

# Casement in Kerry: A Revolutionary Journey

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## Introduction

Marking the centenary of the Easter Rising in 1916 this major exhibition at Kerry County Museum in 2016 makes an important contribution to the national commemoration. It takes visitors on a series of revolutionary journeys: Roger Casement's path from servant of the Crown to Irish nationalist that led to the gallows in Pentonville Prison; the road to independence for Ireland with the first stepping stone of the Easter Rising; and the experience of the Kerry people whose lives were transformed by the events of 1916. The exhibition was officially opened by President Michael D. Higgins on April 21, 2016.

## Casement the collector

There are over 60 objects in the exhibition illustrating different aspects of Casement's life. His experiences in the Congo and the Putumayo are crucial to understanding the development of his views on British imperialism and a number of objects that he collected in both regions are on display in the exhibition. During the course of his official work he collected many objects, some of which he sent back to relatives in Magherintemple in County Antrim and also to the National Museum of Ireland. He was also deeply interested in and curious about other cultures and he collected ethnographic material in Africa and South America relating to the daily lives of the people there.

In the exhibition, therefore, we are displaying rubber baskets used by the exploited people of the Congo in the forced extraction of rubber, alongside a dramatic throwing knife from the Upper Congo, as well as drum beaters from the Putumayo region of South America. These objects have been loaned by the National Museum of Ireland and the Casement family in Magherintemple. Casement's ground-breaking reports into the exploitation of the indigenous people of the Congo and the Putumayo are also on display, kindly loaned by the historian, Dr Angus Mitchell.

### **The boat – a trophy of war**

Roger Casement's life was packed with incident and each different aspect of his life could in itself make for a major exhibition. The focus in our exhibition is the landing in Kerry and its lasting impact. The centrepiece of the display is the boat that brought Casement, Monteith and Bailey to shore on Banna Strand on Good Friday morning in 1916. The landing in Banna was famously described by Monteith as "three men in a boat – the smallest invading party known to history".

Regarded as a trophy of war, the boat was presented to King George V in June 1916 by the Royal Irish Constabulary to mark their success in capturing the 'Arch Traitor' Roger Casement. In turn, the King presented it to the Imperial War Museum in 1920 where it was displayed in a major exhibition about World War 1. As such, its story contributes significantly to a new understanding of the impact of the Casement landing in both Ireland and Britain at a crucial moment in history.

Illustrating the most fateful of the many journeys Casement made in his life, the boat has a powerful symbolic value as the vessel, which propelled him into history as a traitor on one side of the Irish Sea and a patriot on the other. Having travelled by submarine from Germany at the height of World War 1, his landing on the strand in Banna in this boat led directly to the charge of treason and his subsequent execution.

In Britain Roger Casement was seen as a traitor, and hanged because he was found guilty of adhering to the King's enemies, namely the German Empire. The boat was a significant part of the evidence proving that his landing in Banna was an act of treason, committed in concert with Germany in pursuance of a plan formed in Germany.

In Ireland, however, Casement was seen a patriot, a martyr in the nationalist cause who was hanged by a vengeful John Bull. The Rising had taken place because Britain was at war, and any hopes of military success that the rebels had were dependent on German aid. Casement's journey in this boat was seen as a doomed but heroic effort to bring that aid, ensuring that he would be numbered amongst the patriot dead.

In this context, the return of the boat to Kerry has a broader significance than merely the loan of an object from one museum to another. It allows us to explore the highly charged atmosphere during the summer of 1916 on both sides of the Irish Sea. Putting the boat on display now provides an excellent opportunity to promote a greater appreciation of the overlapping histories of Britain and Ireland. The boat has now been taken out of storage where it has languished, overlooked and disregarded, and, on display here in Kerry County Museum it serves as a powerful symbol of the distance travelled by both countries in the intervening years.

## **Exhibition features**

The boat is displayed over a giant map, eight feet high by twenty-four feet long, depicting the places in Kerry connected with the events of the landing in Banna. Using the map as a guide, visitors can trace Casement's route from U-boat 19 all the way to his eventual departure from Tralee by train early on Easter Saturday morning. It also charts the early morning march of Robert Monteith and Daniel Bailey into Tralee to make contact with the local Volunteers, and the subsequent adventures of Austin Stack, Con Collins and Bailey in their failed attempt to locate Casement.

