

**Speech by President Michael D. Higgins at Official State Commemoration in  
Honour of Roger Casement**

Banna Strand, Ardfert, Co. Kerry, Thursday, 21st April, 2016

A Aire,

Ambasadóirí, Your Excellencies,

A Cháirde,

Is mór an pléisiúir dom a bheith anseo inniu sa cheantar álainn, stairiúil seo de Chontae Ciarraí. Mar Uachtarán na hÉireann, tá áthas orm an deis seo a thapú chun an méid a rinne Ruairí Mac Easmainn ar son saoirse mhuintir na hÉireann agus ar son cosmhuintir an domhain i gcoitinne a athaint agus a cheiliúradh. □

[It is my great pleasure to be here today, at this beautiful and historic part of County Kerry. As President of Ireland, I am very happy to have this occasion to acknowledge and celebrate, in the name of the Irish people, the great contribution of Roger Casement, not only to Irish Freedom, but to the universal struggle for justice and human dignity.]

Roger Casement was not just a great Irish patriot, he was also one of the great humanitarians of the early 20th century – a man who is remembered fondly by so many people across the world for his courageous work in exposing the darkness that lay at the heart of European imperialism.

His remarkable life has attracted the attention of so many international scholars, Peruvian Nobel Laureate Mario Vargas Llosa is a recent example, and all of us who are interested in Roger Casement's life are especially indebted to the fine work of Angus Mitchell, in particular for the scholarly work on the Putumayo Diaries, and the recently published "One Bold Dead of Open Treason: The Berlin Diaries of Roger Casement 1914-1916".

In his own time, few figures attracted the sympathy and admiration of their contemporaries as widely as Roger Casement. Striking in appearance, his photograph was widely distributed and displayed in the homes of Ireland, and Roger Casement was described by many as a man of considerable charm and distinction.

Those who knew him – his friends in the Irish nationalist movement, those in the Congo Reform Association, his colleagues in the British Foreign Service – have all emphasised Roger Casement's idealism, his passionate empathy for the hopeless and the oppressed. His friend Bulmer Hobson thus said of him:

“ I have known no one who was so stirred at the thought of injustice and wrong, whether it was in Africa, America or Ireland. I have not met his equal for courtesy or kindness or generosity . . . I do not expect to meet his like again.”

And yet, none of the leaders of 1916 has excited as much controversy just before their death and ever since. Casement was undoubtedly a complex personality, and he was centrally involved in one of the most contentious episodes of the Irish revolutionary period.

A hundred years on, with the benefit of hindsight, we are able to see in a new light the life and legacy of Roger Casement. We are better able to grasp how the multiple layers of his identity and allegiances, as an Irishman and a sensitive humanitarian at the turn of the last century, were played out in the life of Roger Casement.

We can more readily discern, too, the complexities of his personality, the impact of early childhood and separation, but also the coherence of his journey, from his membership of the British colonial administration to his most fundamental critique of Empire, and his ultimate commitment to the cause of Irish independence.

This afternoon, as we come together at the location of Roger Casement's last stand as a full-blown Irish revolutionary, it is appropriate that we recall the crucial part that he played in the lead-up to the Easter Rising of 1916.

Indeed it was here, on this Lonely Strand, that Roger Casement, Robert Monteith and Daniel Bailey, came ashore in the early hours of the morning of Good Friday, 21st April 1916. The three men had arrived to Kerry aboard the German submarine U19 and they had expected to meet The Aud, a German ship disguised as a neutral Norwegian freighter, that carried a supply of arms for the men and women who, across Ireland, were getting ready for an armed uprising scheduled to happen on the following Easter Sunday.

Due to failures in communication, the two vessels failed to meet in Tralee Bay. Casement, Bailey and Monteith set off for the shore in a small wooden boat, which capsized. Drenched, exhausted, and suffering from a recurrence of the malaria he had contracted in the Congo, Roger Casement remained in hiding at McKenna's Fort while his two companions walked ahead to Tralee to seek help.

At around 1:30pm that same day, Roger Casement was discovered and arrested by Constable Bernard O'Reilly and Sergeant John Hearn of the Ardfert RIC; he spent the night in Tralee's police barracks, where he was treated with kindness by Head Constable John A. Kearney, before he was transferred to London to be interrogated and tried for treason.

Meanwhile, out at sea, having evaded British naval patrols and survived several violent storms, The Aud and its arms shipment had arrived in Tralee Bay on Thursday, 20th April. When they discovered that there was no pilot to guide them into Fenit, Officer of the Imperial German Navy Captain Karl Spindler and his crew of 22 men, all of whom had volunteered for the perilous mission, decided to wait in the bay throughout the day. Eventually trapped, The Aud was escorted

by HMS Bluebell to Queenstown [Cobh Harbour], where the crew decided to scuttle the ship rather than surrender their cargo.

