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**Mario Vargas Llosa’s latest hero - Roger Casement**

**The portrait of this protean character in El sueño del celta will outlast many of the biographies**

David Gallagher

Mario Vargas Llosa’s Nobel Prize came at a good moment. He had been working for some three years on a major novel which was just ready to be published. The new novel, El sueño del celta (The Dream of the Celt), is a magnificent addition to an oeuvre which the Swedish Academy have rightly distinguished.

“The Dream of the Celt” is the title of an epic poem which Roger Casement wrote in 1898. Casement’s biographer **Angus Mitchell** says that “framed by powerful imagery of the sea, it returns to the theme of his youthful efforts: English misrule in Ireland under the Tudors and Stuarts”. Mitchell concludes that “underlying the verse is Casement’s emerging vision for a new Ireland”. Vargas Llosa’s novel, a return to the historical form he has used over the years, is wholly about Roger Casement.

Why choose this controversial Irishman who served the British Crown with loyalty, was knighted in 1911, then hanged for treason five years later? It is not hard to guess the appeal for Vargas Llosa. This protean character, who managed to lead many lives simultaneously, would attract a novelist who has always been interested in what separates the image we project from what we really are and do. When Casement was writing “The Dream of the Celt” in 1898, the British Consular Service, which employed him, had little idea of his nationalist views on Ireland. They did not know that Casement, who became an expert in leading a double life, was already nurturing the deepest contempt for the British Empire, while being solicitous and diligent with his employers. He appears also to have been leading a complex sexual life; not even his closest friends seem to have suspected him of promiscuous homosexuality.

Casement’s championing of human rights must also have attracted Vargas Llosa, whose fiction often explores the evil to which people sink when they have too much power. This is exemplified here in Casement’s reports on the shocking abuses that were carried out in Leopold II’s Congo and in Peru’s Putumayo basin, during the commercial exploitation of rubber. Then there is Vargas Llosa’s interest throughout his work in the differences between actual events as they unfold, and the historical narratives that later claim to describe them. It is these differences that attract him to the historical novel and lead him to suggest that fiction is often truer than history.

When Casement was arrested in April 1916, he was trying to smuggle arms into Ireland on a German submarine, but he also wanted to get there in time to prevent the Easter Rising. He was certain it would fail, as he had not been able to get the Germans to send troops in support of it. And yet at his trial he was accused of travelling to Ireland in order to provoke the Easter Rising. “Is all history like that”, muses Vargas Llosa’s Casement as he wastes away in Pentonville Prison, awaiting execution. “The history one learnt at school? The one written by historians? An idealized, coherent, rational fabrication, to describe crude realities, which in actual fact consist in a chaotic, haphazard mixture of plans, accidents, intrigues, surprises, coincidences, and conflicting interests?” Through Casement’s eyes, Vargas Llosa takes a Tolstoyan delight in comparing the smooth historical record with the chaotic events that actually occurred. As a subject, Casement offers material for the deep sense of justice and thirst for truth Vargas Llosa has always exhibited in his work. Although he is no doubt aware that not everyone will agree with him, a novel gives him the chance to set the record straight and do justice to a man he believes to have been deeply wronged.

Much of the novel takes place in Pentonville Prison, where Casement is confined to a windowless cell as he awaits the decision of Asquith’s Cabinet on whether to commute the death sentence. He has brief prison visits from officials and friends, among them Fr Casey, the prison chaplain, with whom he discusses God as he gradually turns to Catholicism, agonizing over whether he is acting from conviction, or fear of death, or to boost his image as an Irish patriot. He also sees the Irish historian Alice Stopford Green, who feeds his hunger for news of the tragic aftermath to the Easter Rising. The Pentonville scenes are interspersed with chapters depicting Casement’s Irish childhood, his life in Africa, his Congo and Putumayo reports, his stints as consul in Brazil, and finally his disastrous attempt to create an Irish Brigade in Germany out of the Irish prisoners of war, and his catastrophic landing in Ireland in April 1916.

