

# Books

**THE 10-YEAR MANHUNT**  
INSIDE OSAMA BIN LADEN'S  
HIDDEN COMPOUND  
**P22-23**



**FORD FOCUS**  
BANVILLE ACCLAIMS RICHARD  
FORD'S BRILLIANT NEW NOVEL  
**P24-25**

Irish Independent Saturday 2 June 2012

## HISTORICAL FICTION

### The Dream of the Celt

Mario Vargas Llosa

Faber and Faber, £12.99, pbk, 404 pages

Available with free P&P on www.kennys.ie or by calling 091 709350



For decades after his execution for treason in 1916, there was a great silence in Ireland about the life, death and legacy of Roger Casement. He was justifiably celebrated while alive as one of the great humanitarians of his age due to his work in the British diplomatic service to expose the barbaric treatment and exploitation of natives in the Congo and Amazon by European imperial powers.

But despite being knighted in 1911, he devoted himself to Irish republican endeavour, attempted to recruit an Irish brigade from prisoners of war in Germany to fight against the British empire, and was arrested after landing from a German submarine on the Irish coast, on his way to persuade those organising the 1916 Rising to hold off until more support could be arranged.

After his petition for clemency was rejected by the British government he was hanged at Pentonville Prison and his body was not returned to his native Ireland until 1965, where he received full honours as a patriot.

The discovery after his arrest of his Black Diaries, containing graphic information on rampant homosexual encounters, allowed a smear campaign that undermined his status and appeals for clemency.

For years, it was maintained they were forged in order to blacken his name, but now they are accepted by most, though not all, as genuine.

The diaries undoubtedly created awkwardness about how he was remembered which meant that until the 1960s his legacy remained somewhere in limbo. But by the time of the golden jubilee of the Rising in 1966, with his body back in Dublin and an improvement in Anglo-Irish relations, the balance had swung back in his favour.

In writing this book, translated from Spanish, the challenge for Llosa, the Peruvian novelist who was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 2010, was to make sense of the public and private worlds of Casement and to imagine his hopes, fears, torments and internal dialogue.

To an extent he succeeds, but the balance is not always struck. At times Llosa is so keen to include the historical research he has conducted that it breaks the flow of the narrative. He includes too much detail and if he had decided to allow Llosa the novelist rather than Llosa the aspiring historian to dominate, the book would be shorter and more powerful. That does not mean this is a bad book; there is much to admire here and most of it is absorbing.

The narrative device is effective; Casement is in his cell in Pentonville Prison, reflecting on the extent to which "his life had been a permanent contradiction".

# Sex, lies & the Black Diaries

This is a sensitive portrait of Roger Casement who saw his life as 'a permanent contradiction' says Diarmaid Ferriter



Execution: Roger Casement is escorted to the gallows of Pentonville Prison in London. Inset: Mario Vargas Llosa and, above right, Casement's diaries

He is awaiting news of his fate and reflects on his life and career from his birth in Dublin in 1864 to his entry into the British colonial service in 1892 and beyond.

There is exhaustive detail on his successful, though tortuous, quest to highlight the atrocities in

the Belgian Congo and the Amazon.

Llosa spares no detail in describing the difficulties of working in such colonial regions; the heat, malarial fevers, feverish sleeping, psychological exhaustion, the hostility he faced and the chronic ill-health he suffered as a result.

As well as lengthy passages on the beauty of the jungle and its creatures — "a compensation for the moral ugliness they discovered at every turn" — the full horrors of the treatment of the natives are laid bare; the mutilation and torture inflicted by those running the compa-

nies that profited from the harvesting of rubber.

One sadistic officer would "raise them with a chain, tied to a tall tree, and then release them to see how their heads split open and their bones broke or their teeth severed their tongues when they fell to the ground".

But while at times powerfully atmospheric, there is too much repetitive detail on the various missions Casement undertook.

Llosa deals with his homosexual encounters subtly and sensitively, signposting his preoccupation with adolescent boys, and suggests that many of the diary entries in relation to sexual encounters were imagined rather than real, "writing what he hadn't experienced in order to pretend he had".

Such sexual encounters as occurred were commercial transactions, and involved "pure sex, hurried and animal".

He traces Casement's growing abhorrence of colonialism to the point where he had to ask himself in relation

Such sexual encounters as occurred were commercial transactions, and involved 'pure sex, hurried and animal'.

to his evolving Irish republicanism, "am I turning into a fanatic?"

His devotion to political action became total, but was undermined by the humiliation of his failure to persuade enough Irish prisoners in Germany to follow him ("how naïve and foolish I was").

Llosa also dwells on his struggles with religion, conversion to Catholicism and fears about how God will judge his sexual encounters.

Llosa includes a non-fiction epilogue in which he makes clear his admiration for Casement, but he does not sentimentalise or simplify this complex, intriguing character, concluding: "It's not a bad thing that a climate of uncertainty hovers over Casement as proof that it is impossible to know definitively a human being."

He succeeds in painting a sensitive portrait of the uncertainties Casement had about himself, alongside his considerable courage.

Diarmaid Ferriter is Professor of Modern Irish History at UCED. Mario Vargas Llosa will be in conversation at the Gate Theatre on Sunday, June 10, at 3pm as part of the Dublin Writers Festival.