**Angus Mitchell, In Conversation with John Gibney**

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**Author: Angus Mitchell, with John Gibney**

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**John Gibney:** First things first: what got you interested in the subject of Casement?

**Angus Mitchell:** Well, John, I was living in Brazil, and I attended the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, where I got interested in the fate of the Amazon rainforest, and began to read the environmental history of the region and came across a whole series of references to Casement. I knew he’d been consul in Brazil, but little was known about his time there and I wanted to try and retrieve him into the narrative of Brazilian history in a more substantive way. Initially, I concentrated on that period when he had served in Brazil as Consul General. And that took me to archives across Latin America. I spent a long time in Lima, Peru, looking at the extensive repository of land claims of those families and farmers who had emigrated into the Amazon in the late nineteenth century to start extracting rubber. I worked for several months at the *Palácio do Itamaraty*, which is the archive of the Brazilian Foreign Office. Through an understanding of the importance of extractive rubber and the rubber resource wars of the early twentieth century, I developed a grounding in Casement, and his relevance to world history. That was before I entered the vortex of Irish history.

The story of extractive rubber is *critical* to understanding the tropical environment and the greater Atlantic region. In just a few decades, from 1880-1910, those inner regions of South America and Africa were very rapidly and violently opened up to commerce and colonial administration. This was immediately followed by the deforestation of large areas of Indonesia and Southeast Asia in order to make way for plantation rubber, which usurped the economy of extractive rubber in the early twentieth century. So, rubber and the industrial processes that turned latex into “white gold” also transformed the tropical regions of the world, and this is an absolutely defining moment in global environmental history, which we are still trying to understand.

Casement becomes a key witness to that moment and he writes about it in an official capacity. His importance is now recognized. John Tully wrote an excellent recent study, *The Devil’s Milk:* *A Social History of Rubber* (2011),[[1]](http://breac.nd.edu/articles/65812-angus-mitchell-in-conversation-with-john-gibney/" \l "_ftn1" \o ") that looked in detail at rubber as a global, historical issue and its relevance to labor history. It’s been quite gratifying to see the University of São Paulo researching the extractive rubber industry in a more meaningful way. There is now a Spanish translation of *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement*,[[2]](http://breac.nd.edu/articles/65812-angus-mitchell-in-conversation-with-john-gibney/" \l "_ftn2" \o ") which I published originally in 1997 from the manuscript held in the National Library of Ireland.  There’s also a Brazilian-Portuguese edition published through the University of São Paulo, thanks to the work of Professor Laura Izarra and the principal translator, Mariana Bolfarine. President Michael D. Higgins has written a foreword to that edition, where he articulates how Casement was important not just to the history of human rights but to the idea of the ethical economy. Casement is now a significant figure within the history of the wider Amazon region.

**JG:** I suppose that brings us to his international experiences. How did those experiences shape his life and career?

**AM:**  Casement arrives into the Congo as a colonial officer in 1884, just a few months before European diplomats gathered in Berlin to essentially discuss the trading future of Africa. So, he’s there right at the very beginning of the great administrative push into Sub-Saharan Africa and he bears witness to that over the next twenty years. If you consider Casement in terms of those twenty years in Africa, you see there is a tremendous logic to his actions based in an acute awareness of what colonial administration and power can do. He becomes an integral witness to that administration and sees it for what it is. This starts him thinking about Ireland in a different kind of way. Again, the *accepted* view of Casement is that he arrives onto the Irish nationalist political scene quite late in his life, but that’s not right either—he’s always trying to influence things in Ireland’s favor. He read widely on Ireland: Thomas Davis, John Mitchel and Charles Stewart Parnell were all big influences. He saw himself as the successor of Davitt. Certainly there was a good deal of reciprocity between his experience of Africa and Brazil and his actions for Ireland.

**JG:**   That’s a subject I want to come back to in a moment, but it would be worth dwelling on his international experience, because Casement is often namechecked as a pioneering advocate of human rights, or an exposer of human rights abuses. And we have a very well-developed discourse of that now, but I’m thinking of the investigations he conducted in the Congo, and later in the Amazon Basin. What were the contemporary implications of investigating such crimes against humanity in the early twentieth century?

