassification of official documentation.²² The polemic involving Sawyer and myself as described above escalated into an intense and sometimes fierce public debate. In 1999 Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, during his annual Arbour Hill

Easter oration, made a reference to the need to open an inquiry. In May 2000, the Royal Irish Academy took up the challenge and hosted a two day symposium on Casement (Daly 2005). A suggestion by the official historian of MI5, Christopher Andrew, to select two non British or non Irish forensic examiners was ignored. Instead, W.J. McCormack, an Irish academic employed at that time in a British University appointed a steering committee of British and Irish “non-experts” and hired a former Special Branch forensic examiner, Dr Audrey Giles, to compare handwriting under the full glare of film production crews funded by the two state broadcasters: RTE and BBC. This may have made good spectacle and helped reinforce consensus but it did little to satisfy those who could read through the whitewash. The U.S. document examiner, John J. Horan, said the tests were inadequate and flawed and would be unacceptable in a court of law. McCormack’s published volume showed his own particular biases and his interests in proclaiming a specific and categorical outcome in favour of authenticity. The controversy also exposed the great lack of transparency and the long role of ambiguity in the scripting of Irish history.

Publication of Jordan Goodman’s *The Devil and Mr Casement* (2009) brought the story in some way to an end. Goodman, a retired British academic, wrote a scrupulously researched account of Casement’s Putumayo investigation, but cleverly avoided the controversy by ignoring the Black Diaries and reducing their relevance to a few brief sentences in the context of his trial. The British press almost universally decided not to review his book. In Ireland a Casement stripped of his sexuality was a Casement which few people recognised.

*

A matrix of different reasons can explain why the diaries came into existence and why they have been carried through so persistently to the present day. George Orwell’s comment, made at a later stage in the century, might well be applied: “In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act.” Casement’s life was first and foremost about forcing systems of power to confront their crimes and misdemeanours. His investigations ultimately led to an excoriating attack on power itself and, because he had privileged access to the main players in imperial government, his accusations were all the more damning. After the outbreak of the war in 1914, he looked for every conceivable way to damage Britain’s war effort and promote the cause of Irish sovereignty. With the barrel of his pen he attacked some of the most highly placed statesmen in the imperial galaxy, including Winston Churchill, Sir Edward Grey and A. J. Balfour. But his most excoriating attack was levelled at the distinguished historian and statesman, James Bryce. Bryce was a man closely connected to the atrocity culture of the age. He had been one of the visible Oxford historians who had spoken out against the Bulgarian atrocities back in 1874. In 1915 he would lead the official British investigation into German atrocities in Belgium.

When Bryce was British ambassador in Washington in 1912 he had helped Casement court US government sympathy for the Putumayo atrocities and from this

collaboration it is apparent that both men shared concerns about humanity. Their differences, however, on the British Empire were diametrically opposed. For Bryce, the protection and extension of the British Empire and the building of the Anglo-American special relationship was the presiding concern of his political writing and action. He believed the Empire could and should be used as an instrument for the improvement of mankind. Casement, by contrast, who had watched the violence underlying colonial rule, detested empires and the violent injustices they produced. He became equally concerned with the potential tyranny which could result from the Anglo-American special relationship. In 1915, Casement published a scathing attack on Bryce's widely circulated report on *Alleged German Outrages* in an essay called *The Far-Extended Baleful Power of the Lie*. (Mackey, 1958) Significantly, he accused Bryce of exaggerating and lying about the extent of German atrocities in Belgium and fabricating evidence. The charges were not made lightly.

