

Unwilling to Compromise: Roger Casement's Human Rights Views, 1900-1914
by Daniel Joesten

On August 3, 1916 Irishman Roger Casement, at the age of 51, was taken from his cell in Pentonville Prison in London and led towards the gallows to be executed. Months before he had been convicted of high treason for his attempt to enlist German military support of an armed uprising against the British in Ireland. As he walked towards his demise, Casement's normal fiery and indignant disposition was eerily somber. The trial itself had been a public spectacle, with the prosecution besmirching Casement's character and reputation as a human rights activist by releasing a diary that detailed various homosexual encounters in South America. The release of the diary during the trial effectively isolated Casement from various individuals who might have come forward to defend him. Thus, much like the rest of the trials and obstacles in his life, Casement's conviction and execution were undertaken alone.

Casement, however, was not always perceived as an enemy of Great Britain. In fact, he had spent the majority of his adult life in the service of the British Foreign Office, helping to bring down the tyrannical rule of Belgium's King Leopold II in the Congo and expose the Peruvian Amazon Company's use of torture and slavery of the Putomayo Indians in South America. Casement's actions brought him praise and popularity in Britain, even earning him a knighthood from King George V. However, during the last few years of his life, Casement turned his back on the country he had served for over two decades in favor of supporting Ireland, which he felt was suffering the same indignations he had fought to eradicate in Africa and the Americas.

What had changed for Roger Casement? How did he go from being a crusader for human rights in the employ of the British to a traitor against Britain in the name of human rights in the push for Irish independence? Moreover, how did Casement's human rights language develop over the course of his career? Casement was seemingly pro-imperialism early in his career and even demonstrated a desire to work within the system to correct the inhumane treatment of natives. However, it became increasingly apparent through his work that Casement felt isolated in his feelings of responsibility for the well being of the natives. As his career progressed, Casement's trust in the British government waned as he became more passionate in his pursuit of human rights and civilized treatment of the oppressed victims of imperialism. Furthermore, both Casement's Irish heritage and homosexuality helped him to view the world not as an oppressor, but as one of the oppressed.

The Congo Report and Its Aftermath

Casement's experience in Africa early in his career gave him a taste of imperialism, and it also exposed him to multitudes of people ruled by European powers. After working for a shipper in Liverpool in his youth, Casement set off to work on exploratory expeditions and various other jobs in Africa. According to B.L. Reid, this experience was "long, active, and varied" and "gave him a knowledge of the southern half of the continent equaled by very few men."¹ In addition, this time spent in Africa brought Casement into close contact with the native population. These interactions with the natives exposed him to their way of life and gave him a unique perspective that would benefit him on his later missions to Africa. Casement was not like other European visitors to Africa, especially in his treatment of the natives. While working at a Baptist

¹ B.L. Reid. *The Lives of Roger Casement* (London: Yale University Press, 1976), 8

mission in the Congo his employer said of him, “He is very good to the natives, too good, too generous, too ready to give away. He would never make money as a trader.”² Even early on, Casement had compassion for others that was unmatched by his European counterparts.

The defining event of Casement’s early career and perhaps his life was his 1903 journey into the depths of the Belgium Congo as Foreign Consul for Britain to investigate reports of forced labor and torture on the native population. Casement compiled his investigation into the Congo Report released in 1904. His previous trips to the Congo and his extensive knowledge of Central Africa gave Casement a baseline on which to measure his findings. For example, Casement notes that while navigating the Congo River, “The open selling of slaves and the canoe convoys, which once navigated the Upper Congo, have everywhere disappeared.”³ Casement goes on to write that, “While the suppression of this form of slave dealing has been an undoubted gain, much that was not reprehensible in native life has disappeared with it.”⁴ Casement’s unique experience in Africa qualified him to make such assessments. In fact, much of the early Congo Report deals with the disappearance of native life which once flourished in the area, something that someone without previous experience would not notice.

Other elements present in Casement’s Congo Report are his belief in the rule of law as it stands in the imperial system and his faith that wrongdoings could be corrected through that system. One such instance occurred when a local Mantumba chief had approached Casement about the loss of a canoe he had recently purchased. Casement

² Adam Hochschild. *King Leopold’s Ghost* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 196

³ Roger Casement. “Mr. Casement to the Marquess of Landsdowne, London December 11, 1903” in *The Eyes of Another Race: Roger Casement’s Congo Report and 1903 Diary*, ed. Seamus O Siochain and Michael O’Sullivan (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2003), 58.

