**[Response to Battersby Irish Times interview with Mario Vargas Llosa on 2 July 2012 - letter unpublished]**

See later 2016 article by Eileen Battersby: <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/roger-casement-a-romantic-defender-of-the-oppressed-1.2743055>

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Dear Editor,

Eileen Battersby in her interview with Mario Vargas Llosa (2 July 'view from the margins') stated that Joseph Conrad declined to sign a clemency plea for Roger Casement as the “Polish-born [author] had settled in England and refused to support Casement for fear of offending the British authorities.”

This is inaccurate and somewhat patronising. Conrad had his own strong views on Casement’s character, and on Irish separatism, informed not least by his own anti-German views and the fact that his son Borys was serving at the front.

Casement’s close friend, the sculptor Herbert Ward, similarly had a son in the army. His antagonism was so strong that in 1915 he set about legally changing the name of a younger son embarrassingly named ‘Roger Casement Ward.’

Conrad had no fear of the London establishment, rather he shared its outlook, expressing his views forcefully in correspondence with the Irish-American lawyer and art collector John Quinn who also knew Casement. Conrad never commented directly on the diaries, copy pages of which Quinn was eventually shown and authenticated. But Conrad, unlike Quinn, wasn’t going to assist a man whose actions he so opposed.

Of Casement, Conrad famously and accurately wrote on 24 May 1916, “He was a good companion but already in Africa I judged that he was a man, properly speaking, of no mind at all. I don't mean stupid. I mean that he was all emotion. By emotional force (Congo report, Putumayo - etc) he made his way, and sheer emotionalism has undone him. A creature of sheer temperament.”

In the same letter he provided his perspective on the Easter Rising, “The S.F. outburst has thrown Irish affairs into lurid relief. But that's only momentary. It has saddened me but has not shaken my confidence in the future of Anglo-Irish relations. One only wonders in one's grief, what it was all for? With Britain smashed and the German fleet riding the seas, the very shadow of Irish independence would have passed away. The Island Republic (if that is what they wanted) would have been merely a strongly held German outpost - a despised stepping stone towards the final aim of the Weltpolitik. I needn't labour the theme. You can see it perhaps better than I do.”

On 11 July, coldly, it was, “No, I don't suppose Casement will swing in any case. As to the military action in Ireland one may regret it; but a state grappling for life with such an adversary as Germany is not likely to meet a stab in the back with a gentle remonstrance. In any other country it would have been a thousand times worse. I share your belief that Casement's hands are clean as far as actual German money is concerned. But that is a mere distinction which can have no bearing on the legal aspect of the case. For what he wanted to bring about would have been necessarily financed for the most part with German money. As to German blood I imagine they would not have had any to spare in that quarter. It was a mere intrigue; and they would have seen Ireland drained to the last drop of blood with perfect equanimity as long as it helped their military action on the continent forward an inch or two.”

By 16 October 1918, with Borys still alive despite three years at the front, Conrad wrote, “I will tell you frankly that we don't think much about Ireland now. As long as they didn't actually and materially add to the deadly dangers of our situation we were satisfied...I, who have seen England ever since the early eighties putting on the penitent's shirt in her desire for conciliation, and throwing millions of her money with both hands to Ireland in her remorse for all the old wrongs, and getting nothing in exchange but undying hostility, don't wonder at her weariness.

The Irishmen would not be conciliated. That's a fact. And I don't presume to judge whether they were right or not. I only know that they took the money and went on cursing the oppressor with renewed zest. Their able men scrupled not to make their careers in England and exploit all the advantages that arose from a connection with a great and prosperous empire. I have seen those things, I, who also spring from an oppressed race where oppression was not a matter of history but a crushing fact in the daily life of all individuals, made still more bitter by declared hatred and contempt. A very different thing from an historical sense of wrong and a blundering administration, which last I will admit if you like.”

Polish-born he may have been, but Conrad was British in respect of Irish separatism and wedded to Realpolitik as any German.

Yours sincerely

Jeffrey Dudgeon

**JOSEPH CONRAD ON ROGER CASEMENT, THE 1916 RISING AND IRISH NATIONALISM**

**Article length response to Eileen Battersby quoting Conrad’s correspondence with John Quinn**

In an Irish Times interview with Mario Vargas Llosa (2 July 2012 – ‘view from the margins’) Eileen Battersby recorded the Nobel Prize for Literature winner and author of ‘The Dream of the Celt,’ on a recent Dublin visit as saying:

‘“I knew nothing about him; the first time I came upon him was while reading a biography of Conrad. Then there he was, this Casement, the man Conrad told that without him he would never had written Heart of Darkness. I said to myself that I had to find out about him.”

Admittedly, Conrad’s subsequent behaviour, in refusing to sign a petition pleading for clemency for Casement, was inexcusable. Vargas Llosa sighs sympathetically. “I too was most disappointed in Conrad.”’

