

# Sir Roger Casement

diplomat, humanitarian  
Irish nationalist and  
executed traitor

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23rd January 2019

# Outline of Talk

- Lifeline & context of the times
- Character & connections
- Career in the Diplomatic Service
- Irish Nationalism
- Capture
- Trial & Execution
- Aftermath & ongoing interest

what kind of  
man was he?

what were the origins  
of his nationalism?

How is he  
remembered?

How important are the  
Black Diaries?

What role did he play in the  
Easter Rising?

# Summary Lifeline

1864 born in Dublin

Both parents died young; brought up by relatives in Ballymena, Antrim

1880 starts work for shipping company in Liverpool

1883 travels to Congo

1890 appointed first British Consul to the Congo

1903 Investigation into treatment of locals in the rubber industry

1904 *Casement Report* published in UK

1905 awarded CMG

1906 assigned to Brazil as Consul

1910 -11 investigated Peruvian Amazon Company in Putumayo, Columbia

1911 knighted

1913 retires from Diplomatic Service

1914 travels to Germany to recruit Irish Brigade

1916 Captured, tried & executed

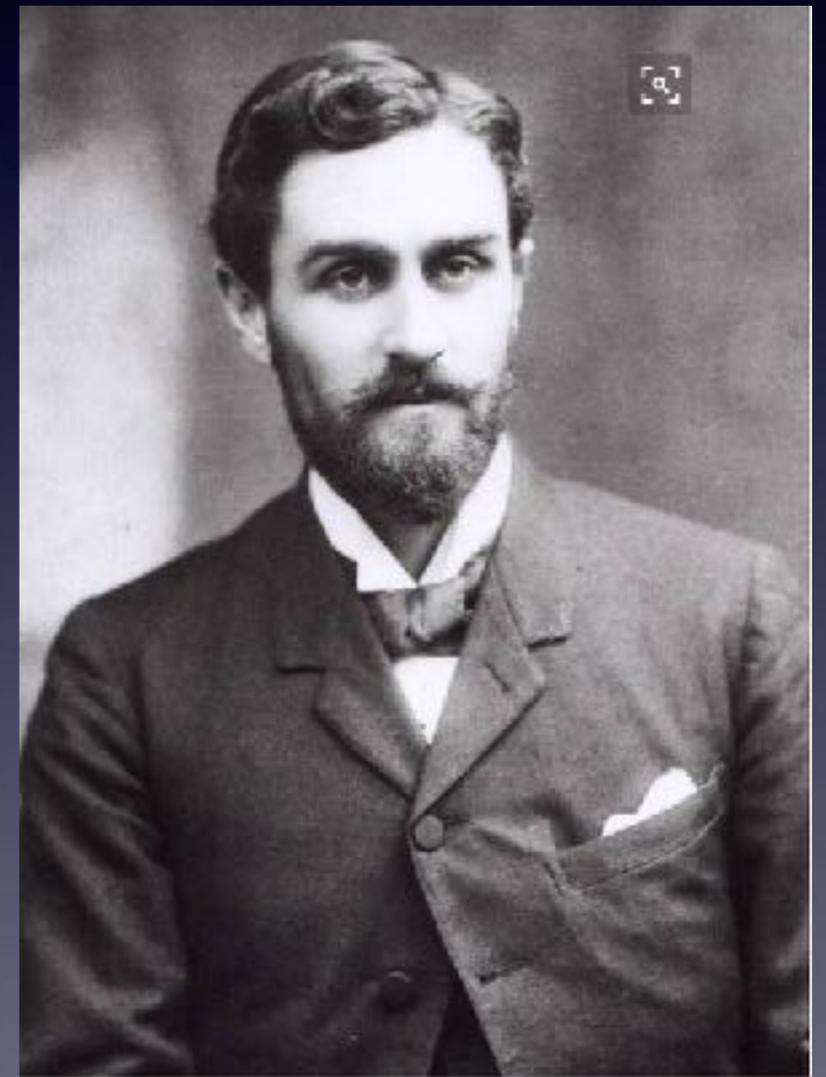
# Personal Characteristics

- Tall, dark beard, blue eyes
- Well dressed
- Courteous manner
- Beautiful voice

*He seemed to me one of the finest looking creatures I had ever seen; his countenance had charm and distinction and high chivalry*

*He doesn't so much speak to you as purr at you*

- Diligent, hardworking
- Prolific diarist & correspondent
- Promiscuously homosexual, allegedly



