

Remarks by Tom Arnold, Director General, IIEA, at the launch of the exhibition 'Roger Casement: Voice of the Voiceless'.

National Museum, Dublin.
3 August, 2016.

I was honoured to be invited to launch this important exhibition. The first consequence of the invitation was that I took down from my bookshelves a number of books I had accumulated over the years on Roger Casement - but never read! In common with many of my generation, I remember his state funeral in 1965, but the 50th commemoration of 1916 the following year had somewhat overshadowed that funeral in the public's recall and certainly in my memory.

In any event, examining Roger Casement's life and achievements fifty years on allows perspectives not available in the 1960s. In subsequent decades, public recollection of that 1966 commemoration was viewed through the prism of the Troubles in Northern Ireland and the concern, whether justified or not, that the emotions stirred by the commemoration had been a factor in fermenting the Troubles. The 2016 centenary commemoration programme has inevitably been informed by a more complex and nuanced historiography than was possible in 1966.

Roger Casement had an extraordinary life and, in focusing on his humanitarian work, this exhibition covers but one aspect of that life. I am not sufficiently qualified to comment in detail on the full range of Casement's achievements and how they should be assessed historically. There will be continuing debate about the political wisdom and morality of his support for Germany during the Great War. But, by any standards, what he achieved in his humanitarian work was remarkable.

In examining these achievements, I thought it would be useful to reflect on where Casement fits into a longer term perspective of Irish humanitarian action over the centuries. And it is also useful to ask the question, as does the exhibition, as to what relevance does Roger Casement's life and work have in today's world?

If one goes to the 21st century version of the dictionary, Wikipedia, 'humanitarianism' is defined as 'a moral of kindness, benevolence and sympathy extended to all human beings. Humanitarianism has been an evolving concept historically but universality is a common theme in its evolution'.

Is there such a thing as an 'Irish humanitarianism' and if so, what are its wellsprings and characteristics?

It is probably indisputable to claim that, for a country of its size, Ireland has had a disproportionate impact in humanitarian action over the centuries around the world. Speculating about the wellsprings of an Irish humanitarianism suggests a number of elements - a wandering gene, religion, and a sense of national identity expressed through nationalism or republicanism. The balance between these different elements vary through the centuries. I will try to offer support for the thesis of an 'Irish humanitarianism' with evidence of some remarkable individuals and their actions over the past 1500 years.

It may be argued that the first Irish person who could be considered a great humanitarian is St Columbanus. Last week RTE re-broadcast the documentary presented by former President Mary McAleese made to mark the 1500th anniversary of his death in 615. His story is a remarkable one. Against the background of a Europe in political, religious and social crisis, Columbanus established a network of colleges which brought learning and scholarship to the continent. He challenged the behaviours of many Church leaders and succeeded in bringing about reform and renewal in the Church.

Speaking in 2008, Pope Benedict XVI described him as 'the best known Irishman of the early Middle Ages. Since he worked as a monk, missionary and writer in various countries of Western

Europe, with good reason he can be called a 'European Saint'. With the Irish of his time, he had a sense of Europe's cultural unity'.

The RTE programme made another significant claim - that Columbanus has an influence which stretched way into the future. In 1950, leading European politicians gathered in Luxeuil in France, the location of his first monastic settlement, to celebrate the 1500th anniversary of his birth. Among those present was French Foreign Minister, Robert Schuman, who declared that Columbanus was the 'patron saint of all those who seek to build a United Europe'. It was the 'Schuman Declaration' in May 1950 which laid the foundations of what was to become the European Union - which has been described, notwithstanding all its problems, as 'the greatest peace project in history'

The colleges established by Columbanus in the late sixth and early seventh century were the precursor of a tradition of Irish educators contributing to European life and education in later centuries. The record of this contribution is set out in the magisterial book by the late Daniel Murphy of Trinity College 'A History of Irish Emigrant and Missionary Education', published in 2000. It sets out in learned detail what Irish educators and missionaries achieved in Europe in the centuries following Columbanus and, from the 17th century onwards, their contributions in North America and Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Africa and Asia. In the author's preface, Murphy provides an apt summary of his book: 'This was a truly world-embracing movement extending over fourteen centuries which shows Irish education as cosmopolitan, assimilative, highly adaptable to other cultures, and truly international in character, by virtue of its roots in European culture, and the global scale on which its traditions were extended to other peoples'.

