

1953

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Casement Going Home

By courtesy of the government headed by Sir Winston Churchill, Great Britain is relinquishing the remains of Sir Roger Casement to the Irish Republic which he helped to found. Allegedly buried in quicklime immediately after his hanging in Pentonville prison, London, August 3, 1916, the body probably has been reduced to fragments, but such portions of it as can be recovered will be carried back to Dublin.

Casement undoubtedly was what The Star called him on the day of his execution: "A fanatic partisan, misguided by his zeal into believing that he could bring about the liberation of Ireland from British sovereignty by a rebellion started in the midst of war's distractions . . . a sorry figure, his romantic patriotism not exalted by his fate." But he did have valid claims to be regarded as an Irish nationalist leader, and the Irish Republic of 1953 certainly grew out of the Irish nationalist movement of 37 years ago. Without romantics like Casement, Pearse and Skeffington, modern Ireland could not have come into existence.

Yet Great Britain felt impelled to deal with Casement and the rest as traitors. Under somewhat different circumstances George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and other American revolutionary patriots might have met the same fate in 1776. They too rebelled against the British crown. And their revolt likewise was successful in the long run. The parallels between the United States and the Irish Republic are neither few nor inconsequential. Casement was in America studying our history and institutions when World War I commenced. He knew he was gambling his life when he went to Germany in quest of aid.

Remembering him, some readers correlatively will recollect the pitiful story of Major John Andre. He was not a traitor, of course; but he was a spy and he died on a rope just as Casement did and was buried in a similarly dishonored grave. When the passions of armed conflict cooled, however, his ashes were taken up, conveyed home to England and placed in a monumental tomb in Westminster Abbey. Subsequently, Great Britain granted comparable charity to the body of Napoleon, allowing it to be retrieved from St. Helena and enshrined at the Invalides in Paris.

