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**Vargas Llosa: view from the margins**

[Mario Vargas Llosa: 'The novelist can do things the historian cannot attempt.'](http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/images/2012/0702/1224319176043_1.jpg?ts=1341241279)

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The Nobel Laureate did not expect to write a novel about Roger Casement, but ‘chance discovery’ led him down a fascinating literary path

DISTANCE AT TIMES proves a most valuable resource for a writer. It may well be the distance of a cultural remove as dramatic as in the case of the Peruvian Nobel Laureate in Literature Mario Vargas Llosa and his latest book. The Dream of the Celt is a sympathetic fictionalised biography of Roger Casement, who, within five years of being knighted for his services to the crown, was found guilty of high treason and executed in 1916 by his former employer, the British government.

Vargas Llosa smiles his gracious smile. “For me it was a chance discovery that became an investigation, one that led me to a novel I had not expected to write but . . .”. He gestures happily, pleased that he did write it.

While British and Irish novelists may have considered writing Casement’s story, a South American acted. Historians have criticised the book but Vargas Llosa remains confident: “I was telling a story about a man who happened to live, and what a story he had. I did the research, I have been a journalist, but I am also a novelist.”

Neither defensive nor defiant, he is pleased to discuss the book, and while it has been immensely successful throughout the Spanish-speaking world, he is excited at being back in Ireland where he did much of that research. That includes a viewing of Sir John Lavery’s great painting of the doomed Casement appeal, with the subject sitting impassive, that hangs in the King’s Inns in Dublin. He is curious to see the reaction to the book in this country.

The Irish dimension was to prove the most difficult. “The politics, the religion, the culture, the relationship to England: all very complicated and difficult to get exactly right. The 1916 leaders with their blood sacrifice were unlike any other group of rebels.”

One of the most intriguing of international literary personalities, Vargas Llosa is above all modest, as unpretentious as he is cosmopolitan; a terrific talker with a colourful, rather maverick streak. Still very much the dashing dissenter who once announced “The Latin-American situation offers a virtual orgy of motives for being a rebel and living dissatisfied”, he exudes curiosity, energy and natural friendliness. He seems at home in the elegant surroundings of the Spanish ambassador’s residence on spacious grounds in Ballsbridge, Dublin 4.

Unlike many of the leading Latin-American writers, Vargas Llosa looked more to European and particularly American writers: “I have always loved Faulkner, especially Light in August.” His books are often autobiographical and invariably daring, beginning with his exceptional debut, The Time of the Hero (1962), in which he pilloried the Leoncio Prado military academy he had attended in Lima. His early life, including that miserable stint at the military school, a period as a crime reporter at 15 and later, still aged only 19, elopement with his uncle’s sister-in-law, is itself the stuff of fiction.

Cultural distance was something he already knew about as the son of Peruvian parents of Spanish descent. “It is funny, you know, but I had to go to Paris to realise that I was South American. Before that I always felt at a remove, marginal, despite the Spanish world being so extensive.”

This awareness of being an outsider has remained with him; he has travelled the world and explored many subjects at first hand and in his fiction. An interest in politics involved him in a failed presidential bid in 1990. If one word describes him, it is determined.

He looks suave, but determination has dictated his life. He has a sense of mission as well as a lively mind. “I wanted to be a writer, so I picked jobs that would enable me to live but also to write. That was my reasoning, always.” His interest in – “my obsession [with]” – Casement quickly begins to make sense. “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.” The Polish-born Conrad had settled in England and refused to support Casement for fear of offending the British authorities.

Casement’s story, that of a courageous humanitarian turned Irish patriot and ultimately tragic hero, is extraordinary, not only for its diversity but for the strange reality that Casement remains, even in Ireland, as the figure on Banna Strand, arrested soon after disembarking from a German U-boat. Before he ever began to play his role in the 1916 Rising, Casement had lived several lives. He spent 20 years in Africa and a further seven in South America, in Amazonia.

“It took me three years to research the book, I realised that Casement was misunderstood; not so much forgotten as overlooked.” Vargas Llosa recalls visiting the neglected grave in Glasnevin cemetery. Yet when Casement’s remains were reinterred there in March 1965, 49 years after his death, he had been given a State funeral which Éamon de Valera, then 82, attended against medical advice.

Still, Vargas Llosa is correct; Casement has drifted to the edges of the Irish historical consciousness and the full extent of his humanitarian achievement in exposing the brutalities of the Belgian Congo, his report of which earned him his knighthood, has not been appreciated.

