

Interview with David Rudkin

Mariana Bolfarine

Abstract: *Interview with David Rudkin on the radio play Cries from Casement as his Bones are Brought to Dublin. Medium: e-mail; date: 17/04/2012*

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The celebrated playwright David Rudkin was born in London in 1936, of Irish parentage, and spent long periods of his childhood and youth in Ireland, more precisely, in County Armagh. Much of Rudkin's work, like *Ashes* (1974) and *Saxon Shore* (1986), delves into the sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland in an allegorical form. This also comes into view in the radio play *Cries from Casement as his Bones are Brought to Dublin*,¹ (1974), written in the 1960s when Rudkin was commissioned by the BBC to contribute to a series on historical rebels.

Cries from Casement draws on the biography of Roger David Casement (1864-1916), a controversial British Consul, acclaimed for exposing atrocities against humanity in the Belgian Congo and in the Peruvian Amazon. He was sentenced to death for high treason for turning into an Irish revolutionariy, and prevented from becoming a martyr due to a set of homosexual so-called Black Diaries, found by the British Home Office. Excerpts from these documents were distributed among members of his defense and he met his death at the gallows of Pentonville Prison on 3 August, 1916. However, as the interview revelas, the play is actually concerned with the issue of partition and it was first broadcast one year after the bogside massacre on BBC Radio 3 in February 1973, and in that same year it was staged by the Royal Shakespeare Company. Rudkin, thus, felt an urge

to write a large piece that gave utterance to my Northern Irish Protestant identity as opposed to my English one ... This grew more pressing as Ulster lurched toward the brink of a sectarian war. Suddenly, I realized that my Casement play and my Ulster play were the same thing. (Rudkin)²

Against such a dramatic backdrop, Rudkin was aware that the piece's polemical content could be of "discomfort" in Britain. (Rudkin 81)³ He affirmed that the radio, as a medium, conveyed the physical distance between the stage and the audience, who

he believed could become aggressive, and who “would have good reason to withdraw whatever good will they came with” (Rudkin 81). In addition, radio was aesthetically appropriate since the action was supposed to be set in a box, Casement’s coffin; therefore, it was meant to be heard from a box, the radio.

This interview with David Rudkin was taken during my PhD research, “‘Between Angels and Demons’: Trauma in Fictional Representations of Roger Casement”, and it was focussed on the playwright’s views of the play and of the historical figure, Roger Casement. It is relevant to underscore that, perhaps due to the controversial topics the play tackled at the time it was written and broadcast, it has not achieved the attention it deserves. It has been 43 years since the play was written, and it shows that at the brink of the centenary of Casement’s death, his story brings to the fore issues such as politics, religion and sexuality that are contemporary and relevant to an understanding of Irish and transatlantic history.

Mariana Bolfarine: Do you see the period Casement spent in Brazil as fundamental to his transformation from imperialist to nationalist?

David Rudkin: And Africa. Yes. They exacerbate C[asement]’s sense of sexual alienation – also, the Foreign Office compromise his two Reports (for reasons of Higher Policy), and that provokes his political alienation.

MB: From the works that I have read so far, I feel that yours is the one that best depicts the complexities inherent to Casement, because, as one critic has said, “you fragment him in order to see him whole”. Would you agree to that?

DR: I don’t ‘fragment’ C[asement] – I discover the fragments into which his self is currently broken. My C too is on a journey of that discovery – and that determines the technique of the piece (it never felt to me like a ‘play’).

MB: In relation to this fragmentation, present in both form and content: literary theory has produced (of course in different perspectives: Frederic Jameson as a Marxist theorist on one side, and Stuart Hall and Linda Hutcheon on the other) numberless works about fragmentation being a predominant characteristic of “Postmodernity”. Do you see *Cries from Casement* as a postmodern piece of work?

DR: I’m not sure I know what ‘postmodern’ means! I never think about critical terms. Each work emerges from inside its own material; I just try to be as honest and clear as I can.

MB: How do you see the relevance of scholars (like myself) today, in a way, trying to “unbury” Roger Casement in the 21st century and being completely carried away by his life story?

DR: It's an existentialist issue: a multi-compromised individual, in quest of his authentic identity. That will always be political.

MB: I have found very few pieces of contemporary criticism (if at all) about *Cries from Casement*. In your opinion, why does this occur?

DR: Radio is given very little serious attention – though at that time there was at least (not any more) a very good weekly *The Listener* in which, around Feb/Mar 1974, Anthony Thwaite wrote a serious response to the piece.

