



Against the Demon

The Devil and Mr Casement: One Man's Struggle for Human Rights in South America's Heart of Darkness, Jordan Goodman, Verso, 288pp, £17.99, ISBN: 978-1844673346

Jordan Goodman, the eminent historian, was born on a refugee ship en route from Cyprus to the new state of Israel in 1948. His parents were holocaust survivors. A few months after his birth, the Jewish exile and staunch pacifist, Balder Olden committed suicide in Montevideo, Uruguay.^[1] Sixteen years earlier, before fleeing in fear for his life from the Nazi regime, Olden had published one of the earliest biographies of Roger Casement *Paradiese de Teufels* (A Paradise of the Devil), a work printed twice in German but never translated, and rarely referenced in Casement bibliographies.^[2] Olden's interest in Casement hints at the remarkable international resonance of the man and the fact that his life and legacy belong more to the fight for universal humanity than to the troubled closet of Irish historiography. The devil in the title of Goodman's history is the same devil which resided in Olden's paradise.

The single quotation on the dust jacket of this book is provided by the American author, Adam Hochschild. A decade ago, Hochschild reawakened popular interest in the historical plight of the Congo with his shocking book *King Leopold's Ghost*.^[3] In several ways, *The Devil and Mr Casement* is a deliberate and worthy sequel to Hochschild's bestseller. Both are Manichaeic tales relating the struggle between evil (materialism) and good (spirituality). The prose reads with the pace of a novel, but this does not compromise its value as a work of historical exactitude. The writing is clear, the research is scrupulous and the story retrieves an important human rights campaign of the early twentieth century. With the detachment required of his discipline, Goodman pieces together the facts, silences and fictions associated with the atrocities committed along the Putumayo River of the Upper Amazon, an extensive region of rainforest bordering Colombia, Brazil and Peru, which was turned into a killing field when western markets went mad for rubber. Goodman gives a chilling account of an appalling crime against humanity. The moral of the tale has clear resonances in our own time when the destruction of ancient cultures continues unchecked

and where the rapid degradation of the planetary environment propels us towards an increasingly unstable world.

The story broke across British newspapers in 1909 and remained alive for the next five years until it was closed down and largely forgotten on the outbreak of war in the summer of 1914. The exposure of demonic horror was one more scandal which hastened the strange death of Liberal England. A spiral of revelations about crooked financial dealings, slavery, torture and unspeakable crimes, committed by employees of a company financed through the City of London, shocked the sensibilities of the British public. Furthermore, it exposed the process of human destruction which lay behind the daily newspaper columns reporting stock market fluctuations and soaring share prices.

In the Putumayo, Casement witnessed things which radicalised him and set him on a path to open rebellion. Early on in the book, when sketching the broad outline of Casement's life, Goodman asks if the Putumayo is the key to understanding Casement's transformation from knight of the realm to disgraced traitor. The answer is left to the reader. In the uncharted rainforests of South America, Casement found the same injustices, brutality, and exploitation which he had encountered in the Congo. He also realised that having fought to change the system for ten years through persistent lobbying and networking, the system was incapable of change. Revolution was the only transformative option and his own path to revolutionary resistance would be morally justified by his discovery of crimes against humanity. This view was echoed in his speech from the dock: "If there be no right or rebellion against the state of things that no savage tribe would endure without resistance, then I am sure that it is better for men to fight and die without right than to live in such a state of right as this."[\[4\]](#)

But this is more than merely another book about Roger Casement to add to the dozen or so monographs and edited volumes published since 1997. It is a profoundly revealing fragment from a larger story of resource war, waged across the tropical regions of the world for control of latex rubber. The fallout from the rubber business is still apparent in many areas. The resource-rich Congo remains an inferno of corruption and bloodshed, a situation which originated in the violent introduction of modern administration into the region in 1884. The degradation of the Amazon ecosystem continues despite endless international promises to mitigate deforestation. Vast areas of Southeast Asian rainforest were felled to make way for rubber plantations, which replaced extractive rubber gathering.

Today, natural rubber remains a key strategic commodity in the world market. Only the scramble for crude oil and the mining and burning of coal has damaged the planet as severely as rubber.

Under western eyes, rubber contributed to a second phase of the industrial revolution, where science and technology were wedded with industry. From the 1850s onwards, the tropical interiors of sub-Saharan Africa and Central and South America started to take on a new value as forests with rubber-bearing trees were opened up for exploitation. By far the most productive area was the Amazon. Tens of thousands of Brazilian *nordestinos* – inhabitants of the arid north east of Brazil – afflicted by years of drought, migrated upriver to populate the new frontiers. In Peru, thousands crossed the Andean peaks into the forested *montaña*, to make land claims in the unmapped river valleys flowing into the upper reaches of the river basin. Colombians pushed south towards the Río Caquetá. Rubber-bearing trees were found as far north as Chiapas and Oaxaca in Mexico. From Europe, legions of adventurers came in search of this latex El Dorado.