The Casement who emerges in The Dream of the Celt echoes Parnell and Wilde. Vargas Llosa looks thoughtful at the mention of Wilde and admits he has not considered the parallels. The explicit homosexual content of his personal diaries effectively destroyed Casement. Although there had been suggestions that they were forgeries, Vargas Llosa feels Casement did write them. “But I believe that they belonged to a fantasy life, he imagined these happenings, but he didn’t live them. I see him as a lonely person, very gentle, too shy to have acted in such a brutal way.”

He pauses and again, without even the slightest hint of defiance, merely remarks: “I was writing a novel. The novelist can do things the historian cannot attempt.”

History has engaged Vargas Llosa before. The Feast of the Goat (2002) is based on the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic. But Casement is different: “A special human being was there to be found. I liked him, I like him. I feel such sympathy. The more I investigated, the more I needed to know and the stronger my feelings for him became.”

In England, Casement remains an outcast, but in Ireland, it is not so much ambivalence as little more than the enduring image of an ill-fated vigil kept on a Co Kerry beach. Vargas Llosa may well have completed an act of historical retrieval for the Irish, and although he has always been political he does not consider it a political book. “I have always felt that writers should be politically engaged without being politically involved.”

It seems an odd thing to say considering that he did challenge for the presidency of Peru, although it is possible that the experience changed his views about writers and politics. His presidential challenge was thwarted most painfully when his opponents opted for citing the more lurid sex scenes in his fiction as proof of his unsuitability. What did he think of being a candidate? He doesn’t respond to the question, perhaps distracted by the arrival of tea and coffee with a small plate of biscuits, and instead makes a general comment about the beauty of the sun-filled yellow room where we sit.

He begins to speak about his decision to become a writer: “First and always important: I learned to read when I was five. It opened the world to me. The marks on the pages began to make sense, and then pictures. I had learned the code. It is the most important thing in life, to learn to read. I began to travel in my imagination. The first big influences for me were Dickens, Victor Hugo, Tolstoy.”

He seems relaxed, and effortlessly transforms an interview into a conversation. The facts of his life are well known but there is nothing world-weary about him. His toughness is subtle and it seems pointless to ask him about the background to the punch he delivered in 1976 to his one-time friend Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the Colombian writer who won the Nobel Prize in 1982, 28 years before Vargas Llosa.

Now 76 and only a few months away from the second anniversary of his Nobel Prize, Vargas Llosa speaks with the enthusiasm of a man half his age. He loves reading, and along with the 19th-century writers who seduced him are the mid-20th-century writers, such as Sartre, that he came to know and later rejected. “I began admiring Sartre,” and even quoted him in the epigraph to The Time of the Hero, “but rejected his agenda and ended as a fan of Camus”. French literature was always important to him. At the mention of his study on Flaubert, The Perpetual Orgy (1975, translated 1986) in which he considers Madame Bovary as the first modern novel, Vargas Llosa refers to the beauty of Flaubert’s prose and the care the French master lavished on “each phrase, every word”.

Flaubert, he says, “taught me to write. I am also indebted to Mauriac.” The French writer François Mauriac won the Nobel Prize in 1952. “I loved the ease of his writing.” He could almost be referring to his own work. Vargas Llosa instinctively knows how to tell a story.

It seems the moment to discuss Peru’s great writer’s other books, particularly one of his finest to date, The War of the End of the World (1981), which was inspired by a battle that took place in late 19th-century Brazil and was famously revered by the Chilean novelist Roberto Bolaño.

Yet his latest book stands apart from his others. Even the style is different. The prose is flatter, devoid of his customary flourish. “I deliberately wrote it in a neutral Spanish, almost reporter-like.” There is no denying that the sheer weight of the material burdens the book, and that reimagining conversations results in leaden dialogue. Vargas Llosa accepts that it is an important work rather than a piece of art. Very few writers and none of his stature would simply nod and agree that there are stylistic limitations. The flashback technique, in this instance split between Casement in prison awaiting the pardon that never came and his previous life, is always difficult. There is also a naivety about the book, and Vargas Llosa sees this as being true to Casement’s diffident nature.

“You could say that I was also conscious of Dos Passos as I wrote it; he is another writer I admire. In the Casement story there were so many facts, opinions, real people. A real hero. But all of it overshadowed by his sexuality. I needed to get to the story and the man.”

He certainly has.

The Dream of the Celt is published by Faber and Faber