MB: I have not found any documentation about the reception of the play (both the radio play and the stage production by John Tydeman). How was it received in the 70's, when the Troubles were at its summit?

DR: It was seen (as I intended it) as a direct contribution to the ongoing 'debate' about Ireland, a 'debate' then in a critical phase. Academics dismissed my piece as unscholarly, and simplistically polemical. One historian said my interpretation of C was 'crazy'. (He later publicly apologised.) Progressive Nationalists welcomed it; even traditional Nationalists welcomed it – up to a point; I remember a personal conversation with an IRA chief-of-staff who said the homosexuality 'didn't matter'. But the problem was, and still is, that nobody has really understood, or taken on board, the underlying biographical thesis: that C[asement]'s sexual alienation was essential to his politics, and in fact catalysed them. (The original radio production, by John Tydeman, was definitive, and is one of the BBC radio classics. The much later stage production was by somebody else, and misconceived, and does not merit discussion.)

MB: Do you think that if *Cries from Casement* were produced today, it would be better received than in the 70's? Do you think that society has changed in the sense that it would better accommodate a character as complex and as kaleidoscopic as Casement?

DR: Some attitudes are more liberal now, but 'progressive' critics and historians can be driven by ideologies that narrow them in new ways. 'Experts' are still shortsighted – I saw in the early 2000s a TV documentary analysing C[asement]'s handwriting(s). It thought it had all the answers; but even at 30 years old, my piece was streets ahead of the experts, in its *insight*. That insight comes from being the work of a dramatist experiencing C[asement]'s world from inside *him as a character*.

MB: In relation to your background, I have read that you, in some ways, identify yourself with Casement due to the difficulty in dealing with the fact of being aware that you have a split and incompatible (or irreconcilable) identity: British and Irish. Do you still feel the same today?

DR: ...and of course, in discovering my *character* C[asement], I discovered that I too had similar questions to answer and choices to make for myself. Existentialism again. The piece emerged as it did, because it was energised by that.

MB: I believe that *Cries from Casement* is an allegory for a fragmented Ireland (both in 1916 and in the 1970's) and that your construction of Casement is an attempt to enact a "poetics of reconciliation" represented by the third burial in Antrim that the character longs for. Do you still believe the "colours will mix", eventually, and that a united Ireland is still be possible?

DR: My ending was idealistic but not really very hopeful – and I am still not hopeful. At the moment there is still a Catholic-Fascist (e.g. pro-Franco *et al*) tradition active in Ireland that would wish the Protestants ethnically cleansed (and this is quietly happening in some lonely Border areas). As part of the so-called 'peace process' the Ulster Protestant tradition has been largely subverted, and the mood out in rural Ulster I find quite tense and hateful just now. The place just doesn't feel *true*. A political 'unity' could always be mechanically imposed on Ireland, but she would still be broken in her soul. It's a tragedy, because the 5-plus centuries of **pre-Catholic** Christian tradition in Ireland, and the Huguenot Protestant tradition, are essential elements in Ireland's identity (it was Protestants who led the first rebellions) – but Modern Catholicism prefers to overlook those paradoxes. Ireland's 'history,' as Joyce says somewhere, is a 'nightmare from which she is still struggling to awake.'

MB: Even today, some historians are trying to prove that the *Black Diaries* are forged. How do you stand in relation to this controversy?

DR: I think the play answers that.

MB: You did extensive archival research on Casement (like the *Author* in the play). I was wondering about your creative process in transforming so much historical material into fiction.

DR: I don't think of the piece as 'fiction' – I was finding out about C[asement] the man, and poetically 'becoming' him. To mediate such a quantity and complexity of material, I found myself logically evolving a variety of techniques, all of them thematic – and very much to do with radio broadcasting. (Looking at it now, I think it's rather like a radio *Citizen Kane*.)

MB: What's your view of the historical revisionism that had dominated the writing of Irish history from the 1960's to the 1990's? How does this affect the writing of fiction?

DR: I don't have any useful thoughts on this – and, as I've said above, I don't think of the piece as 'fiction', but as bringing a historical figure to poetic life.

Notes

- 1 From this moment onwards, the play will be referred to as *Cries from Casement*.
- 2 Quotes by David Rudkin present in book jacket notes with no acknowledged author.
- 3 Following the script, there is a section written by Rudkin called “Thoughts on Staging the Play” (81-84), which offers insightful reflections on his choice over the radio as an appropriate medium for the play and how to transpose it to the stage.

Works cited

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