

Richard Murphy and Casement's Funeral

Coming from a family with a strong tradition of colonial service and a deep sense of involvement with Ireland, Richard Murphy was bound sooner or later to write of Roger Casement. The latter had exposed corruption in the Belgian Congo early in the twentieth century and was knighted for his distinguished diplomatic career in 1911. By then, however, he was already showing signs of a desire to identify with Irish nationalism: and in 1913 he became an organiser with the Irish Volunteers. He went to Germany in 1914, seeking military help for an Irish uprising, but was captured on the north Kerry coast following his return by U-boat to Banna Strand. Casement was tried and executed for treason in August 1916, despite protests from such writers as George Bernard Shaw, who assisted his defence. In order to discourage such supporters, the British authorities circulated diaries purportedly kept by Casement in which he recorded homosexual activities with youths. These have been traditionally viewed as forgeries by most Irish people—including the poet W.B. Yeats—but in recent years, and especially following the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the republic, some Irish nationalists have argued that the diaries may be genuine.

“Casement’s Funeral” was included in Richard Murphy’s 1968 volume titled *The Battle of Aughrim*. The poem was written after the new Labour government in England finally acceded to a longstanding Irish request to have Casement’s remains returned. This was done in part because Labour had more supporters than the Tories among the Irish voters in Britain, and as a prelude to a series of Free Trade Agreements negotiated between the two sovereign states in the lead-up to eventual membership of the European Economic Community. Casement had expressed a wish to be buried in his native Antrim, but this was ruled out as potentially provocative of Unionist counter-demonstrations: and so his remains were buried at Glasnevin cemetery in the nationalist compound. The diaries themselves were not returned although they might have been considered Irish property: but even the return of the bodily remains occasioned some protest from the more extreme Unionists, who correctly saw the event as presaging a thaw in

North-South as well as Anglo-Irish relations. The decision was announced in both the House of Parliament and the Dáil only when the process was already in train: and the Irish civil servants who witnessed the disinterment were not allowed by the Home Office to pay the prison officers for their hard work in exhuming the body. That work took many hours, as the diggers had to go down very deep and then painstakingly reassemble the bones of Casement's skeleton, which was in quicklime. Some time later, the Home Office gave clearance that the men could be presented with Waterford Crystal, as a mark of thanks and goodwill from the Irish government.

Murphy's poem is characteristically dry, ironical and laconic. He sees the "gossiped" black diary deeds as somehow overridden in popular memory by the fact that Casement's mortal body was thrown into quicklime, the better to destroy it. But Irish turpitude may have played its part too—the second stanza notes how the nation "Atones" for those Kerry people who, wittingly or unwittingly, betrayed the soaked rebel quixote to the his enemies near Banna Strand. Casement's bones "fathered nothing" in life, but after his sentence he began "to tower in legend like Wolfe Tone", another patriot of Protestant background. Now Casement is treated like a saint, his body known only in relics ("freed ash", "chalk remains") whose burning flame "purged for martyrdom the diarist's flesh".

Now, just as the reader seems about to be drawn wholly into the commemorative act, the poet pulls back and remarks that it is all happening "on the small screen". Ironically, the Protestant patriot has been commemorated at a High Mass in Dublin's Pro-Cathedral. The distancing effect tilts the moment to the comic, but without loss to Casement's own grave and poignant dignity. The mockery is rather of "rebels in silk hats now", who "exploit the grave with an old comrade's speech". The final image is of Eamon de Valera, the eighty-two-year-old President, who delivered the graveside oration, despite a severe and recent illness. Advised to cover his head, he refused saying "Casement deserves better than that". DeValera had in fact christened one of his sons Ruairi, the Gaelic version of the patriot's forename, in honour of his fallen comrade: and so he pays bare-headed homage, "white hair tossed, a black cape flecked with snow".

The poem is clearly and knowingly both an updating and rewriting of Yeats's "Parnell's Funeral", set in the same graveyard and marking the obsequies of an earlier Protestant patriot. The reference in Yeats's opening line to "the Great Comedian's tomb" clarifies the somewhat more polite reference to "the Liberator's tomb" in Murphy's lyric: but the mocking intent is the underlying link. In Yeats's analysis, Ireland has moved from the back-slapping, gregarious world of O'Connell to the tragic decorum of Parnell, as to its own anti-self. O'Connell is evoked in terms of the "crowd", for he was indeed a crowd-pleaser,

unlike the more solitary Parnell: and the jump-cut in Murphy's poem, from Banna strand to the "draped catafalque" seems to raise a question as to whether Casement has not been imprisoned a second time by state forces, first English, now Irish. Yeats had noted how Parnell was betrayed by the crowd:

But popular rage
Hysterica passio dragged this quarry down.
 None shared our guilt; nor did we play a part
 Upon a painted stage when we devoured his heart.

Yeats's poem veers away from this moment into a series of recriminations against later leaders (de Valera, Cosgrave, O'Duffy), who failed to share in Parnell's fastidious mystique, before invoking Jonathan Swift and the Anglo-Irish tradition as a true source of wisdom for an independent Ireland.

Three decades later, Murphy resists the temptation to hector, preferring to allow his scene to speak for itself: but he does mark the irony of former rebels in silk hats, who seem to have lost their old purity and revolutionary fervour. By invoking Yeats's poem, he may be indicating his awareness that it was written decades after Parnell's actual funeral, at which (it was said) a shooting star fell to earth as the casket was lowered into the grave. Casement has been honoured, in effect, with a second funeral, but this one occurs for most of his fellow-citizens only on a small television screen. The whole of Irish history seems to have been scaled down by its own too-successful protagonists. Murphy's poem is, correspondingly, reticent in its criticisms and in its claims. It captures with beautiful conciseness the public mood of 1965, but without sentimentalising either the patriot-victim or the alternative Anglo-Irish traditions which Yeats felt the need to invoke.