

# ROGER CASEMENT

TRAITOR IN ENGLAND AND HERO IN IRELAND

**By Roger Casement**

AN EARLY PROPOSAL FOR AN IRISH OLYMPIC COMMITTEE

**Introduction by Séamus Ware**

**Roger Casement is regarded as a national hero in Ireland and (if remembered at all) as a traitor in Britain. He was born in Dublin in 1864, and following the deaths of his parents while he was young, he was raised by an uncle in Ballycastle, Co. Antrim (in North East of Ireland).**

Casement worked for a shipping firm in West Africa and then joined the British Consular Service. In 1904 he reported on slavery and brutality in the (then) Congo Free State. He travelled to the Patamayo region of the Upper Amazon in 1910/11, where he investigated and reported on atrocities carried out against Peruvian Indians on rubber plantations. Casement was given a British knighthood for his humanitarian work.

Due to ill-health, he retired in 1913 and got actively involved in Irish nationalist affairs. Casement was in America when World War I broke out, and travelled to Germany to seek aid for a planned Irish insurrection. He tried, with little success, to raise an Irish Brigade from Irish soldiers in the British Army who were prisoners of war. Eventually, the Germans sent arms in the ship "Aud" (which was captured off the Kerry coast) for the rising which took place at Easter 1916. Casement followed by U-boat and was captured on landing near Tralee.

He was tried in London on a charge of high treason, convicted and hanged. Before his execution, a campaign for a reprieve lost momentum when copies of the so-called "Black Diaries", found in his lodgings in London, were circulated to demonstrate to influential opinion ( see Addendum ) that Casement had been an active homosexual ; controversy still rages about the authenticity of the diaries.

Through a "tip-off" from a friend, I found the following article, in Casement's handwriting, in the National Library in Dublin. It was written in 1907, when the author was on holiday in Ireland, apparently to Bulmer Hobson, a prominent Irish nationalist. I give hereunder a condensed version of this article, with permission from the National Library.

## **IRELAND AND THE OLYMPIC GAMES - THE OLYMPIC GAMES OF 1908**

by Roger Casement

Anything notable or noble that Irish soil, Irish feeling, Irish blood and Irish sympathies may evolve is simply annexed as a "British" or more probably as an "English" achievement. This remarkable English quality of annexing what is good and fameworthy has in no respect been more strikingly illustrated than in the frequent purloinment of Irish athletic successes. At the last Olympic Games, held in Athens in 1906, three (see Note 1) of the principal events were won by Irishmen, all of them owning distinctively Gaelic or Milesian names, yet in each instance the English press agencies published these Irish successes to the world as "great English victories". Ireland may be credited with her "crimes" and "paupers", a distinctive national property for which she must pay in more senses than one, but when she gains by strength, skill, or valour, a right to praise, her identity is simultaneously merged in that of her "sister island". "The submerged tenth" might aptly mark her place on the map of Great Britain and Ireland. Were it not for the obsession which besets the Irish intelligence and which sets politics in place of nationality, we should all of us, long ere this, have joined together to maintain as our very own our truly national possessions of brave hearts, strong limbs, and courageous outlook on the world.

London will next year be the centre of a worldwide gathering. The Olympic Games of 1908 are already discussed as a part of the Franco-British Exhibition to be held at Shepherd's Bush, and a Stadium holding about 80,000 people and to cost £550,000 will be erected for the celebration of this great international athletic festival. Every effort, we are told in the London Press, will be made to make the Olympic Games of 1908 the greatest athletic meeting that has been held. Olympic Committees have been formed in different parts of the world, and more than 22 countries will be represented at the Games. Ireland should be the twenty-third.

No one can deny to Ireland the status of a "country". A state or a kingdom she may not be, but a country she surely is (see Note 2). The (U.K.) Board of Trade differentiates each month between "British and Irish Exports and Imports", and the (U.K.) Registrar General in his quarterly returns of population always notes "Irish Emigration" as apart from "British Emigrants". Why then should we not own our own Irish athletes? Let Ireland set about forming an Irish Olympic Committee without delay.

It will surely be a disgraceful exhibition of Irish disunion or subservience if in the next ten months we cannot gather a distinctively Irish team to represent our country at the Olympic Games next summer. All that is best in our athletic life would gladly rank itself on the side of Ireland. In running, in jumping, in throwing the hammer, we should surely produce some of the finest types of agility, speed, and strength in the world.