Mounted on the map is a detailed scale model of U-boat 19 made by Kerry-based sculptor, Mary Moynihan. The map is also accompanied by graphic novel style illustrations by Dutch artist Ron van der Noll, especially commissioned for the exhibition. This series of meticulously researched and beautifully executed drawings vividly bring to life Casement's Kerry sojourn.

A touch screen allows for a more detailed exploration of some of the aspects of the Casement story through film, audio and text. Film footage includes Casement in Germany, crowds outside the hearing at the Bow St Magistrates Court in London, Thomas Ashe's funeral, Casement's funeral in 1965 and an interview given in 1966 by Raimond Weisbach, Captain of U-boat 19.

In the audio section is a moving account by Fenner Brockway, a fellow inmate of Pentonville, of seeing Casement in the prison grounds on the eve of his execution. Casement's life, work and tragic end has inspired generations of singers and songwriters, both at home and overseas. We selected a small random sample of different approaches taken by recording artists down through the years for visitors to explore. The touch screen also allows us to include biographical sketches of many of the characters in the Casement story, and recount what happened to them after 1916.

## **Local and global**

A significant loan from Britain is the display of objects from the Crime Museum in Scotland Yard. These are exhibits that were used in evidence in Casement's trial, as well as objects found in and around the boat. They have never been seen in public before and we were determined to put them on display as they are so closely connected not just with Casement himself but also with the people from Kerry who encountered him after the landing in Banna.

The charge against Casement was that he had committed high treason by adhering to the King's enemies outside the King's realm, namely in the German Empire, contrary to the Treason Act of 1351. Four of the witnesses in his trial were people from Ardfert who, in the course of their daily activities, had encountered Casement on Good Friday morning. Their evidence was used to show that the events of April 21 in Banna were directly connected with Germany, and therefore an act of treason.

Within a fortnight they had been subpoenaed and taken to London to give evidence at the hearing in Bow Street in May and at the trial in the Royal Courts of Justice in June. Four were also called to give evidence in Dublin on June 16 at the court-martial in

Richmond Barracks of Stack and Collins. For two months the everyday lives of these Kerry people were turned upside down as they became caught up in international events beyond their control. Back at home, public opinion had been transformed in the wake of the Rising and they arrived back to an uncertain homecoming when they were finally allowed to leave London after the trial. They were regarded as traitors who had betrayed Casement and by extension, the nationalist cause.

In this context a significant object on display is a sketch map drawn by Casement to indicate where he had hidden money in McKenna's Fort. He hid £50 in gold and silver coins at the fort, as well as binoculars. He drew the map while he was in custody in Scotland Yard and gave it to his interrogators so that they would send someone to find the money, which he badly needed at that stage. After a few days he was told that a police search had found no trace of the money. After his execution his solicitor, Gavan Duffy, brought it up again with Scotland Yard and in Feb 1917 a police search party made another effort and a report was sent back to say that they had found nothing.

There the matter rested for 100 years. It has only recently been discovered that Casement's sketch map was kept by Frank Hall, one of Casement's interrogators in Scotland Yard. It was put up for sale at auction in March 2016 along with an accompanying note written by Hall showing that the money had in fact been found at the time and had been divided up amongst the local Royal Irish Constabulary officers who had arrested Casement. But for 100 years, because no-one knew what had happened to the money, it was assumed that it had been stolen by local people. That assumption fed into the general feeling that Casement had been abandoned and betrayed in Kerry. The Museum successfully bid for the map at auction in order to put it on public display for the first time ever. In doing so, it challenges long-held perceptions about how Casement was received in Kerry.

## **Conclusion**

Casement's landing in Banna was one of the few significant events of the Easter Rising to happen outside of the capital, and it had a national and international impact. The Rising was an attempt to establish a nation state for the whole country, not just for Dublin, and the exhibition at Kerry County Museum provides a space for people to reflect on how the events of the period were experienced beyond the capital. Here, the global and national intersect with the local, revealing the dramatic effect the revolutionary period had on the lives of ordinary Irish men and women.