These men spent the subsequent war years in prison for the part they played in supporting the plans for an Irish armed rebellion, and both they and their families paid a price for these actions. Some of the crew, including Raimund Weisbach, Wilhelm Augustin, Otto Walter, Jans Dunker and Friedrich Schmitz, participated in the official Irish State ceremonies of 1966, and they travelled to Kerry to witness the laying of the foundation stone of this memorial at which we stand today.

Again today, fifty years after 1966, and a century on from April 1916, it is appropriate that Ireland acknowledges the debt of gratitude we owe to these men for their actions in support of Irish freedom.

The events that unfolded here in Kerry a hundred years ago are notorious – they are remembered in song and in legend; but the background to these events, and, above all, their many ramifications and consequences abroad are sometimes cloaked in confusion although they are of immense importance in understanding the events that would take place in Dublin during that Easter Week.

It is well known, for example, how, upon learning that Casement had been captured and that the arms were lost, leader of the Irish Volunteers Eoin MacNeill issued his countermanding order calling off the Rising. However, popular memory has often omitted to register that, upon coming back to Ireland, Roger Casement's intention had been to try and prevent the planned rebellion from taking place. Recognising his own recruitment and procurement efforts to have failed, and not aware of the separate efforts of John Devoy, Casement was anxious to avoid the unnecessary loss of Irish lives.

Indeed Casement believed that any Irish insurrection would be easily suppressed unless it received substantial assistance from Germany. In October 1914, he had travelled to Berlin as the envoy of Irish American nationalist leaders, to lead discussions with high-ranking German officials and try and form an Irish Brigade from among thousands of Irish Prisoners of War held in Germany. The 18 months Roger Casement spent across the Rhine were, overall, a failure: he managed to recruit only 56 volunteers for his Irish Brigade; and, eventually, disillusioned with the minimal character of imperial Germany's support to an Irish uprising, he resolved to go back to Ireland to advise the nationalist leaders that any armed uprising was doomed and should, therefore, be aborted.

When reflecting back on those founding events of our state, it is essential to locate the Easter Rising within its global and European contexts, and particularly within the “game of embattled giants” that was the First World War, in the words of Roger Casement. In the eyes of many Irish Republicans, that imperialist war was both an appalling loss of life in which “small nationalities” were mere “pawns”, and a catalyst for the great Irish revolt they were calling forth.

The reference to Germany as “our gallant allies in Europe”, in the Proclamation of 1916, must be read in that context. We might find such intervention of a belligerent nation against which many Irishmen were then fighting from within the British Army an uncomfortable fact to acknowledge.

Yet it is important that we refrain, at a distance of one hundred years, from any simplistic judgement – whether apologetic or condemning. It is important that we endeavour to do justice to the motivations of the actors of the time, and to the manner in which they judged or were induced to seize the opportunities afforded by that wider context to advance a cause they believed was just; however it was to be attained. The ambivalence of Irish republicanism to the great powers was perhaps best captured in the slogan, “We serve neither King nor Kaiser, but Ireland”, which was also proclaimed on Liberty Hall in the lead-up to the Rising.

Roger Casement, having seen through the moral breakdown of the free-trading Empire he had willingly served for several decades, was in no doubt, by Easter 1916, where his loyalty lay. As he put it in his famous speech from the dock, of which we have just heard several moving excerpts:

"Loyalty is a sentiment, not a law. It rests on love, not on restraint. The government of Ireland by England rests on restraint, and not on law; and, since it demands no love, it can evoke no loyalty.

That blessed word Empire, that bears so paradoxical resemblance to charity! For if charity begins at home, Empire begins in other mens' homes, and both may cover a multitude of sins. I, for one, was determined that Ireland was much more to me than Empire, and that, if charity begins at home, so must loyalty."

Today we must also recall how, in a true Republican spirit, Roger Casement's generous vision for the Ireland of the future was one that included all of the people of Northern Ireland, in the diversity of their beliefs, origins and history. This was a vision which Casement recalled in that same speech from the dock, when he said:

"We aimed at uniting the Ulster Volunteers to the cause of United Ireland. We aimed at uniting all Irishmen in a natural and national bond of cohesion based on mutual self-respect."

This reminds us that throughout his life, Roger Casement always thought of himself as an Ulsterman. When he and a small number of his friends, including Bulmer Hobson, Erskine Childers and Alice Stopford Green, took the initiative of the Howth and Kilcoole gun-runnings, in the summer 1914, they had in mind the example of the Ulster Volunteers, who had imported guns from Germany a few short months earlier.

Sharing a common Antrim background, both Roger Casement and Eoin MacNeill also shared an admiration for the determination of the Ulster Unionists, and Roger Casement was slow to relinquish his hopes that they might be won over to the struggle for Irish Home Rule.

Notwithstanding what some have described as the naiveté of such views, today we must appreciate the rich and multi-layered sense of belonging to Ireland that underpinned all of Roger Casement's actions. A boy brought up in the Protestant faith, first in County Dublin and then between Ulster and Liverpool, he admired and identified with the Irish rebels of the past, as well as with the legendary Ulster heroes. Those figures featured prominently, for example, in “The Dream of the Celt”, an epic Roger Casement began on his way out to Loanda (and which would go on to be the title of Mario Vargas Llosa's fictional biography of Casement).

