

# Evolution and Degeneration in the Thought of Roger Casement<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Biographers have tended to stress the element of emotional instability in the personality of Roger Casement. Instability, however, is made to appear greater to the extent that some of the significant contexts of his life and the patterns of his thought are neglected. The present essay explores one such patterning of thought: ideas of evolution and degeneration, or progress and decay, in his thinking with regard to a range of societies: Ancient Rome, the peoples of Africa and South America, Britain and Germany, and Ireland. The essay draws on recent work on degeneration in the history of ideas.

## 1. Introduction.

### CASEMENT'S CAREER.

In 1884 Roger Casement, a young man of twenty, arrived to take up the first of a series of employments in the Congo region. This was just seven years after Henry Morton Stanley completed his famous three year journey across Africa (1874-77), in which he discovered the course of the Congo River. The Scramble for Africa was beginning. Casement was to spend the next twenty years of his life in Africa, stationed in the Congo, the Niger Coast, Lourenco Marques, South Africa and St. Paul de Loanda (Angola). His career in Africa was to end with one of his most notable achievements, his investigation into and Report on atrocities perpetrated by officials of the Congo Free State against its native population. The Report was published in early 1904; for it Casement received the C.M.G.

After Africa came, first, the beginnings of his immersion in Irish affairs, during a protracted period of leave (1904-06), and, then, his appointment to Brazil, where he served in Santos, in Pará and, as Consul General, in Rio de Janeiro (1906-10). He was to repeat his Congo feat with a similar Report on the wholesale exploitation of Indian peoples in the Putumayo region of the Upper Amazon, in Peruvian territory (1910-12). He was knighted afterwards.

Returning home, he was soon to resign, turn completely to Irish affairs, involve himself in the Irish Volunteer organization, travel to Germany after the outbreak of WWI, be captured in Ireland on the eve of the Easter Rebellion in 1916, be tried and hanged.

### EMOTION VS. INTELLECT.

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper was given at a joint Anthropology-Sociology Seminar in St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, in January 1997. I thank the participants for many useful comments.

In 1890 Joseph Conrad made the acquaintance of Roger Casement on the Congo, where he stayed for two weeks as Casement's guest. His diary records a positive impression. Later, in 1904, when Casement tried to enlist influential friends to help bring public pressure on the British Government to act on abuses in the Congo, Conrad again wrote in positive vein about Casement to R.B. Cunninghame Graham, the Scottish writer-campaigner. But in 1916, shortly before Casement's execution, he gave a different, less generous, assessment of Casement:

"He was a good companion; but already in Africa I judged that he was a man, properly speaking, of no mind at all. I don't mean stupid. I mean that he was all emotion. By emotional force (Congo report, Putumayo, etc.) he made his way, and sheer temperament - a truly tragic personality: all but the greatness of which he had not a trace. Only vanity. But in the Congo it was not visible yet."<sup>2</sup>

While drawing attention to the shift in Conrad's assessment and to the lack of generosity in the later one, Casement's biographer, B.L. Reid, still finds Conrad's later view insightful:

"His (Conrad's) statement was cold and it was perhaps overemphatic; but it was shrewd and it moved toward essential truths. Perhaps no more penetrating observation of Casement was ever made."<sup>3</sup>

Reid goes on to present what tends towards being a psychobiography of Casement, which stresses the emotional instability of the subject's personality. Not only is Casement an emotionally-driven and, therefore, less than rational man, his personality is deeply divided in a number of ways: religiously (Protestant father, Catholic mother), politically (public servant of the Crown, secret nationalist), sexually (secret and increasingly promiscuous homosexual). Elements of a similar approach, foregrounding flaws in Casement's personality, are common to all recent biographies.<sup>4</sup>

While not wishing to deny the emotional dimension in Casement's personality and life, more systematic attention to the various contexts of his life and to the patterns of his thought reveals his behaviour to be considerably more complex than is generally recognised.

A broader, contextual, approach would include the following:

(i) giving attention to the specific contexts of his career, i.e. the locations, employment responsibilities (e.g. consular duties), historical contexts in which he worked. This should apply, not only to major episodes, such as the Congo and the Putumayo, but to the Niger Coast and Lourenco Marques, for example;

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Conrad to John Quinn, 24/5/1916, quoted in Reid p.15.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> See, also, Sawyer p.1ff. Rene McColl, in addition, characterises Casement (wrongly, in my opinion) as a regular bungler.

