

Roger Casement

Saint or sinner? Hero or traitor? Depending on the point of view, Roger Casement was probably all *four*. He is another Anglo-Irishman who was devoted to Irish nationalism, one who, from the English point of view, committed an unpardonable sin for an Anglo-Irishman: attempting to create an Irish brigade to be trained in Germany to fight for Irish liberty while Great Britain was engaged against Germany in World War I. England's greatest fear was to have at its rear an Ireland allied with its European enemies. Earnestly wanted by the British security forces, Casement fell into English hands on the Good Friday before the Easter Monday of the 1916 Easter Rising. What brought this son of the Protestant Ascendancy to the gallows as a traitor to England?

One answer must be Casement's father, Roger. He resigned his military commission in 1848 after fighting in England's colonial battles against the Sikhs and the Afghans only to fight in 1849, not as an English officer,



against the Austrians to drive them from their colonial occupation of Hungary, motivated solely by democratic principles and altruism. Roger the elder was able to use his influences in the British government to protect the Hungarian rebel leader Kossuth from deportation from Turkey to be arrested in Austria. In one of those great ironies of history, the Hungarian revolt from Austria was studied by the Irish patriot Arthur Griffith and it influenced the development of the Sinn Fein movement in Ireland. At his father's death (1905), Roger the son said of his father:

"Although an officer in the British army, he was, throughout his life, an ardent and sincere lover of Ireland-- one who sacrificed something to his country, and never wavered in his loyalty to her National claims... [he had] an overmastering love of freedom born of a close perception of the evils of Irish misrule."

Roger the parent married an Irish Catholic from Wicklow, Anne Jephson, with whom he had four children, Roger being the youngest, born in 1864. There are credible anecdotal reports that, at his mother's request, Roger was baptized as a Catholic in Wales when he was four years old. Indisputable is the fact that Roger Casement, a freethinker most of his life, died a Catholic, receiving his First Confession and First Communion in jail.

Joining the English civil service at age seventeen right out of school, Casement quickly tired of the work of a clerk and, fired by the fabulous stories of Livingston, Stanley and Speake's explorations in Africa, resigned

his position and sailed to Africa as a ship's purser. Thus began what was to become Casement's life's work; he wound up spending one-third of his life in Africa. He was an eye witness to the colonial exploitation of the Congo under the rule of Belgian King Leopold. His experiences in the Congo as a young man helped him to formulate the philosophy that ruled his life: freedom and dignity is the right of all people. He believed that the riches of the Congo should be developed for the benefit of the indigenous people.

Back in England in 1891, Casement rejoined the civil service and won the Queen's South African Medal for his work in the Boer War. He returned to the Congo in 1903 where he wrote a report about the crimes in the rubber plantations which shocked the world. Readers of his report were revolted by Casement's accounts of military enforcement of work quotas, failures to pay for work done, depletion of the population of villages, and mutilations. Unconfirmed but plausible are accounts that King Leopold offered Roger Casement a blank check if he would report favorably on the plantations.

His reputation as an enemy of exploitation led to Casement's being sent to Peru as a consul in 1906. He found and reported on the same kind of cruel exploitation of native labor on rubber plantations, these managed by the Portuguese. He found the Peruvian Amazon Company guilty of flogging, half-drowning, starving, and murdering its laborers. The English Parliament held hearing on these reports and Casement was hailed in the English press as an advocate for freedom and dignity. Three years before he was to die as an Irish hero, Roger Casement, a recipient of royal honors, retired from the English consular service, collected his pension, and started on the path that would make him England's most wanted man.

Even during his consular years, Roger Casement had acted as an Irish nationalist. He had made several attempts to learn Irish; he organized a Feis in Antrim in 1904; he never opened the package containing the certificate of his knighthood as Commander in the Order of St. Michael and St. Gregory awarded in 1906. He declined to make a donation to his *alma mater* in these words: 'I am already committed by promise to aid several educational movements in Ireland of a distinctively *national* character which must have the first claim on my sympathy and support.... I was taught nothing about Ireland in Ballymena School, I don't think the word was ever mentioned in a single class of the school and all I know of my country I learnt outside the school....As an Irishman, I wish to see this state of things changed and Irish education to be primarily what that of every healthy people is-- designed to build up a country from within, by training its youth to know, love and respect their own land before all other lands.'" In his diary entry in 1910 during his Peruvian service, Casement was saddened to see natives changing their names to appear more European. This reminded him of the

Irish: "Just like the Irish O's... dropping their first names or prefixes to show their respectability and their ancient tongue itself to be completely Anglicized." These observations led Casement to the conclusion that "Men are conquered not by invasion but by themselves and their own turpitude." A pensioner, Sir Roger Casement now had time to devote to Irish political causes.

Home Rule had been a burning issue in Ireland when Casement retired. He supported Home Rule and became active in the Irish Republic Brotherhood. Volunteers on both sides of Home Rule, the Citizens Army and the Ulster Volunteers, were ready to square off, but Home Rule and Ireland were pushed to the bottom of England's agenda when World War I broke out. Casement pleaded with Irishmen not to enlist in the British army: "...the remnant of our people are being urged to lay down their lives on foreign fields in order that a great and inordinately wealthy community may grow greater and richer by the destruction of a rival's [Germany's] trade and industry." Casement went to America in 1914 to raise money for Irish causes where he met John Devoy of Clan na Gael who helped to forge an Irish-German link. Roger Casement was sent to Germany to create an Irish Brigade out of Irish prisoners of war to fight against the British. Casement had high hopes for this mission, as he says in his diary: "...the time has come for me to see the break-up of the British Empire... The world will be the better, the more sincere... for a British defeat and a German victory."

Germany set up a camp for the Irish POW's, but Casement's plan was to be an unmitigated disaster because he did not understand the code of the fighting man. When the German's separated the Irish soldiers from their Scots and British comrades and offered them preferential treatment, they rebuffed the unequal treatment: "...withdraw these concessions unless they are shared by the remainder of the prisoners, as in addition to being Irish Catholic, we have the honour to be British soldiers." The Irish soldiers even refused to attend masses said by a Fenian leaning priest, seeing him as more political than spiritual. Casement was also hissed at and booed at meetings with the Irish POW's. His initiative a failure, both the Germans and the Irish leadership ignored Casement. He had no part in the planning of the Easter Rising, but Germany agreed to sneak Casement into Ireland by submarine to join the Rising. On the Good Friday before the Rising, Casement landed in Kerry and was promptly arrested by the Royal Irish Constabulary. Sir Roger Casement, Britain's most wanted man, was in British custody.

Roger Casement's defense was the same defense offered by Irish patriots over the centuries: the English had no jurisdiction over an Irishman. He was found guilty and sentenced to death. In another eloquent speech from the

dock by an Irish rebel, Casement again made the case that only the Irish can judge the Irish: "Place me before a jury of my own countrymen, be it Protestant, Catholic, Unionist or Nationalist, Sinn Feineach or Orangemen and I shall accept the verdict and bow to the statute and all its penalties.... [British rule] is a rule derived not from right, but from conquest." Roger Casement, having received his First Communion, was hanged in Pentonville Prison, London in August 1916.

Roger Casement was reburied in Ireland after a state funeral in *1965*. He is continually being rediscovered as a humanitarian who sought freedom and dignity in Africa and South America and who died for freedom and dignity in his native Ireland.

(Written by John Walsh, April 2001)

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