

# Roger Casement's Vision of Freedom

*By Séamas Ó Síocháin*

## INTRODUCTION

In 1907 some time after Roger Casement's conversion to Irish nationalism, he reflected on the shift in his allegiance, in a letter to Alice Stopford Green:

I had accepted Imperialism – British rule was to be extended at all costs, because it was the best for everyone under the sun, and those who opposed that extension ought rightly to be “smashed”... Well the [Boer] War gave me qualms at the end – the concentration camps bigger ones – and finally when up in those lonely Congo forests where I found Leopold I found also myself – the incorrigible Irishman!<sup>1</sup>

In that statement, Casement linked his growing anti-imperialism to his Irishness. In this paper I wish to examine three themes which also show the interrelatedness of Casement's wider experiences with his Irishness and which I believe to be important in summing up key patterns of thinking and action in his life: land and agriculture, the defence of the underdog, and a critique of empire. Each theme has roots in his youth, draws on his later Irish experience, and was affected and developed by his experiences outside Ireland.

## LAND AND AGRICULTURE

A fact not hitherto adverted to and which I believe to have significance is that Casement's teenage years coincided with the Irish Land War, which dominated Irish public life in the years 1879–82. The 1870s were years of agricultural depression and falling prices for agricultural products. When bad weather and the failure of two successive potato crops were added to this towards the end of the decade, a disaster on the scale of the Great Famine of

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<sup>1</sup> National Library of Ireland (NLI) Ms. 10,464(3), Roger David Casement (RDC) to Alice Stopford Green, 20 April 1907. Alice Green (1847–1929), nationalist historian, was one of Casement's closest associates.

the late 1840s threatened. Inability to pay rents led to a jump in the number of evictions. The Irish National Land League was formed in 1879 and, on a platform of 'the land of Ireland for the people of Ireland', it organised opposition to landlords, and aid for farmers. The Land War of 1879–82 that followed has been described as 'the greatest mass movement of modern Ireland.'<sup>2</sup> Emotions were inflamed and evictions and retaliatory actions increased in number. Michael Davitt and Charles Stewart Parnell were the two most prominent leaders of the public agitation in Ireland. Gladstone's government responded with the 1881 Land Act and with two coercion bills. Davitt was arrested in February 1881; Parnell and other leaders were arrested some months later. Ultimately, a compromise solution was reached and the leaders released.

Casement was clearly keyed into the land issue; he was later to express his admiration for Davitt, while Parnell was one of his heroes. His cousin Gertrude Parry attested to his practice of pasting onto the walls of his room newspaper cuttings dealing with Irish matters.<sup>3</sup> One surviving item corroborates and exemplifies this practice. Pasted onto the inside cover of a copybook containing his early poetry are some newspaper cuttings giving details of a Land League meeting in Ballycastle, Co. Antrim, of debates in the House of Commons on the introduction of a Coercion Bill and a Land Bill, and of the arrest of Michael Davitt. This would date them to the early months of 1881, when Casement was sixteen. The cuttings also indicate that, from an early age, his interest in Ireland was not confined to the past; he was in touch with current issues and was to remain so throughout his life.

In various contexts, he was to express a concern over the importance of agriculture for a healthy economy and the importance of cultivators having access to land. In 1893 when serving in the Niger Coast Protectorate, in a letter to his uncle John in Magherintemple, he praised his uncle's practices of ploughing, harrowing and manuring and compared these methods to those in West Africa: '... I wish some one would do the unkind things you do to the Earth out here, and produce the same kindly results your efforts induce at home'.<sup>4</sup> When he was British consul in Lourenço Marques (Mozambique), some years later, he criticised the priority given to mining over farming. In his 1896 trade report from Lourenço Marques he argued that an economy which neglected agriculture for either mining or the mere shipping of goods was not a healthy economy.

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<sup>2</sup> T.W. Moody, 'Fenianism, Home rule and the Land War (1850-91)', in T.W. Moody and F.X. Martin eds, *The Course of Irish History* (Cork), 1967, 286.

<sup>3</sup> Gertrude Parry, 'Introduction', in Gertrude Parry (ed.), *Some poems of Roger Casement*, (Dublin, 1918). xi. (ix-xviii). 'In his school days he begged from the aunt, with whom he spent his holidays, for possession of an attic room which he turned into a little study, and the writer remembers the walls papered with cartoons cut out of the *Weekly Freeman*, showing the various Irish Nationalists who had suffered imprisonment at English hands for the sake of their belief in Ireland a Nation'. Casement developed a close relationship with his cousin, Gertrude Bannister ('Gee'); she later married Sidney Parry.