This essay was part of a co-ordinated propaganda campaign which Casement waged against British power following the outbreak of hostilities. His writings against the British Empire and comments on the role of certain statesmen in dragging Britain and Ireland into the conflict make reference to "secret knowledge" and "inner history" and exposed a conspiratorial space within the diplomatic build up to the Great War. Among a slate of accusations he made the following remark:

It was Napoleon I think said that the falsification of official documents was more common with the English than with any other nation. Sir Edward Grey is said by his friends to be thoroughly English, and no one who has read his famous White Paper giving his version of the origin of war, or his speeches in Parliament explaining what the White Paper omitted to make clear, can doubt for a moment his nationality. The White Paper has already been revised twice I think – certain lacunae having been discovered, even after a triple editing, that gave the mockers occasion to revive Napoleon's calumny. There were dates that had gone astray and curious discrepancies that showed a later hand at work than that ostensibly penning the despatch. At the second revise it was hoped that the present edition (the 3rd edition let us call it, second million, cheap or popular issue at 1d.) was above detection even by the expert. The most careful revising eye in the Foreign Office could find no opening for attack. Alas, for the reputation of the experts.²³

To conclude, the Black Diaries are a variation on what in modern military intelligence parlance is termed a PSYOP (psychological operation)?the interception of a signal (in this case a text) and its reconditioning in order to influence and confuse the enemy. This is not an isolated incident. Britain's long and often dirty war fought against Irish republicans provoked some desperate acts in the battle for hearts and minds. Recent research has revealed how a deliberate policy of "verisimilitude" was instigated during the War of Independence by the British authorities in Dublin Castle and how this policy prompted the contamination of the historical record. Intellectual dishonesty and "lying

for the common good” is a recognisable trait in writing about the revolutionary period. The presence of the Black Diaries has also suited the politics surrounding the polemics of Irish history, which has deliberately censored the pivotal role played by a cabal of Anglo-Irish insiders, most notably Casement, the historian Alice Stopford Green, and the novelist Erskine Childers, who together organised the running of the first shipment of arms into Ireland in July 1914.

Finally, the effect of both postcolonial studies and critical discourse theory has shown how representation is constituted by the powerful in ways that validate and normalise their positions. The long road of political compromise in the dividing of Ireland has necessitated deliberate restrictions to sensitive information and calculated manipulation of the record. Keeping the lie of the Black Diaries alive once served the interests of British national security and the twenty-six county Irish republic. It has not served the cause of universal justice. In the extractive rubber industry millions of lives were destroyed or ruined. Vast areas of the Amazon and Congo were opened up to extraction. Further tropical devastation occurred in Southeast Asia, as more rainforest was cleared to make way for rubber plantations. Casement was the unique witness to this crime and the extent of that crime is rendered meaningful through understanding his life. The story will continue to haunt Irish and British historiography until judgment day, but those who enter the Casement labyrinth should be cautious to keep a critical eye open to the politics of historical knowledge and the contrary constructions of colonial reality.

Notes

- 1 See Angus Mitchell (ed.), *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement* (1997) and *Sir Roger Casement's Heart of Darkness: the 1911 documents* (2003).
- 2 NAI, Department of Taoiseach S 7804 A, Eamonn de Valera to Julius Klein, 11 October 1934.
- 3 Studies include Ovidio Lagos, *Arana, rey del caucho* (Buenos Aires, Emecé, 2005), Geraldo Cantarino, *Uma Ilha chamada Brasil: O Paraíso irlandês no passado brasileiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Mauad, 2004); Roberto Pineda Camacho, *Holocausto en el Amazonas: una historia social de la Casa Arana* (Bogotá: Espasa, 2000); Márcio Souza, *Silvino Santos, O cineasta do ciclo da borracha* (Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, 1999).
- 4 A second edition of his biography *Roger Casement* was published shortly before Inglis' death in 1993 with an important Preface about the diaries' controversy. A critical view of Inglis was sketched by the essayist Hubert Butler in "Grandmother and Wolfe Tone" in H. Butler, *Independent Spirit* (124-131).
- 5 At the start of chapter 8 "A fine beastly morality for a Christian Co." of *The Lives of Roger Casement* Reid refers to the diary as "the conflated (and inflated) fuller journal that survives in manuscript and typescript in the National Library of Ireland" (104). In his footnote he gives the reference number NLI 13085-86. The actual reference for the MSS version is MS 13087/25 and the typescript version in MS 1622/3. Reid's cryptic comment and incorrect archival number suggest that he was conscious of the significance of *The Amazon Journal* but wanted to confuse its relevance to the argument.

