

Ghosts and Roger Casement in the Work of W.B. Yeats: A Paper and a Post-Script

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Abstract: *W.B. Yeats first summoned the 1916 patriot Roger Casement as one of the unnamed heroes in his poem “Sixteen Dead Men” which appeared in his collection Michael Robartes and the Dancer (1921). He returned to Casement late in his career when, having read with sympathy William J. Maloney’s The Forged Casement Diaries (1936), the poet returned to Casement in three poems in his late New Poems (1938): “Roger Casement,” “The Ghost of Roger Casement” and “The Municipal Gallery Revisited.” Yeats makes his case that Casement was libeled in “Roger Casement”; he describes the figure of Casement in Sir John Lavery’s painting of the trial. “The Ghost of Roger Casement,” Yeats’s most dramatic Casement poem, describes Casement’s ghost’s return to beat on the door and to indict John Bull. The image of the returned ghost of Roger Casement made the poem popular with fellow Dubliners after it was published in The Irish Press (February 2, 1937). This essay will examine Yeats’s use of ghost tradition in Irish folklore in his early poems and plays and his return to that ghost lore in the Casement poems in New Poems.*

In the winter of 1881, John Butler Yeats moved his family to Howth, the fishing village north of Dublin. John Butler Yeats had a studio in Dublin and his son William Butler Yeats went in with him each day on his way to the Erasmus Smith High School. Yeats remembered the two years the family spent in Howth as happy ones for his mother. The location overlooking the Irish Sea reminded her of her home in Sligo, and she enjoyed talking to the wives of local fishermen. Their stories included ghost stories because they were a lively presence in Howth: sighted in the laneways, on the steps, on the quay and by the churchyard.

Yeats’s writing career began with editing anthologies of folklore from printed sources. He edited *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888) and *Irish Fairy Tales* (1892).¹

When he produced his own collection of folklore, *The Celtic Twilight* in 1888 (rev. 1902), he added his mother’s ghost stories to his own ghost stories from the west

of Ireland in his essay “Village Ghosts.”² He describes the ubiquitous, benign ghosts of H (Howth) and then the ghosts of the west “. . . who have a gloomy matter-of-fact way with them.” Yeats lists some of the reasons they return: to announce a death (“The Phantom Ship”); to fulfill an obligation – the woman who returned to a neighbor to ask that her children be taken from the workhouse and that three masses be said for the repose of her soul. The workhouse story is closest to the stories of ghosts that were told in the Irish countryside down through the first six decades of the twentieth century. People were told to speak to a ghost because it had returned for a reason: to settle a debt, to keep a promise, or to help a family member.

In “Irish Fairies, Ghosts, Witches etc.,” an article for the Theosophic magazine *Lucifer* (1889), Yeats offered some theory and a typology of the supernatural that included ghosts. He defined the ghost or *taibhse* as “merely an earth-bound shell fading and whimpering in the places it loved” and linked it to theosophical beliefs suggesting that ghosts were part of a world-wide tradition about the unquiet dead. Less frequently, there are ghost stories about other spirits who have been condemned to haunt the site of her/his earthly crime. Yeats’s haunted play, his best-known Noh Play, “Purgatory” is based on this ghost tradition.³ This play, like “The Dreaming of the Bones,” about which I will refer a little later, turned on Yeats’s belief, a belief that he attributed to the *Anima Mundi*, that spirits after death live on – not in the flesh, of course. In “Purgatory” the ruined house is haunted by the souls in purgatory: the old man, the mother and the father on the evening of the old man’s conception, the most awful moment of this soul’s transgression, the mother must live through – once again – the actions and feelings of that night and feel remorse, once again. The “purgatory” is that the souls have to relive the moment over and over.

Finally, there is still another ghost tradition, the avenging ghost of a murder victim who identifies her/his killer. For example, in “The Two Sisters” (Child 10), a king’s daughter drowns her younger sister in a pond. She thinks she has committed a perfect crime until a musician appears at court. The first song the musician plays ends with a version of the line, “You’ll drown my sister as she did me.” Sometimes the harper has an instrument made of the breastbone of the drowned girl; in other versions, the musician is a fiddler whose fiddle is strung with the hair of the drowned girl.⁴

Roger Casement is one of the avenging ghosts. Like Yeats, Casement was born in a village south of Dublin: Casement in Sandycove in 1864 and Yeats in Sandymount in 1865. The son of a Protestant father and a Catholic mother, Casement was orphaned young. At the age of fifteen, he went into the Ender Dempster Shipping Company, a job that took him to the Congo in 1884; he stayed until 1891. When he became the British Consul in the Congo, he was charged with investigating reports of the abuse of rubber workers. It was the transforming experience that established his reputation as a crusading humanitarian whose reports were objective, meticulous and compassionate; the British government recognized his efforts with a CMG (Companion of the Order of Saint Michael and Saint George). His efforts in the Congo led to a physical breakdown in 1904. Casement took a medical leave that he spent partly in Ireland.