Alongside the descriptions of Casement’s investigations into the abuses by Leopold II’s agents in the Congo, and the London-listed Peruvian Amazon Company in Amazonian Peru, where natives who don’t tap enough rubber are burnt alive or mutilated (depending on the offence, their arms, ears or sex organs are chopped off), are reflections on the way evil can take over in places where there are no limits to the power of those in charge. This is territory which was explored in La fiesta del chivo (The Feast of the Goat, 2000), Vargas Llosa’s passionate denunciation of the Dominican dictator Leonidas Trujillo. “We carry evil in our hearts”, says Dr Dickey, the American doctor who has worked for the Peruvian Amazon Company.

"In Europe and in my country, it is more disguised, and only becomes blatant when there is a war, a revolution or an uprising. It needs pretexts to become public and collective. But in the Amazon it can show itself barefaced and lead to the worst atrocities without the justification of patriotism or religion. Plain greed is enough."

Vargas Llosa depicts Casement having discussions about the nature of evil with Joseph Conrad, during the latter’s time in Africa. Casement reminisces about these talks with Alice Stopford Green on one of her Pentonville visits. In their version, Conrad only understood the extent of human evil thanks to Casement: you have “deflowered me”, he had said to Casement. But Alice thinks that in Heart of Darkness, Conrad takes the opposite view to Casement’s; Conrad thinks Africa makes Europeans become evil, whereas in the Congo Report, Casement shows that it is the Europeans who introduce evil to Africa. Vargas Llosa’s Casement believes that the Europeans are more evil than any native Africans or Amazonian Indians could be. It is not that he thinks that the natives are unremittingly noble. He recognizes that they can be cruel and that some of them are cannibals, but that does not justify exploiting them cruelly, as the agents of Leopold II and the Peruvian Amazon Company do. They claim that the “savages” are not really human and that they can do what they like to them.

One of the important themes in the novel is Casement’s gradual disillusionment with colonialism. With this comes his growing belief that the destruction of the African, and later Amazonian, way of life by the colonial occupiers, is analogous to what happened in Ireland as a consequence of English occupation. The only difference, he argues, is that the British in Ireland are more decorous in the way they despoil the natives of their heritage. His Irish patriotism develops in the heart of Africa and later, in the Peruvian jungle. Contemplating the power of the Peruvian Amazon Company, he concludes that “the only way the Putumayo Indians can overcome the miserable conditions into which they have been reduced is by rising up in arms”. From this he infers that the same is true for Ireland: there will never be independence there without violence.

Although it is written in the third person, El sueño del celta resembles a fictional autobiography. It takes Casement’s point of view, and examines his conscience. Why did he fail with the Irish landing? **How many lives did he put at risk?** What happened to the Irishmen he left in Germany, the unlucky few who had dared join his Irish Brigade? Why did he accept a knighthood when he hated Britain? The novel also inevitably considers Casement’s sexuality and the question of whether he wrote the so-called Black Diaries found after his arrest, or whether they were a British forgery used to blacken his name. Vargas Llosa holds – it is, he believes, his “right as a novelist” to do so – that the diaries were written by Casement, **but that he did not do all that he described in them;** he was promiscuous, and had a compulsive need to pick up young men, though not with the frequency recorded in the diaries. So Vargas Llosa’s Casement sometimes records a recent sexual exploit, and sometimes a fantasy of what might have taken place. We see him trying to fight his compulsions, feeling disgust after a night out and embarking on long periods of abstinence. But we also see him happy when the sight of some athletic young man re-awakens his yearning. These are moments when Vargas Llosa is at his best; sexual duplicity is a recurring subject in his work.

His novelist’s conclusion about the diaries is plausible. Some of Casement’s sexual exploits took place in remote places in Africa and South America, where he would have had enemies spying on him. If the exploits had been as numerous as the diaries suggest, he would have been found out and denounced many times. When one of Casement’s sexual adventures is described by Vargas Llosa, we get a strong sense of risk; this is a public figure who picks up strange men in bars and public baths, sometimes going off with more than one.