- 6 In *Casement: The Flawed Hero*, Sawyer took the Inglis line and preferred occlusion. He defended his position in the *Irish Times* 24 October 1997.
- 7 The provenance of this diary can be clearly traced. It was sent by Casement from the Canary Islands in 1913 to Charles Roberts and used as evidence before the Parliamentary Select Committee. Roberts quoted a long passage from the diary when he was cross examining Henry Parr. See *Report and Special Report from the Select Committee on Putumayo*, Q. 8466: 337. The question of the provenance of the diaries is dealt with at length in the introduction to my edition of *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement* (31-54)
- 8 National Archives of Ireland, Department of Taoiseach / S7805D.
- 9 Letter to *Irish Times*, 16 April 2002.
- 10 Colm Tóibín has made some valuable interventions in the most recent cycle of the controversy although his own use of the Black Diaries as a symbolic text for raising the profile of gay Irishmen has neglected some of the deeper ethical issues embodied in the diaries. See his *Love in a Dark Time: Gay Lives from Wilde to Almodóvar* (London, 2002) and ‘The Tragedy of Roger Casement’, *New York Review of Books*, Vol.LI:9, 27 May, 2004, pp.53-57. For a useful critique of Tóibín see Barra Ó Séaghdha, ‘Re-viewing Casement’, *Irish Review* 33 (2005): 85-95.
- 11 The principal figure involved has been Lucy McDiarmid who has scripted a series of essays and, most notably her chapter in *The Irish Art of Controversy* (Dublin, 2005). W.J. McCormack produced an idiosyncratic account *Roger Casement in Death or haunting the Free State* (Dublin, 2002).
- 12 On the maps see ‘Casement’s maps of the Niger delta’, *History Ireland*, 14:4, July/August 2006. 50-55 and Robert Burroughs, ‘Imperial Eyes or ‘The Eyes of Another Race’? Roger Casement’s Travels in West Africa’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 37:3, September 2009. 383-397.
- 13 Sergeant Sean Francis Kavanagh, *The Betrayal of Roger Casement and the Irish Brigade* (Unpublished typescript, 1955). Intriguingly, Kavanagh described himself as ‘Casement’s Special Secret Service Agent’. A copy of this typescript survives in the Clare County Archives.
- 14 See NLI MS 46,064 containing Roger Sawyer’s papers on Peter Singleton-Gates. This includes Singleton-Gates’ typescript of ‘A Summing Up’ (1966) with a few new revelations about the diaries and the role of different agencies.
- 15 The Penguin ‘Famous Trials’ edition contained extracts from the 1911 diary charting Casement’s second voyage up the Amazon and was published for the mass market. On Montgomery Hyde’s importance to both Ulster Unionism and Gay rights see Jeffrey Dudgeon, ‘H. Montgomery Hyde, the Ulster Unionist MP (and author of *The Other Love*) who led the 1950s Westminster campaign for homosexual law reform and his struggle for political survival’, in Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, D 4372.
- 16 TNA FO 337/107 – entitled ‘Irish conspiracy’ from this file it is apparent that the Foreign Office referred to Casement’s involvement with Germany as a conspiracy from October 1914. Also see CO 904/195.
- 17 See my ‘John Bull’s other empire: Roger Casement and the press, 1898-1916’ in Simon J. Potter (ed.), *Newspapers and Empire in Ireland and Britain: Reporting the British Empire c.1857-1921*. Dublin: Four Courts, 2004.
- 18 Two journals in particular, *Archivaria* and *Archival Science* have led the field in publishing theoretical critiques of the archival turn. Most notable is the work of Terry Cook, ‘What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival ideas since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift’, *Archivaria* 43 (Spring, 1997): 17-63.
- 19 Correspondence regarding the reorganisation of the archive is held in TNA FO 10/739, Roger Casement to Marquess of Salisbury, 13/12/1900.