While Yeats was collecting and swapping ghost stories during his 1904 lecture tour to the United States, Casement was visiting family in Cushendall in the Glens of Antrim. Like Yeats, Casement became interested in the Irish language. Both men believed the nationalist Thomas Davis who wrote in his essay “Our National Language” (1843) that a national language was essential to a national identity. While speaking with a local man, a Mr. Clarke, Casement expressed an interest in an upcoming *feis*, a festival of Irish language culture: singing, dance, storytelling, and he gave Clarke a couple of his verses on the Irish language and a generous £5 subscription for the *feis*. Clarke told his neighbor Annie McGavock about Casement saying that he could hardly believe that he was a Casement of Ballycastle as they were considered to be tyrants in the old days and hardly held such nationalist views (Tierney 84). As it happened, Mrs. McGavock was a sister of Eoin MacNeill, Casement’s fellow Glensman who called the meeting that led to the founding of the Gaelic League in Dublin on July 31, 1893.

Casement and MacNeill became close friends, and he was a welcome visitor to the MacNeill household in Herbert Park in the decade between 1904 and 1914. MacNeill’s children spoke affectionately of Casement in the 1970s. MacNeill and Casement also shared the friendship of the nationalist historian Alice Stopford Green. Casement’s letter to Mrs. Green spoke of the loss of the Irish language, a loss that the Gaelic League was designed to restore. He wrote, “The Congo will revive and flourish; the black millions will again overflow the land, but who shall restore the destroyed Irish tongue?” (Noyes 41).

After Casement’s African assignments, he was posted to South America. In 1906, he arrived to investigate and expose the exploitation of Putumayo indigenous people working on rubber plantations in the Amazon. Six years later, in 1912, Casement testified before a British Parliamentary Inquiry about Brazilian conditions. They concluded that his charges against the Peruvian Amazon Company were valid, and they urged Peru, Brazil and the United States to close down the rubber operations; however, with the onset of the First World War in 1914, the need for rubber outweighed human rights concerns.

When Casement retired from the British Civil Service in 1910, he devoted the rest of his life to the cause of Irish nationalism. By 1911, both Casement and Yeats were disillusioned with the Gaelic League. Casement wrote to Mrs. Green, “I have really in my heart no hope for the language” (Inglis 222). One problem for both was that they failed to make much progress in Irish though Casement was generally a good linguist who spoke fluent French and some Spanish and Portuguese. In addition, Casement thought that League policy was confining, and Yeats found the League repudiated the Abbey during the 1911 riots in New York over their production of *Playboy of the Western World*. Casement turned from cultural nationalism to a more militant, physical force nationalism. Casement was not present at Dublin’s Rotunda on November 25, 1913, when MacNeill founded the Irish Volunteers, but he threw himself into the movement travelling around the country with MacNeill to recruit new members and to raise money

for the organization. He was appointed to the Volunteer Executive in April 1914, the year that Casement organized the Howth gun-running, a shipment of 1500 rifles purchased in Germany by Darrell Figgis and Erskine Childers that were brought into Howth Harbor on July 26th aboard the Childers' yacht the *Asgard*.⁵

While Casement organized the Howth gun-running and took credit for its success, by the time the actual rifles arrived, Casement was in the United States trying to raise money for the Irish Volunteers. He was an excellent choice to send to America at that moment. The hard line Irish American nationalists like John Devoy lionized Casement for the audacious Howth episode. He wrote to Casement saying, "You've done more than anyone else for Ireland in the last 100 years" (Carroll 35). The wealthy and influential moderate Irish Americans found him a very attractive figure. His knighthood gave him a certain cachet. While Casement was dismissive of it, others found it was emblematic of his character.⁶

Yeats's friend and patron the Irish-American lawyer and collector John Quinn hosted Casement when he came to New York, and he introduced him to his circle of influential Irish-Americans who were John Redmondite Home Rulers: New York State Supreme Court judges James F. Byrne, Daniel Patrick Cohalan, Martin Jerome Keogh and Victor J. Dowling and New York Congressman: the gifted orator W. Bourke Cockran who was Winston Churchill's cousin. Quinn and Casement's biographer B.L. Reid described Quinn's circle as, ". . . men of modest wealth who could still be depended on to put their hands in their pockets for a hundred or five hundred dollars for almost any good cause...[and] theirs was an Americanized generation, a qualified Irishry" (Reid 110).