**AM:**    Well, I think Casement in some ways speaks the unspeakable. If you look at Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness*[[3]](http://breac.nd.edu/articles/65812-angus-mitchell-in-conversation-with-john-gibney/" \l "_ftn3" \o ")—and, of course, Conrad had known Casement quite well—you see how Casement lends substance to Conrad’s metaphysical view of the colonizing of Africa. In the early 1890s, they’d shared a mud hut together in Matadi and they remained in contact for the next fourteen years and met on a number of occasions in London and Kent. Casement supplies the evidence that helps to root that lie at the heart of western civilization and the colonizing process. The public back in Britain find this very shocking and then Casement makes the argument that what is happening on the frontiers of the Congo and Amazon is no different to what happened in Ireland. That is profoundly unsettling, both then and now.

One of the principal misconceptions about Casement claims that his relevance in Africa only begins in 1904, after the publication of his report detailing the findings from his six-month investigative journey into the upper Congo, at the end of 1903. I think it’s more correct to see Casement’s investigation of the colonial administration beginning when he arrives in the region in 1898. So, essentially, he spends six years as consul in that area, and during that time he generates an enormous amount of documentation. It all pieces together into this very, very coherent damnation and indictment of King Leopold’s rule, as well as the complicity of European colonial systems and socially irresponsible trading practice extending from untrammeled capitalism. In some ways, the real work on Casement in Africa has yet to be done; only a fraction of his official and unofficial writing has been published. If the day comes when it is assembled and made available, it will give people a much clearer understanding of just how deep his investigation went. Throughout that period, Casement was informed by the progressive thinking in Britain and Ireland on questions to do with social justice, labor reform, and environmental protection. The aim and language of the Congo Reform Association is directly lifted from Irish Land League politics.

From 1904, Casement grows very close to the historian Alice Stopford Green, who in various ways mentors both him and E.D. Morel on the Congo reform movement. But Stopford Green herself is close to that group of social activists like Beatrice and Sidney Webb, Nannie Dryhurst and Florence Nightingale, who are searching for reform in different ways. As liberalism begins to fragment in the early twentieth century and takes on a more Liberal Imperialist trajectory, Green, Casement and others find it harder and harder to accommodate their own imperialist credentials with Liberal ethics. They hold onto the ethics of Gladstonian liberalism and a Gladstonian perspective.

**JG:**    What would you mean by a “Gladstonian perspective”?

**AM:**   Well, in this instance what I see by Gladstone’s perspective is essentially the Little Englander. It’s about the endeavor to devolve power to a local level and away from the global or federal model. Green was a great believer in municipal authority against centralizing tendencies. Her histories of Ireland tell the story of how Ireland governed itself peacefully and fairly through the Brehon Laws before the arrival of Henry II. Casement supported such a view. In the Congo he had been one of the first white men into the upper regions of the river and described societies at peace: communities based upon agrarian co-operation and sustainable fishing. When he returned to those regions sixteen years later he found devastation exacted in the name of “civilization” and the “free state.”

**JG:**     In relation to Africa, there’s a picture from the back of your book, which I presume was taken during his time in Africa. Would you care to expand upon it?

**AM:**    Yeah, sure. It’s a picture from, I think, 1885, and it shows Casement standing at the back in the center of a group of senior administrators in the Congo. Some of those figures, twenty years later, would be advising King Leopold II in his own war against Casement and Morel, and in his efforts to try and create a kind of propaganda front to challenge the swell of negative publicity that was emerging about his administration in the Congo. But I think the significance of the photo is that it shows Casement in his early twenties—aged twenty-one or twenty-two. His look is confident, if a little rebellious: he is wearing a straw hat in contrast to the pith-helmeted, colonial types. There’s always been this idea that Casement was not a particularly senior official. OK, he was a consul and never rose above the rank of consul general; but I think within the kind of rather broad remit of being a consul, Casement actually is listened to by those at the highest level of power in Whitehall. Certainly, Lord Salisbury, Lord Milner, and James Bryce had his ear at different times. He was close to Lord Lansdowne, and of course, it’s Sir Edward Grey who in 1906 persuades Casement to come out of retirement and return to the foreign office and then he sends him to Brazil. So Casement is, although his official position wouldn’t necessarily suggest it, actually operating at the highest level of imperial power. That level of influence isn’t easily described and isn’t adequately recorded. But it is the case and would explain why the authorities became so obsessed by Casement once his “treason” had been identified.

