

# A passive investigation into...

## *Sir Roger Casement and the International Humanitarian Movement*



The use of the passive tense has many motivations, when a writer uses a passive construction, they are intentionally omitting information from a text concerning agency or shifting focus onto a particular person/thing. This can make the reader ask: who or what undertook this action? Read the text below and focus on the eleven highlighted sentences, which include a passive construction, then for each sentence try to work out....

A. Why was passive used?

B. What would the agent/subject be if it had been included?

C. What would the sentence look like in the active construction?

Roger Casement's reputation as a humanitarian is arguably the least contentious aspect of his much-debated career. For Roger Sawyer, writing in 1996, he was 'probably the bravest, most selfless, practical humanitarian of his day'. The following year, in introducing his edition of *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement*, Angus Mitchell pinned on Casement the double accolade of 'humanitarian and Irish revolutionary' and wrote of his 'humanitarian work' as representing, for both his contemporaries and those with hindsight in our own day, 'the greatest human rights achievement of his age'.

This is a claim with which many contemporaries agreed. It was, after all, for his official role as a British Consul in exposing the atrocious systems of forced labour established in the Congo and Amazon River basins that Casement received his knighthood in July 1911. One of the few such honours available to the foreign service, this was no mean recognition. It came from a people and a state that prided themselves on their active concern, stretching back more than a century, to protect the rights and advance the liberties of indigenous peoples in many parts of the world. It was widely felt that Casement had succeeded where the British directors of the Peruvian Amazon Company exposed in his despatches had conspicuously failed. In the House of Commons, Members of Parliament drew attention to Casement's reports as outstanding examples of the consular obligation to comment fully on labour abuses, and saw in them 'the legacy of the old nineteenth-century campaign against slavery'. By contrast, in the Company, 'we have a case of directors who have been very indifferent to the great record of England in the past, and the great service which she performed in the suppression of slavery throughout the world'.

It is also a claim that has been endorsed by later scholars. Although, as William Roger Louis noted nearly forty years ago, for a time his 'role as Irish patriot ... obscured his role as Congo reformer', that obscurity was not allowed to persist. Following the independence of the Belgian Congo in 1960, Louis and the Belgian historian Jean Stengers examined in detail *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Casement's place in the history of the Congo. The early 1900s saw widespread and sustained humanitarian criticism of King Leopold's Congo Free State for its atrocities against Africans. When this was combined with popular support for the Congo Reform Association, founded in 1904 by E.D. Morel, the public pressure reached such a pitch as to compel international intervention in Congo affairs. Louis and Stengers showed how Casement's official consular report of 1903 on the condition of the Upper Congo, and, unofficially, his encouragement and mediation behind the scenes, were of crucial importance in promoting and sustaining the movement which led to the eventual transfer of the Congo to the Belgian state in 1908 and its formal annexation. Recalling the birth of the Congo Reform Association some years afterwards, Casement wrote 'How we planned and plotted - & I said that if the Congo question was to be made a living one, it must be taken out of the hands of the F.O. & Govt. and made a people's question - & how I said to you "Thou art the man"!'.

Casement's Congo experience and his effectiveness as an investigator later made him a natural choice for a similar mission in South America. As Consul in Rio de Janeiro, he was sent in 1910 to report for the Foreign Office on reports of analagous brutality in the exploitation of wild rubber by British-directed entrepreneurs on the Putumayo River, in a region disputed between Colombia and Peru. His report of 1911 again created a sensation, and in the face of delays and procrastination by the Peruvian government, Britain's Liberal ministry felt obliged in 1912 to establish a parliamentary Select Committee to investigate. The Committee's proceedings include Casement's evidence and still merit reading, but,

although its Report endorsed his findings, action was delayed and was in any case soon overtaken by the outbreak of the First World War.

As a result, while the Congo developments are well known, the Putumayo episode has since received comparatively little attention, although there have been several biographical narratives since the early 1970s. The Putumayo has also provided a focus for examination of Casement's ethnographical ideas, and for analysis of the 'culture of terror' often associated with colonialism. Only in 1996 did it emerge far more prominently as the accidental beneficiary of attention following renewed controversy over Casement's diaries. This was brought about by the revelation that for his journey to the Putumayo in 1910 there existed two such diaries, one 'black', recording his numerous homosexual experiences, and the other 'white', including no such references. Nevertheless, neither at the time nor since has there been any serious disposition to deny that the Putumayo investigation provides ample evidence of the continuities in Casement's career. The personal dynamic of humanitarian commitment; the professional, painstaking observation and reportage; and the unofficial encouragement of the Anti-Slavery Society's reform campaign, were again much in evidence.

Such modification as has occurred of this general picture of Casement's role has been two-fold and refers to the Congo issue. The full extent of his dependence on the missionaries for information and informants while on tour - and of Morel's and the Congo Reform Association's reliance on them to harness support for their public campaign - has now been demonstrated. Most recently, the contribution at a later stage in the campaign by one of Casement's consular successors, Wilfred Thesiger, in advising the Foreign Office on the continued default of the Congo authorities, was important in maintaining the diplomatic pressure for reform.

The record of Casement's practical achievements is thus now well known and essentially uncontested. On this occasion, in reconsidering his place in the context of the international humanitarian movement, it is therefore perhaps most useful to turn to his ideas and their relation to the conventional wisdom of his day. It is a reconsideration which necessarily begins in the 1880s, a decade which saw the process of African partition gather serious momentum, and Casement's own first contact with West Africa.