(ii) giving attention to the larger historical moments in which he lived, e.g. the Scramble for Africa, the Second Anglo-Boer War, the tensions leading to the outbreak of World War I, and the Irish situation from the Cultural Revival to the tension surrounding the Third Home Rule Bill;

(iii) giving due attention, not only to the personal correspondence of Casement, but to his consular reports and to his published writings, for what they reveal of the patterns of his thought, of his world view. Casement's private personal correspondence has been the main source for recent biographies and it is a vital source. It frequently reveals a side to the man not evident in despatches to the Foreign Office. But there has been a tendency to under-use his consular reports and to ignore the articles, admittedly few and admittedly campaigning, written in the latter part of his life, which also yield important clues to his concerns and manner of thought.<sup>5</sup>

In the present essay, I wish to survey, briefly, some of the evidence for what I think is one such pattern in Casement's thought, i.e. notions of progress and decline in the life-history of societies.

## 2. Progressivist evolutionary thought.

I have drawn attention, elsewhere, to the progressivist dimension of Casement's thought and to his use of terminology with evolutionary implications:

**Civilization**, or its variants, is a term which appears very frequently in Casement's writings. It has an evolutionary connotation, being contrasted regularly with **savage(ry)**, **barbarism**, and **wild**. The evolutionary assumptions are indicated by such phrases of his as: a 'stage of human progress,' 'higher in the human scale,' and the failure of the rubber company to introduce 'civilisation to replace savagery'.<sup>6</sup>

A graphic example of his evolutionary thinking is contained in an undated draft article on the Niger Coast, housed in the National Library of Ireland Casement collection. It contains the following passages:

[The Niger Coast] offers the contradictory spectacle of a soil but little less fertile than that of Egypt, possessed by a people as remote from our civilization as were the very earliest inhabitants of the Nile Delta, and yet administered in accordance with the very latest method of Foreign Office control.

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<sup>5</sup> I have been struck at B.L. Reid's neglect of Casement's consular writings and of his published work. In the case of the latter, it seems due to his poor opinion of Casement's literary and nationalist writings (many of which have been collected in the volume **The Crime against Europe**, quoted below). Roger Sawyer, in contrast, is the first biographer to thoroughly examine Casement's consular role and writings.

<sup>6</sup> S. Ó Síocháin, "Roger Casement, Ethnography, and the Putumayo", **Éire-Ireland**, XXIX, (2), 29-41. p.33.

A Consular Court sits to enforce the Africa Order in Council - passed by the Queen's Most Excellent Majesty... in relation to a race of savages who date their most recent beliefs from an era well before Moloch. In this intricate network of creeks - deep, still and hidden - far from our ways of thought as the most hopelessly unrecalable days of antiquity, and yet almost within sound of the mail steamer's whistle...<sup>7</sup>

Elsewhere, we find Casement comparing Islamic with non-Islamic societies in Africa, again with assessments as to progress. For example, in one instance he contrasts naked tribesmen with Islamic civilization while, in a letter to his friend, Edmund Morel, he suggests that Congo natives are a long way behind Nigerian Mohammedans.<sup>8</sup>

In specific as opposed to general terms, he registered what he saw as positive and negative characteristics of native life. On the negative side, Casement disapproved of or was appalled by witchcraft belief, human sacrifice, cannibalism, warlikeness, laziness. On the positive side, he noted agricultural or gardening productivity, house construction, trading networks, family affection and loyalties.

### 3. Colonialism as "civilizing process".

The bulk of Casement's despatches from Africa deal with his consular duties, especially looking after the interests of British subjects - registration of births, marriages, deaths; helping the destitute; logging of shipping movements and mediating in cases of accident; responding to enquiries from Government Departments; producing annual Trade Reports. One can identify, however, some broad features of his thinking on colonialism from his despatches. Enlightened European intervention could, he believed, help raise Africans to a higher plane of civility.

I have argued elsewhere that Casement broadly accepted the three traditional components Europeans had to contribute to African life, - "the white man's burden" - the three Cs: Christianity, civilization, commerce.<sup>9</sup> Analysis of his writings reveals what his conception of proper colonial administration entailed. This conception is often implicit in his criticisms of the methods of the Portuguese in Lourenco Marques and Angola and, more so, of the methods of the Congo Free State.

In the first place, one detects a deep religious and moral aspect infusing all of Casement's attitudes. His approach was altruistic; a European presence was only justified to the extent that it offered a helping hand. Colonialism should be

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<sup>7</sup> "Negroland" (NLI Ms. 13082 (1/i)).