⁴ *Ibid* 58

notes, “Although afraid to complain locally, the chief declared he would be perfectly willing to accompany me if I would take him before one of the Congo judges...I assured him that a statement such as that he had made to me would meet with attention at Boma, and if he could prove its truth he would get satisfaction for the loss of his canoe.”⁵ In this statement, Casement reveals his faith that the government in place, that is the Belgian Government, will respond to the complaint and take action accordingly. His writings do not yet show his disdain for imperialism that will be present in his later writings. What had not yet occurred to Casement was that the natives of the Congo did not speak to authorities about their grievances because they feared retribution for themselves and their families. He had yet to witness the reality of Belgian rule in the Congo.

One case in particular had such a profound effect on Casement that he ended his tour of the Congo early, and this was the Epondo Case. In fact, one could look at Casement’s life as a human rights activist in two parts: prior to the Epondo Case, and after—he was never the same again. Epondo was a young teenager from the village of Bosunguma whose hand was cut off by a sentry man working for the rubber company for no apparent reason other than than to induce terror in the African or or coerce him to some action. When Casement visited the village, Epondo’s case was brought to him. At first, Casement still had faith that justice would be done. He notes, “The things that Kalengo [Epondo’s aggressor] was charged with doing were quite illegal, and if the government of his country knew of such things being done, the perpetrator of such crimes would, in all cases, be punished.”⁶ However, after speaking with many people who lived

⁵ Ibid, 66

⁶ Roger Casement. “Note of Information taken in the Charge of Cutting off the boy Epondo’s hand, preferred to Mr. Casement by the People of Bosunguma, September 7, 1903” in *The Eyes of Another Race*:

in the village, Casement began to put together that all the incidents he witnessed up to this point were not isolated incidents, but rather signs that the very system in place was rotten and corrupt. Casement writes, “The fact that no effort had been made by these people to secure relief from their unhappy situation impelled me to believe that a very real fear of reporting such occurrences actually existed amongst them.”⁷ It is also at this point that Casement begins to develop his own views about the rights of natives in an occupied country, which is something that would define the rest of his life. Casement states, “These people were entitled to expect that a civilized administration should be represented among them by other agents than the savages euphemistically termed ‘forest guards’”⁸ This is one of the first times that Casement begins to speak about individual rights and liberties of the native populations. The phrase, “entitled to expect”, illustrates Casement belief that the natives of the Congo had fundamental rights that any government would have to respect and it is a small turning point in Casement’s view of imperialism.

While the official report of the Epondo Case is informational and lacking passion, behind the scenes Casement wrote many letters that were scathing and desperate in nature. A few days after the Epondo Case, while the horrors of what he saw were still fresh in his mind and without the permission of his Foreign Office, Casement wrote an emotional letter to the acting Belgian Governor General of the Congo, Felix Fuchs. In the letter to Fuchs, Casement outlines his disgust, “I cannot conceal from your

Roger Casement’s Congo Report and 1903 Diary, ed. Seamus O Siochain and Michael O’Sullivan (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2003), 171.

⁷ Roger Casement. “Mr. Casement to the Marquess of Landsdowne, London December 11, 1903” in *The Eyes of Another Race: Roger Casement’s Congo Report and 1903 Diary*, ed. Seamus O Siochain and Michael O’Sullivan (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2003), 112.

⁸ *Ibid*, 112.

Excellency that, to me, the responsibility for the dreadful state of affairs prevailing in many parts of the country I have visited is not to be attributed to the meaner instruments of crime and the savage agents of extortion I have seen at their dirty work, but to the system of general exploitation of an entire population, which can only be rendered successful by the employment of arbitrary and illegal force. That population is supposed to be free, and protected by excellent laws: those laws are nowhere visible; that force is everywhere.”⁹ While Casement’s official report did not reflect the same tone or language, it was at this point that Casement let the nagging feelings of responsibility take control of him as he took matters into his own hands to express his disgust with the Congo government. By sending the letter, Casement was acting outside of his official duties as consul and once again expressing his belief that the population should be free and protected by laws. It was also at this point that Casement puts the responsibility he feels for the natives over his duty and loyalty to the British Foreign Office.

