

Combining History & Poetry: The Potential of Comics to Interpret the 1916 Easter Rising

Author Biography

Fionnuala Doran is an Irish artist, living and working between Scotland and England. She graduated from the Royal College of Art in 2015 and is senior lecturer at Teesside University's newly launched BA in Comics, Graphic Novels and Sequential Art. Her first graphic novel, [The Trial of Roger Casement](#), chronicling the contested life of Irish rebel, revolutionary and gay icon, Sir Roger Casement, was released in September 2016 by [Self Made Hero](#). She came down with a bad case of comic-fever in 1990 and has never recovered.

Abstract

In this paper I address the representation of the 1916 Irish Rising, running parallel—and in response—to the Great War, through comics. I will primarily refer to my own graphic novel, *The Trial of Roger Casement*, and the depiction of the protagonist's journey from a respected, knighted human-rights advocate at the outbreak of war in 1914 to his execution for treason in 1916, at the height of British patriotic fervour. His mission—to seek political and military assistance for the Irish independence movement from Germany, the primary rival to Britain for European dominance—was thrown into chaos by the outbreak of hostilities.

The paper examines the challenges and opportunities of using the graphic novel form to depict the life of Casement, a man whose life and legacy has been fought

over for a century. His private diaries, documenting his sex-life as a gay man in the pre-legalisation world, were seized by the British secret service and forwarded to Casement's former allies and friends in the emerging human-rights movement. These diaries have since been debated and contested, with some allies claiming forgery and defamation while others have accepted them in their entirety.

The combination of word and image and disregard for taxonomical distinctions within the comic-book provides the ability to blur the lines between objective and subjective truths, and offers a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations to the reader. The graphic novel may provide a way for creators to engage with the 1916 Rising without becoming overwhelmed by the weight of history, offering the potential to deal with socio-political themes in a way that can combine history with poetry.

I will also look at the approach of other creators to similar figures from the 1916 Easter Rising in a new breed of Irish-history graphic novels. This will include Sean Charleton's '*James Conolly: The Irish Rebel*', the Nerve Centre, Derry's short comics focusing on Winifred Carney and Gerry Hunt's '*Blood Upon the Rose*'.