<sup>4</sup> Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) T3787/8. RDC to John Casement, 27 January 1893. John Casement was Roger David's granduncle; the Casement family at Magherintemple in Co. Antrim had helped bring up the young boy, after the death of his parents.

... there can be little doubt that in all this part of South-Eastern Africa an insufficient attention is paid to the soil or its capabilities of production. The gold fever would seem to drain the earth, not only of its precious metals, but of much of that necessary labour upon its surface which yields returns more vital to mankind than any to be gained from exploiting its depths.<sup>5</sup>

Early in 1903, when consul in the Congo, he produced for the Foreign Office an impressive memo on land concessions in French Congo. The issue of native land rights was at the core of his argument. Among the points he made were that, if a European Power granted concessions, it 'remains to be shown that such exercise of the sovereign right is in harmony with the anterior rights and well-being of the native races and the advancement of legitimate commerce.' The claims of the Congo Free State rested on treaties made with local chiefs. But, as Casement pointed out:

The Chiefs could not grant what they did not possess; and in no part of Central Africa can a claim be maintained by any native Sovereign to sole possession of the land, the products of the soil, or the labour of the inhabitants. The Chief is only the trustee of the tribal family, and his public rights are well defined and strictly limited by popular control.

The claim by the King of the Belgians, therefore, to be sole owner of nearly one million square miles of African soil and of its products and occupants, Casement believed to be preposterous. It was a form of 'legalised piracy'. One of the results of Congo state policy for the native was that 'his lands are no longer his own – he may neither sell nor let them; their produce he may no longer dispose of in open market; neither is the work of his own hands his.' The lands now belonged to the state or to the concessionaire, who could now pay him a pittance for products and labour exacted by force.<sup>6</sup>

Agriculture cropped up again in his trade report from Pará, at the mouth of the Amazon, in Brazil. Criticism of Brazilian agriculture lies close to the surface in much of this report:

With the growth of the rubber trade and the yearly widening area of search for the *Hevea* and kindred milk-yielding trees nothing has been attempted to put agriculture, the basis of all sound development, on a healthy footing.<sup>7</sup>

Explaining the details of a new law on agriculture, he observed:

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<sup>5</sup> F.O., Diplomatic & Consular Reports on Trade & Finance, Portugal, Annual Series, No. 1904, 1897, (C. 8277-122) XCII, 6, *Report for the year 1896 on the trade and commerce of Lorenzo Marques*; Public Record Office (PRO) FO 403/338, F.O., Diplomatic & Consular Reports on Trade & Finance, Portugal, Annual Series, No. 1904, 1897, (C. 8277-122) XCII.

<sup>6</sup> PRO FO 403/338. RDC to Foreign Office (FO), 15 February 1903.

<sup>7</sup> Diplomatic and Consular Reports, Brazil, 1908 (C. 3727-194), CIX, 38. *Report for the Year 1907 on the trade of Pará*, Annual Series No. 4111.

## DEFENCE OF THE UNDERDOG

The second theme I wish to draw attention to is Casement's well-known aversion to cruelty and his compulsive support for the underdog. Again, an incident from his youth attests to the trait. There was a close relationship between Roddie (Roger's pet name) and his sister, Nina, and she recalls him, the youngest, rushing to defend her from 'attacks' by her older brothers Charlie and Tom. Their father taught the children to be kind to animals, putting a splint on a blackbird, keeping a 'beautiful hyacinth-blue macaw' named Polybius who would sit on his shoulder and kiss him.<sup>10</sup>

A friend from his Lourenço Marques years, the Austrian Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, offered the following assessment long after Casement's execution:

All I can say from personal experience, and long friendship, is that I always found him sympathetic, clever, and fascinating, and that I have met very few men during my whole life who had such an exceptional personality. He possessed an absolutely genuine though somewhat exaggerated idealism: nothing whatever would stop him assisting the weaker against the stronger, because he simply could not help it.<sup>11</sup>

Coudenhove-Kalergi's characterisation coincided with Casement's own. When explaining his reasons for taking up the unpopular stance of sympathising with the Turks during the Balkan wars of 1912-13, he concluded, by saying: '... to sum up all I am always for the underdog'.<sup>12</sup>

As a very young man in his early twenties, when he worked in a series of employments in the Congo, Casement took a stand against cruelty. The first evidence of his active intervention in defence of the native population (not previously adverted to) concerns incidents of flogging in the Congo in 1886 and 1887. He later recalled one such incident, which involved an agent of the State, Lieutenant Francqui:

One of them, who had been so cruelly flogged by this officer's direction and under his eyes that he was literally cut to pieces, I had to have carried in my own hammock for over fifty miles when taking him to Boma to the State Doctor to have his wounds dressed and in order that I might lodge a complaint on his behalf... I was laughed at for my pains... Lieutenant Francqui was never punished.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> NLI Ms. 17594, Elizabeth Bannister's *Memories of Roger*, n.d. Elizabeth was another of Casement's Bannister cousins in Liverpool.