- 20 TNA FO 743/22 Memorandum on Care of Confidential Archives at Pará by Roger Casement, HM Consul, 7/10/1908.
- 21 There have been several attempts to explain the 1930s phase of the Casement debate. The most idiosyncratic is W.J. McCormack, *Roger Casement in Death, or Haunting the Free State* (2002) or Lucy McDiarmid, *The Irish Art of Controversy* (2005).
- 22 Readers at the U.K.'s National Archives interested in examining the Black Diaries have immediate access to microfilm copies. Access to the originals remains complicated.
- 23 NLI MS 29064, ff.45, Casement signing himself John Quincy Emerson to the Editor of the *Continental Times*, 6 October 1915.

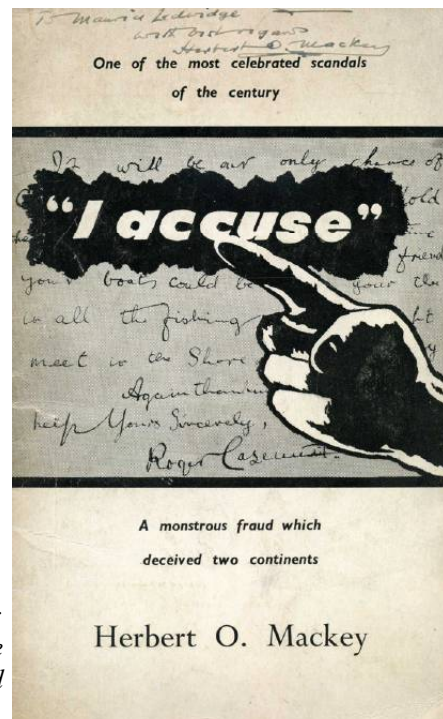
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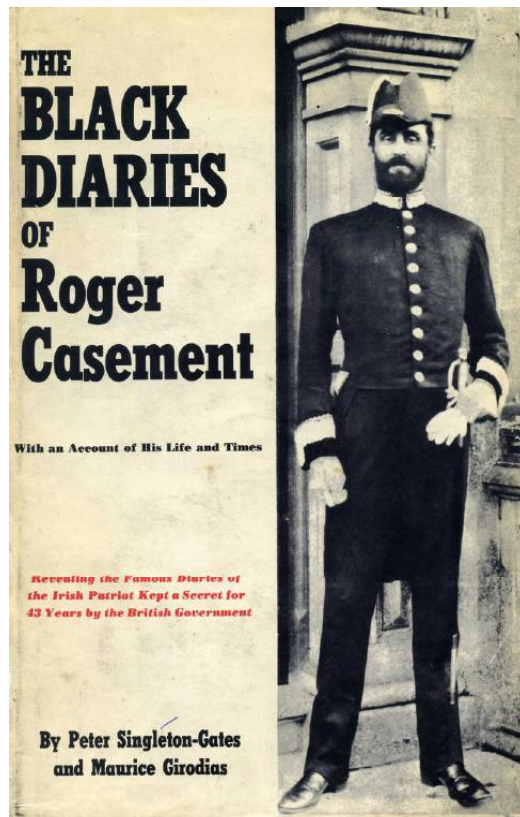
Roger Casement aboard an Amazon riverboat 1910.



Herbert Mackey’s pamphlet from 1960 “J’Accuse”; an obvious reference to the French writer Emile Zola’s defence of the French army officer, Alfred Dreyfus.



The Black Diaries released into the UK's National Archive in 1959 after decades of denial about their existence.



The US version of the Black Diaries published by the Grove Press.