# Friends & Associates

## In England & Ireland

- Canon Doyle
- Alfred Noyes
- WB Yeats
- Bernard Shaw
  
- Mrs Alice Green
  
- Rev F D Amour

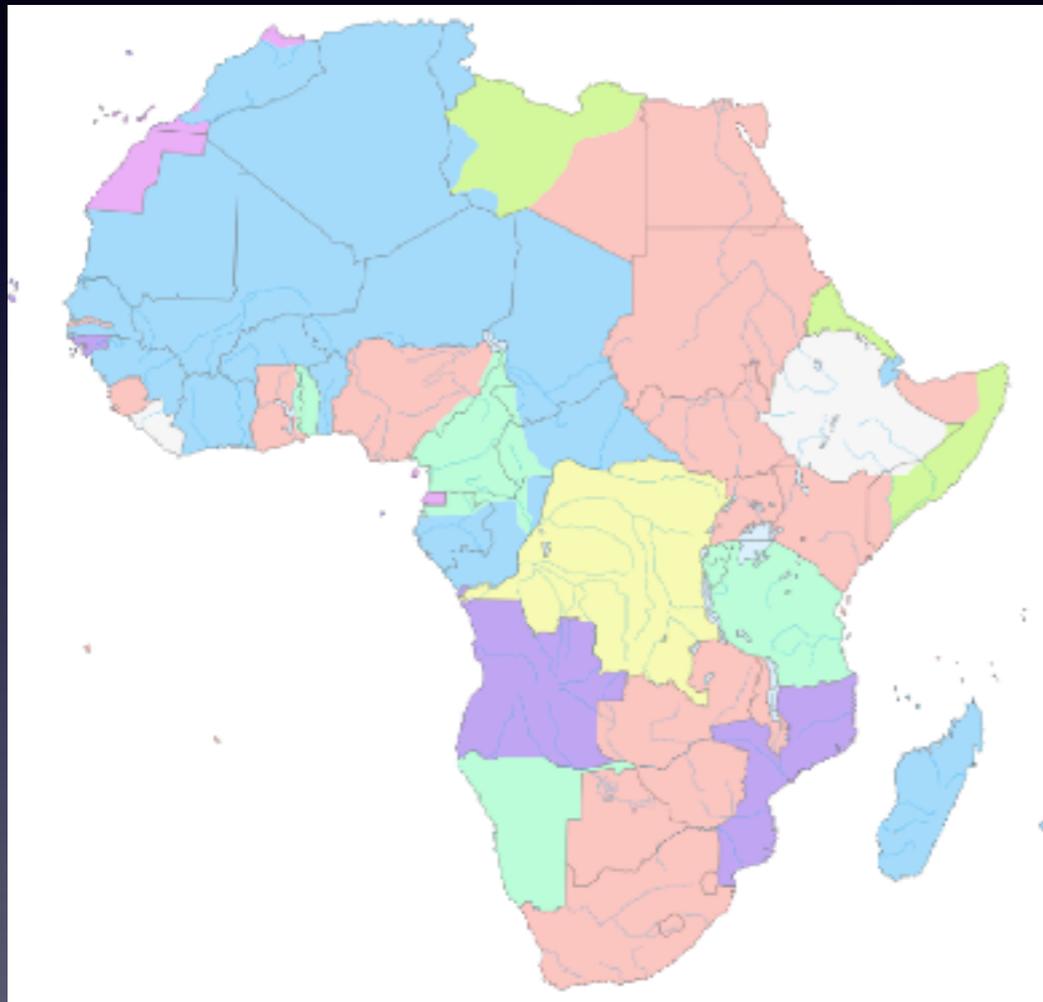
## In Africa:

- ED Morel



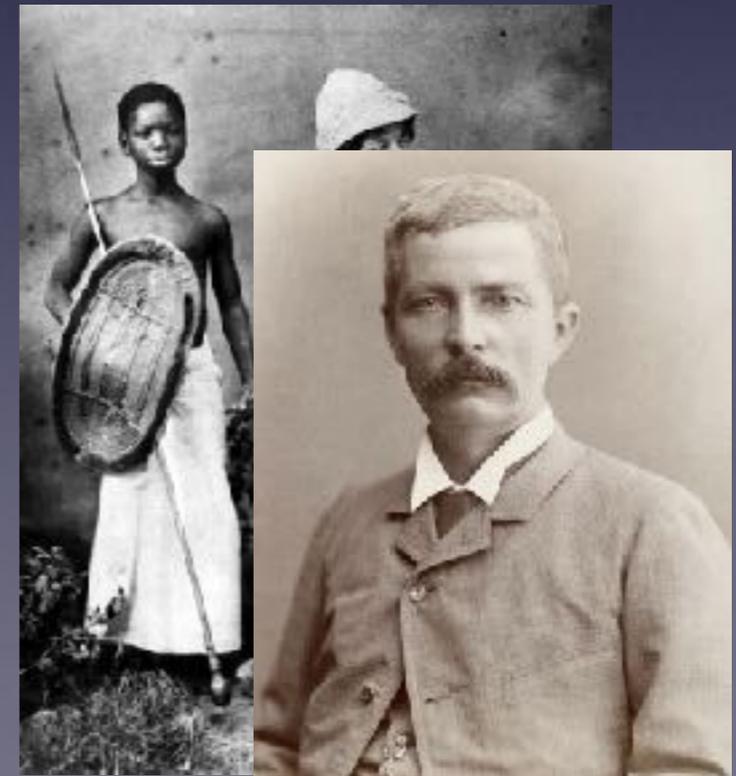
- Joseph Conrad
- Herbert Ward

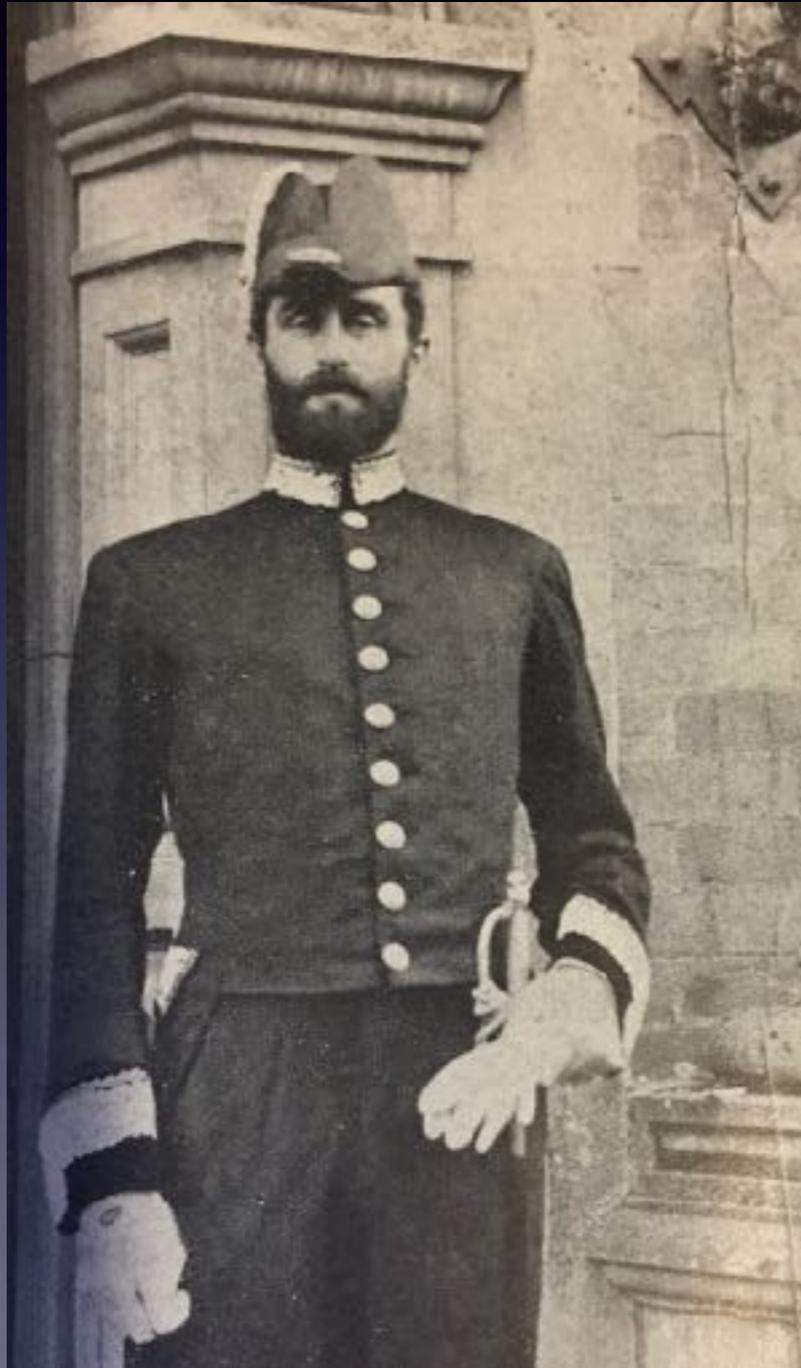
# Congo



- Africa International Association
- 1885 Berlin conference
- Congo ceded to King Leopold II of Belgium

*“open the territory to commerce, abolish slavery, civilize & Christainise the pagans”*