The difficulties in the way of organising such a Committee and ensuring our country the place she is entitled to are but trivial. A little goodwill and determination would carry the thing to assured success. The funds required would be the least part of the Committee's difficulty. The composition of the Committee and the bringing together of clashing organisations, such as the Gaelic Athletic Association and say the Trinity College or Lansdowne or Ulster Football Clubs, in one discussing Executive would be our task. Yet surely

for once all politics might be dropped, and a National basis resting on Irish birth or parentage should be an all-sufficing ground of concord.

With a little give and take on all sides, we should be able to send forth next summer a band of Irish youth and health and strength which should rank with the foremost contingents of the world.

It will be a shameful thing if our narrow thoughts should leave Ireland out of anything wherein New Zealand, Cape Colony, Canada, Australia, Denmark, Argentina, Brazil, and Greece – nurturer of Olympic Games – shall all compete amid the nations of the world for the prize of perfect manhood.

The Irishman has ever been an athlete and the greatest detractors of our own people have not been able to deny us the possession of swift limbs and supple bodies. Innumerable instances might be cited, carrying down to our day, and to the last

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Olympic Games at Athens, this strain of Irish blood which ever mounted generously to meet the task before it – whether it were a six foot gate to be leaped or a foe-man to be overthrown.

The rivalry of next summer's Olympic Games

will be a generous rivalry. Noble blood can enter there. Let the Englishman, the Scotsman, the Welshman stand each for himself and his own land, and let the Irishman enter himself in the name of and for the fame of Ireland. Ireland might send to the great Olympiad of 1908 a team of Irish youth and manhood as perfect in form and training as ever contended of old, before the eyes of the ancient world, for the priceless crown of wild olive.

**Notes by Séamus Ware:**

(1) Two events at the 1906 Olympics were won by Irishmen recorded as British (apart from Martin Sheridan's wins in the Shot and Discus) – High Jump by Con Leahy and Triple Jump by Peter O'Connor, in addition to three silver medals. (see article by the late David Guiney in "Citius, Altius, Fortius", vol.4, no.3, pp.32/33).

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down the negotiations with the Allies, because he was afraid his army would become prisoners of war in Russia. Beijnen passed this military secret on as fast as possible to the Allied Forces. So they knew straightaway what the real intention of the negotiation partner was. Blaskowitz was ordered to Wageningen on the 5th of May 1945. There he was told clearly what the Allied capitulation demands were. A day later he signed the capitulation.

Teun Beijnen died rather suddenly on July 13th 1949. His death was caused by a paralysed heartmuscle. It was a result of his smoking addiction. When there was a cigarette shortage during the war he even smoked his own grown tobacco mixed with beechtree leaves. All the inhabitants of Beusichem attended his funeral. A tangible remembrance of Teun Beijnen is being kept in the Olympic Museum in Lausanne: the more than 70 years old "J.A. van der Vegte", the boat with which Beijnen and Røisingh won their Olympic medal.

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(2) Coubertin favoured separate recognition for Ireland, as well as other small European countries ruled by Empires prior to World War I (*Mémoires Olympique* pp. 120/121). It is interesting to see Ireland included in a list, published in 1913, of 35 nations that were to be allowed to participate in the Games planned for Berlin in 1916. (see "Citius, Altius, Fortius", vol.4 no.1, p.11 – article by F. Kolár and J. Kossl).

**Addendum by Séamus Ware:** (based on an interview in the 1980s. between Dr. Cyril White of Dublin with Bridget Boland, daughter of John Pius Boland, double Olympic tennis champion in 1896).

In August 1916, Bridget (then a young girl) remembers that the children in the Boland family were sent to bed early because important visitors were coming to see her father at his house in St. George's Square, London. She later learned from her mother that the visitors were Herbert Asquith, British Prime Minister, and John Redmond, leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party in the House of Commons.

They came to Boland's house because he was an M.P. (for South Kerry) and Acting Chief Whip of the Irish Party at the time.

The purpose of the visit was to discuss and read the (alleged) diaries of Roger Casement, which showed him to have been engaged in homosexual activities in the Congo and the Amazon Basin.

Casement had just been sentenced to death for high treason, and the Irish Party was considering supporting calls for a reprieve or commuting of the death sentence, as happened in case of some leaders of the 1916 Irish Easter Rising such as Eamon de Valera. The "secret" diaries were used by the British Government to try and dissuade prominent figures – Irish Catholic Bishops, Irish-American leaders, and the Irish Party – from such action, and they succeeded.

The visitors stayed overnight, talking and reading documents with John Boland. The following morning, Bridget heard Asquith thank her mother for the hospitality. When she saw her father at breakfast, he looked "utterly drained".