<sup>8</sup> NLI Ms. 13082 (1/i) Mecklenburg; LSE, MP F8/24, Casement to Morel, 22/4/1911. Edmund Morel was one of Casement's closest friends. He was the principal campaigner in the Congo agitation and Secretary of the Congo Reform Association.

<sup>9</sup> Ó Síocháin 1994.

non-exploitative. He frequently commented on native rights. He generally recoiled from violence, though he did condone “punitive expeditions”, while in the Niger.

Secondly, the helping hand should involve the stimulation of trade, the improvement of farming methods and the provision of infrastructure and of civic services. One of his major criticisms of Leopoldian intervention in the Congo was that it had destroyed the vibrant preexisting patterns of trade on the river, in which the local populations had played a key role. Again, writing to Magherintemple, he regretted the absence in the Niger Protectorate of productive husbandry such as that practised by his uncle.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, he regretted the wasteful manner of rubber harvesting. With regard to technology and civic services, he was involved in the planning process for roads and railway, while his criticisms of the Congo found fault with the failure to provide hospitals and a non-exploitative administrative and judicial system.

Thirdly, throughout his consular career, one notes a preoccupation with efficiency.<sup>11</sup> He was regularly critical of inefficiency and of the waste of human potential. As well as being a theme with regard, for example, to the Portuguese colony during his tenure at Lourenco Marques, it also appeared regularly in his despatches to the Foreign Office regarding the organization of the consular system.<sup>12</sup>

Between 1901 and 1904 a major change in Casement’s attitudes took place. During this period he increasingly directed his energies at unmasking the system in operation in the Congo Free State. His personality began to take on an emotional intensity which was to stay with him for the rest of his life - he had become a crusader against wrongs.

But, by 1904, his opposition wasn’t only to the Congo regime, he had become a determined critic of the British Empire. While it is easy to understand his zeal with regard to the Congo, it is more difficult to trace the causes of his rejection of British Imperialism. This can only be dimly traced in the surviving record, but was virtually complete by the time his Congo Report was published in early 1904. The evidence that does exist suggests an increasing disaffection with British policies in South Africa from the time of the Boer War on.

From this point on his treatment of terms like “civilization” and “commerce” were to be much more ambivalent (as was, though for different reasons, his attitude to Christianity). He more frequently talks of cruelty, force, of greed and capital. He is

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<sup>10</sup> PRONI T3787/8, Casement (Old Calabar) to John Casement (Magherintemple), 27/1/1893.

<sup>11</sup> One can see why Joseph Chamberlain, the liberal-imperialist and standard-bearer for efficiency, was an early hero of Casement’s. He remained so as long as Casement himself was, effectively, a liberal-imperialist. Once the latter’s imperialism went, Chamberlain became an object of contempt.

<sup>12</sup> It is not possible to address Casement’s emotionalism properly, e.g. his crabby letters from Brazil, without, for example, taking full account of the deficiencies of the consular system as experienced there.

more likely to apply the term “cannibals” to Leopold and his supporters than to the natives of the Congo basin. And one finds him stressing the inoffensive or positive characteristics of native peoples: their gentleness, childlike character, resistance to oppression.

Casement’s optimistic, progressivist thinking, while it was never replaced (in the latter part of his life he still envisages a civilising mission for Europe in South America), was complemented later by a more sombre counterpart, a degenerationist mode. I believe the shift, both at a personal psychological level and in his thinking was connected with his growing disillusionment with colonialism, in general, and with British Imperialism, in particular.

While it can to some extent be attributed to personality characteristics and to the nature of his experiences in Africa, I believe that it reflects another source as well—a concern with the decline of societies or civilizations.

#### 4. Degeneration.

The focus on evolutionary thought in the nineteenth century has, until recently, been heavily on its progressivist dimension. Recently, however, increasing attention is being devoted to a neglected dimension of evolutionary thought, yet one which was of considerable concern in the nineteenth century and beyond, namely the possibility of evolutionary decline or degeneration. Fear was for the decline, not so much of “inferior” races, but of the European heartland itself. The theme has been explored in detail by Daniel Pick (1996).<sup>13</sup>

Pick’s work begins with the observation that evolution as progress has been extensively studied, but that a major concern in the second half of the nineteenth century and up to the First World War, i.e. the possibility of decline, degeneration, in the most developed Western nations, the very heartland of civilisation, has been virtually ignored or forgotten.

The concern manifested itself in a range of types of writing: biology, criminal anthropology, medico-psychiatry, social and political commentary, and literature. It was not confined to any single political orientation, but was found among conservatives, liberals and socialists.