Foreign investment flowed in, rubber was shipped out, and in the maintenance of that simple free trade formula millions of lives were lost. As settlers and administrators spread into the region, the world ended for countless indigenous communities in unreported acts of violence. Vast slave kingdoms were established. The legendary Colonel Fawcett remembered: “The atrocities on the Putumayo in Peru, disclosed by Sir Roger Casement, were only a fraction of the terrible story. Slavery bloodshed and vice reigned supreme on the rivers, and there was no halt to it until the bottom fell out of the rubber market.”^[5]

In Europe and North America, by contrast, rubber was the life force of a new age of modernisation. The reinvention of the wheel in the form of a pneumatic rubber tyre was followed by the mass production of both the bicycle and then the automobile. For a period of about twenty years from 1892 to about 1912, the market demand was insatiable and extractive methods had to meet the demand. Nothing captured the opulence of the time as well as the opera house in Manaus, immortalised in Werner Herzog’s film, *Fitzcarraldo*. The scramble for rubber unleashed a resource war of unparalleled proportions. No story relates the destructive potential of modernity, quite like rubber. And the story has not gone away. One of the first martyrs of the environmental movement of the late twentieth century, Chico Mendes, was himself a rubber tapper.

Knowledge of the atrocities was hushed up or explained away in simplified survival of the fittest Social Darwinist terms. While huge and fast fortunes were made in market speculation, the rubber business was getting a bad reputation. Outcries denouncing the brutal excesses of King Leopold II's activities in the Congo, led to the famous 1903 journey by Casement into the upper Congo to investigate the situation for the Foreign Office. The publication of his 1904 report unleashed a bitter war of words between the *Palais Royale* in Brussels and Whitehall.

Unofficially, Casement was the prime mover behind the founding of the Congo Reform Association (CRA), a movement almost evangelical in both its strategy and resolve to preach the gospel of reform and mobilise popular, political and intellectual support. Monster meetings were held across Britain and several influential public figures joined the crusade. One of them, Harry Grattan Guinness, son of the Irish preacher, Henry Grattan Guinness, toured England and Scotland using lantern slide shows to illustrate the horror.^[6] The CRA – like the 'Make Poverty History' campaign of recent years – united political differences behind universal good intentions. The publishing of *Red Rubber* by the acting secretary of the CRA, E. D. Morel saw the campaign go global.^[7] A number of distinguished writers such as Mark Twain and Arthur Conan Doyle joined in the battle for public support.

Recent histories of human rights have identified the CRA as a key organisation in the shift from nineteenth-century abolitionism to the type of non-governmental organisation which plays such a prominent role in global governance today. The movement was born from the collaboration of lobbying groups, anti-slavery activists, churchmen and dedicated individuals prepared to volunteer their time and efforts. But during its decade of operations, it is also possible to see the aspiration for a more ethical foreign policy mutate into an active anti-imperialism. On the outbreak of war in 1914, Morel became the founder of the Union of Democratic Control, a pacifist movement demanding, among other things, more transparency in the conduct of foreign policy. Casement adopted a revolutionary trajectory through an arms conspiracy with the historian Alice Stopford Green and the novelist Erskine Childers. All three were prominently involved in imperial affairs and their conspiracy to run guns into Ireland in 1914 remains a sensitive moment in Ireland's troubled history. If this is a story about a desperate resource war and a human rights tragedy, it also involves a

series of intersecting histories of defiance and betrayal, which render its telling even more complicated.

News of the Putumayo might never have reached London had it not been for two young and carefree railway engineers, Walt Hardenburg and Walter Perkins, who stumbled into the Putumayo or Devil's Paradise, as they called it, by accident. Apart from their own aggressive handling by the company, they heard stories of systematic brutality, of slavery, torture and murder. Outraged by what was happening, Hardenburg spent several months in Iquitos gathering depositions and evidence supplied by Benjamin Saldaña Rocca, an independent printer and publisher responsible for exposing, through his two low-circulation newspapers, the demonic commercial activities of Julio Cesar Arana.

Arana, the Devil in this story, was a self-made Peruvian rubber baron, who had extended his family's fortune by a mix of luck and ruthlessness. In some respects he personified both the excesses and attitudes of his time. Born into a family of Panama hat-makers in the town of Rioja, on the eastern slopes of the Peruvian *montaña*, he built up a trading empire in the department of Loreto, which he then extended into the disputed frontier region between Colombia and Peru, by taking illegal possession of the Putumayo river valley. Through his control of all river transport in and out of the area and using the artificial borders to escape prosecution, he was able to impose a ruthless regime, with little more than a cabal of thuggish section chiefs and some well tried strategies of oppression. He then imported 196 Barbadians, British-subjects, into the area to work in different capacities for his regime. Anyone who threatened his domination was silenced. His success was measured exclusively in terms of the profit and loss it generated for his family and the company's shareholders.

