

## Roger Casement's Bones: The 1965 Funeral

In 1965, the bones of Roger Casement were dug up in the London prison where he had been hanged, after which they were flown to Ireland and re-interred during a ceremonious State Funeral in Dublin. But what was the significance behind this event? In 1911, the Anglo-Irish Sir Roger Casement had been knighted for his proto-humanitarian work in the Congo and the Putumayo, where he had reported on the atrocities of the Belgian and British colonial regimes. Only five years later, Casement was arrested and convicted of high treason against the British Crown for his involvement in Ireland's own anti-colonial and nationalist uprising. Due to the emergence of the so-called "Black Diaries" which detailed Casement's homosexual encounters, his legacy as a national hero was troubled for decades in the then still staunchly catholic Ireland. Thus, it would take half a century for his bones to be brought back to the island of Ireland, which remains partitioned in the aftermath of the British colonial occupation of over 700 years. Casement remains buried in the capital of the Republic of Ireland, and not, as he had requested, near his family home in (British) Northern Ireland.



1. Read the introductory text and watch the video of Casement's State Funeral.
2. In pairs, discuss the significance of Casement being buried in the cemetery's "heroes' corner". Why was it important for his bones to be brought back from England to Ireland? Be prepared to report back to class.

## Roger Casement's Bones: "Secular Relics"

➔ *What is a relic?*

Relics are historical objects surviving from an earlier time. In a religious context, relics refer to parts of a holy person's body or their belongings. Places storing such relics, or touched in other ways by the holy person, are visited in pilgrimages. Items or places imbued with a special significance or magic can also exist in secular or non-religious contexts.



*Read the text below with the following questions in mind, and highlight any words with which you struggle:*

1. Can you describe what secular relics are?
2. What happened to Roger Casement's body, his possessions, and the landscape itself when he swam ashore? Why did they grow in significance? Can you think of other "charismatic landscapes"?

### **Lucy McDiarmid, "Secular Relics"**

The moment Roger Casement landed on Irish soil in North Kerry on 21 April, Good Friday, 1916, around two-thirty in the morning, grand, magical transformations took place. The small wooden rowboat carrying Casement and two companions had overturned in the waves, and the men pulled it along as they swam ashore. Soaking wet, exhausted, Casement touched Banna Strand and fell asleep. A change occurred: his body became a collection of future first-class relics, his clothing and possessions future second-class relics, and all the paraphernalia he brought ashore instant memorabilia. At that moment Banna Strand itself became a charismatic landscape, a place of supernatural power, a point of pilgrimage.

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- Extraordinary powers were attributed to the spot where Casement first touched land. They must have been activated at that moment, because Casement felt the landscape's magic. 'When I landed in Ireland that morning,' he wrote to his sister Nina Newman from prison, 'swamped and swimming ashore on an unknown strand I was happy for the first time for over a year. Although I knew that this fate waited on me, I was for one brief spell happy and smiling once more. ... all round were primroses and wild violets and the singing of the skylarks in the air, and I was back in Ireland again.'



20 The transformation that took place with Casement's landing also involved the people  
of North Kerry: everyone he met became politically implicated as a traitor to the Crown or a  
traitor to Ireland, spiritually implicated as someone who had helped or hindered a martyr,  
legally a witness, and a participant one way or another in a narrative whose smallest details  
were passed on to later generations, personal memories that constituted local collective  
memory. National Irish collective memory of Casement is itself complex and disturbed, inseparable  
from the continuing debate about the authenticity of the 'Black Diaries', whose records  
of homosexual encounters may – or may not – have been authored by Casement. The appar-  
ent betrayal of a hero by his own people in Kerry also forms a part of national memory. In the  
25 words of Richard Murphy, watching Casement's 1965 reinterment on television, it was the  
Kerry witnesses 'whose welcome gaoled him'.

