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**REVIEW BY MARGARET O’CALLAGHAN**

**Sir Roger Casement’s Heart of Darkness: the 1911 documents by Angus Mitchell
(Irish Manuscripts Commission, E24.50)
ISBN 1874280983

Casement
Angus Mitchell
(Haus, £8.99)
ISBN 1904341411

Roger Casement: the Black Diaries with a study of his background, sexuality and Irish political life
Jeffrey Dudgeon
(Belfast Press, £25)
ISBN 0953928721**

Most of the documents—official and unofficial letters, extended accounts for the Foreign Office supplemented by notes, annotations and linking commentary—in Angus Mitchell’s extraordinary volume concern Roger Casement’s diplomatic efforts to bring to book key individuals within the Peruvian Amazon Company for murderous exploitation and decimation of the native Boras, Andokes, Huitotos and other peoples in the Putamayo tributary of the Amazon and its environs in 1911. This covers the period of his second sojourn as a British consular investigator in the area (as consul general of Brazil he had been in Rio, Sao Paolo and Iquitos previously) and develops the story opened up by Mitchell’s earlier volume of Casement’s 1910 writings, The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement, published by Lilliput in 1997. The destruction of huge numbers of these peoples through the rubber trade and the forced debt labour or peonage on which it depends proceeds apace as Casement struggles to indict specific individuals for the system of labour they run on floggings, gratuitously imposed malnutrition, torture, rape, summary executions, and long and murderous forced marches. He had been in these ‘godforsaken hell-haunted wilds’ for six months of the previous year investigating these rubber barons. This volume opens as he returns to London at the start of 1911 to prepare transcriptions of interviews with Barbadian employees of the company who were literally slave-drivers.
As he wrote to his friend, the benevolent philanthropist William Cadbury, in May 1911:

The humanitarian world has been accustomed to think two things that are both wrong. One was that slavery was an institution that applied solely or almost entirely to the Black or Negro races—and the other was that slavery ceased to exist with the Civil War in the States and the abolition in Brazil.
‘Slavery’ meant ‘Negro Slavery’ and outside of that there was nothing of slavery in the world worth troubling much about. Slavery is rampant today in many parts of the world—and I believe has taken on to itself a considerable expansion in recent years. It is not and never has been confined to the Negro races—and there are today worse forms of slavery and its attendant barbarities among the Indians of the American continent than, I believe, ever prevailed in Africa.
What I have seen there on the Putamayo exceeds in horror, in downright ghastliness anything I dreamed of before, and the state of things on the Putamayo was merely a somewhat more acute form of what goes on over an extended area of the Upper Amazon forest.

He also writes a long and very detailed, if lurid, official report for the Foreign Office, which was completed in March. As Angus Mitchell’s magnificent trawl of documents makes clear, Casement was on terms of friendly professional acquaintanceship with many of the key Foreign Office officials, though to my ears the letters written to Grey are of the ‘Dear Minister’ variety. But this documentary cornucopia gathered by Mitchell scotches a frequently propounded view that Casement was a marginalised, cranky, peripheral, lowly consular official. It was on the basis of the 1911 report—not, however, published until the following year—and his enduring profile as a humanitarian public voice of the Congo, still visible through his involvement in the Morel Testimonial campaign of that year, that Sir Edward Grey recommended him for a knighthood later that year.
For Casement the Barbadians who had been brought in to work and drive the captured Indians to tap the rubber were pawns in a system arrestingly similar in underlying structure to the slavery and genocide he had witnessed in the Congo in 1903, again as an investigating British consular official. His sense of both horrors was informed by a long perspective. He had, after all, originally gone to Africa in his mid-teens in the early 1880s. By the second trip of July 1911, however, while remaining (falsely) optimistic about his capacity to bring the key perpetrators of atrocity to book, deeper doubts about the possibilities of ameliorating a global phenomenon shine through his writings. E.D. Morel, his close friend and fellow campaigner on the Congo, asked Casement to advise the benevolent industrialist W.H. Lever, architect of the benign Ruskinian workers’ idyll of Port Sunlight in Cheshire, on his plans to go to the Congo. Casement wrote back, in a letter that had largely been about the recently published book Barbarous Mexico, which he was pushing nearly as hard as Alice Stopford Green’s Irish Nationality all through 1911:

I could not do much but talk my views which may not be worth having—I am sure (from all I hear) he means well and intends to do good on the Congo—but the conditions are strange to him and his enterprise may get beyond him. He may get out of his depth with a Diaz-Leopold administration owning the soil. He won’t be there himself and half his staff will be Belgian. There are good Belgians and bad—but the maxim of Belgian rule on the Congo up to this has been—‘The native has no rights’—That’s how Mexican and Peruvian slavery prevail over the immaculate paper constitutions of these countries [my emphasis]—‘The Indian has no rights’—a government founded on slavery dies hard—and just as Belgian rule in Congoland has been built up on a denial of native rights and on theft of native land so it will be long, I fear, before good can come out of that evil. I would by no means say to Lever not to go to the Congo or not to take the concession even—it is too late now anyway. He’ll go whatever you do or say. Your task should be to guide him right by friendly help and friendly criticism—not by hostile attack. Remember, men who are worth handling do much more for being handled quietly than for being trounced and driven.

As this letter indicates, the Casement who emerges in these pages is a far more complex figure than the simple crusader against all evil. He has a tragically acute grasp of the economic inevitabilities contingent on concessionary capitalism, on the Amazon in particular. Even as he bemoans the escape of Arana’s henchmen from the allegedly avenging powers of the Peruvian legal process as prompted by the Foreign Office, he reluctantly advises the reconstruction of the Peruvian Amazon Company on reformed lines. If a British company, potentially regulated through legislation initiated as a result of his reports, does not remain, then the unregulated brutality of the protean Arana brothers and their epigones will emerge in other company forms and other locations on the Amazon. He sees Peru and Columbia as states erected on the still naked skeletons of slavery, and their press and legal systems as instruments of the financial interests that drive them. Casement’s trips to President Taft and the intercession of James Bryce do not disguise the fact that effectively the South American battle is a hopelessly unequal one. His writings here on the damage to ways of life, historic communities, languages and a lost innocence are laments for a world literally being destroyed before his eyes.
Two vast rivers—the Congo and the Amazon—lay at the centre of exploitation in the last years of the nineteenth century. In the Congo in 1903 Casement believed that brutality and genocide were appalling by-products of an expansionary trade; by the time he gets to the Amazon he is beginning to see them as its ineluctable consequences. Some changes were effected in one specific company, through various devices some benevolent missionaries were brought in to stand between the rolling maw of the rubber trade and the people in its path, but the documentary evidence he so splendidly provides effectively belies Angus Mitchell’s argument that Casement’s report drove the British government to action. The establishment of the Roberts Commission of Enquiry in 1912 may be described as elucidating the primary responsibility of commissions throughout the ages—removing a vital subject into an anteroom of history. The movement of the rubber trade to Malaya through imperial botanical relocation was a tribute to the superior convenience of a plantation system over a natural one. The reprieve for the Amazon Indians was neither long nor enduring, as Angus Mitchell clearly attests.
On his way out to South America in August 1911 Casement writes what later becomes part 1 of Ireland, Germany and the Freedom of the Seas. Mitchell says that ‘during those months when the political and social uncertainties had openly erupted as a consequence of the constitutional crisis opening up over Home Rule, he made that transition from cultural nationalist into revolutionary’.
I’m not so sure. The nature of the relationship between Casement’s career as a British consular official and as an Irish nationalist is complex and dialectical, not linear and sequential. His notion that he discovered himself again as an Irishman up in the lonely Congo forests suggests this dialectical connection, and it is probable that the 1910 trip may have deepened his sense of systemic imperial damage and heightened his reading of Irish history, particularly in the light of the company he kept in Belfast, Dublin and London. Also it would appear from the early poetry that Casement’s early and adolescent identification with the damage sustained by Gaelic Ireland in the seventeenth century remained powerfully embedded in his consciousness and conditioned his reading of other cultures.