Hardenburg arrived in London in 1909, just a few months before King Leopold II died in Belgium. He brought with him a dossier of evidence and plenty of grit and determination to expose Arana's operation. His case was taken up by the former Congo missionary, John Harris, acting secretary of the recently amalgamated Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society. His story was published in *Truth* magazine under the provocative title "A British-Owned Congo" and, on 29 September 1909, the issue was raised for the first time in the House of Commons. The Foreign Office was obliged to respond once the allegations had been confirmed by a British army officer, Thomas Whiffen, who

had made a recent journey through the region to investigate the strange disappearance of the French anthropologist, Eugenio Robuchon.

The choice of Roger Casement to investigate the affair was made for various reasons. His Congo investigation gave him a depth of experience none could match or dispute. He was also the man on the spot. After eighteen months in temporary retirement from official duties, Casement had returned to consular service in 1906 to take up the first of three postings in Brazil. This was no forgotten outpost. Brazil was an integral and very lucrative component of Britain's informal empire in South America. Over the centuries the historic alliance with Portugal had made successive generations of British bankers and businessmen rich from trading in Brazilian resources.

The mining of deposits of diamonds, gem stones and gold and the harvesting of tropical hardwoods and coffee by African bodies had made Brazil the largest slave market in the world until the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807. British naval officers were instrumental in facilitating the flight of the Portuguese court to Rio de Janeiro in 1808 as the House of Braganza fled the Napoleonic armies. Relations remained strong during the seismic shifts from colony to independence and through the long reign of Brazil's second and last emperor, Dom Pedro II (1825-1891), whose imperial court was modelled on the styles and protocols defined by Queen Victoria. Anglo-Brazilian relations remained steadfast through the declaration of the republic of Brazil in 1889 which followed shortly after the abolition of slavery under Brazilian law.

From the 1850s, when British interests in Amazon rubber became apparent, public understanding of the region was based on travel books and scientific expeditions. Popular imagination had been strongly influenced by two late nineteenth-century books by the naturalists: Henry Walter Bates, *The Naturalist on the River Amazons*, and Alfred Russel Wallace, *Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro*. Ocean liners departed daily from several European ports to make the journey thousands of miles into the depths of the Amazon rainforest. The Booth Steamship Company, based in Liverpool, ran a regular service all the way to Iquitos, the jungle-girt capital of the Peruvian Amazon. The ships were lavishly decorated with tropical hardwoods. A cruise on the Amazon was considered both fashionable and exotic.

In 1909 Casement was appointed Consul-General in Rio de Janeiro. He did not harbour the same love and respect for Brazilians as he had for Africans. In his often

derogatory comments about the Brazilian people, he recognised the legacy of a nation founded upon violence, recoiling from the legacy of slavery and aspiring to little more than the materialism and manners of the European bourgeoisie. Casement's sympathies lay naturally with the indigenous people – the pre-Columbian Amerindians – still suffering from the internal colonisation imposed by Brazilian administration.

Casement's journey up the Amazon in 1910 to investigate the reports of atrocities was undertaken on the orders of the British foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey. Accompanying him was a commission of experts selected by the Peruvian Amazon Company, who were to report privately on the matter for the directors. Over a period of almost three months Casement travelled through the region. His surviving journal details the matrix of criminality, colonial violence and deceit supporting the company's control over the region.^[8] As he walked from one rubber station to another, constantly in fear of his life, he witnessed and described a world destroyed by the tools of modernisation: lethal armaments, efficient communications and the dehumanising technology of corporate organisation. Basic laws protecting human rights and natural freedoms were ignored. Instead, the section chiefs maintained order using callous cruelty to strike panic and fear into the enslaved Indians. Those who fell out of line were chastised by the whip – the *marca de Arana* – and all forms of violence were performed on the native bodies.

As Casement returned to England he placed this tragedy into the historical context of European colonisation of the Americas. His condemnation of centuries of Iberian government reads like a preamble to Eduardo Galeano's classic *Open Veins of Latin America*. There can be no doubt that the experience had a considerable effect on his outlook. His dwindling belief in the reforming potential of empires had evaporated.

