**Nobel winner Mario Vargas Llosa finds perfect protagonist in Roger Casement**

Peruvian author takes on staggering story of former British consul who was hanged for treason in 1916

* [Sam Jones](http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/samjones) and [Benedicte Page](http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/benedicte-page)
* [guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk), Monday 18 October 2010 19.19 BST



An undated photo of Roger Casement, who was tried for treason and hanged at Pentonville in 1916. Photograph: PA

The ghost of Roger Casement – martyr and traitor, liberator and predator – is once again beating on the door. The former British consul who died an Irish revolutionary has remained a persistently unquiet spirit in the 94 years since his life ended in a Pentonville prison noose, and Casement's knocks could soon prove deafening – thanks to the Peruvian-born winner of this year's Nobel prize for literature.

Casement's colourful life is the subject of [Mario Vargas Llosa](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/mario-vargas-llosa)'s forthcoming book, El sueño del celta (The Dream of the Celt), which will be published in Spanish on 3 November. The novel won't be available in English until early 2012, but its publisher, Faber, believes the combination of Vargas Llosa's Nobel prize and the ever-controversial Casement could prove irresistible.

Casement's story is staggering. Born in Dublin to a Protestant father and a Roman Catholic mother, he went on to become British consul in the Congo, where he was commissioned by the British government to examine forced labour in the Congo Free State. His report on the atrocities he witnessed contributed to Leopold II of Belgium's relinquishment of his colonial fiefdom.

A few years later, he travelled to Iquitos in northern Peru, from where he embarked on a similar investigation into the treatment of the Putumayo Indians by the Peruvian Amazon Company. After the publication of his findings, the British board of the company resigned.

Having cemented his establishment credentials by being knighted for his efforts in 1911, Casement eventually retired from diplomacy and dedicated himself to the Irish nationalist cause. After helping to found the Irish Volunteers, he went fundraising in the US and tried to persuade Germany, by then at war with England, to help create an independent [Ireland](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/ireland).

In April 1916, Casement was dropped off in County Kerry by a U-boat and arrested. When the Easter Rising began, he found himself in the Tower of London awaiting trial for treason.

He was defiant in the dock of the Old Bailey: "Self-government is our right; a thing no more to be doled out to us or withheld … than the right to feel the sun or smell the flowers or to love our kind," he said. But his words did no good, and he was hanged at Pentonville on 3 August 1916.

Any chances of clemency were dashed by the leaking of the so-called "Black Diaries", which revealed that not only was Casement a traitor, he had indulged his taste for teenage boys and young men on his travels. His naked body was thrown into an open grave and blanketed with quicklime. Casement's remains were finally repatriated to Ireland in 1965, and he was reinterred in Dublin's Glasnevin cemetery in a state funeral attended by Éamon de Valera.

Give such a life to a renowned novelist who is part journalist, part politician and an inveterate chronicler of power and its abuses, Faber argues, and the result is likely to be a winning one.

"Casement is a figure with a complex historical relationship to the UK establishment and there is bound to be significant interest in this novel from a constituency of readers much broader than fans of Vargas Llosa or, indeed, readers of literary fiction," said the firm's editorial director, Lee Brackstone.

"We certainly expect to grow Mario's sales dramatically in the wake of the Nobel with a novel so fixed in British and Irish political and cultural history."

Brackstone said the publication of the Black Diaries in the 1950s had led to a "conflicted perspective on Casement in Irish history" that continues today. Although a scientific examination of the diaries in 2002 found they were genuine, some maintain they were forged by the British government to blacken Casement's name. Scholars on both sides of the debate will be intrigued to see where the Nobel laureate stands, and to discover whether he can reconcile the many sides of Roger Casement.

Séamas Ó Síocháin, author of Roger Casement: Imperialist, Rebel, Revolutionary, said: "I would hope [the novel] might strengthen the perception of Casement's importance in the human rights area. But [the diaries], unfortunately I think, [have] been the major fascination about Casement."

Vargas Llosa will give his verdict in a fortnight, but perhaps his readers should not expect anything too definitive: "There are many areas of shadow in his life, many aspects that are not clear and probably never will be because he was a very secret person, especially in his private life," he told the Guardian. "There is a great debate about his homosexuality and paedophilia that has never been resolved and probably never will be … A highly contradictory character. Perfect for a novel."

**Stranger than fiction: novelist's past works**

Vargas Llosa is no stranger to mixing fact and fiction. After setting his first novel, La Ciudad y los Perros (The Time of the Hero), in the tough Lima military academy he attended as a teenager – an effort repaid with the burning of 1,000 copies on the school's parade ground – he has frequently gone further by reimagining the lives of real people.

• In La Guerra del Fin del Mundo (The War of the End of the World), he used real events in late 19th-century Brazil to tell the story of the charismatic preacher Antônio Conselheiro, whose predictions of the end of the world and utopian visions set him and his followers against the government.

• In 2000's La Fiesta del Chivo (The Feast of the Goat), he tackled the violent dictatorship of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, who ruled the Dominican Republic from 1930 until he was ambushed and assassinated in 1961. The Trujillo that emerges from the book is a sex-obsessed, prostate-troubled monster.

• His 2003 novel, El Paraíso en la Otra Esquina (The Way to Paradise), chronicled the lives of artist Paul Gauguin and his half-Peruvian grandmother, Flora Tristan, as they pursue their respective passions, painting and equality.

• Despite his fondness for reimagining the lives of real people, Vargas Llosa is also keen on paying homage to his literary heroes. His most recent book, Travesuras de la niña mala (The Bad Girl) was a slow and deliberate wink of appreciation in the direction of Flaubert's Madame Bovary.

Sam Jones