Another detail of Casement’s Congo diary that reflected to his growing sympathy for the oppressed natives are the multiple allusions to his homosexuality. Though Casement does not specifically mention his homosexuality (nor would it have been wise for him to), there are many entries that suggest his sexual orientation. For example, on March 13 Casement writes, “Augustinho – kissed many times. 4 Dollars.”¹⁰ Augustinho was a seventeen year old who appears in a few different entries, suggesting that Casement may have had a relationship with him. Moreover, there are a series of entries in April 1903 surrounding the suicide of Sir Hector Macdonald that imply that Casement

⁹ Roger Casement to Fuchs, 13 September 1903 (London: Kew Public Records Office, FO 403/338)

¹⁰ Roger Casement. “The 1903 Diary” in *The Eyes of Another Race: Roger Casement’s Congo Report and 1903 Diary*, ed. Seamus O Siochain and Michael O’Sullivan (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2003), 202.

had homosexual sympathies. Macdonald was British soldier who, amid charges of homosexual acts, killed himself in Paris in 1903. On April 17 Casement writes, "HMS Odin arrived. Brought news of Sir Hector Macdonald's suicide in Paris! The reasons given are pitifully sad! The most distressing case this surely, of its kind and one that may awaken the national mind to saner methods of curing a terrible disease than by criminal legislation."¹¹ The news of MacDonald's death as well as other acts of homosexual oppression, such as the imprisonment of fellow Irishman Oscar Wilde in the 1890s, must have made an impression on Casement's own feelings of his homosexuality. One simply could not be openly homosexual and in a prominent position in British society. To be homosexual was to be an outsider. Though Casement lived and worked among European men and women, he could never truly be himself around them. If anything, Casement's homosexuality served to heighten his alienation from the British and make him more sympathetic to the natives, whom he considered outsiders too.

After leaving the Congo, Casement submitted his Congo Report detailing his findings. The report had a somewhat polarizing effect; it enlightened many people and drummed up support to the cause, and it was subsequently disputed and criticized by Leopold and his supporters. Casement was not dissuaded by the criticism, nor did he relent in his pursuit of justice, in fact he left the Congo more motivated than ever.

Almost immediately Casement provided funding and support for the Congo Reform Association (CRA) that was founded by his old friend E.D. Morel. Morel and Casement knew each other from working together years previous at Elder Dempster, a Liverpool shipping company. It was Morel who had discovered inaccuracies in the records of Belgium ships going to and from the Congo around the turn of the century,

¹¹ Ibid, 215-216

making him suspicious that something was wrong. In 1902, Morel quit his job at Elder Dempster to focus his attention on writing letters, articles and pamphlets about reform of the Congo. When Casement returned from the Congo in 1904 with his report, he urged Morel to start the CRA. Casement wrote to Morel at the time, “It seems quite clear to me that if those of us who feel strongly...we must unite in an organized association having one clear sole aim—namely to enlighten, systematically and continuously, public opinion in this country, and abroad, upon the actual condition of the Congo people...they [King Leopold, etc] are systematic—and only a systemized effort can get the better of them.”¹² Eventually, the European public would pressure Leopold to investigate the Congo himself and when his findings matched those of Casement, his empire there was dissolved. However, by the time this happened, Casement was on another mission in the Amazon Basin, witnessing what was seemingly another Congo.

All Alone in the Amazon

In the Amazon Basin, Casement found himself thrown into another situation where human rights were being violated indiscriminately. In the fall of 1910, Casement was sent to investigate the Peruvian Amazon Company, a corporation with British registration and London financial backing. The company was rumored to have a system of forced labor and torture similar to what Casement had witnessed in the Congo. For all their similarities, however, this was not the Congo. Here, Casement did not have the support of European missionaries or the benefit of a local magistrate to bring even an illusion of justice to any criminals. In addition, Casement’s diary and views had changed even further since his time in the Congo. He began to feel more isolated, less supported

¹² Roger Casement to E.D. Morel, 25 January 1904 (London School of Economics and Political Science, Morel Papers F8/23)

by Britain, and he became more prone to despair. It is in the Amazon that Casement fell further away from Britain and developed a more anti-imperial outlook on the world.

The biggest difference between the Congo and the Amazon, however, was that the Congo was a personal empire of King Leopold. Casement writes, “Behind the exploitation of the Congo people stood only one sinister figure; but behind that figure stood a progressive and vigorous European people.”¹³ The atrocities in the Congo could be linked back to one man, and one man was a lot easier to expose than a faceless, corrupt company, especially once the European public was persuaded. However, the Amazon was different. Casement writes, “The evil there is deeper and far older; and the remedy nowhere apparent or so remote as to have no bearing on the fate of the enslaved and disappearing Indian.”¹⁴ A monarch is easier to expose because they are slaves to public opinion. Once Europe was convinced of Leopold’s guilt the European public pressured him and his personal ownership of the Congo dissolved. On the other hand, bringing down a company was proved difficult because there was not just one man involved, and it was hard to pinpoint who was corrupt and who was not. Casement did not know who to trust.