Casement spent the first eight months of 1911 travelling between England and Ireland. He completed two reports for the Foreign Office by March and then tried hard to protect the Peruvian Amazon Company from bankruptcy. He argued that a reformed company, run by a responsible British board, would have more chance of protecting the vulnerable and delivering real change than a company which was liquidated and thereby remained under Arana's control. In May 1911, with the help of Alice Stopford Green and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, he helped organise the Morel Testimonial: an occasion intended to celebrate Morel's tireless efforts to improve the situation on the Congo and raise funds to enable him to continue the work. The event was indicative of the extensive influence and

power of the Green-Casement network. The following month, he reluctantly accepted a knighthood in recognition of his exceptional work in the Congo and Amazon.

Sir Roger Casement embarked on his second journey up the Amazon in August 1911. This voyage coincided with Robert Falcon Scott's *Terra Nova* expedition to the Antarctic. A comparison of these parallel voyages reveals much about the British Empire. Scott, the chosen hero of British imperial endurance, would die for no obviously worthy purpose beyond self-aggrandisement and the extension of the Union Jack. Roger Casement made his own way upriver, away from the glare of publicity, on a personal crusade to deliver justice on his own terms. This time his enemies watched his every move as he attempted to apprehend some of the criminal chiefs of section and galvanise the judiciary in Iquitos to use the law to control Arana's activities. While Scott's expedition has passed down into the mythology of the Empire in terms of the triumph of failure, Casement's journey has been discreetly forgotten.

There are several aspects of this journey which will probably always remain unclear and mysterious. Goodman's narrative does not engage with some of the covert aspects informing Casement's return. Part of his brief, coming from somewhere inside the Foreign Office, possibly the Commercial Intelligence Department of the Board of Trade, was to prepare other British consuls and agents on the Amazon for the impending crash. He was also entrusted with changing the secret codebooks used by consuls when communicating sensitive matters with the Foreign Office. Goodman also misses one of the appealingly colourful facts of this trip. Casement returned downstream with a huge hyacinth macaw – *anodorhynchus hyacinthinus* – perched on his shoulder; one of the most spectacular and vibrant birds in the world (now, sadly, approaching extinction in the wild).

In the first days of 1912, Casement journeyed by steamship from the Caribbean to the US and through the British ambassador in Washington, the historian-statesman James Bryce,^[9] he met with US President William Taft and managed to bring State Department pressure to bear on the situation. But behind the scenes he was highly critical of the Monroe doctrine, which prevented positive European intervention in the region. In July, after further prevarication, the publication of the official Blue Book, containing his reports and the Barbadian testimonies, contributed to the collapse of investment in Amazon rubber. Venture capital flowed away from the extractive rubber market into the emerging rubber plantation economies of Anglo-Dutch colonies in Southeast Asia.

Internationally, there was outcry at the findings of Casement's report. Canon Herbert Henson denounced the British directors in a fierce sermon from the pulpit in Westminster Abbey. The Vatican issued a Papal encyclical *Lacrimabili Statu Indorum* (On the condition of the Indians).^[10] Casement helped organise the raising of funds to send a mission to the area and five Irish Franciscans were granted access to the region and remained there for several years providing some protection to the surviving communities. Evangelical missionaries, trained in the Grattan Guinness missionary school in East London, tried unsuccessfully to enter the Putumayo with their Gospels. One of the most moving eulogies attesting to Casement's courage was forthcoming from his collaborator in Congo reform, E.D. Morel:

To denounce crime at a distance is a relatively simple task. To track the criminal to his lair in the equatorial forest, to rub shoulders with him around camp fires, to realise he knows it is only you that stands between him and immunity – you, and a few inches of cold steel, which makes no noise ... to be enervated by fever, and maddened by the bites of stinging flies; to run short of food – and what food! To parch in thirst, to experience the lassitude of damp, moist heat which makes exertion a misery – this is different. And to retain, through all, your clearness of vision, capacity to weigh evidence, self control and moral strength – this is to pass through the highest point of mental and physical endurance, to attain the most conspicuous point of human achievement.

Morel's comments capture the tremendous courage required of the investigation, where the simplest mistake or a moment of poor judgment would have threatened the integrity of his case, or worse, cost him his life.

In the summer of 1912, at the height of his official career, Sir Roger Casement's name reverberated into every recess of the British Empire. The story remained in the public eye after Prime Minister Herbert Asquith set up a parliamentary select committee inquiry. Over the next six months, the select committee interrogated a succession of witnesses including Casement, Arana and Hardenburg. The inquiry brought into the public domain an immense amount of detail revealing the culpability of the board of directors, the extent of the cover up and disturbing aspects of bribery, forgery and sexual exploitation. One

indicator of the gravity of the case was evident in the choice made by the directors of the Peruvian Amazon Company to be represented by the Prime Minister's son, Raymond Asquith and Douglas Hogg, 1st Viscount Hailsham, a future Lord Chancellor of England.