Slavery existed before written history and in many cultures. But the large scale transatlantic slave trading dates from the early 16th century following the decision, in 1503, of the Spanish Governor in the Indies to replace Indians in the mines by Negroes. The trade flourished over the next century and during the 18th century a number of British traders rose to dominance in the trade. But it was also in Britain where the resistance to slavery arose and it was declared unlawful in 1772. Despite this, the slave trade continued and it was only in 1807, following years of campaigning by William Wilberforce and others, that the British Parliament finally agreed that slavery should be abolished.

From his entry into public life in 1800, the Irish political leader Daniel O'Connell was a passionate opponent of slavery and he became one of the great international champions of the anti-slavery movement until his death in 1847. In 1845, he formed a remarkable bond with the leading American slavery abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, during Douglass's visit to Ireland, introducing him at an anti-slavery rally in Dublin as 'The Black O'Connell of the United States'. Douglass had started his life as a slave but had an epiphany moment when, as a boy of twelve in 1832, he had been asked by two Irish labourers he met on a wharf in Baltimore 'Are ye a slave for life?'. In his classic book 'Narrative of the life of an American Slave', Douglass writes 'I pretended not to understand them: I was afraid: I nevertheless remembered their advice, and from that time I resolved to escape'. He did escape in 1838, published his Narrative in 1841, and became a powerful abolitionist until that goal was achieved through President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.

I have found no evidence that Casement was an admirer of O'Connell or of his stance on slavery. But Casement's two great campaigns, in the Congo and the Putumayo region in the Upper Amazon, were essentially against slavery and the great violations of human rights he found in each case. This exhibition gives a sense of the scale and horror of the abuses he encountered. Already in the Congo in the late 1890s, Casement's was noting an important parallel between the plight of the Congo people and that of Ireland. As he wrote to his friend Edmund Morel in 1904, 'The Congo question is very near to my heart - but the Irish question is nearer: it was only because I was an Irishman that I could understand fully, I think, the whole scheme of wrongdoing at work in the Congo'. (Seamus O'Siochain, 'Roger Casement: Imperialist, Rebel, Revolutionary'.)

It seems to me that Casement's uniqueness as a humanitarian is that he bore direct witness to two of the great human rights scandals of his age: he did so while serving as a senior member of the British colonial service: he overcame obstruction in the political system to highlight the abuses he had witnessed: and through his role in creating the Congo Reform Association with Edmund Morel he recognised the importance of harnessing public opinion to create additional political pressure for change.

O'Siochain's biography charts Casement's growing disillusion with the imperial project to which he had given the best years of his life and his increasing engagement with Ireland and the rapidly changing political events from 1912 onwards. That was to lead to his sojourns in the US and Germany between 1914 and 1916, his arrival on Banna Strand in April 1916, his arrest and execution in August 1916. His execution and that of the other leaders of the Rising some months earlier changed utterly Irish public opinion and politics and led to Irish independence. These changes in public opinion also coincided with changes in the Irish Catholic Church and Irish society.

In his book 'God's Entrepreneurs: How Irish Missionaries tried to change the world', Joe Humphreys writes 'While missionary recruitment had been accelerating from the mid-19th century onwards, 1916 was a major turning point and it led to an explosion of missionary activity'. Edmund Hogan, the author of 'The Irish Missionary Movement: A Historical Survey, 1830- 1980' wrote of the 'smoldering emotionalism' that surfaced in the aftermath of 1916. This atmosphere was ripe for a missionary movement that blended the high ideals of Republicanism and Christian sacrifice.