Pick’s book focuses on selected manifestations in Italy (Cesare Lombroso...), France (B.A. Morel...) and England (Henry Maudsley...). It was, in part, related to tensions derived from unification in Italy, to revolutions and defeat in war in France, and to the emergence of mass democracy and socialism, on the one hand, and fears of degeneration in the city, on the other, in England. He draws attention to the fact that concern with degeneration and its host of component issues (physical and mental deformity, criminality, sexual perversion, the mob, racial purity, eugenics..) was not confined to Germany but was widespread throughout Europe. His work,

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<sup>13</sup> I am grateful to Angus Mitchell for bringing Pick’s work to my attention. The topic of degeneration is also discussed in Young (1995).

therefore, is a corrective to the preponderance of focus on the genesis of Nazism in Germany, where such issues had a cataclysmic end.<sup>14</sup>

In late Victorian and Edwardian Britain, fears grew among the middle classes of degeneration among the urban poor:

Although the debate, and the fear, can be traced back much earlier in the Victorian period, it is in the 1880s, Stedman Jones insists, that the theory of hereditary urban degeneration first received widespread support from the middle classes and found its authoritative backing in the work of Booth, Marshall, Langstaff, and Llewellyn Smith. And at the edge of the writing of those 'sober' commentators, there was a huge populist literature which saw the social problem in truly cataclysmic terms.

The fears persisted in the 1900s. Amidst the early disasters of the Boer War and the scandal of an apparent deterioration in the average physique of potential recruits, the fear of urban degeneration found its apotheosis.<sup>15</sup>

While the Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration (1904) rejected the term and the reality of degeneration in a sense, Pick points out that its recommendations gave it credence in another. The Report, however, stressed environmental factors rather than hereditarian ones:

The evil is, of course, greatest in one-roomed tenements, the overcrowding there being among persons usually of the **lowest type**, steeped in every kind of degradation and cynically indifferent to the vile surroundings engendered by their filthy habits, and to the pollution of the young brought up in such an atmosphere.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, Pick points out that the image of the **parasite** "informed late-nineteenth century eugenics and the biological theory of degeneration". The parasite was a prime example of degeneration. For example, the American Eugene Talbot wrote:

The essential factor of crime is its parasitic nature. Parasites, in a general way, may be divided into those which live on their host without any tendency to injure his well-being...; those which live more or less at his expense, but do not tend to destroy him; and finally, those which are destructive of the well-being of man and lack proper recognition of individual rights which constitutes the essential foundation of society.

Francis Galton applied the image of the parasite to society. There was an absolute

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<sup>14</sup> Fritz Stern's (1965) discussion of the growth of pessimism in German ideology, though approaching the topic from another angle, is also relevant.

<sup>15</sup> Pick p.202. The reference is to Gareth Stedman Jones, **Outcast London; a Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society**. Harmondsworth. 1984 [1971].

<sup>16</sup> Inter-Departmental Committee 1904, **Report**, p.17, quoted by Pick p. 185, emphasis added by Pick.

contrariety of ideals between the beasts that prey and those they prey upon, between those of the animals that have to work hard for their food and the sedentary parasites that cling to their bodies and suck their blood...<sup>17</sup>

## 5. Casement and degeneration.

I will now try to demonstrate that Casement thought, not only in progressive terms, as outlined earlier, but that the theme of decline, of degeneration, was also an important component of his thought. It became stronger as his own mood became more intense and more pessimistic. As well as reflecting a personality change, I believe that it formed part of a theory of society, one that was built up through the course of his life. In addition, it seems plausible to suggest that he was reflecting concerns being aired in his day. I will look at views of his on: the decline of Rome; the decline of the Putumayo Indians; the cases of Germany, France and Britain; and the case of Ireland.

A. Rome: In a letter to his close English friend, Richard Morten, in which Casement takes issue with his friend's attitude toward the Chinese labour question in South Africa, the discussion turns on the circulation of money and the nature—healthy or unhealthy—of labour. Casement writes:

If the labour be unhealthy, demoralising and only possible in a compromising environment the character of the labourer and therefore of the nation to which he belongs is deteriorated... 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 - and India. The case against Chinese labour rests on moral and economic grounds I believe.<sup>18</sup>

This passage reveals that Casement drew on Montesquieu's **Consideration 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

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<sup>17</sup> Pick 173; 233; 23, quoting Talbot, **Degeneracy: Its Signs, Causes and Results** (1898) p.318; 198, quoting Galton, **Essays** p.36. Galton coined the word eugenics in 1883.