**JG:** You might say that, conversely, he was operating at a high level of *anti*-imperial activity sometime later. His involvement in international anticolonial networks later in his career: would you mind expanding upon that and on some of the figures that you’ve already mentioned such as E.D. Morel and Beatrice Webb, and the connections between these people who were *opposed* to what Casement had discovered.

**AM:**     It is quite hard to really give a comprehensive view of the anti-colonial network, because so much of that discourse has either been lost or destroyed. But certainly, what is amazing about Casement is just how far his tentacles reached into the depths of South America and European revolutionary politics and the metropolitan centers such as London, Lisbon, Berlin, and even New York.

In 1910 and 1911 he is part of a group that organizes a series of openly hostile anti-colonial meetings in London. The Morel testimonial held in Whitehall in 1911 brings in intellectuals from across Europe. On the surface they come to pay their respects to Morel, but another conversation is at play and one with a socialist agenda. It enables a different kind of discussion to happen around questions of social justice, and international labor law. The question of Congo reform reached across national frontiers. We should never ignore how the pursuit of Irish home rule was intellectually coupled with a conversation about the legitimacy of empire.

I’m interested at present in a figure called Nannie Dryhurst who was Dublin-born—the mother of Sylvia Dryhurst, who married Robert Lynd. Robert and Sylvia were important figures within Gaelic League circles in London in the early twentieth century. But Nannie Dryhurst—who, again, would have known Casement from the 1890s and possibly even before, and who translated Prince Kropotkin’s great work on the French Revolution and helped distribute his anarchist newspaper—was mainly interested in the question of Georgian relief. At the end of June 1910, she organized a conference in Caxton Hall, which of course was closely associated with the militant side of women’s suffrage and the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU). Casement was quite probably there; certainly E.D. Morel, Henry Nevinson, and George Gavan Duffy spoke at the event. John Harris and Travers Humphreys, the two leading figures of the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines’ Protection Society, also contributed. Casement was just about to leave for the Putumayo to carry out his investigation into the dreadful stories that had been circulating from that part of the world about the treatment of native labor. But what’s interesting is that the conference gathered together representatives from different nation states, and what was articulated by Lynd right at the outset was the integral relationship between nationalism and internationalism. And he very openly stated that

Nationalism is the necessary complement of Internationalism in any true sense. Either without the other becomes perverted and inhuman, and is a denial of great spiritual principles. The true Nationalist is he who aims at universal peace and brotherhood through universal liberty.[[4]](http://breac.nd.edu/articles/65812-angus-mitchell-in-conversation-with-john-gibney/" \l "_ftn4" \o ")

The cause of Nationalism is conceptualized as part of a much longer project for Internationalism. Obviously, this is a view held by James Connolly and many others. Influential nationalist agitators gathered at that conference. Muhammad Fareed, a prominent Egyptian nationalist who advocated Britain’s complete military withdrawal from Egypt, attended. Indian nationalism was represented by Lala Lajpat Rai and Bipin Chandra Pal, two of the three assertive nationalists known as Lal, Bal, and Pal, who were in the process of mobilizing the Swadeshi movement across India. There were other nationalists from Persia and Poland. Aino Malmberg spoke on Finland’s struggle against tsarist Russia.

That congress in 1910 was one of a number of different moments when London was hosting these identifiably anti-imperial events attended by political subversives. In the shadows of his official work, Casement is certainly beginning to link up with different revolutionaries in the Americas, who are supportive of Irish independence and anti-imperial struggles. In 1915, when Joseph Mary Plunkett journeyed to Berlin and met with Casement, he mentioned in his diary that Casement was hanging out in Berlin with a prominent Hindu revolutionary, called Virendranath Chattopadhyaya. “Chatto,” as he was called, was an energetic operator within Indian revolutionary circles, and close to Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, and Jean Jaurès. In those years leading to the First World War, there was a significant anti-colonial conversation happening at the heart of Whitehall and Casement and his investigations were key to that discussion. We need to retrieve that network in order to understand the broader context of the Irish nationalist struggle.

