

## CASEMENT AND IRELAND

SUCH is the unity of all history that anyone who endeavours to tell a piece of it must feel that his first sentence tears a seamless web.'

These memorable words of Maitland naturally recur to the mind as one reads the direct and lucid story of the life and death of Roger Casement that Denis Gwynn has given to the world.† In the course of his life—so abruptly ended—Roger Casement seemed to be the meeting-place of many strange forces; of the living and of the dead. Some of these forces reflect themselves or are reflected in the titles Mr. Gwynn has chosen for his contents page. The Congo; Putamayo; Ireland; Germany (The Great War); the Traitor's Gate. The mere repetition of the names gives more than a hint of the strange cycle through which the life of Casement moved. In the beginning of his public career he was a figure of international power and reputation. Later, he declined (or ought I to say, developed?) into a person of some importance in Irish national politics. He ended as a lonely man upon the scaffold. He was so lonely at the end as to be out of touch and in a large measure out of sympathy with the counsel who defended him and with the arguments they used in his defence. And yet, just at the end, in the Divine Mercy, Roger Casement was reconciled to the Church of his Baptism, of which he had forgotten (if indeed he had ever realised) he was once a member. In truth he had received Catholic baptism as a small child at Rhyl while on holiday with his mother, who had been born a Catholic but who had ceased after marriage to practise her religion. The fact was verified

†THE LIFE AND DEATH OF ROGER CASEMENT. By Denis Gwynn. (Jonathan Cape; 12/6.)

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while he lay in prison at Pentonville with a memory only of a vague experience at Rhyl during which a priest 'splashed water over him.'

The pages of this biography reveal, what was indeed scarcely a secret before, that his renewal of interest in the Church and his final reconciliation were due in large measure to the influence of a kindly Dominican, Father Crotty, who created for Casement in the prison camp at Limburg (which he visited from time to time with a view to the realisation of his insane idea of an Irish Brigade) 'a centre of restfulness and consolation that meant more to him than it could mean even to prisoners of war in their unending incarceration and enforced idleness.' After a time he began to tell Father Crotty of his desire to share the simple Faith of 'the indomitable soldiers who preferred to remain in prison without hope of liberation rather than listen to his appeals.' And one of the most dramatic pages of the book tells of the journey which Father Crotty made without passport or permit from Limburg to Berlin in the single hope and expectation of receiving Casement into the Church on the eve of his ill-fated expedition to Ireland a fortnight or so before the memorable Easter Week, 1916.

Actually, as has been stated, Roger Casement was reconciled to the Church in the prison at Pentonville while awaiting the end. On the morning of his execution he assisted at Mass and received Holy Communion. As the Chaplain left the prison he was asked by a journalist of more enterprise than discretion if Casement had made his confession and if the Chaplain had any statement to make concerning it. To which after a long pause the answer came, 'You have asked me a question which is a secret between Sir Roger Casement and his God.' The same answer may fairly be made to those curious minds which even now inquire about the truth concerning the Casement diaries.

Of more avail and interest is another enquiry concerning the place that Casement holds in the making of Irish history. It is a matter with which Mr. Gwynn does not directly deal. His book is a lucid and ordered record of life and fact. Yet the issue arises and will arise more acutely in the biography of John Redmond, on which (to the joy of many) Mr. Gwynn is known to be engaged.

It is, we think, easy to exaggerate the influence in Irish history of Roger Casement and his fellow revolutionaries. The movement towards and the achievement of Irish political freedom depended much more on the incessant play of vast economic and moral forces than on the deeds of violence of one or many Irishmen (and men who were not Irish!) acting as individuals or in concert. One may trace as on a graph the curve of the Irish effort and advance towards freedom during the period 1870-1914. The fortunes of the successive proposals of Home Rule during this period give the trajectory of the curve and convey an idea of its projection into the future. Thus, in 1886, the strength of the Irish demand was sufficient only to secure the introduction of a Home Rule Bill into the House of Commons, where the Bill was in fact defeated. The second Home Rule Bill of 1893 was successfully carried through the Commons and failed only in the House of Lords. The third Bill of 1912-14 was carried or driven through the Commons and the Lords to the Statute Book, where it lay during the war in a state of suspended animation. The projection of the curve traced on our graph by these three successive measures gave an after-the-war establishment of Home Rule as a matter of moral and historical necessity.

Before the war, the constitutional theory of the Union had in fact broken down. During the period 1870-1914 the whole movement of history was to reverse the theory of the legislative Union of Great Bri-

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tain and Ireland and to create in Ireland a separate economic and social system governed by a separate Irish Law. During the debates on the Home Rule Bill 1912-1914 it was a common-place of argument that the House of Commons had no time to attend to what was called 'Irish Business.' Yet even those who used the argument did not always realise its true inwardness or extent. The growth of separate legislation for Ireland was plainly opposed to the idea of a legislative Union and certainly did impose a physical strain on Parliament; but (what was much more important) it imposed also a moral strain. The moral and social principles animating the new Irish Statutes—for instance, the long series of the Irish Land Acts and the Labourers Acts—were essentially opposed to the principles animating the parallel legislation for Great Britain. The point of departure may be taken to be the Divorce Act of 1857. The Act did not apply to Ireland: the Christian tradition of the Family was saved. And the whole course of legislation for Ireland (after the failure of Deasy's Act in 1860) was based upon the social unity of the Family and was directed to its economic restoration. The unit of Irish Land Reform was called the Economic Holding and the Economic Holding was defined as 'an amount of land necessary and sufficient to maintain a family according to some standard of decent comfort.' The Economic Holding is the translation into agricultural terms of a celebrated Papal definition of the Living Wage. The whole course of Irish agrarian reform, and of the legislation which governed the reform, was directed to the economic restoration of the family. In England, on the other hand, with the passing of the Christian tradition society came to be conceived as an aggregate not of families but of individuals. Walter Bagehot says somewhere that all the economists he read in his youth conceived society in the image of two men cast upon an

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uninhabited island. This conception of society as an aggregate of individuals was (and is) common to the Individualist and the Socialist schools, the difference between these being largely a matter of emphasis, on the individual or the collectivity as the case may be. Under the influence of this order of social and political ideas English legislation tended rather to dissolve than to consolidate the Family, and English statesmen found it more and more difficult to understand and impossible to imitate the principles of the Irish reform even when (as in the case of the Land Reform) the Irish example was a manifest and striking success.

By a process so natural as to be almost insensible a population of peasants inspired by Catholic ideas, with social and economic ideas corresponding more and more closely with those ideas, and with laws that more and more fully reflected the same ideas passed or was passing out of the control of the Parliament of an industrial people whose leaders found it impossible in the gathering twilight of the Faith to operate or understand the moral and social ideas of Christendom.

In this condition of things the establishment in Ireland of a system of Home Rule became a matter of moral and political necessity. In the years before and after the war, the only real issue concerned the inclusion or the exclusion of the six counties of Ulster. On this issue, Irish politicians (like John Redmond) and Irish revolutionaries (like Roger Casement or Michael Collins) equally failed.

The failure alike of the politicians and of the revolutionaries was perhaps due to a common inability to identify or control (or guide) the deep moral and spiritual forces whose dynamism made or underlay the conflict for Irish political freedom.

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