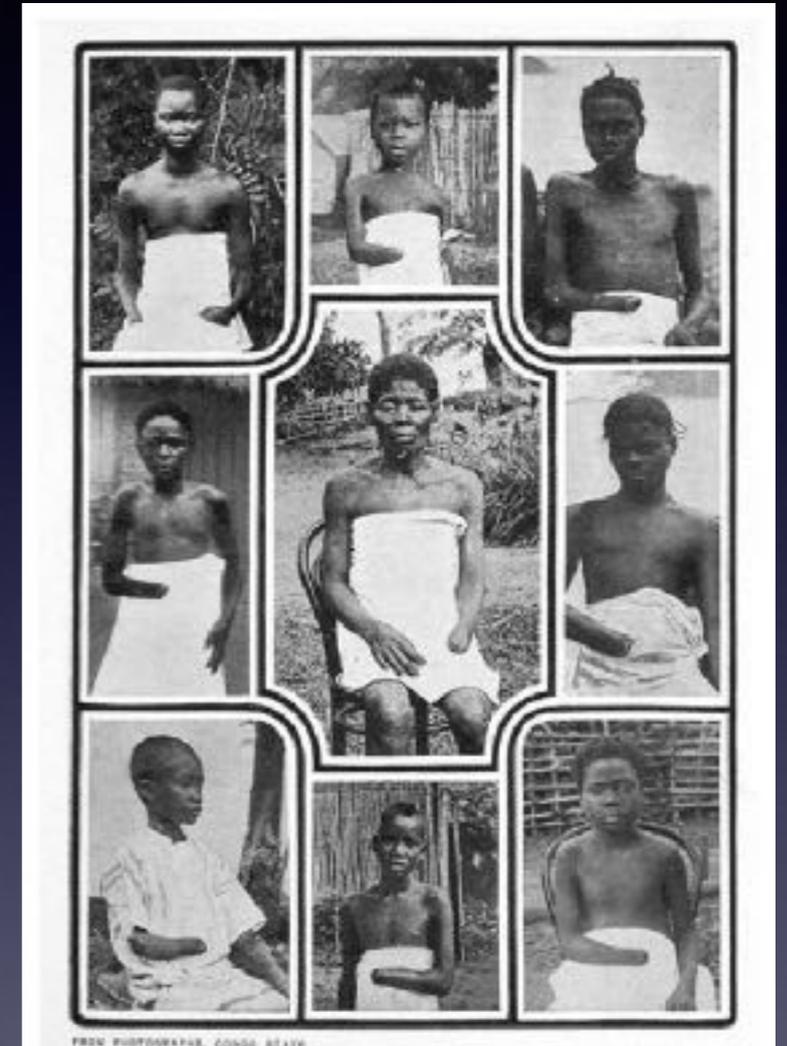




# Early Career

- 1883 arrived as young, idealistic colonial
- Worked for several private enterprises
- Joins Diplomatic Service
- Several African postings