<sup>18</sup> NLI MS. 13,600, Casement to Dick Morten, 2/1/05. South African mine owners had imported Chinese indentured labourers due to a labour shortage. The issue, including their treatment, engendered political controversy in Britain.



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 general**, 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 part of a set of views, which would remain with him (though further developed) throughout his life.<sup>19</sup>

B. The Putumayo Indians. In 1912, the **Contemporary Review** published an article by Casement on the Putumayo Indians. As well as describing the area, its component tribes, alluding to the history of slave raiding parties from Brazil, and travellers' comments, Casement speculates on Indian origins. They were not, he felt, native to the forest region.

Commenting on the songs of the Indians, which were sung "in words that none of the Peruvian or Colombian white men, who often spoke the native language of the tribe with extraordinary fluency, could understand anything of," Casement was informed that the songs were "old, old songs that no one knew the origin of and the very words of which were meaningless outside the dance." The songs, continued Casement, "referred to some dim, far-off events that none of the whites could learn anything about; the Indians only said they came down from their remote past. That that remote past was something wholly different from their present-day environment I became more and more convinced as I studied these innocent, friendly, child-like human beings."

While lost in the forest, in a depressing environment and with the most basic material culture, "their minds were the minds of civilised men and women." He explains:

Yet nothing became more clear the more these Indians were studied than that they were not children of the forest, but children of elsewhere lost in the forest - babes in the wood, grown up, it is true, and finding the forest their only heritage and shelter, but remembering always that it was not their home. They had accommodated themselves, as far as they might, to their surroundings, and made a shift at living there; but had never really accepted this environment. Thus while their bodies were strayed and lost in the trees, their minds, their memories, maybe refused to accept these surroundings. They never gave the impression of being at home. They had refused to make the material best of circumstances. While their knowledge of the forest and everything it possessed was profound, one felt that these age-long denizens of the woods were not citizens of the forest, but strangers, come by chance amid surroundings they did not love, although they knew them by heart, and that their lives were spent in an hereditary picnic rather than in a settled occupation. All their material surroundings were temporary - their only permanent possessions were mental, and if I may use the word, spiritual.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Shackleton, **Montesquieu**, pp.156-170. 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>20</sup> R. Casement, "The Putumayo Indians", **Contemporary Review**. 102 (1912) 317-28.

C. Germany, France and Britain. Germany. While Great Britain was the first country to industrialise, by the latter part of the nineteenth century, others were closing the gap. Among these was Germany. The unification of Germany and the establishment of the German Empire in 1871 followed Prussian military successes against Denmark in 1864, Austria in 1866 and France in 1870. Economic growth, the expansion in trade, colonial endeavours all followed. Towards the end of the century and into the twentieth, Germany embarked on a policy of naval expansion, which led to a naval armaments race with Great Britain, each side producing numbers of the new type warship, the dreadnought. German population expanded also.

The salient characteristics of German growth can be seen from the following summary:

By the year 1906, 25 years after the founding of the Empire in 1871, the Reich's population had grown from about 41 million to 62,863,000. National income had risen from the early 1890s, when it stood at 22,638,000,000 marks, to 39,919,000,000 marks by 1906..... The transformation of the German Empire from an agricultural to an industrial society was rushing ahead. In 1871 63.9% of the population had lived in rural areas; 40% did so in 1910..... Between 1897 and 1906 hard coal extraction had risen from 91 to 136 million tons, pig iron production had doubled, and German foreign trade had risen in value from 8,455,000,000 Mk to 14,582,000,000 Mk..... Germany's industrial base and population were already larger than that of the United Kingdom and she had become a serious threat in trade and finance, activities hitherto dominated by British enterprise.<sup>21</sup>

Casement saw Germany as a rising nation, France and Britain as declining ones. The following extracts from his late essays, published as **The Crime against Europe**, reveal how he saw and interpreted the direction of German development:

The laws of progress demand that efficiency shall prevail. The crime of Germany has been superior efficiency, not so much in the arts of war as in the products of peace. (p.13)

During the first six months of 1914, German export trade almost equalled that of Great Britain. Another year of peace, and it would certainly have exceeded it, and for the first time in the history of world trade Great Britain would have been put in the second place. German exports from January to June had swelled to the enormous total of \$1,045,000,000 as against the \$1,075,000,000 of Great Britain. As war against such figures could not be maintained in the markets, it must be transferred to the seas. (p.12)

