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**An Irishman's Diary**

[[](http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/images/2012/0418/1224314875636_1.jpg?ts=1334743319)'Roger Casement had witnessed similar atrocities before, in Africa. Indeed, it was his investigation of abuses in the Congo rubber plantations that recommended him as the British government's investigator in Peru.' Photograph: Central Press/Getty Images](http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/images/2012/0418/1224314875636_1.jpg?ts=1334743319)

FRANK McNALLY

AMID the plethora of major centenaries this year, the 100th anniversary of a report into the “Putumayo atrocities” may not make many headlines in these parts. As the name hints, it concerned events in Latin America: Peru, to be exact. Even so, what began in a remote corner of the Amazonian jungle was to have major consequences on this side of the Atlantic too, not least for the report’s author, a certain Roger Casement.

The horrors of Putumayo were a product of a 30-year period known as the first “Rubber Boom”: a phenomenon created, in its turn, by the advent of the motor car and related technologies in the 1880s.

Latex-producing trees – then found only in the Amazon and Central Africa – had had their uses for centuries. Now, however, with the need to smooth the wheels of European and US commerce, they would become suddenly and hugely lucrative. Fortunes were made in a hurry.

Moreover, since the latex trees were far from the centres of western civilisation, those fortunes could be made without fretting about such inconveniences as labour laws.

Werner Herzog’s 1982 film Fitzcarraldo is a relatively benign account of the rubber fever, notwithstanding the half-crazy character of its title, played by Klaus Kinski (and based loosely on a real-life, Peruvian-Irish explorer, Isiais Fermin Fitzcarrald).

In Herzog’s version, Fitzcarraldo’s dream is to build an opera house in the Amazon city of Iquitos, funded by a tract of rubber-trees to which he has bought rights. The problem is that the trees are all-but inaccessible. So to harvest them, he must first drag a 300-ton steam ship across a mountain. In which heroic but doomed cause, he enlists the voluntary help of local tribes.

The reality of Peruvian rubber extraction, in Casement’s experience, was both more prosaic and more horrific. In effect, as he reported, the local overseers of a company listed on the London Stock Exchange had developed the habit of press-ganging indigenous workers into slavery.

The rubber harvesters were not paid, or in many cases even fed. They were regularly flogged and branded. When they failed to meet their ever-rising quotas, they could be tortured, maimed, and even killed.

Half-starved children sometimes had to carry their own weight in rubber and, if they collapsed from weakness, risked being finished off with a bullet in the head.

Casement had witnessed similar atrocities before, in Africa. Indeed, it was his investigation of abuses in the Congo rubber plantations that recommended him as the British government’s investigator in Peru.

The difference was that, whereas the African report exposed King Leopold II of Belgium – who had been profiteering from the Congo under the cover of a supposedly humanitarian mission – the Putumayo inquiry embarrassed some of Britain’s most respected establishment figures, who sat on the company’s board and took its generous fees while claiming to know nothing.

Despite which, the report earned Casement a knighthood. And – for three or four years at least – it secured his fame in Britain, where in 1912 the London Times agreed that he had again proved himself one of the great humanitarians of his age.

**THE PUTUMAYO** centenary will coincide with the appearance in English of Mario Vargas Llosa’s 2010 novel The Dream of the Celt. Originally published in Spanish, and as such already a bestseller, the book is a fictionalised account of Casement’s life. But it is also meticulously researched, its Nobel Prize-winning author having visited Ireland and the Congo, among other key locations, and stays close to the historic record throughout.

The novel’s dominant theme is colonialism and its evils. In recreating Casement’s thoughts of the period, however, one of the questions Vargas Llosa inevitably had to deal with was the infamous diaries. Here he agrees with the latter-day consensus that the diaries are genuine, at least in the sense that Casement wrote them. But he also sides with a subset of the consensus: that they may not always have been factual.

In effect, the suggestion is that, along with the unfortunate habit of recording his homosexual encounters in brutal, mechanical detail, Casement had the even more unfortunate habit of recording his unrealised fantasies in the same way, as an auto-erotic aid.

Such embellishments may have cost him dearly, once he fell from grace in Britain. Certainly when, after his conviction for treason in 1916, a campaign for commutation of the sentence gathered strength, diary extracts were selectively circulated to mute the appeals for clemency.

There was a dark mockery in this of his greatest triumph. Five years earlier, after he finished his Putumayo report in March 1911, it was first circularised only in government and diplomatic circles, as a lever to influence policy. Not until July 1912 was it made public.

Whereupon, in Vargas Llosa’s words: “it produced an upheaval that, with London at its centre, advanced in concentric waves through all of Europe, the United States, and many other parts of the world”. Attempts to prosecute the guilty were less successful. But the Putumayo game was up, anyway. Share-prices plummeted. So did investment. And with the planting of latex trees in south-east Asia bringing new competition, the rubber-boom city of Iquitos went into sharp decline.

As Vargas Llosa puts it: “In a few years, it again became a remote, forgotten town in the heart of the Amazonian plain.” As for Casement, close observance of colonialism at its rawest only strengthened his already militant views on what needed to happen in Ireland. Sadly, the certainties that had guided him on his Foreign Office missions would be no match for the murky waters of war-time intrigue, nor indeed for the conspiracists within the IRB. For good or bad, however, the winding road that had taken Casement to the Congo and Peru would soon lead him, without the German guns he had hoped to bring home, to lonely Banna Strand.