- 1890 becomes British Consul to Congo
- feels his talents not being recognised

# Experience in the Congo

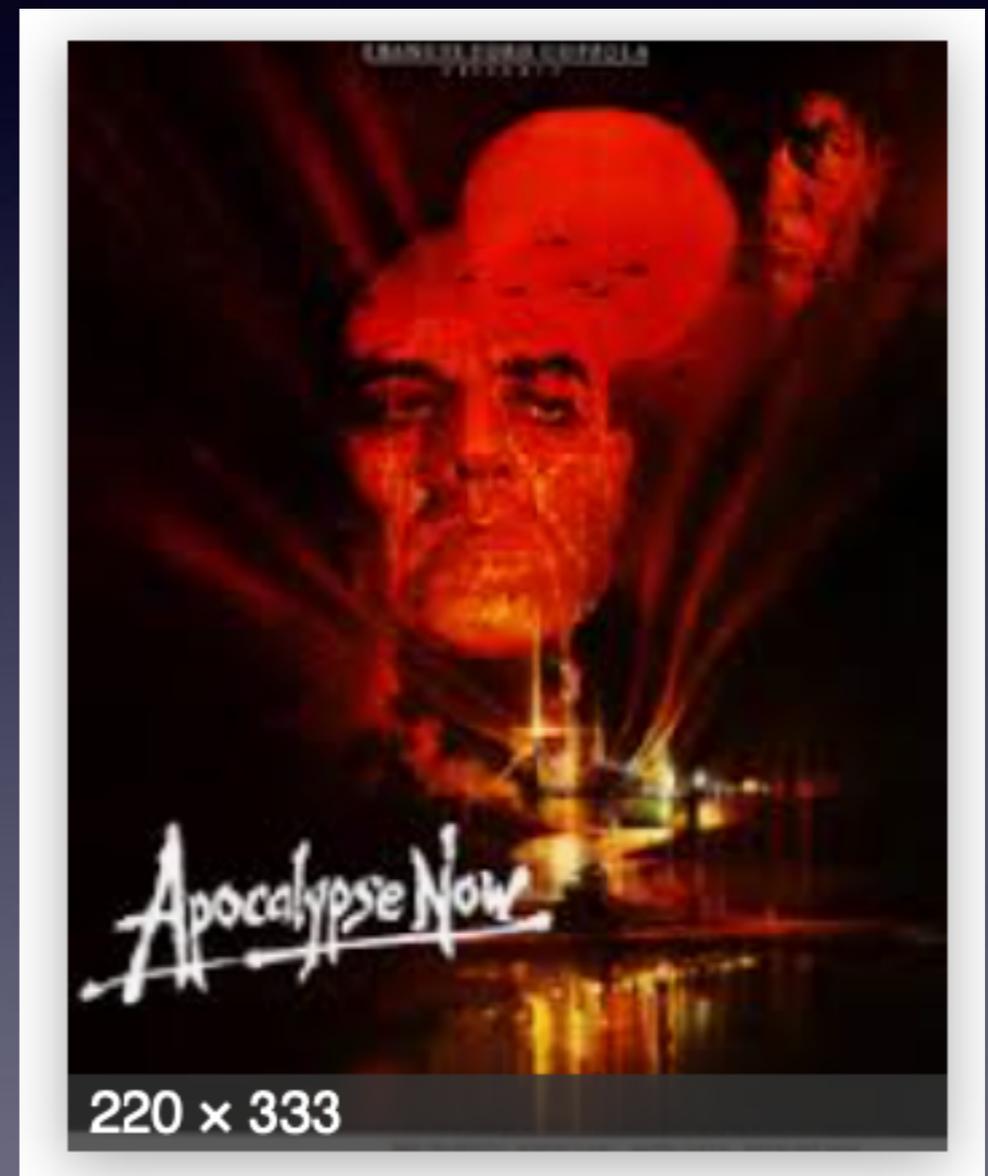
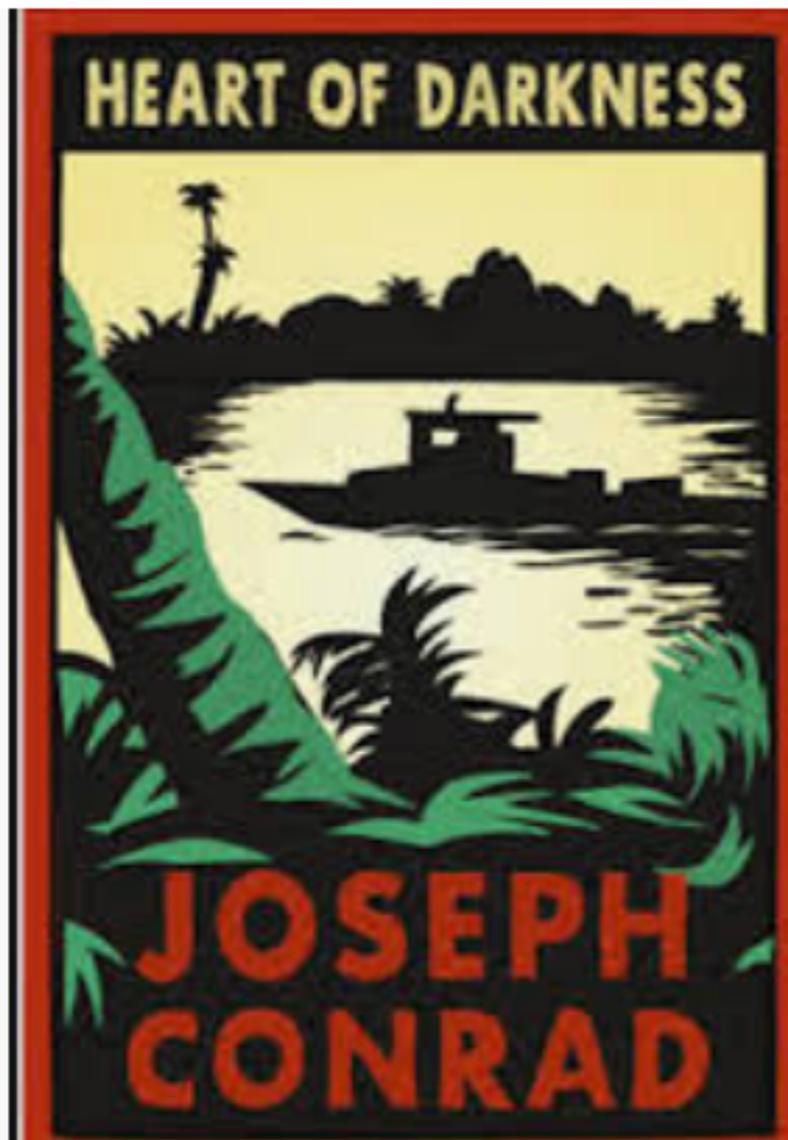


