

SIR ROGER CASEMENT

by Mike McCormack, AOH NY State Historian

Roger Casement was born in Antrim on September 1, 1864 to a Protestant father and a Catholic mother. At 17, he went to work for the Elder Dempster Shipping Company in Liverpool; three years later he was sent to west Africa. There he joined the British Colonial Service and was gradually advanced to a position in the British Consulate there. Always a fair and honorable man, he was horrified at the inhuman treatment of native workers in the Congo, and wrote a report exposing those conditions. The story was published, and when Casement returned to England in 1904 he was celebrated. In London he met Alice Green, a historian who denounced England's exploitation of the Irish. Her argument impressed Casement and when he returned to Ireland he looked up her friends: Bulmer Hobson, Eoin MacNeill, and Erskine Childers. He soon became a confidant of these men and other nationalists as well.

Casement's diligent service earned him the post of Consul General at Rio de Janeiro, and he sailed off to assume that enviable post, but even there his sense of fair play was to guide his actions. He wrote a scathing report on the cruelties practiced by whites on native workers on the rubber plantations along the Putamayo river. It became an international sensation. He returned to England in 1911 and was Knighted for his public service. Casement retired from the Colonial Service in 1912 and returned to Ireland where his sense of fair play was again aroused - this time by the conditions of his own people under the rule of the Crown.

A man of strong nationalist sympathies, he joined the National Volunteers in 1913. When he visited London the following year, he was on a different mission - to arrange for the Irish Volunteers to bring 1500 Hamburg guns into Howth. History shows just how successful he was for many a man marched into Dublin on Easter Monday morning shouldering his old Howth gun. When more money was needed to secure more arms, Casement was sent to New York on July 4, 1914 to see John Devoy who had been raising funds for that purpose among the American Irish. While in America, World War I broke out, and he immediately contacted the German ambassador to America seeking aid to win Irish independence. On October 15, 1914 Casement sailed to Germany, carrying a small fortune to purchase more arms.

His persistence paid off and the Germans dispatched the ship **AUD** with a cargo of arms to be landed in Co Kerry; these arms were to be used in the rising planned for Easter Week, 1916. Casement followed in a submarine, landing on Banna Strand in Tralee Bay on Good Friday, April 21, 1916. Those who were to meet him there did not. A delay of 24 hours had been radioed to the AUD, but the ship's radio was inoperative. The Gaelic American newspaper stated that American President Wilson knew of Casement's intentions to land arms in Ireland and warned the British government. (*New York Times*, April 27, 1916, pp. 1 & 4.) The British, alerted to the plans, intercepted the message, and went instead to meet the bewildered Casement who decided to wait on the beach until his contacts arrived. He was captured, identified, and hurried away, a prisoner, to London. At the same time the AUD, disguised as a Norwegian timber ship, was stopped by a British patrol boat. Rather than submit, she was scuttled by her own crew as Casement was on his way to England to stand trial. Found guilty of high treason, he was sentenced to be hanged.

A world-wide furor erupted over the severity of the sentence. Here was a just man, recently praised and knighted by the Crown for his efforts on behalf of persecuted natives in far corners of the world, sentenced to death by that same Crown for daring to challenge the exploitation of his own downtrodden people. In an effort to reverse public opinion, the British government circulated copies of diaries alleged to be Casement's, which recorded homosexual practices. Much controversy surrounded these **Black Diaries**, but they had the desired effect. The public furor died down, and Casement was hanged in Pentonville Prison on **August 3, 1916** – the last of the Easter Executions.

For many years after the Irish government finally won its limited freedom from England, official requests were made to have Sir Roger's remains returned to Ireland. It was not until 1965, that England finally relented, but only after circulating the questionable Black Diaries once more. This time they didn't reckon on modern

analytical methodology, and the diaries were proven to be forgeries. In spite of English efforts to sully the name of this dedicated Irish patriot, Casement's remains were respectfully received by the Irish people, given a huge state funeral, and re-interred in Glasnevin Cemetery on March 1, 1965 - just one year before the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising.

Editors Note: Years later, in conversation with another great patriot, Joe Cahill, who had once been apprehended bringing arms into the IRA. He asked if I knew the name of the ship he was caught on. I replied 'Yes, it was the CLAUDIA'. He smiled and said "drop the first two and last two letters and what have you?" He loved the irony!