Casement had arrived in New York on the 4th of July, 1914. Just a month later, the British declared war on Germany. The same day, August 4, 1914, John Redmond called on the Irish Volunteers to support the British war effort. The Irish Volunteers split over Redmond's proposal. The majority, some 150,000 followed Redmond; they called themselves the Irish National Volunteers. A small minority, perhaps, 2000-3000, stayed with MacNeill's wing of the Volunteers. They did not disagree with Redmond about Home Rule; it had passed both houses of Parliament and only awaited the King's signature. They objected to the war. MacNeill said the Irish Volunteers would fight only if Ireland were invaded, if the British government were to try to suppress the Volunteers or if the British tried to enforce conscription into the British Army.

Casement saw the Volunteer split as an opportunity to enlist German support for Irish independence and sailed for Germany in the autumn of 1914 to pursue his own plans to secure a German intervention. This was not a new idea for him. In 1913, he had published an article titled "Ireland, Germany and the Next War" in *The Irish Review*. It was republished in 1918 as a pamphlet titled *The Crime against Europe: a Possible Outcome of the War of 1914*. He had proposed that he seek German cooperation to secure Irish independence. His friend MacNeill differed from Casement about Germany writing later in his unpublished Memoir, "I would see little to choose from between one

imperialism and another” (Tierney 159). Quinn broke with Casement over Casement’s German initiative. Even before the sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1917 brought America into the war, Quinn was anti-German. He could not accept Casement’s dealings with the Germans even if, as he argued, he was acting for Ireland.

Quinn found that Devoy and his Clan na Gael associates were sympathetic to Casement’s German initiative. Casement drafted a declaration of Irish-American support for Germany which was signed by the Clan na Gael executive in August 1914. He and John Devoy met with the German Ambassador to the United States Count Johann von Bernstorff to propose that they recruit an Irish brigade from Irish soldiers in German prisoner of war camps. The Clan financed Casement’s trip to Berlin. Casement’s plan for an Irish Brigade had met with no success. By December 1914, having only recruited fifty or so prisoners of war, he said, “in my heart I am very sorry I came” (Tierney 172).

Unbeknownst to Casement, Devoy was negotiating separately with the Germans on behalf of the Irish Republican Brotherhood who sent Joseph Mary Plunkett to Berlin in spring, 1915 to establish direct contact with the Kaiser’s government and to keep Casement occupied. Plunkett had an interview with the German Chancellor, von Bethmann Hollweg, and secured from him a promise that the Germans would send arms to Ireland in the spring of 1916. Plunkett also tried Casement’s plan of recruiting Irish prisoners. It too was unsuccessful, but it served its purpose by distracting Casement. Just a week before the Dublin Rising, Devoy had also contacted the Germans on behalf of the American Clan na Gael to send them instructions about landing arms and men in Ireland.

The IRB effort to negotiate for German arms was part of their plan for an armed uprising before the end of the War. They did not divulge their plans to MacNeill, their commandant. They knew the conditions under which he would call up the Volunteers. They knew he would not send his men into a rebellion that was doomed to fail. Like MacNeill, Casement believed that the Rising had no chance to succeed without significant German help, help that was not forthcoming. He decided that his only recourse was to try to stop the Rising scheduled for Easter Sunday, 1916. The Germans sent him back to Ireland by submarine that was meant to coordinate with the promised shipment of arms arriving on another ship heading for Tralee Bay.

When MacNeill discovered, on the Holy Thursday evening, 1916, that a Rising had been planned secretly, he responded by threatening to cancel the orders for the Rising. He was persuaded to wait to cancel the Rising because Casement was en route with German arms. When he learned that the guns had been scuttled and Casement had been captured, MacNeill cancelled the Volunteer order to gather. As things turned out, the Rising was not canceled but only delayed by one day. MacNeill took it for granted that Casement was involved in the plan for a rebellion; Casement equally assumed that MacNeill was at its head.

Casement was captured on Friday morning, April 21, 1916, shortly after he came ashore on a small boat on Banna’s Strand, County Kerry. His actions were regarded

as treason and he was arrested and escorted through Dublin during the week of the Rising, taken to London and imprisoned in the Tower of London till his trial at Old Bailey began. He was charged with high treason.⁷ Inevitably Casement was found guilty sentenced to death on June 29th. His legal counsel appealed the sentence. Partly due to his counsel Alexander Martin “Sergeant” Sullivan’s collapse during the trial, an appeal was granted. It was heard over two days in July 1916.

Support for Casement had been building –George Bernard Shaw, who didn’t approve of the Rising, urged that Casement be spared. In New York, Quinn, who had not approved of Casement’s actions, believed he was honest and honorable. Struck by the irony that Casement had returned to Ireland to stop the Rising only to be the first rebel captured moved Quinn to begin efforts to save Casement. He believed that Casement had a chance writing to Joseph Conrad confidently on June 29, 1916, “Casement won’t swing” (Reid 233).⁸ Yeats’s sisters Susan Mary (Lily) and Elizabeth Corbett (Lolly) also believed that Casement’s death sentence would be commuted. Lily wrote her father John Butler Yeats on June 30, 1916, “There is no special news except for the verdict from Sir Roger. I hope they won’t hang him – surely the sentence will be commuted.”