An exhausted and unwell Casement left England in December in search of winter sun. He stopped first in the Canary Islands and then continued south for his last visit to South Africa and a short stay with his brother Tom in the Drakensburg mountains. There he relaxed briefly with visits to some ancestral caves of the Bushmen containing perhaps the oldest rock paintings in the world. His unauthorised correspondence with the chair of the select committee inquiry, Charles Roberts, during these months displays his implacable energy and an extraordinary grasp of the case.

In 1913, shortly after returning from Africa, Casement retired from the Foreign Office and began to devote himself openly to the cause of Irish separatism. His campaign now extended into Ireland and, with Alice Stopford Green and Douglas Hyde, he initiated a campaign to alleviate the suffering of those afflicted by typhus in southwest Connemara. He referred to the situation, in somewhat overstated terms, as an 'Irish Putumayo'. But Goodman makes only cursory reference to Casement's Irish interests.

Without Casement's dynamism, interest in the story of the Putumayo quickly disintegrated. The propaganda war was maintained by Arana, who tried hard to win back his credibility and status. He paid for the training of the first film-maker of the Amazon, Silvino Santos to study cinematography in Paris. In 1914, Santos produced a film attesting to the success of Arana's civilising mission in the Putumayo. It was the first film ever made about the Amazon but the only negative copy was destroyed on its way by boat to Europe and only a few clips from the cutting room floor survived. Ultimately, the market decided the fate of the Putumayo Indians and when the rubber prices collapsed, the company pulled out.

Even before Casement's treason had been identified, discreet efforts were made to expunge the Putumayo affair from public memory. Thomas Whiffen's *The North-West Amazon* published in 1915 omitted all reference to Casement.[\[11\]](#) The following year, Arana tried to force an apology from Casement as he waited to be hanged. Nevertheless, the expose had embarrassed many individuals and damaged the international standing of the City of London and, ever since, has remained an awkward subject for apologists and defenders of the British Empire.

Current efforts to claim Casement as an early advocate of human rights are also brought into focus by this narrative. He began to invoke a new language identifying both rights and responsibilities. Although the word humanitarianism has long been attached to his name, in the light of Goodman's analysis this is both inadequate and inaccurate. Casement was more than an imperial do-gooder, he was a dissector of systems and a fierce critic of the destructive capacity of colonial administration and the unregulated market. He began to experiment with new ways of communicating knowledge which would provoke reaction and inspire the existing channels of diplomatic power towards positive reform. While crimes against humanity and human rights are expressions which Casement used in his writing during this time, he was all too aware of the responsibilities of the individual to fight oppression in every lived moment. His growing despair with the existing structures of power to reform and regulate in a way which would protect the vulnerable turned him towards the view that direct action was the only language that corrupt and irresolute governments could understand.

Casement's own trajectory into Irish revolutionary politics, his collusion with Germany on behalf of an unrecognised independent Ireland, his landfall on Banna Strand from a submarine on the eve of the Easter rising, and his execution for high treason allowed his campaign to be discreetly closed down by the strong and long arm of the agencies defending British imperial security. Most of the documentation about his investigation remained buried in Foreign Office files until it was discreetly declassified in the shadow of the sensational release of the Black Diaries in 1959. Other documents gathered dust in the basement of Rhodes House in Oxford, where the papers relevant to the Putumayo atrocities are no more than a small link in the stacks piled high with anti-slavery papers, cataloguing the greatest continuing crime in modern world history.

Economic historians can determine boom and bust cycles through deciphering columns of figures, and there are several histories of rubber which ignore any acknowledgment of the human cost. The atrocities committed across the Amazon and Congo in pursuit of extractive rubber should be understood as a "limit event" (comparable to the Irish Famine): an historical episode of such violent, traumatic and disfiguring proportions that it dislocates the progressive historical narrative legitimating the moral economy of western civilization. Casement's essay published in 1914, *From "Coffin Ship" to*

“Atlantic Greyhound”, was an insightful interpretation of the political economy of the potato famine and had clear resonances with his analysis of the Putumayo tragedy.[\[12\]](#)

In 2002 in Leticia, Colombia’s port on the Amazon, the anthropologist, Juan Alvaro Echeverri spoke to me of how, in the immediate aftermath of the atrocities, the last surviving tribes in the area (Boras, Andokes, Huitotos, Muinanes) tried to forget the horror – the pain was too great. The collective language of memory was effectively extinguished by the atrocity. But more recently, a new generation of indigenous descendents is starting to reclaim some identity by remembering what happened. The process of storytelling has stimulated a course of catharsis and healing.