Territory administered by *Force Publique*



*“we all on earth have a commission and a right to defend the weak against the strong, and to protest against brutality in any shape or form”*

# The Congo in Literature & Film

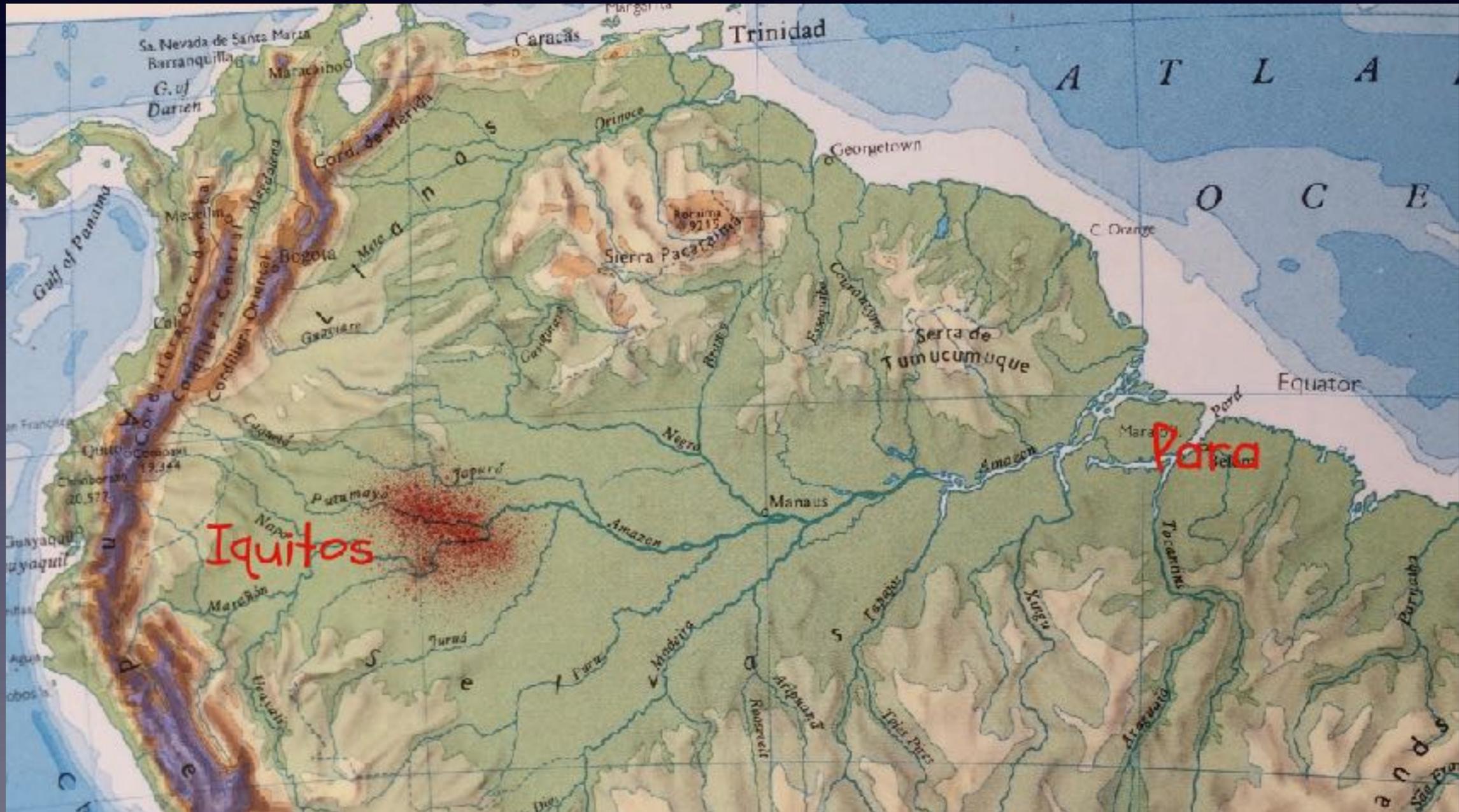


# Human Rights Investigation (1903-1904)

- Protest vote in House of Parliament
- Government commissions Casement to:
  - investigate allegations of human rights abuses
- Spends three months travelling in rubber producing areas
- Shocked by systematic abuse of locals
- Returns to UK to finalise report
- Resistance from Leopold's sympathisers
- 'Casement Report' published in 1904
- Massive public outcry
- Awarded CMG
- Leopold's own commission corroborate findings

# Posting to South America

- 1906 posted to South America:  
Santos, Para then Rio de Janeiro
- Bored, under-utilised



# Investigation of PAC



- 1910 part of commission investigating Peruvian Amazon Company (PAC)
- Two rationales for British involvement:
  1. company was register on LSE (dignitaries on the board)
  2. several Barbadians were reported to have been abused
- Found conditions to be as harsh as in the Congo:
  - PAC operating beyond the reach of government
  - natives subsisting in near slavery
  - brutal treatment common place
- Interviewed both abused and abusers
- Report widely praised; had immediate impact. PAC ceased trading.
- Second visit in 2011 to assess promised improvements
- Knighted (did not attend ceremony)

# Irish Nationalism

- Saw parallels between history of British rule in Ireland with behaviour of colonial powers in Africa & South America

*The tragedy of that dear old country is a far deeper and more dreadful  
...than the dreadful tale of Leopoldism on the Congo...  
...who will restore the destroyed Irish race - the dead Irish tongue -  
murdered Irish music?*

Letter to ED Morel 1908

- Promoted speaking of Gaelic
- Joined Irish League then Sinn Fein in 1913
- Opposed Irish involvement in WWI
- Travelled to US to raise funds

# *“My enemy’s enemy is my friend”*

- used his diplomatic connections to have high-level contacts with German diplomatic service
- Spent 18 months in Germany trying to raise Irish Brigade from Irish PoWs
- granted a training camp at Limburg an der Lahn
- unsuccessful recruitment - only about 50 signed-up
- Used US money to arrange for Germans armaments to be shipped to Ireland

# Return to Ireland & Capture

- returned by submarine from Germany, SM U-19
- 21st April landed at Tralee Bay, Kerry
- captured next day
- taken to London
- held in Tower of London
- interrogated by Scotland Yard
- transferred to Pentonville Prison