William Butler and the Quinn circle worked on Casement’s behalf during the period leading up to Casement’s appeal trial. With some pressure from Maud Gonne, Yeats signed a petition on Casement’s behalf. It was the only political petition he ever signed (Foster 2, 519).⁹ He also wrote a long memorandum to the Home Secretary and cabled the Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith urging clemency (Foster 2, 52). Quinn wrote to the press, composed memoranda to the British Foreign Office Sir Edward Grey asking that Casement be spared on humanitarian grounds and collected the signatures of twenty-five prominent Americans to send to Grey (Carroll 77-78). Quinn cautioned the British that it was tactically dangerous to make Casement into a martyr. In the end, the interventions on Casement’s behalf were unsuccessful; he was hanged at Pentonville Jail on August 3, 1916.

After Casement was hanged, his supporters continued to rally round. Rumors continued to circulate about the diaries recovered from Casement’s flat. Since he had no reason to believe that Casement was a homosexual, Quinn assumed that the diaries were forgeries produced like the Piggot forgeries were to discredit Parnell. Four years later, Lolly Yeats wrote to her father with some satisfaction that the “cocoa Magnate” William Cadbury and his family believed absolutely in him and said, “someday his name will be cleared.”

Casement was slow to appear in Yeats’s poems, but of all those executed for their part in the Rising, Casement was ultimately Yeats’s most persistent ghost. W.J. McCormack has pointed out that after World War I, there was a growth of interest in the occult and in séances on the part of the bereaved trying to contact their loved ones (50). The idea that the living and the dead could communicate was consistent with Yeats’s ghost beliefs. To the folk tradition of ghosts, Yeats added the influence of the Japanese Noh theatre. One might argue that Yeats prepared for Casement’s ghosts with his ghost/Noh play “The Dreaming of the Bones.”

“The Dreaming of the Bones” is a ghost story. A young man fleeing from the General Post Office in Dublin, the headquarters of the rebels during the 1916 rebellion, takes shelter in Corcomroe Abbey, the 12th century (1182) Cistercian abbey in the Burren of North Clare. According to tradition, Devorgilla left her husband Tiernan O’Rourke, King of Breifne, and ran off with Dermot Mac Murrough, King of Leinster. Dermot was banished and sought help from Henry II to recover his Leinster kingdom. His request provided Henry with the pretext to undertake the conquest of Ireland in 1169. Yeats built his “Dreaming of the Bones” on the tradition that Dermot and Devorgilla, the two people responsible for the English invasion and occupation of Ireland, will not rest until people of their own race forgive them. In the play, the ghost of Devorgilla haunts Corcomroe seeking that forgiveness. The young man declares his feelings about those who commit Dermot and Devorgilla’s offence:

Young man: In the late Rising
I think there was no man of us but hated
To fire at soldiers who but did their duty
And were not of our race, but when a man
Is born in Ireland and of Irish stock,
When he takes part against us....

Unable to forgive them, (the young man says, “O never, never/ Shall Diarmuid and Devorgilla be forgiven”), so the lovers are condemned to continue to wander, whirling around like Paolo and Francesca in Dante’s *Inferno* until they are forgiven. Speaking of his treatment of the Dermot and Grainne story in his book *Plays and Controversies* (1923), Yeats wrote:

In making the penance of Dermot and Devorgilla last so many centuries, I have done something for which I had no warrant in these papers or from that source but warrant there certainly is in the folklore of all countries. At certain moments the Spiritual Being, or rather that part of it which Robartes call ‘the Spirit’ is said to enter into the Shade, and during those moments, it can converse with living men, though within the narrow limits of its dream (458).

So Yeats was thinking about ghosts and history in 1919.

Casement does not appear in Yeats’s iconic “Easter 1916”; instead, he is the unnamed sixteenth man in Yeats’s ballad “Sixteen Dead Men,” a poem about the ghosts of Padraic Pearse and Thomas MacDonagh.¹⁰ In her chapter “Tales, Feelings, Farewells: Three Stages of the Yeatsian Ballad,” in *Our Secret Discipline, Yeats and Lyric Form*, Helen Vendler points out that in his effort to avoid the clichés that were gathering around the executed heroes, Yeats “. . . visualized a literal afterlife gathering of the sixteen dead men, still ‘loitering,’ as ghosts are wont to do, around the place where they died. Having set the cauldron of rebellion boiling, they linger (or rather as newly homeless men, ‘loiter’) to keep the pot active by stirring it.” (Vendler 121).