<sup>11</sup> Evelyn, Princess Blücher, quoted in Prince Gebhard von Blücher, *Memoirs* (ed.) 178 (London, 1932); Brian Inglis, *Roger Casement*, (London, 1974), 43.

<sup>12</sup> National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM), A/C25/1-20, RDC to C.P. Scott, partial undated letter 1912 (two letters), C.P. Scott Correspondence (Roger Casement). Scott was editor of the *Manchester Guardian*.

<sup>13</sup> PRO F.O. 10/807. RDC, Memo to FO, 14 January 1904. Emile Francqui (1863-1935) was to become a banker and liberal politician; he was the Belgian Minister for Finance in 1926.

Roman, French—and she remembered them questioning their mother on Irish history.<sup>18</sup> One of his heroes from youth was the Carthaginian leader, Hannibal, and I suspect, from his later reference to it that he had studied, during his schooling, a work by Montesquieu on the decline of the Roman Empire.

In the first part of his professional career Casement remained a general supporter of the British Empire. But a change set in, the earliest indications of which stem from the last phase of the Boer War. One of his clearest later statements on empire came in an article on chivalry that he wrote in 1914:

Chivalry dies when Imperialism begins. The one must kill the other. A chivalrous people must respect in others what they strive to maintain in themselves. Hence it comes that when the age of empire begins the age of chivalry dies. So it has ever been. Rome the Republic, Rome the Nation, had her knights and knighthood, and the ideals of knighthood are the laws of chivalry. But Rome the Empire lost her ideals as she extended her frontiers, and when an Augustus or Claudius replaced a Cincinnatus or Horatius, Rome, the emporium of the world, had all things but knighthood and chivalry... Rome was the first great illustration, but not the last in history, that where wealth accumulates men must decay.<sup>19</sup>

Years earlier, he had expressed similar sentiments on the decline of empires in a letter to his close English friend, Richard Morten:

If you would study history more attentively you would see this. Rome centralised the wealth of the ancient world in herself – Italy became a beautiful garden filled with the villas of the rich, maintained by the labour of millions of slaves. And Rome fell. Spain, in her pride, exploited the mines of the Indies by Carib slave labour – just as, identically as, Leopold is exploiting the India rubber mines of the Congo by Bantu slave labour – and sent the wealth of Peru, Mexico and the Caribbean sea to Madrid. She had a monopoly of the gold of the world - but she did not know how to use it wisely – and Spain fell. Read Montesquieu's *Considerations sur the decline and fall of Rome...* and you will... find considerations in it which will make you tremble when you look at South Africa –

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<sup>18</sup> NLI Ms. 9932. Nina's Recollections, n.d. Nina was Casement's sister, Agnes (Newman).

<sup>19</sup> Sir Roger Casement C.M.G., 'Chivalry', in *Fianna Handbook*. Issued by the Central Council of Na Fianna Éireann for the Boy Scouts of Ireland, 1914, 75-86: p. 75. For Casement the fall of Carthage had similar causes to the decline of Imperial Rome. He wrote elsewhere: 'England relies on money. Germany on men. And just as Roman men beat Carthaginian mercenaries, so must German manhood, in the end, triumph over British finance. Just as Carthage in the hours of final shock, placing her gold where Romans put their gods, and never with a soul above her ships, fell before the people of United Italy, so shall the mightier Carthage of the North Sea, in spite of trade, shipping, colonies, the power of the purse and the hired valour of the foreign (Irish, Indian, African), go down before the men of United Germany.'; Roger Casement, *The crime against Europe: writings and poems of Roger Casement*, Herbert O. Mackey (ed.) (Dublin, 1958), 27-8. The notions of chivalry and knighthood reflect Victorian and Edwardian values. The influence of Standish James O'Grady may well be present.



Later, as British consul, he had special responsibility for the welfare of British subjects. Black British subjects from West Africa, who worked in the Congo Free State, were regularly ill treated. Writing to Sir Martin Gosselin from South Africa in 1900, Casement linked their treatment with that of all natives of the Congo.

