

Suspension of judgement

Margarita Cappock reports on 'Artist as Witness' at the Hugh Lane, which focuses on Roger Casement's trial and proffers an alternative destiny for the ill-fated humanitarian

The exhibition 'High Treason: Roger Casement' at the Hugh Lane Gallery marks the centenary of the Easter Rising and is part of the 'Artist as Witness' exhibition programme for 2016 at the Hugh Lane Gallery. The decade of centenary commemorations from 2012 to 2022 have been marked by significant exhibitions from the permanent collection of the Hugh Lane with 'Revolutionary States: Home Rule and Modern Ireland' (2012), 'Dublin Divided: September 1913' (2013) and 'Efforts and Ideals: Prints of the First World War' (2014). 2015 saw an exhibition to mark the centenary of the untimely death of Hugh Lane on the *Lusitania*. Indeed, given the history of the establishment of the Hugh Lane Gallery, which is so closely interwoven with the turbulent events of the first decades of the 20th century in Ireland, the gallery is uniquely placed to draw on its own rich collections to mark these significant events.

The genesis of the exhibition was the small oil on canvas, *The Court of Criminal Appeal, London 1916 (Roger Casement)*, 1916 (Fig 2) painted in the Royal Courts of Justice by Sir John Lavery. Lavery donated a substantial number of works, including this one, to the Hugh Lane after the death of his wife Hazel

in 1935. Yeats famously referred to the painting in his poem, *The Municipal Gallery Revisited* (1937), in the lines 'Casement upon trial, half hidden by the bars'. The work was a study for a much larger painting, *High Treason: The Appeal of Roger Casement. The Court of Criminal Appeal, 17 and 18 July 1916* which is part of the British Government Art Collection but on indefinite loan to the King's Inns in Dublin, and now forms the centrepiece of this exhibition. In this sensational work Lavery captures the drama of the moment in the crowded courtroom with the accused at the centre of the composition and the viewer's position conceived as if observing from the jury box. The presiding Judge, Mr Justice Charles Darling, sits at the centre of the five judges. Darling was a colourful character who had sat for Lavery on previous occasions and it is possible that Darling suggested that Lavery paint the scene or may have arranged for Lavery's vantage point in the courtroom. The exhibition features portraits of some of the legal personalities involved in both the Trial and Appeal including Judges Lord Chief Justice Sir Rufus Isaacs who presided over the trial and also prosecuting council Attorney General Sir Frederick Smith later Lord Birkenhead and



these are on loan from the National Portrait Gallery, London. Among other works drawn from the Hugh Lane's collection are Lavery's portrait of George Gavan Duffy, who with Sergeant Sullivan represented Roger Casement and Rothenstein's pastel portrait of Alice Stopford Green, a close friend of Casement and supporter of his Congo Reform Movement.

Casement has attracted the attention of many famous Irish writers, such as George Bernard Shaw, who offered to draft a speech for Casement to deliver in the dock, William Butler Yeats, who penned *Roger Casement* and *The Ghost of Roger*

Casement, and latterly, Mario Vargas Llosa. Casement also exerts a fascination for contemporary Irish artists too and for this reason, the exhibition includes Elizabeth Magill's exquisite portrait, *Roger and the Swans*, (Fig 1) and Alan Phelan's hauntingly atmospheric film *Our Kind* (Figs 3&4). Phelan, has a long-standing interest in and, indeed, encyclopaedic knowledge of Roger Casement and for this reason, was commissioned by the Hugh Lane to provide a contemporary response to Casement's trial and appeal. In his film, shot in black and white, Phelan provides a fictional alternative life for Casement had he not been executed. Set in Norway in 1941, Casement is in exile with his former manservant and now partner Adler Christensen, and they receive a visit from Alice Stopford Green. The film, with its different imaginary scenarios, challenges the viewer in that Casement is not presented as a hero but as an ordinary man with human emotions and failings. It also brings to the fore in the mind of the viewer, the complex interpretations, rumours and misleading information that surround Casement including the prejudices and controversies that have dogged him posthumously. This exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue with contributions by Mr Justice O'Donnell, Angus Mitchell, Sinead McCool, Charles Esche, Chris Clarke and Tacita Dean providing insights into Casement from diverse legal, humanitarian, and indeed personal perspectives. The artist Tacita Dean's essay is particularly illuminating in this regard in that it tells her discovery of a family connection to the trial of Roger Casement through one of the presiding judges, Sir Rufus Isaacs, who, it transpired was her great, great uncle. ■

'High Treason: Roger Casement' Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, until 2 October 2016.

Margarita Cappock is Deputy Director and Head of Collections at Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane.

1 ELIZABETH MAGILL *ROGER AND THE SWANS* 2015-16 oil on canvas 31x31cm

2 JOHN LAVERY (1856-1941) *THE COURT OF CRIMINAL APPEAL, LONDON 1916* (Roger Casement), preparatory study oil on canvas

3&4 ALAN PHELAN *OUR KIND* (stills)