Europe reproduces herself yearly at the present time at the rate of about five million souls. Some three-fifths of the number are to-day absorbed into the life of the Continent, the balance go abroad and principally to North America, to swell

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<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Steinberg, "The German background to Anglo-German relations, 1905-1914" p.193.

the English-speaking world. Germany controls about one-fifth of Europe's natural annual increase, and realising that emigration to-day means only to lose her people and build up her antagonist's strength, she has for years now striven to keep her people within German limits, and hitherto with successful results far in excess of any achieved by other European States. But the limit must be reached, and that before many years are past. Where is Germany to find the suitable region, both on a scale and under conditions of climate, health and soil that a people of say 90,000,000 hemmed in a territory little larger than France, will find commensurate to their needs? No European people is in such plight. (p.45)<sup>22</sup>

France. In contrast, Casement saw France as being in decline. We find him, in the same essays, writing such phrases as: "her stagnant population of 40,000,000" (10); "Her life blood is dried up" (13); "France as a great free power is gone" (14); in decline (20); "France, far from needing outlets, increases not at all, and during 1911 showed an excess of close on 40,000 deaths over births. For France the day of greatness is past." (46)<sup>23</sup>

England. England, too, Casement saw as declining, due to the related phenomena of the degeneration of her urban population and general population decline. In one of his first nationalistic writings, in opposing Irish enlistment in the British army, he states:

Let her arm and drill the sickly population of her slums; the men of the hills and the country places in Ireland will go no more.<sup>24</sup>

On other occasions, too, Casement referred to Britain's "army of slum dwellers."<sup>25</sup> And Brian Inglis cites Casement's parody on a poem of Henry Newbolt, one verse of which goes:

Down thy valleys, Ireland, Ireland  
Down thy valleys green and sad  
Still thy spirit wanders wailing  
Wailing, wailing, wailing, mad.

To which Casement responded:

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<sup>22</sup> **The Crime Against Europe.**

<sup>23</sup> **ibid.** See, also, p.20.

<sup>24</sup> **Irishmen and the English Army**, Dungannon Club Publications No.1. 1905. p.102 (Hobson). The pamphlet was coauthored by Alice Stopford Green, Bulmer Hobson and Casement. Casement regularly drew attention to the use by England over the centuries of Irishmen to fight its wars, while depriving Ireland of its manpower to defend itself.

<sup>25</sup> **The Crime Against Europe.** p.66.

Up thy chimneys, England, England  
 Up thy chimneys black and sad  
 Goes thy smoke-wrapped spirit, paling  
 Goes pale-aleing - feeling bad.<sup>26</sup>

On the question of population decline, he contrasted Germany's population of 66,000,000 "the vast majority of them of German blood" with the British Empire's 59,000,000 "made up of various national and racial strains." With her own population in decline, she relied more and more on the peoples of the Empire for her manpower.<sup>27</sup>

D. Ireland. Moods of deep pessimism with regard to the future of Ireland regularly swept over Casement. This pessimistic attitude was shared by others.<sup>28</sup> Alice Stopford Green, the historian and a close confidant of Casement's, wrote in 1903 to James (later Lord) Bryce, declining an invitation to travel with him to Greece:

In Ireland all is so critical - every hope if there are people to work and every ruin if there are none. Greece is dead - except in print, but Ireland is only on its death-bed, the still living Ireland.<sup>29</sup>

Another friend, Ada McNeill, wrote to him in 1905, asking whether he thought an Irish Ireland possible under English rule? The Gaelic Leaguers didn't, she felt. She herself spoke of Ireland being too weak, of the need to build up, of "keeping alive through a dark epoch - the spirit of the old, old race - we are like our own native turf - the fire is always there - only wanting blowing up."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Roger Casement, p.117.

<sup>27</sup> Details can be found on p.65ff. of **The Crime against Europe**.

<sup>28</sup> In a recent book review on a biography of the Irish nationalist figure, Tim Healy, Liam de Paor wrote:

"Now that the Ireland of a hundred years ago and more falls into the perspective of history, we can notice more clearly perhaps one striking feature of the time: shame; self-loathing; a revulsion from the shoddiness of this second-rate province of the British Empire. It shows in the writing of Joyce, of Yeats, of Pearse, of lesser people like D.P. Moran. Its epitome was T.M. Healy, so much so that his current political biographer, Frank Callanan, at the end of his Acknowledgements, half hints that there is some shame attached to devoting 'close on two decades' of his own life and work to that witty, vituperative, hate-filled Catholic conservative nationalist."