**JG:**    This brings me two things, which I hadn’t categorized as two separate questions, but from what you’ve said they feed into each other. How did that experience impact upon his understanding of Irish issues on the one hand, but also, how did  it shape Casement’s  distinctive take on geopolitics in relation to the First World War?

**AM:**   Well, those are two quite distinct questions. In terms of understanding Irish issues, I think Casement begins to see the possibilities of Irish separatism as an alternative space, and one which can be established in intellectual opposition to the violent authority of empires, whether British, Belgium, Spanish, Portuguese or even American. “Nations are born, empires rise from hell,”[[5]](http://breac.nd.edu/articles/65812-angus-mitchell-in-conversation-with-john-gibney/" \l "_ftn5" \o ") he wrote to his cousin, Gertrude Bannister. He recognizes the importance of Irish culture: the language, hurling, self-sufficiency, and a people’s history as all critical components of true independence. His support for the Irish Catholic church should also be understood. He sees, too, what Alice Stopford Green defined as the ancient memory of the Irish people that was under constant attack from what he quite dismissively called “Anglo-Saxonism.” And certainly in his propaganda writings, penned from 1911 onwards, you can detect Casement’s concerns about what we rather benignly call the “special relationship” between London and Washington. Of course, his belief in the “Irish race” is problematic by the standards of our own time, although Casement sees that “Irish race” as transcending the color line or even *geographical* distinction. He recognized the importance of the diaspora as part of the wider community. He talked about “Irishness” as a global alternative to the kind of modernizing and homogenizing structures of the “white man” and the white supremacist world. He connects his final humanitarian campaign on behalf of the typhus fever victims of Connemara to his investigation in South America.

**JG:**      Isn’t that his reference to Connemara, as the Irish Putumayo?

**AM:**   Exactly.

**JG:**    So that’s almost turning it around.

**AM:**   Yes! That’s correct. When he resigns from the Foreign Office in 1913, he comes back to Ireland and he begins to speak out vociferously against the treatment of the victims of an outbreak of typhus in southwest Connemara, seeing their neglect as part of a systemic failure of the administration over many centuries. And he very deliberately links this tragedy with his investigation in the Putumayo—it gets him into deep water. And the comparison is disproportionate, it has to be said; but nevertheless, what I think Casement is trying to explain is how the periphery is endlessly sacrificed for the benefit of the metropolitan center. And he’s someone who is always trying to protect the periphery. It’s interesting to consider how Mary Robinson uses similar arguments in the twenty-first century to alert us to our collective responsibility to protect peripheral societies, notably those most affected by increasing weather extremes caused by global warming. And that’s really where human rights law can intervene: to safeguard those people who stand outside the boundaries of national protection, whether they are the “indigenous” communities of South America or Irish-language speakers in western Ireland. That, I think, is how it impacts on his understanding of Irish issues, but the question deserves a more complex answer.

As for the First World War, that is another big question. Casement really begins to wage his own war against the British Foreign Office, and he’s not alone in this. E.D. Morel, Alice Stopford Green, and Casement were three insiders who well in advance of the war realized that a big European conflict was inevitable. It was a view as unpopular then as it is now. Of the many histories published in the last few years on the First World War, it is alarming to see how little space or sense of legitimacy has been granted to those who opposed the war. From 1911, Casement starts to reveal the secret reasons why conflict is inevitable, and he speaks of the lack of accountability in foreign policy, and in particular the way in which so much diplomacy has been separated from any democratic process. There’s a particularly revealing essay called “The Secret Diplomacy of England,” which traces how Irish Home Rule caused this transition within foreign policy, and how, under the premiership of Lord Salisbury, the open parliamentary discussion of foreign policy was closed down. Casement, who was privy to the discussion over foreign policy in Whitehall, considers this as quite simply undemocratic. Increasingly, he becomes furious with Sir Edward Grey, and also James Bryce, who as British ambassador in Washington helped Casement in his Putumayo campaign and was an old and close friend of Alice Stopford Green. When Bryce is selected by [Prime Minister H.H.] Asquith to carry out the official investigation into German atrocities in Belgium at the end of 1914, the report that is published in the spring the following year is, to Casement’s mind, part of a worldwide web of lies being told about Germany and the causes of the war. A lot of his time in Germany in 1915 was spent publishing secrets about the dark and increasingly covert side of international governance and British foreign policy. So, in the end, it inevitably takes you into a kind of realm of conspiracy, which is something that historians don’t like to talk about very much.