The awakening of this process might be traced back to the intervention by the American anthropologist, Michael Taussig in the 1980s. Taussig’s own theory, expressed in *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (the title has clear echoes with the book under review), tried to reconfigure anthropology within the postmodern turn by designating the task of the anthropologist to be the study of how peripheral cultures accommodated and critiqued capitalism: in other words, how the periphery talked back to the metropolitan centre. Taussig’s polemic was followed by his seminal study *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: a study in terror and healing*. Informed by the philosophy of Walter Benjamin, he dismissed the history that sought to show things “as they really were” as the “strongest narcotic of our time” and claimed that his interest was “not whether facts are real but what the politics of their interpretation and representation are.”[\[13\]](#) In trying to unpick the story of the Putumayo atrocities, Taussig realised that the historian, in particular, was faced by a knot of conflicting realities and factual confusions, which he identified as the “the politics of epistemic murk and the fiction of the real”.

Goodman’s enduring achievement is how he has read through and beyond ‘the politics of epistemic murk’ and produced a narrative which summarises and explains the story though an intuitive insight into the distortions extending from the sources. In doing this, he enables scrutiny of the misrepresentations and exaggerations evident in other versions. In her review of Goodman in the *Irish Times*, Mary E. Daly claimed that the “story of Casement’s Amazon expedition has already been told by his biographers ... Goodman adds little that is new”.[\[14\]](#) On the contrary, Goodman’s work is important because it accentuates the integrity of Casement’s investigation and repositions it within the

much greater narrative of anti-slavery history without falling into the mire of epistemic murk which is still so over-stimulated by the confusion concerning Casement's sexuality. Through this history it is possible to see how those who have wished to know about Casement have been obstructed from understanding the facts or fallen short with their research, which, in some cases, renders them unconscious collaborators in the continuing production of epistemic murk.

Thankfully, Goodman leaves the aggravated controversy over the Black Diaries to a few dismissive sentences at the end of the book. The fact that three of the four diaries coincide with Casement's Amazon adventures bothers him not. They are ignored as sources and relegated to the hostile propaganda entanglement informing Casement's trial and the bitter and twisted history wars fought over his reputation. However, since these documents continue to provoke lurid fascination, a few comments are appropriate.

Since their partial release in 1959 the Black Diaries have served as a deterrent by scrambling Casement's meaning on three levels. First, they have blocked public understanding of the official investigations he conducted into the Congo and Amazon atrocities. Second, they have contributed towards silencing the revolutionary project he provoked. In the moral insurrection which Roger Casement and Alice Stopford Green organised, the capture and occupation of the moral high ground was vital to the integrity of their cause. Through discrediting Casement a key intellectual component of the Irish revolution was disabled, and a good deal of international sympathy for the cause of Irish independence was thereby lost. Third, they have helped foster homophobic anxieties as is evidenced by the offensive and abusive nature of the lingering controversy.

Of course, this analysis is unrecognisable to those unable to see beyond the official version of events, or to question the infallibility of the official archive. Eventually, deconstruction of the Black Diaries' debate will reveal the political crisis at the heart of Irish history and the inability of Irish revisionist historians to tolerate revised interpretations which cut against the grain of their own embedded politics and imposed orthodoxies.

Norman Cohn (1915-2007), the historian of eschatology and millenarianism, remarked to me some years ago that Britain had to hang Casement, they had no option, "he knew too much". When this comment is placed in the context of Casement's highly damaging revelations and allegations, published in Germany, after the outbreak of war – an aspect of his life that his biographers have preferred to leave alone – then Cohn's comment

makes good sense. Cohn is widely remembered for his classic study *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, (written, incidentally, when working as a lecturer in Ireland). This was followed by his exposure of one of several historical forgeries of the pre-First World War period, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. When questioned about the Black Diaries, Cohn remained open about the possibility of forgery. Cohn's life's work examining genocide – he was instrumental behind the founding of the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies – had made him acutely aware of the intense and divisive politics surrounding atrocity claims. Atrocities, genocide and crimes against humanity remain the most persistently divisive areas of history. The massacre of Armenians in Turkey, Japan's continuing refusal to acknowledge the Korean "Comfort women", the silencing of the Aboriginal voice in the national narrative of Australia are all examples of how the past continues to haunt the present. Belgium, too, is finally starting to face up to the use of the memory hole in the diffusion of its colonial history. Recent historiography has demonstrated how long and hard Belgian diplomacy fought to maintain and disseminate a positive view of Leopold II's Congo Free State.[\[15\]](#)

When placed in the environment of the atrocity they claim to describe, the politics of the Black Diaries become deeply suspect. Archival releases of the 1990s suggest that Ireland had to embrace the Black Diaries as part of the secret diplomacy behind the Irish Free State treaty. But, as Martin Luther King commented, no lie can live forever. That it has taken non-Irish historians and intellectuals like Goodman to throw the most disinterested and scholarly light on Casement, further reveals the abusive nature of the controversy. Reflecting on the writing of Irish history in 1978, F. S. L. Lyons wrote:

The question about the past is simply this have we in our entanglement with history locked ourselves into a hall of distorting mirrors so grotesque that we can no longer distinguish the realities of what has happened in this island from the myths we have chosen to weave about certain symbolic events?[\[16\]](#)

If, as Lyons suggests, there are cultural constraints involved in the writing of Irish history, then it is no wonder there is a lingering reluctance to clarify the distortions which disclose inconvenient truths. In Ireland, the discipline of history remains, for the most part, remarkably traditional in its empirical approach and ignores the possibilities of

understanding difference through critical and theoretical departures. Not until Casement is thoroughly examined using the instruments of deconstruction will his ghost be finally exorcised and the Black Diaries discarded into the dustbin of history.