I have written you a long letter, but I know that you are interested in the welfare of our native subjects residing there. The simplest way to secure their well being is, perhaps, to strive for that of all natives of the Congo. It is difficult to obtain a special recognition of and favourable treatment for one class of black men, when the whole practice of executive obligations towards natives is so wilfully wrong as it is upon the Congo today.<sup>14</sup>

When in the Putumayo region he again threw all his energies into opposing the gross mistreatment of Amazonian Indians. On one occasion he commented:

There were no labourers – there was no industry on the Putumayo. It was simply a wild forest inhabited by wild Indians, who were hunted like wild animals and made to bring in rubber by hook or by crook, and murdered and flogged if they didn't. That was the system... The whites in the station did not care a damn where the trees were, all they troubled about was where the Indians were – that is to see they did not 'escape'.<sup>15</sup>

Given the intensity of his feelings, it is not too surprising, when in May 1913 a serious fever epidemic broke out in the Connemara Islands region and Casement took up the cause, that it should conjure up for him thoughts of the Putumayo. He submitted a letter to the *Irish Independent*, which appeared under the heading 'This "Irish Putumayo"', in which he attributed the 'appalling state of things in Connemara' to the 'absence of anything like civilised government in that part of the world. Were this, in truth, a "united kingdom", the Press of its capital would contain some reference to a state of things so near its doors, but I have not seen a single word in any London daily, from the *Times* to the *Globe* or *Daily News* to the *Westminster Gazette* of this dire need of our plague-pestered "fellow-subjects" of Connemara.'<sup>16</sup>

### EMPIRE

My third theme concerns Casement's attitude to empire.<sup>17</sup> Casement's sister, Nina, recounted that, in their youth, she and Roddie loved history—Greek,

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<sup>14</sup> PRO FO 403/304. RDC to Gosselin, 30 April 1900. Sir Martin Gosselin was appointed assistant under-secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in 1898 and Ambassador to Lisbon in 1902.

<sup>15</sup> RDC, Journal, 3 October 1910, *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement*, Angus Mitchell (ed.), (Dublin, 1997), 149-50.

<sup>16</sup> RDC letter to *Irish Independent*, 20 May 1913, 5.

<sup>17</sup> For parallel treatments of Casement's approach to empire, see Séamas Ó Síocháin, 'Roger Casement, ethnography, and the Putumayo', *Éire-Ireland* 29, 2 (1995), 29-41, and 'Evolution and degeneration in the thought of Roger Casement', *Irish journal of anthropology*, 2 (1997), 45-62.

and India. The case against Chinese labour rests on moral and economic grounds I believe.<sup>20</sup>

Here is a theory of the decline of the empires of Rome and Spain, with a definite moral for the British Empire. The accumulation of wealth, if based on the exploitation of labour, will bring a fall. There is a strong moral content (the vices are aggression, venality, perhaps the debilitation caused by wealth itself).<sup>21</sup>

For Casement, empire was based on the use of force to deny the freedom of conquered peoples; so, too, was the accumulation of wealth associated with empire. In an article on 'The romance of Irish history', published in 1914, he wrote of the emergence of Ireland into history:

When, at the dawn of the Christian era, we first hear of Ireland from external sources, we learn of it as an island harbouring free men, whose indomitable love of freedom was hateful to the spirit of imperial exploitation. Agricola's advice to the empire-builders of his day was that Rome should 'war down and take possession of Ireland, so that freedom might be put out of sight'.<sup>22</sup>

Thus it was, he continued, that the Fianna of early Ireland prepared themselves to defend the shores of Ireland and Irish warriors went to the aid of their kin against the Romans in Scotland.

The first external record we possess makes it clear that when the early Irish went forth to carry war abroad, it was not to impose their yoke on other peoples, or to found an empire, but to battle against the Empire of the World in the threatened cause they held so dear at home. In this early Roman reference to Ireland we get the keynote to all later Irish history – a warring down on the one hand, so that freedom might be put out of sight; an eternal resistance, on the other, so that it might be upheld.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> NLI MS. 13600. RDC to Dick Morten, 2 January 1905. South African mine owners had imported Chinese indentured labourers due to a labour shortage. Their treatment, engendered political controversy in Britain. Richard Morten was a close friend, who provided Casement with accommodation just outside London.

<sup>21</sup> The passage reveals that Casement drew on Baron Charles de Montesquieu's *Considerations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur decadence*, written in 1731–3. This is the only reference of his to Montesquieu that I have found, but it is revealing. Montesquieu described the love of liberty in the Roman Republic and Rome's decline under the empire due, partly at least, to softness. He touched on other issues, which may well have had an influence on Casement, such as a negative attitude to the Spanish Empire, the attribution of a spirit of liberty to the Germans, and a notion of *esprit général*, akin to Casement's sense of national character. If, as I suspect, Casement studied this work as a school text, we have an indication of the source of a set of views, which would remain with him throughout his life. Casement, who could not remember the precise title of the *Considerations*, comments to Morten: 'it is years since I looked at the delightful book'.