She then stated he declined to sign as the “Polish-born Conrad had settled in England and refused to support Casement for fear of offending the British authorities.”

This is inaccurate and somewhat patronising. Conrad had his own strong views on Casement’s character, and on Irish separatism, informed by a number of realities, not least his own aversion to Germany and the fact that his son Borys was serving at the front.

Casement’s close friend, the sculptor Herbert Ward, similarly had a son in the army. His antagonism was so strong that as early as 1915, with one son killed and another a prisoner of war, he set about legally changing the name of his third son from the embarrassing ‘Roger Casement Ward’ (Casement was his godfather) to ‘Rodney Sanford Ward.’

Conrad had no fear of offending the London establishment; rather he shared its outlook, expressing his views forcefully in correspondence (now in the New York Public Library) with the Irish-American lawyer and art and manuscript collector John Quinn who also knew Casement. Ward and Quinn were both Francophiles which Casement was definitely not.

Conrad did not comment directly on the diaries, copy pages of which Quinn was eventually shown by a British diplomat in Washington, and which he authenticated. But Conrad, unlike Quinn, wasn’t going to assist a man whose actions he so opposed.

On 13 June 1890, Conrad had noted in his diary after they first met at Matadi in the Congo, “Made the acquaintance of Mr Roger Casement, which I should consider as a great pleasure under any circumstances and now it becomes a positive piece of luck. Thinks, speaks well, most intelligent and very sympathetic.”

In December 1903, he famously wrote to Robert Cunninghame Graham, “I send you two letters I had from a man called Casement, premising that I knew him first in the Congo just 12 years ago. Perhaps you’ve heard or seen in print his name. He’s a protestant Irish man, pious too. But so was Pizzaro. For the rest I can assure you that he is a limpid personality. There is a touch of the conquistador in him too; for I have seen him start off into an unspeakable wilderness swinging a crookhandled stick for all weapon, with two bulldogs, Paddy (white) and Biddy (Brindle) at his heels and a Loanda boy carrying a bundle for all company. A few months afterwards it so happened that I saw him come out again, a little leaner, a little browner, with his sticks, dogs, and Loanda boy, and quietly serene as though he had been for a stroll in a park. […] I have always thought some particle of La Casas’ soul had found refuge in his indefatigable body. [...] He could tell you things! Things I have tried to forget, things I never did know. He has had as many years of Africa as I had months – almost.”

Later of Casement, Conrad also famously, wrote (to Quinn on 24 May 1916), “He was a good companion but already in Africa I judged that he was a man, properly speaking, of no mind at all. I don't mean stupid. I mean that he was all emotion. By emotional force (Congo report, Putumayo – etc) he made his way, and sheer emotionalism has undone him. A creature of sheer temperament – a truly tragic personality, all but the greatness of which he had not a trace. Only vanity. But in the Congo it was not visible yet.”

This was a remarkably accurate assessment except perhaps for the vanity. It was however one made in hindsight, as Conrad admitted.

He prefaced this view by saying, “I met Casement for the first time in the Congo in 1890. For some three weeks he lived in the same room in the Matadi Station of the Belgian Societé du Haut Congo. He was rather reticent as to the exact character of his connection with it, but the work he was busy about then was recruiting labour. He knew the coast languages well. I went with him several times on short expeditions to hold 'palavers' with the neighbouring village chiefs. The object of them was procuring porters for the company's caravans from Matadi to Leopoldville – or rather to Kinchassa (or Stanley Pool). Then I went into the interior to take up my command of the Stern-Wheel "Roi de Belges" and he apparently remained on the coast.

Next time we met was in 1896 in London, by chance, at a dinner of the Johnson Society. We went away from there together to the Sports Club and talked there till 3 in the morning. I asked him down to Pent Farm (where we lived then). He came for the night. Lord Salisbury had taken him up or was going to take him up. Certain liberal circles were making rather a pet of him: well-connected Irishman, Protestant Home-ruler, of romantic aspect – and so on.

In 1911 (I think – but anyhow before the Putumayo atrocities Report) we came upon each other in Surrey St. Strand. He was more gaunt than ever and his eyes still more sunk into his head. There was a strange austerity in his aspect. He told me he was British Consul in Rio de Janeiro on leave home for 3 months. We parted after 5 minutes conversation and I never even heard of him (except from Putumayo Report) till I read the news of him being in Germany. We never talked politics. I didn't think he had really any. A Home-ruler accepting Lord Salisbury's patronage couldn't be taken very seriously.”