The question of distorting myths comes into focus when the clash between history and memory is scrutinised. In the analysis of memory a fundamental distinction is made between those who describe a person or event from direct experience compared to a memory which evolves across a much longer period of time among generations who have to negotiate the past for the requirements of the present. Memory is a palimpsest, constituted by multiple interpretations and imposed and superimposed readings. The de-remembering and re-remembering of Roger Casement is a good way of understanding how such memories mutate and collide. Casement's relevance to Irish modernity has been almost exclusively about his sexuality. From his status as a straightforward homosexual or gay man he has been variously recast and reclassified more recently as paederast, paedophile and sex tourist. Such readings and terminologies make no sense when situated beside the comments of those who actually knew Casement.

One of the most evocative descriptions of Casement from someone who knew him from the political world he inhabited and was also present at his trial was the poet and community worker, Eva Gore-Booth, sister of the revolutionary Countess Markiewicz. She wrote in the months after his execution, "it is easy to see how the long years of selfless devotion and affectionate friendships had brought him [Casement] into harmony with the unseen purposes of the universe, and very near to the Divine meaning of human life."[\[17\]](#) In the current confusion over Casement's identity it is hard to decode what Gore-Booth meant by this almost mystical description of the man. Some sense might be discerned from an entry in his journal for Monday 6 November 1910, as Casement prepared to leave the headquarters of Arana's rubber company in La Chorrera

... I looked up from the verandah to the Eastern sky – and saw, to my amazement, an arc of light across the dark, starless heaven. For a moment I did not realise what it was – then I saw it – a lunar rainbow – a perfect arch of light in the night. The moon was in the West – with clouds and a clear sky round her in the East, obscure sky and coming rain – and this wondrous, white, perfect bow spanning the dark. I called Fox, Bell all of them – everyone came – none had ever before seen such a sight. It was

about 7.30 – as near as could be – and as we looked at the perfect arch, curving from forested hill to forested hill right across the Eastern heavens, the rain began to gather over it. It was slowly dissipated – broadening and fading away. We watched it for nearly ten minutes. I take it to be a good omen – an omen of peace and augury of good – that God is still there – looking down on the sins and crimes of the children of men – hating the sin and loving the sinner. He will come yet to these poor beings – and out of the night a voice speaks. I shall not sell the great question of the Indians and their hopes of freedom for this mess of pottage for the handful of blackmen. These shall get their rights, too – but they shall come as rights – freely granted – and I shall not be the agent of silence, but I hope of the voice of freedom.[\[18\]](#)

In this passage he very clearly connects the language of rights to the aspiration for freedom – an argument which dominates his final speech from the dock. Casement's view of the Irish nation was not of the narrow gauge type, which many have rejected for its own inbuilt set of prejudices and phobias. For Casement, Irish freedom required a grassroots and paradigmatic shift in the very notion of human interaction and the individual's relationship to those dispossessed by modernization and the systems which destroy agency. Like other women and men of his time, he dreamed of an Ireland which would arise in opposition to the insatiability, war-mongering and secrecy determining imperial hegemony. Some may dismiss his view as utopian, but Casement lived and performed his dream and dedicated his life to defending the oppressed, subverting strategies of domination and fighting for freedom. To the bitter end, he never vacillated from his belief that such an Ireland was possible and, indeed, necessary to balance the tyrannies born from imperial ambition.

Such a position has served neither the interests of the British state, nor the Irish republic, nor the splintered political gamesmanship of Northern Ireland. It is now possible to track the intentional manipulation of the events of the Putumayo atrocities and how they have served the interests of different ruling elites. There has been a discreet connivance to isolate Casement, by refashioning him in an image which renders him unacceptable either for his sexuality, his pro-German sympathies or his empathy for the dispossessed. De Valera's assumption that Casement's reputation was safe in the hearts of the Irish people has proved erroneous. It is refreshing, therefore, that Goodman largely strips Casement of his Irish

status and concentrates on his universality and humanity – an approach which transcends the agreed fictions of the Anglo-Irish history wars.