The investigation proved to be especially difficult because the more Casement looked into the company, the more corruption he found, including an intricate system of forced labor. Casement writes, “The present system was not slavery, but extermination. A slave is well cared for and well fed, so as to be strong for his master’s work. These poor Indian serfs had no master who fed or cared for them, they were simply here to be

¹³ Roger Casement. “Untitled Essay” in *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement*, ed. Angus Mitchell (London: Anaconda Editions, 1997) Kindle Electronic Edition: Paragraph 3, Location 8328.

¹⁴ Ibid, Location 8341

driven by lash and gunfire to collect rubber.”¹⁵ Maybe it was because Casement had witnessed so much in a short period of time or that more than a decade in the service of the British Foreign Office had made him bitter, but only a week after his arrival in the Amazon he was already beginning to write with a tone of sarcasm and desperation. Upon accepting an invitation to attend dinner with a company official Casement remarked, “I was his guest, or the Company’s guest, I was really the wretched Indian’s guest. They paid for all. The food we ate and the wine we drank, the houses we dwelt in, and the launch that conveys up the river- all came from their emaciated, half starved and well flagellated bodies.”¹⁶ While Casement attempts to remain an objective observer at the onset of his mission in the Amazon, it was instances like these that brought Casement’s cynicism to the surface and convinced him that the corruption was everywhere in the company.

As Casement’s investigation in the Amazon progressed, his tone and language in his diary changed. His entries became more impassioned and emotional, as he increasingly felt more isolated and powerless to do anything he feels he had a responsibility to do. As Casement took statements from those who were afraid to speak out he writes, “I was responsible for the safety of these men. They had relied on my obvious right to ask them to state the truth, as far as they knew how...but I had no power to protect them, there was no law or authority of any kind in this country.”¹⁷

Furthermore, the lack of law in the country prohibited Casement from doing his job.

Casement notes, “It is impossible to investigate anything of this kind, because as your

¹⁵ Roger Casement. “Sir Roger Casement’s Diary, September to December, 1910 [Abridged]” in *Roger Casement’s Diaries 1910: The Black and the White*, ed. Roger Sawyer (London: Pimlico, 1997), 145

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 149

¹⁷ Roger Casement. “Sir Roger Casement’s Diary, September to December, 1910 [Abridged]” in *Roger Casement’s Diaries 1910: The Black and the White*, ed. Roger Sawyer (London: Pimlico, 1997), p.150

investigation will end in criminal charges – you must abstain from making it, since there is no one to arrest the criminal or punish the crime you may bring to light.”¹⁸ Here Casement is morally conflicted, he feels a deep responsibility to help bring justice to the natives, but he cannot because there are not any avenues to punish criminals. This adds to his feelings of powerlessness and isolation.

Casement’s powerlessness led him to feelings of hopelessness and despair while in the Amazon. For example, some company men felt that a satisfactory trip by Casement would lead to further financing of the company. Casement writes, “He [a company official] feels sure the result of my journey to the Putumayo will be more capital for the company. Yes, more capital punishment if I had my way. I swear to God, I’d hang every one of the bad wretches with my own hands if I had the power, and do it with the greatest pleasure.”¹⁹ Casement, it should be noted, was a pacifist. Therefore an entry such as this was alarming and a result of his overall infuriation with the brutal tactics of the company. However, Casement’s frustration with his own powerlessness became equally matched with his frustration with the country that employed him.

In the Amazon, Casement came across a few British men, and a couple of non-British men who had been educated in British universities. Casement discovered through these men that he was even more alone in his outrage than he thought. Casement must have felt at first that at least the British would share his indignation, but the interactions with these men would prove otherwise. Most of Casement’s anger at the British at this point stems from their penchant to tolerate or overlook the crimes committed by the company. Casement writes, “Here are two kindly Englishmen not defending it...but

¹⁸ Ibid, 156

¹⁹ Ibid, 146

seeking to excuse it to some extent, and actually unable to see its full enormity or to understand its atrocious meaning.”²⁰ Finally, Casement started to assign some of the blame for the atrocities to Britain’s financial backing of the company and its obvious profit from it. Rather than simply blame the men who tortured, killed or coerced, Casement suggests, “It is the system that is the crime, not the criminals who administer it, and you, when it becomes demonstrably indefensible, adopt the argument that this English company is not responsible, because the government of Peru is callous, indifferent, absent, or non-existent.”²¹ In other words, Casement felt that the British had a moral responsibility as financiers of the Company to do something to stop the crimes, but instead passed the responsibility onto a country that had a weak government and system of laws.