Roger Casement himself claimed that it was his Irish identity that allowed him to fully grasp the oppressive nature of European colonial rule in the Congo and the Amazon. Indeed he would become the whistleblower of imperial colonial greed in two continents. Although Casement's transformation is indeed quite an astonishing one – five years after being knighted in recognition of his investigations in the Putumayo on behalf of the British Foreign Office, he was put on trial for his separatist revolutionary activities and hanged for high treason – there is coherence and integrity to this journey.

Recent scholarship has shown how Casement's 'reading' of Ireland as a victim of conquest informed his outlook on the oppression of the indigenous peoples of Africa and South America. In turn, his experience in these sites of plunder, exploitation and degradation probably crystallised his view of Ireland's subjugation to British imperialism in all its different forms, including the subjugation of Ireland's culture and language.

Tellingly, two of the most important junctures in Roger Casement's professional life as a British diplomat – the publication of his report on the Congo in 1904, and on the Putumayo in 1911 – also correspond to two thresholds in his involvement with the Irish revolutionary movement.

In 1904, after travelling to remote areas of the Upper Congo, Roger Casement presented plentiful of evidence that the collection of rubber in the territory under the direct control of King Leopold of Belgium, the so-called "Congo Free State", was widely associated with extortion of taxes, forced labour, murder, mutilation and depopulation.

As a formidable indictment of a system based on the crudest violations of human rights, Roger Casement's findings contributed to boosting international pressures that eventually led to a reform of the administration of the Congo.

It was in June of that same year 1904 that Casement attended the Feis of the Glens in Antrim – a festive occasion that bonded him for the next decade with a circle of Irish cultural and civic activists, and sparked his deepening interest in the Irish language and the revival movement.

Seven years later, in March 1911, Roger Casement completed a second report for the Foreign Office, in which he documented the atrocities associated with the activities of an Anglo-Peruvian rubber company operating in the frontier region of the north-west Amazon. The publication of this report coincided with the culmination of Casement's estrangement from the British Foreign Service, from which he resigned in 1913. From thereafter, Roger Casement moved decisively towards separatist activities, up to that fateful Good Friday 1916, when he was captured in the nearby McKenna's Fort.

Roger Casement was hanged in Pentonville Prison, in London, in the early morning of 3rd August 1916, following a trial that attracted the attention of writers, humanitarians and lawyers from around the world.

While much of the controversy surrounding the trial has revolved, up to our times, around the question of Roger Casement's sexuality, the more important question always related to the various

distortions of justice that characterised these legal proceedings. The trial was outrageous for its imperilling of an adequate defence by the circulation of material that would strike a populist note and blacken the defendant in an extra-judicial attempt at undermining the international campaign for clemency.

Beyond and above all these considerations, the ongoing commemorations offer an important opportunity, I believe, to engage with the fundamental questions Roger Casement raised about power and human rights, about the rights of communities and indigenous peoples, and about the rules guiding foreign policy and international trade. His was an epoch that is sometimes referred to as that of the “first globalisation” – an era when capital moved freely between countries and when the flow of goods exchanged within and between Europe’s huge colonial empires increased dramatically; an era, too, when tens of millions of Europeans left the old continent to seek their fortunes in what was called the New World.

It is only now, despite the pioneering humanitarianism of such as Casement, that the degradation of indigenous peoples has grown into a central issue in human rights discourse. At the same time, it is in those very regions visited by Casement that we continue to see today the greatest damage to ecosystems and communities – and where, outrageously, once again immunity is being sought by irresponsible but powerful commercial interests in sectors such as logging and mining.

Is deis íontach é an chomóradh an chéid seo dúinn díriú ar na ceisteanna moráltachta bunúsacha a d’árdaigh Ruairí Mac Easmainn lena chomhghleacaithe a scrúdú san athuair - ceisteanna iad atá fós le freagairt againn céad bliain níos déanaí. Is cúis mórtais dúinn is ea é idéalachas Mhic Easmainn sa lá atá inniu ann, agus is ceart dúinn a bheith bródúil as an méid a rinne sé ar son cosmhuintir na domhain, a cur chun cinn na saoirse, in Éirinn agus thar lear.

[These centenary commemorations, then, are an invitation to pay full attention to the fundamental moral questions which Roger Casement was calling on his contemporaries to face, questions that still confront us in our own times. Today we take great pride in recalling Roger Casement’s idealism, his passionate defence of the human dignity of those who were the victims of a brutal world order, and his commitment to the cause of Freedom, in Ireland and abroad.]

May I, here in Kerry, at the site of his last efforts in the name of that Freedom, quote once more Roger Casement’s own words, conveying his beliefs and his life’s purpose:

"The faculty of preserving through centuries of misery the remembrance of lost liberty, - this surely is the noblest cause ever man strove for, ever lived for, ever died for."

Go raibh maith agaibh.