A century on from when the story was first brought to public attention in Europe, the history of the Putumayo atrocities has become the most integrated investigation of the colonial encounter since the landfall by Christopher Columbus in 1492. There is a growing corpus of published primary sources, controversial critical analysis and accessible secondary material. The history links scholars in Colombia, Peru, Brazil, the U.S., Ireland, Germany and Britain and possesses stimulating interdisciplinary potential. It is, however, the global nature of this narrative which makes it both contemporary and topical. The history of rubber is integral to the advent of globalisation, not merely in terms of how it connected the centre and periphery through communication, information and markets, but in how it briefly galvanised governments with power and influence to realise their responsibility for a world ravaged by the violent potential of unregulated capital.

In his time, no one did more to bring the periphery into the metropolitan centre than Roger Casement. One of the ironic conjunctures in this story happened in July 1914. In that month, Lord Lytton presented a Slavery Bill before parliament which sought to make some radical changes to the Slave Trade Acts. Thanks to the Putumayo investigation there was a prominent clause on directorial responsibility: any company dealing in slaves anywhere in the world could not plead ignorance and could be found guilty of negligence. But the bill was read once and then evaporated. By then Casement was in the U.S. making inflammatory speeches against the British Empire while his co-conspirator, Erskine Childers, was steering the *Asgard* towards Howth with the first shipment of guns for the Irish Volunteers.

The passing of time has been necessary for consciousness to unfurl in different ways; for the inner histories and significances of what Casement witnessed and described to be understood; for the archive to be unlocked and official secrets declassified; for a space of tolerance to be opened and for some of the prejudice to fall away. There is, inevitably, still a good deal of embedded opposition to understanding the story differently, but the measured, precision of Goodman's narrative will awaken those who have retained the capacity for free thinking – in an era when the collective crime of indifference prevails – to see through to the other side. Anyone wishing to understand the extraordinary life of Roger Casement should leave the shelf of flawed biographies alone and turn instead to this book, which unmask the

deeper identity of one of the most ineradicable individuals ever to stand up to the evil that men do.

[1] Balder Olden (1882-1949), writer and journalist, his early aspiration to be an actor was ruined when half his face was paralysed in a duel. He was imprisoned by the British in Tanzania during the First World War and wrote critically about colonial rule in Africa. He fled Berlin after the Nazis came to power.

[2] Balder Olden, *Paradiese des Teufels* (Berlin, 1933); 2nd edition (Berlin, 1977). The first edition appeared in the same year that works by Jews and humanists were burnt in the streets of Berlin.

[3] Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Basingstoke, 1998). A 2nd edition of Hochschild's book, published in 2006 contained a supplementary chapter 'Looking Back: A Personal Afterword' reflecting on the controversy resulting from the publication of his book in 1998.

[4] G.H. Knott (ed.) *Trial of Sir Roger Casement* (Edinburgh, 1917) p.204.

[5] P.H. Fawcett, *Exploration Fawcett* (London, 1953) p. 58.

[6] Kevin Grant, *A Civilised Savagery: Britain and the New Slaverries in Africa, 1884-1926* (New York, 2005).

[7] E.D. Morel, *Red Rubber: The Story of the Rubber Slave Trade Flourishing on the Congo in the Year of Grace 1906* (London, 1906)

[8] Angus Mitchell (ed.), *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement* (London; Anaconda Editions, 1997)

[9] James Bryce (1838-1922) The leading legal historian of the age and a key architect of the Anglo-American 'special relationship'. Bryce became the object for a fierce attack by Casement because of his role in the investigation of German atrocities in Belgium in 1914/15.

[10] Francesco Turvasi, *Giovanni Genocchi and the Indians of South America 1911-1913* (Roma, 1988)

[11] Thomas Whiffen, *The North-West Amazon: Notes of Some Months Spent Among Cannibal Tribes* (London, 1915).

[12] 'From "Coffin Ship" to Atlantic Greyhound"' was published in successive editions of *The Irish Review*, February-April 1914, under the pseudonym 'An Irish American'.

[13] Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago, 1987) p.xiii.

[14] *Irish Times*, 17 October 2009.

[15] See Guy Vanthemsche, 'The Historiography of Belgian Colonialism in the Congo', in Csaba Lévai, *Europe and the World in European Historiography* (Pisa, 2006) Available at: http://www.kevsam.com/mmw5paper/2/Historiography_Belgian_Colonialism_in_the_Congo.pdf

[16] Ciaran Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism* (Dublin, 1994) p. 88.

[17] Geoffrey de C. Parmiter, Roger Casement (London, 1936) pp. 354-359. Originally published in *The Catholic Bulletin*

[18] *Amazon Journal*, 362-363.

- See more at: <http://www.drb.ie/essays/against-the-demon#sthash.NAxPLAN7.dpuf>

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