The “you” of the second stanza lines, “You say that we should still the land/Till Germany’s overcome,” speaks for the poet who believed that the rebels should have waited to see whether the King’s promise to sign off on Home Rule after the War. Home Rule had been passed by the British Parliament in 1913 but delayed for the duration in 1914. Remember the lines from “Easter 1916”: “For England may keep faith/For all that is done and said.” Yeats ends the poem by uniting the 1916 heroes Pearse and MacDonagh with Lord Edward Fitzgerald and Wolfe Tone, heroes of the earlier and unsuccessful revolution of 1798. (While neither was executed, Fitzgerald died of gunshot wounds received when he was captured. Wolfe Tone committed suicide while awaiting execution).

What brought Casement from the margin, from his place as an unnamed “dead man”? The matter of Casement’s diaries had surfaced again with the publication of *The Forged Casement Diaries* (1936) by the Scottish physician W.P. Maloney. The book argued that the forged diaries were used to impugn Casement’s character so that he was guilty not just of treason but of sodomy.¹¹ Yeats’s involvement began in March 1933, when Patrick McCartan, the American physician, asked Yeats to help obtain a prominent author’s introduction to Maloney’s book. Yeats suggested Shaw and that was the end of his activity until Nov 1936 when the book appeared without an introduction from Shaw. The book prompted Yeats to write a ballad based on the matter of the Casement diaries. He wrote to Dorothy Wellesley on Nov 28, 1936 from Riversdale:

I sent off a ferocious ballad written to a popular tune, to a newspaper. It is on ‘The Forged Diaries of Roger Casement,’ a book published here, and denounces by name - and for their shares in abetting the forgeries.¹² I shall not be happy until I hear that it is sung by Irish undergraduates at Oxford. I wrote to the editor saying I had not hitherto sent him a poem because almost [all] my poems were unsuitable because they came out of rage or lust. I heard my ballad sung last night. It is a stirring thing. (*Letters* 868)

[PS] My ‘Casement’ is better written than my ‘Parnell’ because I passed things when I had to find three thymes and did not pass when I had to find two. (ibid. 869)

The popular tune Yeats mentioned was the air to the song “Glen of Aherlow” a ballad written by Charles Kickham, author of *Knocknagow*, a novel of the land war, the most popular novel of the late nineteenth century. Kickham’s ballad of Patrick Sheehan describes the soldier from the Glen of Aherlow who was blinded at the Siege of Sevastopol. After Sheehan returned home, he was arrested and jailed for begging on Grafton Street. The treatment of a disabled veteran and the tropes of eviction and the workhouse in the ballad shamed the British into giving Sheehan a pension of a shilling a day. The “Glen of Aherlow,” published first in the *Kilkenny Journal* on 7 October 1857, was reprinted by Yeats, in 1890, under the title “Patrick Sheehan” in his anthology *A Book of Irish Verse*. Yeats knew his own ballad would marry public sympathy for a nationalist martyr with a familiar song with its own national grievance.

Yeats sent a copy of his poem from Riversdale to Ethel Mannin on November 30, 1936:

My dear Ethel,

Here is my Casement poem—the daily press will have it in a day or two—it is now with the editor of the *Irish Times* and if he funks it will go to the *Irish Press*.¹³ If my rage lasts, I may go on and in still more savage mood. . . . Some day you will understand what I see in the Irish National movement and why I can be no other sort of revolutionist. . . . I remember O’Leary saying, ‘No gentleman can be a socialist, though he might be an anarchist.’ (*Letters* 869)

When Dorothy Wellesley wrote to Yeats urging him not to publish the poem, he responded on December 4, 1936:

I could not stop that ballad if I would, people have copies, & I don’t want to . . . But the Casement evidence was not true as we know – it was one of a number of acts of forgery committed at the time. I can only repeat words spoken to me by the old head of the Fenians years ago. “There are things a man must not do even to save a nation.” By the by, my ballad should begin

I say that Roger Casement
Did what he had to do
But died upon the scaffold
But that is nothing new.

I feel that one’s verse must be as direct & natural as spoken words. The opening I sent you was not quite natural.

No I shall not get the ballad sung in Oxford, that was but a “passing” thought, because I happened to know a certain wild student who would have been made quite happy by the talk – the idea amused me. (Wellesley 119-120)

Yeats wrote again to Wellesley on December 23rd about a second Casement ballad, “The Ghost of Roger Casement”:

I will send that ballad but will not be able to do so for a few days. My last typed copies went off to America on Monday & and it is always difficult to get a typist here who can read my writing or take my dictation. Then you might as well have the two Casement ballads together, they are meant to support each other. I am fighting in those ballads for what I have been fighting all my life, it is our Irish fight though it has nothing to do with this or that country. Bernard Shaw fights with the same object. (Wellesley 126).