The years following 1916 saw the establishment and remarkable growth of a number of Irish missionary orders, including the Maynooth Mission to China (the Columbans), St Patrick's Missionary Society (Kiltegan Fathers), Medical Missionaries of Mary, Holy Rosary Sisters, as well as the growth of the orders established during the 19th century such as the Holy Ghost Fathers and the Society of African Missions (SMA)

The decades from the 1920s to the 1960s may justly be described as the high point of Irish missionary endeavour. The number of Irish men and women working within the missionary movement, mainly clerical but supported by a substantial number of lay people, reached new heights. I don't have time in this speech to attempt to evaluate what was achieved in humanitarian and development terms over these decades, but I suspect the evidence will show it was a great deal.

The 1960s saw a fall in religious vocations and the beginning of the growth of a new organisational form - the NGO - which was to provide a basis for a new generation of Irish people to volunteer for humanitarian work overseas. The Biafra crisis in 1967/68 evoked an outpouring of generosity from the Irish people. This outpouring was likely due to two key factors - most Irish families had either relations or friends who worked 'on the missions' and Biafra was 'the first famine on television'. The Biafran response led to the establishment of Concern in 1968. In 1974, the Irish Bishops established Trocaire and in 1977, Goal was established by John O'Shea. These three organisations have developed into internationally recognised NGOs and continue to this day.

The 1980s saw the Great Famine in Ethiopia. Live Aid mobilised an international response to it - it was mobilised by an Irishman, Bob Geldof. His fellow Irish pop star, Bono, was also active at that time and since then has become the most recognised international advocate for aid and development. At another level, Mary Robinson has also served as a major international advocate for human rights and justice through her work on climate justice, as UN representative in the Great Lakes region and on nutrition.

So, all in all, over many centuries, through individuals and mass movements, Irish engagement in humanitarian action has been singular and consistent. So to the question, where to from here and does Casement's life and humanitarian work offer any basis for decisions as to what an Irish government, an NGO or any individual should choose to do in seeking to advance the cause of humanitarianism in the 21st century.

What Casement represented may have a contemporary relevance both within the island of Ireland and through Irish foreign and development policy.

In delivering the oration at the Official State Commemoration for Roger Casement at Banna Strand on 21st April, President Higgins stated 'Today we must also recall how, in a true Republican spirit, Roger Casement's generous vision for the Ireland of the future was one that included all the people of Northern Ireland, in the diversity of their beliefs, origins and history'

That sentiment and vision should be of direct relevance as the people of the island, North and South, begin to grapple with the major political, constitutional and economic uncertainties generated by the recent UK referendum on Brexit and take decisions in the best interest of the people of this island.

At the level of international policy, Ireland should continue to play a leadership role on humanitarian and development issues - a role which is consistent with our long tradition of humanitarian action and with solidarity with the poorest people of the earth. We should play this role in a strategic and intelligent way, recognising where our history and strengths provide a basis for Ireland's influence in international fora, focusing on a limited number of areas.

It is important to recognise that we are already doing this. The Irish Ambassador to the UN, David Donoghue, is co-chairing the process which will lead to the Migration Summit in New York on 19 September. One year ago, Ambassador Donoghue co-chaired the process which led to the agreement of the Sustainable Development Goals - the SDGs - which has set the global development agenda up to 2030. Being asked to chair both important processes is certainly a tribute to Ambassador Donoghue's personal qualities but it is also international recognition for Ireland's credibility as a key actor in humanitarian and development issues.

Another part of the Irish international agenda should be drawn from the conclusions of this exhibition which highlights the completely shocking fact that, according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), 21 million people live in some form of slavery today. It would be a fitting tribute to Casement that the Irish government through its aid programme should support the Anti-Slavery Movement which continues to work to eliminate all forms of slavery.

I will conclude by suggesting a continuing focus in Irish foreign and development policy on two areas which are of crucial importance to the future of millions of the world's most vulnerable people - nutrition and climate change.

Ireland already has a strong leadership role in relation to nutrition and government policy, working closely with the major NGOs, the private sector and academia should ensure this remains the case.

We do not yet have similar level of international credibility in the area of climate change but we have the potential, through a combination of taking the right domestic action in such areas as climate smart agriculture and using this as a basis for our aid policy, to develop such credibility.

I hope these remarks provide a context for considering this important exhibition. I congratulate the National Museum and all associated with the exhibition's preparation and am delighted to formally declare the exhibition open.

Tom Arnold
3rd August, 2016.