Vargas Llosa comes to his conclusion about the Black Diaries slowly. At first, his Casement is ambivalent about them. When asked about them by his prison visitors, he changes the subject or claims he does not know what they are talking about. He thanks Fr Casey for not asking about “those filthy things which, apparently, they are saying about me”. He tells the priest that he will not heed Cardinal Bourne’s outrageous request that, before he becomes a Catholic, he should repent of all those “vile things the press is accusing me of”. But we also see Casement reminiscing – alone in his prison cell – about his first homosexual awakenings; how in Africa he felt free of the constraints of Victorian society; how that boy in Boma, with whom he went fishing, suddenly closed up on him. “Shutting his eyes, he tried to resurrect that scene of so many years ago: the surprise, the indescribable excitement . . . .” Little by little, over the course of the novel, we see Casement picking up more and more boys. Towards the end, he falls in love with **Eivind Axel Christiensen**, a Norwegian he picks up in New York in 1914, who travels with him to Germany. Christiansen was later to denounce him to the British – one instance where sex does real damage to Casement. Despite the betrayal, Vargas Llosa’s Casement has erotic dreams about Christiensen at Pentonville.

The narrator has Casement ask himself, in his prison cell, why he was so stupid as to leave the diaries in his flat. He also had incriminating evidence in his pockets when arrested. Even a German train ticket. Perhaps he wanted to be found out? Vargas Llosa’s Casement does not ask himself that – instead he attributes his carelessness to madness. But we wonder whether he didn’t want to put an end to so much stressful duplicity. He was at the end of his tether. He had taken the decision to seek Germany’s help in the liberation of Ireland. He had spent nearly two years stranded in Germany. The Germans had humiliated him by leading him on and then letting him down.

Writing about Casement takes Vargas Llosa to some of those dangerous places he has enjoyed writing about, ever since The Green House (1965), an early masterpiece partly set in the Peruvian jungle. Vargas Llosa has a good eye for the viciousness of tropical nature, and the precariousness of human attempts to encroach on it. Iquitos, in Peruvian Amazonia, which becomes a boom town when the market for Peruvian rubber is at its peak – the club on the main square is an iron house designed by Gustave Eiffel – is almost reclaimed by the jungle when the market collapses, following Casement’s Putumayo Report, and the fall in the price of rubber caused by the new British plantations in Malaya. While daydreaming in prison, Casement delights in the thought of nature having its revenge on the robber barons’ camps in Putumayo.

"The place will fill with the song of birds, the whistling, growling and screaming of parrots, monkeys, serpents, capybaras, paujils and jaguars. With the rain and the landslides, in a few years there won’t be a trace left of those camps in which greed and human cruelty caused so much suffering, mutilation and death. The wood of the buildings will rot with the rains, and the houses will crumble, their wood devoured by termites. In the not too distant future, all human trace will have been erased by the jungle."

At the end of the novel, Dr Percy Mander, the doctor who witnesses the execution, authorizes Casement’s burial only after he has meticulously examined his anus. With a white rubber glove, he probes it to satisfy himself that it is, indeed, dilated, thus “confirming” that he had indulged in the “practices” which were described in the Black Diaries. This final touch is characteristic of Vargas Llosa, always a meticulous observer of the details that accompany a human being’s degradation. I thought that he must have invented it, until I found it documented in **Séamas Ó Síocháin’s** biography of Casement.

Vargas Llosa has clearly enjoyed writing this novel, and the enjoyment will be shared by its readers. He describes Casement’s life with a novelist’s eye for its extraordinary complexity, but, at the same time, makes his character surprisingly coherent. **There is much in Casement of which Vargas Llosa would disapprove; the novelist has a horror of nationalism, and yet he describes Casement’s obsession with Irish mythology, and his hopeless attempts to learn Gaelic, with sympathy.** Vargas Llosa clearly likes Casement, and in what is a brilliantly persuasive novel, he makes the reader like him. He finds in Casement one of those quixotic heroes he has always admired: men who are deeply flawed, dizzyingly complex, probably mad, yet moved by deep conviction, and nobler than most of their contemporaries. **Vargas Llosa’s portrait of him in El sueño del celta will outlast many of the biographies.**

Mario Vargas Llosa
EL SUEÑO DEL CELTA
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**David Gallagher** is the author of Modern Latin American Literature, 1973, Improvisaciones, 1991, and Otras Improvisaciones, 2005.

