**Times Literary Supplement**

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**Roger Casement**

Sir, – David Gallagher’s review of Mario Vargas Llosa’s new novel El sueño del celta makes reference to the postmortem digital probe of Roger Casement’s anus with a white rubber glove by Dr Percy Mander (December 17, 2010). In 1995, when these details were fully released at the National Archives, I sent a copy of the brief document to a retired British army doctor to ask his opinion. “A postmortem examination is performed,” he replied, “usually by a pathologist, firstly to discover the precise cause of death and secondly to determine if there is evidence of pre-existing disease, or injury.” He doubted if Dr Mander, the duty prison medical officer at Pentonville Prison, had sufficient experience to be able to distinguish between a normal and an abnormal anus postmortem. Did he make a habit of examining the anuses of hanging victims? Was he confusing the morbid anatomy with the living appearance?

Fortunately, a brief history of Casement’s anus can be collated from various medical records and correspondences. For much of his adult life Casement suffered from haemorrhoids. The earliest mention occurs in 1893, when he borrowed £30 for an operation on piles brought on by hard living conditions and bad food endured during a journey down the coast of West Africa. The operation was carried out at St Thomas’ Hospital in London. In 1900 he had another operation for fistula-in-ano. During an extensive medical check-up in 1912 by Dr Lauder Brunton, he underwent an examination “in rectum”. This revealed continuing recurrence of piles and evidence of ancient fistulae.

The anus, by which Dr Mander apparently meant the anal sphincter, was likely to be dilated after hanging because of congestion of the veins, especially if there were haemorrhoids present. Mander’s expert examination makes no reference to any pre-existing condition.

Casement probed the extremities of European imperialism in sub-Saharan Africa and South America – was this a case of the authorities getting their own back?

ANGUS MITCHELL
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**[Unpublished response]**

20 January 2011

Dear Editor,

Having had “a brief history of Casement’s anus” from Angus Mitchell (TLS Letters, 12 January 2011), readers may not wish to read much more on the subject. However Mr Mitchell is no pathologist, any more than the retired army doctor he relies on over the hanged patriot’s post mortem. More importantly, in another attempt to refute evidence of Casement’s homosexuality, he omits a key passage from the prison doctor’s memorandum.

As I wrote, in *Roger Casement: The Black Diaries*,[[1]](#footnote-1) Percy Mander, the medical officer at Pentonville reported thus to Sir Ernley Blackwell: “I made the examination which was the subject of our conversation at the Home Office on Tuesday, after the conclusion of the inquest today, and found unmistakable evidence of the practices to which it was alleged the prisoner in question had been addicted. The anus was at a glance seen to be dilated and on making a digital examination (rubber gloves) I found that **the lower part of the bowel was dilated as far as the fingers could reach** [my emphasis]”. Thus was Blackwell provided with more evidence of what he described to the Home Secretary as “the most engrossing pursuit” of Casement’s life.”

The large amount of vigorous anal sex recorded in his extensive diaries had had its effect. This non-diary evidence is reinforced by a raft of statements in the National Archives’ files about Casement and his Norwegian sailor companion being “sodomitter”, as in the Norwegian original. The ever-traitorous Adler Christensen had first informed on Casement at the British Legation in Christiania (Oslo) in 1914.

Angus Mitchell with three Casement books under his belt still has a problem accepting the authenticity of the Black Diaries, but he needs to be consistent.

In 2009, in *History Ireland,* he wrote that the latest phase “of the Casement controversy unleashed the arguments that Dudgeon has yet to either recognise or address: the separation of the issue of sexuality from the textual. In case he still hasn’t yet grasped the subtleties of the position, let me remind him once more. The argument is no longer about Casement’s status as a homosexual.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

So why is he now querying the evidence of Casement’s homosexual status?

As Casement’s most recent biographer, Séamas Ó Síocháin, writes, “When old ‘discrepancies’ or ‘contradictions’ have been found to be no longer sustainable, The forgery school has continued to reinvent itself by discovering new ones.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Mitchell and his fellow sceptics remain of the old faith and still find notional fault although never evidence to the contrary. Ironically, the controversy is more ‘sexual than textual’ because of the diary deniers.

I have always maintained that Casement, the Irish separatist ideologue, was as important as Casement, the British government’s humanitarian trouble shooter, if not more so. Also that he is no gay icon, albeit a rare recorder of an active homosexual life a century ago.

For my pains, I am told by Angus, “Jeff Dudgeon uses the Black Diaries to update the queer geographies of Ulster and to re-imagine Northern Protestant nationalism as some high camp drama driven by a cabal of queer crusaders.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Can he not engage in the Irish politics for a change instead of convoluted conspiracy theories?

Yours sincerely

Jeffrey Dudgeon

1. Jeffrey Dudgeon,*Roger Casement: The Black Diaries - With a Study of his Background, Sexuality, and Irish Political Life*, p. 10 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Angus Mitchell, *History* IRELAND, November/December 2009, Letters, p. 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Séamas Ó Síocháin, *Roger Casement: Imperialist, Rebel, Revolutionary*, p. 493 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Angus Mitchell, *Beneath the Hieroglyph: Recontextualising the Black Diaries of Roger Casement,* <http://www.irlandeses.org/0907mitchell01.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)