**JG:**    Is this one of the reasons why the British authorities devoted so much time to Casement prior to the Easter Rising of 1916? Obviously he was in Germany, and would have been seen as someone who was conspiring against British interests; but was that the only reason that attention was devoted to him?

**AM:** Well, I think Casement is quite key in the buildup to the Rising. I mean, if you see the Rising merely as the week, or the few weeks, before and after the Rising itself, then Casement’s part is quite peripheral. But, if you see Casement as part of a much larger intellectual movement to bring about the independence of Ireland, then I think his position can’t be ignored. There is a hefty file compiled by Dublin Castle on Casement’s movements in Ireland from 1913 that demonstrates how the authorities in Britain and Ireland considered Casement to be an extremely high risk enemy. His network reached throughout the Atlantic world. We shouldn’t forget that Casement had a private meeting with Theodore Roosevelt on the fourth of August, 1914. Doesn’t that say something of his influence?

Part of the problem with the inclusion of Casement in the myth and history of 1916 is that, as the last pages of his Berlin diary reveal, he was adamantly opposed to the Rising as planned, although he was committed to the use of force to bring about the end of the British Empire. His reasons for adopting this line are explained in his own words. He was worried that if a rebellion did go ahead, without the right support from Germany, that it would be little more than a tremendous sacrifice of life, and that much of the leadership of the movement would be taken out. And he believed that that would be a disaster.  Furthermore, he was worried about how, in the end, the act of rebellion would be manipulated for England’s war aims, and be used within the propaganda entanglement.

**JG:**       One issue that naturally rears its head at these times is the question of Casement’s sexuality, it’s fair to say. I’m just wondering, though, does that ongoing controversy actually add to our understanding of the man in any way, shape, or form?

**AM:**     I think it is a fascinating dimension, if you like, to the hermeneutics of the history. But it is ultimately irrelevant and has stirred far too much anxiety in recent years. The diaries’ controversy has been used very, very effectively to veil Casement’s deeper meanings. Does it not strike you as odd that the Black Diaries configure with the most heroic moments of his official work: his voyage into the upper Congo in 1903 and his voyages up the Amazon in 1910 and 1911? My argument that the Black Diaries have deliberately robbed Casement of the moral high-ground in his investigation of colonial violence is one that historians have been slow to approve. Understanding Casement as some sexual outsider is much easier than understanding why he chose his anti-imperial trajectory and why his narrative has required so much careful control. Part of the dumbing down of the intellectual history of 1916 has been achieved through a lurid obsession with the sex lives of the revolutionary generation.

But, one has to be cautious that the question of authenticity of the Black Diaries isn’t conflated with the question of Casement’s sexuality. I have never tried to deny the possibility that Casement was a homosexual. He never married. He never had what we would call a “steady girlfriend”—but there are no revealing love letters either way. There is an argument that can be made that he loved men. He certainly loved women. He was deeply emotional and was very able to express emotion towards both men and women. There is *definitely*, I think, quite an innocent homoeroticism to some of his writings, or at least we can interpret them as such in this day and age. He loved the physical prowess of the African body and the Irish body. But recent media and academic focus on the Black Diaries as the beginning and end of Casement is shameful in how it has distorted Casement’s meaning and his intellectual contribution to the independence struggle. In years to come, when the Black Diaries are finally accepted for what they are, I expect the controversy will be understood as an extraordinary and highly revealing insight into academia itself and the control of historical knowledge.