He wrote Wellesley once more on February 8, 1937, about the reception of “Roger Casement” as he had worked to bring the poem to the attention of the public. It was sung at the Abbey on February 1st and broadcasted on Radio Éireann the following day when it was published in *The Irish Press* (Foster 573):

On Feb. 2 my wife went to Dublin shopping & was surprised at the deference everybody showed her in buses & shops. Then she found what it was –the Casement poem was in the morning paper. Next day I was publicly thanked by the vice-president of the Executive Council, by DeValera’s political secretary, by our chief antiquarian & an old revolutionist, Count Plunkett, who called my poem ‘a ballad the people much needed.’ DeValera’s newspaper gave me a long leader saying that for generations to come my poem will pour scorn on the forgers & their backers. The only English comment is in *The Evening Standard* which points out my bad rhymes & says that after so many years it is impossible to discuss the authenticity of the diaries. (The British Government has hidden them for years.). (Wellesley 138-9)

Yeats’s final letter to Wellesley about his Casement poems refers to his letter to *The Irish Press* on February 12, 1937 which acknowledged Alfred Noyes’s “noble letter” calling for an impartial tribunal to examine the Casement letters. Yeats explained that Noyes’s name did not appear in the second version of “Roger Casement.” He wrote Wellesley on February 18th :

I told you that my Casement ballad came out in DeValera’s paper some three weeks ago – it has stirred up no end of a commotion. Shaw has written a long, rambling, vegetarian, sexless letter, disturbed by my causing ‘bad blood’ between the nations; & strange to say Alfred Noyes has done what I asked him in the ballad – spoken ‘his bit in public’ in a noble letter – I have called it that in my reply – various ferocious Irish patriots have picked off some of the nobility but not all. Public opinion is excited and there is a demand for a production of the documents & their submission to some impartial tribunal. It would be a great relief to me if they were so submitted & proved genuine. If Casement were a homosexual, what matter! But if the British government can with impunity forge evidence to prove him so, no unpopular man with a cause will ever be safe. Henceforth he will be denied his last refuge –Martyrdom. (Wellesley 141)

Yeats assuaged his conscience about writing a political ballad that he sent to the public press by sending the payment for his poem to Ethel Mannin “for your labour poor box –not for politics” (*Letters* 884).

“The Ghost of Roger Casement,” Yeats’s second Casement poem, was more memorable, less controversial. It has the haunting refrain line, “The ghost of Roger Casement is beating on the door.” Casement arrives as an accusing ghost who is not a singing bone but a door rapper who has returned to haunt his accuser (ballad drafted in Dec 1936 RF 575). While opera devotee Roy Foster links Casement’s ghost with the avenging ghost in *Don Giovanni*, it is more likely that the line was informed by Yeats’s knowledge of the traditional folk belief about the unquiet dead, and that Casement’s ghost returns to clear his name and to warn the forgers that:

And there's no luck about a house
If it lacks honesty.

Casement's last appearance in a Yeats poem was in "The Municipal Gallery Revisited." By then, one could say that the British government had its own ghost of Roger Casement, Sir John Lavery's two paintings of the trial appealing Casement's sentence of death. The trial was captured for history by Sir John Lavery's paintings "High Treason" and the earlier oil study for the "High Treason," called "The Court of Criminal Appeal. The Trial of Sir Roger Casement. London, 1916" that hangs in Dublin's Hugh Lane Gallery. Casement's expression is intent, and he sits framed, top and bottom, by bars, with his arms folded watching his barrister.

The larger finished painting "High Treason" is far more dramatic. The court room is darker and Casement's small, white face appears out of the darkness staring straight ahead. Asked to paint the trial by his former patron, the presiding Judge Mr. Justice Darling, Lavery occupied the empty jury box with his painting kit on the seat beside him well out of sight.¹⁴ The mood of concentration was such that Lavery's sketching was detected only by Casement who stood in the prisoner's dock facing him. Casement sent notes to his cousin Gertrude Bannister Parry inquiring "who was the painter in the jury box?" and who was the "beautiful" and "sad-faced" lady who sat near him?¹⁵ (McConkey 132).

The focal point of the picture is Casement's barrister Alexander Martin "Sergeant" Sullivan who is addressing the court. Attorney General Sir Frederick Smith who prosecuted for the Crown sits in the front row at the Inner Bar. Casement and Smith had been named on the same 1911 Honours List. Later, as Lord Birkenhead, Smith was a member of the British delegation that negotiated the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1921 that ended the hostilities between Ireland and Great Britain and created the Irish Free State.

Thinking about the trial, Lavery later wrote in his autobiography *Life*:

It was difficult to realize that a man's life was at stake in the drowsy monotony of the talk that went on for two days or even at the end when Judge Darling, in the most casual manner, said, 'the appeal is dismissed.' Casement stood up and looked round the Court, waved to someone in the gallery, turned his back and disappeared down the stairs that would lead to the scaffold. (99)

In a letter to his cousin Gertrude, Casement said he was grateful that it was an Irishman who painted the picture (McConkey 132).