Liam de Paor, review of Frank Callanan, **T.M. Healy**. Cork University Press, 1996. **Irish Times**, 14/12/96. It seems to me that the motif of shame, raised by de Paor, and the pessimism associated with degenerationist views are closely related.

<sup>29</sup> Bodleian Library, Oxford. MsBryce 72 fols. 112-70. Alice Stopford Green to Bryce, 26/5/1903?

<sup>30</sup> NLI MS. 13073 (12/ii) Íde Ní Néill (Ada MacNeill) to Casement, 28/11/05.

An English friend, "Shelagh", a member of the household of the Lord Norbury, was even more pessimistic in two letters written in 1905. In the first, while referring positively to reforms proposed by Lord Dunraven, she suggested that all was a grasping at straws - nothing could save Ireland now - all were emigrating. In her second letter, again referring to the Dunraven scheme, she exclaimed that Ireland's wrongs would make the stones cry, but that reform was too late - 30/40 years too late. The population was emigrating, and railways and steamers were only facilitating the process.<sup>31</sup>

Casement's own pessimism is evident in general comments he made from time to time in his correspondence. Writing to his friend and fellow campaigner, Edmund Morel, he wrote:

there is work here for an Irishman to do - and when one's country is going downhill so fast as Ireland is it is the duty of all who care for her to make her lot theirs.<sup>32</sup>

Writing to his cousin, Gertrude Bannister, he said:

It is a shameful thing that a whole race should be slowly and relentlessly done to death and refused the right to heal themselves. First stricken to the dust, drained of their wealth - their industries destroyed, their land entirely confiscated - their religion, their laws, their language banned - until too weak to resist they gave up all and sank in despair - and now to be chucklingly regarded as a fair green isle that can, all in good time, be replaced with the dregs of English City life.

The history of civilisation offers no more shameful picture than the persistent agony of Ireland... and..no parallel.. to the steady, persistent clinging to their own lofty generous ideal of kindly humanity as the Irish people present.<sup>33</sup>

To an unidentified correspondent, he wrote:

The people are sleeping.. It may be a lost cause - it probably is. I fight with despair in my heart. That matters nothing - it even makes you keener..<sup>34</sup>

And to Alice Stopford Green:

Africa can wait - for centuries and centuries. She will still be Africa. Leopold might murder millions but nothing could destroy or efface the ineffaceable negro - his ways, his colour, his mind, his stature and all that makes him the negro. No matter how cruel the persecution he might suffer the negro will remain unchanged and unchangeable and Africa could always be reconstituted by her own sons and the

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<sup>31</sup> NLI Ms. 13073 (46/xvi) "Shelagh" (Carlton Park) to Casement, 25 May and 26 July, n.y. (1905?).

<sup>32</sup> LSE, MP F8/22 Casement (Ballycastle) to Morel, 1/8/1907.

<sup>33</sup> NLI MS. 13074 Casement to Gertrude Bannister, 15/3/05.

<sup>34</sup> NLI MS. 13089. Casement to ? (partial).

waves of European misgovernment ebbed back leaving no trace upon her shores or native character.” - not so Ireland.<sup>35</sup>

Writing again to Mrs. Green, he referred to the people of the South and West as being in a penal swamp:

One is conscious that one is talking to men who are not yet quite free and still have the fears and weakness of slavery round them.<sup>36</sup>

Casement was widely read in Irish history, particularly in the work of nationalist-minded historians (though he also refers to Froude, Lecky etc.). I suggest that it is possible to interpret his orientation to Irish history as a reflection of the degenerationist pessimism common in his day as much as it is to treat it simply as a recounting of 700 years of conquest.

One of the striking images he uses to interpret Irish history is that of the parasite.<sup>37</sup> England was a parasite feeding off Ireland and squeezing the life-blood from her. It is possible to identify the source of this image: it was a book by Henry Walter Bates titled **The Naturalist on the River Amazons**, first published in 1863. Bates, a naturalist, spent eleven years (1848-1859) on the Amazon and the book was one of the results. Casement possessed a copy, which he perused when in South America.

He wrote:

The British Empire is no northern oak tree. It is a creeping, climbing plant that has fastened on the limbs of others and grown great from a sap not its own. If we seek an analogy for it in the vegetable and not in the animal world we must go to the forest of the tropics and not to the northland woodlands. In the great swamps at the mouth of the Amazon the naturalist Bates describes a monstrous liana, the ‘Sipo Matador’ or Murdering Creeper, that far more fitly than the oak tree of the north typifies John Bull and the place he has won in the sunlight by the once strong limbs of Ireland...