**JG:**       From the vantage point of 2014, what would be the state of scholarship? Has it progressed beyond that?

**AM:**   I’m not sure, really—there are so many dimensions to Casement’s interpretation both progressive and reactive. I think one view is that the diaries’ controversy is no longer relevant. This was the idea that came up after the Royal Irish Academy symposium back in 2000, that it was time to move on from the controversy. But that’s not actually easy to do, in the sense that those documents aren’t merely about Casement’s sexuality. They are also about offering an insight into his human rights’ investigations. So, in that sense, they have a value outside and beyond the quite insoluble question of Casement’s sexuality itself. There is no ignoring them, but there is a need to understand them in other contexts. What is rewarding is to see how Casement’s investigations into crimes against humanity are now seen as part of the longer struggle for human rights. Jordan Goodman’s book *The Devil and Mr Casement* (2008)[[6]](http://breac.nd.edu/articles/65812-angus-mitchell-in-conversation-with-john-gibney/" \l "_ftn6" \o ") was an important intervention in that regard.

**JG:**      Well, coming to the last two questions, both of which are essentially related. Why study Casement today? What does an understanding of him and his career offer to our understanding of Ireland, of the world, of scholarship? What might his legacies be, in any of those fields?

**AM:**   Well, I think it was interesting to see in September 2014 how the “People’s Climate March” through New York, which had over 2,000 affiliated events around the world, was led by a united front of “indigenous” people, and that one of the main speakers at the rally was Mary Robinson. I would like to suggest that Casement is connected to both those strands of activism. In his day, he did a huge amount to actually draw attention in diplomatic circles in the western world to the plight of what we call, in inverted commas, “indigenous people.” In that sense, his message is very contemporary and merits comparison to the view of, say, the ethnobotanist and traveler Wade Davis, who is making the same plea on behalf of our collective responsibility to respect and cherish other belief systems because they offer us this extraordinary alternative insight into other worlds. And the message that Casement was bringing back to the centers of power in the early twentieth century and his description of the decimation of forest communities in Africa and South America—it’s still happening. The genocide committed against the Native American peoples, whether of North, Central, or South America, is still ongoing. The desperate local wars fought across the Congo are a legacy of European interference in that region in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and are driven by our insatiable need for resources. So, Casement, in a way, has not reached a state where he can be historicized in a manner that separates him from the present. He’s very much a figure whose message is still rooted in our contemporary concerns. So, I think, when you try and interpret him, you can become locked inside those present anxieties and see that the horror that he witnessed and described is still at the heart of our own sense of “civilization” and “progress.” But because he takes a revolutionary path and organizes gunrunning and fraternizes with the Germans, there are other sides to his interpretation that render him problematic and discomforting. So he’s not easy, in that sense, to either decipher, or to include. But I doubt we’ve heard the last of him!

*Angus Mitchell’s main body of writings on Roger Casement can be accessed freely through his* [*Academia.edu site*](https://limerick.academia.edu/AngusMitchell)*.*

[[1]](http://breac.nd.edu/articles/65812-angus-mitchell-in-conversation-with-john-gibney/" \l "_ftnref1" \o ") John Tully, *The Devil’s Milk:* *A Social History of Rubber* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

[[2]](http://breac.nd.edu/articles/65812-angus-mitchell-in-conversation-with-john-gibney/" \l "_ftnref2" \o ") Roger Casement, *Diario de la Amazonía*, ed. Angus Mitchell, trans. Sonia Fernández Ordás (La Coruña: Ediciones del Viento, 2011).

[[3]](http://breac.nd.edu/articles/65812-angus-mitchell-in-conversation-with-john-gibney/" \l "_ftnref3" \o ") Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales* (Oxford: OUP, 2008).

[[4]](http://breac.nd.edu/articles/65812-angus-mitchell-in-conversation-with-john-gibney/" \l "_ftnref4" \o ") Robert Lynd, “Preface on Nationalism and Nationality,” in *Nationalities and Subject Races: Report of Conference Held in Caxton Hall, Westminster, June 28-30, 1910*, Vol. 8 (1911; repr., London: Forgotten Books, 2013), 12.

[[5]](http://breac.nd.edu/articles/65812-angus-mitchell-in-conversation-with-john-gibney/" \l "_ftnref5" \o ") See Angus Mitchell, *Roger Casement: 16 Lives* (Dublin: The O’Brien Press, 2013).

[[6]](http://breac.nd.edu/articles/65812-angus-mitchell-in-conversation-with-john-gibney/" \l "_ftnref6" \o ") Jordan Goodman, *The Devil and Mr. Casement: One Man's Battle for Human Rights in South America's Heart of Darkness* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

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