Though the idea for the painting was Judge Darling's, Lavery was criticized for taking to commission. Cuttings in Lady Lavery's scrapbooks include comments like, "Girls in White, Girls on the sand in full sun or girls on horseback – such used to be Lavery's themes. But the penalty of fame has brought him other subjects including a Coronation and a trial. Of all the trials not to paint, the Casement trial I should have

thought would have had first place. But Lavery, the debonair, had gone right through with the painful task . . .” (McCooole 65-66). The *Weekly Dispatch* (22 October 1916) cautioned that Lavery should not paint the picture without knowing the contents of the two diaries “from all of which it follows that the forthcoming picture is sure to attract immense attention but scarcely the kind of notice that so popular an artist is seeking” (McCooole 131, n66).¹⁶

It took Lavery into the 1930s to complete “High Treason,” because he had to paint all of the individual faces in the courtroom. When the painting was finished, Lavery offered it to the National Portrait Gallery who turned it down (Dunne 9). The last thing England wanted was a permanent reminder of what happened to Casement. The solution was to give the painting, officially part of the United Kingdom’s Government Art Collection, to the Dublin King’s Inns on permanent loan.¹⁷ The Sir John Lavery painting of the Casement trial that Yeats actually saw at the Municipal Gallery, the painting to which he refers in the poem, was probably the study for the larger painting, “High Treason –the Court of Criminal Appeal” which Lavery bequeathed to the Royal Courts of Justice and which has been on loan to the King’s Inn, Dublin, since 1951.¹⁸

Post-Script

At one level, Casement’s ghost was settled in Ireland in 1965. Before his execution he asked that his remains not remain “in this dreadful place”; however, it took nearly fifty years of negotiations to bring him back to Ireland. It was Harold Wilson, Prime Minister of Great Britain from 1964-70, who permitted Casement’s remains to be returned to Dublin in March, 1965. He lay in state at the military Chapel of the Sacred Heart, was given a State funeral and buried with other national heroes in Glasnevin Cemetery.

That was not the end of the ghost of Roger Casement. He became, inadvertently, the poster boy for organizations like the New York ILGO, the Irish Gay and Lesbian Organization, who has had a long-running feud with the Ancient Order of Hibernians about their right to march behind their organization banner at the annual New York St. Patrick’s Day Parade. Casement is not about openly gay people who have same sex relationships with consenting adults. The ghost of Roger Casement continues to haunt the twenty-first century Irish psyche – a noise in the plumbing: persistent and reproachful – because, if the diaries are authentic, there is the matter of Casement’s choice of native boys and young men, some under age, as his sexual objects. It would be an ironic choice for a man honored for his humanitarianism and known for his deep antipathy to imperialism.¹⁹ (In Ireland, cases of clerical abuse detailed in *The Murphy Report* involve the same exploitation of boys, often underage boys also involve the additional vulnerability of class.)

The Casement ghost reappeared again in 2009 with the recent allegations that the openly gay, Irish language poet Cathal O’Searcaigh sexually exploited young

Nepalese boys over the twelve years that he has visited his adopted village in the place he calls his “spiritual home.” His gifts to the village have included sponsoring the education of several young people in the village. Protesting that he was not a “sex tourist,” Ó Searcaigh blurted out, “I had hardly any sex with anybody of 16” (Holly). The matter came to light when Nessa Ní Chianain produced *Fairytale of Kathmandu*, a documentary about Ó Searcaigh’s charitable work in Nepal, raised questions about the poet’s relationship with the boys and also about the attendant issues of sex, money and power.²⁰

Shifting the lens from the dominating figures of the 1916 leaders, what Roy Foster named as “the distorting prism of 1916” a figure like Roger Casement has much to say to twenty-first-century Ireland, where Irish identity seems to have fragmented from the tight triangle of nationalism, Irish language and Catholicism to a period of confusion when Irish society is forced to deal with human rights, equality and a sexual revolution that has no clear guidelines. Perhaps, we are now more understanding of Casement’s human flaws and more mindful of the principles that shone through his frailties.