In the same May 1916 letter he provided his perspective on the Easter Rising, “The S.F. outburst has thrown Irish affairs into lurid relief. But that's only momentary. It has saddened me but has not shaken my confidence in the future of Anglo-Irish relations. One only wonders in one's grief, what it was all for? With Britain smashed and the German fleet riding the seas, the very shadow of Irish independence would have passed away. The Island Republic (if that is what they wanted) would have been merely a strongly held German outpost – a despised stepping stone towards the final aim of the Welt-Politik. I needn't labour the theme. You can see it perhaps better than I do.”

On 29 June John Quinn replied agreeing, “I was greatly interested in what you said about Casement. Confidentially, I made my plea for him in a direct communication to the Foreign Office sent through the British Ambassador here. He won't swing. I knew a great many of the young Sinn Feiners, particularly Pearse, the two McDonoughs, Plunkett and Connolly. Of course the attempt to found a republic was a ridiculous, childish thing. But Maxwell's shooting of them, with the tacit approval of Asquith and without any protest from Redmond, was one of the colossal blunders of the war. England had a perfectly spectacular, perfectly dramatic opportunity to show that there was a new spirit there, and she threw it away.

Casement is not a profound thinker, either on politics or anything else. He is all emotion and sentiment and temperament, but honest and honorable. I am perfectly certain that he never touched a penny of German money. I believe that he is a man of the utmost austerity and purity in his personal life. And the damn insinuations that came out of England that they had something on him in the way of degeneration of some kind, were too filthy and nauseating to even think of. I am positive that his personal life was clean.

You will observe that I don't use the word "pure". That word has been sadly overused, overworked, by and about and on behalf of women and ladies and girls, who even if technically pure, had unclean minds. There isn't much choosing between a woman who is technically chaste but with a corrupt mind and who keeps her chastity for the highest bidder and the clean whore. The chief difference is that the technically chaste is a better trader and drives a longer bargain. But we have drifted a long way from Casement.”

On 11 July, coldly, the Conrad reply was, “No, I don't suppose Casement will swing in any case. As to the military action in Ireland one may regret it; but a state grappling for life with such an adversary as Germany is not likely to meet a stab in the back with a gentle remonstrance. In any other country it would have been a thousand times worse.

I share your belief that Casement's hands are clean as far as actual German money is concerned. But that is a mere distinction which can have no bearing on the legal aspect of the case. For what he wanted to bring about would have been necessarily financed for the most part with German money. As to German blood I imagine they would not have had any to spare in that quarter. It was a mere intrigue; and they would have seen Ireland drained to the last drop of blood with perfect equanimity as long as it helped their military action on the continent forward an inch or two.”

By 16 October 1918, with Borys still alive after three years at the front – if shell shocked and gassed – Conrad wrote again, “I will tell you frankly that we don't think much about Ireland now. As long as they didn't actually and materially add to the deadly dangers of our situation we were satisfied. I am speaking now of the bulk of the people, not of our politicians. We had asked the Irish to come to some arrangements among themselves. They couldn't or wouldn't; and then the active, living interest in the problem died out. Even what America thinks of all this has ceased to occupy our thoughts. I, who have seen England ever since the early eighties putting on the penitent's shirt in her desire for conciliation, and throwing millions of her money with both hands to Ireland in her remorse for all the old wrongs, and getting nothing in exchange but undying hostility, don't wonder at her weariness.

The Irishmen would not be conciliated. That's a fact. And I don't presume to judge whether they were right or not. I only know that they took the money and went on cursing the oppressor with renewed zest. Their able men scrupled not to make their careers in England and exploit all the advantages that arose from a connection with a great and prosperous empire.

I have seen those things, I, who also spring from an oppressed race where oppression was not a matter of history but a crushing fact in the daily life of all individuals, made still more bitter by declared hatred and contempt. A very different thing from an historical sense of wrong and a blundering administration, which last I will admit if you like. But what administration could be free from so called blunders when dealing with a people that being begged on bended knees to come to some understanding amongst themselves is incapable or unwilling to agree on the form of its free institutions.

I can't help asking myself, if Gladstone's Home Rule Bill had passed what our position would be now, with an independent power (for it would have come to that by this) with an army and a navy just across St. George's Channel, still nursing a sense of historical wrong as their dearest possession and chumming up with Germany in sheer lightness of heart and for the sake of a jolly good fight.

However they will get their independence, I haven't the slightest doubt, in some way or another; but I suppose it won't matter very much then, because by that time President Wilson's Millennium will reign on earth and even the carrying of walking sticks will be strictly prohibited amongst the members of the League of Nations.

And Ireland will still remain discontented. For what's the use of independence without the power to break England's head. However the genius of a people will out; and I have an idea that the Angels on the Central Committee running the League of Nations will have their hands full with the pacification of Ireland. It will be the only state that will not be weary of fighting, on the whole round earth.”

Polish-born he may have been, but Conrad was very British in respect of his attitude to Irish separatism yet wedded to his own realpolitik.