At the Royal Irish Academy conference on Casement in May 2000 it became apparent that unless the vast amount of unpublished Casement material in various archives was brought into the light of day the attempt to assess Casement’s significance in Irish and world history could never get beyond the eternal and circular debate on the so-called Black Diaries. Casement was an extraordinarily prolific writer, and even though almost all of his diaries have been destroyed there are huge swathes of other materials available. Nobody has done more than Angus Mitchell to bring this material into published form. This volume is so dense that it cannot easily be assimilated. It is a vital primary source for all students of Casement, of the Belfast nationalist revival of the early 1900s, of South American history in the early twentieth century, and of the proto-history of globalisation. Mitchell’s lucid biography of Casement is the best short life that we have. It is informed by his own extensive research and the as yet unpublished proceedings of the 2000 Casement conference.
Jeffrey Dudgeon took the case to the European Court of Human Rights at Strasbourg that finally resulted in the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Northern Ireland in 1982. In this, another huge, idiosyncratic volume, in its own way a fascinating biography of Casement, he inserts and comments upon the texts of all of the so-called Black Diaries. Unlike Sawyer’s single black diary of a few years ago and the original late 1950s publications, Dudgeon’s text allows us to see these diaries in full. Dudgeon’s Casement is a gay icon and as such is presented as a potential role model for our times. Those sections of the book that contain the diary extracts are heavily interpolated by Jeff Dudgeon’s voice helpfully explaining all sexual actions in the jargon and practice of our times. It thus tells us as much about gay life in late twentieth-century Belfast as it does about its subject. Casement, as active homosexual chronicler and fantasist, is, for the author, a liberating and admirable figure.
Casement the nationalist is harder for Dudgeon to deal with. Hence we get another version of a B.L. Reid (an earlier biographer of Casement) style psychoanalytic reading of an individual with a central flaw, who is rendered somehow ‘unserious’ or psychologically inadequate because of it. Reversing Reid’s psychopathology of Casement, Dudgeon’s Casement is anchored by a carnivalesque and freewheeling homosexual being which is admirable, but disabled and fatally flawed by an Irish nationalism that is variously ascribed to bad genes, a feckless poor-relation father, a Catholic mother, a mother who died of cirrhosis of the liver allegedly caused by an alcoholism that is invoked without anything in the way of evidence.
Despite this tension at the heart of Dudgeon’s project there is much that is of interest here, particularly on aspects of Belfast and Antrim, and it is certainly worth reading. The author has gone through the archives and read them in the light of the Black Diaries. Jeff Dudgeon claims to have discovered the identity of Casement’s Belfast boyfriend. In this he merely reproduces the fairly dubious findings that I have seen on Kv intelligence files, parts of the case for Casement’s homosexuality being cobbled together by Hall and others in the six weeks before Casement’s death. The tracing of a bike to Millar Gordon was sufficient in 1916 to indicate that he was in fact Casement’s lover, and Dudgeon proceeds on the assumption that this is the case. His corroboration lies in the Black Diaries.
Of course it is clear that the issue of the Black Diaries will not go away. The Giles Report that claims to have definitively settled the issue of their authenticity has not done so. Again, it seems useful to let scholars working in the field believe what they will in this matter. In the meantime some serious scholarship on all of Casement’s other writings can continue. Eventually it will be in the context of an overall appreciation of his extensive work that the issue will be resolved. Lucy McDiarmid, one of the most astute analysts of Casement’s afterlife, would probably say that this core controversy will never go away. For historians it will always matter, not because Casement is better or worse if the Black Diaries are real or false but because he is different.

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