Notes

- 1 Horace Reynolds has suggested that Yeats’s early uncollected poem “The Phantom Ship” was based on the story that Yeats used in the Introduction to “Ghosts” and that he repeated in his review of D.R. McAnally’s *Irish Wonders* (1888) about the man who saw the dead of his village one night while he was sitting in a rath. Another ghostly premonition appears in Padraic Colum’s “She Moved Through the Fair,” a song that has passed into folklore. The song was used in the film *Michael Collins* in the scene where Collins’s fiancé Kitty Kiernan is shopping for her wedding clothes while Collins drives toward his death at Beal na Blath, Co. Cork on 22 August 1922.
- 2 The essay was published first in *The Scots Observer* (May 11, 1889)..
- 3 Yeats’s last public appearance was at a performance of “Purgatory” in 1939.
- 4 In another Child ballad, “The Unquiet Grave” (78), the tranquility of the grave is disturbed by the excessive grief of mourners.
- 5 Like Casement, Childers had been in the British service: the civil service and the armed services; however, he became increasingly attracted to Irish nationalism. He took the Republican side during the Civil War and was one of the first Republicans to be executed by the Free State government. Childer’s wife Molly thought Casement was “crazed.”
- 6 When the Irish writer Molly Colum met Casement in New York, she called him “chivalrous.” Casement himself valued the trait; he later wrote a chapter titled “Chivalry” for the Handbook that the Countess Markiewicz edited for the Fianna Éireann, her Irish boy scouts.
- 7 The capture of Casement, however, and the attempt at an arms-landing had given the Castle the opportunity it needed to prove connection between the Volunteer movement and the German enemy and nothing can be more certain than that if the “military council” had not struck on Monday, action by the government would have taken place by the middle of the week (Tierney 218).
- 8 While Conrad did not add his name to the public list of Casement supporters, he wrote to Quinn about his memories of his meeting with Casement into the Congo. He had gotten to know

- Casement when they shared a room for three weeks. Conrad described Casement as having a “tragic personality” who seemed to be on the one hand to be “all emotion”; and at the same time, “strangely austere” (Reid 234).
- 9 A copy of WBY’s letter to Asquith is in the NLI MS 10,564, 14 July 1916 : “the evil has been done, it cannot be undone, but it need not be aggravated weeks afterwards with every circumstance of deliberation.” (Foster 683, n. 28)
 - 10 “Sixteen Dead Men” was published first in *The Dial* in November, 1920.
 - 11 Maloney argued that the British had interpolated into Casement’s innocent consular diaries those on one of the Peruvian criminal he had been investigating in 1910. All the homosexual acts, then, were those of Armando Normand, a rubber agent of the Peruvian Amazon Company.
 - 12 Yeats denounced the poet Alfred Noyes and the Oxford classicist Gilbert Murray. The original fifth stanza of the poem read:
Come Alfred Noyes and all the troupe
 No matter what names they wear
A ‘dog must have his day’
And whether a man be rich or poor,
He takes the devil’s pay (*Variorum* 582).
 - 13 “Roger Casement” was published in *The Irish Press* on February 2, 1937 (IP [1]); a second version was published in *The Irish Press* on February 13, 1937 (IP[2]). *The Irish Press* was DeValera’s paper.
 - 14 Sir Frederick Smith objected to Darling’s invitation to Lavery to paint the trial; however, later Smith, as Lord Birkenhead, thought of having the painting purchased as a historical record of the trial for the Law Court. Lavery said that he did not complete the painting in time and Smith lost interest. John Lavery to J.H. Morgan, 14 December 1931 (Tate Archives 7245.5). McCoole 63, n. 127.
 - 15 The “sad-faced lady” was Lavery’s American wife Hazel. Kenneth McConkey suggests that listening to the Casement proceedings affected her. She became increasingly sympathetic to the cause of Irish nationalism. McConkey’s footnote notes that much was made of Casement’s attitude toward the proceedings. He wondered, for example, if the painter did not come “dangerously close” to “aiding and comforting” the judge. This was an amusing reference to the legal wrangling over the Treason Act which dated to 1351 in which it was considered treasonable to “aid and comfort” the king’s enemies. 232 McConkey refers to H. Montgomery Hyde’s *Famous Trials* and John McGuigan, “A Rare Document of Irish History: ‘High Treason’ by Sir John Lavery.” *Irish Arts Review Yearbook*, 1999, 15 (1999): 157-9.
 - 16 The following year, 1917, Lavery became an official war artist with a Special Joint Military Permit for the Home Front. After the War, his commission for two paintings of women’s work for the Imperial War Museum took him to the Continent.
 - 17 Aidan Dunne, “A passion for the political,” *The Irish Times* 26 July 2010, 9.
 - 18 W.J. McCormack includes a list of visual images of Casement including Lavery’s paintings, Kernoff’s woodcuts and Fanto’s lithograph (108-29).
 - 19 W. J. Mc Cormack points to Casement’s photographs of young males as an instance of further eroticism of the boys with whom he had sexual contacts (193).
 - 20 While the age of consent in Nepal is sixteen, a sixteen year old is not a consenting adult in Ireland, and, under Irish law O’Searcaigh can be prosecuted. So far no charges have been filed. O’Searcaigh has an informally adopted son who is now married and living back in Nepal.

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