At that point, Casement began to make a huge distinction in his way of thinking that made him different from the Englishmen he encounters, and that is the fact that he is Irish. Though always Irish, Casement had worked for and lived in Britain most of his life. However, years of working for Britain had gradually made him feel more like an outsider than a citizen. Casement writes, “The world, I am beginning to think—that is the white man’s world- is made up of two categories of men- compromisers and Irishmen... Thank God I am an Irishman.”²² Casement’s work with the Englishmen in the Amazon only served to illustrate this point. The Englishmen there were willing to compromise the lives of the natives or seek to excuse their treatment in any way possible. Casement, on the other hand, would not compromise. He saw what he felt was wrong and would not budge on his stance or excuse the behavior of the company. The English,

²⁰ Ibid, 169-160

²¹ Ibid, 158

²² Ibid, 160

having never been the victims of imperialism, had the luxury of being able to compromise. In Casement's view the Irish could not compromise because, as subjects of Britain for hundreds of years, they had to fight for everything they had. Perhaps at first Casement felt as if he was one of the British, but through the years and especially through his experience in the Amazon, he saw that an English education and pedigree did not lead to moral or racial superiority. Casement felt that the English, with all of their power and influence, should be leading the fight for human rights, not compromising or excusing the existence of brutal tactics on natives. The hypocrisy of the British would lead to Casement's final act of human rights advocacy as he joined the fight to free Ireland from the grip of British domination.

Epilogue

In the autumn of 1914, Casement journeyed to Germany on a secret mission. He had two objectives: to persuade the Germans to provide weapons, ammunition, and officers to Ireland in order for the Irish to stage a rebellion against the British, and to obtain and train Irish POWs in Germany for the rebellion in Ireland. Casement's journey was not as successful as he hoped. He received only a fraction of the military aid that he wanted and his task of recruiting Irish POWs did not produce many volunteers. Upon returning to Kerry in western Ireland, Casement was apprehended by the British and transferred to Pentonville Prison in London where he stood trial for treason. Casement was found guilty and hanged on August 3, 1916, his body buried in the prison cemetery.

The study of Roger Casement has been as inconsistent as his legacy. While some studied his life in the decades following his death (most notably, Geoffrey Parmiter in 1936), Casement's life remained largely ignored by historians, especially in Ireland who

chose to celebrate such revolutionary heroes as Michael Collins and Patrick Pearse instead. It seems that the controversial homosexual diaries that emerged during his trial alienated Casement from the staunch Catholic country, who would have rather not associated with him during such a fragile time in their history. By the middle of the century, public opinion of Casement began to change and his supporters were convinced his homosexual diaries were an elaborate ruse by the British to negate his accomplishments. In 1965 Casement's body was exhumed, repatriated to Ireland, and buried in Dublin with full military honors. Afterwards, historians such as Brian Inglis and B.L. Reid released biographies that detailed his vast accomplishments in the British empire and in Ireland. Finally, in 2002, a forensic study of the alleged Black Diaries confirmed that they were indeed written by Casement. The emergence of this new evidence changed the way that historians studied Casement, as they could no longer ignore his homosexuality. With that, new works by Irish historian Seamas O'Siochain and Nobel Prize winner Mario Vargas Llosa both addressed the issue of his homosexuality, but only in terms of how it affected his trial and reputation. In the future, Casement's life and legacy would benefit from a deeper analysis of how his homosexuality affected the way he viewed the British, his work, and the native lives he changed in the far reaches of the world.

Regardless of his controversial legacy, Casement remains one of the first modern human rights activists. He gave a voice to people who would have otherwise had no voice. Casement, it should be noted, stood to gain nothing by doing so. In fact, most of the time he was risking his career and life by doing what he felt he had a moral responsibility to do. During his trial, and days away from the end of his life, Casement

addressed the courtroom for the last time, “Self-government is our right, a thing born in us at birth; a thing no more to be doled out to us or withheld from us by another people than the right to life itself... Where men must beg with bated breath for leave to subsist on their own land, to think their own thoughts, to sing their own songs, to garner the fruits of their own labor... then surely it is a braver, a saner and a truer thing to be a rebel.”²³

²³ Hochschild, 286