**Your Comments**

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| User Image | Lord Truth wrote: From then on the future enemy of Britain was Germany and Britain went round Europe making alliances with every Catholic state it could. Catholic Ireland obviously had to be got rid of and it was only the obduracy of the Unionists that prevented a peaceful separation in the 1890s-finally agreed in 1914.It is extraordinary that Casement and others did not realise that the end of WW1 would bring independence without any problem.To attempt to create trouble when Britain was fighting –with 2000 dead a week- with London being bombed nightly was grotesquely stupid.The reviewer mentions the infamous diaries- first Casement was picking up young men ,only later does this change to young boys...Make up your mind David...Finding out what really motivated Casement may be part of this half fiction half documentary style novel yet we will never really know.That some Irishmen can become so insane with a hatred of people ,the British ,whose screwed up class obsessions and social racism can certainlymake them distasteful but who practice these cultural characteristics against themselves as equally as they do to lesser races and who do not use their prisoners of war for bayonet practice or stick people on top of wooden spikes or carry out in modern times any of the worst human atrocities-is always puzzling.Perhaps its simply guilt at leaving a country where the weather is abominable and the society is religiously repressive-the guilt being transferred to the British.That this Peruvian with a murky political background can also try this clever smearing –the endless comparing and mixing up of the appalling atrocities in the Congo with what Lhosa calls the more decorous British treatment of the Irish is sickening and frightening.This is a most dangerous and evil novelIncidentally ,I have wondered recently ,how many of those many Irish Americans who ceaslessly talk of the ’old sod’ and love their (very brief) four day flyins to Dublin etc have thought of helping out Irelands present problems by buying up one of its many unsold houses-’for the grandchildrens holidays...’ Er...sorry...no thanks....When it comes to it,it seems no one wants to live there and Americas love affair with Ireland suddenly becomes as flimsy as an Irish mist and just as quickly vanishes. December 17, 2010 7:06 PM GMT on community.timesonline.co.uk

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| User Image | Lord Truth wrote: Sweden seems to have besmirched itself recently,what with the Assange affair and the Nobel peace prize-yes we know that man should not be in jail- should be lecturing at Princeton etc- but to to stir up trouble in a huge nation that only sixty years ago was a fragmented broken fragmented naked starving wreck and is now nearly top of the worlds,shows the mischieveness of those always behind the scenes CIA players...But we now also have the Swedish Nobel Literature prize winner and here things do get stinkier.For the winner is one of those South American writer /politicos (Peruvian) beloved of the Western bourgeoisie,and Readers Digest...someone nicelyleftish –liberal (at first)–to give the rich that warm feeling that they are not simply vicious brutal capitalists-but who becomes centre right –which in South America means police torture and (in Peru) 44 percent poverty... His are the kind of books frequently found lying on the soft leather seats in the back of luxury cars...But what is this?... because coming from a murky political background that could be the source of a dozen novels Vargas Llosa has chosen to write a novel ’about –of all people Roger Casement .Only last week the TLS reviewed Prof Bartletts new Irish History intended to prove it was the English and not the French Normans who actually invaded Ireland in 1169The pages I have read on Amazon actually concern themselves with these events. The level of misrepresentation in those pages is appalling ,referring to ’English’ barons ,never giving the full French names of those involved and this from a professor in these matters!! One cannot help wondering if Irish America –for whom these books /histories etc are intended, has decided to fight back against Irelands recent debased image of foul priests and crooked politicians, desperately revving up the only thing that gives the Irish any sense of identity-hatred of the British? It may be... Casement is certainly a strange figure. Like the rest of that weird gang of Protestant /Communist/ Anarchists,in the Easter Rising,someone who never shook hands with a Catholic without having a good wash afterwards (that Catholic priests muscled in on him in the condemned cell can be discounted ) his crackpot ideas-based though on perhaps a good misplaced heart are almost laughable.He and the other members of the gang actually believed that after destroying evil British rule Ireland should have a Prussian king-–the brother of the Kaiser!Now in 1916 the Germans were the most hated people in the world (except by dear old Einstein –who having skipped off to Switzerland to avoid serving in the German army skipped back instantly when offered the job of Director of the Berlin Academy of Science.-.Now about this poison gas Herr Einstein.....) The world regarded the Prussians in 1916 as nothing more than braindead thugs-in this respect totally different to the Nazis whose ideas twenty years later were respected and admired by many in Europe and America .Casements ideas must have seemed completely lunatic to the GermansBritains interest in Ireland had vanished overnight when in 1870 the Prussians beat the French in six weeks and occupied Paris.From then on the future enemy of Britain was Germany and Britain went round Europe making December 17, 2010 7:04 PM GMT on community.timesonline.co.uk

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