The analogy is almost the most perfect in literature, and if we would not see it made perfect in history we must get rid of the parasite grip before we are quite strangled. If we would not share the coming darkness we must shake off the murderer’s hold, before murderer and victim fall together. That fall is close at hand. A brave hand may yet cut the ‘Sipo Matador’, and the slayer be slain before he has quite stifled his victim.<sup>38</sup>

The crucial period of English conquest for Casement was the Tudor and following reigns. He regularly refers to the “pious Tudors and their pilfering pirates”. The Irish were gradually defeated militarily, their land taken, industry destroyed and

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<sup>35</sup> NLI MS. 10,464 (3) 20/4/07. Casement to Alice Stopford Green.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* (7) 11/11/13.

<sup>37</sup> For the significance of the parasite in the discussion of degeneration, see Section 4, above.

<sup>38</sup> **Crime**, pp.83-4. See, also, Ch.XVIII, “The Emerald Isle and its Giant Parasite.”

trade subordinated subsequently to that of England. The Act of Union was equally an act of perfidy. But the process was clearly in evidence in his own day. Three examples have importance: depopulation, the use of Irishmen in the British army and navy, and the overtaxation of Ireland.<sup>39</sup>

From whatever point of view we survey it we shall find that England's Empire at bottom rests upon Ireland to make good British deficiencies. The Dominions are far off, and while they may give battleships they take men. Ireland is close at hand - she gives all and takes nothing. Men, mind, food and money - all these she has offered through the centuries, and it is upon these and the unrestricted drain of these four things from that rich mine of human fertility and wealth that the British Empire has been founded and maintained.<sup>40</sup>

## 6. Conclusion.

Casement's thinking exhibited both evolutionary and degenerationist elements and a related concern with patterns of growth and decline in individual societies. Evolutionary thinking is more evident in the earlier part of his career, in Africa, while degenerationist concerns strengthen in the latter part of his life. Decline in societies, in Rome and imperial Spain, for instance, was partly explicable by moral failure and this was true in the case of Britain. Casement's treatment of Britain's decline echoes the degenerationist themes current at the time. Ireland's decline, on the other hand, was due to the parasitic hold of her predatory neighbour throughout the centuries. Part of his pro-Germanism is also attributable to this pattern of thought.

Thought-patterns such as these have gone unrecognised, hitherto. They have to be reconstructed, mostly, from scattered comments in his writings, public and private. Casement was not a scholar or a systematic follower of academic debates but, variously, a busy consular official and a public campaigner in causes. To the extent that his opinions reflected concerns such as that on degeneration, he almost certainly derived them from general reading in newspapers, reviews and selected books and from his social intercourse.<sup>41</sup> But they were also markedly influenced by the specific experiences of his life. His experiences as consul in Portuguese colonies in Africa and his years in South America, for example, helped form his ideas on Iberian civilisation, which he then contrasted with Teutonic civilisation.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Two of his publications in 1905, when he was seriously concentrating on Irish affairs, have population decline as their backdrop: the anti-recruitment pamphlet and his article on Redistribution. The shadow of the Famine and the subsequent emigration fall heavily over the page.

<sup>40</sup> *The Crime against Europe*, p.68.

<sup>41</sup> Casement had a collection of travel books, which, like Bates' work, are likely to have been mixtures of personal adventure, ethnography and natural history.

<sup>42</sup> I have drawn attention to this in my 1994 article.

B.L. Reid has written that “Casement’s admiration for Germany was an old story, but it was shallowly based and largely theoretical. Aside from a couple of brief tourist experiences he really knew almost nothing about Germany.”<sup>43</sup> And a few pages later: “Loving ‘Ireland,’ hating ‘England,’ admiring ‘Germany,’ all as absolutes and at least one of them virtually unexamined.....” The development of Casement’s admiration for Germany, to which Reid makes reference, whatever one makes of it, was hardly “virtually unexamined”, but derived from a complex set of ideas, one part of which has been the subject of the present essay.

Undoubtedly, Casement was an emotionally-driven man. But the failure to give due attention to the patterns of his thought and, indeed, to recognize the extent to which many of them were widely-shared at the time has led, at times, to a one-sided portrayal of the man.

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<sup>43</sup> Reid, p.184. See the rest of that passage and his comments on p.188. Reid’s comment relates to 1913. Yet, his first account of Casement’s admiration for Germany, on pp.91-2 of his book, relate to 1909 and is referred to in the index as “Germany, early praise of”!



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