# Trial

26 - 29 June 1916



Sir John Lavery

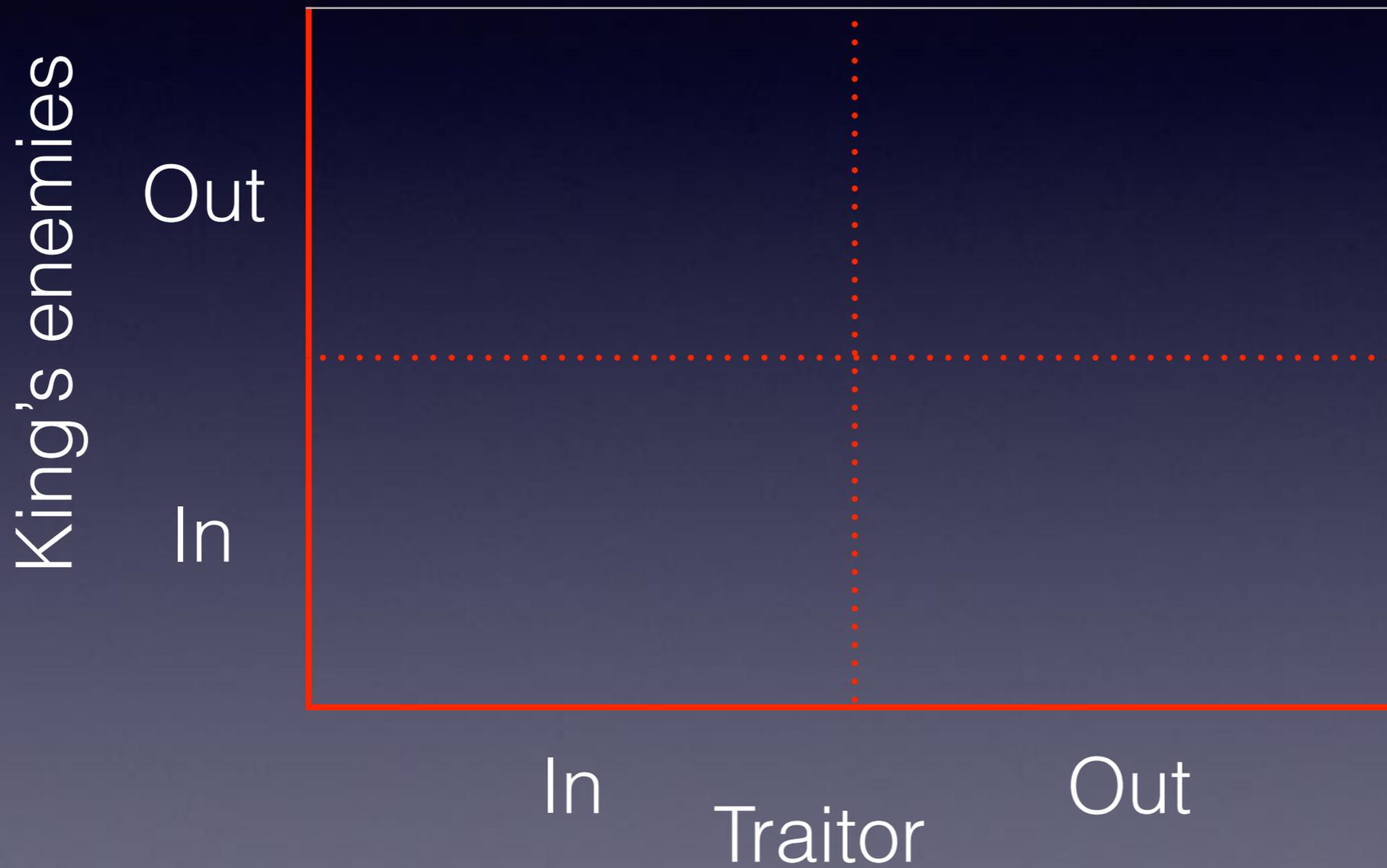
# Trial

- Tried under 1351 Treason Act
- Lengthy discussion of legal interpretation
- Evidence of treasonable acts not disputed
- Declined to plead insanity
- Following “Guilty” verdict, Casement made an impassioned speech:
  - refutes several factual errors
  - challenges the authority of the court to try him
  - ends with a rousing nationalist plea

*“Where men must beg with bated breath for leave to subsist in their own land, to think their own thoughts, to sing their own songs, to garner the fruits of their own labors... then surely it is braver, a saner and truer thing, to be a rebel in act and deed against such circumstances as these than tamely to accept it as the natural lot of men”*