<sup>22</sup> Roger Casement, 'The romance of Irish history', [1914], reprinted in Séamus Ó Cléirigh, *Casement and the Irish language culture and history*, (Dublin, 1977), 42–53: p. 42.

<sup>23</sup> Casement, 'The romance of Irish history', 43.

A community of free men stood up against imperial might. Subsequent Irish history Casement viewed as a pattern of repeated brave resistance in defence of freedom against a mightier power. Such was the resistance to 'Danish, Norman, Tudor, Stuart and Cromwellian assault to the larger imperialism of the nineteenth century.'<sup>24</sup> Such, too, that of Hugh O'Neill and Red Hugh O'Donnell, Owen Roe O'Neill, the young Mayo men of 1798 and the Fenians of the nineteenth century.

The law of the Fenian of the days of Marcus Amilius was the law of the Fenian in the reign of Victoria – to give all – mind, body and strength of purpose – to the defence of his country, 'to spread truth and harbour no greed in his heart'.<sup>25</sup>

Ireland had not succeeded in creating a state. 'Freedom had not come to Ireland; it has been "warred down and kept out of sight"; but it has been kept in the Irish heart, from Brian Boru to Robert Emmet, by a long tale of blood shed always in the same cause. Freedom is kept alive in man's blood only by the shedding of that blood.'<sup>26</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The three themes I have dealt with began to come together very strongly about the time of the Putumayo investigation. In a letter that he wrote in 1911 to Travers Buxton of the Anti-Slavery Society Casement launched into a set of reflections:

The expropriation of the Indians and barefaced denial of all rights in land of the Indians is at the bottom of the whole system of slavery that undoubtedly exists in those regions. If the Indians were protected in their land ownership they would not be the easy prey they are today to the exploiter. It is the Leopold system in Africa – all over again – only it is the great original on which conception of 'State' ownership Leopold modelled his astute claims in Congo land... If you root the natives in the soil – African or Indian, Polynesian or whatever band of native he may be – you free him.

When the [white] Natal farmers... some few years ago wanted cheap Zulu labour they got legislation against his ownership in the soil under way – they talked of 'breaking up the reserves' as well as taxing his huts. If a native owns land he can live by it and feed himself and wife and children and ultimately grow more than he and they need and so you get the root of all healthy commerce planted too – for he sells thereby his surplus. If you deny him ownership in the soil you render him a landless alien in his own country and drive him into the slave pen in the end—as you see Diaz has done in Mexico.

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<sup>24</sup> Casement, 'The romance of Irish history', 43.

<sup>25</sup> Casement, 'The romance of Irish history' 50.

<sup>26</sup> Casement, 'The romance of Irish history', 47.



It is the old system of Imperial Rome versus the free tribal life of the Northerners. In Europe the free men of the North won in all northern Europe and destroyed the Imperial system—in the Mediterranean races it endured and Spain carried it to the New World. The slavery of the Indians has grown surely and fatally from that assumption – that the land does not belong to the people but to ‘the State’. It has got to be fought wherever it lifts its head – for once it is admitted by the freedom-loving world of Northern Europe it would, I believe, destroy our civilisation itself. There is no danger I think of these State claims winning in northern lands – the Irish Land War has been a reassertion of a people’s right to live on and by their own soil the effect of which will ultimately travel far beyond the shores of Ireland.

Body slavery and individual ownership and tilling of the soil cannot go together—and if the Peruvians and Mexicans and other Iberian States in South and Central America could be forced or induced to recognise and register native claims to land, resting not on title deeds emanating from a politician but from the obvious long association of the claimant and his forbears with the soil in question then a healthy agricultural life would take the place of this abominable exploitation and concessionaire regime which we find systematically dogged by human slavery wherever it goes...

It is of little permanent value fighting the slaver, if you don’t go to the root of things and fight these claims to land ownership by States who are, rightly, merely the eyes and ears of the people. We can smash slavery today on the Putumayo perhaps—but it will arise again tomorrow—in a new form if you leave the Indian tribesman without legal recognition of his tribal right to live by and on the soil of his country.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Rhodes House, Oxford, Anti-Slavery Society Papers, Mss. Brit. Emp. S 19 D2/2. RDC to Travers Buxton, 18 April 1911.