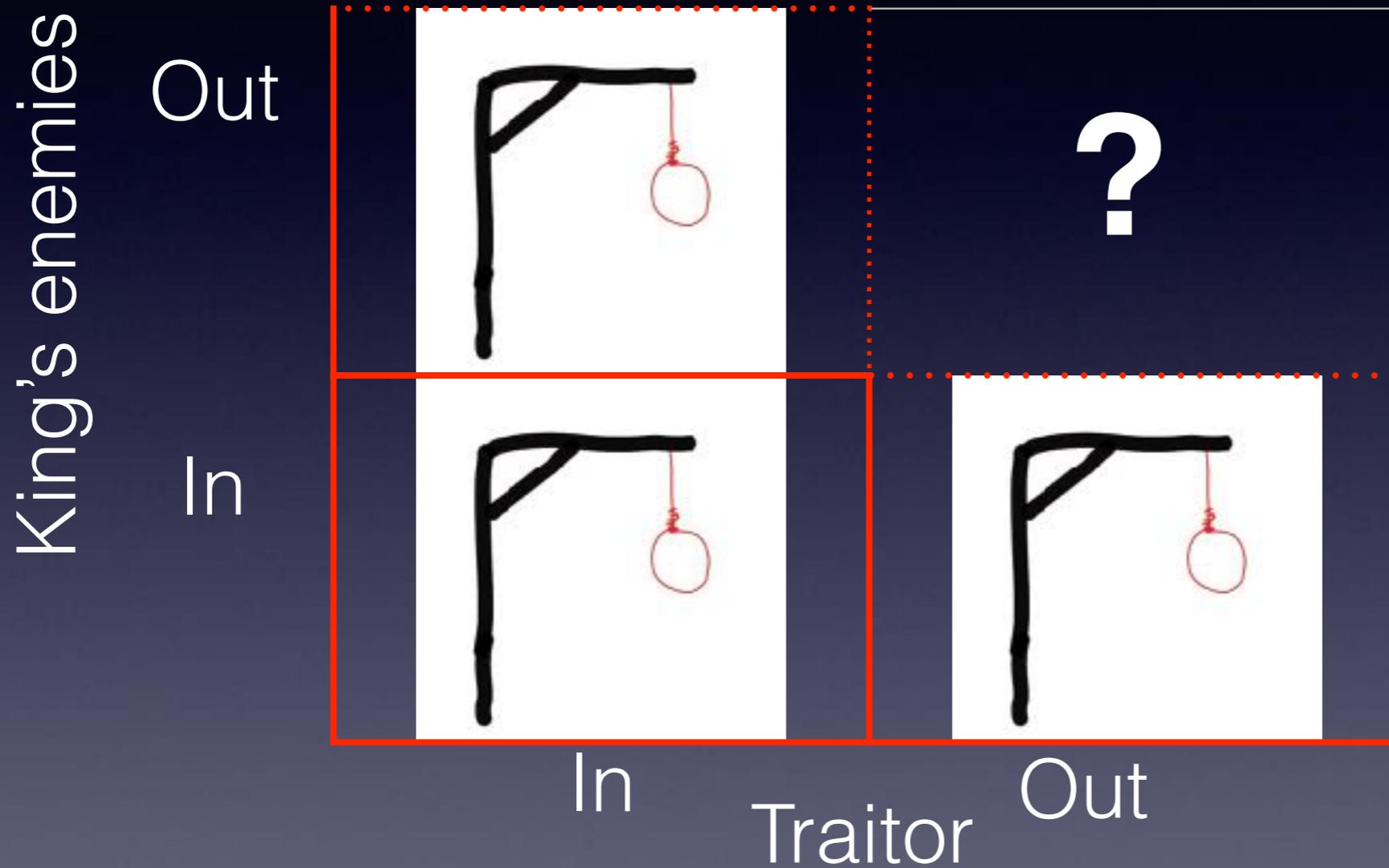
# Appeal

Hinged on legal definition of *venue*:



# Appeal

Hinged on legal definition of *venue*:



Came down to subjects' *duty of allegiance*

*"Hanged by a comma"*

# Appeal & Execution

- considerable public support for reprieve by his influential friends at home & abroad (some notable abstentions)
- concerted effort to defame Casement, by selective release of lurid excerpts from *Black Diaries*
- Attorney General denied leave to appeal to House of Lords
- Cabinet declined request for reprieve
- Executed at Pentonville on 3rd August 1916

# Aftermath & legacy

- 1959 *Black Dairies* released, but access controlled
  - 1963 Remains released by British Government
  - 1965 State funeral, buried in Dublin (contrary to his wishes)
  - Ambivalent attitude towards him in Ireland
  - Recent resurgence of interest
- 
- in 1890s, was instrumental in formation of Congo Reform Association
  - Style of first hand, named & fact-checked reports widely used to this day



*"victims and perpetrators of atrocities ... never before had distant colonial subjects been given such personal voices in an official document."*

# The Ghost of Roger Casement

*I poked about a village church  
And found his family tomb  
And copied out what I could read  
In that religious gloom;  
Found many a famous man there;  
But fame and virtue rot.  
Draw round, beloved and bitter men,  
Draw round and raise a shout;  
The ghost of Roger Casement  
Is beating on the door.*

WB Yeats

# The Black Diaries

- Opinion divided on his sexual orientation, then and now



- authenticity disputed
- to what extent were diaries manipulated at time of trial?
- strictly limited circulation of typed copies of excerpts
- several subsequent books & much discussion

SIR,—In his review of Mr. Noyes's book on Casement, Mr. Christopher Hollis says: "It is indeed strange, if Casement was such a man as the author of the diaries apparently depicts himself to be, that this should never have been suspected in his lifetime." It would, indeed, have been strange! But it was not merely suspected; it was generally accepted as a fact in Brazil, where I took over the Consulate General at Rio de Janeiro from him in 1910.

Your reviewer implies that Casement was "high-minded." It is hardly the adjective which personal acquaintance with him would suggest, though he had certain qualities that are undeniable. Vanity, sheer vanity was Casement's undoing, as I pointed out in my book *British Consul*, and people who knew Casement (the late Sir William Haggard was one) were sorry that he should come to such an untimely end.

ERNEST HAMBLOCH.

Kingston-on-Thames.

## The Great What-if?

*Had he died of his tropical ailments or been shot on capture in Ireland, how would he be regarded today?*

and if that isn't enough,  
there's more, much more:

<http://www.decoding-casement.com>

*The first and only website dedicated exclusively to the  
still controversial case of Roger Casement.....*

# Sources & References

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